



The Main Feature

Season 37 - Issue 15

screening 27.4.17

UK 2015 Cert 15 1hr 48m

Director and Writer Alex Garland
Cinematography Rob Hardy
Editor Mark Day
Music Ben Salisbury and Geoff Barrow

Cast:

Alicia Vikander – Ava
Domhnall Gleeson – Caleb Smith
Oscar Isaac – Nathan Bateman
Sonoya Mizuno – Kyoko
Symara A. Templeman – Jasmine
Elina Alminas – Amber
Tiffany Pisani – Katya
Claire Selby – Lily
Corey Johnson – Jay (helicopter pilot)



Deus ex machina – an unexpected late intervention that saves the day. From ancient Greek theatre, where the machinery lowered a character onto the stage to change the course of the story.

Under the capacious umbrella of science fiction, there are many and varied stories. Alongside the existential threats to mankind – *The Andromeda Strain*, *The War of the Worlds*, *Alien*, *Space Cowboys* – there are parables, such as *The Day The Earth Stood Still* and *Wall-E*, which make us think about the human contribution to the state of the planet we live on and the peril we perceive it to be in. There are adventures and thrillers, the latter being the sub-genre of *Ex Machina*.



The rich recluse with too much time and money, too few moral constraints and a desire to push the boundaries of science provided us with some of the earliest science fiction tales, from *Frankenstein* (1818) to *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896). *Ex Machina* brings the story up to date, with Nathan Bateman, the man who creates an artificial brain hosting an artificial intelligence that he is sure can convince anyone that it is actually another human being. He invites one of his employees, Caleb Smith, to visit his remote high-tech home to test the credibility of his creation – the Turing test. When Smith finds out how long Bateman has been working on the project and how many prototypes he has discarded, he realises that he is out of his depth, out of contact with the outside world and out of luck...

The line between robotics and artificial intelligence has become more blurred over the last few decades. Robots started out as mechanical devices which performed tasks which are too dangerous for humans, or required too much physical effort. Decades of development has brought us not quite to the Synthetics of Channel 4's *HUMANS* but to helpers who can take on the drudgery of housework and provide

companionship. The only problem is it appears that people don't really like them, as detailed in this report: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-12347219>.

Robots are generally thought of as programmable machines, obeying the commands embedded in them and, at their most independent, still governed by the Three Laws of Robotics, drawn up by Isaac Asimov in his short story *Runaround* (1942):

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws

The director Alex Garland was asked how he played with these "Laws": "Without wanting to sound negative to the question, the Asimov's Three Laws ... I completely ignored them because it's not like a law, not an actual ... it's a self-declared law. But why should one observe it? It may or may not be observed. It's just sort of a suggestion, isn't it? I don't feel obliged by the Courts of Sci-Fi to do whatever Asimov thought was the right thing to do. I don't actually think that he'd have expected that either because he was a writer, a fiction writer."

Artificial intelligence is what gives machines the ability to learn and adapt. Professor Sir Roger Penrose believes that the human brain is not a computer and that computers cannot replicate some of its attributes, such as intuition. The Penrose Institute (<https://penroseinstitute.com/>) "is inspired by the scientific philosophy and work of Roger Penrose. It seeks to understand the human brain, creativity and the interplay between quantum mechanics and general relativity."

Don't worry: you don't need to understand it all to appreciate the story unfolding in tonight's film.

With a \$15 million budget, the film was shot as ordinary live action. During filming, there were no special effects, greenscreen, or tracking markers used. All effects were done in post-production. To create Ava's robotic features, scenes were filmed both with and without actress Alicia Vikander's presence, which allowed capturing the background behind her. The parts necessary to keep, especially her hands and face, were then rotoscoped while the rest was digitally painted out, and the background behind her restored. Camera and body tracking systems transferred Vikander's performance to the CGI robot's movements. In total, there were about 800 VFX shots, of which 350 or so were "robot" shots.



Knowing the above, it won't come as a great surprise that the visual effects team lifted the Oscar in 2016. Alex Garland was nominated for Best Original Screenplay. Alicia Vikander won enough awards from various academies and critics' associations to need a new display cabinet. After six weeks of filming, post-production took another six months as the VFX team brought Ava to life (if that's the right expression!).

"I loved film growing up - I watched a lot of horror and I loved prosthetics, so my natural thought was to get into that," says Sara Bennett, who was the first female VFX supervisor to win an Oscar at 2016's ceremony. It was only the third time in 89 years that a woman had been nominated for visual effects. The last winner? Suzanne Benson for *Aliens* - back in 1987.

Read more of Sara's story on the following page.....

Gill McGlashan

The printing of the notes by Reppoint is undertaken free of charge

Is it still a man's world behind the camera?

BBC website 23.2.17 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-39040666>



Sara won her Oscar alongside fellow VFX artists Mark Williams, Paul Norris and Andrew Whitehurst

"Until last year's Oscar nomination, I'd never really thought about it being male-dominated," Sara Bennett says. "The hard time for me was learning the craft and moving up, as opposed to dealing with men in my industry." She grins. "Being a woman probably went in my favour, to be honest."

Sara, whose back catalogue includes *Sherlock*, *The Martian* and the first four *Harry Potter* films, says she loves the variety her work gives her.

Her passion for her work is infectious, and she says it was "amazing" winning the Oscar - she couldn't quite believe it when her name was read out. But she also mixes it up by managing a team, mentoring young women and leading children's workshops.

Having trained in prosthetics and make-up, she became a runner during the 1990s, working as a general assistant on film sets before switching to VFX. As a compositor, she learned how to combine several visual elements into a believable on-screen image, gaining her first credit in 1998 for *Babe*, *Pig in the City*.

Although aspiring VFX specialists can now learn through YouTube tutorials, software and courses, Sara's adamant that the best experience is found in the workplace.

"Until you're working flat out and your eyes are bleeding at four in the morning, that horrible feeling - that's when you really learn about the job," she laughs, talking about the pressures of working to tight deadlines.

Three years ago she set up London and Cardiff-based visual effects company Milk with four male colleagues, after their section in another VFX studio, The Mill, was closed down.

Sara now sees more women moving through the ranks, and says with delight: "When I was younger it was about 80/20 men to women in VFX, but now it's closer to 60/40."

Fie Tholander, 31, has been inspired by Sara, working for her as a VFX compositor at Milk. As a Danish high school student, she already knew she wanted to work in VFX, studying art at before heading for London, with an internship at The Mill.

It was there that she met Sara, who became her mentor. "Having Sara as a role model makes women realise they can actually do it," she says. "VFX is portrayed as a technical thing, which isn't always the case. I'm not a technical person, I'm more creative." Fie thinks women need to be more assertive: "I think women in general hold back, we're afraid to ask, and men are a bit more bold with their careers."

Sara says it will take a while to change. "There's so many women doing VFX. Maybe they're not doing the big A-List films, but they're out there doing it all." Sara's words of advice are all about being resilient. She adds: "If you get knocked back just get back up again - keep trying, make sure you enjoy it, put a big smile on your face - don't give up."

Comments and reactions to:

Both **Trouble in Paradise** and **Grandma**

Funny witty dialogue

A quick fire double!

Then as now, most problems seem to revolve around money or sex - or both

Trouble in Paradise

Sparky amoral comedy that has not aged

Well paced

Amazing acting, great script - very modern

Wonderful diction!

Enjoyable – especially considering the passing decades

Awful

Entertaining with three good performances

Slow start but really amusing

Brilliant – a gem from the past

Good film – fantastic gowns!

Faultless! Why don't USA make films like this anymore?

They don't make them like that anymore – very polished production

Some nice touches, but best bit was the fabulous art deco setting and furniture

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	~	1	1	2	2	9	8	2	1

No of reaction slips received = 30

Average Score = 6.93 (11th in season)

Grandma

A modern day fairy-tale – very enjoyable

Great

An insightful look at a problem the world over

Great film

Excellent acting, but definitely not entertaining

A little gem

Beautifully observed, witty independent film

Funny witty dialogue

Very realistic – maybe too much so

Very good. Sad and funny

Not so wonderful vocabulary but great character

Nicely paced and observed

Entertaining – great acting if done before

Quirky, very well acted and cast

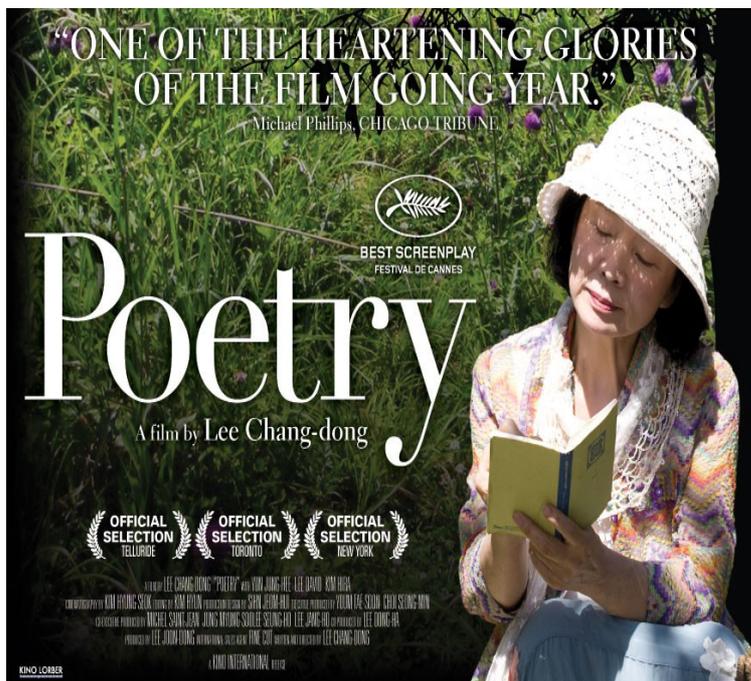
Enjoyed but doubt she has “There's no one quite like Grandma” in her record collection

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	~	~	~	1	4	9	14	1	~

No of reaction slips received = 29

Average Score = 7.34 (9th in season)

Next on 11 May we have:



For cinema goer's who appreciate that there's a world of cinema out there, this low-key South Korean drama is a little gem.

“A Korean movie about an aging housemaid that turns out to be one of the best films of the year.”

“What makes Poetry so involving is that it's never clear how the story will be resolved.”

“Like the flowing waters in its opening shot, Poetry is a beautiful film that carries us along slowly, subtly, yet unrelentingly.”

“A beautifully acted, deeply moving tale that brings a lump to the throat.”