Dreaming of Electric Sheep:
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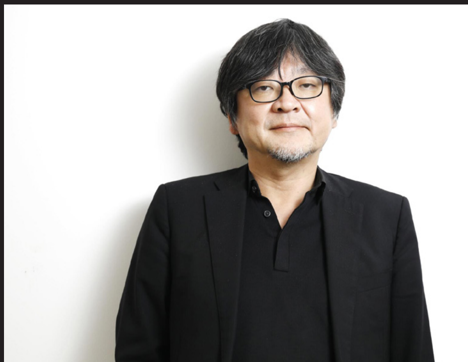
The Cyberpunk of MAMORU HOSADA

Virtual Identities and Digital Worlds *by Brian Ly*

While perhaps not the first name that springs to mind when it comes to cyberpunk anime, a genre and a medium that are deeply intertwined, Mamoru Hosoda has demonstrated a deep interest in exploring the concepts of virtual identity and digital spaces within his films. As an animator, he began his career at Toei Animation, with his first directorial credits on short films and even an amusement park ride for the *Digimon* franchise, and though he was working on established properties, it can't be denied that *Digimon Adventure: Our War Game!* has his authorial footprint all over it as his first exploration into digital communication via the Internet as a form of human connection, a key theme that he would further expand upon in spiritual reimaginings through *Summer Wars* and *Belle*, which act as a sort of loose trilogy of his films that particularly concern the boundaries between the real world and the constructed virtual spaces of the Internet and how communication can be in some regards just as, if not more, authentic in the way we portray our identities through avatars, embodying personas that more accurately reflect our true selves.

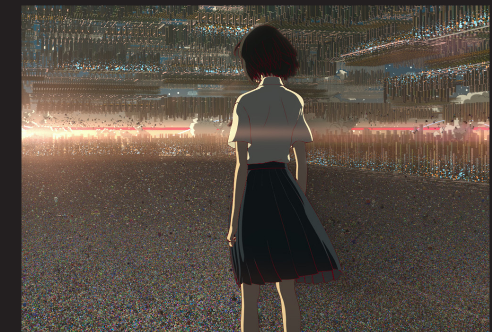


Though the origins of cyberpunk anime often concern how the advancement of technology directly impacts the physical space of the real world, Hosoda finds himself more concerned with this alternative reality that exists parallel to it in the Internet as a representative space that has become ubiquitous in the modern human experience, and in some regards, it's his deep involvement with the *Digimon* franchise that has allowed him to envision this future far before it became a reality. The franchise as a whole is centered around children who enter a digital world and fight alongside their digital companions, but *Our War Game!* really begins to blur the lines between the virtual world and the real world through the central conflict of an enemy Digimon that spreads like a virus and impacts real-world systems, illustrating the intertwined realities of these two spaces, whereas prior conflicts had been constrained to the digital world. This is alluded to even earlier in the prequel *Digimon Adventure* short that was his first directorial effort, where Digimon appear in the real world in an almost surrealist fashion. While the original incarnations of this franchise kept these spaces rather distinct, Hosoda was already thinking about the inherently interconnected nature of the real world and the Internet, not as distinct spaces, but rather as complementary entities that influence one another.

This was a challenging exercise within the confines of the existing lore of a franchise, and *Summer Wars* is typically considered a purer representation of the ideas initially explored in his first attempt. The central conflict is very much the same: a virus begins intervening with the real world with some rather catastrophic consequences, and while the overarching framework of the film surrounds family, it's a much deeper exploration into identity within the virtual world, as characters represent themselves as avatars rather than being literally transported into the world. Perhaps the most striking contrast between the real world and the virtual world is with the character Kazuma, a recluse to the rest of his family besides his martial arts training with his grandfather, yet in the virtual world of OZ, he is the acclaimed King Kazma, famous for never losing a battle. In the relatively safe space that is family, through this major conflict, the families begin to understand him a bit more, acknowledging their surface-level impressions differ from his true personality that he may not have been comfortable revealing as a child, yet when embodied in a strong avatar, he demonstrates a commanding presence. The virtual identity is thus not merely a form of wish fulfillment or an alternate reality but rather a reflection of the inner self within a safer, more democratized space compared to the burden of expectation in the real world, especially in the rather stuffy atmosphere of a storied family with a deep legacy, high standards, and strict requirements.

While *Summer Wars* is largely just a rehash of *Our War Game!*, it is in *Belle* that we really see Hosoda begin to evolve his ideas in perhaps his most ambitious film to date. Though often derided as a half-baked *Beauty and the Beast* adaptation, the film truly explores the dichotomous nature of the real world and the virtual world, where Suzu, a shy girl with body image problems grappling with the grief of the loss of her mother who has lost her ability to sing in the real world, is able to rediscover her voice behind the beautiful avatar of Belle in the virtual world of U, becoming a global sensation and a famous idol. Her identity becomes a bargaining chip threatened with exposure by the literal internet police for protecting the wanted criminal Dragon, a violent avatar that is actually a misunderstood, abused child whose rage and strong desire to defend his weaker brother from their father manifests itself in power and strength in the virtual world. While her secret identity had shielded her from any possible criticism in the real world, she knew she had to reveal her identity to the increasingly retreating Dragon, whose mental state was crumbling from both real-world abuse as well as the online witch hunt, in order to establish trust so that she could come to his aid, transcending the divide between the virtual and real selves, recognizing them as two parts of a whole, and acknowledging that the safety of a virtual avatar allowed her to become who she truly was all along, the biggest pop star in the world, without the inhibitions of the weight of everything going on in the real world. Virtual identities become a way to cope with trauma and abuse, but they allow for genuine human connection, healing, and empowerment through tough times as heightened versions of the self until they themselves become a part of you that was always there, but you weren't ready to accept it or show it until you had the confidence, affirmation, and realization that you are allowed to be the greatest version of yourself.

Though by no means the typical physical domains of the cyberpunk genre, the digital worlds of Hosoda very much embody the modern-day concerns over technological advancement in the most pervasive form that impacts our daily lives, the Internet and how it has become an extension of reality. It's a space in which people essentially embody alternative versions of themselves, existing in ways that they could not in the real world, admittedly in forms of weaponized toxicity almost as often, if not more so, than empowerment. Though Hosoda acknowledges villains in the form of bad actors, whether it's literal hackers wreaking real-world havoc or in the form of the mob mentality and general internet toxicity, he's ultimately more concerned with how virtual identities can enrich lives by allowing people to be the most authentic versions of themselves. Rather than focus on the more nihilistic worldview of human degradation in online spaces or the loss of data privacy to corporate and government interests, he instead sees how the digital world augments reality, providing community, healing, and self-actualization for those disenfranchised in the real world. The traditional view of technological advancement has deep ties to the overall military-industrial complex and how corporations and government are intertwined in their collective goal of oppressing the masses, but there's a certain beauty in how nobody truly owns the Internet, which makes it quite peculiar as a democratized form of technology and communication that allows for collective influence, both positive and negative, though with an optimistic worldview, power is ultimately ceded to the people. Hosoda trades the neon-lit cityscapes for the empty whiteness of the metaverse: a blank canvas that allows for infinite creativity as a space for exploring identity, healing, and developing community. Even as there are increasingly greater fears over the surveillance state, government corruption, and corporate overreach, Hosoda's cyberpunk is one of hope for humanity.



YOUR FUTURE IS METAL!

EXPLORING 30 YEARS OF JAPANESE CYBERPUNK

by Jesse Camacho (@ominouswoosh / @candycolorclown)

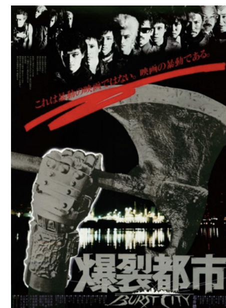
1980s Japan was a strange time for the archipelago nation and its cinematic output. During its “Bubble Economy” in the late 80s, Japan had become the second-largest economy in the world after a few decades of rapid reconstruction and technological advancements following World War II. A high-tech megalopolis marked the capital of the nation experiencing newfound prosperity, with soaring real estate and stock prices and high GDP growth. However when it came to the state of Japan’s cinema, this was a completely different situation. Major studios were in a major decline, with Nikkatsu amidst bankruptcy and Daiei shuttering its doors for good, while Toho and Toei barely managed to stay afloat. High production costs ran rampant, even the legendary Akira Kurosawa could not acquire funding for his projects, being considered a “risk” and having to resort to getting funds from American filmmakers like George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola. This period has come to be known as the “Lost Decade” of Japanese Cinema and it could not have been a bleaker period for the medium. However, where the major studios saw risks and failure, independent filmmakers saw opportunity. A new era of *jishu eiga* (“self-made”) cinema was kickstarted, and one movement emerged from these depths: Japanese Cyberpunk.

When you think of “cyberpunk,” what probably comes to mind is the rain-soaked, sprawling metropolis of LA in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, the menacing conglomerates and computer hackers found in the pages of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer,* or the green-tinted Mega City of *The Matrix.* However, the “cyberpunk” found in the world of Japanese cyberpunk films is a far-cry from what Western fans of the genre may be used to. Often focusing less on the “cyber” and more on the “punk,” this brief-lived movement in the underground of Japanese cinema has left its mark on what we think of when we picture the genre, even if it has not been fully given the appreciation it deserves. Japanese cyberpunk can be characterized as more raw and primal, emphasizing attitude over high-concept, with themes of sexuality, violence, and technology taking the forefront. These films revel in the intersections of these themes, often in ways that are an all-out assault on the senses.This is not to say that the sensibilities of these films would be completely foreign to Western audiences, often taking cues from films like David Lynch’s *Eraserhead* or the early films of David Cronenberg. Taking inspiration from these films during a time where the nation’s cinema was in a not-so-great state, a group of filmmakers decided to make their weird, outsider art, often with close to no budget, and ended up changing Japanese cinema, and in turn all cinema as a whole, forever.

The first of these filmmakers, and the one who can probably be mostly credited as the “creator” of the Japanese Cyberpunk movement, is Sōgo Ishii (now known as Gakuryū Ishii, but for the purposes of this writing I will be referring to him as the former). Getting his start in films with 8mm film projects in college, Ishii was also a punk musician. He was exposed to American punk music growing up in Hakata, eventually playing a part in growing in the region’s music scene. Realizing that he wasn’t fully cut out for music, he turned his eye towards film. Attending Nihon University, he would only attend campus when he needed to borrow film equipment. He directed his first short film in 1977, *Panic High School,* which revolves around a student whose mental breakdown leads him to shoot up his school and the ensuing police stand-off. This film was noticed by the Nikkatsu Corporation to direct a feature-length remake of short, however

Sōgo/ Gakuryū Ishii

Crazy Thunder Road (1980)



Burst City (1982)

he was considered too inexperienced to direct the film on his own and had director Yukihiro Sawada attached to the project as well. Having felt that the film was “robbed” from him, Ishii left mid-production and vowed to never work with a major distributor again. This experience led him to direct ***Crazy Thunder Road* (1980)** entirely on his own, which can be considered for all intents and purposes the first film in the Japanese cyberpunk movement. Ironically, this film would be distributed by Toei, however the film had already been made completely under Ishii’s direction. Feeling almost like *Mad Max* with punk rock and bikers as well as a Yukio Mishima stand-in, this is the film where Ishii’s true style emerges. Taking place in a near-dystopia world of rival biker gangs, neon-lit buildings, and punk rock music, this film would set the groundwork for Ishii’s next film.

Just two years later, ***Burst City* (1982)** was released, becoming the major touchstone for what Japanese Cyberpunk would be all about. Not too dissimilar from his last film, rival punk bands and bikers gather on abandoned highways and try to stop the yakuza and greedy businessmen from building a power plant. To describe the plots of Ishii’s early films feels almost foolish, as he is not concerned with “story,” instead working in a style that could be described as “stream of consciousness,” almost to the point of meandering, mixed with rapid editing and the use of undercranking that give scenes an energetic feel, as well as throwing in musical performances by bands like The Stalin and The Roosters. This film set in motion the punk rock and guerilla sensibilities that would define the entire Japanese cyberpunk movement. Even today Ishii has still not fully gotten his flowers for what he achieved with these two films and the rest of his work, likely in part due to the fact that he was so far ahead of the curve when it came to this radical new form of independent filmmaking.

Now, if Ishii is an unappreciated figure in the genesis of Japanese Cyberpunk, then Shigeru Izumiya has been nearly completely forgotten. An accomplished musician in his own right, having starred in Sōgo Ishii’s *Burst City*, Izumiya would also go on to direct and star in his film ***Death Powder* (1986).** If the plots in Ishii’s films can be “meandering,” then this film is borderline nonsensical. A group of researchers are tasked with securing a feminine cybernetic android named Guernica. She is capable of spitting out a poisonous powder that causes hallucinations and mutations once consumed, and of course one of our protagonists does and chaos ensues. This film barely exists, I watched it on a bootleg DVD but I’m sure it exists somewhere on the internet, it is just barely over an hour long, and the plot is almost as comprehensible as the Picasso painting the main subject is named after, but it is significant in that it is the first film to really dive into the themes of what I am going to refer to as the ”New Flesh,” first coined in David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome*, which can be loosely defined as the intense fusion between man and technology, and the resulting societal or sexual revolution that follows. Izumiya’s film might not be the most impressive accomplishment in terms of cinema as an art form, or even within the confines of this underground movement, but it does launch the New Flesh into the forefront of Japanese Cyberpunk.

Death Powder (1986)

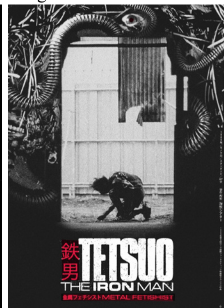
Shinya Tsukamoto (L) & Tomorowo Taguchi (R)

When discussing the New Flesh, there is probably nobody more fitting to explore the idea than quite possibly the most famous figure in the entire Japanese Cyberpunk movement than Shinya Tsukamoto. While Sōgo Ishii got his start in music, Tsukamoto had a focus on theater, specifically in the aftermath of the underground *Angura* ("Little Theater") movement. Performances were held on the streets of Tokyo which can be mainly categorized as "unorthodox," often in DIY tents or cardboard structures, and often ran counter to the heavy policing of the area. Tsukamoto's group would perform in a cardboard and paper-maché structure shaped like a giant water *kaijyu ("strange beast"),* which would be the origin of Tsukamoto's production company, Kaijyu Theater. The troupe consisted of members like Kei Fujiwara, Tomorowo Taguchi, and Nobu Kanoka, who would work with Tsukamoto on his first few films. Tsukamoto had previous experience making 8mm short with his brother using his father's camera as a child but had grown jaded and given up on the medium to pursue his interest in theater, however after realizing that film was the "natural" transition after his theater work and wanting to capture the work permanently, he assembled his troupe and returned to the medium with three back-to-back films.

The first of these was ***The Phantom of Regular Size* (1986)**, a film that essentially acted as test footage for what would become Tsukamoto's first feature. Immediately after, he directed ***The Adventures of Denchu-Kozo/"Electric Rod Boy"* (1987)**, a film adaption of a play performed by the Kaijyu Theater troupe which revolves around a boy born with an electric rod on his back who is sent to the future to battle a group of android vampires in order to save humanity. It is the third of these films however that is the most significant, being the landmark film of the Japanese Cyberpunk movement; 1989's ***Tetsuo: The Iron Man.*** A remake of *Phantom,* the exploration of the intersection between metal and flesh has achieved its zenith in this film, telling the story of a salaryman (Taguchi) and his girlfriend (Fujiwara) who kill a man known as the "metal fetishist" (Tsukamoto) in a car accident. As revenge, the fetishist infects the salaryman with the same affliction, turning him into a hulking mass of flesh and metal.The salaryman has a nightmare where his girlfriend sodomizes him with a giant snake-like metal appendage attached to her crotch. When he awakens he finds that his penis has been turned into a violently powerful drill, which he uses on his girlfriend to graphic results. He battles the fetishist, ending not in a traditional one-sided victory, but with complete assimilation, both fusing into a tank-like monstrosity resembling a giant phallus, riding off together declaring that their "love can destroy this whole fucking world." This is a film about male and female sexuality out of control, the fear that this can cause, as well as the love and freedom that will result. If the Japanese Cyberpunk movement had a thesis it would be Tetsuo. In my eyes, this film is one of the only pieces of art conceived through pure alchemy, or at the very least one of the most aesthetically cohesive works of art in existence. Not only this, but it is the epitome of the movement's ethos, that of truly independent, no-budget filmmaking, with Tsukamoto acting as director, writer, cinematographer, producer, editor, and star of the film. It is also no surprise that the film's production, alongside the previous two, tore Tsukamoto's theater troupe apart, being the last film they'd ever work on all together.

It cannot be understated how much of a shake-up on the Japanese film industry Tsukamoto's first feature was. It premiered to great praise at Rome's FantasyFest and kickstarted a cult following of Tsukamoto and experimental Japanese cinema. A sequel was quickly greenlit and ***Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* (1992)** was released. A self-contained story, this film does away with the metal fetishism and instead focuses on the human form pushed to its limits. Tomorowo Taguchi, who is the only returning cast and crew member from the last film, once again stars as a salaryman who is terrorized by Tsukamoto, who this time around runs a cult of bodybuilding cyborg skinheads. *Body Hammer* and the previous film's settings were inspired by Tsukamoto and his brother Kôji's childhood of playing in the industrialized area of Tokyo, specifically during the construction in lead up to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Both films end with the apocalypse (or near-apocalypse), caused by the rapid industrialization of the Japan, and the feeling that Tsukamoto, as well as other filmmakers in the movement, portray during the most economically prosperous times in Japanese history almost tells a story of pessimism or even defeatism about the nation they live in, foreshadowing many things to come.

The Phantom of Regular Size (1986)



Tetsuo: The Iron Man (1989)

The Adventures of Denchu-Kozo (1987)

Tetsuo II: Body Hammer (1991)

Shinya Tsukamoto

While the original *Tetsuo* crew may not have survived intact into post production, two members would go on to have their own careers, specifically within cyberpunk. The first, Kei Fujiwara, who at the time described herself as Shinya Tsukamoto's twin and also acted as assistant director and cinematographer for the film, would direct ***Organ* (1996),** a yakuza opera about black market organ dealers. The plot is almost irrelevant, as this first and foremost is a demo reel for Fujiwara to flex her practical effects muscles, with some of the best body horror effects this side of no-budget cyberpunk. The film itself constantly alternates between highly entertaining and honestly very frustrating to watch, but as really the only woman at the forefront of the movement I felt that it was notable to highlight. It is very unfortunate that Fujiwara would not really have much of a career in film, directing only one more film in the mid-2000s and a random acting gig here and there, but her mark on Japanese cyberpunk is not one to be forgotten as her collaborations with Tsukamoto that are fundamental. In fact, it was her home that was used as a primary film location that also housed the 20+ *Tetsuo* crew members at one point.

Organ (1996)

The other significant *Tetsuo* alumni is Shozin Fukui, who was assistant director for the film (however he describes the work as just driving a truck around) as well as a crew member on Sōgo Ishii's *The Master of Shiatsu* (1989). Fukui had learned plenty from working with the two prominent figures in Japanese cyberpunk, the two of which do not have the greatest relationship (they both attended the same university and Ishii believes that Tsukamoto stole his spotlight, which I mean you can't blame him), and had a short-lived career of his own. His first two films, which pre-date his collaborations with Isii and Tsukamoto, ***Gerorisuto* (1986)** and ***Caterpillar* (1988)** act as test footage for what he would go on to do later. The former is quite literally 12 minutes of a girl throwing up in the streets and subway, filmed with real reactions from passerbys, as an almost homage to the scene in *Possession* where Isabelle Adjani does the same. The latter film is footage of a day in the life of different people, from an abandoned cyborg to a rock singer, who are being observed by a giant tin-foil caterpillar. These two films lay the groundwork for Fukui's first feature film, ***√964 Pinocchio* (1991),** a film about a brain-wiped cyborg sex slave with erectile dysfunction who is abandoned on the streets after failing to perform. He meets another street vagrant and she shows him how to love as he discovers the truth about his life. To describe this film as "absolutely nuts" does no justice to the sheer madness being captured on celluloid, including an infamous scene where Pinocchio runs through a real street covered in the blood and white powder with a large concrete block chained to him, to the awe of everyone in the crowd. This film explores a new side of the New Flesh that hadn't really been before; the psychological. While in the *Tetsuo* films, our protagonist goes through sudden and rapid physical change, the characters in *Pinocchio* and his next film ***Rubber's Lover* (1996)** go through a psychological mutation. *Rubber's Lover,* which is considered by some a prequel to *Pinocchio*, consists of human experimentations in an underground bunker, with characters subjected to their heads exploding into black puss or forced cannibalistic urges, akin to something out of Japan's dark history in human experimentation at Unit 731 or maybe the origin story for one of Hideo Kojima's freaky villains. Both films explore the human mind pushed to its absolute limit, specifically by an ominous corporate figure looming in the background. The brain is perverted by forceful technology, and yet the characters try to push through and their humanity persists. While Fukui's duology seems like an echo of the *Tetsuo* films, they can also be seen as almost the antithesis, with Tsukamoto's films showing the outcome of survival through embracing technology, while Fukui suggests survival through the all-out rejection of technology.

While the world of cyberpunk anime is far outside of the scope I want to cover here, mostly due to the fact that animation is just a completely different beast in terms of filmmaking, I would be remiss to not mention the biggest landmark film from this movement. I am talking of course about Katsuhiro Otomo's ***Akira* (1988)**. When one thinks of "Japanese cyberpunk," this film, and the 1982 manga it is adapting, are probably what first pops into your mind. It is considered one of the best pieces of animation ever, the scale of the production alone would make one's head spin. Its themes

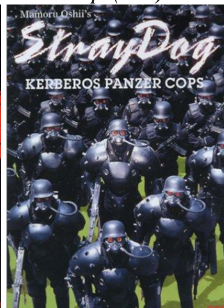
√964 Pinocchio (1991) (Below)
Rubber's Lover (1996)

of a dystopian future, societal decay, atomic weapons, and the dangers of authoritarianism not only mirror the past of Japan but also the future of our world. It is truly a dense work, but I also bring the film up here because it is a key example of the way Japan watched movies going into the 90s. Not necessarily a "failure" at the box office, *Akira* was definitely a huge financial risk, but with the rise of a new technology it surely did recoup any lost profits: VHS.

The early 90s marked a significant change once again for Japan as a nation and the cinema it was producing; the Bubble had burst. After a decade of leading the world's economy and an era of affluence and prosperity, Japan enters its "Lost Decade." Not to be confused with the aforementioned "Lost Decade" of Japanese cinema, this period was marked with economic stagnation and deflation. The Japanese film industry came even closer to the brink of collapse. However, a new revolution in filmmaking would thrive in this environment. Shifting focus from the silver screen to the television set at home, the rise of the VHS opened up new possibilities for independent low-budget cinema. Straight-to-video cinema became a lucrative market. V-Cinema (or Video Cinema), while a trademark of Toei, came to encompass the entirety of this new kind of movie. Not having to worry about theatrical distribution, big budget and big name directors like Akira Kurosawa and Kon Ichikawa were pushed to the wayside and new faces began to emerge as new opportunities arose. New faces like George Iida with the film ***Cyclops*** **(1987)**, which is like if you condensed every David Cronenberg movie into 50 minutes, or Chiaki J. Konaka who wrote ***Scan Doll*** **(1996)** who would later go on to pen *Serial Experiments Lain.* Other highlights include like **Lady Battle Cop (1990),** a blatant ripoff of the Verhoeven classic *Robocop,* or ***Mikadroid: Robokill Beneath Disco Club Layla*** **(1991),** featuring collaborations by Gainax founder Shinji Higuchi, Mamoru Oshii composer Kenji Kawai, and an on-screen cameo from then little-known director Kiyoshi Kurosawa. The most significant V-Cinema alumni however was one Takashi Miike, who came to prominence with films in the cyberpunk genre such as ***Full Metal Yakuza*** **(1997)** and ***Andromedia*** **(1998).** While the ethos of V-Cinema filmmaking is a far cry from the underground and avant-garde ethos of the early cyberpunk cinema, with *Rubber's Lover* arguably being the last one of the 90s (and even more arguably the last ever), the filmmakers of the direct-to-video world kept the spirit alive going into the new millennium.

(Above and Below)
The Red Spectacles (1987)

StrayDog: Kerberos Panzer Cops (1991)



Another filmmaker to emerge from the world of video, directing the first ever OVA (Original Video Animation) series way back in 1983' *Dallos,* is Mamoru Oshii. While definitely on the outskirts of cyberpunk, Oshii's work leans more towards a more quiet and contemplative style, often reminiscing on the philosophical quandaries of man and technology. The first two entries in the *Kerberos* saga directed by Oshii, ***The Red Spectacles*** **(1987)** and ***StrayDog: Kerberos Panzer Cops (1991)*** depict a version of Tokyo run by an authoritarian government where a hyper-militarized police force nicknamed the "Kerberos," were tasked with eliminating all crime and evil in the city. The unit succeeds in their mission, yet continues their fanatical hatred and elimination of "evil" with excessive force. After an incident where a citizen is killed for a misdemeanor, the Kerberos unit is abolished and all members of the force are required to surrender their weapons and turn themselves in. Many ex-Kerberos members leave Tokyo and go into hiding, until soon enough their pasts catch up to them. Now, this all sounds very high-concept but I am overselling this aspect a huge amount, most of this is told in the form of expository title cards. These are the films where Oshii's style truly emerged, with the first film feeling more reminiscent of a surreal neo-noir straight out of the Japanese New Wave, while the second is almost entirely a Taiwanese travelogue.

The sick Kerberos armor gear is almost like windowdressing, possibly even bait for someone to fall for, as Oshii is known to do. This style coalesces in the seminal anime film ***Ghost in the Shell*** **(1995)** and later on its sequel ***Ghost In the Shell: Innocence*** **(2004),** which set Oshii up to become a figurehead of Japanese Cyberpunk in the coming decade.

At the turn of the millennium, after having been kept on life support for the last half of the 90s through anime and manga, Japanese Cyberpunk was given its final lease on life with the release of possibly its three final live-action films. The new millennium was a time of much uncertainty but one thing was definitely clear: the Internet is here and it is here to stay. Now the 2000s was certainly not the first time Japanese film was considered with the advent of the World Wide Web. I've seen the term "Heisei Era Internet Anxiety" thrown around online to describe a group of films that tackled being scared of the computer, including films like Satoshi Kon's *Perfect Blue* (1997) or Hideaki Anno's *Love & Pop* (1998). However in the futuristic and dystopian worlds of Cyberpunk, the distinction between the "future" and the "now" became more and more blurred as the world seemed to become smaller and more connected.

The first of these films is Mamoru Oshii's ***Avalon*** **(2001),** a unique case in this group of films as it is a Japanese and Polish co-production shot in Poland and starring exclusively Polish actors. The film revolves around the top player of a banned, highly-addictive virtual reality video game and her attempt to reach the rumoured "next level." The subject matter is potent for Oshii, often dealing with themes of identity, with the world of *Avalon* blurring the lines between the real world and the game world as was happening in our world at the time. While the plot sounds reminiscent of *The Matrix,* which had just released two years prior, I'd argue it is more akin to Cronenberg's film from that same year *eXistenZ* (1999). Cronenberg and Oshii treat the internet/video games as worlds that we engage with "willingly," and can "stop" at any time, which feels very prescient seeing the world we live in now, constantly plugged in.

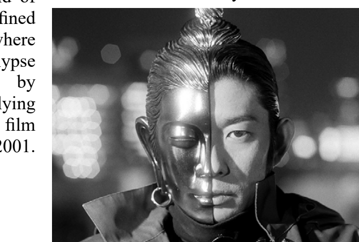
The next film is ***Pulse*** **(2001),** directed by V-Cinema graduate Kiyoshi Kurosawa, who by this point had reached international audiences with his 1997 masterpiece *Cure.* While not explicitly "cyberpunk' (whatever that term even means at this point), I think its world of "ghosts in the machine," industrial settings, and the apocalypse garners it a spot on here. *Pulse* creates an almost new form of "VR" than seen in other films, with the dead trapped inside our computers, trying to trap the living in their world of loneliness. The "dead" in this film don't just represent literal death, but also the death of real human connection. The "ghosts" in this film are also a subversion of the Hollywood idea of spirits from the beyond being an inherently malevolent force, instead begging for the whole film to help them. The film could also be seen as an indirect commentary on the rise of the *hikikomori* ("pulling inward, being confined") phenomenon throughout Japan, which is a type of person who can essentially be described as a social recluse who spends more time with machines than other people. The climax of the film, while admittedly kind of silly in concept, feels almost like a joke, a world of people confined to screens where the apocalypse is signalled by a low-flying plane in a film released in 2001.

(Below)
Avalon (2001)

Pulse (2001)

Electric Dragon 80.000V (2001)

The final film of this trio surprisingly has nothing to do with the internet, but instead feels like a nostalgic love letter and send-off to the genre, that being Sōgo Ishii's return to the cyberpunk genre, ***Electric Dragon 80.000V*** **(2001).** Reptile investigator Dragon Eye Morrison, who gained the ability to control electricity as a boy, has his life of searching for lizards in alleys disrupted when he crosses paths with a TV repair man by the name of Thunderbolt Buddha, who wields a similar set of powers. The two battle on the rooftops in a final showdown to find out who is the most powerful. The film's fairly straightforward premise is there to set the stage for Ishii's throwback to the 80s sensibilities of punk rock filmmaking. Black and white photography and a soundtrack from Ishii and the star Tadanobu Asano's band MACH-1.67 really make this film feel like something straight out of the beginning of the movement. This would be one of the last films Ishii made under the name of Sōgo, signalling some sort of finality to this film.



While *Electric Dragon* feels like the series "finale" to cyberpunk as a genre, it's punk style, low budget, and lean 55 minute runtime as well as the rise of DVD and Internet distribution ushered in a new period of similar films. This era has come to be known as "Splatterpunk." The progenitor of this style can be seen as far back as Yoshihiro Nishimura's ***Anatomia Extinction*** **(1995),** in which a man must pick between dying at the hands of a serial killer or joining him in eradicating the overpopulated human race. The film is most notable for its impressive and visceral body horror special effects. Nishimura would go on to co-found Fundoshi Corps, a production company which specialized in cheaply produced and overly violent films. The studio's first film was Nishimura's ***Meatball Machine*** **(2005)** and went on to release films like ***The Machine Girl*** **(2008)** and ***Tokyo Gore Police*** **(2008).** These films are certainly fun in their own right, and made by many veterans of the early cyberpunk movement with the focus on practical effects and insane body horror gore channeling the same independent spirit of the films from the 80s and 90s. However, unfortunately, these films just don't hold a candle to their predecessors. Sure, elements of subversion and eroticism are still present, but they have been substituted with the trashy and tongue-in-cheek sensibilities of V-Cinema and pink films. The subversions of techno-fetishism

seem sanded-off or outright forgotten, often feeling like just haphazard genre-blends of sci-fi and horror, leaving the films of the "splatterpunk" genre to me in a weird limbo where they don't hold the same staying power as their progenitors. The bold, experimental, and often avant-garde of the films like the ones by Shozin Fukui, Shinya Tsukamoto, and Sōgo Ishii, which all had a sense of immediacy and frustration at the world, seem to have been left by the wayside in favor violent "shocking" films akin to video nasties.

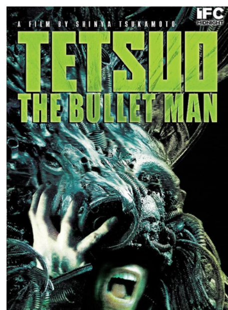
Meatball Machine *(2005)*

Tokyo Gore Police (2008)
(Above)

2010 marked the thirty year anniversary of the official unofficial start of Japanese Cyberpunk with *Crazy Thunder Road* in 1980. Many of the pivotal filmmakers like Shozin Fukui and Kei Fujiwara had gone on hiatus from directing, Sōgo Ishii has changed his name to Gakuryū in order to signal a new phase in his career.. However, a year earlier Shinya Tsukamoto premiered the first cut of his latest film in Venice, and after mixed reception, has recut the film and it was released as ***Tetsuo: The Bullet Man* (2010).** Originally to be produced by Quentin Tarantino, it was Tsukamoto's first English language film and his first foray back into the cyberpunk genre since the last entry in the series, *Tetsuo II,* eighteen years prior. In that time, Tsukamoto had established himself as a successful director post-cyberpunk, with films like *Tokyo Fist* (1995), *Bullet Ballet* (1998), and *A Snake of June* (2001) still tackling themes of technology and eroticism in new ways. However, he decided to return to the *Tetsuo* franchise after nearly two decades and, unfortunately, I may have to hand it to the Venice crowd on this one. Shinya Tsukamoto is my favorite filmmaker alive right now, so it brings me no pleasure to say that the third entry in the *Tetsuo* series is a total dud. A mix of a derivative story that is a mix of the first two films and shoddy effects make this an overall disappointing affair that feels like a half-hearted attempt at recapturing the lightning-in-a-bottle of the first film. What should just be a miss in a career of pure hits becomes something much more in the context of what the *Tetsuo* films and Tsukamoto stand for in the cyberpunk genre.

As I wrote this essay on the history of Japanese Cyberpunk, I questioned the need for and especially the usefulness of the term "cyberpunk." There are films I discussed here that I may need to argue about their place in the "genre," if cyberpunk can even be categorized as such. Did Philip K. Dick and William Gibson intend to write "cyberpunk" stories? Certainly not. They were writing about the present they were living in and projecting that onto the future. Does the same go for the film movement that I wrote about here? It certainly is a movement, but is it "cyberpunk?" Perhaps Japanese "cyberpunk" is inextricably tied to a specific time and place, such as the punk scene it was born from. Obviously this is just a term we retroactively fit onto certain films for the sake of clarity or maybe organization, because naming things is just easier. However, many of the filmmakers described as such outright reject the label, so really what is the efficacy of this? Plenty of media keeps coming out that replicates this aesthetic, from movies to books and comics to music to even a massively popular video game and tie-in animated TV show simply titled *Cyberpunk 2077* (which has made research for this a complete pain in the ass), created by people who may or may not have done their "homework," such as watching weird, horny Japanese movies from the 80s. At what point does this all cease to be "cyberpunk" and start to become something new? At what point does it all just become a parody of itself, an ouroboros of an "aesthetic?"

I have no answers for any of this, of course. I am just airing out thoughts on this as I struggle to figure out how the hell to end this, reminding me to include a conclusion in my outline next time. The doomer-ism at the end of this essay is not here to discourage anyone from checking out the incredible films in my favorite cinematic movement (God I hope not, after writing 5000+ words on the subject) which I begrudgingly but also endearingly refer to as Japanese "Cyberpunk."



Tetsuo: The Bullet Man (2010) *(Below)*

CORRUPTED FLESH

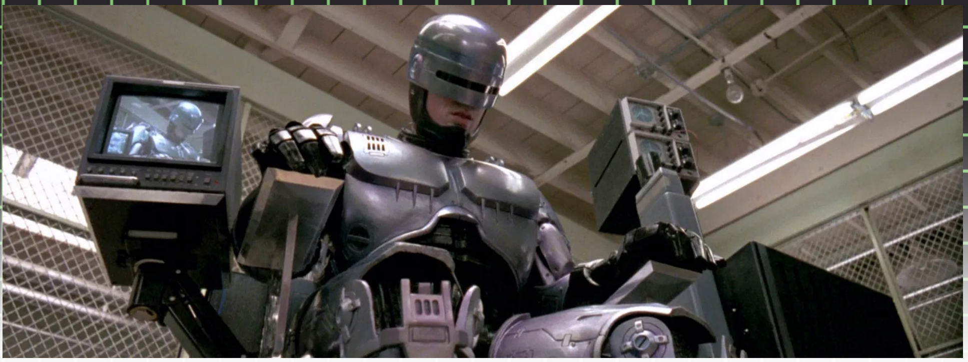
By ADAM MORSE
@adamintheshell
@adamwarlock

Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop* is nothing short of a masterpiece. Not only a thrilling action film and genre all-timer, but a brilliant meditation on retaining humanity in a world increasingly corrupted by the death grips of corporate capitalism. Centered by the mesmerizing central performance of Peter Weller, and combined with excellent special effects from Rob Bottin and razor sharp satire by Paul Verhoeven, the film remains a permanent spot in my memory like nothing else. Despite releasing just two years shy of 40 years ago, the commentaries it makes still remain as poignant as ever, covering everything from corporatization and militarization of police, to questions of whether our humanity is defined by our flesh or our soul.

It's no secret there has been a decades-long effort to further militarize the institution of the police. Billions of dollars are poured into police departments every year from PACs, police foundations, and corporations from all sectors such as tech, real estate, media and communications, and investment firms. These efforts are made essentially to mobilize police as their own personal foot soldiers to protect capital interests. This, combined with the police's already embedded mission to protect the capital and political interests of the federal government stemming from its historical beginnings as organized slave catchers, leads to a police that's sole mission is to protect and maintain the status quo of capitalism and colonialism, willing to shed any amount of blood to do so. For so long now, we've seen police and other weapons of the government such as I.C.E being mobilized and used against countless people, people whose only crime is believing in and fighting for a better world.

In the world of *RoboCop*, it's a similar story. The police are directly owned and operated by Omni Consumer Products (OCP), a mega-corp operating as a monopoly in all major sectors. OCP not only runs the police, but also has major investments in global military technology, culminating in the development of the ED-209 project. The ED-209 is a bipedal tank, ostensibly used as a peacekeeping tool. However, during a demonstration for OCP executives, ED-209 brutally guns down a board member in one of the most memorable scenes in not only the film but 80's science fiction at large. The ED-209 was initially intended as the security force for a project called Delta City, an OCP-run Company City where they would maintain complete and total control, and bulldoze Old Detroit in the process, acting as an allegory for gentrification. Delta City, if completed, would be a corporate dystopia hellscape, where OCP acts with total impunity, answering to no one but themselves. To OCP, who lives and dies doesn't matter to them, as long as profit quotas are met, projects are on schedule, and the line stays going up.

One of OCP's projects, the Robocop project, is in need of a test subject. Who better than Alex Murphy, a Detroit officer played by Peter Weller in his absolute best role. We don't get to spend much time with Murphy before his death and transformation into Robocop, but from what we see, he is an affable and likeable man. He has good rapport with his partner, Anne Lewis, he cares for his family and aspires to be a good role model for his son, and even enjoys doing spinning gun tricks inspired by his son's favorite show. We establish this sense of humanity within Murphy, so it can be then contrasted when Murphy is transformed into Robocop. When Murphy is cornered by Clarence Boddicker and his gang, they unload on him with shotguns, blasting him into pieces in a scene that is both a wonderful showcase of Rob Bottin's incredible effects work, and a deeply disturbing and brutal death for Murphy. After this, the Murphy we knew is gone, and has given way to Robocop. Robocop isn't a person, it's company property, with a set list of directives and goals, all acting in the best interests of the company. The only thing that remains of Murphy is his face, grotesquely affixed to the robot chassis, and parts of his brain. Murphy's flesh, his body, is gone, flesh and blood traded for wire and steel. Murphy has become physically corrupted by the systems and institutions of his world, systems he worked within as a police officer, and is now a literal tool of OCP, not just a metaphorical one. There are still glimmers of Murphy's humanity shining through the darkness of the cold metal. Robocop spins its gun on its finger, like Murphy,



which is a small detail but shows that even after everything *something* remains. Robocop, after encountering a member of Boddicker's gang, starts to regain memories of Murphy, leading to a brewing inner turmoil of Murphy trying to regain his humanity. A scene in the middle of the film paints this perfectly. Murphy returns to his family home, now abandoned and decrepit, and relives the beloved memories of his family. This, combined in learning that Dick Jones of OCP is working with Boddicker, culminates in Murphy storming the OCP tower in search of Dick Jones, only to barely escape with his life after being attacked by ED-209 and the Detroit police. Murphy retreats to the abandoned warehouse and is joined by Lewis, who bears witness to Murphy removing his visor and revealing his face, finally returning to Murphy. During the final showdown between Murphy and Boddicker, there's a brilliant moment where Murphy shouts out Clarence's name, but this time fully in Murphy's voice after spending the rest of the film in a robotic monotone, this moment representing the completion of Murphy's arc. At the end of the film, after fulfilling his revenge and going on this journey of rediscovery, Robocop proudly tells The Old Man his name is Murphy. Murphy has managed to re-emerge, and despite his flesh being gone, he's still Alex Murphy.

When it came to bringing Alex Murphy to life, I would be remiss to not discuss Peter Weller's brilliant performance. The depth and humanity Weller brings to Robocop is staggering, from the walk to the talk, and is especially impressive considering the conditions of the famously cumbersome Robocop suit. The great performances extend beyond Weller, of course. Nancy Allen is wonderful as Lewis, giving the film a solid emotional anchor and providing a humanizing dynamic to Robocop, being a true friend and helping Murphy find himself. An out-of-type Kurtwood Smith is incredible as the sleazeball Clarence Boddicker, with some of the most iconic lines from the film, and a palpable and unforgettable screen presence. Clarence's gang, while limited in in-depth characterization, is such a delight to watch, from Jesse Goins' iconic cackle, to Paul McCrane getting all goopy, and of course a pre-Twin Peaks Ray Wise with some great screams (one of the best coming from his reaction to the aforementioned goopiness of Paul McCrane during the film's climax). Speaking of goop, a lot of what makes this film so truly memorable is special effects legend Rob Bottin's work. The practical squibs of blood during the ED-209 scene for example help give the film both a disturbing brutality and comic absurdity, and the Go-Motion of ED-209 itself is incredibly charming. The Robocop suit and make-up is incredibly well done, to the point where I'm left wondering how it was even done. Jost Vacano's cinematography and William Sandell's production design round out the world of Robocop, from the decaying streets of Old Detroit, to the corporate neon brutalism of the OCP offices, the world that is built is palpable and truly feels lived in.

Robocop portrays a world that is buckling under the weight of the sins of the past and the present, the sins of corporate expansion, of colonialism, of capitalism. Capitalism has reached its late stages, and it brings to question what humanity means when all that is left is rubble. The film vividly portrays that our humanity, who we are as people, is not defined by our physical form, but by our souls, our memories and experiences, the people we care for and the people who care for us, and that no matter the turmoils of the systems that drive our world, we can always find ourselves.

CYBERNETICS, CYBORGS, & CYBERTRUCKS

Corporate Control of Our Bodies in Cyberpunk Movies by Thomas Robinett

@tommydog2000 / @revivalists.la
www.tommydogstudios.com

Cyberpunk is more than a subgenre of science fiction, but a stylized look into our own world. Cyberpunk combines the visual language and tone of noir, the conspiracy of political thrillers, and the futuristic advances in technology of science fiction. In cyberpunk stories, corporate systems of power are enacted through the body in the form of surveillance technology, cybernetic enhancements, and fraudulent memories. Cyberpunk contends with dominant ideas within the culture, time, and place in which the art is conceived, examining how advances in technology and corporate control are portrayed through both entertaining and distancing lenses.

Even though it is heavily inspired, *The Matrix*'s (1999) approach to identity is completely contradictory to *Ghost in the Shell's* philosophy about memories creating identity. *The Matrix* tells a very Western story of an individual overcoming technology in a messianic hero's journey to free humanity. Neo takes the 'red pill', revealing the truth of the matrix, that humanity is a battery for artificial intelligence, and every memory and experience is but an illusion. This 'red pill' view of identity has been co-opted by radical conspiracy theorists' distrust of society, leading to acts of violence. The climax manifests this ugly truth in a mass shooting in an office building as the answer to breaking free of modernity. While I don't think the film endorses this violence, it is an unfortunate parallel to today's society in showing the psychological disillusionment of people who fall into the rabbit hole of online conspiracies.

Japan's first cyberpunk stories are set on the fringes of society and criticize the evolution of Japan into a hypermodernized capitalistic country. In *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989), technology grows like cancer inside Tetsuo, robbing him of his humanity as he mutates into a hyperparanoid, mind-controlled killing machine. This movie is gory and exaggerated, but there is truth in how this film depicts the prevalence of industrialism and the adverse effects we come to know from addiction to the internet. There is no overcoming or defeating technology in *Tetsuo*, but rather adapting to the rising tide and fully engrossing himself into technological evolution.

Cyberpunk isn't limited to the US and Japan, but also to other cultures to metaphorize inequities, such as *Sleep Dealer's* (2008) depiction of Mexican immigrant work. Through nodes in the body, working-class Mexicans can hook up to the computer and work low-wage jobs anywhere in the world through a VR-controlled robot. This technology was made as a reactionary policy to halt immigration into the US from Mexico, while still monetarily benefiting from the exploitation of their work virtually. These characters often work such long hours that they fall asleep and sometimes die from overwork and exhaustion. This is reminiscent of the current unlawful ICE raids, stripping migrants of their humanity, making them slaves to a system they don't have access to. Exploitation of the working class for the benefit of oligarchs can be seen in most cyberpunk stories as a core tenet, while others just have cyberpunk as an aesthetic flourish.

In *Blade Runner* (1982), Rick Deckard is a bounty hunter who does not have agency in carrying out the will of the ruling class. He hunts down replicants for retirement, hired by their manufacturer, the Tyrell Corporation. With a short lifespan of only four years, the replicants band together to muscle their way into a cure to live longer by overthrowing the company that created them. Roy, the lead replicant, assassinates the CEO Eldon Tyrell in hopes of causing reform. This killing parallels real world corporate and political assassinations, in making a violent statement to a powerful company that decides who lives and dies. The result of the killing is not the meaningful change that the replicants desired, but rather the rise of the equally repressive Wallace Corporation in *Blade Runner 2049* (2017).

Upgrade (2018) is basically the *Death Wish* (1974) of cyberpunk, endowed with the same rage and blind vengeance towards the scapegoats of the source of his anger. Grey's wife is killed by a ruthless mob that leaves him paralyzed. Grey is upgraded with cybernetic enhancements to take revenge against his wife's killers. The corporation Cobolt is run by a squirrely tech CEO, Eron (sound familiar?) who has total control of both Grey's location and body. In most cyberpunk fiction, this control would be a commentary against the NSA spying on individuals within the Patriot Act, or social media companies selling all of your information to the highest bidder. Rather, the AI and the poor are treated as enemies for Grey's revenge, leaving Eron and Cobolt as morally upstanding and free to create a better AI for next time. This is an example of mainstream abduction of the cyberpunk aesthetic to tell a within the grain story. Even the film's vehicle design heavily resembles Elon's cybertruck, negatively influencing real world tech aesthetics.

In *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), career cop Major is a human in a robotic body, or 'shell', owned by Section 9, a government corporation, feeling alienated from her physical form. If she were to retire, the company would repossess her body, and she would not be able to live; her ghost would have no shell. She rather finds consciousness and identity through her soul, or 'ghost', a culmination of her memories, thoughts, and goals that make up her persona. The film complicates the idea of autonomy when Major encounters the Puppetmaster, a consciousness born of the internet seeking sovereignty. They are both mercilessly destroyed by Section 9, resurrecting into a singular new body. This results in Major and the Puppetmaster becoming a new identity, something altogether different.

Cyberpunk ranges in its messaging but is always up for the task of asking the big questions of technology, consciousness, and power. The aesthetics of cyberpunk provides an escapist lens to look more objectively at our problems within late-stage capitalism and our lives surrounded by all-pervasive and watching technologies run by companies that do not care for us as people. Cyberpunk is not a sci-fi world we desire to live in, but one that is seen as inevitable, unless we actively take steps to change our future.

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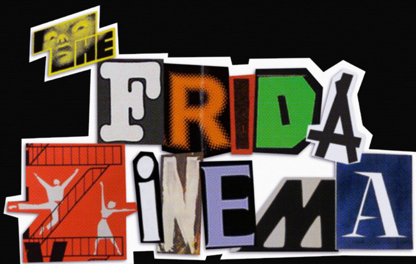

Cover art by Jesse Camacho (@candycolorclown)

In the 13th issue of The Frida Zinema we explore the world of Cyberpunk Cinema. First coined in the 1980s, the genre can be characterized by rapid advancement of technology or virtual reality contrasted with a bleak, dystopian future marked by societal decay and corporate control of bodies and minds. Local writers explore the genre, from the films of Mamoru Hosoda to the underground punk movement in Japan.