

**JAPAN'S LOST DECADE, ABOUT 1992 TO 2003**, encompassed the systemic economic, political, and social crisis left by the collapse of the bubble economy. During that time Japan seemed to lose direction, and the Japanese, afflicted by youth violence, alienation, and the aftereffects of a spending spree that brought ruinous debt and spiritual emptiness, were left to wonder what their hard work since the end of World War Two had accomplished. Anyone who wants to understand the existential angst that gripped the Japanese during this period should look at this anime series from Satoshi Kon.

**THE SERIES NOMINALLY CENTERS ON THE SEARCH FOR A TEENAGE BOY ON IN-LINE SKATES**, popularly known as *Shōnen Bat*, who attacks residents of a Tokyo neighborhood with a golden aluminum bat. The victims in the first four episodes seem to invite attack because it releases them from the terrible stress they suffer and enlists public sympathy for their private anguish. Only after a young suspect is questioned by the police in Episode no. 5, do we begin to understand that Kon is not simply repeating a formula to examine various social pathologies or the crises of daily life, but intends to take us someplace much darker and farther out. Through the interrogation of the suspect, we learn the larger theme of the series, the unendurable pressure of modern life and the ways people find to relieve that pressure. In Kon's view, wish-fulfillment fantasies, often of a rather dark hue, are the key to survival in the modern age. For some people, though, the wish to be relieved of life's burdens takes a more active form. This is especially so with *Shonen Bat's* first victim, Tsukiko Sagi, a harried young woman whose cute popular character, Maromi, has become a nationwide sensation. The jealousy of her co-workers and the unbearable pressure from her boss to repeat this success causes Sagi to manifest the paranoia agent of the title, the mysterious assailant known as *Shōnen Bat*. Now brought to life, the roller-blading, bat-wielding teenager embarks on a spree, attacking other victims who radiate similar levels of desperation.

Throughout the series, Detective Ikari, senior investigator on the case, serves as Kon's stand-in. For the director, Ikari embodies the utter bewilderment felt by the immedi-



## PARANOIA AGENT



### The Anime Series by Satoshi Kon

PRODUCED BY  
MADHOUSE STUDIOS

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DVD, THIRTEEN EPISODES,  
FOUR-DISK SET

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REVIEWED BY PAUL DUNSCOMB

ate postwar generation that rebuilt Japan and created the era of high speed economic growth with young Japanese born of the bubble economy and the lost decade, particularly Kozuka Makoto, the boy who claims to be *Shonen Bat*—but in fact is not. Kon, playing on this sense of bewilderment, makes a wonderfully subversive suggestion. Perhaps the greatest threat facing Japan is a national sensibility, shaped by the desires of teenage girls who seek relief in the anodyne cuteness of popular characters (thereby escaping the harshness of reality), and by teenage boys who retreat into the virtual world of role playing games (to find meaning in life). The cute Maromi and *Shōnen Bat* are two sides of the same coin, and both, ultimately, wreak destruction on Tokyo. Despite the heavy loss of lives and property, this amounts to a happy ending for Kon, who suggests that Japanese were more content and understood themselves better when busy with the tasks of recovering from war and destruction.

The series features levels of sex, violence, and adult themes, that make it suitable only for college students. Consider using the series towards the end of a Modern Japan history or social anthropology course to provide a glimpse of Japanese society at the start of the twenty-first century. Episodes eight through ten, on disc three, are essentially stand-alone place fillers, bulking up the series to thirteen episodes but not advancing the meta-narrative of the other three discs. They do, therefore, offer opportunities for teachers wanting to look at social phenomena—like internet suicide chat rooms or the role of gossip city homemakers in enforcing neighborhood norms—with quick and provocative introductions to the topic without having to get stuck in the larger issues Kon is concerned with. ■

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