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## **Ōtomo's Exploding Cities – The Intersection of Class and City in Ōtomo Katsuhiko's Works Before, During, and After the Bubble Economy in Japan**

**Sebastian Klausner.**

### **ABSTRACT**

In one of Ōtomo Katsuhiko's interviews held during the sponsoring events for *Metropolis* (2001) he stated that, characters aside, the city itself was a driving force behind his initial concept. Ōtomo wanted a city that felt "alive" on the one hand, but that he could gleefully "completely destroy" on the other. Although the artist is neither a stranger to "exploding cities" in a figurative (i. e. exploding population) nor in a literal sense, the ways he imagined his cityscapes changed bit by bit. Considering the essential position held by the apocalyptic idea as a key-image in both political and pop-cultural discourse during the *Lost Decades*, as the years following the burst of the bubble economy are known, Ōtomo's works open up the possibility to examine how the image of urban landscape and its destruction are interconnected with the discourse of class (or with its vanishing and re-emerging) in Japan during the 1980s and 1990s. By looking at *Dōmu* (1980-1981), *Akira* (1982-1990; 1988), and *Metropolis*, one can not only approach the image of the (exploding) city and its possible change over time, but also the shift in discussion of class in the once called "classless society".



## CITIES WITHOUT AN END UNTIL THEY ARE ENDING

What is the quintessential city portrayed by Ōtomo Katsuhiro in his works? Searching for clues, let us turn to the first few seconds of the animated feature *Akira* (AK): A bird's-eye view of Tokyo on the date of the film's premiere, July 16th 1988, ending with a big explosion swallowing everything in sight, then jumping immediately thirty years into the future where its story takes place (AK 0:00). The scene is well known and often cited because of its links to traumatic imagery of the atomic bomb in Japan (Lamarre 2008; Standish 1998, 63). Yet this simple and powerful association somewhat obscures our vision of the city itself or how it is drawn. Up to its destruction, we only see one background plate, the lowest layer of cel animation, drawn in a forced perspective which creates the illusion of a camera tilt towards the horizon. Riekeles and Lamarre raise the issue of background plates and how they are designed to direct our attention (Riekeles and Lamarre 2012, 175). An important hint that we should follow: seen from a top-down view, a four-lane motorway situated in the middle of the screen between two rows of multi-storey buildings guides our view to the top of the screen, thereby motivating the camera movement into the same direction while zooming out. The buildings left and right of the motorway are quite detailed and colourful, allowing us to estimate the size of the space we see. In contrast, the buildings surrounding them are only coloured in shades of black and brown, giving us a vague feeling of heterogeneity (different shapes and sizes alternating), chaotic patterns (black and brown lines run frantically across the screen), and endlessness (most of the buildings are cut off in some way). As the camera pulls back, the background plate's perspective is slowly turning towards the horizon, revealing more and more of the dense cityscape, while we keep following the road diminishing in size, until it vanishes into a sea of buildings. When the camera movement finally stops, we are confronted with millions of tiny dots representing buildings extending towards the horizon. Just a moment, before the explosion hits, we vaguely recognise Mount Fuji in a pale blue shade. Despite its cultural relevance (Ivy 1995, 108), it is insignificant compared to the city.

Even before we jump decades into the future where we find the prototypical postmodern cyberpunk city, Ōtomo shows us Tokyo as an endless cityscape defying a simple order and thus harking back to Ashihara Yoshinobu's famous description of the city. Even though it has a "chaotic layout" (Ashihara 1989, 13), thereby being "an ugly, chaotic metropolis", its structure is "organic and constantly in the throes of change", thus "remain[ing] a synchronic whole, tenaciously surviving by rather an amoebic adaptability" (Ashihara 1989, 43). This idea can not



only be found in the rebuilt Neo Tokyo of *Akira* later on, but also in some of Ōtomo's other projects, as pointed out by Lawrence Bird with regards to the animated feature *Metropolis* (*Metoroporisu*) (MET) which Ōtomo adapted and storyboarded (Bird 2008, 140).

Other authors go even further by playing up the similarities between his urban designs as a manner of discussing class (De Domenico 2012). As Thomas Lamarre argues, Ōtomo has been dealing with youth culture and class conflict since 1979 by concentrating on “newly developed areas outside central Tokyo“ and joyfully destroying them (Lamarre 2008, 133) – thereby combining three important, intertwining aspects: city, class, and explosion. Considering the significant position held by the apocalyptic idea as a key-image in the political as well as pop-cultural discourse during the *Lost Decades* (Leheny 2006, 14) (as Japan's recession following the burst of 1980s bubble economy is known), Ōtomo's works open up the possibility to examine how the image of urban landscape and its destruction are interconnected with the discourse on class (or with its vanishing and re-emerging) in Japan during the 1980s and 1990s. Given the underrepresentation of class in Japanese discourse (Slater 2010, 140), culturally and historically contextualised analysis of the manga *Dōmu* (DO I-III), and the animated features *Akira* and *Metropolis* will illuminate how the discourse on class has changed during the last three decades. One should not be bedazzled by the blazing explosions of cityscapes, misinterpreting Ōtomo's cities as endless repetitions of the same few blocks being blown up, but rather take a close look at the aesthetics of this leitmotif.

### ***DŌMU* – TRAPPED IN THE “CLASSLESS SOCIETY“**

As one of his first successes, *Dōmu* is a six chapter long manga first published in 1980 and 1981. After a series of mysterious deaths, the police investigate a common looking public housing complex, but cannot find any clues, while the corpses keep piling up. When a little girl called Etsuko moves in, she easily figures out the perpetrator, an old man called Chojiro, due to superhuman powers they both possess. Though still in the dark, police and other figures of authority try to keep the order intact, while Etsuko and Chojiro are fighting and destruction and chaos ensue.

Similar to the first short assessment of Ōtomo's city, *Dōmu* presents a series of panels showing a seemingly endless skyline (DO-I, 16; DO-II, 25; DO-II, 46). However in *Dōmu*, they are all centred around a type of public housing complex called *danchi*, which overshadows the landscape either from the front or from the back, looking massive in all cases. At one point, a



character even comments on this factor by calling attention to the time it takes to get back to the front entrance (DO-II, 25). Therefore, our first glimpse at the *danchi* is paradigmatic. A two-page spread – a panel spreading from one page to the next, thus emphasising size and relevance – shows the top part of one building and the bottom part of another from a bird's-eye view, thereby confusing our senses and making it impossible to estimate its exact size (DO-I, 6-7). To answer why the *danchi* is *Dōmu's* focal point, one has to turn to Japanese class discourse since the 1960s. Following the announcement of the “Income Doubling Plan” by Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato in 1960, public investment in infrastructure and construction started growing rapidly in the ensuing years (Kingston 2004, 122) to ensure the stability of “the expanding new middle stratum”, a phenomenon first articulated in 1957 (Hashimoto 2003, 17). To facilitate the growing number of urban population, “[c]ountless old quarters” mostly inhabited by marginalised groups “were torn down and replaced by apartment buildings” in the 1960s and 1970s (Schulz 2012, 193). This creates what Tange Kenzō called “gluey architecture”: “Rather than giving the impression of being freestanding buildings” they are “built in a uniform manner, as if to suggest that they have no value other than that of being enormous” (Tanaka 2011, 274), which is similar to the *danchi* portrayed here. This form of housing complex reemerged as a popular uncanny setting during the peak of J-Horror in the late 1990s to illustrate distress in familial relationships, thereby becoming a symbol of national anxiety (McRoy 2008, 76; 86-91). But in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was a symbol of progress. In this respect the question if *Dōmu's* complex is designed with a specific *danchi* in mind is irrelevant (Tanaka 2011, 284), because it represents the prototypical *danchi* found all over Tokyo at that time. Therefore, it is a symbol of the new “classless society”.

The idea of an all-including middle-class society based on a meritocratic system had existed since the late 1950s (Hashimoto 2003, 17). However, the discourse did not gain momentum until 1977, when Murakami Yasusuke published his short article called “The Reality of the New Middle Stratum”, claiming that 90 percent of the population identified themselves as middle-class. In spite of controversy and criticism regarding Murakami's methods and definition of class (Hashimoto 2003, 27; Lützel 2008, 77), it only became more important in the years to come. The belief in this system is based on the *gakureki-shakai-ron*, a discourse regarding the “Japanese credential society” in the 1970s and 1980s linking personal effort to academic and economic success. Based on standardised examination (later called “exam hell”), in theory every student has the same chance to be accepted into a high school and university of one's own choice, which in turn directly correlates to the company one would work at after graduation



(Kariya 2010, 89). Besides the system's utter failure during the recession, indicated by the difficulty to find a (stable) job (Ambaras 2006, 197), its structure was flawed from the very beginning. While students were socially diverse at first, a complex and elaborate structure of expensive cram schools formed within a few years, thereby putting class back in school (Slater 2010, 144).

With consideration to this discourse, William W. Kelly calls attention to the common mistranslation of *chūryū* as “middle class”. Its broader scope as “mainstream” gets lost in translation. It is not a term to analyse social stratification, but to bury it by transcending class (Kelly 2002, 234-236). The reason why *chūryū* was widely accepted was a conservative turn in politics during the 1970s. Analysing the shift, economist Komiya Ryūtarō holds a fear of the future following the oil crisis accountable for this turning point, in spite of scandals in conservative ranks. According to his article originally published in 1979, the oil crisis had a relatively minor impact on Japan compared to the global economy. Though economic recovery was relatively fast, the crisis initially caused shock, which discredited any call for socialist economic theories, but also emphasised the need to pull together as a nation (Komiya 1989, 202-203). This is often understood as a major factor for the prominence of *nihonjinron*, the discourse regarding Japanese homogeneity. Similarly, Kotani Satoshi attributes this turn to the lack of liberal tradition in Japanese culture which forced the political left to fall back on Marxism and its radical form that were already disintegrating for some years at that time (Kotani 2004, 37). Hence, without much opposition, the discourse gained momentum despite the increasing inequality of income distribution since the early 1970s.

In this context, the *danchi* overshadowing everyone without any regards to profession or social standing says a lot (DO I, 28; DO II, 27). There are some figures representing social struggle, but they are as trapped as everyone else by the complex. It does not matter if one is a policeman, a salaryman, or a worker. Etsuko aside, anyone who enters the complex is fair game. This is especially true for those who try to embrace the hegemonic (gender) identities, but fail, as in the case of a man applying for college three years in a row, who is the talk of the town (DO I, 10). At one point, this would-be-student controlled by Chojiro first slits his own throat and then attacks Etsuko, presented on a page structured by two horizontal panels. The one on top (about one third of the page) shows only his face in the middle of the panel surrounded by his arms reaching for Etsuko, while the bottom one shows a staircase surrounded by multiple levels of corridors which head in the same direction as his arms, thereby aligning them with his



body as if he were just an extension of the building (DO I, 77). He is perpetrator and victim at the same time.

Even after Chojiro is revealed to be the villain of this piece, the *danchi* continues to be prominently featured as an antagonising entity, seemingly playing with its residents (DO I, 34), trapping them (DO I, 28) and finally killing them. In the final battle Chojiro and Etsuko fight and fly all over the complex which allows Ōtomo to play with the angles we see the *danchi* from, while destroying and using it as a weapon. At first, it is only tilted a little bit one way or another (DO II, 47), then suddenly upside-down (DO II, 48-49), and finally floors switch places with walls (DO II, 50). The top horizontal panel of one page shows parts inside the complex in a point-of-view-shot, while the bottom one is a reverse shot which shows the same courtyard, but now upside-down, making the complex appear to be everywhere. Therefore, the *danchi* is a world of its own one cannot escape from.

The first time the *danchi* is introduced, we see a salaryman jumping from the building. This harks back to a media discourse that began about a decade earlier, when the *danchi* became a popular site to commit suicide at (Tanaka 2011, 280). It was therefore not just a symbol of the success of *chūryū ishiki* (mainstream consciousness), but also of its demise due to the pressure it put on people. So, while criticising the Japanese system (represented by the *danchi*), *Dōmu* perpetuates the idea of “classless society” by making everyone its victim regardless of class. At the end, Etsuko can defeat Chojiro, but the *danchi* is still standing. Everyday life keeps going on as if nothing has happened.

### **AKIRA – BŌSŌZOKU'S OWN PLAYGROUND**

Based on Ōtomo's manga by the same name serialised from 1982 to 1990, the animated feature *Akira* is about a teenage bike gang led by Kaneda in Neo Tokyo in 2019. When one member, Tetsuo, gets injured driving into a boy with psychic powers, he is abducted by government troops and starts developing psychic powers of his own. Once he hears about a greater entity called Akira, Tetsuo begins searching for him to find answers and more power, while government troops, resistance fighters, and Kaneda try to stop him.

After the initial explosion in 1988 described above, the movie cuts immediately to an aerial shot of Tokyo Bay (AK 0:00). But instead of the typical deep blue, the bay is utterly obstructed by newly built urban landscape. As architectural historian Don Choi pointed out, this image is eerily similar to Tange Kenzō's 1960-plan to expand the city into its bay (Choi 2008,



741). This links the movie directly to the 1960s, its discourses on *chūryū ishiki* and on *doken kokka* (“construction state”). These issues became particularly relevant during the years of the economic bubble in the late 1980s, because the booming real estate speculation made it nearly impossible to buy land in Tokyo (Lützeler 2008, 93). At this time the city became too expensive for (upper) middle class, thereby leaving upper and lower class to inhabit Tokyo, polarising its social composition even further (Lützeler 2008, 56). But in and of itself, this futuristic vision of Tokyo Bay is just an expansion of the idea presented by the very first image of Tokyo in *Akira*: a never-ending metropolis, now radicalised in another dimension. In the vein of the “gluey architecture” discussed above, megastructures illuminated by neon lights shape the skyline. Each time the perspective of the city changes due to detailed multilayered cel animation, buildings reveal only more buildings. Skyscrapers literally exist on top of each other (AK 0:03; 0:42). Every camera tilt upwards is cut off before the top of any skyscraper can be glimpsed (AK 0:06; 1:55). And even during the day, the sky looks like a grey mass obscuring any difference between itself and the city (AK 0:30).

Commenting on these “soaring skyscrapers” of Neo Tokyo, Lamarre calls attention to the class struggle symbolised by the “immovable vertical hierarchies” both in a social and a structural sense of the word (Lamarre 2008, 137). In some respects, his assessment is correct. From the start, we are introduced to class struggle on television and in the streets harking back to classical 1960s iconography of protest, by incorporating the chanting of socialist slogans, single-coloured helmets, and swaying flags (AK 0:01; 0:07; 1:18-20). In this and similar instances, such as failing class discussion by the government, the vertical nature of buildings and rooms is emphasised by panning over the background plates from top to bottom and vice versa (AK 0:07; 0:37; 0:42). But those are the most deluding forms of power existing in the movie. The government is paralysed due to infighting, and reminiscent of the loss of importance of the radical left mentioned above, the demonstrations have no impact on the story whatsoever.

One reason for this is the lack of a clear city centre to construct a hierarchy from. Except for one building during a very short period of time – the institute holding psychic children captured (AK 0:45, 0:50) –, there is no complex being staged as city centre. While the incorporation of Tange's plan can (and should) be understood as a well-crafted nod to the 1960s, his core concept also focused on urban decentralisation by means of restructuring Tokyo along a line of sub-centres to ensure “spontaneous mobility of contemporary society” (Choi 2008, 741). There are two aspects in this design worth pointing out regarding *Akira*. Firstly, poor and rich live side by side. The first few background plates depict damaged buildings, dark



alleys, and destroyed cars in the foreground, while showing us glimpses of blue and green lit parts of the city in the background (AK 0:01-02). Interestingly, those city lights are chaotic and come from every direction. This negates an explicit urban structure along class lines. There cannot be any clear hierarchical architectural structure representing a social one, because both real Tokyo and fictional Neo Tokyo are socially polarised within district borders (Lützel 2008, 193).

Secondly, movement decentralises cityscape. Starting in the late 1970s, juvenile delinquency became more problematic year by year, at least in the public eye. Although “juveniles have comprised at least 40 percent, and sometimes more than 50 percent, of those arrested for penal code offenses[,] [...] [t]he majority of these cases have involved shoplifting or other types of petty larceny“ (Ambaras 2006, 195). The result is the beginning of what would later be called “youthphobia“ – a term coined by Kotani regarding the overwhelmingly hysteric public reaction to youth subcultures considered to be hedonistic, egoistic, and non-compliant (Kotani 2008, 32-33). The years before, but especially following the burst bubble have seen a vast variety of youth subcultures becoming scapegoats for everything going wrong in Japan. The reason to focus on one group is its visibility at a time (Leheny 2006, 82) – and in the 1980s, there was no one louder and flashier than *bōsōzoku* (speed tribe) (Sato 1991, 204).

*Bōsōzoku* groups are motorised gangs of teenagers and young adults trying to disrupt traffic, similar to their fictional contra-parts. *Akira's* protagonists are clearly part of this phenomenon or at least inspired by it as many theorists have argued by referring to their gender behaviour, attire (Standish 1998, 60; 67), and the film's overall setting (Lamarre 2008, 135). However, for this analysis, it is more important to know if there is a connection to class. Opposing Satō Ikuya's sentiment that *bōsōzoku* has no affiliation to class issues (Sato 1991, 137-138), Standish describes the subculture as an obviously class driven phenomenon. On the one hand, the bikers return to the “blue-collar” background they came from, once they re-enter the workforce. On the other hand, *bōsōzoku's* attitude towards work ethics is antithetic to the dominant meritocratic discourse, thereby causing media moral panic (Standish 1999, 58). In the movie, besides lacking any familial background (in and of itself a sign for social issues in Japanese society), the protagonists are mostly coded as working class by the school they are attending. This industrial school lacks any kind of authority, nobody seems to care if students learn anything, and it is only ruled by brutal force, seen in the use of violence as a legitimate form of punishment (AK 0:22-24). Therefore, it partially fits the description of bottom ranked high schools given by David Slater. They function as “an important link in the channeling of young





people from mostly working-class backgrounds into working-class jobs, and in teaching the skills, aspirations and strategies that allow working-class youth to get by in the city“ (Slater 2010, 139). This signifies an “intellectually confusing and often emotionally draining“ transition from in-group class heterogeneity to class homogeneity (Slater 2010, 145), thereby emphasising the existence and importance of class in a student's life.

So, *Akira's* protagonists are victims of class structure, but instead of chanting socialist slogans, they are riding their bikes. Susan Napier refers to their motorcycles as “agent[s] of change, a symbol of subversive flexibility against a monolithic and indifferent state.” (Napier 2005, 41) The “immovable vertical hierarchies“ Lamarre talks about are reconfigured in “the sensual experience of movement“ on bike and screen (Standish 1999, 65). The first driving scene emphasises this constant energetic movement on a visual and acoustic level (AK 0:03-12). The virtual camera cannot keep up while the gang dashes away, highlighted by blurring lines of the background plates. Even though the bikes are long gone, traces of their red taillights linger on screen, as if marking the cityscape. The perspectives of the buildings are constantly changing, thereby creating their own order of the urban landscape in a form of “(o)*matsuri* (festival) or *kaanibal* (carnival)“, terms chosen by bikers “to describe the atmosphere of *boso* driving“ (Sato 1991, 19). Though agreeing with Napier's great analysis of *Akira* describing the monstrous form of the marginalised Tetsuo “as a reflection of Japan's own deep-seated ambivalence at this time“ (Napier 2005, 40), most of the film's urban imagery speaks a different language, because it is seen (or experienced) as if riding a motorcycle. As socially marginalised others, they reclaim the city in *bōsō* fashion.

At the end, even the second destruction of the city is linked thematically and literally to *bōsō* driving. Entering the white space of the explosion, we are met by flying buildings, other parts of the city, and constantly moving white lines which focus our attention on the middle of the screen and remind us of the movement on the bike. Finally, the movie cuts to a dream sequence of Kaneda and Tetsuo riding their bikes in a similar fashion as before (AK 1:47-48). After the mayhem, parts of the city are still standing, maybe a little bit damaged, demolished, and rearranged while the surviving protagonists ride their bikes right into its remains (AK 1:55). As in the beginning, the destruction does neither mean the end of the city nor the discovery of the *furusato* – a popular discourse which describes a longing for a long lost home sometimes linked to ruins (Ivy 1995, 103) –, but instead means Tokyo's re-formation, thereby fulfilling Ashihara's idea of “amoebic adaptability“ (Ashihara 1989, 43). As one of many examples of Japanese “anti-Utopian“ texts, Napier considers “the absence of any real 'home' [...] a paramount feature“ of



*Akira* (Napier 1996, 183). Kaneda and his gang are neither searching for a “lost” nor a “real” home. Instead they use the city as their “own playground”, as *bōsō* driving is intended to do (Sato 1991, 21).

## **METROPOLIS – CLASS STRUGGLE REVISITED**

Based on the 1949 manga of the same name by Tezuka Osamu (itself an adaptation of Fritz Lang's movie), director Rintaro and script writer Ōtomo were influenced by many different sources and combined them in their 2001 adaptation of *Metropolis*, thus creating an interesting mixture of styles regarding text, tone (Napier 2005, xv), and architecture (Bird 2008, 140). While visiting Metropolis, Kenichi finds himself in a socially polarised and vertically structured city. The inhabitants of the top floors have too much, the ones of the lower levels too little, the serving robots nothing at all. Meanwhile, the tycoon Red Duke oversees everything from his gigantic tower in city centre called Ziggurat. While resistance fighters are preparing for a revolution, Red Duke commissions the most complex robot ever made, an exact replica of his late daughter. But before he can collect her, she gets lost during an accident at the lab, leaving her at the side of Kenichi to learn about her existence and the city itself. At the end, the (human) revolutionaries will fail, whereas a robot called Tima will be the reason for the self-destruction of the Ziggurat by means of her self-sacrifice.

The heavily referencing nature of the movie allows the filmmakers to link the text directly to the interwar period, thereby returning to class struggle thought in a more traditional (Marxist) manner. Within the first few minutes the viewer sees not just a nationalistic address seemingly shot on grainy black-and-white film and with a speech pattern reminding one of World War II propaganda (Bird 2008, 138), but also hears jazz music and talks about social issues and robot abuse, until finally, fascist troops emerge to fight everyone who oversteps their literal boundaries, when a robot who features red printing on his head and heels saying “Zone 1” is destroyed (MET 0:02-07). Later on, we will see masses of orderly marching workers (coloured red by light) in formations resembling Lang's direction (MET 0:42) and a variety of robots, all displaying numbers on their bodies to illustrate where they belong to. Metropolis is a place where everyone has their place.

In sharp contrast to the original manga by Tezuka which focussed on a horizontally structured city with confusing order to describe postwar Japan (Bird 2008, 134), the cinematic Metropolis is vertically structured and subdivided in different levels and zones in a similar way to



Lang's movie. Everywhere one looks there are numbers and figures painted on walls and floors to describe the part one is in. To emphasise this structure, the film is vertically organised both on a narrative and an aesthetic level. Most of the time, the characters are falling down shafts, riding elevators, and climbing up ladders, but when they look up they always see the Ziggurat right in city centre. Even though Red Duke's tower was positioned outside of Metropolis in the manga, it was moved to be the focal point of city and film (Bird 2008, 139). From the very first moment, the virtual camera moves constantly from and towards the Ziggurat (MET 0:02; 0:11; 0:24) and frames it both in the centre of the screen (MET 0:36, 0:57) and in extreme low and high angle shots (MET 0:49; 1:31), which illuminate its overshadowing nature and those “immovable vertical hierarchies“ Lamarre pointed out with regards to *Akira*.

At first glance, this structure refers to the idea of recentralising Tokyo, that became a major issue at that time, as one can see in the Tokyo-Plan 2000 (Tōkyō kōsō 2000) (Lützel 2008, 143). Furthermore, it is a significant symbol for class regaining importance in the first *Lost Decade*. Though mentalities do not change that fast and there is still a dominant tendency to rather criticise groups marginalised by economic structures than to understand them, judging from books on bestseller lists, popular interest in class has been quickly resurfacing since the early 1990s, thereby following developments in academic fields (Hashimoto 2003, 36). Because (working class) belief in the meritocratic system was failing (Hashimoto 2003, 200), after the first *Lost Decade*, the projected self-image of an egalitarian society could not be sustained anymore and was exchanged for “[t]he label *kukusa shakai* (disparate society or socially divided society)” which is widely accepted now (Sugimoto 2009, 2). Commenting on this trend, Miyadai Shinji refers to a parallel shift in popular culture by adapting a concept by Uno Tsunehiro called “Battle Royale Type”. In these texts, protagonists find themselves in some form of ruthless world ruled by an iron fist that easily can be understood as the Japanese *Iron Triangle* of industry, state, and bureaucracy (Kingston 2004, 3). The only way to survive is to adapt a dog-eat-dog mentality and to destroy one's opponents (i. e. one's peers). According to Miyadai, this type of text could be misunderstood as neoconservative fantasies if it were not for “one difference: the keyword here is *justice*.” For him, this change of pace in popular culture is first and foremost linked to the “homeostasis of the self”, but one can easily attribute this shift to greater social issues and change in the mentality regarding class (Miyadai 2011, 246-248).

There is an underlying social rage present in *Metropolis*. Workers protest, quote Marxist ideas of revolution, and even use recurring, iconographic imagery of Che Guevara (MET 0:47-49). This leads up to a revolution that fails miserably at the halfway point of the movie (MET



0:53-58). In the context of the story, the defeat is caused by compromise and treason, but metatextually one can trace it back to the design of the Ziggurat. Comparing the different versions, Lawrence Bird calls attention to the similarities between the Ziggurat and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building constructed by Tange Kenzō in regards to design, structure, and function as a centre of power. As a result, the building serves as a placeholder for the right wing politics of the governor at that time, the infamous Ishihara Shintarō (Bird 2008, 143). His successful campaign focused on ruling with a firm hand, by positioning himself against indecisiveness in politics under slogans such as “The Tōkyō that can say 'no'”, which is reminiscent of his bestselling book “*The Japan That Can Say 'No'* (*'No to ieru Nihon'*)” (Hein and Pelletier 2006, 172). Keeping this promise, he became a prominent figure of reactionary politics often criticised for sexist, racist, and revisionist remarks. In the same vein, the division of Metropolis' society is not just based on class hierarchies, but on “speciesist” aspects as well: Just like the upper class, workers mistreat robots on several occasions and even start their revolution by killing one. Comments on the dangerous nature of work done by robots (MET 0:04; 0:38) remind us of the 3-Ks-set suggested by Kenneth Henshall to describe the poor working and living conditions of most immigrants coming from Southeast Asia: “*kitsui* (tough), *kitanai* (dirty), and *kiken* (dangerous)” (Henshall 1999, 84). At the end, it is the destruction of the Ziggurat caused by a robot (and not the human revolutionaries) that breaks down the borders of the levels and social hierarchies, symbolised by an abundance of different signs contradicting one another. Now marginalised others (Kenichi and his robotic friends formerly belonging to different zones) can come together to walk side by side into the opened up city (MET 1:36-39). This is the only form of justice there can be, thereby discrediting any class discussion that ignores other marginalising factors.

## CONCLUSION

At the very beginning of this paper, the question of the quintessential city portrayed by Ōtomo Katsuhiro was posed. It should be acknowledged that this was the wrong question to ask or should at least have been phrased differently. There are essentials of his cities, such as the endless cityspace, its fascinating heterogeneity, and the reduction of Japan into Tokyo; and there are the changing parts which allow a deep look at the shifting mentality regarding class. In the early 1980s (*Dōmu*), flying around the *danchi* is a way to illustrate its encapsulating nature and signifies the discourse regarding class homogeneity. During the years of the bubble



economy (*Akira*), the ecstatic *bōsō* driving of the youth is thematically and aesthetically interconnected with the final destruction of Neo Tokyo, which is an act of reclaiming what belongs to a socially marginalised group by reforming the city. At the turn of the century (*Metropolis*), there is the need to find an object of social rage and to destroy it, thereby pulling down class structures. Though each text criticises Japan's social system, their differences indicate changes in class discourse. If one overcomes the stage of just emphasising the repeating nature of Ōtomo's recurring motif of exploding, endless cities, one will find a chronology of how social class was thought of in the last three decades hidden in plain sight, in the way the cityscape is depicted and destroyed.

Mag. Sebastian Klausner BA is an independent scholar of film studies, contemporary history and (visual) cultural studies. Areas of interest and publications include Jewish masculinities in the 19th and 20th century, the motive of crisis in different discourses regarding masculinities, and the intersection of trauma and gender. His upcoming project focuses on the cultural significance of Japanese recession in the context of destruction and apocalyptic imagery in Japanese popular culture of the 1990s. Email: [Sebastian.klausner@univie.ac.at](mailto:Sebastian.klausner@univie.ac.at)



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