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Ambient Athleticism: Politicizing *Akira's* Accelerationist Olympiad

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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with a concentration in Film Studies
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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Atomic.....	14
Athletic.....	25
Ambient.....	38
Conclusion	55
References.....	61

Abstract

This thesis politicizes Katsuhiro Otomo's 1988 animated cyberpunk film, *Akira*, specifically through how it stages its myriad neoliberal crises as opportunities for accelerationist solutions mediated by the Tokyo Olympics. *Akira's* display of fully animated and intense action physics produces an aesthetic relation to its own athletes that contracts around their bodies in an attempt to transgress classical and oppressive compositions. *Akira's* vague utopic promise receives broad acceptance and affirmation by extant scholarship, often relying on the accelerative impulses found in the works of Gilles Deleuze to substantiate *Akira's* hopeful ending. Invoking Gilles Deleuze's notion of *athleticism*, this thesis critically rereads *Akira's* athletic aesthetic as a woeful acceptance of neoliberal ontologies that necessitate sacrifice and destruction as a part of a zero-sum Liberal money ontology. I instead rely on Modern Monetary Theory's (MMT) overturning of this misconceived nature of money and capital as external and uncaring forces akin to physics. I engage in, what I call, an *ambient attention*, weaving together money, athletics, and other multimedia forms of communication and expression as a broad cascade of interdependence and political contestation, or an ambient athleticism, thus uncoupling them and *Akira* from accelerationism's fatalistic and fascistic inevitability.

Introduction

“A young athlete born within sight of the atomic blast, that devastated Hiroshima 19 years ago, was chosen this week to light the flame that will burn throughout the Tokyo Olympics.”¹

New York Times, August 23rd, 1964

19-year-old Sakai Yoshinori’s symbolic torch run at the 1964 Olympic Opening Ceremonies crystallized the political significance the Tokyo Summer Olympic Games would dramatize for a global television audience. Nicknamed “atom boy” on account of his being born adjacent to the Hiroshima atomic blast, Sakai was asked to display his young athletic body as an emblem of Japan’s monumental post-war recovery. How could one deny Japan’s renewed prowess in the face of this vital body spawned in union with the atomic bomb? The ideological labor of mobilizing regulated bodies is not exceptional for nationalistic regimes. Indeed, the Olympics have routinely fostered a war-like mobilization of bodies and resources during times of relative peace. What marks the 1964 Tokyo Olympics as unique, however, is the historical labor such a mobilization performs.

The final relay of the 1964 torch lighting ceremony is haunted by Japan’s legacy of war and empire. Previously, Japan had largely repressed its dramatic defeat and suffering during World War II, severing the then present historical traumas. Yet Sakai’s body serves as an ambiguous historical bridge; the young torch bearer shores up present Japan by restoring a lost

¹ “Boy Born on Day A-Bomb Fell Chosen to Light Olympic Flame.” *The New York Times*. August 23rd, 1964.

link with the past. In doing so, the athletic body operates as prosthesis. As historian Yoshikuni Igarashi argues, by rendering the mobile limbs of the individual athlete as an extension of the national body, Japan enacts a “re-membering” of the war that sutures future prosperity on the necessity of past aggression.²

Contemporaneously, another emblematic “atom boy” made his debut appearance on Japanese television. He is known in the West as “Astro Boy” (*Tetsuwan-Atomu* or “Mighty Atom” in Japan). Directed by Osamu Tezuka in 1963, the *Astro Boy* television series stars a powerful robotic youth created to ease the grief of his inventor, military scientist Dr. Tenma, who loses his son to a motorcycle accident at the top of the pilot episode. Prefiguring Sakai Yoshinori’s torch relay, *Astro Boy* similarly joined past tragedy and military technology in an exceptional youthful athleticism. Revolutionizing the animation industry, the Astro Boy character emerged as a key figure for post-War liberation and peace. It would go on to become an archetypal protagonist for Japanese animation series throughout the following decades. In this way, both the Japanese Olympics and the animation industry leveraged their respective powers to broadcast young athletic bodies as symbols of hope and recovery, that, however exceptional, were forever haunted by the traumas of war and often subjected to the violence of military technology. In the ensuing years, the “atom boy” archetype would undergo myriad iterations, seeking to restore a sense of balance in response to escalating fictional conflicts.³

² Yoshikuni Igarashi. *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970*. (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6.

³ Otomo cites *Akira*’s particular influence as being drawn from his childhood memories of reading *Tetsuwan Atom*’s 1952-68 manga, but also more specifically he would base the names and character designs of the two main characters, Tetsuo and Kaneda, on the 1956-66 manga series, *Tetsujin 28-go*. See this in an interview Forbes conducted with Otomo, Ollie Barder, “Katsuhiro Otomo on Creating 'Akira' And Designing the Coolest Bike in All of Manga and Anime,” *Forbes*, (2017). In *Tetsujin 28-go*, a boy, Shotaro Kaneda, inherits a gigantic pilotable robot his father, military scientist Dr. Kaneda, developed in the final phase of the Pacific War. In this I also find generative comparison with Yoshiyuki Tomino’s *Mobile Suit Gundam* series, and its first protagonist Amuro Ray as part of this lineage. The “Newtype” archetype established in *Gundam* acts as an extension of this athletic youthful

It is with the release of *Akira* (1988) that Katsuhiro Otomo's own warped version of the "atom boy" would be reintroduced to the world and the Olympic stage. *Akira* arrived near the peak of Japan's economic boom in the 1980's, also regularly cited as the beginning of a new wave of Japanese animation with regards to production, distribution, audience, and aesthetics.⁴ As an economic spectacle, *Akira* far eclipsed the resources required of any preceding Japanese animated feature. Its production largely abandoned the staples of anime's aesthetic up to that point. Beginning with television anime in the 1960's, most notably in *Astro Boy*, anime production often avoided simulating the animation techniques of studios like Disney. The Disney style, often classified as full animation, is characterized by smooth volumetric movement and perspectival composition that attempts to emulate elements of live-action cinema. More interested in abstract evocations of action, anime played with the nonrealistic movements that occur in the limited manipulation of both the cels and the layers that separate them, creating an image that is not smooth nor volumetric but instead jerky and flat. This play between intervals has been picked up by scholars and artists both in Japan and abroad as a major aspect of Japanese visual culture. *Akira*, however, boasted one of the largest budgets and staffs for an animated feature in Japan yet, would culminate in a film made up of over 150,000 separate, luxuriously detailed images shot on 70mm.⁵ The extravagant expense alone constituted it as a worldwide

body burdened by war, yet also highly attuned to piloting gigantic robots and communicating telepathically to other Newtype pilots. Newtype would enter cultural and theoretical lexicon, especially in a subset of Japanese media theory called *Otaku* theory or *Otakuology*. See both Toshio Okada's *Otakugaku Nyuumon (Introduction to Otakuology)*, (Shinchosha, 2008), and Hiroki Azuma's *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. [English ed.]. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) to name a few. We would later see this "atom boy" archetype receive even more subversion and attention after *Akira* with Hideaki Anno's hit 1995 television series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and its traumatized youthful protagonist/skilled robot pilot Shinji Ikari, and so on and so forth.

⁴ Thomas Lamarre. "Born of Trauma: Akira and Capitalist Modes of Destruction." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 16, no. 1 (2008), 154.

⁵ Yuichi Shintani dir., *Akira Production Report*, Akira Committee, 1988.

event. *Akira*'s international theatrical run lavishly displayed the height of Japan's economic might and cultural influence. Japanese animation had found its Sakai Yoshinori in *Akira*.

The film's protagonist, Tetsuo Shima, represents a torchbearer turned monstrous, undergoing a painful transformation in the middle of the reconstructed Olympic Stadium in 2019 Neo-Tokyo, Japan. Neo-Tokyo's government has visibly and violently abandoned much of the city. Decrepit infrastructure, derelict construction sites, and gutted public institutions populate the film's *mise en scène* — the exception being the highly provisioned intervention by way of Olympic investments. Coopted by a sprawling military industrial complex, the Olympic stadium itself stands out amidst a domineering dystopic landscape. Tetsuo's mutation into an agent of nuclear annihilation contends with the optimistic image of Japan's earlier athletic-atomic union. However, I argue previous scholarship overlooks the central historical significance of the Olympics as a symbol of systemic intervention in *Akira* and, in particular, how the film's ambient backgrounds mediate its apocalyptic aesthetics of athleticism. Instead, Tetsuo's monstrous athleticism receives much of the critical attention and praise.

In this thesis, I look at *Akira* as an emblematic case regarding the confused dilemma of accelerationism in the Japanese context, and the limits and dangers of such logics as a playground for aesthetic and theoretical revelation concerning the perils of capitalism. Although this project mainly speaks to the field of Japanese animation scholarship in the West, I look to contest accelerationist tendencies that pervade global media culture. Accelerationism originated as a derogatory term coined by critical theorist Benjamin Noys in the 2010s. To cite his initial definition, Noys writes, "if capitalism generates its own forces of dissolution then the necessity is

to radicalise capitalism itself: the worse the better. We can call this tendency accelerationism.”⁶

At first, Noys deployed the term to categorize Nick Land and the Cybernetic Cultures Research Unit’s (CCRU) theoretical work in the 1990s. Whether self-consciously left or right wing, Noys’ critique concerns accelerationists’ shared desire for capitalist destruction. Steven Shaviro puts it like this, “The hope is that, by exacerbating our current conditions of existence, we will finally be able to make them explode, and thereby move beyond them.”⁷ Such a principle presupposes our current conditions as a subject of autonomous capital forces, uninhibited by human agency or control. The tendency to characterize capital as an untethered agent run amuck is not unique to accelerationists however, as these impulses have been traced back to the 19th century, such as Karl Marx’s dialectical analysis of capitalism. Looking at Marx’s characterization and warnings of class conflict as an inevitable historical force propelling capital contradictions into violent revolutions, it’s not surprising many accelerationists position Marx’s work as an anticipatory movement to their own.⁸ In the 20th century, Italian Futurism further foreshadows accelerationist ideas today. Andrew Hewitt links Futurist figurehead, Filippo Marinetti, and his philosophy to Marx. He argues Marinetti “champions a radicalized, less ‘fixated’ capitalism – of the sort sketched so dizzyingly in the Communist Manifesto – in which the inherent and violent contradictions of the system of commodity fetishism are allowed to play themselves out.”⁹

Futurist aesthetic and political similarities to accelerationism is also something Noys makes sure

⁶ Benjamin, Noys. *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 5.

⁷ Steven Shaviro. *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism*. (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 1.

⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1848, traces this dialectic, but it is telling that Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian’s accelerationist reader, *#Accelerate: the Accelerationist Reader*. (Falmouth, United Kingdom: Berlin: Urbanomic Media Ltd.; in association with Merve, 2014) include work from Marx in their collection as an anticipatory example of their movement.

⁹ Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*. (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1993), 10.

to note, calling Futurism a “crucible of accelerationism” with a complicated yet apparent desire to similarly appear “mimetic and apologetic of the acceleration of capitalist technology.”¹⁰ Futurist aesthetics contain a kind of contemporaneity due to how a renewed embracing of speed finds its way in modern accelerative works, like anime.¹¹ Most importantly, concerns of an uncontrollable apocalyptic spiraling have deeply embedded themselves in the everyday vernacular of neoliberalism.

Included in Noys’ characterization of accelerationism is the prominent interest in individual bodies pushed to their carnal limits through technology. Noys investigates, what he calls, “fantasmatic and libidinal elements of the promised integration of the human with the machine.”¹² The anti-humanism in accelerationism is predicated on the dreadful weakness of the human body as constituted, as if a fleshy speed limit curtails the necessary acceleration for change. The need for a body mechanized, technologized, or made obsolete altogether, reiterate an obsession with bodily form as primary negotiator of and/or hinderance for accelerative forces. Noys finds a compulsion to deliriously strive “for a new post-human state beyond any form of the subject.”¹³ Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian trace a similar history, notably stating that accelerationist writers employed “the disturbing invocations of SF [science fiction] movie narratives; sid[ing] not with the human but with the Terminator.”¹⁴ Not unlike *Akira*, the philosophical foundation of accelerationism is self-consciously fed by film and media aesthetics from the 1980s, like that of Ridley Scott’s *Bladerunner* (1982), William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*

¹⁰ Benjamin Noys. *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism & Capitalism*. (Winchester UK: Zero Books, 2014), 23.

¹¹ For a deeper exploration of how *Akira* and Japanese animation’s similarities (and differences) to the Italian Futurist movement, see Zach Gottesman’s “Tetsuo and Marinetti: Akira as a Cyberpunk Critique of Futurist Modernity.” *Journal of Japanese & Korean Cinema* 8, no. 2 (2016), 104-126.

¹² Benjamin Noys. *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism & Capitalism*. (Winchester UK: Zero Books, 2014), 36.

¹³ Benjamin Noys. *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism & Capitalism*, x.

¹⁴ Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, “Introduction,” in *#Accelerate: the Accelerationist Reader*, 21.

(1984), or James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984). What is known as the cyberpunk genre, this media foregrounds the exploration of exceptional post-human bodies in futuristic mega-cities celebrated by the CCRU. As aesthetic extensions of neoliberal violence, these SF action films are mobilized as sites of creative destruction by post-human actors. In these figures are the embodiment of the cathartic sensorial embraces of capital cruelty collapsing in on itself — city as body, body as city, both forms often undone or destroyed by the film's end. Such images are vital to reinforcing the philosophy's technosocial and aesthetic transformation of the working subject. The end goal being the facilitation of the accelerative forces necessary to push capital past its limit within the working subject themselves.

The perpetuation of devastation and bodily transformation represented in *Akira* particularly embodies many of these same accelerationist logics. Japanese media scholars have thoroughly highlighted one of *Akira*'s key accelerationist paradigms that I have mentioned previously, even if they do not name it as such: the desire to exacerbate the current conditions of capital until we can move beyond them. Thomas Lamarre, for instance, gives his account of *Akira*'s repetition of destruction as a film not interested in directly addressing Japan's history of nuclear trauma, but rather as a vehicle for a violent accelerationist overcoming of capitalism. He writes, “[*Akira*] takes the intensification of acting out of nuclear destruction as the basic condition for the passage into a new era and a new world.”¹⁵ Lamarre diagnosis a central paradox in Otomo's work. The film is not “working through” or “mourning” disaster.¹⁶ Instead, it imagines its own contemporary post-war atomic union, whether it be one between destruction/creation, body/technology, or local/global. Mass destruction in *Akira*, and by

¹⁵ Thomas Lamarre. “Born of Trauma: *Akira* and Capitalist Modes of Destruction,” 133.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

extension late-capitalist society, “holds things together...at some level...destruction is production, and vice versa.”¹⁷ Isolde Standish too recognizes *Akira*’s thematic obsession with the “havoc and destruction of the past being simultaneously criticized and contrasted with a future Utopian society that will come about after the film.”¹⁸ *Akira*’s paradoxical visualization of “not only destruction...but also the birth of a new universe,” as argued by Steven Brown, is a widely accepted complication in the film’s narrative.¹⁹ *Akira*’s surface level Olympic critique is complicated by this accelerationist contradiction, by placing its utopic hopes in individual athletic bodies as the film’s political imaginary problematically plays within the same field of the government it antagonizes.

Rather than seeing this aspect of *Akira* as revolutionary, “meditat[ing] on the mechanisms of authoritarian power and how to resist it,” I read it as a conflicted, yet unconsciously accelerative acceptance of the “nature” of capital as that which lies outside human intervention.²⁰ In what follows, I resist both the film and the related scholarship’s funneling of possible intervention only through the medium of exceptional bodies and destructive forces. On my reading, such narrow channeling is not only reductive, but also harbors the more dangerous and, frankly, fascistic impulses inherent in both accelerationism, neoliberalism, and Japanese nationalism.

Akira’s dense and complex mobilization of political and historical referents to and critiques of 1960s Japan, and Japan’s place within a broader global stage, require a broad

¹⁷ Ibid., 134.

¹⁸ Isolde Standish. “Akira, Postmodernism and Resistance.” *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture*, no. 1985, (2009), 63-64.

¹⁹ Steven T. Brown. *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture*. 1st ed. 2010. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2010), 8.

²⁰ Ibid., 7.

rethinking of hegemonic understandings of mediation as to effectively investigate its accelerationist aesthetics. As an alternative to these accelerative impulses, I draw upon the humanities work developing in the field of Modern Monetary Theory (MMT), or Neochartalism, to reexamine and upend *Akira*'s foundational aesthetic and philosophical logics.²¹ MMT contends that money is an abundant tool of governance, mediation, and communication involving accounting, law, language, and aesthetics. Money, on this view, is not a finite, alienable resource to austere manage and private capital is not the primary agent or cause of modern political economic production or crises. MMT provides an expansive and inclusive counter logic as a heterodox macroeconomic framework. Taking up such arguments, the MMT Humanities project critically analyzes cultural and media forms in ways that denaturalize and contest privation and injustice. With this, it breaks with Marxist and accelerationist forms of critical resistance to neoliberal violence. For the MMT Humanities scholarship, such critical postures take Liberal money ideology at their word, condemning money as both an external and limited resource, vilifying and naturalizing its alienating, uncaring privation and thus foreclosing the unbounded possibilities therein. MMT Humanities scholar Scott Ferguson, in particular, locates the problem in critical theory's commitments to "immanent" criticism. "In holding up private exchange value as a porthole to the future," he writes, "Marxist modes of immanent criticism mire us in the contradictions of the global marketplace, while reducing the riddle of tomorrow to the enigmas found in capital's fantastical expressions."²² My reading of *Akira* participates in the broader Humanities project of MMT, this new set of economic and political

²¹ The MMT Humanities Project represents a collective of scholars and activists; William Saas, Jacob Feining, Scott Ferguson, Max Seijos, Andres Bernal, Natalie Smith, etc., who are publishing both academic literature and other media like podcasts, online video, and essays to expand MMT scholarship to humanistic fields outside economics.

²² Scott Ferguson. "The Unheard-of Center: Critique after Modern Monetary Theory." *Arcade*, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/unheard-center-critique-after-modern-monetary-theory>

ontologies can uncover aesthetics' dormant potential to address social issues previously unthinkable with prior leftist frameworks.

Akira's aesthetic relationship to the broader landscape of contemporary sci-fi action media situates it within a broad preoccupation with physics. I argue *Akira's* tenuous relationship with anime's distant and flattening predecessors is due to its highly motivated participation as a large-scale production akin to its many sci-fi Hollywood action blockbuster influences. Ferguson's book, *Declarations of Dependence: Money, Aesthetics and the Politics of Care*, intervenes into such aesthetics, investigating the "conspicuous convergence of money, physics, and aesthetics in contemporary action media."²³ My analysis of *Akira's* evocation of blockbuster action physics relies on Ferguson's diagnostic work revealing a neoliberal unconscious in such action media. Just as the Liberal money ontology perceives money as a force that crashes and flows, mediated by an unaccountable physics, such action media "teach spectators ... to subordinate abstraction to physics and seek salvation in an erratic material flux."²⁴ I trace *Akira's* specific aesthetic tradition, and find much in common with the dominant values of Hollywood's biggest contemporary action films concerning constructing and presenting physics and space, but also a scathing critique of the same. By doing this, I also complicate Japanese animation scholarship that pushes against this hegemonic western visuality. While their terms slightly differ from Ferguson's, like *Akira's* own critique, I too find a compulsive appeal to physics as a way out of the dominating power structures, and without a proper alternative, their work fails to truly trouble the prescribed limits of aesthetics' political potential.

²³ Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence: Money, Aesthetics, and the Politics of Care*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 8.

²⁴ Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence*, 10.

Akira critiques and subsequentially unravels its blockbuster aesthetic through appeals to accelerative disintegration of composition. I chiefly look at Tetsuo's climactic transformation sequence to prove the undergirded accelerationist logics that motivate *Akira's* utopic yearnings. To do this, this project employs a critical re-reading of Gilles Deleuze's notion of athleticism. Deleuze mobilizes the term athleticism most prominently in *The Logic of Sensation* to theorize and affirm the dynamic visual intensity in the paintings of Francis Bacon. Scholars like David Johnson regard athleticism as among "some of the most fundamental ideas in Deleuze's philosophical system."²⁵ It is Deleuze's term and its ties to exceptional bodies that I investigate as a key underlying relation in *Akira*, the Olympics, and accelerationism more broadly. In turning to athleticism, I look at Deleuze's foundational ontologies. By turning to Deleuzian foundations, I also turn to the roots of many accelerationist notions and modern media theory, especially in the field of Japanese media scholarship. Most writers in each tradition position the work of both Deleuze & Felix Guattari as a wellspring of theoretical notions. By cataloguing *Akira's* many athletic articulations, its political hopes harshly contract around the vulnerable athletes that participate in its dystopic, capitalistic Olympics.

Rather than totalizing *Akira* as accelerationist, I draw out the constitutive desires for and expressions of fiscal mediation and social repair in the films many detailed backgrounds. The riotous backdrop of Neo-Tokyo places chief neoliberal anxieties of unemployment, austere fiscal policy, and an absence of governance in opposition with the aesthetic abundance of athletic set-pieces and meticulously constructed worldbuilding. To tease out the rich and conflicted significance of such backgrounds, I deploy a mode of noticing and reading I call *ambient*

²⁵ Johnson, David Benjamin. "Pictorial Athleticism and Intensity in Francis Bacon." *Deleuze Studies* 10, no. 2 (2016), 187.

attention, a term infused with a sense of Andre Bazin's attention to cinema's holistic spatio-temporalities and Anna McCarthy's politicization of the oft-ignored ambience produced by multimedia signs pushed into the background of public spaces. The film's Olympic context permeates its contested spaces. These spaces are constitutive of ambient multimedia signs that analogize the historic political contradictions the Olympic produces in both its host cities and participating athletes. In this way, I theorize *Akira's* aesthetics as an *ambient athleticism*, situating the film's violent bodies in contested and polyvalent contexts that trouble accelerationism's conditions of possibility and inevitability.

In the three sections that follow, I first position *Akira's* action physics in its proper aesthetic contexts. By surveying their similar indebtedness to an intensification of physics, I put pressure on both *Akira's* and extant scholarship's critique of dominant visual modalities. Secondly, I connect the film's reliance on accelerative physics to Deleuzian athleticism and its immanent aesthetics of force and motion in aims of a disintegrative release and resulting utopic euphoria. Lastly, I employ an ambient attention that undoes the externalization of accelerationist hopes, remediating the film's backgrounded dialogue of multimedia signs as a present and active political agent. In doing so, I discover an ongoing distant abstract action that undermines the evident politics of inaction that Neo-Tokyo's politicians profess, mimicking the failures of accelerationist political hope for inevitable world renewal. I critique a politics that relies on such athleticism, dooming the utopic hopes of both accelerationism, and *Akira*, to a cyclical reproduction of the fascist forces that accelerationism attempts to transgress. I conclude this thesis by looking at later evocations of the Tokyo Olympics that follow in *Akira's* wake. The thematic preoccupation with Olympics and disaster has grown more intense in Japan during recent years, both in Japanese science fiction anime and manga as well as the 2020 Tokyo

Olympic Games. In all these things, it is necessary to read their forms through a lens of ambient athleticism, a lens that recognizes athletics' place in broad social mediation without exalting and contracting political hopes solely around its intensified energetic potentials.

Atomic

To dramatize its accelerationist athleticism, *Akira* stages a major aesthetic and narrative crisis, namely, classical physics giving way to modern physics. In this case, classical physics pertains to pre-20th century understandings of the laws of nature modelled by the work of Isaac Newton et al., where modern physics consists of post-20th century theories like relativity, quantum mechanics, and the forces like nuclear and electromagnetism. The history of science typically affirms the transition from classical to modern physics as a story of progress, even if it means embracing new uncertainties. Yet in *Akira*, however, this transition is frenzied, an intense unravelling that destabilizes the world, as if scientists have lost control instead of achieved monumental progress toward prosperity. As Tetsuo's psychic transformation intensifies, the physics of the film unravel both narratively and aesthetically, matching more and more to the contours of modern physics. Coming to terms with such a disintegration of the classical motivates the primary conflict of the film. This conflict is foreshadowed from the beginning. Near-silently, an awe-inspiring explosion rips through a 1988 Tokyo cityscape. Seconds later the film seems to cut to black, but soon the massive crater of the prior explosion comes into view as we are introduced to a 2019 Neo-Tokyo. We see a dark void of immense visual mass, accompanied by loud percussive booms and bangs, rattling the spectators deeper into their seats. Impressed on us is a feeling of immeasurable weight inscribed into *Akira's* ground zero. *Akira's* gravity is almost immediately too much to grasp.

The opening goes out of its way to announce *Akira's* aesthetic fixations. The psychic explosion prefigures post-classical physics invading the film world, but it also acts as a resounding rejection of the flat jerkiness of limited animation, disrupting a continuity with several of anime's established aesthetic tenants. Once the film settles into the city proper, *Akira's* early sequences provide a tapestry of appeals to proper Newtonian worldbuilding. Various elements work to ground the spectator into a classical space. Bodily integrity in contemporary action cinema allows for more tactile impacts of said bodies against structures or other bodies. Otomo's distinctly anatomical character design gives *Akira's* sufficiently material bodies that can partake in the push and pull pleasures of Newtonian motion. The countless crashing, falling, crushing, and exploding that litter *Akira* continually reinforce the film's preoccupation with physics. Enhancing this effect, Otomo insisted on the expensive process of pre-scoring dialogue, the recording of voice over before fully animating scenes. This allowed the animators to synch the lips of the characters accurately and smoothly to their spoken dialogue, inverting the normative industry practice. Pre-scoring plays an important role further distancing *Akira's* characters from its flattened ancestors and backgrounds. In addition, *Akira* ensures to place those bodies in robust and volumetric spaces. An example of this is how the film largely omits the use of speed lines, a technique that abstracts the space around characters moving quickly through it, giving the idea of speed without having to properly imbed them into the world. Instead, we are variously immersed in the painstakingly animated Neo-Tokyo city streets, imparting an embodied velocity as motorcycles crash and zoom in and out of tight corridors. In these sequences of speed, *Akira* embraces blistering Z-axis movement, a notoriously difficult thing to animate traditionally while keeping a consistent perspective as characters move toward or away

from the camera. The union of such effects and techniques set up the dramatic transition of form as Tetsuo's psychic power awakens and turns toward telekinetic action at a distance.

Action at a distance in *Akira* becomes a central aspect of later conflict. As Tetsuo's powers climb the cosmic evolutionary ladder, the more he can control objects from a distance. Distant action is a much-debated notion in Newtonian physics. While hard to pin if ever he outright denied its possibility, Newton was, at best, tolerant of the concept, at least when gravity is concerned.²⁶ Motion seemed to require substantive contact between two concrete materials. However, his gravitational theories suggested that cosmic objects can produce motion in the distant bodies that orbit them, radically departing from the mechanical philosophy that governed then current scientific understandings. Mechanical philosophy found major advocates in early 17th century French philosophers René Descartes and Pierre Gassendi. They looked to systematically prove all mediation was enacted through matter's contiguous relationship to motion. It is in their wake that Newton developed and complicated their claims, leaving an anxious problematic at the center of classical physics that would not be resolved until Einstein's theory of relativity in the early 20th century. It is this anxious problematic that *Akira* exploits, unlocking the cosmic potentials of Einsteinian physics within the bodies of individuated human test subjects. However, these mechanist worldviews, ambivalent like Newton, or outright dismissive like Descartes, still maintain a profound influence on the values of the modern

²⁶ There is a collection of ongoing debates about Newton's view on the problem of action at a distance. See Andrew Janiak's, 'Physics and Metaphysics in Descartes and Newton', in Steven Nadler, Tad M. Schmaltz, and Delphine Antoine-Mahut (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Descartes and Cartesianism, Oxford Handbooks* (2019; online edn, Oxford Academic, 9 May 2019), 804 – 815. In it, Janiak mentions that "In a famous letter to [Richard] Bentley from 1693, for instance, [Newton] seems to say that action at a distance is absurd," while other documents elsewhere somewhat contend this hard stance. This debate has also played out in John Henry's "Newton and action at a distance between bodies—A response to Andrew Janiak's 'Three concepts of causation in Newton'", *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A, Volume 47* (2014), 91-97, or Steffen Ducheyne's, "Newton on action at a distance and the cause of gravity," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A, Volume 42, Issue 1* (2011), 154-159.

culture, a culture that, in *Akira*, have no ability to control or intervene in these out-of-bounds forces.

I look to redeem action at a distance in *Akira*, but critique how the film's aesthetics defines its newly unraveling distant relations through modern physics. On the contrary, scientific understandings need not govern abstract social relations like aesthetics, or any form of mediation for that matter. Mediation necessarily acts at a distance, but has long been determined private, finite, and material. Important work has been done in Japanese animation scholarship critiquing neoliberalism's classical understanding of mediation. Japanese visual culture proves a generative source of alternatives that help make plain the biases that still dominate western modernity. However, I depart from their critique in a crucial way. Action at a distance does not need to be justified through a new understanding of theoretical physics.

Thomas Lamarre, in the introduction to the *Mechademia* issue *Lines of Sight*, sounds a call to transfigure the values that dominate modern visual culture. In locating the origin of these values, Lamarre zeroes in on Descartes. The principles of Cartesianism that Lamarre critiques centers on “the establishment of a series of conceptual and practical divides—between space and time, between body and mind, between object and subject.”²⁷ Cartesian dualism has become an inflexible model for Western inquiry, severely limiting “the ways in which we make connections across different disciplines or domains of knowledge.”²⁸ Even as Descartes's work has since become largely outmoded in scientific communities, Lamarre identifies in humanistic studies and aesthetic production a long held Cartesian indebtedness. While Cartesian hegemonic structures largely foreclose any alternatives, Lamarre argues that certain Japanese media and popular

²⁷ Thomas Lamarre, 'Introduction', *Mechademia 7: Lines of Sight* (Minneapolis, MN, 2012; online edn, Minnesota Scholarship Online, 24 Aug. 2015), x.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

culture propose alternative perspectives that “overturn key aspects of Cartesianism.”²⁹ *Lines of Sight* advances its critique of Cartesianism to that of cinematic realism, close reading nonrealist Japanese animation that critically relates to how hegemonic digital imaging technology (i.e., the camera apparatus or 3D-CGI technology) remains contingent on Cartesian paradigms. The aesthetic openness of many of the key anime texts leaves intervals of unknowing, as the abstract distances between layers behave contrary to Cartesian metaphysics. Treating such classical understandings as immutable laws that necessarily structure aesthetic construction is ludicrous to Lamarre, as modern physics has long moved past the need of simple contiguous causality and so should aesthetics. However, In *Akira*'s case, I do see an embrace of physics that disrupts a continuity with much of anime's theretofore status as a nonrealist aesthetic alternative, binding Lamarre and *Akira* to mediation still defined by external pressures.

Highlighting *Akira*'s relationship with classical physics also develops the work done by Scott Ferguson in his book *Declarations of Dependence*. It is impossible to let *Akira*'s Hollywood Science-Fiction influence go unnoticed, as I mentioned above when concerning cyberpunk genre films like *Bladerunner* (1981). Each party's obsession with aestheticized physics and globally realized spaces engages with a larger historical narrative on gravity's role in modernity. Ferguson observes within the broader institution of post-1970 Hollywood blockbusters an ideological aesthetics highly contracted around physics, the term he employs to sum up this aesthetic is “hyper-Newtonian.”³⁰ My claim is that the New Hollywood blockbuster's hyper-Newtonian aesthetic, pioneered by filmmakers like George Lucas and Stephen Spielberg, had never been realized as acutely in Japanese animation than in *Akira*,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence*, 170.

representing a clear break from the limited animation of the past. Ferguson's diagnosis of the neoliberal blockbuster as hyper-Newtonian better captures the totality of *Akira's* aesthetic crisis than that provided by Cartesianism.

The New Hollywood blockbuster's primary interests have been documented thoroughly by scholar Julie Turnock. She finds that New Hollywood constructs its aesthetic through an "enveloping cinematic environment."³¹ In this environment, spectators are suspended in a state of continuous and contiguous sensorial overload. With generous application of surround sound technologies and "fast-paced, kinetic action lead[ing] the eye around the busy frame, jam-packed with moving elements and flashy, eye-catching graphic details," going to the movies became a thrill-ride.³² Kinetic, z-axis movements "establish a sense of forward momentum, all of which generate an immediate and usually fast-paced sense of immersion into a fantasy diegesis."³³ Turnock's analyses do resonate with some of Lamarre's critiques of cinema's power to naturalize hegemonic Cartesian perspectives around notions of "realism" or hyper-realism. However, in articulating New Hollywood's contraction of the cinematic experience around sensations of friction, falls, and crushing impacts, Ferguson's work examines the deeply connected relationship between such action and the broader political economic conditions that fixate on them.

Distinct from Cartesianism, Ferguson does not argue that there is a naturalized scientific rationality at the heart of modern visual culture, but instead, an intense, bodily desire for immersive physics. The immersive physics contends with the long-held anxious problematic of

³¹ Julie Turnock, *Plastic Reality: Special Effects, Technology, and the Emergence of 1970s Blockbuster Aesthetics*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 182.

³² *Ibid.*, 68.

³³ *Ibid.*, 69.

modernity Ferguson traces back to the Renaissance, that being abstraction, or action at a distance. What becomes naturalized by hyper-Newtonian aesthetics is a neoliberal theory of mediation, one that treats abstraction as something to overcome through private means. As Ferguson claims, “post-1970s action media should be regarded as the unrecognized social epicenter of the neoliberal turn.”³⁴ He explains further that the weight of the blockbuster’s phenomenology acts as “a ritualized site of convergence and repair for a fractured social body.”³⁵ Here, Newtonian physics manages the viewer’s anxious relationship with neoliberalism’s insistence on broad fiscal uncertainty and political uncaring as scientific eventualities. This critique of the New Hollywood blockbuster points out the ideological parallel between an aesthetic that disguises modes of abstraction like analog and digital special effects as “realistic” immersive physics with neoliberalism’s treatment of money, an abstract social relation, as a private, finite, and zero-sum resource.

Investigating *Akira*’s animated hyper-Newtonian aesthetics requires developing and complicating Ferguson’s original theorization about post-1970s American cinema. By adopting the blockbuster’s aesthetic, *Akira*’s aesthetic foundation helps naturalize neoliberal and fatalistic accelerationist assumptions like finitude, zero-sum tradeoffs, and no-alternative capitulations. These logics even explicitly come to the fore in the film’s plot. However, I do not look to wholly condemn *Akira* as being totalized by hyper-Newtonianism. In many ways, *Akira* is critical of these imposed logics, and in being an apogee of traditionally animated film, its preoccupation with physics stands out as exceptional amongst other more abstract and surrealist visuals. *Akira*’s dedication to animation helps make transparent the contradictions of the hyper-Newtonian

³⁴ Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence*, 15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

blockbuster. The New Hollywood blockbuster's anxiety toward alternative and abstract modes of seeing has grown ever more complicated by a mounting reliance on alternative and abstract modes of production, specifically that of computer animation. Animation's dominant application in contemporary action cinema is not interrupting gravitational drama but amplifying it. Decades of work have been spent engineering software and optimizing animation techniques to render kinetic physics with computer animation alone. *Akira's* globally recognized achievements in animation often collect around moments where it replicates, or even exceeds, the physical intensity found in other contemporary action cinema. For *Akira* though, it's no accident these moments almost exclusively concern action scenes of psychic anguish. *Akira's* peak visual intensity aligns with peaks in narrative suffering, going beyond purely gravitational forces, as if the whole universe bears down on the characters and its audience. It is as if the Einsteinian forces are invading on the blockbuster's Newtonian safehouse.

Lamarre's provocative conclusion in *Lines of Sight* troubles both his and, I'd argue, *Akira's* critical turn against classical physics. Lamarre writes, "As matter proves energetic, and even the inorganic has its reasons, we can no longer think in terms of simple causality, mastery of objects, or a one-to-one self-contained correspondence between a viewing position, a self, and a world."³⁶ Lamarre's appeal to modern physics does indeed unsettle the core pillars of Cartesianism. However, the main issue I see in a hegemonic classical physics returns here at the end, a desire to organize aesthetic around a system of physics. Lamarre will make similar appeals to modern physics in his other work, specifically when discussing *Akira*. Lamarre too sees *Akira's* opening explosion as a foretelling of Einsteinian physics, where he writes, "The workings of psychic powers in *Akira* follow logically from nuclear radiation: invisible yet

³⁶ Thomas Lamarre, 'Introduction', *Mechademia 7: Lines of Sight*, xviii.

exceedingly powerful forces that act at a distance, inducing deformations of the human body.”³⁷ He later explains, “In spectral form, *Akira* the child bomb anticipates the emergence of new communication and information technologies in the 1990s. Only here, the human body itself is the information technology that spurs new modes of destruction.”³⁸ Lamarre works off Paul Virilio’s remarks on Einstein’s late work concerning information networks as analogous for invisible distant forces like nuclear. While it seems late modern physics proves perhaps even more hegemonic than classical when networks of information are involved, Lamarre finds liberatory potentials in leveling social relations, and the human body itself, to quantum exchanges of invisible electromagnetic signals. I argue, by routing sociality through a set of decentered flows or uncertain quantum mechanics, whether literally or metaphorically, or both, similarly dooms to artificially constrain political potentials around univocal natural laws just like neoliberalism’s and Cartesianism’s relationship to gravity, no matter how contingent or open that may be understood.

Akira is a film set in a futuristic Tokyo, wholly subsumed by neoliberal globalization. Both its form and story-world feel the pressure of external and invisible forces. More precisely, *Akira*’s drama explicitly politicizes atomic and electromagnetic forces likened to Lamarre’s appeal to Einstein. While two of the film’s lead characters, Kaneda and Kei, are imprisoned together, Kei embarks on an expository soliloquy about *Akira*’s metaphysics. She posits that germinated in every atom is the very power that jumpstarted the universe. The conflict of the film arises when human experimentation leads to test subjects, like Tetsuo, gaining the ability to tap into these latent forces well before evolutionarily scheduled. To use Kei’s elegant

³⁷ Thomas Lamarre, “Born of Trauma: *Akira* and Capitalist Modes of Destruction,” 140.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

metaphorical question, what if “something like an amoeba were given power like a human?” Bestowed upon these youths are powers beyond human understanding, and Tetsuo, like Akira before him, threaten to destroy the world, yet also harness the only power left that can save it.

Tetsuo’s psychic awakening ratchets up the intensity of *Akira*’s gravitropic drama and becomes a key site of Newtonian understanding giving way to the film’s deterritorializing Einsteinian physics. Tetsuo’s swirling psychological anguish while trapped in the military hospital showcases this turn. The other psychic children — Masaru, Kiyoko, and Takashi — frighten and threaten Tetsuo in his hospital room with hallucinatory images of monstrous toys. Amidst the panic, Tetsuo steps on a broken glass, causing blood to puddle onto the ground. His attention fixates on this image as the camera takes on his perspective. Looking at the injured foot, all we hear is Tetsuo’s elevated breathing. Purely embodied in his line of sight, the image dissolves to a disembodied perspective shot barreling through the labyrinthine hospital corridors to the children’s true location marked Room A. Here, the facsimile of 3-dimensional space is so expertly crafted that the wormhole-like travel wooshes us into a new realm. The delicate stillness of the prior perspective, one that fixates on a punctured body vulnerable to the outside, carefully attunes us to the jarring transition from classical to modern. Stumbling through the corridors on his injured foot, Tetsuo plays the part of the loosed amoeba, a walking “body without organs,” to put it in Deleuzian language. His powers manifest more fiercely. Screams of agony consume him as he squashes guards against crushed walls with force-like powers, and ceiling lights flicker as he unthinkingly charges toward Room A. After an action-packed confrontation upon arriving at Room A, Tetsuo collapses the structure to rubble and blasts himself out of the hospital. The camera, outside the building now, captures him plunging horizontally from the building. The Z-axis movement of his body toward the camera, however, stimulates gravitational excitement as if

he is tumbling toward the ground below. Instead, Tetsuo enacts a supernatural flight, misplacing our trust in the blockbuster's Newtonian grammar, indicating a physics beyond gravity is now orchestrating *Akira's* movement.

Categorizing *Akira* as a staged crisis of physics provides a productive lens to read its futuristic action. In extending Ferguson's work on the New Hollywood blockbuster to *Akira*, I observe an obsessive extension of embodied physics within the historically abstract mode of traditional Japanese cel animation. What is also revealed is an important political constraint for Lamarre's critique of Cartesianism. The organizing of abstract social relations, whether it be government, money, or aesthetics, around any system of physics, not just Cartesian, problematically restricts what can be politically imagined possible. Particularly manifest through Einsteinian principles, *Akira* happens upon an acutely accelerative body politics as Tetsuo's psychic rampage culminates in the Olympic Stadium. Instead of a politics of rationality (i.e., Cartesian), or one of contiguous reassurance (i.e., hyper-Newtonianism), the Einsteinian physics that orient *Akira's* second half articulate a politics of acceleration predicated on athleticism.

Athletic

The scholarship on *Akira*, and Japanese anime more generally, is often influenced by the work of Gilles Deleuze. This Deleuzian influence tends to focus on the “athletic body” of the anime characters as a contracted site of mediation for the postmodern spectator. Such bodily aesthetics draw from principles Deleuze’s sets forth for *The Logic of Sensation* (1981) where he analyzes the work of 20th century British painter Francis Bacon. I do find such Deleuzian interpretations quite fitting for much of *Akira*, as its disintegrative movement from classical to modern physics exhibit strong Deleuzian and post-structuralist impulses. However, unlike previous scholars, I turn to Deleuze to reveal the limits and problems with such impulses rather than to affirm them straightforwardly or uncritically. Not only does such scholarship dangerously reify a narrow accelerationist politics but also obscures and thus hardly exhausts *Akira*’s ulterior aesthetic and social meanings.

Francis Bacon’s compulsive exploration of the distorted human body opened a discursive rift for Deleuze’s theorization of affective athletics in post-war aesthetics to emerge. Bacon’s figures undergo immense trauma, his well-repeated ambition was to impress upon the spectator a direct nervous system response. The most recognizable of his work concerns the papal portraits of 1953. It is these paintings from which Bacon’s most iconic images belong, primarily *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*. Inspired by Spanish artist Diego Velázquez’s *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* in 1650, Bacon upends classical composition with the virulent angst and despair that now dictated the theology of the post-war era. Velázquez’s *Portrait* captures the

confident composure of the Papacy at the height of its global power. Bacon's update agitates that composure into a persistent state of crisis. Such persistence relies on Bacon's rare ability to let movement permeate his canvases. Sequenced photography was a major influence and technique that Bacon relied on when composing his paintings. Sam Hunter writing that with his Popes, Bacon created "[A]n entirely new kind of painting experience. He combines the monumentality of the great art of the past with the 'modernity' of the film strip."³⁹ Bacon's pope reads as a psychic snapshot of despair, with a totally subsumed and vulnerable subject unaware of his repeated indexical captures. That indexicality, for Bacon, is sourced from a set of sequenced, or what we might understand as animated images, which directly translate that technology to the nervous system through its intense sense of movement.

For Bacon, the truth is in sensation, and that experience is stimulated in the body of both subject and spectator. Put similarly by Andrew Brighton, Bacon's paintings revealed in the "Horrorific nature [that] is imminent within the ambiguity of fractured pictorial conventions."⁴⁰ What arises from these intensely critical post-war Images is a radical immanence to a contracted bodily medium, where the "new" is that which accelerates out of the violent fissures and rifts of the classical figure. Image (capital I) here is what Ezra Pound defines as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional idea complex in an instant of time."⁴¹ The Image treats time as a malleable fourth dimension, instead of absolute and linear. Instant recognition of a whole divests narration of its potency since that still depends on linearity. Speed is what wins in the end. Bacon's shocks train our nervous system to the demands of the new world, a world of

³⁹ Sam Hunter, "Francis Bacon: An Acute Sense of Impasse," *Art Digest* 28 (October 15, 1953), 16.

⁴⁰ Andrew Brighton and Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon*. (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001), 67.

⁴¹ Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot, (London 1960), 4.

acceleration that necessitates instant transmission of information, leaving the rest of the body woefully unequipped, fracturing under the pressure.

It is Deleuze's philosophical encounter with Bacon in *The Logic of Sensation* that athleticism as a concept emerges, capturing the theoretical and metaphysical potentials of the Bacon Image. Deleuze's affective athleticism describes the potent visual quality of Bacon's Figures. Athleticism is a culmination of sensations produced by a "body without organs," or what he'll also refer to here as a Figure of "flesh and nerve," and their collisions with external forces within Bacon's painting.⁴² The athletics of the Image is the resulting sensation and arrives at one of Deleuze's most fundamental theoretical claims, the irreducibility of identity to the fixed form of the body. He writes, "When sensation is linked to the body in this way, it ceases to be representation and becomes real."⁴³ Bacon's athletic bodies are never whole, they lack definition against the contoured space of the painting which invade the figure's outlines and structure. More like convulsing muscles than an organized organism, the figure is flesh and nerves with no organs, "the body is completely living, yet nonorganic... exceeding the bound of organic activity...conveyed in the flesh through the nervous wave or vital emotion."⁴⁴ The athletics of the figure are stimulated by the contour, which Deleuze several times metaphorizes as a "trapeze apparatus or prothesis," establishing the gymnastic virtual space for the movement of the flesh.⁴⁵ We can see this with Bacon's *Pope Innocent X*, and how the veil of opaque strips in the foreground look as if they structure the body's deformation, applying force and delimiting the space for the figure to curl around the dark black streaks like a shockwave. The papal figure is

⁴² Gilles Deleuze, trans. Daniel W. Smith, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), 45.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

not self-aware the way a complex organism like the Velázquez pope is, instead he takes on “an excessive and spasmodic appearance.”⁴⁶ An affective athletics is provoked by a hysterical struggle between the Figure and intense invisible forces. Athleticism moves toward a limit in a sort of affective climax that “manifests such convulsive pain and vulnerability, but also such delightful invention, color, and acrobatics.”⁴⁷ To accomplish this, Deleuze writes that it is necessary for the painter, subject and spectator to “pass through...catastrophe...embrace the chaos, and attempt to emerge from it.”⁴⁸ The gambit being that something new, perhaps even something delightful, emerges from the catastrophic deformation of the athletic contest.

Deleuze’s rousing prose offers a radical position on representation, an exciting and violent severing with classical composition that stimulates revolutionary impulses. However, it brackets that revolution within an ahistorical playground of random chance. Deleuze dictates any consideration of represented violence inherent in athleticism as “overly facile detours.”⁴⁹ In doing so, athleticism necessarily draws a definite out-of-bounds around representation, one divested of socially or historically contextualized violence. By ignoring the historically situated violence of Bacon’s paintings, Deleuze divests the paintings of meaningful engagement with their explicit referents. Bacon’s *Pope Innocent X* read this way forecloses the explicitly situated violence of the political and religious figure from the conversation. Deleuze judges violence as a glib offshoot of a liberatory play-space of representation through the contracted body as ahistorical Figure. Like the historical violence inherent in accelerationism, there is a disturbing ease in justifying such sacrifices as necessary for an “emergence of another world.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁹ Ibid., x.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 100.

What reigns, for Deleuze, is the quotidian violence inherent in the ordinary everywhere relation between the body and invisible forces (or modern physics), hence the need for a new world altogether. Put another way, Deleuze writes that the painter inhabits a “frenetic zone in which the hand is no longer guided by the eye and is forced upon sight like another will, which appears as chance, accident, automatism, or the involuntary.”⁵¹ The hand is instead guided by some underlying rhythm of life, the actual “essence of painting” determined by Deleuze.⁵² This not only reduces aesthetics and abstraction to the physics of the quantum realm, but explicitly places the uncertainty and randomness of quantum physics as the primary orchestrator of mediation, the body as its conducted instrument. Deleuze’s theory of chance finds a totalizing mistrust of structure, of “the optical world.”⁵³ This logic purports a disgust for static binaries, yet what emerges is a firmly rigid binary of representation that governs any sort of historical engagement and political intervention as “overly facile detours.”

Anglophone animation scholarship express a consistent indebtedness to Deleuze and *The Logic of Sensation*. Ryan Pierson mobilizes these concepts in his recent book *Figure and Force in Animation Aesthetics*. This work is not interested in Japanese anime in any way but goes a long way to unpack the Deleuzian assumptions that have historically motivated Japanese animation scholarship. He argues the Deleuze-Bacon encounter subverts the normative transformation of figures in animation. Transformation being, “a change from one definite shape to another...not unlike the linear metamorphosis found in cartoons.”⁵⁴ Pierson then features moments of Deleuzian deformation in animation, where the Deleuze-Bacon encounter gives

⁵¹ Ibid., 137.

⁵² Ibid., xv.

⁵³ Ibid., 137.

⁵⁴ Ryan Pierson, *Figure and Force in Animation Aesthetics*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 40.

language to the disintegration of “the fixity and clarity of relations of representation, deformation forces us to encounter forces above and below the level of things.”⁵⁵

When returning to scholarship on *Akira* we see this perspective develop and begin to dominate readings of the film. Tetsuo’s monstrous transformation into a cosmic infant of oozing flesh and writhing machinery is a climactic set piece where *Akira*’s philosophical and aesthetic tendencies converge around Pierson’s “forces above and below the level of things.” By “oozing across all the normal borders of identity,” Susan Napier situates the mutation as a spectacle of rebellious adolescent abjection.⁵⁶ Following Napier’s reading, Steven Brown affirms the numerous superpositions of transgressive identity that Tetsuo’s entangled nonhuman body inhabits, analogous for “the rhizomatic network of reception [*Akira*] has spawned.”⁵⁷ Christopher Bolton’s evocative description echoes Brown, reading Tetsuo’s mutation “into a pulsating, pustulating mass of flesh and machinery that explodes outward” as the culmination of “an aggressive, even uncontrolled propagation of images that cannot be reined in by meaning.”⁵⁸ The body emerges as a key site of ideological labor, and using Tetsuo’s bodily mutation and subsequent deformation, these readings share a sense of generative posthuman resistance against classical frameworks. I’d argue these readings are highly athletic in nature. As Brown’s quote also suggests, many of these scholars uncritically rely on Deleuzian frameworks, reproducing accelerationist prescriptions therein. When Brown suggests about *Akira* that, “some beings are able to channel life’s energy more constructively than others,” the dangers of such a reading tend

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Susan Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. Updated ed., [Rev. ed.]. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 46.

⁵⁷ Steven T. Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk*, 5.

⁵⁸ Bolton, Christopher, “From Ground Zero to Degree Zero: Akira from Origin to Oblivion.” *Mechademia*, vol. 9, no. 1. (2014), 301.

to exalt exceptional athletes and punish/exclude everyone else that can't match their output.⁵⁹

Akira, by transgressing identity, giving way to generative trauma, and establishing a network of decentered readings, produces the principles of Deleuze's affective athleticism.

To be sure, what we see leading up to *Akira*'s climactic sequence is acutely athletic. Tetsuo's form fails to ever recollect into a definite shape stably before disappearing. The scene begins with intense foreshadowing of an athletic climax of total deformation. It starts with an establishing shot of the nighttime Neo-Tokyo skyline, panning down to the partly constructed Olympic Stadium. Cranes, scaffolding, and debris cover the structure, composing an image of an incomplete figure in a state of becoming. A throne, adorned with the Olympic insignia, stands near a far end of the stadium. Medical jars preserving the organs of the titular Akira, the psychic child responsible for the original explosion that opens the film, sit behind the throne. Akira has already emerged from his struggle, as evidenced by that prior explosion, leaving his organs behind. He exemplifies Deleuze's Figure, a literal body without organs that is "completely living yet nonorganic." Tetsuo, recently injured after his confrontation with the Colonel, has just replaced his missing arm with a robotic one. We witness his nonorganic transformation take place with each subsequent battle. He is taking shelter in the stadium, being helped to the throne by quasi-love interest, Kaori. Tetsuo's recently mechanized arm ensnares him, wires exploding from his limb and burrowing into the throne's arm. Treating Tetsuo's seat at the Olympic throne as Bacon-esque produces another rich papal image. Tetsuo, who too has become a prominent religious figure in Neo-Tokyo, similarly adorned with a red cape much like Velázquez's Pope, has reached a maximum threshold of power that his human form can feasibly operate. As Hugh Davis describes, Bacon's Pope is "trapped as if manacled to an electric chair, the ludicrously

⁵⁹ Steven T. Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk*, 8.

drag-attired subject is jolted into involuntary motion by external forces or internal psychosis.”⁶⁰

As we understand in *Akira*, external forces, like electromagnetic or nuclear, and internal psychosis are one and the same. This involuntary motion is evident in *Akira* too with Tetsuo’s own loss of bodily autonomy. His cyborg limb manacles him to the Olympic marble, leading to yet another tormented crisis of his body. As I have observed in *Akira*, the aesthetic transition from classical to modern in Bacon unravels primarily through the body, giving the paintings their motion. As he futilely covers the seeping wires with his red cape, he experiences intense pain fighting against the out-of-control technology. Tetsuo, the complex organism, the adolescent, expresses vulnerability here. He is currently competing with his athletic amoeba-half in his own internal hysteric struggle. The empty Olympic stadium acts as the contour of negative space, or trapeze apparatus, for Tetsuo’s deformation. The Colonel, who acts as an agent of that structure, who is already responsible for his missing limb, finds Tetsuo upon the throne, agitating our figure into violent acrobatics. Tetsuo’s own prosthesis crushes the concrete arm of the throne with such immense force that it sends the Colonel flying back. This short sequence acts as a harbinger, collecting the ingredients for Tetsuo’s athletic emergence.

The pervasiveness of athletic interpretations in Japanese animation scholarship is partly due to this animation’s interest in posthuman politics. The crisis of the body in athleticism strikes a chord with many popular anime outside of *Akira*. Consequently, posthumanist interpretations abound in the field’s extant literature. Many of the posthuman assumptions found in anime rest on a belief that, as Carl Silvio defines it, “humans primarily consist of information that has been

⁶⁰ Hugh Marlais Davies and Francis Bacon. *Francis Bacon: the Papal Portraits of 1953*. (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001), .

embodied in material form.”⁶¹ Silvio then posits that “without this assumption...*Astro Boy* would not have been possible.”⁶² The posthuman perspective decenters the human as a self-confirming entity centered on liberal subjecthood. As is often the case, the cyborg, the animal, and the adolescent are positioned as productive nonhuman entanglements.

Speaking on *Astro Boy*, Lamarre further illustrates these entanglements. In the prior section, I discussed Lamarre’s reading of *Akira*’s psychic bomb as an analog for the explosion of information in a then-burgeoning neoliberal network society that contextualizes *Akira*’s creation. In the closing remarks of his essay on *Akira*, Lamarre prescribes an embrace of nonhuman entanglements to break with the cycle of disaster capital. Breaking the cycle, for Lamarre, is dependent “on our willingness to take seriously the transformation of human bodies and life itself in the image of the bomb.”⁶³ When Lamarre later looks at the character of *Astro Boy*, he sees an example of a highly mobile nonhuman actor. *Astro Boy* “is evidently human, yet his neotenous features allow him to fuse with the nonhuman animal, and at the same time he is an atomic-powered, high-tech machine.”⁶⁴ *Astro Boy*, for Lamarre, acts as a relay for the potentials of the nonhuman, transmitted through electromagnetic signals into “a parasocial field, a world of social relations in which human and nonhuman actors mix and mingle.”⁶⁵ *Astro Boy*’s appeal hinges on the promise of liberation he offers within a “technocratic state in which sovereignty is forever deferred and compromised.”⁶⁶ Generative intervention can be imagined within the

⁶¹ Carl Silvio, “Animated Bodies and Cybernetic Selves: The *Animatrix* and the Question of Posthumanity” in *Cinema Anime: Critical Engagements with Japanese Animation*. (1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 116.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Thomas Lamarre, “Born of Trauma: *Akira* and Capitalist Modes of Destruction,” 153.

⁶⁴ Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Ecology: A Genealogy of Television, Animation, and Game Media*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 219.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

broader “electromagnetic socius” that nonhuman characters can help humankind recognize and experience.⁶⁷ In every way that Tetsuo’s character extends along an Astro Boy lineage, perhaps this aspect of Astro Boy is most visible in how both *Akira*’s narrative and reception situates Tetsuo’s nonhuman body’s athleticism. Tetsuo (and Akira before him) acts as a prominent relay for invisible forces, becoming, what I’d argue, a liturgical site within the accelerative technocratic state, and thus the only imaginable opposition to their violence is saddled onto the sacrifice of exceptional youthful athleticism.

If the New Hollywood blockbuster understands bodily disintegration as an anxious problematic to stem, an athletic aesthetic embraces the liberatory potential of Tetsuo’s figural annihilation. However, *Akira*’s ambiguous ending excuses the destruction as a hopeful final break with the structures that restrict their intervention. We see several characters converge in the stadium. Tetsuo and Kaneda, the psychic children, Akira’s remaining organs, the Colonel, Kaori, etc., all gather to participate in their own strange Olympic event. The Olympic stage mediates a bracketed-off play-space, here set apart from the rest of Neo-Tokyo, but historically as well. It too acts as a provisioned site of richly layered athletic contests between and amongst several different relational superpositions for Tetsuo (lover, friend, menace, Christ, kin, etc.). In the spirit of Lamarre’s view on the way we engage with today’s gamic realities, “the flesh of the world thus includes media worlds and platform infrastructures, and differences are lived and negotiated through play.”⁶⁸ The aesthetic of modern sports amplifies this virtuality, as Melissa McMahon writes about sporting events as a Deleuzean affection-image:

⁶⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 354.

The affection-image deterritorialises its object, abstracting it from its spatio-temporal coordinates and its place in a causal chain. In this way, affection-images recreate their own environment or atmosphere that Deleuze calls an ‘any-space-whatever’⁶⁹

Unlike Astro Boy, who deftly maneuvers these negotiated differences, Tetsuo incompetently manages every one of the presented frameworks throughout the entire film. It is possible he has not yet, “conceptualized collective life via vulnerability and dependency rather than security and autonomy,” as Lamarre prescribes.⁷⁰ Tetsuo’s violent outbursts are constantly in search of an individualist masculine ideal that Kaneda naturally exhibits. From the very first time we see Tetsuo, he is pouring over the specs of Kaneda’s iconic bike, that which he proves unable to ride himself. His powder blue outfit and bike sharply contrast with Kaneda’s brash red combo. The entire film explores Tetsuo’s constant feelings of impotence, whether it is his inability to defend Kaori from a gang of biker thugs, or his reliance on Kaneda to protect him against childhood bullies. As he is seen writhing on the ground after a brief struggle with Kaneda (which is still at best a stalemate even considering Tetsuo’s superpowers), the façade of his power is literally torn as his bulging flesh tears through his newly acquired red cape. The Olympic setting has fostered a total break with Tetsuo’s social conformity.

Tetsuo’s vulnerability becomes undeniable and all-consuming, as his body begins to rapidly swell, he immediately abandons his independent personhood. Tetsuo’s whaling and grimaces are intensely affective, the convulsive spasms extend for long durations as his body escapes ever outward from itself. We hear him begging for help, calling out to those around him,

⁶⁹ McMahon, Melissa. “The Other Industrial Art: Deleuze, Cinema, Affect and Sport.” *Deleuze Studies* 10, no. 2 (2016), 220.

⁷⁰ Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Ecology*, 335.

while also violently integrating them into his flesh. Exhibiting ultimate vulnerability, Tetsuo's body at one point takes the shape of a giant baby, a twisted homage to Kubrick's own cosmic baby in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. We experience both a cosmic rebirth as well as a spectacular death. By untethering Tetsuo from typical forms of subjecthood, his unchecked abilities to channel these intensified forces culminate in the film's second apocalyptic and all-consuming explosion. The pustulating body is consumed, along with the city itself, by an immense white dome of pure energy and destruction sourced to Tetsuo's spectacular death. Tetsuo disappears in this explosion. We only hear his voice saying, "I am Tetsuo," as the film zooms through the cosmos, (another seeming homage to *2001*), effectively breaking through and pushing past the limits of the body to a new universe with new possibilities. The obliteration of self, subject, or meaning entirely, prescribe this scene an affective athleticism so severe as to circuitously affirm such disintegration as a necessary step to wake from a postmodernity laden stupor.

Akira's aesthetic finally frees itself and its bodies from dense claustrophobic athleticism upon Tetsuo's death. *Akira's* characters emerge from the violence in a colorful flood of ocean and sunlight breaking through the parting clouds. The intensity gives way to a more abstract and relaxed planar scrolling, horizontal movement across the frame returning now that the suffocating streets of Neo Tokyo have been leveled and z-axis zooming lines are no longer necessary. Deleuze's athletic resolution seems fitting here. "It is out of chaos," he writes, "that the 'stubborn geometry' or 'geologic lines' first emerge; and this geometry or geology must in turn pass through the catastrophe in order for colors to arise, for the earth to rise toward the sun."⁷¹ Tetsuo's direct athletic sacrifice provides a diffuse dispersal of classical compositions, opening toward, as Standish reminds us, "a future Utopian society that will come about after the

⁷¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 111.

film.” The explosive display of his bodily powers lights an Olympic torch that points toward a prosperous future that will follow this sublime conflict. That other side, however, as always tends to be, remains ambiguous, whether it be a big bang scale event fundamentally changing the laws that govern reality or a political reset that our principal cast can finally intervene in. Whatever the case, the deferred state of the new that emerged on the other side of Tetsuo’s sacrifice echoes Sakai Yoshinori’s athletic display for Japan in 1964, situating the film’s apparent overcoming of the past through a monumental form from that very past.

Ambient

A recent exhibition at Berlin's Tchoban Foundation titled *AKIRA – The Architecture of Neo Tokyo* ran for several months during the summer of 2022. It featured dozens of original production backdrops, concept art, and layout drawings from *Akira*. The show was curated by Stefan Riekeles, author of *Anime Architecture: Imagined Worlds and Endless Megacities*. Riekeles's book, like the exhibit, acts as a visual reference guide for artists and researchers alike, attuning our attention to the urban planning that structures many of anime's most popular sci-fi metropolises. *Akira's* backgrounds, many of which were drawn by art director Toshiharu Mizutani, have long been considered a highpoint for traditional animation. Unparalleled in scale, craft, and detail, the exhibit further cements *Akira's* enduring legacy and highlight how critical it is to properly attend to these backgrounds and not just the athletic bodies that navigate them. Crucially, by carefully surveying the film's many abundantly detailed environments and spaces, I make visible a pervasively latent commitment to situating the athletic body within a broader mise en scène of contested public money and mediation. Neo Tokyo's backdrops are often read as inert and imposing symbols of historical oppression and classical composition to overcome or leave behind. However, I understand *Akira's* depth of detail give their spaces an active role, creating an expansive and distantly coordinated dialogue among nested signs that mediate the film's action.

To do this, I develop what I am calling an *ambient attention* to the film's overlooked backgrounds. I define ambient attention as a holistic looking and reading for "actions at a

distance” that reclaim the nested array of background multimedia signs from the immanence and inevitability of physics. Such arrays are fundamentally dialogical, I argue, because they involve spectators in a heterogenous, multi-scaled and thoroughly political interdependence. This definition synthesizes impulses from film theorist Andre Bazin and television scholar Anna McCarthy. From Bazin, I borrow his attentiveness to the holistic spatio-temporalities in cinema, and thus I attend to animatic spacetime holistically, not hierarchically on particular figures or directions, nor appealing to the instant transmission celebrated in nonhierarchical athletic readings. I return to Bazin not to recover his theory of cinematic realism, rooted in cinematography’s material or “indexical” relationship to worldly referents. Instead, I focus on Bazin’s critical attunement to the fullness of cinematic space-time in order to reveal the imperceptible tensions that breed in *Akira*’s background. The imperceptible and ambiguous for Bazin is often referred to as part of a spiritual reality made observable through cinematic techniques like the long take. Dudley Andrew’s study on Andre Bazin summarizes the theorists claim on the kitchen scene in Orson Welles’s *The Magnificent Ambersons*, where he says, “that the emerging dramatic forces are a product of the long take – that is, of the surging forward of hidden relationships within the block of time frozen before us.”⁷² The recognition and contextualization of the surging, hidden relationships through the mise en scène of *Akira* are the focus of this section of study. Secondly, I invoke Anna McCarthy’s work in *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space* to explore the significance of multimedia as they dissolve into background ambience and mise en scène. Extending McCarthy’s reading, I investigate *Akira*’s encounters with multimedia sites that intersect with “sites of commerce, bureaucracy, and

⁷² Dudley, Andrew. *André Bazin*, (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), 167.

community, constituting the landscape of public life.”⁷³ Crucially, her work combats “idealistic notions of public space as a polis under siege,” by focusing “on the more *unremarkable* and *everyday* forms of the apparatus.”⁷⁴ Ambient attention, I argue, helps us locate examples of *Akira*’s abundant abstract intermediaries that uncover complications in the film’s received reading of accelerative and bodily contraction around Tetsuo and multimedia networks.

My theorization of ambient attention departs from previous appeals to Bazin in animation scholarship. When Bazin is cited in animation scholarship, by Lamarre for instance, Bazinian realism is extended to the electromagnetic and parasocial, where figures like Atom Boy act as relay for the imperceptible. This specific imperceptibility primarily bounds social relations to sensorial contact with the forces of physics external to political and social signifiers, and in Lamarre’s case this primarily concerns the television screens that interest McCarthy. The electromagnetic parasociality is a collective contact with an apolitical undercurrent of pure energy, sometimes Lamarre will term this as an “energy cascade.”⁷⁵ Interfacing with the energy cascade is what Lamarre argues fosters a relationality outside the political (and hence outside the human), gravitating spectators “to the Atom future.”⁷⁶ The energy cascade term relies too much on a Liberal metaphysics that dooms technology, whether it be an abstract tool like money or that of the television, as space-contracting terminals, collapsing both distance and difference. In this context, the energy cascade is embedded into political and social spaces from before, providing an escape as an apolitical agent through the athletic bodies trained to harness it. This energy pervasively and univocally invades into these structures, disrupting and revealing lines of

⁷³ Anna McCarthy. *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5, 9.

⁷⁵ Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Ecology*, 115.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

flight out of such political spaces. *Akira's* political and economic entanglements seem to be localized in these cordoned-off zones of finite resources and exclusionary spatial and hierarchical relations. *Akira's* climactic deterritorialization fundamentally assumes there is a pre-political exterior on the other side of Neo-Tokyo's collapse that frees the people from these fascistic interiors. However, this paints creation as a direct action predicated on zero-sum mediation. This often results in a policy of destruction as necessity, needing a world renewal event to make room for something new (and hopefully better) to take up space, exemplar of one of the crucial paradoxes of *Akira's* creation/destruction paradigm.

I make a key distinction, as the cascade that I'm interested locating in *Akira's* imperceptibility is not Lamarre's, but instead the "transcendent cascade" that Scott Ferguson theorizes by way of 13th century theologian and philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, in *Declarations*.⁷⁷ Cascade as a term proves descriptively paramount when tackling *Akira's* background complexity. It aptly describes *Akira's* backgrounds' aforementioned scale, capturing a sense of scale that registers on both a global level — considering the sheer size of Neo-Tokyo's many skyscrapers — and on a local level with the amount of minute detail when zooming in on individual spaces and windows. "Thomism's boundless cascade," Ferguson writes, "linked dependent beings to God across great distances and did so through the Church's emphatically abstract intermediations."⁷⁸ Conceiving an abundant cascade at the center of mediation, as Ferguson argues, furnishes a commons that uncovers acts of creations as "irreducible to locomotion through circumscribed space," allowing each individual contribution the space of the whole at any distance.⁷⁹ The transcendent cascade rejects the Liberal metaphysic premise

⁷⁷ Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence*, 106.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Scott Ferguson. "The Unheard-of Center: Critique after Modern Monetary Theory." *Arcade*, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/unheard-center-critique-after-modern-monetary-theory>

entirely, redeeming the political and, in particular, the fiscal “as an originary multi-scale interdependence” of which there is no exterior or circumscribed space within.⁸⁰ It is this articulation of *cascade* that I mobilize an ambient attention toward in *Akira*. By reading *Akira* with ambient attention, I reveal rich aesthetic and social meanings that complicate both the film’s foregrounded accelerationism and the relations theorists of the athletic body in *Akira* have also previously foregrounded.

An ambient attention applied to *Akira*’s full and ambient aesthetics alerts us anew to how the film figures space. *Akira*’s spaces, on a surface level, reify capital as an outside force, one that wreaks havoc external to the bounds of the political. Corporate pressure and capitalists lie outside of the story, figured only by the monolithic altars of production that make up *Akira*’s domineering skyline. However, the principal story moments take place within interiors. These interiors are almost exclusively confined to the last vestiges of publicly provisioned environments. Whether it is the city streets, abandoned public construction projects, rundown public schools, police precincts, government offices, military hospitals, other various military facilities, or the Olympic stadium, it is necessary to think about how these spaces encounter our athletic youth, and not only as structures to destroy and overcome.

The Harukiya bar, a frequent hangout of Kaneda’s biker gang, is the first space we are presented following the iconic opening. The bar acts as a refuge for the many outcasted youth of Neo-Tokyo. From the street view we see the neighboring window has the English text “INTERIOR” written on it. I find this text compelling as a floating and ambiguous distinction between inside and outside. Thanks to the depth of detail in this city street of Neo-Tokyo, hidden

⁸⁰ Maximilian Seijo and Scott Ferguson, “The Mark of Fascism: Lebensraum for The Left,” *Money on the Left*, July 5 2021, <https://moneyontheleft.org/2021/07/05/the-mark-of-fascism-lebensraum-for-the-left/>

relationships make themselves known, especially between interiors and exteriors. When Bazin writes on Welles' *Ambersons*, he too honors the *mise en scène* and their contexts. He notices how "the house's interior architecture seems to be completely and continually on the screen, just as one sees the streets in its entire lengths several times, either directly or through the reflections in the shop windows."⁸¹ Resting on the surface of *Akira's* first interior space is a shop window nominalization that labels it as such. Already, *Akira* makes messy its mediation, as key relationships engage in dialogue throughout its environments, especially as the English used itself troubles the inside/outside of Japan as a nation-state. This is driven further as the next shot follows a man from the street view down the stairs into the bar itself. The walls and staircase are covered in graffiti, a recurring demarcation of the public contestation that reverberates throughout *Akira's* backgrounds moving forward. Like the film, our attention moves from sign, to nation-state, back to sign, traversing the cascade of scale and meaning in *Akira's* many ambient spaces.

Akira is not shy about fiscal mediation as a charged political theme, immediately establishing money (or lack thereof) in its construction of space. It is striking, in this regard, that the first dialogue in *Akira* is overheard from a news report on a television in the background of the Harukiya bar. The reporter speaks on the recent riots staged across Japan. The television news report sees state finance and taxation as intimately connected to political opposition and rioting, and importantly self-reflexively mediates these connections through television as a mass electronic medium. In full, the reporter says,

⁸¹ André Bazin, trans Jonathon Rosenbaum. *Orson Welles: a Critical View*. (Acrobat Books, 1991), 73.

“Groups of unemployed workers, who have grown in number due to the tax reforms enacted by the former Prime Minister, are rioting all across the country. And with the confusion among members of Parliament sparked by the comments of Finance Minister Takanashi during a recent Parliament inquiry, there seems to be no compromise in sight between the government and opposition.”

Akira is, however unwittingly, demonstrating a crucial argument of the MMT Humanities: the politics of fiscal and tax governance condition and engage broader social and aesthetic arrangements and contestations. What is most interesting is this tavern’s televisual relationship to its unamused spectators. The bartender’s response to these audiovisual images in the next shot is that of a yawn. Later we see this news station again, this time linked across a wall of televisions on the city streets before being interrupted by a dog food commercial. These screens too get ignored by the characters in the shot, aligning them with McCarthy’s ambient reading, where they take on “the screen’s role in supporting particular generic qualities in places.”⁸² Television is set up to be ignored into the background like the opposition’s graffiti and the money that neither side seem to have. However, critics, often taking the bait of the yawning bartender, ignore its significant insignificance, treating them too as “overly facile detours.” Consequently, television dissolves into a broader multimedia ambiance that includes *Akira*’s other nested signs like money and like graffiti. If anything, ambient attention does not look to emphasize electronic or digital media, like television or internet networks, as something wholly unique to other, what is often termed ‘analog,’ modes of communication. Instead, attending to these ambient details affirms abstract multi-media forms that cascade throughout Neo-Tokyo.

⁸² Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television*, 19.

We won't see the "actual" rioters until the film begins following the Esper child, Takashi, and the wounded Resistance member who abducted him from the military. The rioters march by them in the hundreds, set in conflict with police. We notice the smoking wreckage and carnage of these clashes. The police briefly turn their attention toward the resistance member and gun him down. Soon after, the police return to their firehoses, tear gas, and batons to beat back the protesters. We witness rioters holding flags, and we can make out one with the text "Oppose Imperialism." Amid the chaos, the military locates Takashi within the riots. Fellow Esper child, Masaru, beckons Takashi, saying "We can't survive on the outside. Let's go home." It is after all this that we happen upon our first evidence of the Tokyo Olympics. A flyover shot reveals the stadium under construction, fading to a billboard counting down till the opening ceremony. It reads "Tokyo Olympics. 147 days until the event. Let's all pull together to make it a success." Below the message, various graffiti demand the events cancelation.⁸³ The billboard message stages the Japanese government's desperate attempt to "pull together," or bring back inside that which has fled within the zero-sum, deadline narrative of the Olympics. All the while the graffiti resists such integration, demonstrating the choice to not recognize such restraints and/or reevaluating parameters for "success". So much is done in this exhilarating first conflict to not just develop a tension between inside/outside through background details and various dialogue but enfold both in a broader cascade of rich and contestable mediation. The last remark of which is given to the Olympic character that looms so large.

Akira's layered negotiation between highly contextual background ambience and energetic athletic bodies, brings to light the film's intertwined ambient athleticism. This ambient athleticism in the film captures the indelible political preoccupations with the Olympics as both

⁸³ One graffiti message specifically reads, "中止だ中止 (Chuushi da Chuushi)," or "Cancel it. Just cancel it."

an athletic competition and far-reaching institutional and industrial practice. I intentionally close read *Akira's* spaces of unrest as analogous to its athlete's own bodily disintegration. I attend to the abrasive expansion of Olympic-inspired public provisioning and the responding symptomatic geopolitics of tax and fiscal policies that fiercely reintegrates state sovereignty as a stable and single contiguous body. In light of historical precedents, the political and economic policies and attitudes host cities employ for the Olympics would naturally precipitate *Akira's* Neo-Tokyo protests. The Olympic Games are routinely met with fierce opposition. It is widely acknowledged that every modern Olympic festival is held at a severe cost to municipal infrastructures and national budgetary commitments, often with a reported USD price tag in the tens of billions. What is regularly under reported is how participating athletes as well as vulnerable populations are put in the crossfire of preparing a city for the Olympic games. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) campaign on the Games' promise of political and economic windfall, historically however, this is rarely the case. As economists Robert A. Baade and Victor A. Matheson ascertain, the Olympics by several different metrics are "in most cases... a money-losing proposition for host cities."⁸⁴ So much of the infrastructure that is built, many of which being highly specific, massive, disruptive, and expensive to maintain, sit unused and turn to ruin. The implementation of oppressive taxation laws hastily leverage austerity onto the local population to justify such extravagant expenses on Olympic infrastructure. Additionally, as Helen Lenskyj reminds us, "Local politicians and boosters often used the excuse of hallmark construction to bypass usual stages in urban development applications, including social and environmental impact assessment, public hearings, etc."⁸⁵ Toronto protesters opposed

⁸⁴ Robert A. Baade and Victor A. Matheson. "Going for the Gold: The Economics of the Olympics." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30, no. 2 (2016), 202.

⁸⁵ Helen Lenskyj, *Inside the Olympic Industry Power, Politics, and Activism*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 105.

the city's bid for the 2008 Games (awarded to Beijing), coining the slogan and group name "Bread Not Circuses."⁸⁶ Once the Olympic industry leaves town, the locals incur the brunt of the cost of the vacant infrastructure and/or laborious repair with no real economic benefit. There is a general feeling amongst these protesters that there are more urgent problems needing public investments that routinely get sidelined for the athletic circus.

The Olympics stand as a colossal contradiction in a political economy organized around money's finitude. As Baade and Matheson illustrate through London's 2012 Olympic Games, "at the same time David Cameron's government in the United Kingdom was promoting the supposed expansionary effects of fiscal austerity in the wake of the Great Recession, the same government was touting the stimulative effects of increased government spending on London's Olympic preparations."⁸⁷ Prominent MMT economist Stephanie Kelton critiques this contradiction in her book *The Deficit Myth*, where she writes that "Irrational fears about government debt and fiscal deficits caused policy makers in the US, Japan, the UK, and elsewhere to pivot away from fiscal stimulus toward austerity in the years following the global financial crisis."⁸⁸ As Kelton explains, "MMT emphasizes the role of the government as the issuer of the currency. For countries like the US, the UK, and Japan, the government's financial ability to pay can never be in doubt...it means that citizens should never be forced to suffer harsh austerity on the grounds that the government lacks the ability to pay."⁸⁹ Austere and zero-sum economic policy necessitates the heavy burden of the Olympic Industry as a pseudo-crisis in an economic sense. Olympic preparations are needlessly coopted as a practice in crisis management just to avoid

⁸⁶ "Bread Not Circuses voices concerns to IOC," *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, March 9, 2001, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/bread-not-circuses-voices-concerns-to-ioc-1.295757>

⁸⁷ Robert A. Baade and Victor A. Matheson. "Going for the Gold," 206.

⁸⁸ Stephanie Kelton. *The Deficit Myth*. (London, England: John Murray, 2020), 197.

⁸⁹ Stephanie Kelton. *The Deficit Myth*, 256.

making legible money's imperceptible and abundant topology, hence the contradictory nature of the Games. However, the unique stakes of national pride that the Olympics regularly incentivize continue to mobilize government spending. The public purse is made available to Olympic preparations in a way only reserved for war making. Sports historians Toby Rider and Matthew Llewellyn suggest this idea as well, "the Olympic Games remain[ing] the most visible, global platform for celebration and expression of state-based nationalism and national identity in the twenty-first century."⁹⁰ Consequently, "it is no wonder that throughout modern history political leaders have applied state funds to galvanize national Olympic teams."⁹¹ Japan's own 1964 Tokyo Summer Olympics is no exception, "where symbolic politics and the burdens of history called for image management not simply in order to enhance marketing opportunities but to reconstruct national identities."⁹² Japan utilized the Games as a strategic "rite of passage" that integrated its citizens into a reinforced sovereignty that was weakened due to war, marking their resounding return to the global economic and territorial stage.

Akira's destruction, in an Olympic context, oscillates between dystopic and utopic precisely because of the Games' fraught reliance on cycles of destruction and reconstruction. Famously, Kon Ichikawa's documentary on the 64' Games, *Tokyo Olympiad*, provides this important thematization in its opening sequence, a sequence to which *Akira's* explosive opening harkens back. Ichikawa's opening, a seeming rejoinder to Leni Riefenstahl's Olympic film, *Olympia* (1938), responds to her opening's fascist imagery of an exalted and Edenic antiquity with images of wrecking balls and demolition instead. As Igarashi notes, "The contrast between

⁹⁰ Matthew P. Llewellyn and Toby C. Rider "The Five Rings and the 'Imagined Community': Nationalism and the Modern Olympic Games." *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 35, no. 2 (2015), 29.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁹² Christian Tagsold, "Modernity, Space and National Representation at the Tokyo Olympics 1964." *Urban History* 37, no. 2 (2010), 291.

the demolition scene sequence and the serenity of the newly constructed Olympic facilities completes the cycle of destruction and reconstruction.”⁹³ *Tokyo Olympiad* performs a double move of fascistic and militaristic critique, that of Nazi Germany and the Japanese Empire, by similar means of *Akira* – through destruction. The film resituates the “sufferings before 1945” as “necessary conditions for the 1960s recovery.”⁹⁴ Out of the wreckage of Japan’s militaristic past “the stadium stands as a monumental structure with the solemnity and grandeur of a religious building.”⁹⁵ Just as Ichikawa demolishes the borders that construct Japan’s past state image, they emerge again, only redrawn in the monuments of sport instead of war.

Akira itself uses Japan’s own 1964 Olympic fallout as inspiration. David Murakami Wood and Kiyoshi Abe speak on “the rise of the harajuku zoku [Harajuku tribe], the youth sub-cultural scene that, in the wake of the Olympics, grew up in the immediate area of the stadia.”⁹⁶ So little of the benefits of large-scale construction made its way to the local community, as Wood and Abe reference, “The Japanese state had come to rely on a few very large construction companies... The embedding of a corrupt construction machine into the heart of the state... fueled what became known as doken kokka [the construction state].”⁹⁷ The promises of full employment during Olympic preparations and the economic windfall thereafter rarely materializes, as private interests entrench themselves in public projects, the states willfully divest their own agency in wide-scale public matters. This leads to a large swaths of unemployed youth parading bygone monoliths of national vitality they had no hand in creating and no use of now.

⁹³ Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory*, 145.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ David Murakami Wood and Kiyoshi Abe. “The Aesthetics of Control: Mega Events and Transformations in Japanese Urban Order.” *Urban Studies (Edinburgh, Scotland)* 48, no. 15 (2011), 3245.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3246.

The assured failure of the Olympics' utopian messaging rests in the nationalistic framing that ties the zero-sum private money form to the necessarily disintegrative violence of accelerationist ontologies. It is in the backgrounds of Neo-Tokyo that *Akira's* government enacts this struggle to integrate labor into their construction state body. The background fight gets analogized through Tetsuo's initial psychic disturbance in the city's Industrial Zone. After being ambushed by the Clown biker gang, Tetsuo and Kaori are saved when Kaneda comes to their aid. Tetsuo responds by lashing out, aggressively refusing the reality of his weakness and dependence on Kaneda. Like Neo-Tokyo's violent police, this lashing out is due to a lack of control and weakness. It is telling that Tetsuo's outburst is staged in an area where every wall is littered with Shimamoto Labor Union strike imagery and graffiti. We also see some hastily plastered or painted over graffiti with anti-union slogans like "SMASH THE STRIKE" or "End the Shimamoto Labor Union's Illegal Strike." The contested space of labor mirrors both Wood and Abe's important historical work concerning the Japanese state's reliance on corrupt construction corporations during the 1964 Olympics, as well as Tetsuo's painful psychic attack. Tetsuo begins to receive visions of the future that flash on screen as his agonizing screams escalate. Tetsuo's hallucinations unravel his ground/body integrity. The asphalt crumbles below him causing him to fall back to the ground all the while his organs drop out of his body. He then frantically attempts to scoop these imaginary insides back into his body before getting back up and stumbling toward the wall. When attending to both Tetsuo's psychic awakening and the contested dialogue that make up the *mise en scène*, his body captures the failure of the city/state as one body analogy so popular in sci-fiction and accelerationist literature. The ontological ground that constitutes inside and outside not only is unstable and violent, but imaginary, and quickly Tetsuo is sedated and scooped up by the government again before these crises develops any further.

Ambient attention is especially valuable when contending with *Akira's* contracted and fast-moving blockbuster aesthetic. This contraction and speed obscures the plasticity and expanse of public space afforded to sports at the expense of social welfare. Kaneda and his biker gang were brought into a police precinct for questioning following the riots mentioned prior. The walls in this precinct are narrow, the space confined. The police have crammed hundreds of suspects into tight corridors, shuffling them in and out of various interrogations. Near the end of this scene, however, the camera pans up, revealing, for a few seconds, that this contracted space of policing and state power was built, ad hoc, inside an expansive sporting gymnasium. The state is afforded this room by the hugeness of the sporting infrastructure. *Akira's* Japan is a state in crisis, fighting for room, investing heavily in both military to make that room as it abandons projects of employment and construction, except for the Olympics which is provisioned that necessary space from outside. Sport or athletic contest becomes a space of abstracted exteriority, a place of extensive public provisioning that plays several distinct roles for the nation-state. When Napier writes on *Akira*, she describes a different relation, “[a]t the beginning of the film the oppressive male adult authority structure of government, military, and the scientific establishment (not so different than contemporary Japan, although more extreme) wield all control.”⁹⁸ However, this make-shift precinct is an example of the lack of control and power the government wields in relation to capital, even early on in the film. The decisions made by Neo-Tokyo officials make crystalline how little power they wield to control the path of the city. The Olympics act mostly as a futile last gasp to wrest some control from and/or appease the invisible forces that constrain Japanese autonomy.

⁹⁸ Susan Napier. *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, 44.

Akira's government demonstrate an inactive politics, despite their “best” efforts, ultimately appealing to the whims of the external forces of capital. The Olympics stems the tide of capital, but *Akira* treats it like a gamble, the government's last vestige before going broke is going all in on the Olympics. Investigating the details of government spaces, like offices of Neo-Tokyo’s bureaucrats, we see a commitment to retain a Japanese cultural essence or Japanese-ness that has been carved out of the city itself. These quiet, elegant meeting rooms and offices, aesthetically embrace the politician’s role as vanguards for the Japan image, however feeble or limited their reach. One of the parliament members, Mr. Nezu, embraces a more accelerationist politics, partnering with various terrorist organizations to sew chaos throughout the city and hasten its destruction. He says to the Colonel at one point, “In all respects, this city is saturated. It's like an overripe fruit. And within it is a new seed. We only need to wait for the wind which will make it fall. And that wind is Akira!” Needing only to wait, government takes a passive role, metaphorizing capitalism as an invisible wind that will inevitably bear fruits of rebirth. The Colonel makes similar remarks, lamenting that “[t]he passion to build has cooled and the joy of reconstruction forgotten.” All these explicit politics converge in the Supreme Executive Council meeting that both the Colonel and Nezu attend. The ballyhooing about budgetary excesses, joking about welfare spending, and redirecting attention to impending Olympic concerns saturate the meeting in a dark comedy, the impotence of Neo-Tokyo’s bureaucrats on full display. This impotence creates a vacuum of power that the Colonel eventually fills himself. Neo-Tokyo has no money, no room, and no time, and the Colonel’s subsequent military coup turns its attention to Tetsuo’s rampage. For the audience, the Colonel becomes an almost sympathetic figure, however. The fact that the Colonel does not just elect a politics of inaction paints his militaristic takeover as more desirable than a capital-subordinate politics. The dangers of accelerationism are

lived out through this short sequence. Waiting out capital as it wreaks havoc reifies and even romanticizes the fascistic logics that accelerationism seeks to transgress.

Akira's accelerationist politics are made analogous with *Akira's* Olympics as a relationship between Japan and outside. The state takes the brunt of responsibility, fiscal and labor, to don a domesticated role as proper host. Hosting a mega-sporting event becomes a ritual of feminized table setting to please the masculine and external pressures of capital on public spaces (this relationship historically has been felt more acutely by Asian nations). The city must demonstrate proper keeping of house to bear proper athletic subjects. Thus, the Olympics historically function as a rare exception for public spending as a religious festival of capital excess. Tetsuo is the “new seed” of the city; his cosmic birth is necessarily mediated by the Olympic Stadium, fertilized by the invisible flows the event conducts from all over. His new powers flood him with aggressive answers to the impotence he has experienced up to that point, before barreling him back to an infantile vulnerability. The Stadium is the constructed womb of the state made for the autonomous and global capital flow that the Olympics represent. *Akira's* destructive spectacle situates the failed Olympic promise of both world peace and sovereign and economic windfall as analogy for the failures of Liberal money mediation to maintain world order.

Ambient attention to *Akira's* background space reveals an aesthetics of multimedia that makes visible a boundless cascade of intermediation alternative to the foregrounded athletic bodies privileged by the film and naturalized as important posthuman relays of resistance by scholarship. The result of this attentiveness is a theory of *Akira's* ambient athleticism, capturing the many diverse and scalable layers of the film's contested multimedia signs as they converge on the Olympic image, an image where Liberal money's symptomology is most clearly

spatialized and exteriorized. The Olympics permeate Neo-Tokyo's cityscape through signs of austerity, reintegration, and public provisioning. When considering the historical and social effect of the Olympics in Tokyo's 1964 Games and beyond, the clash of these signs render *Akira's* athletic bodies as analogues for a doomed Olympic promise predicated on cyclically destructive zero-sum logics. Athletic encounters with these signs fracture the powerful bodily metaphors of which fascism relies on and accelerationism reifies through its appeals to an imagined exteriority. Rather than redeeming the film wholly, I redeem its complexity of scale by uncovering the political implications and contested meanings throughout *Akira* that previous scholarship has ignored and/or foreclosed.

Conclusion

Akira's conclusive gesture leaves ambiguous the future of Neo-Tokyo on the other side of Tetsuo's explosion. Otomo's film provides a vague utopian impulse as the contracted aesthetic loosens and both sun rays and Tokyo Bay water flows behind Kaneda, Kei, and the other remaining survivors. While Tetsuo's "I am Tetsuo" refrain punctuates a film suggestive of a new world order after his return to the exterior, the original manga's ending does not choose to end there. Otomo's *Akira* manga would not be completed until 1990, its ending complicating assumptions about the film's hopeful turn. As Kaneda, Kei, and others regather in the Neo-Tokyo ruins, a United Nations Peacekeeping Force (UNPF) is sent to assess the damages and "restore order." Kaneda rejects their intrusion on, what the unfurling banner behind him would suggest, a new "Great Tokyo Empire." Kaneda declares the man-made territory of Neo-Tokyo as a "sovereign nation" before riding off into the city streets in the manga's final panel. Otomo provides a much clearer ending in the manga, one that completes the Olympic critique. The UNPF, like the Olympics, is a global actor that visits upon a sovereign nation. It is up to that nation to accept their intrusion, that which Neo-Tokyo does readily, and aid in a restoration of order. Kaneda chooses not to capitulate like the previous government had, harshly redrawing borders around a new empire and enacting an isolationist policy reminiscent of Japan in the Edo period. There is a cyclical nature to *Akira*'s manga's ending that merely picks up where the opening left off. Kaneda takes the baton of the Colonel, wary of the external forces that Neo-Tokyo was previously overrun with, but brashly reifying the problematic ontology that falsely

constructs the interior/exterior dynamic that still reigns. Circuitously, *Akira* returns to a classical composition in the manga.

As my earlier claims address, *Akira* stages a crisis of aesthetics and mediation governed by separate, but still limiting laws of physics. As this crisis continues, the compositions under critique unravel into a spectacle of bodily disintegration. In surveying Francis Bacon, Gilles Deleuze, extant scholarship, and close reading these scenes, this violent display clearly was not constructed nor received as condemnable, but perhaps a necessary step in combatting capital's external hold on daily life and aesthetic potentials. Here, I have endeavored to reveal the dangerous implications of such accelerationist impulses that naturalize the fascistic logics that Tetsuo's mutation is supposed to combat. Instead, I have provided an alternative method of reading *Akira*, through an ambient attention, redeeming composition through technological multimediation as abundant tools uncoupled from finitude and contracted physics that seem to cyclically doom *Akira*'s Olympic athletes.

Akira's destructive images continue to deeply impact the world that receives them. The shadow of the 3/11 Fukushima disaster still looms large in Japan, and the Tokyo 2020 Olympic preparations reinvigorated arguments around the disaster sites that are still condemned nearly a decade later. The stain of nuclear disaster haunts Olympic political discourse, James Simms criticized Tokyo for putting "political, bureaucratic and commercial interests ahead of the health and well-being of the overall public – similar to what happened before regarding Fukushima."⁹⁹ Locally, the government's insistence to plow ahead with the games without presenting a coherent strategy for dealing with COVID-19 made the Olympics very unpopular. In an *Asahi Shimbun*

⁹⁹ James Simms, "The Road to Fukushima (and Tokyo Olympics): Forgotten Lessons (Again)" *The Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus*, Volume 19, Issue 17, no.7, (2021), 1.

poll, over 80% of those surveyed wanted the games delayed or cancelled outright.¹⁰⁰ Amid this opposition, commentators on social media and news sites the world over noticed a humorously dark similarity the current tumultuous Tokyo Olympics had with Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira*. The stain of mishandled nuclear fallout found easy comparisons to Neo-Tokyo's own 2019 dystopic Olympic rendering. This comparison was such an apt description for some that the billboard shot from the film's inciting action sequence became a prominent Olympic protest image in Japan. This happenstance illustrates Lamarre's own observation about the film having an "eerie convergence between what is presented in the 'text' and what is happening between the text and the world."¹⁰¹ However eerily precise *Akira's* warnings end up being, it is no surprise how present its Olympic problem is to a Tokyo yet again entrenched in the Games.

The 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics in many ways fit the historic model of Olympic Games up to that point. The preparations regularly made headlines for their record-breaking price tag for sure; however, the human cost so consistently ignored by mass media finally commanded a profound spotlight due to the context of COVID-19. The Games were considered such a serious threat to public health an unprecedented delay was enacted, pushing the event from its initially scheduled 24 July to 9 August 2020 date to 23 July to 8 August 2021. Olympic Games have only ever been cancelled outright during periods of global war. Following the delay, the late Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, recalling this militaristic referent, resolutely stated that the Olympics "must be held in a way that shows the world has won its battle against the coronavirus pandemic."¹⁰² Abe's assurance that this new global war against the coronavirus would be won due in part by his nation's commitment to their Olympic spectacle makes invisible

¹⁰⁰ "Survey: 83% against holding Tokyo Olympics this summer," *The Asahi Shimbun*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14351670>

¹⁰¹ Thomas Lamarre. "Born of Trauma: Akira and Capitalist Modes of Destruction," 134.

¹⁰² Ingle, Sean (29 April 2020). "Tokyo Olympics in 2021 at risk of cancellation admits Japan's PM". *The Guardian*

and exterior Japan's opposition. While aesthetic scholarship on the 2020 Tokyo Summer Games is still nascent, the especially charged nature of an audience-less Olympics amplifies the contradictory nature of the Games. The 2020 Games' torchbearer, tennis star Naomi Osaka, also imparts a newly contested image of the athlete. Later, Osaka's shockingly early exit from the Games capped a two-month mental health break from competition that preceded her Olympic participation. Coupled with prominent American gymnast Simone Biles's withdrawal from individual competitions due to similar mental health concerns, and Tokyo's most recent Olympics became shaped by an alternate form of athletic resistance than that found in *Akira*. Compared to Sakai Yoshinori's triumphant and reintegrative relay, these circumstances profoundly recontextualizes Osaka's own symbolic and deeply complicated torch lighting ceremony.

Along with renewed Olympic interest in Japan, recent science-fiction anime and manga series with prominent apocalyptic narratives have been engaging with the Olympics as a primary figure. One of these is Netflix's *Japan Sinks: 2020*, directed by Masaaki Yuasa. The series imagines a future following the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics, where high school track and field athlete Ayumu Mutō and her family navigate the chaos of a major earthquake hitting Japan. It is discovered that it is no normal earthquake, and the territory of the Japanese archipelago is sinking into the ocean. Ayumu must outrun the disintegrative pursuit of the impending external threat on her country and life. *Japan Sinks: 2020* uncomplicatedly redraws Japanese bodily integrity through its Olympic athletes. Made even more self-evident and symbolic since the plot of *Japan Sinks: 2020* reconvenes at the next Olympics with Protagonist Ayumu Mutō's and her prominent prosthetic leg competing in a track and field event for Japan during the show's final episode. This epilogue reminds us of *Akira's* reintegration through Tetsuo's posthuman body in

athletic competition. *Japan Sinks: 2020's* source material and original domestic hit 1973 film, *Nippon chinbotsu*, according to Napier, “allowed its audience the melancholy pleasure of mourning the passing of traditional Japanese society. The film essentially an elegy to a lost Japan.”¹⁰³ *Japan Sinks: 2020* troubles its more conservative predecessor in a couple of ways, one being the primary Japanese athlete, Ayumu, like Naomi Osaka, is a mixed-raced Japanese woman that disrupts the supposed purity of conservative and male-dominated Japanese ethno-state rhetoric. For all there is to affirm there, by capitulating to accelerationist tendencies contracted around savvy multimedia navigators and posthuman athletes, the show ultimately does little to rethink the defined boundaries that burdens the vulnerable athlete with the responsibility to redraw and shape Japanese national identity through Olympic competition.

Olympic resistance has grown more visible as the empirical evidence against their sustainability grows insurmountable for bidding host cities, especially since Tokyo 2020. Victor Matheson and Andrew Zimbalist’s reporting on this phenomenon reveals the IOC’s desperate situation concerning their lack of willing applicants. In an unprecedented move, both the 2024 and 2028 Games were awarded simultaneously, as Paris and Los Angeles remained the only suitable applicants for the foreseeable future as every other potential bid were withdrawn due to a lack of public support. Matheson and Zimbalist advocate for “designating one or a small handful of permanent host cities.”¹⁰⁴ As they say, “There is little rational reason to rebuild the Olympic Shangri-la every four years in a new city.”¹⁰⁵ Other frontline reporting like Jules Boykoff book *Nolympians: Inside the Fight Against Capitalist Mega-Sports in Los Angeles*,

¹⁰³ Napier, Susan J. “Panic Sites: The Japanese Imagination of Disaster from Godzilla to Akira.” *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 19, no. 2 (1993), 335.

¹⁰⁴ Victor Matheson and Andrew Zimbalist, “Why Cities No Longer Clamor to Host the Olympic Games,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, April 19, 2021, <https://gja.georgetown.edu/2021/04/19/why-cities-no-longer-clamor-to-host-the-olympic-games/>

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Tokyo & Beyond investigates the tumultuous ongoing local resistance in Los Angeles concerning the cities upcoming 2028 Games.¹⁰⁶ As the systemic problems with the Olympics intensify, so does the need to properly attend to the aesthetic significance of Tokyo's COVID-19 Summer Games in relation to *Akira*'s prescient athletic complex. In doing so, we can hopefully imagine an alternative relation between athletics and aesthetics that avoids the fascistic and/or destructive ontologies that dominate mega-sporting and media events the world over.

¹⁰⁶ Jules Boykoff. *Nolympians: Inside the Fight Against Capitalist Mega-Sports in Los Angeles, Tokyo & Beyond*. (Columbia University Press, 2020)

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