



Screen

29.07.2014

Review: Boyhood

By Hugh Lilly



T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock measured out his life in coffee spoons. Richard Linklater, in his miraculous new film, marks time with pop songs, haircuts, and an abundance of the other small, fleeting moments that shape a person and create familial bonds. *Boyhood* is a beautifully life-affirming coming-of-age story told with heart-breaking sincerity. It shares DNA with Linklater's previous work, and yet stands apart from it—and indeed from most of the rest of the art form—largely due to the dazzling audacity of its construction.

Filming began in 2002, when Linklater's principal actor, Ellar Coltrane, was just a kid. In the opening scene, the propulsive strumming of Coldplay's "Yellow" places the film chronologically around the turn of the millennium, as a six-year-old Mason (Coltrane) stares up at the sky in the film's poster shot. We're soon introduced to his mother, played by Patricia Arquette; his sister (in a spot of nepotistic casting, she's played by Lorelai Linklater, the director's daughter), and his father, played by Ethan Hawke. At film's end,

Mason is 18 years old and heading off to college—where his sister has already been for a year—and his parents are divorced, as they have been for most of his life.

In the preceding two-and-a-half hours, we've borne witness to the formation of a personality. We've been through his parents' break-up and his mother's remarriage—twice, both times to men destined to be abusive alcoholics. Step-siblings and friends have come and gone as the family has moved from town to city, and back to town again. We've observed as his teen angst emerges from childish mischief to blossom into a grown-up ennui, complete with adolescent existential crises. We may not witness Mason's first kiss or see him drink his first beer—two traditional cinematic markers of the creation of a young adult—but what we do see are a multitude of quotidian moments that, stacked atop one another, give a deeper understanding of his character than most obvious signifiers could.

Through all of this, Mason and his family have matured, at intervals, right before our eyes: over an incredible twelve-year period, Linklater reconvened his cast annually to shoot a few days' footage, adapting the story and writing a bit more script each year to suit the actors' life experience—and his own. Michael Apted may have done something similar with his ongoing *...Up* series, but where those films were chiefly ethnographic with perhaps a socio-political bent, *Boyhood* is pure movie-making. This isn't *cinéma vérité*; there's nothing documentary-like about Linklater's method here. Where any other film would have used enervating montages, *Boyhood* gives us complete scenes.

Linklater is no stranger to the thematic territory of *Boyhood*; his key subject has always been the passage of time—think of the *Before* series—and he has always excelled at exploring this through freewheeling, open-ended conversations, spied on through camerawork that seems so naturalistic you almost forget you're watching a movie. This happens in *Boyhood* a number of times, and most memorably unfolds in a virtuosic Steadicam tracking shot as Mason, aged about 16, walks alongside a girl on a bike talking about school; she invites him to a party that's happening that weekend because one of her friends has a crush on him. On the surface, it's a scene about nothing—but, just as in the *Before* series, Linklater combines and juxtaposes this type of scene repeatedly to arrive at nothing less than profundity.

What is new to Linklater, though, is a large-scale production schedule this ambitious. It is, in fact, something almost unmatched in the history of cinema, and especially in American cinema. Its effect is nothing short of magical. The film as an experimental project is interesting for what it has to say about the lives, both on- and off-screen, of its actors. It's fascinating to think about what else Ethan Hawke was making as he returned each year to the role of itinerant, weekend Dad to Mason and his sister. His character skimming stones across a pond or talking frankly to his kids about safe sex might not seem momentous, but the sweetly honest way they're depicted here makes them so. The film pinpoints some undeniable truths about parenting, and about being a kid. There is nothing particularly sentimental about the storytelling, and, importantly, Linklater doesn't judge—or permit a cynical view of—any of his characters. On his fifteenth birthday, Mason is given a shotgun by a Texan grandparent. In many other films, especially American comedy-dramas, this would have been set up as a joke at the grandparent's expense—"look at this Southern hick giving the boy a *gun*," we might be prompted to think—but here, the genuine warmth he evidently feels for Mason is overwhelming. You can't help but be moved by his expression of love.

Linklater shot in 35mm for continuity purposes: with digital-camera technology advancing as quickly as it has in the past decade, the film would have been an ugly patchwork of image qualities even if he had started with what in 2002 was high-end equipment. Even though it was timed digitally and will only be projected that way, using film stock has, of course, meant

that the picture looks stunning the whole way through. The director has made only one slip-up in the writing, but it's minor enough to be forgiven. There is a small scene in the second act in which a peripheral character—a day labourer, probably intended to be seen as an illegal immigrant—chats to Patricia Arquette's character about some plumbing work he's doing for the family. The conversation is forced, and, in the scheme of things, unnecessary to the development of her character. She gives him some advice, and the scene is overall unimportant to the narrative as a whole. His reappearance in the third act, then, is surprising and disruptive to the film's emotional acuity.

Any film can have a great soundtrack, but the time-capsule nature of *Boyhood* means it will be seen as a veritable catalogue of modern pop-culture touchstones. Songs by Wilco, the Flaming Lips, Cat Power, the Hives, Arcade Fire, Yo La Tengo, and even Gotye serve the story as background markers of a particular scene's era, but their secondary effect is to suffuse the film, wonderfully, with little "Oh, *that* song!" moments. Remember the summer when "Crazy" by Gnarl Barkley was inescapable? *Boyhood* will take you back there, briefly. Perhaps this is how baby-boomers felt watching *The Big Chill* for the first time, packed as it was with Motown singles.

In this way, Linklater generates an authentic, intense nostalgia for the very recent past in a way few other filmmakers would bother to attempt. In some of the the parts of his life that we see, Mason dresses up as a wizard to buy the latest *Harry Potter* book, plays Pokémon on Gameboy Pocket, and watches *Dragon Ball Z*. There is certainly nothing *universal* about these experiences—the film is, of course, aimed at a certain audience—but their appearance here transcends whatever generic qualities they might carry. American pop culture is so pervasive that, when they appear, some of the lines in "Hero" by Family of the Year:

Everyone deserves a chance to
Walk with everyone else

While holding down
A job to keep my girl around
And maybe buy me some new strings
And her and I out on the weekends

And we can whisper things
Secrets from our American dreams

...seem perfectly calibrated to lend emotional heft to the film. It's the sort of end-credits track that wouldn't be out of place over the credits of the next *American Pie* instalment, but the way Linklater deploys it makes it something more.

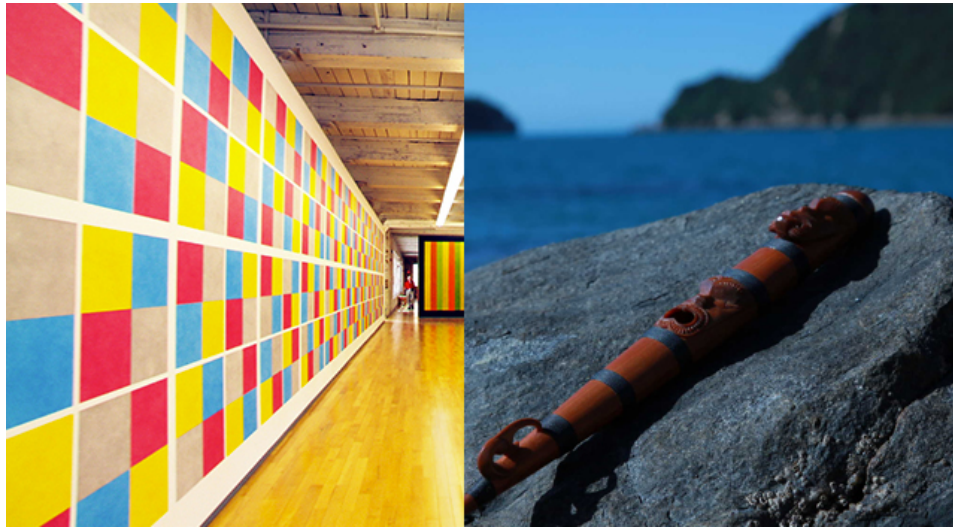
Because it is told with such earnestness, this film will immediately take its place in cinematic history as a wholly new kind of period piece. It is, to borrow from Emily Gould via Hannah Horvath, the cinematic voice of our generation—or at least a voice of a generation.

NZIFF: Boyhood

D: Richard Linklater (USA, 2014, 164 minutes)

[Buy Wellington tickets here](#)





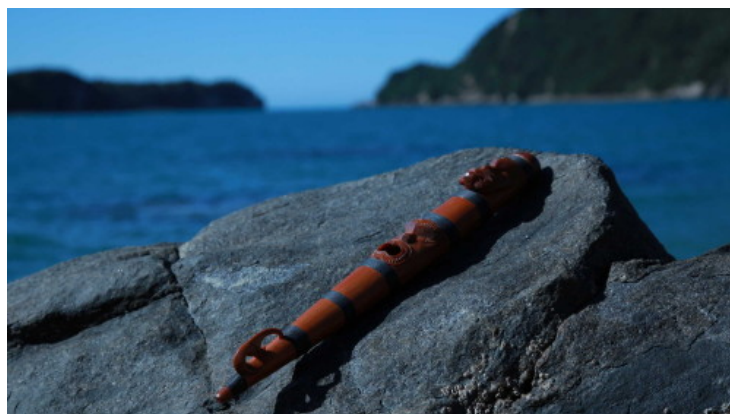
Screen

12.08.2014

Review: Voices of the Land: Nga Reo o te Whenua and Sol LeWitt

By Hugh Lilly

One of the great pleasures of seeing films in a festival context is the discovery of unexpected thematic and textual links between ostensibly disparate cultures. For perhaps obvious reasons, this phenomenon seems to occur more frequently in the documentary realm than with fictional worlds. Case in point: profiles of the American artist Sol LeWitt and the New Zealand ethnomusicologist Richard Nunns share an avid exploration of the passage of knowledge, and disruptions to it, both through time and down generations.



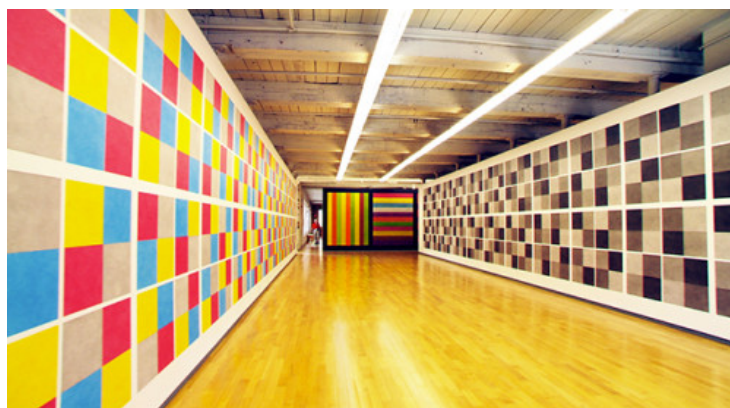
The sounds produced by *taonga pūoro*—traditional Māori instruments—have become commonplace in this country, to the point where, in certain settings, their absence is noticeable. Radio New Zealand recently introduced new theme music for some of its shows, among them *Morning Report*; the appearance of certain *taonga pūoro* in the cue before the 8am news bulletin now reveals both the absurd blandness of the synth-driven '80s track it replaced, and just how central these instruments and their

sounds have become to our sense of national identity at the start of the 21st century. Te Reo Irirangi o Aotearoa now *truly* “sounds like us.”

Director Paul Wolfram (*Stori Tumbuna: Ancestors' Tales*, NZIFF '11) has crafted a rigorous, in-depth profile of Nunns, who is the preëminent scholar of *taonga pūoro*. As its title would suggest, *Voices of the Land: Ngā Reo o te Whenua* explores, through Nunns' life and work, the notion that traditional Māori instruments, music, and *waiata* are inexorably linked with the physical features (the geography and geology) of the land in which they were created. In doing so, *Ngā Reo o te Whenua* functions, in part, as a celebration of the quickening renaissance enjoyed by *te reo*, and by Māori culture more generally. (As such, to this writer's mind at least, the film barely needs its English foretitle.) Most interesting is the film's intellectual endeavour to educate viewers about the differences between Western musical traditions and instrumentation and those of the Māori. Many *taonga pūoro* went unheard for most of the 20th century; Nunns is credited, as Bill Gosden notes in the festival's programme, with “retrieving [them] from the silence of the museum,” sometimes single-handedly.

The film is deliberately paced to match both the slow rhythms of Nunns' multi-faceted story, and his now-limited physical abilities: an auxiliary concern was to document Nunns' affliction, in recent years, with Parkinson's disease. Wolfram reveals information piecemeal, and in certain cases even occludes it until it is absolutely necessary to understand what has been happening on screen. Nunns is an erudite speaker, and appears a remarkably patient man; even to the uninitiated viewer his absolute expertise in his field is evident within the first few minutes of his appearance. The only downside of the film's construction is that, to those unfamiliar with him, Nunns' speeches perhaps seem more like pronouncements from on high than the miniature academic essays they evidently are.

Ngā Reo o te Whenua is a deeply spiritual journey; the film's undeniable beauty is predicated in the marriage between Alun Bolinger's plentiful cinematography and Tim Prebble's faultless, emotive sound design. For the bulk of the documentary's 100 minutes, Nunns traverses Te Waiponamu, the South Island, playing instruments with Horomona Horo, who is something of an apprentice of his—though, as with other facts, this isn't made explicit until late in the piece. Performances in honour of Nunns given at a concert at Te Papa some years ago are threaded through the film. Wolfram looks at Nunns' work largely through his collaborations: principally with the late Hirini Melbourne, but also with the master carver Brian Flintof, and a host of musicians and other artists, many of whose works pay tribute to Nunns and the intellectual opportunities he has created through reviving these art forms.



Chris Terrink's comparatively homogenised *Sol LeWitt*, is, by contrast, a portrait of the artist as an absent presence, so to speak. It is distinctly not biographical. LeWitt, who died in 2007, was camera-shy and avoided fame, stringently opposing any notion of the artist as a personality. Core to his understanding of conceptual art (judging by Terrink's slender and slightly hollow film) was the elimination of the artist, or any notion of her influence,

from the work. Permanence was not a concern of LeWitt's; many of his works were ideas to be realised, and nothing more—he would have been happy, as one commentator says, to have some of them exist for only an hour. He never attended an opening, and rarely posed for photographs.

Maintaining this philosophy, Terrink's film includes LeWitt only as an abstracted voice in a filmed interview, and then only very briefly. The documentary concerns itself with surveying, in especially eloquent visuals, current expositions of his pieces on gallery walls, and with the realisation of one LeWitt's "Wall Drawing #801" by a group of assistants. The finished work, installed in 2011 in the interior of an art-museum tower in Maastricht, Holland, is a minimalist piece, grand in scale, that makes a feature of natural light: concentric circles, spaced at exacting, mathematically evaluated distances, are painted onto the conical wall. This involves applying floor-to-ceiling runs of masking tape on the surfaces before inky blackness takes over the interim spaces. Many people, and much scaffolding, is required for this purpose. The film exits these preparations every so often to examine LeWitt's work posthumously through interviews with friends and colleagues, referring to archival material only rarely. His Italian period, which reveals the origins of his "Wall Drawings" concept, seems to have been his most life-affirming, and is presented here with the most warmth and appreciation.

The connection with Wolfram's film is in the way that the artist and the academic-musician are repositories from whom information and ways of working are learned and applied later—even, as with LeWitt, absent the creator. As these two films show, the gallery assistants in Holland are not dissimilar to Nunns' scholarly colleagues and apprentices; what is important is that ideas and interpretations are retained for future generations—along with instructions on how to best use them.

Voices of the Land: Ngā Reo o te Whenua, a film by Paul Wolfram
New Zealand · 2014 · 100 mins.

Sol LeWitt, a film by Chris Terrink
The Netherlands · 2014 · 72 mins.

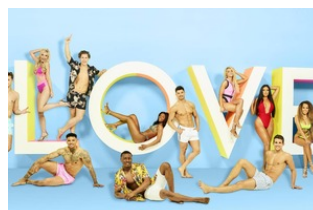


More by this author →

Share:



Similar Posts



On at the movies by HUGH LILLY

Moonrise Kingdom

directed by WES ANDERSON

It's remarkable, really, that it has taken Wes Anderson until his seventh feature to find a place for Benjamin Britten's *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, given its pomp and didacticism – but it's wonderful that he has.

Moonrise Kingdom, a sweetly comic tale that treats the flutters of first romantic love – and even nascent sexuality – with a wholesome sincerity rarely seen in American cinema, is the director's first period piece. The story takes place in the summer of 1965 on a fictive island called New Penzance that lies just off the coast of New England; in three days' time, it will be battered by a ferocious storm. First-time actors Jared Gilman and Kara Hayward

play Sam Shakusky and Suzy Bishop. Twelve years old and enamoured of each other, they decide to elope – but only to the far side of the island. He has to escape his Khaki Scout troop to rendezvous with her.

After an exchange of letters in which he gives her detailed, orienteering-like instructions on how, when and precisely where to meet, they walk towards each other in a field – he clutching a bunch of wildflowers, her carrying a kitten in a wicker picnic-basket. (She also has a suitcase containing some books she swiped from the library, and the portable record player she borrowed from her younger brother.) Suzy's parents, hoping to find the runaways before the storm descends, are played by the ever-brilliant Bill Murray and Frances McDormand. They instigate a search party, which soon expands to include scoutmaster Edward Norton and his troops, and Bruce Willis, cast (somewhat) against type as the island's only cop.

Britten's *Guide*, woven through the film, is buttressed by some of his other works (*Cuckoo*, and his 1957 opera *Noye's Fludde*, which the kids perform at film's end) and by Alexandre Desplat's majestic score. This comprises a suite, *The Heroic Weather-Conditions of the Universe*, that interpolates and reshapes some of Britten's themes, and stands with Desplat's compositions for *The Tree of Life* as some of his best work. The film's soundtrack isn't all classical, mind: Sam and Suzy dance on the beach to her favourite 45, Françoise Hardy's *Le Temps de l'Amour*.

Anderson's filmic influences are many, but *Kingdom* nods most directly to Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (chiefly its pop-tastic colour scheme) and François Truffaut's *L'Argent de Poche*. From Waris Hussein and Alan Parker's sweetly formed but little-known 1971 film *Melody*, Anderson has used the conceits of his lovebirds' ersatz

marriage, and having the boy be a budding artist.

The film is grounded by the heartfelt, simple love story at its core, but this is still a wholly Andersonian world, ie, slightly off-kilter, both candy-coloured and sepia-toned: phrases like *l'esprit de corps* are deployed at whim and in earnest; someone is called "Roosevelt", and there's a "Dept of Inclement Weather"; Tilda Swinton's character, who swans in wearing a bold blue cape at the start of the third act, is referred to only as "Social Services"; and last but certainly not least, Murray appears shirtless, three sheets (at least) to the wind, and wielding an axe. Anderson writes once again with Roman Coppola, and has here perfected his pop-up-storybook visual style. This may just be the American master's best film yet. ★★★★★

Films are rated out of 5: ★ (abysmal) to ★★★★★ (amazing).



Now showing

Bernie

Jack Black stars in Richard Linklater's documentary-dramatisation of a well-meaning funeral director and the mean little old lady he befriends (before it all goes wrong) in smalltown Texas. Linklater clearly has a fondness for his characters and interviewees, but adds nothing to the unexciting story. As a straight doco, this would have been brief and dull; as a hybrid it's uneven and odd. ★★

The Campaign

Saturday Night Live alumni Will Ferrell, Jason Sudeikis, and Zach Galifianakis are experts at improvisation and impersonation. This frustratingly dumb comedy, favouring bawdiness over political satire, doesn't allow the actors to flex those comedy muscles. ★★

Cheerful Weather for the Wedding

Jumping on the *Downton Abbey* bandwagon, this stiff, stogy adaptation of a 1932 novella stars the luminescent Felicity Jones (*Like Crazy*) as an anxious young bride-to-be, but gives her little to do except seem forlorn and heartsick. ★★

Take this Waltz

Sarah Polley (*Away from Her*) directs Michelle Williams in this airless, contrived story of a young woman who is awkwardly falling out of love and, as she says in the script's most blunt explication of its central theme, "afraid of connections". ★★



For more brief film reviews, visit www.listener.co.nz/now-showing

Bradford's Hollywood by TRISHA HOUND



From left, Aaron Paul, Imogen Poots, Ciaran Hinds and Chris O'Dowd.

Emmy award-winning *Breaking Bad* star Aaron Paul has landed a key role in *A Long Way Down*, the latest film based on a Nick Hornby novel. He will play a failed musician turned pizza-delivery guy, opposite Pierce Brosnan as a disgraced TV talk-show host, Toni Collette (who was in the film of Hornby's *About a Boy*) as a lonely mother of a disabled boy and Imogen Poots as a troubled teenager. The quartet befriend one another on the roof of a building on New Year's Eve. The dark comedy is about to start shooting in London and will be directed by Frenchman Pascal Chaumeil (*Heartbreaker*).

Michael J Fox, another popular Emmy-winning actor, is planning a return to prime-time television. The star of *Family Ties*, *Spin City* and *Back to the Future* has teamed up with director Will Gluck (*Easy*

A) and writer Sam Laybourne (*Cougar Town*, *Arrested Development*) on a new comedy inspired by Fox's own life. Given that team's pedigree, American networks are already fighting to land the show, which will go to air next year.

In other exciting comedy news, Christopher Guest, creator of *This Is Spinal Tap*, *Best in Show* and *A Mighty Wind*, has developed a new documentary-style show. Called *Family Tree*, it will star Irish actor Chris O'Dowd (*Bridesmaids*) as a 30-year-old who, having lost his job and girlfriend, begins exploring his family heritage after receiving a mysterious box from a great aunt he has never met. During the eight-episode series, which will air simultaneously on HBO and BBC2, he uncovers a world of unusual characters and a feel for who he really is. Guest will direct and is likely to appear, too.

From Julius Caesar to King Beyond the Wall, the biggest new role in the third *Game of Thrones* series has gone to top Irish actor Ciaran Hinds. The star of *Rome* will play Wildling leader Mance Rayder, who has united the Far North clans and plans to attack the Wall. He has been frequently mentioned but unseen until now, with Night Watchman Jon Snow (Kit Harington) being taken to meet Rayder in last season's finale. Hinds's casting follows much online speculation about who would play the role. Some fans wanted Hinds's *Rome* co-star, James Purefoy, but he has landed a key part alongside Kevin Bacon on new serial-killer show *The Following*. Hinds is a powerful actor and will have a lot of hometown support, as he is from Belfast where *Thrones*' primary production is based. Season three will also be shot in Croatia, Iceland and Morocco. ■

On at the movies by HUGH LILLY



On the Road

directed by WALTER SALLES

Just as it may prove to have been impossible for Baz Luhrmann to convey visually the feeling conjured up by the breathtaking final sentence of *The Great Gatsby* – “So we beat on, boats against the current...” – it must have seemed equally daunting for Brazilian director Walter Salles and screenwriter José Rivera to face adapting the mellifluous freewheeling prose of Jack Kerouac’s era-defining novel *On the Road* into something legible to most filmgoers.

Salles, who captured a more

politically inclined improvised road-trip in *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004), has here delivered a kinetic firecracker of a film, fuelled by equal parts sex (it’s more explicit than the book), drugs (Benzedrine, popped everywhere and at all hours, especially the wee small ones) and jazz, which seeps into the story from the first timid whine, early in the piece, of a plaintive clarinet.

The filmmakers have taken Kerouac’s sometimes unwieldy run-on verbiage and formed from it characters who, as in most movies, develop in reaction to experience as the story unfolds. That’s not to say the novel’s exuberantly haphazard mood has been jettisoned; it’s just that they’ve not delivered an avant-garde rendering of the text. This is a Hollywood movie through and

through. (Such experimentation with the Beats is, in any case, ill-advised: witness the unwatchable triptych bio-doc of a few years ago, *Howl*.)

English actor Sam Riley, who was perfectly cast as Ian Curtis in Anton Corbijn’s *Control* (2007), plays the narrator and Kerouac stand-in, Sal Paradise. He’s good here, except when he tries to be too faithful, in his line readings, to recordings he has heard of Kerouac’s voice. Ditto Garrett Hedlund as Dean Moriarty, the novel’s “hero-saint”; the actor has the physicality but lacks the wry, knowing sensibility needed to fully embody the character. The pair are, however, surrounded by talent: Kristen Stewart as Marylou, Dean’s hedonistic girlfriend; Kirsten Dunst; Amy Adams; and Viggo Mortensen – plus a few cameos.

At 137 minutes, the film runs a little long. Salles unwisely includes a coda in which Riley – whom we see taping together sheets of paper to form the now-mythical scroll – types out the opening lines and breathlessly recites the oft-quoted “mad ones” speech. (Salles cut the film by 15 minutes for the Toronto festival and the US market, probably in the hope of being given a lower MPAA rating.)

One of the great delights of the film is its landscapes.

One of the great delights of the film is its landscapes. Master cinematographer Eric Gautier takes, in brilliant 35mm clarity, picture-postcard images of snow-shrouded cars speeding across unworn highways; the rough-and-tumble NYC of the late 1940s, and the sickly heat of Tijuana. In the novel, Sal says he sees Nebraska towns “unreel with dreamlike rapidity”. In capturing some of this sentiment, Gautier helps counteract Rivera’s script, which – perhaps a necessary concession, given the picture’s mainstream-audience aspirations – is sometimes heavy on the voice-over.

In *Paris, Texas*, Wim Wenders showed us the American West as he – an outsider – insightfully perceived it. Salles, by occasionally slowing the pace from a manic rush, pauses, roadside, to savour what Kerouac called “the fantastic end of America”. ★★ ★

Films are rated out of 5:

★ (abysmal) to ★★★★★ (amazing).



On the Road: a Hollywood movie through and through.

On at the movies

by HUGH LILLY

Looper

directed by RIAN JOHNSON

Can we forgive a sci-fi movie these days for being indebted to Syd Mead? He was the “visual futurist” – the production designer and concept-artist – on *Blade Runner*, a movie that, despite numerous attempts to unseat it, remains the best cinematic adaptation of a Philip K Dick novel. The exciting new film from writer-director Rian Johnson, who burst onto the scene in 2005 with the stylish murder-mystery *Brick*, has only one weakness: some of its future-noir cityscapes are, forgivably, borrowed from Ridley Scott's 1982 opus.

Looper begins in the year 2044. Thirty years hence, time-travel is invented – and immediately outlawed. It is used only by organised-crime syndicates. Joseph Gordon-Levitt – who broke free of his *3rd Rock from the Sun* shackles in the role of the hard-boiled high-school detective in *Brick* – plays Joe, a “looper”, one of many skilled assassins tasked with eliminating whomever



Joseph Gordon-Levitt in *Looper*

the mob sends down the time chute. Eventually, every looper must kill his future self (thereby ceasing to have existed). This is known as “closing a loop”. In 2074, the mob's kingpin, “the Rain-maker”, is hell-bent on closing every loop – so Joe goes back to the future to stop him.

Gordon-Levitt doesn't quite look himself in this film, but it's only because his face is covered in prosthetics so that he more closely resembles Bruce Willis, who plays Joe's escaped

future self. This initially seems an absurd mismatch, a misjudgment in casting – but in the scheme of things, it works. Emily Blunt and a grizzled Jeff Daniels also star, and Paul Dano has an amusing cameo as a nervous George McFly type.

The film is front-loaded with astonishing camerawork: Johnson *really* knows how to shoot a futuristic fight sequence. The remainder has a comparatively calmer, wide-eyed Spielbergian tone, replete with lens flares and a sugarcane field – plus

some amazing gravity-defying special effects. Among recent sci-fi fare, only Shane Carruth's *Primer* and Duncan Jones's *Moon* have so energetically told such smart, inventive stories. Johnson ups the ante on a technical level and deftly mixes action, intelligent dialogue-heavy scenes and even a bit of body-horror into a thrilling puzzle-film. ★★★★★

OPENS SEPTEMBER 27

Films are rated out of 5:

★ (abysmal) to ★★★★★ (amazing).

Where Do We Go Now?

directed by NADINE LABAKI

In 2007, Lebanese actress-turned-filmmaker Nadine Labaki made her directorial debut with *Caramel*, a romantic comedy set in Beirut. Her new film is both more resolute in its aims and more assuredly composed than its comparatively frivolous predecessor. She again focuses on a group of women,



Where Do We Go Now?

but this time illuminates politics. The women plot to stop the Muslim and Christian men of their isolated village – who hear

of religious tensions nearby breaking into unrest – from killing one another.

This is no war film, though:

writing again with Jihad Hojeily, Labaki skilfully inserts light-hearted musical sequences to counterbalance the film's thought-provoking moral and religious drama. (The inspiration for the song-and-dance routines, she says, comes from having watched *Grease* and animated Disney movies as a child.) An air of fable pervades: the precise country and time period are never named, and the deliberately fanciful title reinforces this spirit. ★★★★★

OPENS SEPTEMBER 27

Bookplates: Small works of art

Documentary heritage

Bookplates are used to indicate a book's owner. The artistic design of each bookplate typically provides clues to the owner's taste and individuality. In the early 1900s book collecting boomed and a lot of people commissioned a personal bookplate design. Before long, societies formed around these impressive works of art.



Jack London's Klondike tales are exciting, vigorous and brutal. The Call of the Wild (1903), his story about a tame dog who eventually leads a wolf pack, is one of the finest animal stories ever written, beloved by generations of readers. The book was no doubt the inspiration for his distinctive bookplate.

London, Jack, 1876-1916, artist.

Auckland War Memorial Museum - Tāmaki Paenga Hira.

Small works of art

Bookplates, or *ex libris*, are small-scale graphic prints commonly placed in the front of books to denote ownership. Book collectors and bibliophiles have always inscribed their names into their prized possessions. After the Middle Ages the art of the bookplate evolved from simple labels to armorial (heraldic) images made from woodcuts and engravings. Such plates bore a coat of arms, which would often be accompanied by the Latin phrase *ex libris*, meaning 'from the library of' or 'from the books of'. This design element would continue to appear on bookplates despite a shift away from the armorial style.

The advent of mass publishing in the early to mid-19th century gave rise to book collecting as a widespread pastime. As a result, the bookplate as an art form in its own right began to attract considerable interest. The first three decades of the 20th century would come to be known as the 'golden era' of bookplates. This was largely due to a move away from the armorial type, which was typically heavy on ornament, and toward highly decorative pictorial or motif-based designs. These designs were more personal and more symbolic of a collector's taste and individuality. Artists and designers began to be commissioned to create bookplates, and societies were formed around the world to promote the discussion, collection and study of these small but impressive works of art.

Ex-Libris in Auckland

Hilda Wiseman, a noted and prolific Auckland artist, was at the forefront of the bookplate-appreciation movement in this country. Wiseman had connections with a number of influential and important personalities, including the founder of the movement in Australia, Percy Neville Barnett.

The Auckland Ex Libris Society was formed in November 1930, just a short time after its Wellington counterpart. Both were branches of the national society, which had held its first meeting in the capital in April of that year. As former Museum Librarian Ian Thwaites and his co-author Rie Fletcher note in their history of the Auckland chapter, *75 Years of Bookplates*, "If further proof were needed of [Wiseman's] pioneering efforts, one has only to consider the exhibition of her bookplates which took place at Auckland Art Gallery, 7–26 April 1930". This was seven months prior to the first Auckland meeting, and just before the first national meeting.

An Australian connection

Auckland War Memorial Museum is home to a significant bookplate collection, which is believed to be among the largest in Australasia. It comprises three distinct collections: one made by Turnbull Librarian Johannes C. Andersen; one made by the Museum Library itself; and one acquired by the Museum via the Auckland Ex Libris Society in 1956 from the Barnett estate, three years after his death. This last grouping, which at more than 7,000 plates forms the greatest part of the Museum's collection, is very strong in Australian and New Zealand pictorial plates.

In 2007, the Museum held an exhibition entitled *Every Picture Tells a Story: Exquisite Ex Libris 1900–1950*. It featured dozens of bookplates, drawn mainly from the Barnett collection, arranged into nine themes. Famous personalities (such as Jack London) who had commissioned and owned plates, and significant New Zealand artists, such as Wiseman and E. Mervyn Taylor, were well represented. The exhibition also featured plates from around the world, including some beautiful Japanese woodblock prints.

Cite this article

Lilly, Hugh. *Bookplates: Small works of art*. Auckland War Memorial Museum - Tāmaki Paenga Hira. First published: 5 June 2015. Updated: 9 July 2015.

URL: www.aucklandmuseum.com/discover/collections/topics/bookplates-small-works-of-art

Related objects

Displaying 1 - 6 of 227 records

The Research Library — Te Pātaka Mātāpuna

In November 1867, eight days after the Auckland Philosophical Society (later the Auckland Institute) was formed, a meeting was held to discuss the purchasing of periodicals, with a view to forming a library.

—*The Centennial History of the Auckland Institute and Museum, 1867–1967*

The Research Library cares for and provides access to the Museum's Documentary Heritage (DH) collections. These comprise manuscripts, ephemera, maps, charts and plans, newspapers and periodicals, rare and contemporary books and pamphlets, photographs, and works of art in the form of paintings, bookplates, and sketches and drawings. The Museum's own business and research archives are housed alongside these. As the above quote illustrates, the Library began chiefly as an academic venture under the auspices of what would become the Auckland branch of the Royal Society of New Zealand. The collections are managed by the DH department, while access to them is provided by the Collection Information & Access (CIA) department.

The Library's nationally significant holdings in both original material and published works parallel (and hence support research of) the wider museum collections. We have, for example, an overarching emphasis on the Auckland province and te ao Māori; an impressive collection of botanical books; academic and general-interest works to do with the natural sciences, as well as a wealth of material covering subjects as varied as applied arts and design, ethnology and human history, and, of course, military history. Our collections are used frequently for research into whakapapa, genealogy, and family history. Where possible, the Reading Room collection enriches temporary and short-term exhibitions through the acquisition and display of relevant new material.

Chief among our rare-book holdings are publications relating to early voyaging and travel, particularly in the Pacific. We also have a large and important collection of Pacific-language works, among them one of Alexander Shaw's rare and prized 'Tapa Cloth' books, and the only known extant copy of Thomas Kendall's *A korao no New Zealand; or, the New Zealander's first book*, published at Sydney in 1815. The latter has recently been added to the UNESCO Memory of the World cultural-heritage register, which also recognises as internationally important the papers of Sir Edmund Hillary, one of the many prominent New Zealanders whose diaries, letters, photographs, notebooks, and other objects are held in the Museum's collections. As well as acting as a survey of photographic techniques, the pictorial collection also contains the works of the late Robin Morrison and the Warkworth-based Tudor Collins. Archives of commercial operations such as the Auckland *Star* and Sparrow Industrial Pictures are also represented.

The Library facilitates the publication of the Museum's academic periodicals, the annual *Records* and occasional *Bulletins*, and has since 1930 received on exchange publications issued by a large number of overseas institutions. We also participate in the National Library of New Zealand's Interloan scheme, and, although we do not lend books to the general public, we have strong connections with public libraries and other institutions in Auckland and around the country.

The CIA is also instrumental in the promotion and continual improvement of two of the Museum's flagship digital products: Collections Online¹, which makes available cataloguing information for — and, increasingly, digital images of — more than a million items in the Museum's collections, and Online Cenotaph², our biographical database established to commemorate those who have served in the armed forces for New Zealand. In addition to this, the Library manages the preparation and supply of print-quality images of objects and material from collections Museum-wide for commercial-reproduction and personal-research needs.

Hours

The Library is open from 10am to 3pm Monday to Friday, and from 10am to 5pm on Saturdays. It is closed on Sundays and public holidays (except ANZAC Day?). In the main our collections are open-access, though some items have special requirements. Museum staff, guides, and certain historical members of the Auckland Institute may borrow books from the lending collections.

Contact Details

Phone: 306 7070 ext. 7084

To make an enquiry, go to aucklandmuseum.com/contact, and select the appropriate department.

Document History

Complied by: Hugh Lilly, Co-ordinator, Research Systems
Reviewed by: Hugh Lilly, Co-ordinator, Research Systems
Bev Moon, SCM, Documentary Heritage

Created: 25/06/2016
Last reviewed: 28/06/2019

¹ aucklandmuseum.com/collections

² aucklandmuseum.com/cenotaph