

Interview: Director Alex Garland Seeks Humanity in 'Ex Machina'

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CHICAGO – Who are we anyway, when as inventors of artificial intelligence, we can create a new wave of thought process? That is what writer – and now director – Alex Garland (“28 Days Later...,” “Sunshine”) has been grappling with his entire career. His directorial debut is the stunning and prescient “Ex Machina.”

The film relates a story of Artificial Intelligence and robot/androids, supposedly invented by a Bill Gates type of world conqueror, portrayed by Oscar Isaac. When he brings a low level worker to interact with his new robots – designed to look like beautiful young women – the implications of the brave new world become apparent. The film works on many interesting levels, including the very question of what being alive means.



Lead Actor Alicia Vikander Talks On-Set with Alex Garland for 'Ex Machina'
Photo credit: A24

Alex Garland has been an influential novelist and screenwriter for over a decade within the Science Fiction and film industries, creating memorable scenarios for “28 Days Later...,” “Never Let Me Go” and the remake of “Judge Dredd” (“Dredd”). His fascination with the notion of technology and man became the theme of “Ex Machina,” and the issues he presents in the film makes for a fascinating perspective, and a marked philosophy in the ongoing tech debate.

HollywoodChicago.com talked to Alex Garland last month, as he promoted the film in Chicago. "Ex Machina" opens here April 17th, 2015, part of a rollout release throughout the country.

HollywoodChicago.com: We've had so many works of fiction and film speculate on the creation of Artificial Intelligence, or 'A.I.' What idea sparked the theme of what you wanted to speculate about in 'Ex Machina.'?

Alex Garland: Two things. One of my friends has a key interest in neuroscience. His position is that machines will never be sentient...the machines will always be fundamentally different in its thought process, and will always be that way. I instinctively disagreed with this, I couldn't disagree more. This discussion between us happened for years, until I came upon a book which discussed the consciousness and its embodiment. Even though I had been reading about that topic for a long time, and was pretty savvy about it, this particular book sparked the idea for the film.

It was matched up with something else as well. It was about any anxiety I could feel about machines and Artificial Intelligence, which became a zeitgeist kind of thing. If you look up how the landscape of film is now, and narrative in general, there has been tons of A.I. movies. Our film is actually late to the party, because the issues have been hanging in the air. I got really interested in why that was the case, because there really hasn't been a huge breakthrough in artificial intelligence.

HollywoodChicago.com: So what source did you point towards?

Garland: It's coming from search engines, I believe, and how we feel about search engines – search engines, Twitter, Facebook and other Social Media. What we have is a bunch of machines – computers, tablets, smart phones – and we don't understand how these things work, but they seem to understand how we work. We've handed over a lot of information, without realizing it. Either on a conscious level, or an unconscious level, that freaks us out. Hence, within the film, there are nods to search engines and our relationship to them.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since the title is taken from the term Deus Ex Machina, i.e. God as a machinery for the creation of change, is your title essentially saying that the machines themselves will actually be the creation of change? How do you see it playing out in our current technology?

Garland: What I think, which is tied into that in the anxiety we are generating, that it is possible that A.I.s will be the instrument of our destruction, as theorists like Stephen Hawking have said. The analogy I would draw upon is like nuclear power, it contains enormous latent danger that could destroy the world, or it can also power us, if used responsibly.

But what I really thought about is that if you produced a consciously thinking machine, it would be like the development of a child and an evolutionary change. And with children, what we want most of all in our anxious interaction with them, is that they'll outlive us all. If we have a life, we'd want our children to have a life that is better. So the idea that conscious and emotional machines would have the same existence that we do, and would survive environments that we can't, doesn't seem scary to me as much as exciting and good. The circumstance wouldn't be separate from us, it would be a continuation of us. I'm more alarmed by humans than machines.

HollywoodChicago.com: The 'mad scientist' in the film is based on our tech heroes, the people who we admire for their expertise and wealth accumulated from that expertise. How did you and Oscar Isaac come to the particular look and attitude of Nathan?

Garland: The 'look' was something that Oscar and I got to together. The only initial thing I knew about this guy is that he's a trim and trained fighter – he hits the heavy bag a lot and can throw a punch. I also liked that he had a beard. Oscar's thoughts is that he should have very short hair or very long hair. We tried different versions, the long haired tests made him look like a really angry hippie. [laughs] But the last piece of the puzzle, besides going with the better looking short hair, was to give him glasses – because glasses make people look smarter. He looked like a thug without them, and looker smarter with them.



Dohmnall Gleeson and Oscar Isaac in a Scene from 'Ex Machina'

Photo credit: A24

HollywoodChicago.com: Formulating the 'body' of Ava, as realized by Alicia Vikander, is rooted in body images that women have to deal with their whole lives. What did the women actors, or your own curiosities, feed back on regarding the body images presented in the film, and how did you add that to the narrative?

Garland: That's a big question. First and foremost, it was going to present these machines as women. So I went to the actresses and asked them to choose. I asked them to choose the degree of nudity they were comfortable with, and how they looked as a machine, including clothing choices. I was not involved in that in those decisions. I allowed them to understand their own character, including what to wear, which telegraphed their persona. And that was it.

There were two reasons for this...there were some pretty complicated gender politics and dynamics going on in the film. I needed to be careful about how that was going to be presented, it had to be thoughtful and respectful. That would include how we shot the nudity. Film almost has a gravitational pull towards being pornographic and exploitative, and women in their early twenties are used as fetishes not only by film, but by the rest of society. I wanted to be very careful about that presentation.

HollywoodChicago.com: Humans are imperfect, and are subject to their environmental nurturing, as the film rightly points out. What advantages does an Artificial Intelligence have over the messiness of humans and their evolving souls?

Garland: I thought a lot about that question. Whether my answer to it is good or not, it is what it is. All of my thought processes are hidden from me, all of them. I don't know what thinking is, or what a thought looks like. Do I think in English, or some kind of weird brain language, that words are placed upon? I really have no idea.

When a thought does come to me, it's the end of the thought process. My brain has been 'thinking' about this topic for awhile, and I wasn't even aware of it. I was doing the dishes. Suddenly I think, I have to do this thing, as if it arrived in the moment. My brain was formulating it without me being aware.

HollywoodChicago.com: So how is that contrasted with an A.I.?

Garland: So much of the confusion between humans and communication exists because of those hidden thought processes. In contrast, an A.I. doesn't have that problem. They would have their emotional life, but if you asked them why they are having a certain thought at a certain time, they would be able to clearly tell you. It would be like an old fashioned ticker tape machine from the early days of stock market technology. You'd be able to stop it at a certain point, and understand what data it's giving you. The hidden stuff is not hidden with an A.I.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since so much of the film depended on production design of the A.I. beings, what limitations kept emerging in dealing with all that 'green screen' and potential post production work?





Alex Garland in Chicago, March 16th, 2015
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Garland: Literally none. I have worked on multiple projects with the same group of people, including the production designer. One of my earlier film was a remake of 'Judge Dredd,' which had tons of green screen. But the technology has moved on, and the industry moves quickly. The effects guys told us that no 'green' was necessary, and we could just shoot it. There would not be any limitations, and the actors not having to be aware of on-set framing. It was a fantastic way of working on a story like this.

HollywoodChicago.com: It is often said that dogs see their caretakers as God. How do you anticipate, if the future meets your theory of A.I., that these new sentient lives will codify the notion of God?

Garland: They may or may not. I will compare it to the birth of children. I knew my wife was pregnant, but I couldn't conceptualize the child until it arrived. I think A.I.s will be like that – they will be fundamentally mysterious until they arrive. To use your dog analogy, I think dogs know they are sentient beings, but I don't know what being a dog is like, and I never will. It will be the same with Artificial Intelligence. The short answer is I don't know.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your films as a writer, often you use science fiction as a commentary on the current human condition. How do you view the evolution of the human condition if technology continues to proliferate at a speed its going at now, and are you an optimist or a pessimist when it comes to thinking about that evolution?

Garland: I'm broadly an optimist, and I personally feel it doesn't matter where technology goes, because our human interaction with it will be finite. As individuals, we have a lifespan, and we all die. Nothing will change that. In some respects, you extrapolate outward from the individual to the whole thing, and you say to yourself, 'be a decent person, and enjoy your life.' That's all you can do.

"Ex Machina" will get a limited release, including Chicago, on April 17th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Dohmann Gleeson, Oscar Isaac, Alicia Vikander and Sonoya Mizuno. Written and directed by Alex Garland. Rated "R"



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