Film Feature: The 10 Best Films of 2015, By Patrick McDonald

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on December 23, 2015 - 8:53am

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CHICAGO – Another year is about to slide towards the next one, so it's time to look back at the cinema universe of 2015, the 10 Best Films of the year. In this arena, the intrepid "Über Critic" of HollywoodChicago.com, Patrick McDonald, will attempt to give his spin on the "best of" point of view.

And now we switch from third person to first person, so I – the aforementioned Patrick McDonald – will attempt to claim it all. It was another roller coaster year of robots, driving machines, pop stars, financial derivatives and Miss Universe. In other words, another year of inventive film creativity and philosophy.

This is the 2015 honorable mention section, and there were so many "eleventh place" films of note. My favorite superhero film was "Ant-Man," for their mix of "small time" adventure and comedy. The dramas "Brooklyn," "Sicario," "Flowers," "The Farewell Party," "Nasty Baby" and "Spotlight" were excellent experiences. I loved Sylvester Stallone's one-more-time-in-the-ring as the character Rocky in "Creed," which was as much about boxing as any of the previous films.

In the documentary world, there were three that really stood out; "Amy" – about Amy Winehouse – "Hitchcock/Truffaut," the explanatorily titled doc about the historic interview sessions between the filmmakers, and "Batkid Begins," a true feel-good movie. The best performance of actress Alicia Vikander, in a year of her other great performances, was in the epic "Testament of Youth." There was the intensely emotional animated film, "Inside Out," sure to become another Pixar Studio classic. And finally, they met my expectations with "Star Wars: The Force Awakens."

Below each film will be a link to full reviews and/or interviews, when applicable, associated with the films. So now, filtered through my fevered approach to opining, Patrick McDonald's 10 Best Films of 2015…

10. "Mad Max: Fury Road"

Mad Max: Fury Road
Photo credit: Warner Bros.

What was most impressive about this re-imaging of the first films – which began in 1979 – was that the original director (George Miller) took it on again, and created a whole new art and adventure for his latest Mad Max (Tom Hardy). It was a high octane journey through hell, as a post-apocalyptic world is reduced to endless roads to nowhere. But along the way there is an homage to fertility, rock-n-roll, intense machines, brilliant action and a feminist theme that evolves into humanism. The stand out production and cast, which includes Hardy, Charlize Theron and the underrated Nicholas Hoult, are up to making an overall impression, in a lasting and significant way. Roll up for the mystery trip.

HIGHLIGHT: The atmosphere of the production design, headed by Colin Gibson.

9. “Chi-Raq”

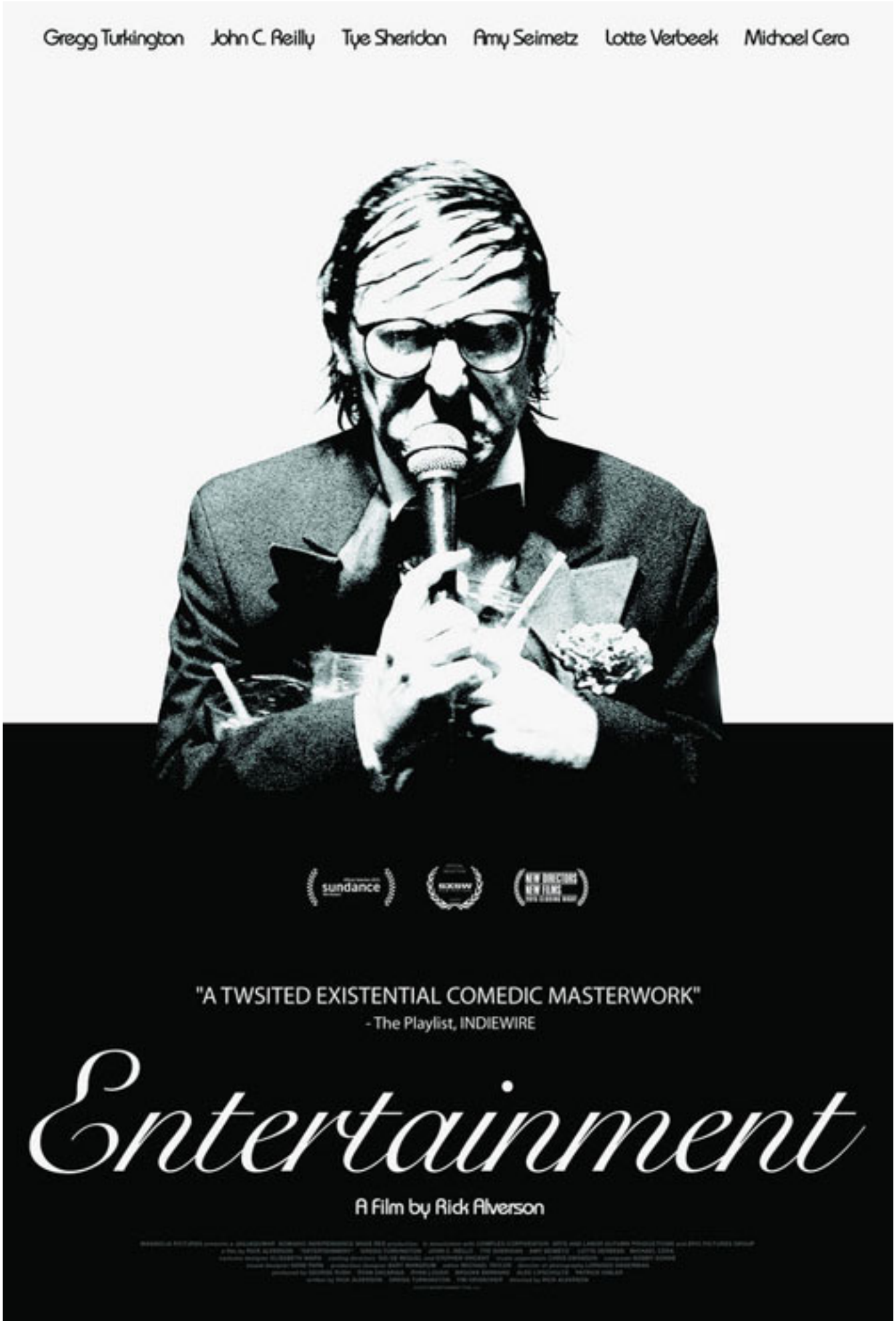
Chi-Raq
Photo credit: Lionsgate

Part of the beauty of this film was its marketing – the way the old scalawag, writer/director Spike Lee, generated buzz just from the title, and then pulled the rug out regarding what the film was actually about. There was one train of thought about what it would be when it was being filmed in Chicago, another train once the trailer came out, and then yet another experience with the actual film. In stitching together "Chi-Raq," the mother Spiker produced a greatest hits package from his previous films – including "She's Gotta Have It," "Do the Right Thing" and even "School Daze" – to create a combination of "Dr. Strangelove" satire and a necessary plea for sanity. It really didn't even need Samuel L. Jackson, but he's always welcome. No peace? No piece.

HIGHLIGHT: Teyonah Parris as Lysistrata, who projected a perfect nature as the leader of the film's sex strike for peace.

Click here [22] for the full review of "Chi-Raq."

8. "Entertainment"



Entertainment
Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

The cinematic equivalent of a fun house mirror, “Entertainment” creates its energy through a certain truth about human nature and comedy. Gregg Turkington, also known as his comic persona Neil Hamburger, portrays “The Comedian,” a sad sack victim of his own war against normalcy in doing stand up. He spends the film traveling from dusty town to dusty town in the American southwest, hoping eventually to get “home” to his daughter. Along the way he meets his friends and enemies, including a wicked turn by John C. Reilly. I found the film to be actually poignant regarding our current culture, and the collaboration of director Rick Alverson, Gregg Turkington and producer Tim Heidecker is pitch perfect.

HIGHLIGHT: The jokes and routines of The Comedian.

Click here [23] for an interview with director Rick Alverson of “Entertainment.”

7. “The Big Short”

The Big Short
Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

There are decent creators in Hollywood, and often they are hidden behind their type of films they start out with, and their successes with them. But in this case, co-writer/director Adam McKay ("Anchorman") has used his cache to produce "The Big Short," which is a spot-on break down of the events that led to the housing crash of 2007-08, and the people who knew it was coming. The film is crackling with wit, sorrow, inventive use of filmmaking and telling performances from the all star cast of Christian Bale, Brad Pitt, Ryan Gosling and Steve Carell – and it used scenes like Margot Robbie in a bathtub to explain how the robber barons rob us. Ultimately, it might make you angry, but hell, we know it's going to happen again, and at least Adam McKay has made us laugh at the devil.

HIGHLIGHT: Steve Carell never flagged in his weird and tic-filled performance as Mark Baum.

Click here [24] for the full review of "The Big Short."
Click here [25] for an interview with writer/director Adam McKay of "The Big Short."

6. "Youth"

Youth
Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

I loved, loved, loved the consequence of the message in this film, probably because I'm at a certain status in my own youth. Old pros Michael Caine, Harvey Keitel and Jane Fonda teamed up with Paul Dano, Rachel Weisz and Madeline Ghenea (as the true Miss Universe) to escalate the vision and truth of Paolo Sorrentino ("This Must Be the Place"). The film is both meditative and philosophical, but doesn't pander to any easy solutions. Its setting of a luxury hotel had a metaphor-of-purgatory sense, and when it finally moves from that setting, the outside world becomes almost a fantasy. The ending is so luxurious it spins on multiple levels, and Michael Caine intently conducts the whole enchilada.

HIGHLIGHT: I shall never gaze upon another Miss Universe past the representation of Ms. Ghenea in this film.

Click here [26] for the full review of "Youth."

5. "45 Years"

45 Years
Photo credit: Sundance Selects

Each of the lead actors in “45 Years” have been performing for that long, and longer. Charlotte Rampling and Tom Courtenay portray a couple on the cusp of their 45th anniversary, when a revealed secret – previously buried – unravels their careful celebration. These are two ultra-actor players who make precisely the right decisions in bringing the delicate situation to life. The film was adapted from a short story and directed by Andrew Haigh, who paces the narrative with an eye toward maximum emotion and empathy. It is also a lesson in honesty within coupling, that the cover-up of a secret can be more damaging than the secret itself. This is a classic character-based film.

HIGHLIGHT: Charlotte Rampling makes a gesture towards the end that is achingly heart breaking.

NOTE: “45 Years” will open in most markets next month.

4. “Carol”

Carol
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

This is less melodramatic than the previous 1950s incarnation from director Todd Haynes ("Far From Heaven"), but it was no less sumptuous. The film is an adaptation of a notorious 1950s novel (Patricia Highsmith's "The Price of Salt,"), and involves two women, the titular Carol (Cate Blanchett) and shopgirl Therese (Rooney Mara). They become intertwined in a lesbian affair, but the story is much more than that, because the deep emotional well of Carol influences the actions and reactions of all her other fellow travelers, including her estranged husband Harge (portrayed with in-depth feeling by Kyle Chandler). The centerpiece of this wondrous human study is the radiant Cate Blanchett, who is definitely at the peak of her marvelous powers as an actor. I couldn't take my eyes off this film, and I never wanted to.

HIGHLIGHT: The final tracking shot as Carol looks up.

Click here [27] for an interview with director Todd Haynes of "Carol."

3. "Ex Machina"

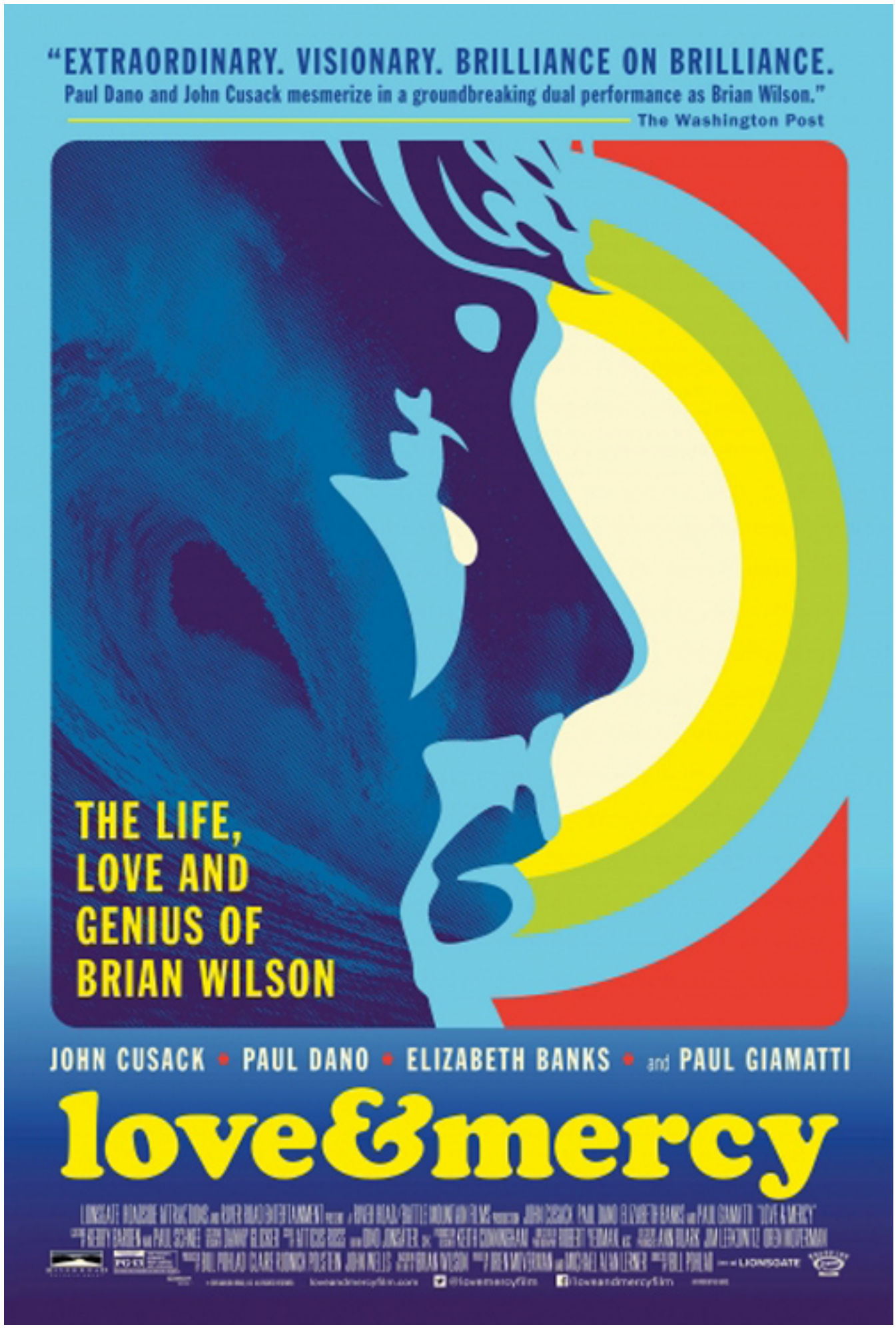
Ex Machina
Photo credit: A24

What will happen when our soulless technology somehow gains a soul? This has been explored many times in science fiction, both literarily and cinematically, but rarely has it been given the type of food-for-thought as “Ex Machina.” The story pits a coder nerd (Dohmnall Gleeson) with a megalomaniacal Steve Jobs-like inventor (Oscar Isaac) in a game of seduction, using sentient female robots. It may be set on the edge of an evolution, when machines will gain the knowledge of their own being. Writer/director Alex Garland thoughtfully and profoundly tackles the weight of the issue, and makes a case for human blundering when it comes to the potential Frankenstein monsters they create. Alicia Vikander, who has shaped characters in “The Danish Girl” and “Testament of Youth” in this film year, scores huge as the robot Ava, who seeks the understanding.

HIGHLIGHT: Ava’s wonder of the outside world, and her place in it.

Click here [28] for the full review of “Ex Machina.”
Click here [29] for an interview with writer/director Alex Garland of “Ex Machina.”

2. “Love & Mercy”



Love & Mercy
Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

Trying to isolate what makes an artist tick can be elusive as grabbing sunshine. Brian Wilson of The Beach Boys was as elusive as they come, and suffered from a mental condition that both fueled and destroyed his creativity. This circumstance is intensely brought to light in the momentous biography film "Love & Mercy." Wilson is portrayed in two phases of his life – during the creation of The Beach Boy masterpiece album "Pet Sounds" (portrayed by Paul Dano) and later in life, while struggling with a psychologist caregiver and his misdiagnosis (crucially brought to bear by John Cusack). Both performances of Brian are far-reaching and brilliant, and created a merciful perception of the pop star's trials. Done with the cooperation of Wilson, it explored vistas that other music biographies refuse to contemplate, and it may actually help others to deal with their struggles as well.

HIGHLIGHT: "Wouldn't it Be Nice"

Click here [30] for the full review of "Love & Mercy."
Click here [31] for an interview with John Cusack of "Love & Mercy," and here [32] for an interview with the music icon Brian Wilson.

Number One. "Room"

Room
Photo credit: A24

The subtlety of “Room” lies not in its sensational aspects – a woman is captured and kept inside a closet-like shed for seven years, while raising a son birthed through her captor – but in the mechanics of life in and out of the confinement. Brie Larson has a breakthrough performance as the woman, and Jacob Tremblay is virtually truthful as the child – the guidance from director Lenny Abrahamson must have struck a target in Tremblay’s young psyche. But the true strength of the film lies within its symbolism about life in general, how we’re all confined to a series of “rooms” in our own consequence. The real world is unreal, and truth of life is all relative to its experience. There is never anything expected in this film, especially in the post-room world. We think we will be free if we can just get to the next room, and then the next, and the next…

HIGHLIGHT: The TV interview on a perky, “Dateline NBC”-type show, and how phony it all is.

CLICK HERE [33] for the 10 of 2015’s Worst Films by Patrick McDonald and Spike Walters of HollywoodChicago.com.

To directly access the reviews, interviews and writings of Patrick McDonald, Writer and Editorial Coordinator of HollywoodChicago.com, click here. *[15]*

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