NOTES AND CORRESPONDENCE

Coding Out the USA. *Avalon*, the first film directed by Mamoru Oshii since *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), is unusual in many ways. It was released in Japan in January 2000 and in Europe in February 2001. No release date has been set for the US, the major market for sf films. The Internet has nothing to say about this: only that a US distributor (Miramax) was not found until mid-2001. Although it is a beautifully made live-action film (Oshii's first) with appropriate computer special effects that conflate all of Oshii's postmodern obsessions—artificial intelligence, virtual reality, computer games, cyborg consciousness, gorgeous anerotic brunettes, state-of-the-art mecha and the inevitable basset hound—there are good reasons to expect that the film will fail to make much money, except as a cult film. From beginning to end, the aesthetics of *Avalon*, and its vision of the science-fictional world, ignores America, whose cultural hegemony appears only as a fleeting impression. *Avalon* is an sf film made as if the US had never produced an sf film.

Avalon's live action was filmed in Poland, with Polish actors and Polish dialogue. In the first few minutes, this is disorienting, but it quickly becomes natural. Oshii had good reasons for filming in Poland: costs are low, the Poles are eager to jump-start their impoverished film industry, and they offered the use of their military hardware (crucial, since even firing small arms is prohibited in Japan). In interviews Oshii has said that "I have always loved Polish cinema, and I wished to return to its universe and make it live in a film of my own" (Pedroletti).

The film's action is divided between a real world in a dark, decrepit Polish city and the world of a virtual reality war-game, the Avalon of the title, where teams of players and a few solo warriors fight battles that resemble theater combat in World War Two and a Half, or replays of Budapest 1956 and Prague Spring. European audiences are not used to seeing sf in such homely settings. Not since Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), whose influence on *Avalon* is clear, has a nineteenth-century European city been the setting for a major sf film.

There's a historical logic to this within sf. Cyberpunk writers were never happy with completely wired New Cities. Their postmodern metropoli were in decay, and the matrix was a compensation for (as well as a cause of) the collapse of civil space. When they tired of urban depression, they turned to European cities, which somehow maintained their vitality despite having very little biz to offer—Gibson found it in London in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1989), Sterling in Prague in *Holy Fire* (1997). Wong Kuen Yin has pointed out how Oshii used Hong Kong to create the sense of postmodern urban spaces overlapping earlier ones in *Ghost in the Shell* (US release, 1996). Sf-anime almost always depicts its cities as Americanized—street signs and shops are generally bilingual, in Japanese and English. It's as if the American presence is inescapable. In *Patlabor 2* (1993), also directed by Oshii, it isn't even a matter of vague cultural infiltration; there's an overt American threat to re-

occupy Japan. By placing the action of *Avalon* in a generic Central European city, evoking Warsaw, Prague, Budapest, or Sarajevo, Oshii is following the cyberpunk logic of bringing the problem closer and closer to the present moment. It is part alternate history, part true history. Late in the film, in a moment shocking for audience and heroine alike, we are transported to a game-level known as "Class Real," where the setting jumps ahead in time from socialist dreariness to throbbing contemporary business, ads, and color. Thrown from one allegory into another, the film evokes a historical shock that few Americans can imagine.

There are many other touches that make the film seem like a bona fide Central European film from the Golden Age of the 1960s. Sepia cinematography, old books, lusciously photographed still-lives of cabbages and potatoes and sausages, ubiquitous cigarette smoke and vodka, and the quiet of cities that sleep, are all images evoking daily reality in the Middle Europe of the Cold War. The soundtrack, by Kenji Kawai, who also wrote the score for *Ghost in the Shell,* in places evokes Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*; but just as *Ghost* was dominated by the haunting pseudo-archaic Japanese credit-theme, *Avalon* returns again and again to a gorgeous lyric aria sung in Polish. This song embodies the film's operatic longing, which takes material form at the end in a diegetic orchestral performance in a sumptuous European concert hall—one of the most striking meta-cinematic moments in the film.

The language of the computer-net in the film is, however, English, as if that were inevitable in any world. And once again, the word *ghost* is uttered as an English-loan word, as it was in *Ghost in the Shell*, even though Polish and Japanese have more than enough words of their own for ghosts. This System-English in *Avalon* seems to have no real native land, as if to say that English is the matrix's native tongue, the command language. There are some allusions to the *Alien* films; major characters are named Ash and Bishop. But even here Oshii plays a polyvalent trick. Bishop is in fact *a* Bishop, a character-class—he wears a clerical collar, but it's clear that this extremely high rank has as much to do with chess as with religion. In one brilliant game-battle scene, the characters perform an action that is pure chess-strategy, an allusion that must be dear to audiences that revere chess as the ultimate game.

The question arises: why would Oshii make an sf film that will not appeal to Americans and that seems to establish a bond between Central European and Japanese sensibilities? The film has already been greeted with critical enthusiasm in Europe. This is especially true in Francophone countries. *Avalon* won the Grand Prix at the 2001 Utopiale and was shown as a special entry at Cannes. It appears that the French in particular recognize the affinities between the French sf tradition, from Chris Marker to Les Humanoïdes Associées, and Oshii's work. But it may well go further than this. Does this film, made by one of the most influential contemporary directors of sf film in the world, prefigure the development of an alternative line of global sf, perhaps in overt resistance to the conventions of US spectacular sf? As the US's historical present becomes increasingly entangled in the conventions of spectacular media—brought home

by the images of the World Trade Center attack and the video-bombings of Afghanistan, and the relentless mustering of patriotic consensus by telemedia—will sf artists resisting US cultural power strive for a new style to represent technologies of virtualization?

Avalon's conclusion is also unusually open for an sf film. Utterly unlike *The Matrix* (1999), with its bogus messianism, but also unlike *eXistenZ* (1999), with its grudging acceptance of the right to construct virtual realities, *Avalon* appears to ignore the question of whether the game-world is as legitimate as reality. It is truly a gamer's vision, the product of a mature *otaku* consciousness (an oxymoron?), where old debates about the relationship between game and the real are bracketed out. In *Avalon*, myth and game establish the frame, and the Real is not the final level. Oshii has declared his dissatisfaction with Hollywood films about virtual reality, which always end with a return to the real world: "because those real worlds exist inside film they themselves are lies. Reality is a questionable thing" (Ellis). Such films as *The Matrix*—for which Oshii appears to have little enthusiasm—"are all wrapped in a pretty Judeao-Christian morality that has all the virtues except that of engaging in the debate and managing some honest reflection, free of reactionary prejudices that claim that virtuality is unambiguously bad" (Astec, online article). If virtuality has been one of the main domains of postmodern US power, *Avalon* may be an attempt to conceive of that domain in other terms.—**ICR**

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The Horizons of Wells's Numerology. When writing on Wells in the very early 1970s, I too, like Prof. Ruddick (*SFS* 28.3: 342), became exercised with the obviously provocative number of the Time Traveler's first stop. I also hit on the fact that in 802,701 there were two "markers" or "sememes": one was the zero in the middle, the other was the difference of 101 between the digits left and right of the comma signifying thousands. The zero fits well into the cosmic thermodynamics that (according to pessimistic nineteenth-century theories, and according to the structure of *The Time Machine*) tend toward zero. And the 101 fits well into my hypothesis of sociobiological evolution as the organizing principle of that story. But I found that when the subtraction of 101 is prolonged beyond 701, this interval had a strange numerological property: it resulted in a symmetry between the positive numbers 802 and 701 on the one hand, and the negative numbers to which one eventually gets. Here is how this works: