

Essay

Alternative considerations on *Avalon*

This essay will highlight in what contexts *Avalon* (Oshii, Japan, 2001) can and has to be considered an alternative piece of filmmaking. The dictionary definition of the adjective ‘alternative’ reads somewhat along the lines of ‘what is other’. In applying theories and discourses surrounding the films argued to alternative in general I will show that they can be applied to *Avalon*. Style and Reflexivity are critical issues that form a core of the definition of what is alternative and what is not. Due to its relative novelty *Avalon* has not been the object of any scholarly discussion to date. It can therefore not be proven whether it will have any relevance in a later discourse on its alternative status. I will therefore apply principles, mainly concerned with cult, and show their relevance to this film as well as introduce own ideas developed throughout the research for this essay.

Avalon tells the story of Ash, a young woman living anonymously in an anonymous country in an anonymous future. Her true prominence, apart from being the main character in this film is the fact that she earns her life by playing a forbidden computer game. To access it players need to lie down in a chamber and put on a virtual reality helmet that connects their brains to the game. In this game, players or teams of players earn points - that can be transformed into money - by killing other soldiers, players or war machines. She is so good at it that she has become a virtual star, other players looking up and admiring her. During the course of the film we get to know the fact that she was once the member of the best team to ever play the game, “Wizard” but has, since their break-up, played solo. One day she learns from another “Wizard” member that their former leader, Murphy, has been left in a waking coma after he tried to access a hidden level in the game called class real. On her quest to find information on this level, she meets the mysterious Bishop who takes her under his wing and shows her the way to a ghost that’s supposed to be the doorway to level real. Once there she locates Murphy and after a debate on what reality is shoots him down and is faced by the same ghost again.

Avalon was directed by Mamoru Oshii who has already made his name first and foremost by directing Japanese Animation Films and Series. The screenplay is by

Kazunori Ito, a long time partner as is Kenji Kawai who signed responsible for the film's music.

The production itself can be seen as being alternative as the film was financed by Japanese investors thus it is a Japanese production but was shot in Poland with an entirely Polish cast and crew. The fact that a Japanese film with Polish language exists can be explained to serve to alienate the designated Japanese audience further.

Alternative Looks – Style in Avalon

Applying the four point stylistic analysis that David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson suggest one can identify a discrepancy in styles between the varying levels of reality that the film deals with. These four levels as suggested by the film are “The real world”, “Avalon” and “Class Real”. The film's first shots are set in Avalon here Oshii uses unsteady camera movement that reminds the viewer of war zone reports. This shaky camera style thus serves to reflect the state of constant war that the different classes of Avalon is under and gives immediacy to the scenes. The use of close-ups and medium shots leaves the audience desiring to see a more ensemble view; here the lack of the traditional establishing shot can be felt.

In “the real world” the camera movements shift to smooth dollies, elaborate camera movement but mostly still cameras. The bleakness of the world is thus transmitted in static shots suggesting the uneventful lives lived in this world. The absence of masses of Extras that liven up shots and the general absence of motion make it easy for Oshii to draw attention to his main characters, in most cases Ash. This proves what Bordwell and Thompson mean by ‘one part of the director's job is to direct our attention, and so style will often function simply perceptually’¹

“Class Real” uses a system of conventions that seem to be drawn on contemporary mainstream inner-city films. Not only does the protagonist now move through a busy European metropolis, it becomes harder for the viewer to tell her apart from the other characters on screen. The shots show capitalist icons and are overwhelming in their motion and colour compared to the other two levels of reality.

What strikes the viewer from the start is the look of the film. Everything except a few key items in the films and the last 19 minutes of the film are rid of colour. The shots look over-exposed, washed out and are covered in a sepia tone. It was Oshii's will to shoot on colour stock and then digitally alter the colours taking

¹ Bordwell & Thompson, p.331

away the primary colours and leaving the audience with a bleakness that can also be seen in the mise-en-scene. Most of the shots are under populated; especially telling is a complicated crane sequence when Ash exits her Interface cavern. The camera follows her from the point she exits the door, dollies and rises as she makes her way up a winding set of steps and follows her until stopping to let her leave the frame on the right. Despite the complex camera setup, the fact that the four extras, one at the middle level of the staircase and three standing near a rail on the top don't move gives the shot a very weird look. I would argue that this and other examples that happen throughout the sepia toned parts of the film prove the fact that Oshii uses codes innate to Japanese Animation. In Anime² the artist often use minimal animation as opposed to their American counterparts. As such, the repetition of cells to animate the main character and a background with fixed "extras" is satisfying. This minimalism can be seen in the aforementioned scene, but is present throughout the film, especially when the camera is left still.

The differences in musical themes and sound between the three levels are also emphasizing the stylistic division of the film. While "Avalon" is filled with synthetic sounds, the tone of "the real world" is more sober and uses realistic sounds. Finally "Class real" is as with all other elements of style crowded with city noises that blank out any musical accompaniment until the appropriate location for musical performance is reached in the opera hall.

The use of the computer to alternate the colour, lighting, grain and focus of the images gives the director more tools to finalize their vision of what a shot should look like. This can be seen as one of the issues highlighted by Bazin when he speaks of 'the destructiveness of conscious artistic intervention'; by intervening through these digital tools, the effectively destroys the reality that was captured and bends it to his own will, he creates what Viktor Shklovsky called '*ostranenie*; a making strange of the world'³. A state of complete and utter directorial control has been achieved lately as was shown by the use of digital techniques to manipulate frames in high tech films such as *Star Wars Episode II* (Lucas, USA, 2002) and *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy (Jackson, NZ/USA, 2001/2/3) These films have shown the possibilities open to film artist today.

- Issues of Reflexivity in *Avalon*

² Short for Japanese Animation

³ Polan, p.667

The world manifests truth and all one has to do is contemplate the world or its identical embodiment in human activity – texts – to gain insights into that meaning.⁴

In the light of Polan's statement I would argue that the questioning of Reality that takes place in *Avalon*, and that has taken place in films like the *Matrix* trilogy (Wachoski Brothers, USA, 1999/2002/2002), *eXistenZ* (Cronenberg, USA, 1999) is in itself a reflexive element. Closer reading of *Avalon* reveals a number of these that I will address in this part of this essay.

Through Oshii's use of a multilayered narrative he creates a first level of estrangement in the audience; he takes this further in creating a certain feel particular to these realities through style. Each of the three realities that one can discern from viewing the film is accorded its own set of colours, camera movements and other stylistic devices as highlighted in the previous part. The levels are however interlinked by transposition, mostly of the main character Ash, into these realities. Another such element can be seen in the fact that Bishop is first seen in the game, when we next see him, he is still wearing his clerical collar and the scope of his gun. Other transcendent elements are the appearance of the Bassett hound, and the musical theme.

The meaning of *Avalon* is ambiguous and hidden as the interviews conducted on a sample audience seem to prove. Whether or not Polan's idea that 'political art defamiliarises the world. But it does so playing off our connections to that world'⁵ It seems clear that the audiences are defamiliarized by the constant shifts in reality and the riddled progression of the story. However the links to the familiar are omnipresent. The beginning of the film for instance sees a group of tanks driving through a city street filled with civilians running away. It goes on to show a similar street, maybe the same being bombed by helicopters. These images seem through style and content reflect the events that took place in Eastern-Europe during the 1950s and 60s and other popular upheavals. The relative calm that exists in "the real world" contrast this thus leading to the audience, possibly, questioning the apparent complaisance of this world. Application of this on the real world can be explained as a hint by Oshii who has explained in many interviews that he was a participant of student revolt and likes ideas of change in society. Could the shifts in style be seen as a call for society to stop

⁴ Polan, p.663

⁵ *ibid*, p.670

living revolutions in virtual worlds and make them happen in the real world? I would argue so.

Oshii is aware of his former works and he shows this in *Avalon*. The references to former Oshii films are omnipresent, whether it be the scene of Stunner eating that reflects an identical scene of characters contemplating another eat in a loud and uncivilized manner in *Stray Dog* or the scene of introspection revealing Ash's habits that directly mirrors a wandering through futuristic Hong Kong in *Ghost in the Shell*. In this case the selection of shot length, composition and music with no diegetic sounds reveals the same idea behind the sequence namely that to question habits and explain character motivations.

The title sequence shows that Mamoru Oshii is also aware of his position inside the Science-Fiction genre. Andy and Larry Wachoski have expressed themselves in interviews to be fans of *Ghost in the Shell* the title sequence to *The Matrix* shows this. Both have explained that it was their reference to the film and more are to be found inside their film. Oshii then goes on to reference back through both films in the establishing of *Avalon*'s title sequence.⁶

Robert Stam indicates a number of arguments in relation to reflexivity. The most prominent to apply to *Avalon* seem to be his realization that 'reflexive artist see themselves as unbound by life as it is perceived (Reality), by stories as they have been told (Genre), or by a nebulous probability (Verisimilitude)⁷ these three points can easily be applied to Oshii's work in general but *Avalon* in particular.

Alternative Fans – Issues of Cult regarding *Avalon*

One other issue that has to be taken into account when talking about the alternativeness of *Avalon* is that of its Cult potential and presence. Many journalists have already praised the film as cult, but since this term has been used so many times and has become a staple in the reviewing of films in the fantastic genre, I feel the need to highlight evidence that leads me to believe in its cult statu

As was mentioned earlier Mamoru Oshii started his career in the field of Anime and has from there grown to be one of the most influential directors in that domain. His name ranks among the top three besides that of Hayao Miyazaki and Osamu Tezuka. The fan following of the Anime genre and subgenres have risen

⁶ Details of this could be found on the official French webpage no longer online but part of the portfolio handed in prior to this essay.

⁷ Stam, p.129

considerably and created a Cult-category of their own. Regular conventions see people dress up as their favourite character and sharing the viewing of a maximum amount of Anime during these weekends of immersion. The regularity that Internet Forums and Newsgroups dedicated to Anime are visited and the wealth of topics and discussions that go on are astronomical. The available merchandise, books, DVDs and other Anime related items make it a popular culture that remains in the cult areas only because of its still relative anonymity. This status could well tip into the mainstream since films like *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, Japan, 2001) are becoming popular and earning awards at big western festivals (Berlin 2002) or award ceremonies (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences of America Award for Best Foreign Film 2002).

The fact that a predominantly Anime oriented Artist enters the live-action film stage could favour the cult of his films. If in this case he uses styles that are intrinsic to Anime, it will very possibly be so. The reception of *Avalon* in France proves this. The majority of French reviewers linked Oshii's name to *Ghost in the Shell* and have praised the film for its technical qualities. In this case the full grown Anime cult that exists in France⁸ have indeed anticipated the film and welcomed it with both critical and commercial success, a fact that can not be held true of all European Countries (apart from French speaking Switzerland)

If one were to imply that Umberto Eco has produced a guideline to Cult films there would be much controversy however, from his essay on *Casablanca* one can take nine Eco-ist criteria that help define a cult film. Eco enumerates the following properties of a cult film:

The work must be loved [1] ... it must provide a completely furnished world ... so it can be quoted [2] ... a world about which one can make up quizzes and trivia [3] ... these elements must have some archetypal appeal [4]⁹

These first four can be seen as met by *Avalon*. It is obviously loved, the amount of websites and positive feedback in magazines and on the Internet prove that. It also provides a world that is quotable, as Krzysztof Paluchowski and his Film Division Plan9 prove, through their Fan film *Avalon Preloaded 67%* currently under production. Paluchowski and friends prove the concept of 'textual poaching', another defining aspect of cult, in which readers appropriate themselves parts of a text and use

⁸ France was one of the first countries to adopt Japanese Animation for its Children's TV program in the mid 80s. Since then Anime and the related items have had a strong following among the youth of France who have grown up accustomed to Japanese semiotics and styles.

⁹ Eco, p.198

that to tell their own story or film, thus taking it further and possibly away from the original intentions. Questions on *Avalon* and its underlying myth should not be hard to come by either and it seems rather clear through the apparent simplicity of the characters that archetypes are quickly established. Eco goes on:

... a cult movie must display some organic imperfections [5] ... one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it ... reducing it to a series of excerpts [6]¹⁰

it must have

a disconnected series of images, of peaks, of visual icebergs [7] ... it must live on, and because of, it's glorious ricketiness. [8] However, it must have some quality [9]¹¹

Nowhere do these properties become more apparent than in interviews conducted on the film. All participants in these Interviews cited examples of scenes that stood out in their mind whether it was through their spectacular nature or their connection to the advancement of the narrative, participants pointed to weaknesses in the text as well as to strong points. The most notable instance was the happiness of one interviewee when he exposed his theory on the link between the film and Arthurian Legend to the group, dissecting the film and applying extratextual knowledge on it. As one can see the Eco-ist model of the cult film seems to apply to *Avalon*.

Next I would like to draw attention to the similarities that are displayed between one particular *Avalon* fan site on the Internet and the research Julian Hoxter has done on *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, USA, 1973). In it, he highlights different patterns that emerge on websites that fans dedicate to their object of admiration. In this particular case the website 'Nine Sisters' by a certain 'Alan'. Not only is the name and the address of the site directly inspired by the intratextual group trying to take away Ash's gear before meeting their doom at the hands of a virtual helicopter, it also imitates the style of the film in that it only uses sepia and black. The site is subdivided into 'DVD', 'CD', 'Web Sites', 'Books' and 'Thoughts' sub-pages. The first four list the available Media surrounding the film. The first of these is dedicated to the film's DVD apparitions all over the globe. Here 'Alan' list in meticulous detail what language tracks, subtitles, special features and extra features can be found on any release of *Avalon* on DVD in the whole world, he even adds commentaries as to the value and the validity of these editions.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p.198

¹¹ *ibid*, p.198-199

The impression one gets from reading fan discourse is that of the centrality of ownership or perhaps more appositely, of possession and control of knowledge about the cult object which speaks to a sense of insecurity and anxiety regarding the status of the fan before his object.¹²

The final of these categories is certainly the most interesting on this page. The 'Thoughts' section opens the discussion up to other fans from all over the world to give their interpretation. 'Alan' does not interfere in these but for a short editorial introduction and many fans have used this pseudo-forum to explain the sense that they made of the film, not only does this then lead to a further life of the film outside traditional filmic life on the silver screens and then on DVD or Video. In this case the narrative openness that Oshii has left in the text gives the audience space to speculate.

To use Hoxter's expression 'The effect of this repeated desire for a return to the 'mother text' is, for Bruce Kawin at least indicative of a similar expectation of, and pleasure in, a kind of imagined reciprocity between text and fan...'¹³. Text should in this case be understood as the intended product of the director or more generally the author. This notion leads to a facet of film theory that has gone through many changes over the years and has created much turmoil as to its validity, the Auteur theory.

Alternative by nature: The distinct Oshii-isms in *Avalon*

Avalon is Mamoru Oshii's fourth live action film, after *The Red Spectacles*, *Stray Dog Kerberos Panzer Corps* and *Talking Head*. Viewed apart from his Anime *oeuvre* these films make obvious certain links that seem to prove the validity of the auteurist conceptions. This concept uses trademarks to identify the works of a certain director as his own. It becomes apparent through the recursion of certain elements that Oshii uses techniques that he has inherited from his working on Anime. Among other instances the fact that all comic elements in the first two films are directly drawn from other Anime or at least seem to mimic them.¹⁴ *Talking Head* is itself dedicated to the workings of an Anime production company. The last film in the line or subject can be seen along this same line. The links to Anime Style have been established previously, as have the links between *Avalon* and other films in the genre of Reality/Unreality.

¹² Hoxter in Mendik and Harper, p.178

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 177

¹⁴ The drop through a taxi's roof results in the main character being stuck heads down, wiggling his feet in the air. This same comedic technique is used in *City Hunter*, *Maison Ikkoku*, and *Lum* (an Oshii creation) among others.

The argument that becomes clear by looking at the totality of Oshii's works is that his roots in Anime have never left him. The common elements needed to establish the links between films are many. One can enumerate stylistic devices such as the panels that appear before his speculative films, the action sequences that enter the viewer into the atmosphere of his films before disclosing the title sequences. The theme of high technology seems to be omnipresent in Oshii's films as well, be it the armour suits in the Panzer Corps Trilogy¹⁵, the weaponry of Patlabor or the Cybertronic concerns of *Ghost in the Shell* and on a different level in *Avalon*.

Whether through style, content or ideology a Mamoru Oshii film can be distinguished by looking for certain clues, most prominently the appearance of dogs and it can be reasonably well argued that his style is alternative for all his films fall under one if not more of the categories and definitions that actual debate around Alternative cinema focuses on.

In the case of *Avalon* I would argue that Oshii has reached his climax, for it combines all of the elements that one can see as alternative in his other films and takes a step further. The film is introduced by two panels explaining the given elements of the story, a highly artificial 'Loading Map Data' Title then highlights the fact that the following is in the game. The introductory action sequence introduces the viewer to the gritty world inside *Avalon* whose artificiality is reinvigorated by the 'Mission complete' overlay on the exploding Helicopter and the following title sequence. Much like *Ghost in the Shell* and *The Matrix* this title sequence links itself strongly to the theme of artificiality, computerisation and cyberspaces.

The Dog's relevance throughout the film as aforementioned proves the importance that the director sees in dogs. This idea is further explored in the two first Panzer Corps films where the Corps is allegorized as dogs and the governmental troops replacing them are catlike and introduced by cat-sounds.

In most of Oshii's films technology serves to alienate humanity. The Panzer Corps soldiers are seen and act like merciless killing machines when their suit's typical red spectacles lighten up. Major Kusanagi, the main character and android, constantly struggles between her cybernetic body and the almost human artificial intelligence that reigns in her brain. The *Patlabor* films pit enormous Robots against each other in which the humans are but the controllers and must find themselves

¹⁵ This easily recognizable category is made up of *Red Spectacles*, *Stray Dog* and *Jin-Roh* for their common element of the fictitious Panzer Corps Police regiment.

dismissed to the role of organic brain for these units. In the case of *Avalon* technology seems to have changed the whole society to the rank of slaves to a game. Even though the game is forbidden, it seems to be one of the few sources of income still available to humanity¹⁶

Finally the intratextual and intra-oeuvre – Oshii referencing his former films – reflexivity, discussed earlier, can be seen as another Oshii trademarks.

These concerns are but a sample of those that can be found and deserve to be more closely looked upon in further work on this film. Concluding this chapter however it seems important to state that these elements can in no way be attributed solely to Mamoru Oshii. I would rather argue that the group that is lead by Oshii for a certain film adapts itself to the need of the director. The Auteur argument can easily be applied to Oshii's films since the team surrounding him has often incorporated Kazunori Ito and Kenji Kawai, thus, Team Oshii has stayed somewhat homogenous over the several productions.

Conclusion

Through the variety of issues addressed in this essay, whether it is the computer aided stylistic differences between the levels of reality and the resulting otherness to ordinary films, the use of reflexive elements and the issues of Cult, it seems apparent that *Avalon* should be treated as an alternative Film. This essay does, due to its size constraints, not reflect the entirety of elements that link it to the domains of alternative cinema. Most notably in the area of reflexivity Robert Stam has introduced many more arguments that can without hesitation be applied to *Avalon* and will hopefully be done so in future projects.

4232 Words

This is where I ended the Essay due to spacing reasons, 3500 was what was asked for. I would have added the relations between the dedication in Video gaming circles especially Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games and the link that has to Avalon as the game in the film. Then the Chapter on Reflexivity had to be cut short, I would have added- and will probably add more thoughts and concerns with reflexivity in particular on Stam's Chapter and how it relates to Avalon.

¹⁶ The only other jobs that are apparent are the butcher, the tram-driver and bar/restaurant personnel

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