The Flame

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FNAF 2 Review: Freddy's Unready (To Make A Good Movie)

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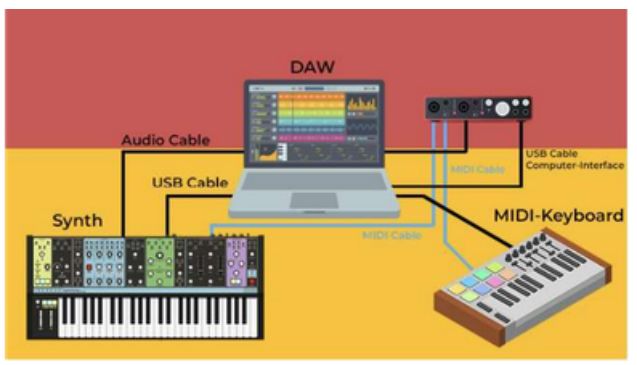

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One Banger After Another: Apple TV's Generational 2025 Shows

Joseph P. Brandon, Grade 11

Introduction

Tech companies. They make the things that we humans use so often that some of us actually hate them – but we still use them anyway, although that's an article for another time. Tech companies make all sorts of things, from phones, computers, phone computer tablet things, fridges and other appliances, but Apple is different. They don't make fridges – they make TV shows. They don't just make any old TV shows though, some of the best shows on TV right now have come straight from Apple TV (formerly Apple TV+, not really sure why that was a necessary change in the first place). This article will be an appreciation of the insane run that Apple TV went on in the year 2025 A.D.

The Studio

Hollywood loves to indulge in itself. There is possibly no other TV show that illustrates this better than The Studio, by Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg (Superbad, This Is The End). This show is absolutely full of cameos and fan-service to cinephiles everywhere, with some of the best cameos being Adam Scott (Parks and Recreation, Severance), Antony Starr (The Boys), Charli d'Amelio (TikTok), and Martin Scorsese (Almost every mob flick from the past century). It's not the most inventive concept: at its core, this show is about a bumbling studio exec and his day to day life as the head of the fictional Continental Studio. However, Rogen and Goldberg manage to put their own spin on every episode, putting the leads in situations like locating a lost reel of film, trying to figure out whether they accidentally made a racist cast for a movie, and getting Martin Scorsese to direct a film about Kool-Aid.

It's also greatly impressive from a technical aspect. Almost all of the scenes are shot in takes that are never shorter than about 30 seconds of continuous handheld camera. The most prominent example of this is the second episode, "The Oner", which chronicles attempts to shoot a 2-minute scene in a film while the episode is a oner itself. This means that the whole 27 minutes of it is one continuous take. When asked about the choice to do this, Seth Rogen had this to say:

"We were like, [the use of the oner] is actually gonna capture the panic and the mania, the compressed nature of the timelines and the stories, which a lot of the episodes have."

The script for this episode was a total of 40 pages long, with 10 pages being rehearsed for 7 hours and shot for 1 hour and 30 minutes every day for a total of four days. When asked about what it was like shooting the episode, Seth Rogen stated:

"I thought it was going to be too dark. The take we used, I think, was the very last time we did it. And it actually ended up working perfectly."

The show wouldn't be as good without the quality of the performances though. Seth Rogen leads as Matt Remick, a nervous guy who absolutely needs to be liked by everyone, from co-workers to celebrities. His co-stars include Ike Barinholtz (Disaster Movie), Kathryn Hahn (Knives Out 2), and Bryan Cranston (Breaking Bad). This show actually resulted in Rogen winning his very first Emmy award. In fact, The Studio pretty much dominated in terms of awards last year.

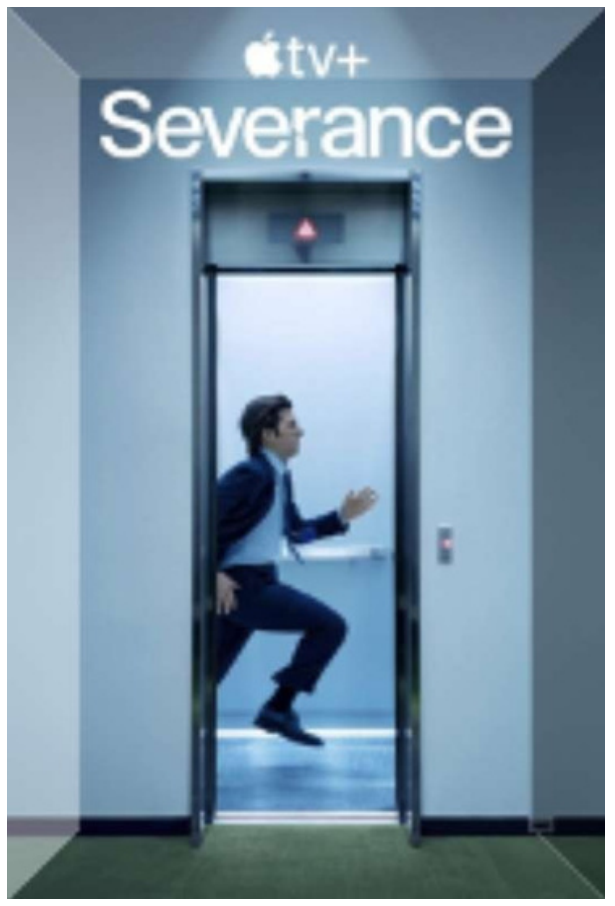
The Emmys

If you're not familiar with the Emmys, they're essentially the Academy Awards but for TV. Much like the Academy Awards, they're a really prestigious thing to receive, with only the best of the best being nominated each year. Every year, there's normally a show that wins a few more awards than all the others, think The Bear in 2023, but last year, The Studio won a lot more awards than all the others. It even broke the record for the most awarded comedy show ever, set by The Bear. Seth Rogen was awarded two Emmys for himself, one for lead acting, and one for directing the episode The Oner. However, the show as a whole won 13, after being nominated for 23 in total.

That's not to say that The Studio was the only good show at the Emmys last year. In fact, it wasn't even the most nominated show. After 7 Emmy nominations and not a single win in 2022, Ben Stiller and Dan Erickson had been working on the sophomore season of their thriller show Severance, starring Adam Scott, which ended up getting a whopping 27 nominations, of which it won 8.

Severance

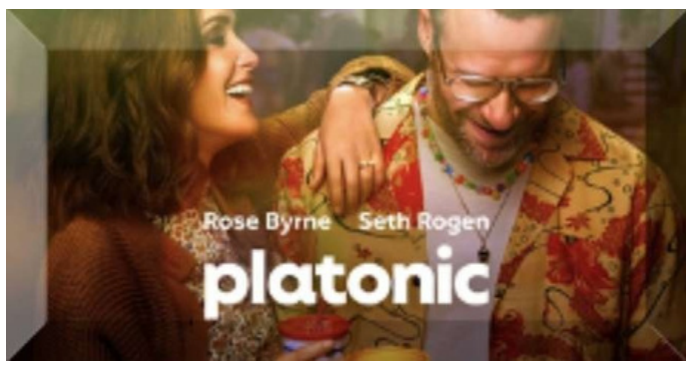
What if you didn't have to go to work? That's called unemployment. What if you were able to split your consciousness into your work self while you're at work, and your regular self when you aren't? That's the question that Dan Erickson sought to answer when he came up with the idea in 2015, with it being picked up by Ben Stiller and then greenlit for production in 2022. The backstory for the show is quite depressing though, as it was based on Dan Erickson's discontent for his dull office jobs, making him wish he could just skip through the whole thing.



The show is led by Adam Scott (who coincidentally has a cameo in The Studio) as depressed man Mark Scout in life, and devoted Lumon Industries employee Mark S at work. Scott does an incredible job of differentiating between his two characters, with each one having his own body mannerisms, style, and way of speaking. For every severed character though, Severance works as an impressive character study and example on how to effectively portray two characters. The supporting cast also includes Britt Lower as a disgruntled new hire, Zach Cherry as a foul-mouthed colleague, John Turturro as an innocent severed employee.

Much like most of the shows featured in this article, Severance is one of those shows that just gets better and better the more you watch it. In cases like The Studio, shows can get better simply because of improvements in writing, but in shows like Severance and the to-be-mentioned Pluribus, they get more entertaining and intriguing as you learn more about the mysterious worldbuilding of the show.

Platonic
In the interest of self-disclosure, I'll say that at the time of writing, I haven't watched Platonic's second season yet, but Platonic is honestly one of the less good shows in this article. That certainly isn't to say that it's a bad show, it's a decently fun cringe comedy sitcom with great performances by Rose Byrne (Two Hands) and Seth Rogen, but it's just dwarfed by the likes of The Studio and Severance. I think that this is because both of those shows have things that make them unique respectively. The Studio has its technical aspects, and Severance has its outlandishly creative concept. Not that those are the only things that make them great, but their concepts on their own are not grounded in reality, and are therefore vastly different from real life.



Platonic features Byrne and Rogen as two platonic best friends named Sylvia, a mother of 3, and Will, the brewmaster of a bar. The show (from what I've seen) sees them going about their daily lives, with the odd cringe occurrence every now and again that makes it a little hard to watch but even more fun (The Studio uses this same tactic).

Pluribus
Note: At time of writing, only a few episodes of Pluribus have aired, thus this segment is not fully informed.

When you hear the name Vince Gilligan, you either think "I don't know who that is", or you think "he made Breaking Bad and Better Call Saul". After his success with the Breaking Bad universe, Gilligan decided that he didn't want to write anti-heroes anymore. He chose to express this through his new show, featuring Rhea Seehorn as just a

flawed hero. It's a science fiction show in a very loose sense of the term. The kind of sense in which something science-fiction related happens at the beginning, and the rest of the show covers the characters navigating their new surroundings.

The marketing for the show was incredibly ambiguous, with the tagline reading just "Happiness is contagious", which leaves a very wide array of possibilities as to what the show could be about. It chronicles the journey of depressed fantasy author Carol being immune to a global virus which makes those infected with it relentlessly optimistic. This premise offers a very interesting dynamic between the flawed hero and her surroundings, begging the question: "What would a discontent person do if they were consistently surrounded by contentness?"

Conclusion
In conclusion, Apple makes good phones, but they also make good TV. This is reflected in the critical response to their shows, as all of these shows have a Rotten Tomatoes score between 90% and 100%. If I were to rank these shows in my personal opinion, the ranking would go like this:

1. Severance
2. The Studio
3. Pluribus
4. Platonic

Again, not to suggest that any of these are bad. If you're looking for something to watch, try out one of these shows and see what you think. My word isn't law, however I can confidently state that there is something to love in all of these shows.

The Cost of Convenience

Julian Danailov-Benguernane, Grade 9

It's 7 a.m. in Hanoi. Motorbikes zip past street vendors, rivers of commuters, and tourists snapping photos of the Old Quarter. Minh, a 34-year-old Grab driver, navigates the chaos with practiced skill. Three years ago, he was stuck in a low-paying cafe job. Today, his phone is both a lifeline and taskmaster, buzzing with ride requests and food deliveries.

At first glance, Minh's job seems flexible, even empowering. Grab promises you autonomy; you log in when you want, work how you want. But when digging deeper, and a more complicated picture emerges: for drivers like Minh, freedom comes at a cost.

"I can choose my hours," he says. "But the app decides which orders I get. If I don't take enough high-paying trips, I don't earn enough. The rules are invisible, but they control everything."

Minh's experience mirrors the reality of millions of gig workers across Southeast Asia. Grab dominates ride-hailing in Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and beyond, and its app-based model is emblematic of the region's growing digital economy. Yet the same platforms that promise opportunity often deliver precarity, long hours, and insufficient protections.

Consider Minh's daily routine: he logs 12–14 hours on his motorbike, weaving through Hanoi's traffic, delivering meals and passengers alike. On a good day, he earns around $30–35. Fuel, repairs, and commissions to Grab can eat up a third of that. Accidents are a constant threat. Health coverage is limited, and there is no guaranteed minimum income.

Grab drivers across Southeast Asia report similar struggles. A 2023 survey by the Asian Development Bank found that 60% of ride-hailing drivers in Vietnam and Indonesia earn less than $400 per month after expenses, and nearly half cited exhaustion or poor health as a major concern. Platforms like Grab provide opportunity, but also exposure to the volatility of gig work.

Yet Minh's story also shows the upside. He can support his family, pay his younger brother's tuition, and save for a motorbike upgrade. He is part of an economic ecosystem that allows small vendors, restaurants, and street stalls to survive and grow. Grab's logistics network creates visibility and reach that would be impossible for a small business otherwise.

An example is Lan, a bánh mì vendor near Hoan Kiem Lake. Through Grab, her stall reaches hundreds of customers daily. But every order comes with a commission; often 20–25% of the sale. "Without Grab, I wouldn't really have any sales," she says. "But it also takes a big big part of my money." This dynamic access and dependency, is emblematic of the platform economy.

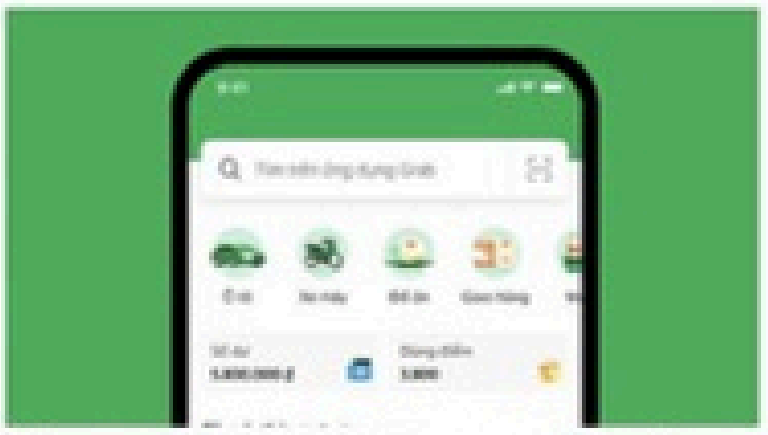
It raises a question: are gig workers like Minh truly empowered, or are they trading security for flexibility? In some ways, Grab formalizes informal work. Drivers are tracked, earnings are logged, and payment is digital. But this formalization is incomplete. Social protections, labor rights, and collective bargaining remain limited. Algorithms mediate opportunity and risk, creating dependence that is invisible yet pervasive.

Regional differences complicate the bigger picture. Singapore offers stricter labor regulations and some insurance requirements for drivers. In contrast, Vietnam and Indonesia are still developing frameworks for gig work. Drivers in these countries navigate both digital and regulatory uncertainty. Minh describes the balance vividly:

"The government says they want to protect people like me," he explains. "But when something goes wrong, it's for us to figure out."

Grab also influences social norms and expectations. Consumers have come to rely on instant delivery, and urban life increasingly revolves around convenience. For drivers, this means intense peak-hour demand, long shifts, and constant pressure from both the algorithm and customers. The social promise of gig work, flexibility, autonomy can often masks the physical, economic, and emotional toll.

And yet, there's a paradox. Platforms like Grab enable social mobility. Minh's earnings, while modest, allow him to support his family in ways he couldn't before. The app gives him a seat at a digital table that was previously closed to informal workers. For young Southeast Asians, it represents opportunity. But for the older generation of workers or those unable to adapt to digital tools, the same platforms can also deepen inequality.



I'd argue this tension, between opportunity and precarity, is the real story of Grab and the gig economy in Southeast Asia. Minh's life shows both sides: the empowerment of income and mobility, and the invisible labor pressures that digital platforms extract. He is neither a hero nor a victim, but he is a participant in a system that is larger than any single person, shaped by technology, policy, and social expectation.

Grab's expansion into financial services, grocery delivery, and logistics adds another layer. Each new service increases earning potential for drivers but also intensifies reliance on the platform. Workers become both the enablers and the consumers of the system, tethered to an ecosystem that offers growth while perpetuating vulnerability.

By late afternoon, Minh has completed dozens of deliveries. Sweat drips down his forehead, and his back aches from hours on a motorbike. Yet he pauses at Hoan Kiem Lake, looking at the tourists and locals mingling around the water. "I love this city," he says. "It's messy, loud, sometimes hard, but it's also full of life. And I get to be a part of it every day."

His words stay, but they also serve as a reminder that Grab is more than just an app. It is a digital labor engine changing lives, economies, and urban landscapes across Southeast Asia. Drivers like Minh navigate the line between empowerment and exploitation, shaping the future of work in real time.

For policymakers, the challenge is clear. To ensure that platform growth does not come at the expense of human well-being. Social protections, fair wages, insurance, and regulation must catch up to the rapid pace of technology. For consumers, it's worth asking: every convenience comes with a human cost. And for the drivers themselves, the future is uncertain, but their work is undeniable proof of adaptability, resilience, and the human desire for opportunity.

It might seem trivial. A ride, a meal, a few clicks on an app, but in the streets of Hanoi, the story of one driver reveals the bigger picture: the gig economy in Southeast Asia is a story of digital empowerment shadowed by invisible labor struggles. Minh carries it on his back, day after day, offering a view into the promises and pitfalls of platform capitalism in the 21st century.

All images are from Getty Images, Educative Use Only

Are MIDI Musicians Real Musicians? and the Evolution of Music

Leyla Shah, Grade 9

A Bit of History...

The world of music has seen an extensive amount of controversy, from strange lyrics to celebrity scandals, old and new. This is because music is always adapting, always developing and advancing to fit in a world that switches gears like a bike. The evolution of Music has 4 main key points in history. The first one, ancient and early music, has a long history. Evidence suggests that it probably existed for as long as humanity itself, instruments dating back to the Upper Paleolithic Era (about 40,000 years ago), like bone flutes found in Germany. Not to mention vocalization that researchers believe could possibly date back to 400,000 years ago. The second key point follows the emergence of written musical notation (around 1040 CE) and the Medieval Era, with the development of more polyphonic music in the Renaissance and Baroque Period. The 20th century saw the third point that brought a huge musical expansion of style, artist, and before that was the classical and romantic musical eras (think symphonies and sonatas).

The fourth main point was the rise of the digital era. Around the mid 20th century, conceptual foundations were set up by early experimenters and sound analysts looking at synthesis and electronic music through seemingly old and mundane looping systems like tape recorders and generators. Famous musicians and producers include Edgard Varèse, Pierre Schaeffer, and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Things began to pick up pace a bit in the late 1970s-1980s with the transition to commercial digital music and CDs (Compact Discs), made through digital recording systems. The 1980s saw the development of MP3 for audio data compression (Karlheinz Brandenburg, a German electrical engineer, was one of the primary people who drove this development). Widespread adoption from the consumer side of the digital age of music gained momentum with the internet, legal digital download platforms (Apple iTunes, 2003), and later streaming services like Spotify and Apple Music.

All of these eras are notable and separate from each other because they were shaped by their surroundings.

Changes in music are correlated to changes in the world.

I use the term "world" very generally here. The creation of Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) brought recording software and online, computer based music studios that allow artists to record, edit, and mix music from their own computers!

Musical formatting like MP3 and AAC efficiently compressed and stored the sound, allowing for easier sharing and portability for devices. The internet became the primary conduit for musical distribution and led to shifts in music platform models economically. All of this lets listeners gain access to hundreds of millions of songs and let artists reach global audiences (without a major record label).

And yes. There are drawbacks, and most notably is the emphasis on profitable music. Generally in MP3 storage, the sound optimizes space via compression over the quality of the sound, a cheat for profit. The market saturation and competition with algorithm dependence (especially when artists depend on social media to promote their music) tends to be toxic in ways that reduce the music to its creator or its platform or the latest social media trend. There is also something deeper, a more sentimental loss, when the physical sense of music (vinyls, tapes, tangible products) fades into files online.

But all of this is a response to let music continue to build in a world heavily influenced by technological advancement. It is as evolution has it; music is not a linear process.

What is MIDI?

MIDI is a fancy acronym for Musical Instrument Digital Interface, which is a fancy term for the communicative system between electronic musical instruments (like synthesizers), computers, samplers, and other devices. This link is not an audio, but rather provides data like pitch, velocity, and note tempo. It's a control system that allows musicians to produce music, record performances, and re-record audio.

Thorough MIDI setup (keyboard, computer, analog synthesizer) - From an article by Eloy Caudet

MIDI can meticulously focus on the structure and texture of the music, controlling every aspect of the sound, from the tone to the pitch to the dynamics to the duration and velocity of a single drum beat.

Who are MIDI Musicians?

"MIDI Musician" is a very loose and halfway inaccurate term.
MIDI musicians are not a single, distinct type of musician in the general sense of playing an instrument. They are a diverse range of producers, composers, instrumentalists, and electronic artists, who use MIDI as their primary tool to create music. The most common association is electronic music producers (think EDM, Hip-Hop, Pop), who tend to use DAWs to create synth lines, sequence beats, sample sounds, arranging and mixing entire tracks electronically. However, movie and gamemakers often use MIDI for the modern scoring of their films and games. Sometimes they will create full orchestral tracks solely on DAWs, and sometimes they will record the performance and then edit it using MIDI. Other studio musicians and session players often will connect their physical instruments to MIDI systems during a recording session. For example, a keyboardist might layer several different synth loops for a single take. Even live performers use MIDI in real-time performances! They could use MIDI foot controllers to switch guitar effects or sync the lighting in time with the music.

Solo artists tend to use loop pedals to give a larger harmonic effect. In this sense, a "MIDI musician" is simply a musician who uses digital tools to create expression and don multiple roles from a traditional composer to a sound engineer.

What does all of this mean?

It means that MIDI musicians combine a high degree of musical knowledge and artistry in order to create music that can blur the boundaries between composition and production. They use complex skills of technical arrangement and experimentation to design sound, and they are able to do this because of technological evolution in the industry. MIDI software is a tool used so much in musical production today to give musicians an audience. Even in a musical world that seems so different from the past, music would not have any significance without people. People listen, people create music, people build connections through music, and then we can realize that sometimes you can be the musician and the audience at the same time. That hasn't changed throughout history, and it (maybe) won't change in the future.

Chainsaw Man Movie - Reze Arc: A Review

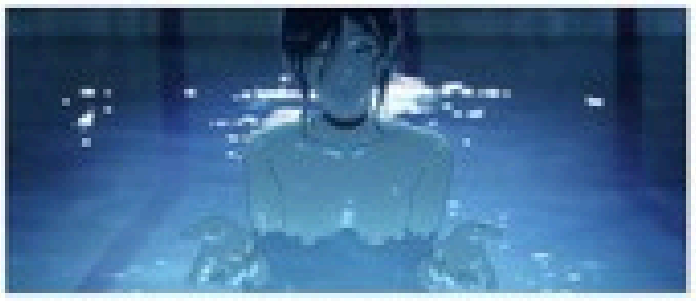
Damiano Piro, Grade 11

Official Chainsaw Man Movie - Reze Arc poster.

Release Day

September 26th, 2025 was a big day for anime fans in Vietnam. The long-awaited Chainsaw-Man Movie: Reze-Arc has finally arrived. A continuation from the on-going manga and anime series Chainsaw Man by Tatsuki Fujimoto. The movie rolled out its global release on September 24th, 2025 and on October 29th, 2025 for the U.S. A movie where anime fans across the world heavily mark these days on their calendar as one of the hottest anime shows, Chainsaw Man, made a huge return with a masterpiece of animation that fans around the world highly praise. A movie which screams passion for anime fans worldwide that love such a powerful story being told through the lens of Japanese animation.

The original manga story follows a teenage boy named Denji, who is impoverished as he decides to merge into a Chainsaw Dog (Pochia) after being betrayed. Eventually, he gets scouted and found by the Public Safety division, which is an organization that hunts "devils" in the world in order to exterminate the most dangerous ones that exist.



Reze in the pool with Denji. "I can't live, so I'll teach you how to swim" - Reze

Movie Synopsis

The movie picks up from the continuation of the first season of the show, where Denji meets a girl named "Reze" as he is trying to look for romance in his life. Reze is presented as a normal cafe worker in Tokyo as initially, Reze had feelings for Denji as she really liked him and his personality. However as the movie progresses, Reze is revealed to be a devil where she has a mission to kill and steal "Denji's heart", which ultimately turns this into a big battle between Denji and Reze, the centre-piece of the movie where it leads to a big clash between humans and devils. The movie explores in depth themes of Life, Survival, Love and Freedom.

Visuals and Animation

The Chainsaw Man Movie: Reze Arc was animated by Studio MAPPA, most notably known for animating the final season of one of the most popular shows of all time: Attack on Titan by Hajime Isayama. The movie had delivered arguably some of the best animation anime fans have seen in a very long time. All of the characters in the show were animated in a way to really immerse the audience and anime fans alike into the world of Chainsaw Man. The texture, colors, visuals, music, sound effects all augment into one unforgettable movie experience that has lead to great astonishment and praise from myself and the world.

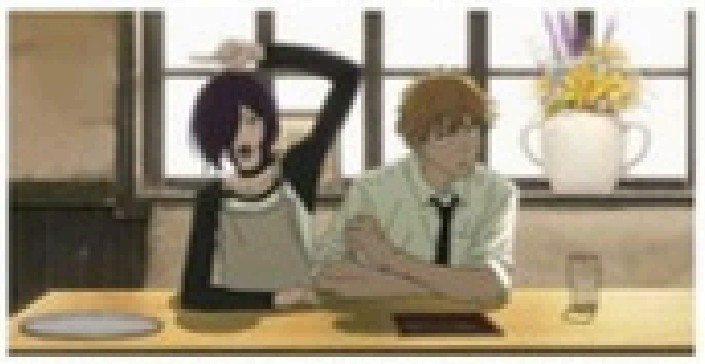
One notable scene where the animation showed its best in class was the famous fight between Denji vs Reze. The fight is the climax of the film where the animation studio took its time to animate one of the best animated fight scenes for the anime industry in recent years. The main centre-piece animation comes from when Reze and Denji clash. Both Denji and Reze's powers have been animated in a way that has impressed millions of viewers around the world. From Reze's Bomb devil power to Denji's Chainsaw, it was a fight that will be remembered for a very long time with the intense, violent and brilliant animation.

Denji during the final battle against Reze.

Denji and Reze prepare for a huge clash in the final battle.

Character Complexity & Impact

The movie explores the significant relationship between Denji and Reze. Denji's character and role in the film explores how he wants to find love in his life and his desire to live a normal life in the world. The movie highlights the emotional and intense interactions that Denji and Reze has. Through meeting at a cafe, to swimming in a pool together, both characters earlier in the movie looked to have developed feelings for each other.. Reze however, tries to take advantage of Denji's struggles as initially, she is really kind to Denji. She praises him a lot and tells him that she would want to "date" or "love" him. Denji and Reze get along with each other very well in the beginning of the film, and even Denji saw Reze as a girl that he can love or like. The dynamic and relationship of both characters develop further throughout the film as it progresses. It eventually leads to an ultimate final battle between the two, setting up for a complex and emotional ending of the film for anime fans and viewers alike.



Denji and Reze both at a café together during the early scenes in the movie.

Conclusion

All in All, The Chainsaw Man Movie: Reze Arc was an unforgettable masterpiece movie that was created by Studio MAPPA. Through the very strong, emotional and powerful character complexity and development of Denji & Reze throughout the film, to absolute stunning world-class visuals n the final battle between the two characters in the clash of Denji and Reze , sound effects, coloring, catchy soundtracks and great music (IRIS OUT by Kenshi Yonezu, the movie theme and JANE DOE by Utada Hikaru & Kenshi Yonezu (ending). The movie leaves the anime world with a masterpiece that leaves many lovers of Chainsaw Man and anime in general a highly recommended watch as it is one of the hottest movies in recent times. 10/10 recommendation for anime lovers alike. All eyes now turn towards the Chainsaw Man Season 2, where it is highly anticipated for anime fans worldwide as Denji's story still continues.

Reviewing Mother (2009), a timeless east asian thriller

Duc An Tom, Grade 11

Mother (2009) is a gripping South Korean psychological thriller directed by Bong Joon-ho, a filmmaker renowned for his ability to blend genre filmmaking with sharp social commentary. While Bong Joon-ho is often celebrated internationally for his later works, Mother stands as one of his most intimate, unsettling, and emotionally devastating films still.

At the center of the film is a middle-aged woman played by Kim Hye-ja, whose performance anchors the entire narrative. She portrays a quiet herbalist and acupuncturist living in a small provincial town, scraping together a modest living while caring for her intellectually disabled son, Do-joon. Her life appears small and restrained on the surface, defined by routine, isolation, and social invisibility. Yet beneath this reserved exterior lies a fierce, almost terrifying determination to protect the one person she loves above all else.

Do-joon, portrayed by Won Bin, is emotionally volatile, naive, and vulnerable. His tendency to act impulsively and his difficulty navigating social situations make him an easy target in a community eager for a scapegoat. When a local teenage schoolgirl is brutally murdered, suspicion quickly falls on him. With flimsy evidence and little resistance, the police arrest Do-joon, content to close the case swiftly rather than pursue the truth.

As lawyers and law enforcement dismiss her concerns, Do-joon's mother takes matters into her own hands. What begins as a desperate attempt to clear her son's name slowly transforms into something darker and more unsettling. Bong Joon-ho refuses to frame her simply as a heroic figure. Instead, he forces the audience to confront uncomfortable questions: What happens when love becomes obsession? Where is the line between protection and moral collapse? And how far is too far when defending amily?

The film opens with one of the most haunting sequences in modern Korean cinema. In an open field, the mother dances alone to a flamenco-inspired soundtrack, her movements slow, awkward, and deeply unsettling. At moments, she covers her eyes and mouth in gestures that evoke grief, shame, and horror yet she continues to dance. This surreal opening sets the emotional tone of the film perfectly. It is both beautiful and disturbing, foreshadowing the emotional contradictions that define the story: tenderness coexisting with violence, love intertwined with guilt.

Visually, Bong Joon-ho directs with surgical precision. Every frame feels deliberate, turning an unremarkable rural town into a suffocating environment filled with secrets, rumors, and unspoken judgments. Narrow alleyways, cramped interiors, and long silences heighten the tension, making the audience feel trapped alongside the mother. The pacing is deliberate, almost deceptive, lulling viewers into a false sense of familiarity before pulling the rug out from under them.

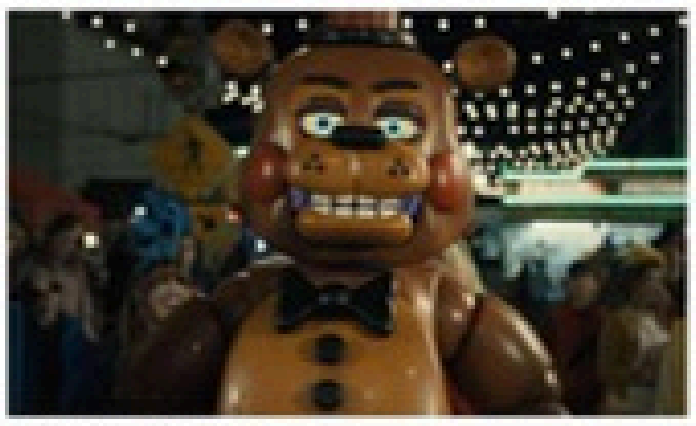
Bong Joon-ho subverts expectations repeatedly, refusing to give the audience easy answers or moral comfort. Just when the story seems to settle into familiar thriller territory, it veers sharply into psychological horror. More than fifteen years after its release, Mother remains one of Bong Joon-ho's most powerful and emotionally resonant films. While it may not have the global cultural footprint of Parasite or the procedural intensity of Memories of Murder, it stands proudly alongside them as a masterclass in tension, character study, and moral ambiguity.

If Parasite introduced you to Bong Joon-ho's brilliance, Mother reveals his depth. It is a film that lingers long after the credits roll, forcing you to sit with its final moments and question your own assumptions about love, justice, and innocence. The disturbing, heartbreaking, and unforgettableMother is an essential watch and a testament to Bong Joon-ho at the height of his powers.

10/10.

FNAF 2 Review: Freddy's Unready (to make a good movie)

Thomas Hughes, Grade 12



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Longtime readers of the Flame (as in whoever was reading back in 2024) may recall my two-part dive into the history of video game movie adaptations. As fun as it would be to do a Part 3 following up on the conclusion to see if my prediction of the "video game movie curse" dying out bore fruit, I don't think there's been enough new video game movies released since that article to make anything sufficient yet. For today's review I want to instead follow up on one movie in particular that I mentioned. At the beginning of that series I briefly touched upon the Five Nights at Freddy's film (based on the horror game series created by Scott Cawthon), my main inspiration for the article (even though in hindsight it barely factored into either part). Two years later and on December 5, 2025, the hotly anticipated sequel to the Five Nights at Freddy's film premiered in the wake of an extensive months-long hype campaign. Set around a year after the first film's story, this one follows the aftermath of the first film's traumatic events and the horrors surrounding Freddy Fazbear's Pizza: not only have resurfaced rumors of haunted animatronics gripped the local town in a Fazbear frenzy, but a whole slew of animatronics from the original restaurant escape to wreak havoc, under the control of the vengeful spirit of a serial killer's victim. SPOILERS AHEAD. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.

Before I get into discussing the film, I think it's important to divide my judgment on it into two camps: judging it as a film overall, and as a Five Nights at Freddy's film specifically. Because, to give away my overall judgement of this movie before I even give my criticisms, from the perspective of judging it as a film with a plot and characters it is laughably bad. But through the lens of it as a Five Nights at Freddy's film, aside from a few rather iffy points it's a sigh of relief for certain (if you know the track record of video game movie adaptations). I'll try to avoid leaning towards that side of things in this review, as I am aware most readers of the Flame are probably not dedicated fans of this franchise, but it will make its way into some of my judgments on this film.

Moving onto, y'know, actually talking about the film, I want to start off with my problems with it. Because despite my relatively neutral tone thus far, I think this film has major flaws on multiple levels. The biggest overarching issue is the plot... or, lack thereof. Because aside from a couple narrative throughlines, this film doesn't have a plot so much as it has generally sequential scenes that lead into each other but otherwise serve no real purpose to actually progressing the story forward, all while playing hopscotch with a minefield of plot holes.

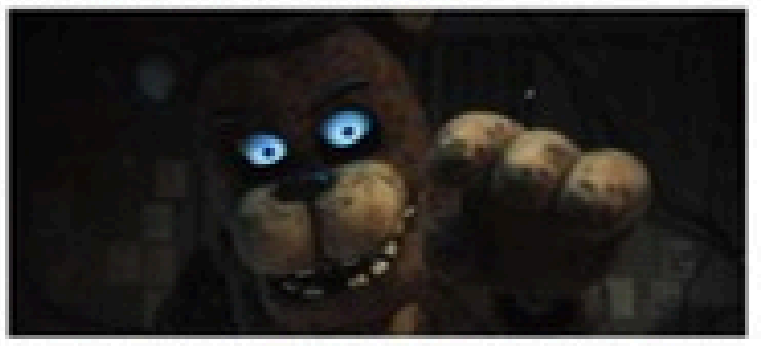
Pro tip, Scott Cawthon: the science fair B-plot shouldn't switch gears to become the main plot for the middle third of the film (conversely, the A-plot of murderous animatronics wreaking havoc, the actual plot of this movie, should probably take up more screentime overall than getting shoved into the back half of the film). These overall script problems culminate in the ending, perhaps one of the most baffingly rushed, overloaded yet skimmed-through endings I've seen in a movie. Simultaneously so much and so little happens in this scene that it boggles the mind. The ending, in rough summation: fails to actually conclude the antagonist's storyline, suddenly brings back a character from the beginning of the film and reveals him as the new main antagonist before he gets chased off just as quickly as he appeared, brings back the original animatronics only for them to straight up die barely a minute afterward, and immediately ends on a cliffhanger. And believe you me, if you think this sounds confusing and like a convoluted Frankenstein of random sentences, I am deliberately simplifying it. Watching this ending in the cinema, I could just feel the dawning, gut-sinking sensation of dread as I slowly realized that this was how this movie was ending. The ending is easily the worst part of the movie, precisely because of how much it exposes the flaws. Despite everything, I was genuinely enjoying myself so much throughout the movie that I didn't really care about what I was tenuously acknowledging as flaws, but the ending just baffled me so much that it took me out of my immersion and left me much wiser to the problems in the script. It also leaves me worried for the third film: this film is already setting up the antagonist of the third game, the monstrous Springtrap, as the next installment's villain; having the Marionette, this film's foe, stick around for the third movie risks overcomplicating the plot and taking away focus from the next film's villain. As we have learned from this movie, complexity addiction kills.

Copyright: Universal Studios

There's a few other glaring problems with this film, mostly involving characters being underutilized: while our main characters get a good amount of focus as necessary, others get shafted pretty badly. This is most evident with two characters in particular: Henry, father of the murdered Charlotte Emily and former business partner of serial killer William Afton; and Michael Afton, the son of William. In the case of the former, I was going into the movie expecting him to be a much more important character who would play a bigger role, and was sorely disappointed to see him only receive a couple scenes, only one of which even featured him in the flesh. It's a severe waste of both Skeet Ulrich's acting talent and the character's fascinating potential as a remorseful man trying to atone for his mistakes through bringing down his murderous former friend and vengeance-driven daughter; it would have been extremely easy to have him be the one to appear at the end of the film to drive off the Marionette and confront his daughter's vengeful spirit, but apparently an emotionally-effective character moment is off the cards for this one.

As for Michael Afton, I have a theory that he's a fugitive of an earlier draft of the film where he was the main antagonist full-time and somehow survived every revision of the script, because to call his character out of place does not cut it: he only appears in one scene in the first act before returning out of the blue at the end to suddenly reveal who he is and that he's the bad guy behind the animatronics all along (despite Charlotte already being clearly established to be controlling them), before getting punched out and slinking away while nobody notices. I wholeheartedly think that he could be cut from this movie's plot and nothing would change in any significant way. It's a shame too, because the son of the prior film's villain being desperate for his father's approval and trying to follow in his villainous footsteps is a genuinely interesting direction to take the character in, with Freddy Carter's acting adding some much-needed depth to the character as is. His execution in the film's final cut, though, certainly left much to be desired.

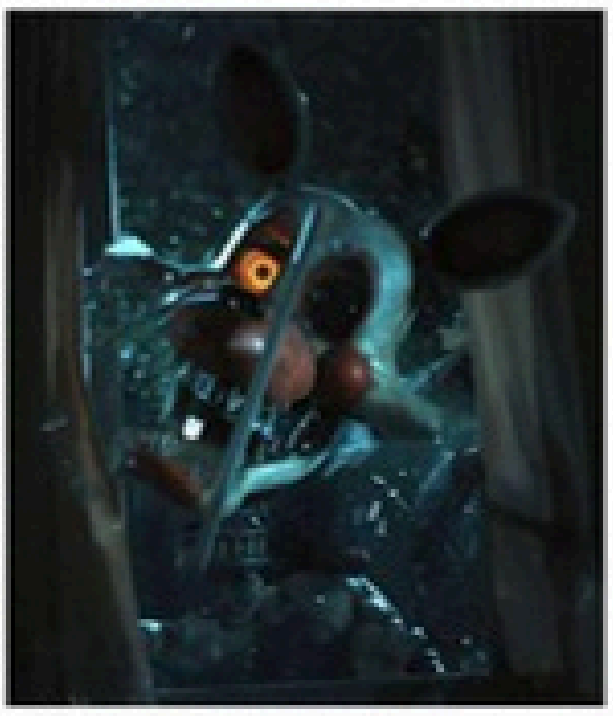
Similar problems arise with the film's animatronic characters. The first movie could get away with limiting the number of animatronic scenes, both due to the low number of animatronic characters and its status as an introductory point to the series for newcomers requiring it to not overwhelm the audience with increasingly obscure top-hatted animatronic bears. This second movie, inheriting the second game's infamously huge cast, does not have that same luxury. And despite having the vast potential held within utilising the animatronics, including some of the most iconic ones from the series, their screentime is both limited and uneven: some individual characters get the lion's share of screentime and plot relevance, while others are lucky to get a minute onscreen. This lack of focus on the animatronic characters reeks of wasted potential and makes them less effective as threats: we can't get a proper gauge on how threatening they are if only a few of them are actively posing a threat for most of the film, and by the time they actually go on the warpath it feels too little, too late, barring a couple moments.



Prototype Freddy Fazbear, during the approximately one minute he appeared in the film. Copyright: Universal Studios

Hoo boy, that was a lot. At this rate we'll never figure out if this movie actually has any redeeming qualities. Does it? Let's see. The practical effects are, like the first movie, still phenomenal: Jim Henson's Creature Shop and their ability to create animatronics that are both extremely accurate to the original games and still function perfectly remains unmatched, especially regarding the second game's more complex designs like the spindly Marionette and aptly-named Mangle. All actors deliver good to great performances, buoying the script and their characters with charm, depth, and believability, with Elizabeth Lail, Matthew Lillard, and Skeet Ulrich being particular standouts. If I have to complain again, though, leading man Josh Hutcherson feels low-energy for most of the film, even if that's mostly down to the dip in his writing quality in this film - when the action kicks in he gets to be entertaining again.

In comparison to the first film, this one is much more confident in being a horror film, at least in the sense of the scare volume: while the first film's scary scenes were much rarer and cut back on the explicit gore in favor of implication, this one has multiple scenes dedicated to animatronic terror and much more visceral (though not overtly explicit) implications of gore and death (this is one of the few movies I've seen with the guts to have a child bleed out and die onscreen), and a much more consistently tense atmosphere. I might have griped about their underutilization, but when the animatronics get moving they feel like real, consistent threats; compare it to the first movie, where their threat level was undermined by scenes of them being openly friendly to our protagonists without any sinister motives behind them. Whether this is to its benefit or detriment is a matter of debate: while the first movie, in my opinion, managed to makes its few overt horror scenes much more suspenseful than this film makes its equivalent scenes, this one manages to sustain that air of tension for longer throughout the film, and with greater efficacy.



Here's Mangle! Copyright: Universal

There's a sequence where Lail's character Vanessa forces herself into a nightmare to confront her own fears that's genuinely very effective at creating tension and fear (perhaps, ironically enough, through using the very human threat of her abusive father rather than an ineffable machine), and some of the scenes in the abandoned pizzeria where Hutcherson's character Mike Schmidt has to fend of waves of incoming animatronics serve as a lovely extended reference to the gameplay of the original game that keeps the tension high and momentum quick. It's very much a movie to be enjoyed more than one to apply critical thought about, despite the writer's best intentions.

C'mon. You knew I had to make the joke.

He will come back. He always does. Copyright: Universal Studios

The Book that killed the American Dream

Tien Mai Phan Phuoc, Grade 10

F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, "The Great Gatsby", is the evisceration of the American Spirit. In ways both subtle and blatant Fitzgerald ridiculed the American Dream, positioning a knife at its very heart. For the author, American society has decayed into chaotic materialism and the country has taken this American Dream with it. The events of the story are remarkable, seething with Fitzgerald's distaste at the country around him. Every character in "The Great Gatsby" is truly deplorable and the worst of them escape entirely unscathed. In authoring this brief 200-words novella, Fitzgerald reflected on the America of his age and predicted the America to come. The book is filled with false prophets but it is Fitzgerald himself who emerges as the true psychic. By contemplating "The Great Gatsby" and its context, we can discover uncomfortable truths about the past and present of America and the American Dream.

The American Dream

Of course, before we see how Fitzgerald dismantled it, it would do well for us to identify the American Dream itself. This term, "The American Dream", was not actually coined until the early 1930s, about 7 years after Fitzgerald wrote "The Great Gatsby". But the myth, the narrative, had existed for centuries without a tidy name. The American Dream is said to be the greatest dream for the individual.

It tells us that even those born at the bottom may rise up to the pinnacle of society. They can own a house, impact a nation and move mountains. This is usually achieved through some combination of tenacity, talent, optimism, and grit. For Fitzgerald, this has all decayed into a propaganda. It was a former truth, long distorted by the realities of American society. To come to his conclusion, Fitzgerald simply examined the world around him. Now, Fitzgerald was not a philosopher or a social critic. He was a writer of fiction, so rarely has he expressed this disdain in a pointed, non-fictional way. But if we examined the cultural climate of his time and the works Fitzgerald studied, we can see how the author reached his rather pessimistic conclusion.

Fitzgerald wrote "The Great Gatsby" in the early 1920s, at a time of economic revolution in America. After the first World War, the US economy fell into a depression. Unemployment rose to nearly 12% in 1921. The price of crops surged to problematic, unattainable highs. But these economic woes swiftly turned around. Unemployment dropped to 2.4% by 1923, the nation's GDP increased by 40%, annual income per capita surged by 30%. The scholar Robert A. Divine has said: "The American people by the 1920s enjoyed the highest standard of living of any nation on Earth." In the early 20s, the American economy grew by 7% per year with the country responsible for 50% of the world's industrial output.

Amidst time like these, the American Dream was alive as ever, but Fitzgerald and his contemporaries perceived danger. The author Oswald Spangler published a book called "The Decline of the West" in two volumes from 1918 to 1922. Read today, the book is massive, confounding and provocative to the point of being self-indulgent. It is at best a bore, and at worst, vaguely racist. But it was a product of its time, and indeed it became one of the most influential works in the era. Fitzgerald once wrote in a letter: "I read Spengler the same summer I was writing The Great Gatsby and I don't think I ever quite recovered from him." We cannot say with certainty which portion resonated so intensely with Fitzgerald, but the overall narrative of the Western decomposition sits at the heart of "The Great Gatsby". Spangle wrote: "As soon as the market has become the town, it is no longer the question of mere centers for streams of goods traversing a purely peasant landscape, but of a second world within the walls"...; "The true urban man is not the producer...He has not the inward linkage with soil or with the goods that passed through his hands.";

"He does not live with these, but looks at them from outside and appraises them in relation to his own life-upkeep..."; "In place of thinking with goods, we have, we have thinking with money."

This idea of thinking with money is crucial to "The Great Gatsby", but it is like clothing the book wears at the sole of Fitzgerald's novel we have a more profound disillusionment with the American Dream. With that in mind, it is time to begin our investigation in earnest.

The "Greatness" of Gatsby.

Narrated by a man named Nick Carraway, "The Great Gatsby" follows its titular character Jay Gatsby. Born impoverished, Gatsby pursues a romantic and idealized life which is represented by his ostensible love for a wealthy young woman named Daisy. Essentially, Gatsby tried to become the old money sort that Daisy desires. Gatsby earned a fortune as a bootlegger, reacquaints himself with the now married Daisy and tries to earn her favor as a very new man. This could be romance is the driving point of the narrative action in "The Great Gatsby", but we must understand that Gatsby himself is to discover the true meaning of this romantic entanglement. Jay Gatsby was born as James Gatz in North Dakota. It would be very blunt to say that Gatsby yearned to be rich. More accurately and more sincerely, he yearned to be what he was not. According to the narrator, Nick: "His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people - his imagination has never really accepted them as his parents at all.". It is precisely this imagination that typifies and motivates Gatsby.

This rejection of his past, too, can be said of an American dreamer as suggested by William E. Cain in his paper: "American Dreaming: Really Reading the Great Gatsby". Cain notes: "The greatest American Dream say yes, but their power comes first from saying No..."; "The American Dreamer is propelled by the dreamer's disavowal for his or her past, the refusal to be that person: I cannot accept these, this upbringing...Who I am is intolerable to me, and I will not endure my existence in this paltry life...I will become someone else.". Indeed, this is Gatsby's goal. Already we can see that Daisy is not exactly the love of his life. His romantic interest in Daisy is just one facet of Gatsby's larger goal. She is his trophy for his lifelong quest. Fitzgerald's blow of the American dream comes when Gatsby's career is revealed: He is a bootlegger who sells alcohol illegally in pharmacies across the country.

Here, Fitzgerald rejects the traditional social mobility which the American Dream claims. Gatsby is shown to be a capable, intelligent man, but even he resorted not to schooling and career building, instead taking up a life of illegitimate gains and criminality. Through this methodology, Gatsby still does indeed amass a great fortune. It is a fortune that he display ostentatiously for a number of reason; in fact his wealth often takes place of Gatsby himself before we even meet him: The titular character is defined by the opulence of his home. The narrator, Nick, describes it: "[The house] was a colossal affair by any standard - it was a factual imitation of some Hôtel De Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool and more than forty acres of lawn and garden.". Gatsby is further defined by the ruckus parties which he throws each weekend which are so blanketed and expense that they may as well be celebrations of money itself. Although glamorous, Fitzgerald unmasked these parties and then again, in sizes the American Dream

To execute these events, Gatsby employs a small army of butlers, maids, cooks and servants: "Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York...every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulp-less halves."; "There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour...if a little button was pressed 200 times by a butler's thumb." The lower class, the butler, like this one then are little more than tools for Gatsby's glamorous lifestyle. Gatsby, who we take as the embodiment of the American Dream is built on the backs of the poor, his life requires exploitations, like his machine extracts the juice from oranges only to discard the "pulp-less halves". Fitzgerald's American Dream squeezes the person to extract the juice of capital for those invited to the parties. Gatsby's absence continues throughout much of the book, so instead of meeting the man himself, we are first introduced to his world: his parties, his house, his cars.

Bougainville and the 2027 Deadline

Julian Danilov-Benguernane, Grade 9

Bougainville. For most people, it is just a name on a map, a green island floating east of Papua New Guinea (PNG) in the Pacific. But for its roughly 300,000 residents, it carries weight, history, struggle, and hope. Bougainville is preparing to become what could be the world's newest nation by September 2027, but whether that independence will be recognized beyond its shores is still unclear.

The push for sovereignty did not come overnight. Decades of tension, economic exploitation, and violent conflict shaped it. Bougainvilleans are ethnically and culturally distinct from PNG's mainland. Historically, the island has been closer to the Solomon Islands than the Capital, Port Moresby, and its people long felt marginalized.

Tensions escalated in the 1970s with the opening of Panguna, acopper and gold mine. One of the largest mines in the world at the time, it created enormous wealth for PNG and foreign investors, but very little for locals. Farmland was destroyed, rivers polluted, and communities displaced. Resentment simmered.

By 1988, the grievances boiled over into a decade-long civil war. Known as the Bougainville Civil War, it claimed 15,000–20,000 lives, displaced tens of thousands, and left villages scarred. Schools, hospitals, and entire towns were destroyed. When peace was finally negotiated in 2001, the people were left with deep loss and a clear desire for self-determination.

That demand became law in the Bougainville Peace Agreement. The agreement granted autonomy and promised a referendum on independence. In late 2019, votes were cast. The result was undisputed: 97.7%chose independence. The referendum was transparent, fair, and internationally observed.

Yet it was non-binding. According to the peace deal, PNG's parliament must approve any move towards full sovereignty. That approval has not yet come;Bougainville remains in political limbo.

Despite the uncertainty, Bougainville's leaders have marked September 1, 2027, as the target for independence. President Ishmael Toroama, a former rebel commander, frames the date as both a political commitment and a moral promise. For him, independence is more than politics, but it is decades of struggle made real. But political will alone is not enough. True independence today means governing effectively and gaining recognition from the international community. It means functioning within the global system of trade, law, and diplomacy.

Economically, the challenges are steep. Panguna could fund a small state if it reopens, but the mine carries risks. Environmental damage, social unrest, and political tension shadow its past. Outside mining, Bougainville relies on foreign aid and subsistence farming. Building a functioning state with a budget, courts, currency, and civil services would require time, expertise, and money. Infrastructure is limited. Even with preparation, independence is daunting.

Recognition is another hurdle. International law does not automatically accept new states. Under the Montevideo Convention of 1933, a country needs a defined territory, a permanent population, a functioning government, and the capacity to engage internationally. Bougainville meets most of these criteria.

Yet recognition is political, not just legal. Without PNG's approval, Bougainville risks becoming like Somaliland or Northern Cyprus: self-governing in practice, but invisible in most international arenas. For the UN, recognition would require a nomination from a Security Council member, followed by approval from a two-thirds majority in the General Assembly. Without Port Moresby's consent, that path could be blocked.

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~ Acknowledgments ~

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Happy reading!
🔥🔥🔥

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