

Coursework 1 – Portfolio

on

Mamoru Oshii's *Avalon* (2001)

The aim of this portfolio and this accompanying explanatory piece is to provide a basic amount of evidence from all kinds of sources to suggest that *Avalon* (2001/Japan/Mamoru Oshii) can be considered an alternative film. This essay will not consider the film itself but only extra-textual information that can be divided down into three groups. The first group is closely linked to the film as it contains production, distribution and promotional information, the second contains material that sources outside the film's production circle have produced be they reviews, academic essays or . The third group is made up of academic material that links the Film with debates concerning Film Studies.

In order to present this portfolio in an acceptable manner, most of it's contents have been put an a CD-ROM that is appended. The Structure of the CD-ROM will coincide with the grouping of the items.

- Primary Material

In this section I have regrouped material that is directly connected to the production, distribution and advertising of the Film, whether in Cinemas or on DVD/Video.

Avalon was shot on location in Poland in Summer 1999. Mamoru Oshii and a skeleton crew of Japanese producers directed a crew that was made up of mostly Poles.

The story had been co-written by renowned Anime playwright Kazunori Ito.

After this the film was postproduced in Japan where strong alterations have been made to the footage that Oshii brought back from Poland. The musical score was

realised by Kenji Kawai known for Japanese animation and live action scores throughout the world. Anime The final sound mix was made at Skywalker Sound in California, the most advanced sound studio in the world. The film was presented in Polish with Japanese subtitles and has in most cases of projection in the world remained Polish with local language subtitles. This issue of multinational collaboration on a Japanese film and its presentation in a foreign tongue to the originating country's is very unusual and therefore worth looking at in the light of alternative filmmaking

The film performed poorly in cinemas in most regions¹, nevertheless the secondary market (DVD) seems to be better suited for the film as I was told by the Swiss distributor². France seems to be the exception for that³. In this light it seems that the film is a product that people want to have to watch again, on the one hand this reflects the cult status that the film has gained among fans, on the other it shows that the film is deemed worth or in need of multiple watching.

Distribution was assumed by Companies that are known for distributing alternative films. Miramax is often associated with the importation of European arthouse films to America. Blue Dolphin has imported Cult Films like *Bad Taste* (1987/NZL/Peter Jackson) and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974/USA/Tobe Hooper) to the UK while STUDIOCANAL has a long tradition of bringing Asian Cinema to France/Europe.

Censors in Britain found no objections to its content giving it a 12 rating, American censors rated it R for violence. Although this might be telling about American hypocrisy it does not necessarily set up the film as alternative.

It was shown at various festival throughout the world. In Europe, these were mainly fantastic film festivals although it was also shown "hors competition" in Cannes.

¹ See 'Avalon Distribution BO etc.xls' for BO and DVD/Video results.

² idem.: The film had only 8000 entries at the Box office in Switzerland but 5000 DVD units had been sold by October 2003 with the distributor looking at the Holiday season to heighten that number.

³ Ibid. 133743 entries

The film's posters and other promotional materials mainly display the main character in either of two poses: androgynous on a tank or in combat gear where we can distinguish female eyes. Another feature of the promotional materials are their highlighting of Mamoru Oshii's Name and/or his making of *Ghost in the Shell* (1995/JP/Mamoru Oshii). Interestingly the U.S. release for the DVD planned for 16th December 2003 is predated by the release of Oshii's first 3 live action films on DVD at the beginning of November 2003 pointing again to a heightened interest in his work as personal and auteuristic.

The name *Avalon* has been put on a number of accompanying books in Japan among them "making of"s, a novel and a manga series. This can be seen as a move towards expansion in the Otaku⁴ segment in Japan.

Most interesting in the whole promotion campaign seems to be the use of a quote that James Cameron, a renowned admirer of Anime who has commented on many such texts and is often used as a reference when it comes to distribute Anime in the Western Hemisphere, said after seeing the film: "The beauty and style of this work of art exceed every Science-fiction film that has been made until now".

- Secondary Material

This section regroups everything that has a direct link to the film itself, whatever was published or said after the film was completed. It contains reviews, opinions, Interviews et al.

Reviews on the film were interestingly formulated in so far as that there are few reviews that give a completely negative nor completely positive about the film. Most of them seem to be located somewhere on the positive or negative side of the status quo.

Most interesting were the Reviews by Mirco Hölling on the Internet and Tony Rayns in

⁴ *Otaku*: literally translated from Japanese "Pervert". Otaku is the name used to describe Anime/Manga, Game and other subculture fans in Japan. The term has spread over the world to describe fans of Japanese subculture.

Sight and Sound. Hölling gives a rather positive comment on the film although he admits he did not like it at all and felt very bored by it, nevertheless he felt that there was some things left to discover and advises the reader to look for it. Tony Rayns in his article seems to be apologizing for the fact that his is only the second time that a film by Oshii is reviewed in the magazine. He delves into Oshii's past and recommends the seeing of his films. As a common theme throughout most of the reviews found, there is a sense of new discovery. Many mention, incorrectly, that this is Oshii's first try at live action film. Every review mention *Ghost in the Shell* as his former masterpiece and proceeds to mention style, characters and story. Many reviewers seemed baffled by the narrative structure or the lack thereof. The main negative voices focus on this and the artificiality that they seem to recognize in the film. Another noticeable fact is that reviewers seem to be hard pressed to set the film in a certain pantheon of other film that either look like it or have similar concerns.

The same appears in the Interviews with viewers. In the first interview conducted the interviewees were busier figuring out the meaning than actually responding to questions. The second interview conducted made things clearer for the people who had then seen it for a second time, yet left those seeing it for the first time guessing. This is a sign that Oshii is clearly understating when he says that his plot is straightforward.

User comments on the Internet pick up on the same strand, some denounce the treacherous Trailers that promised action others the open/emptiness of the story. All mention the shifts of reality

The absence of academic work on the film can be explained by the novelty of the film, the lack of a U.K. video/DVD release and by the fact that the film hasn't been released in the U.S.A. yet.

- Tertiary Material.

Richard Werly's Article on Japanese video game fans playing Paintball in a suburb of Tokyo uses *Avalon* in order to illustrate what these people are looking for. The article states that most players have seen the film and have the desire to reproduce what they saw on screen and what they experienced during video-gaming sessions. As such the article firmly links the film to the subculture of Videogames and highlights the frame of mind that the player's have, one is quoted saying that they keep a certain set of rules and that 'the goal is not massacre, but adrenaline'⁵

Segueret on side compares the rise in videogame culture to that of the cinema. *Avalon* is used in this case to illustrate 'to what fusinal radicalism a filmic reflection on virtual worlds can lead' again linking the film to it's core gaming subject.

Continuing on in the computer game area, Annick Rivoire's article on a Sony Playstation advert competition throws *Tron* (1982/USA/Steven Lisberger), *The Matrix* (USA/1999/Wachoski Brothers) and *Avalon* into the discussion when assessing the novelty of one of the final three films and it's 'decerebrating and derealising' elements. In a similar way Blumenfeld, in his review of *Minority Report* associated *Avalon* with other reality bending films.

In the first of his articles, Pedroletti focuses on the Japanese director's present in Cannes in 2001. Mamoru Oshii is integrated into the Japanese filmmakers (Imamura, Kurosawa, et al.) but immediately held apart from them because he 'comes from another school'⁶.

In his second article he highlights the facts that Japanese films use more and more computer generated imagery. *Avalon* is cited along *Final Fantasy* (USA\Japan/2001/Sakaguchi) and again connected to the video-gaming industry. In his third article he sets up Oshii's former films as an essential point and points to common points among all his works.

⁵ Werly

⁶ Pedroletti, 'La maturité nouvelle des jeunes réalisateurs japonais'

Comparing these articles that refer to the film as an example it becomes clear that it is most commonly linked to the Computer-games/Otaku subculture and it's large media spectrum: Games, Manga, Anime.

Avalon Preloaded 63% is a polish fanfilm that bases itself on the world described in the film and uses it to tell another story. The phenomenon of fanfilms is also closely associated to Cult films such as the *Star Wars* films⁷, the *Star Trek* franchise and other films or franchises with mass fan followings.

In conclusion, all three areas of research seem to be marked by key elements of the film.

These elements are:

- Mamoru Oshii's past as a canonical Anime director
- The production process
- The theme of computer games and the subculture of gamers
- Drawing from that, the theme of realities and identity.
- The references to the filmic style, the philosophical nature and the way it is set up in groups with other films.

These main, extratextual elements and others seem to prove that *Avalon* can indeed be considered an alternative film. All of the elements found in this Portfolio deserve a closer reading which is not possible due to the size constraints of this piece.

1703 Words

Portfolio Contents:

In hardcopy

CD-ROM

PRIMARY MATERIAL

DVD, French 3 Disc Collector's Edition

With booklet and Original Soundtrack
Film DVD

Date

08/2003

⁷ Will Brooker spends a chapter discussing fanfilms in *Using the Force: Creativity, Community and Star Wars Fans*, London: Continuum 2002

- Interview with K. Kawai
- Set Photos
- Press Conference with M. Oshii
- Bonus DVD
- Gate to Avalon (Making of)
- Avalon VFX (Making of CGI)
- Days to Avalon (Raw footage of shoot)
- Japanese Trailer
- Interview with M.Oshii

Pressbook by Des Film, Studio Canal and Cinevia Films	03/2002
'Dossier de Presse' Cinenygm 2002	04/2002
'Programme' Cinenygm 2002	04/2002

SECONDARY MATERIAL

Laight Rupert, 'Avalon: The Matrix in Polish' in <i>Film Review</i> 11/02 p.80	10/2002
Newman, Kim, 'Avalon' in <i>Sight and Sound</i> 12/02 p.41-42	11/2002
Rayns, Tony, 'Gamemaster' in <i>Sight and Sound</i> 11/02 p.28-29	10/2002
Rayns, Tony, 'Interview with Mamoru Oshii' in <i>Sight and Sound</i> 11/02 p.30-31	10/2002
Grouard, Georges & Bouton-Drouard, Nathanaël, 'Entretien avec Kenji Kawai'	
Fantastique Zone No.4 Jan/Feb 2002	01/2002
Mad Movies #134*	2001
Mad Movies #140*	2002

TERTIARY MATERIAL

CD-ROM containing Avalon Preloaded Fan-Film*	24/10/2003
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On CD-ROM

PRIMARY MATERIAL

Avalon Production Information	23/10/2003
Avalon Distribution, BO etc.	30/10/2003
- Trailers	
Cineart Teaser	12/2000
French Trailer	03/2002
TV Spor A	12/2000
TV Spot B	12/2000
- Websites	
http://neocarbhone.free.fr/avalon/index.html	early 2001
Official Website (moved from Avalon-le-jeu.com)	
http://www.avalon-movie.com/index.asp	mid-late 2001
Official International Website	
- Posters	
French des Films Poster	02/2001
French Poster	02/2002
Japanese Poster	12/2000
Swiss Poster	04/2002
Japanese Avalon Flyer	01/2002
Sci-Fi London Web advertisement for UK Premiere	01/2002

- Photos

SECONDARY MATERIAL

- Reviews

- Pedroletti, Brice, 'L'étrange guerrilla urbaine d'Avalon' 07/02/2001
Le Monde
- Sharp Jasper, 'Avalon' 12/03/2001
<http://www.midnighteye.com/reviews/avalon.shtml>
- Knowles, Harry, 'Mamoru Oshii's Avalon review' 07/05/2001
<http://www.aintitcool.com/display.cgi?id=8928>
- PETSSSSss-, 'Jeux de guerre: Avalon, verger de pommes' +-05/2001
http://www.cannes-fest.com/2001/film_avalon.htm
- H.N., 'Avalon' 06/06/2001
Positif
- Azoury, Philippe, "'Avalon" et le manga s'incarna' 27/03/2002
Libération
- Blumenfeld, Samuel, 'Plongée comateuse dans un future virtuel archaïque' 27/03/2002
Le Monde
- Naccache, Thim, 'Avalon' 27/03/2002
http://www.6nema.com/Avalon/critic_Avalon.htm
- Gerle, Jörg. "Avalon - Spiel um dein Leben". 13/08/2002
in "film dienst" (Germany). Vol. 55, Issue 17. Pg. 37
- Micchiche, Jean-Marc, 'Game generation' 30/08/2002
http://www.land.lu/html/dossiers/dossier_cinema/avalon_300802.html
- Hölling, Mirco, 'Avalon' 03/09/2002
<http://www.linc.de/review/Film/avalon/avalon.html>
- Russell, Jamie, 'Avalon (2002)' 17/10/2002
http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2002/10/17/avalon_2002_review.shtml

- Academic Essays

None

- User or Viewer Comments

Selection of www.imdb.com and <http://neocarbone.free.fr/avalon/bibliotheque-avalonetvous.htm>

- Press debates

- Mentions or references

InCamera (Kodak Periodical) 01/2003

Imdb.com Reference to *Avalon* in *Spy Kids 3D: Game Over* unable to confirm
Summer 2003

amazon.com: 'Reference to *Avalon* in *1000 Game Heroes*' unable to confirm
2003

- Interviews

Interview 1 SCA 25/10/2003

Interview 2 ACEMK 27/10/2003

Interview 3 G	28/10/2003
McCarter, Charles, 'Interview with Mamoru Oshii'	early 2001
http://www.ex.org/articles/2001/2001.6.16-exclusive-peering_into_the_mists_of_avalon-pg1.html	
Kenji Kawai Interview	12/2001
Mamoru Oshii Interview Cinevia	12/2001
Mamoru Oshii Interview Cineart	mid 2002
Email correspondence with Grzegorz Kierzwi	3/11/2003
Email correspondence with Krzysztof Paluchowski	3/11/2003

TERTIARY MATERIAL

Pedroletti, Brice, 'Les créateurs d'images animées nippons jouent avec le réel'	
Le Monde	10/05/2001
Pedroletti, Brice, 'La maturité nouvelle des jeunes réalisateurs japonais'	10/05/2001
Le Monde	
Werly, Richard, 'A Tokyo, les fans se jouent le film grandeur nature'	27/03/2002
Libération	
Pedretti, Brice, 'Mamoru Oshii, entre chien et loup'	02/04/2002
Le Monde	
Seguret, Olivier, 'Les amours très nature du film et du jeu vidéo'	03/04/2002
Libération	
Rivoire, Annick, 'un court de grand'	19/06/2002
Libération	
Blumenfeld, Samuel, 'Le monde selon Philip K. Dick'	02/10/2002
Le Monde	

* These items were not included as the postal service could not get them to me before the deadline. They will be submitted as soon as they arrive.