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The Poisoned Rain of Agharti:
Searching for the Hybrid Aesthetic

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Overview

"There are ideas that change the way many people think, spend, and live. Some people ride these waves of ideas and are carried forward, while others tread water and let the waves pass through them. A few harness these waves and channel them in new and more powerful directions that impact everyone. These waves are what we call an imprint."¹

Imprint Culture Lab

In recent years, anime and manga² have become a popular culture phenomenon in the West. It has become essential for those who aspire to work in the field of animation to understand the impact of anime and manga administered to global culture of today. Manga, once limited to a single shelf in specialised stores³ now pervade isles in bookstores and libraries. Teenagers crowd around comic sections, attracted by the artwork and compelled by the unique storytelling of manga and anime.⁴ Similarly, anime in the West has crossed into the mainstream, largely thanks to the films of Studio Ghibli, with Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001) winning an Oscar in 2003.⁵ "Even casual observers of popular culture could hardly fail to notice the influence of Japanese comics, along

¹ Taken from Imprint Culture Lab mission statement on 'Imprint Life website', 2007, interTrend Communications, Inc., accessed on September 6, 2007 <<http://www.imprintlife.com/>>

² 'Anime' is an abbreviation for the English word, 'animation.' 'Manga' describes a style of comics (with distinguishable conventions of aesthetics, genres and archetypes). Both terms, which originated from the Japanese language, are now practiced worldwide. "Anime has now entered the American vocabulary as well to the extent that it has appeared in recent years in a New York Times crossword puzzle." (Naiper, 2001, p.5) Anime and manga are often treated in English academic texts with special formatting (*italics*, 'inverted commas' or Capitalisation). For the purposes of this essay (with the subject of cultural exchange at its core,) anime and manga will be used as regular terms without special formatting, just as terms for other styles (e.g. crime fiction, graphic novels) would be treated.

³ The Cartoon Gallery, established in 1991, once located in the Imperial Arcade closed down in 2006 due to increasing availability of import Japanese anime and manga related goods from rising competitors. See 'News' at <<http://fm2.cartoongallery.com.au/cartoon/default.html>>

⁴ See Morgan, 2007, 'Superheroes in a Complex World,' Sydney Morning Herald Arts & Entertainment, p.8

⁵ Ibid.

side their animated sibling anime, on film, computer games, fashion and even cosmetics.” (Ridout 2007)

The Poisoned Rain of Agharti is a cel animation combining traditional and digital processes. Set in a post-war dystopian city, *Agharti* touches on the subjects of environmental depletion, the consequences of war and loss of innocence. It places emphasis on the importance of narrative, revering animation as an evocative act of storytelling.

Embarking on a journey to discover the waves of ideas channeled in new directions by others, one hopes to discover ways in which to harness these waves in order to create an imprint. *Agharti* is the start of a search for an imprint, a combination of influences drawn from Eastern and Western cultures, a hybrid aesthetic.

1. Walking through Agharti

1.1 A Brief Synopsis

Once revered as the ‘City of Rain,’ Agharti prospered during a worldwide drought through trading its water supply to other countries. Years later, it stands as an inhabitable toxic wasteland. *The Poisoned Rain of Agharti* tells the story of Agharti citizens, 14-year-old Nuru and his 6-year-old sister, Karin, journeying from their hidden underground dwelling to explore the surface ruins of Agharti. Their adventure is disrupted when the city’s poisoned rain starts to fall. To reach the safety of their underground shelter, Nuru and Karin must brave the toxic rain. They encounter enemy soldiers who pervade the city, searching for Agharti’s remaining clean water supply.

1.2 The Original Story vs. Alternate ending

From the start *The Poisoned Rain of Agharti* was a very ambitious project. Script revisions and an alternate ending⁶ were some measures taken to ensure that *Agharti* would be completed by the due date. However, the alternate ending which cuts an entire scene (2 minutes) from the original script, carries a very different message to the original story. (See Appendix 1 & 2 for scripts to compare the original and alternate endings.)

The original ending carries messages of hope where as the alternate ending destroys hope. In the original story, the children live on to walk forward. Their separation is inevitable however so is their capacity to grow and draw on inner strengths to pull through a dark future. In the alternate ending, it is revealed that the children are merely spirits of the desolated city of Agharti, roaming the streets by day and returning ‘underground’ by night.

Tracking the progress made throughout this project I keep an online blog⁷ where I have often expressed regret for resorting to the alternate ending. The alternate ending was not the story

⁶ A suggestion made by Iain McCaig during a conversation about the animated storyboard.

⁷ The Poisoned Rain of Agharti progress blog online: <<http://agharti.blogspot.com>>

wanted to tell. Blindly aiming to accomplish the amount of work I set out for myself in the beginning within a year was naïve. However I hold no regrets for undertaking this project, which has pushed me to limits and made me realise my potential to write a good story. *Agharti* marks the beginning of a long journey of search and discovery. Learning of my capabilities and interests, I am able to move forward to accomplish greater feats in the field of animation.

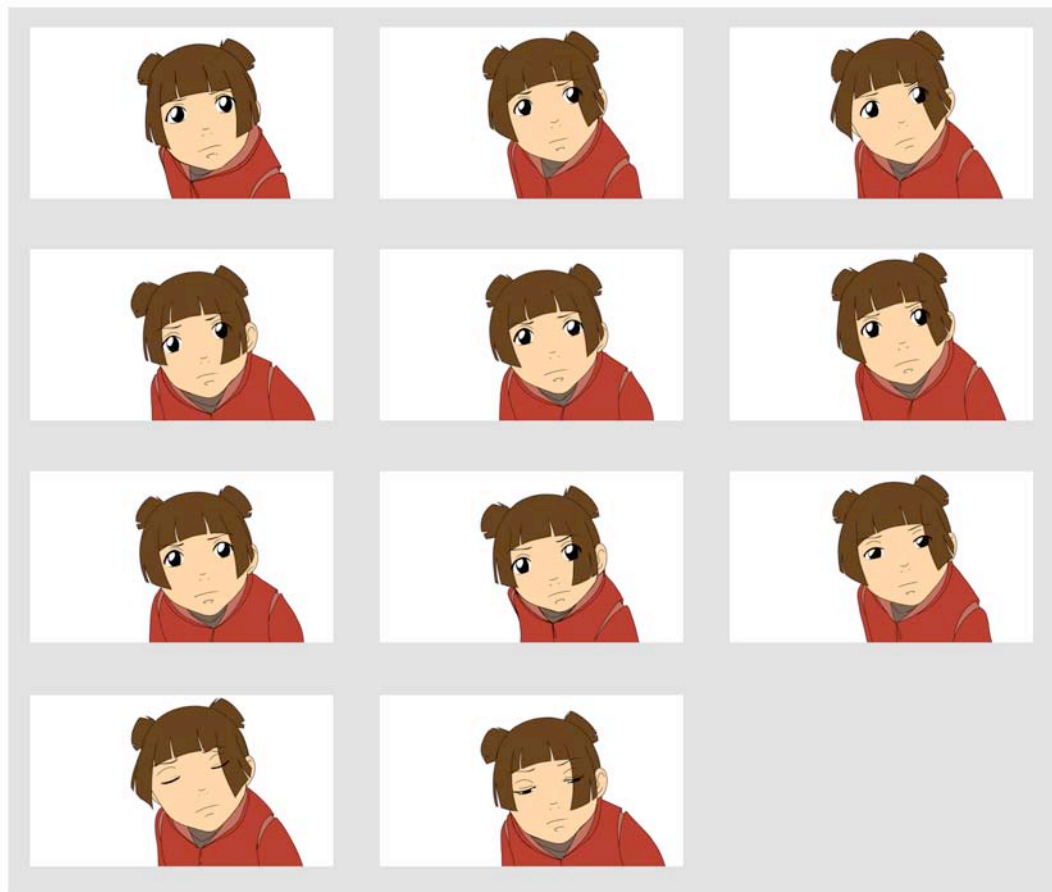


Plate 1 (above): Coloured Animation Cels

As Nuru leads Karin through the underground passage to the surface, he explains that there is something she needs to understand. Karin listens intently.

1.3 The Origins of Agharti

The ideas behind *Agharti* started with an impulse to write a story about rain. After watching the documentary film, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2005) and recalling the experience of water restrictions caused by the recent drought in Australia,⁸ I decided to take an environmentally conscious approach to story writing. I looked to Japanese folktales⁹ for inspiration and finally wrote a fairytale called, *Chaela's Wish*, a story about a princess named Chaela, born into a city where it always rained. One day she decides she wants to see sun and wishes the rain away. Because of her wish, the rain never returns and soon, the city falls into a severe drought. With the shortage of water, citizens became desperate and soon, a great war erupts.

Pan's Labyrinth (2006) was recommended after discussions in class about the notion of 'fairytales'. Upon watching the film, I was decided that 'fairytale,' would not be the right approach.

Moving in a new direction I began to describe Chaela's city and its citizens. A distinct image of two children in an alleyway of a deserted city formed in my mind. A young girl plays with a kitten whilst her older brother kicks a soccer ball against a wall. It starts to rain and the children take refuge under a shelter. The young girl sees the kitten out in the rain and runs to rescue it but her brother holds her back. He knows there is something dangerous about the rain.

He points to a dandelion nearby and they watch as the rain gradually destroys it. They decide to wait out the rain. Suddenly, a roar of fighter jets approaches the city. The boy realises they have no choice but to brave the rain in order to reach the sanctuary of their underground city.

⁸ In 2006, scientist claimed it was Australia's worst drought in one thousand years. (Vidal, 2006)

⁹ Some of which I found translated by Tom Ray online at < <http://www.his.atr.jp/~ray/stories/>>



Plate 2 (above): Concept art for *The Poisoned Rain of Agharti* (2007), watercolour pencil

Karin explores the alleyway while Nuru examines a puddle of water, collecting samples for his research.

The city was named Agharti¹⁰. Storyboards were inspired by images from World War II¹¹ and Elena Filatova's photographic documentation of her Chernobyl tour¹². The more aspects of the real world were brought into the visualisations, the more Agharti materialised along with its history.

Plate 3 (right): A residential area of London in 1941 during World War II.

Image taken from historyplace.com (see footnote 11).



Plate 4 (left): Early storyboard of a residential street in Agharti after the war.

¹⁰ The mythical city, Agartha is said to occupy the Earth's core. Agharti is a spelling variation found listed on Wikipedia. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agharti>>

¹¹ Found on websites such as *The History Place: World War Two in Europe* <<http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/timeline/london-blitz.htm>> and google image search.

¹² Elena Filatova, 'Ghost Town' Kiddofspeed's Website, May 16, 2004, viewed March 2007 <<http://www.kiddofspeed.com/chernobyl-revisited/chapter1.html>>



Plate 5 (left): *The Final Check Point*

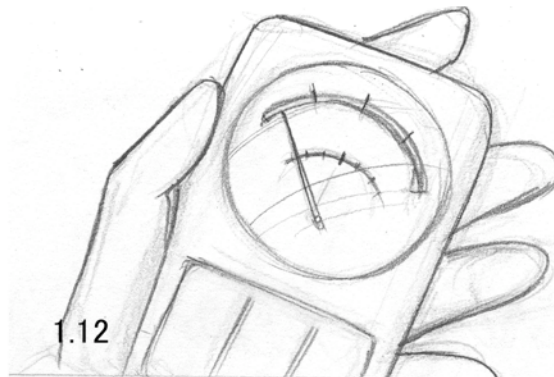
Filatova visits the area surrounding the Atomic Power Plant that was permanently shut down in 2000. She carries around with her a Geiger counter to measure levels of radiation.

Image taken from Kiddofspeed's website. (See note 12)

Plate 6 (right): Air Contamination

Measuring Device (Storyboard Frame)

Nuru carries this device around the surface to measure air contamination levels. Here, the needle is pointing left indicating safe air levels. Higher-level readings usually occur during rainfall.



The city's history began to take shape. The following summary of the back-story appeared in earlier versions of the script as a narration spoken by Nuru.

In the future, a worldwide drought devastates the world. Agharti remains one of the few places left unaffected by the drought. Because of its efficient water storage system, Agharti becomes prosperous through trading precious drinking water to other countries. Finally, the drought reaches Agharti and annual rainfall

decreases. The price of water surges and other nations dependent on Agharti's water supply become desperate, invading the city to take control of the water supply. As war escalates, the citizens flee to a hidden underground city. For reasons unknown, the city's rain becomes poisoned.

The narration was later omitted for the simplicity of focusing on an adventure story of two children. However, small clues can be found in distant shots of the city that hint at a story beyond Nuru and Karin's journey.



Plate 7 (left): Water Towers

Concept Image for *Agharti*.

Watercolour

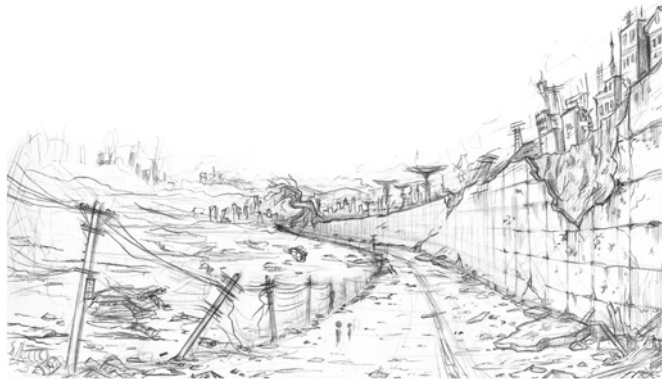
The Water Towers are land marks unique to the city of Agharti. Part of the city's water storage system, the funnel-shaped towers collect rainwater, which is then stored underground.

Plate 8 (right): Background Sketch

Art by Vivienne To

Pencil

Nuru and Karin emerge from the underground passage, dwarfed by an enormous dilapidated city. In the distance stand clues to the past, the water towers of Agharti.



After viewing my animated storyboard (with the original ending)¹³, most people are reminded of Isao Takahata's *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988). Apart from the main protagonists being a 14-year-old boy and his younger sister, living in a context of war, the original story did not have much else in common to Takahata's film. It is more accurate to say that Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind* (1984) played a major influence on *Agharti*. However neither of these films inspired the original idea.

It was only in later revisions of the script and research into Miyazaki's films when I began to realise the connections to *Nausicaä*. Just as an environmental event had influenced *Agharti*, "the 'one big event,' ... that sparked [Miyazaki's] imagination and fuelled his desire to create *Nausicaä* was the pollution with mercury of Minamata Bay, as a result of which the fish stocks - left

¹³ The latest version of the *Agharti* animatic with original ending, viewable through QuickTime is available online at: <<http://www.altheaaseoche.com/agharti/progress/aghartianimatic.mov>>. Uploaded October 2007.

untouched as they would evidently be inedible - adjusted to the uncongenial environment by learning how to absorb the poison and indefatigably continued to reproduce." (Cavallaro 2006, p.48).



Plate 9 (above): Nausicaä sleeps in her secret laboratory.

Image taken from *The Art of Nausicaä*, 1984

During a scene in *Nausicaä*, Lord Yupa discovers Nausicaä sleeping inside her secret laboratory (40:06-43:06, See Plate 9). Plants surround her, grown from spores she had collected from the poisonous forests. Nausicaä awakens, explaining how she had grown these plants with clean water and sand drawn from deep under the earth and as a result, the plants did not release poisonous spores as they would in the toxic wastelands. She reasons that the poison is in the surface soil, even in the Valley of Wind and asks “Why? Who would make such a mess of this world?”¹⁴

¹⁴ 42:09

The poison in Agharti's rain was not initially an attempt to answer Nausicaä's question. However, the potential connections between Miyazaki's distant-future dystopic world and the not-so-distant-future post-war city of Agharti opened the gateway to further allusions towards *Nausicaä*. The city and characters of *Agharti* experienced a metamorphosis.

Originally described as a 10-year-old boy seeking an adventure, Nuru transformed into a 14-year-old with more sophisticated understanding of his world. He wishes to follow in the footsteps of his father, who is part of a scientific team outside the city, researching on a solution to purify the rain of its poison. Like Nausicaä, he ventures into the toxic world, collecting samples of soil and water for his own research. He monitors the effects of the poison rain on the devastated environment. Nuru hopes to contribute to the research that may lead to a cure for his mother's terminal illness, caused by the poisoned rain. Meanwhile he acts as a parental figure to his younger sister, Karin in place of their absent father and sick mother.



Plate 10 (left): The Alleyway early storyboard.

Nuru examines weeds growing on a wooden fence while Karin assists by collecting dirt samples into a test tube.

Plate 11 (right): Nausicaä collects spore samples into a test tube from the toxic forests.

Image taken from *The Art of Nausicaä* (1984).



Nausicaä also played a significant role in the evolution of Agharti city. Originally, Agharti was imagined as a city with no signs of life, not even birds. It would be a silent ghost town much like Filatova describes the eerie silence of the city of Pripyat.¹⁵



Plate 12 (above): Animated key frames to the disintegrating dandelion.

¹⁵ See Chapter 11 of Filatova's journey <<http://www.kiddofspeed.com/chapter11.html>>

However it was soon realised that this would conflict with one of the important sequences in *Agharti*: Nuru and Karin witness the poison rain's adverse effect on a dandelion. I decided to borrow Miyazaki's idea of an ecosystem adapting to a poisonous environment. Although the poison in the rain still kills the dandelions, the weeds always manage to grow back. Other plants show signs of mutation.



Plate 13 (above): Giant tree background colour key, art Vivienne To.

Nuru and Karin encounter a giant tree. At first glance this tree may seem dead however the tree must have grown over the years after the evacuation to be standing in the middle of a road.

2. Beginnings, Discoveries and Hybrid Manifestations

2.1 Beginnings

It was autumn of 1999 in my second year of high school when *Neon Genesis Evangelion* first aired on Australian television¹⁶. From the first episode - I was captivated. *Evangelion* was unlike the Disney animations that I grew up with. I was challenged by themes and semiotics I could barely begin to comprehend. Whether it was because the main character was a teenager; or a combination of these reasons and more; I was instantly a fan. After the first run of all 26 episodes I was lured to something else that would rise phenomenally and become the new culture of the next millennium: the Internet.

Exposed to a whole new world of fandom, I reached out to other fans across the globe, exchanging ideas through enthusiastic mailing lists and forum posts. Crawling at 36K dial-up modem speed through numerous fan sites dedicated to *Evangelion*, I collected hundreds of images of Misato Katsuragi, Asuka Langley Soryu, Shinji Ikari, Rei Ayanami and Pen-Pen. Eventually I discovered other anime and watched the small collection of titles on VHS at local video stores¹⁷.

I started drawing my own stories and characters, mimicking the visual conventions of anime and manga.¹⁸ Soon this pastime grew into an ambition to become an animator. Exploring and discovering the process of creating a 2D animation fueled my desire to work with the medium.

¹⁶ Directed by Hideaki Anno, *Evangelion* first aired in Australia on SBS channel. The series originally ran in Japan throughout 1995-1996. See website, *Anime News Network* <<http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/encyclopedia/anime.php?id=49>> (accessed September 18 2007)

¹⁷ With titles such as *Project A-ko*, (1986), *Slayers* (1995), *Gunsmith Cats* (1995) and *Gunnm: Battle Angel* (1993)

¹⁸ The distinctive anime and manga aesthetic is often described as “fantastic post-apocalyptic worlds inhabited by cute, large-eyed children and pubescents, animals and robots.” (Morgan 2007) Compared to the cute and cuddly Disney characters, anime designs are “sharper, more angular, less ingratiating.” (Ladd 2006) See Cavallaro (2006, p.15-16) for details on aesthetic conventions in anime and manga.

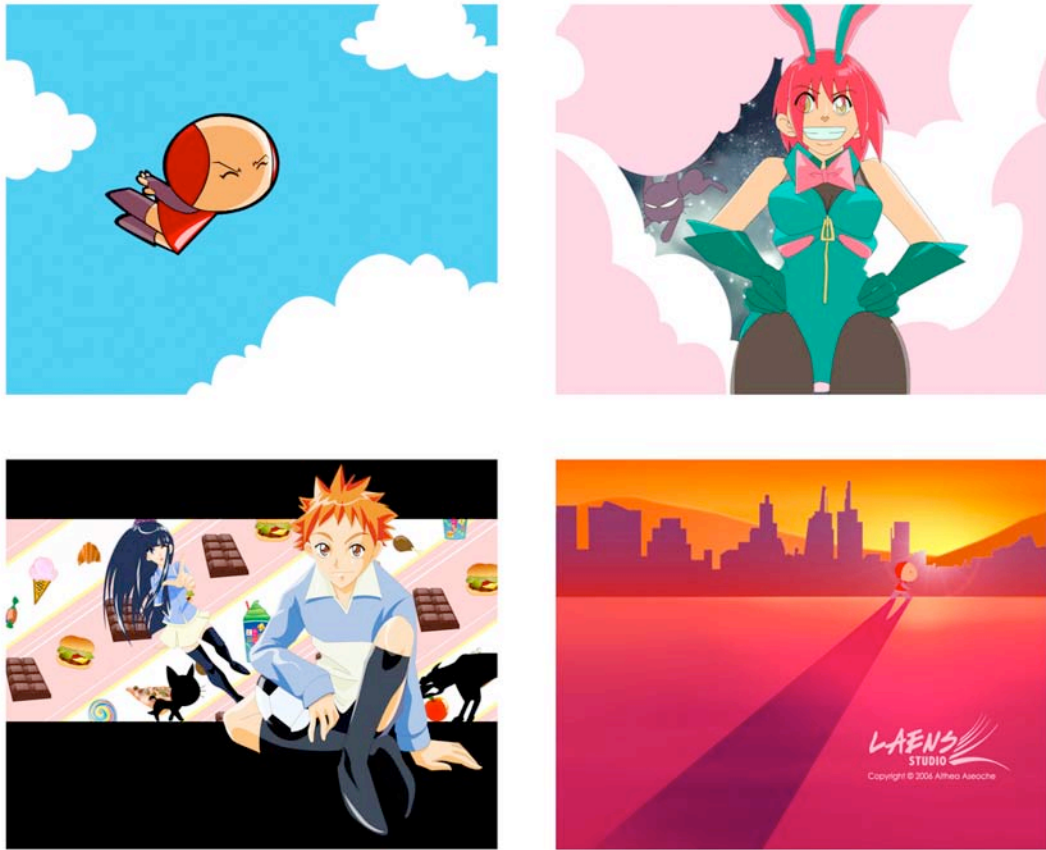


Plate 14 (above): Screenshots from *Space Alien Ehushu* (2006)

Space Alien Ehushu is described as "an opening title sequence to a hypothetical anime series." *Ehushu* was my first attempt at cel animation, combining traditional hand-drawn animation with digital processes. Using (what turned out to be very little) available resources¹⁹, I determined a methodology, one that would also be used for *Agharti*.

¹⁹ It was found that animation supplies such as peg bars with acme or round-hole registration, animation hole punchers, discs... etc. were unavailable for purchase in Australia and had to be purchased over the internet from an overseas supplier, Lightfoot Ltd. Animation supplies: <<http://www.lightfootltd.com>>



Plate 15: My Animation Set-up

Equipment for traditional animation including an animation table,²⁰ animation disc, light box and round-hole registration peg bars purchased from an overseas supplier.²¹

My honours project began as quest to depart from a completely anime-influenced style. I yearned to discover a new aesthetic that I could call my own, essentially draining away the foundational influence of anime from my practice.

Attending the exhibition, *Tezuka: The Marvel of Manga*²² instigated a change to this approach. Seeing the undeniable influence of Disney in Tezuka's original work, I realised that even the God

²⁰ Hand-made by William Burdis.

²¹ See footnote 19.

²² *TEZUKA: The Marvel of Manga* exhibition ran from February 23 to April 29 2007 at Art Gallery of NSW. <
<http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/archived/2007/tezuka>>

of Manga²³ himself imitated the style of one of his primary influences before developing his own sophisticated style. I embraced the influence of anime and manga as the genesis of my pursuit to develop a hybrid aesthetic.



Plate 16 (left): title page for *Ribon no Kishi*,
Princess Knight (1965)

From TEZUKA: The Marvel of Manga (2006), 40
Tezuka's illustration reminds me of Disney's Snow
White with the primary colours used as well as her
black hair and pale skin.

²³ Osamu Tezuka is often credited as the 'God of Modern Manga' (Morgan 2007)

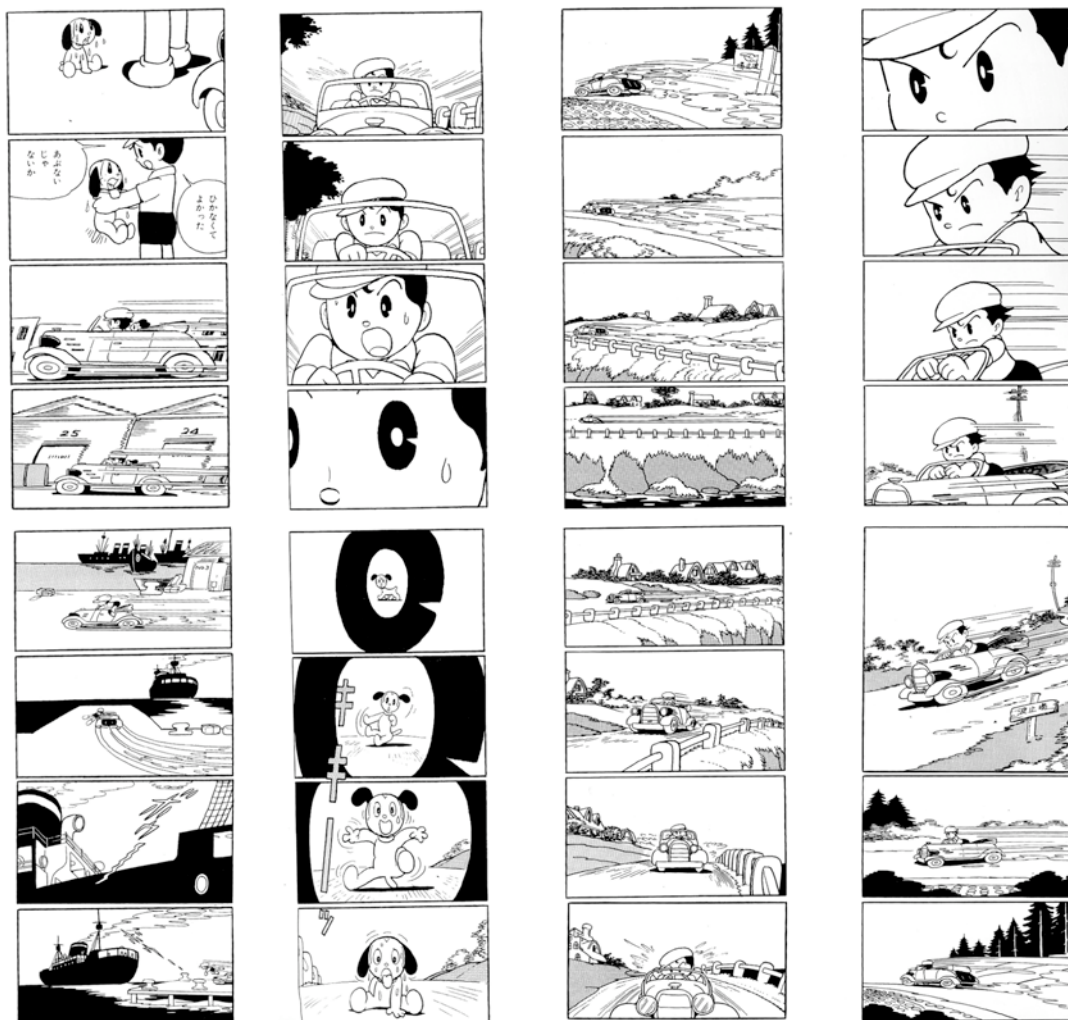


Plate 17 (above): *Shin-Takarajima*, 'New Treasure Island' (1947)

From *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics* (2004), 26-27

Influenced by many films from America and Europe, Tezuka introduced cinematic pacing to manga.²⁴

Fusanosuke Natsume describes how Tezuka's use of a whole double-spread page to depict only a speeding car was really shocking to readers of the time.²⁵

²⁴ Paul Gravett (2004), *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics*, 26

²⁵ Fusanosuke Natsume (1992), 'Where has Tezuka Gone?' in *Tezuka, the Marvel of Manga*, National Gallery of Victoria catalogue, 2006, 35

2.2 Channeling the waves: Discoveries and Hybrid Manifestations

The influence of anime and manga is widespread over a range of disciplines. To understand the notion of ‘hybrid manifestations’ in anime, manga and film, we now look to works, which have emerged in the West in recent years that exhibit ‘hybrid’ characteristics. In the past, most imported and translated manga have originated from Japan yet Joyce Morgan asserts that the market is changing. “What’s emerging is a demand for original English-language work, created for a Western audience.”²⁶

Paul Gravett discusses the notion of “World comics” – the idea of a comic style of the 21st century understood by all readers. (Gravett 2004, p.157) He lists a few examples of ‘hybrids springing up all over the world,’ including the works of Paul Pope, Frédéric Boilet and *Megatokyo* (2000-current). On a similar notion, Cefn Ridout talks about the LA-based publishing company, TokyoPop in its initiative towards ‘global manga.’ (Ridout 2007, p.13) Ridout comments on the cross-cultural exchange that has come full circle; starting with the exposure to American comics throughout World War II and the influence of Disney and Fleischer Studios and on Osamu Tezuka. In turn, Tezuka ‘single handedly revitalized Japan’s post-war comics industry, redefining its style and storytelling and broadening its thematic range to engage readers of all ages.’ (Ridout 2007, p.12) It is widely known that Tezuka, who worked across both mediums of anime and manga, had influenced many creators in both industries, including Hayao Miyazaki.²⁷ What has helped shaped the Japanese anime and manga customs we know today is the result of ongoing exchange of ideas between the East and the West.

Hybrid manifestations as a result of the impact of anime and manga culture are not limited to the realm of comics. Two notable films, which have drawn from aspects of anime, are *Kill Bill, Vol. 1* (2003) and *The Matrix* (1999). Dani Cavillaro describes how the animated sequence in *Kill Bill* “constitutes a unique application of Japanese-style animation to live action cinema, concurrently

²⁶ Joyce Morgan (2007) quotes Dean Prenc of Madman Entertainment. ‘Superheroes in a Complex World,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald Arts & Entertainment*, 9.

²⁷ Helen McCarthy (1999), *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation: Films, Themes, Artistry*, 28

demonstrating that [its] impact... [is not] limited to those who work specifically in the field of animation.” (Cavallaro 2006, p.21) Likewise, Carl Silvio talks about the use of visual styles in *The Matrix* borrowed from Japanese animations such as *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and *Akira* (1988). Silvio further accounts how several well-known Japanese animation directors and artists expressed a desire to create animated renditions of *The Matrix* after experiencing the film. Along with *The Matrix Trilogy*, the Wachowski brothers went on to commission these anime directors to create *The Animatrix*, which Silvio eloquently describes as “[responses] to what had initially been a response to their work.”²⁸



Plate 18: Screenshot of Bullet-time effect parody.

FLCL (2001), episode 1. 5:08.

It is also interesting to note that Katsuhiro Otomo’s *Akira*, which marked the dawn of cyberpunk anime, drew on the visuals of Ridley Scott’s *Bladerunner* (1982)²⁹. Furthermore, since the release of *The Matrix*, the ‘bullet time effect,’ which was popularised by the film has been parodied in several comedy films and television series³⁰, including Japanese anime.

²⁸ Carl Silvio, 2006, ‘Animated Bodies and Cybernetic Selves: The Animatrix and the Question of Posthumanity’ in *Cinema Anime*, 114.

²⁹ Philip Brophy, 1994, discusses the work of Katsuhiro Otomo in *Kaboom! Explosive Animation from America and Japan*, 135.

³⁰ *Scary Movie* (2000), *Shrek* (2001), *The Simpsons* and *FLCL* (2000) to name a few.

In addition to English-language manga, Joyce Morgan suggests that animation may also be heading towards the notion of a ‘global language.’ *Afro Samurai* (2006) created by studio GONZO in Japan was made first in English and aimed at a Western audience. Samuel L. Jackson voiced both lead roles of Afro and Ninja Ninja. The hip hop musical score was produced by RZA, a member of the Wu-Tang Clan. *Afro Samurai* is a clash of East and West culture in the visual and in soundscape. It is a futuristic Feudal Japan inhabited by a miscellany of people and culture.

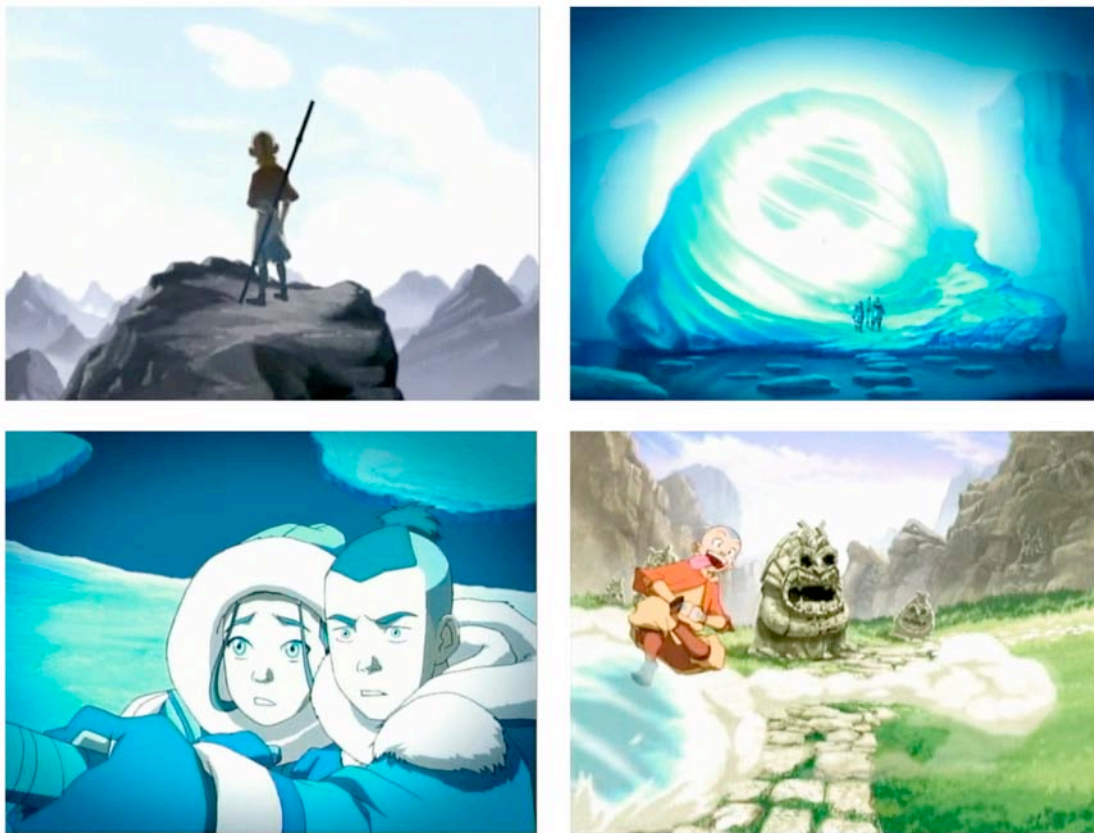


Plate 19: Screenshots from the Introduction of Avatar: The Last Airbender

Created by Americans, Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, *Avatar, the Last Airbender* (2005-current) draws influences from Asian mythology, Kung Fu, Yoga and Eastern philosophy and anime aesthetics. According to Tasha Robinson (2006), Aang’s six-legged flying

bison, 'Appa' has likeliness to Hayao Miyazaki's Catbus in *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988).

The impact of the realm of anime and manga even reaches the renowned studio, Pixar. Cavallaro (2006) notes, "Pixar director, John Lasseter has described Miyazaki's works as 'the most inspirational films,' for him, stating that '[a]t Pixar, when we have a problem and can't seem to solve it, we often take a laser disc of one of Miyazaki's films and look at a scene in our screening room for a shot of inspiration. And it always works!'"

The Zoetrope³¹ is another example of East and West cultural exchange of ideas. The "Bouncing Totoro" Zoetrope (see plate 20) displayed in the Ghibli Museum was built with 3-dimensional models of several characters from Studio Ghibli's *My Neighbour Totoro*. Inspired by the Bouncing Totoro³², Pixar Studios created its own zoetrope for the recent exhibition *Pixar: 20 Years of Animation*³³ (See Plate 21). Using over One-hundred and fifty modeled characters from *Toy Story 2*, it "employs early cinematic devices to achieve the perception of motion... [The zoetrope] demonstrates the basic principles of animation before the invention of film."³⁴

³¹ 'Invented in 1834, the zoetrope is a hollow drum with slits in its sides. As it spins, the images inside the drum - viewed through the slits - seem to move, a precursor to animation.' (Solomon 2005)

³² On his blog, Chad Kerychuk quotes Paul Lieberman who wrote "'The show stopper is a re-creation of the 19th century's version of high-tech entertainment technology, a zoetrope. During one of the six visits that MoMA curators made to Pixar in California, Pete Docter, director of Monsters, Inc., mentioned how he'd seen one at the Tokyo museum of Pixar's Japanese counterpart, Studio Ghibli, and one thing led to another.'" (<http://pixaranimation.blogspot.com/2005/12/pixar-moma-zoetrope.html>)

³³ Developed by Pixar Animation Studios and the Museum of Modern Art in New York and has been shown in London, Tokyo, Edinburgh and Melbourne.

³⁴ Chad Kerychuk, 2005, 'Pixar MoMA Zoetrope,' on the *Luxo* blog.

<http://www.acmi.net.au/pixar_exhibition_details.htm>



Plate 20 (left): 'Bouncing Totoro' Zoetrope at the Ghibli museum.

The aim was to create "something 'fantastic' that would make anyone stop and gaze in awe for at least a few minutes." (Taken from the ghibliworld.com website).³⁵

Plate 21 (right): The *Toy Story 2* Zoetrope

Taken from the *Luxo* blog³⁶ this Zoetrope shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Later versions³⁷ included Jessie the doll.



In Australia, the comic scene has recently felt a surge of new young artists influenced by anime and manga. The final volume of the manga trilogy, *The Dreaming*, composed by Australia's first commercially published manga artist, Queenie Chan is scheduled for release in November 2007.³⁸ Other local manga and comic artists are mainly self-published or submit work to anthologies such

³⁵ The movement of the figures were originally based on one scene from the film however others suggested that more movements needed to be added. The idea escalated, more characters moving in cycles were added and the project took a year to finish. (<http://www.ghibliworld.com/museumspecial.html>)

³⁶ See footnote above.

³⁷ Seen at *Pixar: 20 Years of Animation* exhibition in the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne, 2007.

³⁸ Queenie Chan, TokyoPop, "The Dreaming," 2005, viewed August 2007
<<http://www.queeniechan.com/thedreaming/home.html>>

as *Generation*.³⁹ *The Sydney Manga and Anime Show* (S.M.A.S.H.)⁴⁰ held over half a dozen art competitions.⁴¹ Young artists are encouraged to draw "fan art" of characters from their favourite series and even illustrate their own stories through graphic novels. It may only be a matter of time before the local scene in Australia will bloom into an industry. Although the reality is at the moment - apart from competition prizes and exposing your work to the public, there is no money to make or much else to be reaped through creating comics.

³⁹ *Generation: An Australian Manga Anthology* is in its forth-year run with the latest issue *Generation 2007* making its debut at the Sydney Manga and Anime Show (S.M.A.S.H.) of August 2007. See website, <<http://paint.at/generation/>>

⁴⁰ In the first year running, the Sydney Manga and Anime Show (S.M.A.S.H.) held their first convention on August 18, 2007 with 1435 attendants including staff and volunteers. See website <<http://www.smash.org.au/attendance.html>>

⁴¹ For more information on the art competitions, see website, <<http://www.smash.org.au/artcomps.html>>

3. Techniques: Networking and the Studio-Based Work

3.1 The Internet: Outsourcing and Networking

The Internet is one of many important tools used throughout my creative processes. Most communication took place online, via email. Much time was spent writing up clear instructions to crewmembers, detailing how I want a specific background to look or what kind of sound the elevator makes. Attached to emails are sketches or links to my videos which have been uploaded to my website server.

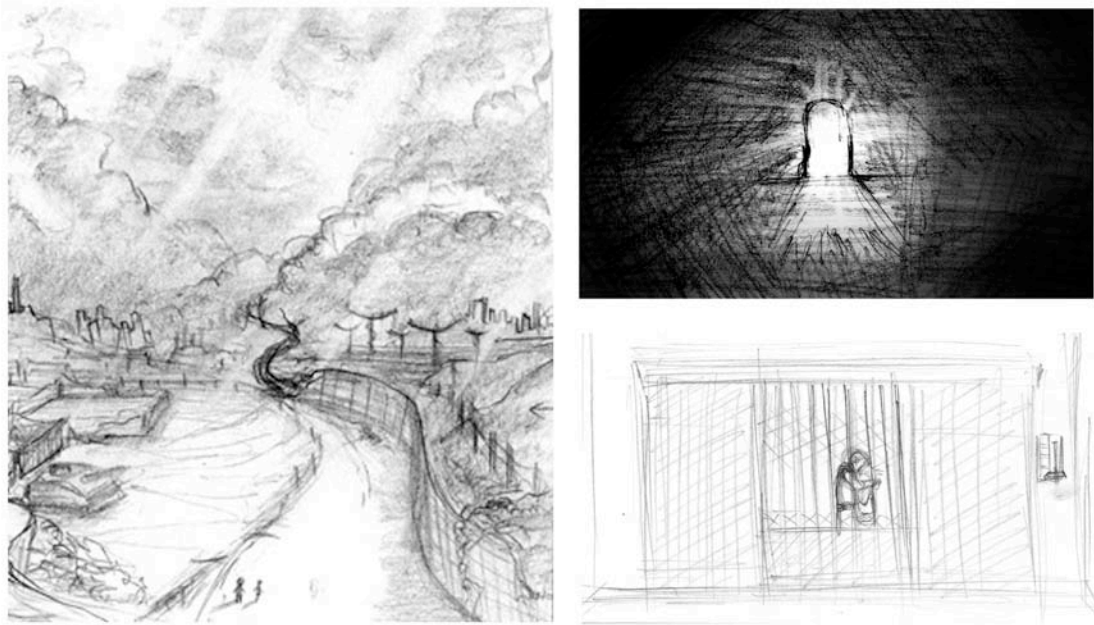


Plate 22: Storyboards for the surface, underground passage and elevator.

The Poisoned Rain of Agharti (2007)

Also used in the animated storyboard.

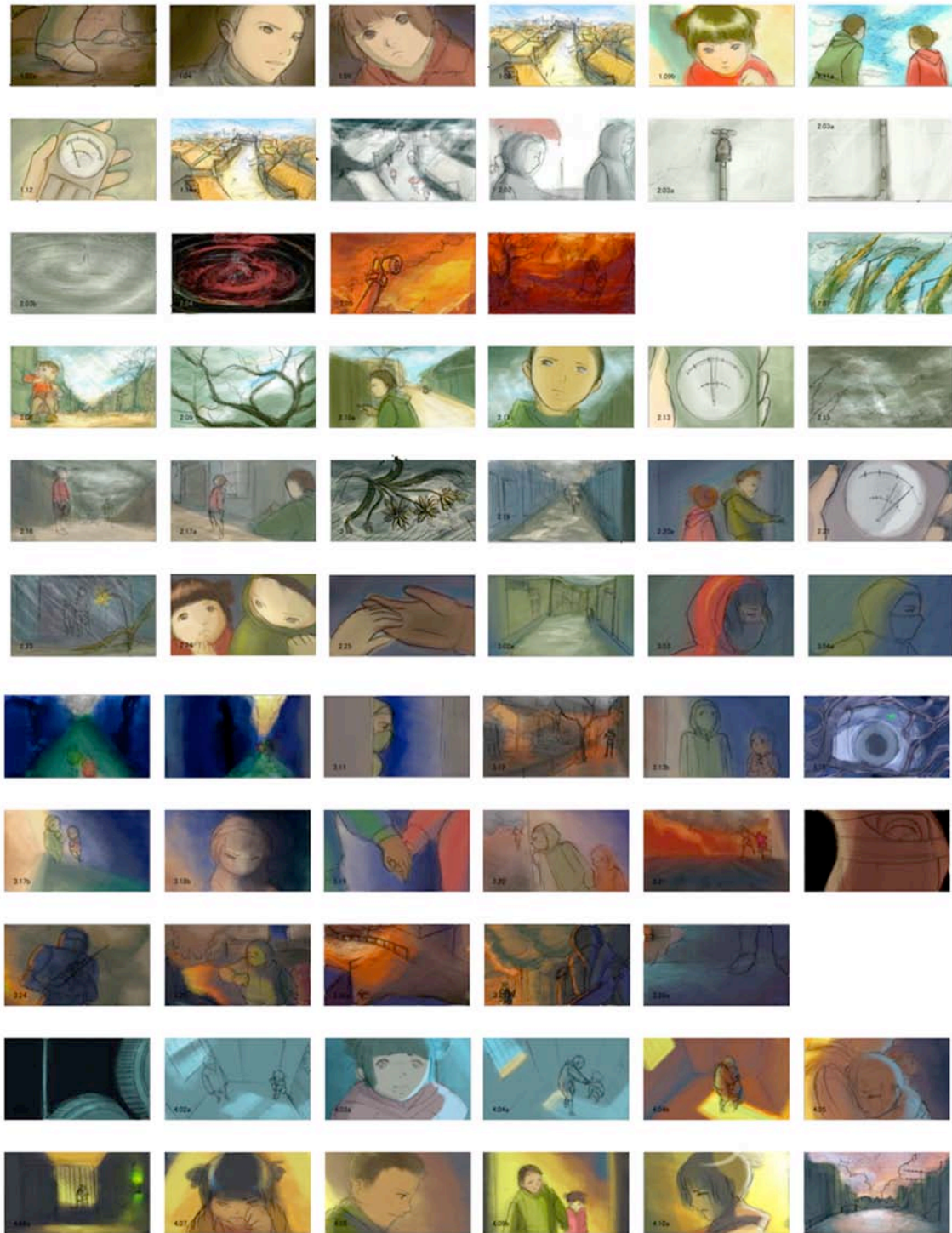


Plate 23: Early Colour Storyboards for *The Poisoned Rain of Agharti* (2007)

Using one of the earlier versions of the storyboard, selected frames were roughly coloured to communicate the desired mood through lighting.



Plate 24: Colour Sketch for the surface, underground passage and elevator.

Art by Vivienne To for *The Poisoned Rain of Agharti* (2007)

To assist with deciding colour palettes for cel shading, the background artist provided colour keys for the environments.

3.2 Voice Casting

One of my main concerns in the beginning was finding voice actors. The suggestion was made to approach local performance art schools and radio stations⁴². I also looked to the online community without any true expectation of success. It was there that I found the solution.

Voice Acting Alliance (VAA)⁴³ is a forum for aspiring voice actors and creators/directors. Some of the activities include fan dubbing⁴⁴ of short clips or even entire anime episodes, radio plays,⁴⁵

⁴² Suggestion was made in conversation with Steve Weymouth.

⁴³ Voice Acting Alliance Forum, < <http://voiceactingalliance.com/>>

⁴⁴ Dubbing is re-recording the audio of a feature, in this case, Japanese animation, in another language, usually (but not limited to) English. On VAA, fans create dubs as a past time, usually to practice or experience voice acting, build up a portfolio and increase exposure of their work and talent if they wish to pursue voice acting as a career.

karaoke,⁴⁶ and original animation projects (usually for web). Potential voice candidates are invited to audition⁴⁷ for roles in such projects. To be able to participate means you need at least a computer, a microphone and sound recording software. The importance of sound quality and minimal noise in recordings is often emphasised by regular members. Many forum members are teenagers or young adults from all around the world. Skill levels range from amateur to professionals who have played official roles in English animation dubs. Creators of projects cast the roles to the best auditions. Most productions, particularly fan dubs and radio plays are posted on VAA when completed for other forum members to respond with feedback on the performances.

The Poisoned Rain of Agharti was posted as a production on VAA. Within two weeks I had cast the roles of Nuru, Karin, Soldier and Radio to voice actors living in Kansas, Minnesota and New York.

In the article, 'Cartoons Crafted by Hand,' Sandy George describes how Gini Santos, an animator from Pixar Studios "finds inspiration in the voices of the actors who give the animated characters speech."⁴⁸ This was also true in the case of *Agharti*.

One of my initial concerns was "what English accent should I go with?" The question was posed to me, "Why use an American accent if you are creating this in Australia?"⁴⁹ Accent concerned me because specifying a particular accent would place *Agharti* on the world map, which was

⁴⁵ Radio plays are audio versions of fan fictions; stories inspired by particular animation or manga series transposed into scripts, which a group will act out. The result is an audio compilation of the dialogue as well as music and sound effects to enhance the story.

⁴⁶ Karaoke amongst online communities involves individuals posting recordings of their singing to karaoke/instrumental (vocal-less) versions of popular songs, often but not limited to J-pop or anime theme songs.

⁴⁷ The creator of the project is usually asked to provide a description of the characters and a few audition lines. Potential voice actors would then send recordings (usually in mp3 or wav format) of the provided lines in character to the creator of the project via email.

⁴⁸ Sandy George, 'Cartoons Crafted by Hand,' *The Australian*, June 27 2007, pp.10

⁴⁹ The issue of accent was first raised in conversation with Steve Weymouth and reinforced in honours group discussions by students and supervisors.

something I wanted to avoid. *Agharti* is a city that is nowhere and everywhere.

Most VAA members lived in America or England, speaking with distinct native accents. It was decided that the English accent would be determined by whoever was casted for Nuru's role.

Cyrus Oliver II sent in an audition for Nuru, mentioning in his email that he aimed for something "somewhat British." What resulted was exactly an accent that was neither identifiable as a stereotype of American, British, Australian... etc. but containing aspects of each. It was the "universal English accent" I was hoping to find. It suited a teenage boy, living in the futuristic, post-war city of Agharti.

Crystal Lonnquist's voice also inspired a change in Karin's character. Earlier versions of the script depicted a six-year-old girl who barely spoke and often cried and complained. Crystal's portrayal of Karin is strong, stubborn and clear, giving life and dimension to her character. As more dialogue was added in through script, Karin's new lines reflected her inquisitive, curious and dynamic personality.

Conclusion

The Search for a Hybrid Aesthetic is a question of identity. It is a journey for which at its destination, one arrives at self-awareness. In realising that my journey starts with Japanese animation, I begin to step out of this shell to discover new waves of Eastern and Western visual cultures. As Tezuka introduced new techniques into manga, borrowed from the external influences of Disney and cinema; as Larry and Andy Wachowski channelled the visual language of science fiction animation titles such as *Akira* and *Ghost in the Shell*; I aspire to do the same in future endeavours as I explore the limits of animation.

Cultural exchange is an ongoing conversation between the East and the West. Like a hardwearing thread, anime weaves together the fibres of Eastern and Western cultures, creating more and more connections and bringing us closer to a global language of comics and animation.

The Poisoned Rain of Agharti may not be in the form I originally desired to accomplish. However the experience of taking this first step towards an awareness of interests and abilities can only make one more determined to move forward to more ambitious ventures. It is my intention to continue working on *Agharti* in the next few months in order to accomplish what I had initially set out to do. Although it may seem like a step back to return to Agharti, I am a believer in good stories and it was my belief in the original story that has pulled me through. Most of the work is already done. All I need is my passion for animation to help me realise the accomplishment of this goal.

Appendix 1 - Screenplay (with Original Ending)

The Poisoned Rain of Agharti

Screenplay version 7

INTERIOR. UNDERGROUND PASSAGE – DAY.

NURU (14-year-old boy) and KARIN (6-year-old sister of Nuru) walk through an underground passage.

KARIN

Nuru, where are we going?

NURU

To the surface. You've never been there before, right?

(pause)

I want you to see it. I need you to understand.

Nuru and Karin approach the end of the tunnel.

NURU

We're almost there.

Light fills the screen.

EXTERIOR. AGHARTI SURFACE CITY – DAY.

TITLE

The Poisoned Rain of Agharti

Nuru and Karin emerge from the underground labyrinth to the surface ruins of Agharti City.

KARIN

Wow!
[laugh]

Nuru and Karin look up at a clear blue sky.

KARIN

It's so blue!

NURU

It's great, Isn't it?

Karin covers her mouth

KARIN

Our masks!

NURU

Ah, the air contamination? Don't worry.

Nuru shows Karin a hand-held Geiger counter-like device that reads air contamination levels. The needle points to green.

NURU

See? It's green. We're safe.

Nuru pockets the device and offers his hand to Karin.

NURU

Want to go further?

Karin takes Nuru's hand.

KARIN

OK!

Nuru and Karin run off into the distance.

EXT. FURTHER DOWN THE ROAD – DAY.

NURU

Now, try to remember the way as best as you can. We'll be walking pretty far.

KARIN

Really far? Are we going to see dad?

NURU

[laugh]
No, not that far.

KARIN

When *is* dad coming home?

NURU

Probably not for a while.

KARIN

Oh!

Karin sees a giant tree off screen and runs towards it.

KARIN

Whoa!

Karin stares up at the giant tree in amazement.

NURU

Come on, this way.

EXT. ALLEYWAY – LATE AFTERNOON.

Karin is picking flowers while Nuru examines plants growing on a wooden fence. Karin presents a bouquet of dandelions to Nuru.

KARIN

Nuru! Will these flowers make mum feel better?

NURU

Ah – put those down! They might be poisonous.

Air contamination measuring device beeps.

NURU

Oh –

Nuru takes the device out of his pocket and reads it. The needle points to yellow.

NURU

[gasp]

Nuru looks up at the sky. Storm clouds form. A low thunder rumbles in the distance.

Karin looks up at the sky.

KARIN

It's raining...

NURU

Karin! We need to head back, now!

Nuru runs towards Karin, grabs her hand and drags her away. Karin drops her bouquet of dandelions.

It starts to rain.

Nuru and Karin run down the alleyway, towards a shop shelter.

EXT. SHOP SHELTER – LATE AFTERNOON, RAINING.**NURU**

This is the nearest entrance.

Nuru leans over a trap door and tries to open it.

NURU

Argh! It's locked.

Air contamination measuring device beeps.

Nuru reads the device. The needle points to orange.

NURU

Something's not right.

[pause]

Put your mask on. We need to get to the other entrance.

KARIN

Nuru, look!

Karin gestures to a dandelion o.s.

Nuru and Karin watch as the dandelion gradually disintegrates in the rain.

NURU

Your mask must be on tight, Karin.

KARIN

Mm.

Nuru offers his hand.

NURU

Let's go.

Karin takes Nuru's hand.

* (NOTE: Alternate ending starts here. See Appendix 2.)

EXT. STREETS – LATE AFTERNOON, RAINING.

Nuru and Karin run through the streets and alleyways towards the other underground entrance.

NURU

[voiceover]

I'm leaving the city, tomorrow night.

INT. ELEVATOR – LATE AFTERNOON**KARIN**

Tomorrow? Why?

NURU

I want to help dad and join his research team to find an antidote.

KARIN

A cure, for mum? I want to go too!

NURU

You're not old enough. Besides, you have to stay and take care of mum.

EXT. STREETS – LATE AFTERNOON, RAINING.**NURU**

[voiceover]

If we fix the rain, I'm sure we'll find a cure for mum soon.

Nuru and Karin approach the edge of an alleyway. Nuru slows down and signals for Karin to keep quiet.

Nuru peaks around the corner and spots two enemy soldiers standing guard.

NURU

Oh! Enemy.

Nuru takes a second glance then looks over towards the 'entrance.'

NURU

[o.s. over street]

The entrance is just straight across.

NURU

When we get a chance, we run, OK?

KARIN

Mm.

Nuru takes Karin's hand.

NURU

Don't worry we'll make it.

RADIO

[o.s. over Nuru and Karin holding hands]

Hey, come take a look at this.

One of the soldiers (RADIO) in the distance waves her gun at the soldier closer to Nuru and Karin. SOLDIER turns and walks towards her. Nuru watches both soldiers intently, waiting for the right moment.

NURU

GO!

Nuru and Karin dash across the street towards the 'entrance.'

Air contamination measuring device alarm goes off. The needle points to red.

NURU

Oh!

Nuru looks towards the soldiers.

The soldier turns around, hearing a faint noise.

SOLDIER

Hm?

Nuru and Karin run into a building just in time before the soldier is close enough to see them.

RADIO

Something wrong? Over.

[pause]

SOLDIER

Ah, just some ghosts.

Nuru and Karin watch the two soldiers walk off into the distance before making their escape through a doorway.

INT. ELEVATOR - LATE AFTERNOON.

A continuation from the earlier elevator scene. Nuru stands near the elevator door while Karin sits in the corner, hugging her knees.

NURU

If we fix the rain, I'm sure we'll find a cure for mom soon.

KARIN

[cries]

Nuru walks over, picks Karin up and embraces her.

NURU

Sh.h. Don't cry, Karin. Dad and I will be home in no time. And we won't have to hide anymore.

Elevator lands. The door opens and Nuru breaks away from the embrace.

KARIN

It hurts.

NURU

Be strong, Karin. We're going to make it. You, me, mom, dad, the city.

Nuru bends down and takes Karin's hand.

NURU

I promise.

Nuru leads Karin out of the elevator. A final tear drops from Karin's eye.

EXT. STREET - LATE AFTERNOON, CLEARING SKY.

Pan up.

THE END

Appendix 2 – Screenplay (with alternate ending)

NURU

Let's go.

Karin takes Nuru's hand.

**EXT. STREETS – LATE AFTERNOON,
RAINING.**

Nuru and Karin run through the streets and approach the end of the alleyway. Nuru slows down and signals for Karin to keep quiet.

Nuru peaks around the corner and spots two enemy soldiers standing guard.

NURU

Oh! Enemy.

Nuru takes a second glance then looks over towards the 'entrance.'

NURU

[o.s. over street]

The entrance is just straight across.

NURU

When we get a chance, we run, OK?

KARIN

Mm.

Nuru takes Karin's hand.

NURU

Don't worry we'll make it.

RADIO

[o.s. over Nuru and Karin holding hands]

Hey, come take a look at this.

One of the soldiers (RADIO) in the distance waves her gun at the soldier closer to Nuru and Karin. SOLDIER turns and walks towards her. Nuru watches the soldiers intently, waiting for the right moment.

NURU

GO!

Nuru and Karin dash across the street towards the entrance.

Air contamination measuring device alarm goes off. The needle points to red.

NURU

Oh!

Nuru looks towards the soldiers.

The soldier turns around, hearing a faint noise.

SOLDIER

Hm?

Nuru and Karin run into a building just in time before the Soldier is close enough to see them.

RADIO

Something wrong? Over.

[pause]

SOLDIER

Ah, just some ghosts.

Nuru and Karin watch the two soldiers walk off into the distance.

KARIN

Nuru, didn't they see us?

Nuru looks at Karin and sees that she is turning transparent. He looks at his own hand and sees it is transparent. Clenching his fist, he looks away, remembering they had died a long time ago.

NURU

No, they didn't. We made it Karin. Let's go home.

Nuru and Karin enter the underground passage to find their way 'home.'

THE END

Appendix 3 – Credits & Cast Biographies

Crew

Written and Directed by	Althea Aseoche
Screenplay Editor	Kaitlyn Nguyen
Storyboard/Animatic	Althea Aseoche
Character Design	Althea Aseoche
Lead Background Artist	Vivienne To
Background Artist	Fiona Darwin
Assistant Background Artists	Melissa Mai Althea Aseoche
2D Animation	Althea Aseoche
Cel Shading	Kaitlyn Nguyen Althea Aseoche
3D Modeling	Albert Morrissey Tim Gaul
Rigging	Albert Morrissey
3D Texturing and Rendering	Tim Gaul
3D Animation	Tim Gaul
Sound Design	Ferdinand Malaihollo
Music	Keith Allen
Opening Titles	Melissa Mai
Casting Facilitated by	Voice Acting Alliance
Project Supervisors	Steve Weymouth Maureen Burns Phil George William Burdis Simon Hunt Lynne Roberts-Goodwin

Cast

Cyrus Oliver II (as Nuru)

Cyrus is creator of the comic strips *Funny Bunnies* and *Planet Gorfus!*. He works at KOFO 1220 A.M. radio station and *The Ottawa Herald*. Cyrus studies at Baker University majoring in Mass Media with Theatre as a minor. He provides illustrations and writes the editorial comic *Relevant Irrelevance* for the university's newspaper. Cyrus works at KNBU-TV and has appeared in several local commercials. He is listed in America's National Dean's List and is a member of Phi Theta Kappa from which he has won several awards.

Cyrus is intrigued by animation and hopes to eventually become a professional cartoonist and voice actor.

Website: <http://www.olivercomics.com>

Crystal Lonnquist (as Karin, Radio)

With experience in theatre, independent film and voice acting, Crystal recorded her first voice over commercial in early 2006 and has loved voice acting ever since. Studying Graphic Design with a minor in Theater at Bethany Lutheran College in Minnesota, Crystal pursues voice over work for animation, independent video games and audio dramas in her spare time. She won the award for Sogencon Voice Actor Idol in May 2006 and has voiced a role in Machima Film for the Electronic Arts, which won the UK Sims Shorts Film Competition in December 2006.

Crystal says her ultimate wish is to voice a character in a Miyazaki Film.

Website: http://www.freewebs.com/morningstar_smiles/

Lucien Dodge (as Soldier)

From a young age, Lucien maintained a passion for acting, playing lead roles in school theatre productions and participating in several workshops. Lucien discovered voice acting in his early teens, spending hours experimenting with the craft and sharpening his skills through online voice acting communities. In addition to hundreds of fan dub productions, radio-plays and original flash animation online productions, Lucien has provided voice-over work for several television, radio and online media commercials, video games and animation. In two episodes of *Pokemon: Battle Frontier*, first airing on Cartoon Network in November 2006, Lucien makes a guest appearance as the Battle Referee named Maron.

Lucien currently works as a freelance voice actor and is now represented by Access Talent in New York City.

Website: <http://www.luciendodge.com>

Production Related Links

Progress Blog: <http://agharti.blogspot.com>

Animatic: <http://www.altheaaseoche.com/agharti/progress/aghartianimatic.mov>

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