

# *All the Money in the World*—above all, the “expunging” of Kevin Spacey—and *The Shape of Water*

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*All the Money in the World*, directed by Ridley Scott, written by David Scarpa; *The Shape of Water*, directed by Guillermo del Toro, written by del Toro and Vanessa Taylor

## *All the Money in the World*

Ridley Scott’s *All the Money in the World* is a fictional account of the kidnapping of J. Paul Getty III, the grandson of billionaire oilman J. Paul Getty, in Italy in 1973.

The film is loosely based on John Pearson’s 1995 book, *Painfully Rich: The Outrageous Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Heirs of J. Paul Getty*. Getty was at one point the richest man in the US. By all accounts, he was also one of the most detestable.

The abduction of the 16-year-old Getty heir by Calabrian organized crime made international headlines at the time and undoubtedly possesses intriguing and suspenseful elements. In Scott’s work, however, the episode is not treated in any great depth and, frankly, a more immediate and pressing drama overtook the film’s production and release.

As most readers will know, the shooting and post-production of *All the Money in the World* took place with Kevin Spacey in the central role of J. Paul Getty. However, once allegations of sexual misconduct emerged against Spacey in late October, Sony executives and Scott shamefully rushed to remove the actor from the film, replacing him with Christopher Plummer and in the process reshooting 22 scenes.

Brook Barnes in the *New York Times* (“The Race to Erase Kevin Spacey,” December 13) described what was involved in scrubbing out Spacey’s performance. At a “secret, hastily arranged meeting” on November 7 between Scott, who had flown in from London, and Plummer, the director issued an urgent plea: “Would Mr. Plummer help expunge the disgraced Kevin Spacey from Mr. Scott’s latest film, one set for theatrical release by Sony in just six weeks? ...

“And so began a race to pull off something never before attempted in Hollywood: revisiting a finished movie, reassembling major members of the cast, refilming crucial scenes, re-editing many sequences, retooling the marketing campaign—and doing it all at the last possible minute. Mr. Scott and others worked 18-hour days as they rushed to finish in nine days what would typically have taken at least a month.”

One of the extraordinary aspects of the entire discussion about replacing Spacey is that no one involved seems to have had any serious qualms about the operation.

Christopher Plummer did express some personal concern about Spacey’s fate at the time he was handed the latter’s part in Scott’s film.

He told *Vanity Fair*, “Kevin is such a talented and a terrifically gifted actor, and it’s so sad.” The actor added: “I’m very saddened by what happened to Kevin, but what can I do? I’ve got a role.”

Plummer’s ineffectual sympathy for Spacey provoked “outrage” and “an outcry online,” and his advisers no doubt encouraged him to button his lip.

On the whole, the unprecedented “expunging” of Spacey, who had not been found guilty of or even charged with any crime, was treated by all the participants in the film’s production and by the media as a straightforward business practicality, even as a particularly clever maneuver by Scott and Sony.

The entire dirty operation indicates the lack of democratic sensibility or even of elementary decency in the contemporary film world and the obliviousness of these people to any broader social issues. Does anyone believe for an instant that this milieu, obsessed with or intimidated by the stalwarts of the reactionary #MeToo movement, will put up the slightest resistance to a new round of explicitly political, McCarthyite witch-hunting?

Whatever the merits or defects of *All the Money in the World*, it will never entirely escape the odor of deceit and betrayal that surrounded its reshooting. Amid all the revisiting and revising, apparently no thought was ever given to retitling the movie *All the Treachery in the World*.

As for the content of Scott’s film, whose narrative jumps back and forth in time, it begins in 1973, when the bohemian Paul (Charlie Plummer) is abducted from a Roman street by thugs and thrown into the back of a van. Flashbacks reveal that the oil tycoon (Plummer) has strong feelings for his grandson, despite or because of the fact that Paul’s father is a weak man, who at the time is a drug-addicted wreck.

The kidnapers, hiding out in southern Italy, expect that it will be an easy matter to extract a paltry \$17 million from the fabulously wealthy Getty, but they reckon without his meanness and miserliness.

Getty in fact is so cheap that he has had a pay phone installed for his guests at his (rented, at company expense) palatial English manor. He also washes his own clothing by hand. He tells the media that he sees his 14 grandchildren as potential abductees and therefore 14 sources of financial vulnerability.

Paul’s mother Gail (Michelle Williams) pleads in vain for the ransom money from her former father-in-law and eventually begins her own desperate negotiations with her son’s captors. (Gail has no money of her own because she gave up all financial claims in the divorce settlement.) One of the kidnapers, Cinquanta (Romain Duris), who has a certain sympathy for Paul, becomes her point of contact.

Getty calls in company operative Fletcher Chase (Mark Wahlberg), a former CIA agent, to help Gail obtain Paul’s release without paying a penny. During the five months that Paul is held captive, the ransom will

be knocked down to \$4 million, and Getty initially agrees to pay only the portion of that amount that is tax deductible. To get to that point, Getty's grandson will suffer enormous physical and emotional damage.

The real J. Paul Getty (1892-1976), like fellow tycoon Howard Hughes, was an eccentric and particularly American abomination. His father had gone into the oil business, making a small fortune. Getty's great breakthrough was the deal he reached for a tract of barren land near the border of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in 1949. From 1953 onward, the venture produced tens of millions of barrels of oil annually, making Getty by 1966 the world's richest private citizen.

In the 1930s, "Like many foreign businessmen," John Pearson comments in his biography, "he [Getty] also had a fairly uncritical attitude towards the Nazis, frankly admiring the efficiency with which they seemed to run the country." Later, however, Mussolini supplanted Hitler in Getty's affections. He "became infatuated both with Rome and with Fascist Italy," Pearson writes. After seeing Mussolini in the audience at the opera one night, Getty wrote in his diary, "The greatest son of Italy since the Emperor Augustus."

*All the Money in the World* doesn't shy away from portraying Getty unsympathetically. After all, this is a man willing to shell out \$1.5 million for a painting at the same time as he refuses to part with any cash to save his grandson from possible mutilation or death. But, while presenting an unflattering portrait of a "bad billionaire" only in love with objects, the film does not raise a single question about the social order that produced Getty and his ilk.

Now 80, Ridley Scott has been making films for 40 years. Having directed over 40 movies, he is not without talent and efficiency when it comes to storyline and action. As opposed to a good many highly thought-of directors today, Scott is capable of creating a coherent and intelligible drama.

But his artistic biography has certain telling features. Born in 1937, Scott belongs to the same generation as some of the most prominent left-wing (or formerly left-wing) British directors, writers and actors (Trevor Griffiths, Ken Loach, Albert Finney, Vanessa and Corin Redgrave, Tom Courtenay, Nicol Williamson, Mike Leigh, etc.). However, he did not take part in the social realist filmmaking of the 1960s and early 1970s. Scott worked largely and lucratively in commercials during the turbulent portion of the latter decade. He came to feature filmmaking in the late 1970s after the tide of radicalism had largely ebbed and significant layers of the middle class were moving to the right.

Scott made his name with *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982), two striking and violent but essentially empty works. He was set on a course from which he has never seriously deviated. Although capable of pursuing vaguely anti-establishment themes, Scott has never identified himself with social opposition. His often ruthless heroes and heroines single-mindedly pursue their own interests. Scott has essentially gone with the flow of the commercial film industry—albeit working the slightly more sophisticated, "independent," stylish side of the Hollywood blockbuster.

The director has always had his finger in the wind, including in relation to identity politics. Scott has built up "a binder full of film's feminist icons," in the words of one commentator, including "Lt. Ellen Ripley and her unflinching resolve in *Alien*, Demi Moore's determination in *G.I. Jane* [1997], Clarice Starling and her intellectual strength in the face of institutional injustice in *Hannibal* [2001], and *Thelma & Louise* [1991] flipping the bird to the patriarchy." Scott's filmography also prominently includes *Gladiator* (2000), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *American Gangster* (2007) and *The Martian* (2015).

There is a connection between Scott's (and the other participants') willingness to sacrifice Spacey without a hesitation and the weaknesses of *All the Money in the World*. This is not a film made on the basis of penetrating thought or analysis. It takes things more or less as they present themselves on the surface. In interviews, Scott treats his lead actor's

elimination, as a mere logistical obstacle, like bad weather on location, to be overcome by rapid organizational means.

Along the same lines, the filmmaker doesn't seem to have any strong feelings one way or the other about the allegations against Spacey, or to have spent much time considering them or their implications. Speaking of his two performers, Scott blandly contends that Plummer "can give it a bit more depth. Kevin—who, without question, did a great job—was colder. The humor was cooler, except he was quite nice to the boy who he walks around the park of Hadrian's Villa. That was a nice scene with Kevin. That was the softest I've seen Kevin." The comment typifies Scott's publicly expressed thinking on the matter.

Overall, *All the Money in the World* is a mediocre artistic effort. It displays Scott's propensity for unnecessary brutality (the scene in which the thugs cut off Paul's ear is gratuitous), his tendency to pander to the cheap misanthropy of contemporary moviemaking. Like most fictional recreations of historical episodes these days, the film takes the line of least resistance, glossing over and truncating events, trying to fit complicated processes into easy templates. Nothing in the narrative is ever fully developed or worked through, which helps account for its generally superficial and choppy quality.

As a by-product, the actors are forced to fall back on mannerisms and other shortcuts. This is true of Williams, a genuinely talented performer. Wahlberg wanders around like he never left the Saudi desert. His only key and relevant scene is when he miraculously intimidates the presumably fearsome Getty into loosening the purse strings for the ransom and also relinquishing his claim on Gail's children. (Getty had demanded full custody of the children for his son as a condition for helping Getty III).

One of Wahlberg/Chase's more unconvincing and ludicrous moments occurs when he strolls into the "offices" of the Red Brigades (Italian left-wing terrorists in the 1970s), which is complete with a plaque identifying the group by name, in search of information about the kidnapping. One senses that Chase might as well have found the underground outfit's address in the phonebook.

As for Plummer, having been parachuted into the film at the last moment, he could not possibly give a serious or in-depth performance, even if it had not been surrounded by the realities of bad faith and disloyalty.

The critics have generally praised Scott's film. Both Manohla Dargis and the newspaper for which she writes, the *New York Times*, have a great deal invested in the sexual witch hunt and the #MeToo movement. Dargis, after validating Spacey's purging, writes of the film itself: "But while the kidnapping is the movie's main event, it is only part of a story that is, by turns, a sordid, desperate and anguished tragedy about money." This is precisely what the film is about, but not in the sense intended by Dargis. Sony and Ridley Scott's removal of Spacey was, in the final analysis, a sordid betrayal that was all "about money."

### *The Shape of Water*

Directed by Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro, *The Shape of Water* is a well-meaning, charming fantasy set in the US. It touches upon militarism, police brutality, racism, anti-immigration and workplace sexual harassment.

Elisa (Sally Hawkins) is a mute janitor who works at the secret Occam Aerospace Research Center in Baltimore during the Cold War in the early 1960s. Her closest friends are Zelda (Octavia Spencer), a fellow cleaner, and Giles (Richard Jenkins), her gay neighbor and an unemployed Norman Rockwell-type illustrator, whose skills are being made obsolete.

One day, the military facility receives the shipment of a tank housing an

amphibian-humanoid (Doug Jones) captured in the Amazon by Col. Richard Strickland (Michael Shannon), a sadist who cracks hard candy in his teeth and liberally uses a cattle prod—his “Alabama howdy-do” (a reference to attacks on civil rights activists in the South)—on the creature. Strickland also reads books on the power of “positive thinking” and is vile to his robotic suburban wife and children.

When Elisa starts communicating with the “Asset,” she comes to the attention of Dr. Robert Hoffstetler (Michael Stuhlbarg), a scientist at the lab and also, it turns out, a Soviet spy. Realizing that both the Russians and the American military want to destroy the endearing amphibian-man, who has great healing powers, Robert helps Elisa, Zelda and Giles rescue the being. Normal boundaries are transcended by Elisa and her other-species love.

Del Toro is a creative filmmaker who has explored diverse genres—horror, science fiction and gothic melodrama, his best-known work being *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006). *The Devils’ Backbone* (2001), *Hellboy* (2004), *Pacific Rim* (2013) and *Crimson Peak* (2015) are among his other films. In a 2007 interview, del Toro pointed out that most of his villains were authoritarian figures, including businessmen, Nazis and Francoists, and noted that he hated “any institutionalised social, religious, or economic holding.”

Undoubtedly, the director intended his imaginative *The Shape of Water* (Amphibian Man is a remarkable technical achievement) in part as a statement against Donald Trump and the US establishment—its savagery, callousness and slash-and-burn approach to the world (personified by Shannon’s Strickland). Del Toro has made two cleaning women, one impaired and one black, as well as an unemployed homosexual and a liberal scientist, his heroes.

In an interview, del Toro explains that he set the film in 1962 because “shortly thereafter, [President John F.] Kennedy’s shot and Vietnam escalates and everything starts to disintegrate. ... If you were a minority, if you were a woman, if you were the wrong gender, social class, sexual preference, 1962 is really hard. And I wanted to talk about now, not about ’62. ... And the beauty of the movie is it that it not only speaks of tolerance and solidarity, it gives voice, literally, to the voiceless. It gathers a group of invisible people [including a group of black loading-dock workers at the lab] that rescue the ultimate outsider, which is this creature and they find the beautiful and the divine and the lovable in the other and I think it’s a fable that is very healing for me, right now.”

Del Toro’s “fairy tale for troubled times” has the limitations of even the best fairy tale, a lack of social concreteness and urgency, but its positive qualities are real.



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