

Kino's Journey

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Basic Premise

"To be an adult means to act cheerful and always smile, no matter how much you hate your life." So believed the people of a certain country in a certain age. For this reason there came into existence the Operation -- a procedure that implanted a device inside every citizen when they came of age to force them to mask their desperation. In this country, a young girl awoke one morning to find a wanderer checking into her parents' hotel. His name was Kino, and she eagerly shared her country's customs with him -- adding that she herself would receive the great Operation in mere days! Kino tried to hide his dismay, but he planted seeds of doubt in the young girl's mind. When the day came, she refused the Operation. The townsfolk came to kill her, but Kino jumped in front of their weapons and sacrificed his life so she could escape. Taking his name (and his motorcycle), the girl left her country, and began a journey through the beautiful world...

Reviews

Similar Anime: None I can think of. Perhaps *Hi no Tori*?

Main Characters

Kino: An androgynous, ageless girl. The consummate traveler -- detached, curious -- her humanity buried inside.

Hermes: Kino's motorrad, complete with voice-synthesizer. Guileless and childlike, he holds Kino in some awe.

None of the anime's many other characters appear in more than two of the show's 13 episodes -- most only for one.

Pimpage

Kino's Journey is the Gulliver's Travels of turn-of-the-century Japan. Kino travels from dystopia to dystopia, each of them subtly or not-so-subtly insane, and many of which allude to facets of modern civilization in general and Japan in particular. A country of perfect democracy, ruled by an absolute king. A land where bringing people together has cut them apart. A country whose only tradition is the search for a tradition. Kino generally visits one such country per episode, and makes it a rule to stay for no more than three days. Her trip has been long, but we are not told how long, nor whether the episodes -- presented as they are in vignettes and flashbacks -- are even in chronological order.

As for Kino herself, she is the embodiment of the Chaotic Neutral alignment. Kino may choose to do good or evil at whim, but above all avoids forming attachments. Her inner life is something of an enigma. Some viewers accuse her of apathy, yet in small ways Kino continually shows regard for life and freedom. If I, Robot had been about humans, Kino could comfortably have played Susan Calvin -- testing the range of human function and dysfunction, all the while maintaining an artificial (and illusory?) distance between herself and the ones she tests.

Kino's tone is muted and contemplative, much like Kino herself. (The show has been accused, not without justice, of being consciously artsy.) Even during interludes of intense action -- Kino is a fearsome shot with a Persuader -- the anime remains unhurried in pace, building inexorably towards a climax. For all its slow pacing, though, Kino keeps the adrenaline level surprisingly high; her "beautiful world" (the ironic title of the ending theme) is also a dangerous one, generating an ever-present gnawing feeling of dread of what might be behind the next plot twist. Episodes are presented largely without music, apart from the splendidly mercurial opening theme and the plaintive closing.

Kino is not an anime for the casual viewer. Like Revolutionary Girl Utena, it is unabashedly symbolic and allegorical, but unlike Utena, it is carried largely by its symbolism and allegory. As a result, Kino is a wonderful stimulant for the imagination -- and a great untapped resource for fanfiction!