THE Accidental AUTEUR

BY ERIN FINNEGAN

Tekkonkinkreet is Awesome BUT Your Friends May Not Understand It

You're going to see Tekkonkinkreet eventually, whether you like it or not. Only a few feature length anime films come out of Japan every year, and most of them are all like "Detective Conan the 19th Movie" or the thirty-fourth "One Piece Summer Spectacular". After this year's Shonen Jump films you're basically left with "Paprika"—the new Satoshi Kon flick, "Brave Story" from Gonzo, "The Girl Who Leapt Through Time" from Madhouse, and "Tekkonkinkreet".

If you don't see "Tekkonkinkreet" this year, you will eventually end up at a friend's house, or an anime club, or a convention, or in an animation class, and someone is going to make you watch this movie. You don't really have a choice, so you might as well get the upper hand and watch it first. No one is going to shove "A Tree of Palme" down your throat, but people are going to be talking about

"Tekkonkinkreet", and as an informed otaku, you have to watch it, whether you like it or not. It's going to be a classic.

"Tekkonkinkreet" is the story of two badass kids named Shiro (White) and Kuro (Black) who fly through the air in a series of never-explained ninja-esque leaps. They think they own Treasure Town (Takara Machi), the crappy borough of a growing metropolis under schedule for urban renewal by alien developers. The adult street gangs are no match for local yakuza man "the Rat" who sold out the borough, and the local tough-as-nails cop can't stop Kuro from beating the crud out of anyone trying to take over "his streets".

"Tekkonkinkreet" is based on Taiyo Matsumoto's manga, published in English as "Black and White" and due for a reprint by Viz Media by the time you read this (see sidebar for full review of the manga).

What Kind of Japanese Name is Arias?
"Tekkonkinkreet" opened to Japanese audiences over the New Year's holidays, plastering director Michael Arias's face all over the media. Despite working with an all-star crew of animators to

adopt Matsumoto's ideas, it is Arias who is drawing all the attention as the first American to direct a Japanese feature film.

Although Arias fascinated the Japanese public by being American, he seems to have offended parts of the Internet anime fandom by being non-Japanese. A lively discussion at the Animation Insider forums presented the question: Can "real jazz" only be performed by African-Americans? As such his "Tekkonkinkreet" has opened up a host of interesting issues about race, nationality, and legitimacy in a field that's been notoriously closed off to foreign voices in the past (and no, English voice actors don't count).

Arias has lived in Tokyo longer than he's lived anywhere else. He speaks (and emphasizes that he can also read and write) fluent Japanese. He started working on anime when he developed a CG Toon Shader plug-in for "Princess Mononoke". He went on the produce "The Animatrix".

Fans who are critical of the gaijin-director

ought to take note that international co-productions are the norm nowadays. "Spirited Away" was backed by Disney money, ADV regularly helps fund anime, Cartoon Network funded a second season of "The Big O". "Afro Samurai" was a co-production primarily for the American market. Many American cartoons are animated in Korea, with Rough Draft studios producing nearly every show on Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon, as well as "The Simpsons" (starting from season three).

More and more anime series are animated in Korea and China as production budgets get tighter and tighter. Read the credits of a current late-night TV anime like Naruto and you'll notice a lot of Korean names, spelled out in English. Look for "DR Movie" in the credits of any given anime series—DR Movie is a Korean studio. There are no 100% domestic animation studios in Japan. Even Studio Ghibli and Production I.G farms stuff out as needed(Ghibli outsourced the Earthsea to DR Movie.)

According to Arias, the only Korean names in the end credits of "Tekkonkinkreet" are Koreans who work at Studio 4°C in Japan. Arias himself was already a 4°C employee, so this was an

inside job. Other anime studios are listed it the "Tekkonkinkreet" credits, including Studio Ghibli and Production I.G. along with Madhouse and dozens of other domestic studios. If anything, "Tekkonkinkreet" is more Japanese than many current anime series.

According to Arias: "Reliance on local talent is a cornerstone of 4c's operation (though we use many more freelance artists than either IG or Ghibli, who both have much larger employee staffs)."

In the Animation Insider forums Arias says: "The Japanese animation community is pretty small so it wasn't long before various artists started stopping by to see what we were up to. Our work spoke for itself and word spread. By the time the project finished we had perhaps the most talented lineup the industry's seen since 'AKIRA.'"

So much press coverage has been given to Arias's American-ness that it's easy to forget about the film's remarkable dream team staff. Character designer and overall animation director Shoujirou Nishimi did key animation in "Mind Game," and started off as an in-betweener for "AKIRA". Art

Captions credits

director Shinji Kimura was also the art director of "Steamboy" and "Project A-Ko". Kimura also did background art for classics like "My Neighbor Totoro", "Angel's Egg", and "AKIRA". Key animators Masashi Ando and Tatsuya Tomaru were animation supervisors on "Paprika" and "Spirited Away" (Ando) and "Steamboy" (Tomaru). Storyboard artist and animation director Chie Uratani did key animation for several "Animatrix" shorts as well as "Kiki's Delivery Service". Masahiko Kubo, another storyboard artist and animation director was the key animator on "Millennium Actress", "Trigun", and a many other series. Technical director Hiroaki Ando was the CGI director of "Steamboy" and "Metropolis". Storyboard artist Koji Morimoto has worked on dozens of titles, including key animation on "Kiki's Delivery Service", "Golgo 13", "Dagger of Kamui", "Dirty Pair: Project Eden", "Macross; Do You Remember Love?", and even "Unico"! (I wish I could have both Golgo and Unico on my resume.)

You might remember Studio 4°C for their short films in "The Animatrix" ("The Beyond", "Kid's Story","Detective Story", "Second Renaissance" parts 1 and 2) and the "Memories" anthology (4°C

did "Cannon Fodder" and "Magnetic Rose"). "Mind Game" has been widely praised but is not yet available in the U.S. Studio 4°C is also behind this summer's "Genius Party", a feature length anthology of short films by seven masters of anime. No U.S. release is scheduled at this time, but I would say Genius Party is my "most hotly anticipated summer film".

Arias brought on Anthony Weintraub to write the script based on the English and French manga adaptations. Weintraub is a partner in A-line pictures, an indie film company that produced "Capote". Arias also hired the British techno band Plaid to do the soundtrack. Arias has been a fan of Plaid for years, and they were excited to work on the film.

Before I researched "Tekkonkinkreet", I had come to the conclusion that the film was an art house masterpiece, a kind of flagship for Studio 4°C selling Arias as an auteur director. In reality, Arias seems annoyed by such a pretentious title, and likes to play up the group effort. It's clear from the interviews he grants (including the one in this very issue) that would like to be judged on the quality of the film, and not the color of his skin. So we should grant him that.

I Already Know What Your Friends Will Think
I already know what your friends will think of "Tekkonkinkreet". They will take to their blogs and
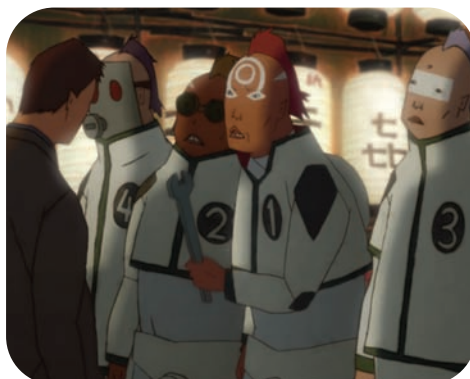
podcasts and write their reviews which will begin "I liked this movie OK, the animation was awesome, but it didn't make sense." Unless your friends are French, in which case they will have no problems with "Tekkonkinkreet". The French love this shit. Tekkonkinkreet has a French feel to it, and the French media are already in love with it. But this is Otaku USA magazine, so I'm telling you what Americans will think of the film.

More purist anime fans will dismiss the film as non-anime, since it was directed by an American. Fans of the original manga will be disappointed, because fans of the manga are always disappointed. Anything based on a manga can't possibly live up to what goes on in the reader's head. In fact, I recommend seeing the film first

TEKKONKINKREET
The Original Manga

Originally printed by VIZ way back in 1997, "Tekkonkinkreet" (initially sold as "Black and White") is being reissued in time to tie in with the US release of the anime movie. In the mean but somehow charming streets of a ramshackle city, Black and White (aka Kuro and Shiro) are homeless orphans seemingly gifted with adult strength and the ability to fly like Peter Pan. As the more mature Black tries to protect his dim-witted friend, he tangles with street gangs, yakuza and martial artists, breaking teeth and cracking skulls, until his increasing violence and rage forces him to confront his own dark side.

The manga is famous mostly as a showcase for Taiyo Matsumoto ("Blue Spring", "No. 5"), whose artwork is like something from an underground comic; the children's book backgrounds are exquisitely hand-drawn, and even in the frequent fight scenes something strange is always going on in the corners of the picture. Dialogue is sparse; the point of the manga is images, not words. Although not as deep as it wants to be, it's a charming book, more a world to explore than a story to read. Highly recommended. ●

Jason Thompson

for maximum enjoyment (Besides, reading the book after seeing the movie is the American way).

In the world of Internet fandom, there are the cheerleaders who see films opening day and talk it them up, and late-coming nay-sayers, who see the films weeks later and say they were not as good as the late-comer was lead to believe. It is hard not to cheerlead "Tekkonkinkreet". It looks like a big budget movie with insanely gorgeous backgrounds and detailed animation that never cuts any corners. The CG blends flawlessly and undetectably with the 2D elements.

The strength of the film is best shown in the first 20 minutes, wherein Kuro and Shiro fly around Treasure Town in that way that Kung Fu masters can jump around a bamboo forest. They get involved in a territorial dispute with a couple of other street kids, and it's all fun and games and super-violent fighting, and your friends will totally like this part. Shiro and Kuro spring through the air as the plot dictates necessary. No explanation is ever given, but the powers of flight are limited to young children and the alien assassins in the film.

Shiro and Kuro make up the two-man Team Neko (Cat). Shiro is the prophetic semi-retarded somewhat-androgynous one of the two-man

team. He's kind of like a more positive and optimistic version of Delirium from Neil Gaiman's "Sandman". Kuro is older and more responsible, violent, and angry, kind of like the "all caps" Harry Potter from book five (Order of the Pheonix). I found it a bit didactic at first that all the characters had such blatant symbolic names, "The Rat", "Mr. Snake", etc., but I got over it after about ten minutes.

"Tekkonkinkreet" has been praised in several reviews (notably, the Japan Times) for its "Japanese-ness" and its accurate portrayal of Asian cities, although in my opinion there are many nods towards New York. The alien real estate developer Hebi ("Snake") has plans to install an amusement park that will cut down on street crime, bring in

tourist dollars, and shut down the porno theaters. In short, it is the "Disney-fication" of Times Square. The urban renewal themes in the film may be universal to any city, but to me they seemed specifically about New York. Arias lived in New York for two years, on the brink of the Disney-fication period. He even did some location scouting in Alphabet City around the time the community gardens

CHILLIN' AT 4°C

Hidden deep within Tokyo's anime hotbed of Kichijoji lies the studio where "Tekkonkinkreet" sprang to life.

The area is located at the intersection of the JR Chuo and Inokashira rail lines. As such, all of the major players, Madhouse, IG, Gainax, Telecom, Sunrise, to name a few – are within a couple stations' distance from Kichijoji. And of course the talent pool of animators and mom-and-pop inbetweeners, ink-and-paint houses, etc. are also within a few minutes drive or train.

The Kichijoji ward is also redolent with anime history; it's also the former home of the famed Studio Ghibli and of the legendary, long-defunct Artmic, the design company that created such classics as Megazone 23, Bubblegum Crisis, and the Mospeda arc of the Robotech trilogy.

Now, just a few steps away from Kichijoji station, lies undisputed domain of the anime industry's cutting-edge wunderkind: Studio 4°C.

Before our interview, director Michael Arias was kind enough to give me a sneak peek inside of the magic kingdom where his anime film was forged.. Behold the desks, shelves, and cubicles where not only "Tekkonkinkreet" but classics such as "The Animatrix" sprang to life. Now that production has wrapped, the atmosphere is quiet, the majority of the desks unoccupied and waiting to be used in the studio's next production. In fact, the atmosphere was pretty much like any average office, save for the fact that most of the desktops featured backlit tracing tables for "in-betweening," the process of creating the intermediate sequences between key frames of animation.

Among the sights and sounds of the studio included a massive "war board" still showing which "Tekkonkinkreet" shots had been completed, now all marked in red. Also note the shelves where the finished cels were briefly stored after being digitized (most have

were bulldozed. Anyone who remembers the strange metal-junk and dis-carded-doll sculptures of the Alphabet City gardens is sure to see the paral-lels in "Tekkonkinkreet".

"Tekkonkinkreet" visuals are stunning, but the plot is a little loose and the pacing is a little off. The themes of the film might get in the way of the action, and the ending is abstract enough to leave mainstream (i.e. non-academic) audiences cold. In short, "Tekkonkinkreet" will easily win the eyes of critics who hate the old "big eyes small mouth" thing, but it might lose the hearts of fans who were hoping for a narrative that made nuts-and-bolts sense.

At the climax of film, as Kuro faces his inner darkness and "The Minotaur" shows him the type of man he could become—a gambler, a yakuza, a fre-quenter of prostitutes. It is this climactic scene that "Tekkonkinkreet" will lose most audiences. Here's why: The climax of the film takes place inside of Kuro's head under a pile of special effects and experimental filmmaking. In a traditional Hollywood-style 3-act screenplay, Shiro and Kuro would face off against Hebi in battle. But by the climax of "Tekkonkinkreet", Hebi has already won. Treasure Town is already a tourist-packed theme park.

My biggest problem with the climax of the film is not the moment everything goes all Hideaki Anno on you. Rather, I was annoyed that Shiro was left out of the action. While Kuro is out there facing his inner-Minotaur, Shiro is cooped up in a crappy Witness Protection/Police Custody apartment drawing with crayons. It is not very cinematic to have one of the protagonists sitting and coloring during a key scene. Up to that point, "Tekkonkinkreet" has delivered in the action department, and suddenly, just when it matters the most, the main conflict has changed from Man vs. Man to Man vs. Himself. I'm sure that the movie was very loyal to the manga, but movies must stand on their own as movies to be enjoyable.

To be very clear here, having a Hollywood climax does not have to be clichéd or bad; consider the ending of "Porco Rosso", wherein Porco and his rival pilot Curtis duke it out in a few feet of water. It is an incredibly satisfying conclusion to conflict, which is exactly what "Tekkonkinkreet" is missing.

Still, it's an awesome cinematic experience all the way. ●

Pull quote

been moved into permanent storage by this point, though.) Best of all were a pair of sculptures of pro-tagonists Shiro and Kuro, handmade and mailed to the studio by a devoted eighteen year old fan, cur-rently displayed atop Arias' desktop for inspiration.
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By Matt Alt