

Moon

(2009, Jones, UK)

Component 1: Varieties of Film and Film-Making (AL)
Component 2: European Film

Core Study Areas:
Key Elements of Film Form
Meaning & Response
The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area:
Narrative
Ideology (AL)

Rationale for study

An engaging low budget (\$5 million) science fiction film involving a terrific central performance from lone on-screen actor, Sam Rockwell. Critically lauded and nominated for two BAFTAs – it won one for Duncan Jones, ‘Outstanding debut by a British writer, Director or Producer’. Scientifically plausible and very much in the lineage of 1970s low budget realist space dramas from the USA such as *Silent Running* (Trumbull, 1972) and *Dark Star* (Carpenter, 1974). *Gravity* (Cuaron, USA, 2013) and *The Martian* (Scott, USA, 2015) represent high budget star-driven movies based on similar themes. Movies like *Alien* (Scott, USA/UK, 1979) and *Outlands* (Hyams, UK, 1981) are also an influence.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

00:31 - Beginning - The text ‘Where are we now?’ appears onscreen followed by an aerial ELS of a refinery.

Our short-sighted reliance on fossil fuel energy is highlighted from the very first shot.

01:28:53 – Ending - As Sam’s space capsule re-enters the Earth’s atmosphere we hear over the air waves the Earth’s reaction in a number of different

languages. We learn that the share prices of the company have fallen and that Sam 2 is giving evidence at a hearing. Finally however we hear an American radio talk show host and shock-jock ranting that Sam 2 is either a wacko or an illegal immigrant but either way he should be locked up.

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- The lighting style is often high key to emphasise the clinical environment.
- A graphic ECU and focus pull revealing Sam 1’s actual physical decay – in-built obsolescence is a theme explored in terms of artificially intelligent androids in *Bladerunner*.
- One of the many beautiful ELS’s of the Earth and the moon – emphasising their narrative and actual connection.
- Sam 2 surveys with suspicion Sam 1. The trope of the mirrored sunglasses shielding his eyes and concealing his identity is something which, given the narrative twist emerging in the plot, becomes a form of self-protection. Rockwell noted that this is one angle of the story that engaged him – what if you did meet yourself? What would you think of yourself? Subject becomes object – literally mirrored in the eyes of another.

Mise-en-Scène

- Our first close up of the film’s protagonist Sam (Sam Rockwell) working hard on a treadmill – staying fit but also ‘going nowhere’. The bearded astronaut has become a realist trope of the space explorer genre ever since the 1970s – subverting the clean-cut conventions of earlier space explorers such as seen in *Flash Gordon*, homaged in *Star Wars* and spoofed in *Toy Story*’s characterisation of Buzz Lightyear. Sam’s T-shirt is an ironic comment on the life and death of a clone.
- The first LS of Sam Gerty (voiced by Kevin

Spacey), the mobile on-board computer and Sam's carer/parent, enters frame right and exits frame left. Sam's casual dishevelment acts as counterpoint with the pristine and clinical environment of the space station which was constructed as lock down set. The claustrophobic framing adds to the sense of Sam's literal and metaphorical imprisonment. The retro styling of Gerty's smiley/sad face is a wry commentary on the inability to make machines human and of course the reverse too – to make humans into Machines.

- The use of retro styled models on an interior set, give the film a sense of homaging the pre-CGI films of science fiction. The onscreen text and the earlier corporate video also act as a neat piece of narrative exposition.

Editing

- The editing of the scenes of Sam 1 and Sam 2 is seamless but clearly very exacting for Rockwell and all technicians – thus the construction of straightforward two shots is actually a monumental achievement. Below a dishevelled Sam 1 beats an uptight and upright Sam 2 at table tennis.
- The faux corporate video for Lunar Industries starts with a montage and constructs a bleak view of a world over-reliant on fossil fuel.

Sound

- The score by Clint Mansell is assured and atmospheric. The final shots are accompanied by an upbeat score which mirrors the euphoria of Sam's escape – only somewhat undercut by some negative reactions to his arrival and subsequent court case as heard on radio.
- Audio tropes associated with the genre are frequently used such as alarm klaxons, airlocks opening and closing, electronic doors sliding, digitised sfx, etc.
- As Sam 2 re-enters the Earth's atmosphere he woops with joy. This scene has affinities with the similar hand-held, surreally coloured work of *2001 Space Odyssey* and with the upbeat humour of *Dark Star* where a character surfs into the sun.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

Representations

- Gender, Ethnicity and Age: Space exploration is presented as a largely 30-something white

male activity. The whole point of the movie is about the cloning of an individual so it's perhaps significant that the choice of such an archetype is an American white male. Performing a substitution exercise and making our central performer non-white and /or female does yield a more radical reading. We do meet other characters (all on screens and monitors or in brief flashbacks) but their representations are largely as prosaic narrative notes – wives, men in suits, etc.

- Space exploration and Cloning: The modernist representation of space as encapsulated in the Star Trek mantra: '...to seek out new life and new civilisations; to boldly go where no man has gone before...' – is subverted. Space is seen as merely an opportunity to further exploit nature. The misuse of human clones being just one further extension of that attitude – given licence by the literally moral vacuum of space. The dramatic crux of the film is the emotionally devastating moment Sam 1 establishes a direct video link with home, talks briefly to his now teenage daughter, learns his wife has died some years before and hears himself in the background (presumably the actual Sam rather than a cloned version). The heartless immorality of cloning for slave labour and imprinting false memories into clones designed with a shelf life of only three years is remorselessly depicted.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- A key feature of the aesthetics is an attempt to keep digital effects to a minimum and use a lot of model work to convey a retro feel. To help with this Jones worked with Bill Pearson, the supervising model maker on *Alien*.
- The moon itself is a character in the film as obviously highlighted by the film's title. Jones explained his fascination: "*It's the desolation and emptiness of it...it looks like some strange ball of clay in blackness.... Look at photos and you'll think that they're monochrome. In fact, they're not. There simply are no primary colours.*" (The Independent, 2011).

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- The euphoria of the space race is over but the race to put tourists in space (if not on

the moon) is still evident as we see in the recent attempts to launch rockets by Richard Branson and his Virgin Galactic enterprise.

Historical

- The film's retro approach to space exploration via mining on the moon is based on a historical appreciation of a canon of dystopic, pessimistic science fiction that can be traced back to the literary work of H.G. Wells and contemporary writers such as J.G. Ballard and Phillip K. Dick. In terms of film influence Lang's *Metropolis* (1927, Germany) remains an early dystopian landmark of science fiction.

Political

- The film follows in the anti-corporate science fiction tradition of such films as *Alien* and *Bladerunner*. The corporate cloning of Rockwell's astronaut and miner is clearly presented to us as immoral – an example of big business putting profit above people.

Technological

- Jones in an interview with online magazine *SyfyWire* noted: "We decided that we weren't going to go on any location shoots. We wanted to have completely controlled shooting environments, so we did everything on soundstages. We basically had two soundstages, one which was for the interior of the moon base, which we built in its entirety and which was another attempt to create a believable location space and also to save us some space, since a lot of our lighting was pre-existing within the set build. So our cinematographer only had a very small lighting kit that he had to carry around with him around the base. Most of the lighting was actually built into the base. For the exteriors, we built this chunk of lunar terrain, about 30' x 40', and were pulling around model miniatures. So we went with a very retro technique for doing those effects. Obviously, we had the benefit of having the backup of a post-production company like Cinesite, who sort of beautified and fixed all the obvious problems, like being able to see fishing line when we were pulling trucks across the lunar landscape and digitally expanding the landscape. But we tried to capture as much as possible in-camera in order to save ourselves money and to give the film a different, hybrid look that just felt more real.

Institutional

- No big studios were involved until the distribution stage with Sony Picture Classics. The film premiered at Sundance festival and successfully targeted a number of festivals such as Edinburgh to raise its profile. Its eventual worldwide box office of \$9.8 million on a limited and staggered release bode well for ancillary sales to TV and on DVD/Blu-ray.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Narrative and Ideology

Starting points

- In an interview with the on-line magazine *SyfyWire* Jones commented on the difficulty Rockwell faced in effectively acting opposite himself. "*It was an incredibly hard thing for Sam, because he's trained in this acting technique called Meisner, which is very much a reactionary form of acting where you use the actors you're working with to spur you to improvise back at them. It's a very collaborative way of working, which, obviously, completely had no bearing on what we were doing.*"
- The film's resolution is only hinted at as we do not return to earth with Sam. The use of overheard Radio/TV bulletins to inform us of the reaction to his return suggests his arrival will have repercussions for big business and government policy but no specific detail is given. Indeed one member of the general public rants about Sam as an 'illegal immigrant'. In these post-Brexit times a wry joke that feels somewhat more prescient now.