coiled muscles, a jaw that seems almost fused together—are especially evident here. With her eyes both bolded, and her considerable pride wounded, Christine has no recourse for retribution; she compensates instead by hardening herself even more. She approaches her domestic tasks with exacting efficiency and precision, exuding an air of unyielding hauteur. Yet this rigidity, of course, can never completely mask psychic wounds when Christine sees a reflection of her body in a closed-door mirror as she washes herself, she stalks for a moment, seeming not to recognize what she sees, then slams the door in utter disgust. Her obdurate sense of self-casts easily; these fissures will quickly accumulate to terrifying, full-blown madness.

What drives Christine her only sense of pleasure—if not purpose—is Léa (Julie-Marie Parmentier). Christine wages furious battles with their mother, still Léa’s lawful guardian, to allow Léa to work in the same household with her. Once they are working together in the Lancelin home, Christine fiercely guards Léa, acting more and more like a protective, possessive lover, Christine makes Léa’s life so pleasant and pleasant for mother, she becomes unhinged at the thought of her sister ever marrying. Parmentier’s sensitive, thoughtful approach to Léa—a delicate balance of trust, naiveté, and awkwardness—makes Christine’s devotion to her all the more poignantly desperate. When the sisters become lovers—in a raw, charged scene devoid of prudence—one senses that Christine is seeking a salve for the festering wounds to her spirit. The sisters attempt to create a hermetically sealed, blissful life for themselves within the spartan confines of their attic bedroom; removed from the scrutiny of their bourgeois employers—indeed, removed from the surveillance of the world—Christine and Léa are free to indulge the fantasy of being lovers who need nothing but each other. As Jean-Paul Sartre noted in his introduction to Genet’s *The Maids*, “[f]each of the two maids has no other function than to be the other, to be—for the other—herself-as-other. Whereas the unity of the mind is constantly haunted by a phantom duality, the dyad of the maids is, on the contrary, haunted by a phantom of unity. Each sees in the other only herself at a distance from herself.” Jacques Lacan called the sisters “genuine Siamese souls”; their symbiotic, smothering relationship was their Utopia.

Yet Utopias can be maintained for only so long before they are infiltrated by the external world. At first kindly, Mme. Lancelin (Dominique Labourier, of *Celine and Julie Go Boating* fame) grows increasingly suspicious of the sisters’ secretiveness. When the Lancelins go out for a Candomas celebration, Christine and Léa throw a party for themselves. Naked in bed, the sisters feed and caress each other with the ebullience of any deeply infatuated couple. Mme. Lancelin and her daughter return home unexpectedly; on the stairs, Christine defiantly responds to her employer’s outraged incredulity. Her worst suspicions confirmed, Mme. Lancelin contemptuously says, “You’ve deceived us with your saintly airs.” Being exposed is intolerable to Christine, and she snaps. The savagery of her actions seems not so much the result of class warfare as Christine’s furious indignation at her perfect, separate life being condemned. Terrified at the thought of being separated from her sister, Léa assists in mutilating the Lancelins’ flesh: “I’ll say I helped you. I’ll go with you,” she says, anticipating their arrest.

The film’s coda shows both sisters in prison: Christine, completely psychotic and wild-eyed, screams repeatedly for her sister. When they are united briefly, Christine attacks Léa, frantically trying to rip off her clothes. Léa recoils—they are immediately separated and would never see each other again. Her death sentence commuted to life imprisonment, Christine died four years later in a psychiatric ward; Léa died ten years of hard labor and was discovered to still be alive during the making of *Murderous Maids* in 2000. We can never really know what triggered those grisly murders in 1933. But *Murderous Maids* makes the inexplicable all the more powerful by charting the misery and the joy in the lives of Christine and Léa Papin.—Melissa Anderson

A Beautiful Mind

Produced by Brian Grazer and Ron Howard; directed by Ron Howard; screenplay by Akiva Goldsman, based on the Sylvia Nasar book; production design by Wynn Thomas; edited by Daniel P. Hanley and Mike Hill; costume design by Rita Ryack; music by James Horner; starring Russell Crowe, Ed Harris, Jennifer Connelly, Christopher Plummer, Paul Bettany, Adam Goldberg, Josh Lucas, Anthony Rapp, Jason Gray-Stanford, Judd Hirsch, Austin Pendleton, Vivien Cardone, Jill Marie, Victor Steinbach, and Tanya Clarke. Color, 134 mins. A Universal Pictures and Dreamworks release.

*A Beautiful Mind* is not a film about math. It’s not even a film about John Nash, really. It is ultimately a film about gimmick—Hollywood gimmick. Indeed, it could even be placed within the growing genre of Hollywood ‘gimmick’ films, the kind that take a strange twist near the end, forcing the audience to reevaluate everything they’ve just witnessed. Only ostensibly a biopic, *A Beautiful Mind* belongs with films such as *Fight Club*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Mulholland Drive*, and even *Memento*.

Everyone involved in the making of the film has insisted repeatedly that *A Beautiful Mind* is not intended to be a biopic, but is merely ‘inspired by’ Sylvia Nasar’s biographical portrait of John Nash. Mostly this has been bat- tled down as a flimsy excuse for the liberties the filmmakers have taken with the story of Nash’s life as described in the book—Nash’s homosexuality, his child with a woman he knew before he married, and even his divorce from wife Alicia are left out of the film. And indeed, upon reading the book, one finds myriad other important details that are absent from or misconstrued in the film and others that are manufactured completely. The imaginary friends in the film, for example, do not exist in the book. The film also represents Nash’s appointment at MIT as a grand prize, when in reality MIT was not, at that time, the powerhouse it is today. His position there was considered a step down.

Nash treated the women in his life badly, including his wife Alicia, who nearly finked out of MIT—she was not the star student she appears to be in the film. Even Nash’s elegant southern twang in the film is completely manufactured—the real Nash is indeed from West Virginia, but has no accent (perhaps the filmmakers were going for a rags-to-riches story, but were disappointed to discover that Nash came from a wealthy, educated West Virginia family, so they instead removed the family from the film and gave him a heavy accent to compensate).

Ultimately, the book delivers a John Nash who is arrogant, selfish, unkind, and unrepentant—traits that are either removed from or made charming in the film. The film does not, for example, include the fact that Nash often belittled students and colleagues as stupid if they merely asked him to clarify something: the film instead gives us a few playfully arrogant quips intended to make Nash seem endearingly socially inept rather than cruel. Upon first meeting a fellow Princeton grad student and competitor, for example, Nash (Russell Crowe) bluntly tells him that his work doesn’t contain a

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single, solitary original idea,” and he tells his students on the first day of class that they are wasting “not only your time, but, more importantly, mine.”

But the removal of complexities is a move that has less to do with politics than with Hollywood’s idea of entertainment. Avoiding the issue of homosexuality in this film is not the same as changing it to alcoholism in The Lost Weekend. Here, it merely illustrates the limits of Hollywood’s ability to handle complexity. The goal of this film is to trick the audience into ‘feeling schizophrenia,’ and messy subplots about gay tendencies and divorce would distract from that goal. The film has no political agenda; it is interested only in its gimmick. And everything in the film is subservient to the successful execution of that gimmick. It dumbs down the mathematical content, assuming the audience would be unable to grasp such sophisticated ideas (or maybe the filmmakers didn’t), and never really explains what Nash won the Nobel Prize for. A good chunk of Naras’s book is devoted to elucidating the intricate details of Nash’s mathematical feats, and while geometry theories may not necessarily make for arresting cinema, there has to have been a less condescending way to render game theory understandable than by turning it into an inspiration about how to pick up girls in a bar.

Indeed, the film even simplifies schizophrenia, removing it from any context or complication. It engages with no discourse on the disease, gives no historical context for its treatment, and, most shockingly, simplifies Nash’s recovery, conveying the impression that the disease can commonly be cured with good old-fashioned American determination, hard work, and the love of a good woman. True, Nash today is in remission from the disease, but the film fails to acknowledge how rare this remission is, and the many years, many relapses, and considerable pain—to himself and his loved ones—Nash experienced in getting there. According to the film, after a stay at a mental hospital and an unsuccessful trial of medication, Nash’s recovery is kicked into gear—in pure Hollywood style—by a ‘moving’ speech from Alicia (Jennifer Connelly), who calms him down after a paranoid episode by telling him that what’s real isn’t in his head, but in his heart. After that, he’s on the road to recovery (literally, as he is shown walking to Princeton every day, a routine that the film also credits with curing him).

The details of his recovery are not mentioned again until a representative of the Nobel Prize committee visits him many years later to check on his health before awarding him the prize. When asked about his mental state, Nash says, “I still see things that aren’t there, but I have learned to ignore them.” That’s it. Problem solved. A Beautiful Mind is a thoroughly American film, a fantasy, a triumph of individualism over adversity. Ultimately the film is best viewed, as its makers have contended, as a spectacle inspired by, but not loyal to, the life of John Nash or his biography.

All of this is not to say that much of the criticism directed at the filmmakers is unfounded or unfair, just that it’s irrelevant. The problems with the film are not so much a result of deviousness or political bias as they are of a blindly dumb attempt to turn schizophrenia into an adventure for the audience. Nash’s story has been kidnapped, hollowed out, and turned into a roller-coaster ride. And that is possibly the most disturbing consequence of all. Schizophrenia becomes an occasion for a cinematic magic trick that leaves the viewer with no concept of the difficulty involved in getting well. Once the film has given the audience its ride and revealed its trick, it abandons its tenacious loyalty to ‘the feel of schizophrenia’ and wraps it all up neatly in a warm glow. The film takes its time with the prediagnosys years and revels in the setup, but once Nash is diagnosed and the audience sees that it has been tricked, the filmmakers run out of steam (or lose interest). The film becomes choppy and uneven and skips over thirty years in a matter of minutes.

The filmmakers could have avoided the criticism over authenticity had they merely changed the film’s title (which is probably the film’s only direct link to the book, after all). When a film is adapted from a book there are all kinds of extraordinary demands about authenticity and loyalty, and when a film is adapted from a biography, those demands are even greater. The story is about a life actually lived, not one that is invented; therefore, a certain measure of ‘reality’ is assumed. Biography, like documentary film, is assumed to represent fact objectively. The fact that this book’s author, Sylvia Nasar, once was a reporter—with an assumed allegiance to journalistic ‘fact’—adds another layer of ‘authenticity’ to her ‘unbiased’ account, and another layer of responsibility for the filmmakers. But ultimately biography is shaped and molded by its author, just as documentary film is. An author’s biases, interests, and competencies inevitably inflect the work in ways that will always distort ‘truth.’ It is always one person’s version of a truth. Indeed, in a recent interview with The Advocate, Nash admitted that she was just too confused by the concept of bisexuality (and had no chance to form any real conclusions about Nash’s sexuality in her book.

There are, of course, degrees of authenticity, and Nash’s version of Nash’s life certainly is much more of an attempt at objectivity than is the film. Where she presents evidence but avoids conclusions, the film sidesteps the issue altogether. Ultimately, the film sidesteps Nash altogether. A Beautiful Mind reduces a complex and interesting life to a cheap one-note thrill ride, an effect that could have been—perhaps should have been—accomplished with any fictionalized story of a schizophrenic.

—Cynthia Rockwell

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