# Exploring science fiction through animation: akira (1988) and wall-e (2008)

Animation: Contexts and Concepts

*Choose <u>TWO</u> different animation films [they do not need to be of similar make up, technique or style]. Analyse and discuss your chosen film(s) in relation to the concept of ' genre', and in terms of their borrowings and/or deviations from established genres*

" Animation is often wrongly considered to be a genre of film. A genre is essentially a label that categorises the type of the product, be it film, book, or animation." – Dobson (2009; 83).

Animated movies tend to be categorised as a separate genre, however, animation is just a different medium of film. Animated films, in the same way as movies or comics, can be of various genres: science fiction, westerns, fantasy, comedy, horror, etc. A genre is " a French term imported to film theory from literary studies meaning *type* or *class" (* Watson (2012; 189 *)* . A genre taxonomy help audience to define the boundaries between one genre and another. Each film genre is related to different themes, historical subjects, the intended effect, aesthetics, and iconography. Science fiction, for example, is recognised by its use of traveling in spaceships, futuristic concepts of technology or alien landscapes. Even so, science fiction isn't defined by one thing only and there is a number of sub-genres. Animation is especially convincing in science fiction movies because animation offers freedom from a camera's indexicality: characters can look disproportionate or act in an unnatural way. Animation has been an essential fragment of the science fiction genre since the time when stop-motion animation becomes an element of creating a science fiction film. *Akira* (1988) and *Wall-e* (2008) are

great examples of exploring the genre of science fiction through the medium of animation.

Firstly, *Akira* (1988) escapes the ' high-tech anime' convention by instead portraying an alternate universe altogether. Anime is a style of animation typically aimed at adults. It's a distinct genre because its medium allows telling extensive stories that would require a large budget if it was made with practical effects. Japan acquired its rich animation traditions because of how deeply anime is integrated into its culture. According to Scalzi (2005: 263), Japan is the second largest producer of science fiction in the world.

*Akira* (1988, dir. Katsuhiro Otomo) was one of the first major feature-length anime releases to become popular in the Western marketplace. *Akira* (1988) belongs to the sub-genre of cyberpunk. This sub-genre started in 1982 with the debut of the manga series by the same name.

Following the success of *Akira* , anime prompted a rise of cyberpunk films, like *Blade Runner (1982)* and *The Matrix (1999).* Johnson Cheu has stated that " cyberpunk plots often feature anti-heroes as a protagonist" (2012: 242). The hero of *Akira* (1988) is a teenage criminal who with his gang use violence, such as rape and murder.

The film is set in a violent post-apocalyptic 2019 Neo-Tokyo when the old Tokyo was destroyed after a nuclear war. The theme of nuclear weapons in science fiction became popular after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and inspired by the Cold War atmosphere.

Nuclear power is dramatically shown from the perspectives of acquiring cheaper power for daily use or risk damage to the natural way via mutations. This is seen in the surge of a film about nuclear way and monsters. These elements are prominent in *Akira* (1988) too. The protagonist Tetsuo becomes subjected to secret military testing that leaves him with hallucinations and transforms his physical body into part-cyborg. Tetsuo gains mutant powers. As stated by Wells (2002; 51) " Akira's post-apocalyptic World refuses any interrogative approach which is grounded in the material world, and it sustains an authentic account of its own perspectives". As Tetsuo telekinetic strength grows, he becomes the pretext between the military forces of Neo-Tokyo and the revolutionaries.

In science fiction movies, one of the most popular character tropes is the " mad scientist". The character of the scientist has changed significantly over time, dependent on the society insight of scientific study and innovative technology. Early versions of the ' mad scientist' can be found in films such as *Frankenstein (1931)* and *Dr. Strangelove (1964)* . *Akira* (1988) reflects this trope on the scientist who tries to find the answers to existential questions – who created humanity? He does not listen to the military leader and risks all of Neo-Tokyo's citizens' lives with his experiments; he uses children, thus establishing his crossover from socially accepted morality to a crazed scientist: ultimately, he is unable to control the power so, like Frankenstein, he creates a monster. All in all, *Akira* (1988) features a lot of science fiction elements and conventions, to show how science fiction can portray not just a high-tech world but an alternative world order.

The purposefulness of the science fiction genre has become more complex as a result of the fast technological developments during the twenty-first century. Genre is most important principles by which cinema advances, changes, and develops. Watson pointed out that: " Even though it is impossible to avoid the taxonomic impulses associated with the act of defining genres and classify films, it is impossible to design a universal typology of genres that can accommodate and classify all films at all times". With culture, technology and kinematics changes became popular to make films that have more than one genre features. The best example is the animated film *Wall-e* (2008) produced by Pixar for Walt Disney Pictures.

Hollywood has an unsuccessful relationship with animated science fiction. Walt Disney released its first science fiction themed animated film in 2001 when it debuted with *Atlantis: The Lost Empire (2001)* . The second one was *Treasure Planet* (2002) was a financial disaster and was partially responsible for the studio closing down its in-house animation studio. Scalzi pointed out that " The lesson Hollywood has learned from this is apparently not to release science fiction-themed films unless they are computer animated"(2005; 194). The computer-animated film *Wall-e* (2008) is primarily a science fiction film but features comedy as a key narrative component so it may be described as a science-fiction-fantasy-comedy hybrid. According to Collington (2016: 88): " Many narrative art forms have shared or similar genres as well as ones particular to their discipline". *Wall-e* (2008) is a solid proof that it is true. *Wall-e* (2008) shows the impact of technological advancement, alongside the results of global warming, while making fun of the popularity of fast food, gender roles, and romance.

Nowadays, people's worldview has become more complex, and this is reflected in the complexities of genre.

Collington (2016: 91) pointed out that " science fiction is the transferal of present-day situations into a fictionalized alternative utopian or dystopian one". This is the first time that Disney has represented a dystopian world. Differing from *Akira* (1988), Wall-e's setting is a widespread ecological disaster. Disaster movies are a common topic in science fiction movies, in particular, a future disaster provides the fear and motivation that drives the characters. These types of films often address a particular person and serve as a tool to advice the audience to be more aware of the relationship between technology and nature. *Wall-e* (2008) depicts the importance of nowadays problems with global warming and how human activity can destroy the whole ecosystem. *Wall-e* (2008) future world is a landscape shaped by mountains of trash, a man-made desert without any life forms.

Robots are a vital convention. In *Wall-e* (2008), robots are the protagonists. They do everything, like cooking and cleaning for humans. However, the old robot Wall-e is a social misfit. The time he spent abandoned on earth has taught him the perspective of humanity. This way, he's more relatable to the audience. According to Wells: " The anthropomorphism is key within animation in general, but most significantly in the films of Walt Disney that were to follow" (2012, 234). All in all, *Wall-e* (2008) show how after a long time period purposefulness of the science fiction genre has become more complex.

These two films conflate in how they execute the narrative but have tons of similarities to the theory of science fiction. The visualization of these films is quite different. *Akira* (1988) is a 2D anime, while *Wall-e* (2008) is a 3D animation.

These films target different audiences. *Akira* (1988) is aimed at adults: it has a lot of blood, nudity, violence. On the other hand, *Wall-e* (2008), as would be expected of ' Disney•Pixar', is a family film: funny and cute characters are enjoyable for the youngest spectators, while the deeper meaning of the narrative entertains those who are older.

Both of them can be categorized into the science fiction subgenre – post-apocalyptic fiction. Most importantly, both films portray society. According to Grant (2012; 44): " A genre is a more precise set of conventions, including plots, characters, and settings, which portrays long-standing dramatic conflicts vital to the culture". These conflicts arise from a characteristic subject, such as the impact of new technology in science fiction or gender and sexuality in a romantic comedy. *Akira* (1988) has many unreal futuristic details yet is still relevant to contemporary audiences. Firstly, it shows the importance of friendships. After Tetsuo has killed two close friends of Kaneda, Kaneda still tries to help Tetsuo and keep him alive. This film shows the complexity of relationships, and how difficult a woman's position is in Neo-Tokyo. Tetsuo's girlfriend was raped by another gang so as to get revenge on Tetsuo. She has been used as a pawn in their power games. Napier (2005; 11) states: " It may be that animation in general – and perhaps anime in particular – is the ideal artistic vehicle for expressing the hopes and nightmares of our uneasy contemporary world". It is easier to watch

animated scenes of crimes and horror than live action because it looks less real. It's almost cathartic for the adult audience. However, hopes and nightmares can be shown not only in anime films. Even when the main characters are not people, their actions and feelings can be close to the audience, like *Wall-e* 's close relationship with the cockroach Hal. Whitley and Nelson (2012; 149) pointed out that:

" It would be easy to dismiss the significance of this relationship as simply another version of the buddy pairing between humans (or humanized larger creatures) and smaller animals that have been a stock feature of Disney animation since Jiminy Cricket first sallied forth with Pinocchio in 1940."

Wall-e takes care of Hal and feeds his only one companion. Secondly, Wall-e falls in love with EVE. *Wall-e* (2008) reflects the feminism in nowadays society: while Wall-e is a romantic, caring robot, EVE is independent, strong and aggressive. All in all, despite all the differences these two films *Akira* (1988) and *Wall-e* (2008) prove that even in science fiction genre, narrative can be comparative to the audience and demonstrate common problems.

All things considered, animated films can be of various genres and are a superb choice for the science fiction writing style. Films such as *Akira* (1988) and *Wall-e* (2008) show various aspects of the science fiction genre: characters (mad scientists, mutants with a special power, robots), sets (future cities, post-apocalyptic worlds, space). Also, show that the science fiction genre has a lot of sub-genres (cyberpunk, post-apocalyptic) and that film can be of hybrid-genre ( *Wall-e* (2008). And demonstrates how science fiction can create the artistically future world, but as well that no matter how

different the world will be it can still represent common human problems and opinions.

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