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Article

Has *Akira* Always Been a Cyberpunk Comic?

Martin de la Iglesia

Institute of European Art History, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg 69117, Germany;
martin.delaiglesia@gmail.com

Abstract: Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, interest in the cyberpunk genre peaked in the Western world, perhaps most evidently when *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* became the highest-grossing film of 1991. It has been argued that the translation of Katsuhiro Ōtomo's manga *Akira* into several European languages at just that time (into English beginning in 1988, into French, Italian, and Spanish beginning in 1990, and into German beginning in 1991) was no coincidence. In hindsight, cyberpunk tropes are easily identified in *Akira* to the extent that it is nowadays widely regarded as a classic cyberpunk comic. But has this always been the case? When *Akira* was first published in America and Europe, did readers see it as part of a wave of cyberpunk fiction? Did they draw the connections to previous works of the cyberpunk genre across different media that today seem obvious? In this paper, magazine reviews of *Akira* in English and German from the time when it first came out in these languages will be analysed in order to gauge the past readers' genre awareness. The attribution of the cyberpunk label to *Akira* competed with others such as the post-apocalyptic, or science fiction in general. Alternatively, *Akira* was sometimes regarded as an exceptional, novel work that transcended genre boundaries. In contrast, reviewers of the *Akira* anime adaptation, which was released at roughly the same time as the manga in the West (1989 in Germany and the United States), more readily drew comparisons to other cyberpunk films such as *Blade Runner*.

Keywords: audience; comics; genre; Germany; manga; reception history; science fiction; translation; United States

1. Introduction

Katsuhiro Ōtomo's *Akira* was first published in the Japanese manga periodical, *Young Magazine*, from 1982 to 1990. Spanning almost 2200 pages, *Akira* was collected in 6 volumes in Japan between 1984 and 1993. The first edition in the Western world was the English translation by Epic, an imprint of American publisher Marvel, in 38 issues from 1988 to 1995 (De la Iglesia 2016). French, Italian, and Spanish translations followed (all of which begun in 1990), and between 1991 and 1996, *Akira* was released in 19 German volumes by the publisher Carlsen. The following text focuses on the American and German first editions as being representative of the entire Western world.

In the wake of these foreign *Akira* editions, a considerable number of similarly themed manga were translated into European languages, such as Masamune Shirow's three titles, *Appleseed*, *Dominion*, and *Ghost in the Shell*, Masaomi Kanzaki's *Xenon*, and Yukito Kishiro's *Battle Angel Alita*. According to Roger Sabin (2006), the success of *Akira* created a "fashionable template" which Western publishers tried to follow by selecting manga titles from the same genre for translation, which "had the benefit of co-opting manga into the tradition of SF comics in the USA and Europe". The attribution of a genre to a comic (or any piece of fiction) is a critically relevant act because genres "specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact"—they "ensure their appropriate reception" and exclude "undesirable responses" (Jameson 1981, pp. 106–7). "Genre guides interpretation"; it "structure[s] our reading, guiding the course it will take, our expectations of what it will encounter" (Frow 2006, pp. 101–3).

Therefore, the audience response, and ultimately the success of a comic among critics and other readers, is connected to the identification of its genre. However, what genre precisely does *Akira* belong to? From today's perspective, *Akira* is regarded as cyberpunk—a genre that had its heyday just at the same time when Ōtomo's manga was first published in the Western world. However, was it actually identified as cyberpunk back then? And, did the popularity of the cyberpunk genre really play a role in the success of this manga? To answer these questions, we need to first ask whether people in the late 1980s and early 1990s were familiar with the concept of cyberpunk at all. We also need to verify that *Akira* is in fact a cyberpunk comic. Furthermore, in order to do so, we need to define what cyberpunk actually is. These questions in reverse order result in the outline of this article: Section 2 is a brief definition of cyberpunk, followed by a reappraisal of *Akira* as cyberpunk in Section 3. Section 4 provides the chronological context of cyberpunk in general, and Section 5, the centrepiece of this text, is an analysis of magazine reviews with which the genre awareness of the readers of *Akira* is gauged.

2. The Concept of Cyberpunk

There is no universally agreed-upon definition of cyberpunk. Some authors even go as far as to deny cyberpunk any usefulness as a concept, claiming that the term "served [. . .] only to provide a facile adjective for the working vocabulary of lazy journalists and unimaginative blurb-writers" (Womack 2000) and wondering whether "we should simply stop talking about 'cyberpunk SF', that witty coinage of [Gardner] Dozois's? Perhaps it might be more useful to say that there is the writer William Gibson, and then there are a couple of expert PR men [...] who know full well the commercial value of an instantly recognizable label, and are sticking one onto disparate products?" (Suvin [1989] 1991). Others insist on either cybernetic body modifications or cyberspace (or both) as necessary elements of cyberpunk fiction, however such narrow definitions would exclude many stories that are typically regarded as cyberpunk.
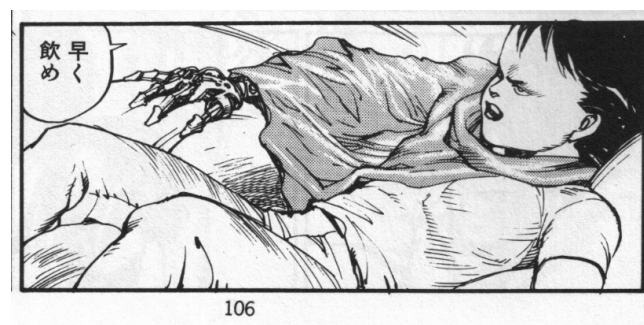
Instead, for the purposes of this article, the concept of cyberpunk is better described in the words of Istvan Csicsery-Ronay (Csicsery-Ronay [1988] 1991): cyberpunk is about "alienated subcultures that adopt the high-tech tools of the establishment they are [...] alienated from". When Csicsery-Ronay wrote this, he meant it as criticism of the entire concept of cyberpunk and felt that the cyberpunk writers did not succeed in convincingly conveying these subcultures' "political-aesthetic motives". However, Csicsery-Ronay's quotation can nevertheless serve as a succinct definition of cyberpunk, albeit only in word and not in spirit. In a similar vein, Bruce Sterling, one of the protagonists of the cyberpunk movement in science fiction literature, described cyberpunk as an "unholy alliance of the technical world and the world of organized dissent" in his preface to the *Mirrorshades* anthology which became a sort of cyberpunk manifesto (Sterling [1986] 1991). In another text (Sterling [1986] 2003), Sterling condensed this formula to the classic phrase, "lowlife and high tech" (often rephrased by others as "high tech and low life").

In other words, the cyberpunk definition used here relies on two necessary characteristics: a piece of cyberpunk fiction needs to feature high technology, and that technology needs to be employed by anti-establishment, counter-cultural characters from the fringes of society. It should be noted, however, that a formal or thematic definition of any genre is only valid with regard to a specific period in time (in this case, the late 1980s and early 1990s). Genre theory has stressed that genres are not static but evolve or mutate over time as their characteristics are negotiated and renegotiated by authors, critics, and audiences (Altman 1984; Frow 2006, p. 139; Rieder 2017, pp. 5, 66). In fact, more recent definitions of cyberpunk put more emphasis on "information networks", "virtual reality" (Nicholls [1993] 1999), "the information explosion" (Clute 2003), "computer technology, artificial intelligence" (Prucher 2007), "global information exchanges", "massive interlinked data networks, virtual realities", "flows of information", and "virtual cyberspaces" (Higgins and Duncan 2013). This shift from high technology in general to computer technology and information networks in particular might have been influenced by the increasing impact of the Internet on society from the 1990s onwards.
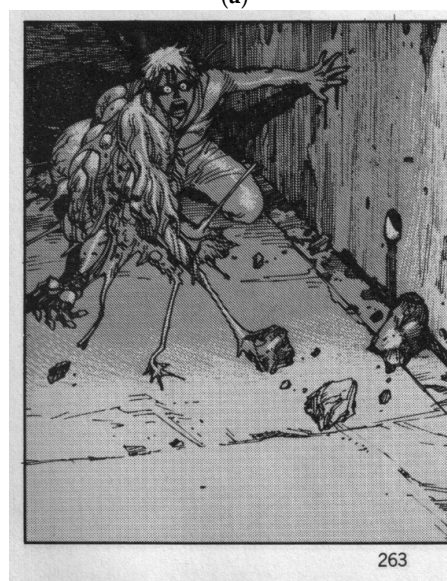
3. *Akira* as Cyberpunk

Is *Akira*, according to the definition that was derived from Csicsery-Ronay and Sterling (high technology employed by anti-establishment characters), a cyberpunk comic? On closer inspection, only five cyberpunk elements can be identified in *Akira* that play any role whatsoever, which are listed here in order of their significance.

- Tetsuo's arm (Figure 1): the metallic arm of Tetsuo, one of the protagonists of the manga, is the closest thing in *Akira* to a cybernetic limb. It is visible for the first time in vol. 4 on p. 106 (all volume and page numbers refer to the Japanese 6-volume collected edition from 1984–1993). In the previous volume, we see how his natural arm is shot off by a laser blast, but we do not get to see how the mechanical arm got attached to his body (the animated film adaptation, however, shows how metal parts levitate towards his body and are assembled into the arm through supernatural powers). Therefore, even though Tetsuo's arm looks very much like a cyberpunk motif, it is probably not a piece of high tech, at least not one that was developed by the "establishment" (i.e., the government, military, or industry), and thus, it does not strictly fit the definition of cyberpunk given above. This is a crucial point, as the appropriation of pre-existing "establishment" technology, rather than the autonomous creation of new technology, is what justifies the "punk" part of the word "cyberpunk". Later, we see a mutation spreading over Tetsuo's whole body starting from his arm (from vol. 5, p. 263), and later still, his body fuses with machines, such as a jet fighter plane and an aircraft carrier (vol. 5, p. 352). Again, these motifs might seem typical of cyberpunk stories, however strictly speaking, they do not meet the criteria of our definition.
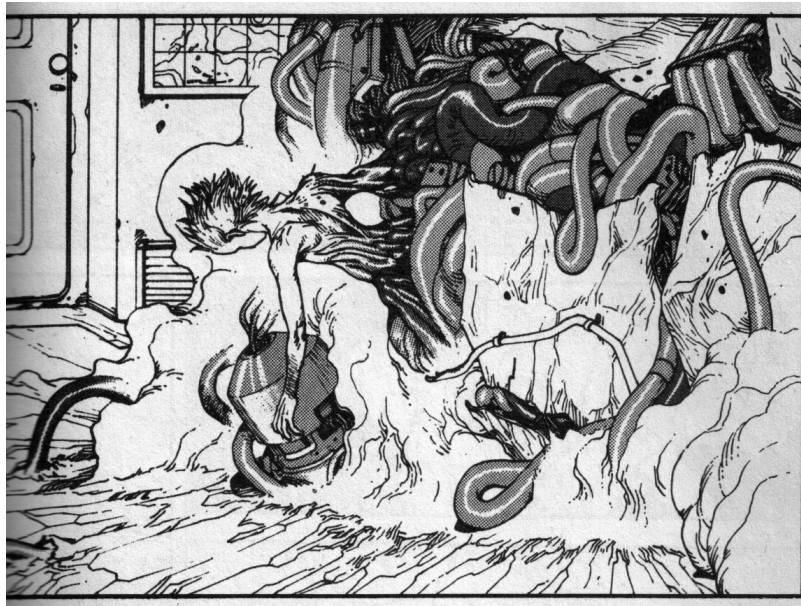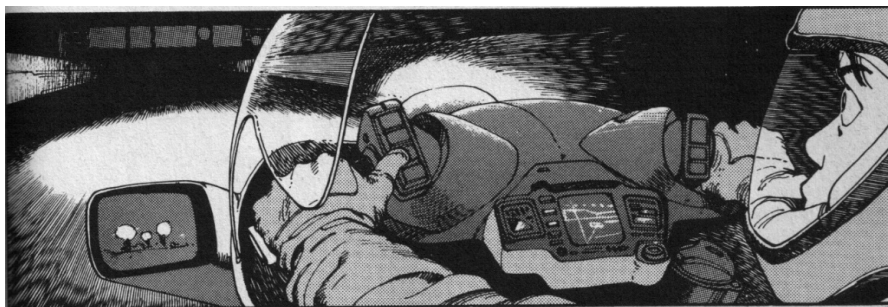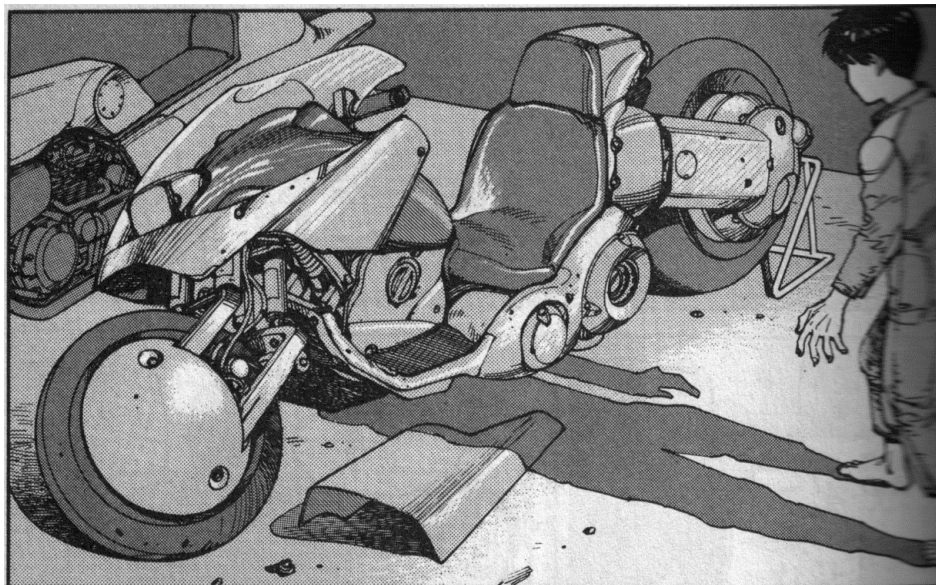

(a)

(b)

Figure 1. *Cont.*

(c)

Figure 1. (**a**) panel from Katsuhiro Ōtomo, *Akira* (Kōdansha), vol. 4 (1987), p. 106; (**b**) vol. 5 (1990), p. 263; (**c**) vol. 5 (1990), p. 352.

- Motorcycles (Figure 2): not all of the motorcycles that are depicted in *Akira* are high tech machinery, however some are definitely pieces of futuristic technology. The first one of these is protagonist Kaneda's motorbike, which is even equipped with a display screen (vol. 1, pp. 10–22). Kaneda is the head of a gang of teenage motorcyclists, an anti-establishment, lowlife group of characters if there ever was one, which makes his motorcycle a strong cyberpunk motif. Two other instances of motorcycles in *Akira* are noteworthy: in vol. 5 on p. 55, Kaneda is given a new motorcycle by his ally, Joker. It is another futuristic-looking model, and this time Kaneda is not going to use it for fun, but to confront Tetsuo who has seized the political and military power in the city. Even more anti-establishment is the use of the same motorbike at the end of the series (vol. 6, pp. 419ff.) by Kaneda and his companion Kei against the United Nations troops.
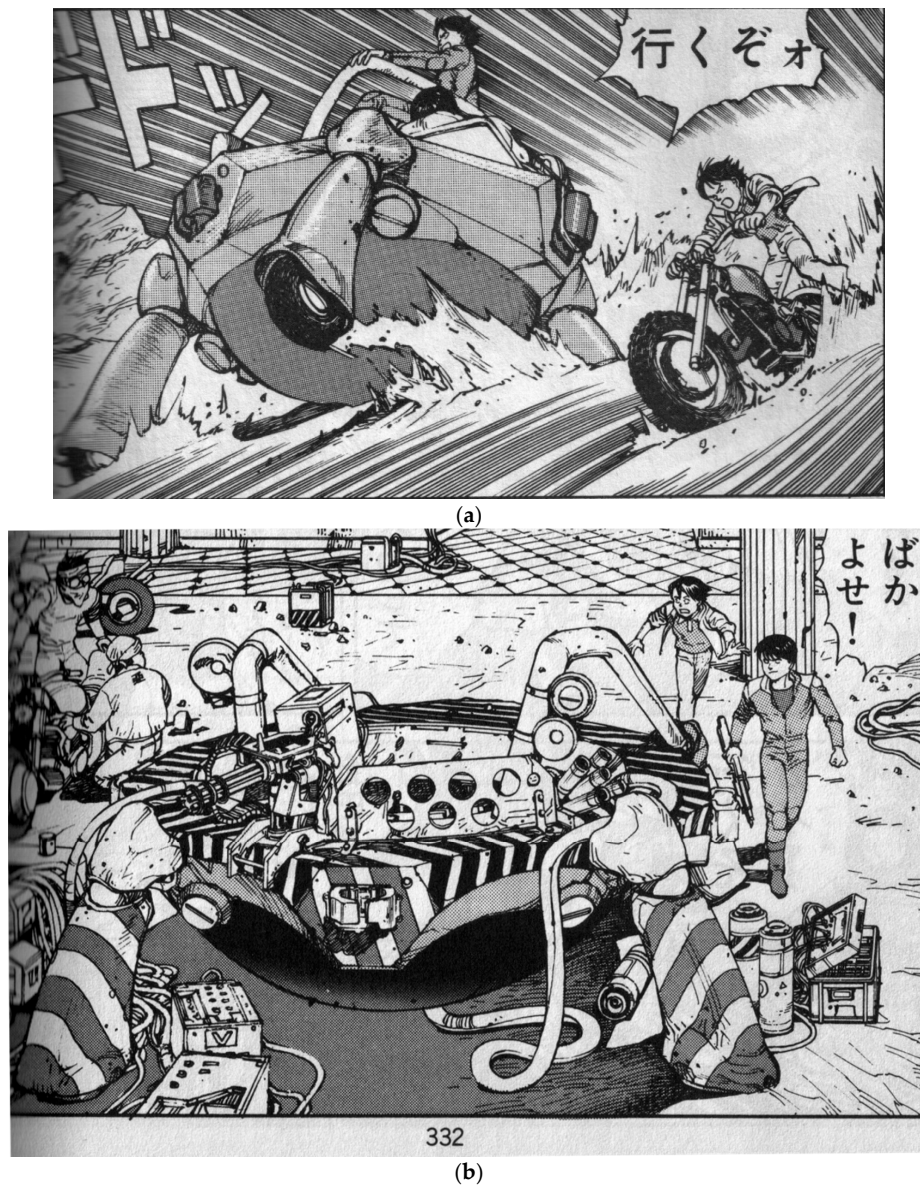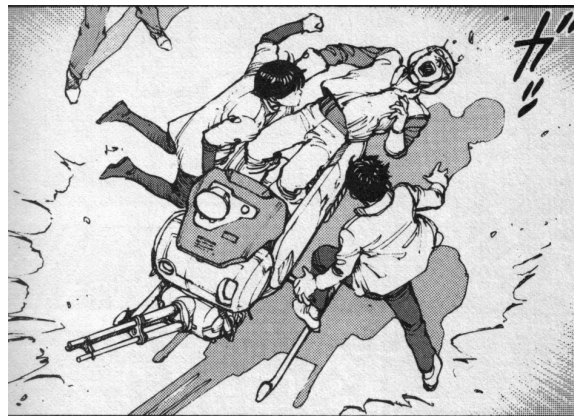

(a)

Figure 2. *Cont.*

(**b**)

(**c**)

Figure 2. (**a**) panel from Katsuhiro Ōtomo, *Akira* (Kōdansha), vol. 1 (1984), p. 16; (**b**) vol. 5 (1990), p. 55; (**c**) vol. 6 (1993), p. 420.

- Caretaker robots (Figure 3): the so-called caretaker robots, or Security Balls, could even be considered Artificial Intelligences, however only in the beginning of the manga when they are still controlled by the military. When Kaneda and his friends get their hands on one of these robots, they convert it into a manually operated transport vehicle (vol. 5, p. 152). Later still, Joker reworks a caretaker robot into a combat vehicle which is equipped with a machine gun (vol. 5, p. 332).
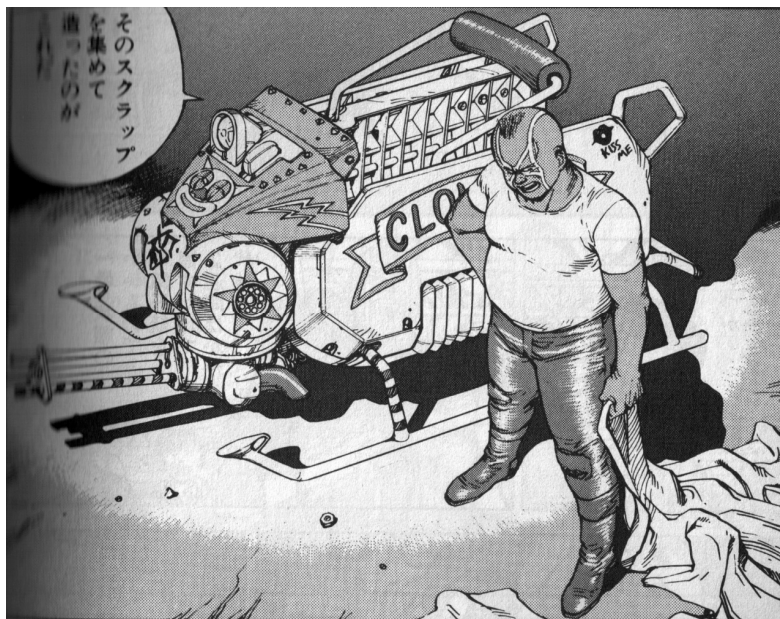
(a)

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Figure 3. (**a**) panel from Katsuhiro Ōtomo, *Akira* (Kōdansha), vol. 5 (1990), p. 152; (**b**) vol. 5 (1990), p. 332.
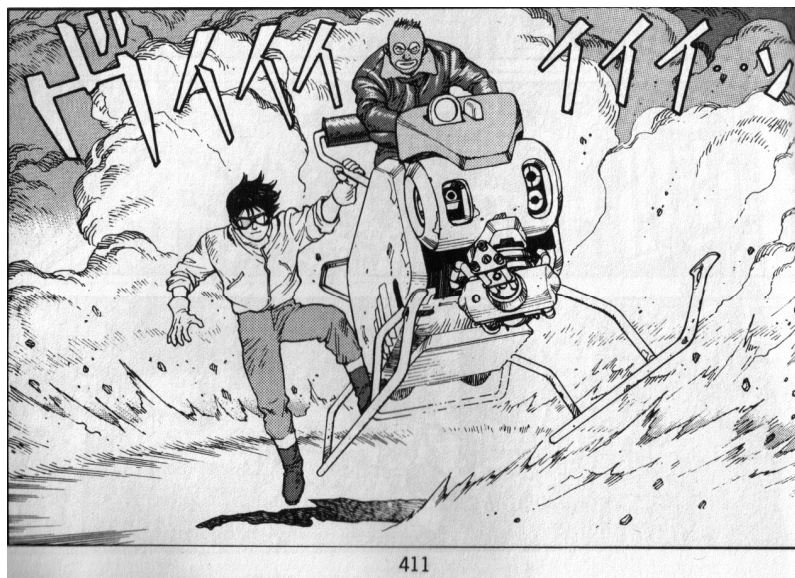
- Flying platforms (Figure 4): the flying platforms are another example of advanced military technology. The first one of these aircraft is captured by protagonists Kei and Kaneda already in vol. 2 on p. 190. Later, it is again Joker who assembles his own flying platform from parts of the wrecks of others and gives it an idiosyncratic paint job (vol. 5, p. 314). At the end of the manga, a flying platform is once more used by Kaneda, Joker, and their allies against the United Nations forces (vol. 6, p. 411).
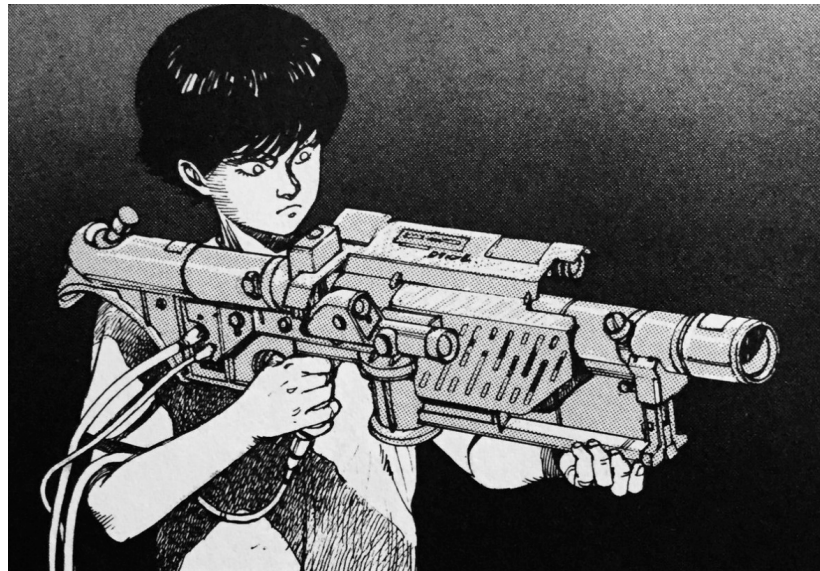
(a)

(b)

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Figure 4. (**a**) panel from Katsuhiro Ōtomo, *Akira* (Kōdansha), vol. 2 (1985), p. 190; (**b**) vol. 5 (1990), p. 314; (**c**) vol. 6 (1993), p. 411.

- Laser rifles (Figure 5): laser beam firearms are experimental technology that are developed by the military. A laser rifle is stolen by Kei and Kaneda in vol. 2 on p. 72 and is used against the military. In vol. 5 on p. 312, Joker reveals that he too has obtained one such weapon which is subsequently used in the fight against Tetsuo.

(a)

(b)

Figure 5. (**a**) panel from Katsuhiro Ōtomo, *Akira* (Kōdansha), vol. 2 (1985), p. 72; (**b**) vol. 5 (1990), p. 312.

Apart from these five recurring objects, there are hardly any further cyberpunk elements in *Akira.* One might say that Tetsuo appropriates the cryogenic chamber, a piece of governmental high tech, when he carries Kaori's dead body there (vol. 6, p. 201), however the functionality of the chamber—if it is still functional at all at this point—cannot possibly bring Kaori back to life; more likely, this place is meant to be a sort of burial site for her due to its symbolic meaning. Neither can the Colonel's improvised, unauthorised use of the satellite laser weapon called "SOL" against Tetsuo in the second half of the story (e.g., vol. 6, p. 20) be considered anti-establishment, and is thus not cyberpunk, because he still believes to act in the interest of the official government. Some might consider the synthetic, mind-altering drugs that are featured recurrently in *Akira* to be a cyberpunk trope, however, while such drugs are a theme in many cyberpunk stories, it is safe to say that they are neither a sufficient nor a necessary cyberpunk characteristic.

By and large, at least some cyberpunk elements are undeniably found in *Akira.* However, elements from other genres abound as well—supernatural powers from the "science fantasy" genre, the setting of a city in ruins (in the second half of the comic) from post-apocalyptic fiction—so that *Akira* resists to be readily and wholeheartedly pigeonholed into the cyberpunk genre.

4. Cyberpunk in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s

Cyberpunk originated in science fiction literature, with the central author here being William Gibson. His first published short story, "Fragments of a Hologram Rose" from 1977, already contained some cyberpunk themes. With his subsequent short stories such as "Johnny Mnemonic" (1981) and "Burning Chrome" (1982), Gibson built a near-future world in which he then set his seminal novel *Neuromancer* (1984) which can be regarded as the nucleus of the cyberpunk genre. Shortly before *Neuromancer*, the term "cyberpunk" was coined by Bruce Bethke's eponymous short story, which was first published in 1983. It was not until 1984, however, that this term was applied to a group of science fiction writers around William Gibson (Dozois 1984). Another important event in the formation of the cyberpunk genre was the publication of *Mirroshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* in 1986, the preface of which, written by editor Bruce Sterling, gave the cyberpunk movement its manifesto.

Cyberpunk was also influential in film. The most important cyberpunk film, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, was already released in 1982, which makes it cyberpunk *avant la lettre*. Of course, both *Blade Runner* and Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall* from 1990 are based on much older stories by Philip K. Dick, however the film versions proved to have a stronger impact. Also noteworthy in the context of cyberpunk are the films of David Cronenberg, primarily *Videodrome* (1983), as is another Paul Verhoeven film, *RoboCop* (1987), as well as the James Cameron films, *The Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, the latter of which was commercially the most successful film of 1991 worldwide.

However, there were also cyberpunk comics in the Western world before or at the same time as *Akira*. The following titles appear to be the most important of these: *The Long Tomorrow* by Dan O'Bannon and Mœbius (US release 1977), *Judge Dredd* by various authors (from 1977), *Rōnin* by Frank Miller (1983–1984), *Shatter* by Peter Gillis and Michael Saenz (1985–1988), *Appleseed*—another manga that was released in the US in the same year as *Akira*—by Masamune Shirow (1988), and *Hard Boiled* by Frank Miller and Geof Darrow (1990–1992).

Considering all of these developments in the fields of literature, film, and comics, it seems likely that comic readers were familiar with the concept (though not necessarily the explicit label) of cyberpunk at the time when *Akira* was first released in America (1988) and Europe (1990/1991). Furthermore, many cyberpunk stories were set in a fictional future Japan or other East Asian countries (Tatsumi 2006, pp. 44–47, 111) which might have made it easier for Western readers to draw a connection between *Akira* and cyberpunk.

5. Genre Designations in Magazine Reviews of *Akira*

Did readers recognise *Akira* as cyberpunk? To find an approximate answer to this question, reviews and other texts about *Akira* from magazines and newspapers were searched for any terms or phrases that place *Akira* in a genre or put it in any kind of context. Beginning with the anglophone world, the first article on *Akira* is an announcement from the *Comics Buyer's Guide* from January 1988, which calls *Akira* a "color series about post-holocaust mutants". In March 1988, the same magazine ran an advertisement by Westwind Distributors which announced *Akira* as "a science-fiction adventure tale". *The Comics Journal* identified *Akira* as "an imported science fiction Japanese manga" in April 1988. *Marvel Age*, in August 1988, called it "a science-fiction thriller". In May 1989, *Advance Comics* referred to *Akira* simply as "the Japanese SF series", and in January 1990, the same magazine noted a "shift in tone from hardware SF to a post-apocalypse saga". The only reference to the cyberpunk genre with regard to *Akira* is found in the December 1988 issue of *Amazing Heroes*: "Elements of the story reminded me of the Sprawl stories and novels of William Gibson, the high priest of cyber-punk [sic]. Otomo deals with

several of Gibson's themes: the fate of directionless youth in a technological world, the possibility of heroism and the value of friendship in what might seem to be unsalvageable individuals."

In Germany, the situation was largely the same: *Akira* was identified as science fiction in general or as some other genre, but not cyberpunk. In 1991, Epic editor Archie Goodwin was quoted in the German comic magazine *ICOM-INFO* (all translations mine) saying, "The story belongs to science fiction." Also, in 1991, *Rraah!*, another important German comic magazine, saw in *Akira* a "trailblazer for the influential violent tendencies of modern Japanese comics". In 1992, *Rraah!* spoke to a new *Akira* volume, "once more there's high speed action", and in 1994, the same magazine referred to *Akira* as "the futuristic thriller". In a review of the anime adaptation from 1991, the German film magazine *Cinema* also mentioned the manga source, calling it a "science fiction epic". Another German comic magazine, *Comixene*, identified *Akira* as an "adventure series" in 1995, and in the same issue, it claimed, "Otomo is called the Ridley Scott of the Land of the Rising Sun". This last statement is the only one that can be said to make some connection between *Akira* and cyberpunk, however as the article in which it appears is about Katsuhiro Ōtomo and Hayao Miyazaki as both comic authors and anime directors, it is not clear whether this statement refers to Ōtomo as the creator of *Akira* the manga or *Akira* the anime.

By way of comparison, journalistic texts about the animated film adaptation of *Akira*, which was theatrically released in the West between 1989 and 1991, shall also be considered here. In contrast to the reviews of the manga discussed above, the film reviews quoted below represent only a small sample which was selected rather arbitrarily. Once more beginning with English-language reviews, the earliest one in this sample was published in the *Washington Post* in 1989, saying of the fictional Neo Tokyo in which *Akira* is set that "The rebuilt city [is] looking like an animated *Blade Runner* prototype", and that "There are several *Scanners*-style showdowns, *Altered States*-like hallucinations and none of the comic release usually found in cartoons." In 1990, the *Seattle Times* also mentioned "'Neo-Tokyo,' an endless metropolis which gets much of its visual inspiration from *Blade Runner* and *Brazil* [...]". The British *Monthly Film Bulletin* wrote in 1991 that "The film version sits comfortably between *Blade Runner* and *2001*" and is "closer to Cronenberg's 'new flesh' than to the orthodox versions of genetic engineering". On the occasion of the laserdisc release of *Akira*, *Time* magazine said in 1993 that "[Neo] Tokyo is imagined down to the last noodle shop and intersection, a place of deep night and lurid neon that looks like *Blade Runner* on spoiled mushrooms." None of these texts mentioned cyberpunk explicitly, however it is striking that all four of them compare the film to the (proto-) cyberpunk classic *Blade Runner*.

This tendency is also apparent in German texts about *Akira* the anime. The comic magazine *ICOM-INFO*, this time referring to the film, said in 1991, "One could rank *Akira* among classics such as *Blade Runner* or *RoboCop*" (again, all translations mine). In the aforementioned 1991 issue of *Cinema*, the film is described like this: "Katsuhiro Otomo's futuristic animated film *Akira*, like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop*, or David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, gives off the foul smell of doom in a hyper-technocratic world." The same text later explicitly assigns the cyberpunk label: "Even without machine men, *Akira*, like *Blade Runner*, belongs to post-apocalyptic cyberpunk". Another German film magazine, *Filmdienst*, noted in 1991 "the morbid mood of *Blade Runner*", and said that *Akira* "ranges from *Blade Runner* over *E.T.* back to *Rebel Without a Cause*" and contains "action orgies in the vein of *RoboCop*". Most extensively, cyberpunk is written about in the *Akira* film review of the Berlin city magazine, *Tip*, also in 1991: "*Akira*'s psycho demons are no avant-garde specter, only the cyberpunk is a new phenomenon. Cyberpunk is the philosophy of *Akira*, and is explained by *Akira*'s press department as follows: 'Cyberpunk is a philosophy that can shape the world in its own image and create a self-mutilating freedom, that is, an image that angrily growls back.' Even if no one has growled in the first place."

Why did journalists readily identify *Akira* the anime as cyberpunk, but not *Akira* the manga? There are two main reasons for this. On the one hand, consider once more the list of cyberpunk elements in *Akira* the manga that are given above in Section 3. These cyberpunk scenes appear in different issues

or volumes that were published at different times during the long publication history of *Akira*, both in the US and Germany. The following list gives the number of cyberpunk scenes from issues that were published in the corresponding year for the first American edition that was published by Epic:

- 1988: 2 cyberpunk scenes
- 1989: 1
- 1990: 3
- 1991: 5
- 1992: 0
- 1993: 0
- 1994: 0
- 1995: 2.

Here is the corresponding list for cyberpunk scenes in volumes of the first German edition by publisher Carlsen:

- 1991: 3 cyberpunk scenes
- 1992: 2
- 1993: 6
- 1994: 0
- 1995: 0
- 1996: 2.

In both editions, the majority of cyberpunk elements appear only several years after the launch of the series. In other words, *Akira* was not a cyberpunk comic in the beginning (when most of the reviews and announcements that were quoted above were written)—it only became a cyberpunk comic during the course of its serialisation. Therefore, if *Akira* can be identified as cyberpunk at all, it is only in hindsight, with the complete series published. In the anime adaptation, the whole story was released at once and all of its cyberpunk elements (except for the caretaker robots which appear only in the manga version) were present in the condensed form of a two-hour film, meaning that it was easier to recognise *Akira* as cyberpunk in its animated form.

On the other hand, it appears that the idea of a genre to which a work belongs, and also its intertextual context, is strictly confined to its own medium, at least for the writers of the journalistic periodicals discussed above. That means that it is easier to place a film in a filmic genre than to place a comic in a filmic genre and vice versa. It is also easier to make comparisons between two films or two comics than between a film and a comic. Therefore, even if we ascertained that comic readers of the late 1980s and early 1990s could have been familiar with the cyberpunk genre in general, we still need to ask: was the cyberpunk genre already established in the medium of comics specifically? The six early cyberpunk comics that were mentioned above represent only a small part of this comic genre. A bigger picture emerges when we turn to attempts of canonisation: in recent years, several websites have published best-of lists of cyberpunk comics (White 2016; Davidson 2017; Lovett 2017). While these lists are rather subjective, some titles are included in two or even all three of them, apart from the aforementioned *The Long Tomorrow*, *Judge Dredd*, *Rōnin*, and *Hard Boiled:* namely *Ghost in the Shell* by Masamune Shirow (US release 1995), *Battle Angel Alita* by Yukito Kishiro (1995–1998), *2020 Visions* by Jamie Delano and various artists (1997–1998), *Transmetropolitan* by Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson (1997–2002), *Heavy Liquid* (1999–2000) and *100%* (2002–2003) by Paul Pope, *The Surrogates* by Robert Venditti and Brett Weldele (2005–2006), and *Tokyo Ghost* by Rick Remender and Sean Murphy (2015–2016)—interestingly, the comic adaptation of Gibson's *Neuromancer* by Tom De Haven and Bruce Alan Jensen (1989) has not had much of an impact and is mentioned only by Matt White (2016).

Although a certain degree of presentist bias is to be expected from these kinds of websites, it is striking that according to them, most canonical cyberpunk comics were published in the mid-1990s and later, and thus after *Akira*. It seems as if for comics, unlike science fiction literature, the defining

decade of the cyberpunk genre was not the 1980s, but a later one. Therefore, the readers of *Akira* around 1990 must have had difficulties recognising it as cyberpunk, because cyberpunk comics were not an established genre yet.

In conclusion, the hypothesis has to be refuted that the success of *Akira* is explained by its affiliation with the cyberpunk genre, as this affiliation was not largely recognised. More likely, Ōtomo's manga was seen as something new and exceptional. Its success might have been due to a combination of perceived freshness and sheer quality. In an attempt to replicate this success, Western publishers looked for similar, near-future science fiction manga to license and translate, some of which belong to the cyberpunk genre.

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