

A career in Harmony: The Michael Arias interview

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Over the years here at UK Anime we've spoken to numerous unique and engaging figures from across the anime business, but we suspect none of them can match the sheer breadth of experience paraded by **Michael Arias**.

Arias' story has taken him from childhood memories of extracting explosives from fireworks, stuffing them into various models and then filming them as they blow up through to working with the Wachowski's on the ground-breaking **Animatrix** anthology, then onto directing the award-winning **Tekkonkinkreet** and - more recently - his anime adaptation of Project Itoh novel **Harmony**. Oh, and he also happened to be a key member of staff that developed Toon Shaders, a software application for digital animation that came to be used by Studio Ghibli as they entered the digital realm with **Princess Mononoke** and, later, the Oscar-winning **Spirited Away**. These substantial achievements are made all the more impressive by the fact that Arias isn't a Japanese native, making him something of a rarity as a western talent in an industry that

rarely sees outsiders exert such influence over its productions.

Sitting down to talk to the man himself turned out to also be a suitably unique experience. Softly spoken, self-effacing and honest to a fault, Michael Arias isn't one to take any question lightly, nor is he one for placatory answers. Thus, every question we fielded was carefully picked up by the director, mentally turned over and over as he analysed and built his thoughts on the topic at hand before providing and reinforcing his answer. It made for an engaging conversation that one suspects could have gone on for hours more as he deconstructed and analysed his career before us, while also providing plenty of insight into both the anime industry and the production processes within it.

Of course, it was with digital animation software and Toon Shaders that Arias really made his break into the industry in a distinctly unique manner, and given the success of that software he's clearly better qualified than most to comment on the current state of CG technology in the anime industry - something he wasn't shy about professing disappointment in.

"It sounds self-important, but I think Tekkonkinkreet is the last really big paradigm shift in the use of 3D in traditional animation - I think Tekkonkinkreet really put 3D and hand-drawn artwork together in a more or less seamless way; it was the last watershed and I haven't seen anything better at it on that scale that isn't trying to copy what we did on that film. In that sense I haven't seen much evolution and it's kind of disappointing to me."

Given that, would he suggest that Japan is lagging behind in the field of digital animation and CG?

"Well, we've always lagged behind in the area of 3D animation - we can't possibly compete with Hollywood (Pixar and Dreamworks) or even come close. Actually, the companies that do 3D animation in Japan the best are very deliberately imitating the very rigid, hierarchical and specialising

production pipeline of Hollywood.

Relying on some stuff that Japan has unique power in regarding traditional animation is a way of tipping the scales a bit in the favour of the Japanese studios, but it's limited in what it can do mixed with 3D stuff. I actually don't like movies where the aesthetic is completely traditional animation but it's executed entirely with CG - not because I think that's off-limits, I just don't think it looks as good. I think so much effort is spent reverse engineering traditional animation - why not just draw it? The look of traditional animation evolved to suit the very limited resources that people had at their disposal; it doesn't make sense to me to imitate the superficial qualities of traditional animation."

Arias' next big break came as a result of surprise megahit *The Matrix*, the success of which led to the idea of making an animated anthology series inhabiting its world. Thus, *The Animatrix* was born, with Michael Arias playing a key role in this blend of western film and Japanese animation as a producer of the anthology. The results of this unique collaboration are something he clearly remains proud of.

*"It's been quite a while since I watched *The Animatrix* start to finish, but once in a while I'll look at an episode if I wanted to remember how a certain shot was done and I think it's really good. We finished *Animatrix* in late 2002 or early 2003, and I don't really think there's another animation omnibus that's been done in that mode since that's done it better.*

There's a lot of reasons for that - one, we were very fortunate to have the right people. The Wachowski's were very supportive and very generous with their time and money. They knew that they had designed and imagined this very interesting universe and they wanted to see how that would be explored by a lot of the artists that inspired them, so they weren't silent partners but they were our ultimate patrons and very supportive.

We spent a long time setting up The Animatrix - getting the right people, and part of that setup was building trust between the American side and the Japanese filmmakers, and that paid very big dividends in terms of communication and trust."

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Even with this producer's role as a gateway, the move from software developer to movie director seems like a massive one, and it came not as part of a clearly charted career path but simply out of necessity to ensure that *Tekkonkinkreet* - Arias' passion project as a huge fan of the original manga who carried it everywhere that he went - came to fruition.

"Directing seemed to be the only avenue that remained for making Tekkonkinkreet. It wasn't my ambition to direct it, it was just my ambition to make it. I'd gone down a couple of different roads with another director, with me working as producer and technology guy, wearing a couple of different hats. But nothing was working, and the person who had directed a pilot version of the film but had subsequently lost interest in the project told me, not in a completely friendly way, "if

you like it so much, why don't you fucking direct it?" It was the right thing to say to me at the time, and it got me thinking of directing less as something that only geniuses can do than as another job in the process of making films. Admittedly, the job is to be the leader - it's not necessarily harder than any of the other jobs that are absolutely essential to film-making.

One thing that I had that is essential to directing well is that the director has to be the person with the most passion for the project, and that's something that I had with Tekkonkinkreet. The other thing I had was a lot of experience making movies - not directing movies, but I'd spent a very long time since a very young age making movies, so I felt like I knew the process from every angle."

For all of that experience, taking up the director's chair still presented a steep learning curve nonetheless, as Arias explains:

"It was incredibly difficult. There was a lot of work, and a lot of self-doubt. Part of making something cool is that you never really know if it's going to work, and understanding that not knowing if it's going to work is an essential part of making something cool, as no-one has done it before or nobody has combined things before in the same way."

Still, these difficulties were at least offset by the director's knowledge of the process of creating an animated feature and the tools involved, which he acknowledges was particularly valuable while working on Tekkonkinkreet.

"Definitely with Tekkonkinkreet... a little less with Harmony, ironically. In general I think that the more you know about how movies are made the better equipped you are to make them. There's a certain amount of wilful ignorance - I don't want to know the details of every aspect of how things are executed, but I have to be able to communicate with all of the other artists so you have to be able to identify with where their heads are at. I'm not an animator, but I'm glad I know as much as I can about

animation without being an animator, which gives me a leg up."

Having focused on shorts and tried his hand at directing a Japanese live-action film in *Heaven's Door*, *Harmony* sees Michael Arias return to the director's chair for this theatrical anime project that serves as one component of a trilogy of films based around the novels of Project Itoh. However, the final product that reached the silver screen was distinctly different from its initial plans - Fuji Television initially imagined these adaptations of all three novels as a TV series with Arias directing the currently unfinished *Genocidal Organ*, while Arias for his part had already read and envisioned *Harmony* as a live-action film.

"I was given the book by a friend working at my distributor and asked for my opinion about its possibilities as a film adaptation. At the time I was talking about live-action - I thought it would be interesting to try making it as a minimal and low-budget film. Harmony seemed like a very cerebral book and something that you could do with a very minimal approach, and so I imagined a way of doing it almost like a theatre production and really getting into the austerity of it. To a certain extent I think maybe we got some of that across in the movie we eventually made, but by that time so much time had passed as had so much of my original lust for the project, so it evolved quite a bit from what I started with."

While the progress of time and the changing face of the *Harmony* project clearly dimmed Arias' enthusiasm for it somewhat, his respect and love for the source material remains intact.

"There's a very feminine quality to Harmony that I really liked - it seemed really unique, particularly for Japanese sci-fi which tends to operate in a more muscular way. Half of the story is just three schoolgirls talking to each other in a hallway, and it feels very real in a way that a lot of sci-fi doesn't, with the conversations between these three girls given the circumstances. It was easy to imagine it working as a very intimate and small project, and I think some of that comes through in the scenes of the

characters when they're younger."

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As he went on discussing the importance of *Harmony* and its story, he passionately sums it up in a way that really couldn't be more any more compelling or relevant to the technological landscape of 2016.

"Harmony is concerned with something that is very important to people these days, and it's something that I think about a lot and that people should be concerned about. As regular people we're losing control of our lives in a way that's really unique, and it's all down to technology. It really frightens me in a way - that decisions are being made for us because of the technology that we interact with, and because it's getting so easy to internalise technology, it's such a big part of our lives. Looking up a phone number - it used to be a whole process, and now it's fun and you get exposed to other shit you didn't even want to know about, but by

the time you've got it you don't know what you've given away - whether it's your photo library or your address book, it's all just stuff and it's such a seamless part of our lives.

Harmony was written as a satire of modern Japanese society, but it's probably as applicable here as it is in any other modern country. It's a satire so to a certain extent it's almost in the Jonathan Swift mould, but the scary thing about it for me is that as I was making the movie the thing I realised was that a lot of the stuff that was satire in the book was already happening to me - not just the tech side of it, but the way I was interacting with and using the tech and the way it was using me. I never thought about it this way.

The question Harmony asks is: What is privacy? Do you need it? Why do you need it? What's going to happen when you don't have it any more? The only thing you thought you owned - your body - is not even yours, and we're already part of the way there. Maybe it doesn't matter? Maybe the answer is that it's easier to look up a phone number or to book tickets at the movie theatre, so who cares? Somehow I feel like humans will have to reckon with the idea that you can't just write a letter home any more without it being uploaded to the cloud where you don't know who reads it, where it goes or how it's going to be used. Now you can't go anywhere or say anything without someone with authority over you having a window into you. I don't know why it's bothersome or disturbing but somehow it feels like we're giving away more than we're getting, although at the same time it doesn't always seem like that because we're getting all this other stuff for free.

*Harmony is a very cool look at that - it feels very organic somehow, and I think Itoh did a very good job with it. It's amazing to think he did it almost from his deathbed. It feels really relevant now - like, **right now** - and I think that's why people will want to see it. I'm a little concerned about how it's going to age in fifty years, because a lot of the stuff in there*

is happening now. That's why I think of it more as a satire, as it's amplifying things that are happening now to a ridiculous degree, only it doesn't feel that ridiculous any more."

Given its origins and subject matter, it's fair to say that *Harmony* is a very verbose and dialogue-heavy film, which presents a clear challenge when trying to bring its story across into a visual, cinematic format. Of course, it was a problem of which Michael Arias was very much cognisant, although his discussion of the issue also gives mention to a recurring theme when discussing the film - the compromises required as part of its production.

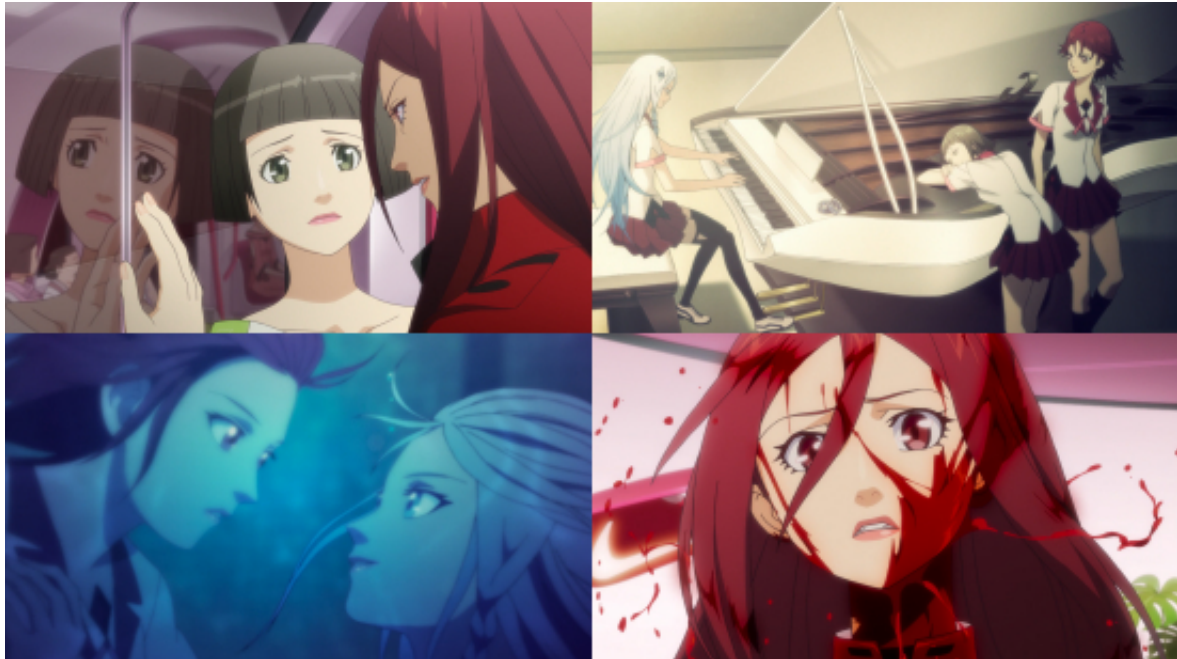
"I have to admit that I had a very different idea of how to make Harmony visually compelling initially, but the project evolved quite a lot from just me and a writer to me, another director and a different writer than we started with. Either way it's challenging to take something and find a way to make it visually interesting. You have to create a lot more stuff just to give it life, otherwise it just becomes a slideshow or a lot of talking heads.

I had this idea for just doing a lot of very rich, detailed background paintings and just very simple but rational camera movements - something very dark and less expositional than the movie we ended up with. I wanted to do something more philosophical, and more of an art movie. But as they say, everything is a compromise - that's not to take anything away from the movie that we made, but I knew I wouldn't be able to make the movie I had in mind originally, so a lot of it for me was a process of getting to know the people I was working with and figuring out the thing we were going to do that's going to be cool. It's still pretty recent, so I don't really know if it's worked out or not."

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From further discussion, you can't escape the feeling that much of the compromise came from sharing the director's chair with industry veteran Takashi Nakamura, whose resume includes animation direction on *AKIRA* and outright directorial roles including *Fantastic Children* and *A Tree of Palme*.

While acknowledging the "*complicated relationship*" between the two directors, Arias says of Nakamura "*Compromise was not his first language*", leading to him taking on a role he surmises as a decision that "*I'm just going to be his little brother and make it happen for him*". This isn't to suggest that the relationship between the two was entirely dysfunctional however, and while commenting on how he needs to sit down over a beer to talk about the project with Nakamura now it's complete he also pays service to the benefits of working alongside an experienced director and animator. Indeed, the differing talents of the two men seemed to match up perfectly when it came to sharing the directorial workload.

"At the beginning it was just writing and planning and working with the

art director and character designer - for that we were there all the time. Once we started getting into the animation, Nakamura-san is an incredibly talented animator so he homed in on directing the animators. The busier I got with my end of things - the effects and digital stuff, graphic design and screen graphics - the less involved I actually got with checking all the timing of the animation for example. My involvement in the actual shots diminished as we went further and further into the production as it just became natural with the limited time that the two of us had.

There's a certain part of the project when he was focused completely on the characters and animation and executing the analogue side of stuff, and I was completely on the digital side of things - then we came together at the end to figure out how to make it all fit together.

It's always interesting to work with people who have great ideas - I definitely got something out of the project I wouldn't have got directing by myself, and that's very valuable."

Given the sheer breadth of Michael Arias' experience to date, one suspects that Nakamura may have something similar to say of his co-director, who for all of his self-doubt clearly has an intelligence and passion which shows in his work. If Arias himself is still unsure of the impact and legacy of *Harmony*, it'll soon be the turn of UK viewers to cast that judgement, with the film set for a UK home video release from Anime Limited and its premiere taking place as part of the BFI's 2016 Anime Weekend.

For our part, we'll be keenly watching to see where Michael Arias turns his attention from here. Considering the versatility he's shown throughout his career to date, we wouldn't even want to hazard a guess as to what he'll try his hand at next.

The UK premiere of Harmony (which also features a Q&A session with Michael Arias) takes place as part of the BFI Anime Weekend in London -

[tickets are available here.](#)

The series is licensed for a UK home video release from Anime Limited.

Many thanks to Anime Limited for arranging this interview, and of course to Michael Arias himself for taking the time to talk with us.

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