

***Akira & Post-War Japan: A Rhetorical Analysis***

Julian Strain

Dept. of Writing, Rhetoric, & Information Design, University of Central Arkansas

WRID 4320: Intercultural Rhetoric

Dr. Kyle Mattson

September 2024

Katsuhiro Otomo's magnum opus, *Akira*, was originally a six-manga series following the chaos of Neo-Tokyo. *Akira* was eventually adapted into a movie in 1988. Today, it is widely considered one of the most influential anime ever created and is credited with popularizing anime in the United States (Taggart, 2022). Otomo managed to condense his six-novel masterpiece into arguably, the greatest animated film ever created. The film condenses the manga into a singular 2-hour movie. This paper will solely focus on movie adaptations. *Akira* hit the theaters in 1988 and is set in 2019, in Neo-Tokyo. 31 years ago, before the story took place Tokyo was destroyed in World War III, and Neo-Tokyo rises from the ash left from the desolation caused by the atomic blasts. Neo-Tokyo is a sprawling massive mega-city, drowning in a sea of neon lights. Neo-Tokyo dances on a fine line of incredible human innovation and dystopian, post-apocalyptic ruin. *Akira* drops the audience into a dystopian world where unchecked technological advancement runs rampant, talks of revolution and rebelling in the underbelly of Neo-Tokyo, all while trying to heal from the scars left by human destruction and war. Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* serves as a rhetorical commentary and critique of nuclear warfare, unchecked technological advancement, rise of rebellious subcultures, and the physical and psychological scars in post-war Japan. Otomo accomplishes these incredible feats of rhetoric through storytelling and art; a talent very few have these days.

The first and clearest parallel most viewers connect is the symbolism of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in WWII. Otomo shows explicit parallels between Tokyo being obliterated by a nuclear bomb in *Akira*, and Japan's collective trauma the atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima are responsible for. Both the manga and the movie make this parallel impossible to miss with the first page and opening scene is Tokyo being destroyed by an ominous black orb representing an atomic blast. This opening scene immediately sets the tone of

the movie: An enormous explosion so intense it is clear it implies nothing will be the same afterwards. This event starts a chain-reaction of unexpected consequences and events, similarly to the aftermath of the atomic bomb dropping on Japan. Otomo confirms his obsession with destruction in an interview with Forbes magazine stating that “What's more, the grand plot for *Akira* is about an ultimate weapon developed during wartime and found during a more peaceful era. So, the accidents and story develop around that ultimate weapon” (Barder, 2017, para. 29).

Otomo is not the first to symbolize the catastrophe of the atomic bombings' destruction. *Godzilla* was the first to do it, “*Godzilla* (Gojira) is a film less about a giant dinosaur running amuck and more about the psychological recovery of a people trying to rebuild their cities, their culture, and their lives threatened by radioactive fallout.” (Brothers, 2011, p. 36). While it is easier to misunderstand *Godzilla*, Otomo made sure it would be very clear about what *Akira* represented. Reviewers quickly caught on to the clear inspiration behind *Akira* and its similarities to *Godzilla*. According to a review of the movie by Dave Kehr, he says that it is easy to recognize the outlines of the Japanese A-bomb anxiety that has been embedded in their popular culture from *Godzilla* onward,” (Bolton, 2014, p. 297). Ultimately, the fictional destruction of Tokyo, that led to the birth of Neo-Tokyo, mirrors the physical and emotional scars left on Japan after World War II.

Another major plot-point of this story is that our protagonist, Kaneda's best friend, Tetsuo, gets wrapped up in a secret government operation, ultimately making Tetsuo into a human-weapon hybrid. Leading into the next rhetorical critique, *Akira's* commentary on how dangerous and destructive unchecked technological advancement can be. While this section could be lumped into the previous section, I believe it deserves its own section. An issue Tetsuo faces is not being able to understand or control his incredibly powerful and destructive powers.

This leads Tetsuo into unintentionally spiraling out of control in multiple instances. It is speculated that this is a representation of how unchecked technological power represents how the world does not learn from its previous mistakes. Koo (2015) describes this best in her essay over *Akira*: The manifestation of unbridled power and the pushing of science too far in Tetsuo represent the failure of Japan to learn from its mistakes. It is perhaps this fear – the inability to learn from repeated self-inflicted disasters – and not necessary the fear of the disaster itself that plagues the minds of the Japanese ... following Tetsuo's transformation, he cries out for help realizing that he is no longer in control of the powers he had just previously flaunted” (para. 4).

This is Otomo commenting on how easily we can forget the traumatic past due to how blinded we are as a society by technological advancements, and we do not consider the consequences that arise, until it is too late. “Once they rebuild in Neo Tokyo however, these lessons are cast aside, and they easily give into their temptations for power through science again” (Koo, 2015, para. 4). Otomo is aware of the trauma, physical and emotional damage, and the years of healing to recover from an atomic blast. Through *Akira* we see that Otomo is fearful that we are doomed to repeat this catastrophe, as we have not fully learned from this mistake as a society.

The lasting effect of nuclear warfare is not the only post-war theme Katsuhiro Otomo illustrates in *Akira*. Otomo dives into the underbellies of Japanese society with commentary on the rebellious subcultures that were a product of post-war Japanese society. More specifically the Bōsōzoku, the infamous biker gangs of Japan (Princen, 2024). The Bōsōzoku started as seemingly just a motorcycle club but began “forming actual gangs with a hierarchical structure, customized bikes, and a unique fashion style which became the hallmark of the gangs” (Princen, 2024, para. 6). This quote perfectly encapsulates Kaneda’s biker gang we are introduced to in the

opening scenes of the movie. While this may seem like a speculation of Otomo's imagination, these gangs were in-fact real and ran rampant in Japan. This was especially an issue while Otomo was creating *Akira*, "in reality, biker gangs really did roam the streets of Tokyo en masse in the early '80s when Katsuhiro Otomo began conceptualizing *Akira*, and they were just as intimidating as the manga and the movie depict" (Schupp, 2018, para. 2). In the film, these biker gangs ran the streets violently and with an iron fist, to the point it is an exaggeration. Yet, Otomo might have played down the bikers in his film, because apparently:

During the 1980s, the National Police Agency of Japan estimates that membership for bōsōzoku gangs were more than 40,000 nationwide. ... They also frequently clashed with normal citizens and police, causing noise violations with their heavily modified rides, damaging property, and sometimes resorting to full-scale riots (Schupp, 2018, para.8).

Heavily modified rides, clashing with citizens and police, damaging property, and rioting. These are all scenes we see during the film as Kaneda and his gang fly through the city on their bikes. I knew of the bōsōzoku before this paper but never made a connection with *Akira* until now. These biker gangs are a direct descendent of post-war Japan and the American occupation of Japan. The first bōsōzoku riders were Kamikaze pilots returning after World War II that never got the honorable death they expected. After the war ended, the American occupation of Japan is how the western side of the bōsōzoku emerged, with greaser and American biker culture gaining popularity. (Schupp, 2018). These rebellious and violent subcultures can only be traced back to post-war Japan, a fitting theme for Otomo to incorporate in *Akira*.

Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* is the gold-standard when it comes to science-fiction and dystopian storytelling. *Akira* presents itself as powerful critique of the danger and uncertainty of unchecked technological advancement, the sheer power of destruction nuclear warfare brings,

the lasting scars left by World War II in modern, post-war Japan, and the deeply rooted feeling of alienation felt by the post-war Japanese society. Through a deliberate and intricate narrative, breath-taking and striking visuals, and deep understanding of post-war Japanese society, Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira*, confronts and challenges the audience to come face-to-face with the ethical dilemmas and consequences that arise from society's hunger for power and technological advancement.

Whether it is to educate the world on the destruction of the atomic bomb and the time it takes to truly re-build from an event like that, unchecked technological advancement which led to Tetsuo's horrifying transformation into a super-weapon, the haunting screams from the past that Neo-Tokyo chooses to ignore, or how the youth is being failed and neglected by society, and how damaging the youth's rebellious subcultures are as a direct result of the neglect. Still to this day in 2024, *Akira* manages to still be increasingly relevant to the issues we face as a society to this day. Today we are tackling these same issues whether it is the fast advancement of AI, or the tens of thousands in the world of nuclear bombs that could launch at the press of a button. We still face the problems depicted in Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira*. Luckily, *Akira* was not a Mayan calendar, or the world would have been close to ending 5 years ago. Ultimately, Katsuhiro Otomo manages to reflect on these societal issues in an intricate, beautiful, but cautionary story that is *Akira*.

### References

- Barder, O. (2017, May 26). *Katsuhiro otomo on creating 'akira' and designing the coolest bike in all of manga and anime*. Forbes.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/olliebarder/2017/05/26/katsuhiro-otomo-on-creating-akira-and-designing-the-coolest-bike-in-all-of-manga-and-anime/>
- Bolton, C. (2014). From ground zero to degree zero: Akira from origin to oblivion. *Mechademia: Second Arc*, 9, 295-315. <https://doi.org/10.5749/mech.9.2014.0295>
- Brothers, P. H. (2011). Japan's nuclear nightmare: How the bomb became a beast called "godzilla." *Cinéaste*, 36(3), 36-40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2024.2367264>
- Koo, A. (2015). *Japan's vision of the future*. Disasters and Rebuilding in Japan. Swarthmore.  
<https://www1.swarthmore.edu/library/exhibitions/japan/essays/vision1.php#:~:text=Film%20ed%20nearly%20half%20a%20century,man%2Dmade%20disasters%20to%20reoccur>
- Princen, G. (2024, April 20). *Bōsōzoku - The biker gangs of japan*. Yokogao.  
<https://www.yokogaomag.com/editorial/bosozoku-biker-gangs-of-japan>
- Schupp, R. (2018, December 11). *Japan's violent motorcycle gangs that influenced akira and anime history*. Tokyo Weekender.  
<https://www.tokyoweekender.com/entertainment/movies-tv/japans-violent-motorcycle-gangs-influenced-akira/>
- Taggart, E. (2022, May 9). *Why akira is still relevant more than 30 years later*. Linearity.  
<https://www.linearity.io/blog/akira/>