

Akira

Research Paper

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Survey of Animation and Visual Effects

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*“The Japanese artist known for the groundbreaking 'Akira' is considered among the world's most influential animators.”*

-Annie Awards Ceremony 2014

Katsuhiro Otomo, born on April 14, 1954 in Miyagi Prefecture, Japan, is a very successful Japanese manga artist, screenwriter and film director. He also is a dedicated writer and penciller. “A penciller is an artist who works in the creation of comic books, graphic novels, and similar visual art forms (*Comic Book Penciller- How To Be A Comic Book Penciller*).” He is best known for his works *Dōmu* and, even one more popular, *Akira*. Otomo’s passions are anime and manga. “A manga is a style of Japanese comic books and graphic novels, typically aimed at adults as well as children (*Manga 101 - Basic Walk-through of the Manga World*).” Also, a manga usually follows an anime series, but can also be a prequel to an anime series as well. Present day, at the age of 60, Katsuhiro Otomo received a major award to honor his outstanding work through out his career as an animator. His most recent award was actually given to him at the 41<sup>st</sup> Annie Awards ceremony that took place on February 1, 2014, at the UCCLA campus. The Annie Award is an American award for accomplishments in animation. The award that Katsuhiro Omoto received was significant for his unsurpassed career achievements.

Katsuhiro Otomo was born and raised in Tome-gun, Miyagi Prefecture, Japan. During his high school career, Otomo developed a fascination for movies. It is actually said that, during breaks for his school holidays, he would go on three to four hour train rides just to go see movies at different places because ones he wanted to see were not

screened close to him. In the year 1972, Otomo graduated from high school with a 3.6 grade point average. He almost extemporaneously left Miyagi and headed directly towards Tokyo with the hopes and dreams of becoming a successful manga artist. On October 4<sup>th</sup> 1973, Katsuhiro Otomo published his first work. It was a manga adaptation of Prosper Merimee's short novel *Falcone*, titled *A Gun Report*.

Otomo has had a pretty successful career. He created his first science fiction piece in 1979 called *Fireball*. Prior to this, he made multiple short stories for a magazine called *Action*. Although *Fireball* was never completed, it is considered a huge milestone in Otomo's career. This is because it contained a variety of the same themes that he would explore in his later created manga *Dōmu*, which ended up being much more successful. *Dōmu* began its series in January of 1980 and it continued to run for two years until Otomo had completed it. It eventually became published into book form in 1983 and Otomo won the Nihon SF Taishō Award. This award is actually the Japanese equivalent to the Nebula Award.

“The Nihon SF Taishō Award (Japan SF Grand Prize) is a Japanese science fiction award. It has been compared to the Nebula Award as the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of Japan or SFWJ gives it. The Grand Prize is selected from not only Science Fiction novels, but also various SF movies, animations, and manga”. (*Science Fiction Awards Watch*)

Otomo had his big anime debut in 1982 when he worked as a character designer for *Harmagedon*. A year later, Otomo began to work on his most commended and most famous work: *Akira*. It took him eight years to complete this masterpiece and he

accumulated over 2,000 pages of artwork. Otomo continued working on anime up and through 1987, this is when he got his first opportunity to actually direct an animated work. The anime that he directed is called *Neo Tokyo* and not only did he direct, but he also wrote the screenplay and drew the animation for it as well. He followed *Neo Tokyo* up with two segments in an analogy called *Robot Carnival*.

In the process of making the manga *Akira*, and even though it wasn't finished, Otomo decided to make it into a feature film. The animated version of *Akira* was released in 1988. In 1990, Otomo actually did a brief segment on MTV to represent the Japanese manga scene at the time.

In the early 2000's, Otomo worked with a significantly noted studio called Sunrise Studio. In 2004, Sunrise Studio helped animate and produce his feature film *Steamboy*. They also helped with his project in 2006 called *Freedom Project* and later on, in 2007, with *SOS! Tokyo Metro Explorers: The Next*.

According to some rumors that have been going around, Otomo is said to be the executive producer of the live action adaptation of *Akira* ('Akira' Moving Forward Again; May Begin Filming in Spring 2014). There have been rumors of this for nine years. Also, in an interview in 2012, Otomo said he was going to start a new manga series. This series would take place in Japan during its Meiji period which is in the late 1800's and early 1900's. This is going to be his first elongated piece of work since *Akira*.

In 2013, Otomo released his newest film called *Short Peace*; this is nine years after his release of *Steamboy*. *Short Peace*,

“is an anthology consisting on 4 shorts: His own short based on one of his stories called *Combustible*, a tragic love story set in the Edo period, *Tsukumo*,

directed by Shuhei Morita in which everyday tools metamorphose into supernatural things, *Gambo*, directed by Hiroaki Ando, which features a battle between an oni goblin and a polar bear, and *Buki yo Saraba* directed by Hajime Katoki, depicting a battle in a ruined Tokyo". (Anime News Network: Short Piece (movie))

At the time of *Akira's* release in the late 1980's, films such as those released by Disney were the highlight of popularity in the United States, displaying simple, family-friendly story lines and artistic animation. In the 1980's, however, Disney was at its lowest point; Don Bluth, an animator at Disney, left with a number of other animators to create his own company. This put Disney behind in a number of ways, including the production of *The Fox and the Hound*. This worked out favorably for *Akira* as well as other, lesser known types of films, helping them gain recognition and popularity, including film types such as anime, which were virtually unknown in the United States at the time. *Akira* was something incredibly different from Disney-style films, which, understandably, accounted for the reaction that ensued after its release in the US in 2001. *Akira* is known as the film that brought anime from Japan to the United States, introducing an entirely new world to Western viewers, artists, and animators alike. It helped to bring anime out from the sketchy cult section of video stores and introduce the public to "the head-swiveling richness of anime." (Corliss, *Akira*) At the time, anime was a virtually unknown type of animation in the Western world. The impact *Akira* would have not only helped to introduce anime, but helped with cultural diffusion between the Western and Eastern worlds. The reaction by the general public in the

United States to *Akira* was that of intrigue and interest, but nothing revolutionary, or so it seemed. The film, however, would have a hard hitting and lasting effect on future film as well as pop culture. *Akira* would reverberate through the film industry and become a major influence on future live-action films such as the classic and widely popular film *The Matrix*, which would become a world renowned film, popular within not only pop culture and the film industry, but the world as a whole. In 2011, *Akira* made TIME Magazines list of The 25 All-TIME Best Animated Films, which was fitting and well deserved considering the amount of time and detail that went into production as well as the interesting and deep themes within it. (Corliss, *Akira*) It also managed to make it onto TIME's list of 5 Top Anime Movies on DVD. (Corliss, 5 Top) Copies of the movie would eventually be released on DVD and as box sets that would include subbed and dubbed versions. The users of popular movie review website Rotten Tomatoes gave the film an 87% "fresh" rating, a 7.4 out of 10, as of September 2014. (Rotten Tomatoes) *Akira* also spurred on the wave of anime fans that would soon well up in the Western world, drawing in viewers that would later develop into a cult-like following. There was also a video game based on *Akira* released in 1988 for the Nintendo Famicom console, available exclusively in Japan. The game was, according many across the internet who reviewed it, pretty bad. The game, though, did more closely followed the manga than the film. "It was aiming for release on Genesis, the SNES, Game Gear, and Sega CD before its cancellation by publisher THQ." (Williams) The *Akira* video game never made it to US consoles nor did it ever manage to get an English translation. *Akira* may not have been a huge hit around the time of its 2001 US

release, but it has had an undeniable impact since, known as a catalyst for other popular films as well as a strong influence on the style of anime to come.

One of the reasons *Akira* was so interesting and exciting to the Western audience was its contrast to the popular animation of the time. Unlike filmmakers such as Disney, who produced ethereal stories of princes and princesses, magic and love stories, all with happy endings, Otomo introduced energy-packed animation combined with complex plot lines and dark themes to create stunning animations as seen in *Akira*. Unlike Disney films, *Akira* brings a hard hitting story that's packed with energy, motion, and emotion. *Akira* was much less a family oriented movie and focused more on adult themes that included violence, language, gore, horror, and the overall complex plot line. The art itself is less detailed, especially in the characters faces, but the use of dramatic perspective, movement, and emotion is what makes the film darkly enthralling. The voice actors in *Akira* were also recognized as an important facet of what made *Akria* so engaging. The characters were really brought to life via their emotion-fueled voices which was meant to accurately match their movements and expressions and consequently made them much more realistic and stimulating their voices brought them to life. In 1990, the English dub of *Akira* don't by Lionsgate was released in Canada and by 2001, another was released in the US at *Akira*'s time of release by Pioneer Entertainment's Animaze & ZRO Limit Productions. The English dub was very poorly received by Otomo himself; he highly disliked the dub and believed it took away from the original voice acting and the life and raw emotion it provided.

The combination of these elements is what touched viewers and greatly interested animators. A work that could touch people so strongly clearly had something to give to animators and, consequently, the film industry.

*Akira* is the most famous work of Katsuhiro Otomo. *Akira* had a total of 327 different types of colors used for the film. The film is set at night which is important because when animating night scenes, more color is needed for it. Fifty new colors were made for the film in order to get the proper night time effect. Most animators try to avoid having to animate nighttime scenes because of the additional color use which makes *Akira* one of the very few films that did. A lot of the color used within *Akira* was very vivid and bright. The plot of the film had been based off of the original manga by Otomo but since the production of the anime started before the manga was completed, Otomo had to quickly come up with a suitable ending to tie up all of the plot points. The manga had taken eight years to make. The entire eight year series of the manga had to also fit into two hours of movie, which was difficult.

The motion for this film is very fast paced and many things are happening all at once. Since most of the lengthy manga had to be put into this film, the animation is very busy with some sort of action almost always happening. When the film was put together it was much easier to see the flow of everything that was happening at once than just the manga which would just have separate images that were seen one at a time. For most of the film, the story went incredibly fast and that was because of fitting eight years of manga put into a two hour long movie.



The texture in *Akira* is very distinct. The animators make it look very three dimensional and really concentrated on the depth and perspective. In the film, they make the visuals very alive, with something always happening at all times. The backgrounds of *Akira* are extremely detailed and very complex which make it very appealing to the audience. They made sure everything was very well drawn whether it is with characters themselves, what is happening in the background of the film, or the backgrounds themselves. *Akira*, takes place in “Neo Tokyo” which is a massive dystopian city. The city was a very important element in the animation and much attention to detail was paid to that . One section of film for the city was created using dozens upon dozens of layers when the actual image that was shown was only up for about two seconds in the final film. Animators gave the characters very human like figure and focused on making accurate proportions and making their movements very lifelike and as natural as possible.

The shape of the characters had specific outlines that were very organized and made them seem more realistic in the final film. In the film, viewers are able to see the details on the character’s bodies’ very easily. Various elements in the city itself were shaped like parts of the human body, which created a very creepy and dark setting. “Our first sight of *Akira*’s Neo-Tokyo is a visceral red shape suggesting a heart, lungs or guts.” (Empire). Animators wanted people to see how the city came alive with everything that was happening in it. The city is a powerful metaphor for the deeper, emotional elements in the movie and helps create a connection between viewers and the film itself, bringing them in visually as well as emotionally.

Katsuhiro Otomo got his inspiration for *Akira* from Western films. Many films he saw that gave him ideas were from the late sixties to the early seventies. Films that Otomo drew inspiration from included *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Harkens* (1970), and *Back to the Future* (1985). Otomo also drew influences from comics, especially ones coming out of Europe. He also gathered inspiration once he started living on his own in his apartment in Tokyo. He saw many people and various things happening; situations amongst people as well as political, moral, and ethical things. He also visited New York and liked the skyscrapers which fascinated him and compelled him to incorporate those into *Akira*.

In comparison to other mangas, Katsuhiro Otomo drew inspiration for *Akira* from comics and other manga that had made it big in America. He liked the American style very much and had said, "I wanted the page-count, the contents, the paintings, everything about it to create a deep, full, American comic-style world." (Empire).

Another manga of his that was popular was *Dōmu*, and was his first major success. *Dōmu* had many elements that were similar to *Akira*. Both pieces share the same ideas and the same type of very detailed style. Otomo's "chilling earlier work explores the same themes of immaturity, poverty and power with just as much dynamism and style". Some major differences between the two are that *Akira* is much longer than *Dōmu*. The plot of *Akira* is understandably more in depth and complex considering its length. *Dōmu* also didn't have color due to the fact that the manga was in black and white. The art of *Dōmu* was similar to *Akira* but the characters themselves were much less detailed than those in *Akira*.

*Steamboy* is another film by Katsuhiro Otomo. *Steamboy* and *Akira* are not as similar as *Dōmu* and *Akira* were. *Akira* and *Dōmu* both had a basis in Japan and were both about power coming from the thoughts of a child. *Steamboy* is set within Europe and is set in the past while *Akira* is set in the dystopian future. *Steamboy* was also not a horror style film. *Steamboy* and *Akira* both have a lot of detail within their characters. The backgrounds in both films are similar due to the fact that they have a lot of detail. *Akira* has an amazing amount of detail in its backgrounds as does *Steamboy*, but in the backgrounds of *Akira*, the sky is always cloudy and dim, the sky obscured and often set at nighttime, while in *Steamboy*, it is blue with some clouds.

Otomo directed another film called *World Apartment Horror*. It was a live action film unlike all of his other works but it was still based off of a manga. It was classified as a comedy horror and was his first time doing live action. Like most mangas, it was done in black and white. One experimental film done by Otomo was *Memories* which is a set of three films in one and was also based off of one of Otomo's mangas. *The Legend of Mother Sarah* was a comic of his that was released from Dark Horse. It was 14 volumes long and was one of the last works that Otomo did with comics. Some differences between *Mother Sarah* and previous mangas and comics by Otomo is that he did not do the art for it. The backgrounds compared to those in his other works are very plain and don't have much to them. This was because it was not done by Otomo himself. The artwork in this looks very different because of this. *Mother Sarah* did have a sci-fi theme like *Akira*, either The other works Otomo did before *Akira* had a lot to do with how it was formed. The work after *Akira* shows that he's trying to expand on some of those ideas with sci-fi while still trying to develop and expand on new techniques.

*Akira* is a visually stunning movie that uses several unique aspects in its production. The standard of Japanese anime prior to the creation of *Akira* was that anime should be an exaggeration of reality, but director Katsuhiro Otomo fought against that idea ("The Art of Akira."). From the beginning of production, Otomo saw *Akira* as less of an animation and more of a visual piece. He wanted every precise detail to be in his film. Expenses were not an issue since *Akira* was given a budget of ¥1,100,000,000 which is \$179,753,365 when converted to U.S. dollar (*Akira* Production Report (DVD)). The Trailer for *Akira* was released in 1987 and the full movie in 1988, two years before the manga series was completed (Hughes 27).

In the preproduction of *Akira*, Katsuhiro Otomo faced some difficult decisions. *Akira* the movie was based off of Otomo's manga of the same title that was still unfinished (Otomo, Katsuhiro). Although it is based off his manga series, Katsuhiro saw it as a completely separate piece of work and was contemplating creating a entirely new world for the anime film. When the movie was being created he had not come up with an ending to the story, because of this Otomo had to begin with creating an end that resolved all the characters storylines, which proved very difficult for him. In the manga series *Akira* there were many more story lines and other details, but because *Akira* the movie had to be under two hours, Otomo had to make the difficult decision of which aspects of the story to keep and which were not as important.

*Akira* uses cel animation but it is not like most other animations that use that technique. To create the fluid human like motions, Otomo had his production staffs create 172,000 hand drawn cels ("The Art of Akira."). Some scenes in the movie use up to nine cels at once. Typically any scene with more than 5 cels is seen as

counterproductive and inefficient, which shows just how much detail Otomo wanted in *Akira*. Otomo also used artificial lense flairs, afterimages, and three-dimensional tracking shots. The technical detail in this movie surpassed any anime that came before it.

A technique Otomo used for the making of the movie was he had the actors record their lines before the animation was created (Otomo, Katsuhiro). The use of pre-scored dialogue in *Akira* ensured that the animation of the characters mouth and when the actor was speaking directly lined up. Pre-scored dialogues was not usually used because Japanese animators used limited animation and were not concerned with the lips of the animated character lining up exactly with the actors voice ("The Art of *Akira*"). A beneficial aspect for using pre-scored dialogue was that Otomo believed the actors would naturally have the action come across in their voice and be livelier because they were not restricted by the animation (Otomo, Katsuhiro).

Otomo also used the Quick Action Recorder in the production of *Akira* (Otomo, Katsuhiro). The Quick Action recorder is a system that digitizes key frames and in between frames with a video camera and will play it back at 24 frames per second. It is used for motion timing checks and to make corrections within the frames during the drafting period before the animation is completed. With this they already knew how the animation was going to look in the storyboard process. Although it can be time consuming and tedious Otomo used this because he wanted to make sure every frame and every scene had the rhythm and motion he was aiming for. In preproduction of this film Otomo filled over 2,000 pages in notebooks with designs and ideas of characters and landscapes but the final storyboard only includes 738 pages (Hughes 27). Another

technique used in the production of *Akira* was a Synclavier (Katsuhiro, Otomo). A Synclavier is a digital audio system that allows one to manipulate various sound effects on a single keyboard. This was helpful since the setting is a futuristic Tokyo and there were many unusual sounds that Otomo wanted in the movie.

Many of the production methods used in this animation weren't widely used techniques. Pre-scored dialogue was not usually the route taken by Japanese animators because it was seen as unnecessary to have the animation and the voice exactly lined up ("The Art of Akira."). They relied on limited animation and lack of detail unlike Otomo. This preference toward limited animation also meant that they tried to keep the number of cels in their animations low. Otomo took the opposite direction having over 100,000 extremely detailed cels that sometimes were only seen on screen for mere seconds. The Synclavier was also a rarely used technique at the time but Otomo thought it would be helpful with adding to the environment of the movie. All these unique methods made *Akira* the artistic masterpiece that it is.

In the film *Akira* by Katsuhiro Otomo, the design and artwork separates him from the rest by being extremely detailed. The reason the work is more detailed from the rest is because he didn't rely on heavy shadows. In a scene from *Akira*, when Testuo had lost his arm and is floating above the stadium the cityscape in the background isn't blackout or blurry it's completely detailed in each individual building and their lights (see picture 1), compare that to *Nausicaä* which came out around the same time there is a scene where a little girl is standing next to a baby Ohm and the full grown Ohm are standing in the background and they are a total of three colors on them red, orange and

black. The artist used the black to hide one half of the Ohm, by doing this he over exaggerated the red eyes on the darkened half and makes the scene more dramatic (see picture 2.) Another example is from the film *Watership Down* when the rabbits are standing on the hill looking out and there isn't anything in the dawn sky and there isn't much going on in the foreground; it's just the grass which draws our eyes up to the rabbits (see picture 3).

In *Akira*, Otomo uses vivid colors such as Kaneda's red bike and red riding outfit to make him stand out more on the dark streets (see picture 4) of Neo-Tokyo. He also uses attention to line to draw attention to the characters and make the main characters stand out. He does this with Kaneda and his bike by making him look like he is one with his bike. Before Kaneda gets on his bike, the front is propped up and as he sits it forms an arch that cradles him into the bike. From front to back while he is riding it makes an arch, which an arch symbolizes strength. The reason Otomo does this on only Kaneda's bike is to show his strength and his position in the "gang." This was also established several times in the movie that only Kaneda can handle his bike the first was in the very beginning when Testuo was going through the specs of Kaneda's bike, the second time was when Testuo actually tried to ride it and stalled it out. The design elements Otomo used to display power in *Akira* stood out like when Testuo lost his arm and was sitting in the chair and his biomechanical arm that he fused with his body starts to move down the chair using fluid lines and solid colors to show the destruction his power is having on himself and that he might not be in control. Also, this scene has an excessive amount of detail in the biomechanical arm (see picture 5). As the wires and flesh move down the armrest, they make a mechanical look almost like a motherboard

and even in the background he still hasn't lost detail in the stadium seats and the frozen pieces of Akira. This is what sets his "art" apart from other animators.

*Akira* was a groundbreaking film that had a profound impact on not only the film industry but the world as a whole. *Akira* helped to culturally diffuse the Western and Eastern cultures of the world and connect the two. Previous to *Akira*, anime was a little known form of animation that was something pretty much strictly seen in Japan. It was confined to the cult section of foreign and unknown films, keeping hidden the incredible animations and themes of the world of anime. *Akira* brought drawing and animation techniques, different and exciting plot lines, new takes on horror, character styles, voice acting techniques, and even some cultural elements that impacted audiences and animators alike. The combination of detail, hard work, and vision behind *Akira* are what touched viewers and greatly interested and influenced animators. A work like this, one so full of so many strong elements that could touch and influence people so strongly clearly had something to give to viewers, animators, the film industry, and the world itself.



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Picture 1



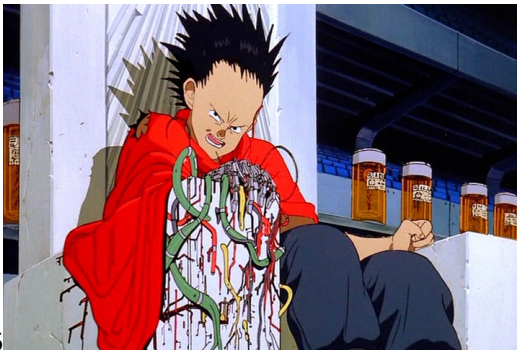
Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4



Picture 5