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Untitled
Acrylic on canvas

For this piece, I created a cityscape that culminates the most intriguing aspects of my research into dystopian literature and film. As a part of my research, I rewatched numerous of my favorite films such as *Akira*, *Ghost in a Shell*, *Tetsuo the Iron Man*, *Blade Runner*, and more. To dissect and analyze the film's imagery, I took screenshots as references to influence my creative process and decision-making. I also used themes such as dynamic lighting and different perspectives to understand what techniques I could use to control how my painting is perceived. Before this, I had only worked at such a large scale doing murals; however, I am still getting accustomed to hand painting, and starting such a large and ambitious painting was quite the endeavor. The process of envisioning my imagery was complex. As I decided on composition and content, I did a series of collages that gave me a general direction for my painting. Beforehand, I had planned on incorporating mixed media with screen printing and etching; however, after comprehending the extent of the painting, I ruled out adding print. However, I decided to rasterize, collage, and paint on top of most design and letter-based imagery to continue the mixed media trend. Juggling the extensive color palette and details was challenging. Considering my limited time schedule, I had to pay close attention to not overworking any specific area while ensuring I got to everything. Despite its challenges, working in this way, while exhausting at times, was extremely rewarding and only made me think of how the techniques I developed could transfer into something similar or more ambitious in the future.

Dystopias in Film and Literature - A Comparative Analysis of Akira and Blade Runner



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An English philosopher named John Stuart Mill coined the term/word dystopia is nothing more than a “bad place” in 1868 and used the word to describe utopia’s opposite: a place where attempts to create an ideal society had gone poorly. Our perception of dystopia was built up over time through its depiction in the media. The traditional elements of utopia, such as prosperity and social justice, were erased or distorted to imagine realities marked by authoritarian governments, technological excess, and environmental destruction. Nobody wants to experience the atrocities they see on screen or in books. Still, humanity has some deep-rooted fascination with the darkest depths of our reality, grounded in everyone’s greatest fears and what they consider hell. Whether that be a fear of becoming a sheep (The Handmaid’s Tale or The Matrix), a fear of not having control over your life (a brave new world), a fear of the growing power of The Man (V for Vendetta), fear of censorship (Fahrenheit 451), or the fear of government power and control (1984). While often disturbing, the appearance of dystopian narratives works alongside their ability to provoke thought, elicit emotional responses, and even be catalysts that contribute to a broader societal change.

Dystopian narratives have uniquely shaped culture and perception in Japan and the United States, influencing how individuals in either society react and perceive challenges. In Japan, dystopian narratives often highlight the resilience of individuals in the face of great fear and challenges. The impact of WWII and the post-war period on Japan influenced many dystopian narratives. The trauma of experiencing nuclear warfare and the process of rebuilding contributed to Japan’s unique perspective on dystopia. The wartime attitude of Japan was rooted in the bushido ethics of fearlessness and determination. The Japanese will and stubbornness in the face of surrender ultimately influenced Truman to drop the bomb, leaving behind a sense of defeat and hopelessness in Japan. The atomic bombings created a shared fear of the destructive

power of technology, causing postwar media to explore the intersection of technology and society, ultimately birthing the cyberpunk genre. Cyberpunk is characterized by a dystopian future where technology has both empowered and enslaved humanity. Cyberpunk has contributed to a cultural fascination with technology and an interest in its potential benefits and risks.

Akira is a Japanese cyberpunk manga series created by Katsuhiro Otomo. The story takes place in a post-apocalyptic Tokyo called Neo-Tokyo in the aftermath of a mysterious explosion that leaves ruin in its wake and triggers psychic abilities in the protagonists, Kaneda and Tetsuo. The government's attempts to control these powers led to political conspiracies, social unrest, and the awakening of the divine power Akira. The series was later adapted into an animated film in 1988. Akira was created following Japan's economic boom and societal transformation. Japan underwent a period of modernization and urbanization following World War II, marking an era of technological innovation. Despite the nation's prosperity, Japan's economic triumphs were accompanied by underlying social and existential anxieties. Otomo created Akira to respond to the challenges and uncertainties of post-war Japan. Neo-Tokyo reflects Japan's fear of unmonitored technological progress, mirroring Japan's own experience of rapid industrialization and the aftermath of the atomic bombings. The plot is riddled with youth subcultures, conspiracies, and anti-establishment themes to resonate with a generation grappling with issues of authority and identity during uneasy times.

Blade Runner is based on Philip K. Dicks 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. Ridley Scott adapted the novel in 1982 to create *Blade Runner*, a neo-noir science fiction film. In a dystopian future with advanced technology, *Blade Runner* explores themes of identity and humanity. Influenced by cyberpunk aesthetics and film noir, it reflects 1980s technological

anxiety. Film noir is characterized by its dark and shadowy visuals that contribute to an uneasy atmosphere and enhance the film's exploration of the city's darkest places. The narrative centers on "replicants," advanced humanoid robots, and follows Blade Runner, played by Harrison Ford, tasked with "retiring" them. Set in a futuristic cyberpunk Los Angeles, Blade Runner is known for its dystopian future and gritty urban landscape riddled with rainy neon-lit streets. Using Philip K. Dicks novel as source material, Ridley Scott establishes the core theme of questioning the nature of humanity and the morality of creating beings with artificial intelligence.

A technological dystopia is a future where advanced technology influences societal issues, ultimately resulting in oppression and dehumanization. Generally, traditional government is replaced by surveillance and artificial intelligence that serve authoritarian regimes that lead to mass control, inequality, and a loss of individual freedoms. The influence of advanced technology often amplifies existing social disparities, creating an environment where innovation is at the people's expense. The narrative questions progress and cautions against unchecked technological power and its potential for harm.

Akira's portrayal of technology is a cautionary tale. The storyline tells the story of unregulated scientific experimentation and a societal reliance on technology. The technological excess evident in the form of psychic powers, military experimentation, and urban decay undermines the potential dangers of technological advancement. The story explores technology as dehumanizing as characters undergo radical and even monstrous transformations, showing a lack of control over many aspects of humanity. Critical in Akira's narrative is the government project, run by corrupt officials, designed to bring about psychic abilities in humans by channeling the divine power of Akira. One of the subjects, Tetsuo, is inducted into the psych ward after becoming seriously injured in a bike accident, only to develop psychic powers as a

consequence of the government testing. After losing a friend, Tetsuo's power becomes uncontrollable, causing him to mutate and swell into a grotesque amoeba of flesh that leaves a path of ruin in its wake. The destructive consequences of the Akira project serve as a stark reminder of the ethical and moral implications of wielding unchecked power. The narrative reveals that pursuing technological control can cause a disconnect from one's humanity.

Blade Runner explores the intricacies of a world divided by artificial intelligence and humanity. The film introduces the idea of replicants, bioengineered humanoid beings indistinguishable from humans. As replicants look to extend their life span and gain control, the viewer has to question the morality of creating sentient beings. The entire plot grapples with how to define humanity and what separates humans apart from one another. Replicants, just like humans, have existential crises and emotions and struggle with identity and purpose. The Tyrell corporation manufacturing the replicants complicates the dilemma between creator and creation embodied by the corporation's god-like role in society. The story also dives into discrimination and the societal fear that comes from treating artificial intelligence as a threat, further complicating the morality surrounding the treatment of replicants.

Though originating from distinct cultural and cinematic backgrounds, both films delve into the complexities of dystopia, the consequences of unchecked technological advancement, the decay of urban environments, and the profound ethical dilemmas their protagonist's face. In Blade Runner, technology is the force that contributes to the cyberpunk aesthetic, but, more importantly, technological advancement in the form of artificial intelligence creates a city filled with urban decay, surveillance, and a society dealing with the reality of creating beings with artificial intelligence. On the other hand, Akira emphasizes the consequences of technological excess, revealing the destructive power of military experimentation. Technology in this context

becomes the catalyst for corruption, military control, and loss of structure. While *Blade Runner* reveals the moral complications of technology, *Akira* shows the physical and societal repercussions of technological overreach. Both films are a cautionary tale about the consequences of humanity's relationship with advanced technology in dystopian futures.

Generally, dystopia is grounded in the targeted society's experiences. In the case of twentieth-century Japan, almost all dystopian media touched on atomic or divine power in some shape or form. Most notably, popular Japanese science fiction films such as *Akira* and the *Godzilla* series are centered around a vision of disaster and social or spiritual collapse. Unsurprisingly, both movies went viral in Japan and overseas, revealing a market for Japanese dystopian, sci-fi, and cyberpunk films. Historically, advancements in technology and military success have only brought destruction to Japan, causing a generally passive and fearful citizenry. So, it isn't surprising that much of post-war science fiction has followed an apocalyptic dystopian trend because it is not far from reality.

Both *Akira* and *Godzilla* present a radical militarized opposition to the unexplainable powers; arguably, both of their abilities are sourced from atomic power. *Godzilla* is awakened by American nuclear testing. It is American science that brings forth the monster, but it is the suicide of a Japanese scientist who ultimately destroys the beast and saves the world. The narrative demonizes American nuclear science as a reference to Hiroshima and Nagasaki while maintaining a happy ending with a Japanese hero. The narrative makes the Japanese audience feel cathartic and compensatory and lets them reimagine their wartime experiences.

At the time of *Blade Runner*'s release, artificial intelligence was not in the minds of most; however, today's relevance partially relies on the film's exploration of artificial intelligence and its ethical implications. As AI advances rapidly worldwide, the questions about consciousness,

empathy, and the moral responsibility of creating sentient intelligence resonate with today's discussions about AI's ethics. In the US, AI has been integrated into various aspects of American society, including finance, law enforcement, and even healthcare. Blade Runner can be viewed as a cautionary tale to prevent potential issues such as the loss of jobs, bias in AI algorithms, and the ethical attributes of AI's creation. Like any significant step in technological advancement, there is much room for corruption in the realm of AI. Blade Runner's narrative is relevant in revealing the potential for harm when AI is influenced by corporate or government power. Blade Runner must remain on the footing surrounding the ethical impact of AI because it prompts the viewer to reflect on the implications of technological advancements and calls for the need for frameworks and legal safeguards as companies continue to create new AI systems.

Akira is a powerful exploration of anti-establishment and resistance movements within a dystopian narrative. Post-apocalyptic Neo Tokyo is seemingly chaotic due to their society being plagued by government and military corruption, which sets the stage for the film's anti-establishment undertones. Historically, subcultures and countercultures are born from struggle and oppression as an escape. This is the case for the protagonists Kaneda and Tetsuo, who, along with their posse, symbolize defiance against the establishment through their motorcycle gang, political activism, and clashes with military forces. The film reflects the counterculture movements of the 60s and 70s in Japan, portraying youth challenging authoritarian rule.

Blade Runner uses replicant rebellion and individual agency to uncover anti-establishment themes throughout the storyline. Replicants were initially designed for "off-world" labor; however, their quest for extended lifespans and autonomy became a focal point of the story. Despite their unnatural creation, replicants contain individual agency in

grappling with existential questions, desire freedom, and search for a meaningful existence. A rebellion of replicants eventually forms, inviting viewers to empathize with their struggle for agency and identity, further blurring the lines between human and artificial consciousness. Not only does Blade Runner connect themes of rebellion and individuality, but the film raises questions about the moral responsibility of those who created replicants and how replicants can challenge the boundaries put upon them by their creators.

In both stories, rebellion is a catalyst for exploring humanity's resilience against oppressive systems. Whether manifested by replicants seeking autonomy in "Blade Runner" or by psychic-powered youth resisting governmental control in "Akira," rebellion becomes a powerful lens through which these dystopian tales examine the yearning for freedom and individual agency in the face of societal structures.

Both films explore complex themes of identity, humanity, and the consequences of uncontained technological progress. The films' legacies are evident because of the continued exploration of themes such as artificial intelligence and atomic power in contemporary science fiction. The film's impact goes beyond its initial release, with Blade Runner even receiving a sequel in 2017. Both films are constantly referenced in contemporary dystopian media, showing the relevance and influence of these films on cinema, aesthetics, and our perception of dystopian futures. Their narratives caution against the unchecked advancement of technology, portraying worlds where rapid progress leads to societal decay and environmental devastation. The neon-lit urban landscapes in both stories symbolize a fear of urbanization gone wrong. Themes of government control resonate with concerns about growing centralized power and surveillance. The confusion surrounding technology in these works parallels current debates surrounding artificial intelligence and the ethical uses of scientific progress. In essence, the enduring

relevance of “Akira” and “Blade Runner” lies in their ability to resonate with and reflect the evolving societal fears and challenges throughout eras.

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