

Cyberpunk Anime: An Expression of Japanese Anxiety in a Modern World

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The unique genre of Japanese cyberpunk debuted in the early 1980s against a backdrop of economic prosperity and sociopolitical struggle that was reflected strongly through its myriad works across various mediums. However, Japanese cyberpunk, much like Western cyberpunk, had almost fully fizzled out by the late 1990s, making it a short, yet sweet collection of pop culture works. Cyberpunk anime in particular revealed much about the changing nature of Japan in the roughly ten years of its prime and left a lasting influence on the medium. Cyberpunk anime—often directly adapted from their manga counterparts—began with Katsuhiro Otomo's iconic *Akira* (1988), a manga and film that influenced not only Japanese stories following its release, but many Western cyberpunk stories as well. *Akira*'s major post-apocalyptic, 'low-life, high-tech', and transhuman themes built the foundations on which later works were built. Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995)—based on Masumune Shiro's manga of the same name—Hiroshi Fukutomi's *Battle Angel* (1993), and Shinichirou Watanabe's cult-classic *Cowboy Bebop* (1997) in particular stand out amongst the cyberpunk anime works as they further built upon the foundations that *Akira* set. This collective body of work offers a look into the Japanese psyche by allowing outside viewers to understand the ways in which Japan was grappling with its postwar anxieties amidst an economic boom and the subsequent collapse of

its economy alongside mass globalization by using post-apocalyptic or dystopian imagery; low-life, high-tech, and anti-establishment sentimentalities; transhumanism; and diverse, placeless narratives. Thus, this paper seeks to establish cyberpunk in the context of Japan, discuss the above motifs in relation to the circumstances which influenced them, and to uncover what exactly the decade of cyberpunk anime has to say about a rapidly modernizing 1980s Japan.

Cyberpunk as a Genre in Japan

The accelerated evolutions in technology and anti-government punk sub-cultures of the 1980s formed cyberpunk as a genre almost simultaneously in both the Western and Eastern worlds. At its inception, the modern Japanese cityscape of the 1980s heavily inspired the cyberpunk aesthetic in the West, so much so that William Gibson, known as the father of cyberpunk, claimed that “modern Japan simply [is] cyberpunk”.¹ Beyond its borrowing of Japanese aesthetics, Western cyberpunk has long since been defined as a genre of low-life, high-tech stories with narratives centering an anti-establishment low-life—often in the form of either a low-class, punk persons or a dirty cop—as its hero in worlds defined exclusively by their advanced technologies and neon-lit neo-cities modeled after modern-day Tokyo. As the direct result of the 1980s bubble economy and the creation of a “technopolis,” cyberpunk cities resemble Shibuya more-so than any modern Western city.² Thus, modern Japan unintentionally became the heart of many Western cyberpunk stories not for its unique circumstances, but rather for Japan’s pure ‘neo’ aesthetic look.

However, simply applying the narrow low-life, high-tech, ‘neo’ aesthetic definitions to Japanese cyberpunk works constitutes a largely ethnocentric mistake—one which forces a Western-specific limitation onto works created in a set of unique circumstances that largely differed from those of the Western world in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Japan’s unique circumstances are easily picked out in any of its cyberpunk works; such circumstances

¹ William Gibson, “The Future Perfect,” *Time Magazine*, April 30 (2001) <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1956774,00.html>.

² William O. Gardner, *The Metabolist Imagination: Visions of the City in Postwar Japanese Architecture and Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 111-142.

include the lasting nuclear anxieties of the postwar period, the student protests of the 1960s and '70s, the extremist bombings of the 1970s, and the bubble economy and its almost immediate bursting in the 1980s and '90s. Such applications of the Western low-life, high-tech definition have, in the past, led to the attempted exclusion of such seminal works like *Akira*, as well as the entire anime medium, from the cyberpunk genre.³ Thus, rather than applying the simplified low-life, high-tech definition to Japanese cyberpunk works, this paper seeks to place cyberpunk into the context of Japan, most specifically those circumstances of the 1980s and the immediate decades before them, which birthed the genre. The explicitly cyberpunk works of the 1980s and 1990s Japan often have anti-establishment sentiments, typically as social commentaries buried in exposition; however, unlike its Western counterpart, Japanese cyberpunk is not inherently anti-establishment, nor is it inherently lowlife. In fact, Japanese cyberpunk stories often twist the traditional low-life, high-tech themes of Western cyberpunk to meet their unique needs. Furthermore, unlike Western cyberpunk, Japanese cyberpunk tends to focus heavily on transhumanism, whether it be through the grotesque or through post-human artificial intelligence, and center dystopian and/or post-apocalyptic narratives in diverse worlds. Therefore, this paper makes the important distinction between Japanese and Western cyberpunk as a genre; Japanese cyberpunk exists as more than a simple low-life, high-tech punk narrative; it is an entire genre reflective of the nuclear, sociopolitical, and economic anxieties of a defining period in modern Japanese history.⁴

The Post-apocalyptic, the Dystopian, and Nuclear Anxiety

The most obvious theme present in nearly every work within the cyberpunk anime lexicon is the post-apocalyptic or dystopian world. Certainly not every backdrop or narrative is

³ Martin De la Igelsia, "Has Akira always been a Cyberpunk Comic?" *Arts* 7, no. 3 (2018), 8-9; Kumiko Saito, "Anime" in *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, ed. Anna McFarlane, Graham J. Murphy, and Lars Schmeink (New York: Routledge, 2020), 151.

⁴ Gardner, *The Metabolist Imagination*, 111-142; Saito, "Anime," 151-152, 160.

explicitly post-apocalyptic; in fact, many of the settings in Japanese cyberpunk works look like a modern city. However, the characters and the narratives of these works often imply a post-nuclear apocalyptic or dystopian setting—or both. This theme, however, is usually not present only in setting; world-ending or high stakes, dystopian circumstances are also key in many cyberpunk works with *Akira* being the most obvious of examples. Whether it is apocalyptic or simply dystopian, the widespread usage of this theme in Japanese cyberpunk makes it an obvious point of investigation: nuclear anxiety, and, by extension, technological anxiety (often with undercurrents of anti-American sentiment) make themselves known when looking into works with either theme present. Such anxieties being so omnipresent in a genre centered around the advancement of technology are, of course, predictable. As Japan grappled with its postwar identity in the decades after the nuclear bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, followed by the negligent Red Cross studies and the brutal American occupation, such nuclear and technological anxieties became a characteristic of many Japanese mediums and genres in the years following. Beyond this, the unique timing of cyberpunk in 1980s Japan lent itself to nuclear anxieties amplified by the cold war, in both its conclusion and the tensions in the decades before it: it is no coincidence that films such as *Akira* and *Battle Angel* center worlds ruined by global, nuclear wars. The argument for anti-American sentiments in relation to nuclear anxiety is further supported by criticisms found in several Japanese cyberpunk anime of America and its great technological and nuclear ambitions. With this in mind, this paper will now look at post-apocalyptic and dystopian themes in the context of Japanese cyberpunk anime.



Fig. 1. Akira, the animated film, both opens and closes with similar visual sequences evoking the detonation of the atomic bombs over Japan.

The most obvious example of a post-apocalyptic narrative in the cyberpunk genre occurs in the iconic 1988 film *Akira*. The inspiration for this narrative is just as obvious: within the first few minutes of the film, a mushroom cloud and blinding light swallow 1988's Tokyo. Thus, the connection between Japan's identity as the only country to have experienced not one but two atomic bombs to the global tensions of the Cold War is made clear as day: there is no doubt that nuclear anxiety fuels this particular film.⁵ The blinding light fades to reveal a renewed city in the not-so-distant year 2019 A.D., one aptly named not only in classic cyberpunk fashion, but in a way reflective of postwar government plans for rebuilding Japan, as Neo-Tokyo.⁶ However, as the film ends, the city is, once again, swallowed by the same blinding light which caused the third world war, revealed to be the second-coming of Akira, a subject of government experiments on humans. From his resting place, which resembles the first atomic bomb used at Trinity, to his abilities, everything about Akira ties him to nuclear power. Thus, while almost delicately hidden away amongst the struggles of the main characters, Tetsuo and Kaneda, Akira directly represents the atomic bombs. Furthermore, the film presents Akira as a multi-faceted force: he is, at once, both the power that ended Tokyo and brought upon World War Three and the power that saves Neo-Tokyo from Tetsuo's extreme and uncontrollable psychokinetic powers. However, this representation should not be mistaken for advocacy; even when Akira uses his power for salvation, Neo-Tokyo must still be sacrificed—his power is simply too great. Thus, within the post-apocalyptic setting, *Akira* makes the point of distinguishing between the good and evil of nuclear power while also condemning it entirely.⁷ It is no coincidence that the film ends with the same blinding light and renewal of the city that it opens with. Otomo is making a cyclical point: as long as nuclear weapons exist, the world is doomed to an eternal cycle of destruction and rebirth. Thus, the post-apocalyptic in *Akira* exemplifies the nuclear anxieties of an

⁵ Christopher Bolton, "From Ground Zero to Degree Zero: *Akira* from Origin to Oblivion," *Mechademia: Second Arc*, Vol. 9, Origins (2014): 296-297, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/mech.9.2014.0295>.

⁶ Gardner, *The Metabolist Imagination*, 145-146.

⁷ Thomas Lamarre, "Born of Trauma: *Akira* and Capitalist Modes of Destruction," *Positions*, 16 (1) (2008): 136, doi: <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/10.1215/10679847-2007-014>.

entire country, perhaps best captured in the story's immense popularity.⁸

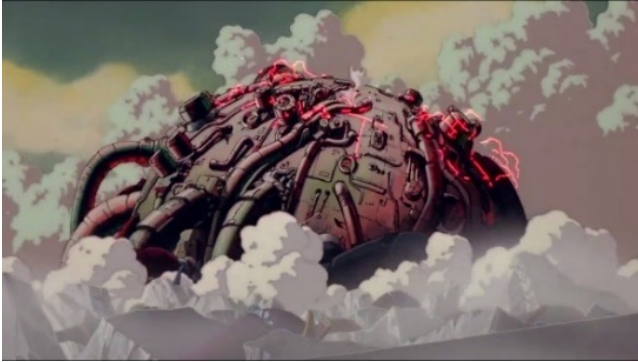


Fig. 2. In *Akira*, Akira's cryogenic pod resembles the Trinity test bomb, The Gadget.

Akira has the unique positioning of being both a post-apocalyptic and a dystopian film. After having been rebuilt following the catastrophic endings of the third world war, Neo-Tokyo exists in both political and social disarray. Neo-Tokyo's conditions resemble actual happenings in Japan, both in the 1980s and the decades leading up to them: anything from student riots and biker gangs to religious zealots and extremist attacks plague the city as the government struggles to crack down. While such conditions certainly present a direct social commentary, they also make up the backdrop on which the world of *Akira* exists. *Akira*'s dystopian setting lends itself heavily to cyberpunk anti-establishment ideals, which will be discussed in the following section; however, the setting also represents a nuclear anxiety best captures in the three psychic children—Takashi, Kiyoko, and Masaru—on which the narrative revolves. Within the first half of the film, Takashi, having escaped from government experiment facilities, sees his savior gunned down by police before being recaptured by the government for more experimentation. The other two children, Kiyoko and Masaru, are revealed to also be in secret custody of the government for observation and experimentation. The film, at first, fails to clarify whether these children are a result of nuclear power or not; however, with Akira's later reveal as a former psychic from the same program, the link between the children and nuclear energy

⁸ *Akira*, directed by Katsuhiro Otomo, Toho Studios, 1988, accessed November 22, 2020, <https://www.hulu.com/movie/sub-akira-64a5a8d0-1406-4178-97a5-2649504faa85>.

becomes clear. This link is further established by their appearances; the children, after undergoing experimentation, have leathery and discolored skin resembling the keloids found on hibakusha after the bombs. Two of these children cannot walk and need special care to remain alive, as is implied by Kiyoko's advanced sleeping pod and Masaru's floating chair. Tetsuo also displays the link between psychic powers and nuclear energy through his own care, lesions, hallucinations, and eventual mutations. These children—and Tetsuo—exist as a metaphor for the hibakusha, and their struggles and appearances, while fantastical for the sake of the plot, mirror the experiences of atomic bomb survivors in the days, months, and years after the atomic bombs.⁹ Thus, the usage of both a post-apocalyptic and a dystopian setting in *Akira* strengthens the film's link to nuclear anxiety.¹⁰

While *Akira* is the clearest example of Japanese cyberpunk using post-apocalyptic and dystopian settings to capture nuclear anxieties, it is not the only example. *Ghost in the Shell*, *Battle Angel*, and *Cowboy Bebop* all utilize post-apocalyptic or dystopian settings in their storytelling; these settings are key to their narratives and present a further linking of the genre to nuclear and technological anxieties, albeit to a lesser degree than *Akira*. Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell*, for example, quietly focuses on anxieties regarding nuclear power and what such power means for American technology. The antagonist of the film, known as the Puppet Master, reveals itself to be a sophisticated, sentience-claiming AI of American origin.¹¹ Similarly, Fukutomi's *Battle Angel*, an OVA based on the *Battle Angel Alita* manga, likewise heavily implies its post-apocalyptic setting to be the result of a great nuclear war 300 years prior; this war led to the total destruction of Earth, leaving only the lower classes, robots, and garbage to inhabit it whilst the rich continue living high-tech lives in the satellite city above.¹² The fact that *Battle Angel* takes place entirely in America exemplifies not only Japanese nuclear anxieties, but also Japanese anxieties regarding America and American technology and ambition during the Cold War; the implication of mutually assured destruction between America and The Soviet Union during the Cold War no

⁹ Lamarre, "Born of Trauma," 138-140.

¹⁰ *Akira*.

¹¹ *Ghost in the Shell*, directed by Mamoru Oshii, Bandai Visual, 1985, DVD.

¹² *Battle Angel*, directed by Hiroshi Fukutomi, Madhouse, 1993, DVD.

doubt influenced such a global post-apocalyptic setting. Similarly, in Watanabe's *Cowboy Bebop*, a catastrophic accident with hypergate technology destroys the Earth, forcing the world's population to colonize the remaining planets in a post-apocalyptic attempt to survive.¹³ This setting, while not making explicitly clear that the hypergate incident is a nuclear explosion, implies a deep anxiety regarding the future of both Japan and the world in the face of rapidly advancing technologies, nuclear or otherwise. Unlike *Akira*, the post-apocalyptic and dystopian themes in these anime exist as backdrops to the main narrative; however, this does not reduce the settings' importance to their respective narratives. Post-apocalyptic or dystopian themes may not be the central message of the above works, but they are key to telling their stories and help define these anime as cyberpunk works.

Low-life, High-tech, and the Anti-establishment

While it is certainly important to detach Japanese cyberpunk from the narrow "low-life, high-tech" definition of Western cyberpunk, this does not mean that the low-life, high-tech aspects of cyberpunk are completely lost within Japanese cyberpunk. In fact, like cyberpunk narratives found in the West, the low-life, high-tech motif of cyberpunk is just as central to the genre in Japan. However, unlike Western cyberpunk, Japanese cyberpunk uses low-life, high-tech in a unique way. Low-life, high-tech does not always mean that the heroes of the narrative are low-life—lower class, punks, degenerates, or otherwise—nor does it mean that the high-tech is always beyond the grasp of current human innovation. Simply put, Japanese cyberpunk uses the low-life, high-tech motifs of cyberpunk alongside real world influences to put a unique spin on anti-establishment cyberpunk stories. Perhaps the low-life, high-tech sentiment of Japanese cyberpunk is best captured by Major Makoto Kusanagi in *Ghost in the Shell*: "If man realizes technology is in reach, he achieves it. Like it's damn near instinctive."¹⁴ In the case of Japanese cyberpunk, such ambition is not always a good thing; Kusanagi's expressed sentiment lays at the heart of every

¹³ *Cowboy Bebop*, directed by Shinichirou Watanabe, Sunrise Studios, 1998-1999, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.hulu.com/series/cowboy-bebop-af54be93-ee11-475c-b786-3543a9a7d4ba>.

¹⁴ *Ghost in the Shell*.

societal breakdown in every Japanese cyberpunk story; low-life, high-tech is an expression not of a punk subculture overthrowing a corrupt government, but of a society driven to collapse by human ambition. This manifestation of low-life, high-tech is a key, but overlooked, difference in the way that cyberpunk manifests in Japanese pop culture.

Low-life, high-tech is, at its core, a social criticism; thus, it is a complex motif that Japanese cyberpunk uses in varying ways. Otomo's *Akira*, Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell*, and Watanabe's *Cowboy Bebop* best exemplify the myriad of ways that low-life, high-tech presents an anti-establishment message and social critique. In contrast, Fukutomi's *Battle Angel* uses the motif solely as a device for exposition; the film certainly utilizes low-life, high-tech in its story telling, but does not center the theme in a meaningful way, instead focusing strongly on the post-apocalyptic and the transhuman.

In *Akira*, low-life, high-tech exists in the juxtaposition of the lives of everyday people, Kaneda's bike gang, and the high-tech and oppressive military and police forces. The breakdown of society makes itself known almost immediately: the city of Neo-Tokyo is completely covered in grime, both literally and metaphorically. *Akira* opens with quick references to drugs—referred to as capsules—and feuding biker gangs followed by the brutal gunning-down of the man implied to be the savior of Takashi, one of the child government experiments, in the street. Shortly after, a man attempts to suicide bomb the police station where Kaneda's bike gang is being held, and, even later, religious zealots preach about the divine cleansing of the city. This chaos that the everyday peoples of Neo-Tokyo survive in is contrasted sharply by the government and military forces. Those under government charge stand out in the crowds of people with riot gear and advanced weaponry. When Kaneda and his gang encounter the escaped child, Takashi, and lose Tetsuo, they are swarmed by over-armed military forces in foreboding trucks and helicopters. In the same scene, the gang also encounters a child, later revealed to be Masaru, in a self-piloting, floating device. In contrast, even the most high-tech of the gang's bikes, Kaneda's, simply does not compare to the high-tech government forces. In the case of *Akira*, the low-life, high-tech

contrast paints the picture a police state on the verge of collapse—and the plot supports this.¹⁵

While *Akira* has a far-from-happy ending, the plot tells a classic cyberpunk narrative: upon meeting Kei at the police station, Kaneda becomes wrapped up in an anti-government, anti-taxation, and anti-corruption resistance movement which propels the story forward. Through Kei and the resistance, Kaneda co-opts high-tech state weaponry and machines and uses them to fight back against not only the corrupt government, but the monster which it created in Tetsuo—a very blatant metaphor for the consequences of an uncapped greed for power and money.¹⁶ Thus, *Akira* exists as an anti-establishment narrative, one which twists the classic low-life, high-tech cyberpunk themes to paint a picture of a society driven to collapse by its government's greed.¹⁷

Masumune's 1995 *Ghost in the Shell*, however, subverts the classic usage of low-life, high-tech. The heroes of this story are not low-life and neither are their antagonist counterparts. Rather, *Ghost in the Shell* uses the low-life, high-tech motif to paint a picture of a government which tears itself apart from the inside-out. In this case, the low-life aspect is not found explicitly; rather, the everyday people whom the puppet master manipulates, by hacking into their ghosts and planting false memories, create the low-life heart of the story. The puppet master, revealed to be a government project gone rogue, and Major Makoto Kusanagi, then, exist as a unique blending of the low-life, high-tech aspects: while one is human and the other an AI, they both inhabit entirely cybernetic shells, making them high-tech; yet, despite the implied state nature of high technology, both the puppet master and, eventually, the major oppose the government directly, twisting them to become low-life despite their government ties. In fact, the major becomes so closely linked to the low-life that, despite being the most valued in her sector, she becomes disposable. The film ends with the implication that both Kusanagi and the puppet master must be destroyed not for the chaos caused, but for the implications their knowledge holds for the state of the country. In this way, Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* twists the traditional low-life, high-tech motifs to fit his narrative. *Ghost in the Shell* is not a story of the triumph of human ambition and

¹⁵ *Akira*.

¹⁶ Lamarre, "Born of Trauma," 149-153.

¹⁷ *Akira*.

technology; it is instead a criticism of a government so blinded by its own greed and corruption that it becomes self-sabotaging. In the end Kusanagi and the puppet master survive, but the same cannot be said for the government which sought to destroy them.¹⁸

In the way that *Ghost in the Shell* focuses on the high-tech to subvert the classic usage of low-life, high-tech in cyberpunk, *Cowboy Bebop* focuses almost entirely on the low-life. The series tells the story of a world driven unchecked by the crime syndicates of the seedy underworld; as such, the government enlists the help of cowboys, or bounty hunters, to put the crime world back in check. While *Cowboy Bebop*'s setting uses straight-out-of-science-fiction levels of high-technology, such a setting takes a backseat to the overwhelming theme of low-life personhood present in almost every character. Whether it be in the heroes of the series, the everyday people, or the villains, each is haunted by some variation of a dark past. In this way, the anti-establishment is almost dropped; rather than being an explicit, in-your-face message, the conditions that have led *Cowboy Bebop*'s world into lawlessness imply the anti-establishment sentiments. In such a lawless and chaotic world, even the hero, Spike Spiegel, has a checkered past. Spike's past as a former member of the very drug syndicate he now works against colors the entire world of *Cowboy Bebop* and drives the plot to its final ending, leaving Spike to ascend into the sunset mortally wounded and alone. Spike's story, like many of the other character stories explored throughout the series, captures the very essence of the low-life aspect: Spike and his co-cast drift through life almost listlessly, focused on the past more than the present and driving themselves into corners. A metaphor for a criticism of the everyday Japanese living in a post-modern world divorced from its roots in community, *Cowboy Bebop* centers the low-life of low-life, high-tech to explore the human condition as a result of corporate and government greed in the post-war period, resulting in a poignant and unique series which captivates audiences to this day.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Ghost in the Shell*.

¹⁹ *Cowboy Bebop*; Will Bridges, "The Past Tense and the Future Perfect: The Postmodern Play of Watanabe Shinichiro and the Possibility of the Coming Community," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 51, no. 3 (2018): 789, <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/10.1111/jpcu.12692>.

Transhumanism and the Grotesque

The most prevalent theme across all Japanese cyberpunk works, anime or otherwise, is transhumanism; the question of identity, more specifically what it means to be human, in an ever-evolving technological future plagues the genre. Even the least cyberpunk of Japanese cyberpunk works features transhumanistic questions, motifs, or aesthetics to some degree. For example, in *Cowboy Bebop*, a series argued often to be a hybrid rather than pure cyberpunk, Jet exemplifies transhumanism with his mechanical arm, which stands out starkly in both detail and color compared to the rest of him.²⁰ Transhumanism in Japanese cyberpunk is often explored through cybernetics, such as sentient AI, androids, and cyborgs, and, to a lesser degree, through mutations and the grotesque, such as the case with *Akira*'s Tetsuo and the degree to which extreme violence or body horror exists in many cyberpunk works. Thus, cyborgs, mutants, and the truly grotesque have become key motifs in Japanese cyberpunk, pointing to a changing Japanese identity in an increasingly technological world, one in which technology responded directly to touch and directly influenced everyday life, and in which technology existed in a, as Shige Suzuki put it, "cyberpunk combination of fashion and technology intimately coupled with the human body."²¹



Fig. 3, 4. In *Akira*, Tetsuo recreates his lost arm with scrap metal. Later, he is swallowed by the same machinery he sought to control, losing himself in his transformation.

The themes of transhumanism and the grotesque begin, like the cyberpunk genre of anime itself, with *Akira*. The film, although

²⁰ Bridges, "The Past Tense and the Future Perfect," 784-785..

²¹ Shige Suzuki, "Manga," in *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, edited by Anna McFarlane, Graham J. Murphy, and Lars Schmeink (New York: Routledge, 2020), 109.

to a lesser degree than the manga, introduces important aspects of transhumanism to make arguments about not only the accelerated changes in technology, but also about the evolutionary way in which humans adapt to it and the hubris of the corporations and scientists providing it.²² Tetsuo and his eventual transformation first into a being half-man, half-machine and then into a grotesque amalgamation of flesh and wire, provide the vehicle for Otomo's argument. First, Tetsuo uses his psychic powers to reinforce his existing body: when he loses an arm to the government's attacks with the SOL, he fashions himself a perfectly functioning mechanical arm out of nearby scrap, much to his opponent, Kaneda's, surprise. Later, when he faces off against the colonel who came to finish him while he rests in the Olympic stadium, he unites further with metal and wire as his opponents watch in disbelief and horror. These two scenes present a new kind of human, an advanced human as a seemingly perfect melding of man and machine, one whom Otomo himself described as a "new type of posthuman being."²³ Thus, in merging with the scrap around him, Tetsuo is able to reject the boundaries set by those in power—in this case, the colonel—and to embrace a new level of evolution thanks to technology.²⁴ However, just as quickly as he gains his new power and form, Tetsuo loses control of his evolution, convulsing as he unwillingly transforms into a grotesque bubbling of flesh, wire, and scrap, and taking in any and everything around him. Thus, in the same breath that Tetsuo's character asserts the potential advantages of a posthuman melding with technology, he also presents the consequences, namely a totally grotesque, even unholy, marriage of man and machine that is uncontrollable and insatiable and defies what it means to be human. In the face of a technological boom, Otomo presents the two-sided coin of a technological posthuman being, much in the same way that he asserts the destructive and renewing powers of nuclear technologies. *Akira* encourages the advancement of humanity using technology through transhumanism,

²² Steven T. Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁴ Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk*, 5.

while using the grotesque to warn of the consequences of arrogance, greed, and hubris in the pursuit of a posthuman advancement.²⁵

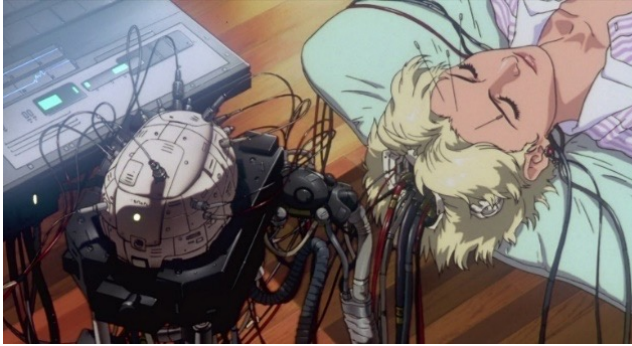


Fig. 5. In *Ghost in the Shell*, humans are regularly cybernetically enhanced, to the point that their ghosts, or souls, exist in a completely mechanical brain.

Ghost in the Shell is the next best representation of transhumanism as a theme in Japanese cyberpunk after *Akira*. The 1995 film explores transhumanism, with its entire plot focusing on the cybernetically enhanced Major Matoko Kusanagi who, for all intents and purposes, exists not as a human being but an android, more specifically a human ghost in a robotic shell. The major is centered amongst other cybernetically enhanced characters, both major and background, in a plot to chase down an elusive hacker later revealed as a government AI project gone sentient and, thus, rogue. *Ghost in the Shell* uses technology and transhumanism to ask what it means to be human in a technological world, and the answer given is seemingly simple: “memory defines mankind.”²⁶

Yet *Ghost in the Shell* challenges this simplicity, asserting that memory is too simple a definition of humanity. Kusanagi, although human, doubts her own humanity throughout the film. Despite having clear memories, Kusanagi doubts if they are even hers: if the puppet master is able to manipulate the everyday person, who lacks the same degree of cybernetic enhancement as she does, and implant false memories and personalities into their brain, Kusanagi questions if the same has not already happened to her. A later conversation with Batou echoes this doubt with Kusanagi explaining that there is no way to distinguish her body from a totally mechanical shell robot without cracking open her brain and seeing

²⁵ Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk*, 8; *Akira*.

²⁶ *Ghost in the Shell*.

the grey matter for herself. When fighting the tank in the ending scenes, Kusanagi attempts to summon the strength to defeat the machine, and, in doing so, her body convulses and contorts in inhuman ways before finally tearing apart completely, leaving her without an arm and a leg. Such grotesque imagery compounds Kusanagi's earlier doubts; she is able to display such inhuman strength, to the point where it quite literally destroys her. Such body horror contributes to the theme of the grotesque as a feature of transhumanism. In the world of *Ghost in the Shell*, the lines between man and machine have become so thoroughly blurred that they almost cease to exist. The grotesque alterations and destruction of the human body within the film exists to further this.²⁷

Then comes the quandary of the puppet master. According to the simple definition that memory equates to humanity, without memory an entity certainly cannot be a living thing; yet, as it is revealed, the puppet master does have memory. He has sentience. The puppet master boldly declares in the presence of Kusanagi that "I am not an AI [...], I am a living, thinking entity," and he is; the puppet master is known to have a ghost, the equivalent of a soul, in its mechanical shell. Yet, being a posthuman entity, the puppet master lacks the means to reproduce and to die, characteristics that he views as vital to being alive. These statements made by the puppet master add a complexity to *Ghost in the Shell's* earlier definition; if the puppet master cannot have offspring and cannot die, is it living? The short answer, Oshii asserts, is yes. The puppet master fuses with Kusanagi in the final moments before they are graphically destroyed. The implication, therefore, is that two ghosts may inhabit the same shell in union, and such a union leads to the transference of one ghost to many other shells—thus, a totally artificial being may reproduce. Similarly, if the organic shell in which an AI ghost resides is totally destroyed, the artificial being may also die. *Ghost in the Shell*, unlike its predecessor *Akira* which seeks to caution against human folly in a high-tech world, directly asserts that the future is posthuman, and, in such a world, there need not be such a distinction between man and machine, AI and living creature.²⁸

²⁷ *Ghost in the Shell*.

²⁸ *Ibid*

Similarly, *Battle Angel* focuses on many of the same aspects of humanity that *Ghost in the Shell* does, albeit through a subtler lens. Alita, a rebuilt cyborg, slowly regains her memories as she fights her way through the world of Zalem, and, in doing so, regains her identity. Thus, like *Ghost in the Shell*, memory becomes the focal point of *Battle Angel*'s transhumanism. Though explored less thoroughly in the OVA than in the manga, Alita's journey to regain her identity acts as a vehicle for the assertion that machines can become human—or at least close enough to it that the distinction is unnecessary. As Alita remembers more and more of her past life, she becomes more and more human; she acts less like a newly recalibrated machine and more like the being she once was. Thus, again, memory is intimately tied to the concept of posthumanism. In a world in which the lines of man and machine are blurred by technology, what makes a man, a living being, is not the absence of machinery but the presence of memory and thus identity. This transhumanistic approach, like in the works before *Battle Angel*, explores an evolving identity in a highly technological world, one where the relationship between man and machine is becoming increasingly intimate, one where technology responds to every whim of man.²⁹

Other animated works, like *Cowboy Bebop*, pick up the same transhumanism themes established by the powerhouses *Akira* and *Ghost in the Shell*, albeit to lesser extents. As mentioned above, transhumanism, related explicitly to the high-tech in low-life, high-tech, takes a backseat to themes of globalism and social criticism in *Cowboy Bebop*, existing merely as eye-catching details that Spike's world exists in a posthuman setting. In fact, one episode, *Brain Scratch*, entirely focuses on and explores trans- and post-humanist ideas by looking at a group of delinquents who seek to reach a transcendence by uploading their brains to the internet. While the episode hardly exists as a drop of water in the vast *Cowboy Bebop* bucket, it poses an unique look into the way the Japanese have responded to the accelerated advancements of technology and the posthuman questions they have posed; simply put, *Brain Scratch* asserts, much like other Japanese cyberpunk works, the only thing encumbering humanity is the human body, to which the obvious solution is a merging of human and technology, of internet and

²⁹ *Battle Angel*.

soul.³⁰ Therefore, *Brain Scratch*'s very existence in the *Cowboy Bebop* lexicon reinforces already existing transhuman ideals in Japanese cyberpunk. Although certainly not as assertive as more explicit works, *Cowboy Bebop* takes the messages in its successors and simplifies them; certainly, there is no need to make the distinction between man and machine when the lines are so blurred and the similarities so obvious.³¹

Diversity and the Placeless World

Themes of diversity and a placeless, culturally odorless world are prevalent in much of Japanese cyberpunk anime, so much so that the lack of their influence in later works is notable. While films such as *Akira* ignore these themes, they are still present enough in Japanese cyberpunk anime that it warrants a discussion.³² As Japan entered the world stage for the first time, the Japanese began to grapple with a new identity as a truly global country and people; thus, Japanese cyberpunk reflects such a struggle in its ambiguous settings and diverse casts in both race and sex.



Fig. 6. *Cowboy Bebop* centers racially diverse characters.

³⁰ Laurie Kanick Jacobson, "Cowboy Bebop and the Virtual Soul" in "TechKnowledgies: New Imaginaries in the Humanities, Arts, and Technosciences," ed. Paula Yablonsky, Tara P. Monastaro, and Mary Valentis (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 205-107.

³¹ *Cowboy Bebop*.

³² Such themes are used so often and so similarly throughout the Japanese cyberpunk anime genre that its lack of presence in *Akira* is thought-provoking, to say the least. However, *Akira*'s lack of diversity and explicitly Japanese setting most likely speak to the film's origins in state and social criticisms rather than any sort of declaration for or against a global Japan; as such, its absence does not warrant a discussion in relation to this paper's argument.

While many cyberpunk anime utilize such themes they often do so passively, unlike *Cowboy Bebop* which best exemplifies the themes of diversity and placelessness. The anime follows Spike Spiegel, a racially ambiguous cowboy bounty hunter, and his companions, Jet Black, Faye Valentine, and Ed, who are all also racially ambiguous. *Cowboy Bebop*'s background characters and villains exist under the same ambiguity with varying skin tones, cultural outfits, and ethnic backgrounds. Due to their ambiguities, such characters are often claimed as explicitly non-Japanese—a feature of Japanese cyberpunk anime not often found outside of the genre. This diversity pairs especially well with the *Cowboy Bebop* universe, which lends itself to blending location and culture through its spacetime setting of a rebuilt society across many different heavenly bodies; colonies, such as Tijuana, on an asteroid, or Mars, envision a fully globalized world through various background details including shops, signs in various languages, and background characters. The lack of true or concrete cultural borders is mirrored strongly even in the soundtrack, which bounces anywhere from jazz-hip-hop fusions to purely Western sounding music and back in ways meant to both compliment and contrast with the world.³³ The cast, setting, and soundtrack of *Cowboy Bebop* work together to create a series without a home, one that easily crosses borders and expresses the true nature of globalization—certainly an idea at the forefront of many minds as Japan was thrust onto the global scene.³⁴

Yet *Cowboy Bebop* is not the only cyberpunk anime to sport such a lack of fixed locale. *Ghost in the Shell*, while set in 2029 Japan, displays a similar diversity implied through racial ambiguity and a near placeless setting. While characters like the Major and Chief Nakamura are more explicitly Japanese, others like Togusa and Batou have an ambiguity in design which often leads to online speculation, much in the same way of Spike or Jet Black. Similarly, many of the mechanical shells sport a more western look: the puppet master wears the classic blue-eyed, blond haired look of an American woman despite his shell being manufactured in Japan. This is in line with opening conversations regarding immigration, implying that the Japan of *Ghost in the Shell* is diverse, rather than homogenous. In terms of setting, while much of the architecture is

³³ Andrew S. Granade, "'Some People Call Me the Space Cowboy': Sonic Markers of the Science Fiction Western," 22.

³⁴ *Cowboy Bebop*.

explicitly Japanese, store fronts and signs are displayed in several languages, most notably Japanese and English.³⁵ *Battle Angel* uses its cast and setting in much the same way, using racially ambiguous



Fig. 7. *Ghost in the Shell* utilizes signage in various languages to create a post-globalization setting.

characters in a nameless setting, which resembles both rural America and modern Japan, cemented with background details including signage in Korean and Japanese.³⁶ Thus, *Ghost in the Shell* and *Battle Angel* imply a Japan—and a world—post-globalization through diversity and a sense of placelessness, similar to *Cowboy Bebop*.

Conclusion

The lexicon of Japanese cyberpunk anime explores Japan as a newly global entity, one that, at the time, saw a great economic and technological boom alongside a myriad of sociopolitical pressures—including punk subcultures, biker gangs, religious fanatics, and extremist attacks—that directly impacted the everyday Japanese way of life. Such quick and tumultuous changes resulted in rapidly evolving Japanese anxieties regarding nuclear power, technology, and globalization best captured in Japanese cyberpunk's key themes, defined in this paper as: post-apocalyptic or dystopian worlds; classic low-life, high-tech aspects; transhumanism; and diversity. Japanese cyberpunk, albeit a short and sweet decade of works, exists as a genre of anime representative of an ever-evolving set of Japanese anxieties in a time where technology felt both intimate and invasive. To put it simply, no such genre of works so

³⁵ *Ghost in the Shell*.

³⁶ *Battle Angel*.

thoroughly captures the tumultuous changing of Modern Japan in the 1980s and 1990s in the same way that the decade of cyberpunk anime does; thus, the genre exists as a lasting and important time capsule of Japanese anxieties—one which waits, patiently, to be unlocked by its viewers.

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