Film Writing: Sample Analysis

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0Nbi0L9bVY **Ex Machina intro scene**

The analysis below discusses the opening moments of the science fiction movie *Ex Machina* in order to make an argument about the film's underlying purpose. The text of the analysis is formatted normally. Editor's commentary, which will occasionally interrupt the piece to discuss the author's rhetorical strategies, is written in brackets in an italic font with a bold "Ed.:" identifier. See the examples below:

The text of the analysis looks like this.

[**Ed.:** *The editor's commentary looks like this.*]

FRUSTRATED COMMUNICATION IN *EX MACHINA*'S OPENING SEQUENCE

Alex Garland's 2015 science fiction film *Ex Machina* follows a young programmer's attempts to determine whether or not an android possesses a consciousness complicated enough to pass as human. The film is celebrated for its thought-provoking depiction of the anxiety over whether a nonhuman entity could mimic or exceed human abilities, but analyzing the early sections of the film, before artificial intelligence is even introduced, reveals a compelling examination of humans' inability to articulate their thoughts and feelings. In its opening sequence, *Ex Machina* establishes that it's not only about the difficulty of creating a machine that can effectively talk to humans, but about human beings who struggle to find ways to communicate with each other in an increasingly digital world.

[**Ed.:** *The piece's opening introduces the film with a plot summary that doesn't give away too much and a brief summary of the critical conversation that has*

centered around the film. Then, however, it deviates from this conversation by suggesting that Ex Machina has things to say about humanity before non-human characters even appear. Off to a great start.]

The film's first establishing shots set the action in a busy modern office. A woman sits at a computer, absorbed in her screen. The camera looks at her through a glass wall, one of many in the shot. The reflections of passersby reflected in the glass and the workspace's dim blue light make it difficult to determine how many rooms are depicted. The camera cuts to a few different young men typing on their phones, their bodies partially concealed both by people walking between them and the camera and by the stylized modern furniture that surrounds them. The fourth shot peeks over a computer monitor at a blonde man working with headphones in. A slight zoom toward his face suggests that this is an important character, and the cut to a point-of-view shot looking at his computer screen confirms this. We later learn that this is Caleb Smith (Domhnall Gleeson), a young programmer whose perspective the film follows.

The rest of the sequence cuts between shots from Caleb's P.O.V. and reaction shots of his face, as he receives and processes the news that he has won first prize in a staff competition. Shocked, Caleb dives for his cellphone and texts several people the news. Several people immediately respond with congratulatory messages, and after a moment the woman from the opening shot runs in to give him a hug. At this point, the other people in the room look up, smile, and start clapping, while Caleb smiles disbelievingly—perhaps even anxiously—and the camera subtly zooms in a bit closer. Throughout the entire sequence, there is no sound other than ambient electronic music that gets slightly louder and more textured as the sequence progresses. A jump cut to an aerial view of a glacial landscape ends the sequence and indicates that Caleb is very quickly transported into a very unfamiliar setting, implying that he will have difficulty adjusting to this sudden change in circumstances.

Without any audible dialogue or traditional expository setup of the main characters, this opening sequence sets viewers up to make sense of *Ex Machina*'s visual style and its exploration of the ways that technology can both enhance and limit human communication. The choice to make the dialogue inaudible suggests that in-person conversations have no significance. Human-to-human conversations are most productive in this sequence when they are mediated by technology. Caleb's first response when he hears his good news is to text his friends rather than tell the people sitting around him, and he makes no move to take his headphones out when the in-person celebration finally breaks out. Everyone in the building is on their phones, looking at screens, or has headphones in, and the camera is looking at screens through Caleb's viewpoint for at least half of the sequence.

Rather than simply muting the specific conversations that Caleb has with his coworkers, the ambient soundtrack replaces *all* the noise that a crowded building in the middle of a workday would ordinarily have. This silence sets the uneasy tone that characterizes the rest of the film, which is as much a horror-thriller as a piece of science fiction. Viewers get the sense that all the sounds that humans make as they walk around and talk to each other are being intentionally filtered out by some presence, replaced with a quiet electronic beat that marks the pacing of the sequence, slowly building to a faster tempo. Perhaps the sound of people is irrelevant: only the visual data matters here. Silence is frequently used in the rest of the film as a source of tension, with viewers acutely aware that it could be broken at any moment. Part of the

horror of the research bunker, which will soon become the film's primary setting, is its silence, particularly during sequences of Caleb sneaking into restricted areas and being startled by a sudden noise.

The visual style of this opening sequence reinforces the eeriness of the muted humans and electronic soundtrack. Prominent use of shallow focus to depict a workspace that is constructed out of glass doors and walls makes it difficult to discern how large the space really is. The viewer is thus spatially disoriented in each new setting. This layering of glass and mirrors, doubling some images and obscuring others, is used later in the film when Caleb meets the artificial being Ava (Alicia Vikander), who is not allowed to leave her glass-walled living quarters in the research bunker. The similarity of these spaces visually reinforces the film's late revelation that Caleb has been manipulated by Nathan Bates (Oscar Isaac), the troubled genius who creates Ava.

[**Ed.:** *In these paragraphs, the author cites the information about the scene she's provided to make her argument. Because she's already teased the argument in the introduction and provided an account of her evidence, it doesn't strike us as unreasonable or far-fetched here. Instead, it appears that we've naturally arrived at the same incisive, fascinating points that she has.*]

A few other shots in the opening sequence more explicitly hint that Caleb is already under Nathan's control before he ever arrives at the bunker. Shortly after the P.O.V shot of Caleb reading the email notification that he won the prize, we cut to a few other P.O.V. shots, this time from the perspective of cameras in Caleb's phone and desktop computer. These cameras are not just looking at Caleb, but appear to be scanning him, as the screen flashes in different color lenses and small points appear around Caleb's mouth, eyes, and nostrils, tracking the smallest expressions that cross his face. These small details indicate that Caleb is more a part of this digital space than he realizes, and also foreshadow the later revelation that Nathan is actively using data collected by computers and webcams to manipulate Caleb and others. The

shots from the cameras' perspectives also make use of a subtle fisheye lens, suggesting both the wide scope of Nathan's surveillance capacities and the slightly distorted worldview that motivates this unethical activity.

[**Ed.:** *This paragraph uses additional details to reinforce the piece's main argument. While this move may not be as essential as the one in the preceding paragraphs, it does help create the impression that the author is noticing deliberate patterns in the film's cinematography, rather than picking out isolated coincidences to make her points.*]

Taken together, the details of *Ex Machina*'s stylized opening sequence lay the groundwork for the film's long exploration of the relationship between human communication and technology. The sequence, and the film, ultimately suggests that we need to develop and use new technologies thoughtfully, or else the thing that makes us most human—our ability to connect through language—might be destroyed by our innovations. All of the aural and visual cues in the opening sequence establish a world in which humans are utterly reliant on technology and yet totally unaware of the nefarious uses to which a brilliant but unethical person could put it.