

TEKKONKINKREET TURNS TEN

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By Jasper Sharp.



At a time when digital releases from Pixar and DreamWorks had become the new monolithic style for American animation, the use of computers on such landmark titles from Japan as *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*, *Mind Game*, *Appleseed* (2004) and *Howl's Moving Castle* was still very much in service of an instantly recognisable anime aesthetic.

One film that bucked the trend completely was *Tekkonkinkreet* (2006), the directing debut of LA-born Michael Arias, realised with the talents of the team at Studio 4C. The film turns ten this year, and so it seems an apt time to revisit its eccentric and innovative production — not the least for its extremely rare status as a bona fide anime directed by a foreigner.

Adapted from Taiyo Matsumoto's popular cult manga of the same name, *Tekkonkinkreet* depicts the adventures of two young street urchins named Kuro and Shiro ("Black" and "White") as they run riot around the aptly-named Takara-Machi (Treasure Town), leading a feral existence far removed from the other neighbourhood kids, an existence that comes

under threat with the arrival of a yakuza boss and his mob with plans to clean up the area for redevelopment.

Given Arias' background as the creator of the [Toon Shaders renderers](#) first used by Ghibli in *Princess Mononoke*, it comes as no real surprise that computers should have featured so heavily in the production of *Tekkonkinkreet*. Indeed, the project was originally conceived as a fully computer-animated feature, with Arias assembling a small team of digital and traditional artists and bringing in Koji Morimoto to direct. The pilot film, made in 1999, screened at Annecy International Animated Film Festival.

Arias' employment on *The Animatrix* resulted in his permanent relocation to Tokyo from America, where he'd been developing computer graphics software at Softimage. It also saw *Tekkonkinkreet* put on the backburner while *The Matrix* spin-off occupied him for over three years. When the idea was revived and Arias decided to make it his directing debut, he decided to concentrate on the creative rather than technical side of the production.

As he explained at the time of *Tekkonkinkreet's* release, “There are a few reasons I went traditional for this film. First, I wanted to concentrate on directing, not CG animation or software. Second, I found a group of artists who I believe are the most talented character animators on the planet and wanted them to work with tools most familiar to them (pencil/paper). Third, I really think hand-drawn character artwork is more expressive than 3D animation. As cool a project as it was, I was never entirely happy with the look of the characters in the pilot. It was torture to get a lot of those shots done. The tools aren't quite there yet and we (in Japan) don't have the 3D talent pool or the budget to make a film like this using purely digital means.”

In the end, while CG was used in about 40% of the scenes, *Tekkonkinkreet* is predominantly hand-drawn, although hardly in a manner that can be described as “traditional”. The animators rejected the wide-eyed, round-

headed, baby-like designs of traditional anime characters, instead choosing large-bodied, pin-headed gangsters with Frankenstein scars and pinprick eyes, their bodies drawn in jagged outline, teetering around on feet as dainty as pig trotters.



Similarly, reversing the post-*Blade Runner* trend of bathing the city in neon and gloom, Studio 4C's animators drew their inspiration from right outside their door in Kichijoji. Takara-Machi is depicted as a bustling early Showa-era theme park of wooden houses, garish shop and advertising hoardings, and warrens of winding streets and covered markets. "One concept I had early on was that the film should feel like a first-person account", Arias told me back in 2006, "a documentary, if you will, about the lives of characters inhabiting Treasure Town."

Naturally, Arias' own Toon Shaders play a large role in this depiction of streets teeming with life and a constant stream of traffic. "Our backgrounds involve a ton of 3D elements, though we took great pains to keep all of them hidden among the traditional artwork... All of the film's vehicles (cars, buses, trains, trolleys, tuk-tuks, bicycles, etc.) were 3D, as well as a great many background characters. The whole thing takes place in a big

city so there's some very complex street scenes with hundreds of vehicles zooming around. There are also a couple of dream sequences with digitally animated schools of fish and flocks of birds. The look of all of this is still 'cel-animated', though we tortured our character artwork using a variety of 2D effects to add paint splatches, soft shadows, and so on."

As well as Toon Shading, *Tekkonkinkreet* makes great use of texture mapping to add hand-drawn details to the backgrounds, a standard technique for creating scenes that retain the traditional pen-and-ink look while allowing for motion in depth, although never before had this background art been so intricately rendered. "The combination of very densely textured pseudo-3D backgrounds and animation supervisor Shojiro Nishimi's characters, and the amount of detail in every shot doesn't have much precedent," Arias stated.



"We spent quite a while refining our 'grammar' of handheld camera moves, out-of-focus and shallow-focus camera work. We also did camera-based projection maps of painted background artwork onto 3D geometry to allow

for a greater degree of freedom in designing camera moves.” The vertiginous opening sequence, in which the virtual camera pursues a crow soaring high over the garish cityscape, took three months to realise.

Since *Tekkonkinkreet*'s release in 2006, Arias has directed two further feature projects: the live-action drama *Heaven's Door* (2009) and the anime *Harmony* (2015), based on the sci-fi novel by Project Itoh and made again in collaboration Studio 4C. There have also been a number of shorts, music videos and commercials, not to mention a host of unrealized projects and consultancy VFX and design work on other filmmakers' productions. He has also spent the past five years translating Taiyo Matsumoto's manga *Sunny* (serialized between 2010 and 2015) into English.

Tekkonkinkreet's anniversary seemed a good opportunity to catch up with its director to look back at its release and assess its legacy. As he now recalls, there was “considerable excitement” at the time its release, “despite Taiyo Matsumoto and *Tekkonkinkreet* not being household names in any sense.”

The film was well-received overseas too, although the project's fruition left Arias feeling emotionally drained, not least because the last few years of the production coincided with the breakup of his marriage. “To be honest, I remember so little about the first days of the release. Finishing the film and then getting it out there was such a cathartic experience — the only thing I can compare it to is what I imagine giving birth is like. Apologies to anyone who's actually given birth, but it really did feel like I'd been getting this egg ready to hatch for ten years!”

“One thing I didn't expect after the release was feeling so alone and bereft. Maybe that's what postpartum depression feels like! *Tekkonkinkreet* had been my life, to the exclusion of all else, for some incredibly intense and creative years, and then, just like that... gone!”

Nowadays he claims his “personal feelings towards *Tekkonkinkreet* are

mixed” and revisiting it is “so bittersweet, so evocative of those difficult days” during which he virtually lived in the studio. He only really saw his two young sons (then aged four and six) when they visited him at the weekends, but they left their fingerprints all over the production, in “all of White’s drawings, and even some voices.”

As for its legacy? “I think *Tekkonkinkreet* has held up quite well. I was a newbie to directing, so there’s plenty I’d love to go back and try differently. But I was working with so many talented artists with such rich source material, that somehow, amazingly, it works. On a purely technical level, I think it’s quite successful — as a hybrid of traditional and digital animation, I still believe it’s unsurpassed.”

Nevertheless, Arias is more than a little surprised as to how little its groundbreaking hybrid techniques have been adopted or built upon by the wider anime industry, even by Studio 4C itself.

Ten years ago, *Tekkonkinkreet* looked like it had the potential to blow open the doors of what was possible within a medium that has languished in a largely self-imposed ghetto. Undoubtedly, conservatism on the financing/production side, catering to the known quantities of an existing audience, has resulted in anime’s general reluctance to drastically change its style to fit new technologies and techniques in a way that the earlier films such as *Memories* and *Innocence: Ghost in the Shell 2* once did.

In this respect, *Tekkonkinkreet* now seems more like an anomaly than a landmark, but it’s still out there available to view, and it’s still well worth a look. And it’s still an incredible amount of fun.

[Tekkonkinkreet](#) is released in the UK by Sony. Michael Arias will be appearing at the MCM [London Comicon](#) this month.