

Deadly Game along the Wistula: East European Imagery in Mamoru Oshii's *Avalon* (2001)

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Abstract: Mamoru Oshii's *Avalon* stands firmly engrained in the director's science fiction oeuvre of completely visually controlled films, focusing on a strong female protagonist shown in critical situations. At the same time the film marks Oshii's return to live action cinema and takes him outside of Asia. This essay seeks to combine biographical information on the director with an aesthetic analysis of some of the images created for the purpose of this film. In particular the essay addresses Oshii's interests in the relations between futuristic technologies and militarised societies, and his use of Polish and Eastern European imagery. I will argue that their combination can be seen as remediating and recontextualising images of war and conflict for a new generation that, through digital media, has developed a new dynamic relationship with history and the conflicts that build Europe and the world.

Keywords: science fiction, virtual worlds, history, geography, Poland

The Japanese-Polish co-production of Mamoru Oshii's *Avalon* (2001) owes as much to its Inceptor's previous films, for example *Ghost in the Shell / Kokaku Kidotai* (1995), his most prominent film, and the works they have inspired, most notably 1999 *The Matrix*. Similarly, *Avalon* owes just as much to Poland, the country in which the director decided to shoot the film. This article seeks to combine the presentation of some biographical information on the director with an aesthetic analysis of some sequences from *Avalon*. In particular, I intend to highlight the Polish and East European imagery, conveyed either explicitly or implicitly, within the narrative and visuals of the film. I argue that the influence that East European cinema, specifically Polish film, has had on Oshii combined with the author's personal experiences to culminate in *Avalon*.

Avalon is the name of a virtual reality, massively multiplayer, first person shooter. The game is seemingly the only way to earn a living in a bleak future, the social structure of which is more deeply explored, and the game explained, in Oshii's *Avalon* as well as in his

later film *Assault Girls* (2009). *Avalon* follows Ash (Malgorzata Foremniak), one of the professional game-players who braves the threats the game poses, in her quest to step out of the shadow of her former team-mates. Her name stems from the ash-grey streak of hair that defines her avatar's appearance. Ash learns that her former team-mate and potential romantic interest, Murphy (Jerzy Gudejko), is lost in the game's mythical 'Class Special A', a particularly well-developed area of the game that only the best players can access. The news triggers her delving into the game deeper than ever before. Gaining access to 'Class Special A' where Murphy is trapped means that there is a high risk of the player's body remaining in a catatonic state as the mind is trapped inside the game. Aiding her in her quest is a mysterious character of Bishop (Dariusz Biskupski) who claims to be one of the originators and administrators of the game. He sees talent in Ash and promises to use his administrative powers to raise her to a position among the ruling members of Avalon if she can complete the final challenge the game offers. The protagonist's journey of discovery is marked by the heavily modified imagery portraying a number of worlds within the film's narrative: from the sepia tones of the game world with its ever present military action to the similarly hued everyday life of Ash, and finally the big reveal of 'Class Real' depicting a bustling and recognizable, but unnamed, Warsaw city centre in full colour.

The production of *Avalon* began in 1999 in Warsaw while the majority of shooting took place in Wroclaw. At the postproduction stage, Oshii and his team turned to editing and altering the images using digital processing equipment and techniques. The production team prided themselves on having Randy Thom one of Hollywood's foremost sound designers, who won the Oscar for best sound with *The Right Stuff* (dir. by Kaufman, 1983) and best sound editing for *The Incredibles* (dir. by Bird 2004)), oversee the sound mixing at Skywalker studios, a fact highlighted in the press pack as well as the production documentary (see Yamada 2002). Working with Thom provided the film with an international—in this case non-Japanese—feel. The film premiered on 20 January 2001 in Japan and it was presented at that year's Cannes film festival and continued a prolific run on the film festival circuit for two years with the last festival appearance dating from 22 March 2003 in Belfast.

The appeal of the film and the small cult surrounding it are arguably fuelled by the way the film allows, indeed requires, the viewer to intellectually interact with it. This interaction includes an analysis of clues and re-evaluation of the presented realities. At multiple points in the film, Ash transfers between realities, emerging from or immersing in them through the means of a virtual reality helmet. Speculation on fan sites (see for example, www.ninesisters.org) revolves around the viewer identifying intra-textual clues, informing others' understanding of the film, and generally sharing personal and informed readings of the text, thus establishing a web of extra-textual information around *Avalon*. The webmaster of www.ninesisters.org has assembled a large variety of interpretations, many of whose theme is a desire to reach an understanding of which, if any, of the three levels depicted in the film in actual fact is real. The Website itself borrows from the film's art design and further strengthens these fans' connection with the film and the mystery surrounding it.

Figure 1. Imitating the original text: the main page of ninesisters.org

Source: <http://www.ninesisters.org> (12 June 2010).

Video Gaming in a Militarized Society

The majority of the films that Mamoru Oshii is known for are concerned with the role of social authority in the form of the police or military. The police forces of the *Patlabor / Kido KeisatsuPatoraba* (1988-1993) and *Ghost in the Shell* (1995-2008) films and television series are confronted with the rising militarisation of their organisations, and are concerned with the interaction and fluid boundaries between man and machine. All of these are based on Oshii's experiences as a young man growing up in Japan.

Oshii's youth can be seen as marked by two main influences. The first is an often-cited love for cinema instilled in him by his father and mother (Rougier 2002). The second is his political activism and participation in 'antiestablishment (sic) rallies and demonstrations' (Ruh 2004, 4). In many of the interviews surrounding the release of *Avalon*, as well as in relation to other releases, Oshii stresses the influence that the involvement in student and revolutionary movements has had on him (Rougier 2002).

While many reviewers saw *Avalon* as a continuation of the *Ghost in the Shell* sequence, or a reinvention thereof after the Wachowski Brothers' *The Matrix* (1999) paid tribute to Oshii's *Avalon* (dir. by Csicsery-Ronay, 2002), I prefer to seek the connection with Oshii's involvement in previous live action and animated film projects. In *The Red Spectacles / jigoku no banken: akai megane* (1987), *Kerberos Panzer Corps / jigoku no banken: keruberusu* (1991) and in Hiroyuki Okiura's animated adaptation of his script for *Jin-Roh: The Wolf Brigade* (dir. by Jin-Rôh, 1998), Oshii chooses as his topic a heavily militarised society in an alternate timeline. The reality these films depict has seen the axis win World War II and the resulting rise of a totalitarian society. These films can be seen as the first attempt to translate Oshii's youth experiences and convictions to film. In *Avalon*, as Ash slowly works her way through the game, using video gaming skills to undermine the public authority represented by the game's rigid architecture and rules, we can see the director's desire to put his video game skills into play to change society.

Poland in *Avalon*

In interviews surrounding the making of, and release of *Avalon*, Oshii often claims that there are a few factors that influenced his choice of Poland as a filming location. Oshii made his first statement in the documentary film *Days of Avalon* that chronicles his stay in Poland; the documentary was released on the French DVD of *Avalon*. His statement revolves around his appreciation for ‘the slightly austere and sombre imagery of Polish cinema’ (Oshii 2002). Additionally, the film ends on a scene in the lobby of Warsaw’s Frederik Chopin Airport, in which Oshii confesses that he has fulfilled one childhood dream by filming in Poland.

Figure 2. Oshii at Warsaw’s Airport



Source: Film still from *Days of Avalon*, a documentary, released in 2002 and showing the location where *Avalon* was shot.

The press pack that Cinevia produced for *Avalon*’s French release on 3 April 2002 makes a strong link between the film at hand and the Polish film tradition. According to the press release, ‘Poland had all the advantages and corresponded to his [Oshii] vision of the future’ (Yamada 2002). Yamada contextualises the film within Polish cinematic heritage, citing Andrzej Wajda, Roman Polanski and Agnieszka Holland as only the most popular of the rich cinematic talent originating from Poland. Yamada concludes by mentioning Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) for its Polish setting, thus further associating the production with internationally known and successful films. Oshii himself mentioned Wajda’s early work as influential and one can easily recognise influences of *Kanal* (1957) in *Avalon*’s depiction of ruined cityscapes and characters evolving within. One final film that Oshii mentions in interviews surrounding *Avalon* is Andrzej Zulawski’s *On the Silver Globe / Na Srebrnym Globie* (1988), whose costume designer Magdalena Testawska was a member of Oshii’s production team. In reference to her and the costumes she designed for his film, the director states rather

comically that ‘the Polish have communism in their blood’, suggesting that the visual style he was aiming for was that of the communist era (Oshii in Anon. 2002).

Oshii has always had a complicated relationship with Japan in his science fiction films; he notably set his biggest success to date, *Ghost in the Shell*, in a futuristic Hong Kong. Oshii’s earlier live action films are also a reflection of the director’s desire to shoot his film outside of Japan. The credibility of the two live action films in the *jigoku no banken* sequence is undermined by the relative modernity that the backdrops provide and the almost complete lack of dated architecture. Moving the production to Poland allowed him to create a more international looking and sounding film for the Japanese audience. Furthermore, it added a certain exoticism to his film through the interaction of its Asian aesthetics with the Polish backdrop and language. The availability of non-Japanese locations, the backdrop for many films known internationally through the recent successes and rediscoveries of Japanese cinema, played a major part in selecting Poland as the (unnamed) setting for the film. According to the director, the wish was to direct a Japanese science fiction film that would resemble a European or USA-made film of the same kind. Creating a science fiction film of this sort is, according to Oshii, impossible in contemporary Japan (Oshii in Anon. 2002). While Oshii gives no concrete clues as to why he would find it impossible to use a Japanese backdrop for the film, his use of Japanese scenery for the previous military productions seems to connect it in his mind with a more historic approach (Oshii in Anon. 2002).

In Poland, Oshii found the climate and architecture to be that which he remembered from the films he had seen. Oshii admires Europe’s ability to conserve a pre-World War II look which ideally fit his idea of a doomed future (Oshii in Anon. 2002). Other elements influencing the decisions were the director’s high regard for Polish actresses and an admiration of the Polish language. Poland put Oshii at ease, even though he admits to knowing relatively little about the country in general (Oshii in Anon. 2002). In interviews, Oshii shows himself impressed most of all by the relative ease of access he and his production team had to the Polish military equipment which ranged from vehicles, like tanks and helicopters, to weapons and clothing. Spurred on by these opportunities and the creative input that his time in Poland undoubtedly provided, Oshii decided to bring Polish military design to *Skycrawlers* (2008), his recent animated work about young fighter pilots caught in a seemingly never-ending conflict. In it he draws extensively on Polish architecture and uses information gathered during his research trips to Poland.

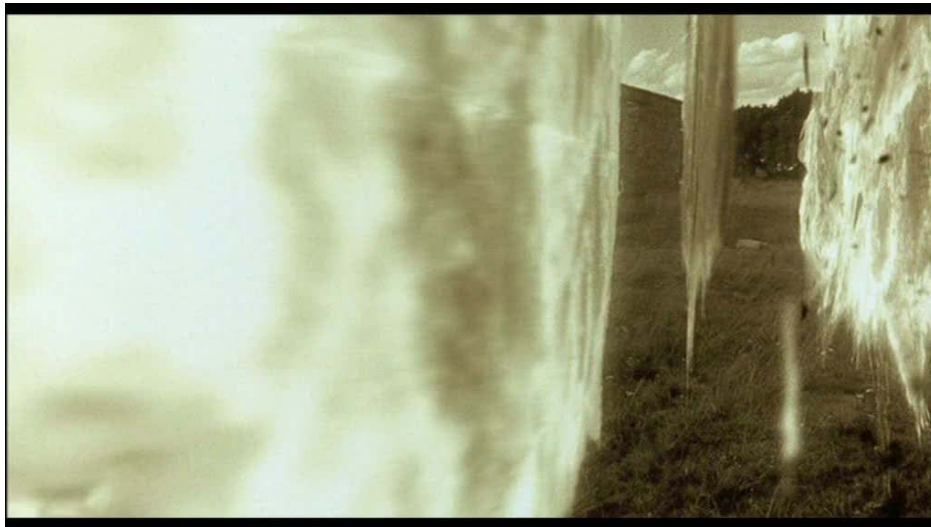
Eastern Europe’s Battleground

The military imagery of *Avalon* is limited to the moments of spectacle taking place within the confines of the allegedly tricky game world. Even though glimpses of the game, such as the Bishop’s scope, the sound of a helicopter and the pieces of artillery outside the opera, penetrate the other two realities, they are rarely as predominant as the images that seem taken straight out of history. It is in these moments that Oshii’s decision for complete visual control through digital post-production proves most effective at anchoring the film in the history of its production locations.

A sepia-tinged scene depicting a column of armoured vehicles being obliterated by aerial bombardment starts the film. The explosions emanating from the tanks freeze and a dolly and

pan reveal them to be layered in two dimensions in the three dimensional space. The movement of the camera helps to highlight the artifice of the scene and the explosions, clearly telling the viewer that this is not reality, but in fact the gamescape of Avalon. Ash appears among a flurry of pixels and polygons, her face hidden and the shape of her body obfuscated in loose army gear. The explosions, the action halting and her appearance signify the end of the previously depicted players' game and the beginning of her mission.

Figure 3. Explosions frozen, the camera dollies and pans to reveal them as 2D in the 3D environment.



Source: Film still from Mamoru Oshii's *Avalon* (2001).

Similar to Ash's appearance, the scene transitions from the Polish army training ground to an inner city with neoclassical buildings, further reminding the viewer of the artifice of the game and the special flexibility that virtual space brings with it. The architecture, on the other hand, acts as a striking reminder of Krakow and Warsaw's residential areas. As soon as the area is fully 'loaded' around her the protagonist is caught among fleeing civilians.

Figure 4. Ash against the neoclassical backdrop

Source: Film still from Mamoru Oshii's *Avalon* (2001).

Contrasting her rather human perspective of the scene is a series of shots focussing on two tanks moving through the street, swivelling their turrets menacingly. The cinematography, especially the *mise-en-scène*, creates associations with the great moments of unrest in Eastern Europe and the way they were reported and have impinged on our collective consciousness. For example, scenes reminiscent of the events in Hungary in 1956 and the Prague spring of 1968 are conjured by the monochrome imagery and stark contrast between human and machinery.¹ Closer to the location, the way in which the tanks 'herd' the civilians who throw cursory glances over their shoulder as they run for their virtual lives, directly alludes to pictures and film footage of the Warsaw ghetto uprising and subsequent outbreaks of civil unrest. This is further emphasised when the sequence continues with the protagonist running against the stream of the fleeing civil population. The blurring of the civilians against her focussed form gives Ash a supernatural and heroic aura.

It is possible Oshii revisited photographs and new reports of the upheavals in Eastern Europe during his youth, particularly given his involvement in politically active groups. The combination of the tanks of the Polish military that were made in the USSR with the particular architecture of Wroclaw and Warsaw and masses of extras in historic costumes allows the director to recreate in tone and in feel the images that are familiar from television news reports all over the world. The scene soon reveals a squad of players/soldiers armed with AK-47 and firing on the tanks. Their bullets ricochet off the vastly superior armour, the volume artificially enhanced at the sound design and mixing stage. The depicted battle, pitting armour against infantrymen, takes on different tones when put into context of the historical surroundings and cinematic influence on Oshii. The Warsaw uprising (August- October 1944) and its depiction in Andrzej Wajda's films like *Kanal* (1956), arguably helped to shape this scene further. The tanks and other military units represent a faceless opponent, just as the blurry, fleeing civilians represent an anonymous neutral side. Both of these elements relate to

¹This is a recurring theme in Oshii's work. For detailed discussions of Oshii's career and the themes of machine vs. human see Ruh 2004 and Cavallaro 2006.

a mostly invisible German force in Wajda’s ode to the independence fighters. The allusions to Wajda’s film are repeated most notably in the flashback to Ash’s original team, Wizard, on their last mission before disbanding, but also in the mission that ultimately allows Ash to access ‘Class Real’. The last disastrous mission of team ‘Wizard’ echoes the scenes of combat in Wajda’s film and the disbanding of the group of resistance fighters during the last days of the Warsaw Uprising. The location of the final battle, an abandoned industrial lot, alludes to the ruins represented in so many war films.

Figure 5. Ash during the final battle.



Source: Film still from Mamoru Oshii’s Avalon (2001).

Returning to the scene at hand, the players seen spraying bullets into the civilians are quickly dispatched when Ash takes control of a tanks’ machine gun. Ash’s actions from the beginning of this scene are a comment on her mastery and unrelenting focus on the game. Her action fulfils two important conditions in the video game environment. Firstly, it advances her character, as she earns experience points or upgrades from a defeated foe (as per the rules of many video games). Secondly, she protects the game’s innocent civilian, non-player characters, which is not an explicit goal of the game but highlights her altruistic trait.

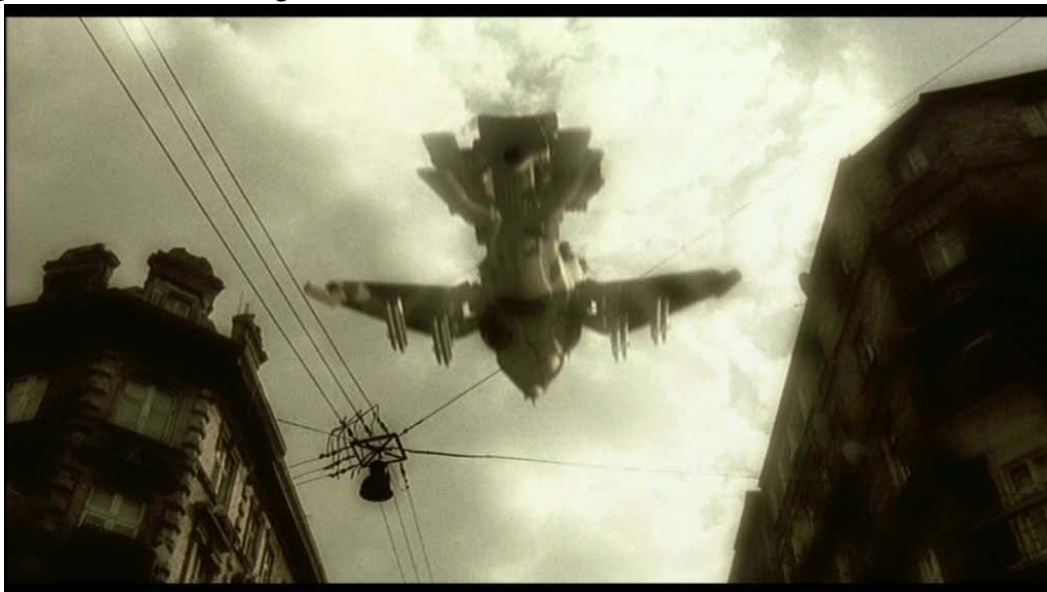
Figure 6. Ash taunting a fellow player.



Source: Film still from Mamoru Oshii's *Avalon* (2001).

Prior to the scene cutting back to an army training field, we see an aerial bombardment from a futuristic HIND helicopter that turns out to be the mission target.

Figure 7. The mission target.



Source: Film still from Mamoru Oshii's *Avalon* (2001).

The scene again shows the neoclassical buildings, typical of Eastern Europe, seen from above with civilians fleeing in every direction. The shot moves to the ground level and shows

the resulting explosions and the now established pixel bursts of players and civilians losing their life. This particular scene seems to conjure up a connection to Wochenschau reports on the seemingly unstoppable advance of the Wehrmacht forces, supported by aerial bombardment during the Blitzkrieg.

The locations used for the film cannot escape their origin. Rather than becoming estranged, as international productions have done in other European locations, the identity of the film setting is presented in such a way that it create an additional connection between the portrayed reality and actual history. The actions in these settings act as ghostly reminders of the past and find resonance with the informed viewers' visual memories. The way that particularly significant events throughout East European countries, notably those of the locations themselves—the Warsaw ghetto incidents and the uprising, and the siege of Wroclaw—have engrained themselves in the visual memory of humanity, can be seen reflected in the way Oshii decided to shoot and process *Avalon*.

Even though Oshii set out to create a universal science fiction film for Japan's audience, the influences from Polish cinema, his political activity and the media images that inspired it set him on a path that would eventually culminate in *Avalon*. The lower production costs, the available sets and other influences might have made the decision to shoot the film in Poland easier for the producers, but the images and impressions left on Oshii by Poland and Eastern European history played a significant part in the process.

In his choice of location and references to historical events through cinematography and mise-en-sc ne and in casting exclusively Polish actors speaking their mother tongue, Oshii makes a strong statement about the importance of geography and history in his work. In addition we have to consider the construct that is *Avalon* as a film-puzzle that is never clear and demands that viewers constantly reflect on the shown evidence. Even when the film is over, some viewers may find searing for clues explaining the film's various overt and hidden allusions rewarding. This extends the aesthetic field of the film as a process of remediating and recontextualising images of war and conflict for a generation that has, through digital media, developed a new dynamic relationship to history and the conflicts that have shaped Europe and the world.

Avalon

Japan, 2001, 102 min.

Director: Mamoru Oshii

Writer: Kazunori Ito

Producers: Atsushi Kubo, Shin Unosawa, Kazumi Kawashiro

Cinematographer: Grzegorz Kedzierski

Composer: Kenji Kawai

Cast: Malgorzata Foremniak, Wladislaw Kowalski, Jerzy Gudejko, Dariuz Biskupski, Bartolomiej Swiderski

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