Steve Jobs fails to transcend conventional mythologizing

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Danny Boyle's new film, *Steve Jobs*, starring Michael Fassbender as the enigmatic co-founder of Apple Computer, opened in theaters across the US October 23. Based on Walter Isaacson's authorized biography—published after Jobs died from cancer at age 56 in October 2011—the film presents its title character as a clairvoyant and brilliant business leader with significant character flaws.

The Universal Pictures production condenses Jobs' life-story into brief blocks of time prior to three key computer product launch events: the Apple Macintosh in 1984; the NeXT Computer (The Cube) in 1988; and the Apple iMac in 1998. Through a series of intense conversations and arguments between Jobs (while he prepares for his various on-stage presentations) and other key figures at Apple, including Joanna Hoffman (Kate Winslet), Steve Wozniak (Seth Rogen) and John Sculley (Jeff Daniels), viewers are introduced to some of the conflicts that dominated Jobs' life during the fourteen-year period the film covers.

The rapid-fire dialogue and plot schema—which necessarily concentrate and fictionalize the exchanges between Jobs and his antagonists—lend the film the character of a three-act play. In contrast to earlier cinematic biographies such as *Pirates of Silicon Valley* (1999) and *Jobs* (2013), which tend to avoid the negative aspects of his personality, the new film places Jobs' cantankerous, egocentric and abusive behavior front and center. This focus makes the viewing experience a rather dark and, at times, tiresome one. It is not clear why anyone would *willingly* spend two hours with this unpleasant, self-absorbed individual.

A working knowledge of the complexities of computer technology and the history of the personal computer is helpful in trying to follow the debates between Jobs and his Silicon Valley subordinates, partners and superiors. Screenwriter Aaron Sorkin (*A Few Good Men, The West Wing, Moneyball*) and director Danny Boyle (*Trainspotting, Slumdog Millionaire, Trance*) have clearly made an effort to keep these aspects as accurate as possible. The dense tech-talk, especially in certain flashback scenes, forms something of a realistic counterweight to the deliberately contrived narrative structure.

An important exception to this general fidelity (at least in the immediate sense) to historical exactness involves the NeXT Computer chapter of Jobs' career. After Jobs left Apple in the summer of 1985—following his removal from the Macintosh team by Sculley and the Apple board of directors—he founded NeXT Computer. Although the NeXT system contained a breakthrough operating system and was used by Tim Berners-Lee in the early 1990s to create the World Wide Web, it was not a commercial success.

That Jobs ended up selling the NeXT OS to Apple prior to his 1997 return to the management of his former firm is an ironic twist of fate. However, rather than provide a serious technical and business reason for Jobs' return, Sorkin and Boyle invent their own explanation. According to the movie, NeXT's eventual commercial failure was part of a long-term strategic plan on Jobs' part, who foresaw his ability to sell a more advanced OS to Apple and then regain the leadership of the company that had removed him twelve years earlier. This far-fetched assertion contravenes the filmmakers' claims that they were not intending to contribute to the mythology that surrounds Jobs.

A recurring plot feature concerns Jobs' relationship with his daughter Lisa, who was born in May 1978. It is well-known that Jobs initially denied his paternity—even after a DNA test proved him to be the father—and that he was emotionally abusive to Lisa's mother Chrisann Brennan for most of the girl's childhood.

These facts are presented toward the beginning of the

film in the form of an encounter between Jobs and Brennan in the backstage dressing room of the Flint Center in Cupertino where the Macintosh computer was unveiled on January 24, 1984. During this scene, Jobs angrily tells his daughter that he is not her father and that the Apple computer system called LISA was not named after her (even though everyone knew it was).

The father-daughter relationship culminates in Lisa's reappearance as a twenty-year-old (Perla-Haney Jardine) in the third act. Some of the rare expressions of genuine human feelings in the movie take place during these moments, largely due to the talents of the actors. (Winslet is also endearing throughout.)

Sorkin and Boyle have chosen Jobs' painful relationship with Lisa as a means of establishing a critical distance from their subject. However, their line of analysis turns the film into essentially a shallow psychological profile. As with Isaacson's biography, the movie finds the source of Jobs' personality defects as well as his creative flair in his having been given up for adoption by his biological parents.

Prior to the release of *Steve Jobs*, a debate broke out in the media among the filmmakers and some of Jobs' associates. Steve Wozniak, who was a paid consultant for the film, enthusiastically endorsed the movie. Meanwhile, those who were close to Jobs at the end of his life—his widow and several key current Apple executives—criticized both Isaacson's book and the film as "fiction," "damaging," "unflattering" and "opportunistic."

There are obvious business reasons for Apple, and Silicon Valley as a whole, to maintain the image of Steve Jobs as an unblemished icon of the information age. The American ruling elite—which lacks a single figure with a genuine base of mass support or who articulates any progressive vision for the future—has an important cultural and ideological need to create false heroes, including a bogus tech-Superman. The manipulative character of the film's effort along these lines is underscored by the scenes of large, faceless crowds stamping and applauding, as though Jobs were some sort of popular hero.

In the broadest sense, the Boyle-Sorkin work is weak because it provides no overview of the business and technological developments at issue. The filmmakers see little if anything more than their myopic and for the most part self-centered characters do. There is virtually no consideration of the larger implications of the conflicts portrayed. What does it mean, for example, that a field so central to modern life is dominated by extremely limited individuals who are preoccupied (according to *Steve Jobs* itself) by questions of prestige, ambition and personal income? An honest, hard-hitting examination of American business and its personalities in the 1980s and 1990s would have been far more dramatic and enlightening.

Despite the presentation of Jobs' "dark side," Hollywood, too, finds it impossible in the end to escape the myth-making and cannot present a penetrating critique of a major figure of modern-day capitalist society. With Steve Jobs, a multi-billionaire who built and ran what has become the most highly valued US corporation (at over $700 billion as of November 2014), there was certainly plenty of material to work with. What would a Theodore Dreiser have done with such an individual?

The primary challenge of biographical depiction in art is to uncover and understand the real, i.e., the objective, contradictory social and historical forces within which the individual emerges and develops. While the psychological aspects are important, any insightful assessment of Steve Jobs would necessarily begin, to one degree or another, with a critical understanding and attitude to the economic, social and political trends that were the backdrop to his life.

This would include the social and political atmosphere in northern California in the late 1960s (Jobs' radical and bohemian influences), the "homebrew" computer hobbyist culture of the early 1970s (the birth of Apple Computer), the scramble for and cutthroat competition within the personal computer industry in the early 1980s (the drive by IBM and other large corporations to dominate the PC industry), the sharp rightward shift of the American political system beginning in the late 1970s, the explosive expansion of financial speculation on Wall Street in the 1990s (the drive for personal wealth accumulation), etc.

None of these important phenomena makes an appearance in *Steve Jobs*.