



Boom. Anime.

Frame from Cowboy Bebop

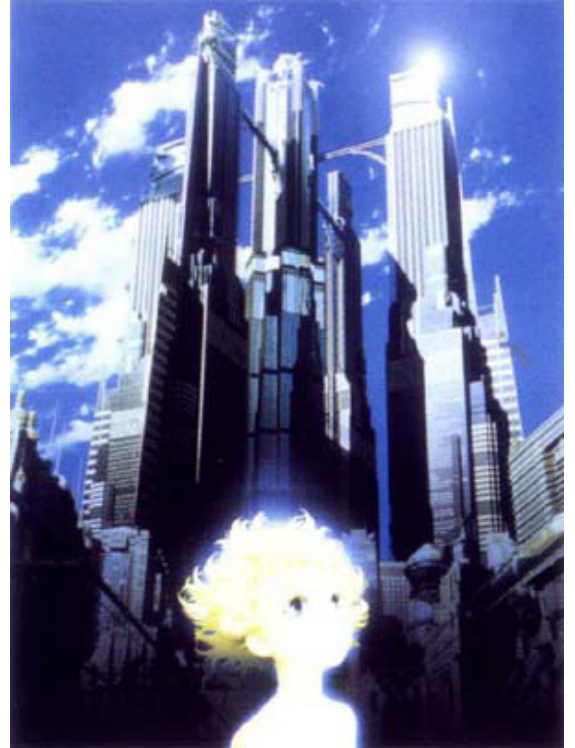


Carefully hidden from western eyes by virtue of the preconception that cartoons are for children, lies a vast universe of immensely rich and profound fantasies about life, death, all that's in between and beyond, time, existence, religion, art and architecture. From the earliest inceptions of Japanese animated narrative cinema a profound difference can be detected from its Western inspirations such as Disney and Warner Brothers. Increasingly tailoring for a mature audience, Anime rose in popularity while Japan's respected live-action cinema industry witnessed a steep decline in the post war era. Covering a wide array of genres and audiences, from sitcom, romantic comedy and children's fairy tales to horror, abstract artistic and a large amount of pornographic genres, Anime defies comparison with the western animated industry. Once accepted as a profound and potentially philosophical medium a study of Anime can yield a wealth of personalised interpretations on the more profound notions inherent in life, that which can only be imagined.... and drawn.

In the blackened and burnt out world of Akira or to the refined psychological manipulative city and infrastructure framework of Lain: Serial Experiments, a world of fantasy exists that defies binaries like good and bad, justice and crime, life and death and dystopia or utopia. Always centered on the human experience, Anime can give a profound meaning to im-



Neon Genesis Evangelion



Metropolis, the Anime

aged architecture as the backdrop, enabler or even generator of human life and experience.

Acknowledgement of intellectual capacity

Although evidence can be found of instances before the 1990's, it was in this era when Anime started to receive attention from academics and intellectuals. This was partly due to the television series Neon Genesis Evangelion (Gainax, 1996-1997) and the film for a younger audience, Princess Mononoke. While both catering to a younger audience, severe sub layers are present that can only be interpreted through deep analysis and application of theories concerning the history of Japanese culture, society and psychology. This led to an intensive study of Minamida concerning the intellectual heritage and evolution of Anime since its inception more than fifty years ago, starting with simple works such as Astro Boy. Susan Joliffe Napier writes¹:

“Anime representations of the human figure range across an extraordinary variety of types (and archetypes), implicitly promising a vast range of fictional identities for the viewer to revel in. The animated space becomes a magical tabula rasa on which to project both dreams and nightmares of what it is to be human, precisely as it transforms the human figure”

1 Napier, Susan Joliffe, Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke, 2001, p36



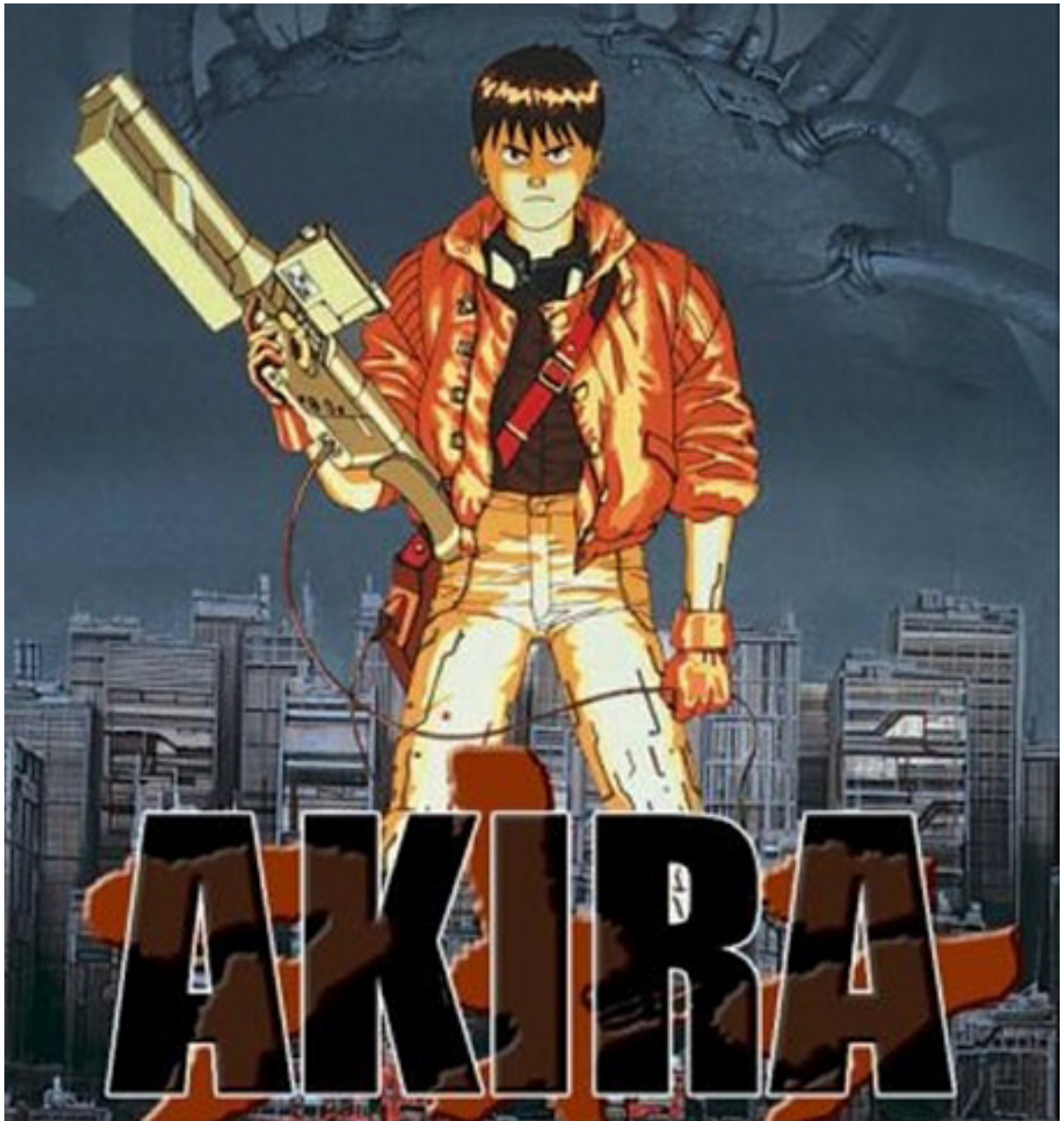
Hentai



Robo/Mecha: Gundam

Paul Wells suggests² that these kinds of metamorphoses might be the “constituent core of animation itself.” Latching on to cultural shared fantasies and several of japan’s subcultures might begin to unravel the backgrounds to pervasive themes throughout the medium such as for example the Robot/Mecha (Gundam) and Maho Shonen (magical girl) and even the boy- and girl-love themed Yuri and Yaoi sub-types. Even the pornographic types such as Hentai, are thematically and narratively complex, and have strong detectable roots in ancient Japanese culture, religion and literature.

2 ibid, p36



AKIRA

AKIRA, 1988, KATSUHIRO ÔTOMO >>

Although by far not the first Anime, nor the most profound, Akira has become the poster-film for the western perception of Anime, due to it being the first Japanese animated full feature film to be promoted and receive widespread attention in the west. Anime series and films are often preceded by a manga series, a comic which often sets the style, narrative and episode cuts for the anime entirely, equally so with Akira. Subsequently, the drawing style, story line and effects have become popular in modern Anime, and it can therefore be seen as an archetype of the industry.

“Kaneda is a bike gang leader whose close friend Tetsuo gets involved in a government secret project known as Akira. On his way to save Tetsuo, Kaneda runs into a group of anti-government activists, greedy politicians, irresponsible scientists and a powerful military leader. The confrontation sparks off Tetsuo’s supernatural power leading to bloody death, a coup attempt and the final battle in Tokyo Olympiad where Akira’s secrets were buried 30 years ago.”

- IMDb³

Akira takes place against a backdrop of a future destroyed city, a clear reference to the destruction of Heroshima an Nagasaki in the second world war. Urban chaos reigns, politi-

3 <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094625/>, May 11 2007



cal unrest is the order of the day, and bike gangs, one of which the main character Kaneda is a member, control the streets. The story unfolds as a complex relationship between scientific experiments conducted by the government, leading to the destruction of the city and an accident leading to the evolution of a young angry street kid called Tetsuo with immense psychokinetic powers, signifying the unstoppable power of the young generations and the struggle against the established order. As the story unfolds, Akira is revealed to be a 10 year old boy who accidentally destroyed the city due to the same experiments that have caused Tetsuo to undergo a similar metamorphosis, whose limbs were separated in separate containers below the city. A struggle between Kaneda and Tetsuo results in the death of various main characters, the revival of Akira and the escalation of the fight causing a renewed destruction of New-Tokyo (the second atom bomb?). Tetsuo's fate is uncertain as he is perceived to be dead, but a glow beyond the horizon suggests a third transformation into an omnipresent entity. The entity Akira's symbolic meaning is well summarised by an anonymous wikipedia writer as representing

“the ‘divine wind’ of orgiastic nuclear detonation, simultaneously feared and held in awe by power-hungry humanity. Wearing a perennial Buddha-like grin of misleading docility and rapturously glorified by expectant fanatics, he stands symbolic of “a greater power” that humans aspire to while stumbling through episodes of atrocity

in the clumsy upward climb of history — the film's climax set within the stadium thus befitting Olympian endeavour toward 'Faster, Higher, Stronger.'"⁴

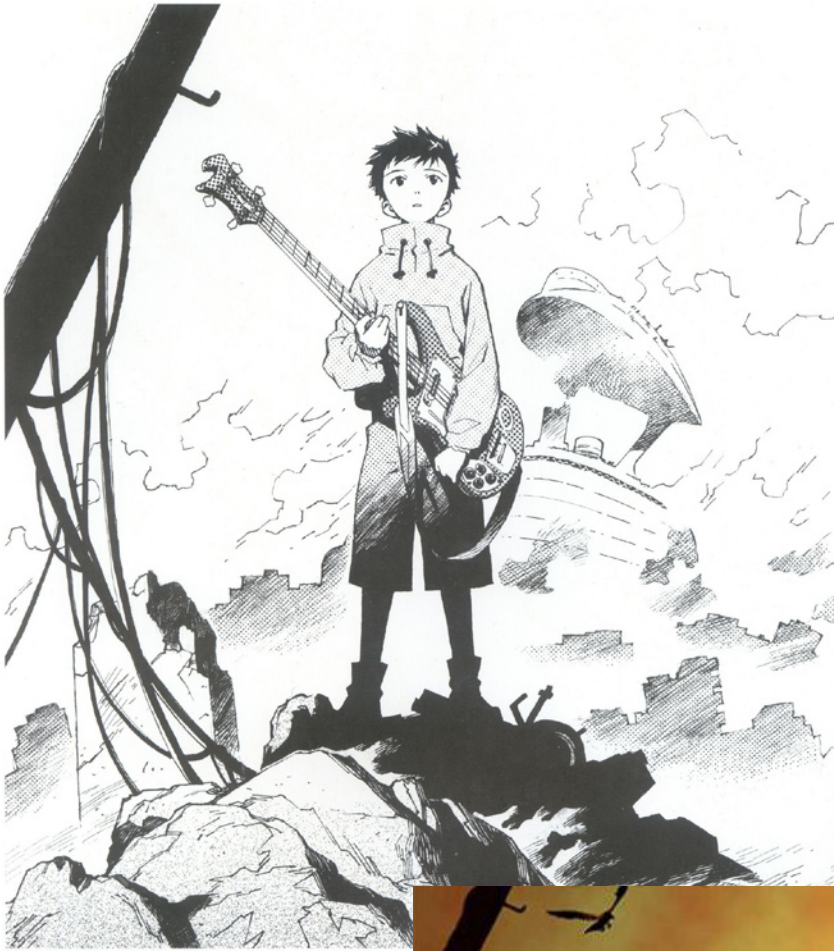
Akira leaves us with a rough sketch of an expanding explosion that suggests that time for change has already come, and that it might be violent.

4 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akira>, may 11 2007



LAIN: SERIAL EXPERIMENTS, DIR: RYUTARO NAKAMURA, 1998

A relatively unknown series that showcases the flexibility and originality of Anime at its best. In Lain an ostracised young school girl is flickering in and out of an alternate reality in which she is another person all together, unknown to herself. Sharing a theme with the famous movie Ghost in the Shell, technology and human existence are rubbing against each other, making the boundaries blur, dissipate, and vanish. With one foot in life, one foot in immortal omnipresence, existence for Lain becomes unstuck, delivering david lynch like psychotic episodes in which her personality folds over into itself and back again. Against a backdrop of a profoundly boring and uneventful city in Japan, brought in splendid abstract view by the cinematographics focusing on details of the mundane... a traffic light, electricity wires, city sounds, people rushing by. A father obsessed with his computers and work, always shown behind glasses that reflect the bright light from computer screens. Life in the modern city is portrayed as a constant murmur of visual and auditory static, from which there is no escape, with no purpose and no end. The city is the old material hierarchy in which life is solemn and useless. The information network is the source of the new life and a profoundly different existence.



FLCL: Manga



FLCL: Anime

FLCL, DIR: KAZUYA TSURUMAKI, GAINAX, 2000 >>

A series which has been described as “complete insanity”, the director of the famous Evangelion series weaves an intricate net of relations and events, not necessarily connected, and with only a remote semblance to narrative structure. It’s a coming of age story in one way, a reflection on society and the use of material objects in another, a love story in a third, a mysterious drama in a fourth way of looking at it, and those are just a few of the possible explanations. The city of the protagonist, a young boy, completely dissolves each day when it is covered in a thick layer of mist each day when the factory of Medical Mechanica (shaped like a giant iron) blows out its excess steam. While contemplating a daily steam eruption, the boy gives birth to a robot out of his forehead after being hit on the head with an electrical guitar running on petrol by an insane older woman on a vespa. And that’s just the beginning.

FLCL excels at persuading us that there are so many ways of thinking that we have not explored, and that reality should not be what we see, but what we imagine seeing. The city is nothing but a chance to reinvent oneself and continue exploring, using the tangible as a coat rack for our absurd ideas. To get to the truly new, we have to let go of all reason, only to get back to it later.



Frames from Cowboy Bebop: Knocking on heaven's door

COWBOY BEBOP, DIR: SHINICHIRO WATANABE, 2001 >>

This Anime departs from the majority of drawing styles and sets a whole new genre, where not overabundance and slapstick style physical humor is used as comic relief, but understated, dry sarcasm and cynicism that creates a level of involvement in the viewer that is hard to find in modern cinema. The cities in Cowboy Bebop are all on different worlds within a space faring universe, but humanity hasn't changed one bit, and neither have the essences of the cities. Instead of a casino city, there is a casino planet, even more abundant and extravagant than anything being imagined in Vegas. But it remains the gathering place of slaves to the game, shrewd loan sharks and naive couples on their honeymoon. Gothic churches stand amidst skyscrapers several hundreds of floors high, vertical transportation tubes and highway zones for flying personal transport are the standard convention of an imagined future, with all the rules of today. And yet, there is something profoundly different here. It is space. The vast emptiness between the hives of bustling activity. The cities, wether based on middle eastern typologies, western internationalism or the wild west, are bustling and highly active zones in an otherwise complete emptiness. How can you fill up the vastness of space? The life aboard a freighter going from port to port, the ocean and space become synonymous.



ABENOBASHI MAGICAL SHOPPING ARCADE, DIR: HIROYUKI YAMAGA, GAINAX, 2002 >>

A more conventional slapstick style anime, Abenobashi is created by the same studio that earlier brought to life giants of anime such as Neon Genesis Evangelion and FLCL.

Growing up in a shopping arcade is one thing, growing up in a shopping arcade built on strange grounds which are governed by four sacred spirits, one of which is a duck, without anyone knowing about it is another. After an accident where one of the spirits is destroyed, this for-all-ages Anime flickers in and out of alternate realities of... the shopping arcade. Taking nothing for granted, not the basic laws of physics, not the appearance family or friends, not the creation of the universe, each world functions with a whole new set of starting variables. Our world being just one of them, this series sheds an interesting light on the idea that everything is predetermined along certain rules, and we're just playing out the game. Of course there are certain degrees of freedom, but the interesting realisation in the series is that it's not so bad wanting to be where you know what the rules are. Living is then just enjoying the space within those rules that you are given.



HOWL'S MOVING CASTLE, DIR: HAYAO MIYAZAKI, 2004 >>

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