

Amoebas Can't Build Houses
An Essay About Akira and Political Progress

Over the course of several months the Californian city of Berkeley has been a hotbed for a number of hauntingly violent protests between Neo-Nazi and Antifa groups. Watching videos and reading accounts of what happened in these confrontations has been both a rude awakening and a completely surreal nightmare. In every snippet of action, one witnesses an insurmountable wave of chaos. Yells and screams of pure rage fill the air. Rocks, soda cans, and other impromptu weapons are thrown over a concrete no-man's land of trash, spit, and broken signs. In some cases, it feels like all out warfare. One person "used a large trash bin as a battering ram as the crowd moved", another man used a bike lock as a weapon seriously harming at least seven people, others attempted to sneak in metal pipes, bricks, and even daggers (St. John) (Ohlheiser) (Wang). It all felt horrifically dystopian, a symbol of the palpable frustration welling up after this tumultuous political climate that left many feeling powerless. Outbursts like these are frightening, yet it is hard not to feel some gratification deep down inside watching that aggression finally coalesce towards action. It's a release to see someone get punched in the face or egged in the head for doing or saying things that were truly terrible. But after zooming out and witnessing the chaos on such a grand scale, I feel lost again. Angry, filled with a deep desire to change the way things are, but conflicted on how that should manifest. Where does one channel all this newly found, politically charged energy in a way that matters, especially while living in a world where chaos tends to drown everything out.

It can become eerie how much depictions of dystopian futures have come to mirror our own. Personally, the feeling of unending chaos and our strange ambivalence towards it strikes me as familiar. Akira, directed by Katsuhiro Otomo, shows us a world where events like those in Berkley happen daily and how the people who live within it function. Violence chases the viewer throughout the film, constantly reminding them that Neo-Tokyo is in turmoil. Even brief moments of respite seem to be punctuated with explosions as the world constantly clashes with itself. It has become a pretty familiar feeling for those living in the twenty first century, but how do our counterparts in Akira deal with their own constant barrage of terrorist attacks, inept, negligent government, and oppressive societal norms?

Through Tetsuo, Kaneda, Kai, and the rest of the biker gang, we can explore what it means to live in a modern world entrenched in chaos and what we can do to change it. Taking place in 2019, post World War III Japan witness an unprecedented economic boom after a mysterious explosion wiped out most of Tokyo in the eighties. From a distance, Neo-Tokyo seems like a beautiful and prosperous representation of the future of Japan. Buildings completely consume the skyline and replace the stars with the ever shining office windows, and alluring store fronts. Neon lights dance through the city beckoning citizens to never stop spending. Glancing up at the cityscape of Neo-Tokyo leaves the audience breathless at the hand painted visage of a capitalist wonderland, but as soon as one glances back down to those who walk the streets the city tells a completely different story. Tear gas flows from the intersections to the alleyways. Buildings constantly burst open with flames from terrorist attacks and

police raids as pedestrians saunter by. Car horns blare while police spill blood in a cruel attempt to quell the people's constant riots. Everything that seems to be touching the ground feels forgotten, left behind and covered in grime and graffiti. The visual design of Neo-Tokyo makes it clear that those who profited from the economic boom rose up both physically and in social class, leaving everyone else to rot. It almost feels real and all too familiar, in no small part due to the historical roots it draws from.

While the general arc of Neo-Tokyo is very representative of post-Hiroshima Japan, Akira is a very specific expression of the frustrations with Japan in the late seventies, and early eighties. Neo-Tokyo serves as a funhouse mirror for Japan after the peak of, what economists refer to as, the "Economic Miracle". During this time, Japan had seemingly rose to become one of the strongest economies in the world over night. Industries were booming. Conglomerates of banks, factories, and manufacturers all worked together to completely crush the competition with their sheer economic clout. A new middle class began to flourish with more disposable income to spend, meanwhile the world of profit and technology seemed to infect every aspect of life as everyone chased a new bar for success. There was a strict drive to succumb to the economic machine in order to carve out your little chunk of the miracle, "even very young Japanese students were part of the regimen, as they submitted to a grueling examination system that prepared them to enter corporate life with dependable analytical skills and a proper attention to rules."(Crawford). In the midst of this gold rush of industrialism and technology, Japan also became more stratified, leading to a lower class that felt forgotten and powerless. Meanwhile, on a political level the Japanese

government was seen as “an entrenched oligarchy that sacrificed the well-being of its citizens to cold economic imperatives.”(Crawford). For those that felt chewed up by the brutal industrial machine everyone lived by, the only solution was to act out and make their presence known.

Otomo takes that struggle and plays with its logical extremes, forcing his characters to represent ways different people try to change (or not change) the defunct society they live in. The biker gang of Akira seem to parody Japanese delinquent culture especially that of 80's Japan. The violent and reckless motorcycle gangs in Akira are directly modeled after Japanese biker gangs known as Bosozoku from around the same era. Their gaudy outfits, violent behavior, and use of improvised weapons feel all too familiar to those who lived in Japan at the time. Often from lower income families forgotten by the economic boom of Japan, the youths of Japan took to their bikes to make themselves heard. In Japan, the children “feel like ‘square pegs’ in Japan's ‘round holes.’... They represent, by their very existence, evidence of societal ills most in Japanese society would like to quietly pretend doesn't exist.” and their counterparts in the film are treated in the same way (Callahan). When the film opens we find Kaneda and his group of young delinquents cheering as they smash skulls and crash bikes as if they were playing a game. They have rebranded the chaos of the city for themselves taking what angers them and releasing it into the world as violence for the sake of entertainment. The only way they feel they can belong in a world so cruel, is to become cruel themselves.

Otomo frames this behavior as not only immature, but inhuman. Despite being victims of the soul crushing economic reality that they live in, they become complicit in its process. Throughout the film, the boys seem numb to the violence around them. On multiple occasions, close encounters with bombings are dusted off as simply nuisances that force them to change where they hang out. They let the world change them into monsters, symptoms of the problems that bleed from Neo-Tokyo. The chaos of modern America has had the same effect. In every form of media we have, we find blaring noise about the constant infringements against our rights, our reputation, and even our decency. Mass shootings roll off our backs in weeks, racist comments from government officials fade from discourse just as quickly as they came, and cruel acts go unpunished while minor infringements are met with unnecessary force. It becomes an endless flow of frustration to watch our news feeds and in response, we feel a justifiably unbearable urge to make those frustrations known. We, in response take to social media, just like the bosozoku took to their bikes, and speak out, loud and clear. What happened at Berkeley happens everyday on the internet, where white-supremacy boils, waves of harassment crash onto innocent people, and the cruel is made comedic. We channel our resistance online, trying to respond, fact check, make fun of, or just speak out against everything that bombards us. It's a visceral process that is instantly gratifying and genuinely helps us carve out a home in all the chaos. But the likes, comments, and retweets can become as intoxicating as the blood that spills in a battle between motorcycle gangs and end up commodifying our resistance for social media platforms to profit from. Conflict brings more traffic, which means more clicks,

which means more money for those in power. It feels like an endless cycle that we end up perpetuating even as we attempt to tear it all down but never truly break free of.

One character in Akira really does break free. While originally part of the central motorcycle gang in the film, Tetsuo represents more than just a delinquent acting out against authority. Orphaned at very young age and constantly belittled by those more fortunate than him, Tetsuo justifiably is the most resentful towards the hand he was dealt in the world. He is utterly repulsed by the constant feeling of powerlessness looming over his life and wants nothing more than the superiority so cherished by the society of Neo-Tokyo. He often behaves like an animal desperately trying to prove himself against an agonizing process of darwinism ingrained within him by Neo-Tokyo.

It is then no coincidence that Tetsuo, the embodiment of those oppressed by the unforgiving machinations of a capitalist machine, gains raw, uncontrollable psionic abilities. He upsets the natural power structure the regime of Neo-Tokyo puts in place, a fact that inevitably tears the city apart. Tetsuo's rage and sense of inferiority also turns him into a monster. Through brute strength he manages to pulverise soldiers, sever buildings, lift entire stadiums all in a fit of pure rage. He almost instantly becomes a being that is both revered and feared by the citizens of Neo-Tokyo, thus celebrated as a god up until their untimely death. But to the viewer, Tetsuo becomes the embodiment of the sins of Neo-Tokyo and his apocalyptic fury seems to spare no one in its wake. Yet, his powers are not inherently dangerous. As we see from other government test subjects, there is a child-like innocence and beauty to the things these powers can create. When properly introduced to Tetsuo, they take the form of giant stuffed animals

and attempt to gently welcome him into his new found strength. When describing the power to Tetsuo's friend, Kaneda, refers to it as absolute energy and as a manifestation of collective memories born before the creation of the universe. It is compared to humanity's ability create and as something that has evolved out of us yet been there since life began. In their analogy, Tetsuo is an amoebas bestowed with the powers of a human yet driven by simple desires such as hunger and rage. By the end of the movie, it becomes too much for Tetsuo to handle. His body mutates, bulges, and fuses with the technology around him. The now inhuman mass of wires, toes, vents, veins, flesh, and bone expands and physically crushes some of the people closest to Tetsuo. Acknowledging that Tetsuo and his powers are now too much for this world to handle, the test subjects come to the only conclusion they can. They wipe the slate clean. Releasing all their energy, they unleash massive explosion of pure white light that slowly erases all of Neo-Tokyo. The city and Tetsuo are consumed by this light, cleansing the world from their all consuming grip. Yet in the wake of the destruction was the birth of something new. Tetsuo with all of his energy manifests into an entirely new universe one where life can start completely anew.

Amidst a movie boiling with scenes of destruction and violence, the final destruction of Neo-Tokyo is completely peaceful. One feels only a catharsis when watching the slow purification of the city and all its inhabitants. There is a clear dissonance between this and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there is no carnage, no flames, and no chaos, just relief. Once Tetsuo obtains his powers, Japanese history no longer dictates the world of Akira. It is something completely new,

straight from the heart of the world's creator Katsuhiro Otomo. The power bestowed upon Tetsuo is tied closely to the concept of progress. It is the "power of god" being bestowed upon a creature unable to comprehend its full potential. "Amoebas don't build their own houses and bridges..." and we cannot sustain the weight of our own progress. Tetsuo, like Neo-Tokyo, like all of Japan, progressed too fast and left his own humanity behind. He ended up as a mindless, all consuming, and ungodly fusion of flesh and technology, like Neo-Tokyo, like Otomo's vision of Japan. Otomo's solution to the problem was to create something new, a new universe with a new story embedded with the memories of our past mistakes. In its wake is inspiring material, fertile to grow from. That was the conclusion that the test subjects came to when confronted with a manifestation of Neo-Tokyo's sins and it was the conclusion Katsuhiro Otomo arrived at when confronted with the cruelty of Japan's society.

He created a new universe, that of Akira, and all the pain, frustration and energy he felt about his own world served as its genesis. Through Akira, he leaves a landscape fertile for the growth of others to use their own power to create and morph the world around them. No government, poverty, social class, or societal prejudice could ever suppress that power as it is something within all of us. We are able to build our own houses and bridges and eventually our own universes and inspire others to do the same. Letting our anger and frustrations build up until we lash out can only change so much, and eventually simply play into what machine expects from us. Instead we need to create, tear apart the old by creating something new and beautiful, put the energy

pent up inside us to something generative not destructive. That is what Akira does within the film, what Otomo does with the film, and what the film implores us to do.

Work Cited

John, Paige St. "21 Arrested as Hundreds of Trump Supporters and Counter-Protesters Battle." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 15 Apr. 2017, www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-berkeley-trump-rally-20170415-story.html.

Ohlheiser, Abby, and Cleve R. Wootson Jr. "A Man Clobbered Protesters with a Bike Lock at a Berkeley Rally, Police Say. The Internet Went Looking for Him." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 3 June 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/05/29/a-man-clobbered-trump-supporters-with-a-bike-lock-the-internet-went-looking-for-him/?utm_term=.e52c410cb595.

Wang, Amy B. "Pro-Trump Rally in Berkeley Turns Violent ." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 5 Mar. 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/03/05/pro-trump-rally-in-berkeley-turns-violent-as-protesters-clash-with-the-presidents-supporters/?utm_term=.3867b8c565fa.

Crawford, Robert J. "Reinterpreting the Japanese Economic Miracle." *Harvard Business Review*, Harvard, 31 July 2014, hbr.org/1998/01/reinterpreting-the-japanese-economic-miracle.

Callahan, Kat. "The Bosozoku Are Japan's Disappearing Rebels Without A Cause."

Jalopnik, Jalopnik.com, 4 Oct. 2014,

jalopnik.com/the-bosozoku-are-japans-disappearing-rebels-without-a-c-1642416129.