

One Liner

A lowly factory worker is delivered from a world of misery and discovers his destiny via an ancient object on the other side of the stars.

Synopsis

Senn is a line worker on Pyom, a world forgotten by even the corporation that owns it. Strange events begin to threaten his job, relationships and life. As his situation reaches a breaking point, an enigmatic alien creature appears. With Senn's sanity hanging in the balance, he and his lover, Kana, escorted by their alien host, journey light years away to the Polychronom - an ancient object that has apparently chosen Senn from across the universe. The group's only hope is for Senn to fulfill a mysterious purpose that may change the very nature of civilization.

The Film

In the fall of 2012, director Josh Feldman wondered “how hard is it to make a good movie?” Roughly a year later, the answer is his debut feature film, *Senn*. Shot in San Francisco and Sonoma County, on a nano-budget under \$15,000—this cerebral indie sci-fi feature explores what it means for a random anybody to be faced with bizarre, otherworldly challenges for which there are no clear choices or easy answers.

The original script, written by Feldman and his coproducer husband, Britton Watkins, tackles how eponymous Senn copes with bleak circumstances living under the heel of institutionalized injustice. North Korean three-generation prison camps were an inspiration and reference. How do the hopeless find hope? How do the downtrodden look beyond the circumstances into which they are born? What does it take to escape a doomed existence? How much courage does it take to face the ambiguous, the overwhelming?

Senn's mind-numbing existence is governed by stifling corporate rules—workers live in fear of being “delisted,” a fate as bad as death. Senn's best friend, Resh, copes with their toxic world by breaking the rules as often and as cunningly as possible. Tragically, they know there is a universe beyond theirs, but brutal corporate control makes it pointless to strive for.

When Senn begins to experience waking dreams that he doesn't understand he feels tested and starts to question his sanity. His lover Kana, who has had her family taken from her by the profit-driven whims of the planet's owners, worries that she may lose Senn too.

The stakes are personal, but become profound as an ancient, alien intelligence reveals that Senn's life is of cosmic importance, and that he is destined to help reweave the fabric of civilization.

The Director

Josh Feldman is a designer and filmmaker. He's a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, and has been profiled in the New York Times and recognized by Wired Magazine for his filmmaking. This is his first feature film.

Q&A with the Filmmakers

There are a lot of ideas in this movie. Which ones are most important to you?

Feldman: The mere existence of a state like North Korea; Chinese factory workers that don't understand the objects they're making; individuals having everything they've been taught contradicted; worldview formation, destruction; people who question everything vs. those who question nothing; the randomness of the universe; understanding or not understanding cultures that aren't our own: they're all perplexing, and I grapple with understanding them in my everyday life.

In general though, the movie explores how individuals navigate the world they're born into, and the choices that have been made for them.

Watkins: I'd like to add that it was challenging for us—living in a comparatively free, 21st century California—to imagine exactly what it would mean to be born and raised on Pyom. It's an environment akin to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The corporation that owns Pyom is too indifferent to its "employees" to even police them, but if they discover anyone causing a problem—they're happy to brainwash him or her for it. Senn, Kana, and Resh are also unprotected from the collateral environmental devastation of their world. How would you motivate yourself in that kind of place? How would it affect relationships? Would a person trapped on that world imagine escaping, or would that slim hope be too painful? It's easier to ponder than to answer.

You'll also note references to insects. I've always found the question of whether "ants know that bees fly," fascinating. Humans, ants and bees are all eusocial; creatures for whom social lives and hierarchies are central. Still, while we share this key similarity, we are all radically different and pragmatically unaware of and indifferent to each others' presence. How can that be? What does that mean in the bigger picture of existence?

If we've accomplished what we set out to, our film will have become a cauldron of ideas and questions. Experiences of the film will vary by viewer, but are best experienced socially and repeatedly.

What do you think most sci-fi fans will find most interesting and enjoyable about your film?

Feldman: Hopefully they will be intrigued by the puzzles we've tried to present, be entertained by the humor, and think deeply about the ideas in the film. Will they come away changed? Or with their eyes and minds opened a bit wider? Who knows, but I can dream....

Senn is a very different kind of protagonist than we often see in a sci-fi movie, why?

Senn is more indifferent than most protagonists. The norm, especially in films with big budgets, is for the protagonist to be hell-bent on something within 20 minutes of the opening shot. That's not how most of us experience life. We're ambivalent, confused, disoriented, sometimes even clueless right up until the end. Life often isn't obvious, and so neither is this character, or film. A typical protagonist's highly ambitious, goal-driven behavior is inconceivable in a place like Pyom; the salient experience on Pyom is submission, numbness, smallness, artificiality. The experience Senn has would be bewildering to someone in his position; it's the only authentic way to write the movie.

The film has been widely praised for its cinematic artistry, how did you achieve that?

Feldman: My background is in graphic design, and I think the sense of balance, form, tone and white space that I try to bring to my graphic work inform and influence my filmmaking—how I set up a shot or plan out a sequence. We were also lucky that the state of DSLRs and digital tools has gotten to the point that cinema-level quality is possible with very inexpensive equipment.

Watkins: To my delight, Josh was a fan of the idea to create an authentic, bespoke language for Senn's world. The language that our characters ostensibly speak and the only one that the viewer sees on screen is a grammatically accurate “constructed language” with its own lexicon, syntax, etc. As texture in our film, it's similar to the Klingon language that I taught to Zoë Saldana and the other denizens of Kronos in JJ Abrams' *Star Trek Into Darkness*. Creating a language was a very inexpensive way to increase the production value and “sci-fi cred” of our film. Unlike a lot of low-budget films, and even some high-budget ones, the language of *Pyrom* is not just gibberish. We hope that adds to the authenticity of this world. Their written language is one of the “in-world systems” we established for the film. Consonants and vowels are written on different lines in their alphabet. So the corporate bureaucracy's reusable name plaque, used while taking badge photos, was designed to follow this in-world logic. Creating the language was a filmmaking experiment, but we think an interesting one. By doing it, we give everyone in the audience a taste of impenetrability. Hopefully it's fodder for inquisitive minds.

Josh, If your goal was just to make a good film on a tiny budget, why science fiction? The genre is increasingly defined by multimillion dollar tentpoles- and the giant robots and space battles those budgets make possible.

Feldman: I've always been drawn to science fiction - to me, the storytelling possibilities in sci-fi are more exciting, less limited. Although I enjoy big brash Hollywood movies as much as anyone, for me it's the story that's always the most important part of a film, and in a smaller, quieter piece there's more time and breathing room to use layered storytelling.

What were the biggest challenges you faced on the production? Shooting, post production, visual effects, etc.?

Feldman: Shooting a movie like this with basically no crew. At most on set there was a crew of myself, Britton and one other person—doing everything! We did end up bringing in people later to help with visual effects, which was a lifesaver. There was something satisfying about doing everything ourselves, but it also makes it ten times more grueling. I don't think we'll be doing that again.

Watkins: Not getting divorced. Let's just leave the rest of that story to the viewers' imaginations.

So, was your experiment successful? Did you make a good movie?

Feldman: I hope so!

Watkins: We like our movie. It's imperfect. It's an underdog. And, it's not for everyone, but this particular script and storytelling exercise could not have—*should* not have—made an “easier” movie. We set up the rules of the experiment and operated within those constraints. I'm proud of us for having accomplished that. We did it because we didn't know that we couldn't. I think Senn would approve, and that's good enough for me.



Credits

Director, Cowriter & Coproducer

Josh Feldman

Cowriter, Production Design & Coproducer

Britton Watkins

Assistant Director

Khalil Omer

Visual Effects

Andrew Knizek

Music

Cubosity

Cast

Senn **Zach Eulberg**

Kana **Lauren Taylor**

Resh **Taylor Lambert**

We **Wylie Herman**

Young Senn **Samuel James Moore**

Corporate Spokesman voiced by **Paul Frommer**

Purchasing Office **Brent Thorn**

Senn's Mother **Lauren Maurer**

Infant Senn **Arthur Dein**

Intake Nurse **Colombe Dein**

Resh's Mother **Pegi Walker**

Roommates **Ross Lai, Riley Davis**

Brainwash Victims **Judy Tuan, Lauren Maurer, Sebastian Wolff**

Security Guards **Orie Zaklad, Buddy Paulette, Steven Lang, Joel Karr**