

ISSUE 33

EXPLOITS

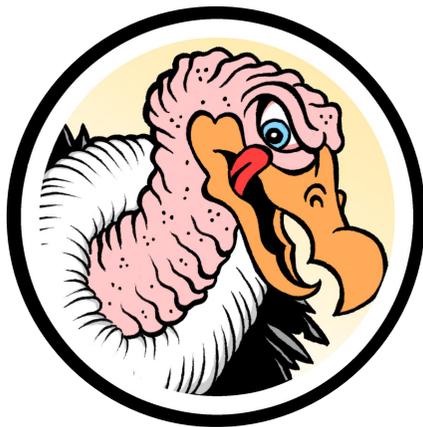
DECEMBER 2020

an UNWINNABLE publication

BEST OF THE DECADE

2010 - 2019

**YEAH, A YEAR LATER THAN EVERYONE ELSE,
WHAT ARE YOU, A COP?**



Editor in Chief | Stu Horvath

EXPLOITS

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE REASONS WE LOVE THINGS

Managing Editor | Melissa King

Music Editor | Ed Coleman

Books Editors | Noah Springer, Levi Ruback

Movies Editor | Amanda Hudgins

Television Editor | Sara Clemens

Games Editor | Khee Hoon Chan

Copyright © 2020 by Unwinnable LLC

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Unwinnable LLC does not claim copyright of the screenshots and promotional imagery herein. Copyright of all screenshots within this publication are owned by their respective companies

Unwinnable
820 Chestnut Street
Kearny, NJ 07032

www.unwinnable.com

For more information, email:
info@unwinnable.com

[Subscribe](#) | [Store](#) | [Submissions](#)

This machine kills fascists.

**LISTEN TO OUR PICKS FOR THE BEST
ALBUMS OF THE DECADE ON SPOTIFY**

(Except for Joanna Newsom, because Drag City records aren't on Spotify; sorry, just go buy that one)

HAVE ONE ON ME, by JOANNA NEWSOM –

Joanna Newsom is not a pop singer. Despite the Joni Mitchell comparisons, she can't seem to write a song with a chorus, much less anything resembling a "hit." Yet, in 2010, she got behind her big ass harp and made the best breakup album of the century. *Have One on Me* is two hours, three LPs, 18 perfectly sequenced songs that take the listener through the unraveling of a romantic relationship.

Occasionally, such as in the sprawling "In California," Newsom's first-person seems like her, as she serves us richly symbolic details from her lonely Nevada City refuge. But for the most part, her songs have discreet, non-biographical narratives that sit on top of the album concept: such as a retelling of the Blue-beard folktale ("Go Long"), a glimpse into the life of Lola Montez, a burlesque dancer and mistress to King Ludwig I of Bavaria ("Have One on Me"), or a scene inspired by the 19th-century novel *Rookwood* where a highwayman is hung for horse rustling ("You And Me, Bess"). Other things that make *Have One*

JOANNA NEWSOM



HAVE ONE ON ME

on Me especially beautiful and "best of": the perfectly restrained woodwind, brass and string arrangements by Ryan Francesconi, the gospel influences, especially on songs where Newsom leaves the harp for the piano and the juxtaposition of rhythm and melody Newsom achieves with her harp(s) and the tension it creates.

10.

– DAISY DECOSTER

RANDOM ACCESS MEMORIES, by DAFT PUNK –

I feel like each album that Daft Punk has released defined an era. Regardless of the year or decade, the presence of the French duo always marks a moment in time. But exploring *Random Access Memories* is different. It lives up to the premise by letting us visit fragments, each song transporting us to a memory, a moment, a location.

“Give Life Back to Music” is a sentiment, and an open door for what’s to come. We witness the cheery claps following the rhythm in “Lose Yourself to Dance” as if we were part of the crowd. We hear Giorgio Moroder talking about the sound of the future from across the table, all the while Julian Casablancas is on the other side of the glass, recording “Instant Crush” in the studio.

This array of style and voices would stand independently anywhere else. But here, they collide and co-exist. Regardless of the year or decade, people always wonder when the band will release



a new album. But I believe it would make sense for *Random Access Memories* to be the last. It evokes the sound of the past, the present and the future. By breaking the tradition of corresponding to an era, it became timeless.

– DIEGO NICOLÁS ARGÜELLO

SO the FLIES DON'T COME, by MILO –

I spent a lot of time on Bandcamp in the mid 2010s, where *So the Flies Don't Come* was my introduction to the genre/movement that Open Mike Eagle started calling “art rap,” looking for a name adjacent to “art rock” and “underground hip-hop.” I was still listening to The Lemon of Pink and Madvillainy, and from Kenny Segal’s unusual beats and samples to milo’s wordy lyrics packed with eclectic references (“Sisyphus surmounts the Aggro Crag”), it felt like this album belonged nestled somewhere in there. The rhythms are soothing but the lines are hot and catchy – the playful language games milo runs through on this album come burbling into my head on a regular basis.

In 2018, Rory Ferreira said he was retiring the milo project and quitting rap to become a farmer. I’m not sure if he’s growing literal vegetables, but through follow-up tours with artists



like Pink Navel (plus a new record as R.A.P. Ferreira), a record label (Ruby Yacht) and a record store (Soul Folks, in Biddeford, Maine), he’s doing some cultivating.

– DANIEL FRIES

MUSIC

ADD VIOLENCE, by NINE INCH NAILS – We talk a lot about rockers mellowing as they get older, especially as they kick bad habits, get married, have kids. Trent Reznor fits the bill. The height of his fame in the 90s came on the back of an album that kicked off with a song named “Mr. Self Destruct,” but he cleaned up, got married, had some kids and is now just one T away from EGOT.

And yet, Nine Inch Nails seems just as relevant as ever. Sure, raw aggression has fallen away, but that’s for kids. Reznor’s main weapons now are restraint and tension. Anyone can write a riff that makes you want to smash shit, but it takes a special kind of someone to pen a song that makes you feel like you’re hurtling through a tunnel on a collision course with the death of all music. And maybe of time itself. At least that’s the place on the edge of panic that my head goes to when I listen to “The Background World,” the final track on *Add Violence*.

Of course this is the case. This is the EP that came after NIN appeared on the mind-bending



eighth episode of *Twin Peaks: The Return* and a bit before Reznor and his musical partner Atticus Ross composed three albums of music for the eerily prescient *Watchmen* TV show, all during one of the most fraught moments in American history. Nine Inch Nails feels like the perfect soundtrack for this ghastly future we live in because Nine Inch Nails has become the distorted sound of our anxiety.

– STU HORVATH

EMOTION, by CARLY RAE JEPSEN – As I learned more about music to add to my Spotify for listening during data entry, I found an unexpected name mentioned among circles usually known for liking rougher sounds – Carly Rae Jepsen. It surprised me to hear that the voice behind 2012’s one-hit-wonder built a reputation as an indie-pop goddess, but the music explained itself.

Emotion is the kind of album you belt out as you drive down the highway, whether by yourself or with friends. It’s unapologetic and wears its heart on its sleeve. The refined rawness you hear from CRJ will soon make it clear why folks with such diverse musical interests keep *Emotion* on their playlists.



– MELISSA KING

MUSIC

STRANGER in the ALPS, by PHOEBE BRIDGERS

— Few artists make an impression the way Phoebe Bridgers did when she released her debut album *Stranger in the Alps* in 2018. Even for those plugged in to the rock blogosphere, she came out of nowhere before appearing *everywhere*. After giving the record a few spins, Bridgers leaves little wonder as to why she took off on such a stratospheric trajectory. It's a confident collection that sounds like the masterwork of an indie veteran rather than an up-and-coming songwriter in her early 20s, showing rare poise while navigating the distance between intimacy, independence, reflection and regret.

She makes her stories feel like the listener's, in a way that elevates the record from some extremely good indie/folk to being one of the most essential records of the decade. Even if Bridgers only wanted to offer an honest set of songs, what she released became the quintessential indie record for the share-all social media age, pulling us all



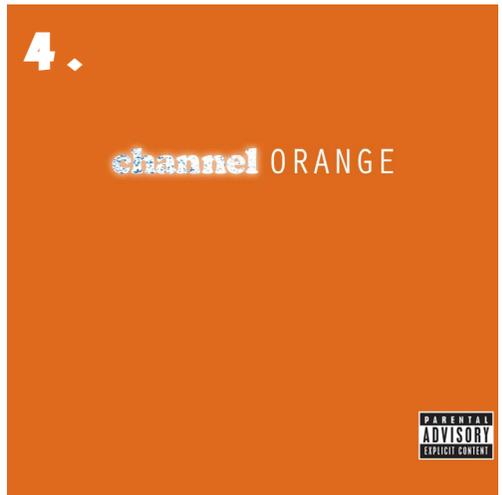
into her orbit simply by being brave enough to be authentically herself and inviting her listeners to do the same. We are made better because Bridgers is here with us to soundtrack all the mundane and yet meaningful moments that make up our lives, even while the world around us falls apart.

— BEN SAILER

CHANNEL ORANGE, by FRANK OCEAN

— After making one of the last big hits of the mixtape/blog era with his 2011 release *Nostalgia, Ultra*, Frank Ocean properly debuted with *Channel Orange* in 2012 and surprised everyone again. With over an hour of songs that somehow never let up and one of the best sonic blends on an album since OutKast's *Stankonia*, it became an instant classic.

Multiple songs I'd consider among the best of the decade reside here: "Super Rich Kids," "Thinkin Bout You," "Pink Matter" . . . and if your mouth doesn't open wide at some point during the almost 10-minute style-shifting epic "Pyramids" that tells a story spanning centuries, I don't know what to do for you. Between the accomplishments of *Channel Orange* and the even better follow-up, *Blonde*,



I think Frank Ocean is to us what Pink Floyd, Sly and the Family Stone or Stevie Wonder was to our parents.

— 2 MELLO

MUSIC

JOY as an ACT of RESISTANCE, by IDLES – *Joy as an Act of Resistance* feels like the best kind of mosh pit in album form. There's the chaos of this mass of energy "Gram Rock" mixed with the solidarity in physical connection forged with "Danny Nedelko" and a joint enthusiastic rejection of normality in "Television".

There's violence throughout and IDLES never tries to deny that. Instead, they embrace it. This album feels like an experimental expression of all the feelings you couldn't put into words because of the interlocking systems bearing down on you. There is a clumsiness that causes some missteps but, ultimately, the well-meaning charm and calls for unity win out in the end.

The album drips with sweat as it makes the



mosh pit a source of unity, transformative political power and, most of all – joy.

– OLUWATYO ADEWOLE

ANTI, by RIHANNA – Rihanna released *ANTI* in 2016, just past the mid-point of the decade. A year later, she unveiled her cosmetics brand, Fenty Beauty, and disappeared into the world of makeup and fashion. But *ANTI* remains behind, an indelible mark on the music world, shining all on its own as a testament to personal growth, to ambition, to full-throated honesty and earnest emotion.

ANTI is the perfect album from what was a perfect (and perhaps final?) moment in Rihanna's storied music career. There's little else like *ANTI* and the conversation suffers for trying to categorize it among the work of other black female vocalists. *ANTI* comes from a performer with a rare breadth of experience and is executed with an astonishing focus. It's an inspiration for anyone who's done a little bit of growing and felt stuck from moving in one direction for so long, unsure of whether they can change course without losing everything they had worked so hard to achieve. Rihanna,



as unique and one-of-a-kind as she is, shows us with *ANTI* (followed so immediately by the runaway success of Fenty) that it's possible to reinvent oneself and to explore new possibilities as long as you do it with unwavering nerve, with unflappable confidence and with an infectious sense of joy.

– YUSSEF COLE

ALBUM OF THE DECADE

BLONDE, by FRANK OCEAN – To be honest, I didn't quite get *Blonde* the first time I heard it. While this isn't the first album that didn't stick with me on the first spin – took me something like twenty attempts to really understand why *Madvillainy* is brilliant – I still don't quite understand what I was thinking on those first couple rounds. From the very first bass drop on “Nikes,” I should have known immediately that this would be a new classic.

It burns even more that I missed this because I knew how good Franky O is. I first stumbled on him right at the turn of the decade when *Odd Future* popped onto my radar. While I was more interested in the horrorcore aspects of their early stuff, Frank's contributions always stuck out to me. I picked up *Nostalgia, Ultra*, his 2011 mixtape, soon after it dropped, and I was blown away by his skills as a lyricist, singer and producer. Because of various unlicensed samples (specifically, his cover of “Hotel California”), it's not part of the streaming monopoly services, but if you can hunt it down, dip your toe back in. You won't regret it.

Based on his success with his first mixtape, I was equally as thrilled when he announced his debut album, *Channel Orange*, the next year. Ocean took all the lessons learned on *Nostalgia Ultra* and refined them, polishing

them into a matured masterpiece, full of longing and regret, but also hope. He even snagged a rare Andre 3000 feature on it. Frankly, if you were to suggest either of these two albums were better than *Blonde*, I wouldn't blame you.

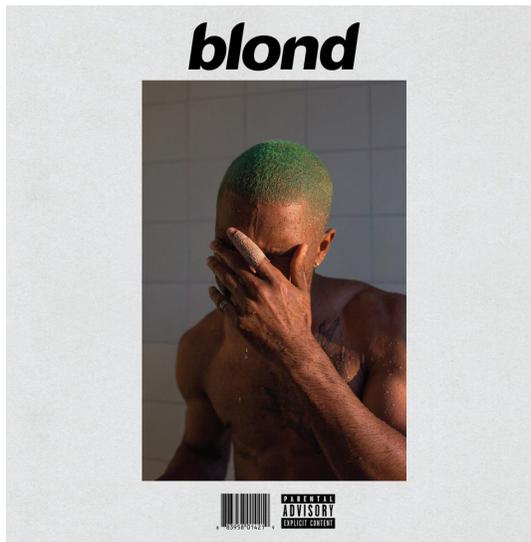
So, when I first put *Blonde* on, what was going through my head? What was I missing? I listened to it as soon as it released, but I left underwhelmed. Then, a couple weeks later,

I tried it again, and this time, a few tracks hit, but still it wasn't sticking for me. Finally, somewhere around my fourth or fifth listen, something struck me. Suddenly, the minimalist guitars, gentle pianos, layered synths and harmonies washed over

me, enveloping me in a lush aural palette. I was waking up with little lyric snippets from “Self Control” or “Seigfried” stuck in my head. Frank's stylized vocals sucked me in as he crooned of love lost, nostalgic memories of previous lives, and psychedelic visions of dueling constellations.

It's been four years since *Blonde's* release, and maybe, someday we'll get another Frank Ocean album. On that day, I'll make sure to listen a little more closely than I did in 2016. But until then, I'll keep dropping back into Frank's masterpiece, letting the album lead me across its meandering, immersive landscape.

– NOAH SPRINGER



BOOKS

ANCILLARY JUSTICE, by ANN LECKIE –

Ancillary Justice shines not through the use of any mind-shattering new theoretical technologies or barely comprehensible imaginative speculation, but because it weaves a relatable tale through some dead-on description of ideas that, if not exactly new, were particularly challenging to explicate. It's a simple book in terms of prose, but it's not a simple thing to convey what it might feel like to exist as an artificial intelligence controlling multiple bodies, or the disorientation of having that reality shattered. Creative writing's most elementary advice calls for showing over telling, and *Ancillary Justice* is a Rosetta stone of the practice, whether it's alternative ways of conceptualizing one's body in space or liquidating the arbitrary barriers that define gender. The big ideas float the narrative, the long-established best method for transmitting challenging ideas, as well as daring real fans to cosplay as a hive-minded spaceship.

– LEVI RUBECK



OCCULTATION and OTHER STORIES, by LAIRD BARRON –

For many more years than I am willing to admit, I thought “cosmic horror” was essentially synonymous with Lovecraft and his Cthulhu Mythos. Discovering the work of Laird Barron disabused me of that notion and, in doing so, he instantaneously became an author I followed, gobbling up every story I could find. I have a bit of trouble distinguishing between his first three collections, of which *Occultation* is the second, as I read them one after the other and they are fused together into a kind of terrifying destroyer of an older order. Here I learned how willing the outré was to crash into mundane lives. I saw men of action ground to dust by an indifferent universe. I saw lovers haunted by loss and attracting the attention of entities with terrible, obscure designs. I saw the natural world infected by the supernatural and made deadlier. Hungrier. In short, Barron introduced me to a brand new world. A shame that the swirling darkness is about to make a meal of it.

– STU HORVATH



The WEIRD, EDITED by JEFF VANDERMEER and ANN VANDERMEER

– Taking on the ambitious and unenviable job of trying to summarize more than a century of weird fiction in even a doorstopper of a book like this one is no small task, yet editors Jeff and Ann VanderMeer pull it off impressively. What's more, the result is more than just a routine "best of" but is, perhaps, as close as we've yet come to a comprehensive definition of just what a "weird tale" really is. In stories ranging from F. Marion Crawford's "The Screaming Skull" in 1908 through genre standbys like Lovecraft, Leiber, Bradbury and Barker, all the way up through modern masters of the form such as Stephen Graham Jones and Kelly Link, this indispensable volume in celebration and summation of what's "left after other definitions are exhausted" is a globe-spanning guide to our favorite subgenre, the weird tale.

– ORRIN GREY

3.

The BROKEN EARTH TRILOGY, by N.K.

JEMISIN – N.K. Jemisin's three time Hugo Award winning *The Broken Earth* trilogy goes to some dark places. But even in its darkest moments, it is relentless in its desire for a better world.

The fictional world of Stillness revolves around surviving the once-every-few-centuries "fifth season," a season of cataclysmic natural disasters. We initially follow Essun, an oppressed and vilified Orogene, a person capable of controlling natural elements, as she seeks revenge against her husband. The narrative balloons from there, turning into a story of wide ranging discovery and exploration of systemic oppression, loss and injustice. Jemisin asks: when faced with a system mercilessly and intentionally designed to oppress you, what do you do to move forward?

A tragic, compelling, genre-defying, extraordinary story about fighting and reaching for hope amidst a literal apocalypse.

– HARRY RABINOWITZ

2.



BOOK OF THE DECADE

The BALLAD of BLACK TOM, by VICTOR

LAVALLE – It’s astonishingly rare to run into prose that’s so economically written, so raw and so honest as it appears in Victor Lavalle’s *The Ballad of Black Tom*. The book’s narrative at first feels somewhat beholden to forebears like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, centered, as it is, in Harlem during its glorious (and gory) Renaissance. A black boy, misunderstood, hemmed in by belligerent whiteness, latching onto whatever purchase promises safety. And in many ways the stories are kindred spirits, both wrapped up in the struggle of black masculinity’s cloying existential dread. *Black Tom*, however, soon departs on its own course, leaping from Ellison’s Harlem to Lovecraft’s haunted Northeast. Here, it squirms and lashes about, like a fish on a lure, scooping up disparate genre elements and transforming itself into an awesome and horrifying sight.

True horror resides in the pages of *Black Tom*. In classic escalation, we start first with the barest hints of the monstrous: old women with too thin arms, shadowy presences nipping at heels, big dusty libraries in rotting old houses. Mixed in between are the pedestrian but no less gripping terrors of navigating white spaces with a black body. Spun together they rise to a feverish cacophony, a whole world bearing down on poor Charles Thomas Tester, both the known and unknown, both unfriendly, both threatening to swallow the simpler life he started out with. When they finally do, the horror is subverted and transformed in shocking and magnificent ways.

In Lovecraft’s stories, horror is rarely faced head on. Most of his pages are spent hinting

at the arcane knowledge hidden behind that ever-important veil. When he finally does sweep the curtain aside his characters tend to fall in a senseless heap, unable to deal with the breadth of what lies before them. In *Black*



Tom, Tester himself willingly steps through that door, throwing aside the warnings and admonitions of his white benefactor Suydam. He goes farther than the traditional Lovecraft protagonist could ever dare, unafraid of the “cosmic indifference” that so overwhelms white men like Suydam . . . After all, “What was indifference compared to malice?” What fear could the unknown present that measured up to a cop’s iron grip on your neck, their boot on your chest? What unease could supersede the feeling of hidden eyes boring down on your back as you walk through the wrong neighborhood at the wrong time?

These factors together, make Tester a Lovecraftian protagonist so perfect, so natural, it feels painful “. . . like a pinched nerve,” that it took us so long to get to the point where someone dared publish his story. Reading the book replicates Tester’s experience of visiting Harlem’s West Indian “Victoria Society” for the first time. It is the same feeling that crops up whenever any sterling example of the black fantastic – or the afro futuristic – lands in our hands or appears on our TV sets: “. . . seeing this place truly, was like learning another world existed within – or alongside – the world he’d always known. Worse, all this time he’d been too ignorant to realize it.” Books this good represent literature’s shining apex as well as the legacy of its shame.

– YUSSEF COLE

MOVIES

COLD in JULY – After *Stake Land*, a post-apocalyptic vampire flick, and *We Are What We Are*, a cannibal flick, I really had no idea what to expect from Jim Mickle’s next film, the adaptation of Joe R. Lansdale’s crime novel *Cold in July*. It turns out “no idea what to expect” is sort of a structural choice of the movie, which seems to change shape and scope every 20 minutes or so. I’ve never experienced a film so unmarried to its own genre clichés and so willing to discard its signifiers as it snakes towards the inevitable violence of its conclusion. The violence, yes, that was predictable. It was always going to end with bullets and corpses. But after countless viewings, I am still amazed how many miles the narrative travels, and how natural it feels.

– STU HORVATH

Honorable Mention



PORTRAIT of a LADY on FIRE – Dear reader, beware the yearning. As I watch Céline Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, I am flooded with all the electricity of two bodies slowly coming together, knowingly savoring the tension that emanates in every inch of space before touch. I love watching women love like this, and *Portrait* is about how we witness these things. A manifesto for the female gaze, *Portrait* is a love story that understands queer joy foregrounds every act of defiance, that constructs womanhood as a class conscious coalition, that enshrines the lush curves and brittle edges of sapphic love. And it is my favorite period film about skinny white femmes that can’t be together. Sciamma’s vision is certainly minimized by this narrowness, but as her gaze refigures familiar bodies and histories into something new, she crafts a substantial contribution to lesbian film of this decade.

– AUTUMN WRIGHT

Honorable Mention



MOVIES

SHOPLIFTERS – There are plenty of movies that are sad, that make you shed a few tears at the climax; plenty of movies that are joyous, that crease the edges of your cheeks in grinning delight. Few, though, feel as extreme in their polarity as *Shoplifters*, a film about a squatter family living on the margins of society and the abused child they take in. There's silliness, and frank humor: the rancorous back and forth of the father and mother, Nobuyo and Osamu Shibata, the directness of the grandmother, Hatsue. And there's also plenty of gut wrenching tragedy: seeing the unfriendly world through tiny Yuri's eyes, understanding, deeply understanding the pain of Nobuyo's inability to lead a normal privileged life, to be seen as a mother, to be valued. It spins you around so that you can barely maintain your bearings, moving from one tightly shot vignette to another, shoving the camera into the tight claustrophobic spaces where these characters spend their time and opening it up, managing to make it look warm and welcoming, a temporary bulwark against the cold heartless society outside. It's a film about holding onto a tenuous peace, and which perfectly depicts the shape of mourning that happens when that peace is dashed.

– YUSSEF COLE

10. (TIE)



SHIRKERS – Filmmaking is a creative, community endeavor and nothing gets to the heart (and the potential betrayal of that) quite as well as the documentary *Shirkers*.

There exists two *Shirkers*, the original, independent, film made in 1992 in Singapore by Sandi Tan, along with her friends Jasmine Ng, Sophia Siddique and their adult mentor and then the 2018 documentary Sandi Tan made about trying to find that lost film, stolen by that self same mentor. The documentary bounces between these two films, the technicolor daydreams of the lost film and the modern documentary of Tan talking about herself as a teenager, the Singapore film industry and growing up.

Shirkers is a meditation, a contemplation on what it means to have made what you were sure was magnum opus when you were a teenager and then to have lost it.

– AMANDA HUDGINS

10. (TIE)

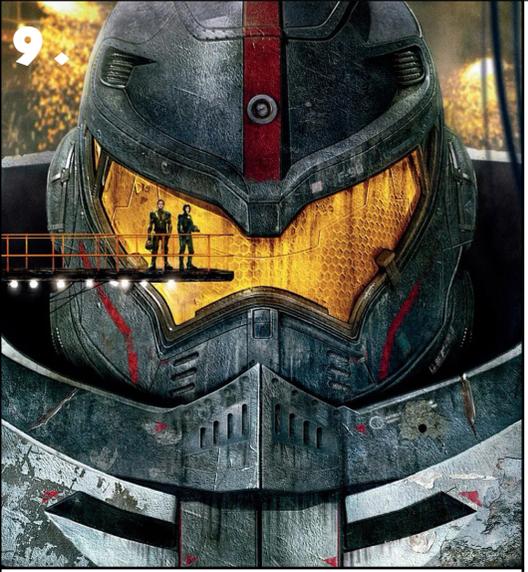


MOVIES

PACIFIC RIM – When *Pacific Rim* first came out I remember reading a review (I forget from where and who wrote it) where the take-away was something like “when one of the robots grabbed an oil tanker to use as a baseball bat, my mind checked out completely.” And I just . . . you’re watching a movie about giant robots fighting giant monsters and that’s where your brain checked out?

“Giant robots fighting giant monsters” was all I needed to know going into *Pacific Rim* for the first time, and it certainly delivered. Oh, sure, it’s not a particularly “intelligent” movie, and there are plot holes aplenty – Drift compatibility is supposedly very rare but suddenly there’s like an entire platoon of people that can Drift with the main character despite the Jaeger Program being in dire straits, really? – but there’s enough spectacle and fun to make it worth any kaiju fan’s time.

– ROB RICH



SHIN GODZILLA – Godzilla has always been socio political commentary, **even accidentally**. The Ishiro Honda original aired anxiety about technology, nuclear energy and using that power to annihilate its own creations. The elemental Frankenstein. After Japan grew comfortable with the nuclear grid, Godzilla became more Paul Bunyan than King Kong. Gareth Edwards’ 2014 Godzilla movie evoked imagery from the Fukushima nuclear disaster, though not to any coherent purpose. *Neon Genesis Evangelion* creator Hideki Anno’s treatment dug deeper to the core of Japan’s inability to handle disasters, turning a monster movie into more of a *Dr. Strangelove*-ian satire. Career bureaucrats shuffle chamber to chamber, deferring down chains of expertise and command, before awaiting a decision from occupying American naval forces, even at the expense of their own annihilation. All the while a Godzilla, looking googlier-eyed than ever, commits its most haunting atrocities to Tokyo in a single nuclear breath.

– ZACK KOTZER



MOVIES

The WITCH – When *The Witch* was released in early 2016, the story of a wide-eyed young woman being gaslit into witchcraft by her ultra-religious but ultimately sinful family came across like a deeply unnerving thought exercise, quietly terrifying but still firmly entrenched in a fictional darkness. These days, it hits different. Watching people who've deliberately fucked over the health and well-being of their own family for personal gain shrug off all accountability and place blame squarely on the shoulders of the person trying their damndest to do right by everyone else is harder to do in 2020. When I wrote about the film four years ago, I asked “When the people you love tell you over and over that you're evil for merely existing, how long does it take to believe them?” Now I'd ask instead, “What do you do when you discover the people you love have been the monsters all along?”

– SARA CLEMENS

7.



A DARK SONG – Forgiveness seems almost mythical, to me. I find most engagement with forgiveness in narrative to ring hollow – redemption arcs dedicated to an offending character's growth in service of cathartic absolution, endless discourse about whether a villain has earned their turn from dark to light, etc. Usually, the people who do you harm don't return; they slip from your world in one way or another, long before growth occurs. From that point on, the onus of forgiveness belongs entirely to you. That's what makes this position so painful – release is in your hands, but embracing it feels almost impossible.

A Dark Song is not a story about bad people becoming better. It is about a woman who asks for the power – not the ability, but the power – to forgive those who hurt her. It's not the decision I could have made, and that's the point. The choice to forgive is hers, and hers alone.

– ELEUM LOUGHNEY

6.



MOVIES

PARASITE – “They are rich but still nice.”
“They are nice because they are rich.”

Parasite is a perfect, haunting dark mirror with which to look upon one’s life and our society. Both are built upon the abstracted labor of others, the accumulated (or lost) wealth of generations before. Each of us, in some way, situated in a teetering human pyramid of capitalism. Bong Joon-ho’s masterpiece is a difficult thorn which showcases holds up a fragile, delicate, societal fabric and shows how perfectly absurd it all is.

It’s a brutal tale that softens some of its most cutting blows with incisive wit and charm. It’s also deeply sad and painful. We know how the story ends before it even begins. The rich get richer. The poor get poorer. And yet, despite all that, the only accolade left for it to earn is endurance.

– DAVID SHIMOMURA

5.



MOONLIGHT – There’s a poetry to *Moonlight*.

You can see it in the held moments: a lip quivers, a grill smokes, tender fingers stroke behind the ear of a blue-Black boy on a Florida beach. That poetry is written in the colors that glimmer, illuminating the skin of a stunning all-Black cast.

In the Best Picture winner, we follow Chiron’s coming of age in three parts, childhood (Little), adolescence (Chiron) and adulthood (Black) as he tries to carve out an identity in a world that is hostile to his existence as a Black queer man.

Jenkins, McCraney and their incredible ensemble infuse every moment with rich layers of meaning and every physical touch says a thousand words. With James Baldwin running through its veins, *Moonlight* tells a powerfully Black story of growth and self-discovery, underscored by the never-ending waves of the Atlantic.

– OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE

4.



MOVIES

GET OUT – Jordan Peele’s Oscar-winning horror debut is that rarest of things: a genuine classic appreciated in its time, beloved by both critics and fans, that actually lives up to the hype. Wearing its influences on its sleeve while using them to make something socially relevant and utterly new, it is at once completely of its moment and utterly timeless. And, let’s be frank, if it did nothing else, *Get Out* would deserve a spot on any “best of the decade” list purely for giving us the idea of “the Sunken Place,” maybe the most potent social metaphor to come out of genre cinema since the subliminal billboards and magic sunglasses of *They Live*. Fortunately, that’s only one of the many gifts that it has to bestow...

– ORRIN GREY



3.

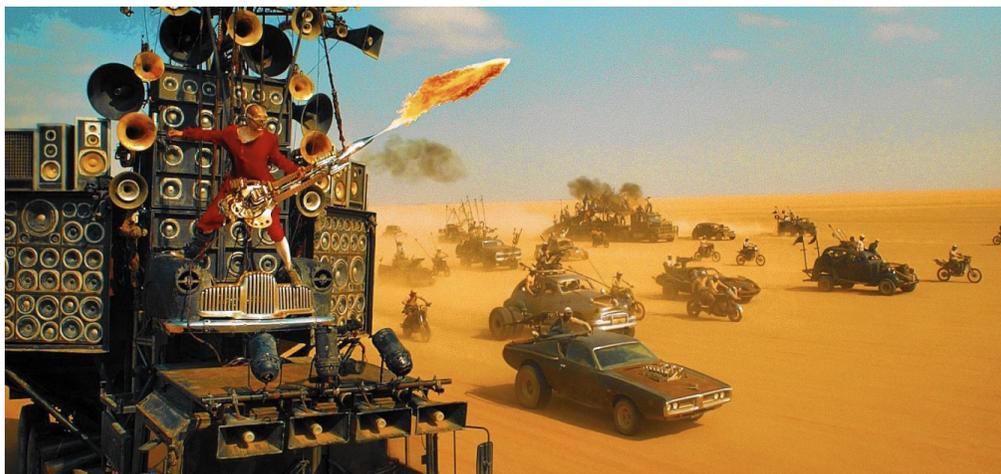
SPIDER-MAN: INTO the SPIDER-VERSE – I’m not really a fan of superhero movies. I mean I’m not a contrarian: I like Nolan’s batmen, *Deadpool*, many of the X-Men flicks and I genuinely thought the Marvel TV shows on Netflix were all pretty great. But, frankly, big budget, hi-def CGI movies aren’t my jam. What I am a fan of, though, is weird animation, and on that front (as well as the superhero side of things) *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* delivers in spades! I’m not even sure how to begin explaining the animation style if you haven’t seen it: while it starts pretty standard, by the time Miles starts exploring the multiverse, the glitchy blending of animation styles becomes, frankly, mind blowing. In combination with the Dan Harmon-level of universe-bending writing and a terrific voice cast, including Shameik Moore, Mahershala Ali, Brian Tyree Moore and the hilarious delivery of Jake Johnson as Depressedman, *Spiderverse* has instantly entered the realm of both classic superhero and animated movies. And on top of it all, it has a genuinely phenomenal soundtrack. The 2010s didn’t get much better than this!

– NOAH SPRINGER



2.

MOVIE OF THE DECADE



MAD MAX: FURY ROAD – On the surface, *Mad Max: Fury Road* is the quintessential “dumb” action movie. Its visual bombast is perhaps unmatched by any movie in recent history, replete with high-speed post-apocalyptic vehicular combat and a level of dialogue that probably fit into fewer than fifty pages in the script (no idea if this is true, but it’s safe to say it embodies the time-tested maxim of “less talk, more rock”).

Dig into the story’s subtext though and *Mad Max: Fury Road* presents itself as a prescient look into a comic book version of a future that may not be entirely far-fetched. Certainly, there is no version of reality where a man strapped to the front of a truck ripping riffs on a flame-shooting double-neck guitar with three-dozen speakers is going to lead some craven resource-hoarding warlord into battle (though it is fucking dope). This is a fictional rock-and-roll vision of the future and the volume is always on 11.

But the film leaves no question as to what real-world forces led to its desert hellscape. From the opening monologue through subtle dialogue details, it is a critique of unchecked capitalism’s inevitable end state. Man’s con-

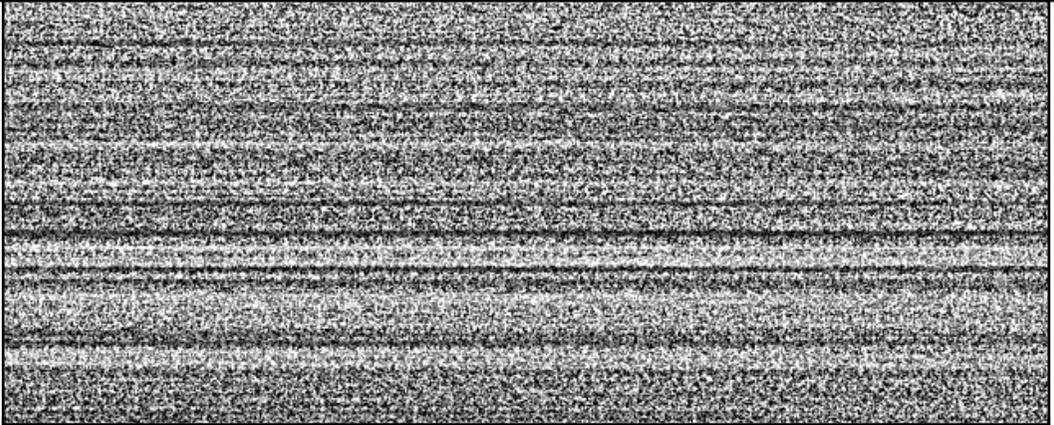
quest of nature becomes man’s conquest of himself and what’s left is a hard scrabble grifter state where a small number of privileged ghouls make monsters of themselves as they devise means to restrict resources, instead of using that ingenuity to improve the lot of a desperate society.

Not too unlike the world we live in now, perhaps, after you strip away the artifice and material comforts that sedate the majority enough to allow injustices against nature and the disadvantaged to self-perpetuate as we speed head-first toward cataclysmic climate change and eventual economic collapse. While the world it envisions is over-the-top, the root causes underpinning its brutal vision are playing out in front of us right now, as they have been for decades, hurtling ever closer to a point of no return that may appear inevitable even though it doesn’t need to be.

No movie in the past ten years has better balanced being stupid and smart in the best ways possible than *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and its place as this publication’s best film of the decade has been well-earned. To Walhalla!

– BEN SAILER

TELEVISION



The PRESIDENT SHOW – Shortly after Election Day 2020, a video clip began making the rounds on the internet. In it comedian Anthony Atamanuik, impersonating the 45th President of the United States, bounces on a large rubber ball in a room full of children doing likewise. Peter Grosz, playing Mike Pence, enters the frame and informs him that it's time to leave. "I don't wanna go," bawls Atamanuik, throwing himself on the floor in a conniption so violent that the actual children seem embarrassed. "Give the ball to someone else," Grosz intones repeatedly, working to drag the whining man-child out of the playroom by any and all of his limbs. His Pence is not an impression so much as a pitch-perfect portrayal of an exhausted, beleaguered parent. Shared on Twitter and TikTok, captions for the video declare some variation on "Tonight at the White House" again and again. Indeed the clip seems so fresh, the Trump impersonation so uncanny, that one could almost believe they were viewing a live feed of the darkest guts of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW. It was filmed in 2017. All episodes of *The President Show* are streaming on demand at Comedy Central. Ignore them at your peril.

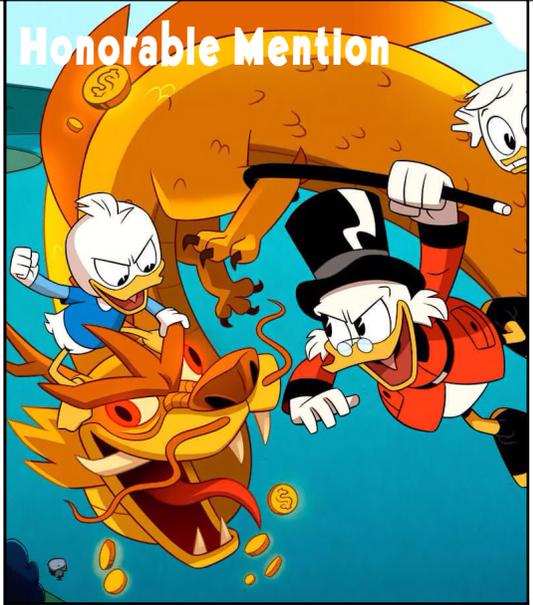
– SARA CLEMENS

TELEVISION

DUCKTALES (2017) – I am aware that *Ducktales* is a show about the often dangerous misadventures of the richest duck in the world and his family. Being neither rich nor a duck, you would think that I would, at best, not care, or, more likely, be outright hostile to this image-buffing portrayal of the 1%, especially as the world falls apart in 2020. But I'm not. I love it, mostly unconditionally. Binging it at the start of the pandemic did wonders for my mental health. The art style is a delight to behold, a Carl Barks comic come to life (they literally incorporate printing halftones into the visual aesthetic), with a stellar voice cast (I can do without Lin-Manuel Miranda, but whatever) and clever, exciting, often hilarious stories. You can, occasionally, even see the show's embarrassment over the fact that it is, in fact, a show about rich people. Which is good. Rich people and things about rich people should be embarrassed about the stockpiling of wealth at the expense of the well-being of your fellow humans! Or ducks! That embarrassment isn't going to topple capitalism, of course, but I'll take any positive sign I can get.

– STU HORVATH

Honorable Mention



I MAY DESTROY YOU – *I May Destroy You* is about sexual assault. It's also about drug use, online dating, the ways we sell our trauma for public consumption and much more. There are so many different layers and experiences packed into 12 episodes and we've never given clean resolutions. The messiness feels intentional, making us sit with the issues and really chew on them. Beyond the thematic, there is a phenomenal level of craft that comes in every episode. It feels like the television format is putty in Michaela Coel's hands, and the last episode in particular plays with that both in the text and metatext. It's also rare to see a show that is entirely centered on Black Brits on our own terms rather than being mollified for white consumption – and this predominantly Black cast does phenomenal work. This is a series that interrogates the messy and interlocking ways we destroy each other, but it's also about the stronger bonds we make when we build each other back up.

– OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE

Honorable Mention



TELEVISION

POLAR BEAR CAFÉ – *Polar Bear Café* gives me fond memories of hunkering down at my dorm room desk every week to see what my favorite talking animals were up to. As one of the anime series that I've actually bothered to keep track of as episodes came out, it represents an era to me rather than a point in time. The premise of *Polar Bear Café* is simple – Polar Bear has a café where all of the town's talking animals like to gather. They share in each other's accomplishments, unwind after a hard day's work and even help one of their own learn how to drive. Every now and then, it dives a little deep into the human (animal?) condition, but it's mainly a lighthearted romp meant to help you unwind. With its cheerful approach and intricately drawn animals, *Polar Bear Café* manages to deliver a low-effort watch without feeling like intellectual junk food. Give it a try if you need a break from high-octane or emotionally intense anime series.

– MELISSA KING

Honorable Mention



JOE PERA TALKS WITH YOU – The world merged into Adult Swim's lane. Their overstimulated, over-educated and overly cynical empire has synaptically latched to a populus that feels similarly about their own distracting chaos. What have we been distracted from? In the spring of 2016, Adult Swim aired *Joe Pera Talks You To Sleep*, an animated short where the 20-something comedian blessed with a supernaturally grandfatherly voice muses about red barns, baseballs and pretzels as a Hallmark snowfall settles outside the window. The short was an unexpected hit, spun into a live action series. In it, Joe introduces us to his sleepy Great Lakes town, makes chain observations on his dominoes, dances and delivers a memorable episode dedicated to breakfast options. We see important new chapters in Joe Pera's life, from finding love to hearing "Baba O'Riley" for the first time. It's weird but completely antithetical to the Adult Swim *thing*. There's nothing deceptive or menacing about it. It's soothing and sincere. Grounding and humble. It's one of the most moving TV moments of the last decade and it's just a man quietly eating a meatball.

– ZACK KOTZER

Honorable Mention



TELEVISION

PLANET EARTH II – I’m a city boy. I’ve lived smack dab in the middle of Los Angeles and New York my entire life. The concepts of rain forest, jungle and tundra are just that: concepts. That is, until that little city boy watched Planet Earth back in 2006. In my enthralled trance, I could feel my relationship with nature changing. 2016’s Planet Earth II isn’t wildly different in content or style, but it is the most visually stunning series I have ever seen. Long story short: 4K resolution and drone cinematography do a lot for nature documentaries. Expertly narrated by nature’s-narrator David Attenborough, Planet Earth II is a stunning view of Earth beyond the confines of our human bubble. Earth is a surreal, beautiful, increasingly endangered place that needs to be nourished and protected. Also, [the iguana/snake chase scene](#) is peak television, fight me.

– HARRY RABINOWITZ

Honorable Mention



SHE-RA and the PRINCESSES of POWER – I know I haven’t shut up about *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* but that’s only because it’s a fucking wonderful show. And not just “compared to the original” which was, let’s face it, just a toy selling vehicle. This *She-Ra* tells an interesting story with fantastic characters. Seeing Eternia and the people in it (and their relationships) grow is captivating from pretty much start to finish, and that includes some of the villains. Especially some of the villains. I didn’t think anything could make Hordak intimidating, and then sympathetic, but here we are. And also crying at the end because [REDACTED], I’ll freely admit that. Really the only problems I had with *She-Ra* are nit-picks like the odd weirdly short season, missing seeing some side characters in the run up to the end and being able to pick a favorite princess – because they’re all The Best.

– ROB RICH

Honorable Mention

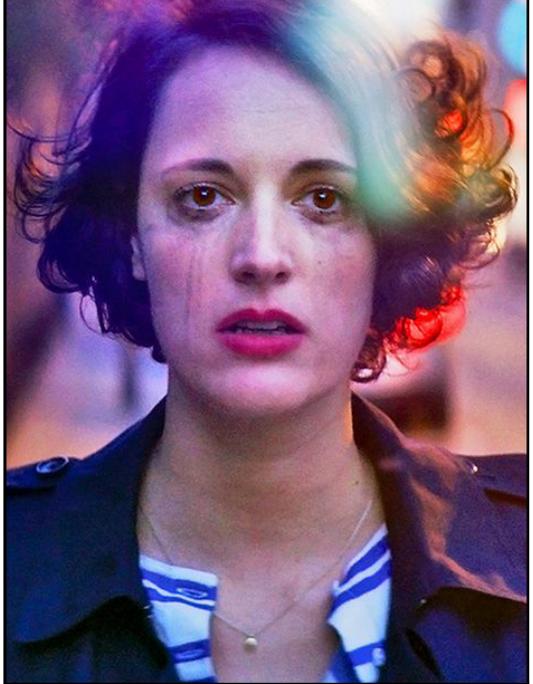


TELEVISION

FLEABAG – Phoebe Waller-Bridge is a damn genius who blesses all of the stories she works on with a raging, brutally funny, blood curdling energy. *Fleabag* is perhaps the ultimate manifestation of her uncanny abilities. It's got a simple enough premise: a young woman navigates her weird, fucked up reality with cheeky gallows humor and a razor-sharp wit. But all the scenarios which, in a more by-the-numbers millennial-aimed sitcom would play out in predictable and rotely humorous ways are exploded and flipped around by Waller-Bridge's unyielding and strange imagination. Her uptight sister is, in fact, more emotionally deranged than she is. Her boyfriend has a near heart attack when *she* instigates sexual role play. She wrestles with the "correct" way to be a feminist while feeling guilty about her self-image and her uncouth appetites. Her friend's death casts a pall over her actions but doesn't magically transform her into a better person. She is flawed, but that's not really the point. She's just flawed because that is the most honest and interesting way she could have presented herself. It's not so much a choice as it is a volatile chemical reaction escaping its bonds and ping-ponging against equally volatile figures. It's a noisy firework display of desperate sadness, sparking elation and rich black humor that refuses to be anything but its beautiful, hideous self.

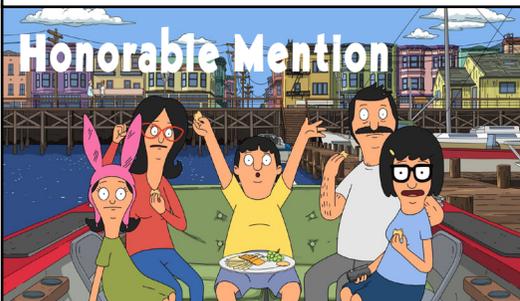
– YUSSEF COLE

Honorable Mention



BOB'S BURGERS – The surreality of *Bob's Burgers* is the surreal of the mundane. After living through the slow, painful death of *The Simpsons*, I never thought I'd fall in love with a comedy about a lower middle-class family just trying to make it again. And yet, here I am. Despite everyone kind of looking like worms or fingers, almost every episode of *Bob's Burgers* is full of the thing that only the best *Simpsons* episodes had: real heart. Despite all of their amazingly obvious flaws, it's not hard to want to pull for the Belchers in almost every episode. They're goofy and self-ish, and a lot of their situation is their fault, but they mean the best and are not afraid to be themselves. Even if that means a lot of painfully awkward yet familiar moments. Like a lot. "You're my family and I love you, but you're terrible. You're all terrible." – Bob

– DAVID SHIMOMURA



Honorable Mention

TELEVISION

The AMERICANS – The clearest and boldest moments in my head, when I think back to *The Americans*, are scenes from the ending. Recommending most other series, I feel like I have to mention that they don't stick the ending ("Maybe only watch the first few seasons?"). The knot at the center of the espionage intrigue slackens for some moments in the middle, but the ending is neither lucky success nor unanswered vaguery – it's stunning and inevitable. And I try not to let that last hour stand over the previous fifty-six, packed full with a veritable buffet of wigs, a compelling marriage drama and defining performances from people like Frank Langella and beloved character actress Margo Martindale. In some ways, *The Americans* felt like the end of an age of Prestige TV: a period piece, on cable, without an ensemble cast. Never too long in the tooth and it knew to go out with a bang.

– DANIEL FRIES

Honorable Mention



BETTER CALL SAUL – As good as *Breaking Bad* was, it lurched out of control around the time it became clear that Walt was responsible for a commercial airline crash and, while it never veers entirely into "not good" territory, it drifts hard in that direction a couple times. Not so with *Better Call Saul*. For all the prequel's apparently meandering fan service, a core truth is that *Better Call Saul* is one of the most rigidly and lovingly crafted shows to ever grace the small screen. Every plot, no matter how tangential seeming, inevitably boomerangs back on Jimmy McGill and pushes him forward on his journey from being a schmuck to turning into an even bigger schmuck. And it does so at a pace that uncompromisingly caters to the show's characters instead of its audience, making *Better Call Saul* the most satisfying, meticulous exercise in frustration I've ever encountered.

– STU HORVATH

10.

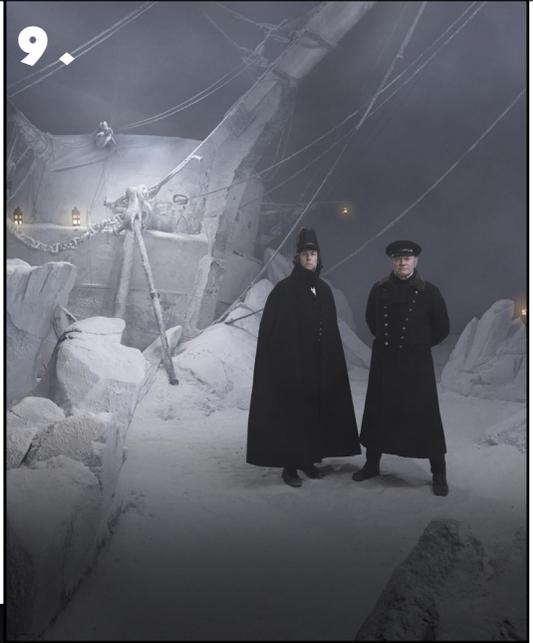


TELEVISION

The TERROR – I never expected a show about 129 men freezing to death on a doomed expedition to the Arctic in 1845 to become comfort television, but that’s exactly what it did, both as it aired in 2018 and again during my rewatch in the summer of 2020. The class-comedies of manners, the savagery and resilience of man, the cruelty and tenderness springing from darkest places, and an ending offering the slightest glimmer of hope: in its microcosmic scope *The Terror* offers up the whole breadth of humanity, distilled to the crystalline perfection of the purest block of ice.

– SARA CLEMENS

9.



8.



TWIN PEAKS: The RETURN – I didn’t know what to expect from *Twin Peaks: The Return*, but what I got was one of the best weekly social experiences of 2017. I loved watching people on Twitter get frustrated and dip out as the show stuck to its aim of ridiculing and trolling through the Prestige Television medium, like the past seasons did with the soap opera. I loved deciding when to put in work theorizing with other fans and when to chalk it up to things just being weird and funny dead-ends. I cheered at the highest highs like the now-legendary Part 8, and I thought the controversial ending was the perfect way to cap off the series (if there isn’t more; Frost, Lynch and MacLachlan are all interested in a Season 4). If you’ve ever dismissively said “Haha were you on drugs when you made this?” you won’t get much enjoyment here, but everyone else should open their minds to the great experiment of *Twin Peaks*.

– 2 MELLO

TELEVISION

ADVENTURE TIME – There are 283 11-minute episodes of *Adventure Time*. The first one aired when I was in seventh grade, the last a junior at university. Its appeal is often described in a single word as nostalgic, though the show has a more ambivalent relationship to this yearning for a fictional past. A melancholic undertow only grows among the rubble of Ooo’s zany futurity, a current of mutability that crashes into the medium, propelling character and drama forward. And there is a confrontation with the people we, too, were. At its conclusion, Finn and Jake, Marceline and Bonnie, Simon and Betty are not the people they once were, as much as I am not the person I was when their stories began. It is this that makes *Adventure Time* a show of its decade, a mathematical coming of age story for the contemporary adolescent and a lyrical memory of who we once were.

– AUTUMN WRIGHT



7.

PARKS and RECREATION

I completely appreciate
That some people – wonderful,
Smart people – like the Unwinnable staff, might not

Think that *Parks and Recreation* is,
Hands down, the greatest show
Ever, but I disagree. It’s not just the

Brightness of its humor or the gentle,
Eloquent way it speaks through the growth of its
Central characters. Not even
The mean streak that (the perfect counterpoint)

Exposes what *is* most
Valuable about the show: its sense of hope. Hope
for the future, hope for
Everyone, if we learn how to support one another.
We are, says *Parks and Recreation*,
Really what matters.

(Except for the first series, which doesn’t say that
and is as rubbish as everyone thinks. Luckily it
came out before 2010, so doesn’t count here any-
way).

– DECLAN TAGGART



6.

TELEVISION

HANNIBAL – A symbolist painter masquerading as a police procedural, Bryan Fuller’s delicious re-imagining of the Hannibal Lecter mythos as a TV show about dueling murder wizards may have (often) stretched credulity, but that was also beside the point in one of the most beautiful, queerest (in every sense of the word) and most legitimately weird bits of prestige TV in a decade full of it. That this operatic, bloody Grand Guignol that photographed its crime scenes as lavishly as its sartorial splendor and gourmet meals (often of human flesh) initially aired on NBC – of all places – only adds to the delight.

– ORRIN GREY

5.



OVER the GARDEN WALL – Wirt and Greg are two brothers lost in the woods, far from home. The single season of *Over the Garden Wall* follows their journey home. There’s a steady sort of unease in *Over the Garden Wall*, the sense that not everything is as it appears. It’s the thesis of many of the episodes: a looming terror is not a real threat; a ghost is not a ghost. It’s not to say that the show is unnerving, because it isn’t; instead it is just that you are set with the knowledge that things are not quite right. At a little over two hours in length, *Over the Garden Wall* doesn’t waste time, concise and precise – a modern fall fable.

– AMANDA HUDGINS

4.



TELEVISION

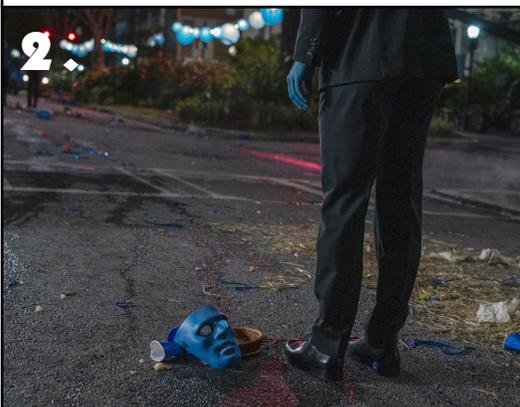
ATLANTA – My first introduction to *Atlanta* was “Teddy Perkins.” As someone who isn’t used to watching horror shows, I was left on the edge of my seat right until the end note that still rings in my ears whenever I remember it. The friend who showed me this episode told me it was an atypical one. “It’s a comedy show,” he said, so I started watching it through that lens. But I quickly realized how the moments of laughter are few and far between, and that horror is imprinted in the stories around the characters. The satirical portrayal of racism, of fame and what it means to live in that city doesn’t make for a funny ambiance, but an unsettling one. Considering it as a mere series of parodic tales would not only be a disservice to its smart direction and crude, witty dialogue, it would be a neglect of the reality of Black people, of trans folks and of women. This was true back when it first aired in 2016 and remains even more so as 2020 comes to a close. *Atlanta* follows its own rules, showcasing systematic problems through the lens of comedy in ways we had never seen before. But when you look underneath, what you find is a raw depiction of a reality that has always been present.

– DIEGO NICOLÁS ARGÜELLO



WATCHMEN – Nobody really thought it could be done. A sequel? To one of the most revered and complicated comics of all time? There was no way it was possible, and even if it was attempted, almost everyone was certain that it would end up like Zach Snyder’s movie: visually interesting (if you like CGI), but thematically incoherent and generally, pretty bland. But, to everyone’s surprise, when Damon Lindelof and HBO announced *Watchmen*, it didn’t look terrible. And then, as the story about justified Black rage and silent white supremacy continued to improve from episode to episode, we started to get excited. By the last episode, everyone knew that they had succeeded in what everyone thought would be impossible. *Watchmen* was not only one of the best TV shows of the last decade (maybe of all time), but it challenged the comic in complicated and nuanced ways, and in many ways improved the source material itself.

– NOAH SPRINGER



TV SHOW OF THE DECADE



The GOOD PLACE – The constraints placed on network television make it difficult for over-the-air programming to compete with the sorts of prestige shows that have become the bread and butter of streaming services. When everything must be broadly relatable to as many people as possible, the results rarely rise to the level of what Netflix et. al. are able to produce (at least in terms of earning critical attention).

So, it may come as some surprise to see *The Good Place* – which first aired on NBC in the United States – earn first place honors here. When we consider what makes *The Good Place* tick though, perhaps its position on this list should come as no surprise at all. As the brainchild of serial writer and producer Michael Schur (*The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Black Mirror*), its premise revolves around the biggest yet most basic questions to have followed humankind since the dawn of time: why are we here and what does it mean to live an ethical existence?

The show searches for answers through the lives and afterlives of its main cast, self-centered saleswoman Eleanor Shellstrop (Kristen Bell), overbearing ethics professor Chidi Anagonye (William Jackson Harper),

condescending socialite Tahani Al-Jamil (Jameela Jamil) and half-witted drug dealer and Jacksonville Jaguars fan Jason Mendoza (Manny Jacinto). They're lead through a torture trap masquerading as Heaven by Janet (D'Arcy Carden), a humanoid possessing all the knowledge of the universe, and Michael (Ted Danson), a demon who himself comes to learn what it means to be good in a world full of contradictions and impossibilities.

What ensues is an endearing story that cuts to the heart of existential unease while transcending personal, political and religious boundaries. It is written in a way that manages to be both genuinely subversive and broadly accessible, masterfully threading a needle that few other shows would dare attempt, let alone pull off. And as its cast comes to terms with themselves and learns to work together despite their differences, we as the audience are invited to confront uncomfortable questions about ourselves and the human condition with the lighthearted comedic touch that defines Schur's work.

It is the perfect show for its time, and one that has earned its distinction as the best show of the decade outright.

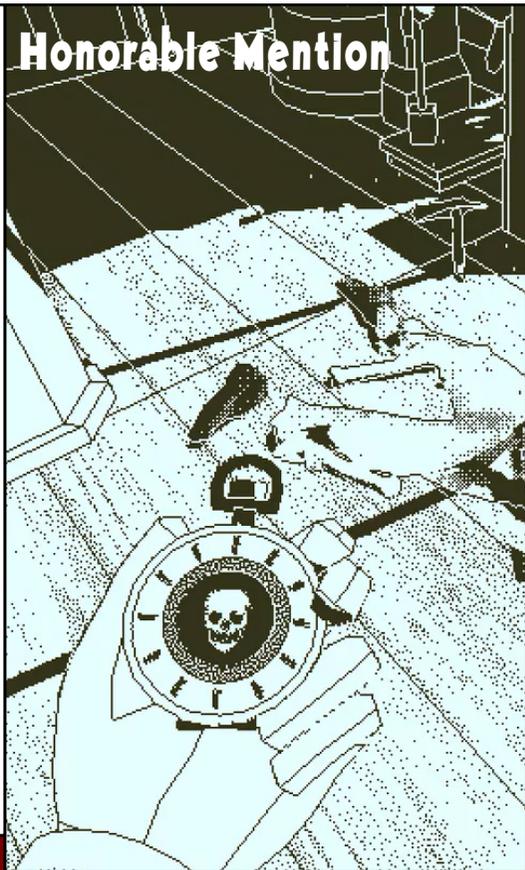
– BEN SAILER

GAMES

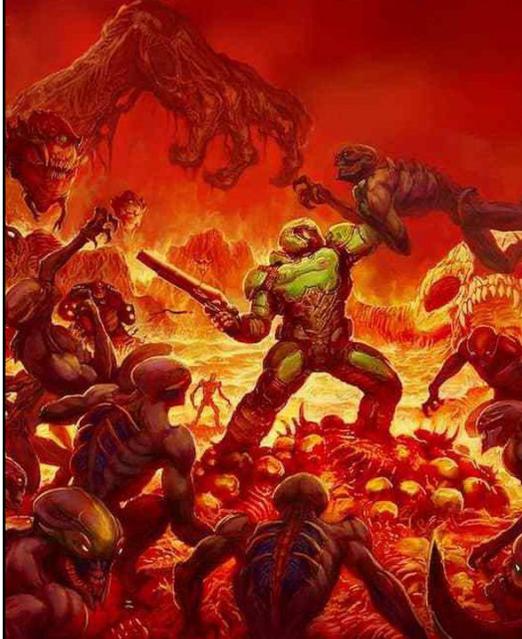
RETURN of the OBRA DINN – *Memento Mortem*, you are told as you pick up the pocket watch. “Remember death.” As you walk towards the still half-clothed skeleton that lies on the ship’s planks, you flip it open and find its hands spinning backwards – spinning just as the screen is spinning, pulling you back to the moment when the body in front of you stopped being a man and became a corpse. This is the beginning of something almost unique, perhaps the grandest whodunnit in all of gaming. Who murdered not just one person nor two, but the population of an entire ship? Everything serves the conceit, not least the ancient-seeming two-tone graphics that conjure up a sense of agedness, of the unknown, of corners in which foul minds and fouler monsters may lurk. Corners that must be explored to reveal the story of this boat and the deaths that occurred on it.

– DECLAN TAGGART

Honorable Mention



Honorable Mention



DOOM (2016) – 2016’s *Doom* was the kind of game that invited you to not give a shit about anything except ripping and tearing. In this, it was the ideal first person shooter.

Doom was designed for this, allowing you the aggressive thrill of bloodily tearing apart demons in literal Hell, encouraging the kind of combat that would make you traverse levels quickly and manically. *Doom* felt like it sounded, a throbbing, heartbeat of a soundtrack that promised destruction. Every level was eye-bleedingly red, and yet you were transfixed, constantly staring into the maw and playing until my hands hurt, playing until you had clawed my way back to Mars.

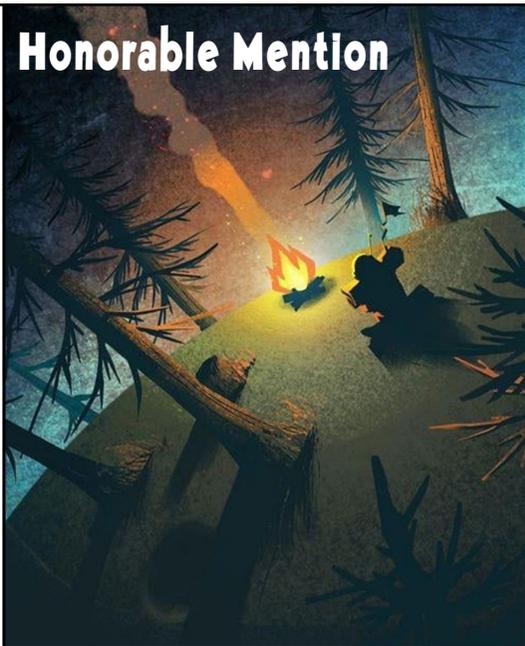
– AMANDA HUDGINS

GAMES

OUTER WILDS – I think it would be easy to describe this game as “existential,” but that feels reductive to me. Existentialism centers humanity; *Outer Wilds* treats life as incidental. The bond it strikes between hope and apocalypse comes from the way reality charges forward, with little care for our hap-penstance presence in it. I find profound comfort in the unflinching decay of its gorgeous clockwork world, even as I – like the protagonist – wake each day seeking the ways to fix our own. Annihilation will always be frightening, but there’s peace in looking outside our need to be present when the uni-verse goes on.

– ELEUM LOUGHNEY

Honorable Mention



10.



HOLLOW KNIGHT – Hallownest is a kingdom reluctant to trespassers. The sole inhabitants left carry an ever-lasting weight, mourning the ones who tried to fight against its down-fall and those who are still blindly follow-ing a sense of duty. History is carved in the walls, but it doesn’t want to be preserved. Valiant adventures have tried time and time again to plunge through its corridors. Some merely for greed, others driven by a pursuit of knowledge. Not many had lived to tell the story, but in *Hollow Knight*, we are allowed to break this tradition. We piece these events together, one scribble in an empty map at a time as we learn what went wrong. Hallow- nest has succumbed in decay and yet, we wit-ness its sense of place and time through his-tory. It’s one of the most mesmerizing visits to a fictional realm I’ve ever experienced – one where leaving a mark felt like a responsi-bility, carrying an ever-lasting weight on my shoulders.

– DIEGO NICOLÁS ARGÜELLO

GAMES

DISCO ELYSIUM – “You are a violent and irrepressible miracle. The vacuum of cosmos and the stars burning in it are afraid of you. Given enough time you would wipe us all out and replace us with nothing – just by accident.”

In *Disco Elysium* you play an amnesiac superstar detective who has to solve a murder he remembers nothing about. All you know is that you’re a fuck-up and everyone hates you.

You start picking up the pieces and learn about the abrasive Martinaise that surrounds you, with its haunting watercolour beauty, still reeling from a violently crushed revolution of decades past. The more time you spend, the more you learn about the incredibly written characters, history and ghosts that fill this place – including yourself.

Maybe your melancholy song in the Whirling Cafeteria will touch hearts and drive them to revolution once again. Or maybe you’ll just be another haggard ghost wailing in the wind.

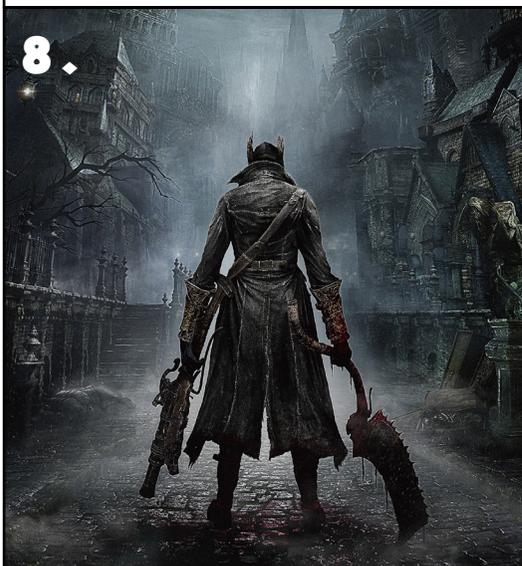
Possibility awaits.

– OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE



BLOODBORNE – Cloaked figures emerging from the mist, blades swinging out and locking into place in a shower of sparks, gnarled, bestial creatures screaming out inhumanly in defiance; and, at the center of the screen: a caped and cowled hero, hunched forward aggressively, arms akimbo, with grotesque old weaponry protruding from each hand. These are the images cemented in the mind of anyone who’s had the macabre pleasure of playing From Software’s *Bloodborne*. *Bloodborne*’s haunted and baroque aesthetic eternally resonates, sticks in your mental craw like some ghostly tune, like the inscrutable language of the Old Ones. More than that, it manages to ground the feel of the experience in something meaty, pulpy, something that responds to your poking and prodding with gnashing teeth and warm, bloody fur. You’re not tapping pixels around, nudging numbers up or down, you’re tearing at ragged and cursed flesh, frantically trying to stay alive and dance your small avatar between the flurrying limbs of ancient beasts. It’s not a game as much as a briefly glimpsed nightmare; one so exquisitely crafted that nothing else takes up space in quite the same, lasting way.

– YUSSEF COLE



The ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM – I haven't actually played *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* since 2015, but when I was thinking about the best games of the decade, it was at the top of my list. I know I'm not alone thinking *Skyrim* is amazing – I mean it was listed as the best videogame of all time by more than one website – but as a huge fan of large, open world games, sneaking with bows and being nice to NPCs, *Skyrim's* got all the trappings for me. It also was one of the first games I played that began to introduce crafting into an ostensible first-person-shooter. Building a hearth and raising some children quickly became just as important as slaying dragons and finishing quests. Now that I'm writing this again, I think I'm going to have to go fire it up again and step back into the hand-crafted world of Tamriel!

– NOAH SPRINGER

7.



The WITCHER 3: The WILD HUNT – One quirk of open world games is their sheer amount of busywork – a masquerade of their virtual worlds' so-called immensity. You'll see it in games like *Fallout 4*, where you'll never run out of besieged settlements to rescue; or in series like *Assassin's Creed*, where there's an overabundance of slick trinkets to hoard, from Animus fragments to faction flags. Rather than engorge itself with such stuffing, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* instead chooses to focus on smaller, self-contained anecdotes, like the starry-eyed villager who fell in love with the Witcher's daughter, or the elderly lady who just wants her frying pan back.

Every tale is more poignant, more eloquent and more human than the sprawling, perfunctory quests of most open world games. It stitches into a patchwork of stories that shaped *Wild Hunt's* expansive universe, turning it into a breathing world that feels genuinely lively and inhabited. The result is an open world experience that other games can only aspire towards.

– KHEE HOON CHAN

6.



GAMES

NIGHT in the WOODS – When 20-year-old Mae Borowski drops out of college and returns home to Possum Springs, she expects everything in the small Rust Belt burg to be the same as she left it. While she finds some familiar faces amongst her ragtag group of punk rock friends and aging locals, she soon learns that nothing will ever quite be the same again. To make matters more complicated, there's something sinister beating beneath the surface of Possum Spring's unassuming autumn aesthetic.

What follows in *Night in the Woods*, an animated 2D story-driven adventure-platformer from Infinite Fall, is an endearing tale that authentically captures how it feels to be young, broke and lost. The way the game slowly unravels its mysteries while its crew of begrudging anti-heroes piece themselves together, with a narrative that clearly carries the weight of its creators' lived experience, leaves a lasting impression long after the credits roll.

– BEN SAILER

5.



FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS – *Fallout 3* introduced me to the series' world. *Fallout: New Vegas* immersed me in it.

While I'm not the type to pit *Fallout 3* against *New Vegas*, I feel more connected to *New Vegas*' contributions to the series than I do *Fallout 3*'s. It demonstrated how inherently messy society can be regardless of the state of the world around it. *New Vegas* also gave us a glimpse into the first two games' lore, that had me diving deep into the wikis to understand every inch of the *Fallout* world.

Plenty of folks would die for a current-gen remake of this game, but I feel that its development and point in time are crucial to *New Vegas*' identity. Obsidian managed to make a compelling game with the game development equivalent of duct tape and toothpicks, which ties in well with *New Vegas*' theme of rebuilding something from nothing.

– MELISSA KING

4.



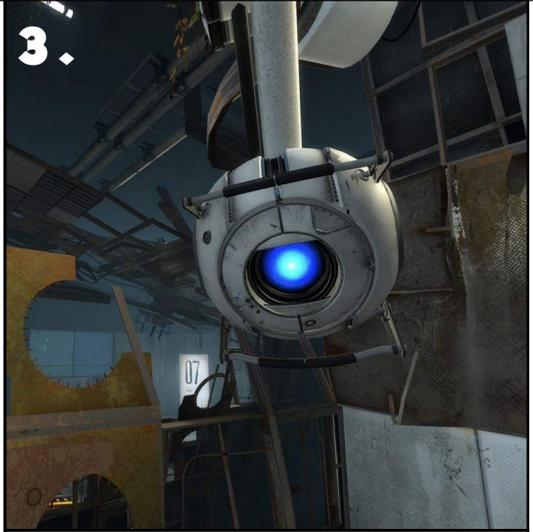
GAMES

PORTAL 2 – I think the secret to unlocking the greatness of *Portal 2* is how it teaches you to think with portals. Every game is an adventure of learning the language of that game but few games do it with the panache of *Portal 2*.

At its core, it's painfully simple. Place portal, remove portal, jump. That's all there is to it. Except, it's not. Except, it is. You never really gain an additional way to interact with the world. You just learn the world, its rules, its weaknesses and the power of possibility you wield.

There are few feelings as good as walking into a room and immediately beginning to unwind the puzzle presented and how your amazingly simple way of interacting with the world will solve it. That's why *Portal 2* endures and will continue to. At least until we stop thinking with portals.

– DAVID SHIMOMURA



3.

NEIR: AUTOMATA – *NieR: Automata* was not undervalued by critics or fans by any means, but did feel somehow neglected by the broader audience for lacking the aesthetics of something more serious. A game like *The Last of Us*, with slowly weeping guitars and lavishly rendered broken glass, has many words about conflict but few things to say beyond violence as a shapeless and tragic aspect of life.

NieR does not concede to that. This game knows that conflict has a well defined structure. That pain is felt by those in or around conflict while parties that benefit from endless struggle can sit so far away from the ruined world they may as well be dead for eons. That love, loneliness and eros are as strong as anger and not mutually exclusive. A completion of the fantastical and horny project Metal Hurlant started. Like someone in a buxom Spirit Halloween teacher costume snapping their fingers at a party to teach the room about the Treaty of Versailles. The combat rules too, but that goes without saying for PlatinumGames.

– ZACK KOTZER



2.

GAME OF THE DECADE



BREATH of the WILD – *Breath of the Wild* is what you call a *gesamtkunstwerk*. What exactly is a *gesamtkunstwerk*? While this means “total work of art” in German, the term was coined by Richard Wagner in reference to a creative composition consisting of several different parts which are subordinated to a common purpose. When it comes to *Breath of the Wild*, these parts will be the mechanics, aesthetics and story. The common purpose would be the conveyance of *mono no aware*.

The concept of *mono no aware* is often seen as being at the heart of Japanese culture. This refers to a sort of sensitivity for the fleeting nature of things. You might even call it a kind of empathy for ephemera. This literally means “awareness of things” in Japanese, but you’ll almost always come across the term untranslated. The developer behind *Breath of the Wild*, Nintendo, made sure that its mechanics, aesthetics and story conveyed a strong sense of *mono no aware*.

Its mechanics are all about impermanence. While you can see it in other systems, the best example of this would have to be the weapon mechanics. People often complain about these, but they have a kind of beauty to them. Weapons can only take a certain amount of abuse. You have to hunt around for more when they inevitably break. The result is that you’re compelled to contemplate the beauty of a brief existence.

Its aesthetics convey a strong sense of *mono no aware*. The color palette provides a good example. With its faded reds, pale greens and soft blues, the game world in *Breath of the Wild* almost looks like it was painted in watercolor. Since it consists of pigments held in liquid suspension, this tends to create clouds before the liquid evaporates and the pigments harden. In other words, impermanence is inherent to the medium. The color palette in *Breath of the Wild* picks up on this.

Its story is colored by the concept of *mono no aware*. The world all around you is in ruins, but things were apparently different in the past. You spend most of your time recovering memories by searching for the places which appear in a series of pictures. When you come across one of these, you experience a flashback which reveals how much the world has changed. The story revolves around the ravages of time.

Breath of the Wild is a *gesamtkunstwerk*. The mechanics, aesthetics and story are all about conveying the concept of *mono no aware*. While developers want their games to be more than just the sum of their parts, they hardly ever manage to create something close to a *gesamtkunstwerk*. Yet Nintendo pulled this off with particular finesse. They produced what amounts to the best game of this decade.

– JUSTIN REEVE