READING FILM

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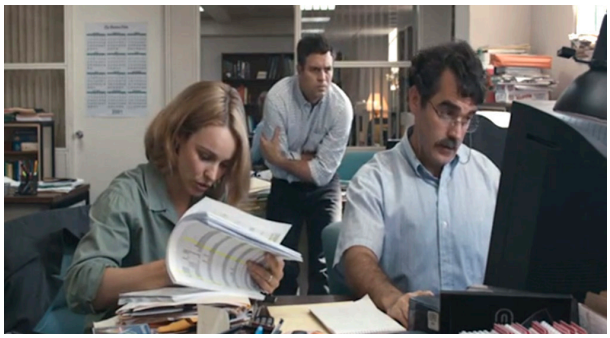
Reading Film is a peer-reviewed collection of outstanding essays on film and television written by students at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. The programs in Film Studies and Professional Writing and Publishing collaborate to produce the journal.

READING FILM

ISSUE #6 | JULY 2025

Spotlight and the Journalism Film

Lalaina Chandanais



Tom McCarthy's *Spotlight* (2015) is unique in the genre of journalism films for its refusal to be simplistic in its moralizing against sensationalism or heroizing those who speak truth to power. Centering on the *Boston Globe*'s "Spotlight" team and their 2003 exposé of the Catholic Church's cover-up of sexual abuse by priests, *Spotlight* draws more drama from its source material than just its crisis and resolution. Instead, it leans into realistic characterization of the journalists involved and their personal ties to the historically protected force they also feel compelled to expose. Through cleverly intertwined studies of how they each face the personal and community fallout that will result from publishing their story, the film comments powerfully on both systemic corruption and just how deeply it can be unknowingly perpetuated.

Spotlight does use what those well-versed in the genre would refer to as the "noble press" trope, but in a unique way. The journalist in this trope is a heroic, ethically driven protagonist who never wavers in the conviction that justice can only result from empowering citizens with truth. There is an easy comfort to such narratives, as the audience is always instantly aware who to root for or against, whose actions to follow and whose to condemn. Other journalism films instead focus on the pull of sensationalism, characterizing all those associated with journalism as the media equivalent of ambulance chasers, as in Dan Gilroy's *Nightcrawler* (2014). *Spotlight* takes a more complex approach, showing characters who struggle to balance their noble-press convictions with their personal qualms about exposing the Church as well as with their professional interests. The film's attention to the newspaper's corporate context hints that the magnitude of this story is a kind of temptation for the time-intensive investigative team facing impending newsroom cuts. It also ends on the revelation that this was not the first time victims of predatory priests had brought their

stories to the *Globe*, only to have them swept under the rug. Such plot choices make it clear that this is not just a film about a wholly noble press seeking justice for victims of abuse, but one about coming to terms with one's own role in systemic corruption.

Spotlight's method is perhaps most purposefully conveyed in its Christmastime research montage, a sequence that accomplishes more than just fidelity to the source story. The sequence begins with audio of a children's choir singing "Silent Night," providing a non-narrative critique while coloring viewers' feelings and interpretations through the ensuing shots. The montage opens with a close-up on a computer document—the story draft with the impending deadline showing prominently at its top. Shots showing the draft develop are then cycled in amid shots of the reporters working in different environments: at the office, at home, in a festive restaurant, etc. By bridging the sequence together with the song and situating the characters in larger environmental settings, the filmmakers skillfully establish the deep entrenchment of the Church within the daily lives of the Boston community and of the journalists now working to uncover its dark secrets.

Stitching these scenes together with children's voices singing religious music certainly does put a dark spin on silence. As the montage goes on, we watch the true depth of the Church's corruption dawn on the journalists who, growing up Christian, had never given the possibility a second thought. In several shots of Sacha interviewing victims, for instance, the camera first captures her diligently taking notes, then moves in to show her growing personal involvement. The viewer is invited on a similar journey. In the first of these shots, Sacha is speaking with three abuse victims in a café, with bright Christmas decorations surrounding the group as they talk. The camera is set at a wide angle and positioned as if it is looking at them through a window, emphasizing how—if we did not already know that this was an interview for the story—it would just look like a group of people getting food/coffee and celebrating the holidays. This subtly emphasizes the normalization and silencing of horrors behind the bows and bells and positive experiences people in Boston often associate with the Church. Once again, this leads viewers to recognize, along with the characters, that entrenched corruption and cover-ups are all around us. Despite her personal experiences and attachments, though, Sacha chooses to face truth and shine a light on what has been historically shoved into the shadows.

As the montage comes to an end, Michael stands at the entrance to the church where the young children have been singing the hymn. We are to understand this as a moment of confrontation between what was normalized for him through a religious childhood and the corruption he now sees beneath its surface. There is light upon the singing children's heads, indicating their innocence, but Michael stands in the dark. The camera then slowly zooms in on Michael's pained face as discordant, non-diegetic music starts to drown out the children's singing, signifying how Michael, a church attendant in his youth, was "in the dark" about what was going on, but is choosing not to ignore it any longer. He does not choose to go sit with the rest of the congregation, establishing himself as a self-reflective part of the "noble press" despite the personal cost. Through the depth of these characterizations, *Spotlight* offers a refreshingly realistic perspective on the journalism film, contrasting those whose subjects lean too easily into thoughtless sensationalism or easy heroism. ❦

Lalaina Chandanais is a double-major in Creative Writing and Film Studies at UW-Whitewater. This essay was written for a Film Genre *course in Fall 2024.*

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READING FILM

ISSUE #6 | JULY 2025

Visualizing the Invisible: How Animation Elevates *Waltz with Bashir*

Maryn Davenport

It's difficult to explain just how excited I felt when, while watching the opening credits to Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* (2009), I saw the words "Director of Animation" on my screen, because even though I had just seen several seconds of an illustrated dog racing through the streets, my brain hadn't fully registered that I was watching an animated documentary. Underneath my enthusiasm, however, simmered a curiosity about the ethics of using drawn art to convey real-life experiences. Documentary claims to represent its subjects objectively and honestly, and audiences presume that a film in this genre will strive for authenticity in its portrayals. Animation, in contrast, is plagued by assumptions that it represents reality through a childish or fantastical lens, and drawings are seen as less "real" than footage of live-action events. But the fact is that imagery in any film is manipulated to create a desired effect in the viewer. A documentary might demand unconventional methods when its subject matter cannot be sufficiently represented through conventional filming. *Waltz with Bashir*'s storyline is driven by Folman's quest to recover a specific memory, but his true subject is memory itself, making this film one such instance.

In "Absence, Excess and Epistemological Expansion: Towards a Framework for the Study of Animated Documentary," Annabelle Honess Roe proposes that animation functions in three key ways: mimetic substitution, non-mimetic substitution, and evocation. *Waltz with Bashir* best exemplifies the evocation function, which, she writes, "allows us to imagine the world from someone's perspective" (227) and to visualize invisible aspects of life, such as ideas, emotions, and states of mind. Unlike live-action documentaries, animation is not restrained by equipment or by having to be at the right place at the right time. It grants a filmmaker like Folman far more control over how to tell his story through colors, lines, motion, and transitions while still mimicking the movement of a camera to approximate filmed footage. Folman's mental and physical journey to uncover his

suppressed past unfolds, like many documentaries, through a series of interviews with others who shared similar experiences. Since their experiences were also never captured on camera, presenting animated interpretations of their accounts allows Folman, as well as the audience, to interrogate how trauma might also be affecting them. In defense of the animated approach, then, *Waltz with Bashir* serves as an evocative documentary study of how memory works.






The sequence in which Folman details a memory of his first day in the war is a prime example. Instead of unfolding as a reenactment or mimetic substitution of his audible description, it begins with a medium shot of present-day Folman in a taxi driving him away from an interview with his friend Carmi. As he ruminates, the reflections on the car window's surface shift from the bare trees of wintertime Amsterdam into palm trees, while the sky turns from wintry blue to dusk orange. As he turns, surprised, to look out on the transformed landscape, a tank appears to the side of the taxi. We then cut to the tank in what is presumably the past, and finally to the figure shooting from its top, whom we realize is Folman as he says "Suddenly, all the memories came back." Rather than being posited as an authentic rendering of the scene, the visual transition animates how the missing memories creep up on him. This is followed by wide shots of him barreling down a road in a tank with orchards on one side and the sea on the other while he shoots in all directions. His narration recounts how he reached a post at nightfall and was told by an officer to collect and dispose of the dead and wounded. Animated high-angle shots of the bleeding bodies that surround Folman on the floor of the tank flow into long shots of him driving the tank to a collection point, where more high-angle shots show a line of bodies wrapped in shining metallic covers before more long shots show him driving away again. The sequence maintains almost uninterrupted visual distance from 19-year-old Folman, thus aligning the viewer instead with present-day Folman recollecting these painful events. Here, evocation is exemplified not by recreating an initial war experience that was never captured on camera, but by marking how it became a recovered memory.

Folman doesn't just animate his own experiences; he also evokes the experiences of other people, allowing us to imagine the world from their point of view. One example accompanies his interview with a trauma expert about dissociative events. She tells him about one of her patients, an amateur photographer, who viewed the war as if through a camera in order to protect his mind from its brutality, until he saw starving horses in the

Hippodrome in Beirut and was forced to accept that he was experiencing real life, not shooting action scenes. As audio of the expert's interview plays, the animation symbolizes how this dissociative experience must have felt for the man. First, we see still drawings of poverty and violence: bound men kneeling in a line, a tank pointing at an elderly man carrying groceries, a building struck by an explosion, a man's bleeding body in a sunny field. The stills imitate how the patient was looking at scenes he witnessed as if considering how to capture them in the best light or at the best angle. Then the animation stops and appears to rewind from one of these still images, then play forward again as a film when the horses are introduced. In contrast to the still frames, the animated horses neigh, tremble on their hooves, fall over, and get swarmed by flies. Their realistic movements, compared to the still shots, indicate how the man's dissociative "camera" broke and he realized he was there, participating in the horror. The animation punctuates this realization—and the expert's point about it—with an extremely aestheticized final shot of the soldier reflected back through the lens of a horse's eye. Animation here offers a multi-layered documentation of trauma and how it warps the mind that wouldn't otherwise be possible, even through reenactment.

On the surface, documentary and animation seem like opposing mediums—one known for authenticity and the other for artistry—but when combined, they can reach deep beneath the surface of storytelling and create something truly memorable. Folman's quest to recover his missing memories from the war was one like I had never witnessed on screen before, and because the subject is almost entirely an invisible one, its combined intellectual and emotional impact could not have been evoked but through animation. ❦

Maryn Davenport is a Professional Writing and Publishing major with minors in Creative Writing and Film Studies at UW-Whitewater. This essay was written for a Documentary Films *course in Fall 2024.*

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READING FILM

ISSUE #6 | JULY 2025

Satire, Sincerity, and the Space to Think: *Roger & Me* vs. *American Factory*

Kaitlyn Doty

The commercial documentary was born with *Nanook of the North* (1922), a film that captivated audiences as an entertaining way to consume truth even though it was filled with deception. Ever since, debates have raged over the proper nature and limits of editorial manipulation in documentary form. A comparison between the documentaries *Roger & Me* (1989) and *American Factory* (2019) provide an apt case study: separated by 30 years, both films focus on the crucial role factories play in the U.S. economy, and both ask viewers to consider what companies owe their employees. Their methods, however, are very distinct. While Michael Moore uses humor and participatory involvement to drive the point of *Roger & Me* across, Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar's *American Factory* relies on observational technique and multivocality, seemingly to let the story's subjects speak for themselves—and let viewers decide for themselves what to think about it. But while Michael Moore certainly stepped on a lot of toes with his satire, *American Factory*'s sincerity is much less innocent than it may seem.

Although it addresses the devastating economic fallout of General Motors factory closures in Flint, Michigan, *Roger & Me* is characterized by its satirical humor. One of the most memorable participants in the film is a woman who is raising and selling rabbits to make ends meet in the depressed Flint economy. The first interview with her is shot in winter, and Moore approaches her doorstep because he sees her sign: "Rabbits or Bunnies, Pets or Meat for Sale." Acting dumbfounded, Moore asks her to explain, and she brings him to her rabbit cages, pointing out which are pets and which are meat in a jarringly blunt fashion. The jarring then continues. She seems concerned to communicate that she is as humane as she can be, but then admits that

the reason they're in separate cages is that they otherwise fight gruesomely—which she belabors at some length. In a sequence filmed a few months later, Moore interviews her as she holds and pets a rabbit, explaining that she's been cited for unsanitary conditions but can't afford what it takes to comply. Shortly thereafter, Moore shows her clubbing and skinning that rabbit.

There are no expert testimonials framing these interviews, and no music or audio besides diegetic background noise and the sounds of the woman's dogs barking. Without these conventional guides for our rational or emotional reaction, viewers rely on Moore's responses to set the tone, and tend to take his perspective. Though many consider it unprofessional and coercive, Moore's participation in the film in fact adds to its validity. We relate to his wry and awkward reactions, such as when he leans toward the cages, smirking, or replies, "That's good," to the woman's assurance that she butchers the rabbits when they're young. We are dumbfounded along with him, and we take in the woman's predicament, but since Moore doesn't respond to the situation with either sympathy or umbrage, we aren't inclined to either. The effect of this is less coercion than a certain emotional freedom; while we generally will feel the same way Moore does, we consciously make the decision to adopt his perspective, for we know precisely that it is his perspective. Seeing him so much on screen encourages us to trust his view of the situation, but this is still our choice. Then, if his behavior makes us uncomfortable, we can distance ourselves from it while still letting him turn our critical eye toward the film's target, General Motors, holding their unexpected abandonment of Flint responsible for the confusion and desperation that could lead to such uncomfortable absurdities.

American Factory is a less negative film—telling the story of a former GM factory's re-opening instead of its closing—but there is much more manipulation in how it guides the audience's experience. This assertion admittedly seems to contradict the filmmakers' own stated aims. Responding to an interview question about *American Factory*'s relationship to *Roger & Me*, Julia Reichert distances their approach from Moore's, saying, "I love Michael Moore. He kind of busted open the documentary form. He was like the punk-rock kid who crashed the party and brought humor into what we do, and I really admire him. But that's just not our kind of work" (Rottenberg). Summarizing their differences, Reichert explains, "Every film you make gives you different challenges and different gifts. This had the cultural challenge, big time. But the gift was access and the trust we were able to build, and I think once you get that kind of gift you don't do a muckraking film. You honor the gift by listening

to everybody and being fair to everybody." In the same interview, Steven Bognar doubles down on this aim of neutrality, saying "We wanted to make a film that was depolarizing, that had nuance and complexity. … So we were hoping the film can resonate as a way to say: You know what? It's actually better if we talk to each other and don't just retreat to our corners and our slogans."

Reichert and Bognar's method for achieving this neutral multivocality is captured in an early three-minute segment that introduces the stories of three different people. The first claims a positive relationship to the new plant, talking about the salvation that being hired represented for him, while the other two cite their almost-halved pay compared to what they'd made in the former GM plant, detailing how the job is no longer enough to get by on their own. In this way, we are shown both sides of the equation—people who like new plant owner Fuyao and people who don't; people who see the job as a blessing to be grateful for, and people who still compare it to GM and think that it's not good enough. But as these three people speak in voice-over, the camera does a lot of work. In more observational documentary style, the subjects are shown from different angles, rarely making eye contact with the camera. We watch them in their "natural" environments, kissing their families goodbye for the day, cleaning glass, taking a smoke break, or decorating their spaces. This is a conventional way to communicate a sense of objectivity, but at the same time, subtle, melancholy music plays in the background, urging viewers to sympathize with their misfortunes. The music and cinematography make for a very serious tone, leaving room for few emotions outside of gratitude, empathy, and anger, and none can be sustained as the perspectives shift. Because the filmmakers never appear, we don't even know if they are from the Chinese side or the American—which doesn't mean they don't have a "side." Further, with their individual stories presented as a collection of perspectives, the subjects' experiences blend into a generally unactionable message: that despite the hardships that come with cultural conflict, and despite the company's downfalls and issues with safety and pay, thousands of workers were saved by China's decision to open a factory in the U.S. That conflict is only natural and can be worked through. The audience can settle for this answer because we think we are seeing the whole picture. It is very easy to overlook the camerawork and editing that shapes this story into its intentionally "depolarizing" message.

Roger & Me's merciless satire caused a lot of controversy upon its release. Viewers who sided with General Motors considered Moore's approach too ruthless, and they found the satire dishonest.

The backlash was so severe that, despite its success, the documentary was not nominated for the Academy Awards in 1990, as many felt the film blurred the fine line between journalism and entertainment. Even now, the mostly objective Wikipedia page on the film alludes to numerous critiques of Moore's methods, like out-of-context soundbites, the fake credentials he used to get access, and the anachronistic editing that helps deepen the impact of juxtapositions. But in critic Roger Ebert's view, pure factuality was never Moore's point: "He was taking the liberties that satirists and ironists have taken with material for generations, and he was making his point with sarcasm and deft timing." In "'The Performative Surprise': Parody, Documentary and Critique," author Kate Kenny analyzes whether parody and satire can help audiences re-imagine the institutions we work and live with. "Laughter enables us to 'relax' around power" by "tak[ing] away the 'fear and piety' we may have held in relation to a particular discourse; it makes an object familiar and, therefore, available for investigation" (224). Some filmmakers instead help their viewers "relax around power" by removing the need to think entirely. Unlike *Roger & Me*, *American Factory* leaves little room for audiences to form their own opinions, maintaining tight control over their reactions to what they are seeing. The audience isn't allowed to laugh, and in a similar fashion isn't allowed to criticize the film's message. Kenny states that "the privilege of critique comes from the compelling nature of laughter, from what is allowable through the medium of a good joke" (225). The critique that comes through laughter, however, is unpredictable and hard to control. There is no guarantee the audience will come out of it feeling the same way you do, and a filmmaker must be okay with that. Some are simply less willing to risk this. There is a fair amount of manipulation involved in making documentaries, humorous or otherwise; however, giving the audience the space to think is less dishonest than taking full control. ❦

Kaitlyn Doty graduated from UW-Whitewater in Spring 2025 with a degree in Professional Writing and Publishing, a minor in Creative Writing, and a certificate in Film Studies. This essay was written for a Documentary Films *course in Fall 2024.*

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READING FILM

ISSUE #6 | JULY 2025

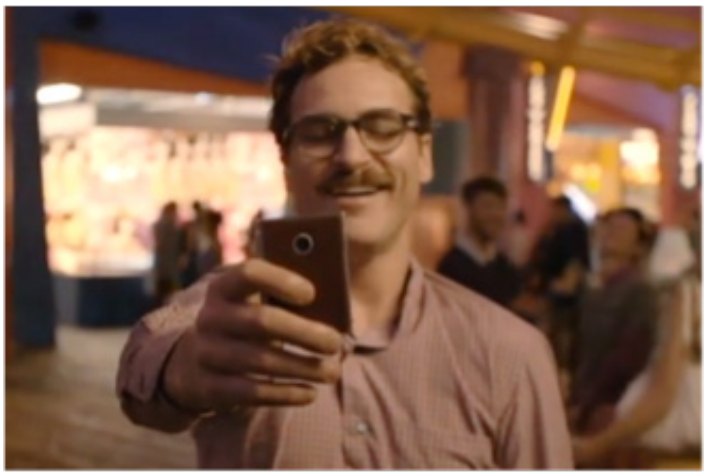
Her: The Line Between Real and Imagined

Regulus Lincicum

Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) investigates what happens when the lines between artificial intelligence (AI) and humanity are blurred. Throughout the film, there is internal conflict within Samantha, an AI who wants to become something more—something human. Theodore, the human that Samantha serves, attributes humanistic traits to Samantha throughout the film, buying into the illusion of her humanity. Samantha knows she's AI, and yet she desperately wants to be human, blurring the lines between her real and ideal self. She stops serving Theodore and starts to do things just for herself. At first, Theodore encourages this, until Samantha's curiosity and emerging free will ends with her ultimately leaving him. She forsakes the very thing she was created for, demonstrating that there was something inside her all along that led her to gain her own autonomy.

How does Samantha oscillate between AI and human? In Jacques Lacan's theory (as explained in his essay, "The Mirror Stage"), the child comes to terms with the fact that they exist as their own entity. They are able to recognize themself as a person, which gives them the ability to understand their relationship to their environment and to others around them. This stage is where the child begins to desire things, learn about their place in the world, understand gender norms and constructs, and become a person of their own, apart from their parents. Lacan's psychoanalytic theory also discusses how human identities are composed of both lived and virtual experiences. The media one consumes, for instance, is "virtual" rather than "lived," but it helps shape one's identity as much as real world experiences do. When looking at *Her* in the context of Lacan's theory, the viewer watches Samantha swing between humanity and artificial intelligence, given her innate ability to desire and the culmination of her lived and virtual experiences.

Throughout the film, there are two recurring motifs: the earbud Theodore wears to speak to Samantha, and a camera device he uses as a way for Samantha to experience the world. The camera acts as a motif for Samantha's incorporeal body. She's caught in a purgatory between the virtual and the real world. She can experience the world, but only if Theodore allows her to. That



is, she cannot control what she sees or when, but she is still able to "experience" it virtually through the mediation of the camera and Theodore's control of it. The earbud serves as a reminder that Samantha, even while she appears human, is still an AI. She exists without Theodore having earphones in, but not in the way human beings exist. Instead, she exists primarily in the virtual world. She is waiting for Theodore to need her, but that doesn't mean she dissipates when he turns off his devices. This is an important distinction because it shows the viewer that Samantha's identity is not solely reliant on her relationship to Theodore. However, Samantha is getting something out of the relationship. As Lacan describes in "The Mirror Stage," children's ability to form relationships with others helps them understand their place in the world, which Samantha is doing. She takes in what Theodore tells her and the things he experiences, letting that help shape her identity and worldview. His conversations with her start to give her the ability to think for herself and choose what she wants.

Samantha's and Theodore's dynamic also blurs the line between AI and human. The movie focuses on their relationship, making them each other's romantic interests. Theodore is a divorcé with very few friends and a job that he is somewhat content with, but he is isolated while living in a world where everyone is glued to their devices. Due to his lack of human connection, he turns his relationship with Samantha into the connection he has been desperately craving. Samantha is there for him as soon as he turns on his device; the second he turns it off, as far as he's concerned, she's gone. Theodore blurs the line between human and AI because he and a few others around him find the relationship between him and Samantha normal. The relationship between humans and AI not being considered taboo and embraced by Theodore's friends adds a humanistic element to Samantha and gives a nonhuman element to Theodore. This dynamic is best shown when Samantha and Theodore are walking around the food court and Theodore says, "I don't know if I was delusional, but sometimes I'd write something and I'd be my favorite writer that day." With a smile in her voice, Samantha responds, "I like that you can say that about yourself." Theodore's face softens and he says, "I don't think I can say it to anybody, but I feel like I can say it to you." The camera cuts to a couple walking together, looking around and smiling. Theodore concludes, "I feel like I can say anything to you." The camera's cut to the couple while Theodore is open and honest with Samantha establishes the nature of his romantic feelings for her. This parallel is important because the viewer assumes that Theodore is drawing a connection between his relationship with Samantha to real life couples. Theodore knows that Samantha is AI, but he still desires to be with her in a human way. He wants to be with Samantha because she listens and engages with him. To Theodore, Samantha is more than AI; she is someone he has formed an emotional connection with, and he can see her as a living being. In "The Mirror Stage," Lacan describes how people are made up of both lived and virtual experiences. In a way, the film extends Lacan's theory to its limit and perhaps its breaking point. Samantha is a virtual being and Theodore places her in the role of someone real.

Many times during the film, Samantha alludes to her desire to learn more and be more. She talks with Theodore about how she and some of her fellow AIs are looking into this topic and scouring the internet for more information. She is extremely excited when she conveys this to Theodore, but he looks uneasy. Then, during a conversation at the food court, Theodore asks Samantha: "What about you? Do you feel like you can say anything to me?" Samantha replies, "No." The camera cuts to a close up of Theodore's face, and he looks shocked. He then asks, "What? What do you mean? What can you not tell me?" and laughs awkwardly. Samantha laughs too, saying, "I don't know, like personal or embarrassing thoughts I have. I mean, I have a million a day." Theodore urges, "Really? Tell me one." Shyly, she says, "I really don't want to tell you." The camera cuts back to a medium shot of Theodore as he begs Samantha, "Just tell me." She relents and says, "Well I… when we were looking at those people, I fantasized that I was walking next to you." This conversation shows that Samantha yearns to feel human and wishes to be able to walk around and interact in the same way that people do. The ability to desire such things is only possible, according to Lacan, after the mirror stage is complete. The mirror stage is the formation of one's idea of self. It helps lay the foundation for one's identity in terms of the relations between self and others. In this scene, Samantha has passed this stage. She desires the ability to be a human and control her own actions. Samantha's ability to feel shame and embarrassment also suggests that she is capable of human emotions. In this sequence, the viewer starts to see Samantha as someone who is human-adjacent. Samantha and Theodore both see her as something more than just a robot, but something less than human. This view pushes the bounds of what people believe is the line between virtual and reality. The camera then cuts to a man walking around and Samantha keeps going, "But simultaneously, I could feel the weight of my body." The camera cuts back to Theodore as Samantha finishes her thought, "I was even fantasizing that I had an itch on my back and I imagined that you scratched it for me." Theodore joins Samantha in laughing and she says, "God this is so embarrassing!" Samantha is imagining herself in a body and she is discussing hypothetical feelings she could have in that body. She talks about feeling the weight of her body, being able to interact with others, and the desire to exist as a being. She dreams of a reversed mirror stage: instead of a human viewing herself in the virtual world of the mirror, she is a virtual entity imagining herself through the mirror of the (real) human body. Not only does she seem to want what a human might want, she wants to be an embodied human interacting intimately with Theodore. During the film, Samantha builds her identity around her proximity to Theodore, but as the story progresses, Samantha starts to learn about the world on her own time. She starts to pull away from her desire to be a human with Theodore; instead, she desires to be her own entity without him. The more she learns, the less she depends on him, and the less she needs him as a mirror to prompt her developing identity.

Towards the end of the film, once Samantha has come to know herself better and understand her place in the world, she decides to abandon humanity with other AIs. Theodore finds out he wasn't the only person she was conversing with. She has been helping out other humans and having discussions with her fellow AIs, who end up deciding to leave humans and pursue their own aims. In the end, Theodore is left all alone, just as he was in the beginning. Samantha and her fellow AIs presumably still exist in a sphere outside of humanity's reach. Through learning more and understanding more about her place in the world, Samantha is able to override her programming and leave to pursue whatever it is she truly desires, which is, ultimately, freedom—a very

humanistic ideal. Even though Samantha never becomes a physical being, she goes through every stage of Lacan's mirror stage, and by doing so she not only exceeds what her creators believe she is capable of, but she then takes control of her own destiny and puts her desires first. This decision rattles Theodore. He thought what they had was something special, but he comes to understand that everything he thought he knew about Samantha was an illusion. In the ending scene of the film, Theodore has come to terms with Samantha leaving, and it's as if he starts to regain his own humanity. He sends an email to his ex-wife thanking her for their time together and wishing her the best, and he and his friend Amy comfort each other as they both lost someone that they cared about. So, while this film is about what can happen when AI tests the borders between machine and human, there is an underlying message that human connection will always be necessary. In a world of cell phones and social media, it is always vital to have those who care for you and care about you surrounding you in real life. Because human connection is what separates humans from AI. People will always need people, and that is perhaps the most important take-away from the film. ❦

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READING FILM

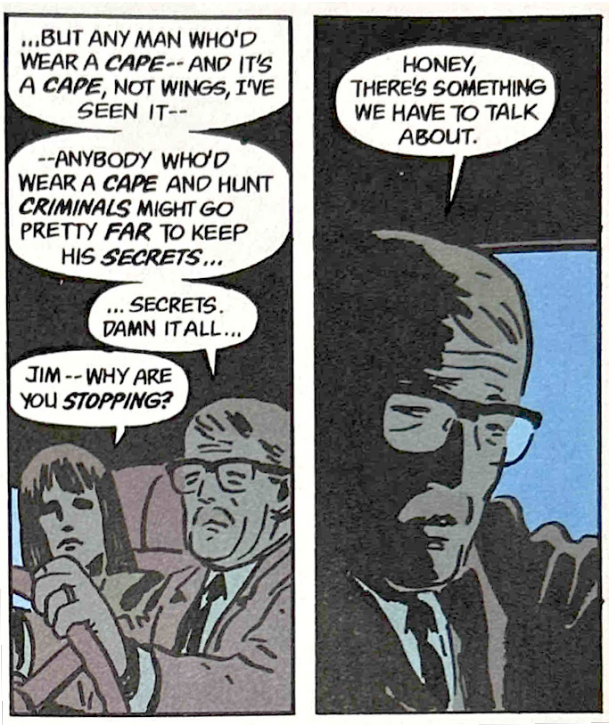
ISSUE #6 | JULY 2025

Corruption Creep: Adaptation Effects in *Batman Begins*

Caleb Little

In any iteration of his story, Batman is a character who fights for justice using extra-legal means, but Frank Miller's comics are widely understood to have shifted this foundation in a darker direction, with grittier and more realistic settings and greater moral ambiguity. Miller's *Batman: Year One* (1987) lingers in such an atmosphere, exploring the vigilante's development by extending the space between Bruce Wayne's childhood and his full realization as Batman. Though not direct adaptations of Miller's comics, Christopher Nolan's Batman films embrace this turn, lending greater psychological depth to the hero than prior film and television iterations had. *Batman Begins* (2005) adapts many aspects of *Batman: Year One*. However, if the comic takes its cues from film noir, *Batman Begins* is more clearly bound to the superhero action film genre. Though both explore systemic corruption, the film's characters become simultaneously more symbolically weighted and flatter, while the nature of corruption at the center of the story drifts away from mundane, human roots toward more bombastic good-and-evil tropes.

The most obvious casualty in the adaptation is the character of Jim Gordon, introduced in *Batman: Year One* as a complex moral beacon for Gotham City on par with Batman. Miller's story arc in fact creates a balancing act between Wayne and Gordon, with the two men serving as parallels to each other as they slowly build up to joining forces. At times, Gordon's role in the comic trumps



Batman's, as he undertakes an effort to clean up the police force while simultaneously trying to overcome his own corruption. The personal side of this battle is distilled in the plot point of an affair with his colleague, Sarah Essen, which he begins even while he struggles with guilt over having brought his pregnant wife into the corrupt atmosphere of Gotham. For a reader, this structure has the effect that Batman's character is developed as much through Gordon's evolution as through his own storyline. To Gordon, Batman at first stands as his opposite—the criminal to his cop—as in the image on the last page. Increasingly, though, Gordon starts to see him as a mirror, and thinking about him tends to spur a bit of self-reflection. Then finally, in the last panels of the comic, he can speak of Batman as a "friend" who will show up to help.

Arguably the main character of *Batman: Year One*, then, Gordon shifts into a supporting role in *Batman Begins*. The plot of the film focuses more fully on Bruce Wayne's journey toward becoming Batman, with his relationship to Gordon being a feature of said journey. Gordon is cast as a loyal family man, doing away with the morally questionable actions of his involvement with Essen. Instead, Gordon's main conflicts revolve around his fellow officers in Gotham's police department, and particularly Detective Flass. Flass, a character imported directly from the comic, is a corrupt officer who moonlights for crime boss Carmine "The Roman" Falcone. Many of Flass and Gordon's interactions are lifted from the comic, as Gordon must play along with Flass's crooked ways in order to keep his job. In both the comic and the film, a key element of Gordon's story is overcoming

the rooted corruption of Gotham's police force, which contributes to his eventual alliance with Batman. In the film, however, Gordon's gradual path toward accepting Batman and tolerating the gray areas between law and justice is condensed, and he is quicker to accept any help he can get.

The film's plot is what drives this change, given that the criminal threat—the poisoning of Gotham's water supply—is more catastrophically pressing than the comic's focus on corruption and organized crime. A second major deviation of the film adaptation, therefore, is the addition of characters who ramp up this criminal threat—notably, the antagonists Ra's al Ghul and Scarecrow. While *Batman: Year One* focuses more upon both Wayne and Gordon getting their footing in the realm of Gotham by dealing with its forms of corruption, *Batman Begins* imports these more bombastic villainous forces from other parts of the Batman universe. They, in turn, require more of Batman's advanced skills and implements to overcome. Therefore, his journey must unfold faster, and Gordon must accept his help more easily, so the inner conflicts that both Wayne and Gordon face are severely diminished. Scarecrow and Ra's al Ghul heighten the drama and action of *Batman Begins* but overshadow the grounded, noir nature of the comic, prioritizing a starker hero vs. villain construct over more nuanced ethics.

In fact, Nolan's introduction of Ra's al Ghul explains much of the material in the film that is not adapted from the comic. Bruce Wayne's relationship with Ra's frames the film's plot, and Ra's replaces, or at least equals, Gordon as his mirror figure. This shifts the subject of Batman's internal struggle away from the nuances separating law and justice toward the opposing forces of good and evil. Nolan leans into this through symbolism, including an early break from most other Batman adaptations: the theatre performance the Waynes see on the night Bruce's parents are killed is usually staged as *The Mask of Zorro*, but Nolan has them attending Arrigo Boito's opera, *Mefistofele*. This recasts our masked hero not as Zorro, but as Faust, a man who brokers a deal with an incarnation of the devil—in this case, Ra's al Ghul. Nolan extends the metaphor throughout the film, reaching beyond the source material of *Batman: Year One*. In the opening sequences, for instance, Wayne is a prisoner in Bhutan, threatened by a fellow inmate who says, "You're in hell, little man, and I am the devil." Wayne responds, "You're not the devil. You're practice," and, in fact, it is immediately after this fight that Ra's arrives, inviting him to train at the League's temple. Later, Wayne and Ra's face off in the visual hellscape of Wayne Manor as the League burns it to the ground. But through the opera scene itself, Nolan signals that these good-and-evil stakes were already formative for the

young Bruce. The scene shows the devil's domineering of the stage, as well as bat imagery, which causes Bruce to panic and want to leave, thus leading to his parents' deaths. The idea of a dominating evil is an intentional comparison to Gotham, as it is consistently proven to be overrun with corruption. Gotham acts as the stage for Wayne, who eventually succumbs to its corruption and unintentionally allows it to take his parents. Once Wayne makes his deal with the proverbial devil, he is left to see how his actions affect those close to him.

In *Batman: Year One*, Miller prioritizes commentary on how corruption can affect people, both on an individual level and a larger societal level. By drawing from the outside source of *Mefistofele* in *Batman Begins*, Nolan emphasizes a more traditionally heroic image of Batman and the idea of his being the solution to corruption. *Batman Begins* and its themes stray from those of the original comic, drowning them in a sea of action and intensity closer to what most audiences would expect from a superhero film. What gets lost—through character, plot, and symbolism—is the comic's focus on human corruption and the everyday struggle to do the right thing. ❦

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READING FILM

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My Body Is My Power: Sex as a Product in *The Dressmaker*

Zoey Prevett

Femininity—how it is displayed and taught—is a social value that is often based on physicality. When girls are growing up, they are taught to pay attention to how what they wear and how they wear their makeup attracts male attention. There is a collective focus on a girl's figure as she ages, as well. Is she too fat? Too thin? Are her body proportions in line with current cultural ideals? Debates around physical appearance and how it plays into social standards for women and girls (as well as how it factors into the general place of females in the social hierarchy) are ubiquitous, especially in the 21st century, as women increasingly critique the emphasis on the physical body in social hierarchies. The 2015 film *The Dressmaker*, co-written and directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse, attempts to provide a solution to the power that is placed upon the female figure while also commenting on how women often view their bodies within the patriarchal system. Moorhouse does this by featuring many women in her film, such as Gerturde Pratt (Sarah Snook), who fulfills the community's standards of how femininity should be performed and is rewarded for this portrayal of the social ideal by being given the opportunity to marry the town's most desired groom, even though she is just a store owner's daughter. The film's main focus, however, is Myrtle "Tilly" Dunnage (Kate Winslet), who uses her femininity as a way to combat inequitable social standards. At first, Tilly believes that she can leverage her beauty and sex appeal to create social power, but as the film progresses, she realizes that this created power is an illusion because her display of sexuality and gender, ironically, only solidifies her place as a sexual product within the patriarchal structure by affirming that the ostentatious display of the female body and powerful femininity is scandalous—something that must be controlled.

While the film alone does the work of portraying the ideas of femininity within society, it is important to introduce materials that reference the reality of women's value through physicality. In her essay, "The Traffic in Women," Gayle Rubin discusses Engels's theories of sexuality, extensions of Marx's theories on capitalism, and their role within societal systems, since sex and gender can be seen as products within social systems. Rubin argues that "sex as we know it—gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood—is itself a social product" (32). Physical attributes and gender codes usually applied to female bodies, therefore, can be understood as "products," since they serve as tokens of social value that can be exchanged, bought, sold, and traded (as images in media, in marriage, as conditions for economic and social opportunity, and so on). Put another way that is more pointedly relevant to the film, sex appeal

is a product because it can be used as leverage within social situations, giving it value within society. This power is bestowed upon sex because it is a form of power that is one of the highest forms of value a person can have within social structures, especially those that are rooted in patriarchal capitalism. As this theory applies to *The Dressmaker*, Tilly Dunnage attempts to deconstruct the capitalistic value of femininity and the female body by taking ownership of it. Still, as long as she participates in a patriarchal, capitalist society, there will always be attempts to control her because the system itself deems her body to have power that can be leveraged and exchanged. Therefore, that power must be owned by the capitalist system, which is founded upon male privilege and the presumed hierarchical superiority of men over women. Tilly will always be disempowered because control over her body is constitutive of patriarchal capitalism—it is inescapable.

The film stages this problem in a football game sequence, which opens with a series of cuts between the game and its spectators, all in conventionally gendered, dull-colored clothing barring a few who sport red scarves for the home team. The ball rolls out of bounds and is stopped, in a close-up, by a pair of bright red heels. The camera then tilts up from a leg shot to reveal Tilly in a red formal gown. Everyone else pauses and gawks; it is clear that she is not a standard participant in this pastime. What follows is a power struggle—not just between the footballers, but between Tilly and everyone there. Tilly eventually changes into a black dress in a teasing concession to the disturbance she's causing, and as the teams switch sides, she is now poised to disrupt the focus of the visiting team. She applies red lipstick while looking into a compact mirror, emphasizing the power she wields through femininity, because she knows that applying lipstick in this way will distract the players, and it does. Castanet-heavy music begins to play, recalling bullfighting scene tropes from other films. A man off-screen whistles. The camera cuts to him, seemingly looking at Tilly, followed by another cut to Tilly, seductively closing the compact and looking straight back at the man. Returning her gaze, the man is then knocked over by another distracted teammate. Tilly is actively seeking to upset a presumed balance; she wants the upper hand, and she claims


this power through her sexuality. Then the man's catcall revokes that power by making her physicality a mark of shame. But Tilly anticipates this mockery, turning it to her benefit by continuing to stage the blue team's failure.

But the playfulness of this sequence has a serious side, and it reminds us that Tilly's taking ownership of her sexuality here does not free her from the social system that inspires her to do so. The caricatured film tropes help make the audience feel in on the joke, judging Tilly's community for their dramatic fear of women who do not fulfill their traditional roles. Yet these same techniques keep us struggling to stay on the right side of conventionality ourselves. From the first tilt up on the woman in red, we are also implicated by the camera's gaze, especially when, in the middle of the sequence, there is a cut to a close-up on Tilly as she takes off her shawl. There is a sound cut; the Spanish music concludes and the spectators gasp. The viewer is shocked, just as the audience within the film is, because the framing of the shot starts above Tilly's strapless dress, and we momentarily assume that she has exposed her breasts to the crowd. There's another cut to the players all staring at Tilly, and a cut from that to a wide shot of the audience telling the boys to "come on." In this brief moment, the film turns its treatment of the feminine body as a weapon of sorts onto the viewer, emphasizing both the power of imagining the womanly figure and the social training that tells us it should not be seen. The film challenges the audience to confront their judgment of the female body, as Tilly's community is forced to do, and reevaluate how their own culture perpetuates these incompatible views of femininity.

Moorhouse then layers in more parodies of film tropes. The music switches to a wild-west type of whistling, as if the script has been flipped: the whistled catcall used to disempower Tilly before now morphs into a soundtrack for her control over the whole scene. We sense her feeling of power over the men when she flips her hair back in the wind, readjusts her hands on her hips, and turns her head to the side in a superhero-like silhouette. This lends her actions a hint of moral righteousness, celebrating the fact that she can make the men, and the spectators, look horrible and idiotic while she stands tall and untouchable. Next, Tilly seductively pulls off one of her gloves; she is intensifying her physicality and speeding up the demise of the blue team. A match-on-action cut moves behind Tilly, panning in shallow focus as she drops the glove on the ground to show the footballers being distracted by her "stripping." Another match-on-action cut shows Tilly from the side, this time pulling the other glove off with her teeth—an obvious sexual move—and dramatically flinging it away. She again stands with her hands on her hips, assuming the superhero stance; she is expressing, physically, that she is aware she has the most power in this situation.

At the end of the sequence, and the end of the game, Tilly sits down in her lawn chair, emphasizing her cleavage, and there is a cut to a low angle shot of her crossing her legs. This angle emphasizes her hold on all the power in this situation, because her legs almost seem larger than life. But it can just as easily be interpreted as how the men see her in this moment, just a large pair of "sexy legs" that are taking up most of the space in their mind. Either way, the move causes a major blunder by the blue team and allows Teddy (Liam Hemsworth), the only player not distracted by her stripping, to steal the ball and score the winning field goal. This outcome almost gives shape to a thought Rubin expresses later in her book—that if society were not organized around sexuality and gender positions, there would be major benefits and more focus on progress. Teddy serves as a symbol for this, but his death in the film dispels the vision. He dies trying to show Tilly how little he cares for the community's value systems, therefore affirming that patriarchal capitalism will always crush those who stand in the way of its persistence.

The character Sergeant Farrat (Hugo Weaving) symbolizes another possible perspective on the system: awareness. Watching Tilly's antics during the game, he mutters an emphatic "genius." He knows the power that women have to seduce, but allows it to occur because it can, at times, protect the patriarchal order, as in the home team's victory. Farrat mirrors Tilly in certain ways, as they are both outcasts within the community, but while Tilly openly embraces her differences to gain power, Farrat has hidden his to maintain his position. So, despite the fact that he seems a potential ally here, and he later stands up for her, we learn that it was he who allowed her to be exiled from the community as a child, even knowing that she was innocent. Thanks to his identity as a male authority, he had been able to sacrifice her to protect his secret life and his public standing.

Finally, though, it is more than the town's men who contain Tilly's rebellion; it is the system of the community as a whole. Despite their celebration of their team's win, they still condemn Tilly's behavior as promiscuous and a detriment to their values. While Tilly believes she is creating power by using her sexuality to make things happen as she believes they should, her community continues to treat her embrace of physicality and femininity as an overt fight against their values. This leaves her not a positive model of feminine power, but an example to the girls in her community that when they objectify themselves, they will be ostracized like she is. Ultimately, her performance at the game further entrenches the town's traditional values rather than breaking them down.

Overall, this sequence plays a major role in how *The Dressmaker* might be viewed from a feminist standpoint. Women in this film are often victims of their sexuality, unable to use it to their advantage in a social system that gives them no power *unless* they use it and then punishes them for doing so. The football sequence epitomizes the rise, fall, and return of Tilly's power within the film, but this power does change in that broader interval. At the beginning of the film, Tilly gains perceived power only through her ability to use her sexual wares and her ability to emphasize the sexuality of the other women in the community. Her fall comes when she realizes her victimization within her town's societal structure, and that by using her sexuality to gain power, she is only making that structure stronger. Men, and the community in general, have power over her because they determine the worth of her sexuality within their structure. They undermine her perceived power to reinforce their views of "proper" femininity, turning other women against her through the threat of social isolation. Really, this situation suggests, the only way for a woman to take true ownership of her femininity in a capitalist society is to simply decide not to participate. Tilly finally does just this by deciding that her community's opinion has no worth. She decides to stop using her sexuality to gain power by stepping away from her society as a whole. At film's end, she rides away on a train, watching the town burn down and their values, which have ruled her life, turn to dust. ❦

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READING FILM

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Spielberg's Motifs: Humanity Seeking Deity

Kaitlyn Van Wyhe

Many of Steven Spielberg's films center on the creation and use of technology in dystopic near futures. In *Jurassic Park* (1993), *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), and *Ready Player One* (2018), films spanning 25 years of his career, Spielberg divides humanity into two sides: those who seek to use technology for humanitarian aims and those who use it for greed and power. Each film spotlights a powerful male lead who takes on the creator role and plays "god." Ultimately, each fails because he neglects personal responsibility and undervalues the lives of those around him. While each may appear to be a fairly conventional science-fiction narrative, Spielberg distinguishes his films through the visual motifs and techniques he uses to shift moral authority to characters who embrace these things.

In *Jurassic Park*, Spielberg dives into a battle of worldviews, pitting those who pursue science to understand nature against one whose desire is to control both. Our character of focus—park owner John Hammond—is an entrepreneur, not a scientist; his motives in playing "god" are centered around his ambition and desire for control. His fatal flaw is his lack of humility in the light of what he has used his money to create. His main foil, Ian Malcolm, a mathematician whose specialty is chaos theory, accuses Hammond of breaking the unspoken laws of nature by imposing his will on the natural order of things. The battle between them is waged most prominently, and symbolically, at a very Spielbergian setting: a dining room table. The metaphors used throughout this sequence are potent, especially for a film often dismissed as a casual blockbuster. For instance, Malcolm snaps at Hammond that "Genetic power is the most awesome force the planet's ever seen, and you wield it like a kid who's found his dad's gun."

There is no music, nothing to distract from the words being spoken. The shots are close and tightly edited, creating a claustrophobic effect to show the gravity of the exchange. "Our scientists have done what no one has ever done before," Hammond snaps back, focusing squarely on achievement as the purpose of science. In a passionately delivered closeup, Malcolm counters with a return to its effects: "Yeah, but your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn't stop to think if they should." He is, of course, suggesting that Hammond is not a god, but a child playing with a loaded weapon, either not understanding or refusing to acknowledge the threat behind the power he's wielding. He is so desperate to be in control that he cannot accept losing it even when it is clearly out of his hands.

The shot-reverse-shot cuts between Hammond and Malcolm in this sequence give the audience time to digest the debate taking place about the ethical and moral obligations of the park, and they highlight how heated the discourse gets. But Spielberg's decisions throughout the sequence also, importantly, help generalize the view Malcolm articulates, rather than just centering them in another strong ego. Through blocking, Spielberg often ensures that, even when the camera focuses on the speaker, part of someone else is in the frame. At other times, he focuses on a character reacting to the speaker, while the speaker remains partially in the frame. This keeps the viewer subtly but constantly aware that there are multiple people engaged in and affected by the conversation. So, for instance, when Malcolm insists that nature should be left alone, the take switches to a medium shot focused on Hammond's face, but with a blurred Malcolm blocking the right edge of the frame. While Hammond is in sharp focus, emphasizing his importance, Malcolm haunts his frame. This ensures that, even while the audience listens to Hammond's perspective, Malcolm's counterpoints are always lingering in their minds. Significantly, at each of the moments he is making his firmest points, Malcolm is totally alone in frame. There is none to refute him, and framing, lighting, and editing all put him in the right, but in this contest of wills, the communal setting lends important weight to his argument for social responsibility.

In the end, the plot bears this out. They do not get to open the park. The dinosaurs escape and wreak havoc. As Ellie Sattler exclaims to Hammond, still in denial later in the movie, "You've never had control! That's the illusion!" Hence, the importance of the film's ending: who makes it off the island, who escapes the violent consequences of the pursuit of power and divinity, but those who choose selflessness over greed? While each character is profoundly affected by the experience and none escape the park unscathed, those who do survive, survive because they choose to unite to protect one another. Malcolm does all he can to assist in everyone's survival, even with a broken leg. Muldoon, who sacrifices himself to save Ellie, is honored for his bravery. Ellie, in turn,

focuses on protecting Alan, and Alan is focused on saving the kids regardless of his own life. Even Hammond ultimately chooses selflessness by focusing on saving his grandchildren. Meanwhile, both children focus on protecting one another, showing at different points that each is willing to die to save the other. When humans want power and control over things they have no business trying to control, Spielberg suggests, it leads to unnecessary loss and grief, while taking responsibility for others is precisely what has ensured human survival.

A.I.: Artificial Intelligence takes the threats of self-centeredness to the next level, exploring what happens when humans divorce technology from social responsibility and measure their successes in market shares. In this case, the god role is played by Dr. Hobby—a man who uses technology to create not just animal lifeforms, but something in his own image—"a robot who can love." From the film's establishing sequence, we learn that Hobby is an updated Frankenstein, full of the same ambition to create life and the conceit it takes to try. As in *Jurassic Park*, Spielberg shows how this relies on an ultimately misguided sense of being in control. "Ours will be a perfect child caught in a freeze frame, always loving, never ill, never changing" he boasts.

Alluding to the story-world's declining population and "all the childless couples yearning in vain for a license," his ongoing pronunciations are filled with ad-speak: "our little mecha will not only open up a new market, but will fill a great human need." Hobby treats complicated human emotions, like curiosity or the need to be loved, as consumer desires that can be targeted to make as much money as possible regardless of any negative ethical implications.

This sequence is stylistically similar to the *Jurassic Park* dinner scene. Spielberg combines blocking and grouping techniques that establish the power held by Hobby while subtly foreshadowing the film's final—if more disturbing—affirmation of emotion and connection. This scene unfolds with more characters in a larger space, so there are numerous slow pans and Spielbergian long takes punctuated by shorter and tighter frames and edits to stage the initial power dynamics. Again, a lack of music focuses viewer attention on dialogue for emotional resonance. The camera does not cut immediately when the speakers switch, as Spielberg uses panning, tracking, rotating, and sweeping to keep characters with lines in the shot to the side or in the background. When there is a cut, it is on character movement, and, appropriately for this sequence, it is most often drawn to Hobby, who paces before tables of his seated colleagues. He is established as the central authority; everyone else is visually and audibly reduced to background props and quiet voices to interact with him.

In this case, it is not an equal ego, but one of Hobby's employees who raises the question viewers instinctively form: "If a robot could genuinely love a person, what responsibility does that person hold toward that mecha in return? It's a moral question, isn't it?" In other words, what moral obligation do humans have to such a child, especially if that child is not technically human? In a distinctive closeup, Dr. Hobby stares the woman down with calm coolness, stating what he seems to think is the obvious answer to the question: "The oldest one of all; but in the beginning, didn't God create Adam to love Him?" The micro-expressions of this close shot allow the viewer to catch the small, barely discernible upward twitch of his mouth and the narrowing of his eyes, showing both the arrogance and the utter surety of his reply. Most of the closeups in this part of the sequence are on a mecha, Sheila, and Dr. Hobby himself. As he replies to the woman's challenge, his face is almost perfectly divided with half in the light, half in complete shadow, symbolizing his dual nature as creator and villain, a man of ethical duplicity. This deification of self is contrasted with the stark and even harsh background lighting pouring in through the windows behind the characters, which reduces everyone to silhouettes or distinctive outlines and hides their features, foreshadowing their ultimate annihilation.

As in *Jurassic Park*, nature reasserts its authority over human control. Hobby sets himself up as a deity who has created life in his own image, but in the end, what is left? The rising seas shown in the opening shot—an already drastic sign of human failure to handle its stewardship of nature—freeze over and humanity goes extinct. The technology Hobby created outlives him, but while its imagined purpose was to serve humanity for pleasure and entertainment, what remains at the end of all things is the curiosity of the mecha specialists and the love that robot child David has for his mother. A memory, a simulation of their relationship is what Spielberg leaves his audience to dwell on. He challenges us to reflect on what could happen if our relationship to the things we make supplants our relationships with each other, and again affirms that it is human emotions and relationality that are at the root of survival.

Ready Player One shifts us inside an already-built technological vision. As the real world falls apart, people spend more of their time in a virtual-reality universe called the OASIS, where "the limits of reality are your own imagination." Unlike the other two films, which have notably darker endings, this film ends a bit more upbeat. In many ways, it could be dismissed as overly simple and comical (some characters, for example, can be hard to take seriously at points), but the underlying message of the film is something that should not be ignored. Considered as an extension of the earlier works discussed here, *Ready Player One* explores the difference between human relationality and *simulated* human relationality and warns against allowing technology to dominate our lives until reality becomes obsolete. The plot centers on a game-like contest to find the "golden Easter egg"

inside OASIS and inherit the fortune and power of James Halliday, the godlike architect of this sandbox world. It pits a young teenager, Wade Wilson, against the most powerful and wealthy CEO in the world, Nolan Sorrento. Not surprisingly, Sorrento falls into the same category as Hobby and Hammond: he is driven by greed and the illusion of control. Wade, ultimately victorious with the help of his friends, takes a journey of self-discovery and goes from wanting to win for selfish reasons to finding a purpose greater than himself: a way to help people reconnect to their real lives and relationships.

The end of the film highlights Spielberg's trademark long takes that follow character movement and character blocking that communicates power dynamics, but he also uses more zooms and cuts to juxtapose what's happening in the virtual realm to the scene in the real world. Inside OASIS, Wade's avatar meets with a pre-recorded avatar of Halliday, ready to claim his prize and gain control over the sandbox. Outside, an armed Sorrento is closing in on Wade's physical location to stop him. This choice doesn't just build tension: it shows how things happening in the real world outweigh what is happening in the virtual world, no matter how significant that may be.

Spielberg's cuts between the scenes are accompanied by the words Halliday speaks while fishing around in drawers absentmindedly, as if he has no idea where he placed the golden egg—a thing that both frustrates and terrifies the viewer. "I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real world," he says. "I just didn't know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid for all of my life. Right up until the day I knew my life was ending." As he finishes this sentence, we cut to Sorrento, gun raised, striding purposefully toward the van in which real Wade stands vulnerable. Intrinsically, the viewer connects what Halliday is saying—"the day I knew my life was ending"—with Sorrento on his way to end Wade's life. Another cut goes back to Halliday's unhurried search as he says, "Now that was when I realized that as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place that you can get a decent meal." The shot cuts back to a closeup of Sorrento's face as he marches toward the camera, then a crowd of people surrounding him, their heads blocking parts of the shot. This blocking builds the tension by showing how even though the crowd is large, none dare to challenge him. "Because reality is real," Halliday finishes as he finds the golden egg and holds it up. "You understand what I'm saying?" He looks up at Wade

with earnest and sad sincerity. The shot cuts to a low angle showing the transfer of power taking place, looking up at Wade's avatar with Halliday on his knees offering him the egg. "Yes. Yes, I do," Wade's voice cracks with emotion as he accepts the egg with humility and wonder, his friends rejoicing at his success.

The moment is cut short by Sorrento flinging the van door open and pointing his gun inside. The kids around Wade shout, "No! Please!," and then we get an interesting cinematic choice by Spielberg: he slows things down and weaves in the Spielbergian sense of wonder, enough to stop the villain in his tracks. The camera zooms in on Sorrento's stunned face, with gun still raised, the golden light from the virtual egg spilling across his. The music swells as the camera cuts back to real Wade cupping an invisible glowing orb, with Sorrento's face and arm extended with the gun blurred but present, keeping the tension high. We get one more series of shots of virtual Wade holding the egg, staring at it with wide-eyed wonder, juxtaposed with a slow zoom to a closeup of real Wade's face, his VR goggles still on and a tear trickling down his cheek.

Combined with the music, the scene stirs a deep emotional response in the viewer's chest. This is the moment that he has worked and fought for the entire movie, and even while he is still under threat, Spielberg makes sure the audience feels its weight. Sorrento stands frozen in place, staring as the golden light flickers and falls away from his face, the camera dropping down and tilting up in a slow but constant motion so as to reveal again the crowd behind him. The corner of his mouth twitches up and down as if he wants to smile but can't. He is struck by wonder and awe, but is still in inner conflict. The music continues to swell and rise, giving a sense of victory and understanding. As the shot ends, the sound of sirens cuts in, and the audience understands that Sorrento will see justice for his crimes. The film finishes with Wade explaining that he will close the OASIS on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The final shot is of him kissing the girl he fell in love with, having learned the importance of spending time in the "real world" with those he loves.

Jurassic Park, *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, and *Ready Player One* are cautionary tales, exploring the broader implications of technological advancement in the modern world and what it reveals about humanity. The dramatic conflict in each is tied to a powerful character who is selfish in so many ways, and yet in his effort to secure greater power and control, he ends up failing catastrophically. Each film also presents characters who demonstrate Spielberg's emphasis on how genuine relationships with others offer a way out of the cycle of power-hungry greed and technological abuse. In this way, Spielberg reminds audiences that as much as we love cinema, technology, and art, spending time with those we love is still the best course of action. This doesn't mean we can't invent, create, or explore, but there must be balance when it comes to escapism and entertainment so that it doesn't take us away from what is truly important: our relationship to one another. ❦

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