



This Oscar-Nominated Animated Western Was Made by Two Pixar Artists



By Rachel Sandell

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For the 2016 animated short *Borrowed Time*, two Pixar animators **Lou Hamou-Lhadj** (*Toy Story 3*, *WALL-E*) and **Andrew Coats** (*Inside Out*, *Finding Dory*) worked outside the Disney system to create a nearly-silent Western short that would go on to **get nominated for an Oscar in 2017**. In just a little under seven minutes, *Borrowed Time* has more heart and passion behind the story than a lot of other feature-length **animated movies** (*Chicken Little* could never). In this short, Hamou-Lhadj and Coats manage to explore two different timelines, grief, and a heartbreaking story that rivals anything that Disney or Pixar have done with their shorts in recent memory.

'Borrowed Time's Story Explores Grief



Image via Quorum

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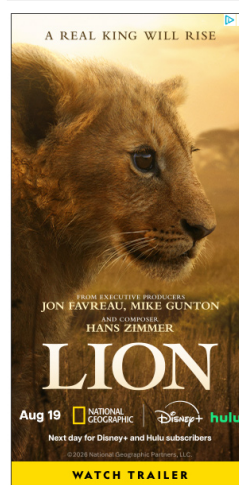
Borrowed Time begins with an image of a weathered sheriff standing on a cliff in front of a collection of bones. Through a series of increasingly intense flashbacks, we come to find out that this is where the sheriff lost his father when he was young. When it comes to grief, facing the source of tragedy is an incredibly difficult undertaking. Through some unspoken clues, we know that the sheriff has been thinking of this moment all his life. The fact that he's a sheriff at all speaks volumes about his attempts to live up to his father's legacy. When the sheriff approaches the cliff, it becomes even clearer that he has been striving all his life to atone for his mistake.

The story looks at the present and the past, both of which are intense, albeit in their own ways. The present timeline follows the sheriff as he walks toward the edge of the cliff, and the past timeline tells the story of how his father died. Following the crash of their wagon and the death of their horse, his father was flung off the edge of the cliff, dangling from a precarious handhold. The sheriff—then a young boy—tries to pull his father back to safety, but he can't quite reach. As a last resort, his father offers his shotgun as a makeshift rope, and they almost accomplish their goal of getting his father to safety when the boy's hand brushes against the trigger.

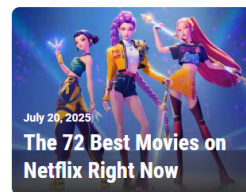


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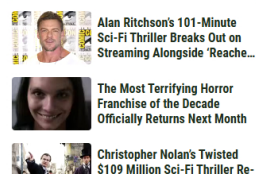


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The added guilt of being the one to accidentally pull the trigger just makes the whole incident all the more heartbreaking. After a life of issuing justice and keeping the law, the sheriff approaches this same cliff and decides to fall from it himself. He's only stopped by the glint of the sun off his father's abandoned pocket watch, which reminds him of his father's love for him. This brings him back from the edge (figuratively and literally), and the sheriff finally reaches a moment of acceptance.

'Borrowed Time's Detailed Animation Works With the Film's Aesthetic



The animation for *Borrowed Time* is incredibly detailed, committing fully to the old Western aesthetic with the dirt and grime covering the characters. The scenery is also quite beautiful, with colors that change with the tone of the story. The short film begins with the dark grays and blues of pre-dawn scenery, signaling the depressing mood, and ends with the orange-purple sunrise of the new day, signaling the sheriff's ability to move forward.

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Borrowed Time's visual storytelling is also very strong; it's no coincidence that there's barely any dialogue at all, in favor of long, drawn-out quiet scenes that let the characters' actions speak for themselves. It's important to note that, even with such a short runtime, *Borrowed Time* isn't afraid to take its time with longer, silent scenes that are more introspective. As the sheriff walks slowly toward the cliff, each step is physically heavy, not just because of his limp but also because of his hesitance to approach the site of his father's death. The sheriff keeps his eyes on the ground, but he's caught off guard by the skull of the horse, which he recoils from with a soft hiss. Even this portion of the memory is too painful to face. He takes a moment to close his eyes, take a breath, and step over the skull. His boot hitting the ground on the other side of the bones propels us into the chase portion of the flashback, signaling to us that he has prepared himself to remember what comes next.

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As the chase gets more intense, his walk in the present moment gets faster, and he surges forward as though against an intense wind. When he gets to the crash, the sheriff falls to his knees; this moment points to just how physically taxing grief can be. The sheriff's movements are animated in such a way that he walks with a heaviness on his shoulders, a slight slouch, and a breathless struggle. It isn't just the characters' faces that are animated with great care and detail (though his father's look of realization just before the gun goes off is amazingly animated); the whole body is intensely expressive. The animators truly displayed great passion for the project here.

'Borrowed Time's Literary Devices Are Top-Notch

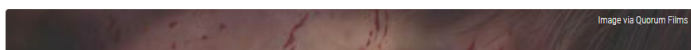


Image via Quorum Films



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In terms of literary devices, *Borrowed Time* uses them expertly to really drive home the emotion. For example, the hat that his father gives him is shot off during the chase, and though the sheriff wears it in the present day, he takes it off before approaching the bones of the horse, as though he can't bring himself to wear it here.

The most notable image, that of the pocket watch, is the very object that saves the sheriff's life. In the flashback, the watch is one of the first things we see, as his father winds it carefully and then gives it to his son as a gift. He uses the sun's glint off the metal to catch his son's eye and attention, dropping it into his hands and ruffling his hair. The watch is lost when the shot goes off, thrown down, and broken. The theme of time comes into play here, as the ticking of the watch, and the movement of its hands, stop completely. From here until the moment on the cliff years later, the sheriff's life is at a standstill.

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As the sheriff wobbles on the cliff's edge, the glint of metal catches his eye like it did so many years ago. He sees the watch lying on the ground and realizes what he's about to do. Startled, he loses his footing and lands similarly to his father back then. With his eyes on the watch (the reminder of his father), he fights to climb back over the edge of the cliff. It's a struggle, but it's one that he undertakes to bring himself back from the brink. This is an important moment of climbing out of a seemingly unending grief that *Borrowed Time* doesn't skip over: the fight to get back over that cliff's edge. When the sheriff finds a picture of him and his father inside the pocket watch, he reaches that moment of acceptance he so desperately needed. As we can pan over to the cliff and the sunrise, we hear the faint sound of the watch beginning to tick again, signaling the restarting of time for the life of the sheriff.

'Borrowed Time' Is an Example of Stellar Animated Shorts Outside of Disney

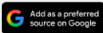


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Coats and Hamou-Lhadj made something truly beautiful with *Borrowed Time*. Its commentary on grief, its animation and visual storytelling, and its use of literary devices makes it stand out among the pool of Oscar nominations for its year. In just seven minutes, *Borrowed Time* told an entire story from start to finish, including two separate timelines, whereas many other feature-length animations fail to reach the same emotional heights with a 90-minute runtime.

In 2017, *Borrowed Time* got an Oscar nomination for best short film alongside *Blind Vaysha*, *Pearl*, and *Pear Cider and Cigarettes*, but it was surpassed by *Piper* for the award. Nevertheless, *Borrowed Time* is a unique and emotional experience that you wouldn't want to miss.

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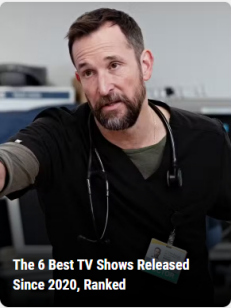
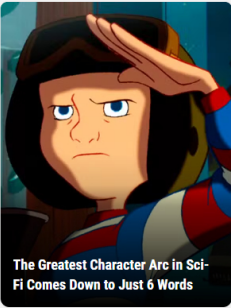


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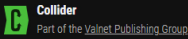
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