

# *Moon: One Small Step for a Director, One Giant Leap for a Genre*

*“He’s just crazy. He could be an illegal alien!”: These are the last words heard as Sam Bell hurdles toward Earth as a stowaway on a cargo shuttle carrying Helium-3 – Earth’s principal clean energy fuel. In his directorial debut, Duncan Jones presents an indie science fiction film reminiscent of the genre’s golden age – the age of *Alien*, *Blade Runner*, *Outland*, and *Silent Running*. These films, like Jones’s *Moon*, focus on drawing out emotion rather than creating a special effects show as seen in recent films like *Transformers* and *Cloverfield*. In simplest terms, *Moon* is about a lunar employee who undergoes a personal challenge – the focus being on the man, not the moon. Sam Rockwell (*Choke*, *Frost/Nixon*) plays the isolated employee whose only company is his robot, voiced by Kevin Spacey (*The Usual Suspects*, *American Beauty*). *Moon*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival 2009, unfolds as a three-man drama with only one actor visible on screen for most of the film, incorporating seamless special effects and intelligence into a film that stands amongst its genre’s giants.*

*While *Moon* is the first feature film that Duncan Jones has directed, he is no stranger to the industry. Having acquired a degree from the London Film School, Jones began directing commercials for an advertising company two years prior to making *Moon*. Unfortunately, he found himself in the midst of controversy in 2006 when he shot a commercial for the clothing company FCUK, featuring two girls fighting and then briefly kissing. With both critics and audiences angered, FCUK pulled the ad, and Jones decided to leave the company in order to fulfill his desire to direct films. As a child, he used to follow his father around the sets of films like *Labyrinth* and *The Hunger*. Being raised by David Bowie not only sparked Jones’s interest in films but also provided the connections he needed to begin working on *Moon*. A self-declared “sci-fi geek,” Jones “always wanted to make a film that could fit into that canon.”*

*The film begins with an advertisement explaining how the Earth progressed from a polluted world into one that utilizes the clean energy of He-3, mined by Korean-based Lunar Industries. The light orchestral hum from the commercial merges into the film as lone employee Sam Bell (Rockwell) continues his daily routine of checking the*

*levels of Helium collection in the mining tanks and conversing with his robot GERTY (Spacey). His contract of three years with Lunar is nearing its end, and he will be able to return to Earth and see his wife and daughter within two weeks. Unfortunately, his health suddenly deteriorates, and he begins to hallucinate. As Bell's health fails, Rockwell succeeds in portraying a tormented, yet determined man teetering between collapse and survival. Rockwell exudes such exhaustion and physical anguish that relate to our most primal emotions, forcing us to empathize with Bell's plight. Possibly the most astonishing aspect of his acting is that he is able to captivate audiences while alone for ninety percent of the film.*

*As Bell's health continues to diminish, he discovers another person at the station. Astonishingly, the new resident looks exactly like him and claims to be Sam Bell beginning his three-year contract with Lunar. Rockwell wonderfully contrasts his primary ailing and confused character to the new strong-willed counterpart who feels his predecessor at the base might just have lost his mind. Rockwell plays both Bells with sophistication and refinement, wonderfully contrasting the naivety of the younger Sam to the troubled psyche of the veteran. Rockwell manages to bring life to the somewhat cut-and-dry newcomer, amazing us with a well-timed and resounding performance – on occasion having such comedic timing that the audience finds itself laughing aloud.*

*Kevin Spacey also delivers a memorable, yet chilling, performance with his resonant voice. Giving life to the HAL look-alike, Spacey is able to convey a series of complex emotions that radiate from about five still images of emoticons. Eerily innocent, the robot GERTY transforms from a programmed box on wheels into an intelligent and essential component of the film's progression in the hands of Spacey. While his performance is spotless, there is however a possibility that his voice may prove to be a distraction due to its familiarity. As soon as GERTY utters his first word, the image of Spacey's quizzical face comes to mind and we are pulled away from the universe of the film – decreasing its impact.*

*In addition to Spacey's voice, the slow pace of the film may turn general audiences (who prefer brisk or energetic films) away from Moon. While Jones focuses on the introspective analysis of human nature, he overlooks the need for human interaction that is crucial to the archetypal "golden" science fiction film. Jones chooses to focus heavily on the internal thought processes of the original Bell over the connection between the two Bells. We see a*

*perfect example of this situation when comparing two vital scenes of the film: Jones gives minimal emphasis to the scene that introduces the second Sam Bell, and later scenes do little to develop the relationship between the two men. In contrast, the revelation of Bell's home life is dealt with in depth by lingering on the individual reactions of both Bells. Whether one scene is more significant in terms of narrative progress is up for debate; however, there is no question that Jones eschews interaction for introspection – rushing certain essential scenes like the climactic final countdown.*

*Moon does however retain the qualities that define superior science fiction films. The pensive nature of the film may not attract general audiences, but it will excite sci-fi fans who have had a drought of such films since Dune. One aspect that all audiences can appreciate is the visual effects. Tapping into the writer's strike occurring at the time of production and employing the help of the industry's experts, Jones was able to create both a weathered space station that looks as if it had actually been built on the moon and a gritty landscape that is reminiscent of Outland's dark exterior.*

*On top of the effects, Moon also reaches into the heart of science fiction by drawing heavily upon allegory and presenting a film that comments on both capitalism and human rights. It presents a somewhat bleak representation of capitalistic "virtues" by making both of Rockwell's characters victims of frugality. The film's opening advertisement from Lunar Industries exhibits a self-glorifying message that places the company at the heights of morality, being responsible for single-handedly saving the world from global warming. This scene establishes the company's ability to do as it pleases with little to no consequences, justified by popular support from the citizens of Earth. It is with this confidence that Lunar reduces Bell to an expendable pawn: A video recording from the company essentially thanks Sam for his three-year stint before denying his return to Earth. On a basic level, Jones uses the company to investigate the question of civil rights and entreats the viewer to look inside him/herself and ask, "If you knew you wouldn't get in trouble, would you do something wrong?" With humanizing questions that critically probe the viewer's morality, Moon exists as intelligent sci-fi – placing it next to masterpieces of the past, such as Blade Runner and 2001: A Space Odyssey.*

*Amongst its more profound link to these films, Moon makes a primal connection as well with a score that is reminiscent of the golden age of science fiction. The evanescent synth and organ music imperceptibly enters and leaves the film, creating an illusion of another character that fills the empty halls of the lunar base. The music melds well with the monotonous setting to create a sense of familiarity and alienation amongst the audience. It implicitly guides them to analyze Bell's psyche and question their own stance on the issues raised by the film. The focus aims at Bell's personal dilemmas and targets the viewer's personal experiences to not only draw out a well-defined position but to add to a sense of reality in the film. In essence, Moon is about life – both the philosophical state of existence as well as the day-to-day. It takes a slow and methodical approach to this subject to allow for a more focused study of individual consciousness, making up for the lack of superficial human interaction that Hollywood audiences have come to expect from films.*

*In effect, Moon is an intellectual sci-fi thriller that succeeds in both modern and classic contexts. Jones has created a film that forces viewers to think for themselves and question their deepest beliefs – allowing for a wider fan base. However, few non-science fiction fans will be captivated by its intrigue, finding it too slow for their tastes. Moon may have made a giant leap for science fiction, but it still has a long way to go before it reaches mainstream audiences.*