

# Synthpop, myths, and the end of the world

ZOHEB MASHIUR

Ulver's 2017 release, *The Assassination of Julius Caesar*, includes in its lyric booklet the celebrated painting *Bonaparte before the Sphinx*. A great myth, the relic of a lost civilisation juxtaposed against a man who was building his own legend. A man who styled himself after Caesar, whose name bookends an entire era.

The event referenced in the album's title is never brought up in the lyrics, but it casts a shadow over every word Kristoffer Rygg sings. Legends fade. History repeats itself. New legends arise but all things are beholden to myths that came before.

Rygg sings, "I want to tell you something about the grace of faded things" but within that same song he admits the difficulties of capturing the weight of history. Words are inadequate, and what was once vibrant can now scarcely be expressed.

"I speak with a frozen tongue in a dead language."

Ulver juxtaposes past and present, the divine and the mundane, in the very sound of the album. From black metal roots this Norwegian group has gained a reputation for jumping and blurring genres with aggression, and this latest album has arguably their most unexpected leap yet. Synthpop alongside Gothic chords. It bounces, it grooves; you can dance to it. All the while Rygg croons about death and fallen empires. Modern Bacchanalia beneath soaring cathedral vaults. It is a very listenable album that is also objectively weird. It's almost a miracle that the combination works at



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all. The sound in *The Assassination of Julius Caesar* isn't just functional, it's gorgeous.

The real meat of the songs are in the lyrics, Rigg's beautiful delivery, and how the tone of each song affects the storytelling. Opening track "Nemoralia" is a true statement of intent, the beat straight out of Depeche Mode as Rigg moves through a list of images by turns idyllic and disturbing. Moon festivals. Christians as "human candles". Nero setting fire to Rome.

As the references pile on, the suggested relationship between the images become

stranger, more complex. Saints Peter and Paul, who died in Rome. Princess Diana, named after the Roman goddess of hunting and the moon, who was hounded to death one night "in the Capital of Romance". As the mournful "So Falls the World" later makes explicit, tragedies are repeated and nothing is new. The promise of the 60s fades away into death, as "1969" recalls that year's darkest myth: the Manson Family's cultish devotion to The Beatles, and the murder of the pregnant Sharon Tate. Fiction is invoked: "We all must carry Rosemary's baby." The house that holds

the Church of Satan disappears. John Paul II survives his first assassination attempt, and his wounds recall the stigmata that mark God's favoured. There are wolves in the forest and the world will fall as Rome once fell, over and over again.

For Rome looms over it all, doomed and gone, leaving behind only the ruins and stories with which we have shaped the world we live in. Rather weighty themes for an album that borrows heavily from Depeche Mode, but Ulver does them justice. Give it a spin, it's good.

# Your Name: A beautiful out-of-body experience

TAMIM BIN ZAKIR

Where so many movie romances begin with a charming meet-cute-and-progress-from-there, audiences can never be quite sure whether the central couple in "Your Name" could ever meet, even though they have a weird habit of waking up in one another's bodies.

An endearingly loopy mix of time-travel, body-swap, and disaster-movie ingredients that's already a massive hit in its native Japan, this unconventional romance hails from the imagination of Makoto Shinkai, a talented up-and-coming animation director who has dedicated himself to creating some of the country's most stunning anime ever since.

*Kimi no Na wa*, or *Your Name's* fantastical premise skips the usual love at first sight cliché and introduces us its would-be couple - Tokyo teen Taki and provincial schoolgirl Mitsuha, under far more intimate circumstances. So, rather than worrying about all the things that could potentially come between them, as it normally would in a romantic drama, here the suspense hinges on whether these two characters will succeed in figuring out who they actually are and from



there, why the cosmos deemed them worthy to connect in the first place.

Initially, Taki and Mitsuha weren't sure of the body swap occurrence, mistaking days spent in a complete stranger's skin as vivid dreams. This is until through their friends' and family's reactions they come to the realisation. Of course, neither has any clue how to handle being thrust into the other's life, surrounded by strangers in a place far from their own homes. It takes a few such switches before they even learn to communicate, and longer still before they discover how to use the arrangement

to their mutual advantage.

Sooner or later, this playful setup gives way to a far more elaborate supernatural scenario, one that exploits a feeling not unlike déjà vu, but only stronger, as neither character can seem to hold onto the memory of what they did while out-of-body for long. Meanwhile, the puzzle becomes increasingly clear to us, as we gradually come to understand the significance of a gorgeous meteorite-sighting atmosphere teased in the film's opening seconds.

Audiences would be hard pressed to

find any animator capable of rendering more beautiful skies, or landscapes other than Shinkai. His work just goes to show that the tradition of hand-drawn animation isn't dead. His earlier films, "5 Centimeters Per Second" and "The Garden of Words", are two of the most beautiful animated features ever made. The director and his team have found a way to keep the aesthetic alive and further beyond it, even while doing all of their drawing on tablets and screens. Among the innovations of Shinkai's all-digital approach are the director's signature hyper-realistic backgrounds, which are more than mere paintings, but shimmer and change perspective in ways that the old cellular-based techniques never allowed.

Technically, to say anything more would be a spoiler. The only way to understand it is to swim in it for yourself, feel your own heart braid around these two lives, and gaze up in awe at the silvery arc that falling stars trace across the sky.

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