

SPACE JAM

a new legacy

the death of art



part one

art is dead?

What is *Space Jam 2*'s artistry? What is it conveying, and what is it using to accomplish this? Cinematographically, it's fairly standard and not trying to be an "every frame is a desktop wallpaper" affair; its acting is decidedly distracting when LeBron appears incapable of even screaming remotely convincingly. The character designs of the Goon Squad are unmemorable, Fortnite-esque translations of NBA greats that are much more in line with third-rate X-Men ripoffs than the Looney Tunes. The writing is a cold, mercenary-efficient conveyor belt of plot and character beats, sprinkling in technological terminology, excruciatingly myopic self-awareness, and attempts at human dialogue that are about as flavorful as unseasoned white rice.

What did people like *The Matrix* for? The fight scenes unlike anything they'd seen before? The thought-provoking concept? The transformation of the familiar, cold world of the urban nineties into a warzone? The cool characters and costume designs? *Space Jam 2*, in its

use of the intellectual property, suggests that it is worth remembering because it is green, has techno, and is in slow-motion.

The transformation of art into something artless, into an image inexpertly conveyed, belies the rankest and most cynical motivation of *Space Jam 2*: you are expected to like it because Content that you like is in it. No matter that the reasons you liked it are gone, no matter that its best-of approach to its crossover sequences means that the sequences it apes are devoid of their stakes and emotional context, no matter that characters initially animated by dead men replace other dead men to deliver dialogue just as dead, the mere presence is intended to evoke the feelings the audience felt when they watched a movie that actually wanted to do something.

The subtitle for this film (which replaces an actual digit; to actually call it *Space Jam 2* would suggest this is not an effective starting point for The Space Jam Franchise, and may risk alienating potential consumers) is *A New Legacy* for a reason. It sets out to redefine Space Jam, and Warner Brothers as a whole. Was *Space Jam* an advertisement for the Looney Tunes and the NBA? Certainly, to a degree - it was birthed from advertisement. Was it *solely* advertisement? *Space Jam 2* certainly thinks so.

"Time for an upgrade," Al. G. Rhythm smirks. Suddenly, the two-dimensional Looney Tunes World, Population Eighteen, is enveloped in bisexual lighting and particle effects. The personality and vivaciousness of this art style is replaced with computer-generated three-dimensionality*, Bugs Bunny clad in photo-real fur. This "upgrade," of course, looks awful. It's a heart transplant of these characters, saddling them with limp side effects and mishmashing aesthetic choices in the incompatible aims of showcasing how advanced their render farm is while also being in keeping with designs that predated Theodore Roosevelt's election as well as allowing them to slot cleanly in with the rest of the Warner Brothers Catalog Now On HBO Max.

Said catalog, by the by, is represented in this movie as a cavalcade of brightly-lit, fancifully colored people in shitty Halloween costumes, constantly wagging and dancing and shaking baseball bats and jockeying for your attention, begging to be freeze-framed and analyzed for easter eggs in a youtube video.

One can make a laundry list of complaints, if pressed, but the complaints are either to be expected as "basketball players are terrible actors" or are as hyperspecific as "the editing is disinterested in portraying the full state of the basketball game and its attempts at kinetic one-on-one energy falls flat after the routine is established."

Clearly, something is wrong here. But it's wrong in a strange, offputting way - what, in actuality, is at fault in *Space Jam 2*? The overuse of green-screen may leap out to a particularly jaded viewer, especially given the atrocious conditions of most VFX workers - but many excellent and beloved movies composite their images, sometimes-invisibly, sometimes-spectacularly. Is it the premise? Reheating an older IP to cash in on people who grew up on cable reruns? To watch *Space Jam 2* is more than that - it is to sense an amorphous dread, a feeling of sickness that hangs over you for more than just the given frames you observe.

Space Jam 2 is something approaching the end state of the current studio film: the overall structure of the it blasts down its uneven aspects; a script flattened in all pursuits but saving the cat, a character arc one can predict in its entirety within a minute in efforts to make it as universally appealing as possible, color grading that forgets that movies are meant to be

joyful, and in this avoidance of nitpicking critique and pursuit maximum wide appeal, it forgets that *art stays with you when it has a heart*.



part two

run from what's comfortable

Universal Soldier is a *weird* goddamn franchise. Beginning life as a blatant remix of Terminator 2 and RoboCop, the Roland Emmerich-helmed first feature managed to double one of its inspiration's box office proceeds despite a critical lashing. Instead of capitalizing on this with a theatrical sequel starring virtually any of the original's cast or crew, two direct-to-television

series were commissioned, recasting Jean-Claude Van Damme's lead role with a washed-up pro football player's.

Reviled by critics and audiences alike, it received another sequel with the same lead in the same year (also swapping out Gary Busey for Burt Reynolds); this was then followed up with a return to theatres with a fourth movie that ignores the prior chronology. Michael Jai-White is in both the television and theatrical sequels, playing different roles. In the film, he is a computer. Despite its boob-brandishing b-movie beguilements, this, too, bombed and the series entered cryostasis for a decade.

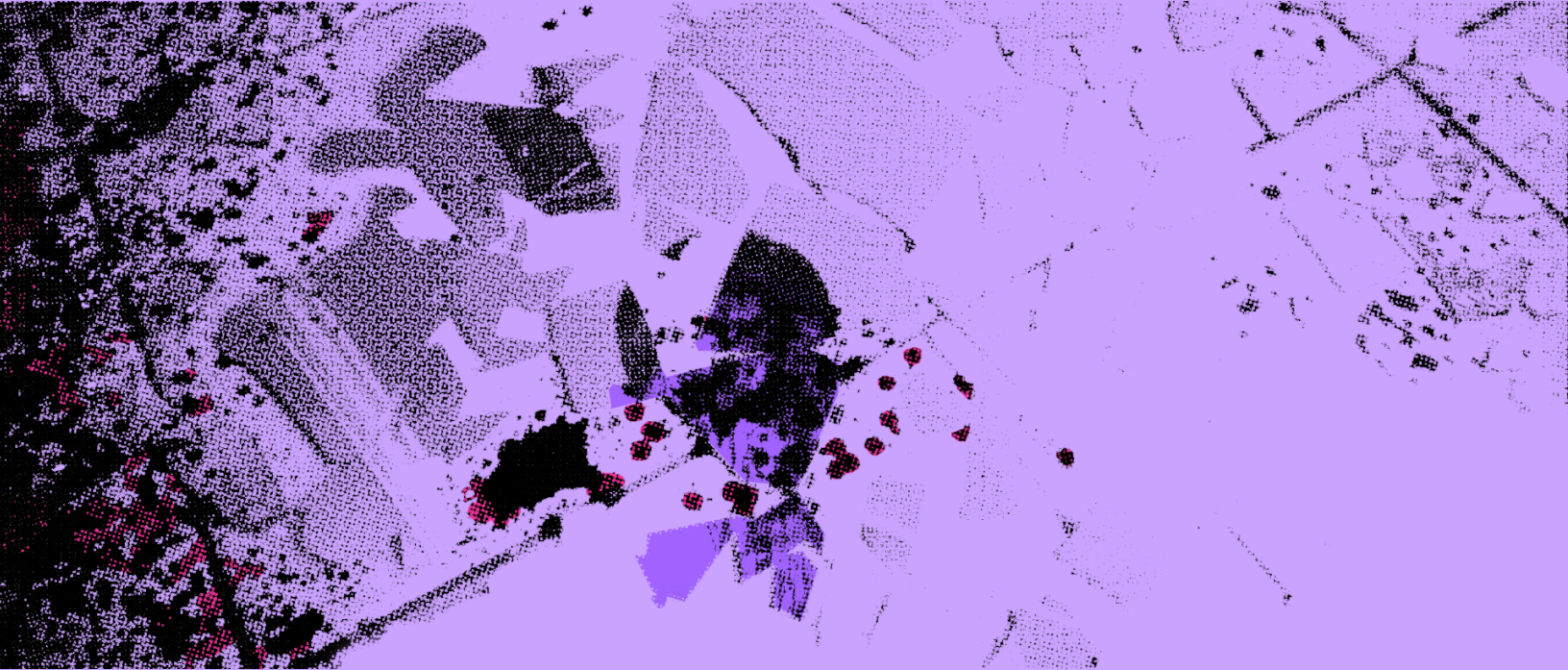
Come 2009, the year's top earners include three literary adaptations and one Transformers film; the prior year's box office was dominated by two comic book films, two sequels, a literary adaptation, and a Bond film. 2009's record-shattering event film Avatar would mark the second-to-last time in recent history that the highest-grossing film of the year was an original IP.** Savvy producers were realizing that you stood to make a fair buck for cheap if one were to tap into nostalgic intellectual properties, modernize them, and release them unto a changing world.

Director John Hyams, armed with DP and father Peter Hyams (dir. *TimeCop*, *Sudden Death*), was tasked to make a direct-to-video sequel to a series that had, at *very debatable* best, one single good movie across seven years of attempts at franchising. Hyams and Hyams decided that their best course of action would be a stylistic homage to Carpenter more than Emmerich, fusing a slasher's pacing and coldness with Van Damme and Dolph Lundgren's front kicks. A spare, pulsing synth score lends the fights a certain starkness to them, and the cast seems to be just as unaware of why they've been brought back as the viewer is.

Lundgren, in particular, deserves mention; his character is, as written, effectively senile. His character bemusedly tells Van Damme that he's "got something to tell you" with all the casualness of somebody trying to remember his bowling scores. Meanwhile, the body he barely seems capable of controlling attempts to kill two screaming hostages. The action is focused on the destruction these men wreak, every blow destroying everything around them, oblivious to the ruin they bring. When the careers of the actors involved feel equally frozen in the past, a meta reading comes easily and depressingly.

This isn't even the one I like to talk about. This is the standard direct-to-video sequel. This is the one that Hyams used as leverage to make the movie he *actually* gave a shit about.



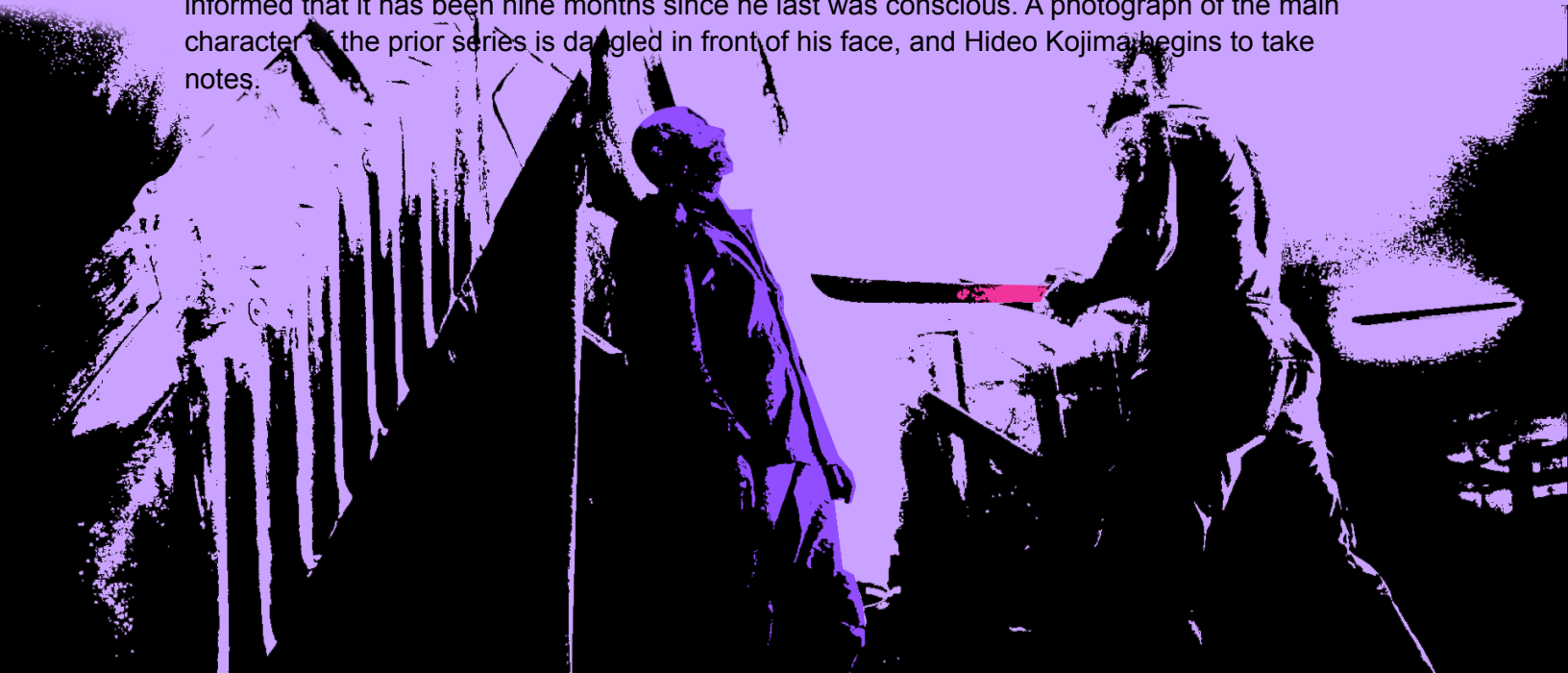


part three

people ii 2: the reckoning

By 2012, *Universal Soldier: Day of Reckoning* was in a world where *every one* of the top-grossing films of the year were either adaptation or sequel. This is the time to make a movie that taps in *hard* into nostalgia, get people into the IP with newcomer-friendly sequel soft reboots, fanbase-friendly castings, and ride the wave all the way to the bank. Hyams makes a film that resembles this in literal form, but not remotely in function, and it's much stronger as a result.

The opening of the film starts with a lengthy POV shot where the main character's tranquil domesticity is shattered by a black trenchcoated incarnation of a prior series mainstay, this time beating the unprepared protagonist into a pulp before executing his wife before his eyes. He mugs the camera, making it clear who he is and how his design changed, before his attention turns towards the protagonist's child. The protagonist awakes in a hospital room, informed that it has been nine months since he last was conscious. A photograph of the main character of the prior series is dangled in front of his face, and Hideo Kojima begins to take notes.



Please note that this section discusses spoilers for a two thousand and twelve direct-to-video martial arts sequel to a 1992 movie your dad watched and forgot about. If you care, please go to **part four: actress in time layers**.

Broadly, the film's tone from then on is reminiscent of *Blue Velvet* crossed with *Metal Gear Solid 2*, a regular guy in the suburbs discovering the rotten core of his surroundings and nation, as he also discovers that his life is a nightmarish lie and that his antagonistic connection with the prior protagonist probably merits radical reappraisal. While never fully crossing into art film territory (outside of some *extremely poorly-considered* rapid flashing that gave me a headache, let alone somebody epileptic) this film still goes in much more strange, offputting, and distinct places than any direct-to-video martial arts film that slots into a film series as the sixth film, third timeline, and third soft reboot in a row ever would be expected to.

The *Metal Gear* comparison, although repeatedly belabored, is a concerningly apt one for a narrative concerned with blending cloning, martial arts, government conspiracy, movie references, and a total lack of meaningful development of its female characters. *Resident Evil 8* also apes its opening to a mind-blowing extent, and a sequence partway through where the protagonist's left hand gets its fingers below the index lopped off, only to regrow in a concerning show of unanticipated superhumanness, is equally evocative.

The film's aesthetic is a fusion of its predecessor's Carpenter-esque coldness and workmanlikeness with a grotesque neon flare that evokes, depending on what strain of film bro one is, Noe or Refn. Its use of the cast is illustrative of its aims: returning cast members are hazily reconstructed from their past appearances, unclear if even aware that all of them have been brutally murdered by Van Damme, whose turn in this film brings to mind *Apocalypse Now's* Kurtz moreso than *Kickboxer****. Dolph Lundgren, perhaps the single most inconsistent mainstay of the cast, acts as his right-hand-man now, his defining rivalry entirely forgotten in favor of spewing endless facile rhetoric that goes against everything he stood for in the original. Andrei Arlovski's slasher villain is now a completely silent stooge who hangs around in strip club bathrooms in a maintenance man's outfit, demolished at the halfway mark of the film having been dragged out into daylight.

Newcomer Scott Adkins' starring role, inserted into this mythos of tired old men doing things while never knowing why, comes not with an assumed familiarity but with a *forced* familiarity. His bonds with the prior cast are implanted into him, the desire to kill and replace his central directive. Every part of his ascension to new face of the franchise is calculated as part of the department's budget, reasoning that the aged stars before him need replacing lest they become infinitely cloned. Despite ultimately succeeding, the powers that be discover all too soon that their victory is pyrrhic: the universal soldiers will endlessly clone themselves anyways, a chain of self-perpetuating simulacra supplanting even their own chain of command.

Suffice to say, this film is fascinating to watch, discuss, and contemplate. It also features the protagonist hitting somebody in the face so hard with a baseball bat their head explodes. Saying that it merits more attention is an understatement, it serves as the ultimate reminder that Hollywood need not merely reheat their leftovers, regardless of the size and scope of the projects they deem worthy of resurrection.

part four

actress in time layers

Nobuhiko Obayashi's life can, broadly, be divided into three parts. As a child, he was raised on the pastoral coasts of Onomichi, located in the Hiroshima prefecture, in the 1940s. Watching disinterestedly as war began to brew in the distance and his teachings became increasingly focused on the virtues of dying for your country: his father enlisted, in fact, and returned to a child whose life was forever changed. Not all of Obayashi's friends survived the bomb, and he carried that with him as he began to pursue higher education a decade later. Despite his scars, he quickly carved out a niche in the burgeoning world of television advertisements, bringing to bear a quirky, pop-art sensibility that charmed audiences and executives alike.

In a western retrospective's eye, however, Obayashi's life truly started in 1977, with the release of *House*. His commercial work served him well, lending his directorial debut an overwhelming energy and freewheeling, pervasive experimentation. No scene in it looks or feels the same, and to give a coherent plot summary is impossible. Critics despised it and young people adored it, generating Toho a modest summer sum at the box office. Obayashi parleyed its success into a lengthy career, helming thirty-nine movies before his passing in April 2020. Every single one of them deserves a cult following, modern-day remasters, and critical examination and discussion. *House* has begun to enter that sphere, but the rest of his oeuvre remains intensely obscure in the West**** (how the hell can one movie of his get a Criterion remaster and not a single other one is even on Amazon Prime?).

His style, while continually unafraid of twisting and turning and surprising, is most immediately memorable for his use of greenscreen and bluescreen. Even back in 1977, well before the advent of digital photography and CGI, he endlessly composited frames together. In an [interview conducted in 2019](#), he sheds further light on this: by combining his shots in post, he creates films that look towards tomorrow infinitely more than one static shot on location. In editing his movies, he states, "a new reality arises from using footage from last year in the compositing process today. In my films, I connect frames, rather than shots."



This style pairs perfectly with the tone of his films: ever-looking towards tomorrow, he focuses on movies that blend past, present, and future, invariably starring or centering around youth. Stitching together a patchwork reality, his films evoke whimsy and terror equally as well as they feel like a memory or a dream. Never afraid to flaunt the magic of filmmaking, every verb in the cinematography world gets hurled at the viewer in disorienting succession and combination. The crew making *House* had no idea what half of its shots would look like prior to editing, and the inventive use of special effects had a major role in it - some deliberately hokey, others simply so strange that nobody could guess how it would turn out. (My favorite is one near the end of the film, where to convey that somebody is being dissolved they were placed on a bluescreen and had their body painted over with blue paint.)

Hanagatami, his penultimate film, feels the ultimate culmination of his career in almost every regard. Prior to even *House*, he wanted to adapt this novel, but was never able to secure funding for it. As his career continued to grow and evolve, he always gunned for it, until he finally was able to embark on filming after forty years. At this point, however, he had been diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer; given four months to live, he decided to push onwards anyways. In the middle of chemotherapy, he shot on location in forty different places, proceeding to then take a year of editing and stitching in order to bring to life visions he'd had for half his time alive.

The heartrending real-life subtext of the film, pushing himself to his limits to make this thing he cared so deeply for, is felt in the film itself. Almost three hours in length, it's as ambitious as anything else in his oeuvre. The politics of the film, of innocence broken in the light of looming war, are baked into the core of his filmmaking yet have never been quite so present in the text itself. Interestingly, *Hanagatami's* script served as the foundation for *House* as well, and this serves to make the intent even clearer.

House's anarchic comedy is founded in a core tragedy: the scars of the past are impossible to understand by a new generation whose only exposure to its horrors in fiction and clinical history - footage of the atom bomb is compared lightheartedly to cotton candy by one of its main characters. War exists on the periphery of *House*, almost imperceptible unless one knows firsthand of its effects. It is not a film about the war, but it is a film about remembering the war - and asking if it's possible to remember it so far removed from the present day.

Hanagatami uses forty years of stylistic evolution to make a film so removed from Obayashi's first that these parallels only arise in retrospective; its initial framing as actually taking place in the war slowly changes as the film goes on, corrupting and falling away as one's own memory fades. An eighty-year old man remembering the past is different from a thirty-nine year old remembering the past, and that's markedly different from a nine-year old's recollection of events.

The stitched sets, green seams and shadows flickering, make clear that this is muddled, false. These neon-tinted memories create impossible architecture, vistas separated by as many miles as years, characters fading in and out of the spotlight as they shuffle in and out of the viewer's life.

“When you re-watch [*Grave of the Fireflies*] today, you understand very well that it is a story set after the war. It's not set during the war. It's a story of remembering the war, after the war. *Grave of the Fireflies* is a story of a brother's egoism that killed his little sister. That's what Takahata meant to express, but everyone read the film as a movie about a brother trying his best

to save his little sister. Takahata used to always say that “I did not intend to make such an righteous film.” My generation understands this very well.”

part five

you are the blood



These films especially merit discussion and consideration in the current filmmaking climate that Hollywood finds itself in. Many film fanatics bemoan the death of practical effects, and it's hard to find fault in that sentiment when the presentation of so many modern major movies feels as if it offloads artistry onto the backs of underpaid workers - did you know that *Life of Pi*'s visual effects firm, despite winning an Oscar for their work on February 23rd, 2013, the studio had laid off two hundred and thirty-eight involved twelve days prior?

But, like, is that *really* the same problem as the existence of CGI and greenscreen? Is it impossible to make movies that look good directly because of their compositions? Obayashi certainly thinks so. Sure, he absolutely goes the extra mile and shoots on location rather than simply recreating it all on a sound stage, but the issue isn't that CGI is overtaking practical effects - it's that practicality itself is at a premium, with mise-en-scene, staging, and the spaces the actors find themselves in being determined in post.

Space Jam 2's crowds, instead of feeling charmingly artificial, feel barren and lifeless. The characters are there not for the sake of a gag, nor plot relevance, nor aesthetic concerns. Their role is to be present for the sake of being present, because there was no heart behind the decision.

Universal Soldier: Regeneration and *Universal Soldier: Day of Reckoning* utilized their intellectual properties in a meaningful modernization: unafraid to homage not only prior *Universal Soldier* entries but a tapestry of horror, action, and thriller ranging far and wide, the films are still unmistakably their own. Understanding the beating heart of their inspirations belies the finest and most inspiring motivation of *Universal Soldier*'s modern films: if audiences are watching something new, it's because it offers something new.

Understanding what came before and transforming it into new shapes and forms, showing the scars of old moving in taut new ways, is the knife's edge that all remakes, reboots, soft sequels, prequels, and every other facile term now-commonplace in cinema must walk along. *Space Jam 2* cares not for this. To be considerate and delicate would risk reducing the number of cameos and crossovers present - having a heart and soul is hard work, sometimes!

Space Jam 2 does not tire me for the presence of intellectual property. *Space Jam 2* does not disgust me for the presence of CGI and greenscreen and cheap costumes. *Space Jam 2*, instead, fills me with a nigh-dysphoria - not the gender kind that is most commonly used in most online of the term. To watch *Space Jam 2* is to feel a certain inability to put your fears to words, to long for something you can't define, to know that *something* is missing despite all the pieces supposedly being there.

Cinema is, at its heart, irrepressibly human. It stands out compared to other mediums in its ability to spend time so close to the real people it depicts - theatre may allow more spontaneity, but at an arm's length. The existence of editing allows one to strengthen the connections to the world around their shots - video games may allow more vicarious connection to their protagonists, but the act of controlling a character forces a specific type of PoV and cinematic framing in all but the most experimental games. To watch a movie, good or bad, is to see the bits of crackling intentionality and humanity that gleam through the camera, editing bay, foley work, costumes, sets, and every other thing emblazoned on every inch of celluloid.

Space Jam 2 unnerves in its ruthless extermination of humanity. Nothing in it matters, and nothing in it lives or dies. No actor wants to be onscreen for a second longer than they must, no writer allowing an inch of personality to intrude on the proceedings. It posits that Warner Bros. generates ideas based on naught but algorithm, and the way that its production slots into a defined place with a defined cast in defined roles adds credence despite it all.

The death of art is not from any one technique that the world deems to be passé, nor is it from audiences having taste different from any given author or creator's. Art dies when it being art was never part of the equation.

THE END.



* the prior scenes with the Tunes were almost certainly also digitally animated and had computer-generated post-processing, however it's tedious to say "three-dimensional cgi" to clarify every single time; i'll just say CGI and we all know what i'm intending, right?

** the most recent, for the record, was Frozen in 2014. the *actual* most recent was actually 2020 with Demon Slayer: Mugen Train, but that's an extremely weird case since even though it's not a sequel to another *movie* it's related to a television series, as well as taking place in probably the single weirdest box office year in history. to include it here would be dishonest.

*** i was actually originally going to go for alliteration with 'apocalypse now' but it turns out that in thirty years of acting *van damme has literally never been in a single thing whose title starts with 'a'*. bust that out at the next party you go to and watch every single person in a five hundred foot radius dry up immediately.

**** in the time since the patreon draft of this went up and the final release, an incredibly sexy and powerful person on twitter created a mega.nz archive of all of his movies that are harder to find. please, please, please take advantage of one of cinema's greatest auteurs having the majority of their oeuvre accessible in one place while you can, i have no idea how long a resource as this will stay up. <https://mega.nz/folder/ewpk0A5L#cpF7XHtpdbvh33rNazJpxw>