From Neo-Tokyo to new path: Postmodern cyberpunk, surveillance, and the fragmented subject in *Akira* and *a scanner darkly*

ID Nathan M. Moore[1]*
[1]University of California, Los Angeles, USA; nathanmmoore@ucla.edu (N.M.M.).

Abstract: This paper explores the cyberpunk movie texts *Akira* (Otomo, 1988) and *A Scanner Darkly* (Linklater (2006); based on Dick (1991) novel) as cultural critiques that use postmodern aesthetics to examine identity disintegration under the weight of surveillance, technology, and political control. Drawing on scholarly sources—and to inversely examine their social capital—this paper analyzes the films' formal techniques, cultural contexts, and narrative structures mirroring each other, and arriving in 20-year increments. To argue that both works contribute to a new transnational discourse in fragmentation, subjectivity, and the dissolution of human agency in the face of a chronologically bound state and technological power apparatus would only be an understatement. As such, we must illicit contemporary cloud-based identity fragmentation, consciousness, and virtualized governance trends in 2025 as a means of producing, such as these films have done in their abbreviated 20-year gap, not just narratives of control, but new aesthetic interfaces of political critique. Notably, *Ne Zha 2*, a Chinese animated film released in 2025, has become the highest-grossing animated film of all time, surpassing *Inside Out 2*.

Keywords: *A scanner darkly, Akira, cinema, Animation, Cultural studies, Cyberpunk, Media archaeology, Posthumanism, technological capitalism, Visual epistemology.*

1. Introduction

The postmodern cyberpunk genre has long served as a vehicle for critiquing the entanglement of state control, technology, and identity. Otomo (1988) and Linklater (2006) *A Scanner Darkly*, though culturally and temporally distinct, share aesthetic and narrative strategies that foreground identity dissolution, surveillance, and the trauma of embodiment. Both films engage with late capitalist anxieties, depicting dystopian societies where characters are subjected to physical and psychological fragmentation. Drawing from film theory, postmodern critique, and cyberpunk studies, this paper situates *Akira* and *A Scanner Darkly* within a shared genealogy of visual media that interrogates the limits of human subjectivity.

This article explores the intersections of visual production, cybernetic consciousness, and political control in Otomo (1988) and Linklater (2006) tracing how both works visualize the digital-human interface long before the VR and cloud revolutions of the 21st century. Combining cultural studies, postmodern film theory, and race/gender analysis allows this paper to offer a media archaeological approach to animation and rotoscope film as philosophical surfaces. I argue that both *Akira* and *A Scanner Darkly* anticipate contemporary cloud-based identity fragmentation and virtualized governance by producing new aesthetic interfaces of political critique, something that exists today.

Why return to *Akira* and *A Scanner Darkly* now? The rapid emergence of generative algorithm cultures and virtual reality social spaces makes these films feel less like retro-futurist spectacles and more like prophetic design documents that were recently declassified. Both films produce a visual logic that foregrounds them in epistemological instability: in *Akira*, the blurred boundaries between flesh,

* Correspondence: nathanmmoore@ucla.edu

power, and technology erupt through Tetsuo's body; in *A Scanner Darkly*, Bob Arctor becomes a composite, clouded subject within a reality he can no longer fully parse. What links them is their insistence on drawing—literally and figuratively—the shifting ontology of the subject under technological capitalism.

In Ne Zha (2025) shattered records by grossing over $2.18 billion worldwide, establishing itself as the highest-grossing animated film in history and a turning point in global animation aesthetics. Building on the success of the 2019 original, the film employs cutting-edge animation techniques that blend 3D modeling with painterly 2.5D textures, creating a hyper-stylized visual landscape rooted in Chinese mythology yet legible to global audiences. Rather than mimicking Disney-Pixar realism, *Ne Zha 2* offers a distinct visual language that signals a post-Hollywood animation paradigm—what can be theorized as "mythic futurism," where national folklore of Chinese mythology, specifically the 16th-century novel *Investiture of the Gods (Fengshen Yanyi)* is rendered through digitally enhanced spectacle. The film's aesthetic choices function as a form of cultural assertion: animation becomes a site of sovereignty, not just entertainment. From a theoretical perspective, *Ne Zha 2* embodies what (Galloway, 2004) might call a "protocol aesthetic," in which software and style converge to regulate cultural legitimacy (2004). By producing an animation system that is both technically advanced and narratively rooted in Chinese epistemologies, *Ne Zha 2* challenges the West's monopoly on cinematic universality and asserts that animation can be a platform for national mythmaking in the age of digital globalization

2. Contexts of Production

This paper integrates insights from Bordwell and Kristin (2016) *Film Art*, Lacey (2009) *Image and Representation*, and Corrigan and White's *Critical Visions in Film Theory*, alongside cultural studies theorists such as (Williams, 1984). I built on my previous research into visual epistemologies and the culture of science to argue that the filmic body in both works is a contested site—where history, hallucination, and surveillance converge.

Akira, released in 1988, emerged from Japan's post-war recovery and rapid economic development. As Napier (2005) observes, the film reflects the trauma of Hiroshima and the anxiety surrounding urban hypermodernity. Bolton (2014) reads *Akira* as a "ground zero" text, thematizing destruction and rebirth. In contrast, *A Scanner Darkly* was adapted in a post-9/11 American context, where Melley (2000) concept of the "culture of paranoia" resonates deeply with the film's surveillance themes. Dick (1991) novel, already rooted in Cold War suspicion, finds new meaning in a society obsessed with national security and technological monitoring.

Otomo (1988) is often read as a post-apocalyptic cyberpunk tale about power and adolescent rebellion. But to limit it to those tropes is to overlook its media-theoretical sophistication. The film's animation techniques—hand-drawn cels with digitally synchronized lighting and hyper-kinetic detail—invoke not just the trauma of atomic collapse but the glitch of digital modernity. In Neo-Tokyo, the city becomes an immersive VR prototype, constantly surveilled and militarized, where speed, movement, and breakdown define both urban space and psychic experience.

In *Akira*, we can reframe the narrative of Tetsuo's transformation not simply as psychic overreach but as a failure of the analog body to contain emergent cloud consciousness. Tetsuo, more than a character, becomes an interface where his mutation visualizes what it means for organic material to become data, unstructured and recursive. This echoes in the production of the film itself: every frame is drawn by hand but conceived as a kinetic system of motion and feedback, resembling modern machine learning image generation in its desire to simulate momentum, not merely depict it.

3. Surveillance and the Fragmented Self

Both films foreground the fragmentation of identity under surveillance. In *Scanner*, Bob Arctor's use of the "scramble suit" renders him visually indiscernible, even to himself. As Sobchack (1992) argues, the phenomenological experience of the body in cinema can reveal how technology mediates identity. The

scramble suit's distortion mirrors Bob's psychological disintegration due to Substance D, a drug that splits his consciousness. Foucault (1977) concept of panopticism is relevant here: Arctor is both watcher and watched, enacting a state-imposed self-alienation.

In *Akira*, Tetsuo's psychic mutation can be read through a similar lens. Haraway (2016) helps frame Tetsuo as a posthuman subject—a being whose boundaries between organic and technological collapse. His identity becomes uncontainable, literally exploding at the film's climax. Jameson (1991) theories of postmodern hyperspace and cognitive mapping help decode the visual chaos of Neo-Tokyo as a manifestation of cultural and psychological dislocation.

Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly*, based on Dick (1991) novel, offers a rotoscoped hallucination of identity collapse. Unlike traditional animation or live action, the film overlays animated textures onto real footage, producing a fluid, uncanny disjunction that mirrors the protagonist's psychological fragmentation. Bob Arctor's scramble suit—a digital fabric that composites thousands of identities in real time—functions as both metaphor and method: surveillance as anonymization, visibility as erasure.

Through Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, we can interpret the scramble suit not only as a narrative device but as a speculative critique of cloud-based identity. The user becomes unlocatable, an amalgamation whose public-facing surface is nothing but flickering data. The film predates the modern cloud but visualizes its logic: storage without substance, memory without narrative. The body becomes merely one node in a surveillance infrastructure.

4. Aesthetics of Disintegration

Formally, both films use experimental techniques to visualize psychological breakdown. *Akira*'s fluid, hand-drawn animation sequences, described by Bolton (2014) as "semiotic implosions," visually destabilize the viewer's frame of reference. Similarly, Linklater's use of digital rotoscoping in *Scanner* evokes an uncanny, disembodied aesthetic. Williams (1984) essay on maternal melodrama (1998) helps underscore how emotion is conveyed even amidst abstraction: we empathize with Bob's disintegration because the visual incoherence mirrors his emotional dissolution.

Sound plays an equally critical role. *Akira*'s use of Balinese gamelan and percussive dissonance, as analyzed in "Balinese Musical Styles in Katsuhiro Otomo's Akira," intensifies its surreal urbanity. Meanwhile, *Scanner*'s subdued ambient score reinforces its affective tone of melancholia and dread. Both films, in different ways, embody what Marks (2000) describes as "haptic visuality"—a cinema that touches the viewer through disorientation.

We see that both films engage, albeit differently, with the racialization of vision and the technologization of the gaze. While *Akira* emerges from a Japanese context deeply shaped by Hiroshima and techno-national trauma, *A Scanner Darkly* stages its critique within American paranoia and post-9/11 digital policy. What binds them is their concern with bodies under observation. In *Akira*, the Children—once test subjects—embody what Maurice (2013) might call "shadow cinema": figures that exist in the margins of vision, monstrous and divine. These figures literalize state experimentation and forgotten futurity. Meanwhile, in *Scanner*, addiction is medicalized and pathologized under the auspices of technological 'help'; yet the surveillance apparatus becomes the real addict, consuming lives and identities without resolution.

5. Cultural Specificity and Political Contexts

Maurice (2013) work on race and technology in early cinema and Stewart (2005) analysis of Black urban modernity are useful for understanding how national histories inflect visual media. While neither film foregrounds race, both encode culturally specific anxieties. *Akira* reflects fears of imperialism and internal collapse in a post-Hiroshima Japan. Maurice's arguments about the shadow of race in technological fantasy apply to *Akira*'s obsession with control and mutation. In contrast, *Scanner* critiques the commodification of addiction and surveillance in a late-capitalist America. Corrigan, Patricia, and

Meta (2011) argue that the body becomes a site of political inscription in contemporary film, a view that aligns with Arctor's literal collapse into his government-assigned role.

6. Gender and the Marginalized Body

Although both films center on leading male protagonists, their treatment of gender and marginalization warrants attention. In *Akira*, female characters like Kei are often sidelined, yet they act as mediators of resistance. Williams (1984) and Kaplan (1987) debate over "Stella Dallas" can inform a reading of Kei as a figure of narrative containment—always watching but rarely central. Similarly, in *Scanner*, female characters like Donna are caretakers yet operate within the system they ostensibly resist.

Stam (1992) *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics* (1992) provides tools for decoding these gendered visual hierarchies, particularly regarding gaze and narrative agency. Gledhill (1987) work on melodrama can also frame these secondary figures as emotionally resonant archetypes whose marginality reflects broader systems of power.

Both films produce a visual logic that foregrounds epistemological instability: in *Akira*, the blurred boundaries between flesh, power, and technology erupt through Tetsuo's body; in *A Scanner Darkly*, Bob Arctor becomes a composite, clouded subject within a reality he can no longer fully parse. What links them is their insistence on drawing the shifting ontology of the subject under technological capitalism. This paper integrates insights alongside cultural studies theorists that I built upon in previous research into new visual epistemologies. For example, a culture of science scholar might agree that a filmic body in both works is a contested site requiring a new "aesthetic" surface with which to engage intellectually, somewhere history, hallucination, and surveillance converge.

Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly*, based on Dick (1991) novel, offers a rotoscoped hallucination of identity collapse and embodies this phenomenon. Unlike traditional animation or live action, the film overlays animated textures onto real footage, producing a fluid, uncanny disjunction that mirrors the protagonist's psychological fragmentation. Bob Arctor's scramble suit—a digital fabric that composites thousands of identities in real time—functions as both metaphor and method: surveillance as anonymization, visibility as erasure.

Through Haraway (2016) *Cyborg Manifesto*, we can interpret the scramble suit not only as a narrative device but as a speculative critique of cloud-based identity. The user becomes unlocatable, an amalgamation whose public-facing surface is nothing but flickering data. The film predates the modern cloud but visualizes its logic: storage without substance, memory without narrative. The body becomes merely one node in a surveillance infrastructure. The film's rotoscope technique itself echoes the dissonance between external reality and internal fragmentation. It aestheticizes paranoia, hallucination, and the impossibility of stable vision. Here, the interface is the body, and the body is already a surface of data. The visual language becomes an anticipatory design for VR environments where perception is unstable, and presence is algorithmic.

Akira and the Aesthetic of Catastrophe in Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* is often read as a post-apocalyptic cyberpunk performativity tale about power and adolescent rebellion. But to limit it to those tropes is to overlook its media-theoretical sophistication. The film's animation techniques—hand-drawn cels with digitally synchronized lighting and hyper-kinetic detail—invoke not just the trauma of atomic collapse but the glitch of digital modernity. In Neo-Tokyo, the city becomes an immersive VR prototype, constantly surveilled and militarized, where speed, movement, and breakdown define both urban space and psychic experience.

Drawing on more nuanced readings of *Akira*, we can reframe the narrative of Tetsuo's transformation not simply as psychic overreach but as a failure of the analog body to contain emergent cloud consciousness. Tetsuo, more than a character, becomes an interface—his mutation visualizes what it means for organic material to become data, unstructured and recursive. This echoes in the production of the film itself: every frame is drawn by hand but conceived as a kinetic system of motion and feedback,

resembling modern machine learning image generation in its desire to simulate momentum, not merely depict it.

We must also consider how *Akira* functions as an early experiment in networked aesthetics. Through the dense urban visuals, Katsuhiro Otomo renders a city as infrastructure—tied to state violence, resistance, and speculative memory. The Children, test subjects of state bio-political experimentation, represent the archive of invisible trauma. In a culture of endless reanimation, *Akira* mirrors the mechanics of cloud storage: retrieval and distortion of memory as a means of governance.

Thinking about gender and the spectralization of marginalized subjects, through the work of Alice Maurice, Jacqueline Stewart, and Donna Haraway, we can read these films as operating not only through visual aesthetics but through what might be called a body politic of emanation—the diffusion of identity across systems, screens, and surveillance infrastructure. In *Akira*, the Children—once test subjects—embody what Maurice might term "shadow cinema": figures whose existence exceeds legibility, whose bodies are literalized trauma and experimental residue. These children are political ghosts, emanations of the state's failed futurity. Their monstrousness is not deviation but exposure: they are the interface through which we see how power scripts the human. Tetsuo's transformation further dramatizes this: his body, overwhelmed by power, does not simply collapse. It leaks, expands, and emanates. It is the spectacle of a subject overwritten by systems, becoming flesh-as-infrastructure.

Meanwhile, in *A Scanner Darkly*, the scramble suit disassembles gendered and racial legibility altogether. Bob Arctor's body becomes a transient node in a visual system that suppresses identity in the name of security. But this, too, is a politics of erasure. Under the guise of anonymity, the marginalized body is not protected but dissolved. The film visualizes a system that renders bodies unlocatable—not in resistance, but in precarity.

Linklater's rotoscoping—a layering of animated artifice atop real bodies—recalls Sobchack's phenomenology of perception. It shows us not a person, but an echo: the emanation of gesture, voice, and surveillance. Gender, like identity itself, becomes flickering code and something always seen, yet never stable. The hallucinations throughout the film aren't merely psychological; they are a visual grammar of how systemic surveillance fragments and disciplines the visible body.

We might extend Stewart's insights on Black urban modernity to *Akira*'s Neo-Tokyo as a technocratic control zone that functions as both a site of innovation and racialized exclusion. Its infrastructure mirrors the logics of containment and mobility that characterize contemporary digital cities: who moves freely, who is watched, who is rendered monstrous. In both films, then, the marginalized body is not absent; it is hyper-visible and spectral, an emanation that haunts the very mechanisms designed to erase it.

Both films demonstrate proto-VR logics. *Akira*'s hallucinations, particularly Tetsuo's visions of flesh engulfed in machinery, can be read through Vivian Sobchack's phenomenology of the filmic body. The viewer does not watch but *experiences* the breakdown. In *Scanner*, the constant visual distortion draws the audience into the character's psychosis, embodying postmodern film's privileging of unstable subjectivity. What both works do, both uniquely and together, is represent the screen not as a transparent window but as a haunted interface. This anticipates VR's paradox: total immersion that disconnects. The rotoscoping in *Scanner* and the layered, frenetic animation in *Akira* are, in this sense, visionary: they simulate experience *without* promising presence.

The hallucinations and transformations in both films also function as diagrammatic structures—maps of how information travels through bodies and cities. In this way, both *Akira* and *A Scanner Darkly* might be thought of not just as representations of virtuality, but as *platforms* of virtuality—design environments that anticipated today's XR, metaverse, and VR development ideologies. Both films engage, albeit differently, with the racialization of vision and the technologization of the gaze. But what comes next? While *Akira* emerges from a Japanese context deeply shaped by Hiroshima and techno-national trauma, *A Scanner Darkly* stages its critique within American paranoia and post-9/11 digital policy. What binds them is their concern with bodies under observation.

Furthermore, we might draw connections to Black urban modernity, as Stewart (2005) has discussed, to imagine *Akira*'s Neo-Tokyo as an allegory of racialized containment zones. The city is fragmented not just by explosions, but by the logics of disposability and systemic control of a racialized geography of futurity that reflects anxieties about who gets to survive in a technological world.

My paper argues that *Akira* and *A Scanner Darkly* share a filmic logic that presages our digital cyberpunk enigma. Consider also their modes of production. *Akira* involved over 160,000 animation cels, becoming a prototype of large-scale computational visualization. *A Scanner Darkly*'s interpolated rotoscope layers recall neural nets—pixel by pixel re-assemblage. In both cases, human labor and machine logic intertwine, foreshadowing digital workflows in today's AI-driven animation and VFX industries.

This convergence of technique and theme opens space for critical intervention for foresight scholars, futurists, and trendsetters. Both films make visible what contemporary technological culture seeks to hide: the recursive nature of data, the political economy of vision, and the precarity of human subjectivity in systems that traffic in traces.

Neo-Tokyo crashes through my memory roadway as if glitching between dream and awake. I call this a subroutine with my hands in the cloud. What I do remember is this: the sound of Tetsuo's mutation bleeding into the void; machine whir, flesh tear, data scream. That was how my adolescence was, too. The pixelated body. The surveillance camera in the school hallway, watching me more than I watched myself. The way teachers looked at my hoodie as if it were a threat, a signal. I think about Bob Arctor sometimes. Not the character, but the condition. The way a body becomes transparent to itself. He doesn't know who he is because the world keeps feeding him new masks. I knew that feeling before I had words for it. Sometimes, I think academia is the scramble suit.

When I first opened Final Cut Pro to trace a line of hypothetical rotoscope across my own video essays, my cursor stuttered. I thought: this is how the machine sees me. Frame by frame. Bit by bit. Never the whole. I tried to drag my voice underneath the image and post-production, but the software clipped the waveform. Watching *A Scanner Darkly* now, I wonder: were we ever supposed to be visible? Or were we always fragments—nodes in someone else's database? I used to imagine that cinema was a portal, a way out. But these films remind me: sometimes the screen is the cell. And yet, here I am—annotating hallucinations. Reading Tetsuo's meltdown as theory. I scroll through my own words and see echoes. I copy-paste myself across files. What is authorship in the cloud, except version control? Maybe that's what these films offer—not resolution, but recursion. Not freedom, but visibility on new terms. To be seen not as complete, but as a glitch. As residue. As transmission. Some nights, I wake up thinking I've dissolved. But then I remember: the trace is still there as a rotoscope. My hands are in the cloud. Writing. Dragging. Surveilled, yes, but still composing.

7. Resistance and the Possibility of Futurity

The endings of both films offer ambivalent takes on resistance. *Akira* concludes with an act of self-annihilation that births a new universe, suggesting a metaphysical break from the known world. This echoes Deleuze and Guattari (1987) concept of deterritorialization as a collapse that allows for radical reformation. *Scanner* ends with Bob, now fully dissociated, unknowingly holding evidence that could expose the drug cartel. His fragmented body still contains revolutionary potential. Fisher (2014) theory of "hauntology" is useful here: both films imagine futures haunted by the ghosts of unrealized change. These narratives do not resolve into utopia but linger in the melancholic space between breakdown and breakthrough.

Both films demonstrate proto-VR logics. *Akira*'s hallucinations, particularly Tetsuo's visions of flesh engulfed in machinery, can be read through (Sobchack, 1992) phenomenology of the filmic body. The viewer does not watch but *experiences* the breakdown. In *Scanner*, the constant visual distortion draws the audience into the character's psychosis, embodying postmodern film's privileging of unstable subjectivity. What both works do—uniquely and together—is represent the screen not as a transparent window but as a haunted interface. This anticipates VR's paradox: total immersion that disconnects.

The rotoscoping in *Scanner* and the layered, frenetic animation in *Akira* are, in this sense, visionary: they simulate experience *without* promising presence. In *Akira*, Asians being "bad" is taken to an even greater effervescence, as Oishi (1999) as a type of queer motivation.

Moving toward a new Media Archaeology of the "Animated Subject" means that to bring this full circle, we must ask: what does it mean to inhabit a visual culture where every image is a trace, every character an archive? What if we already live in the world these films warned us about—not as prophecy but as aesthetic infrastructure? This paper intervenes in the fields of film studies, cultural theory, and science and technology studies to assert that both *Akira* and *A Scanner Darkly* not only reflect posthuman anxieties but also produce frameworks for critical media literacy. By reading them as speculative documents of virtual governance and cloud identity, we do not simply uncover meanings as they become tools, schemas, and diagrams for understanding the techno-political landscapes we now navigate.

These films matter not just because of what they show, but because of how they show us through technique, interface, and disruption. Their continued relevance lies in their invitation to read cinema as not just narrative but infrastructure: a cloud archive of visual epistemology, mapping our fragmenting selves in a surveilled and simulated world.

8. Conclusion

Akira and *A Scanner Darkly* offer incisive critiques of surveillance, control, and the dissolution of subjectivity through their fragmented narratives, experimental aesthetics, and cultural specificity. They exemplify the power of postmodern cyberpunk to challenge dominant narratives of technological progress, and they remain vital to understanding the psychic costs of living in increasingly mediated societies. By engaging with scholarly sources from film theory, cultural studies, and media philosophy, this paper has traced how these texts construct and deconstruct the fractured postmodern subject identity. And in doing so, illuminate the tensions at the heart of our digital futures.

Ultimately, *Akira* and *A Scanner Darkly* share a filmic logic that presages our digital dilemmas. They are not merely stories of dystopia but technologies in themselves—conduits for thinking about surveillance, embodiment, and posthuman becoming. As cinematic texts, they do not reflect the cloud; they *are* the cloud as fragmented, diffuse, aesthetic systems of power and perception. To bring this full circle, we must ask: what does it mean to inhabit a visual culture where every image is a trace, every character an archive? What if we already live in the world these films warned us about, not as prophecy but as aesthetic infrastructure? The global success of *Ne Zha 2* demonstrates that animated spectacle is no longer monopolized by Western studios; instead, digital mythmaking has become a transnational tool of soft power and cultural authorship. As China's most visually ambitious and commercially triumphant animated film to date in a surveilled society, *Ne Zha 2* signals the emergence of what might be called a "mythic protocol"—a media strategy that fuses national folklore with cutting-edge software aesthetics to assert cultural sovereignty on a global screen.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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