

**Treasure Town: The City and Character Perspectives in**  
***Tekkonkinkreet***

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## Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) (programme name). It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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## Abstract

This work discusses *Tekkonkinkreet*, the animated film directed by Michael Arias in 2006. Treasure Town, the film's imaginative urban setting, exists in symbiosis with its characters and plays a central role in the narrative. Its various aspects are revealed to the viewer through the characters' perspectives, as the story follows their attempts to adapt or oppose the city's perpetual metabolism. This analysis explores the unique variety of components of Treasure Town's image and examines its relation to the film's central idea of contrasts. It then considers the oppositions between the film's characters and how they reflect on the integrity of the city. As a result, this work attempts to determine how envisioning a fictional city in the animation medium encourages us to consider the state of modern cities and the importance of humanity in them.

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## Introduction

*Tekkonkinkreet*, a feature-length anime directed by Michael Arias, released in 2006, is an adaptation of Taiyō Matsumoto's titular manga, initially serialised from 1993 to 1994. The film, as is evident by its distinctive style, was produced by Studio 4°C, known for their earlier works such as *Memories* by Katsuhiro Otomo (1995), episodes of the Wachowskis' *The Animatrix* (2003) and Masaaki Yuasa's *Mind Game* (2004). The odd title of both the anime and manga (*Tekkonkinkurīto* in Japanese) comes from the way a child would mispronounce *tekkin konkurito* — steel-reinforced concrete — the material widely used in urban construction.<sup>1</sup>

Michael Arias was the first non-Japanese director of a large-scale anime production. Born in Los Angeles, he became known as a developer of “Toon Shaders” software, designed to make computer graphics look like traditional animation.<sup>2</sup> Due to his previously established connection with Studio 4°C,<sup>3</sup> he was able to fulfil his long-standing dream of adapting Matsumoto's *Tekkonkinkreet*, making it his directorial debut. The film, therefore, presents a unique blend of Western and Japanese approaches. On one hand, Arias worked closely with the Japanese studio's team and strived to keep the story faithful to the original text, and was immersed in Japanese cultural codes, as he spent years living in Tokyo before the production.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, as he admits in an interview, the references for the film were largely comprised of Western works rather than Japanese cinema and manga. Although Arias highlights his aspiration to treat *Tekkonkinkreet's* themes as universal enough to breach the cultural differences.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan Riekeles, *Anime Architecture: Imagined Worlds and Endless Megacities* (Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2020), 187.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Arias was a producer on *The Animatrix*, according to: Michael Arias, “The Michael Arias Interview”, interview by Matt Alt, Otaku USA, October 2007, 2.

<https://hp.michaelarias.net/resources/Press/en/Otaku-USA-2007-10.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> “His adopted home is called Treasure Town”, *Los Angeles Times*, archived December 11, 2018 at <https://web.archive.org/web/20181211135342/http://articles.latimes.com/2007/feb/04/entertainment/ca-arias4>

<sup>5</sup> Arias, Otaku USA interview, 3.

*Tekkonkinkreet* centres around two orphaned kids living on the streets of Takaramachi — Treasure Town — a dystopian city they claim to own and protect. One of them, Black, is fierce and impulsive, while his counterpart, White, possesses childlike innocence and imagination. The balance of their world shifts with the arrival of a Yakuza group, led by Snake, who wants to demolish the old district and build an amusement park, Kiddie Kastle, in its place. The story, then, follows the characters opposing and adapting to the change of their city while the struggle occurs between — and within — them.

The film is distinguished by its energetic direction, dynamic cinematography and thoroughness of its imaginative urban setting. Yet, at its core, it strives to be “a deeply humanist fable”,<sup>6</sup> reflecting the struggles we see around us every day. Thereby, this dissertation will analyse the city in *Tekkonkinkreet* along with the characters living in it in an attempt to determine how their portrayal reflects on the state of the modern world, and what questions it asks the viewer about the value of humanity and personal connection.

Chapter One will discuss the image of Treasure Town by closely studying the film’s artistic decisions. We will attempt to determine the elements constituting the setting’s uniqueness and discuss how its portrayal depends on the character’s perspectives. Additionally, we will examine the notion of the city in Japanese media and address *Tekkonkinkreet*’s place among related intertexts.

Chapter Two will then study the characters under the lens of *Tekkonkinkreet*’s fixation on dialectical oppositions, in conjunction with them serving as representations of the city’s various characteristics. Although not explicitly mentioned in the text, the attempted examination draws on the semiotic method of paradigmatic analysis,<sup>7</sup> along with an additional psychoanalytical approach.

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<sup>6</sup> “Tekkonkinkreet Director’s Notes”, Filmmaker Michael Arias Official Site, January 1, 2004, <https://hp.michaelarias.net/Ephemera/Writings/TekkonkinkreetDirectorsNotes/>.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Asa Berger, *Media Analysis Techniques* (SAGE Publications, 1990), 30.

## Chapter One. Treasure Town: The Organic City of Contrasts

### Welcome to Treasure Town

*“Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.”*

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1.** Establishing shot of Treasure Town. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*, directed by Michael Arias (Sony Pictures, 2006).

*Takaramachi*, or, as it is known in English translation, *Treasure Town*, was born from the mind of Taiyo Matsumoto in 1993, when *Tekkonkinkreet* (also known as *Black & White*) started its serialization.<sup>9</sup> The work was generally acclaimed for both its plot and distinctive

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<sup>8</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (Giulio Einaudi, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> Taiyo Matsumoto, *Tekkonkinkreet. Black & White* (VIZ Media, LLC, 2007). First published by Shogakukan Inc. in Japan as *Tekkon Kinkurito*, 1994, 2006.

visuals, with critics pointing out the influence of European comics' aesthetics on Matsumoto's gritty art style, which centred the setting at the heart of the piece<sup>10</sup>.

In manga, most of the narrative details are conveyed through visual signs, and characters are "perceived and also indicated by elements in the background", according to Robert Brenner.<sup>11</sup> This claim becomes apparent in *Tekkonkinkreet*, where the urban landscape is fundamentally intertwined with the story and its heroes. While other works tend to use obscuring the background as an artistic device to direct the reader's attention<sup>12</sup> elements of Treasure Town's architecture come into focus on nearly every panel of Matsumoto's manga. Depicted with the same thick lines and bold tonal breakdowns as the characters on the page, so visually competing with them, the city refuses to serve as a mere backdrop for the action and emerges as loud and ever-present. It leaps at the reader in a kaleidoscope of warped buildings, street signs and bizarre creatures, stylised within the work's visual language to appear symbolic rather than to create an impression of tangible space. (Fig.3)

Where in other manga centring on the notion of the city, the setting is portrayed through a sense of its physicality, with grandiose establishing shots and attention to intricate details, like, for instance, in works of Katsuhiro Otomo (Fig. 2.1) or Jiro Taniguchi (Fig. 2.2), *Tekkonkinkreet* builds Treasure Town from vaguely recognizable geometric shapes and density of exaggerated quirks. While other city imagery, as we can see below, is constituted with straight, strictly vertical and horizontal lines, Matsumoto favours distinctly hand-drawn curves, which make the environment feel organic. This living organism of Takaramachi, then, stages the characters as its natural continuations.

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<sup>10</sup> Namely, Matsumoto admits drawing inspiration from the works of Mœbius and Enki Bilal in his Tokyo Cool interview: "INTERVIEW: Taiyo Matsumoto (1995)", Comics212, archived July 11, 2012, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20120711030120/http://comics212.net/2008/07/08/interview-taiyo-matsumoto-1995>.

<sup>11</sup> Robin E. Brenner, *Understanding manga and anime* (Libraries Unlimited, 2007), 68.

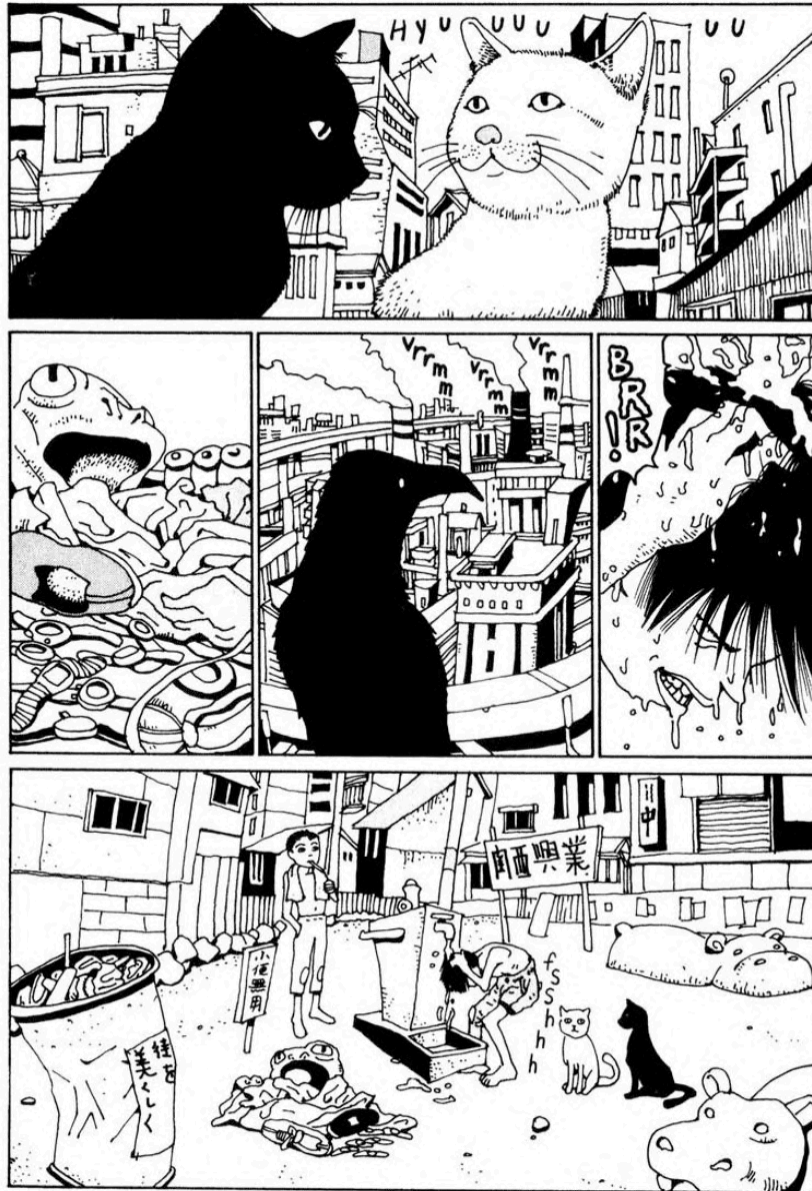
<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 6-7.



**Figure 2.1.** Establishing shot in Issue #1 of *Akira* by Katsuhiro Otomo (Kodansha Ltd., 1934).



Figure 2.2. Shibuya, Tokyo, in *The Quest for the Missing Girl* by Jiro Taniguchi (Ponent Mon, S.L., 2009).



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**Figure 3.** First page of Chapter (Skirmish) 3 of Matsumoto’s *Tekkonkinkreet*.

To describe his world, Matsumoto fuses quintessential elements of the Japanese cityscape with bold fantastical elements. So, he creates Treasure Town — a place made up of the author’s hopes, fears and impressions, where flying kids don’t seem like something out of the ordinary. Suspended between reality and fantasy, it is recognisable enough to “exert a warm nostalgic pull”<sup>13</sup> on the reader, yet nearly escapes the grasp of logic.

<sup>13</sup> “Tekkonkinkreet Director’s Notes”

While turning *Tekkonkinkreet* into an animated feature, both the director, Michael Arias, and screenwriter, Anthony Weintraub, were focused on keeping their adaptation faithful to the original manga.<sup>14</sup> Still, naturally, Treasure Town's appearance needed to be transformed for the new medium. On screen, the city demanded to be rebuilt on a larger scale, and the gaps left unexplored in the manga had to be filled with new details and defined structures, all while preserving the setting's distinctive identity. Thus, supported by the talent of artists from Studio 4°C, namely Shinji Kimura as the art director,<sup>15</sup> Michael Arias embarked on a journey to make Treasure Town "entirely believable in its unreality".<sup>16</sup> In one of his interviews, he describes wanting to utilise all the possibilities of film instead of simply imitating the original, as well as turning the setting into "something that was three-dimensional and felt as solid as the world outside your window".<sup>17</sup> The key to achieving this goal was to seamlessly integrate the characters into their environments to fully immerse the viewer in this fictional world. Hence, the adaptation heavily uses CG elements,<sup>18</sup> making this film a hybrid production just like *Metropolis* (Rintaro, 2001) and *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (Mamoru Oshii, 2004), both of which previously successfully incorporated digital instruments into the traditional pipeline.<sup>19</sup> This is especially apparent in the usage of the handheld camera effect, as if in a documentary, which serves as a striking artistic device telling the visuals of *Tekkonkinkreet* apart from other anime productions. To achieve it, most of the film's hand-drawn backgrounds were separated digitally and composited onto 3D space (Fig.4).<sup>20</sup> As a result, Treasure Town in the film appears tangible and grounded in reality despite its eccentric

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<sup>14</sup> "Tekkonkinkreet Director's Notes"

<sup>15</sup> Shinji Kimura played a leading role in the visual development of *Tekkonkinkreet* and published several artbooks consisting of his original work for the film, so his involvement will be examined in more detail later in this chapter.

<sup>16</sup> "Taiyo Matsumoto's Tekkonkinkreet: Commentary for Pocket Edition By Michael Arias", Filmmaker Michael Arias Official Site, December 2012, <https://hp.michaelarias.net/Ephemera/Writings/TekkonkinkreetPocketCommentary/>.

<sup>17</sup> Arias, Otaku USA interview, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Arias: "We used CG in pretty much every shot, probably 80% of the time. There are not a lot of shots that are just hand-drawn characters on backgrounds." Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Stefan Riekeles, *Anime Architecture*, 138.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 188.

features, making it possible for Arias to accomplish his main goal — to establish the city as the central character of the story.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 4.** Model of Treasure Town in 3D software. Still from *Director Michael Arias' 300 Day Diary*, Amer Béton, 2006, distributed as a *Tekkonkinkreet* DVD On-Disc Extra Feature.

### Japan's Vision of The City

*"This town couldn't care less about us. Just watch — it will keep changing".<sup>22</sup>*

In order to understand what makes Treasure Town unique, as well as its place among other city-centric anime, firstly, I would like to address the notion of the city in Japanese

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Arias and Anthony Weintraub, "Tekkonkinkreet: Black and White. Foreword to the all-in-one edition published by Viz Media", Filmmaker Michael Arias Official Site, March 5, 2007, <https://hp.michaelarias.net/Ephemera/Writings/TekkonkinkreetAllinoneForeword/>.

<sup>22</sup> *Tekkonkinkrett*, 51:19.

media, namely animation films, and how its significance is connected to the urban development in the country.

Discernibly, the history of the Japanese urban landscape can be called an account of destruction and reconstruction. In the past, Japan has faced devastating earthquakes, like the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923, and, as a result of World War II, large portions of three major cities in Japan – Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya, along with sixty-six other cities, were torn down by the bombings.<sup>23</sup> As well as irrevocably affecting Japanese cultural imagination, these events necessitated the rebuilding of many urban structures.

For instance, Tokyo's Metropolitan Government proposed to completely restructure the city: turn it into a network of sub-cities with green belts in between, introduce a new zoning system and draw inspiration from European urban planning. However, due to the lack of management and financial ability, the redevelopment took a different, sporadic and organic direction, mostly led by the residents themselves, with it largely following the pre-war street grid and land use patterns. What came after was an economic upturn, leading to unprecedentedly rapid urban sprawl caused by the population's concentration in metropolitan areas.<sup>24</sup>

In 1960, as the expansion of Japanese cities was on the rise, a group of young architects and designers prepared to publish their Metabolist Manifesto, forming the foundations of the Metabolism architecture movement.<sup>25</sup> Their idea was to reimagine the city as a biological growth: they proposed building urban structures as “entities capable of constant ongoing process of metamorphosis, <...> birth, growth, decay and replenishment”<sup>26</sup>. As Gardner notes, metabolism's initiatives were both a result of Japan's recent history and an attempt to find a new approach to the current reality of fast-changing images of global cities.<sup>27</sup> A notable feature of this perspective was a focus on ideation and process rather than a result,

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<sup>23</sup> William O. Gardner, *The Metabolist Imagination: Visions of the City in Postwar Japanese Architecture and Science* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 27.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

<sup>25</sup> Lin Zhongjie, *Kenzo Tange and the Metabolist Movement* (Routledge, 2010), 23.

<sup>26</sup> Gardner, *The Metabolist Imagination*, 33.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

so, as Gardner again suggests, Metabolism had a “narrative element” to it, which found reflections in literary and visual art forms.<sup>28</sup> Namely, Gardner uses *Akira* (Katsuhiro Otomo, 1988) and *Patlabor* films (Mamoru Oshii, 1987, 1993) as examples of works that reflect and continue to explore Metabolism’s principles within the realm of their stories.<sup>29</sup>

Both *Akira* and *Patlabor* exemplify Japan’s wide adoption of the cyberpunk genre from the West.<sup>30</sup> As anime was reinventing cyberpunk narratives, it used them to echo Metabolism ideas, ruminate on the possibilities of the urban future and reflect anxieties conditioned by the country’s recent history.<sup>31</sup> The animation medium, thereby, functioned as a perfect vehicle for communicating ideas about the state of the modern world. As Susan J. Napier puts it, “animation is a fusion of technology and art, both suggesting in its content and embodying in its form new interfaces between the two”.<sup>32</sup> Thus, a city lies at the centre of many influential anime features, such as previously mentioned *Akira*, *Patlabor*, *Metropolis*, *Ghost in the Shell* (Mamoru Oshii, 1995), and its continuation, *Innocence*. All of them share genre-specific similarities, set in a dystopian near-future and showing different factions’ struggles for control.

Though we cannot straightforwardly call *Tekkonkinkreet* a cyberpunk narrative, as it doesn’t dwell on the presence of advanced technologies and their influence on society and body,<sup>33</sup> It largely shares cyberpunk’s perspectives and concerns about the city’s state in the modern world. As the film draws on the ideas and visual motifs of thematically similar works, it simultaneously calls to the cinema’s role in preserving the past and present.<sup>34</sup> This,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>30</sup> As it generally considered, the primary texts of the cyberpunk genre in the West are Ridley Scott’s film *Blade Runner* (1982) and William Gibson’s novel *Neuromancer* (1984).

<sup>31</sup> Kumiko Sato, "How Information Technology Has (Not) Changed Feminism and Japanism: Cyberpunk in the Japanese Context." *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 3 (2004): 335-355, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cls.2004.0037>.

<sup>32</sup> Susan Jolliffe Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's moving castle : experiencing contemporary Japanese animation* (New York:Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 11.

<sup>33</sup> If we do want to attribute *Tekkonkinkreet* to a visual aesthetic, the closest one to propose would be *grind fiction* also known as *Shibuya punk* with its focus on urban Japanese setting, high-saturation color palette and angular design elements.

<sup>34</sup> Maciej Stasiowski, “Construction Perseveration Disorder. The Extreme Tectonics of Urban Renewal in Post-Modern Japanese Animation” in *Animate(d) Architecture. A Spatial Investigation of the Moving Image*, ed. Vahid Vahdat (Liverpool University Press, 2025), 63-64.

arguably, is a major part of what comprises both Treasure Town's unique visual identity and its particular outlook towards urban metabolism.

## The Makings of Treasure Town

*“Treasure Town has a certain... je ne sais quoi. A Never Never Land, if you will.”*<sup>35</sup>

Now that we have established *Tekkonkinkreet*'s stance among other thematically relevant works, we can start to identify the elements that comprise Treasure Town's unique look, starting with real-world references and intertextual influences behind it.

As Arias mentions in his interviews, he wanted Treasure Town to have a “pan-Asian feel” to it, with appropriate chaos of old and new blended and constantly evolving.<sup>36</sup> So, he and the art director, Kimura, drew inspiration from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, as well as, to a large extent, the city around them — Tokyo.<sup>37</sup> Several notions forming Treasure Town's image are indicative of that.

Firstly, Treasure Town appears to be a self-contained and self-governed district rather than a city in its entirety. We can argue that the textual treatment of this town strongly evokes the notion of a *ward* — Tokyo's unique form of municipal division. Notably, a distinctive trait of Tokyo's wards is their pursuit to define their unique identity: namely, Shibuya is known as a fashion hub, Asakusa represents a traditional city, and so on. So, considering Takaramachi through this angle underlines the theme of how its character needs to be preserved, or perhaps redefined, in the face of constant change. As the foundation of the town consists of architecture resembling the early Showa era (1926-89),<sup>38</sup> we can imagine

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<sup>35</sup> *Tekkonkinkreet*, 03:00.

<sup>36</sup> “His adopted home is called Treasure Town”

<sup>37</sup> Arias, Otaku USA interview, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Riekeles, *Anime Architecture*, 188.

how, in the past, it might have been a quiet residence for a local working community.<sup>39</sup> This definition, however, is lost in the present, where a newfound variety of traditional elements from different cultures is piled on top and coated with signs of continuous redevelopment. The turmoil of the city's self-determination never stops, as every character in the film sees Treasure Town's purpose differently.

Secondly, we should examine the plan of Treasure Town as it's shown in several scenes of the film (Fig. 5.1).<sup>40</sup>

The image below illustrates the resemblance of Treasure Town's layout to a Japanese city, with the evident gridiron pattern, layered with a capillary patchwork of roads and open areas — an organic maze.<sup>41</sup> The paths merge at the centre, forming the iris to the island's eye: this is where Kiddie Kastle will be built in place of a historical district.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the principal point of the city is defined by metabolism, just like most of Japan's urban fabric. The city, then, is understood as a living organism, which is underlined by its striking shape. We see a similar image in *Akira*'s opening, where Neo-Tokyo, also isolated from its surroundings by a river, visually equates to a part of a blood flow (Fig. 5.2).

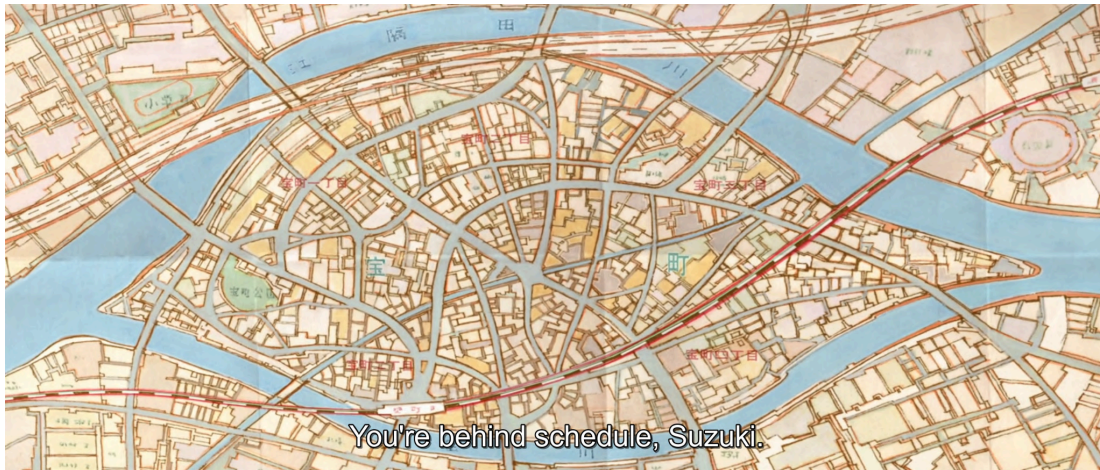
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<sup>39</sup> "Of Iron, Concrete and Muscle", WordPress, effective September 10, 2009, <https://guriguriblog.wordpress.com/2009/09/10/of-iron-concrete-and-muscle-the-architecture-of-tekkon-kinkreet/>.

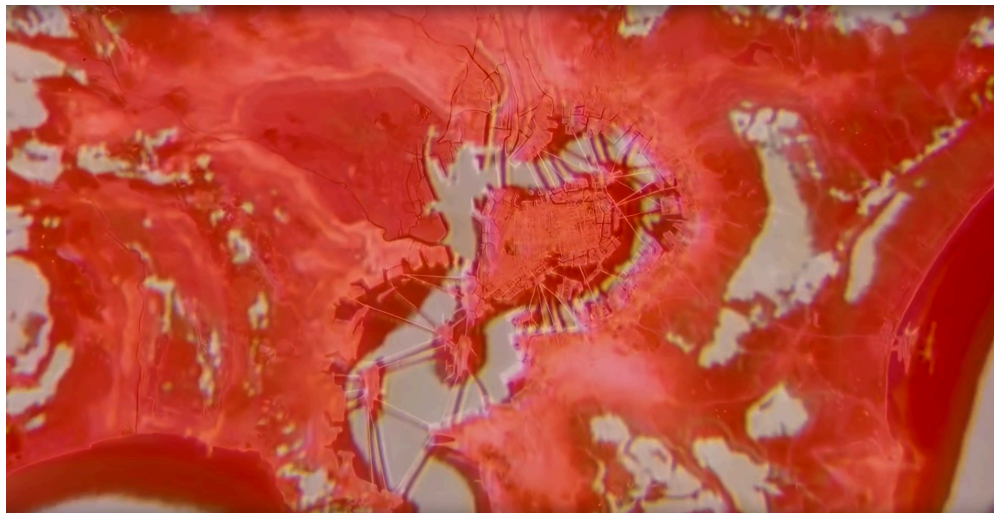
<sup>40</sup> Notably, as Kimura mentions in *Director Michael Arias' 300 Day Diary* (Amer Beton, 2006), forming a cohesive plan of Treasure Town was an essential task during the film's production, since the goal was to create a believable space. Because the team was keeping track of the character's positions and movements throughout the city, its geography remains consistent throughout the entire film.

<sup>41</sup> Botond Bognár, *The New Japanese Architecture*, (Rizzoli, 1990), 15-16.

<sup>42</sup> Shinji Kimura, *Tekkonkinkreet Art Book – Black Side* (Asuka Shinsha, 2006), 183.



**Figure 5.1.** Treasure Town's city plan. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.



**Figure 5.2.** Crossfade to the overview of Neo-Tokyo. Still from *Akira*, directed by Katsuhiro Otomo (Toho, 1998).

Of course, the eye shape of the district stands out as a prominent motif in itself, affirming Treasure Town as an omnipresent living being. This visual is used several times throughout *Tekkonkinkreet*, crossfaded into Black or White's eye, symbolising how they remain the city's integral part, and it, in turn, is shaped by their vision (Fig. 6.1). We can compare this to the well-known moment of an eye mirroring the cityspace in a staple of the cyberpunk genre — *Bladerunner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) (Fig.6.2)<sup>43</sup> — or Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) with its outlook on the city as the sole actor in the film (Fig. 6.3).<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> David Clarke, ed., *The Cinematic City* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1997), 181.

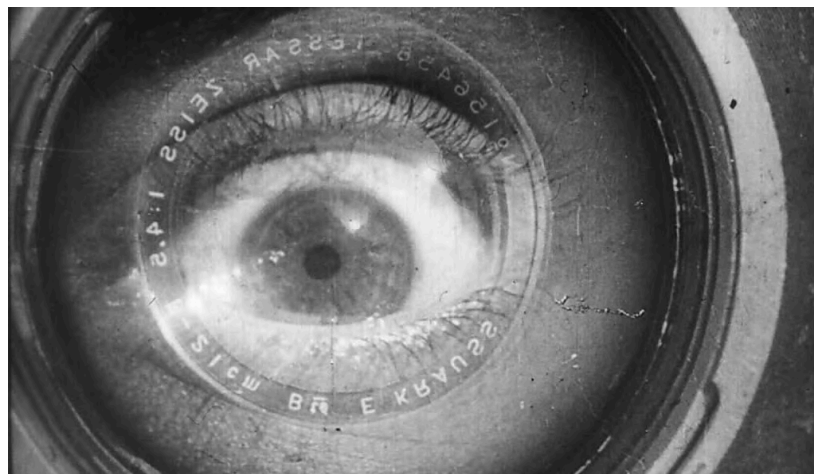
<sup>44</sup> Stasiowski, "Construction Perseveration Disorder", 79.



**Figure 6.1.** Crossfade between Black's eye and Treasure Town. Still From *Tekkonkinkreet*.



**Figure 6.2.** Extreme close-up of an eye reflecting the cityscape from the opening of *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott (Warner Bros., 1982).



**Figure 6.3.** The final shot of *Man with a Movie Camera*, directed by Dziga Vertov (VUFKU, 1929).

Another trait that Takaramachi shares with Asian cities is the overwhelming prevalence of non-architectural elements within it. As architect Boton Bogнар writes about Japan, “the pervasiveness of signs, symbols, billboards and supergraphics, as a kind of progressive anarchy,” is “so thick it sometimes covers up or even replaces architecture entirely” in the

urban scenery.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, similar observations are expressed by Roland Barthes' well-known idea of Japan as the "Empire of Signs".<sup>46</sup> Treasure Town's appearance perfectly aligns with this idea, as its signboards, graffiti and whimsical installations often become the focus of the audience's attention (Fig.7).



**Figure 7.** Abundance of Treasure Town's non-architectural elements. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.



**Figure 8.** Michael Arias surrounded by signs on a street of Kichijoji, on his way to Studio 4°C. Still from *Director Michael Arias' 300 Day Diary*.

<sup>45</sup> Bognár, *The New Japanese Architecture*, 14.

<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (Hill and Wang, 1983).

This abundance of signs and icons is also apparent in other Asian cities (Fig.8), namely Hong Kong, which *Ghost in the Shell* largely refers to when building its urban environment (9.1, 9.3). There, this idea is used to convey a faceless “whirlpool of information” flooding the postmodern city.<sup>47</sup> While *Tekkonkinkreet* does the same to a certain degree, it also uses its non-architectural elements to conjure the image of the past and withered (Fig. 9.2).



**Figure 9.1.** Image board by Hiromasa Ogura for *Ghost in the Shell*. From: Riekeles, *Anime Architecture*, 128.



**Figure 9.2.** Street signs overtaking the view in Treasure Town. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

<sup>47</sup> Wong Kin Yuen, “On the Edge of Spaces. ‘Blade Runner’, ‘Ghost in the Shell’, and Hong Kong’s Cityscape” in *Science Fiction Studies* 27, no. 1 (University of California Press, 2000), 13-14.



**Figure 9.3.** Photograph by Haruhiko Higami, location scouting for *Ghost in the Shell*. From: Riekeles, *Anime Architecture*, 106.

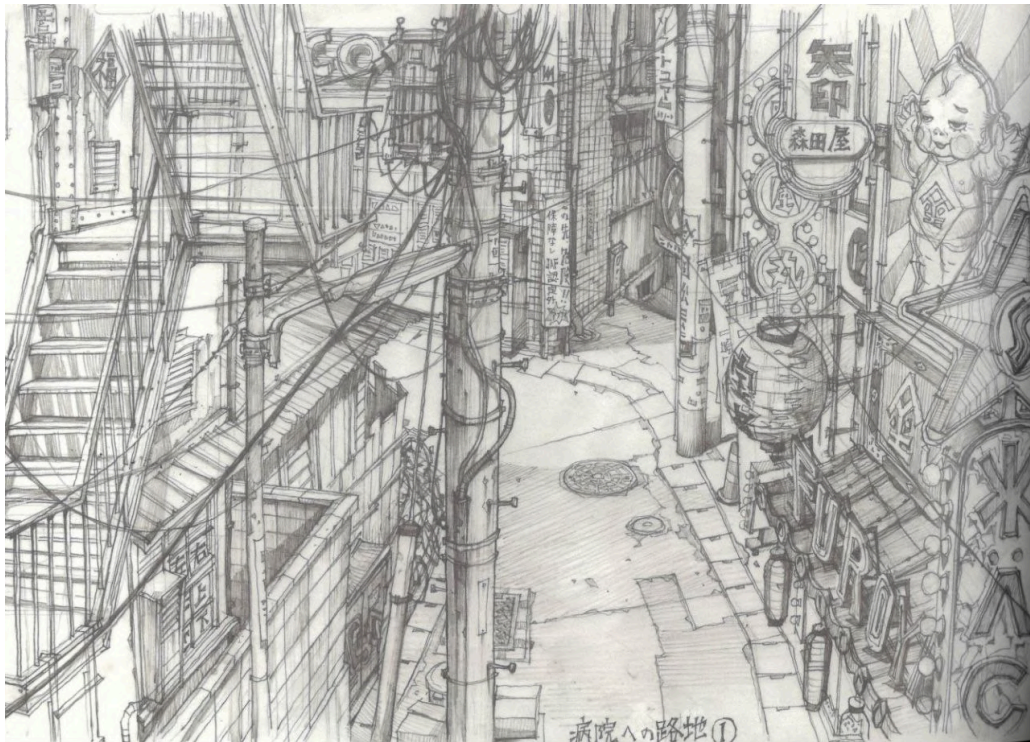
### Motif of Oppositions and Heterogeneity of Treasure Town’s Architecture

*“Even if we stop, the city keeps going.”<sup>48</sup>*

Just like its iconographic elements, Treasure Town’s substantial architecture conveys the sense of the city’s incomprehensibility. As Arias mentions, Taiyo Matsumoto intended to make Tekaramachi in his manga “look like a child’s toy box knocked over”, where “the shiny and new <is> jumbled with the broken and neglected”.<sup>49</sup> Arias and his team, evidently, pursued the same notion in the adaptation by centering two important principles in the town’s depiction — the opposition of modern and wilted, and diversity of the architectural elements (Fig.10).

<sup>48</sup> *Tekkonkinkreet*, 1.10.

<sup>49</sup> “Taiyo Matsumoto’s Tekkonkinkreet: Commentary for Pocket Edition By Michael Arias”.



**Figure 10.** Contrasting elements in *Tekkonkinkreet*'s production layout by Shinji Kimura. From: Kimura, *Tekkonkinkreet Art Book – Black Side*, 135.

In contrast to the cyberpunk aesthetics of earlier anime about megacities, artists at Studio 4°C grounded their creation's design in the reality of what surrounded them — the market area of Kichijoji with its maze-like street network and remains of the early Showa era architecture. Thus, the withering signboards, markets, wooden buildings, and narrow crowded streets in the film are evocative of the respective feeling of nostalgia for the recent past (Fig.11-12).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Riekeles, *Anime Architecture*, 188by.



**Figure 11.1.** Photograph of a covered market in Tokyo taken by Michael Arias. Still from *Director Michael Arias' 300 Day Diary*.



**Figure 11.2.** Background from *Tekkonkinkreet* based on the previous photograph.



**Figure 12.** Showa era street. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

Likewise, many in-film locations are based on existing real-world architecture found around Tokyo, which grounds them in reality despite the abundance of eccentric details, hence conjuring the same sense of familiarity.<sup>51</sup> For example, the river banks under the highways are depicted in line with the scenery often observed in Tokyo,<sup>52</sup> Takaramachi Train Station directly references Gotanda Station on the Tokyo Yamanote Line (Fig.13),<sup>53</sup> Octopus Park was designed based on Ebisu Area in Shibuya (Fig.14),<sup>54</sup> and the Police Station resembles a Dōjukai apartment (Fig.15).<sup>55</sup>



**Figure 13.** Takaramachi Train Station, image board for *Tekkonkinkreet* by Shinji Kimura. From: Riekeles, *Anime Architecture*, 189.

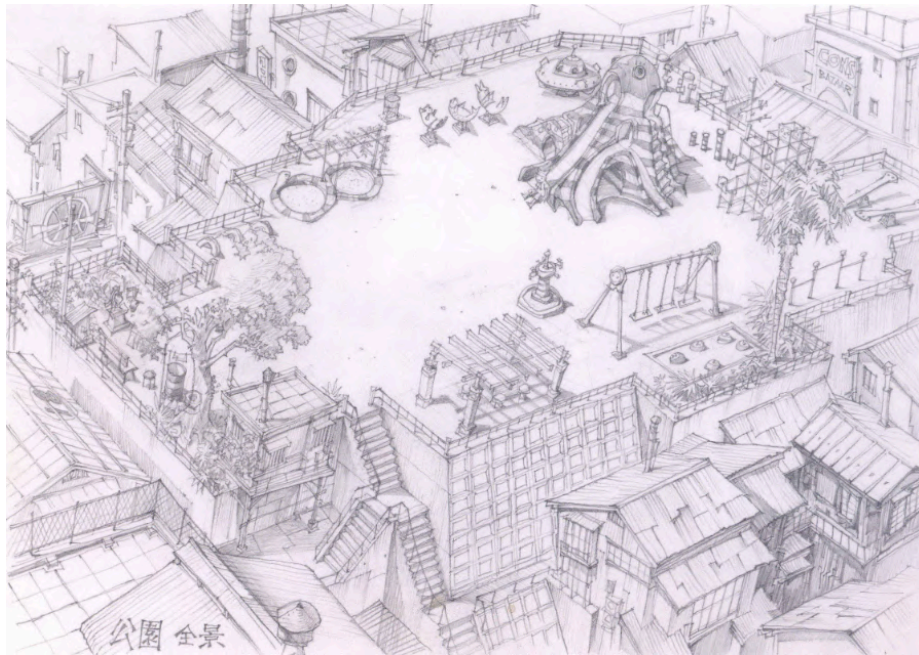
<sup>51</sup> In *Director Michael Arias' 300 Day Diary* (Amer Béton, 2006), Arias mentions how a lot of the film's backgrounds were specifically referencing photographs he took before he started directing.

<sup>52</sup> Kimura, *Black Side*, 78.

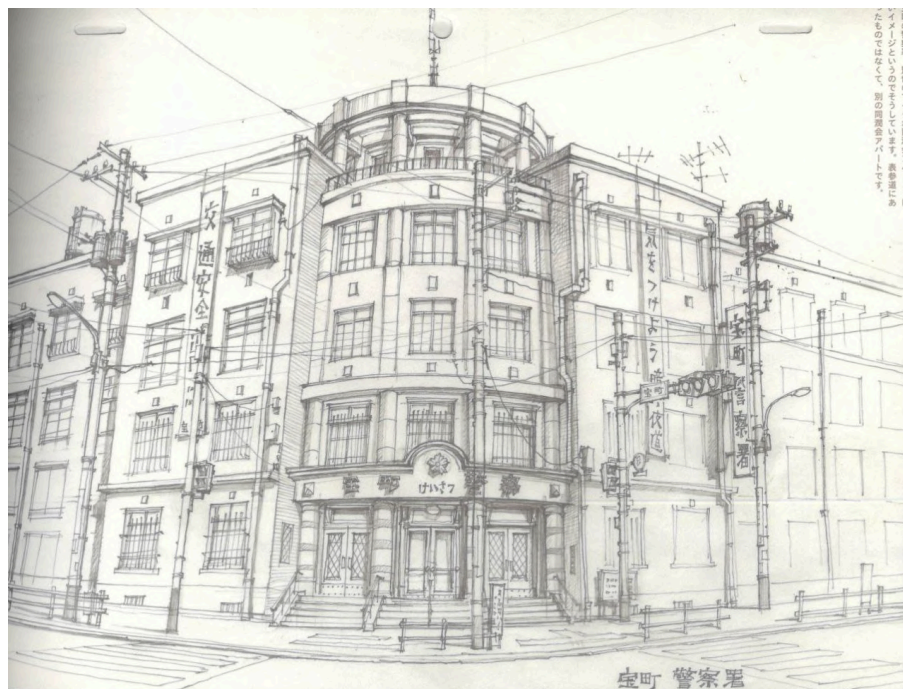
<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 119.



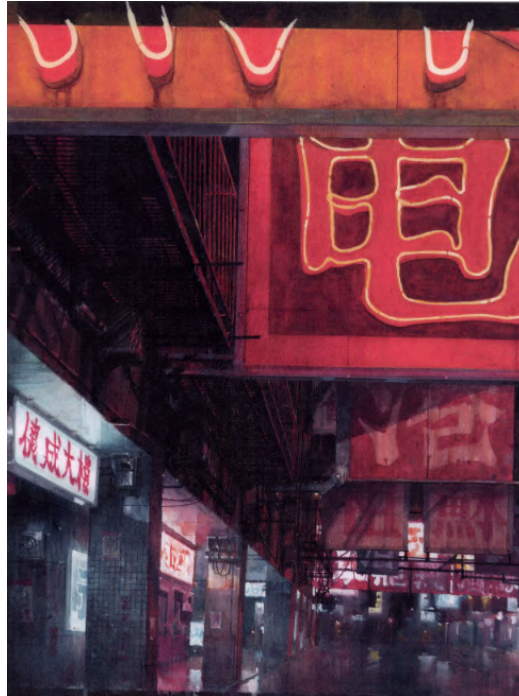
**Figure 14.** Octopus Park, *Tekkonkinkreet* art setting by Shinji Kimura. From: Riekeles, *Anime Architecture*, 213.



**Figure 15.** Takaramachi Police Station, *Tekkonkinkreet* art setting by Shinji Kimura. From: Kimura, *Tekkonkinkreet Art Book – Black Side*, 119.

Along with longing for the past, however, exist elements more typical of dystopian metropolis's depiction — ever-present street poles and electrical wires, high-rise buildings

and industrial piping.<sup>56</sup> At night, when the winding streets of Takaramachi are lit with neon signs, they start to resemble the backstreets of *Akira* or *Ghost in the Shell* (Fig.16).



**Figure 16.1.** Detail from the final production background for *Ghost in the Shell* by Hiromasa Ogura.  
From: Riekeles, *Anime Architecture*, 92.



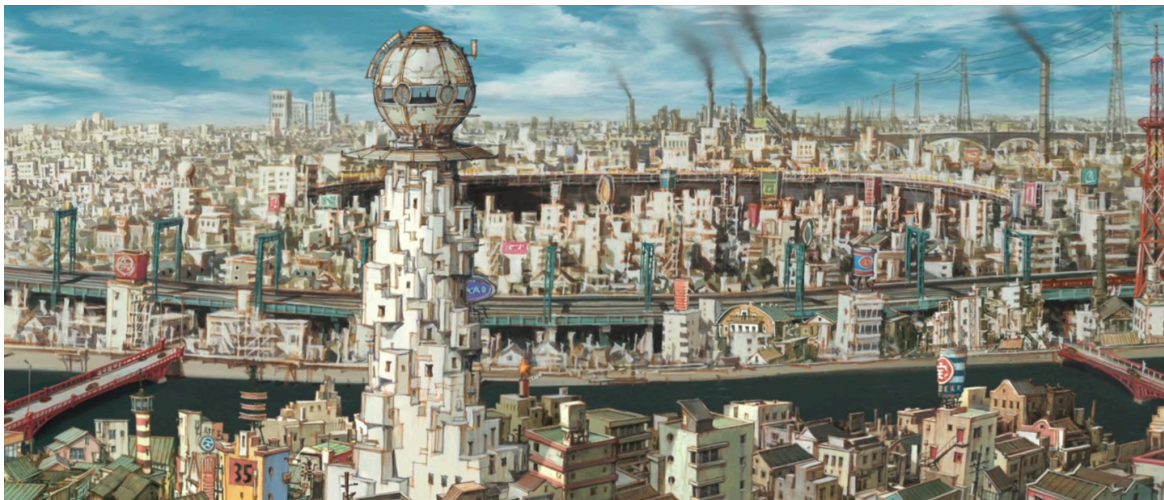
**Figure 16.2.** Treasure Town at night. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

The old and new elements of Treasure Town blend, often layered on top of each other, signifying the struggle between the past and the future — an inevitable part of the metabolic

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<sup>56</sup> Riekeles, *Anime Architecture*, 202, 208.

processes of the city's organism. Frequently, the industrial and traditional, or modern and withered, are shown in opposition to each other. For instance, Snake's panopticon-like tower with its futuristic look seems alien in itself and to the fabric of the city despite the visual harmony of its elements with the rest of the structures (Fig.17).<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Black and White's home — an old car under the highway — is located across from an enormous factory. Their hideout is filled with objects of sentimentality, a ragtag collection of kids' ideas of treasures, and yet in the frame it gets swallowed by the industrial megastructure, representing, in Kimura's words, "the dark side of the world" (Fig. 18).<sup>58</sup> Even the high-rise tower blocks on the opposite river bank are designed to look "pale and distant",<sup>59</sup> the symbols of the imminent progress, standing in stark contrast to older low-rise wooden buildings.



**Figure 17.** Snake's Tower looming over Treasure Town. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

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<sup>57</sup> Kimura, *Black Side*, 124.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 202.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 77.



**Figure 18.** Black and White's home and the factory in the background. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

Notably, the industrial elements in *Tekkonkinkreet* seem to be prevalent during darker narrative turns, while traditional details are associated with a sense of safety. For example, the bathhouse building has a recognisable Japanese roof pattern, while its interior is portrayed in line with how a public bath looked in the old days (Fig. 19).<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Takara Shrine, which White visits under the policemen's protection, is drawn according to the appropriate conventions (Fig. 20).<sup>61</sup> In contrast, both the scenes of Suzuki's death (Fig. 21) and Black and White's separation are permeated by electrical wires. Likewise, Kiddie Kastle, as Kimura writes, was designed to specifically resemble a production plant (Fig. 22).<sup>62</sup>

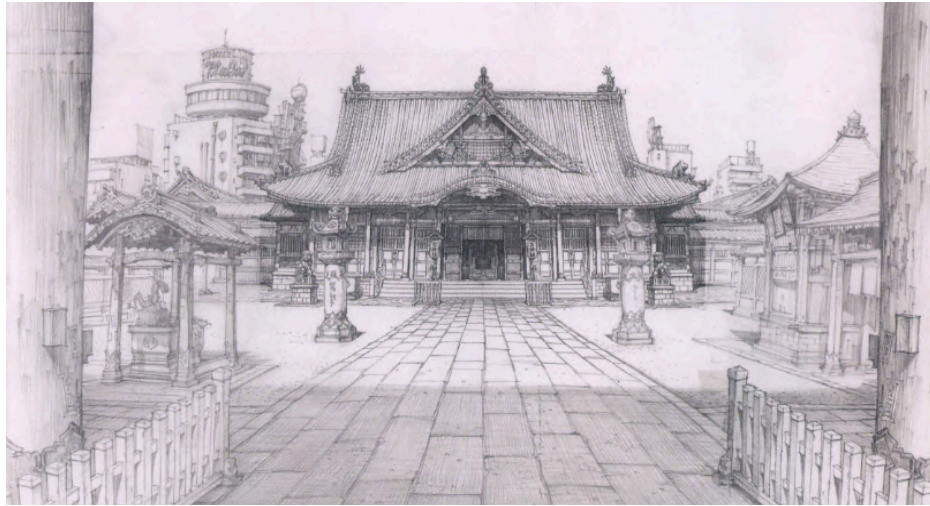


**Figure 19.** Interior of the bathhouse. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

<sup>60</sup> Kimura, *Black Side*, 81.

<sup>61</sup> Kimura, *Black Side*, 165.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 90.



**Figure 20.** Takara Shrine, *Tekkonkinkreet* art setting by Shinji Kimura. From: Riekeles, *Anime Architecture*, 209.



**Figure 21.** Moments before his death, Suzuki is surrounded by wires and evidence of construction. As Kimura notes, the piles of and behind him are supposed to resemble mountains. *Tekkonkinkreet* art setting by Shinji Kimura. From: Kimura, *Tekkonkinkreet Art Book – Black Side*, 170.



**Figure 22.** Kiddie Kastle design. *Tekkonkinkreet* art setting by Shinji Kimura. From: Kimura, *Tekkonkinkreet Art Book – Black Side*, 91.

In addition, the themes of contrast and visual chaos are reinforced with Treasure Town's architectural heterogeneity (Fig. 23). It can be illustrated with the film's opening act, where we follow the main characters running through the city: while the main body of Takaramachi resembles a Showa-era theme park,<sup>63</sup> some buildings conjure the image of Western architecture (or a colonial era architecture similar to what can be found in Sri Lanka), and several structures are directly tied to specific religious and cultural imagery.

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<sup>63</sup> For example, the main street of Treasure Town – Chuo Dori – is modeled after Ginza as it looked during the Showa Era: Riekeles, *Anime Architecture*, 210.



**Figure 23.** Signs in different languages. *Tekkonkinkreet* art setting by Shinji Kimura. From: Kimura, *Tekkonkinkreet Art Book – Black Side*, 81.

For example, we see a Buddha statue in the background, a mosque looming over nearby buildings (Fig. 24), a pagoda tower (Fig.25) and, of course, a giant clock tower with mechanical Ganesha (Fig.27). The clock tower represents a cultural conflux in itself, with Hinduist statues, a *calavera* and a bull head, Hindi writings and symbols on the floor, and a T'ai chi (Yin-Yang) symbol in the middle of the clock face (Fig.26). However, as Kimura admits, the religious imagery is intended to be seen as decorative rather than symbolic, like many other *souvenirs* adorning Treasure Town's streets.<sup>64</sup> Thus, we have to note that while certain architectural signs demand being interpreted in the context of the story's overall themes (the Yin-Yang, Snake's tower, Kiddie Kastle, etc.), others exist merely to enhance the visual disorder.

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<sup>64</sup> Kimura, *Black Side*, 103.



Figure 24. A mosque amidst Treasure Town's architecture. Still from Tekkonkinkreet.



Figure 25. Pagoda tower in the background. Still from Tekkonkinkreet.



Figure 26. The top platform of the clock tower. Still from Tekkonkinkreet.



**Figure 27.** Clock Tower Ganesha. *Tekkonkinkreet* art setting by Shinji Kimura. From: Kimura, *Tekkonkinkreet Art Book – Black Side*, 103.

So, Treasure Town resembles a melting pot of cultures and ideas, each one conveying its own context, but fusing with others to form the unique individuality of the place. Takaramachi is a home for drastically different people and factions, and their clash fuels the city's metabolism — its life force.

### **Treasure Town through Characters' Perspectives**

*"We can't forget the people, the people who were born and raised in Treasure Town".<sup>65</sup>*

Altogether, all the Treasure Town's traits we discussed — the abundance of chaotic non-architectural elements, architectural and cultural heterogeneity and the notion of

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<sup>65</sup> *Tekkonkinkreet*, 41:20.

contrasts — complete the idea of a city as a place beyond rational comprehension. Its different parts don't amass into a consistent image, there is no certain centre to the entanglement of events, and, therefore, the urban fabric cannot be structured and understood as a whole<sup>66</sup>. Nevertheless, as Roland Barthes proposes, the way to bring such an environment into the realm of the *known* is to experience it by exploring, memorising and existing within it.<sup>67</sup> *Tekkonkinkreet's* representation of the city reflects this idea through the contrasting shifts of the visual style, which depend on which characters the plot follows and their emotional states.<sup>68</sup> For instance, Arias points out how he intended the sequences focused on Black and White to “be shown as through shot by a child's instant camera”, while the nightlife “will be shot in the neo-realistic documentary style typical of the photographs of Daido Moriyama and Nobuyoshi Araki”.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, instead of experiencing Treasure Town as a cohesive whole, the audience assembles the image of the city with different parts of it filtered through character's perceptions.

Reinforcing this notion, the main cinematic device Arias employs throughout the film — the handheld camera effect — echoes *cinema verite* in contrast with the “measured and contemplative” framing of other city-centric anime films.<sup>70</sup> The camera work is opportunistic and observational, striving to expose the underlying truth inherent to each narrative subject, instead of the apparent “objective” reality.

Along with its cinematography, *Tekkonkinkreet's* visual style also shifts according to the narrative needs. The colour palettes, choice of perspective, amount of detail and other artistic devices serve the goal of conveying the character's internal states along with the story's emotional progression. As Arias puts it, “seen through Black and White's eyes, Treasure Town is at times a rosy-colored playground, at times a shadowy labyrinth”.<sup>71</sup> This idea can be traced back to Kimura's early key art, displaying a wide stylistic variety. For

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<sup>66</sup> Bognár, *The New Japanese Architecture*, 14.

<sup>67</sup> Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 36.

<sup>68</sup> “Tekkonkinkreet Director's Notes”.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Stasiowski, “Construction Perseveration Disorder”, 78-79.

<sup>71</sup> “Tekkonkinkreet Director's Notes”.

instance, while in some art, Takaramachi is depicted with a child-like naivety through the usage of bright colours and exaggerated shape language (Fig.28), other images define intricate industrial elements and envelop the city in garish colours (Fig.29).



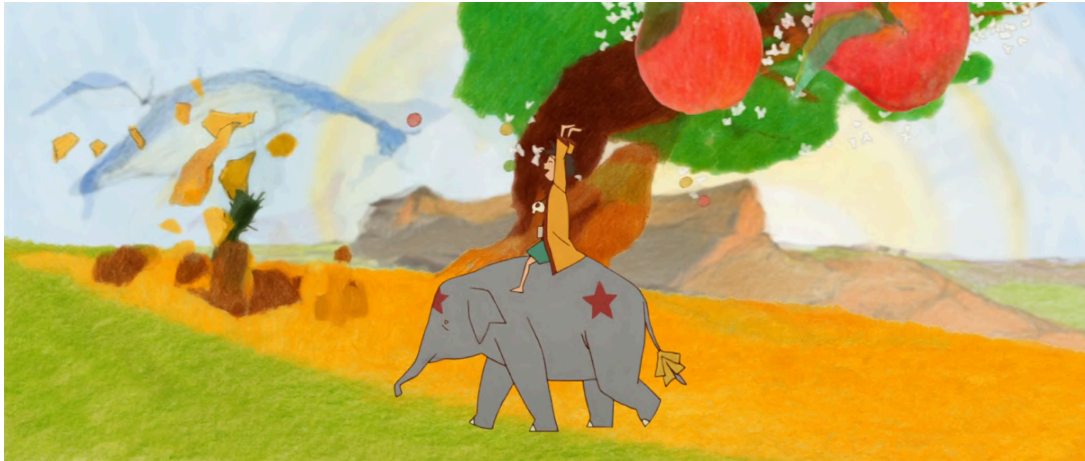
**Figure 28.** Treasure Town through the kids' eyes: according to Kimura, the style of this art was driven by the question of how children would draw clouds. Key art for *Tekkonkinkreet* by Shinji Kimura. From: Kimura, *Tekkonkinkreet Art Book – Black Side*, 10.



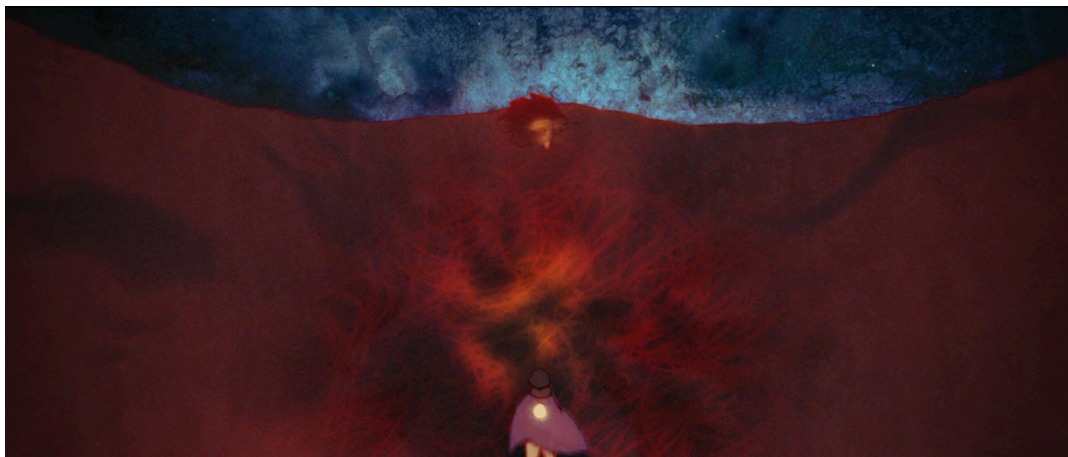
**Figure 29.** Industrial side of Treasure Town. Key art for *Tekkonkinkreet* by Shinji Kimura. From: Kimura, *Tekkonkinkreet Art Book – Black Side*, 30.

This visual diversity culminates in the discrepancy between the apparent reality and Black and White's respective "mindscape": White's imagination is depicted through vivid painterly images resembling "primitive" children's drawings (Fig. 30), while Black's descent into his

internal darkness looks “like something from the work of Francis Bacon or Horst Janssen” (Fig. 31-33),<sup>72</sup> widely diverging from the rest of the film’s visuals.



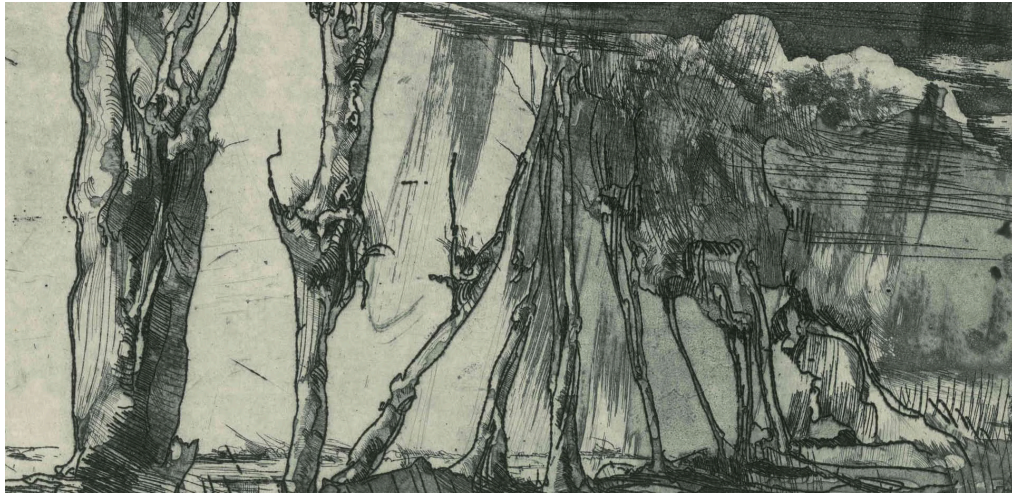
**Figure 30.** White in the realm of his imagination. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.



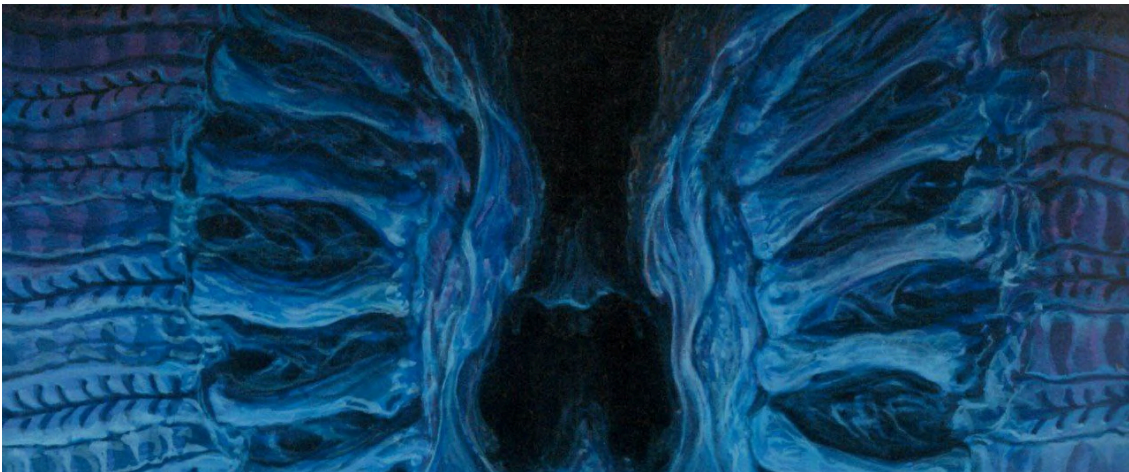
**Figure 31.** Black in the Minotaur’s maze. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 32.** Horst Janssen, “Untitled (from: Propyläen Portfolio I)”, 1972/73, etching. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin. From: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, <https://www.smb.museum/en/exhibitions/detail/in-the-grove/> (accessed March 2, 2026).



**Figure 33.** Key art for the Minotaur’s dimension in *Tekkonkinkreet* by Shinji Kimura. From: Kimura, *Tekkonkinkreet Art Book – Black Side*, 65.

A significant intertext to consider in relation to this focus on characters is the Brazilian film *City of God* (Fernando Meirelles, Kátia Lund, 2002), which Arias names as one of the prominent inspirations for *Tekkonkinkreet*. As he notes, he found it a relevant reference due to its narrative density, setting (a “very sealed off world — a slum”), characters being children, and the way it presented the ideas he wanted to express in his own work.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, we can trace many similarities between the two films, from which *Tekkonkinkreet*’s thematic concerns can be inferred. Both stories, evidently, deal with topics of children raised amid

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<sup>73</sup> Arias, Otaku USA interview, 4.

poverty and violence, and show their cities as full of contrasts. Moreover, like *Tekkonkinkreet*, *City of God*'s setting is a major character in the story that follows its gradual transformation.<sup>74</sup> Different stages of that change are shown in three main parts of the film, each one following its own characters and featuring different cinematographic styles.<sup>75</sup> The fragmented storytelling is paired with "frenetic camera work and restless movement"<sup>76</sup> to stress the authenticity of the subject matter — possibly a method that informed Arias's approach.

Ultimately, *City of God* chooses its devices in an effort to deliver a revelation of the extent of violence in the *favelas*, and then engages the viewer in the discussion of humanity and the roles people play amidst the brutality of their surroundings. In turn, *Tekkonkinkreet* builds on similar ideas to inspect the state of the modern city, through the lens of which we can look at broader philosophical questions of the value of human connection. Both of the works, though, portray the city as a microcosm of the world and push us to examine how much it shapes us.

Since the inextricable link is established between Treasure Town and its characters, we cannot imagine them outside the context of their setting. The characters serve as the viewer's tour guides, and their outlooks on the city fill it with meaning. The fates of Treasure Town's citizens are firmly intertwined with its metabolism, which embodies the relentless clash of contrasts and self-reinvention.

*Tekkonkinkreet*'s characters are largely the actors of the opposing forces at play. Namely, as Arias writes, Black is the city's soul, and White is its conscience.<sup>77</sup> So, through the understanding of the city, we can move towards understanding the characters and how their stories form the overall narrative of the film, along with its core themes.

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<sup>74</sup> Stephanie Muir, *Studying City of God* (Liverpool University Press, 2008), 67.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

<sup>77</sup> "Tekkonkinkreet Director's Notes".

## Chapter Two. Dialectical Oppositions of *Tekkonkinkreet*'s Characters

### The Notion of Oppositions

*“The true is the whole.”*

Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* <sup>78</sup>

In one of his commentaries, Michael Arias points out Taiyo Matsumoto's "fixation on duality" by bringing up the oppositional pairs of characters from his other manga, including *Ping Pong* (1996-97), *GoGo Monster* (2000), *Hanaotoko* (1992) and *Sunny* (2010-15).<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Matsumoto himself admits that "creating a balance between yin and yang by bringing the two aspects closer" composed a recurring motif in his early work.<sup>80</sup>

This idea of conflict between oppositions as a story's driving force arguably stands the most prominently in *Tekkonkinkreet*, which is evident even in the protagonists' names — Black and White. Arias calls *Tekkonkinkreet* "a study of contrasts", where all the characters and plot points epitomise the struggle between antagonistic existential matters such as good and evil, light and darkness, renewal and preservation and so on.<sup>81</sup> Together, they comprise a system of connections between extremes, where the narrative events hinge on the state of balance or lack thereof.

As we observed in the previous chapter, *Tekkonkinkreet*'s setting also embodies the clash of contrasting elements. Treasure Town is shown both as a perilous, grimy place and a thriving, lively environment, capable of nurturing life as well as extinguishing it. Within it, the broken and forgotten parts blend with gleaming modernity, making up a unique and fragile

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<sup>78</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 11.

<sup>79</sup> "Taiyo Matsumoto's Tekkonkinkreet: Commentary for Pocket Edition By Michael Arias".

<sup>80</sup> <https://mangasplaining.substack.com/p/bonus-interview-with-taiyo-matsumoto>

<sup>81</sup> "Tekkonkinkreet Director's Notes".

harmony. The disruption of this balance by urban renovation plans, therefore, marks the logical start of the narrative. The audience, then, witnesses the city's metabolic processes through the eyes of characters, who are inseparably linked to their environment.

*Tekkonkinkreet's* “yin-yang pairings” of characters, all Arias calls them — Black and White as the central one, Rat and Snake, Kimura and Rat, Fujimura and Sawada, and even background characters such as brothers Dusk and Down — represent the same clash of fundamental oppositions within social factions to which they belong.<sup>82</sup> Though, as Arias points out, their portrayal “subverts convention through its deeply humanistic point of view”,<sup>83</sup> so all the characters appear three-dimensional and nuanced rather than ultimate representations of their thematic alignments. This sensibility, however, only deepens our immersion in Treasure Town's microcosm, as we draw connections between characters' beliefs and the city's functions.

## Black and White

*“White is missing lots of screws. I need screws for my heart. God made me broken. Black, too — he's broken. He's missing screws, too. But I've got all the screws Black needs. I've got every one!”<sup>84</sup>*

At the heart of *Tekkonkinkreet's* idea of contrasts, of course, stand its main characters — Black and White, stray kids sharing a brotherly bond, together known as Cats.

As their names clearly indicate, Black and White represent Yin and Yang, respectively, which together make up the image of Tao — the spirit of the absolute in the universe. Thus, Yin and Black demonstrate “a centrifugal force”, darkness and mystery, while Yang and White are “a centripetal force”, brightness and forgiveness.<sup>85</sup> Just like the *T'ai chi* symbol is

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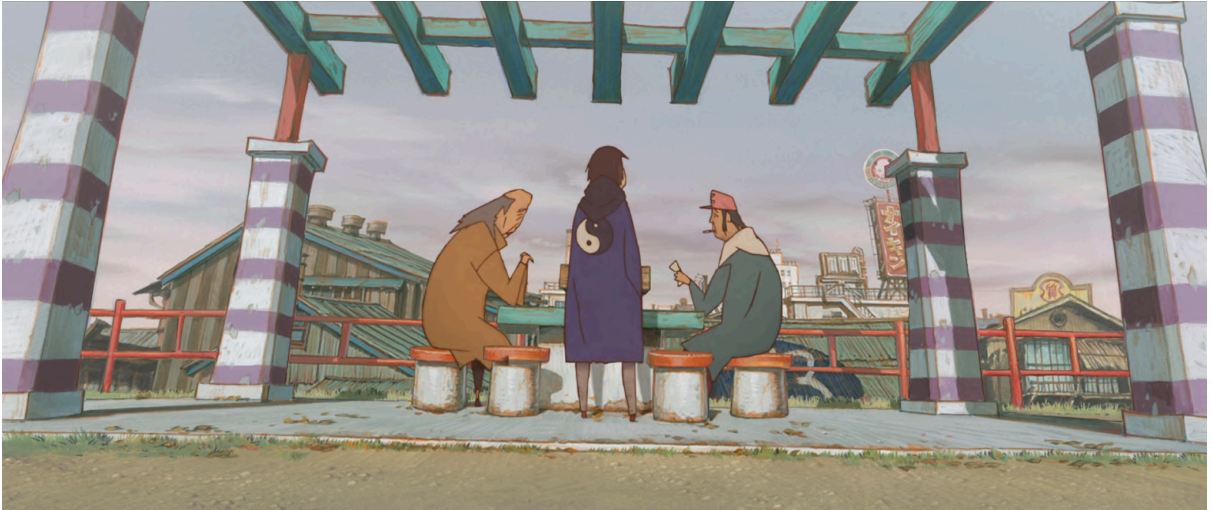
<sup>82</sup> “Taiyo Matsumoto's *Tekkonkinkreet*: Commentary for Pocket Edition By Michael Arias”.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Tekkonkinkreet*, 1:11.

<sup>85</sup> Yoshiko Okuyama, *Japanese Mythology in Film* (Lexington Books, 2015), 67.

created from Yin and Yang's perfect balance, Black and White cannot fully be themselves in separation, as the story gradually reveals (Fig.34).



**Figure 34.** T'ai chi symbol on Black's coat. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

Since Cats proclaim Treasure Town as their own, they protect it and embody its two oppositional sides. As was previously mentioned, Arias calls Black the soul of the city, and White its conscience.<sup>86</sup>

Black navigates life on the streets through instinct, reaction and physicality: his decisions are impulsive and drastic, and he is quick to resort to violence. He recognises the power he possesses and uses it in order to remain in control, as control is his primary way of interfacing with his environment. Therefore, to call Black Treasure Town's soul is to say that he mirrors the city's restless maelstrom of cruelty and power struggles.

White, on the other hand, is introspective and somewhat detached from reality. To the audience, he might seem helpless, as he often stumbles through the physical realm. Yet, he sees the city through the lens of his imagination, and approaches his day-to-day life with playfulness and wonder. Violence brings White pain, so he tries to steer Black away from it, thereby fulfilling his role as the city's conscience. In his ways, White echoes Treasure Town's whimsical, warm and nostalgic side.

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<sup>86</sup> "Tekkonkinkreet Director's Notes".

Black and White are, in a way, a continuation of Treasure Town, so they are able to move through their city freely, unbound by the laws of physics or logic. To them, the world, despite its brutality, resembles a playground — a space for play. They magically leap from roof to roof, fly through the air and survey their surroundings from the highest spots. The town itself comes to their aid at times, like in the scene on top of the clock tower. If we consider the idea of a city's verticality representing its hierarchical structures,<sup>87</sup> then *Tekkonkinkreet*'s main characters surpass this order. Many of the film's scenes, then, are staged with contrasting perspectives, from bird's-eye to ground-level angles. As Kimura notes, Arias intended to use this notion of verticality to reflect and occasionally subvert the narrative's ups and downs.<sup>88</sup> For instance, we see Black contemplating Treasure Town from above (Fig.35) at the story's pivotal moments; one of the most dramatic scenes unravels as Black and White are flying over the city to escape their pursuer (Fig.36); moments before White is about to get stabbed, the background establishes how he is ultimately trapped by placing a metal mesh above him (Fig.37).



**Figure 35.** Black keeps watch on his city as time passes. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

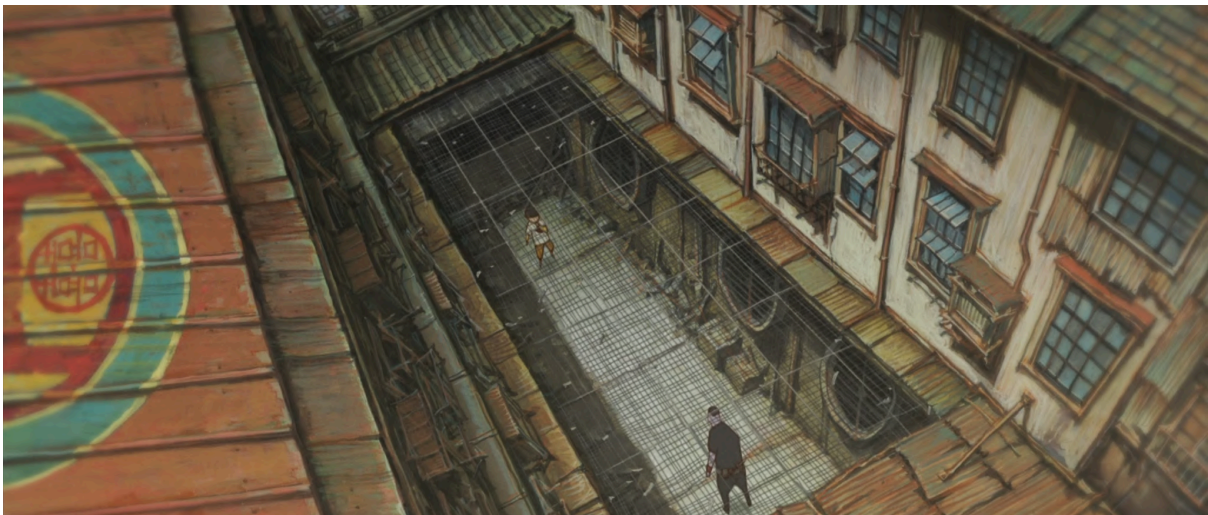
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<sup>87</sup> *Metropolis* can be brought up as an illustrative example of this. See Riekes, *Anime Architecture*, 137.

<sup>88</sup> Riekes, *Anime Architecture*, 190.



**Figure 36.** Black and White escaping Snake's assassin by leaping through the air. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.



**Figure 37.** Metal mesh stops White from running away. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

Since Black and White illustrate the notion of compulsion competing with compunction, it naturally invites us to briefly address the psychoanalytic approach and examine the categories of id, ego and superego found in Freud's hypothesis about mental processes.<sup>89</sup> As Charles Brenner puts it, "id comprises the psychic representatives of the drives", while "the superego comprises the moral precepts of our own minds as well as our ideal

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<sup>89</sup> Berger, *Media Analysis Techniques*, 76.

aspirations”.<sup>90</sup> Overall, Freud’s structural hypothesis describes our psyche as a constant battle between id and superego, where ego — the “individual’s relation to his environment”<sup>91</sup> — serves as a mediator. Hence, Black’s character can be understood as a manifestation of the id, and White’s role corresponds to that of the superego, so their synergy determines the way they both interact with the world around them.

The status quo between the duo hinges on both of them fulfilling their roles in maintaining the balance of their bond. So, the beginning of the film establishes what these roles are: Black provides for both of them and helps White navigate the physical world (dresses him and otherwise cares for him) and, most importantly, keeps White safe (Fig. 38). White, in turn, connects Black with metaphysical matters of the city (senses impending change and dreams of the future) and acts as his moral compass. Throughout the narrative, we see the combinations of their actions and counteractions on display: Black inflicts violence, so White asks God to forgive them; Black steals money, and White gives it away to other kids; Black strives to own and control Treasure Town, and White dreams of escaping it for good, and so on.



**Figure 38.** Black makes sure White is asleep before leaving to fight Kimura. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

<sup>90</sup> Charles Brenner, *An Elementary Textbook of Psychoanalysis* (Anchor Books, 1974), 38.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*

As the story progresses, external changes around Black and White disrupt their balance and widen the rift between them. This culminates during their confrontation with Snake's soldiers, when Black fails to protect his brother, and White loses his innocence as he is forced to hurt and kill their pursuer. Thus, both of the characters surrender their defining traits, which leads to their separation and the culmination of Treasure Town's turmoil.

### **Suzuki, Kimura and Snake**

*"Adapt or perish, gentlemen!"*<sup>92</sup>

Whereas Black and White move up and down the structures of Treasure Town, the criminals dwell on the ground. Characters such as Kimura and Suzuki are often confined in the frame, as if trapped by their surroundings and circumstances of their way of living (Fig. 39). Yakuza members traverse Treasure Town in cars, separated from the world around them, as it turns into a blur of passing images (Fig.40). When they do regard the city from a higher point, the view is always detached from them by glass or metal bars on the windows, signifying the limits of their perception and the narrowness of their outlook on their environment. Similarly, Kimura is often staged with his back to a window, which visually underlines his inability to comprehend the true nature of the city (Fig.41). A telling illustration of the difference between the kids' and the Yakuza's relationship with Treasure Town is a scene of Black's conversation with Suzuki: while the latter is separated from the cityscape by a fence, the former sits on top of it, where he can see everything around him clearly (Fig.42).

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<sup>92</sup> *Tekkonkinkret*, 39:33.



**Figure 39.** Kimura and Suzuki are visually trapped in the frame by the construction site. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.



**Figure 40.** Kimura driving a car. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.



**Figure 41.** A window as Kimura's backdrop. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.



**Figure 42.** Difference in Black’s and Suzuki’s positions in the frame. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

Amongst the Yakuza, opposing forces at play are outlined with the characters of a seasoned local legend, Suzuki, also known as Rat,<sup>93</sup> and his protege, Kimura. As their bond is ultimately that of a father and son, it explores binary categories of the old versus the new. Thus, Suzuki acts as an agent of the “old ways” and preserver of the past, as evident in his negative stance on Treasure Town’s redevelopment and longing for the days gone by (Fig.43).



**Figure 43.** Visual style changes as Suzuki remembers the past. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

<sup>93</sup> Although Suzuki’s moniker — Rat — and Snake’s name evidently allude to the Chinese zodiac, both of them can evoke additional meanings. Namely, the appellation Rat can refer to one of the Japanese yokai — Kyuso, — an “old rat” known for their ability to kill cats. For more information, see Zack Davisson, *Ultimate Guide to Japanese Yokai : Ghosts, Demons, Monsters and Other Creepy Creatures from Japan* (Tuttle Publishing, 2024), 43-44. Snake’s name, in turn, can be read through the notion of the biblical serpent, given his allusions to God and apples comprising a notable recurring image in the film. In addition, Arias in his Director’s Notes refers to Snake as reptilian, or primordial, force.

Kimura, in contrast, is set towards the future, impulsive and eager to prove himself at any cost. Just like in Black and White's duo, one of these characters leans towards the dark, while the other favours the light: Kimura's cruelty and reliance on instinct are set against Rat's respect towards the established system and morals, however twisted they may appear in the criminal world.<sup>94</sup>

Another aspect of their relationship, however, lies in the question of how important it is to have beliefs. Suzuki is guided by a set of principles, from traditions and established order to his enthusiasm towards astrology. Kimura, on the other hand, is completely directionless: without his own convictions, he is susceptible to the influence of those who demonstrate their power. A dialogue between the two displays this clearly:

Suzuki: Kimura, you believe in astrology?

Kimura: I believe in nothing.

Suzuki: Nothing, huh? At least believe in love, Kimura. Love is all you need.<sup>95</sup>

The balance between the two, initially protected by their hierarchy, breaks when Kimura loses his role in said order and, consequently, his ability to act after his confrontation with Black. So, in search of an outlet for destructive energy within and not confined to moral orientiers, Kimura falls under the influence of his other counterpart — Snake.

Snake is an alien presence in Treasure Town — a ferocious capitalist with an insatiable thirst for power and wealth. With his plan to demolish the old city and turn it into an amusement park, he embodies the devastating power of progress. Hence, he can be thematically set in opposition to Suzuki: while one of them represents change and ruin, the other stands for preservation and remembrance. Kimura, then, is caught between the two forces figuratively fighting for his soul.

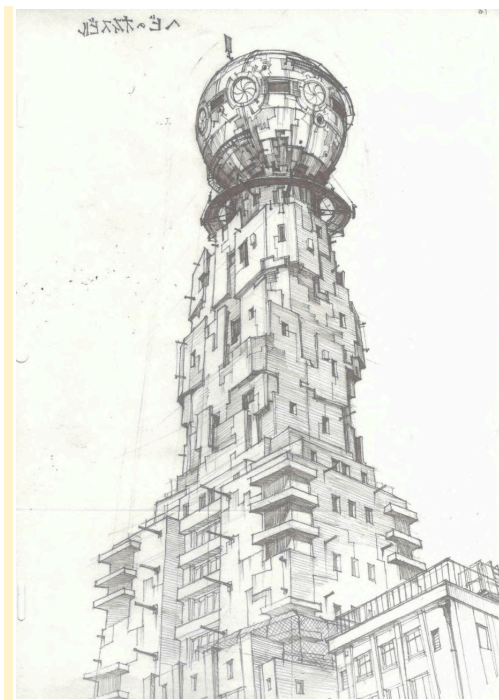
Snake's view of Treasure Town, along with his position within its societal structures, is clearly conveyed through the image of his otherworldly tower that serves as his only vantage

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<sup>94</sup> "Tekkonkinkreet Director's Notes".

<sup>95</sup> *Tekkonkinkreet*, 13:24.

point: just like Snake, this building is a foreign element to the fabric of the city. Its design is modelled from the architectural project of Lebbeus Woods, as is evident by the image comparison below (Fig.44).<sup>96</sup> However, this parallel subverts Woods' vision for his creation: the industrial elements in his work intend to repel the bourgeois and provide space for the common people, in polar opposition to Snake's goals. Snake's headquarters, then, appear to be composed of similar surreal and mechanical elements to underline his desire to make the city only accessible for the rich and eliminate everything that doesn't bring profit (Fig.45).<sup>97</sup>



**Figures 44.1, 44.2.** On the left: Snake's Tower. Tekkonkinkreet art setting by Shinji Kimura. From: Kimura, *Tekkonkinkreet Art Book – Black Side*, 124. On the right: Lebbeus Woods, Quad GA: Square with Geodynamic Towers, 1987, pencil and airbrush on board. From: Metalocus, <https://www.metalocus.es/en/news/lebbeus-woods-line> (accessed March 7, 2026).

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<sup>96</sup> "Taiyo Matsumoto and Michael Arias – Tekkonkinkreet Influence", Wordpress, archived July 10, 2012 at

<https://letsfallasleep.wordpress.com/2008/10/29/taiyo-matsumoto-and-michael-arias-influences/>

<sup>97</sup> "Of Iron, Concrete and Muscle"



**Figure 45.** Snake watches the city through a narrow viewfinder. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

In the pair of Kimura and Snake, their opposition is not immediately apparent. As Arais notes, “their intersection depicts the layers of evil that exist in humanity”.<sup>98</sup> So, although Kimura is an antagonist in the film, his character is shown from a humanistic perspective. It is evident through his acceptance of his role as a father, as his girlfriend expects a child, and through the deep remorse he feels when killing his mentor. Snake, in contrast, personifies the quintessential evil that lies beyond any idea of balance. Depicted as distinctively alien, he is a primordial force originating from an absolute source — something that Snake himself calls God, but we are free to interpret as nature or universal order. Hence, the dichotomy between Snake and Kimura lies in the idea of embracing one’s humanity versus discarding it. Snake is incapable of seeing the city as anything but an experiment or his personal playground built for profit, but Kimura ultimately cannot reject his attachments — so he has a choice to make.

What, then, is the power that can oppose the radical spread of destruction and violence? Kimura answers this question, positioned at the centre of *Tekkonkinkreet*’s narrative, a second before he shoots Snake: “Love <put me up to this>. Love and truth.”<sup>99</sup>

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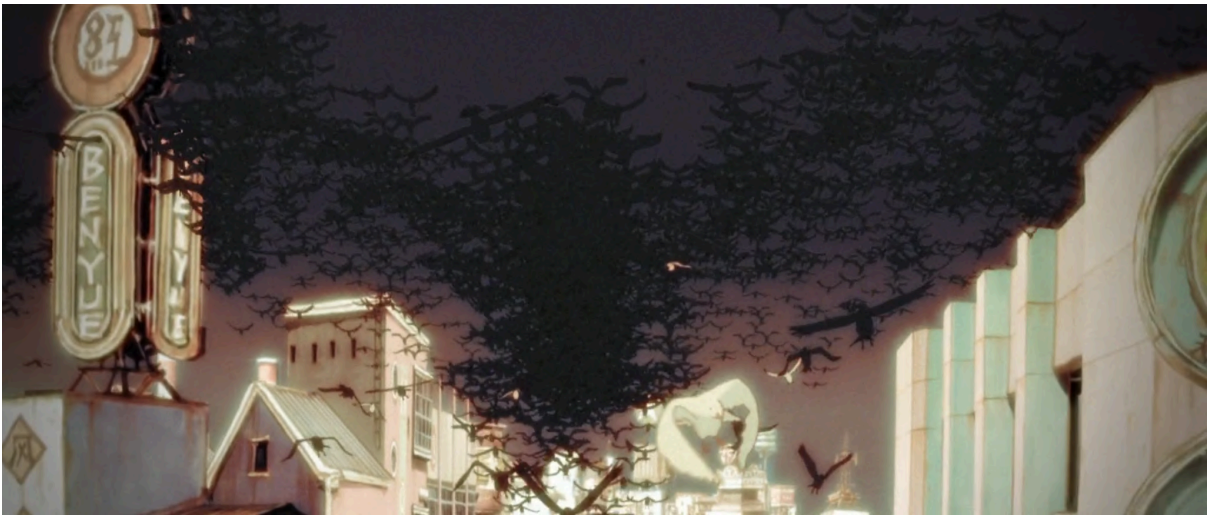
<sup>98</sup> “Tekkonkinkreet Director’s Notes”.

<sup>99</sup> *Tekkonkinkreet*, 1:30.

## Minotaur's Maze

*Lost between light and dark, you found another part of yourself.*<sup>100</sup>

Much like the secondary story of *Tekkonkinkreet* culminates in Suzuki and Snake fighting for Kimura's soul, the primary plot gets resolved through White and the Minotaur's battle for Black (Fig.46).



**Figure 46.** In the Minotaur's version of Treasure Town, devoid of life and color, a flock of black birds consumes the white doves, representing Black's internal battle. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

The myth of the Minotaur — a man-eating beast born from man's greed and cursed to endlessly wander a labyrinth — has been interpreted by countless theorists and widely adopted by modern culture. One of the most prominent interpretations, for instance, stems from Freud, who saw the labyrinth as the human psyche. The Minotaur, accordingly, embodies the bestial tendencies we repress.<sup>101</sup> *Tekkonkinkreet's* evocation of the myth, thus, appears to be in line with this reading.

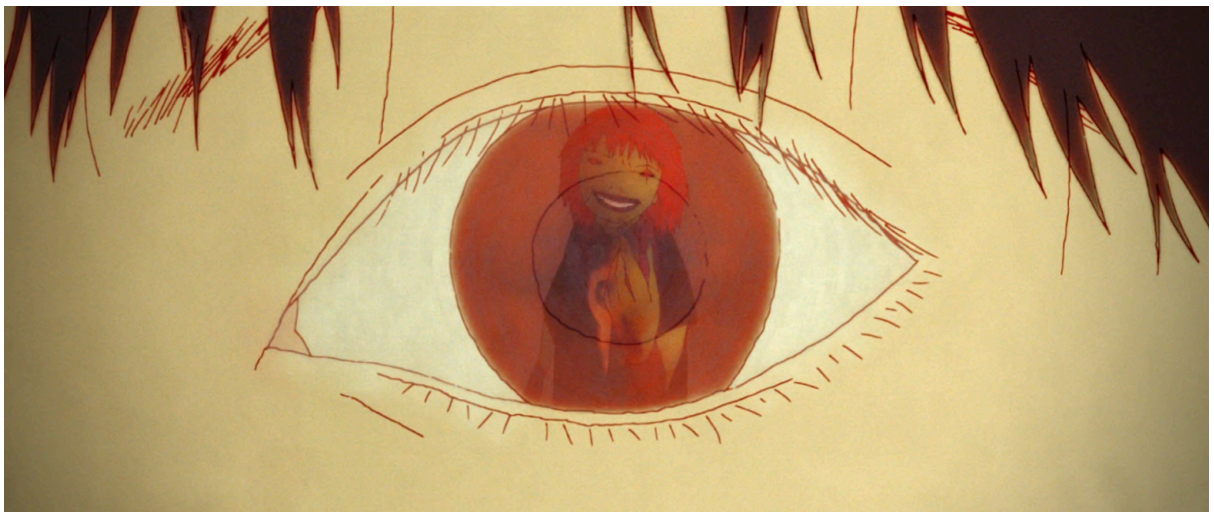
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<sup>100</sup> *Tekkonkinkreet*, 1:34.

<sup>101</sup> Liz Gloyn, *Tracking Classical Monsters in Popular Culture* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019), 194-195.

Although the idea of the Minotaur drifts in Treasure Town's collective consciousness throughout the film, he only makes an appearance at the lowest point of the narrative. Without White, Black's mind unravels, and the darkness within him, without light to balance it, conjures the myth into existence. Treasure Town, similarly, in the absence of its conscience, surrenders the logic and meaning and turns into the winding labyrinth from the legend, or, in other words, a trap — what the city becomes for those who are lonely.

Whereas Snake epitomises primordial evil brought by *external*, universal forces, the Minotaur's power poses an even more sinister threat — the darkness and chaos *within* oneself (Fig.47). Narratively, the Minotaur embodies surrendering one's humanity, along with solitude and the fear of death, as he comes to save Black, who went insane without his counterpart, from his demise. Symbolically, the Minotaur represents the innate state of existence, lack of conscious repression, the id devouring the ego in the absence of the superego — Black, unbalanced.<sup>102</sup>



**Figure 47.** Repeating the eye motif, the Minotaur is reflected in Black. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

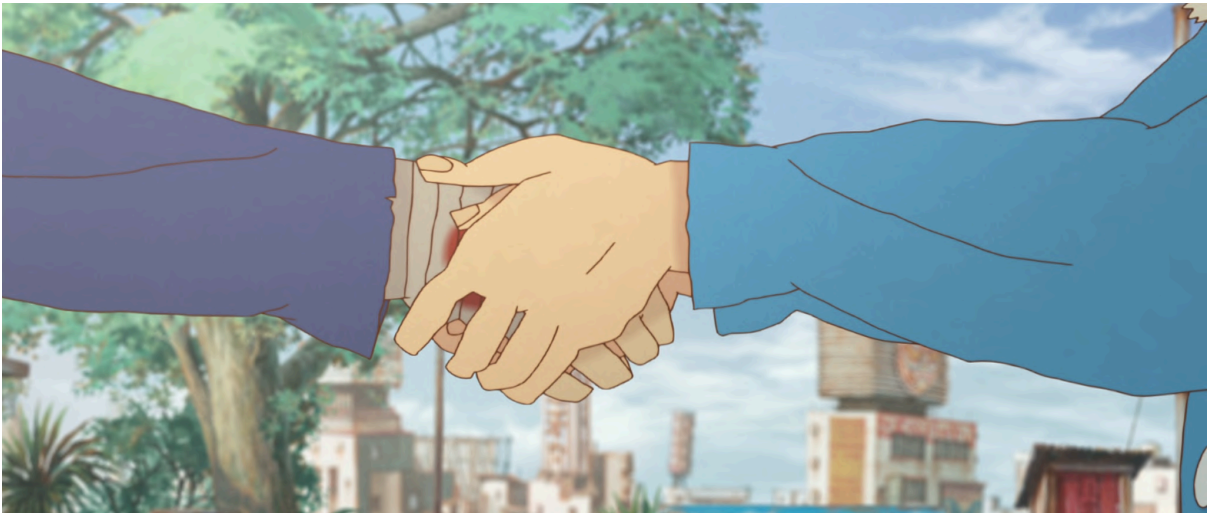
“I’m not just the shadow cast by your light,” — the Minotaur tells Black — “I’m the real you”.<sup>103</sup> Thus, the only way to resist the beast comes in the act of Black embracing and

<sup>102</sup> Berger, *Media Analysis Techniques*, 77.

<sup>103</sup> *Tekkonkinkreet*, 1.34

accepting his attachment to another person. In the depths of pure darkness, Black, much like Kimura, finally chooses to believe in love.

The Minotaur, however, is not slain; only repressed to remain within until the next time Black might need him (Fig.48). This, indeed, fits the definition of the Minotaur as the instinctive force of our psyche: we cannot abolish it completely, as it's as intrinsic to our nature. It, however, can be subdued with the power of balance — even though it means that maintaining this balance and turning to light are active choices we have to make throughout our lives.



**Figure 48.** As he reunites with White, Black has a scar on his hand as a reminder of the Minotaur. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

## Beyond Treasure Town

*Why do we not give in to the chaos, or simply despair at the sight of such entropy? Why continue living when surrounded by such tragedy and evil? What will save us? Love. Above all else, I hope viewers of this film will remember the power of love.*

-Arias<sup>104</sup>

At the end of *Tekkonkinkreet*, Black and White find themselves at the ocean shore, outside of the bounds of Treasure Town's bulging belly and its relentless clash of oppositional forces. Many times throughout the film, we have seen the image of this paradise, as it appeared in White's dreams and, for instance, as an exhibition of Kimura finally reaching the state of balance in the moment of his tragic death. The ocean, therefore, serves as a thematic contrast to the city — a state of freedom found by achieving an equilibrium. Much like in *The City of God*, where the main character survives as he separates himself from the violence of his city by metaphorically and literally shielding himself with a camera lens, Black and White detach themselves from Treasure Town's chaos with the state of their *togetherness*.

Arias intentionally envisioned the final sequence of the film to be ambivalent: neither he nor we know if the main characters truly escaped the city and built a house by the shore, like White wanted.<sup>105</sup> However, the literal reading here appears insignificant, as *Tekkonkinkreet* seems to convey how the symbolic balance brings Black and White to the place of their salvation.

*Tekkonkinkreet* ends with White building a structure out of seashells; resembling an eye, it parallels Treasure Town's shape (Fig. 49). The repetition of this visual motif metaphorically answers White's unvoiced question from the beginning: what do you see there? As Arias

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<sup>104</sup> "Tekkonkinkreet Director's Notes".

<sup>105</sup> Michael Arias in "Director Michael Arias' 300 Day Diary", directed by Amer Béton (Sony Pictures, 2006), DVD.

puts it when talking about the meaning of this moment, “what you see depends only on you”.<sup>106</sup> In contrast to the eye of the city we see all along, which reflects violence and oppositional turmoil, at the end Black and White find the strength to realise that it is not the innate state of existence. Instead, what you see is your own creation, one that can be formed through compassion, collective action and love.



**Figure 49.** White builds an eye on the shore. Still from *Tekkonkinkreet*.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

*From here, you can see everything.*<sup>107</sup>

*Tekkonkinkreet* is a work that centres the city as its main character and the driving force of the narrative. Its meticulously crafted urban landscape, as we have witnessed throughout our analysis, stands out in comparison to other city-centric anime films produced from the 1980s to the early 2000s. In contrast to a usual portrayal of a dystopian megacity, Treasure Town is a patchwork of antiquated architecture and rapidly developing appearances of modern metropolises. It pays homage to Showa-era Tokyo, evokes the chaos of Asian cities and mixes it with inspirations from a wide range of films to construct a truly believable fantastical setting capable of reflecting the dilemmas we face in the world around us.

At its core, *Tekkonkinkreet* is a study of contrasts, from nostalgia and modernity to unity and solitude. This idea is reflected in Treasure Town's relentless metabolism as much as in the portrayal of its characters. In the film, we see the city as a microcosm of clashing beliefs and desires, where change is a natural order of things; however frightening it might be, it cannot be stopped. So, the only way to navigate this chaos is through the pursuit of balance — searching for light in the darkness, reaching for connection, choosing your own principles.

Ultimately, *Tekkonkinkreet* demonstrates the animation medium's powerful ability to create a setting both imaginative and capable of mirroring the state of the modern urban fabric. Thus, engaging with fictional cities like Treasure Town and analysing them allows us to rethink the state of our own reality, along with the role we want to play in it.

Inside every one of us lives the Minotaur. The Minotaur wanders every city's labyrinth, ready to be summoned with betrayal, violence and greed. We call on its power in the face of tragedy and injustice so frequently encountered in the world, but, unleashed, it will turn the world into a void. The only way to save our humanity, then, is to remember the light on the other side of every darkness — to hold on to your beliefs and to the people you love.

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<sup>107</sup> *Tekkonkinkreet*, 1.50

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