CYBERPUNK AND STEAMPUNK ÖTOMO KATSUHİRO'S CAUTİONARY TALES OF DESTRUCTION AND SALVATION

Cyberpunk ve Steampunk: Ōtomo Katsuhiro'nun Yıkım ve Kurtuluş Üzerine Uyarıcı Anlatıları

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Abstract

Ōtomo Katsuhiro 大友克洋 (born 1954) as a visionary creator whose manga (comics) publications have garnered immense acclaim, inspiring a wide range of adaptations into live-action and animated movies. Despite his prolific career as a manga artist, Ōtomo has directed only two animated movies – *Akira* (『アキラ』, 1988) and *Steamboy* (『スチームボーイ』, 2004) –, each of which has profoundly transformed the landscape of visual cultures. The study undertakes a critical examination of these seminal works, dissecting their dramaturgic architectures, narrative structures, character designs, and aesthetic-ideological frameworks. As pioneering contributions to cyberpunk and steampunk, respectively, both animation movies offer powerful meditations on the rebellion against established norms and society's relentless chase of progress. At their core, they intertwine narratives which challenge the dominance of older generations while reflecting Japan's collective trauma from the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in parallel with the nation's unyielding drive for technological advancement pursued by a ruthless elite. Through intricately crafted worlds and richly nuanced characters, *Akira* and *Steamboy* engage with themes of technological progress versus human alienation, generational and socio-political divides, and the omnipresent metaphor of nuclear peril. These thematic explorations are set within a dystopian artistic vision which contemplates the necessity of healing through self-responsibility. As landmark achievements in animated cinema, both animation movies stand out not only due to their technical innovation but also due to their profound and enduring portrayal of the human condition amid rapid change.

Keywords: Japanese animation, dystopia, technological hubris, alienation, despair, inter-generational conflict

Öz

Ōtomo Katsuhiro 大友克洋 (1954 doğumlu), manga (çizgi roman) alanındaki üretimleriyle geniş çapta takdir kazanmış, eserleri çok sayıda canlı aksiyon ve animasyon film uyarlamasına ilham vermiş vizyoner bir yaratıcıdır. Oldukça verimli bir manga sanatçısı olmasına karşın Ōtomo, yalnızca iki animasyon filminin yönetmenliğini üstlenmiştir: *Akira* (『アキラ』, 1988) ve *Steamboy* (『スチームボーイ』, 2004). Bununla birlikte, bu iki eser de görsel kültürlerin seyrini derinden dönüştürmüştür. Bu çalışma, söz konusu başat yapıtları eleştirel bir perspektifle incelemekte; dramaturjik kurgularını, anlatı yapılarını, karakter tasarımlarını ve estetik-ideolojik çerçevelerini ayrıntılı biçimde çözümlemektedir. Sırasıyla siberpunk ve steampunk türlerinin öncü örnekleri olarak *Akira* ve *Steamboy*, yerleşik normlara karşı başkaldırı ile toplumun ilerleme arzusuna yönelik bitmek bilmeyen tutkusuna dair güçlü düşünsel açılımlar sunmaktadır. Her iki film de, yaşlı kuşakların tahakkümünü sorgulayan anlatıları, Japonya'nın Hiroşima ve Nagazaki'ye atom bombası atılmasından kaynaklanan kolektif travmasıyla iç içe geçirirken; acımasız bir elit tarafından yönlendirilen teknolojik ilerleme idealini de eleştirel biçimde yansıtmaktadır. İncelikle inşa edilmiş dünyalar ve çok katmanlı karakterler aracılığıyla *Akira* ve *Steamboy*, teknolojik ilerleme ile insani yabancılaşma arasındaki gerilimi, kuşaklar arası ve sosyo-politik bölünmeleri ve nükleer tehlikenin sürekli varlığını simgesel bir düzlemde ele almaktadır. Bu tematik sorgulamalar, öz-sorumluluk yoluyla iyileşmenin gerekliliğini düşünen distopik bir sanatsal vizyon içerisinde konumlandırılmaktadır. Animasyon sinemasının kilometre taşları olarak bu iki film, yalnızca teknik yenilikleriyle değil, aynı zamanda hızlı dönüşüm koşulları altında insanlık durumunu derinlikli ve kalıcı bir biçimde betimlemeleriyle de öne çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar Keliemeler: Japon Animasyonu, Distopya, Teknolojik Kibir, Yabancılaşma, Umutsuzluk, Kuşaklar Arası Çatışma.

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INTRODUCTION: ŌTOMO KATSUHIRO AND HIS ANIMATED VISIONS

Largely celebrated for his manga (Japanese comics) writings which have served as inspiration for numerous adaptations into neighbouring media such as live-action and animated cinema, Ōtomo Katsuhiro 大友克洋 (born 1954) has directed solely two animation movies which, each of them in its own way, have revolutionized the framework in which visual cultures operate. This study explores the multiple layers of Ōtomo's two animation movies by critically observing their dramaturgic architectures, narrative structures, character designs as well as aesthetic and ideological parameters: seminal pieces within the cyberpunk respectively steampunk genres, intertwining a narrative of rebellion against older generations and society's obsession with progress, both *Akira* (1988) and *Steamboy* (2004) equally reflect Japan's unresolved trauma from the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and its population's relentless drive for technological advancement, under the leadership of a ruthless elite (Bailey, 1996; Mason/Caiger, 1979; McClain, 2002). Through its richly detailed narratives and complex characters, *Akira* and *Steamboy* delve into critical themes such as technological progress versus human alienation, the generational and socio-political divide, the metaphor of nuclear danger, framing these tropes within an artistic investigation of dystopia and the necessity of healing through self-responsibilization. Moreover, the animation movies explore themes of violence, rebellion, and the dangers of unchecked technological progress. At the same time, *Akira* and *Steamboy* offer visions of healing, suggesting that both individuals and society must confront their traumas in order to move forward, thus standing out as groundbreaking achievements, not only for their technical brilliance but also for their profound investigation of the human condition in a rapidly changing world.

Previous research on Japanese animation releases has focused mainly on theoretical explanations of box-office success and positive critical appraisal, and could be divided into two categories of writings grouped around two paradigms situated at diametrically opposed ends of the Japan-related scholarship: what I would label the "Lamarre" paradigm and the "Napier" paradigm. On the one hand, scholars such as Thomas Lamarre, in his in its own ways seminal work *The Anime Machine* (2009), argue that Japanese animation (to be differentiated from *anime* アニメ, which is one of its sub-categories) operates within a "postmedium realm" , in which the traditional constraints of live-action and animated cinema are overcome by new digital technologies and hybridized forms of story-telling. Lamarre's concept of the "animetic interval" (Lamarre, 2009) refers to the space between frames in animation and thus aligns with Deleuze's time-image, crucial to his idea of postmedia, as this interval creates a space for multiple temporalities and perspectives, allowing the animation work to operate in a postmedia environment in which traditional cinematic rules do not apply: e.g., Studio Ghibli's animation movies, particularly in their use of both traditional cel animation and digital technology, exemplify this postmedia condition, with their liquefaction and permeability of the boundaries between media forms. On the other hand, researchers such as Susan Napier in her equally influential *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle* (2005), assert that Japanese animation, including Studio Ghibli's animation movies, while innovative, remain rooted in a more traditional cinematic and narrative structure, particularly in their focus on character development and moral clarity: e.g., while Studio Ghibli's animated releases may reflect some aspects of theoretical considerations, postmedia among others, they memorably retain a commitment to story-telling which resists the full deterritorialization of media forms (Napier, 2005). Furthermore, Western theories, postmedia included, may not comprehensively account for the ways in which Japanese media is embedded within locally anchored traditional cultural practices and values: as the analysts in the "Napier paradigm" explain, Japanese animation, for example, often draws on traditional Japanese aesthetics and narrative forms, such as *mono no aware* (もののあわれ, the beauty of impermanence or the "pathos of things" as it is commonly translated; Keene, 1993; Sansom, 1952) and Shintō animism, which inevitably complicate the notion of postmedia as a purely rhizomatic and deterritorialized-decentralized form of media, rather suggesting that Japanese animation operates at the intersection of modernity and tradition. Ultimately, the strongest critique to Western theories and their relation to Japanese animation materializes as the fact that they have been developed in the Western context, most recently postmodernism, which may not fully account for the specificities of Japanese media and cultural history: as Iwabuchi (Iwabuchi, 2002) and Allison (Allison, 2006), among few others, indicate, Japan's media culture is shaped by its position within global capitalism, with local and international forces constantly negotiating and reconfiguring cultural forms, so that it might appear that Japanese media operate differently than in the West, being more directly tied to processes of commodification and globalization.

Therefore, this investigation approaches theories from the perspective of their real-life relation to Japanese animation as reflected in two of the most iconic releases of the animated universe in the past 30 years: throughout this study, I explore the relevance of theoretical elaborations to Japan's late modernity and, more specifically, to Japanese animation as brought forth by the two animation movies *Akira* and *Steamboy*, emphasizing the nuanced ways diverging from Western media theories and manifesting within Japan's unique historical-geographical context while simultaneously challenging Western theories of postmodernity – grasped as a thought movement, not as temporal delineation, which is

employed as "late-modern" and encompasses the time-frame since the end of the Cold War at the beginning of the 1990s. Thus, in this paper, *Akira* and *Steamboy* are not explored through the lens of Western theories, but rather Western theories are contextualized through their positioning within the framework of Japanese animation as exemplified by two of its most impactful – even though not necessarily most popular – releases.

Methodologically, I draw on more than 20 years of empiric-phenomenological fieldwork on mass media such as (live) theater, animation and cinema, both in Japan and globally. The phenomenological experience is socio-culturally contextualized, emulated in animation as a discursive medium and a performative display of an authentic self and resistance against conformity, uniformity and the alleged superiority which comes from their association, hence striving to attain the highest level of existential transcendence. This refers to the fact that consumerist strategies visible in the Japanese society of late modernity turn out to be plain symptoms of a forever postponed confrontation with the individual reality, and not a reliable solution in terms of personal fulfillment and/or social cohesion. I observe the multiple layers of animated cinema as representative of global mass-media, caught in the stress-ratio between arts and mainstream media, embedded in bureaucratic structures of administration and self-organization such as release politics, the economic supervision of brand-related consumption, the socio-cultural management of producers and consumers, as well as the products themselves and their meta-narrative concatenations. The sources consist of extensive fieldwork with long-term participatory observation and empirical data-collection resulting from archive research of press-releases and informal discussions with producers, viewers, critics as well as additional consumers of products of popular culture, both locally and internationally located. This complex endeavor allowed unexpected insights into the mechanisms of production, consumption, perception and processing of media phenomena in Europe, USA and Japan. Taking into account the fact that the global media industry is extremely volatile and almost painful in its vivacious superficiality with a calculated momentary impact on audiences, the longevity of specific cinema works, live-action or animated, throughout decades is a powerful reminder that determination, hard-work and persistence in pursuing an ideal one firmly believes in are worthy assets in the hierarchy of human values, although not always forthrightly advertised as such.

The following sections present ethnographic examinations of *Akira* and *Steamboy*, which are analyzed through the conceptual framework of the "theoretical illumination", understood as a philosophically motivated perspective on the world – an intellectual counterpoint to media artifacts. Within this context, the animated medium emerges as a dramaturgical pretext for sensitively exploring the "human condition", with particular attention to its intrinsic tensions and rewards. Frontally confronting humanity's shortcomings not for the sake of self-inflicted shame and guilt but for the constructive nurturing of sustainable, multi-layered solutions for the future, has probably never been more urgent than in recent years – as Ōtomo Katsuhiro's animated oeuvre reminds us, unless we want to repeat the mistakes of the past, we must first acknowledge those choices as wrong – or perhaps the only available under the given circumstances – and decide upon new avenues of development ahead.

Akira (1988): A cyberpunk vision of dystopia, rebellion, and unresolved traumas

Akira 『アキラ』 (1988), directed by Ōtomo Katsuhiro, stands as one of the most significant works of animation in the history of global cinema and as a landmark in Japanese animated corpus. Not only does it represent the artistic heights of Japanese animation or anime, a sub-genre of Japanese animation with specific characteristics, incipient by mid-1970s and reaching a climax by mid- to late 1990s, but it also marks a watershed moment in science-fiction. An adaptation of Ōtomo's own eponymous manga published between 1982 and 1990, *Akira* combines elements of dystopian futures, cyberpunk aesthetics, and intricate political commentary while serving as a metaphorical reflection of the socio-political anxieties which gripped Japan during the post-WWII era, as well as the international concerns about technology, youth rebellion, and nuclear devastation. A cornerstone of the cyberpunk genre, which flourished in the 20th century, characterized by its portrayal of high-tech, low-life futures, *Akira*'s setting in Neo-Tokyo appears as a quintessential cyberpunk environment, filled with towering skyscrapers, neon-lit streets, and an overwhelming sense of decay. The genre itself, rooted in works like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), focuses on the interface between advanced technology and social collapse, often featuring disillusioned characters who are alienated from both the human and technological worlds: in *Akira*, this is epitomized by the two protagonists, Kaneda Shōtarō and Shima Tetsuo, whose lives are shaped by the gritty, violent landscapes of Neo-Tokyo.

More importantly, the utilization of cyberpunk aesthetics in *Akira* transcends merely stylistic choices and expands towards encompassing a sharp yet discrete critique of the rapid technological advancements in Japan during the 1960s, often referred to as the "Japanese economic miracle". The skyscrapers of Neo-Tokyo symbolize both the triumphs and failures of this rapid modernization, as underneath the city's technological veneer lies an undercurrent of social disintegration, corruption, and youth delinquency, bitterly implying that technological progress has not led to human upgrade and instead the benefits of technology are accessible only to a privileged few, while the rest of society languishes in poverty, violence, and never-ending cycles of dysfunction – as clearly depicted in the animation movie (see Sakai, 2022;

Yamanouchi/Sakai, 2003; Yoshino, 1992). Thus, *Akira*'s futuristic settings and cutting-edge technology are projected on the prevailing corporate and governmental corruption, in parallel with the degradation of the human experience. Set in the aftermath of World War III, the animation movie's Neo-Tokyo is a sprawling, neon-lit metropolis exemplifying the cyberpunk aesthetics, in which high-tech developments co-exist with widespread decay, social disparity, and urban violence, while the city's architecture, with its towering skyscrapers and ruined slums, mirrors the collapse of order and the breakdown of human connections, a hallmark of dystopian worlds. Moreover, *Akira*'s cyberpunk ethos is more profoundly embodied in its exploration of technological advancements gone wrong, particularly through government experiments on children with psychic abilities: these experiments not only represent the dystopian obsession with controlling human potential through science but also raise questions about the ethical limits of technological progress (see Gerbner/Siefert/Fisher, 1989). In *Akira*, technological development emerges not as an empowering force for humanity, but as an alienating evil negatively impacting individuals, reducing them to mere instruments of power. For example, Shima Tetsuo, one of the animation movie's central characters, undergoes a transformation fueled by his psychic abilities, symbolizing the destructive potential of uncontrolled technological and human advancement: his metamorphosis into a being of immense psychic power is both a literal and metaphorical manifestation of technological alienation, as he loses his humanity in the process of gaining control over technology.

Dystopia and human fragility

Dystopian themes pervade *Akira*, presenting a society teetering on the edge of implosion, prefaced by Neo-Tokyo having been built on the ruins of the old Tokyo, destroyed in a cataclysmic event reminiscent of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of WWII. This devastation forms the backdrop for a future dominated by government repression, rampant violence, and societal disintegration, with the city's streets being overrun with biker gangs, including Kaneda Shōtarō's own gang, who personify the rebellious and violent spirit of the youth. Notably, the dystopian setting serves as a reflection of Japan's collective memory of war and post-WWII reconstruction, as the extermination which obliterated Tokyo in *Akira*'s universe echoes the real-life decimation wrought by WWII and the subsequent US occupation (Mason/Caiger, 1979; McClain, 2002). In this train of thought, in many ways, Neo-Tokyo is a society haunted by its past, constantly on the verge of repeating its mistakes, such as the government's secret experiments on children like Shima Tetsuo: such experiments, aimed at harnessing psychic powers, bring into the foreground the dangerous consequences of unchecked scientific ambition backed and incentivized by political ruthlessness.

A major theme in *Akira*'s dystopian future is the brutal display of the fragility of human control over technology: the climax, in which Shima Tetsuo's powers spiral out of control, underscores the idea that technological progress, particularly in the realm of bioengineering and psychic experimentation, can lead to irreversible disaster, with Shima Tetsuo's transformation into a monstrous hyperbole for the calamitous potential of human attempts to manipulate nature and the anatomic body (see Graham, 2002): this notion of humanity being consumed and eventually destroyed by its own technological creations is a central tenet of dystopian fiction, particularly within the cyberpunk genre.

Violence is omnipresent in *Akira*, as both societal breakdown and individual rebellion: the animation movie opens with images of biker gangs clashing violently in the streets, establishing a world in which survival depends on asserting dominance. Crucially, violence in *Akira* serves a three-fold purpose: the symbolic representation of the state's oppression; its employment as a tool for youth rebellion; an expression of individuals' inner turmoil. Thus, for the animation movie's youth, particularly Kaneda Shōtarō and Shima Tetsuo, violence is not only an act of defiance against a system which has marginalized them, but also a way of asserting identity in a world which offers little control over one's own destiny. On the other hand, Neo-Tokyo's government and military are clearly depicted as oppressors, seeking to maintain order through force, reminding of Japan's real-life experience of political unrest and state control in post-WWII period: in many ways, the violence in *Akira* parallels the violent student protests in Japan during the 1960s, during which young protesters clashed with the state troops in a battle for their rights and futures.

Interestingly and somehow disenchantingly, *Akira* reveals at the same time the futility of violence as a means for achieving true liberation: for example, Shima Tetsuo's increasing powers lead him downwards a pathway of destruction, acutely showcasing the ways in which unchecked power, particularly when fueled by rage, can corrupt and alienate. The catastrophic explosion at *Akira*'s end, echoing the atomic bomb but occurring above the Yoyogi Stadium, the proud symbol of Japan's post-WWII recovery and triumph over its own recent past, reinforces the notion that violence only breeds more violence, perpetuating cycles of destruction rather than providing constructive, sustainable solutions. Therefore, while violence is a pervasive narrative structure in *Akira*, serving both as a means of survival and as an expression of rebellion, it does not offer the cathartic innuendoes one might expect in accordance with classical – aka Western-infused – theatrical and cinema standards (see Barthes, 1970a; Robertson, 1998). The animation movie's young protagonists, particularly Kaneda Shōtarō and Shima Tetsuo, are products of a society which has failed them, as they

belong to a disillusioned generation, ignored and ultimately excluded by the older ruling elites who govern Neo-Tokyo with an iron fist. This inter-generational conflict can be read as a commentary on Japan's post-WWII economic boom, wherein the older generation, responsible both for the catastrophes of war and for the country's recovery consisting of rapid industrialization and technological advancements, became increasingly disconnected from the concerns of the younger population.

Inter-generational rebellion

Shima Tetsuo's rebellion against authority, including his final confrontation with the government and the military, epitomizes the frustration of a youth who feels abandoned and misunderstood: his rise to power, driven by his newly awakened psychic abilities, reflects the desire of the younger generation to reclaim agency in a world in which they are otherwise powerless; yet Shima Tetsuo's inability to control his power equally demonstrates the dangers of unchecked rebellion, as he becomes a destructive force rather than a liberator. Furthermore, the violence in *Akira* extends beyond mere physical destruction to a broader critique of societal decay, as the dystopian society of Neo-Tokyo, plagued by crime, political corruption, and governmental abuses of power, is emblematic of a world in which brutality and cruelty on the verge of local terrorism has become the primary means of communication and survival. From such a perspective, *Akira* critiques not only the violence of youth gangs but also the institutional(ized) violence of the state, which more often than not employs brute force to maintain control over its citizens when softer methods of domination and coercion do not provide the desired outcomes anymore.

In a rather unexpected turn of interpretation, *Akira* can be seen as the rebellion against the 1960s generation who had led Japan through its post-WWII recovery and economic boom known as the "Japanese miracle", as in the animation movie, the older generation, represented by politicians, military leaders, and scientists, is depicted as corrupt, manipulative, and out of touch with the younger generation's needs and desires. This dynamic brings into spotlight the real-world tensions and the growing sense of disillusionment among Japanese youth during the 1980s, who felt alienated by the country's older generation's focus on economic success and traditional values as defined by post-WWII ideologues at the expense of individual freedom and emotional well-being. Indeed, Kaneda Shōtarō and his friends, who make up *Akira*'s main cast, are part of this rebellious youth: they have grown up in a world shaped by the decisions of the older generation, but they viscerally reject the values and structures which have been imposed on them, with their participation in biker gangs, their disregard for authority, and their embrace of violence emerging as the only ways to express their inner urge to break free from the constraints of a society which, they feel, has failed them. At the same time, the animation movie suggests that this rebellion does not offer a simple solution: as much as one hates to admit it, the younger generation is likewise flawed and intransigent, as evidenced by the group's anti-social behaviors and eventually by Shima Tetsuo's descent into madness. Interestingly, *Akira* does not intend to bring forth easy answers, instead presenting a complex picture of a society in which both the older and younger generations are trapped in cycles of violence, alienation, and ultimately despair.

The inter-generational conflict gradually surfaces as a key theme in *Akira*, as the tension between past and future, tradition and progress, in addition to obviously materializing as a critique of the post-WWII development which transformed Japan into a global economic superpower (Vogel, 1979; Yamanouchi/Sakai, 2003). The older generation, represented by government officials and military leaders, are portrayed as the architects of a new Japan, built on technological progress and endless growth, keen on clinging to power and seeking to control the future through experiments on the younger generation, particularly the children with psychic abilities, while completely ignoring the fact that this new Japan is equally one marked by corruption, repression, and social inequality, with the youth, visible particularly in characters like Kaneda Shōtarō and Shima Tetsuo, representing a generation left behind by this historical advancement, alienated from everyone and from themselves as well as full of rage, hatred, and resentment against the society they inhabit. In this context, Shima Tetsuo's rebellion against authority manifests as a metaphor for the frustration of his generation who feels disconnected from the promises and realities of the "Japanese miracle", exclusively accessible to the few privileged. *Akira*'s depiction of youth gangs and delinquency reflects the social dislocation experienced by young people in rapidly modernizing societies: correspondingly, Shima Tetsuo's psychic powers, which eventually lead to his downfall, represent the potential of this disillusioned generation to challenge the *status quo* in parallel with the dangers of unchecked rebellion. In a simultaneously thought-provoking and tragic twist, this inter-generational divide is most clearly illustrated in the relationship between Shima Tetsuo and Kaneda Shōtarō: while they have been close friends at the beginning of the animation movie, their pathways diverge as Shima Tetsuo gains power and seeks to assert his dominance: Shima Tetsuo's rebellion against the government and against Kaneda Shōtarō stems from his need to break free from the constraints imposed by both the older generation and his own peers – nevertheless, his rebellion ultimately leads to his own and others' destruction, suggesting that generational conflict, if left unresolved, can and does have devastating consequences.

Uncontrollable technology and the nuclear danger

A further central theme in *Akira* is the tension between technological progress and human alienation: Neo-Tokyo's futuristic world is one in which technology has advanced far beyond the capacity of the average citizen to understand or control it, particularly evident in the government's secret experimentation with psychic powers, an area of scientific research finally resulting in catastrophic consequences for both individuals and society as a whole. Shima Tetsuo's transformation into a god-like figure, capable of wiping out entire cities, is emblematic for the dangers of unchecked technological ambition, as his powers, derived from scientific experimentation, inevitably, painfully alienate him from his own humanity, as he becomes less of a person and more of a devastating force. In this sense, *Akira* exerts a poignant critique of the dehumanizing effects of technological progress, in which advancements in science and technology lead not to greater human fulfillment but to isolation, alienation, and destruction. Nonetheless, this alienation is not limited to Shima Tetsuo alone, as *Akira* brings into foreground a society in which individuals, particularly the youth, are disconnected from their surroundings and from each other: built on the ruins of the old Tokyo, which had been obliterated by a massive explosion (later revealed to be caused by Akira, a child with immense psychic powers), Neo-Tokyo's reconstruction epitomizes Japan's real-life growth after WWII, often referred to as the "Japanese miracle" – but this progress came at the expense of the city's inhabitants, many of whom live in poverty and quiet despair (see Bauman, 2004; Castells, 1997). The futuristic landscape of Neo-Tokyo itself, with its towering buildings and neon lights, feels cold and impersonal, a reflection of a society who has lost its sense of community and humanity in the pursuit of technological advancement – a preoccupation which resonates with contemporary concerns about the effects of rapid technological progress on human relationships and on social structures, a common motif in cyberpunk science-fiction.

Akira reveals this kind of coldhearted, dehumanizing progress fueled by raw ambition and completely lacking any understanding of the mechanisms driving authentic holistic historical progress as evil and inherently implosive, suggesting that it leads to alienation rather than true improvement, with Shima Tetsuo metamorphosing into the all-encompassing symbol of the dangers of technological power when divorced from ethical and moral considerations. As Shima Tetsuo gains more control over his psychic abilities, he turns increasingly alienated from his friends and from his own humanity: the more powerful he becomes, the more isolated he feels, to the point where he no longer recognizes himself. This transformation underscores the animation movie's cautionary message about the costs of progress – technological advancement without moral or social responsibility inevitably results into irreversible dehumanization.

Lastly, one of the most haunting themes in *Akira* is the experience of nuclear fallout and its connection to Japan's unresolved trauma from WWII: as the animation movie begins with the annihilation of Tokyo in a massive explosion, later disclosed as the effect of Akira's psychic abilities, it serves as a reminder of the devastation wrought by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6. respectively 9. August 1945, events which had left deep psychological scars on the collective Japanese psyche, in parallel with repeated allusions to the real-life devastation of Japanese cities during WWII. The recurring imagery of explosions and destruction throughout the animation movie evokes the specter of nuclear extermination, a constant inescapable memento of the dangers posed by technological and scientific advancements spiraling out of control. Sure enough, a striking metaphor in *Akira* appears the interrelatedness between psychic power and nuclear danger, a reflection of Japan's traumatic history with the atomic bomb: the presumed character of Akira, a child whose psychic powers caused the final destruction of the original Tokyo, emerges as a symbolic representation of both the potential and the dangers of technological experimentation, and the government's continued attempts to control and replicate Akira's powers reflect Japan's actual post-WWII obsession with harnessing scientific knowledge for progress, while simultaneously ignoring the ethical and moral implications of such power. The tension between the promise of improvement through advancement and the potential for extermination is crucial in *Akira*, directly referencing Japan's ambivalent relationship with its own history of scientific and technological ambitions, particularly in relation to nuclear energy, without significantly addressing the "nuclear trauma" as a nationally reinforced tragic narrative, while suggesting that healing from the nuclear trauma is necessary but painful: *Akira* subtly lays bare the elusiveness of such healing as stemming from the older generation's unwillingness to address Japan's role in its own misery.

At the same time, *Akira* offers a glimmer of hope for the future, as the survivors of the final cataclysm begin to rebuild the city – and the world – once again: this cyclical pattern of dissolution and rebirth mirrors Japan's own millennial history, gently suggesting that, while the traumas of the past may never fully disappear, there is always the potential for renewal and healing, when addressing the destructive experiences of the past with courage, integrity, and, last but not least, compassion. Indeed, Neo-Tokyo's obliteration at *Akira*'s end is not portrayed as a final apocalypse but as a necessary step toward rebuilding and renewal: in order to move forward, both individuals and society as a whole must confront their

traumas and seek to understand them rather than stubbornly repress them. The psychic children in *Akira*, particularly Akira and Shima Tetsuo, represent the latent power which, if left unchecked, can lead to catastrophic destruction: a metaphor for the nuclear threat, which has been looming large in Japan's collective consciousness since the Cold War era, this unlimited and limitless power – whether psychic or nuclear – must be controlled and understood, as otherwise it will lead to further suffering. The key to sustainable deep healing is empathy and understanding, not rage and fear. Shima Tetsuo's devastating pathway is the result of his inability to come to terms with his own pain and insecurities, as his psychic abilities, which give him immense power, also make him vulnerable to his unruly inner turmoil. In contrast, Kaneda Shōtarō, a more grounded and empathetic character, survives the animation movie's chaos precisely due to his ability to maintain his humanity and connection to others despite unfathomable losses. Ultimately, *Akira* brings into the spotlight the uncomfortable truth that Neo-Tokyo and its subsequent reconstructed version with its inhabitants, and by extension real-life Japan, must confront its past traumas in order to move forward: the destruction of the city at the end of the animation movie seems, thus, like the necessary step towards rebirth and renewal, a metaphor for the idea that healing requires confronting, understanding, and addressing trauma, not repressing, avoiding, and complaining about it.

Steamboy (2004): A steampunk cinematic exploration of progress, power, and alienation

Released in 2004 as the second animation movie directed by Ōtomo Katsuhiro, *Steamboy* 『スチームボーイ』 is a visually stunning and thematically rich animation movie exploring the intersection of technological progress, human alienation, and power struggles within a Victorian-era steampunk setting: this animation movie represents Ōtomo's foray into the genre of steampunk, merging the imaginative aesthetics of the mid-19th century England with advanced, anachronistic steam-powered technology: set mainly in an alternate 19th century Manchester and London during the height of the Industrial Revolution, *Steamboy* engages deeply with the consequences of technological innovation, particularly steam power, on human societies and the resulting clash between innovation and ethics, technological progress and human values, zooming in on the inter-generational conflicts arising in the wake of rapid industrialization. The narrative, while steeped in fantastical inventions, offers a brutal critique of unchecked technological advancement, underscored by the violent tensions bubbling up when power is misused: thus, with its intricate world-building, memorable characters, and a compelling musical score, *Steamboy* embodies the core elements of the steampunk genre while simultaneously delving into philosophical and existential themes, such as the clash between youth and old, the promise and peril of scientific progress, and the violence which often accompanies human ambitions. *Steamboy*'s story follows Ray Steam, a young inventor living in Manchester in an alternate 19th

-century Britain, a period marked by rapid technological advancements during the Industrial Revolution, who finds himself in the middle of a dispute over a powerful steam engine that his family has developed. Ray is the grandson of Dr. Lloyd Steam and the son of Dr. Eddie Steam, both of whom are renowned inventors and who both play pivotal roles in the animation movie, although they represent opposing visions of the ways in which technology should be employed: while Lloyd advocates for using technological advancements to benefit humanity, Edward is more aligned with the commercial and military applications of steam power. The narrative begins with Ray receiving a mysterious package from his grandfather, containing a small but immensely powerful metallic orb called the "Steam Ball", capable of fueling any machine with an almost limitless supply of energy. Soon after, Ray becomes embroiled in a battle between two factions, represented, on the one hand, by his father, who works for the O'Hara Foundation, a powerful industrial conglomerate which seeks to use the Steam Ball to expand its empire as well as its influence, and, on the other hand, by his grandfather, who believes in the ethical responsibility of scientific progress and sees the Steam Ball as a tool which ought not to be exploited for personal gain, therefore doing his best to prevent the technology from being weaponized.

As the story progresses, Ray must navigate a morally complex world in which innovation and invention emerge as both a gift and a curse. The animation movie culminates in a spectacular battle over the fate of London during the Great Exhibition of 1866 in the British capital, during which the conflict between science and morality reaches its climax in a dramatic and destructive showdown, as the exhibition of technological marvels, showcasing the grandeur and excesses of industrial progress, becomes the battleground on which Ray must decide whether to follow his father's pathway of technological domination or his grandfather's vision of responsible innovation.

Steampunk aesthetics and the Industrial Revolution

At its core, *Steamboy* is a quintessential steampunk animation movie as it imagines an alternate history in which Victorian-era technology – largely driven by steam power – becomes the catalyst for radical societal change. Moreover, by its blending of Victorian aesthetics with advanced steam-powered technology and set in a slightly dystopian world,

thus capitalizing on the tension between nostalgia for a bygone era and the desire for technological advancement, *Steamboy* brings a specific existential worldview to life through its richly detailed depiction of steam-powered machinery, flying machines, and towering mechanical structures which dominate the industrial landscape: a world in which industrial progress has led to immense inequality and conflict, as the animation movie's London is a dark, grimy place, filled with overwhelming factories and massive machines overshadowing the city's inhabitants. This nearly dystopian setting serves as a critique of unchecked industrialization, highlighting the dangers of a macrocosm in which technology is used primarily for profit and power rather than the common good.

Ōtomo's steampunk world is visually enthralling, but equally brings into foreground the Industrial Revolution's dark side, as *Steamboy* depicts the immense potential of technological innovation, while simultaneously metaphorically calculating the human cost of industrialization (Anderson, 1991; Anderson, 1998; Eagleton, 1990). The mechanical marvels seen throughout the animation movie are often portrayed as monstrous, hinting at the dangers of prioritizing technological progress over humanity, with the colossal steam-powered fortress looming over London symbolizing the uncontrollable growth of industrial power and the threat it poses to human life. Eventually, in *Steamboy*, this tension is enacted in the conflict between Ray's father and his grandfather: Edward, the father, represents the relentless drive for progress at any cost, while Lloyd, the grandfather, embodies the more cautious, ethical approach to innovation. Ray, as the protagonist, is caught between these two extremes, as he chooses the pathway of bright hope for a future in which technology can be harnessed for the betterment of humanity without losing sight of its potential dangers.

At the heart of *Steamboy* is the question on the ways in which technological advancements impact human life, both positively and negatively, and the stress ratio between technological progress and human values: the animation movie rejects the notion that progress, particularly technological advancement, is inherently positive. On the one hand, *Steamboy* vividly displays the wonders of steam power – massive machines, flying contraptions, and awe-inspiring engineering feats; Ray's father himself, Edward, is a firm believer in progress at any cost, fully willing to sacrifice morality and personal relationships for the sake of scientific achievements. On the other hand, *Steamboy* juxtaposes these marvels with the darker side of technological progress: alienation, exploitation, and environmental destruction, but by bringing into spotlight Ray's grandfather Lloyd, who advocates for more humane solutions, trusting that scientific progress must be tempered by ethical considerations, it delivers a credible, sustainable, positive unfolding. Indeed, while the Industrial Revolution had brought unprecedented technological innovation and subsequent prosperity which trickled down to the general population, it also led to the exploitation of labor, the rise of imperialism, and the devastation of natural landscapes. In *Steamboy*, this duality is represented by the contrasting ideologies of Edward and Lloyd Steam: Edward sees technology as a means to dominate and control, while Lloyd views it as a tool which should serve humanity, not enslave it. This conflict mirrors the historical debates surrounding the Industrial Revolution, during which rapid technological advancements often came at the expense of human welfare: to make this point even more clearly, workers in *Steamboy* are depicted as cogs in the vast industrial machine, alienated from their own labor as they toil in factories which produce weapons of war without losing a thought – without being able to lose any thought – on the end-goal of their own labor, its results, and its consequences. The animation movie's depiction of mechanized warfare, in particular, reflects the fears of technological alienation, in which machines designed for progress become tools of destruction.

Thus, *Steamboy*'s orchestration of a visually spectacular world of innovation simultaneously functions as a dystopian narrative: most strikingly, the O'Hara Foundation's use of the Steam Ball to build a massive, weaponized floating fortress sternly addresses the dangers of monopolizing technology for profit and power. The Foundation's vision of the future is one in which technological supremacy reigns, with little regard for the effects on society or the environment: the animation movie's climax, in which the huge armored fortress wreaks havoc on London during the Great Exhibition of 1866 – another symbol of imperialist ethos with supremacist undertones – serves as an open warning against the hubris of technological elitism (Giddens, 1991; Hobsbawm, 2003). The dystopian vision of total destruction of one of the world's leading capitals is underscored by the *Steamboy*'s portrayal of the Great Exhibition as both a showcase of humanity's achievements and a metaphor for the impending collapse of societal values in the face of industrial excess.

Characters as archetypes: violence, power struggles, and symbolical redemption

The inter-generational conflicts between Ray and his father and between Edward, his father, and Lloyd, his grandfather, slowly emerge as the theme of opposition between youth and old in *Steamboy*, with Ray standing as the next generation of inventors and thinkers who must inherit the legacy of their predecessors while grappling with the ethical dilemmas posed by technological innovation. His father and grandfather, who protect diametrically opposed sides of the moral debate, symbolize the old guard of scientists and industrialists who have shaped the world's technological landscape and the ironclad grasp the establishment holds over the future spawning many generations ahead. Ray's journey is one of self-discovery as he learns to navigate the conflicting ideologies of his father and of his grandfather: his youthful idealism

and desire to protect people appears in contrast to his father's more cynical, pragmatic approach to power. The inter-generational conflict reflects a broader tension within society during the Industrial Revolution and thereafter, in which younger generations often found themselves at odds with the traditional values of their predecessors, a situation dramatically compounded by ever increasing life expectancies in the post-WWII world (Bauman, 1991; Castells, 1998). This theme is common in steampunk narratives, which often pit the younger generation's desire for what seems as positive change against the older generation's attachment to entrenched systems of domination and control. Ray's struggle to find his own pathway in life, independent of his father's and grandfather's conflicting ideologies, mirrors the broader societal struggle between innovation and tradition, progress and conservation, individuality and inter-generational legacy. The violence in *Steamboy* is not gratuitous but serves to emphasize the destructive potential of technology when employed for selfish gains rather than benevolent outcomes: the animation movie's climactic battle over London is a literal representation of the power struggles which define much of humankind's history, particularly during the Industrial Revolution and afterwards, culminating in two incredibly devastating world wars and countless incessant wars since 1945. The O'Hara Foundation, with its militarized use of steam technology, symbolizes the ways in which industrial advancements were often co-opted by those in power to maintain control over both resources and people. At the same time, Ray's decision to stand against this kind of domination reveals *Steamboy*'s broader critique of technology's utilization to perpetuate violence and inequality while suggesting alternative, sustainable strategies to move forward.

Ray, *Steamboy*'s protagonist, emerges as a delightful orchestration of youthful curiosity and moral integrity, of the hope for a better future: a young inventor trapped between two nearly almighty forces – his father and grandfather, each of whom embodies different approaches to scientific progress. Unlike his father, Ray is not blinded by the allure of power, and instead, he instinctively senses the importance of using technology responsibly. Ray's character arc is one of growth and self-discovery, as he grapples with the conflicting ideologies of his father and grandfather, but ultimately chooses to forge his own pathway, thus evolving from a boy fascinated by invention into a young man who understands the weight of responsibility which comes with technological prowess. His moral compass guides him towards making decisions which prioritize human welfare over the blind pursuit of innovation, his character serving, eventually, as a metaphor for the potential of human ingenuity when guided by ethics and a healthy awareness of accountability.

Ray's grandfather, Dr. Lloyd Steam, appears as the voice of caution in *Steamboy*, advocating for the responsible use of technology as he believes that science and technological advancement ought to be used for the betterment of humanity and is deeply concerned about the potential misuse of the Steam Ball. His character symbolizes the ethical considerations which must accompany scientific progress as he warns against the dangers of unchecked technological power. While his character is more idealistic than Edward's, he is not without flaws, as Lloyd's single-minded focus on preventing the misuse of the Steam Ball sometimes blinds him to the immediate dangers posed by the O'Hara Foundation. Nevertheless, Lloyd's commitment to ethical innovation makes him a sympathetic character, warmly embodying the possibility of using technology for the greater good rather than for personal gain.

Edward "Eddie", Ray's father, represents the darker side of technological ambition: a tragic figure in himself, consumed by his desire for power and recognition, and obsessed with progress and the potential of steam-powered technology, Eddie is willing to sacrifice anything, including his relationship with his son and father, to achieve his goals. His character reflects the dangers of technological determinism – the steadfast belief that technological advancement is an unstoppable force which must be pursued regardless of its social or ethical implications, as innovation relentlessly turns into a means to an end, usually domination and/or control. Edward's alignment with the O'Hara Foundation reveals his willingness to forfeit ethical considerations for the sake of profit and power, thus providing a thinly veiled critique of the industrialists and capitalists of the 19th century, who often prioritized their own wealth and influence over the well-being of society.

An interesting appearance is *Steamboy*'s only notable female character: the 14-year-old granddaughter of the chairman of the O'Hara Foundation and the adolescent heiress on the evil industrial conglomerate. Selfish, spoiled, misguided, yet whimsical and not completely heartless, Scarlett, seemingly based upon the fictional character of the same name from Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind* (1936) – herself a symbol of the "new woman" in a conflicting society, divided by overwhelming historical development and deeply traumatized both by events themselves and by their consequences, embedded within a novel which irreversibly changed the way femininity and feminine identity were constructed on a global scale –, matures as a result of her encounter with Ray. While she stands, initially, for the reckless, egotistic personification of what has come to be associated with the successors of those who had made the "American Dream" an ideology to be pursued and implemented on a national level, throughout the animation movie Scarlett softly, almost subliminally metamorphoses into a vibrant symbol of caring and friendship, eventually supporting Ray in his efforts to destroy the massive fortress and to save countless human lives.

Technical observations: animated legacy as cinematic progress

The musical score of *Steamboy*, composed by Steve Jablonsky (born 1970), plays a crucial role in setting its atmosphere, as it blends orchestral elements with industrial sounds, creating a sense of both wonder and foreboding. The music often swells during scenes of technological wonder, emphasizing the awe-inspiring nature of the machines on display, or takes on a darker, more ominous tone during moments of conflict, unequivocally suggesting the destructive potential of unchecked technological progress. The employment of brass and percussion during scenes involving the Steam Ball and the towering mechanical inventions enhances the animation movie's steampunk aesthetic, while also underscoring the weight and danger of the technology being depicted, as it creates a sense of power and danger, particularly during its climactic battle scenes. During the more emotional moments, nonetheless, such as Ray's interactions with his family, the score shifts to softer, more melancholic melodies, reflecting the personal struggles and ethical dilemmas at the heart of the story. The music ultimately complements the animation work's exploration of the dual nature of technological progress – its capacity for both awe-inspiring achievement and catastrophic destruction, while building on the tension between progress and annihilation, hence capturing the duality which lies at the heart of *Steamboy*'s narrative. By combining traditional orchestral elements with more modern, industrial sounds, the score supports the animation movie's steampunk essential ideology which fuses the nostalgias of the past with the technologies of the future.

Steamboy presents a meticulously crafted visual universe which draws heavily on the aesthetic codes of steampunk, re-imagining 19th-century industrial modernity through a richly stylized, quasi-historical lens. The animation's visual architecture is defined by a sophisticated interplay of mechanical complexity, atmospheric density, and architectural grandeur, all rendered with an extraordinary level of detail and precision, as the perception field is saturated with copper tones, iron hues, steam vapors, and brass textures, evoking a world on the cusp of technological revolution. Through its visual language alone, *Steamboy* constructs a cinematic space where mechanical imagination becomes both spectacle and critique. Foregrounding the visual spectacle of industrial design, the animation movie showcases an elaborate array of steam-powered machinery: pressure valves, pistons, airships, steam cannons, and locomotive hybrids are drawn with mechanical authenticity and animated with fluid realism, as the machines are not mere background elements but active compositional agents, often dominating the frame and directing the viewer's gaze along curved steel lines or rotating cogs. The sheer density of visual information in each frame suggests a world in which the mechanical has begun to overwrite the organic, compressing space with moving parts and churning gears.

Urban and architectural environments further support this aesthetic: *Steamboy*'s orchestration of Victorian-era London is both historically grounded and hyperbolically amplified, with vast iron bridges, neo-Gothic facades, and smoke-filled skies crowding the horizon, as the perspective appears often skewed or exaggerated to enhance the sense of scale, particularly during aerial sequences, in which bird's-eye views of sprawling mechanical cities reinforce a visual logic of expansion, excess, and verticality. Color and light are employed with equal precision: warm metallic tones dominate industrial interiors, while cooler palettes – grays, blues, and whites – are reserved for exteriors and atmospheric backdrops. The pervasive use of steam as a visual motif softens mechanical harshness and introduces layers of translucency which complicate spatial perception, creating a dialectical interplay between visibility and obscurity. Ultimately, *Steamboy* constructs a visual world governed by motion, precision, and industrial grandeur, as its animation style does not simply reflect the mechanics of the world it depicts but embodies them, which each frame emerging as a dynamic blueprint of technological aspiration and aesthetic intricacy.

Ōtomo Katsuhiro's *Steamboy* is a visually stunning and thematically complex animation movie which explores the complexities of technological progress, power, and human alienation on the background of the steampunk genre, while disclosing the moral and ethical dilemmas of technological progress. Due to its steampunk setting and slightly dystopian narrative, it offers a critique of the Industrial Revolution and the ways in which technological advancements have been employed for both good and ill, and raises important questions about the human cost of innovation, the alienation which results from technological upgrades, and the inter-generational conflicts arising in times of rapid change, with the tri-dimensional conflict between youth and old, as displayed by Ray, Edward, and Lloyd, bringing forth the broader societal tensions between innovation and tradition, progress and ethics, individuals and collectives. *Steamboy*'s characters are well-drawn and complex, with Ray serving as a symbol of hope for a future in which technology can be harnessed responsibly. Last but not least, the musical score composed by Steve Jablonsky adds depth to the animation movie's atmosphere, capturing the awe and danger of the steam-powered world envisioned by Ōtomo Katsuhiro. By combining elements of dystopia, steampunk, and action-adventure, Ōtomo Katsuhiro has delivered an animation movie which is both a thrilling visual experience and a thought-provoking meditation on the responsibilities which come with technological power. As Ray Steam's journey illustrates, progress must always be tempered with caution and guided by a commitment to human welfare, lest society becomes consumed by the very inventions it creates. In the larger context of steampunk and dystopian genres, *Steamboy* stands as a cautionary tale about the perils of unchecked technological

progress and the importance of using innovation to benefit humanity rather than to dominate or destroy, ultimately providing a compelling vision of a world on the brink of both progress and peril.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE, MORE BENEVOLENT WORLD

This study has investigated two animation movies released by the popular manga creator Ōtomo Katsuhiro, whose comics publications have delivered throughout the decades ideas for countless animation and live-action cinema adaptations. Both animation movies address the interaction between humans and technology and the tremendous power which can be unleashed or abused by irresponsible individuals driven by personal ambition, financial greed, and a general lack of morality. On the one hand, *Akira* stands as a pivotal work in both global animation and the cyberpunk genre: adapted from Ōtomo's own manga (1982-1990), the animation movie explores themes of dystopia, technological alienation, generational conflict, and nuclear trauma: set in the neon-lit, decayed metropolis of Neo-Tokyo, *Akira* critiques Japan's own rapid technological advancements during the 1980s, reflecting anxieties regarding the consequences of unbridled scientific progress. A quintessential cyberpunk narrative, *Akira* portrays a future in which high-tech advancements co-exist with social decay, corruption, and youth delinquency, thus critiquing the notion that technological progress equates to societal advancement, and emphasizing instead the disparities and violence which modernization can exacerbate. Government experiments on children with psychic abilities further address the ethical dilemmas of scientific ambition, leading to catastrophic consequences through the character of Shima Tetsuo, whose transformation into a destructive force illustrates the perils of unchecked power. Violence permeates *Akira*, serving as a metaphor for both state oppression and youth rebellion, with the inter-generational divide mirroring post-WWII Japan's tensions between economic-driven older elites and disillusioned youth. Most poignantly perhaps, *Akira* engages critically with Japan's deep-seated unresolved nuclear trauma, using its recurring imagery of destruction to evoke the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, presenting a cycle of devastation and renewal as a means to suggest that true progress requires confronting past traumas with understanding, warmheartedness, and empathy.

On the other hand, *Steamboy* is a visually and thematically rich exploration of technological progress, human alienation, and power struggles within a dystopian steampunk setting. Set in an alternate 19th-century England during the Industrial Revolution, the animation movie follows young inventor Ray Steam as he becomes entangled in a conflict over the powerful "Steam Ball", a technological marvel developed by his family. Ray's father, Edward, aligns with the O'Hara Foundation, a powerful industrial conglomerate seeking to exploit the Steam Ball for commercial and military gain, while his grandfather, Lloyd, advocates for ethical scientific progress. This inter-generational conflict brings into foreground the broader tension between technological advancement and moral responsibility within the animation movie's steampunk aesthetic merging Victorian-era designs with superior steam-powered machinery, therefore creating a world which critiques the consequences of unchecked industrialization. The narrative combines the dangers of technological determinism, dramatically emphasizing the themes of progress and human values, youth and old, and the violence often accompanying power struggles, with the climactic battle during the Great Exhibition of 1866 illustrating the destructive potential of unregulated innovation. Complemented by Steve Jablonsky's dynamic musical score, *Steamboy* serves as both an action-packed adventure and a cautionary tale about the ethical implications of technological progress. By realistically estimating the perils of unchecked progress and of moving cautiously, even though perhaps at a reduced pace, towards the future, man-made disasters can not only be avoided but more sustainable development can also be achieved, so that the planet is not depleted of its resources before alternative solutions can be found and scaled for the benefit of the population at-large. This might be one of the most important messages in Ōtomo Katsuhiro's animated cinematography: the world belongs to all of us, not only to the few self-identified as the so-called "elite".

The major limitation of the current study is its almost exclusive focus on the narrative dimensions of the two animation movies and the ways the story-lines emerge from the visual architecture and its aural (auditive, musical) entanglements. Future research might observe the critical reception and audiences' reactions, in an attempt to expand the findings of this investigation so that the inner pathways of planning, projecting, pursuing, promoting and lastly releasing masterworks become more visible – and therefore more easily to be implemented and developed by creators.

In a world increasingly driven by technological advancement and rapid change, it is essential to confront the darker potentials which our futures may hold. The cyberpunk and steampunk visions presented in Japanese animation, particularly in the works of Ōtomo Katsuhiro, serve as warning narratives questioning the very foundations of progress, as they remind us that technological prowess without ethical grounding leads to fragmentation and destruction, as so many times proven by history. The juxtaposition of human vulnerability against mechanized landscapes reveals a profound truth: our capacity to build must always be balanced by our willingness to care, protect, and preserve. While cyberpunk and steampunk dystopias often portray bleak visions of human estrangement, they also disclose the potential for redemption and transformation. The resilience of individuals navigating chaotic, oppressive environments delivers a testament to human ingenuity and adaptability: it is this tension between decay and renewal which challenges us to

rethink our relationship with technology, asking whether we will allow innovation to serve humanity or to reduce humans to mere cogs in an ever-accelerating machine. As the world grapples with unprecedented social, environmental, and economic upheavals, the messages embedded within these animated cautionary tales grow ever more relevant, as they compel us to critically assess our choices and to recognize the potential for both salvation and destruction within our grasp. The enduring appeal of such stories lies not just in their dystopian allure but in their insistence on personal responsibility and collective effort. Alternative realities, whether imagined or actualized, force us to confront our deepest fears, perhaps not yet accessed, and aspirations lurking in the subconscious, as they challenge us to envision futures which transcend the limits of technology, nurturing human dignity in a universe too often prioritizing power and profit: by reflecting on these narratives of extermination and hope, we can foster a sense of awareness which guides us towards building a tomorrow rooted in empathy, collaboration, and sustainable progress.

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