

Harmony

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By Hugh David.



In the future, humanity has invested in public health as the key way to offer individual citizens their best life experience, reducing the sort of concerns that lead to unrest. This includes constant monitoring, alerts and reminders by way of embedded biotech and retinal displays, as well as offering whatever treatments are needed as and when. Japanese Helix Agent Tuan Kirie, from the World Health Organisation's operations agency, attempted to rebel when young as part of a suicide pact with two friends. One balked, and saved her, but the third, the instigator of the pact, died. Now, their mutual past may be key to a lethal cyber outbreak in the present, one that causes mass suicide and is claimed by a group citing very familiar-sounding rhetoric...

The first of the three posthumous feature adaptations of works by late SF

author [Project Itoh](#), *Harmony* adapts the novel with style, even as it cuts it back to the core in order to tell the story in a sweeping cinematic manner. Directors Michael Arias (*Tekkonkinkreet*) and Takashi Nakamura (*A Tree of Palme*) take Itoh's ideas seriously, as much as any live-action adapter of any classic work of literature. Fans of the novel will see immediately the incorporation of ideas like the Emotional HTML, or the flashbacks from the earlier part of the book, even as the film works to convey the narrative without the novel's first-person perspective. There's a fair bit of action for the commercial crowd, with production outfit Studio 4°C offering the sort of animation quality one expects from Production I.G whenever they do a new *Ghost in the Shell*. The opening in particular stands out in this regard, as does a nifty chase sequence in a future Baghdad that in part resembles a hi-tech version of its former imperial glory.

However, it's the non-action sequences that really impress. Future Japan and Baghdad are both beautifully executed, with self-driving cars and impressive uses of space to blend the new tech with the old. The representations of teleconferencing and retinal displays are state of the art. Characters designs are elegant and in some cases quite beautiful. The entire film is a feast for the senses, which is good considering the dialogue at the heart of the story requires one to really focus and pay attention. The visuals help do that, keeping one's eyes busy as one's brain is engaged by Tuan's investigation into both her own memories and the possibility that the key to the current escalating tragedy is buried in her past. It's a wonderful SF update of the classic thriller device whereby the protagonist's self-discovery is as important to the solution of a form of murder mystery as the protagonist's actual ongoing investigation, adding an emotional depth to the procedural elements.



Director Michael Arias offered some insight in a Q & A after a screening of *Harmony* at the British Film Institute's South Bank cinema in June this year. Arias' great claim to fame other than directing the much-praised manga adaptation *Tekkonkinkreet* is he is one of the few Westerners working regularly in the Japanese animation business. While he has a handful of Western credits to his name, he says he has never worked for a U.S. animation studio directly, but in general hours and unions make a big difference to how things get down in the U.S. To his way of thinking, animation in general is a young man's game, one in which the work hours are not bad but can be long, best suited for single men without families who can go without sleep! "From the outside, these might appear tough conditions to be creative under – why would you submit to that? We are doing it because we love making movies, love what we're doing."

With regard to working with Studio 4°C, Arias expressed how this project shows the smaller nature of the Japanese industry, in that when help was needed favours could be called in and other creatives could chip in. He himself continues to have a good relationship with the studio. When questioned about 3D versus 2D styles and techniques, he described Japan as "the only place that still makes 2D animation; maybe France? It's big

business because... part of it is there's a huge demand for it. It's not made with the intent of exporting it, it's to satisfy audiences in Japan." He ascribes that demand as down to the effect of having such a variety of anime and manga: "In Japan, you grow up watching an incredible amount of incredibly diverse animation."

On the subject of computer graphics, he says "You can't make a cartoon without it now. It always ends up digital; we're not shooting on film any more. It felt right for this film, being science fiction; it's a very sterile setting: 2075's Tokyo Medical Centre." That said, he then described the CG used as "pretty old school" saying there was no time or talent to break new ground, as *Harmony* was made on a tight budget and schedule. Lots of decisions were made on the fly, but this was not such an issue given the quality of the animators at Studio 4°C, whom Arias described as "very capable, many of whom worked on *Tekkonkinkreet*".

In terms of the Project Itoh adaptations, Arias had been working on trying to get a live-action adaptation of *Harmony* off the ground without success. Having moved on, Fuji TV approached him about taking charge of the adaptation of the author's debut novel *Genocidal Organ*, but Arias "wasn't comfortable with the protagonist, a very macho, military type"; he also felt the structure didn't onscreen, as the "ideas are in the structure, not the drama." He said: "Too bad you're not doing *Harmony*, I love that one!" The producers came back to him asking if he was still interested; apparently they already had a director attached to *Harmony*, but he was happy to move over to *Genocidal Organ* and so Arias came on to the book he was most interested in.

Arias spent seven or eight months on script and art design with a small team. Co-director Nakamura was in the studio with an animation supervisor; he describes Nakamura-san as "one of my heroes in animation... he's an old-school director." Arias says that with a time and resources an issue, "a lot was decided for efficiency; I'm not sure we would

have made the same decisions if we had the time.” That said, some clear-cut decisions were necessary to transform the novel into a film; for all that the latter remains close to the former, he “stripped out many of the digressions from the book; they’re really fascinating to read but not so good if you want to get to the next scene. We worked to take out more, make it almost wordless, almost like Kabuki; back when I wanted to make a live-action version I wanted to make it almost wordless.” The use of first-person shots came out of the need to unsettle the audience. “We went out to cause discomfort, make the skin on the back of the neck crawl.”

There’s no question but that Arias and Nakamura have done justice to the late Itoh’s work. The film is equal parts action, philosophy, hard SF and the cry of repressed emotions, and yes it does often cause discomfort in a way horror fans will appreciate. It is a grown-up pleasure, a high-tech globe-trotting conspiracy thriller of the kind we could do with more of from anime. Fans of *Re: Cyborg 009* and the Mamoru Oshii films should definitely give this a whirl.

***Harmony* is screening at this year’s [Scotland Loves Anime](#).**