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***Steve Jobs* (2015): Art, The Man, The Machine**

Abstract

The second film in what one might call Aaron Sorkin's 'Asshole Diptych' (following 2010's *The Social Network*) *Steve Jobs* engages with Apple's controversial founder: a man whose legacy, as Sorkin's screenplay voices, had more to do with building beautiful machines than being a beautiful person. This article argues that Sorkin's innovative biopic approaches its complex subject (both Jobs, and Silicon Valley) via the artifice and intricacy of its own screenplay form: the portrait of an imperfect man, as a perfect cinematic machine. Departing from classical biopic's focus on the narrative of a 'life', *Steve Jobs*' three-part structure - focusing on three public product releases - aligns with the structural expectations of the classical screenplay, as well as acknowledging its theatrical setting and influence: the idea of Jobs as a *performance*. In the script's various progressions and parallelisms, this article shows, *Steve Jobs* offers a self-consciously aesthetic rendition of a life seemingly 'fixed'. Recognising that art is more perfect than its subject, Sorkin's film encapsulates and potentially obviates the contradictions at play in Jobs - not unlike the 'beautiful products' for which Jobs is himself recognised.

Keywords

Steve Jobs, Aaron Sorkin, Apple, biopic, performance, screenplay

WOZ

When people used to ask me what the difference was between me and Steve Jobs I'd say Steve was the big picture guy and I liked a solid workbench. When people ask me what the difference is now I just say Steve's an asshole. Your products are better than you are, brother.

STEVE

That's the *idea*, brother.

(From "Steve Jobs", screenplay by Aaron Sorkin)

Released just four years after his death at the age of fifty-six, *Steve Jobs* covers some of the key events in the onetime Apple CEO's professional journey: from his early success as a 1980s computer entrepreneur, to the rejection from the company he co-founded, and then to his successful return to the Apple helm in the 1990s. Looked at from the viewpoint even of this brief life summary, Jobs' career offers to the biopic filmmaker a satisfying dramatic arc: from initial triumph (Apple's rising stock and excitement around the new Macintosh computer), to hubristic over-reach and adversity (the Macintosh's commercial failure, followed by exile from his own company), and finally, towards gilded triumph. Towards the end of Danny Boyle's film, Joanna Hoffman (Kate Winslet), Apple's head of marketing, tells Steve (Michael Fassbender) that his longstanding entrepreneurial dreams and visions for the world of home computing are about to come true: the new iMac is about to become an industry sensation, making Apple the dominant company in the field and Steve the industry leader.¹ And as perhaps any viewer retrospectively knows, not long after the year at which the film concludes - 1998 - Jobs would cement his place in the Silicon Valley pantheon with the ensuing decade of iPods, iPhones and iPads.

As the above dialogue from Aaron Sorkin's screenplay nevertheless hints, the filmmaker's task in *Steve Jobs* is to negotiate the complexity of its titular subject: in particular, the disparity between the products with which he is associated, and his apparent attitude and behaviour towards those with whom he worked, and even with whom he was nominally close. Jobs was well known to take a binary approach to the people around him, praising his heroes, but often calling those who did not fit that label a "shithead" (Isaacson, 2011, p. 561). Yet in the eyes of

¹ Throughout this article, when referring to events in the film, I follow the screenplay's choice to refer to characters either by their first names (Steve, Joanna) or more familiar names (Woz). In the unique case of John Sculley, I again follow the screenplay's lead by referring to him by his surname.

many - including many of his admirers - Jobs himself fell into the latter category. Walter Isaacson, on whose authorised 2011 biography Sorkin's screenplay is officially based, abruptly describes his subject from the outset as "not a model boss or human being" (ibid, p. xix). Nearly 600 pages later, Isaacson, like many of the long-enduring Apple employees he interviews, is still asking why the man could be so ugly to those around him: "The nasty edge to his personality," Isaacson concludes, "was not necessary" (ibid., p. 565).

It is hardly a requirement of the biographical film, of course, that it should deal exclusively with 'model human beings': indeed, much could be said for the notion that it is precisely the complexity and shortcomings of the subject that is the source of the biopic's dramatic value. *Steve Jobs* could be seen to belong to a longer tradition of 'inventor' biopics depicting uncompromising and difficult figures, extending at least as far back as 1940's *Edison, The Man* (dir. Clarence Brown) and seen more recently in films such as *The Aviator* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2004), about Howard Hughes, and *The Founder* (dir. John Lee Hancock, 2016), about the McDonald's restaurant owner Ray Kroc. *Steve Jobs* also appeared on the back of several films, all made following the US stock market crash and recessions of 2008, which did not refrain from depicting the uglier side of the high-stakes finance and tech sectors, all from a biographical perspective; most notably *The Wolf of Wall Street* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2013), *The Big Short* (dir. Adam McKay, 2015), and *The Social Network* (dir. David Fincher, 2010).

Steve Jobs, then, is hardly unique in its concerns with a deeply flawed central subject. The film's innovation within the biopic form, I argue in this article, is to in effect validate this same subject, though not necessarily through narrative strategies that would seek to redeem him, or even to give the lie to Woz's character assessment - an assessment that Steve, notably, does not actually challenge. Rather, the film exploits instead the particular structural properties of film narrative form - what I describe here as *hyper-classical* form - in constructing a portrait of Steve Jobs that embraces the subject's contradictions, ultimately creating something other than a biographical 'life story'. As I discuss, it is in *Steve Jobs*' intricate, balanced and conspicuous assemblage of its various parts that it resembles a kind of machine: a beautiful *product*, in fact, that at once explains and stands in for Steve Jobs himself - a realised film that, like Apple's creations, is intentionally more perfect than the creator. In following this line of argument, I finally make a case for the centrality of design within twenty-first century capitalism, with Apple as the exemplary Silicon Valley company of the last three decades; identifying in turn *Steve Jobs*' own role in reflecting, and even fostering this same idea.

While I will engage with some of Boyle's specific directorial choices at points in this article, my main focus will be on the work of Sorkin's screenplay, in terms both of its structural ploys and uses of dialogue. While not intending to downplay Boyle's contribution to the film, a screenwriter-centred approach is justified here for several reasons. Despite Boyle being an Oscar-winning director at the time of *Steve Jobs*' release (for 2008's *Slumdog Millionaire*), Sorkin's name, unusually, figures last in the promotional material for the film: specifically, on the UK and US posters, the film is identified as being 'from director danny boyle and screenwriter aaron sorkin' (*sic*). The prominence here of the screenwriter's name reflects the level of celebrity attributable to Sorkin based on his previous work: primarily, as the creator and (for its first four seasons) near-exclusive writer of the Warner Bros. television show *The West Wing* (1999-2006). But it also recognises his more recent work as the writer of the widely acclaimed *The Social Network*, for which Sorkin won his own Academy Award.

But there is also a very concrete sense in which *Steve Jobs* forms part of a continuum with Sorkin's earlier film work; to which extent, my claims here for *Steve Jobs*' innovative dimensions centre in part on the distinctive contribution of the writer and an emerging authorial vision. As I discuss later, there are some structural congruencies between *Steve Jobs* and Sorkin's 2011 script (co-written with Steve Zaillian) for *Moneyball* (dir. Bennet Miller). This latter film, like *Steve Jobs*, focuses on another tech-minded disruptor; in this case Billy Beane, the general manager of the Oakland A's baseball team, who used data-analytic methods to revolutionise the evaluation of players. Yet more obviously, *Steve Jobs* is a companion piece to *The Social Network*, about Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. Like the later film, *The Social Network* does not spare its younger subject a similar piece of character assassination as that offered, in *Steve Jobs*, by fellow Apple-founder Steve 'Woz' Wozniak (Seth Rogen). As Mark's now ex-girlfriend tells him in *The Social Network*'s very first scene, as a parting line: 'You are probably going to be a very successful computer person. But you're going to go through life thinking that girls don't like you because you're a nerd. And I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that that won't be true. It'll be because you're an asshole'.

Given this echo across both screenplays, one might think of *The Social Network* and *Steve Jobs* as Sorkin's 'Asshole Diptych' - though not in a way that is meant facetiously. In a society influenced more than ever - culturally, commercially, politically - by Silicon Valley tech, the claim for both films as compromised kinds of *devotional* work might not be so far-fetched. For all his many detractors, indeed, Jobs' relatively early death was accompanied by a show of public grief

and pilgrimage more normally reserved for religious figures or popular music stars. Ed Catmull of Pixar, Jobs' other, slightly lesser-known business home for almost two decades, even includes in his otherwise level-headed memoir a photograph of a rainbow (taken with an iPhone, naturally) that "appeared over Pixar headquarters" - officially, the Steve Jobs Building - "shortly after the announcement of [Jobs'] death" (Catmull, 2013, np). Quite how one makes sense of such a response involves reconciling an awareness of the man and his well-known deficiencies, with an understanding that what Steve says to Woz in the film might be true: that he is the sum not of those many personal failings, but of his *products*.

Yet even if *Steve Jobs* chooses to value the work over the man, or perhaps equate the work *with* the man, this is not a straightforward task either. Whether or not Mark in *The Social Network* is an asshole, and whether or not he breached intellectual property law in bringing his social media site online, the real Mark Zuckerberg *did* actually write the code that produced Facebook. In Boyle and Sorkin's film, Woz's final jab at Steve in the sequence quoted above refers to the returning CEO's criticism of the Newton: Apple's early, unsuccessful effort at a hand-held device, produced in the *interregnum* before Job's rehiring, and which Steve in the film calls a 'little box of garbage'. As Woz reminds Steve, this is still 'one little box of garbage more than you've made in your life'.

At this stage in the film, Sorkin does not give Steve a riposte. Yet an earlier, similar exchange between the two allows the title character to make his own spin on these creative and intellectual shortcomings, when he claims that, while he has no expertise in any individual skill, what he does is to 'play the orchestra': a reference to something Steve claims was told him by the conductor Sheiji Ozawa.² Unlike Woz - 'a good musician' who is 'the best in [his] row' - it is Jobs, the lesser musician but greater orchestrator, and the one who tells everyone else what to do, who gets talked about.

Steve Jobs, then, as this initial summary suggests, does not avoid considering its subject's own profound shortcomings as a man, nor the showmanship that made the charismatic Jobs the abiding face of Apple, over and above those who, like Wozniak, had the technological proficiency Jobs lacked. As I consider now though this article, this same idea of *orchestration*, and of creating a *symphonic* work - of synthesizing disparate elements into a harmonious whole, of creating something that is more than the sum of its parts - comes to embody Steve Jobs in Boyle and Sorkin's cinematic portrait. What is ultimately *produced*, in the world of both Steve Jobs and *Steve Jobs*, matters more than its producer, ultimately replacing them.

² I have been unable to find out whether this is something Jobs actually said, or whether it is Sorkin's invention; though for the purposes of my overall argument, the latter is preferable.

The Computer and Artistic Form

My focus here will be on what I see as the *design* qualities of *Steve Jobs* as a film; its pursuit of an aesthetic form that, in itself, says as much about Steve Jobs as any biographical ‘claims’ the film might seek to make. As such, *Steve Jobs* can be seen not simply as a reflection on Silicon Valley celebrity, but on the cultural and historical value of that which Silicon Valley produces. In this particular case, it engages with the encroachment of technological commodities into the realm of art - and specifically, the central role of Jobs as among the highest profile advocates both of industrial design, and of the interrelationship between technology and the humanities (Isaacson, 2011, pp. 526-7).

In the film, a reiterated dialogue motif has Steve claiming, to Woz’s disagreement, that a computer is like a painting. Indeed, for the actual Jobs, there would be no conflict between the instrumentality of a machine and its aesthetic sense. “Design”, Jobs told *Fortune* magazine in 2000, was not simply “veneer” but rather “the fundamental soul of a man-made creation... expressing itself in successive outer layers” (quoted in Isaacson, 2011, p. 343). For Jobs, the computer should be an object of beauty from end to end, from its internal workings, to the casing that, rather than merely a shell, should itself harmonise with the user in their interaction with the machine. “For you to sleep well at night,” Jobs explained elsewhere, “the aesthetic... has to be carried all the way through” (in Kahney, 2013, p. 106).

The decision to bookend the film with the launches, respectively, of 1984’s Macintosh and the 1998 iMac, frames the film with two defining Apple products that embodied this design philosophy. As touched on in Boyle and Sorkin’s film, the idea for the original Macintosh to say ‘Hello’ was in part to distinguish its approachable and user-centred design from the more intimidating kinds of machines produced (at the time) by companies like IBM, or those fearful ones imagined in numerous science fiction films, such as the sinister HAL-9000 in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1968). The Macintosh, with its floppy-disc slot designed to evoke a goofy grin, introduced consumers to the possibility that computers could look friendly (Kahney, 2013, p. 107). Following this, the later iMac’s unprecedented use of a candy-coloured, “unashamedly plastic” egg-shaped body was a renewed attempt to convince home computer buyers that such technology was neither “alienat[ing]” nor “terrifying” (iMac designer Jony Ive, in *ibid.*, p. 123). The iMac casing’s transparency, moreover, meant that Jobs’ philosophy of ‘end to end’ aesthetics had to be true to its word, as the inner workings of the machine itself were now part of its visible design. This same notion of a machine that both exposes its complex inner workings, and at the same

time sublimates these within an overall elegance of form, is one through which, I suggest, we should also view *Steve Jobs*. The film, ultimately, embraces the complexities of its subject without significantly attempting to vindicate him through anything he might actually do in the course of the film's action. The vindication, as I go on to show, lies in the film's - and, by inference, Jobs' - sense of artistry.

The Biopic and Artifice

In some respect this work on the part of the film is to acknowledge the limitations of the biographical film as a form. Like any biopic, *Steve Jobs* cannot claim to describe 'a life' as such: how is this possible within the space of a couple of hours? As a biographical *film*, then, *Steve Jobs* is a fictional construct operating within specific, and in this instance highly foregrounded aesthetic bounds. Sorkin says as much when he describes his own adaptive relationship to Isaacson's (very large) book, highlighting his role and aim as a screenwriter in specific terms of artistic work, rather than journalism.³

Biographies such as Isaacson's, it must be said, also contain their own sense of artifice. Something as apparently 'natural' as relating an individual life's events in a linear sequence from childhood to death, as is the case in Isaacson's book, can impose its own sense of structure and narrative, of cause, effect and inference. In the time-based medium of the feature film, however, any predisposition in the biographical form to build a narrative from the flow of incident is likely to become even more prominent: a tendency shaped not only by certain inherited generic norms, but also the fairly inflexible set of structural expectations built into Hollywood screenplay blueprint since the feature film's development. As David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson have shown in their broad study of classical Hollywood film, causality, consequence and the overcoming of obstacles on the part of one or more protagonists has long been this type of film's foundational narrative basis (Bordwell et al, 1985, p. 13). Applied in turn to the Hollywood *biopic*, as George Custen has argued, this framework brings with it certain problems and necessarily creative solutions. Most notably, not only does the genre frequently reduce often "alienating" stories to something "congruent with the audience's own experiences and expectations" (Custen, 1992, pp. 18-19); it also tends to "isolat[e] a single life from the flow of history" (ibid, p. 9) - erasing or smoothing out complexities and contexts that interfere with the genre's basis in narrating the *exceptional* life, which is arguably the biopic's very point as a form.

³ As stated in the extras to the Legendary/Universal DVD of *Steve Jobs*.

One way Sorkin highlighted this same generic construction in *The Social Network*, and in turn called it into question, was to avoid straightforward linear storytelling, and as such draw attention to the *act* of narration in itself. Sorkin adopts in this earlier film a flashback schema, with events effectively recounted via the ‘present-day’ legal hearings taking place between Mark and his numerous litigants. By technically framing most incidents as recounted, the screenplay allows for the possibility of unreliable narration: most notably, the first actual words of Mark (Jesse Eisenberg) in the film’s ‘present’, following an initial extended sequence drawn from his ex-girlfriend’s testimony, is ‘That’s not how it happened’. *Steve Jobs*, similarly, also makes use of intermittent flashbacks to incorporate a number of key story elements that together hint at the longer life story: Steve’s work in the garage with Woz, in the 1970s, building the first Apple computer; his original meeting with John Sculley, who became Apple’s CEO in the 1980s; the later board meeting, chaired by Sculley, at which Steve is fired. In this respect the film shares certain narrative similarities with the slightly earlier *Jobs* (dir. Joshua Michael Stern, 2013), starring Ashton Kutcher in the title role, which ranges across a number of key events in the entrepreneur’s life and career. Yet in distinction to this other iteration, Boyle and Sorkin’s film tells its story of Steve Jobs within an unusually compressed framework that isolates not so much the ‘single life from the flow of history’, but rather three single *events*, none of them longer than forty minutes, from the vastly longer flow of a life: here, the launch of the original Macintosh in 1984, at the Flint Center in Cupertino; the 1988 launch of Steve’s follow-up computer, NeXT, at San Francisco’s Opera House; and the unveiling of the iMac, in 1998, at the nearby Davies Symphony Hall.

Like *The Social Network*, *Steve Jobs* centres on another protagonist with a questionable approach to truth, and the purveyor of a ‘reality distortion field’ (as Joanna describes it in the film) employed to bend facts to suit a preferred view. But whereas the earlier film’s motif is the lack of transparency (much of the action takes place in university dorms; Mark is described by his ex-girlfriend as ‘writ[ing] snide bullshit from a dark room’), in “Steve Jobs”, the focus is more on *hyper-visibility* and self-presentational showmanship. Steve’s aforementioned comparison of himself to a great conductor, indeed, takes place within the Opera House’s orchestra pit; a piece of overly explanatory staging that, I suspect, underlines *Steve Jobs*’ own awareness of shaping a biographical story around *performances*.

Louis Bayman has discussed what he terms ‘performance anxiety’ in a number of recent fictional and biographical Hollywood films, seeing this predomi-

nantly as an embodiment of the neoliberal subject's alienation: a trope he briefly suggests might be extended to *Steve Jobs* (Bayman, 2019, p. 280). I will return to this motif at a later point; for now, though, I wish to emphasise mainly the extent to which performance in Boyle and Sorkin's film is emblematic of its deliberate emphasis on artifice and construction. Based as it is around the three highly concentrated real-time episodes, the film mostly restricts itself, in fact, to those often-visible contexts which for many already constitute the limited public viewer of the Apple co-founder. Moreover, these episodes also play out in stringent respect of Aristotle's dramatic unities - effectively, in real time, and in one place. Here, what Shakespeare called 'the two-hour's traffic' of the dramatic play, now the two-hour's duration of the feature-length film, renders little more than two hours of a whole life - with most of it, in this instance, taking place on or around an actual stage.

Engineering the Screenplay

This same tripartite structure, in particular, its concentration of attention, and its astringency with regards to setting and action, serve as a means for *Steve Jobs* to foreground its self-awareness, or its hyper-sensibility, of classical screenplay structural form. While theorists might debate as to the number of 'acts' identifiable in a film, especially in the 'new' Hollywood of deferred endings, complexity and codas (see Thompson, 1999; Bordwell, 2006), much of the discussion around the classical screenplay starts from the notion of an underpinning three-act structure: an idea upheld most prominently by screenwriting theorist Syd Field, author of the books *Screenplay* and *The Screenwriter's Workbook*. Adopting in his surveys of films a similarly analytical approach to that of Aristotle in his *Poetics*, Field came to base his structural model around Aristotle's observation that "every narrative must have a beginning, a middle and an end" (Kallas, 2010, p. 18). On face value, this might seem a bit of a truism. Yet behind its obviousness lies Field's more incisive observation that these three main phases of screenplay action, generated by particular moments of conflict and reaction, usually occur at similar points in the action across many films: points that make organic sense within the screenplay's overall trajectory of cause, effect and consequence.

An early 'inciting incident', for example, disrupts the equilibrium existing, or at least appearing to exist, within initial narrative contexts (Field, 2005, pp. 129-131). This disruption then leads to a first 'plot point' consisting of a decisive act or choice; an action which turns the story in a different direction, and ends 'Act One'. 'Act Two', the longest part of the screenplay, covers the ground taken by the protagonist(s) to confront the conflict initiated in the first act, often piv-

oting around a significant event at the mid-point, and building up to the story's moment of greatest precarity: a second 'plot point' which has the protagonist(s) taking decisive, fateful action. 'Act Three' then covers the impact of this action on the narrative world, bringing the story to its resolution either in positive or tragic ways (Field, 2005, pp. 143-157). The classical screenplay's debt to Aristotelian principles therefore lies in its shared recognition that the phases of beginning, middle and end contain their own "internal unity": "The beginning causes something to happen, sets a chain of events in motion; the middle is caused by the beginning, and causes something else in turn; and the end is produced 'by necessity or as a rule'" (Potolsky, 2006, p. 39).

By its own nature such structural form, though organic in its appeal to the physics of force and reaction, may seem inherently mechanistic and schematic once seen to apply across vast numbers of films. Indeed, Fields' model for screenplay structure is sometimes referred to as his 'paradigm', and as any quick internet search attests, is visually readable as a symmetrically balanced blueprint or diagram. As a form that risks becoming schematic, like any other genre in evolution, audience familiarity might incline the biopic to adapt, moving beyond its 'classical' phase and towards experimentation, self-reflexivity or even parody (for a summary of these ideas, see Altman, 1999, pp. 21-22). Twenty-first-century examples of the biopic, for instance, have explored forms of highly self-reflexive approach, with characters speaking directly to camera, sometimes in a 'mockumentary' fashion (*I, Tonya* [dir. Craig Gillespie, 2017]), or telling the 'life' story through a multiple-protagonist series of characters and alternate histories (the 'Bob Dylan' biopic *I'm Not There* [dir. Todd Haynes, 2007]), or by taking a fragmentary, enigmatic approach, as in *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (dir. François Girard, 1993). The latter film is in fact an interesting point of comparison to *Steve Jobs*, insofar as it hints, similarly, at the idea that the 'life' of a complex human subject is subordinate to, or at least impossible to separate from their work(s): the 'thirty two short films' standing in here for J.S. Bach's thirty-two Goldberg Variations, the piano piece Gould recorded at the beginning and end of his playing career. By contrast though both to the latter, and to those other films' experimentations, *Steve Jobs* may seem exaggeratedly *classical*. Yet it negotiates this potential regression - and achieves its own particular level of self-reflexivity - through its specific emphasis on mechanism and schemata at the surface level of narrative motif. If it is a 'paradigm', in other words, it is one that is entirely exposed through the screenplay's workings.

The film's opening has Steve, Joanna and lead technician Andy Herzfeld (Michael Stuhlbarg) congregated around the Macintosh demo model. It turns

out there is a crisis: against Steve's wishes, the computer is not saying 'Hello', therefore threatening to ruin his planned presentation. Steve's insistence that Andy fix the problem is met by Andy's wry response - one Steve is forced to acknowledge - that getting into the Macintosh's inner workings is not so easy. In a move informed as much by Steve's aesthetic sensibilities as his contempt for hobbyists making add-ons to his machines, the new computer has been built to Steve's 'closed system' specifications. The result is that no one, not even Andy, can open up the computer's shell without the 'special tools' they do not presently have to hand.

Sorkin's introduction to the film by way of this incident (one not appearing in Isaacson's book, but apparently described to Sorkin by Hertzfeld [Keegan, 2015]), nods to a concern on Sorkin's part with Jobs' obsessive concern with form, but also with form's inflexibility. As a screenwriting choice, it also sets up a number of narrative circuits, as it were, leading in particular directions throughout the film, and in this case - like the circuit board in the later, transparent iMac - these circuits are entirely visible. On the one hand, the scene clearly establishes Steve's disregard both for the opinions of those around him and for time constraints, as well as setting up the film's dramatic structural obsession with countdowns. Yet more figuratively, Steve's fixation with closed systems embodies this obsession with *control* - a motif that recurs throughout the film (the phrase 'end to end control' itself appears three times). Here, the professional is seen to elide with the personal: a later dialogue between Steve and Sculley, for instance, focusing on Steve's insecurities as an adopted child, associates this emotional legacy with this same mania for order (Sculley: 'You said that being adopted meant you didn't have control').

As an opening gambit for the film's intentions, the incident around the Macintosh and its 'closed system' also establishes an image and analogy for the screenplay's own work in creating a beautiful *structure*; the sense that the film is *itself* a kind of box, a two-hour container for schemata that create the *illusion* of balance and order. The film's choice, furthermore, to open and end with two respective Mac launches - symmetrically balancing these two Apple events either side of the interlude with NeXT - reiterates this notion that the film itself also resembles the Macs' machinic 'closed systems' and balanced design sensibility.

Rather than confuse the otherwise concentrated unities of time and place at work in the film, the flashback technique employed by Sorkin is another element of this visible construction. In film-structural terms, notably, the division of *Steve Jobs* into three locations and three units of action, while it evokes the *theatrical* conventions of act-divisions, does not itself equate to or necessarily

imply three *cinematic* ‘acts’, since these latter are not temporal as such (that is, few films actually separate their constituent parts in such a foregrounded way). While they do tend to occur at similar temporal points, screenplay acts are principally constituted by those aforementioned dramatic turns in the action and decisive moments: those same specific ‘plot points’ which, screenplay theorists suggest, give the action and development of the story sufficient dramatic interest and turn over the course of the two-hours of action.

Indeed, despite the unusually literal separation of *Steve Jobs* into three separate acts, this approach actually creates specific structural *challenges*. Principal amongst these would be establishing the aforementioned ‘midpoint’, the critical central moment in the centre of the long second act, often the point of greatest narrative stake and possibility. In the broader *narrative* offered in *Steve Jobs* - in terms, that is, of the full extent of story knowledge, assembled and then set out in chronological, linear order - this crisis point would be Jobs’ ousting from Apple in 1985. Not only, though, is this moment quite early within the film’s narrative timeframe (1984 to 1998), but it also lies outside of its specific narrated events, coming in chronological terms very soon after the first product launch, but a whole three years before the next one. In *Steve Jobs*, then, the real-life story does not fit with the demands of screenplay form. Consequently, and to use a deliberately machinic metaphor, for it to fit within the expectations of classical narrative form, the dramatic flow of the life story needs to be *engineered* via moments of non-linearity.

Situating Jobs’ sacking by the Apple board as a flashback within the second act therefore creates a midpoint crisis that is in effect a more strictly *diagrammatic* one, since in narrative terms it has already happened. To support the flashback’s inclusion at the midpoint, Sorkin engineers in the middle of the same act another, this time confrontational meeting between Steve and Sculley, in which the details of Steve’s dismissal are properly recounted. Without this scene and the flashback, in fact, the act would lack an obvious climactic point; and what is more, the flashback here also helps explain this second act in a manner more likely to ensure dramatic interest across its duration. The background to Steve’s dismissal, after all, even though the event itself took place three years prior to the start of the film’s second act, remains unclear within the film’s terms. But then, so too do the motivations behind Steve’s construction of the NeXT computer, an expensively designed and somewhat enigmatic black cube that, as of its presentation in 1988, does not actually do anything. As Steve, prior to this flashback, has admitted to Joel (Pforzheimer), the *GQ* reporter shadowing Steve at all three event launches, the computer about to be demoed at the Opera House is itself

being run on ‘a demo program’; a ‘great car’, in Steve’s words, operated by ‘a golf car battery’ in place of the ‘engine’ they have yet to build. As Joel in turn notes, in reality, a *black cube* is all they have built. ‘Yes,’ Steve concurs, ‘but isn’t it the coolest black cube you’ve ever seen?’

The cool black cube acts therefore as a kind of ruse, given that it literally contains nothing at all. At another earlier point in the same act, during their heated conversation in the orchestra pit, Woz tells Steve that this ‘perfect cube that does nothing is about to be the single biggest failure in the history of personal computing’ - a barb to which Steve calmly ripostes: ‘Tell me something else I don’t know.’ *Since*, though, the viewer is at this moment not yet privy to any more insight, Steve’s verbal shrug appears to go along with the impression of self-destructive hubris and wasteful perfectionism that characterises the NeXT project. *Until*, that is, the conclusion to this second part of the film reveals what Steve apparently has known all this time. Planted slightly earlier in the script is a parody press release from a MacWorld writer, saying Apple is intending to buy NeXT’s superior operating system and buy back the ousted co-founder along with it. Steve pockets the cutting, which is then forgotten until, seconds before he is due on stage, Steve is confronted by Joanna:

JOANNA: This [guy] in MacWorld. He accidentally got it right, didn’t he? You’ve been dragging your feet on the NeXT OS until you can figure out what Apple’s gonna need.

To which Steve, after some further pressing, comes clean:

STEVE: I really wanted to build a computer for colleges... But then Apple stopped innovating and I saw something better. I know schools aren’t gonna buy a \$13,000 dictionary with good speakers, you know I know that. But *Apple* will ‘cause [we’re] gonna build them exactly the OS they need. And they’re gonna have to buy me too...

In this same interchange, Joanna performs her own bit of in-script commentary, by interpreting her boss’s actions and also prompting the viewer’s own potential queries: ‘When’, Joanna asks, ‘did you change your mind and start building the Steve Jobs Revenge Machine?’ The real answer - at least in the *film’s* terms - would presumably be some time shortly after the end of the first act, about forty minutes of screen time earlier. Had the viewer known this prior to the second part of the film, though, not only would the act lose its particular intrigue and reveals (and therefore, as noted previously, be dramatically inert), but the urgency of the midpoint flashback would also lose its force. Even though it has already ‘taken place’, within the logic of the film and the extent of viewer

knowledge, as the film moves into its second act, Steve's firing remains both a source of mystery (*why was he fired?*) but also a source of tension (*what will he do next - or rather, NeXT?*). In the precise intricacy of the film's construction, then, the building of the 'Steve Jobs Revenge Machine' comes only *right now*; as a sequential response to what happens in the flashback. The film here, in other words, aligns with classical narrative's demands for causality and effect, yet in a mostly illusory sense, existing only in the film's cinematic timeline, rather than that of real life itself.

A Beautifully-Made Machine

To take Joanna's second act-ending words at face value, we are now watching the 'Steve Jobs Revenge Machine' in action; yet if this is the case, the third act might prove a disappointment. Just like the firing that precedes the beginning of the NeXT episode, by the time we get to the iMac launch, this 'revenge' - Steve's return as CEO - has *already happened*, summarised in the *entr'acte* montage that precedes the third launch. If there remains any doubt, Joanna confirms the full facts quite early in this final section - about thirty minutes and fifty whole pages of screenplay from the end of the film, in fact, when she shows Steve the huge projected sales figures for the iMac. 'It's over,' she tells him: 'You're going to win.'

As Bordwell has noted, mainly with regard to millennial US film, the plots of many such films typically offer a "*pair of conflicts*" that are at once "external" and "internal", but also mutually influencing (Bordwell, 2006, p. 63, emphasis added). In films about business or the financial worlds above all, where the winner often takes all in a brutal zero-sum game, the presence of the 'internal' conflict can act as a moral counterweight to the protagonist's material ambitions, ensuring that whatever gains (or losses) the protagonist makes by the film's end are balanced (or redeemed) by more humane values on the other side: those same values obscured precisely by the pursuit of success, wealth or revenge. In the main example offered by Bordwell - Cameron Crowe's screenplay for *Jerry Maguire* (1996) - we see how two goals are held in balance, each one seeming to obstruct successful resolution of the other: on the one hand, Jerry's bid to rebuild his sports-agent career following his being fired and cold-shouldered by prospective clients and former colleagues; and on the other, his desire to commit to his wife, Dorothy, and her young son. Jerry is lucky enough to succeed in both ventures, but only, in the end, by applying the same principles of personal commitment and loyalty to both fields. To borrow terms suggested by John Yorke, this tension to which Bordwell alludes in Crowe's film stems from the "relationship between what a character wants and their outer façade, between what they need

and their inner vulnerabilities” - a relationship “inevitably linked to dramatic structure” (Yorke, 2013, p. 136). Yorke’s point here is that it is precisely the gap between what a protagonist *thinks* they desire and what actually completes them as a person that sustains the complexities and conflicts of dramatic form, since it allows for so many false routes and missteps before arriving at a point unforeseen, if not always by the viewer, then at least by the protagonist.

In *Steve Jobs*, it is notable that the fractured relationship with Sculley appears no longer to concern Steve by the third act, suggesting that Steve’s paternal issues might even have been resolved by his successful return to Apple. The desire for ‘end to end control’, in other words, even if associated in the film with feelings of paternal abandonment, seems fulfilled solely by his control of the company at this point in time. But in its characteristically balanced way, the film at this same moment then shifts the question of parental responsibility away from Steve’s unreliable father-figures and towards the film’s *other* absent father: Steve himself.

Early in its first section, the film introduces the dispute between Steve and his former girlfriend Crisann Brennan, relating to his alleged paternity of Crisann’s young daughter Lisa. In this first part, Steve repeatedly denies being Lisa’s father, despite the fairly conclusive evidence of a paternity test he has publicly spun as fraudulent. Towards the conclusion of this first section, though, Steve’s denial of responsibility towards Crisann is mollified by the sight of Lisa using an application on the Macintosh to draw an abstract picture (‘You used MacPaint...’, Fassbender’s Steve utters, mouth slightly agape). In turn, by the final section of the film, Steve’s paternity of Lisa is now acknowledged. Nevertheless, evidence suggests he is still neglecting both his financial and emotional obligations to his daughter, failing to cover college tuition fees and general maintenance, while also being oblivious to Lisa’s mental health issues. Taking these contexts into consideration, it is notable that, immediately after telling Steve he is ‘going to win’ due to the iMac’s projected sales figures, Joanna’s next instruction is that he ‘make things alright with Lisa’.

Sorkin’s earlier co-written script for *Moneyball* follows a similar line. By the concluding act of the film, Billy Beane has similarly ‘won’, inasmuch as his experiment in metrically-driven team selection has borne fruit, bringing his team unprecedented success. The film’s coda nevertheless allows for the mostly solitary and emotionally distant Beane (who never even watches his own team’s games) to reclaim some closeness with his slightly estranged daughter from a former marriage. Here, then, as with the comparative story-thread in *Steve Jobs*, the narrative is bent into line with the millennial ‘classical’ screenplay’s dual-track

expectations, highlighting implicitly what might Beane might ‘need’ over what he thinks he ‘wants’.

In distinction to the later film, however, Beane’s relationship to his daughter (in both a biological and emotional sense) is never questioned; Beane’s failings in this respect are, simply, that he spends a bit too much time wrapped up with work. One might argue that the tying up of this mostly undeveloped plotline in *Moneyball* (one that never features, notably, in the 2003 book on which the film is based) serves mostly to conform, in a superficial fashion, to contemporary screenwriting expectations, or purely to add a more ‘human’ dimension to what is basically a story about economics and algorithms. In *Steve Jobs*, by contrast, not only does the unresolved Lisa plotline run equally through each act, mirroring and illuminating the parallel paternity struggle between Sculley and Steve; there is also an entirely *formal* precision to the way, at this precise point in the film’s final act, the plotline is resolved. Steve, rebuffing Joanna’s demands that he ‘make things right’, complains that Lisa allowed her mother to sell the expensive house he had bought for them both. Joanna retorts:

JOANNA: I don’t care if she put a pipe bomb in the water heater, you’re gonna fix it now.

STEVE: She’s been acting weird for months, She’s turned on me.

JOANNA: Fix it.

STEVE: What the - ?

JOANNA: Fix it, Steve.

STEVE: Take it easy.

JOANNA: Fix it or I quit...

If this sounds familiar to the film’s viewers, it should do. While, in actual terms, this was said *fourteen years* earlier, prior to the launch of the 1984 Macintosh, in the narrative timeframe of *Steve Jobs* we heard it just ninety minutes previously, in the film’s opening scene:

STEVE: We need [the computer] to say “Hello.”

ANDY: You’re not hearing me, it’s not gonna -

STEVE: Fix it.

ANDY: Fix it?

STEVE: Yeah.

ANDY: In forty minutes.

STEVE: Fix it.

Sorkin's screenplay therefore echoes the motif of reparation across its narrational space and time, offering what is in real-life terms an unlikely symmetry (as if Joanna somehow 'recalls' this previous conversation from way back in 1984). It is also a tidy means of flipping the story's focus via a subtle reconfiguration of terms, with the need to fix a technical problem becoming the need to fix a *parental* one: an elision of the machinic and the personal which Sorkin eventually extends to Steve, in his ultimate recognition to Lisa of his flaws: 'I'm poorly made'.

As a summation of Steve's own failings, *Steve Jobs* here alludes to a potentially *tragic* dimension in its construction, in terms of its protagonist's 'fatal flaw'. To return to Bayman's discussion of 'performance anxiety' in recent Hollywood films, he notes how often the latter depict their characters through an aesthetics of "abandonment", in which choices of camera angle and mise-en-scène situate the protagonist as "a lonely figure at the center of an alienating environment" (Bayman, 2019, 282). At points, Boyle's direction leans towards a similar depiction of Steve, framing Fassbender as a solitary figure, dislocated from his surroundings and others. In the opening 1984 section, a heated exchange between Steve and Andy in front of the assembled Macintosh team, culminating with Steve's demands that Andy make the computer say 'Hello' or be called out for his failure, ends with a shot of Steve miming a gun to his forehead, framed between elevator doors (Fig. 1). While in immediate narrative terms the gesture of execution seems targeted towards Andy, it is notably towards Steve's *own* head that the imaginary bullet is headed, as much a gesture of his own suicidal exasperation and isolation - the doors close on him as he makes the gesture - as it is a threat to his chief designer. The film's second section, meanwhile, opens with an unusual shot of Steve's head, seen only fractionally at the extreme left of the image, isolated against an unclear background; a shot that is also lacking any diegetic sound, covered here by the voiceover recounting Jobs' expulsion from Apple and his new project with the NeXT computer (Fig. 2). The lack of obvious context or motivation for this shot hints at the enigmatic conditions for this whole sequence of the film, as discussed above. But it also serves, fleetingly, as the film's glimpse into the central character's solipsism, and ultimately his sense of exclusion and dislocation. (And notably, when we see a reverse-angle shot that reveals the contexts for this enigmatic image, we discover that he is onstage, rehearsing).



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Where I think *Steve Jobs* fits less easily with Bayman's particular focus (in a way, perhaps, that suggests the film's more ambivalent relationship with neo-liberal ideas) is in the sense that this 'alienation' on Steve's part - his failure or resistance to connect, his notion of himself as a faulty machine - is one that is both acknowledged but to a certain extent *willed*. This makes Steve at once a tragic character but also (as befits the film's operatic settings) a *heroic*, even romantic figure of sorts within his own terms. It is of note that this same admission of being poorly made, in the film's concluding scene, is also an avoidance of Steve's own moral agency, deferred here to some kind of fault in his genetic wiring (the tacit acknowledgement, once again, that he really *is* an asshole). Indeed, Steve's final admission of his faulty composition is prompted by the confession to his daughter that the pre-Macintosh LISA computer - which he had previously claimed stood for 'Local Integrated System Architecture' - had 'of course' been named after his daughter, though at the very same time that he was denying paternity. Steve's admission to Lisa, allied to the earlier exchange with Woz, points

to Steve's own acceptance that *he*, perhaps, cannot be fixed - but then again, he is only human. It is in the *product*, by contrast, that the desire for perfection lies; and it is only, ultimately, in the film's tacit recognition that this might just be the case - that being an asshole might, sometimes, be the sacrifice for creating beautiful things, and that the sacrifice is worth the effort - that it validates its subject's behaviour and actions.

Boyle and Sorkin's film, appropriately, foregrounds this focus on beautiful surfaces over actual, messier truths, tensions and contradictions right at its end. In the film's final scene, Steve gives to Lisa a folded-up printout he carries in his pocket: as Lisa opens it, we see it is the abstract she created on the Macintosh, eighty cinematic minutes and fourteen real years previously. As Lisa watches her father take the stage from the wings of the Symphony Hall (Fig. 3), Boyle allows the subsequent point-of-view shot to transform from a clear image of Steve (Fig. 4), to one that blurs in the dazzling haze of camera flashes (Fig. 5). The film therefore concludes with a final impression of indecipherability, perhaps inviting the viewer to question whether we have just seen an actual person, a mirage, or merely an ephemeral idea. Or perhaps, in the end, *Steve Jobs* acknowledges that its subject must remain irresolvable, and that its attempt to bring this same subject to life must remain no more than a dazzling machine: as beautiful, harmoniously balanced and yet as superficial as a black cube - or indeed, the shell of a friendly-looking computer that, in actuality, can't really say 'Hello'.



Fig.3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Conclusions

Whatever form it might take, in its efforts to tell the story of ‘a life’, the biopic form is by its own nature one of *selection*: what any viewer might ultimately ‘know’ about its subject is in turn exclusively the result of the biopic’s structural ploys, the particular *version* of the life it seeks to narrate. As I suggested at the start, with *Steve Jobs*, the added complication within this process is its subject’s difficult, often controversial legacy, the seeming contradictions between the man’s work and what he helped produce. In trying to narrate the life of someone like Jobs, moreover, *Steve Jobs* raises further questions regarding the very nature of its biographical subject, given its focus on the creation of beautiful *commodities*, of machines *described* as works of art, yet produced and sold for consumption, to the greater benefit of Steve Jobs, Apple and its shareholders.

As I have argued here, the hyper-classical approach to screenplay construction Sorkin takes in *Steve Jobs* serves as its own conspicuous reflection on the limitations of the classical biopic as a form of history; but it is also reflects on its *possi-*

bilities, and in particular, on its elegance as a piece of cinematic narration. In the precise, balanced nature of its construction (in its allegiance to classical three-act structure, its use of motif and repetition, and its elegant symmetry, even within its broader time-hopping framework) as well as its self-reflective allusions (to the operatic, to orchestration, to classical tragedy) *Steve Jobs* approaches a purification and intensification of the biopic's classical principles. In doing so, the film makes its own formal intricacy and ingenuity its main pleasure, even if this means calling into question the film's own veracity as a document, at least with regard to its notional subject.

This lack of historical accuracy, though, but also its possible evasion of moral judgement, may be part of the point. The film appears to literalise its biographical task by being called *Steve Jobs*, yet this name remains framed by its own quotation marks, inviting us to reflect on the correlation, as much as any exists, between the film's Steve (Jobs) - a character written by Sorkin and played by Fassbender - and the real, late Steve Jobs. In seeming to offer the trajectory and journey of a life, yet in also limiting the action of the film to what are in effect short excerpts, *Steve Jobs* restricts its claims to the 'truth', even if this means overlooking the murkier ethical terrain of its (real) subject's life - in favour, in this instance, of a depiction that foregrounds the film's beautiful *design*.

Obviating capitalist production contexts by emphasising the beauty of design is, of course, what Apple consistently strived to do under Jobs' tenure. In the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century era of 'cool' capitalism (see McGuigan, 2009) shaped in large part by companies like Apple itself, the aesthetic matters as much as function or necessity. Apple's advertisements sell computers not by showing the hardware but by associating it with radical stances and poetic gestures, as in the company's late-1990s invocation to 'Think Different', coinciding with the launch of the iMac (Archer, 2022, p. 82). Buying and appreciating the hardware itself also becomes an act of sophistication and connoisseurship, whether one is browsing in one of the chic Apple stores built to Jobs' specifications (with their imported Florentine stone paving), or taking a new iPhone out of its snow-white box, and feeling the soft brush of its oxidised-metal surfaces. The conquest of both the market and the wider culture on the part of Jobs' company lies in this appropriation, on the part of the commodity, of spaces and discourses hitherto held by the artwork.

In short, what the product *looks* and *feels* like matters more than the contexts of its construction, or its status as a mass-produced object. Similarly, Boyle and Sorkin's *Steve Jobs* is a beautifully-made machine, almost certainly a much more beautiful and balanced one than the 'poorly made' Jobs himself. The man, his

character and legacy have been subsumed in the film with the stylish and cherished products he helped make. But as Jobs himself may well have said: ‘That’s the *idea*, brother.’

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