

# AEON FLUX

## Creator Peter Chung on the adventures of his morally ambivalent heroine.

By Todd French

What if just as we're cheering one of Arnie's body-count bacchanalia, we find ourselves suddenly switching sympathies with the Terminator's expiring stock villain prey? What if Sly or Seagal were lethally dissed at the start of one of their violence mellers, their killer becoming our new protagonist—for perhaps the next couple minutes before being replaced by another unlikely assassin? Welcome to just a few of the wildly unpredictable adventures of AEON FLUX, animator Peter Chung's morally ambivalent action heroine. The gun-toting, foot fetish miss with the alluring bod and slicked-back coiffure dishes out equal parts ultra-violence and elliptical parody on LIQUID TELEVISION, the MTV cartoon anthology series.

Chung, a 32-year-old animator and Cal Arts alumnus, who has worked for both Disney Studios and Ralph Bakshi (including a six-week drawing stint on the latter's FIRE AND ICE), created the series in 1990 after his bosses at Colossal Pictures pitched his one-page outline to the music video moguls at MTV. The artist remembers the inspiration for his oblique, super-heroic exotica springing from what might strike most viewers as an odd bonding of unlikely, if not downright diametrically opposed, film references. Says Chung, "The idea came after seeing Steven Spielberg's RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK and Stanley Kubrick's A CLOCKWORK ORANGE. I noticed that they were almost the same film. I really thought that CLOCKWORK, on a conscious level, and Spielberg's film, perhaps unconsciously, were using film to glorify or mythify a character who was amoral. In A CLOCKWORK ORANGE, the story is told from the criminal's point of view; there's a subversive intent.



According to Chung, AEON FLUX is about "the interesting seductive quality of transgression, [which] is more compelling than the external threat of traditional villains."

Whereas I thought RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK was pure propaganda, pure White Supremacy. I found the ethno-centrism fascinating. I thought of the idea of doing a film where the main character was doing things that were morally questionable or maybe morally abhorrent, yet portraying it stylistically in such a way as to give you the idea she was the hero. I never saw Aeon as the heroine; to me, she was always the villain." Chung points to such recent films as MAN BITES DOG and UNFORGIVEN as sharing similar thematic concerns with AEON, and cites Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean-Luc Godard, Hitchcock and Japanese animator Osamu Dezaki as major influences. The latter is the creator of GOLGO-13, incidentally, another assassin cel-piece.

For the record, and contrary to popular belief, there *is* a plot to the first season's 12-minute, non-dialogue, cryptic ballisticgram. Aired in six terse, consecutive installments, the breathlessly edited story follows the elusively motivated femme assassin's mission to gun down a tyrant linked to the spread of a deadly virus. Despite the fact that Aeon wipes out enough henchmen to depopulate ten John Woo films, ironically satiric salvos abound, leading to the unexpected, blackly funny pay-off wherein our hit woman, on the brink of icing her target, steps on a nail and free-falls to her death from a vertiginous ledge. It's indicative of AEON FLUX's bucking conventional narrative restraints that Chung provides no background info on the heroine and begins every episode in medias res.

That Chung has a lot more on his mind than racking up the multitudinous pretty-kills of a future-chic LA FEMME NIKITA (the animator's graphic style is a nod to early 20th Century Viennese Expressionist painter Egon Schiele) is clear from the anarchic, nigh Dadaistic tweaking of action-flick conventions that constantly subverts the action adventure conventions at every point. The Voguish Aeon wastes everything in sight with an Olympic gymnast's aplomb, while backed up, like Indiana, with a rousing signature score, via composer-sound man Drew Neumann. Yet, along the way, James Cameronish firepower vies with an almost surreal, off-kilter nihilism: the literally faceless minions doff their masks and hold each other in touching pietas after being gunned down by the remorseless heroine; Aeon blithely tosses the plague antidote in order to use the serum container to lob a grenade at an infected baddie; and, when it turns out Aeon's been after the wrong guy all along (the culprit is actually the



other series repeater, Trevor Goodchild, geneticist, demagogue, and sometime Aeon lover), the futility of her carnage becomes even more pointed.

Considering the outraged public spuma that's been assaulting MTV of late over controversial animation metal-maniacs BEAVIS AND BUTT-HEAD, it's perhaps surprising that the rock vid powers-that-be have not tried to stem the frequently copious flow of plasma in AEON FLUX. Aside from having to alter a scene with two women in a tub in the first season and lower the kink level of a clinch between Trevor and Agent RU-486 the following year, Chung has pretty much been left to his own devices. This, despite the fact that a typical battle set-piece in AEON comes equipped with a mop brigade ready to clean up after the heroine's excesses.

Says Chung, "Maybe it's dangerous of me to say this, but I actually think the problem with commercial television violence is not that it's gratuitous, but that it's purposeful. I think when you say that violence is an acceptable form of resolving conflict, that's when you run into social problems and responsibility. All of the violence in AEON FLUX is gratuitous in the sense that Aeon never achieves what she sets out to do through violent means."

Having killed off his main character in the first season, Chung found himself in a considerable quandary when his sponsors at Colossal decided that they wanted him to resurrect the scantily-clad liquidator. The animator had already started work on a new storyline with completely different characters. When the proposed plot, involving torture and police brutality was coldly received, Chung, in the position of doing another LIQUID TELEVISION season, agreed to bring Aeon back to life, but with the purpose of satirizing yet another of TV's sacred conventions.

"I had to get around the fact that she



In a typical bit of action, our anti-heroine off-handedly offs the opposition.

died," Chung laughs. "So my solution was to make her die in every episode. That was going to be her thing. When I thought about that, it became an interesting pre-supposition; it became the inverse of what a hero in a TV series is—they're always going to survive. Therefore, any time that the hero's life is threatened, as in MCGYVER or HUNTER, or any TV series, you always know they're going to make it, so there's no real suspense; nothing's at stake. Aeon, on the other hand, was going to die; she was going to fail in her mission. All the episodes in the second season were about different aspects of Aeon Flux's death. They weren't so much parodies of heroic action; I was really focusing on the portrayal of death. I had always been dissatisfied with the way death was portrayed in film, and in getting the feeling of actually dying with the character."

To this end, the five episodes, ranging from lengths of three to five minutes, delightfully offed the fatalistic protagonist in a variety of imaginative ways, while providing acute and mordant commentary on

technology, xenophobia, war and the instability of interpersonal relationships. The season's coda, the "war" episode, undeniably stands as not only the best AEON, but the medium's finest take on the ultimate waste of aggression. Co-directed by Chung and Gerrett Sheldrew, the short wickedly deflates pat cinephile concepts of audience identification through the splashy, arbitrary heroics of four different—short-lived—protagonists. Of all the AEON shows, Chung's personal favorite remains the fourth. Composed of a repeated cycle of 20 two-second shots the episode charts the ever-shifting passions and allegiances between Aeon, allied female agent RU-486, and Trevor Goodchild. As Aeon strives to keep her mind on business (finding a plug to keep a man-made island

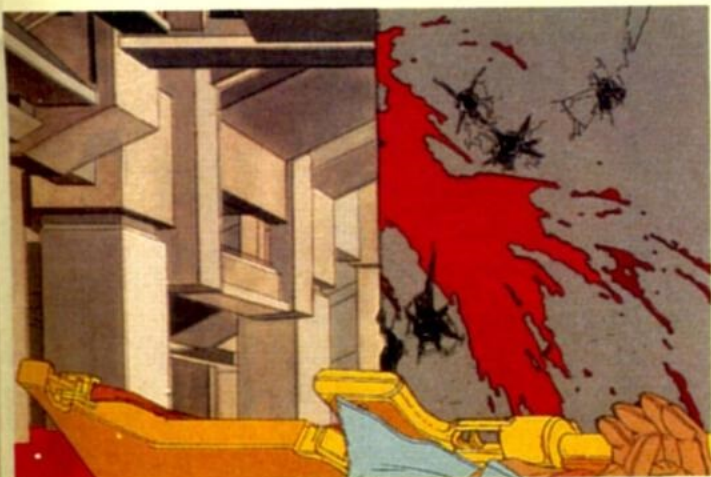
afloat) she increasingly sees her mission compromised by a skulking gun-man and the libidinous activities of RU-486 and the captive Trevor.

"It points in the direction I want to go in the third season," Chung states. "To me, it was about the changing dynamics between three characters. It started out being a formal experiment in structure; I wanted to direct a piece staged in a manner where the camera angles and duration of the shot was not dictated by the content. I was interested in what kind of emotional, psychological effect you could achieve if you structured it more like a piece of music. That was the analogy I used; music is able to generate emotional response through rhythm. I think Alain Robbe-Grillet, a French novelist and filmmaker was the conscious influence on the piece."

Currently negotiating a deal to make a series of 13 half-hour episodes for the

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Some examples (below) of the blood-spattered carnage that results whenever Aeon (right) goes into action. Chung explains that he was interested in "doing a film where the main character was doing things that were morally questionable. I never saw [her] as the heroine; to me, she was always the villain."





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third season of LIQUID TELEVISION, Chung reveals that he intends to showcase a new set of central protagonists and that his femme killer will finally speak. He also plans to fill viewers in on much-needed details of Aeon's world, including the rivalry between the Monica and Gregna, the respective countries of Aeon and the metaphysician-technocrat Trevor. The animator promises that, if anything, the third season will be even more challenging and psychologically dense than the previous two.

"The third season is going to be very much about psychological drama. I think what's really interesting to me is developing characters who are psychologically and morally real, who aren't just typical cartoon stereotypes—an interesting, seductive quality of transgression, which is really what AEON FLUX is about. She embodies the seduction of the criminal, of violence. Our capacity to be seduced by and participate in that is more compelling than the external threat of traditional villains."□

