

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

From the Cellar: Angel's Egg

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Opinions Editor



I once stated that Flannery O'Connor once stated that "a good surrealist film is hard to find," but I'm pretty sure I was lying and that the person I was addressing was actually a small purple dirigible in disguise. C'est la vivre.

Regardless of the quote's invalidity, the sentiment is genuine: there are only a handful of surrealist films out there and those worth watching could fit onto the aforementioned hand's pinky finger.

I had to applaud however (which caused me to drop all the surrealist films I was holding in my hand) when I saw Oshii Mamoru's nearly forgotten 1985 feature, *Angel's Egg*. This is saying a lot, because I happened to be watching the film on my computer while riding in a much larger and less colorful dirigible at the time - and if the awkward glances I suffered are any indication of broad social mores, 'normal' people don't applaud for films they watch on flights.

Knowing this beforehand would have been very handy, just as a bag in which to carry those surrealist films would have been so as not drop them when I unexpectedly broke out in applause...

Alright, now that we're both sick of my half-witted attempts at combining extended metaphor and pun I can get on to the film.

Angel's Egg (Tenshi no Tamago in its native Japan) is a sort of happy anomaly in film: a surrealist effort with a feature-length running time, a dense and intellectual animated work, and a well-funded avant-garde film with little to no commercial appeal.

Aside from the general opulence of Japan's bubble economy at the time I'm unable to offer any explanation as to how this film got produced, but I'm sure grateful that someone was willing to lose money on it, because it's quite a treat.

Like most great surrealist art, the film is based much more on form and symbolism than any kind of cohesive plot, but the thin narrative thread that is presented goes something like this: a young girl who spends her days wandering alone through a seemingly abandoned city is nurturing a large egg she carries with her when she is confronted by a mysterious man who may or may not be Christ. There are also a couple of tangential sequences, like one in which hordes of men go out at night wielding large spears and futilely try to hunt and capture giant shadows.

Like everything else in the film, the meaning of this sequence is left up to the viewer's interpretation; perhaps these men represent normal members of society, wasting their lives and efforts away on meaningless exercises and false promises, or perhaps the church the shadows move across signals that the hunters are the blindly faithful, chasing endlessly after salvation without paying any heed to the real and present Christ figure who silently observes their absurd ritual. With sparse and ambiguous dialogue, the film

can be interpreted in many different ways. With a 65-minute run-time as well as a constant stream of lush visuals, it does not get as tedious as other such obtuse movies.

Angel's Egg is thought-provoking and a hearty treat for anybody who can spare an hour for quiet contemplation, but the film's greatness lies firmly in its direction. Stark, shadowy lighting and sharp contrasts in color accent the eerie world designs by Yoshitaka Amano, whose inspiration seems to lie somewhere between H.R. Giger and Dr. Seuss.

The animation is fluid and elegant and every composition in the film looks like a first-class painting. If you've ever questioned the validity of animation as a serious form of cinema, this film should convince you: not only because of the quality of the animation but even moreso because the film could never have been made as anything but animation (what would have required tens of millions of dollars and hundreds of designers and artisans in live-action filmmaking was here achieved with a fairly modest budget and only five animators).

Despite the matter that there are about as many possible interpretations of *Angel's Egg* as there are people who have watched it (intentionally so, as the filmmaker's involved have refused to give any indication as to a 'correct' interpretation of its symbolism) it is clear that creation is an important element, from the girl's egg which she must nurture to life, to the references to creation and destruction in the story of Noah's ark.

This work is a self-reflexive exercise in paradox, at once a tract on the nature and fallibility of creation while at the same time being an object of creation on the part of the filmmakers. Whether *Angel's Egg* serves more as a denunciation or affirmation of creativity is debatable, but it's place in the pantheon of animated greats is not; and it's worth at least one go-around for anybody who has ever troubled himself or herself with the arts.

Beneath the static Featured Artist: Put Down the Muffin

STEVE BERGQUIST
Columnist

Today's featured artist is a band of local chaps known as Put Down the Muffin. The name is almost as awesome as the music on their debut album, *The Rest of Right Now*.

They serve as a fine introduction into the world of acid jazz, a genre that blends equal parts jazz and funk, plus some hip-hop effects and tones. And because that's just not unique enough, PDtM add their own brand of jam, progressive, electronic, and ambience stylizations.

Drawing from such a diverse catalogue of influences gives them an extremely wide range of musical options to choose from, and thus their debut album is eclectic as could be. Pop tearjerkers ("April Showers") freely intermingle with danceable riffs ("Teens and Juniors") and atmospheric tone poems ("Federal Boiler"). And speaking of tone, just listen



to Bruce Balgaard's fretless bass and marvel at the sloppy majesty of it. Mmmmm... chunky.

If you are not terribly familiar with the realm of jazz, this is a decent place to start, because it has the intricate time signatures, delicate touch and improvisational technique that jazz nuts rave about, while keeping a solid groove that makes it thoroughly listenable. Try starting with "Def Lynyrd" or "Track 11" (which is actually the first song on the album.)

It can't be overstated that this is a marvelous live band. Again, this is jazz (sort of), so you won't hear them play a song the same way twice. Subtle permutations of rhythm and melody abound, though they sometimes take a less nuanced creative route.

When I saw them perform their classic "Butt Hay," everyone dropped out when Matt, the guitarist, signaled for a solo, then proceeded to do two repeats of the main riff from "Day Tripper" be-

fore the band went right back into the song. It was a different tempo, in a different key, and had an entirely different mood. It didn't even come close to making sense, and it amused me to no end.

There really is no such thing as a "typical" PDtM song, but more often than not, you can count on hearing a funky groove from the rhythm section, a bizarre yet poignant line on the guitar, some nimble noodling from the keyboard, and a great vocal harmony or two. "Teens and Juniors" and "The Rest of Right Now" are prime products of the formula, with great beats and flowing dynamic shifts.

There are four ambient tracks on the album, which are excerpts from a single half-hour jam they recorded for the album. I didn't know quite what to think of these songs at first, but after careful listening, they have grown on me. Clouds of notes wash over you, punctuated by quirky samples and effect-laden riffs. A patient listener

will find a good deal of substance amidst the minimalism.

If you are insistent on strict song structure and instantly identifiable melody, then "April Showers" and "Tribute to Bunyan" are up your alley. "April" is an excellent, gloomy ballad that climaxes in a shower of distortion and vocal harmonies.

"Bunyan," on the other hand, is a hilariously hard hitting rock tune guaranteed to make you smile with lines like "He's a big guy, he's a big fat guy/He's got an ox with a steak to fry." The pseudo heavy-metal screaming delivery of that lyric near the end of the song cracks me up every time.

This is rare; this is what happens when fantastic musicians have both phenomenal emotive capacity and a great sense of humor. Welcome to the wonderful world of Put Down the Muffin, the best acid jazz jam band with prog and ambient influences from the Twin Cities I've ever told you about.

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