

Makoto Shinkai Triple Bill
Barbican, 9 July 2006

Shinkai first gained attention with *She & Her Cat*, a short animation piece in which a cat describes its owner's lifestyle. However, this cat is no comical Soseki creation. Despite light-hearted touches (the cat acquires a feline girlfriend) we become aware of the solitary life of a young woman working in a big city.

Her cramped apartment becomes a refuge in which cat and woman seek solace. She seems forever rushing off to work, her unfulfilling personal life consisting of little more than phone calls.

Visually, the piece is also very poetic. Drawn in black and white, it uses omission like blank space on a canvas. The girl's face is never seen - we just get glimpses of her hair or her pale limbs.

This is not animation for children. Shinkai touches on existential issues such as loneliness and belonging.

Loneliness is a theme carried on to the next film, *Voices Of A Distant Star*. Its protagonists are a young couple separated by light years, as she takes part in a space mission while he remains on Earth. The literally star-crossed lovers rely on communication via text messages which take years to reach each other.

Stunning imagery of space fights is juxtaposed with the mundane rhythm of life on Earth, where the lonely young man wonders if he should give up, but decides to keep on waiting.

Shinkai produced this film entirely by himself on his home PC. Even the voicing was done by him and his girlfriend.

Using a full animation studio, Shinkai created the *The Place Promised In Our Early Days*. It's set in the future, in a Japan separated into two states, one of which is Ezo (Hokkaido). A mysterious tower looms, needle-like, over the horizon.

Yet again, there is an underlying theme of yearning - the protagonist is in love with a girl he went to school with and with whom he shared an idyllic summer holiday. However, the girl has fallen into a deep slumber and the authorities are keen to keep her in that state, as her dreams are keeping the fragile status quo between the two states ticking along.

The interrelation between dreams and reality is blurred. Waking the girl would pose the risk of a military conflict, but our hero takes the chance, flying the

comatose girl towards the tower. All hell breaks loose as war erupts, and yet somehow Shinkai's message is an uplifting one.

As in *She & Her Cat* and *Distant Star*, the depersonalising forces of the system cannot destroy the bonds of love. Whether exhausted by the rat race or manning a spaceship in endless missions, his protagonists reach out - to a pet or to a loved one - and ultimately to us.

Interestingly, we can also glimpse values dear to the Japanese soul such as delicacy, perseverance and keeping one's word. In all three films, the female "love interests" are meek and gentle (even the one participating in a space attack manages to do so with feminine grace). In *Distant Star*, the lovers decide to wait stoically for years until a possible reunion, with barely a sigh of frustration. And in *The Place Promised*, the power of a childhood promise drives our hero to risk everything by taking to the skies.

Shinkai's heroes stare into reality with their eyes open, then forge ahead on their idealistic path.