The science fiction film Jonathan mixes Fight Club with Charlie Kaufman

Welcome to Cheat Sheet, our brief breakdown-style reviews of festival films, VR previews, and other special event releases. This review comes from the 2018 Tribeca Film Festival.

The idea of two conflicting personalities sharing a single body is one of those metaphor-rich tropes that writers tend to love. There have been a lot of radically different takes on the idea, from the pop-drama of *Fight Club* to the comedy of *All Of Me* to decades of diverse stories about the Incredible Hulk. Ultimately, all stories in this vein owe some fealty back to Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. But even further back than that, body-sharing stories have their roots in a fundamental human discomfort with our own worst choices.

That's the symbolism the subgenre is playing with: the alternately comforting and horrifying idea that maybe our most self-destructive or inexplicable actions are someone else's fault. That maybe there isn't just a bad angel whispering encouragement into our ears, there are actual gremlins in our heads, taking over and making us say or do something our best selves would never do, even if we end up taking the blame.

Like so many other body-sharing stories, Bill Oliver's *Jonathan* experiments with that idea, with a character's disquieting sense that someone else lives inside him, someone whose goals and desires don't match his own. But Oliver's version has a different twist, a grounding element that changes the narrative. *Jonathan* is a science fiction story about two men who share a body, stabilized by an experimental device deep-brain stimulation device, and living in a

comfortable balance with each other. At least until one of them wants more than he already has, which sends the story off in a direction that wouldn't be at all out of place on *Black Mirror*.

What's the genre?

High-concept science fiction indie drama. At the film's premiere at the 2018 Tribeca Film Festival, first-time feature director Bill Oliver said he could have made the film more of a real-world multiple-personality drama, but he wanted it in a more fantastical setting, with more of a Charlie Kaufman air. Past a certain point, the science doesn't really matter – this could just as easily be the kind of magical-realist plot that produced stories like *Ruby Sparks* or *Prelude to a Kiss*. But by purposefully adding a science element to the story, Oliver and co-writers Gregory Davis and Peter Nickowitz pointedly sidestep any interpretation that everything that happens here is just a psychological conceit. The protagonists aren't mentally ill, they're dealing with a different medical condition entirely. And the lack of ambiguity or interpretation about their condition helps push their story in an equally unambiguous direction.

What's it about?

Jonathan (*Baby Driver*'s Ansel Elgort) is a part-timer in his own body. Every day, he wakes up at precisely 7 am, works a half-day as a draftsman at a prestigious architecture firm, and goes to bed at precisely 3 pm for four hours of sleep. The other 12 hours of the day, his body belongs to John, a temp at a local legal firm. They have separate beds and separate hobbies, but they share an apartment, and try to create a sense of continuity for each other. Every day, they leave video messages for each other, with updates on where they went and who they talked to, so if Jonathan happens to run into a neighbor John spoke to, or vice versa, they can keep up the

pretense that they're one normal person. Jonathan is rigid, precise, and fussy, while John has more of a laid-back bro personality. But they share responsibility around their house like diligent, organized roommates, noting in their daily check-ins which bills need to be paid, what shopping needs to be done, whose turn it is to do the laundry, and so forth.

Then Jonathan learns that John has been secretly seeing a woman named Elena (Suki Waterhouse, star of Ana Lily Amirpour's *The Bad Batch*). The idea that John has been breaking routine, keeping secrets, and ignoring their carefully established rules sends Jonathan into the repressed-egghead version of a frenzy, and he takes invasive steps to control the situation. Events rapidly spiral from there. The revelations about who they are to each other and why they share a body come early in the film, but they're still best discovered onscreen, and so are the next steps, as two men who can't ever meet face-to-face still try to face off against each other.

What's it really about?

Loss of control, especially in relationships. For Jonathan, the shared-body condition is manageable as long as both men adhere to his strict regulations about where they're allowed to go and what they're allowed to do. But it's easy to see how stultifying his lifestyle is to someone who doesn't share his obsessive need for predictability and order. At the same time, both men are in a bind because they're in the ultimate intimate relationship — if John chooses to stay out all night or get blackout drunk, Jonathan has to deal with the exhaustion and hangover too. Neither of them has the freedom to indulge in a youthful indiscretion or a momentary lapse of judgment without dragging the other one along.

In that sense, *Jonathan* is about the dangers of sharing a life with another person – how just trusting someone else enough to let them into your life is a daring and possibly foolhardy act. But it's also about loving other people enough to accept their needs as real, and of equal value.

Is it good?

In the final act, Oliver and company betray their premise a bit by introducing a new out-of-nowhere development that changes the rules of the story and takes a lot of the important action out of the protagonists' hands. That subplot turns a wide-open world about emotional choices and consequences into a predictable ride along some straight-line tracks to an obvious ending. It's an annoying downturn for what's otherwise a winning, surprising film built around John and Jonathan's mutual dependence and mutual frustration. From the start, it's clear that their situation isn't tenable – no matter how regimented and functional it seems to be, it's no way for anyone to live. But until that twist crops up, the story has tremendous momentum, as the conflict escalates to places neither man actively wants.

The filmmakers make an interesting choice from the start – the audience only sees Jonathan's perspective on events, which makes John just as opaque to the audience as he is to Jonathan. When he's leaving detailed video rundowns of his day for Jonathan, he's an open book. When he stops, he suddenly becomes a void, a complete absence in the narrative that's only filled in as the consequences of things he does become apparent to Jonathan. The approach creates a narrative problem, in that John isn't nearly as real to the audience as Jonathan is. But at the same time, John is the relatable one who wants a girlfriend and a normal life. And he's the one who's gotten the worst end of the deal, living from sundown to sunup like a vampire, rarely seeing the sun except briefly in summer. Watching Jonathan fuss at him about laundry and their

bed-making routine like some kind of remote-control Felix Ungar, it’s easy to sympathize with him, even sight unseen.

John’s unenviable situation does raise a lot of questions, and it’s surprising that the script never even touches on them. The scientific side of John and Jonathan’s relationship is handled by pioneering doctor Mina Nariman (Patricia Clarkson, strong as ever), who developed the brain-stimulus device that manages John and Jonathan’s time. (It’s based on real-life implants used to treat a variety of neurological dysfunctions.) And she also acts as a kind of gently supportive referee between them, partway between a psychiatrist helping her patients interpret the relationships, and a mother scolding her sons for fighting. It’s odd, though, how little the script gives her to do from a technical standpoint, as things fall apart. Oliver and the other writers never address, for instance, whether it might be possible for Jonathan and John to swap time slots temporarily, or cede some time to each other to fix ongoing problems, like Jonathan’s inability to take a promising promotion at work, or John being eternally locked away from the sun.

But that’s because *Jonathan* is focused more on the emotional fencing between the two men, and the body-horror of being hostage to each other, than it is on the technical or science-fiction side of its scenario. And in that regard, *Jonathan* is both a memorable movie and a creative spin on a relationship drama. Elena unfortunately gets short shrift in the story because for all her screen time, she’s never really more than a plot contrivance. Even Dr. Nariman makes some unjustifiable choices along the way, and the film stops just short of defining her well enough to explain the things she does. The real story is about the Johns, about bodily autonomy, about accepting other people’s rights, and about how easy it is to fight with people while still loving and needing them.

Jonathan does end up feeling like a hybrid of *Fight Club* and Charlie Kaufman, with the former’s central confrontation and

the latter’s tenderness and humanity. At the same time, *Jonathan* doesn’t fully rise to *Fight Club*’s forceful, confrontational strengths, and it’s never as unfathomably weird as a Kaufman story. And in the end, it doesn’t feel like *Jonathan* fully commits to its own premise. For better or worse, Kaufman and David Fincher are both creators who lock onto an idea and carry it as far as it can go. *Jonathan* instead hits the brakes just when it’s at its most dangerous. It feels a bit like Oliver and his collaborators didn’t want to listen to their own inner gremlins, pushing them out of their safe zone and into some place darker and more unfamiliar.

What should it be rated?

PG-13 for some mild violence and sexual content, but mostly for just being too Charlie Kaufman-esque for little kids.

How can I actually watch it?

Jonathan is currently seeking distribution.

https://www.theverge.com/2018/4/22/17267522/jonathan-movie-review-ansel-elgort-suki-waterhouse-charlie-kaufman-tribeca-2018