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Film Reviews

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Game of Thrones. Dir. Alan Taylor, Alex Graves et. al. Perf. Peter Dinklage, Lena Headey, Maisie Williams. HBO, 2011. TV series.

Game of Thrones first appeared on the premium cable channel HBO in 2011 and has proven to be a remarkable success, not only in the USA but around the world. In many ways the show's Tolkienesque fantasy setting and story conventions seem familiar, but its narrative unfolds in the structurally dense manner which has been the hallmark of previous HBO dramas such as *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood* and *Boardwalk Empire*. In this way *Game of Thrones* gives familiar genre elements an original treatment, revealing surprising nuances in characters who initially seem conventional, and pulling the carpet beneath its viewers with audacious plot revelations and reversals.

Adapted from George R. R. Martin's currently unfinished novel cycle *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the show's main achievement may be the sheer scale of its narrative. The first season introduced the majority of the leading characters in a single location, but as time has passed the world of the show has both expanded and fragmented, scattering protagonists to all corners of its fictional kingdom while continually adding new characters and storylines. Due to this narrative escalation, recent episodes have bounced between scenes filmed in Northern Ireland, Iceland, Croatia and Malta, typically checking in on storylines for a few minutes before taking flight for a new location. Unlike the self-contained story-arcs used to structure much contemporary serialized television, there is little sense of conventional narrative climax from episode to episode, or even from season to season. At times it seems that the multi-stranded story has been divided almost arbitrarily into 60-minute portions. But despite its sprawling structure, *Game of Thrones* manages to be surprisingly coherent, at least for viewers immersed in the details of its plot. The spaces of the show are diffuse, but

the action is thematically patterned so that individual episodes are able to address specific ideas, such as the gulf between honor and realpolitik, the burden of meeting family and ancestral expectations, and the moral effects of ambition.

The popularity of *Game of Thrones* also serves as a fascinating bellwether for the on-going transformation of the American television industry. Despite appearing on an expensive pay-cable service, the show has regularly attracted more than five million viewers, outpacing many high-profile serials on the traditional network channels. However, *Game of Thrones* reaches an even larger audience through "informal" distribution networks. Figures published on the website *Torrentfreak* suggest that over the past two years *Game of Thrones* has clocked up more unauthorized downloads than any other TV show. HBO's subscription business model has clearly been effective up to a point, but its high cost makes the show susceptible to piracy.

In keeping with its presence within informal internet distribution networks, *Game of Thrones* has also been the subject of considerable online activity. Websites such as Slate, the *Huffington Post* and *Salon* post detailed weekly "recap" reviews appended with thousands of reader comments, while the *AV Club* website highlights the hierarchical nature of fan consumption by posting separate reviews for 'experts' who have read the books and 'newbies' who have not. Fan activity has also taken the form of numerous blogs and Tumblrs dedicated to the repurposing and remixing of images from the show. My particular favorite is *ArrestedWesteros.com*, which combinessimages from *Game of Thrones* with dialogue from cult sitcom *Arrested Development*. Hilarious for those who happen to love both shows, but utterly incomprehensible for those unfamiliar with them.

For all its success, however, it's not clear how the series will proceed in the longer term. Much rests on the shoulders of George R. R. Martin, as it seems more than possible that the television show will overtake the novel cycle on which it is based at some point in the next few years. Martin has been writing new installments every 2 to 6 years, while the television show is committed to a yearly production schedule. Even if Martin picks up the pace, there could be trouble ahead, posing intriguing and possible unique challenges for the production team of this highly accomplished show.

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Brave. Dirs. Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman. Perf. Kelly Macdonald, Billy Connolly, Emma Thompson. Walt Disney Pictures / Pixar Animation Studios, 2012. Film.

The golden rule of family movies is to reach the broadest demographic. Do not make them too shrill for adults, nor too nuanced (or dull) for children, and cater to everything in between. The problem is that most movies in this category either ignore the rule, or find it too difficult to strike that balance. However, Disney's Pixar Studios has been consistently achieving this for almost twenty years. One of the studio's most recent offerings, *Brave*, remains well within this tradition.

Set in medieval Scotland, the story follows Merida (voiced by Kelly Macdonald), a young princess whose relationship with her mother (Emma Thompson) is tested when it is revealed Merida must choose an eligible suitor from the agreed noble families. It is apparent that her mother's teaching and training has been leading up to this point, which becomes a source of contention and even resentment. After a heated exchange, Merida runs into the woods and encounters a witch (Julie Walters) who creates a concoction which, when imbibed by Merida's mother, transforms her into a giant bear. This is particularly unfortunate as Merida's father (Billy Connolly) lost his leg in a fight with a bear many years ago, which has made him eager to hunt them when they appear in the vicinity. What follows is a journey, in a literal sense, to discover a way to reverse the spell, and on a spiritual level, an increased understanding between mother and daughter.

In line with much of Pixar's output, *Brave* develops complex and nuanced characterisations from its central figures, specifically Merida and her mother. As a result, the relationship between the two is not only believable but rewarding. It is this very relationship that provides the tension and drive for much of the narrative; Merida's own desires for independence from tradition is at odds with her mother's intent to instill long-held values in her daughter. Merida's justifiable indignation at a forced marriage is gradually complicated by the gradual understanding of her mother's point of view – which is itself successfully communicated in spite of the tremendous complication of her mother being a bear. It is

here that the technological and aesthetic feats of *Brave* become not only relevant, but utterly necessary to understanding how and why this film is the broadly-pleasing artistic success that it is.

What is immediately apparent is the advancement, even within the last decade, of computer generated imaging. There are the requisite exhibitionistic elements: the detailed rendering of Merida's curly, subtly shaded, and slightly tangled red locks, the definition in animal fur as its owner is in motion, and even a dazzling, yet superfluous demonstration that occurs as Merida stands next to a waterfall, and the minute molecules of water mist, splash, and spray are clearly depicted. All of this lends the interest of spectacle, but technological advancement doesn't serve only this.

In comparison with the eerily death-mask-blank poreless faces of Robert Zemeckis's *The Polar Express* (2004) and *Beowulf* (2007), *Brave* stops short of trying to replicate 'realistic' faces. Instead, the movie opts for a standardised design whereby the animated format is apparent, but facial features of the characters are smoothly integrated with the colors, lines, and curves of this fantasy world. The faces are also malleable to the point where every tic, gesture, and expression is not only pitch perfect for the performance, but communicates the appropriate information without jarring against the narrative or the visual surroundings. Pixar has perfected CGI so that it facilitates excellent performances, and enhances the already stellar voice acting work, in this case by Macdonald, Connolly, and Thompson.

Furthermore, there is a distinct attempt at creating a particularly smooth yet propulsive aesthetic. The image appears to be consistently moving and altering, from majestic, sweeping camera shots, to non-jarring yet incredibly rapid editing rhythms. This is supported and in many cases held together by stunning sound work throughout. Overall, the film holds together well throughout, and apart from a few sequences that contribute to the spectacle of the technology used to render the images, every element of the film serves the narrative superbly. And this is where the film achieves entertainment value for the widest possible demographic: it is an interesting story with a sufficient amount of narrative hooks and a smoothly integrated and fluctuating emotional tone, without seeming jarring or to be ticking requisite boxes.

One could make the argument that, if *Brave* had a failing, it would be that the narrative retains too much complexity and too many set pieces for its relatively short running- time, and therefore lacks the simplistic charm of Pixar's *Toy Story* films, or *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), for example. However, I would argue that as the aesthetic not only allows this, but develops the story in a way that it is understandable and accessible to the very young and, at the same time, enjoyable for older viewers, is a significant accomplishment. While there is something to be said for streamlined, simple charms, *Brave* has what is necessary to captivate a wide demographic, which is what is needed for viewers to feel that engaging with this movie is time and money well spent.

Ultimately, I found *Brave* to be one of Pixar Studios's very best offerings. In every respect, it is a highly accomplished film with a compelling narrative, excellent voice performances, detailed and immersive CGI, and intricate audio design. There is more than enough to recommend *Brave*, and it is overall a delightful and spectacular experience.

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Breathe In. Dir. Drake Doremus. Perf. Felicity Jones, Guy Pearce, Mackenzie Davis. Indian Paintbrush/ Sugar Crispy Entertainment, 2013. Film

Breathe In is Drake Doremus's follow-up to festival favurite *Like Crazy* (2011). The story is a snapshot of the lives of an upstate New York family changed forever by the arrival of a British exchange student, Sophie, a talented pianist mature beyond her 18 years. Felicity Jones is again Doremus's romantic lead, this time opposite Guy Pearce. While Jones was beguiling as early 20-something Anna in *Like Crazy*, she struggles here in her attempt to play a character 12 years her junior

Pearce and Amy Ryan are Keith and Megan Reynolds who have been married for seventeen years and have a seventeen-year-old daughter. The couple obviously married young, and now feel oppressed by domesticity and aggrieved at the compromises they have made. Keith is a musician who teaches high school music classes and moonlights as a cellist in an orchestra. Megan refers to the latter as his "hobby" in a moment that neatly sums up the current state of their marriage. For her part, Megan claims she "enjoys" driving her family around to their various commitments while spending her free time collecting and selling cookie jars. The latter is almost tragic in its lack of irony, but sadly the talented Ryan (*The Wire*) is underused and the cookie jars are awkwardly symbolic and painfully revisited as a storytelling short-cut. While Sophie is a more three-dimensional figure, we are told rather than shown that, as an aspiring pianist, she has no idea why she is playing because her uncle has recently died. Whilst *Like Crazy* felt fresh and brave in its portrayal of first love both in its ecstasy and agony, *Breathe In* quickly descends into cliché and heavy-handed metaphors.

While Sophie is mature for her age – and Keith points this out for anyone in the audience who had yet to realize – she makes a couple of remarkably naive decisions. The first of these results in Keith and Megan's only daughter, Lauren (Mackenzie Davis), feeling betrayed by Sophie who she had very generously welcomed into her high school social circle. To ramp up the tension, the two girls share a bedroom. This in itself is a bit jarring as the exterior shots of the house show it to be quite large (enough to fit a grand piano in comfortably) but Lauren is bafflingly expected to share her small bedroom with a stranger for the duration of a year. This is

a small point of irritation but one that contributes to a bigger problem with believability. Lauren is Sophie's opposite; she's tall, athletic, and innocent to a fault, like a gawky fawn stumbling through everyone else's drama, while being unaware of how charmed her existence is. In many ways, the story is about Lauren and her coming of age. Viewed from this angle, the story might have had more potential. Instead it is a very predictable drama about an older man looking to revisit his youth vicariously through an affair with an "exotic" young woman.

Sophie's old-soul sensibility and love of music genuinely seems like a good match for Keith, but their interactions lack the electricity one might expect of a forbidden affair and are instead gentle and comfortable. Doremus takes pains to communicate how happy and pretty the Reynolds family is; beautiful house in a green corner of New York State, jokey interactions and wholesome "games nights", and family portraits that they genuinely seem to enjoy having taken. On closer inspection, of course, the family is not communicating with one another in a meaningful way and it takes little strain for the pretence to crumble very quickly. While the scenes of blissful domesticity are meant to be a façade of a family going through the motions, they are painfully predictable and suggest the filmmaker was also simply going through the motions. When Sophie, the interloper, is introduced to this delicate microcosm, the ripples start small and increase over time. When she is quite rude to her hosts, it can be dismissed as cultural mi-communication: Because she is too mature to be a petulant teenager, it is her Britishness that explains away her behaviur. Ultimately this "foreign body" is treated like a diseased extra limb that can simply be amputated, consequence-free, the wound allowed to heal over time and this does not make for an absorbing exploration of adultery.

Doremus worked with his biggest budget yet on this film and with money comes extra pressure and often also interference. Filmmaking is not an exact science and even good directors do not get it right every time. I would not retract my previous (unpublished) declaration that Doremus is worth keeping an eye on, but his potential is not manifestly on display in *Breathe In*.

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Pieta. Dir. Ki-duk Kim. Perf. Lee Jung-jin, Jo Min-su, Kang Eun-jin. Good Film/ Finecut, 2012. Film.

Ki-duk Kim has received some of the most polarized critical treatment for a generally accepted mainstream "art house" director. His work has been predominantly well enshrined, though some would argue fortunately programmed, within festival circuits, claiming both the 2011 Un Certain Regard at Cannes and the 2012 Golden Lion at Venice. Though receiving these ever decreasingly lauded prizes, the critical reception, both immediate (festival walkouts/heckles) and retrospective, (CinemaScope's recent roundtable trashing) has been generally unfavorable towards Kim's work. Kim's festival success has been used as a stick by several critics to question the validity and expose the insularity of festival programming.

Why then such a polarity? His most recent work *Pieta*, the aforementioned winner at Venice, offers a good entry point to understating this critical split. The film offers quite a good "grab-bag" of Kim's often troubling and divisive thematic preoccupations. *Pieta* centers on Kang-do Lee (Jeong-jin Lee) an extremely violent and episodically misanthropic loan shark, lending predominantly to smalltime mechanics and metalworkers. To protect loans Lee lets debtors sign insurance claims for injury. He then sadistically cripples them using their own machinery, thus collecting any unpaid interest. A woman (Min-su Jo) claiming to be Lee's mother attempts to infiltrate his hermetic existence and soften his stone-like heart. The film shifts from out-and-out sadism in its early stages, into a grotesque Oedipal love story between the supposed mother and son. Alongside this main narrative Kim tries to attach several moralistic parables; the corrupting influence of money, the effects of childhood neglect and the struggles of family reintegration. Two of Kim's continually returning and idiosyncratic narrative devices are also present, namely male dominance/violence towards subordinate female characters and violence towards animals. It has been widely discussed that Kim's consistent use of such devices has extended beyond a possible self-referential critique, descending instead into abhorrent and schlocky spectacle. When Kim tries to balance dogmatic moralism and these more straightforwardly repellent sequences, the film descends into a bathos-inducing mess. Lurching between execrable shocks and pseudo-ethical posturing, the film lacks any clarity of purpose and is thereby open to easy ridicule.

In addition to this thematic disjuncture Kim has cultivated a very particular and peculiar way of shooting, due in large part to his transition to digital. A majority of shots are very darkly lit, often providing some displeasing pixilation feedback. In addition Kim has also developed a penchant for unsettling and jerky hand held digital zooms. The presence of these unusual stylistic markings throws the viewer outside the narrative world,pemphasizing instead the presence of the camera and adding to the film's bathos inducing effect. There is an argument to be made that these thematic and stylistic quirks are intentionally built into the film's fabric by Kim. Indeed, the stilted performances of Lee and Jo seem to exist somewhere between the deconstructive performance protocols employed by Bresson and Brecht. I would argue, however, that within *Pieta* and across Kim's oeuvre more generally, these disjunctures do not fulfill the same deconstructive purpose. Rather, Kim fails to deliver the straighter moralistic messages he is striving for, due to an irreconcilable clash with the film's more abhorrent elements. To put it rather crudely, it is almost as though Kim wants to "have his cake and eat it" by proffering a moralistic stance whilst being repeatedly sadistic to both his female cast and his entire audience. Kim himself has spoken of how "we must learn that this age of ours is one of violence and that nobody is safe from violence. Once rooted, violence keeps growing, spreading, and getting nastier as we see it every day." Whilst this statement has some general merit to it, I feel that Kim's work embodies rather than critiques such a position. As violence continually infiltrates his films, they struggle to avoid being read as simply and straightforwardly nasty. Kim strives to make his films work on two levels; however, the more abhorrent elements usually overshadow any dialectic he aims to set up.

With *Pieta* we have a work that struggles to ascend to the high moralism that particular passages strive for. The reference to Michelangelo's 1498 Renaissance sculpture in the film's title is perhaps the most ironic embodiment of Kim's failure: he has created a film that strives for fluid transitions between opposing ideologies, but we are ultimately left with an incomplete and immovable obelisk, thwarted by its own contradictions.

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Side Effects. Dir. Steven Soderbergh. Perf. Rooney Mara, Channing Tatum, Jude Law. Endgame Entertainment/ Di Bonaventura Pictures, 2013. Film.

Since the release of Palme D'Or winner, *sex lies, and videotape* in 1989, Steven Soderbergh has successfully straddled the boundary between indie and mainstream cinemas. From political biopic, *Che* (2008) and apocalyptic medical thriller *Contagion* (2011) to Rat Pack remake *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), he often traverses the generic frontier which makes it somewhat difficult to pigeonhole him into a neatly labeled box – which is, for this reviewer, where his aesthetic power lies.

In 2013, the sad news that Soderbergh is retiring from filmmaking is offset somewhat by his intention to direct theater and even a television series. His swansong, the Liberace biopic, *Behind the Candelabra* (2013), was preceded by *Side Effects*, which demonstrates his penchant for sleight-of-hand thrillers in the Hitchcockian tradition, complete with MacGuffin and a head-twisting narrative *volte face*. One gets the impression that the director wanted to tick the genre off his corpulent résumé before he ventured into new aesthetic pastures.

What is frustrating about *Side Effects* is the dust that is kicked up about the pharmaceutical industry and then subtly cast aside in favor of a more conventional thriller narrative. Jude Law plays psychiatrist Dr. Jonathan Banks, a likeable character faced with a morass of moral and ethical conundrums that put him and his family through the ringer. Banks is not a morally bankrupt character, but a rounded, complex individual who, above all else, wants to do the right thing. He is, however, tempted by the promise of a financial windfall should he participate in a drug trial. The motivation behind his decision lies not with a penchant for profit-mongering *per se* – he lives in a beautiful loft apartment and clearly has a decent if not lavish lifestyle – but he struggles to succeed economically due to his spouse's unemployment and his duties as familial bread-winner. The possibility of increasing his salary proves a temptation too much and it is here that the character is put on trial when he comes into contact with Emily Taylor (Rooney Mara).

Taylor becomes Banks's latest patient as she fights depression and is hospitalized following a near fatal "accident" as she drives her car into a brick wall at breakneck speed. She has battled depression in the past and the "noonday demon" has returned with menace and threat as her boyfriend (Channing Tatum) is released from prison after being found guilty of insider trading. The so-called "science" of psychiatric medicine is depicted as one of trial and error rather than a exact and reliable practice, as Taylor experiences abysmal side effects from the SSRIs (Serotonin Selective Reuptake Inhibitors) which supposedly counterbalance mental health sufferers by increasing the body's natural supply of serotonin, our biological mood regulator. Taylor's libido is negatively affected and she is confronted with dizziness, insomnia and other catastrophes. Thus begins the psychiatrist-patient relationship of "pill-popping" – or, rather, "pill-hopping" – as she and Banks seek to discover the best means to combat the challenges of depression. This segment of the film is handled well and illustrates the pitfalls of psychological treatment *vis-à-vis* medication as opposed to the benefits of therapy and other talking palliatives. When Dr. Banks is offered the opportunity to expand his practice through trialing drugs, he jumps at the chance. On the surface, this seems like an easy way to make money, and at this point in the narrative, Law's character does not waiver or consider the wider implications of his decision. There is a brief scene where Banks explains the nature of the trial to a patient who, upon learning of the cost-free aspect of partaking in the trial, shrugs her shoulders and signs the waiver to take the medication, Ablixa. Soderbergh handles these issues subtly but with considerable power and profundity. Emily Taylor's former psychiatrist, Dr. Victoria Siebert, (Catherine Zeta Jones) converses with Banks and advocates using Ablixa to treat her ex-patient, about whom she has intimate knowledge. When Taylor requests Ablixa, citing a work colleague's declaration of the drug's efficacy, Banks can't believe his luck and prescribes the drug. Taylor begins to steadily improve; it seems that she can begin to rebuild her fractured, fragile psychology and return to a life without the awful affliction of depression. One side effect of the new medication, however, is somnambulism or, in lay person's terms, sleepwalking. The atmosphere is brilliantly charged with foreboding and a creepy ambience unsettles both boyfriend and audience in turn (or at least this reviewer). One episode ends in tragedy as Taylor prepares the dinner table and when interrupted by her boyfriend, turns around and stabs him to death.

Emily Taylor is arrested and put on trial – or more pointedly as the case may be, Ablixa is put on trial and, by extension, Jonathan Banks who prescribed the medication. Up to this point, the film's critique of the pharmaceutical industry and its method of human trials are also put in the dock, as is the psychiatrist whose life begins to collapse around him. It is here that the narrative changes: what began as an investigation into the morality of clinical trials morphs into a conventional thriller with Banks trying to uncover the deception that has transformed him into a victim. What if Emily Taylor was faking everything in order to cause stock market fluctuations and make a quick buck in the process?

This is the great failure of *Side Effects*. Whilst Soderbergh handles the narrative sleight-of-hand with deft and expertise, and provides intensity and suspense enough to hold the viewers' attention, the *dénouement* leaves a bad taste in the mouth considering the weight of the thematic arc that the film puts into motion. Law is on excellent form, and it is difficult not to empathize with a character who has the figurative rug pulled out from him by Taylor. Zeta Jones's performance as Banks' psychiatric peer, Dr. Victoria Siebert, is solid and, at times, sinister, but the *dénouement* becomes rather absurd and groan-inducing in view of the turn to erotic stereotypes and an alarming demonization of lesbianism. The representation of gender in the film is extremely problematic: the mentally compromised female (Taylor) is conniving, pernicious and amoral (despite her painstakingly constructed façade as mental health sufferer). Similarly, Siebert as lesbian co-conspirator is demonstrably cartoon-like in the finale as she is revealed as the chief villain.

Side Effects is a tale of two halves: an engaging treatise on the pharmaceutical industry and the veracity of psychiatric treatment and a trite thriller whose ending is too contrived to take seriously. Still, the dust kicked up along the way is interesting and one may forgive Soderbergh, alongside screenwriter Scott Z. Burns, for experimenting with the genre form to include serious, topical explorations of contemporary issues.

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Contagion. Dir. Steven Soderbergh. Perf. Matt Damon, Kate Winslet, Jude Law. Warner Bros./ Participant Media, 2011. Film.

Ocean's Eleven. Dir. Steven Soderbergh. Perf. George Clooney, Brad Pitt, Julia Roberts. Warner Bros/ Village Roadshow Pictures, 2001. Film.

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Moonrise Kingdom. Dir. Wes Anderson. Perf. Jared Gilman, Kara Hayward, Bruce Willis. Indian Paintbrush/ American Empirical Pictures/ Moonrise/ Scott Rudin Productions, 2012. Film.

The American auteur Wes Anderson's latest feature to date enjoyed critical acclaim across the world and was the opening film of the sixty-fifth annual Cannes Film Festival in 2012. Besides being the director, Anderson is also the co-writer of *Moonrise Kingdom* with Roman Coppola. The film represents the apex of Anderson's distinct visual aesthetics and screenwriting that he has developed throughout his filmography, starting from the late nineties with *Bottle Rocket* (1996). Sentimental and naïve narratives accompanied by pastel tones within the frames are some of the discernible characteristics of Anderson's films among others, and *Moonrise Kingdom* is no exception.

The film's opening title sequence features Benjamin Britten's musical composition "The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra" as a voiceover through a record that is being played within the film, where a child narrator defines the groups of instruments utilized in an orchestra. This track functions as a prologue to the film and offers a keyword that can help us to define the term "orchestration." *Moonrise Kingdom*'s peculiar narration, particularly, comprises costuming, coloring, composition, framing and camera movements, which are orchestrated in such a way as to draw the viewers' attention to them. This effect does not seem accidental, since within the film we can observe some similar emphases on artisanship and authenticity.

The film is set in September 1965 on a New England island, and central to the narrative is the romantic relationship between two unruly twelve-year-olds, Sam Shakusky (Jared Gilman) and Suzy Bishop (Kara Hayward). Sam is an orphan and is on the island to attend a summer camp as a scout where he is not accepted by the rest of the group because he is "emotionally disturbed," whereas Suzy is the daughter of the island's resident lawyers and the most rebellious child of four siblings. The island is the perfect locale to communicate the protagonists' condition, since both of them are detached from their social surroundings as the setting is detached from the mainland. The misfits meet a year before running away together and plan the escape throughout the year. The end of the summer

of 1965 coincides with the protagonists' end of childhood — the threshold of their teen years.

Sam is extraordinarily talented in anything associated with being a scout, like reading a map, building a tent, and marksmanship; and Suzy carries with her a pile of books and a record player. These traits are in line with their positions as outsiders and are juxtaposed with those of their peers. Moreover, they engage in activities which can be associated more with the historical period in which the film has been set, such as the uses of handwriting, mail, and binoculars, which are emphasized through close-ups. If their escape from places into which they do not fit marks the protagonists' individuality, this is also conveyed through their mastery of crafts and possession of these unique items. Much like the film itself, these characters are separated from the rest through their choice of objects and mastery of skills.

Moonrise Kingdom favors the crafts and the tools of Sixties history both in its formal construction and within the world of the film; we long for the things that have been lost in between. The threshold, which has been conveyed through the end of summer and the protagonists' ages, is also visible through the contrast between past and present, a contrast that exists both for viewers and characters.

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Man of Steel. Dir. Zack Snyder. Perf. Henry Cavill, Amy Adams, Michael Shannon. Warner Bros., 2013. Film.

Superman is both the pinnacle of superheroes and among the most difficult to dramatize. Over the course of the character's history, his powers have developed and his adversaries have had to be ever more inventive in order to pose a challenge to him. On the big screen, Superman has been represented six times between 1978 and 2013, but whereas the previous films can be included in the same narrative, *Man of Steel* reboots the franchise for a fresh start, much like *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012) and, of course, *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005).

Batman Begins is a clear influence on *Man of Steel*, with co-writers Christopher Nolan and David S. Goyer drawing on the template of their earlier reboot. *Man of Steel* makes extensive use of flashbacks to build the character of Kal El/Clark Kent (Henry Cavill), his physical journey, both geographically and in terms of developing his powers, intercut with his earlier emotional and psychological growth, which are both inspiring and traumatic. Clark's powers as a child are frightening to himself and others, demonstrated in an early scene in which he sees through people and objects and the cacophony of sounds become overwhelming. Hiding in a closet is no escape, as his own X-ray vision continues to terrify him and his eye beams burn those who approach. Only his mother Martha Kent (Diane Lane) calms him, as she urges Clark to make the world smaller. In keeping with this imperative, the film focuses on small details, from the corner of a desk to blades of grass, Snyder's close-ups and unsteady cinematography bringing the viewer close to the events both visually and experientially. Sometimes the shaky cam is overdone, especially in the opening sequence set on Krypton, but overall, Snyder displays considerable sensitivity and restraint.

The film's focus on Clark's experience draws the viewer into the hero's journey of self-discovery. The development of Clark's super-identity is again similar to that of Bruce Wayne in *Batman Begins*, and like that origin story, it is one hour into the film that our hero appears in his signature uniform, which thankfully looks more like a suit of armor than a skintight leotard. This reveal is a fitting culmination of the previous

hour, which steadily builds a character possessed of amazing abilities, but also experiencing fear, doubt, compassion and courage. Clark's powers never overwhelm his identity: the man always prefigures the steel. This careful character development ensures that the viewer is with Kal when he embarks on his super journey, his first flights that are both awkward and exhilarating for character and viewer alike, thanks to the intimate style which takes us along for the ride. Similarly, when Kal opposes General Zod's (Michael Shannon's) invasion of Earth, the viewer's engagement with him ensures we share his trepidation and are pulled into the visceral dynamics of the spectacular action sequences. Reviewers and audiences have complained about the third act of *Man of Steel* being merely action without character, but this misses the establishment of the character which enables us to accompany Kal for his battles. The best superhero films are those that give the viewer an impression of superpowers, and *Man of Steel* delivers this impression both in the early scenes when Clark is frightened and confused by his powers, and in the kinetic action set-pieces when he must fight for the survival of himself and Earth.

Man of Steel also manages to accommodate the problem of invincibility by having Kal fight other Kryptonians who are all super-powered soldiers. It is enjoyably distressing to see Superman being trounced in combat, hurled through buildings and vehicles, clearly hurt if not actually injured. Here too though, the conflict is emotional as well as physical, Zod and Kal fighting for different ideologies. Super-villains sometimes lack depth or convincing motivation, but Zod's desire is to save his people, which is understandable given the destruction of Krypton. The ideological clash between Kal and Zod adds further depth to their conflict, suggesting that violence could have been avoided. This makes the finale to their battle genuinely shocking, as the result is not inevitable and, once again, the engagement with Kal means that his anguished reaction to what he must do is heart-wrenching.

The film does have problems – the handheld cinematography is sometimes overdone, there are too many false starts to the climactic battle between Kal and Zod's forces, Lois Lane (Amy Adams) is underused and the devastation inflicted by Zod is highly sanitized, plus it lacks humor. Despite these flaws, *Man of Steel* is both a fine reboot of the Superman franchise and a superhero film that effectively dramatizes what it means to be super and what it means to be a hero. It also has an interesting theme

of aspiration, as Jor El (Russell Crowe) tells his son that he will give the people of Earth something to aspire to and Kal consistently appears as an inspiration for humans to be heroic as well, such as when Perry White (Laurence Fishburne) tries to save Jenny Olsen (Rebecca Buller) who is trapped under débris. Perry is himself in danger, but risks his life to save Jenny, implying that super-powers are not a prerequisite for heroism. *Man of Steel*, therefore, is both an enjoyable blockbuster and an exploration of heroism, which suggests that, in time, we could all join Kal El "in the sun".

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Elysium. Dir. Neill Blomkamp. Perf. Matt Damon, Jodie Foster, Sharlto Copley. TriStar Pictures/ Alpha Core, 2013. Film.

Neill Blomkamp's career-making *District 9* (2009) may have lacked much in the way of subtlety as it skewered South Africa's ongoing racial issues with its biting apartheid allegory, but it established him as that rare commodity in an increasingly risk-averse global film industry: a writer/ director who can handle the political and the SFX. When it grossed a $210 million profit from its meager (for effects-heavy sci-fi) $30 million budget, a follow-up was all but assured; it was only the content that was in question. Four years later, the answer is *Elysium*.

It is, in many ways, a frustrating beast: hints of great beauty (both aesthetic and thematic) marred by an excess of ambition - and enough narrative to fill three films. The plot itself is both simple and needlessly complex: in 2154, Earth has become so polluted and over-populated that the super-rich have retreated to Elysium, a luxury space station in orbit around the planet they've abandoned to poverty, disease, and squalor. When Max Da Costa (Matt Damon), a career felon trying to go straight, is injured in an industrial accident that leaves him with five days to live, his only chance at survival lies in a desperate bid to reach an Elysian med-bay, futuristic medical technology that can cure any human ill. Unfortunately for Max, Elysium's exclusivity is ruthlessly maintained by the sinister Secretary Delacourt (Jodie Foster), who has no qualms about blowing an unauthorized refugee ship, complete with injured children, out of the sky.

So far, so political: *Elysium* overtly parallels contemporary and divisive issues of access to healthcare, immigration and the 1%. Blomkamp notes, in fact, that the seeds of the narrative were sown during a trip to Tijuana, Mexico, where he observed firsthand the geographical dividing line between the First and Second world and the efforts of the former to keep the latter out, and thematically this influence is clear throughout the movie. From the Spanish-speaking protagonists, through a supporting cast drawn largely from South American actors, and down to the choice of Mexico City as a stand-in for the L.A. of the future, the film builds a strong political allegory about the economic desperation on the doorstep of the US and the ethics of providing for one group of people while denying another based, largely, on an accident of birth. Indeed, the Mexico City

location is a particularly effective mechanism in creating and sustaining the narrative's overall ethical debate, and it works on at least two levels: both visually (in terms of establishing the *mise-en-scène* of a world stripped bare by poverty), and by forcibly integrating developing-world poverty into the site of the very developed-world privilege charged with producing the means of its own critique. By transposing Mexico City onto Los Angeles in this way, in other words, the issues that *Elysium* serves to highlight are, as it were, brought right to the front door.

Had the narrative left it at that, *Elysium* had the potential to be a sharp, smart action thriller with a beating, angry heart: old-school science fiction, designed as a feast for both the eyes and the brain. It remains all of these things; however, somewhere around the middle of the second act, *Elysium* becomes encumbered by, quite simply, too much plot. To be fair, there's a clear rationale behind this: getting Max from tech-poor Earth to the fortress of Elysium naturally creates logistical challenges that the movie must answer, and Blomkamp is evidently loth to gloss over the mechanics of Max's transit with visual spectacle and substance-free action scenes. Instead, he delivers a detailed, information-heavy mid-section that provides a step-by-step account of the journey from A to B that is at once indicative of Blomkamp's intelligence as a filmmaker (and, one might argue, the intelligence he demands of his audience) and yet introduces a level of complexity that the narrative struggles to maintain. A labyrinthine sequence of events sees Max, freshly suited with a robotic exoskeleton, steal encrypted information from the brain of Elysian CEO John Carlyle (William Fichtner), and thus, unwittingly, upload to his own brain the details of how to hack the station's security. Jacked into the Elysian mainframe, it could confer citizenship on all of Earth's dispossessed.

The problem? Carlyle has protected the data with a security program that will kill anyone who tries to use it. And this leads us inexorably towards the final act, in which Max, with hours to live, sacrifices his own life in order to open the gates of Elysium to the poor and oppressed of the planet below. It should be noted that this sudden devolution into the quasi-messianic symbolism of saviors, Paradise and freedom from slavery is not, in itself, an unusual path for a science fiction narrative to take, and, if the likes of the Terminator and the Matrix cycles are considerably more overt in constructing their messiahs, *Elysium* is at least generically consistent. It's simply that it's too easy to be satisfying: the solution to the

hardships and inequalities that the movie has taken such pains to present amounts to, essentially, switch it off and switch it back on again.

But, more than that, there's the sense of an obligation dodged. *Elysium* is a movie with a point to make and it presents itself as such, unashamedly, defying us to look away. There are no easy solutions to the problems it writes large across the movie screen: these are issues that have beset human society throughout history, and it's going to take a collective act of will the likes of which we've never before seen to start to set them right. There's no messiah to electronically reset this system. And it's something of an evasion to write one into a movie like *Elysium*.

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