

Hideaki Anno: emotional deconstructionist

With dozens of the renowned filmmaker's works scheduled to be screened at the Tokyo International Film Festival over the next two weeks, we speak to the man behind the 'Evangelion' sci-fi franchise about his apocalyptic influences and prod him on the question that is on every fan's lips

Hideaki Anno has had many job descriptions and worked on many projects in his more than three decades as an animator, but he is best known as the creator of the enduringly popular "Evangelion" sci-fi franchise.

Beginning life as "Shin Seiki Evangelion (Neon Genesis Evangelion)," a 26-part series broadcast from 1995 to 1996 on TV Tokyo, the franchise has since produced five feature films, as well as manga, games, character goods and even a theme park attraction. From being a cult phenomenon with a small, if dedicated, fan base, "Evangelion" in all its permutations has become a mainstream success in Japan, with fans around the world.

The basic concept is simple: Huge bio-machines called Evangelions, or Evas, piloted by specially recruited teenagers, battle monstrous giants known as Angels that are wreaking havoc on the human survivors of a global calamity.

However, Anno and his team at the Gainax animation studio created a world highly developed not only visually — the mechanics of the Evas in particular were so realistic that they seemed less drawn than designed — but also narratively, emotionally and spiritually. The Eva pilots — especially the troubled, sensitive Shinji, whose coldly calculating dad had developed the Evas — were strongly individualistic types whose turbulent lives were as much a part of the series' appeal as its titanic Eva-versus-Angel battles. The show also incorporated a melange of religious symbolism, and a wealth of psychological and philosophical themes reflecting Anno's own investigations and beliefs, as well as his long struggle with depression.

Anno himself became a sort of hero and role model for legions of "Evangelion" *otaku* (obsessed fans), although he has not always pleased them — the last two introspective, hard-to-parse episodes of the "Evangelion" TV series drew loud complaints and even death threats. The first two "Evangelion" films, which recapped the story of the TV series and added a new, less murky ending, were made in part to address those complaints.

Now, however, Anno has been anointed as an animation industry giant, with Studio Ghibli producer Toshio Suzuki proclaiming that Anno — a long-time Studio Ghibli collaborator — would "lead the anime world for the next 10 years" following the September 2013 retirement of studio maestro Hayao Miyazaki. For its 27th edition, unspooling Oct. 23-31, the Tokyo International Film Festival will present nearly 50 of Anno's works, from animated shorts he made as a student to his animated and live-action features. Long known to be a reluctant interviewee, Anno has cooperated with this project by making himself available to the media, including The Japan Times.

Arriving at Studio Khara, the animation studio Anno founded in 2006 after leaving Gainax, I was escorted into a meeting room whose walls were lined with models of battleships and other war machinery — a long-time Anno obsession. When the man himself strode into the room — looking taller and more robust than his rather weedy-looking photographs — and I asked him about the models, he told me, as though he'd heard the question too many times to count, that a friend had built them. Given an animator's typically insane work schedule, this sort of delegation made sense, though it popped my thought bubble of Anno, the eternal otaku, busying himself with plastic models in his spare minutes.

Anno did say, however, that he had involved himself in the Tokyo International Film Festival retrospective, selecting "as many of my films as I was allowed unless there were rights issues that prevented us from screening them." Among them are student shorts that, despite being drawn with little more than paper and pencil, evidence an astonishing talent for the animation craft. Painstakingly detailed *mecha* (mechanical objects) romp across the screen with a combination of invention, realism and humor that recall Pixar.

Anno, however, denied seeing himself as an animation prodigy.

"When you grow up in rural Japan (Anno was born in Ube, Yamaguchi Prefecture in 1960), it's hard to imagine yourself making animation," he says. "I've never been a confident individual. I kind of stumbled into where I am today."

The most decisive of those stumbles was his hiring as an animator for "Kaze no Tani Nausicaa (Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind)," the 1984 eco-disaster fantasy that first made the name of its director, Hayao Miyazaki, known to the outside world.

"I went (for the interview) because a friend invited me," Anno says. "I never imagined I'd have the opportunity to work there."

Impressed with Anno's drawings, Miyazaki not only gave him a job, but assigned him to animate a key sequence in a film — the beginning of an association with Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli that still continues.

From the very start, Anno's forte as an animator was not only cool mecha, but also visions of destruction with a chilling power as well as a fiery beauty. (For examples, see the trailer for the Anno retro on the TIFF site: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fc5xE-coMAA (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fc5xE-coMAA>)). His early inspirations, he says, "were action movies I watched as a kid," including one whose title he has forgotten but lodged in his brain for "the explosion of a gasoline

station — I remember how beautiful the flames were.”

In addition to the aesthetics of explosions, Anno was naturally drawn to apocalyptic visions as a child growing up during the Cold War, with its ever-present threat of nuclear war.

“It was imprinted on my psyche that Tokyo could be annihilated any minute,” he says. “That kind of imprinting expresses itself in my work. I never experienced the horrors of war that my parent’s generation did, but the imagery is very familiar to me, as is the Cold War-era fear of nuclear war. I’ve read many books and seen many TV dramas and movies that dealt with such themes. They’ve influenced me greatly. I no longer think we’re living on the brink of extinction, but the feeling that it could happen is still with me.”

Japan’s many natural disasters have also had their impact on his work, as shown by the tsunami that ravages the world of “Evangelion.”

“That leads to the beginning of something new,” Anno says. “The tsunami wipes out the world and the story then focuses on how the survivors rebuild it. That reflects how I imagine Japan. I don’t know about other countries, but if I were to symbolically tell the story of Japan that’s what it will look like.”

Anno’s own success, beginning with the “Evangelion” TV series and the two 1997 feature films based on it — “Shin Seiki Evangelion Gekijo-ban: Shi to Shinsei (Neon Genesis Evangelion: Death and Rebirth)” and “Shin Seiki Evangelion Gekijo-ban: Air/Magokoro wo, Kimi ni (The End of Evangelion),” owes a lot, he admits, to otaku support. He denies, however, that once-despised otaku culture and the anime it produced is now widely accepted by the mainstream.

“It looks that way now because animation makes money,” he says. “If it didn’t, though, the wider public wouldn’t care about it. You don’t gain public acceptance unless you attract fans and money. ... With animation, you see people lined up outside the theater and it’s easy to spot as a phenomenon so the media picks up on it, telling the public that animation is hot at the moment. That’s how it became more mainstream, I think. We just got lucky.”

When I mention Suzuki’s comment about Anno becoming the anime industry’s next leader, he gives me a wry grin.

“Well, that’s Suzuki’s opinion so it doesn’t make me proud,” he says with a laugh. “I try my best but I don’t see myself that way. I think that’s for the public to decide.”

He also doesn’t care about always being the director — the summit of the film set or animation studio hierarchy.

“All I want to do is to make good films,” he says. “I can either be a director, animator, scriptwriter or producer. Any of those roles is fine with me — I don’t even mind if I’m not involved as a director.”

“Evangelion,” he admits, is something of an exception (“I think it’s better if I direct the “Evangelion” films,” he says), but he balks at comparisons to George Lucas and “Stars Wars,” even though he engineered a Lucas-like reboot of the “Evangelion” series.

Starting in 2007 with “Evangelion Shin Gekijo-ban (Rebuild of Evangelion),” Anno and his Studio Khara animators have retold the story of the TV series in a planned tetralogy, using the sort of 3-D digital technology unavailable in the mid-1990s. Three parts have been released to date — all massive box office hits, with one more to go, although a release date has not yet been announced.

“I don’t want to make (“Evangelion”) my life work,” says Anno, who turned 54 in May. “I want to do a variety of projects.”

He is also not committed the 2-D style of hand-drawn animation (or, as is often done today, digital animation with a 2-D look) that is still the domestic industry standard, years after Hollywood shifted to 3-D computer graphics. “I think there will be more 3-D CG animation (in Japan) in the future and less of the hand-drawn kind,” he says. “I can see myself working in 3-D CG if it fits the project. Hand-drawn animation and 3-D CG are only mediums of expression. They’re only a tool. Japan’s the only place where we’re still making hand-drawn animation. To work with the rest of the world, we have to move on to 3-D. Some aspects of hand-drawn animation will remain, but it will no longer be the mainstream.”

Anno also sees no future for the sort of *tokusatsu* (practical effects) shows such as the “Ultraman” series that he loved as a kid and paid tribute to in his 2004 live-action hit “Cutie Honey.”

“No one’s passing on the techniques,” he says. “It pains me to see it go but it’s inevitable. All I do is make it last as long as I can. As long as I’m alive, I’d like to see it survive. But in 30 or 40 years it will die out.”

Released a decade ago, “Cutie Honey” was Anno’s last live-action film. He also made 1998’s “Love & Pop,” which investigated the *enjo kosai* (compensated dating) scene, and 2000’s “Shiki-Jitsu (Ritual),” a drama about two mentally troubled lovers. Despite the long gap between live-action projects, he has not committed himself solely to animation.

“I’d love to go back to live-action, but I’m doing animation for now,” he says with a resigned shrug.

Asked about the differences between the two, Anno defines animation as more “image centered.”

“In live-action, the image exists in reality and you commit that piece of reality to film,” he explains. “With animation, you imagine something that doesn’t exist in real life and actualize it through drawings or CG.”

Anno, however, is not a fan of live-action films derived from his anime. He dismisses “Pacific Rim,” with its “Evangelion”-inspired tussles between giant aliens and human-piloted robots, as “not so interesting.” Hollywood plans for a live-action “Evangelion” remake leave him cold.

“‘Evangelion’ was conceived as an animation,” he says. “It would be hard to express in live-action.”

One reason for the difficulty of the anime-to-live-action leap, Anno believes, is anime’s different concept of characters.

“Characters in anime are idealized people” he explains. “Animation is good for that kind of idealized expression because each character is symbolic. But when human actors play those characters, it feels phony. You see the actor’s face and think, ‘There’s no way you’re that good of a person.’”

Not, he quickly adds, that the characters in “Evangelion” are all pure-hearted exemplars.

“When we started the ‘Evangelion’ TV series, we tried things you generally wouldn’t expect to see in an anime,” he says. “In the symbolic world of cell animation, we tried to make the drama feel as raw as possible.”

Anno had a chance to act in an anime himself when Hayao Miyazaki asked him to voice the character of Jiro Horikoshi — the designer of the famed World War II Zero fighter — in his 2013 film “Kaze Tachinu (The Wind Rises).”

“Since Miyazaki asked me, I couldn’t say no,” Anno says. He got the role, he explains, because “Miyazaki saw similarities between the person I am and the character of Horikoshi — the way he thought as an engineer.”

In the film Horikoshi is more occupied with building beautiful airplanes than agonizing over their use as weapons of war — until the costs of war are brought home to him. Anno, on the other hand, is fully aware of his beloved military mecha’s duality.

“I know they’re weapons of war,” he says. “However, there’s a beauty in unadorned functionality totally separate from that. Fighter planes and battleships have a simple, unadorned beauty I’m drawn to. But I don’t want to see them in action, killing people.”

I decide, strategically, to end the interview with a question about the fourth and final film in the new “Evangelion” series, a question the Tokyo festival PR representative has warned me Anno will not answer. Why not give it a shot?

“Any news on when ‘Evangelion 4’ will start production?” I ask.

“No comment,” Anno replies in English and the entire room, Anno included, erupts in laughter.

In line with COVID-19 guidelines, the government is strongly requesting that residents and visitors exercise caution if they choose to visit bars, restaurants, music venues and other public spaces.

