



How Hideaki Anno's Live-Action Films Take On Trauma and Power



Eddie Vargas, FEBRUARY 20, 2020



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Although the 59-year-old Japanese director Hideaki Anno — creator of the iconic Neon Genesis Evangelion — boasts a filmography spanning nearly four decades, much of the discourse surrounding his work largely focuses solely on the Evangelion series as a direct reflection of Anno's own mental health journey. Filled with giant robots, kaiju, and psychologically traumatized teenagers, Evangelion has been influential to generations of anime fans since its initial broadcast.

But Anno's other material — in particular, his oft-neglected live-action films — are stylistically unique, thematically dense, and entertaining too. Through his use of introspective dialogue and experimental techniques, his live-action films, most notably *Love & Pop* (1998), *Shiki-Jitsu* (2000) and *Shin-Godzilla* (2016), deal with power structures in the public sphere and their inevitable intertwining with people's personal lives. Continuing and broadening his work in *Evangelion*, in his films Anno has tackled subjects like traditional family hierarchies, patriarchy, and the effects of these structures on the individual's psychosocial state of mind.



Love & Pop

Anno's first live-action movie, the lo-fi *Love & Pop*, focuses on the imbalance and abuse of power between men and women — in particular, the predatory nature of men who pursue underage girls. The film tells the story of Hitomi Yoshii (Asumi Miwa), a Japanese high school student who has taken up *enjo-kōsai* — going on dates with older men — to earn some extra money.

Hitomi's end goal is to have enough money to buy a beautiful but expensive ring. But this is more than juvenile materialism. Hitomi believes that owning the ring will help expedite her transition into adulthood, which both excites and terrifies her. But through this basic coming-of-age story, Anno reveals a seedy underbelly of Japanese society that feeds off of teenage insecurities and naivety.

While the majority of Hitomi's encounters do not begin as explicitly sexual, her dates' intentions rapidly become more obvious and insidious, quickly escalating from verbal insults to threats of sexual assault. Through voiceovers, we get to hear Hitomi's deepest thoughts, in which she provides a firsthand account of her fears and anxieties. These voiceovers are accompanied by montages inundated with multiple, superimposed shots of her environment in low angled, wide shots and shifting aspect ratios, visually reflecting the chaotic flow of anxious thoughts in the human mind.

All the while, Anno's handheld cinematography is engaged in a series of extreme closeups and full shots, either on characters' bodies or empty versions of the room they inhabit, in order to highlight the danger that men bring into these isolated space. When one juxtaposes the faces of these men with the voyeuristic camerawork itself, the male gaze becomes overbearing and proves key in unpacking Love & Pop's critique of patriarchal culture in Japan.

The camera frequently invades the actresses' physical space, with several shots filmed from underneath Hitomi's skirt or beneath her blouse. While these shots may be intended to cause discomfort, they straddle the line between critique and titillation. Still, despite a questionable ending that errs into the realm of misogynistic victim shaming, Hitomi comes out safely on the other side.

Shiki-Jitsu

Blurring the lines between reality and imagination, Anno's next feature, the heartbreaking *Shiki-Jitsu*, focuses on generational trauma and mental health. Here Anno shows how mental illness leads people to isolate themselves from romantic, familial, and societal relationships, thus creating cycles of mental anguish. Being stuck in cycles is a key theme in *Shiki-Jitsu*. Set in an urban, Japanese town with little scenery and even fewer people, the film's psychological expedition is spearheaded by two star-crossed, misfit lovers.

The film begins in media res as an unnamed film director (Shunji Iwai) bumps into and falls for an eccentric woman (Ayako Fujitani). The unnamed woman has convinced herself that the next day is perpetually her birthday. The anticipation of a birthday which never comes becomes an escape from her strong suicidal ideation. Her mental state is eventually revealed to be the result of trauma caused by her mother's abuse and neglect. Ultimately, the director hopes he can help her break the cycle of escapism, re-embrace reality and begin to properly heal.

Anno's visualizes the woman's psyche through his signature combination of chaotic, wide-angle montages, voiceovers, and — for the first time since the *End of Evangelion* movie — a mixture of animation and live-action. During

one particularly dark sequence, the woman sees depictions of her mother as a frightening, two-dimensional children's drawing that morphs into multiple unsettling, three-dimensional creatures. The story unravels in these surreal fragments when things are at their worst but slows things down for introspective dialogue or philosophical soliloquies. Anno's nuanced and sympathetic portrayal of the highs and lows of mental health treatment solidify Shiki-Jitsu as not only a poignant love story, but his most forthright exploration of depression.

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Shin-Godzilla

Shin-Godzilla

By 2016's Toho production of Shin-Godzilla, Anno had traded his psychological nuance for a finely honed, anti-establishment ideology, and Toho's budget allowed him to realize his creative vision on a grander scale than ever. Shin-Godzilla harkens back to the anti-war rhetoric of the original 1954 film with its hyper-critical, anti-bureaucratic sentiment and classic kaiju destruction.

Told from the perspective of a few young government officials tired of the old guard, the film's first act takes place almost entirely in a series of government meetings where politicians bicker amongst themselves. The older members are too enraptured with their own egos and traditions to grasp the reality of the impending catastrophe while the youth advise them to act fast. More often than not, the real monsters of the movie are the bumbling bureaucrats who fail to protect Japan from Godzilla's rampage, rather than the giant lizard himself.

The film's voice of reason comes in the form of Rando Yaguchi (Hiroki Hasegawa) the twenty-something Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary who is the antithesis of the other politicians. He is brave but not stubborn, he listens more than he speaks and he cares little for promotions, focusing instead on public safety. When Yaguchi and his team push themselves into these spaces, their 21st-century sensibilities disrupt the status-quo and bring about real change at last.

Despite its mainstream appeal, Shin-Godzilla still finds ways to experiment with its form. At various moments the film cuts to display white text on a black backdrop, detailing events or persons of interest. These info dumps stay on screen long enough to distract viewers but not long enough to be comprehensively read. Even during the action, captions appear for only a moment to announce a character's title or location before disappearing just as quickly. If you feel as if Anno is teasing you, it's because he likely is. You aren't meant to be able to read all of this; there are more pressing matters at hand.

Once a metaphor for the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,

Anno's *Godzilla* story is instead informed by the more recent Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster and the 2011 earthquakes and tsunamis in Tōhoku. With so much time spent highlighting the slow response of politicians in the face of the kaiju crisis, it's clear Anno is not afraid to air his grievances with the Japanese government. And while Anno's heart lies with those Japanese lives lost in 2011, lackadaisical government bodies are by no means an issue specific to Japan.

Cinema's power to spark conversation, reflection and change is not lost on Anno. Each of his films is an exercise in some form of sociopolitical dialogue, whether that be bringing government bodies to task, shaming patriarchal society's mistreatment of women, or imploring us to face the hidden terrors that trauma can impose on individuals. With a new Evangelion movie on its way this year, it's exciting to anticipate how Anno might further develop these themes.

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