



## FILM FESTIVAL OF CATALUNYA AT SITGES

### Fresh from Japan: *Metropolis* and *Millennium Actress* by Sara Martin

The International Film Festival of Catalunya (October 4 - 13) held at Sitges - the charming seaside village just south of Barcelona, infused with life from the international gay community - this year again presented a mix of mainstream and fantastic film. (The festival's original title was Festival of Fantastic Cinema.) The more mainstream section (called *Gran Angular*) showed 12 films only as opposed to the large offering of 27 films in the Fantastic section, evidence that this genre still predominates even though it is no longer exclusive. Japan made a big showing this year in both categories. Two feature-length animated films caught the attention of **Sara Martin**, an English literature teacher at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and *anime* fan, who reports here on the latest offerings by two of Japan's most outstanding *anime* film makers, and gives us both a wee history and future glimpse of the *anime* genre - it's sure not kids' stuff and it's not always pretty.



Japanese animated feature films are known as *anime*. This should not be confused with *manga*, the name given to the popular printed comics on which *anime* films are often based. Western spectators raised in a culture that identifies animation with cartoon films and TV series made predominately for children, may be surprised to learn that animation enjoys a far higher regard in Japan. There *anime* films routinely hit the top of the box-office charts, appealing to a far wider segment of the population than American animations by Disney, Pixar or Dreamworks. *Final Fantasy*, a state-of-the-art Japanese *anime* spoken in American-accented English and inspired by a popular graphic adventure, tried this summer to attract new teenage and adult audiences in the West with somewhat mixed results. Still, the film helped open the eyes of many westerners to the possibilities of Japanese animation - specifically computer-generated *anime* - beyond the child-oriented likes of the

popular *Pokémon* series.



Two artists outshine all the other stars in the universe of *anime*: Katsuhiro Otomo and Satoshi Kon. Otomo is best known for his *manga* series *Akira*, begun in 1983, which he transferred to the screen in his cult film of 1988, a classic of cyberpunk fantasy. *Akira*, the film, forever altered the course of *anime* in Japan and led to its popularization in the West among a steadily increasing group of dedicated fans. Satoshi Kon's fame is due to a no less celebrated film - the atmospheric *Perfect Blue* (1997) - which proved that not all *anime* had to follow in the wake of Otomo. This year's edition of the International Film Festival of Catalunya at Sitges has included the Spanish premiere of the latest films in which Otomo and Kon have worked: *Metropolis* and *Millennium Actress*, respectively. What their comparison reveals is that Kon's style of animation - more adult-oriented - may be gaining the upper hand and could well lead the way into a more mature phase of *anime*.

The American premiere of *Metropolis* - based on the classic comic (*manga*) by Osamu Tezuka - has been announced for October 28th as part of the events within the most important *anime* festival outside Japan: New York's Big Apple Anime Fest (October 26-28). [For more information see: [www.bigappleanimefest.com](http://www.bigappleanimefest.com)]. *Metropolis'* screenwriter Otomo and its director, Rin Taro, will hopefully have attended the premiere by the time this article appears. They will have thus symbolically closed a circle linking East and West, since Tezuka's original *manga* was inspired by Manhattan's classic skyscrapers. *Metropolis* will subsequently open throughout the U.S. on November 9th, distributed by Tri-Star Pictures. Satoshi Kon's *Millennium Actress*, which received its world premiere on July 28th at Montreal's Fantasia Film Festival - the same festival that launched *Perfect Blue* [See: [www.fantasiafest.com](http://www.fantasiafest.com)] - has not yet been scheduled for U.S. release, and may, unfortunately, never be.

### **Osamu Tezuka (1928-1989): the influence, the inspiration**

American culture is at the heart of Japanese *manga* and *anime*. Osamu Tezuka, the main figure in the history of *manga* and TV *anime*, was an avid follower of Disney's films, which shows in the design of his most popular character, the charming robot Astro Boy, created in 1951. The same Astro Boy in 1960 became the star of the first animated cartoon TV series, produced by Tezuka's seminal company, Mushi, which launched the careers of a whole generation of Japanese artists still active today. Tezuka's life and work, marked by the WWII raid that destroyed his home town Osaka, reveals his love of childish, candid American animation together with a fascination for dark, masochistic expressions of apocalyptic destruction. This arresting juxtaposition, responsible for Tezuka's introduction of new adult elements in *manga*, can be easily read as a consequence of the Japanese ambiguity towards America. Tezuka and his followers, including Otomo, possess a preoccupation with

both America and destruction. Their harassed heroes can often be interpreted as symbolic representations of a defeated Japan which, it is suggested, has not yet overcome the horrid surprise falling on their heads from American bomber planes at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Otomo dedicated his own *Akira* to Tezuka, whom he acknowledges as his master, as does Rin Taro, Tezuka's former collaborator. Rin Taro made a name for himself thanks to the 1960s TV series he directed for Mushi: *Astro Boy* and *Kimba, The White Lion*, based on another popular *manga* by Tezuka. Since the late 1970s Rin Taro has moved away from TV, directing successful *anime* films such as *Galaxy Express 999* (1979), *Harmagedon* (1983) or the cult film *X: The Movie* (1996). The project for *Metropolis*, the film, actually came out of Otomo's and Rin Taro's participation in a round-table discussion on a TV program devoted to Tezuka. The film can thus be said to bridge the gaps between three generations: Tezuka's, Rin Taro's (b. 1941) and Otomo's (b. 1954).

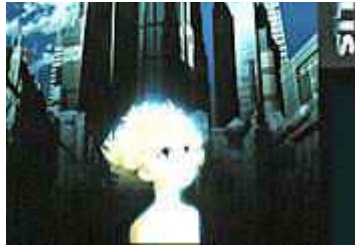
Tezuka's *manga Metropolis*, first published in 1949, is - even more than *Astro Boy* - a genuine post-war product. Fans of *Blade Runner* may be surprised to learn that in the late 1940s Tezuka was already dealing with the theme of whether an organic artificial human being can eventually feel and become fully human. The *manga* story of the bonding between Tezuka's original Micchi, an androgynous flesh-and-blood pseudo-human creature, and Micchi's creator has been inexplicably replaced in the film *Metropolis* by the story of the birth and destruction of the big-eyed, lovely girl Tima, another pseudo-human - this time mechanical - characterized by her lack of a capacity for empathy. The deceptively innocent Tima eventually transforms into a cyberpunk goddess of destruction, more closely recalling Otomo's mutant *Akira* than Micchi. Like *Akira*, Tima is led to unleash apocalyptic destruction onto the city that created her, rather than endure her dehumanization.

Although the title of Tezuka's *manga* clearly recalls Fritz Lang's 1926 classic, Tezuka denied having seen the film at the time he created the comic, claiming instead that a series of photos of New York's skyscrapers had been his inspiration. The architectural wonders of New York - sadly transformed into a real-life apocalyptic landscape by the attacks of September 11th - were, in any case, also the inspiration for Lang's masterpiece. Tezuka may or may not have seen *Metropolis*, but, surely, his adapters have done their homework. The plots in both films are quite similar, involving a powerful tycoon who hires a mad scientist to create an artificial woman. She is an instrument to control the impending revolt of the workers against the economic system of the city ruled by this tycoon but also the metallic reincarnation of a dead woman still loved by the mad scientist's employer: wife in Lang's film, daughter in Otomo's.

### ***Metropolis***



In Otomo's and Rin Taro's *Metropolis*, the workers' unrest arises from their hatred of the robots employed to do their jobs. When the power-crazed tycoon Red Duke hires Dr. Laughton to manufacture Tima - the lovely android that can pass for human -



the seeds of chaos and anarchy are sown. However, the main plot line ignores the issue of revolution to focus on the conflict over Tima between two young men, Duke Red's foster son Rock and the boy Kenichi. Rock wants her destroyed to counteract her hold on his father's affections, from which

he has been excluded after her 'birth.' Kenichi, the sidekick and nephew of Shunsaku Ban - a detective chasing her maker Dr. Laughton for his illegal scientific activities - falls under Tima's spell, never realizing until the end that she is, as Rock claims, nothing but a dangerous toy.

The Freudian triangle between Rock, Duke Red and the aloof Tima is one of the most interesting aspects of an otherwise failed film. The animation is certainly accomplished, deftly mixing computerised graphics for the portrayal of the retro-futuristic, multi-layered city with traditional techniques for the characters. Yet Tezuka's Disney legacy is sadly one of the reasons for the film's failure, for it infantilises the characters too much, making it quite hard for the viewer to care for Tima or her chivalrous protector Kenichi. The storyline, too, has plenty of loose ends, possibly because it tries to follow Lang as well as Tezuka. In *Akira* Otomo reserved the last section of the film for a celebration of chaos through acts of mass destruction. However, what is quite effective in *Akira* comes out as shallow pyrotechnics in *Metropolis*. In the end, the viewer feels not only disappointed but bored, as the high-quality visuals cannot make up for Otomo's predictable, simplistic script.

The ubiquitous presence of female characters in Japanese *anime* clearly expresses the sexist vision of its male creators and *Metropolis* is no exception. Tima is first seen as a naked little girl of silvery, shiny skin, all cuteness and big-eyed charm - a male's shimmering fantasy. In the last part of the film, however, she becomes a frightening monster - the nightmare flip side of the dream girl. Her broken body and its mechanical innards shows she's not human; her inability to fully reciprocate Kenichi's boyish love shows she's nothing more than an unfeeling, uncaring doll. Tima never feels remotely human but it is unclear whether this is because she is a robot or a female. In Lang's original film, scripted by his wife Thea von Harbou, there are two main female characters: the evil female robot and a sweet flesh-and-blood girl, whose physical appearance the robot recalls. The girl represents true womanhood, though rather sentimentally, and is celebrated as a heroine, whereas the robot, finally revealed to be a fake woman, is destroyed. In *Metropolis*, made like most *anime* for and by men, Tima is the only female character, representing a deeply-set male fear: that submissive, pretty girls - a favorite male fantasy - will turn out to be raging furies.

### ***Millennium Actress***

Satoshi Kon (b. 1963) was known as a *manga* artist until he started collaborating in *anime* films, beginning with *Roujin Z* (1991), a film scripted by Katsuhiro Otomo for which Kon designed the sets. The success of the episode *Magnetic Rose*, which Kon wrote for the film *Memories* (1996), allowed him to direct his first *anime* *Perfect Blue*, written by Sadayuki Mura. Kon has often declared his admiration for

Otomo but has also criticized the limitations of the sci-fi *anime* that Otomo's work has inspired. In Kon's view, *anime* should be as varied as *manga*, which addresses a great diversity of readers through many different genres. *Perfect Blue* and *Millennium Actress* are Kon's proposals for leading *anime* into new directions.



Women are also a key factor in Kon's films. *Perfect Blue* focuses on the ordeal endured by Mima, a teenage pop idol and aspiring actress stalked by an obsessed fan. The film excels at depicting her claustrophobic life, fears and insecurity but contains grueling scenes of violence including two rape scenes: a humiliating fake rape scene shot for a film that is to launch her career, and an apparent "real-life" rape, which may actually be a fantasy product of her increasing mental confusion. Given this precedent, it comes as quite a nice surprise to see

that Kon has overcome the urge to use extreme violence in his own original script. His heroine, Chiyoko Fujiwara, is the center of a moving, romantic film that tells the doomed story of a woman's unending search for a beloved man she can never reach.

The basic storyline of *Millennium Actress* is quite simple: Genya Tachibana, owner of a modest production company, is commissioned by the prestigious Gin Ei studios to make a documentary on a relevant aspect of their history, spanning 70 years. Genya chooses as his subject superstar Chiyoko Fujiwara, retired from the screen in the 1960s after a 30-year career. Genya, accompanied by a skeptical young cameraman who does not share his boss's obsession for the actress, finds a way not only into Chiyoko's secluded home but also into her memories of the past.

Kon very cleverly transfers Genya and his cameraman from Chiyoko's home into her memories of the past, which they witness in person, camera in hand. These memories always involve the same episode, narrated against different historical backgrounds. Chiyoko meets a young man fleeing his bloody-minded persecutors; she helps him to hide and he gives her a key - its use is never explained - before running away again from his enemies. She tries to return this key but he consistently eludes her just as she's just about to reach him. The charm of the film is that we never know whether Chiyoko suffers the same fate in successive reincarnations corresponding to different historical periods or whether she is mixing a romantic episode of her youth with the roles that made her a star. These roles correspond to period dramas set in feudal Japan in the Middle Ages and the 18th century, the 19th century Meiji era, the imperialistic period of the early 20th century, the American military occupation after WWII, the postwar economic boom up to the 1990s, and the future, depicted in the sci-fi film that closes her career. As Satoshi Kon himself joked, missing a few minutes of the film means you may miss a whole century of Japanese history.

The scenes selected from Chiyoko's films apparently quote from the history of Japanese cinema, but the viewer needn't worry about this as

the film is perfectly intelligible for those unfamiliar with Japanese cinema. The beauty of *Millennium Actress* lies in its challenging narrative technique, fusing personal memories, national Japanese history and film history. Chiyoko's search for the faceless, loved man haunting her recollection of the past is also strangely appealing. At one point, Chiyoko tells Genya she has come to love her search for this stranger even more than the man himself; she certainly feels happy in her fated quest. For all the humor introduced through Genya's antics and his cameraman's wry comments, Chiyoko's story assumes an almost mystical aura.

In the screening of *Millennium Actress* at Sitges, fans of *Perfect Blue* could be heard complaining that Kon has gone all soft and sentimental. Certainly, this is not a film for those who love *anime's* passion for violence, as shown in Kon's previous film. The male teenage audience, who still comprise the majority of *anime's* followers, may not enjoy *Millennium Actress*, which Kon presumably wrote for a more adult male audience. But if Kon's aim was to insist that *anime* should become as diverse as *manga*, he has certainly taken a step in the right direction. As for women, even though Chiyoko's story has not been created for them, they will find plenty to enjoy in *Millennium Actress*.

Strangely enough, the success of both *Metropolis* and *Millennium Actress* is inevitably tangled up with that of its predecessors and, possibly, with each other. While *Metropolis* will probably do little for Otomo, Rin Taro or their master Tezuka - at least, in the West - the pity is that *Millennium Actress* may sink without trace. This could happen if *Metropolis* fails to draw audiences in the U.S. - as I suspect could well be the case - for then doors will not be likely to open to Kon's exquisite *anime*. This would be a real pity as Kon's film is by far superior. One hopes Americans will at least have access to the DVD version.

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