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-

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