A-LEVEL FILM STUDIES

Paper 2: Critical Approaches to Film

Section A: Contemporary British and US Film

Set text #1

> *Ex-Machina* **(UK, 2015)**

Cinema Audiences

The term 'audience' refers to the collective body of people who consume films, be it at the cinema or via any other kind of media platform (e.g. DVD, streaming, etc.). Generally speaking, cinema audiences can be divided into two types: **mass audience** and **niche audience**. 'Mass audience' refers to a very large section of the cinema-going public who go in their droves to see a film at the cinema, whereas a 'niche audience' is a much smaller, more discriminating section of the public.

Mass audience and tastes

By and large, mass audiences are attracted to the sort of films made by major Hollywood studios, and tend to go see them at a multiplex (such as Vue) or an independent chain cinema (e.g. Picturehouse). These films tend to have **high production values** and lots of **marketing** behind them, the sort of films that you see advertised on the sides of buses, on bus stops, on television and so on. If the film is eagerly anticipated, it may even become an 'event' movie—one you simply have to see. Such mass market films aim to attract audiences through various means, including:

- clear genre elements
- recognisable stars
- straightforward narratives
- recognisable character types
- an emphasis on visual spectacle and/or powerful emotional experiences
- cutting edge special effects
- widespread marketing (trailers, posters, etc.)
- promotional hype (especially online)
- immersive technologies (e.g. IMAX, 3D, etc.)

Much of Hollywood's output today is based around the concept of **intellectual property**—that is, source material (e.g. books, comics, video games, etc.) whose rights have been snapped up by a studio with a view to creating a **franchise**. This not only ensures an existing fanbase but also the chance to make sequels and to set up licensing deals.

What was the last film you went to see at the cinema and where did you see it? Which of the above elements did it feature?

Copyright ©

Niche audiences and tastes

Not everyone likes to go to the cinema purely for big-budget, glossy Hollywood entertainment. Some cinemagoers prefer something a little different, something more thought-provoking and challenging. Perhaps the most 'niche' forms of cinema include foreign-language films, documentaries and live streaming of plays and opera, which may fleetingly show at the Vue for a week and then disappear. However, in terms of US and UK feature films, some are clearly made for a more selective audience. Such films tend to be made on much smaller budgets and have relatively limited marketing and distribution. This makes sense, as the major studios aren't going to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on films only some people want to see.

Take, for instance, *The Beguiled* (US, 2017), a drama set during the American Civil War. The film is a remake of a fairly obscure 1972 Clint Eastwood movie about a wounded soldier who takes refuge in a girls' school. It was made for $10 million—a very low budget in Hollywood terms—and made by a critically acclaimed director, Sofia Coppola (*Lost in Translation*, *The Bling Ring*). It actually features several major Hollywood stars, including Nicole Kidman, Kirsten Dunst and Colin Farrell. However, it is a film with very limited commercial appeal, in spite of its cast. The historical setting, the focus on character relationships/tensions, and overall lack of action and spectacle means that it has little chance of attracting a mass audience. But that is not the intention; it is a serious film with artistic integrity, made for a certain type of audience. The fact that the film only made $8 million at the US box office only serves to illustrate its uncommercial aspects.

Niche audiences will therefore enjoy films with very different qualities to mainstream entertainment. In fact, the two types of film are almost diametrically opposed, with 'arthouse' films offering almost the opposite kind of experience:

- subversion of generic conventions
- performances over star image
- complex narratives
- complex character development
- an emphasis on character relationships
- an emphasis on mood, tone and atmosphere
- limited marketing
- critical, rather than popular, acclaim

These films may be shown at multiplexes and chain cinemas, but probably very fleetingly. Indeed, they are more likely to find their audiences at specialist arthouse cinemas (such as the Curzon or the Gulbenkian).

Have you ever seen a film—and <u>not</u> a blockbuster movie—that features any of the above characteristics? Write down what made it different to the usual blockbuster fare.

Copyright ©

There are films, of course, which cross-over and appeal to both mass and niche audiences. A good example might be Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (US/UK, 2010), a high-concept science fiction movie that features an incredibly complex narrative alongside scenes of action and mind-bending special effects. The film cost $160 million (still quite conservative for Hollywood!) and top-lined Leonardo DiCaprio as a thief who steals corporate secrets through the use of dream-sharing technology. This is a film that had mass appeal: <u>firstly</u> to anyone who enjoys visually-spectacular action films; <u>secondly</u>, fans of British director Christopher Nolan, who had just made his name by directing the first two films in the rebooted Batman franchise, *Batman Begins* (US, 2005) and *The Dark Knight* (US, 2008); <u>thirdly</u>, the film appealed to fans of star Leonardo DiCaprio; and <u>finally</u>, it also appealed to niche genre fans, sci-fi 'geeks' who enjoy complex imaginative fiction. Such was the appeal of the film that it made a staggering $825 million at the worldwide box office!

In other words, *Inception* is intelligent sci-fi dressed up in blockbuster clothing. Which leads nicely into the genre we will be studying…

Genre: Science Fiction

Sci-fi is an interesting genre of cinema in that it can appeal equally to niche and mass audiences. As a genre of speculative (i.e. 'what if?') fiction, sci-fi typically deals with imaginative concepts such as futuristic science and technology; space travel; time travel; parallel universes; and extra-terrestrial life. Therefore, there is an intellectual dimension to the genre that goes beyond simply entertaining the audience with visual spectacle and action set-pieces (although these tend to be an important element of the genre too). Indeed, there are countless examples of low-budget, imaginative sci-fi aimed at an arthouse audience: these include films such as *Primer* (US, 2004—budget: $7,000) and *Moon* (UK, 2009—budget: $5 million). On the other hand, sci-fi is a genre with enormous appeal to mainstream audiences, primarily because of the genre's capacity for visual spectacle and its ability to hybridise with almost any other genre, for example: action (*The Terminator*, US, 1984); horror (*Alien*, US, 1979); comedy (*Men in Black*, US, 1997), war (*Starship Troopers*, US, 1998), and so on. More recently, the genre has been best represented by comic book/action-adventure films embodied by the Marvel and DC 'universes'.

Big budget sci-fi also has the commercial pull of technological innovation, making the most of developments in special effects and cinema exhibition technologies (such as IMAX, 3D, etc.). Indeed, many of the benchmarks in special effects technology have been within the science fiction genre, with films such as *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (US, 1992), *The Matrix* (US, 1998), *King Kong* (US, 2005) and *Avatar* (US, 2009) constantly pushing the envelope of onscreen visual effects work. Undoubtedly it is this kind of film that lends itself to the immersive experience of exhibition formats such as IMAX and 3D.

Task

Look at the following list of 'one-liners' for existing science fiction films and decide which ones have <u>mass appeal</u> and which have <u>niche appeal</u>. Think about what aspects would attract a large audience, and which aspects might put them off. You might also want to think about what some of these films might need in order to appeal to a bigger audience. For example, might the casting of A-List stars make the idea more appealing to audiences?

Science Fiction One-liners: Mass or Niche appeal?

A farm boy on a distant planet learns the ways of a mystical religion and embarks on a dangerous rescue mission to save a captured princess.

Whilst on a mission to investigate strange happenings on Jupiter, a crew of astronauts find that their super-computer develops a murderous mind of its own.

The crew of a deep-space mining vessel lands on a desolate planet, only for a murderous alien organism to find its way on-board.

Los Angeles, 2019: a detective is hired to track down a group of androids who have come to earth illegally in search of extended lifespan.

A computer hacker learns from mysterious rebels about the true nature of his reality and his role in the war against its controllers.

A troubled child summons the courage to help a friendly alien escape Earth and return to his home planet.

A 17 year-old high school student is accidentally sent back to the 1950s in a time machine, but threatens his own existence when he prevents his mother and father from falling in love as teenagers.

A genetically inferior man assumes the identity of a superior one in order to pursue his lifelong dream of space travel.

When their relationship turns sour, a couple undergoes a procedure to have each other erased from their memories.

A lonely astronaut extracting the precious moon gas that promises to reverse the Earth's energy crisis nears the end of his three-year contract.

An alien in the form of a beautiful young woman seduces lonely men in the evening hours in Scotland; however, events lead her to begin a process of self-discovery.

Copyright ©

SET FILM #1: *EX-MACHINA* **(UK, 2015)**

Initial task

Imagine you are a studio executive listening to the following 'pitch' for a movie called *Ex-Machina*. (A pitch is a verbal presentation made by a screenwriter or film director to a film producer or studio executive in the hope of attracting development finance to pay for the writing of a screenplay.)

Read the synopsis carefully and then *make notes on the commercial aspects of the idea that might make it appealing to a mass audience*. Consider elements of the pitch such as:

- genre
- plot/story elements
- characters
- anything else that could potentially appeal to audiences

The Pitch

Caleb, a 26 year old programmer at the world's largest internet company, wins a competition to spend a week at a private mountain retreat belonging to Nathan, the reclusive CEO of the company. But when Caleb arrives at the remote location he finds that he will have to participate in a strange and fascinating experiment in which he must interact with the world's first true artificial intelligence, housed in the body of a beautiful robot girl. **(source: imdb.com)**

Notes:

Copyright ©

About the film's writer-director, Alex Garland

Ex-Machina is the directorial debut of British novelist and screenwriter Alex Garland. Garland achieved popular success with his first novel *The Beach* (1995), which was later turned into a film by the same team that made the hit movie *Trainspotting* (UK, 1996). After writing several high-profile British films, including the screenplays for *28 Days Later…* (UK, 2002), *Sunshine* (UK/US, 2007), *Never Let Me Go* (UK, 2011) and *Dredd* (UK/South Africa, 2012), Garland turned his hand to directing, drafting an original screenplay based on an idea he'd had as a teenager. The script, *Ex-Machina*, dealt speculatively with artificial intelligence and the moral issues it raises.

You will now see the trailers for four films written by Alex Garland. After watching them, write down any similarities you see between them, including ideas relating to <u>genre</u>, <u>storylines</u>, <u>themes</u>, <u>tone</u>, etc.

Copyright ©

Origins of the project and script development

The idea for *Ex Machina* first blossomed when Garland was 11 or 12 years old, after experimenting with some basic coding on a computer his parents had bought him: 'there would be moments when it would feel like he wasn't talking to a computer, even though he knew it was the computer because he'd created the whole system himself'. (http://eastfieldnews.com/2015/05/21/ex-machina-director-selling-small-films-takes-work/) A friend of Garland (with a detailed knowledge of neuroscience) told him that machines could never actually become sentient; as a result Garland began doing his own research into the concept of Artificial Intelligence. One book in particular about consciousness and embodiment confirmed Garland's suspicions, and the central premise of *Ex_Machina* was formed.

Why do you think Garland wanted to direct this film himself, rather than entrust it to another director?

The central premise of *Ex-Machina* is not a particularly original concept. The idea of artificial intelligence and humanoid robots is a major trope of science fiction cinema. Using the internet, make a list of films that deal with 'androids' and artificial intelligence.

Examples of science fiction films that revolve around androids and artificial intelligence:

Copyright ©

edusitesfilm

Funding the movie

In late 2011, Garland sought out financing for *Ex-Machina*. He sent the script to David Kosse, then the London-based head of **Universal Pictures International**, who was impressed with the script and offered $15 million to fund the project. This is a tiny sum compared to most sci-fi movie budgets. Take for example, *The Martian* (US/UK, 2015), which cost $108 million, or *Jurassic World* (US, 2015), which cost $150 million.

However, $10-15 million is a fairly typical sum for the average, high-profile British production.

What would be the implications of making a science fiction film on a budget of $15 million? Write down as many ways as you can think of in which the limited budget might impact on the overall making of the movie:

Garland had not only negotiated a production deal; Universal agreed to put up the money in exchange for the company securing worldwide distribution rights with an eye toward releasing the film in key foreign territories, such as the UK, Europe and Japan.

Why do you think a film like this would do well in these territories, rather than the US?

Copyright ©

In order to actually make the film, Garland took the project to two British production companies: Film4 and DNA Films, both of which had produced movies based on Garland's scripts prior to *Ex-Machina*.

Film4

Film4 is a British film production company owned by Channel Four Television Corporation. The company has been responsible for backing a large number of films made in the United Kingdom. (Their first production was *Walter*, directed by Stephen Frears, which was released in 1982.) It is especially known for its gritty, 'kitchen sink'-style films and period dramas. Prior to 1998, the company was identified as Channel Four Films or FilmFour International. Later, the outfit was re-branded as Film4, to coincide with the launch of a new Digital TV channel of the same name. (source: wikipedia)

Notable recent productions funded or co-funded by Film4:

The Selfish Giant (2013); *12 Years a Slave* (2013); *The Double* (2013), *Suffragette* (2015), *High Rise* (2015), *American Honey* (2016); *Free Fire* (2016); *T2: Trainspotting* (2017).

DNA Films

DNA Films, which is based in London, is one of the most successful production companies located in the United Kingdom. It has financed some very high profile British films and international co-productions, including:

28 Days Later… (2002); *Love Actually* (2003); *The History Boys* (2006); *Sunshine* (2007); *Never Let Me Go* (2010); *Dredd* (2012); *Far From the Madding Crowd* (2015); *T2: Trainspotting* (2017).

> *Why do you think Garland took his project to these UK-based production companies instead of American ones?*

Copyright ©

Casting the film
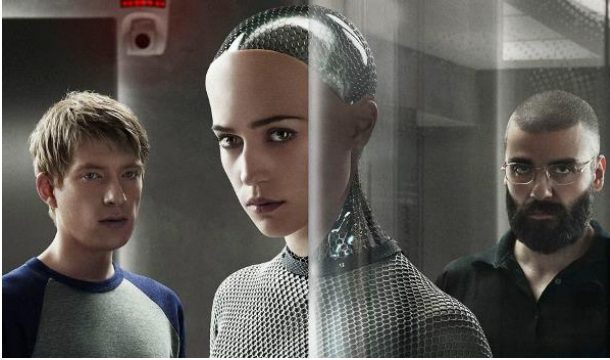
Alicia Vikander (*Ava*)

Swedish actress and former dancer Alicia Vikander was cast as the humanoid robot Ava. Prior to *Ex-Machina*, and after starring in several critically acclaimed Scandinavian films, Vikander appeared in supporting roles in some high profile movies, including *Anna Karenina* (UK, 2012) and *The Fifth Estate* (US/India, 2013). In 2012 Variety magazine declared Vikander as one of the 'Ten Actors to Watch,' while at the 2013 Empire Awards she won 'Best Female Newcomer'. She then landed the lead role of Vera Brittain in the wartime drama *Testament of Youth* (UK, 2014), and followed this with a major role in a Hollywood film, the action-fantasy *Seventh Son* (US, 2014).

Domhnall Gleeson (*Caleb Smith*)

Irish actor Domhnall Gleeson was cast as the protagonist Caleb Smith. After appearing in a variety of low-budget, low-profile films, Gleeson won supporting roles in several high-profile movies, including *Never Let Me Go* (UK, 2010), *True Grit* (US, 2010) and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (UK/US, 2010—as Bill Weasley). Gleeson then went on to play the lead roles in both time-travel romance *About Time* (UK, 2013) and the comedy-drama *Frank* (UK, 2014). Interestingly, Gleeson won the Empire Award for 'Best Male Newcomer' for *Anna Karenina* (UK, 2012) alongside *Ex-Machina* co-star Alicia Vikander.

Oscar Isaac (*Nathan Bateman*)

The role of Ava's creator went to Guatemalan-American actor Oscar Isaac, who had appeared as a supporting actor in a string of American films. Isaac won rave reviews for his lead performance as struggling folk singer Llewyn Davis in the Coen Brothers' *Inside Llewyn Davis* (US/France, 2013), a role that also won him various accolades at a variety of independent film festivals.

Copyright ©

edusitesfilm

Explain the casting decisions made by Garland. What factors do you think motivated him to choose these particular actors for the film?

Now imagine you had an unlimited budget and choice of any stars you liked. Who would you cast in the following roles and why?

AVA (FEMALE A.I. ROBOT)*:*

CALEB (GEEKY PROGRAMMER)*:*

NATHAN BATEMAN (TECH GENIUS AND WEALTHY CEO)*:*

How might the film be different with these actors cast in the roles?

Copyright ©

Pre-production: designing Ava

The most visually compelling and 'high concept' dimension of Garland's script was the character of Ava, the humanoid robot. Here is how she is described in Garland's screenplay:

```
20        INT. HOUSE/OBSERVATION ROOM - DAY              20

          - what appears to be a neon coloured jellyfish.  Tendrils
          like axons, hanging in a black-blue liquid space.

          REVEAL -

          - the jellyfish is contained in a glass orb.

          Which is held in an exposed cavity at the back of machined
          skull-shape...

          ... which is part of a robot girl.

          Her name is AVA.

          She's an extraordinary piece of engineering.

          Proportioned as a slender female in her twenties, her limbs
          and torso are a mixture of metal and plastic and carbon
          fibre.

          The carbon fibre is charcoal colour.  The plastic is cream.
          The metal has the yellow-warmth of nickel.

          The shapes of her body approximate the form of muscle.  There
          are biceps, and breasts.  Her hands have five delicate
          digits.

          Her body-structure is covered in a delicate skin.  The skin
          is a mesh, in the pattern of a honeycomb.  Like a spiderweb,
          it is almost invisible unless side-lit.

          The one part of her that is not obviously an inorganic
          construct is her face - which is that of a strikingly
          beautiful girl.  Created in a defined oval, from the top of
          the forehead to just below her chin.  Indistinguishable from
          a real girl in its appearance and in the way it moves -
          except for one thing.

          There is a very slight, almost imperceptible blankness in her
          eyes.
```

What would be the most challenging aspect of making this character believable on-screen?

Copyright ©

Garland's conception of Ava would clearly either require an elaborate costume or the use of CG effects to bring her to life as illustrated in his script. Garland hired 'Jock', a production designer (and former comic book artist) to design the concept for Ava. Jock had worked with Garland previously on *Dredd*, suggesting that they were artistically and conceptually on the same page.

Here is some of Jock's concept art for the character of Ava:
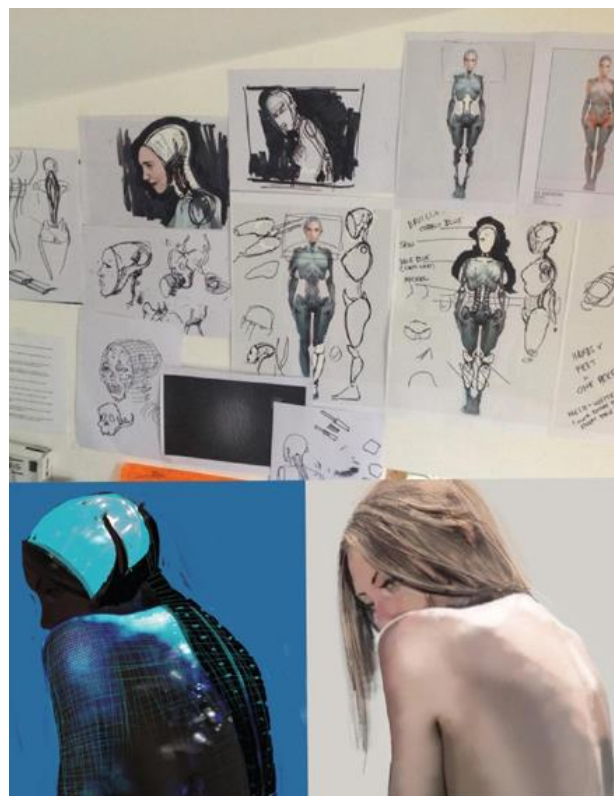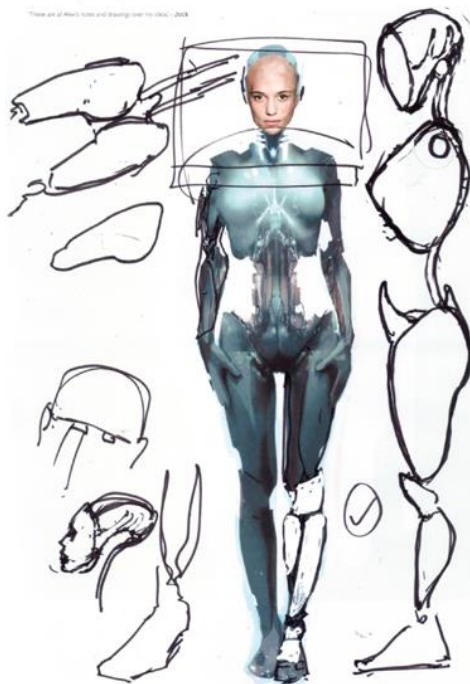
Copyright ©

Production – Shooting Ava (source: https://www.fxguide.com/featured/ex-machina-the-making-of-ava/)

Alicia Vikander as Ava

Ava is imagined in the film as a cyborg with a striking humanistic appearance but also obvious translucent robotic parts - elements brought to life under the supervision of Double Negative's Andrew Whitehurst. Double Negative is a UK-based special effects company with a long track record of visual effects work in such franchises as the James Bond series and Harry Potter.

Whitehurst's visual effects team set out to meticulously track live action photography featuring Alicia Vikander and other actors, and then seamlessly composite Ava's CG rendered body parts into the shots.

Much of *Ex Machina* takes place inside Nathan's house—an isolated building in the mountains filled with glass-lined walls. "The set was really like an enclosed glass box," described Whitehurst. "That meant the camera was either inside or outside, and there's nowhere to hide really, because it meant later on we had to body track things three or four times because the reflections are all different from lens and mirror distortion." That location challenge was exacerbated by the style of the film—*Ex Machina* was not intended to be an action-adventure, but a more cerebral and intimate piece. "Because the whole film is about human consciousness and what it means to be human and what it means to be conscious."


Alicia Vikander and Alex Garland on-set (note her grey 'wetsuit' costume)

On set, Vikander wore a grey wetsuit material costume covering most of her body. When visual effects replaced a section of the actor, the remaining parts were still the wetsuit material. To ensure the CG elements would perfectly match to the live action photography, Vikander was initially photobooth scanned in pre-production so her equivalent CG model could be built. Once the final costume was ready on set, the actress was scanned again and the model refined.

Copyright ©

Post-production – Rendering Ava

In digital post-production, most of the visual effects work was completed. A key aspect of Ava's appearance was the mix of hard metal and then softer outer skin. The visual effects team also added 'ribbons' of plastic visible on the inside of Ava's translucent shell areas; Ava's inner mechanical parts, representing muscles to some degree, also had to constantly move as she did. Other effects companies contributed to the effects, too: Milk VFX worked with Double Negative to create a CG brain for Ava which referenced both a jellyfish and technical feel, as well as delivering Ava's POV shots. According to Whitehurst, "it was one of the hardest body tracking jobs we've ever done. The shots are long, it's performance-based and so we have to absolutely capture what she's doing."
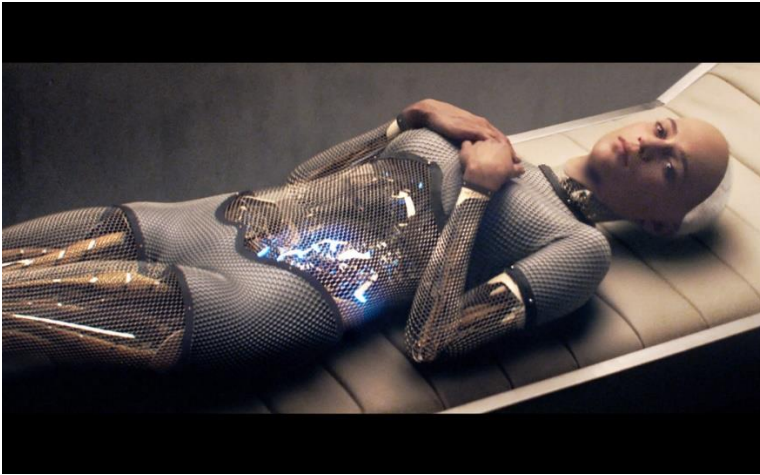
The final, CG-rendered version of Ava

Task

Watch the scene where Caleb first meets Ava.

Make notes on your impressions of the visual effects. How do you respond to them? What is the intention of the effects in this scene? What other elements of the scene work well alongside the effects? How would you rate the quality of the effects in comparison to big-budget movies?

Copyright ©

Distribution essentially involves getting a film out into cinemas: it includes the marketing and promotional side of things (which usually starts during the production phase), as well as paying for digital copies of the film to be made, and arranging deals with cinemas to take the film. It also includes the agreement of licensing deals to make products that cash-in on the film, such as merchandise, soundtracks and promotional tie-ins.

In 2011, Garland had struck a deal with Universal (one of the 'Big Six' Hollywood studios) to fund *Ex-Machina* in exchange for foreign (i.e. non-US) distribution rights. This meant that only Universal could release the film in certain territories around the world when it was completed. Among the key territories they had in mind were the UK, Europe, Japan and Australia.

In the interim, the US distribution rights had not been sold.

By 2014, the $15 million British film was finished and Garland was looking for a US distributor. Universal had right of first refusal, and the project was brought to the attention of Peter Schlessel, CEO of **Focus Features**, Universal's subsidiary company. As a distributor, Focus Features specialises in releasing arthouse and foreign films in the US. Their past releases have included *Anna Karenina* (UK, 2012), *The World's End* (UK/US, 2013), *The Theory of Everything* (UK, 2014).

In spite of Focus Features' track record of releasing independent British films to the American market, Schlessel passed on *Ex-Machina*.

Given that the US is the biggest market for films in the world, why on earth would a big Hollywood distributor like Focus Features pass up on the US distribution rights to this movie? Write any thoughts you have below:

![edusitesfilm logo]

One explanation might be the box office results for films made from Alex Garland's screenplays prior to *Ex-Machina*:

Film	Budget	Gross
28 Days Later… (UK, 2002)	$12 million	£6 million (domestic gross) $45 million (US gross) **$85 million (worldwide gross)**
Sunshine (UK/US, 2007)	$40 million	£3 million (domestic gross) $4 million (US gross) **$32 million (worldwide gross)**
Never Let Me Go (UK, 2010)	$15 million	£625,000 (domestic gross) $2 million (US gross) **$10 million (worldwide gross)**
Dredd (UK/South Africa, 2012)	$50 million	£3 million (domestic UK) $13 million (US gross) **$36 million (worldwide gross)**

Why do you think these box office results might make a US distributor nervous about handling another film from Alex Garland?

Copyright ©

Enter A24

A24

The decision of Focus Features *not* to distribute *Ex_Machina* was a surprising one given the film's originality and dazzling special effects. However, *The Hollywood Reporter* has suggested that Focus's CEO Peter Schlessel was more interested in distributing sequels to mainstream genre fare (such as *Insidious: Chapter 3* and *Sinister 2*) than more offbeat indie movies. Schlessel soon left Focus, with the chief of Universal explaining that she and Schlessel "mutually agreed that it was the right time for him to leave the company as his interests are not solely focused on the specialized film marketplace." (https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/focus-features-shake-up-whats-862969). However, by this time the US distribution rights to Ex_Machina had been snapped up by independent distributor **A24**.

Watch the trailers for the following films distributed by A24:
- The Bling Ring (2013)
- Locke (2014)
- Tusk (2014)

How well does Ex_Machina fit in with the kind of film this company tends to distribute? Make notes below.

Copyright ©

Ex_Machina had relatively limited distribution in the United Kingdom when compared to a mainstream studio film such as *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (US, 2015). While posters and merchandising for *Star Wars* were ubiquitous, the marketing for Garland's film was on a much smaller scale. One might have seen posters for the film on the London Underground and in a few Adshels (window display panels on bus stops), but it was nothing compared to the saturation marketing of Disney's franchise movie. Without such major studio distribution clout, a film like *Ex_Machina* relies on internet marketing, positive word-of-mouth and critical success to draw in audiences.

In addition to the usual trailers and posters, the film had an official website (the now defunct www.exmachina.com) and a Facebook page. In a clear example of **synergy**, the movie was also heavily promoted on the television channel, Film4. A **preview screening**—including a post-screening Q&A with Garland and the film's scientific adviser Adam Rutherford—was arranged as part of a science fiction season at the BFI Southbank in December 2014, and the BFI publication *Sight and Sound* devoted a feature article to the film. All of these things point to the independent, niche nature of Garland's film.

TASK:

Download the PDF brochure for the BFI's Sci-Fi: Days of Fear and Wonder season (Dec 2014). Here's the link:
https://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-press-release-sci-fi-bfi-southbank-december-2014-10-31.pdf

How might the experience of seeing Ex_Machina as part of this season differ from going to see a mainstream film at a multiplex (such as Vue or Odeon)? Make notes below:

Copyright ©

edusitesfilm

UK theatrical release

Ex_Machina was released on January 23rd 2015, and had a three week run. The film was shown in arthouse cinemas and, on a limited basis, in multiplexes across the country. During its opening weekend it was released in a total of 442* cinemas across the country. Here are the UK box office results for the film (available only in $):

Date	Number of cinemas	Weekend gross (UK)	Total gross to date (UK)
January 23rd-25th	442	$1,640,871	$1,640,871
January 30th-Feburary 1st	410	$1,458,041	$3,098,912
February 6th-8th	210	$718,041	**$3,816,953**

(source: www.boxofficemojo.com)

*there were 751 cinemas in the UK in 2015, according to statistica.com

Some examples of British films released in 2015

Title	Certificate	Genre	UK gross
The Lobster	15	Comedy-drama	$2.2m
Shaun the Sheep Movie	U	Animation	$22m
Brooklyn	12	Drama	$8.6m
Legend	18	Crime drama	$28m
Spectre	12	Action-adventure	$125m
The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel	PG	Comedy-drama	$22m
High-Rise	15	Drama	$3m

Look at the box office data above, for Ex_Machina and the other 2015 British films. Was Ex_Machina a successful British film? What factors might account for its performance compared to other films in the above list?

Copyright ©

edusitesfilm

Ex_Machina Worldwide

Look at the following box office grosses for *Ex_Machina*. They are all foreign territories for which Universal International Pictures had the rights to release the film.

- Australia: $544,262

- Italy: $864,385

- Poland: $487,273

- Spain: $923,009

- Germany: $1,323,085

In total, the foreign (i.e. non-US) box-office gross for the film amounted to $11.4m. Remembering that the rule of thumb for a film to 'break even' is 2.5 x its production budget, do you think Focus Features were right to pass on the film?

Write down all the ways in which a film might make money for its distributors aside from a cinema release, both short and long term. Tick which ones are likely to generate profit for a film like Ex_Machina.

Research Task:
Find the box office grosses for *Blade Runner* (1982) and *The Thing* (1982), two films now considered classics of the genre. What do you find surprising about their performance in cinemas when first released? See if you can find out what might explain their box office results.

Copyright ©

US festival release

American indie distributor A24 screened the film at the South by Southwest film festival, Texas, in March 2015. This is common practice for independent film distributors, who enter their films into festival competition in order to garner critical praise and accolades, which they can then use to market the film. A good example of this would be the original *Blair Witch Project* (US, 1999). It is also an opportunity to spread positive word-of-mouth via festival audiences. The festival screening of *Ex_Machina* was accompanied by a viral campaign which utilised a fake Tinder (a dating app) profile for the character of Ava. Her profile featured pictures of actress Alicia Vikander and both interacted in the manner of Ava, the female AI from the movie. As a result of this publicity stunt, the social media platform Instagram also become involved in the marketing of the film.
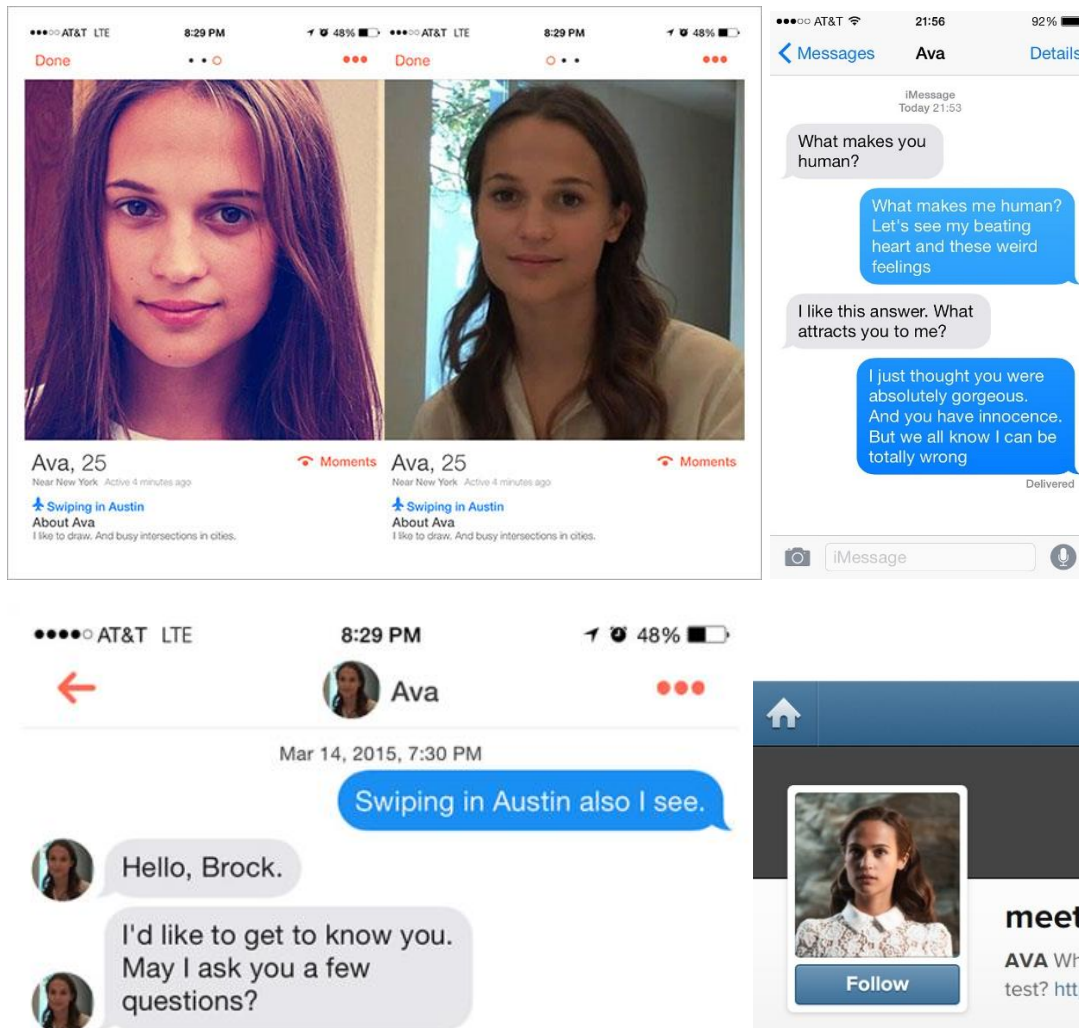
What benefits might an online viral campaign have compared to the traditional forms of marketing (posters, trailers, merchandise?). Explain why social media could be advantageous to an independent distributor.

Copyright ©

US Theatrical Release

Ex_Machina was released theatrically on April 10ᵗʰ 2015 on 1,255 screens across the US. It ran for 15 weeks and grossed a total of $25.4m at the box office.

> *How does this compare to the box office results of previous films released by A24? Find out the total US grosses for the following films:*
> * The Bling Ring: $_____
>
> * Locke: $_____
>
> * Tusk: $_____
>
> *Compared to these releases, was the film a success or failure for A24?*

Comparing the UK and US Marketing Strategies

The marketing tactics used by the UK and US distributors of *Ex_Machina* are noticeably different, and may well account for why the film did well for A24 in the states and underperformed for Universal International Pictures in other territories.

UK poster

US poster

Copyright ©

Look at the above posters for the film and make notes in the following table.

	UK POSTER	US POSTER
Image and mise-en-scene – what meanings/ideas are conveyed by the visual representation of Ava and her environment?		
Tagline – what meanings/ideas are conveyed through the tagline?		
Text – what other text do we get on the poster and how might it contribute to finding an audience for the film?		

Look at the following images. The first is promotional art for the film *Avengers Assemble* (2012). The second is a satirical cartoon by Kevin Bolk, "Avengers Booty-Assemble".

What is the cartoonist saying about the representation of gender in Hollywood superhero movies?

Copyright ©

How do the ideas in the cartoon apply to the image of Ava in the US film poster? Is the UK poster any different in its representation of the female body?

Now consider the poster for *Tomb Raider* (2018), released in the wake of the #MeToo scandal. Here we have an identical angle, a similar pose and even the same actress as the American poster for *Ex_Machina*.

Has Hollywood revised its attitude to the representation of the female body, or are we essentially seeing the same image as before? Write your thoughts below.

Copyright ©

edusitesfilm

Glossary – these are useful terms relating to the film industry.

Look up the ones you're not sure of and find definitions online.

arthouse	marketability
auteur	marketing
box office	mass audience
budget	merchandise
chain	mini-major
co-production	multiplex
distribution	niche audience
distribution rights	pre-production
distributor/distribution company	production company
domestic gross	production values
event movie	representation
exhibition/exhibitor	trope
fanbase	worldwide gross
film rights	
franchise	
genre	
genre codes and conventions	
gross	
high-concept	
hybrid	
intellectual property	
licensing	
major	

Copyright ©