



Written by [Eric Egan](#) on September 27, 2010

Legend of the Guardians: 3D Tour De Force

Legend of The Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole, directed by Zack Snyder, is an animated film based upon the first three books in a series of 15 children's books called Guardians of Ga'Hoole.

The film begins with the abduction of two adolescent barn owls, brothers Soren and Kludd, by a group of owls that refer to themselves as "The Pure Ones." The Pure Ones are actively kidnapping and brainwashing young owls to be "pickers," so called because they must pick through collected owl pellets for a magic element. The strong ones are spared a life of toil and allowed entry into the soldier class in which their main job is to keep the pickers working. While Soren refuses to go along with the evil owls, his brother Kludd is all too willing to betray his brother for the attention.



With the help of an old owl, Soren and his friend Gylfie, a small Elf Owl, are able to escape and embark on a quest to enlist the help of "The Guardians," an order of warrior owls that protect the weak and resist tyranny. They are rumored to abide on the distant island of Ga'Hoole. The only problem is that The Guardians have not been seen for quite some time and many believe they and their island are legend. Along the way, Soren and Gylfie pick up a couple of friends to help them on their quest. This journey takes up a bit less than the first half of the film and the rest is composed of Soren convincing The Guardians to fight The Pure Ones, and then the ensuing battle.

The script is by far the weakest link in *Ga'Hoole*. Rarely is a film too short, but at a brief 90 minutes, this film could have used at least another 20 minutes. The genre is that of an epic family film and 90 minutes is not enough time to allow the plot points to develop sufficiently for emotional impact. For instance, Soren and his friends are told by a prophesying echidna that the journey to find The Guardians will be long and arduous. The journey takes something in the range of two minutes of film time. Cutting directly from our hero being told that his quest is going to be difficult, to him and his friends being saved, drains the film of consequence. Unfortunately, this is not the only point in the movie in which this occurs, and this gutting of the film's plot keeps *Ga'Hoole* from achieving its full potential. It is disappointing to say the least, especially since everything else is well executed, including the performances and the animation. In fact, my only critique of the animation is that it is too realistic, which makes discerning between characters confusing at times.

The visual front is where *Legend of The Guardians* truly shines. It is by far the best use of the 3D medium to date. It should come as no surprise that Snyder, known for his hyper-stylistic, orgiastic gore fests, *300* and *Watchmen*, should be the first to truly hit the 3D nail on the head. In his sophomore and junior efforts, Snyder developed such a unique and revolutionary visual style that it can only be described as Snyderesque. Love him or hate him, the man understands the power of *mise en scène* and



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he knows how to use it to evoke a sort of exhilarating, non-specific emotional response. It is obvious that Snyder understands the basics of cinema as a visual form of storytelling, even if the scripts that he chooses to direct range from overly simplistic (*300*, *Ga'Hoole*) to abstruse (*Watchmen*).

His use of 3D in *Ga'Hoole* puts the technology in its proper place. Rather than being an event in and of itself, the 3D in *Ga'hoole* is just another tool to achieve the next level of *mise en scène*. He does not treat it as a phenomenon. Most 3D films to date include the seemingly requisite shot of something — whether it be an arrow or drops of blood or bullets — flying towards the audience. It's obvious, cliché, and, therefore, dull. Snyder avoids that mistake in *Ga'hoole*, and he avoids it because he does not stray from basic cinematic technique.

Snyder instead views 3D as part and parcel of depth of field. As such, it is directly related to the front-to-back arrangement of objects in the frame. What is truly unique is seeing a basic technique like a rack focus (shifting focus from the foreground to the background or vice versa) not so much reinvented in 3D, but emotionally reinforced by it. In this instance, a 3D rack focus is exhibited toward the beginning of the film when the camera focuses on a cricket that sits atop a blade of grass. The separation of focus between the background and foreground reinforces the illusion that the cricket is right there and when the camera moves focus from the cricket to the background, the result is that the audience is moved into the scene far more effectively than if the shot had less depth perception than that provided by 3D. And while simple reinventions of basic techniques are stunning in their simple audacity, some of the shots in *Ga'hoole* are nothing short of breathtaking. In one such shot, Soren, the film's protagonist, is being taught to fly in a storm. At first his struggle is immense. He is tossed by the winds like a rowboat in the waves. After some wise words by his mentor, however, Soren quite suddenly gets it and becomes one with the storm. Immediately slow motion is initiated, and we feel every bit of Soren's exhilaration — every splash of every rain drop that is dashed upon his feathery face and every swirl of wind that ruffles his young feathers. Then a flash of lightning rends the canvas behind Soren. It is the added touch that pushes the shot over the edge. It is truly stunning. To some extent, it turns the "something-coming-at-you" cliché on its head. Instead, it is more of a feeling of something moving away from you that initiates a sort of emotional sense of flying, minus the physical effects of butterflies in the stomach.

In short, for Snyder, the camera does not exist to complement 3D. 3D exists to complement the camera, and for Snyder, who relies on highly composed shots, this opens up a whole new set of possibilities that he uses effectively.

IMAX CEO, Richard Gelfond, [commenting on the 3D wave at a 3D trade expo](#), states, "Not every 3D movie works. 3D isn't changing the world, and it also isn't disappearing. It's somewhere in the middle." While I wholeheartedly agree that not every 3D film works, I would expand "not every" to "most," at least up to this point in time. Fortunately for Snyder, *Legend of The Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole* does, indeed, work as a 3D film. It is also the rare movie that I would recommend seeing simply for the breathtaking view, regardless of the fact that the script is not quite up to par.



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