Joel vs. Film

What is Joel vs. Film?

Joel vs. Film is a blog wherein I give my input in the thematic context of various films and how they relate to our lives. I cover everthying from movies, to short films, to television series, as well as my thoughts on film as a medium. Furthermore, I use it as a platform to showcase some of my own photography.

What follows is just a taste of some of the content of Joel vs. Film.

One of the photographs from the image gallery of Joel vs. Film

Shin Gojira: Evolution

Ishirō Honda's 1954 masterpiece, Gojira, remains, to this day, one of the boldest political statements put to film. It's a pointed statement against American interventionism as well as a harrowing look at the horrors of nuclear weapons. It disguises itself as a monster movie, but it presents an incredibly poignant look at the attitudes of a post-war Japan.

Following the success of Gojira, Toho Films began to make a multitude of kaiju films, but none of them had the same weight or ambition as the film that inspired them all. None of these films tried to capture the essence of the Japanese experience in the same way Gojira did. That was, of course, until the release of Shin Gojira in 2016, 62 years after the original film.

Hideaki Anno's, Shin Gojira is an enthralling critique of Japanese governmental bureaucracy, and a stark look at how Japan sees itself within the international community, specifically in its relations with the United States. It takes the original idea of Gojira, that is a deeply political film masquerading as a monster film, and evolves that idea to suit a new time with a new audience and new sensibilities.

Anno presented an interesting choice as a director for this film, though when considering the final product, it's difficult to think of anyone else that could have resurrected the original idea of Gojira. Hideaki Anno is one of Japan's most acclaimed animation directors, most notable for his creation of the Neon Genesis Evangelion franchise. Prior to the release of Shin Gojira, Anno had little experience with live action features. However, when viewed in the context of his previous work, specifically with the Evangelion franchise, Anno seems a good candidate to capture the spirit of Gojira.

Despite being a monster movie, the actual creature takes up surprisingly little screen-time. The majority of the film is focussed instead upon the various governmental organizations of Japan, and how they respond to the threat that the giant monster presents. Structuring itself as a political thriller works to the films benefit; as the various organizations prove ineffectual in responding to and combating the threat of the monster. The politicians who lead these organizations are more concerned with the image their responses would present rather than the actions themselves. They become tied up in the bureaucratic process to such a degree that it prevents them from adequately being able to respond to the monster, their hesitance leading to more and more destruction.

Furthermore, there is always the presence of the greater international community, specifically the United States, that further complicates things. Anno's previous works often focus on relationships, and Shin Gojira presents a relevant and modern look at Japan's relationship with the rest of the world. Japan is faced with the dichotomy of protecting itself and its interests while considering how its actions affect the world around them. Similarly, in modern Japan, there's growing questions of Japan's place in the international community, as it questions its own autonomy following the dependance placed upon it following the second world-war. The film reflects these concerns, and brings the question of how Japan should conduct itself within the international community to the forefront.

The monster of Godzilla also reflects a uniquely Japanese experience. In the original 1954 film, the monster represented the horrors of nuclear weapons, something post-war Japan was all to familiar with. Godzilla rages through Tokyo as a seemingly unstoppable force of destruction. Even the design of the creature reflects these fears. Despite being reptilian in design, Godzilla doesn't have scales, it's skin is designed to evoke the image of radiation burns, something many of the survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings bear. It doesn't breath fire, but rather beams of bright atomic light, symbolic of the flash of a nuclear bomb when it detonates.

In Shin Gojira the monster is the result of years of dumping nuclear waste into the ocean. This reflects the fears held by many Japanese people following the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster of 2011. At points the monster silently looms over Tokyo, a source of ever present dread. Even when it's not an active force of destruction, the creature is a constant and ever present danger.

The creation and themes of Shin Gojira, represent an evolution from the 1954 original. However, the idea of evolution is a central theme of Shin Gojira. Throughout the film, the monster rapidly evolves through several different forms. When the monster is seemingly defeated, it comes back, larger and far more powerful. It changes itself to suit its environment and to combat the threats that face it. In response to this, the Japanese government is also forced to evolve to combat the threat that Godzilla represents. The various self-concerned bureaucratic organizations are only able to take on the creature when they unite, combine their efforts and attack the beast head on, not through brute force, but through understanding. So to, the film posits, that Japanese government, and perhaps society, should evolve to face the threats that loom over it. The last shot of the film focuses on the tail of a defeated Godzilla, as it morphs into a collective of humanoid figures, suggesting that the threat will never truly disappear; they too will evolve, and thus so too should society continue to evolve.

Shin Gojira represents how to adapt the spirit and sensibilities of a classic film for a new audience and a new era. It takes the core concept of the original film, and applies it to the modern era. Furthermore, it takes this idea of evolution, and uses it as a core concept. Shin Gojira represents the evolution of a classic film into the modern age.

How to Watch a Film

I've often been asked how I glean the information I do from watching a film. In truth, interpreting a film isn't all that difficult; it just requires a bit more effort than most people are willing to put into watching a film. Watching a film is not a passive experience as some may believe, on the contrary a good film demands the viewers complete attention. I'm by no means an expert, but I'd like to share my own habits and experiences in how I watch films.

First, it is essential to remove all distractions. Most of us have our cellphones on us at all times; turn it off and put it away. Believe me, you'll survive two hours without it. Also make sure that you won't be bothered. Obviously, urgent matters occasionally arise, but any disturbance can throw off the pacing of a film.

Second is to have a good setup. A decent quality screen of adequate size on which to watch the film. High definition is preferable, but not essential. You should also get comfortable, ideally with a good snack and your drink of choice. Being comfortable is important as it allows you to focus solely on the film.

Third, it's important to do your research. Personally, I believe that the best way to go into any film is to do so blindly, knowing as little as possible. That said, knowing the creator(s) of any particular film goes a long way in helping one interpret the film. It helps you to know what kind of person created the film, what else they've done, what themes and ideas do they commonly explore, etc.

Think of every film as a series of moving parts. There's the director, the screenwriters, the actors, the various design teams, all the people that contribute to the creation of a film. Think of each individual part and try to think about how that part is playing out on the screen in front of you. Think of those parts in relation to each other; how are they working together?

One of the most important aspects of any film is its cinematography. It's important to analyze every shot and ask why was this shot that way? Think of the angles, the framing, the juxtaposition, everything about the shot, and ask what is the cinematographer trying to say by shooting this scene in this way. Furthermore, examine the colours; many films have a very distinct colour palette that also conveys theme. Thinking of how things are shot implies a lot about what the film as a whole might be trying to say.

The most important person in the production of any film is the director. They oversee the entire production of a film. As such consider the production from their perspective. How are things placed, how are the actors moving and speaking, how is every individual part of this film contributing to the film as a whole. By asking these questions as you watch the film, you can gain a sense of how a director thinks, and therefore insight into films themselves.

Obviously, this advice is only a starting point, and there's plenty more to consider when watching a film. Insight into the creation of a film is essential to interpreting meaning from film. When viewing the individual aspects of a film, it's important to know that every aspect of a film has an intention; examine that intention and consider it within the context of the overall film. I love watching films, as its probably apparent, I hope that you, the reader, might try to see film in the way I do, and perhaps share a little bit in my hobby.

A photograph of my living room; where I do the majority of my film watching.

Kanamewo: Meaning

There's something almost voyeuristic about watching a short film like Kanamewo. It's almost as though you're watch the innermost emotions of its creator splayed out before you. Despite having no dialogue Kanamewo is able to convey so much, both emotionally and thematically.

Kanamewo is a 2015 animated short film by the independent Japanese animator Rapparu. It follows a young woman who finds a sickly tree spirit. She takes the spirit into her care, nurturing it back to health, and eventually falling in love with it. However, the spirit begins to fall ill again, and soon after passes away. The woman takes the spirit and buries it near a lake. One day, she returns to find that a tree has grown in that spot.

Because of it's vague presentation, Kanamewo leaves itself open to many interpretations. The short is presented with no dialogue or no ambient sounds. The only sound comes from the backing music, the song Lust for Summer Blues by indie post-rock band Adustam. Despite this simplicity, there's a palpable emotional depth that one can feel while watching Kanamewo. It's a film that says a lot while not actually saying anything in a literal sense.

One interpretation is an allegorical representation of humanity's relationship with nature. At the beginning of the film, we see the destruction of nature, an old shrine in the middle of a big city being torn down. This can be taken to represent how humanity has progressed beyond needing spiritual representation for nature. The viewer sees the manifestation of nature, the tree spirit, sickly and laying in the rain. The woman can be viewed as both an individual and as a representation for humanity as a whole. As an individual, she saw the dying spirit and took it in, caring for it and trying to "fix" it. However, as a representation for humanity, she took the spirit and tried to shape it to suit her own needs, exposing it to vice. By trying to make it into something that it's not, the spirit is drained and weakened, eventually bringing about its demise. This is something that's also represented in the colour palette of the film, the city shouts being bleak, drab, and muted while nature shots are bright, vibrant and colourful.

That's not to imply that this relationship is parasitic. The film clearly depicts it as a mutual affection. There's a visceral grief that the viewer shares with the woman at the end of the film. Perhaps then, Kanamewo can be interpreted as a meditation on loss. It works as a representation of how it feels to lose something that one cares about more than anything. There's a fondness for the happiness shared with another individual and an all-consuming grief when that individual is gone.

Kanamewo can also be interpreted as an allegory for depression. If the tree spirit is taken as a metaphor for depression, we see the journey of the woman as she works through it. She accepts it as part of her life, and it slowly becomes a greater and greater part of her life. This continues until it hits a point of dependence. As the depression fades away, the woman is forced to bury it and move on, the tree at the end of the film representing a hopeful and optimistic view of the future. This is also something that can be seen in the colour palette of the film. At the start the film is drab and colourless, but at the end the film is bright and full of colour representing the journey through depression.

Ultimately, Kanamewo can be interpreted as moving on from something. It is a meditation on love and loss and, eventually, acceptance. Regardless of what that thing might be, Kanamewo, presents a deeply emotional look at what it means to deal with the pain of losing something that one loves and eventually accepting that pain and moving beyond it, looking towards the hope of a brighter future.

Borrowed Time: Grief and Regret

Regret is a powerful force that can overshadow all other aspects of one's life. The events of one's past shapes their life, and coming to terms with life's hardest moments can be a long and painful challenge. Oftentimes the most difficult person to forgive is oneself; we are after all, our own worst critics.

Andrew Coats' and Lou Hamou-Lhadj's 2015 animated short film, Borrowed Time, is a deeply personal examination of these ideas of grief, guilt, and regret. It tells the story of an aged sheriff attempting to come to terms with the most difficult event in his life.

An aged sheriff stands near a darkened cliff, his gaze fixed forward; the audience knows that this is a place filled with painful memories for him. With a deep breath he begins to step towards the cliff, and the camera cuts to a moment from the past. As the sheriff steps towards his reckoning, the audience learns that, in this spot years ago, the sheriff accidentally killed his father in a tragic accident. Overwhelmed with grief the sheriff gazes over the side of the cliff.

Borrowed Time emphasizes these ideas of grief and regret through its cinematography. As the film.switches between its two time periods it also switches between two colour palettes. The past is bright, sunny, and vibrant; contrasted with the present with is darker, greyer, and more muted. This colour shift reflects the sheriff's own shift in demeanor; the bright idealism of youth juxtaposed with the depressed tone of his life after the tragedy occurred at the cliff.

Furthermore; these ideas are emphasized in the framing throughout the short film. Many of the present-day segments has the camera pulled in very close on the sheriff's face. This intimate angle helps to convey every minute expression; we feel his grief, his pain, and his regret simply by looking at his face. Similarly; the shots in the past are also viewed within a tight perspective. We view things from the perspective of a boy who looks up to and admires his father, and this idea is also brilliantly portrayed through the facial expressions of the central character.

Despite tackling incredibly heavy themes, Borrowed Time does take a hopeful view regarding these ideas. As the sheriff steps ever closer to the cliff, we see the memories come flooding back. As he stands at the cliff looking down, the audience feels his grief and his pain. However, as the light appears and the reflection of his father's watch catches his eye, a different sort of memory is presented; that of the love shared between a boy and his father. Despite the painful events that occurred in that place that undoubtedly shaped his life the sheriff is reminded of something more powerful than regret, love.

Borrowed Time tells the audience that our fondest memories are more powerful than our darkest ones. While our most painful moments undoubtedly colour and shape our lives so too do the memories we share with loved ones. As the sheriff gazes out to the horizon, we know that not everything has been made right, we know that surely, he still feels the pain of the accident years ago. However, as the camera pans out and the audience too gazes upon the horizon, a light of hope shines out among the grim darkness.

Image Gallery

Here are a selection of photos from the image gallery of Joel vs. Film. All photographs were taken by me in the city of Calgary

Photograph of a man throwing a baseball in a field at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology

Photograph of a train zooming by a fence with graffiti near Kensington

Photograph of graffiti on an art instalation in Kensington

Macro photograph of someone wearing a Rememberance Day poppy

Joel vs. Film