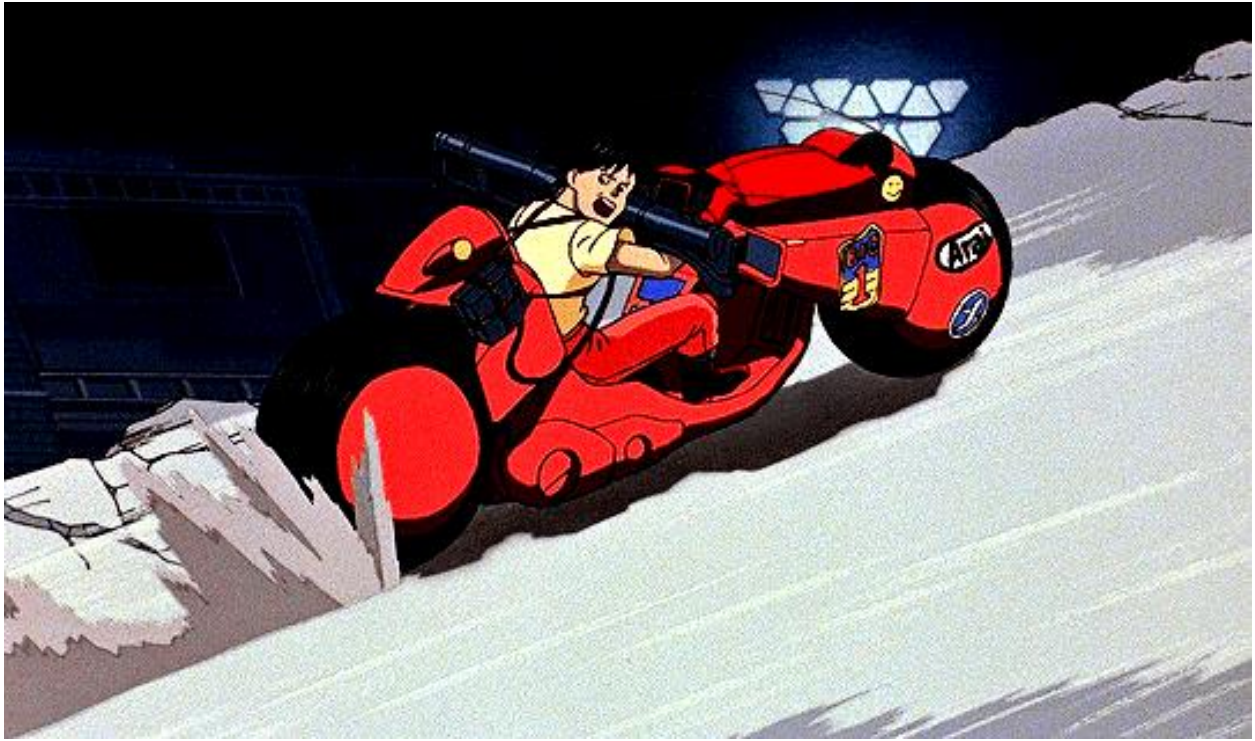


Akira, the Japanese Empire, and the Joy of Being a Woke Buzzkill

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“Akira” was one of the first anime feature-films to be animated, in some segments, up to 24 frames per second.

I had never seen the classic 80’s anime movie “[Akira](#)” before, so, the other night, my friends sat me down and made me watch it. It was really good, of course. If you’re like me and somehow missed it, it’s a movie set in the distant future year of 2020 about a biker gang of kids in Neo-Tokyo, a massive city crumbling under its own weight, and what happens after one of them goes mad with newfound powers. I genuinely really enjoyed watching “Akira”. While watching it, I noticed that it followed a somewhat reactionary narrative: Neo-Tokyo is full of drug addicts, hedonists, parasitic politicians. The city, which was rebuilt after a disaster, has totally decayed. But our main character Tetsuo, after gaining power, gains a following: Neo-Tokyoans of all kinds know that, as the one who may awaken Akira, Tetsuo could renew the world by... blowing

it all up. The world can only be saved from the degeneracy brought on by modern society through a mass death event! I said annoyingly after the movie ended.



Neo-Tokyo: A concrete jungle of moral decay.

But, my friend said, it's true that Neo-Tokyo could not be saved, and, spoiler alert for a movie released in 1989, also true in-universe that blowing it up (for the second time) (after Akira is revived) created a brand new universe. So although it would not be good to do all that in real life, it makes sense for the world of "Akira". But that's the thing about narratives: it's possible to construct a series of events that perfectly fits any given point of view, to sometimes promote that certain point of view.

If something is called "Reactionary", that usually means it is conservative and opposes liberalism. A reactionary narrative would be a story that resolves (or does not resolve) along those lines. For example, in one story where a bad thing happens because something liberal (or symbolizing liberalism) came into conflict with the hero, the moral of that story would be that liberalism is not good. But "Akira" doesn't really involve any commentary on gender relations or

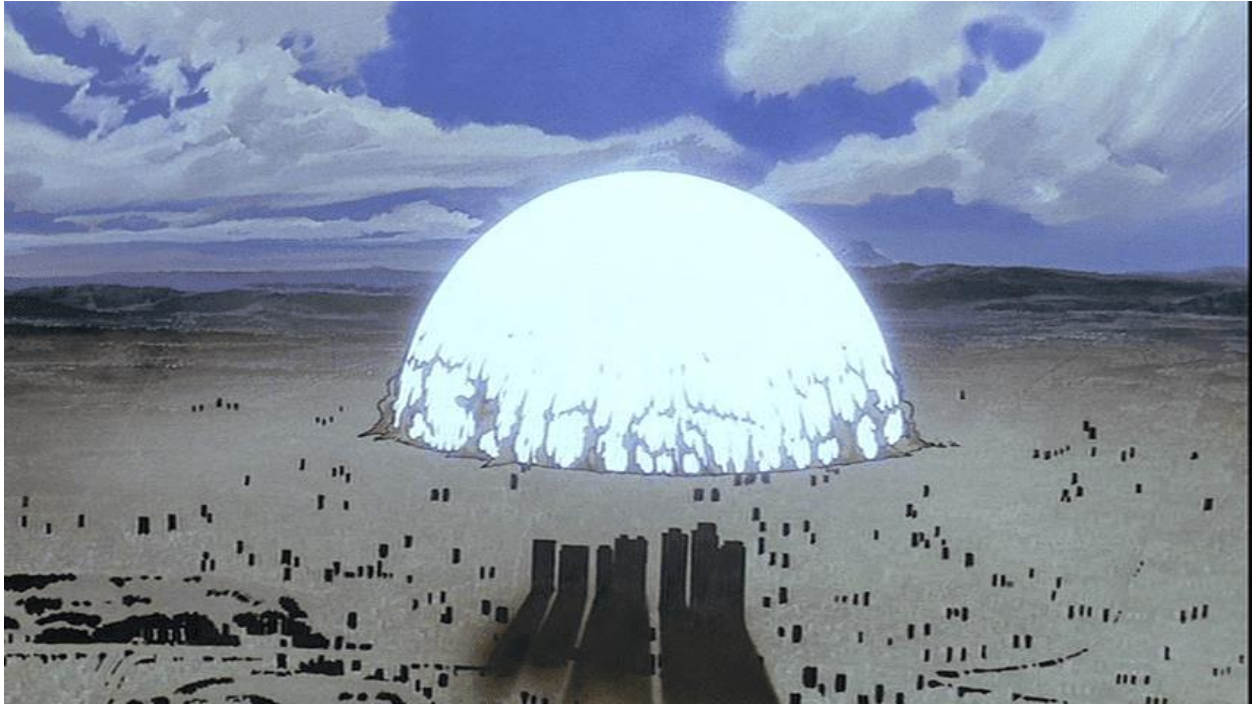
nationalism, at least not directly. What makes its narrative reactionary is its similarity to fascist arguments.

In 1941, the Japanese Empire published "[*Shimmin no Michi*](#)" ("[The Way of Subjects](#)"), a fascist political manifesto to be taught in all Japanese schools. In the preamble, it reads: "With the influx of European and American culture into this country, however, individualism, liberalism, utilitarianism, and materialism began to assert themselves, with the result that the traditional character of the country was much impaired and the various habits and customs bequeathed by our ancestors were treated unfavorably." This is a reactionary narrative that tells a story of Japan's culture being degenerated by outside forces. The core of the statement here is that, to save itself, Japan has to return to a time before liberalism and individualism; it has to reject new ideas. The rest of the document details the solution to this problem, which involves a sort of cultural revival. It ends: "Japan is the fountain source of the Yamato race, Manchukuo [Manchuria] is its reservoir, and East Asia is its paddy field." The document's opposition to liberalism is just as important as *how* it argues that it should be opposed: by colonizing East Asia and creating Japanese supremacy. After the war, Japan was completely destroyed, occupied, and was forced to give up its military.



The imperialists' ideal Manchurian and Chinese future, led by Japan, in a World War II era propaganda poster.

Released in 1989, *Akira* seems to take some inspiration from Japanese history. In the past (1980), Tokyo was completely destroyed by a great and powerful force, and they were left to rebuild. By 2020, the rebuilt city of Neo-Tokyo is decaying. “The passion to build has cooled and the joy of reconstruction forgotten, and now it’s just a garbage heap made up of hedonistic fools”, Colonel Shikishima says, passing by a couple making out on a bench. But the secret weapon – Akira, that same thing that destroyed Japan in 1980 – can, this time, renew the world. “Look what they abandoned in their panic, they were afraid! They were too scared, so they hid it away from the public. They forgot all shame and honor, cast off the civilization and science we had created, and shut the lid of the Pandora’s Box they had opened,” says Shikishima later in the movie. By the end, Akira returns, and the city blows up again, surely killing untold amounts of people. But the skies are clear. “It’s almost as if... is this the birth of a universe?!” one character asks.



This is a good thing.

I still really loved *Akira*, because it's objectively very good. After I had watched it, I went to sleep dreaming about vast and dark Neo-Tokyo. I would definitely watch it again and recommend it to other people. But it's impossible to ignore the narrative it espouses.

I think this is something worth paying attention to, not to make grand judgments about whether or not a piece of art is good or bad, but to understand the context in which it was created, and what emotions it evokes from the audience.

A lot of the time, when conversations about popular movies goes political, it's hit with that overused [thought-terminating cliché](#): "It's not that deep." I'm of the opinion that literally everything is always that deep, but, even if you don't agree with me, terminating a conversation about the political context of media can stop people from gaining a deeper understanding of it, or just lose an opportunity to hear some interesting takes. Who doesn't want to get to know their favorite books, movies, and songs better, and want to know what other interested people think of it?

I think this tendency to avoid conversations like these is related to a fear of cancellation. “Are you saying it’s fascist just to like a movie? [Let people enjoy things!](#)” But just because I’m critical of it doesn’t mean I hate it, or think that you’re a reactionary for watching it. I actually like “Akira” a lot because of how of-its-time it is – every story exists as a network of connections to the world that produced it. It’s like the first piece of a puzzle. Adding on more pieces (that fit) can give us a greater picture.

Also, from a purely utilitarian perspective, thinking about narrative styles in movies can serve as an introduction to developing a more critical lens in general. Reactionary narratives don’t only exist in fiction. History books, political speeches, manifestos (like “*Shimmin no Michi*”), news articles, and editorials all involve some kind of narrative, and most of the time they involve some kind of perspective or argument made about the events given, ones that, inadvertently or not, support certain political ideas. At the cost of being slightly annoying at movie nights, an understanding of how reactionary narratives manifest in popular media can also help us gain familiarity with the worldviews and ideologies that shape our world.