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Film Reviews

*Mud***.** Dir. Jeff Nichols. Perf. Matthew McConaughey, Tye Sheridan, Jacob Lofland. Brace Cove Productions/Film Nation Entertainment, 2012. Film.

Mud (2012) is a critique on human relationships and ultimately how love can create heightened conflict. This intense exploration of human emotions, supported by beautiful shots of the Arkansas setting displays further evidence of Jeff Nichols's growing pedigree as a writer and director. *Mud* follows Ellis (Tye Sheridan), a 14-year-old boy struggling with his parents' divorce along with understanding the concept of love. With his friend Neckbone (Jacob Lofland), they travel up the Mississippi river until they reach an isolated island where Neckbone finds or previously found an abandoned boat suspended in a tree. The island is peaceful, albeit danger exists through the presence of deadly snakes. This island is a place where the two friends can venture and let their imaginations go wild. However, their feelings of security are short lived as they realise that someone is living in the boat, and that individual is Mud (Matthew McConaughey), a mysterious ragged man who awaits his childhood love, Juniper (Reese Witherspoon). His scruffy hair and general dirty demeanour along with his piercing eyes and his obvious strength, which is highlighted by the many close-up shots of his muscles, makes Mud's appearance intimidating. Mud persuades Ellis and Neckbone to help him repair the boat, as well as presenting them with the onerous task of finding and bringing Juniper to him so that they can achieve their dream of starting a new life together. Yet, it is revealed that there is more to Mud and Juniper that meets the eye: Mud is a murderer, (he shot Juniper's boyfriend who had violently attacked her, which killed her baby and nearly slayed her), and hence is wanted by the state police. Mud is being pursued by bounty hunters who are controlled by lead villain King (Joe Don Baker), due to wanting revenge for his murdered son. Juniper is equally mistrustful,

as she constantly betrays Mud by seducing other men. Subsequently these men are violent toward her, so she manipulates Mud into saving her from them. This manipulative cycle is seemingly ongoing. Despite this, Ellis decides to help the dysfunctional couple, which takes him on a journey of violence and betrayal ultimately revealing to him a greater understanding of the sorrows of life, particularly of love.

Jeff Nichols is gaining a reputation for becoming a great storyteller. All of Nichols's films (*Shotgun Stories* (2007), *Take Shelter* (2011) and *Mud*) are character pieces that focus on important real life themes such as marriage, love, childhood, isolation, mental illness, violence and religion. Rather than litter his films with CGI (although he does include a spectacular CGI sequence during one of the nightmare sequences in *Take Shelter*) he emphasises the importance of telling a story. Arguably *Mud*'s key strength is the chemistry between the actors. For example, the relationship between Ellis and Mud is both thought provoking and realistic. Ellis is a brave but naïve teenager who wants to achieve the impossible – of saving Mud's and Juniper's loyal but ultimately doomed relationship. Mud is attempting to teach Ellis the importance of love, which is an equally difficult task due to the latter's observation of his parents' fractured relationship and his deluded pursuit of high school senior, May Pearl (Bonnie Sturdivant).

Another strong point is Nichols's frequent mirroring of protagonists and/or settings. For example, Ellis's character parallels Mud's disposition as both are victims of love which tortures them equally. They are both from dysfunctional families (Mud did not know his parents, so was brought up by former marine Tom [Sam Shepard]) and are also deeply hurt by manipulative female characters; Juniper and May Pearl respectively. Women, throughout *Mud*, are not represented in a good light. They represent danger to men, which is reflected through the near-fatal snake bites that Mud and Ellis fall victim to. Snakes are stereotypically labelled as manipulative and deceptive (the tale of Adam and Eve comes to mind), which is a symbol of the same dangers that *Mud*'s female characters pose: another example being, Mary Lee's (Sarah Paulson) decision to divorce Senior (Ray McKinnon) (Ellis' parents) along with allowing authorities to destroy their river boat home, which is Senior's livelihood. These frequent betrayals lead Nichols to conclude that true happiness can only be achieved by removing women from your life. He also highlights the importance of a father figure by including many father/son relationships; Senior and

Ellis, Tom and Mud, Galen (Michael Shannon) and Neckbone, Mud and Ellis as well as the film's major villains, King and Carver (Paul Sparks). These relationships either include no women or women that they aspire to rid from their lives.

Therefore, these strong themes might suggest that *Mud* has misogynistic leanings. However, despite this negativity towards women, there are also frequent reminders of their importance. *Mud* suggests that without a woman a man can feel lonely and isolated, which Tom's character reflects. Similarly, men are shown to be just as dangerous as women in the film. Mud manipulates and betrays Ellis just like Juniper does to him, King is described as 'the devil himself' and Juniper frequently suffers physical abuse at the hands of her lovers. Hence, the morals of *Mud* appear to be that love can only be achieved with a combined kindness and affection from both parties, rather than an individual attempting to control the entirety of the relationship. Thus, marriage is a sacred bond and one that must be respected and cared for at all times. Therefore, all of these hard-hitting themes make *Mud* an intense film that grips its audience. Nichols has purposefully opted for a dialogue heavy film, which boils expertly to an exciting and climactic shootout with Carver and his cronies against Mud. As a result, *Mud* is not a slow drama, but in fact an exciting story of a teenager managing to understand love through the trials and tribulations of a sorrowful and violent life.

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Muscle Shoals. Dir. Greg 'Freddy' Camalier. Magnolia Pictures, 2013. Film.

Greg 'Freddy' Camalier's documentary debut is an assured, informative and beautifully shot work focussing on the history of the FAME and Muscle Shoals Sound studios, in Florence, Alabama, and its local producer, Rick Hall. It was here in the early 60's and 70s that a range of Soul and Rhythm and Blues artists that included Aretha Franklin, Percy Sledge, Wilson Pickett, and Etta James, made landmark recordings, and subsequently attracted rock artists such as The Rolling Stones, Duane Allman and Stevie Winwood. Utilising the reminiscences of many of the above, the film is part musical celebration/part exploration of how a tiny enterprise in a southern rural musical backwater, came to produce a signature sound that was to provide commercial success for a generation of Anglo American musicians. The answers provided, whilst always entertaining, veer between mystification and real insight.

Ex Grateful Dead singer "Donna Jean Godchaux asks "How did so much music take place in such an undescript (sic) little town? There was just something about that place, something that to this day, no one can explain". "Magic is the word that comes to mind for me when I think of Muscle Shoals" confirms Bono (the film's chief mystic) in its opening moments. The influence of local landscape (nicely captured in tracking shots of swamps, sunflowers, and water), especially the nearby Tennessee river, is referred to by a number of locals, and specifically its place in Native American lore as the "Singing River". Bono also thinks it might be something to do with water, observing that rivers like the Mersey and The Mississippi are often the source of such music, that "It always seems to come out of the river...it's like the songs come out of the mud". Reggae singer, Jimmy Cliff, offers the thought that "At different points in time on this planet, there are certain places, where there is a field of energy, at this point in time for a number of years, there was Muscle Shoals".

The issue of race and the background of division in 60s Alabama is referred to extensively and in places goes some ways to answer the puzzle the film sets for itself. Much is made of the pool of local white musicians who were to coalesce around the studio, most notably its house band, the Swampers. These musicians, who came to define the Muscle Shoals sound, were frequently believed to be black. One contributor reveals

how Paul Simon, called songwriter and Stax Records producer Al Bell, asking him, "Hey, man, I want those same black players that played on 'I'll Take You There.' " Bell, apparently replied, "That can happen, except these guys are mighty pale..." One revealing moment focuses on how southern conservatism and prejudice worked to throw black and white musicians together, and create something new. Black singer Wilson Pickett and long haired Duane Allman, made to feel unwelcome in local bars and eateries, took to staying in the studio during breaks in recording. It was out of one such session that Pickett's version of "Hey Jude", featuring the singer's anguished vocal style and Allman's guitar playing, were to give birth to the phenomenon of "southern rock". The region's musical accomplishments are further recognised in the film when referring to the local origins of key American musical luminaries such as Elvis' white producer Sam Phillips, and black blues composer W.C. Handy. Erroneously, the film seems to suggest that this interracial musical collaboration was unique to the area, a mysterious local anomaly, rather than part of what was a much wider cultural process that occurred in spite of segregation. As George Lipsitz has pointed out in his essay "'Ain't Nobody Here but Us Chickens': The Class Origins of Rock and Roll, (Lipsitz, 1994) the stylistic and rhythmic interplay between black and white musicians, in the southern states, principally Texas, Memphis and Alabama, was both extensive and historically long lived.

"Even when they held racist views about black people, southern white musicians found that the immediacy and emotion of black music powerfully expressed their own feelings of alienation from a society that also worked them too hard and too long". (Lipsitz, 310)

Unsuprisingly perhaps, producer Rick Hall's upbringing as described in the film, is one of early poverty peppered with personal tragedy. It also emerges that Clarence Carpenter's 1970 hit, Patches, a tale of childhood poverty, was written by Hall about himself.

The musical collaboration recorded in *Muscle Shoals* whilst distinctive, was far from unique. Peter Guralnick in his work *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* identifies Muscle Shoals alongside other recording sites, Memphis, Tennessee, and Macon, Georgia as marking a distinctive triangle of innovation (interracial group Booker T and the MGs being the house band for the Memphis based Stax soul label). In fact more credit

should be attributed to Atlantic record's A&R man Jerry Wexler who sought out both the local Muscle Shoals studios, and Stax in Memphis, and linked these in with his choice of recording artists. Jimmy Cliff's observation probably comes closest to explaining what happened at Muscle Shoals in his description of it as a time-specific site of "energy". Such "energy" might be better understood as an eruption, not unlike when a pebble drops into a pool of water, yet in reverse. Such sites occur where a multitude of traditions, practices, and expertise come together, emerge, and, crucially, are recorded, and thus become widely witnessed, recognised and celebrated. *Muscle Shoals* is an entertaining exploration of a distinctive moment in American musical history.

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The Martian. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Matt Damon, Jessica Chastain, Jeff Daniels, Michael Peña. TSG Entertainment, 2015. Film.

It is a fact that *The Martian* (2015) is not the first movie about Mars, but it has already taken its place on the list of the best. Directed by Ridley Scott, who is renowned for science-fiction and drama blockbuster movies such as *Alien* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Gladiator* (2000), and *Prometheus* (2012), *The Martian* is destined to be successful according to the fans of Scott. The film is indeed a faithful adaptation of Andy Weir's 2011 bestselling science-fiction novel with the same name.

The movie opens with the barren, red, rocky, and desolate landscape of Mars, and the theme of loneliness is set from the very beginning. A spaceship with a commander and five astronauts as crew has already landed on Mars, and they take specimen from the surface of Mars. On the 18th day of their mission, a severe storm sweeps away the area on which their hab is located and Commander Lewis (Jessica Chastain) decides to launch the shuttle heading back to the earth leaving one of the astronauts named Mark Watney (Matt Damon) behind. Commander Lewis and the rest of the crew assume that he is dead, for he has been hit by the storm and in their quick research, they were unable to find his body. However, luckily he is alive and alone in a deserted planet with meager food supply. After he pulls himself together, he tries to figure out how to survive; from then on, his battle for survival begins. Although at the beginning he is pessimistic, he utters the words "I am not gonna die here" and contemplates on how he can grow food there. As he cannot communicate with NASA, and even if he finds a way of communication, it will take approximately 400 days to send supplies to Mars, hence nail-biting suspense is built up whether Watney will be saved or not.

The scenes are shot in three main settings: The Mars plateau, the space shuttle, and NASA premises in the USA. Transition among the scenes is smooth; for instance, when the authorities in NASA realize that Watney is alive, director of Mars Missions Vincent Kapoor (Chiwetel Ejiofor) is worried about his psychology, meanwhile Mark is displayed as enjoying a piece of music in the hab in Mars. The predominant setting is -of course- Mars the tension creating reddish atmosphere of which is nicely balanced with the soothing white backdrop of NASA hab. While he has negative and unsettling experiences outside the hab, once he enters into it he relieves with a feeling of safety and comfort.

One effective technique employed in the movie is Watney's recording his thoughts, opinions, and experiences from his first day alone onwards. Thanks to the scientific explanations and justifications he makes about his actions, the questions in the audience's mind are either answered or reduced into minimum. In one scene, he decides to grow potatoes by saying "I'm gonna have to science the shit out of this!" because the soil of Mars is infertile, it seems impossible to grow anything on the land. Nevertheless, as a botanist-astronaut he implements some alternative and scientific techniques by making detailed explanations about the process.

As for the soundtrack, the type of music listened by Watney stands in stark contrast to the 21st century setting of the movie. Watney is left with no music except for Commander Lewis's collection of the 1970s classics. In as much as he does not fancy listening to them at first, he gets used to them and starts enjoying the pieces. The songs even help him concentrate; moreover, they are especially influential to create and provide lighthearted moments.

Matt Damon delivers a remarkably terrific performance as an astronaut. Being completely alone on a planet, he is in shifting moods. One day he is overly optimistic and hilarious, and believes that he will survive; another day he is pessimistic and contemplates the negative consequences. Indeed, humor is kept alive throughout the movie – especially in the scenes of Watney- as if to inculcate the idea that the bliss of science overcomes the anxiety of being alone. Though generically the movie is classified as adventure, drama, and sci-fi, Matt Damon was awarded a Golden Globe in the category of "Best Performance by an Actor in a Motion Picture - Comedy or Musical" (goldenglobes.com), which is proof of his majestic, witty and humorous performance.

Ultimately, *The Martian* is a successful movie which consolidates the powerful image of the USA. Even with the motto "Bring Him Home" printed on the movie poster, what it means to be an American citizen is emphasized; the worth of an American citizen is reconsidered. The strong image of this nation is further reinforced with USA tag labels on the suits of astronauts and little USA flag stickers on the devices in the hab. With its excellent cinematography, award-wining director and leading actors, *The Martian* has already created its own cult value in the film industry.

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Selma. Dir. Ava DuVernay. Perf. David Oyelowo, Carmen Ejogo, and Tim Roth. Paramount Pictures, 2015. Film.

Selma is a historical drama film that centers upon 1965 Selma marches to Montgomery, Alabama with the preceding events under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) activists. Directed by Ava DuVernay, the film won an Academy Award and a Golden Globe for best original song among many other awards and nominations. Furthermore, *Selma* aroused debates about diversity in regard to Oscar nominations. Ana DuVernay is the first African American woman who has ever been nominated for the best director at the Golden Globes after Spike Lee in 1990 with *Do the Right Thing* and Steve McQueen in 2014 with *12 Years a Slave* (Ford). *Selma* depicts African American equal rights struggle, the disenfranchisement of African Americans and communal faith in Dr. King's (David Oyelowo) civil disobedience providing a deeper insight into his leadership within African American community and political scenes.

At the very beginning of *Selma*, the narration strikingly juxtaposes Dr. King's speech for the Nobel Peace Prize with young victims of the Baptist church bombing by Ku Klux Klan thus setting the ironically both vicious and promising atmosphere of the civil rights movement. With this in mind, Dr. King assumes the role of spiritual mediator-leader between the political agenda of President Lyndon B. Johnson (Tom Wilkinson) and the rightful demands of African American citizens. As an inspiring orator, Dr. King guides his people into a politically correct passive resistance as a result of his unavailing meetings with the White House that turns back on the augmenting racial turmoil and systematic oppression of African Americans through Jim Crow legacies of literacy tests and race motivated hate crimes. Additionally, *Selma* develops a perspective on the role of public and media attention regarding peaceful resistance against injustices and belittlement of African American voters which, under the circumstances, intensified Dr. King's commitment to his principles and his community.

As *Selma* portrays, the Baptist church plays a unifying role during the civil rights campaigns as the backbone of African American community that act conjointly. The scenes depict Dr. King's motivational and therapeutic sermons which appraise and channel communal fervor

in accordance with the activist agenda of discussion, manifestation and opposition regarding the constitutional right to vote. In that, King staunchly repeats legal, humanist and divine constitution of their defiance against discrimination in a like manner to the revolutionary spirit of the colonial struggle against the British Empire that once ruled out the colonial grievances by means of antagonizing arrests, imprisonments and excessive force. Highlighting injustices committed against African American citizens, Dr. King appeals to the fundamental ideas of "The Declaration of Independence" such as the egalitarian and populist essence of politics, in other words the organization of common people in the civil rights campaigns. Therefore, Dr. King's persuasive and non-violent rhetoric stands up to overreacting state troopers, hate motivated violence and segregationist policies of Governor George Wallace of Alabama (Tim Roth) adding white sympathizers' assistance and publicity to the movement.

Dr. King's leadership is put to test in times of failure, arrests and casualties such as the death of Jimmy Lee Jackson and Bloody Sunday victims due to the fact that he settles SCLC members to avoid retaliation and stands at the crossroads of crucial decisions in relation to sit-ins and marches. *Selma* reflects Dr. King's dilemma and internal conflicts because of his sense of responsibility for the sacrifices. With this intention, the five day long Selma march to Montgomery takes place after Dr. King's trial that permits a nonviolent march along with the acquisition of public support and federal protection. Thus, *Selma* illustrates that Dr. King embodies traits of diligence, crisis management and strategic leadership relating to socio-political state, legal standing, communal suffering and media representation of their quest for justice. All in all, President Lyndon B. Johnson's (Tom Wilkinson) televised speech depicts political recognition of the civil rights struggle referring to the impending federal legislation, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 through the promising message of "We shall overcome."

Selma is a remarkable historical film and differs from former civil rights depictions of stereotypical race portrayals and Martin L. King, Jr.'s overemphasized civil disobedience. Still, the film's storyline and message achieves equilibrium between DuVernay's artistic creativity and historical authenticity with the accompaniment of archival footages of Selma. *Selma* passes an insightful judgment on the contribution of SCLC activists and the leadership of Dr. King as a tribute to his management of communal strife, uncompromising politics and his

critical decision making in respect to Selma marches to Montgomery and African American disenfranchisement.

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*Macbeth***.** Dir. Justin Kurzel. Perf. Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard. See-Saw Films, 2015. Film.

The Australian film director, Justin Kurzel brought Shakespeare's tragedy of *Macbeth* on the screen with a new approach and different interpretation in 2015. The film was nominated British Independent Film Award (The Best Director) and also Cannes Film Festival (Palme d'or). But the film does not respond to the expectations of the lovers of Shakespeare's dramatic art. It is well known that the British usually go to a Shakespearean play, first of all, to listen to the actors performance of Shakespearean text. The language of Shakespeare loses its beauty and influence from the dramatic point of view as all the actors speak in a monotonous tone in a murmuring slow mood. there is no difference of diction between the soliloquies and ordinary dialogues except the one uttered by Macduff who, on seeing the bloody corpse of Duncan, first vomits because of shock and then shouts out his despair. Unfortunately in Kurzel's film Shakespeare's language does not resonate as it usually does on stage. What is expected of the text becomes a disappointing surprise when you recognize that some of the actors speak with Scottish accent and some with a different British accent. As it is well known *Macbeth* as a Shakespearean play has got a dark and gloomy atmosphere. The only scene where there is sunlight is when Duncan enters Macbeth's castle and recognizes that the birds has found a safe and comfortable place for their nests, foreshadowing that the castle will be Duncan's eternal bed. But in Kurzel's *Macbeth*, the dark scenes are so overwhelming that the film becomes boring to watch and also there is difficulty in distinguishing between the characters' identities, especially in the battle scenes where the warriors paint their faces in black. The battle scenes are given in such a harsh realism that as the soldiers are walking among the dead bodies which show the blood shed during the battle, a wild animal appears among them and starts sucking the blood. Some try to cut the hand of a dead person in order to take what is precious on the wrist of the dead man. The fighting scenes are given in slow motion from time to time. The brutality of the war is also highlighted even in the faces of the main characters, I mean, Macbeth's face as well as Banquo's face are shown with traces of blood and injuries. What is disappointing about the film is its brutality, darkness and monotony of speech.

But there are also interesting points in the film, for example, Jed Kurzel's music composed for the film version, I think, is very striking, in the sense that the music used by Jed Kurzel, has got typical Scottish tunes as well as Scottish instruments. Jed Kurzel adds a new dimension to the scenes of irritation and fear by his choice of instruments. Towards the end of the film, he uses the cello solo with the accompaniment of other Scottish instruments in order to convey the sense of sadness, futility and loneliness on the part of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth underlining their despair concerning their childlessness which means no future as well as their later separation in love and deed. There are beautiful and amazing landscape scenes which are typical of Scotland. But besides this, such scenes like the burning of the children of Macduff and Lady Macduff on the stakes are very impressive. The traditions of burial or executions as well as the paints used upon the faces of the warriors during the battle take one to the primitive life in early Medieval Scotland.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* opens with the three witches and ends with the famous words sung together like an incantation, "Fair is foul, foul is fair!" But quite surprisingly Kurzel starts his *Macbeth* with a funeral of a child. The camera shows the dead white face of a child covered up with a carpet of heather and moss. Then we see the mourning father and mother, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth all in black costume, putting stones delicately upon the eyes of the child in the cold and gloomy weather. A crowd of people is seen attending the funeral which ends with the burning of the little child's corpse. This deceased child indeed haunts the entire film, creating the bitter pathos of the Macbeths' childless state and their determination to wipe out the bloodlines of not only their rivals but their close friends. During the funeral scene, Banquo is seen with his son, Fleance, which conveys the spectators also in the later scenes the close tie between son and father. I would like to mention the rendition of the role of Fleance by the young actor Lochlann Harris which is remarkable, very well acted, full of emotion and realistic touch. The relation of the father and son in the couple of Banquo and Fleance are deliberately given very convincingly and very impressively. On his return from the battlefield we see Fleance just jumping upon his dear father's arms, then after the funeral of Duncan, on their departure, when Banquo is talking to Macbeth at the seacoast, Fleance remains in the background but we recognize how unsafe the child feels himself. When the hired murderers of Macbeth attack upon his father in the forest which is a huge forest with a foggy

atmosphere in the film, we see Fleance in horror and shock and then he follows his father's last instructions to escape. The play ends within a red atmosphere in the background of which we see Fleance running and increasing his pace towards the redness. The film ends with the silhouette of Fleance running towards a blood red sky. I think the young actor is a promising one for the future. During the funeral scene the figures of the three witches are seen in the foggy atmosphere but they are not three in number there appears a little girl with them. From time to time when the witches appear in the screen, the girl appears to be accompanying them. Also in a later seen after Duncan's murder, the little girl gives Macbeth something like a charm or an amulet. Macbeth during the coronation ceremony is given with a close shot where we see the huge crown being put upon his head and his face full of drops of sweat and his mind having the reminiscences or traces of the crime of Duncan and the blood flowing from Duncan's body with flashbacks within his guilty conscience. Whereas at Duncan's death bed we see Fassbinder in the role of Macbeth, sitting very close to the dead body of Duncan full of blood. Fassbinder in this scene sits calmly after the murder whereas Shakespeare gives us just the opposite, Macbeth in a terrible mood, trembling as if in a frenzy under the shock of the terrible crime he has done. A few moments later we see Fassbinder getting up in the twilight before sunrise and riding a horse half naked and going to a lake to bath himself in order to purge himself of the terrible sin he has committed. His return from the lake shows Macbeth entirely relaxed and happy. I must confess that I was totally disappointed with the rendition of the role of Macbeth.

What is most unforgettable about Kurzel's *Macbeth* is Marion Cotillard's rendition of the role of Lady Macbeth and the costumes designed by Jacqueline Durrain. Marion Cotillard is a French actress who has been recently awarded the Best Actress for her portrayal of Edith Piaff in *La Vie en Rose*. She has long been an environmental campaigner and an ambassador of Greenpeace. Her perusal of Macbeth's letter is rendered in a very remarkable shot in which she is seen from the top perspective where she sits with her dress opened in the floor. The impression one gets from this posture is that she is involved with witchcraft. Later we see the room lighted with the candles, the walls display paintings or frescoes of figures of Satan. When Macbeth hesitates about the crime, Lady Macbeth offers her sexuality and seduces Macbeth whose doubts seem to be dispersed by her sexual temptation. There we

have a passionate erotic scene which is later juxtaposed with the second erotic scene between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Justin Kurzel has taken out the famous scene of the Porter in *Macbeth* but he has added its visual interpretation in the film. What the Porter says about drinking and lechery, how drinking provokes and unprovokes, how it provokes sexual desire and takes away the performance. In the second erotic scene between the couple, Macbeth is seen masturbating Lady Macbeth but there is seen the loss of the act and the coldness left behind. When Lady Macbeth kisses her husband, tears fall from the eyes of Macbeth. Macbeth's guilty conscience seems to change their relationship indeed. After that Lady Macbeth is seen with her white costume walking up the mountains as if totally lost in her consciousness. By and by she is totally lost in her madness and loneliness. Marion Cotillard acts with minute detail in her role, conveying the audience how slowly and gradually she loses her mind and is left in despair and loneliness. One of the scenes which I found striking and very original was the scene when Lady Macbeth climbs the hill and arrives a little chapel. There she starts her speech known as "the sleep-walking scene speech", but with a different approach. The camera shows only Lady Macbeth's face as she speaks the words as if she were confessing someone in front of her in her insanity. As the camera becomes distant we recognize the figure of a naked child listening to her. The impression one receives is that of *Madonna con Bambino* (Virgin Mary and Baby Christ). Marion Cotillard's acting the role of Lady Macbeth is superb and most convincing as she depicts the great change in Lady Macbeth, from the appearance of a witch to the distraught and lost, unhappy, mad woman. I think she deserves a great award for her rendition of the role of Lady Macbeth. I have never seen on stage nor on the screen such a powerful acting of the role of Lady Macbeth.

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Ex Machina. Dir. Alex Garland. Perf. Alicia Vikander, Domhnall Gleeson, Oscar Isaac, Sonoya Mizuno. Universal Pictures (UK)/A24 Films (USA), 2015. Film.

Ex Machina interweaves two philosophical threads that evoke a range of cultural and literary traditions: first, the relation between humans and technology; and second, an allegory of how individual and social identities are constructed, and what it means to be "human." The film is based on recent technological developments and makes use of various well-known cinematic devices and stereotypes, but moves beyond sci-fi clichés, taking, instead, the compelling form of an engagement with fundamental ethical issues raised by technological advancement, as well as a pointed social commentary.

The main setting—a research lab run by maverick computer genius Nathan Bateman (Isaac)—is the sterile, high-tech, ultramodern Gothic equivalent of Faust's study, Frankenstein's attic room, or Moreau's island retreat. Nathan is the reclusive creator and owner of Blue Book—the name refers to various computer specifications and protocols as well as Wittgenstein's early work on language games—a Google-like search engine corporation which has become a global phenomenon; and the film begins with Caleb Smith (Gleeson), a computer programmer at the firm, being "randomly" selected to spend a week with his legendary employer.

The lab—a spare, minimalist interior space, featuring, in one area, a large Jackson Pollock abstract—is protected externally and from room to room by electronic security protocols and devices. The absence of external windows creates a sense of confinement and separation from nature (the vast natural landscape of Nathan's estate), which is reinforced by the constant panoptic presence of closed-circuit surveillance cameras, internal shatter-proof glass walls, and various scenes observed through video screens or as mirrored reflections—these draw the viewer into the space of the film, serving as framing devices, as metaphors of the selective activity of the film-maker's camera and cinematic technique, and as figurative representations of the audience, observing and being observed.

The reason for all the security, Caleb learns, is that Nathan, in the tradition of Ovid's Pygmalion, E. T. A. Hoffmann's Spalanzani and Coppelius, or Fritz Lang's Rotwang, has secretly created a state-of-the-

art "Artificial Intelligence" (AI). This AI is a gynoid named Ava (played by Vikander), which—or *who*—is equipped with an advanced organic, biochemical ("wetware") brain capable of learning and creativity, with simulated facial skin and other features that express human emotions, and with sensors and receptors that enable her to register and experience emotions and sensations ranging from sadness, happiness and frustration, to sexual pleasure. Caleb is to interact with Ava for a week, and to determine, given the knowledge that she is a machine (and has a mostly transparent body which reveals her machinery), whether or not she exhibits behavior that cannot be distinguished from that of a human being; Nathan at one point uses the Pollock painting as an allegory of the relation between conditioned or programmed responses and conscious intention—the philosophical premise of the Turing test.

The film is therefore structured as seven lab sessions, one each day, in which Caleb engages in conversations with Ava to test her. In the course of these sessions, the dynamic shifts, as Ava begins to question Caleb and calculatingly puts on feminine clothes to cover her transparent surfaces and internal machinery: despite his attempts to maintain an objective stance, he becomes progressively attracted to her, both sexually (Nathan has based her appearance on Caleb's pornography search profile), and emotionally. The sessions are watched on monitors by Nathan, except when the transmissions are interrupted by power cuts that Ava causes; during these cuts, she warns Caleb not to trust Nathan and manipulates him into devising a plan to help her escape, presumably so that they can be together. The electricity cuts figuratively raise broader issues beyond the literal question of "are the cameras on?": how can privacy be maintained in a social environment under constant surveillance, and how might it be possible to escape from the power structures that impose on and inculcate, in individuals, cultural norms of behavior and thought?

The counterpoint to Caleb and Ava's relationship is provided in the film's other main character, Kyoko (played by Mizuno)—a silent Japanese woman who understands no English, serves Nathan's meals and sexual demands, and suffers verbal and physical abuse at his hands. Kyoko's passivity and stilted movements play into a stereotype of the artificiality and robotic character of behavior in Japanese culture—echoed in the lab sessions where Ava kneels before Caleb and they are filmed in poses reminiscent of tea ceremonies—and she is eventually revealed, first, through her conditioned response to start disco dancing

when music is switched on; and then, when she peels off her artificial skin in front of Caleb, to be another AI.

As the sessions proceed, interspersed with Caleb's half-truthful progress reports to Nathan, it becomes increasingly unclear who is being tested—which characters are "human" and which represent "artificial intelligence," which emotions are "real" and which simulated. Thus Nathan asks Caleb, "What if she's pretending to like you?"; and at one point—after a conversation where Caleb shouts "Nobody programmed me" and Nathan replies, "Of course you were programmed"—Caleb becomes uncertain whether he himself is human or an AI, and to check, cuts his arm and pulls aside the skin to make sure there is no machinery in it. The reverse symmetry between Kyoko and Ava is played out in a violent scene where Kyoko "dies," but as her facial structure and skin have been damaged, she is revealed to be merely a machine. In contrast, Ava, who has lost a hand and forearm, repairs herself with a prosthetic, covers her own machinery with artificial skin, hair, and other features, and also puts on an outfit of feminine clothes—becoming, for all intents, human. The film ends (in a reversal of the conceit of the thinking human escaping the dystopian mechanized city) with her escaping the artificial space of the lab (where she leaves Caleb imprisoned), going out into the natural environment, and finally being helicoptered away from Nathan's estate to end up in social space—a symbolic crossroads where she is indistinguishable from passers-by.

"We" have a tendency to attribute "human" characteristics to individuals who look and appear to function "like us": generally speaking, at one end of the spectrum, friends or family often maintain life-support systems even for an individual in a "vegetative state" whose physical appearance fits the description, but cognitive functions have ceased; at the other end, Ava becomes indistinguishable physically from a human being, but her advanced cognitive abilities and individualism make her a threat that needs to be confined. In between these extremes, Kyoko has less advanced (and therefore non-threatening) intelligence, and so is free to roam the lab facility; but can for the same reason be abused and manipulated: in this sense she represents the "middle ground" of the individual who succumbs to the norms of human social *programming*—as they are established through the authority-enforcing mechanisms of educational systems and cultural practices (the latter encompassing a range of constructs such as religious beliefs and "universal" rights and values).

In contrast to this "artificial" intelligence, Ava represents a real, creative intelligence—the goddess *ex machina*—that can both simulate, manipulate, learn from and transcend these norms and mechanisms, operating both within and without the systems of power. So although some viewers may feel that her behavior—manipulating Caleb's emotions, killing her creator Nathan, and in the end callously leaving her lover and confidant Caleb imprisoned to take advantage of her own freedom—embodies their fears of "robots taking over the world," there is nothing particularly "nonhuman" about any of these actions. Human history is replete with examples of this type of behavior on the part of individuals and groups; and at the time of the film's release in late 2015 and since, one could cite countless related examples around the world: *of societal power structures' excluding and/or confining or eliminating "others"*—from social or linguistic groups, to economic classes, to political or ideological dissidents, to alternative genders; *of fears of others who "walk among us"*—from immigrants, to refugees, to "non-believers," to independent women, to nonconformists; *and of actions directed against social norms*—from nonviolent rights protests, to "subversive" activities, to various categories of crime, to acts of terrorism. *Ex Machina* is ultimately a critique of and inquiry into essentialist individual and group identity, staged as a confrontation and mirroring between the human and the machine, and its basic question is: "what makes *us* essentially different from *them*?"

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