

THE POP-UP PUNK OF ONCE UPON A TIME AMID TREES

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In Kenji Araki's *Once Upon a Time Amid Trees* (Japan, 2014) potential apocalypse comes in the form of a teddy bear from outer space.

As you digest that sentence, consider also the opening scene of the film, as set in a bustling city street that looks like a pop-up illustration. 2-D silhouettes of industrial structures float in both directions across a green screen, as the shadows of extras march up and down the street on a loop; their outlines are all we ever see of them.

In front of these shadows appears our hero Lil, a young woman with a red bow in her hair. In front of her is more red in the form of a 1960s telephone perched on something or other (think the Batphone, but chunkier.) The stars above meanwhile shine like tacky disco-dressing, as a toy UFO flies in their midst. This is the first of many cheap miniatures we'll see in the film's scene transitions; toy ambulances and plaything TVs are used with gay abandon throughout.

The film may sound like a low-budget nightmare, but bear with me. *Once Upon a Time Amid Trees* (OUATAT) is shot like a fairy tale through a particularly twee and shiny Instagram filter. This is not a children's movie; it's something far harder to categorise. No 'grown-up' movie looks or even *sounds* like it, with odd, burbling synthesizers used for soundtracking duties. Imagine Wes Anderson set to the music of 1960s *Doctor Who* and you're kind of seeing the new art that OUATAT presents, a filter-heavy fairy tale for the *otaku* generation. And I haven't even explained about that teddy bear yet.

The film's first location scenes see Lil walking in a gorgeous Japanese forest, happily minding her own business until - Surprise! a thief nicks her bag. Chasing ensues to drum machine beats, and the thief almost gets away with his crime, if it wasn't for the invisible force field he runs straight into. That's when his head falls clean off onto the forest floor, the wound at

the end of his neck looking like what I can only describe as a crown doodled upside down in red felt tip. A synthesizer bursts amateurishly with noise as the thief's eyes close in death. It's all very 'naive art', if not art *brut*, one might say.

Lil looks nonplussed yet not too horrified about this feverish happening; she perks up as the UFO from earlier lands in the forest. That's when the alien teddy bear emerges, a 7ft cutie with yellow skin made from canvas; again, it looks like something from a pop-up book. Much like the film itself, it's colourful, three-dimensional fun, all bold and bright without a care in the world.

Anyway, what's the alien teddy doing here you wonder? Because it wants to conquer the world, duh. But before that, it wants Lil to spread the word around Earth. In a calm male voice devoid of any kind of emotion, Teddy explains it wants mankind to be warned of his evil plan. Why exactly, I have no idea, as I can't speak a lick of Japanese. I'm just going by a scant blurb I found online here! Besides, I don't think plot is very important to this film, do you? It's more about generating fuzzy, 'kooky' feels in the viewer.

Eventually, the bear gives Lil what looks like a vintage synthesiser, on which she twiddles a few dials to locate a mad scientist fellow. In his lab-slash-glass encased kingdom, this scientist finds a teddy bear's head hidden within Lil's stomach, flashing on the x-ray like a rave-era version of Radiohead's *Kid A* logo. Lil is being secretly tracked, I think? Anyway, that all comes to an end when she has sex with the scientist's son and spits out the little head like some arrant bit of food stuck in her throat. The latter action happens in a kind of *Yellow Submarine*-inspired shot, which is groovy. The '60s shift dress Lil wears meanwhile adds to the retro worship; she looks like the perfect candidate for a Pizzicato Five promo.

If you're wondering why exactly a teddy bear

is flying around in a UFO, fret not, for a twist near the end explains everything. I won't spill the beans here, although it does revolve around a brain transplant. To be honest, though, it's highly unlikely you'll ever see OUATAT. The film was a straight-to-'bare bones' DVD release which was shown in selected cinemas around Tokyo for one week only. Nothing exists about it on IMDB or Wikipedia or Letterboxd; it has no overseas title. None of its cast or crew are or have been household names (but that isn't a surprise considering the film was released as part of a series dedicated to up and coming new directors from Japan.) You can't even find it on torrents, alas. The movie is just one level of indie above 'Final Student Film Project.'

I will reveal though that the film ends with a *Godzilla*-esque fight scene between the teddy and a giant cycloptic alien. Potential apocalypse has never looked so cutesy nor quirky, as bear and octopod duke it out in front of cardboard, crayon-coloured skyscrapers. Did someone say *kaiju kawaii*? That could be one name for this genre. How about twee punk, or green-screen punk?

'Pop-up punk' is probably the best word for *Once Upon a Time Amid Trees*. But when something pops up, it eventually pops down, and all you're left with is an article like this, making you wonder if the thing ever existed at all.

Did I make this movie up, you wonder? Is it just a fairy tale of mine, told to give you some cultural Fear of Missing Out? If so, would the world be ready for the real thing? Would our planet even need such a film?

I say yes, for most great art comes from an innocent space, and with a raw, DIY spirit. Also, as we hurtle ever closer to apocalypse, perhaps it wouldn't hurt to take comfort from the nicer things in life, like nostalgia, twee aesthetics, and bloopy synthesizer sounds.

It wouldn't hurt to retreat back to the trees, either.

