THE MICHAEL ARIAS INTERVIEW   BY MATT A
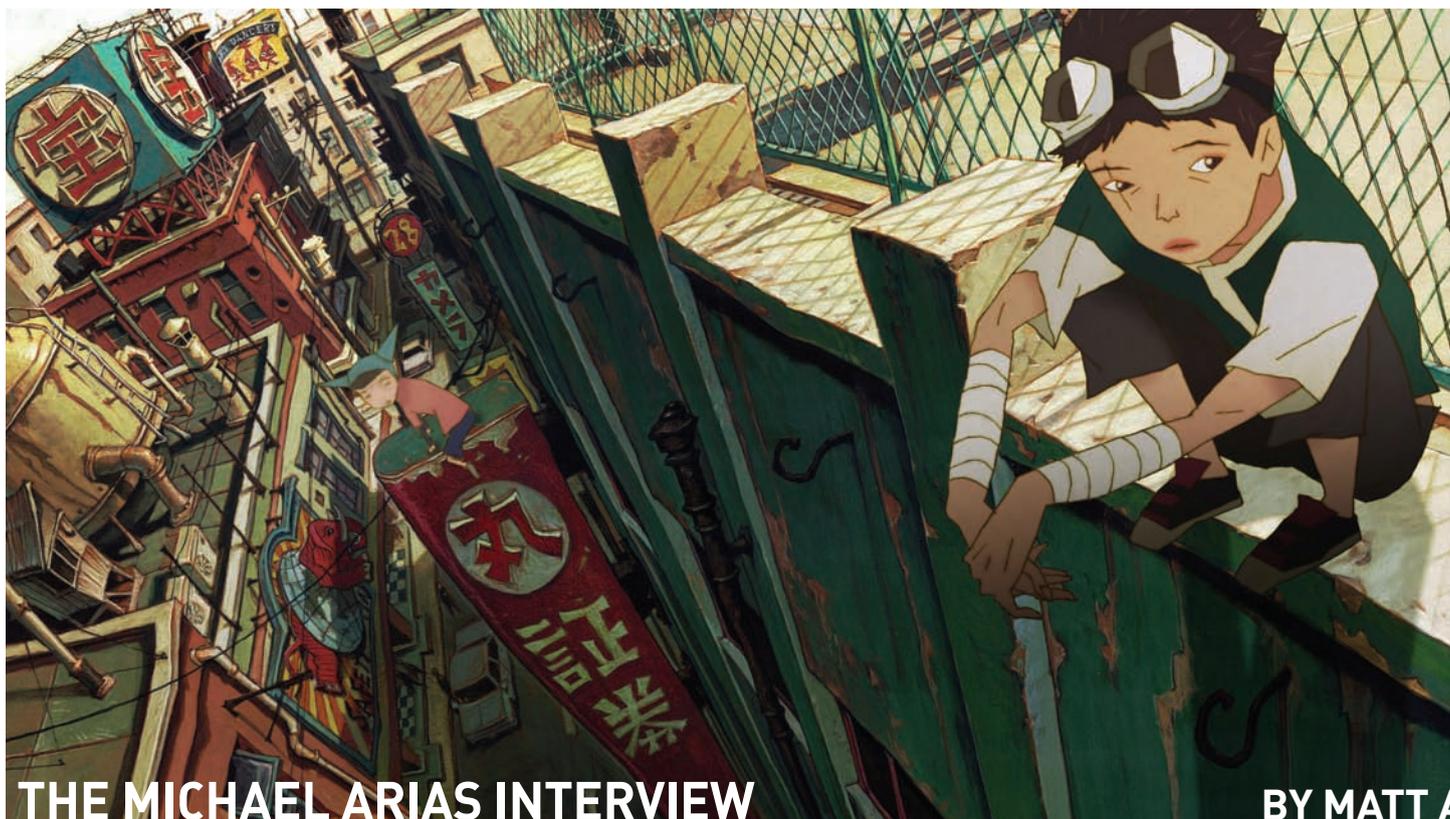
"AS IMMERSIVE AS POSSIBLE"

MICHAEL ARIAS IS THE DIRECTOR OF "TEKKONKINKREET." He's also the first American (or foreigner for that matter) to ever to direct a feature length anime movie in Japan.

Although "Tekkon" is Arias's directorial debut, the Japan resident of 15 years has long been active behind the scenes on a number of high-profile movie projects, including stints as a special-effects technician on James Cameron's "The Abyss" (1989) and "Total Recall" (1990). Arias, who admits that he's "not much of a draftsman," went into developing software, a career move that eventually led to work on animated films in the United States and Japan.

Arias formed a strong relationship with the cutting-edge anime production house Studio 4°C and wound up as the producer of "The Animatrix" (2003), a package of short films inspired by "The Matrix" movie series which is now the best-selling direct-to-video anime title ever in the U.S.

Given his experience, Arias could have cashed in on the wave by attaching himself to another project to further bridge the gap between Herculean Hollywood and the animation industry in Japan. Instead, for the last decade he has spent untold hours toiling on a single-minded quest to bring Taiyo Matsumoto's "Tekkonkinkreet" manga to the big screen.

OTAKU USA's Matt Alt paid a visit to Studio 4°C headquarters in the Kichijoji district of Tokyo to ask Arias such questions as....

So when were you initially exposed to Japanese animation?
I didn't really discover manga and anime until I came to Japan, about 16 years ago. In those days, there wasn't so much access to it in the US, though I did watch SPEED RACER, YAMATO, and

GATCHAMAN in English when I was much younger. But I started working in Tokyo pretty much around the time of AKIRA and another movie that Otomo was involved with called "Meikyu Mono-gatari" (released in the US as "Neo Tokyo"). I saw them and thought they were really cool movies and that no one was doing anything similar in the US. But I was (happily) doing visual effects, then computer graphics, and eventually CG programming. And around 1995 I got very obsessed with the manga of "Tekkonkinkreet" and I made a little 30 second pilot film. Well, not really a film; just one shot. It was meant as a demo of some software I'd written. And that connected me to (anime director) Koji Morimoto, and he and I ended up making this 4-minute "Tekkon" CG demo film. He really wanted to see what could be done with CG and I was looking for a way to make this movie. I used some rendering software I wrote that I had been working on for about seven years. It's a plug-in called "Toon Shaders," but its really a whole set of little programs that help render computer graphics so they look like kind of like traditional animation. Studio Ghibli used it a lot on "Princess Mononoke" and "Spirited Away" and it was also used by Dreamworks for "Prince of Egypt," and "The Road to El Dorado", who knows what else.

So I guess its safe to say you have a pretty strong grounding in the technical aspects of animation.
Well … yeah. I mean I'm not a draftsman by any stretch of the imagination. I started out doing special effects. But even if you started out doing lighting, or making models, you could say that this kind of work is half technical and half artistic. I don't know where to draw the line. I certainly don't have the chops to be a traditional animator.

One of the things I noticed while watching "Tekkonkinkreet" is how seamlessly the computer graphics are integrated into the film. In so many movies, it's painfully obvious whenever the computer takes over.
One thing that I wanted to wanted to get away from was that feeling of "Ok, here comes the big CG shot." Even a child can look at that and say, "there's something weird about that." So my answer was to try and make the blend of traditional animated elements and computer generated elements as organic as possible, so you couldn't really tell where one started and one ended. We used CG in pretty much every shot, probably 80% of the time. There are not a lot of shots that are just hand-drawn characters on backgrounds.

The film feels very handmade for such a high-tech film.
We wanted to keep all the background art looking as hand painted as possible. And we did all kinds of things to our characters to dirty them up and make them seem more handcrafted. So there was a bit of "humanness" or a random element put into every frame. We went and put some digital splotches on our paintwork to mimic the look of paint on acetate cells (which no one uses anymore). In the old days of animation they would draw the lines on paper and use either carbon or Xeroxing to transfer the image onto acetate and then ink and paint the back of the cels. You look at the front of the cel and it looks like very clean, but if you look on the back where the paint is, you can see all these brush strokes and irregularities where the density of the paint varies. So we did a lot of stuff like that to mess it up. But then we also added out-of-focus effects and motion blurs and stuff for which there are no analogs in traditional animation. We just wanted to make the mixture as diffuse as possible so you couldn't say, "this is digital and this is hand drawn."

Did you make a deliberate decision to make the buildings appear more realistic than they do in Taiyo Matsumoto's original manga?
Matsumoto's artwork is fantastic, revolutionary even. But I wanted to do something that that was three-dimensional and felt as solid as the world outside your window. I wanted to make it feel like a documentary shot inside a hand-drawn, hand-painted world. And I don't think just taking Matus-moto's style of artwork—black lines on white paper – and just filling in colors would be enough. You can do so much more in film. You've got color, motion, sound and all this stuff, so why just imitate the original? I think the challenge is to find something that you can only do in cinema that has a similar effect on the viewer's heartbeat. Otherwise you might as well say "why not put dialogue in bubbles and have it be a silent movie?" In that sense you could say that the movie is a departure from the original but only insofar as the original is our launching pad. A lot of this was realized though working with my art director Shinji Kimura and animation supervisor Shojiro Nishimi.

A lot of films claim that their imaginary cities have characters of their own, but it feels like much more the case in "Tekkonkinkreet."
That actually was my pitch to get Kimura involved in the project. Here's a movie where what you would normally call the background is actually the star character. And of course, that's the greatest thing you can tell an art director. We never just wanted to have the characters just sitting in front of the backgrounds. We wanted to have them running down through the backgrounds or going behind things or have stuff coming in front of them. Because the technique for creating the characters and the technique for creating the background is so different that its very easy—particularly with really old-school animation—to wind up with a great distance between the two. It can look like the characters are floating over the background because they basically are. We really wanted to make the characters feel that they were in this world and that you were in there too and could follow them around wherever they went. I just wanted to close the gap between the audience and what's on the screen as much as possible. One challenge you have with traditional animation is - because it's all drawings, its sort of a surreal experience. You can do a close up of an animated face and you don't get any of the stuff that you get in live-action, like nose hair, eyebrows, and eye lashes...all this detail which

somehow adds to the experience. So how do you get people more involved in the experience or make that you can't just frame and hang up on a wall? How do you make it as visceral and involving as possible? My approach was to try and make it as immersive as possible. Basically you have all this detail that needs to be filled in, so what do you put in? You wind up putting in whatever you feel is going to work and become an organic part of this world. So I took some trips with the art director and by myself to Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. We also went and took pictures of stuff all over Tokyo.

I'd heard somewhere that the film "City of God" (2002, Brazil) was also an influence.
Yeah, it was a huge influence. The reason I asked our staff to watch it is because it's a very dense experience with a lot of information and I thought that was quite relevant to what I wanted to accomplish with "Tekkon". There's not a lot of time explaining stuff and it also takes place in this very sealed off world—a slum. And a lot of the characters are children. So I thought it made a really good reference. It's an awesome movie.

The soundtrack by (UK musicians) Plaid doesn't sound like something you'd normally hear in an anime film. Did you make a deliberate decision to not go with a more Japanese-style score for the film?
I didn't just want to have action laid over pop songs. I wanted to have a real composer score the action on the screen, someone that knew how to push and pull the emotions, and really tell the story through music. I say this, but I knew right from the beginning that I wanted Plaid to do it because I was a huge fan. I discovered their music while working on the "Tekkon" pilot film and I always associated their work with this story. I didn't know at the time if they could score a movie, but I got in touch and sent them the comic book and they were very eager to do it. It's the first score they've done and I'm very happy with it. There's a lot of really bad music out there, not only for anime but for movies in general. There are some good scores, but the high level achieved by "AKIRA" or Kenji Kawai's stuff is very rare.

So was there any resistance to letting you, a foreigner, direct a Japanese animated film?
Not as such. I've been working in Japan for 15 years doing film, and I produced "The Ani-matirx" which was a huge hit. I made a pilot film with Koji Morimoto who is huge in the industry here. I also have a very tight partnership with Eiko Tanaka, the president of Studio 4°C. So it wasn't like me with a script going to door to door trying to get people interested. I didn't just show up, direct a couple of commercials, and then go straight to a feature. I've been here doing this for a long time now. Also, if anything, I didn't really want to direct movies … I just wanted to get this film—"Tekkon"—done. It didn't matter to me what I wound up doing on it. I would have been happy doing computer graphics if Morimoto had directed "Tekkonkinkreet" instead.

Do you think you being an American made this a different film than if someone like Morimoto had directed it?
Well, not necessarily just because I'm an American…it's more that we are very different people and have different approaches. I don't have a "style" as such; I've only made one movie, whereas Morimoto is a great illustrator, designer, and director. Still, I think I focused on some things in the story that might not have been obvious to a Japanese reader or director. The original "Tekkonkinkreet" is for all intents and purposes the only manga I've ever read. I wasn't using other manga for reference or thinking about it in the context of the history of manga. The references I had for "Tekkon" were more like American westerns and movies that I loved, not necessarily Japanese ones like Fellini's "La Strada" or Sergio Leone's "Once Upon a Time in the West." Those were the kind of references I was making use of whereas someone local might have much more local references. But in a way, I think one of the film's strengths is that it has very universal themes and we ended up treating those in a universal global way. Maybe someone else would have made it on a smaller scale. But I wanted to make this film as large scale and cinematic as possible.

It's interesting you bring up Leone, because he was an ousider as well, making cowboy films in Italy, of all places. He was also into the idea of scale, bringing characters into these huge landscapes.
That's exactly it. We wanted to make it, in a way, operatic. We always wanted to have the sense of these very human characters and their lives—these two street kids—and to have that occurring in this much, much larger world with huge forces operating against them. There's Black and White, and then the local street gangs like Dawn and Dusk and the Apaches, and then there's the yakuza and behind them there's this alien real estate developer, and behind him, some kind of religious cult or deity. I just identified with that part of the story. The manga had this great seed in it that I thought could be turned into something…well, I hate to say cinematic in scale, but that's what I was thinking. I think my screenwriter Anthony was the one to first make the comparison with westerns, maybe not Leone's. We have this little nowhere town and someone builds a railroad through it and the bad guys ride in on this train and what's going to happen to this little family of characters that's going to get pushed out of the way?

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So if Leone made "Spagehetti Westerns," what are you making? "Hamburger Anime"? What do you call this?
I've been in Japan for so long, I think my sensibility is probably a bit removed from "hamburger" as well. My first impulse when I first came here was to ask, "Why is this different? This doesn't work the way I'm used to." Now I'm more amazed at how similar things are. You can go to the other side of the world and wind up where you started. Still I'm also hoping that it won't all end up with a brand outlet or mall on every corner.

Is that something that you dislike about Tokyo? That it's constantly changing too much?
No, but that's definitely a fact of life. You see buildings come down and replaced all over the city all the time and its happening at a pace way beyond what you see in the US and Europe. It's basically

been the pace of evolution since the war, and it can be disorientating if you are used to going outside and seeing the same thing everyday. Here, it's in motion all the time. I think one of the themes of "Tekkon" is that change is inevitable and you can spend your life bemoaning it or you can accept it. "Tekkon" asks the question, "what do you believe in?"

A lot of the characters in the film have nostalgia for a kind of city that doesn't seem like a particularly great place to live, at least for them.

Well, mainly Suzuki, the old yakuza. Actually, nostalgia is something I thought a great deal about making this movie. First of all, making this world which is a recreation in some sense of sixties Tokyo or Osaka or sixties urban Japan...we used a lot of elements of that. A Japanese person of a certain generation can look at this movie and find it very nostalgic. Of course, that's lost on me to an extent because I didn't experience 1960s Japan in real time so my choices of what to put in there were based more on my own memories of childhood in a big city. Urban development is something you have to confront daily when you live in a city like Tokyo. You can fight it I suppose, and say, "leave things the way they are, this is such a beautiful place with a lot of street life, it's great." But at the end, that's just your own taste, and somewhat irrelevant I think. 30 or 40 years from now, someone will probably say..."Odaiba (Tokyo's futuristic artificial island development), how nostalgic! They don't make cities the way they used to!" You can argue about it 10 different ways. With "Tekkon"—even though it has a message that's related to the evolution of cities—I didn't want to make

it seem like I'm mourning that old city, that it has a nostalgic message. But I'd just as soon not see mega brands on every corner and I don't like the idea that all cities are evolving towards the same image. I think that's kind of a waste. Why not have something different on every corner? So when making this film we definitely wanted to make the city seem as playful as possible. Treasure Town has many goofy, whimsical elements.

So what kind of advice do you have for foreigners who dream of making it big in the Japanese anime industry like yourself?

Well, I don't think you could easily replicate what I did. I didn't really have those goals in mind anyway. Because I'm not an animator myself it wouldn't have occurred to me to direct an anime movie. But I found a group of people that I thought were the most inspired and hardworking filmmakers here (possibly in the world) and they became my friends and family.

I know a couple of French guys and one American guy who are working as animators and they are living hand to mouth in the process. Generally speaking, the hours are pretty long even compared to working in the American film industry. I lived at the studio for the last year of production. I had a cot that I slept in next to my desk and I only went home on Sundays. And even before that, the schedule was Monday through Saturday. A lot of my staff was coming and going at different hours, so I had to be at studio to greet people at 8am and then stay until midnight to work with others. At midnight my lead animation supervisor and I might get a drink, and then I'd come back to the studio to look at shots. The financial side of work here can be daunting. It's no surprise that most animators are guys without families of their own. But I guess it depends what you want to do. No one is making movies like this in the United States. Japanese animation is unique. It's the only place to make a movie like this.
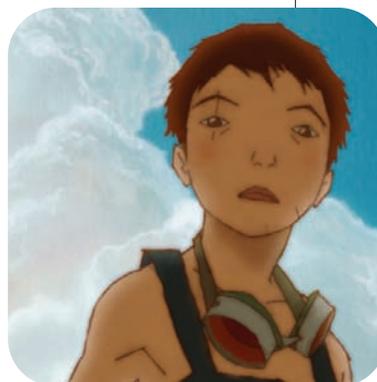
There's been some scary talk recently about the future of the anime industry in Japan.

Yeah, there are fewer young people in the industry, than, say, 20 years ago. There's a group of guys in their late 30s that all got their start doing in-betweens on "AKIRA" and they are the "young guys." And not a lot of them get to direct features. People are going into computer graphics; games, jobs with better pay or that have a more human-friendly work environment. Big screen theatrical experience is on the decline anyway, and it's much easier to make a film that's only going to be seen on an iPod than to make something that's going to fill a 50-foot screen. But in some ways, animation is a better gig than directing live action here. Doing a film like mine can keep you busy for years whereas a live action movie is often cranked out in a year.

Still, we managed to finish "Tekkon" under budget and on time, and it's been received quite well in Japan and played at a lot of film festivals overseas. I think it was totally worth the effort and the time. I'm not sure yet if directing is something I want to do for the rest of my life, but I'd like to think there's a few good movies in me.

So what's coming up next?

Currently I am finishing up work on my episode of " NHK Ani-Kuri", an animated anthology of 1-minute shorts for TV, directed by luminaries such as Satoshi Kon, Mamoru Oshii, and Shoji Kawamori, as well as some lesser-known folks like myself, Shinji Kimura, Shojiro Nishimi, and Osamu Kobayashi). I'm also prepping for a live-action feature shooting early next year if all goes well and an original animated feature (who knows when). ●