

E•X•P•L•O•D•E

AKIRA

THE MOVIE

“Neo-Tokyo?” you might ask. Sure! Don’t you remember when Tokyo was nuked in July 1988 and World War III was started? No? Well, that’s what happened in the world of **AKIRA**, a name already familiar to comics and animation fans. The movie, now being released in the United States, is based on a popular Japanese comic strip by Katsuhiro Otomo. It started in 1982, serialized in the bi-weekly **Young Magazine** and when finally completed it will run over 1800 pages long! The **Akira** comic is being published in America by the Epic Comics branch of Marvel Entertainment Group.

AKIRA is set in a rebuilt, Neo-Tokyo in the year 2019. After a flashback to the nuclear destruction of old Tokyo in '88, the film charges into the future with an ultra-violent, marauding motorcycle chase which initiates a non-stop sequence of death, destruction,

carnage, psychic warfare, and for the viewer, a heap of entertaining thrills! There has never been a film to compare with **AKIRA**. Some reviewers have likened it to **BLADERUNNER** and **SCANNERS** but there are only superficial similarities. It’s a filmic event and the fact that it’s animated doesn’t help for mass American acceptance.

We in the States traditionally dismiss animation as sub-juvenile and unworthy of serious attention, mainly because the American animation producers feel that way. (Notice the tagline for the **TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES** live action film was “Hey Dude, this is no cartoon!”, as if ashamed of their animated origins.) **AKIRA** may change that. It has action, “cyber-punk” science fiction, gore, drama, unequalled camera angles and tracking shots, hallucinogenic episodes,



explosions, dynamic color, detail and a great, energetic soundtrack.

Creator Katsuhiro Otomo, in his late 30s, is a respected, award-winning comic book artist who has successfully graduated to film direction.

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Creator Katsuhiro Otomo

Akira began in 1982 as 20 page episodes appearing every two weeks in Kodansha Ltd.’s 300 page **Young Magazine** and then collected into a series of several-hundred-paged volumes. Americans have been able to follow the saga in English since May 1988 (a month before Old Tokyo exploded) thanks to

Marvel’s upscale Epic-Comics format in 64 page color installments. Some excellent examples of Otomo’s magazine illustration and advertising work have been printed in the beautifully designed, deluxe hard cover book, **Kaba**, from Kodansha Ltd. and distributed in America by Marvel.

Otomo took a year and half off the **Akira** strip to character design, storyboard, co-write and direct the 70mm animated film version. Since it had sold millions of copies, there was great demand for an



A sequence from the **AKIRA** film; Tetsuo, on his hopped-up cycle, is about to slam into the psychic child, Takashi (code-numbered '26').

AKIRA movie, yet its scaled seemed prohibitively impossible to translate to the screen. A bunch of companies with interest in the property, Kodansha Ltd. (publisher), Bandai (video distributor), Toho (film distributor), Mainichi Broadcasting System (TV rights), Laserdisc Corporation, Tokyo Movie Shinsha Co., Hakuhodo Inc., and Sumitomo Corporation formed the Akira Committee and put up 1 billion yen (\$7 million to us westerners) to produce it as an

animated blockbuster.

There are many interesting characters in Neo-Tokyo 2019 and the title character, Akira, is not really seen in the film as he is in the comics. One of the main leads is a teen motorcycle gang leader named Kaneda. A member of his gang, Tetsuo, gets nailed in a bike accident and is oddly abducted by the Army. The Colonel is in charge of a top-secret project developing psychic abilities in children. Tetsuo comes to learn he is one of the

chosen and has incredible psychic powers. All this triggers a wild battle, both conventional and psychic, with Tetsuo versus the Army, politicians, a radical resistance group and old friend Kaneda. And they're all looking for the mysterious Akira. As creator Otomo says, "Although the movie's title is the name of a child, in fact it does not revolve around any single character. No one person is the main character, yet it is possible for many to be seen as such. All people have drama in their lives, so the plot is simply the intermingling of many such dramas." Maybe so, but not all people face such drama as psychic battles or nuclear attack every day... usually. Thousands of people die graphically on camera every few minutes in **AKIRA**, yet it is in no way gratuitous. Unlike most films, you get the feeling these are real people with real lives and with real deaths.

The attitudes and motivations of Kaneda and his group seem to reflect the actual image of post-atomic Hiroshima and Japan where



A satellite laser is about to shear off Tetsuo's arm in this scene from the film printed in the AKIRA Anime book.



kids became street-wise hoodlums; pimping, black-marketing and drug dealing in order to survive day to day. The post-nuclear city of Neo-Tokyo is a realistic projection. It is splattered with neon, advertising blurbs and high-technology; all covered in a filmy grime with graffiti and other abuse. "In the final sequences, which feature Tetsuo's transformation, a lot of the action can only be captured by animation," says Otomo with massive understatement (Tetsuo's transformation is the most extreme and intense ever on film!), "To show such scenes with a sense of realism depends a lot on the appearance of the backgrounds. In order to show spectacular scenes or extraordinary powers, the artist has to depict normal backgrounds and scenes with a great sense of reality. In doing so, the scenes of devastation take on an added sense of realism. I also pay much attention to the value of artwork and color in enhancing reality." That's for sure! According to the Akira Comittee's production notes, typical goofy animation colors were avoided and over 327 colors were used; 50 of them created especially for the film! I can't wait to see all the new Akira Crayola colors!

To shoot all the psychic wars, tank battles, building collapses, satellite implosions, street fighting, bike racing, bridge falling and city nuking action, over 2,212 separate shots were set up. Over 160,000 individual cels were painted to allow for smoother than normal animation.

Now that the production of AKIRA, the movie, is over, Otomo is returning to Akira, the comic. He is making a deliberate attempt to make the two projects different by altering the comic story to keep the fans from guessing the actual conclusion. Some purists are upset over this, but as Otomo says,



Tetsuo as he got disarmed in the original AKIRA manga (Japanese for comics).

"Because the movie had to fit within the framework of two hours, it was important not to waste any time when cutting to other scenes. In comic stories, one is allowed greater freedom to digress, but if you try the same thing in a movie it loses its clarity and sharpness." Otomo is able to infuse more detail and character development in his 1800+ page epic than he can in a 124 minute film. The movie stands on its own as a stunning piece of entertainment and the comic series expands from there.

The Akira comic is available in

comic shops monthly and the film is sweeping across the country this summer. If you know a local movie theatre that plays cool movies, film retrospectives, animation or has "midnight shows," tell them to book AKIRA (distributed by Streamline Pictures in Los Angeles). Fortunately, it hasn't been cut and edited into non-sensibility as has happened consistently with past, imported animation and it's released without a rating. Streamline is dedicated to releasing quality animation from Japan uncut and we at MONSTERS ATTACK! wish them lots of luck!



Examples of AKIRA's different formats, shown in relation to a copy of MONSTERS ATTACK! The collected AKIRA, Volume 1; a copy of YOUNG MAGAZINE, the Japanese comic AKIRA was originally serialized in; an issue of the American AKIRA from Epic Comics; and the film told in comic-style with panels shot from movie stills, AKIRA Anime, Volume 4.