

It's The End Of The World As We Know It: *Eli, Eli, Lema Sabachtani?* and Japanese Cinema's Rock'n'Roll Apocalypse

Anthony Carew, critic at large

Eli, Eli, Lema Sabachtani? 2005. Directed by Shinji Aoyama. 107 minutes.

From World War II to the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, Japan has, more than any other country, experienced nuclear horrors first-hand. It is no surprise, then, that so many Japanese films have dealt with the fallout, both literal and figurative, from these nuclear scares. From Godzilla and his coterie of kaiju pals – titanic figures still being sequelised at home and abroad – through *Nausicaä of The Valley of The Wind* (Hayao Miyakazi, 1984), *Akira* (Katsuhiro Otomo, 1988), and *Battle Royale* (Kinji Fukasaku, 2000), some of cinema's most famous exemplars and vivid visions of apocalyptic environments and ecological horrors have come from the Land of the Rising Sun.

There is such a robust corpus of Japanese films confronting Armageddon that you can mine specific thematic seams, like: the power of rock'n'roll in confronting a great apocalyptic cataclysm. In the madcap, timeframe-hopping *Fish Story* (Yoshihiro Nakamura, 2009), the only way to stave off an extinction-level event might be the old recordings of the titular (and fictional) '70s punk band. In the bonkers, B-movie-inspired *Wild Zero* (Tetsuro Takeuchi, 1999), a combination alien invasion/zombie infestation is fought off by the real-life garage-rock trio Guitar Wolf. In *We Are Little Zombies* (Makoto Nagahisa, 2019), a quartet of orphans forms the titular chiptune band – in a junkyard, surrounded by the homeless – as a way of saving them from the mindless zombification, and alienation, of contemporary Japanese society. And *Eli, Eli, Lema Sabachtani?* (Shinji Aoyama, 2005; sometimes titled, in translation, as *My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?*) takes place in a post-apocalyptic landscape, where the only cure for a deadly virus could be noise music.

Eli, Eli Lema Sabachtani? is set in a wasteland, where countless people have died due to Lemming Syndrome, 'a virus that makes its victims want to kill themselves'. Its 'A.D. 2015' was, at the time of its making, the distant future; ten years hence into an unknowable tomorrow. As 2015 itself came and went, this dystopian future did not come to bear, but watching Aoyama's film in 2020 is a changed experience. Here, once sci-fi notions – a global pandemic, streets eerily empty, those venturing out into the world doing

so with masks and attendant risk – now have a ring of familiarity, lending the story an unexpected air of prescience.

In a desolate Japanese seaside town, musicians Mizui (cult-movie hero Asano Tadanobu) and Asuhara (real-life noise musician Nakahara Masaya, who has recorded as Violent Onsen Geisha and Hair Sylistics) walk through the emptied landscape. They are looking for abandoned junk they can turn into sources of field-recorded sound, or use to build homemade instruments. Much of the film – and essentially all of its first act – finds Aoyama calmly chronicling the pair at work; repurposing, say, old electrical fans and lengths of tubing to create a multi-speed drone generator. For fans of outsider music and instrument-building, there is incredible charm to these scenes of improvisation and experimentation. You could even connect the spectacle to childhood play, and thus a return to a pre-adult state in the face of societal collapse and environmental horrors.

In turn, early assumptions by audiences are likely just that Mizui and Asuhara are fighting off boredom, killing time in the face of a run-amok contagion (like another on-screen musician, played by Anders Danielsen Lie, in Dominique Rocher's 2018 zombie comedy *The Night Eats The World*). But soon, their music is revealed to have played a part in their survival, and their experimentations seem more symbolic of scientists seeking a cure. Elderly Miyagi (Yasutaka Tsutsui, the novelist who wrote *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* and *Paprika*, which birthed two classic anime adaptations) and sleazy, gun-wielding Natsuishi (Masahiro Toda) forcibly persuade the musicians to use their musical powers to save the life of young, sullen, suicidal Hana (Aoi Miyakazi, previously seen in Aoyama's epic, Jim O'Rourke-inspired 2001 movie *Eureka*).

Though Hana is initially resistant, she soon submits to an experimental (musical) treatment, which is: being blindfolded and situating herself in the middle of a sound bath, blasting out of a circle amplifiers, high upon a verdant hilltop. The hows and whys of this cure are, of course, kept very vague. In the second act, we are told 'noise doesn't kill the virus, it feeds the virus', and no one knows why this 'works', like an inoculation. Aoyama stages this performance as his film's climax, the noise resounding loud over ten minutes of unbroken screen-time. The viewing experience is experiential: audiences, too, having to sit back and let the waves of noise wash over them, the music's lack of pop/classical structure echoing a film not particularly concerned with plot.

This finale could be dismissed as a rockist fantasy: Tadanobu, long hair blowing in the wind, shredding on his guitar amidst various speaker stacks (the suddenly-frenetic

cutting and use of effects also echoes music videos). But, submitting to the volume and force of this torrent of sound, as viewers, leads to real profundity, too.

In turn, *Eli, Eli Lema Sabachtani?* is an odd mix of tonality; a movie at once spooky and wonky, a work of narrative minimalism whose cinematic grandeur comes from the reverence it has for music, performance, and the sheer all-consuming sound of Japanese noise. Here, that sound's immensity, its fury, is equated to power; its art to humanity. And though movies like *Fish Story* and *Wild Zero* may be goofy, beneath their hijinks is unmistakable sincerity in their love of bands, records and musical lore.

When music is employed as something that can fight off the end of the world (as we know it), it scans as not just a shrine to the power of rock'n'roll, but the recognition of art – expressive acts that transcend time – as humankind's greatest creation, and greatest repudiation of mortality.