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## AUM: The Cult at the End of the World

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## AUM: The Cult at the End of the World

### Abstract

This is a film review of *AUM: The Cult at the End of the World* (2023), directed by Ben Braun and Chiaki Yanagimoto.

### Keywords

Apocalypse, Terrorism, Aum Shinrikyo

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### Author Notes

Dereck Daschke is a professor of Philosophy & Religion at Truman State University and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Particularly interested in the intersection among religion, psychology, and wellness, his academic work over more than two decades has analyzed the transformational breakdowns and creative buildups in the form of apocalypses, mysticism, new religious movements, psychedelics, the Bible, Bob Dylan, and, of course, film. He regularly teaches “Religion and Film” at Truman and has overseen a number of student research theses that have contributed to the conversation about just why it is that movies capture our meaning-making imaginations in the way they do.



**AUM: The Cult at the End of the World (2023), dir. Ben Braun and Chiaki Yanagimoto**

When members of Aum Shinrikyo, a Japanese apocalyptic cult directed by “guru” Shoko Asahara, released sarin gas into some parts of the Tokyo subway system on March 20, 1995, killing thirteen commuters and injuring up to 1000 or more, some in the United States viewed the incident as a terrible harbinger of things to come—of a piece with the explosion of a bomb in the parking garage of the World Trade Center (WTC) three weeks earlier and the siege of the Branch Davidian religious complex in Waco, Texas, which had begun two days after the WTC bombing and would conclude with the fiery deaths of almost the entire Davidian community a month after the sarin gas attack. The terrible end of the Waco siege would itself partly inspire, two years to the day afterward, the bombing destruction of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City by two right-wing domestic terrorists. Asahara and Aum’s terroristic targeting of ordinary workers and commuters in a major first-world city would, of course, be recapitulated and eclipsed in New York

City on September 11, 2001. As terrifying as the events on that March day in Tokyo were, as it happened they were overshadowed by the horrors that would soon follow, some of which the world continues to live with today. Have the threat posed by Aum and Asahara, and the lessons to be learned by understanding how and why such an attack had taken place, been all but forgotten with the deluge of cataclysm that has occurred in the decades since?

Filmmakers Ben Braun, an American whose elementary school was blocks from 9/11's Ground Zero, and Chiaki Yanagimoto, who grew up near Aum's headquarters in Kamikuishiki at the base of Mt. Fuji, seek to bring viewers' attention back to those events and their historical, political, religious, and personal contexts, with a keen eye for the alarming parallels they see between the cultural tensions in the world today—especially in the US—and those in Japan in the 1990s. Based on the 1997 book *The Cult at the End of the World* by investigative journalists David E. Kaplan and Andrew Marshall, Braun and Yanagimoto's film updates the story of the group and its criminal activities by interviewing numerous individuals directly impacted by Aum, Asahara, and their actions: survivors of attacks, parents of victims and cult members, ex-members, and even Asahara's PR flack and a top leader in Aum, Fumihiro Joyu. The perspective of almost thirty years reflection back on the tragic events inevitably adds a layer of comprehension and reconciliation with the past that treatments from the time period like Kaplan and Marshall's work, or even Robert J. Lifton's 1999 psychological analysis, *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism*, could not.

The film, of course, presents much of what had come to be known about Aum in the years following the subway attacks and the subsequent raids on Aum facilities and arrests, trials, and executions of Aum members, including Asahara. After its extraordinary story rebuilding itself literally from the ashes of World War II, Japan's economic engine was stalling in the 1990s, and

a kind of despair and distrust in the country's various institutions had set in among many young adults, including some of the brightest in the worlds of science and technology. The emergence of new religious movements in the 1980s had started offering alternative values by which to live in the world, one of which was Asahara's yoga school, which would become Aum Shinrikyo. In fact, the documentary reveals that he had actually established the roots of his spiritual deception—and a pattern of fleecing people for their money—in creating a sham pharmacy offering natural “cures.” Later, within the Aum movement itself, devotees would pay to drink vials that purportedly contained Asahara's blood or bath water, which were supposed to impart some of the guru's cosmic powers to his followers. Indeed, much of the pull of this organization for recruits centered around two things: the promise of developing powerful abilities, like levitation and psychic capabilities, and Asahara's own personal charisma by which he answered any and all questions immediately and with confidence. These two factors would be crucial in driving Aum towards its apocalyptic confrontation with Japanese society, particularly after a disastrous foray into regional politics, when Asahara concluded that if Aum couldn't influence Japanese society democratically (as contemporary religious group Soka Gokkai had done successfully), it would need to impose Asahara's societal corrective by force before the arrival of the inevitable global Armageddon. This plan, which was the impetus behind the sarin gas attacks, was driven by the Tibetan Buddhist concept of *poa*, whereby a person dies (i.e., may be killed) at the best possible time for a positive rebirth.

As fascinating as the details of the internal dynamics of Aum that this documentary provides for a non-Japanese viewer are, its true power in 2023 is in its revelation of the ways in which Asahara personally entertained the Japanese media on the one hand and manipulated legal and governmental authorities into allowing Aum to operate with virtually no oversight—even after

a string of criminal acts, from kidnappings to gas tests on small villages, happened virtually in plain sight but with no one connecting the dots to Aum. The film reveals how successful—and at times bizarre—Asahara’s charm offensive was with the media, appearing on talk shows, creating anime features, and even staging a dance number for himself performed by female devotees all wearing papier-mâché masks of his face and chanting his name and “guru guru guru.” Yet if there’s anything the modern world should learn to be suspicious of by the third decade of the twenty-first century, it’s dismissing too quickly the appeal of clownish narcissists who offer simple solutions to complex problems.