



The World of Makoto Shinkai

DEEPARGHYA DUTTA BARUA

Makoto Shinkai, often dubbed as the new Miyazaki of Japanese animation, has put out a fair amount of work in his 20-year long career. Here's a review on the animator's career as he is possibly busy arranging more trains for his upcoming film.

The *Voices of the Distant Star*, written, directed and animated entirely by Shinkai was released in 2002 and is still hailed by critics as one of his finest shorts. The short revolves around two friends drifting away as one of them goes out to wage a war against aliens. Their communication gets stifled as the distance makes it difficult to send messages, eventually taking up years to transmit. While it is conceptually amazing, the art is the weakest aspect and the interesting directing decisions fail to supersede the rough character designs, turning the experience into a chore. However, it does get a special nod for holding the torch of all those who are willing to do mammoth tasks like animating in solo mode.

The theme of that particular short strings most of his future material in unison as his patterns become more apparent. The *Place Promised in Our Early Days*, released in 2004, is his first feature film that takes place in a divided Japan. The three main figures are tied together with a promise that has to be fulfilled in order to break the sleep of Sayuri, the central female figure who shares a connection with the parallel universe through dreams. The movie is

somewhat enjoyable but it gives the impression of being a demo of his most successful film *Your Name*. Subjects like war do not get fleshed out properly, leaving lots of loose ends. The themes of isolation and loneliness are brought up quite often throughout the film. It does wrap up but it lacks the acuity of emotions compared to his other works.

Next up for the list is *5 Centimeters per Second*, released in 2007, which I personally believe to be his best and most mature work till date. The hour-long run has three segments, each taking place in different phases of the protagonist, Takaki. Unlike his earlier releases, this particular film heavily sticks to realism as it explores how idealised romantic interests are flawed and that things, like caring, regardless of promises made in the past, are not constant as people can deviate further away from each other with time and also due to the differences in their paths. The film depicts how Shinkai likes splattering trains throughout his work and it ends exactly at the same place it had started, wrapping up beautifully with a very bitter note. Even if you don't want to warrant your brain with all the romantic mush, the film is a must watch for your next desktop wallpaper since it has the most stunning backgrounds Shinkai has ever put out, unless you hate pink.

His 2011 film *Children Who Chase Lost Voices* is often considered to be his weakest so far. While I do not agree with the particular remark, it has glaring mistakes that make it harder for anyone to recommend. The main complaint

regarding the movie is that it's a Miyazaki rip-off and even if this accusation was put aside, the movie fails to project a proper purpose. The main protagonist seems clueless, the antagonists play a pointless role and the conclusion doesn't conclude anything. There are traces of what might have been a masterpiece as it breaks the tiring formula Shinkai has groomed for most of his films but the sub-par execution impairs the huge ambition that acted behind the making of it. This film is meant to be watched if you need anything Ghibli-esque to cure your rare health condition but it would act more like homoeopathic medicine.

The *Garden of Words*, while acclaimed to be one of his best, seemed lacklustre to me personally as it felt like a clichéd romantic gamble. The interactions that take place seem very organic and it does so well at its job of being that way that it ends up being a tad bit boring at times. The emotions and conflicts portrayed in the film are very intense and while they do serve as strong points as to why one would watch it, the plot, in general, feels very average with no mentionable flairs to it. The age gap between the two romantic interests barely come off as something odd or intriguing. As a side note, never watch the dubbed version of this release.

Your Name, released in 2016, is the title that pops up in everyone's head when referring to Shinkai and even in cases where people don't properly recall his name. The most successful Japanese animated movie of all time is indeed worth a watch despite the time-travelling

clichés as it has brilliant art, an interesting progression, and other ingredients required to make it a polished film. It branches out from a portion of his earliest feature film's concept, adds spiritual references and also slam-dunks the people who were unhappy regarding the bitter ending of *5 Centimeters per Second*. And guess what? More trains.

His other mentionable shorts include *She and Her Cat* and *Someone's Gaze*. The latter is a short capsule that touches down on the feelings of yearning and growing up to embrace adulthood, quite remarkable for such a small piece of animation.

With all the bite-sized reviews pieced together, my impression towards Shinkai is mostly positive, but not overwhelming. He tore down most of the regurgitating anime tropes by penning quite a unique style of blending detailed art along with novelistic monologues, but somehow has managed to create his own bubble of predictability that engulfs a significant chunk of his potential. With that being said, he is relatively younger compared to his counterparts as he has breezed his way through the production pipeline at a faster pace. Given that he doesn't quit anytime soon, there's a lot more to expect from him and hopefully, his best is yet to come.

Deeparghya Dutta Barua likes to feel apprehensive whenever there are more than two people around. Help him in finding new ways of butchering his name at deeparghya@rantages.com