

[← Back to Original Article](#)

MOVIE REVIEW

Battling civilization in the anime spirit

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A clutter-bomb vision of a colorfully decaying pan-Asian metropolis that spurs a few of its fiercest defenders into violent battle, "Tekkonkinkreet" is a Japanese anime feature that for all its stylistic bravado is sharply attuned to a modern world afraid of change. Based on an acclaimed, beloved manga series by Taiyo Matsumoto, the film takes place in a graffitied, old-Tokyo-like city called Treasure Town whose mixed-style zoning aesthetic of faded buildings, cramped housing, industrialization and crisscrossing electrical lines resembles a cobwebbed, steel-and-tile rash.

Commanding this turf are a rooftop-hopping urchin gang of two named Black and White -- brothers for whom the urban sprawl is their sea and telephone pole tops their bird's-eye masts. Black is a hard-bitten, clear-eyed youth with a Droog-like taste for assault, his 11-year-old brother White a forever childish, heart-driven innocent who needs Black to tie his shoes. Intended to represent the two-sided soul of the city, they suggest the war between nostalgia and cynicism that characterizes many present-day struggles against progress.

It's a heady construct that L.A.-born but Japan-familiar director Michael Arias -- the first Westerner to shepherd a Japanese anime feature -- doesn't always articulate smoothly. The visuals, however, are hypnotic, from the lived-in geographical detail to some nice digital shading that suggests a viewpoint either glassy or smudged, and the restless camerawork. Also effective is the escalating action, notably with the entrance of villainous Mr. Snake, a wraith-like developer who intends to bulldoze Treasure Town's sinful heart to build his amusement park empire -- shades of Disney versus Times Square.

Arias has a tendency toward creative overkill, mostly in the climax that renders with apocalyptic imagery the metaphysical consequences of Black and White's separation. But the best thing about this sequence -- Black's whirlpool pessimism finally rising to threaten White's sunny visions of a blue-skies-and-sandy-beaches future -- is that it stems from the filmmakers' close emotional connection to their young, scarred protagonists. It ensures that "Tekkonkinkreet," for all its architecturally grimy virtuosity and flourishes of anime cool, remains the story of a damaged city that can still point to one mighty example of brotherly love.

"Tekkonkinkreet." MPAA rating: R for some violent and disturbing images, and brief sexuality. In Japanese with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes. At the Landmark, 10850 W. Pico Blvd., West L.A. (310) 281-8233.