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Grrr: Feral grrr! Princess Mononoke speaks with the voice of Claire Danes.

# Apocalypse already

A second look at *Akira's* anime prophecy, a first look at the American *Princess Mononoke*.

By Alvin Lu

As any conspiratorially obsessed *otaku* will tell you, anime, if watched carefully, with pause-and-frame-advance under the thumb, harbors secrets, big secrets, about the state of things and the matrix and such. Such as: according to the litany of destruction that is the gospel according to *Akira*, the world already ended, on July 16, 1988!

And yet, it says here on this Miramax press release that *Princess Mononoke*, animator Hayao Miyazaki's legendary masterpiece, is due to be released in Bay Area theaters on Oct. 29, 1999!

1988 ... 1999 ... I ... These past 11 years seemed nothing but a resounding anticlimax ... Once upon a time, anime seemed poised to roil through

the world and flatten it into cartoon clarity (to believe this it helped if you were 19 at the time). Which is what happened. Thus, Pokémon. But a decade after the sporadic American release of *Akira*, postapocalyptic landscapes no longer seem what they used to be. They're just outside your window now, and so anime, with *Mononoke*, has chosen to divulge the age's deepest secrets through not

another conflagrant vision of the future, but one of the distant past.

## 1988

Recently I took another look at *Akira* — my first since its initial release, despite the paradigm shift it pulled on me — and found little had changed. The first half is an intoxicating incitement to cartoon insurrection, the second half induces migraine headaches. What struck me this time around was how much *Akira's* apocalypse is a recitation of '60s apocalyptic talk — and how much closer 1988 (couched here as 2019, 31 years after the end of the world) was to 1968 than 1998. Riots and police in the streets, underground radical terrorist organizations, millennial Buddhist cults, biker gangs, lysergic visions of transcendence, ESP as nuclear allegory, paranoiac rumblings of a military coup d'état, cultural revolutionary rhetoric ("distortion of truths under

pretext of science, desolation of people's hearts in the name of culture"), pickup lines like "I'd like to discuss revolution with you" — *Akira* brings it all together, and what was all this but workings-through of Katsuhiro Otomo's '60s youth?

Like another document of the revolution of '88, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (at that time, hip-hop was just American anime), *Akira* derives its iconography from romanticized radical terrorism. And, like PE's assault on music itself, *Akira* formally condenses narrative into mythic, rhythmic bits of anarchy — shocks of recognition welling up from a collective memory of an era that was already being concreted over — building up into narratives too complex to explain. In the case of *Akira*, the collage attack of politically loaded images works until it all turns into literal goo. But that didn't stop it from being one of the most striking films of its time, especially in terms of what it was showing: "The future isn't only heading in one direction."

## 1999

These thoughts came to me as I watched the dubbed Miramax version of *Princess Mononoke*. A brief rundown: the original Japanese version has attained legendary status as the late masterpiece of Miyazaki (*My Neighbor Totoro*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*); in 1997, *Mononoke* shocked the world by becoming Japan's highest-grossing film ever, this with a plotline that seems, to me, to be muddled at best, and with philosophy and imagery that would hardly be considered childlike or even adolescent (but then anime isn't really only for kids, is it); and ever since Disney's acquisition of the rights a long time ago, we have all been impatiently awaiting its stateside release, which is

finally happening.

No doubt *Mononoke* looks sumptuous — and sustains a good deal of attention just on the intricacy of its Hokusai-like delineations alone — but it wouldn't be exaggerating to say my reaction was curiously similar to when I first saw *Akira*: bewildered disappointment that seemed almost beside the point, considering one was confronted with images of mythic power. As for my reservations, the dubbing, which could have been a lot worse, is only part of the problem. Like *Akira*, and like a lot of anime and science fiction in general, *Mononoke* is far more interested in evoking a world than building a plot. Plus, weirdly again like *Akira*, the ending gets bogged down in too much goo. As such, the film is still unformed in my mind as of this writing. Deeply layered, it might be much more interesting below the surface, a surface where it often seems that either nothing or too much is happening.

Politically, *Mononoke* stems from the same leftist sources as *Akira*, with greater concentration on feminist and ecological themes. The focus in both of these epic animations is on the social rather than the individual. *Mononoke's* fundamental break is from *Akira's* urban fabric, woven from broken threads of recent history, taking place in a "junkyard of desire-driven idiots." In *Akira*, the contemporary had already taken on the character of mythology. In *Mononoke*, we are in a mythological 15th-century Japan, of forests and protocities that already face utter destruction. It's a place where we could go back, if only we could, to make the better decision. Future *Mononomaniacs* may decipher the mysteries of Miyazaki's dark world. From here, right now, 1999, it seems all pasts and futures have converged, and older, more vicious mythologies hold sway. ❖