

Tesla: The cognizable, knowable scientist and visionary

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Written and directed by Michael Almereyda

Written and directed by Michael Almereyda, *Tesla* is a drama inspired by the life of Serbian-American engineer and physicist Nikola Tesla (1856-1943), a remarkable figure. Ethan Hawke plays Tesla.

According to *History.com*, Tesla “made dozens of breakthroughs in the production, transmission and application of electric power. He invented the first alternating current (AC) motor and developed AC generation and transmission technology.”

In 1884, he was hired as an engineer at inventor Thomas Alva Edison’s Manhattan headquarters. “At one point Edison told Tesla he would pay \$50,000 for an improved design for his DC [direct current] dynamos. After months of experimentation, Tesla presented a solution and asked for the money. Edison demurred, saying, ‘Tesla, you don’t understand our American humor.’ Tesla quit soon after.”

A genius inventor, but not a good businessman, Tesla’s own Electric Light Company failed and at one point he found himself digging ditches for \$2.00 a day. In 1887-88, he was granted more than 30 patents and eventually caught the attention of George Westinghouse, who had launched the first AC power station near Boston and was the chief rival of Edison, the developer of DC.

Tesla “invented electric oscillators, meters, improved lights and the high-voltage transformer known as the Tesla coil. He also experimented with X-rays, gave short-range demonstrations of radio communication two years before Guglielmo Marconi and piloted a radio-controlled boat around a pool in Madison Square Garden.” Tesla and Westinghouse lit the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, then partnered with General Electric to install AC generators at Niagara Falls, which became the first modern power station.

Tesla also had a short-lived relationship with financier J.P. Morgan, who eventually withdrew from subsidizing the iconic innovator. In Almereyda’s film, Morgan (Donnie Keshawarz) comes across as a fairly reasonable man, rather than a rapacious capitalist.

Almereyda adds his own “modernist” twists to Tesla’s life. Morgan’s daughter Anne (Eve Hewson), Tesla’s potential love interest, narrates the film, using a laptop. The director opens his movie with Tesla on roller skates and features an ice-cream fight between Tesla and Thomas Edison (Kyle MacLachlan).

For some reason, famed actress Sarah Bernhardt (Rebecca Dayan) appears in the film, and Edison is seen checking his iPhone at a bar. At one point, Tesla karokes Tears For Fears’ “Everybody Wants to Rule the World.”

Hawke, a talented performer, grunts throughout the darkish movie, apparently too busy inventing to make genuine human contact. The laptop-toting Hewson as Anne Morgan is lively, while MacLachlan as Edison is inappropriately facetious (this is not his fault).

In an interview, Almereyda says that he “stitched from material found in 19th-century newspapers, letters, and books, and from Tesla’s serialized autobiography, written in 1916 ... I didn’t *invent* much of anything! But it may be more appropriate to consider the movie a collage, patched and stitched together from a great many sources.”

Tesla is definitely “patched and stitched together,” but into a confused hodge-podge, an unintegrated series of vignettes, some of which are interesting and some of which are not.

Almereyda wants to paint Tesla as a visionary and futurist, although he never makes clear precisely what that means. The film never establishes what the director’s attitude is toward the society that was

developing, and which Tesla was helping to shape. Presumably, the movie views Tesla as a creative genius strangled by Machiavellian big-business interests. Unlike Edison and Westinghouse, he was an eccentric who did not fit into the world. Someone who believed it was a certainty there was life on other planets, Tesla was an individual, in Almereyda's view, clearly more oriented towards heaven than earth.

But the oddities, annoying gimmicks and quirkiness are largely a way of avoiding the problem of what American capitalism was becoming and has become.

Almereyda has demonstrated that he is a gifted and sensitive filmmaker. His adaptations of Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (2000) and *Cymbeline* (2014), in our view, remain his strongest work. In 2002, the WSWS commented that Almereyda's *Happy Here and Now*, unfortunately, was one of the "most notably disappointing films" at the Toronto film festival that year, "a self-indulgent and self-conscious work about the search for a missing woman in New Orleans, which leaves virtually no impression at all."

One of the chief difficulties, as is the case so often, is that artists of Almereyda's generation (he was born in 1959) have such a weakened sense of history and the historical process. Bound up with that, they have been influenced, one wants to say "infected," by irrationalist postmodernist conceptions. For instance, Almereyda told an interviewer recently that one notion that had "invaded" the film was that "history is often unknowable and struck together from widely speculative rumors filled with blind spots and that idea prevailed throughout. The idea that history is unreliable became part of the texture of the story. As you can see in the way the story is narrated."

This "unreliability" and the general inability to arrive at an approximation of the truth become phenomena to boast about. As the director also commented, "Trying to get closer to him [Tesla] and not succeeding—that failure became part of the story." Almereyda further explained that he found Tesla "unknowable and confounding."

Undoubtedly, making sense of American society's transition in the late 19th century and the emergence of large-scale industrial capitalism, as well as the human beings who sank or swam in the process, is no easy matter. But artists like Theodore Dreiser, in *Sister Carrie*, *The Financier* and *The Titan*, accomplished it.

Such an effort requires relentless labor and serious thought guided by an attentiveness to historical laws.

Tesla was not the only "visionary" and "eccentric" to run up against the brutal realities, nor the only individual to be ground up by the social and economic processes at work. Such things can be cognized by the artist and transformed into works that shed genuine light. Almereyda is far too easy on himself.

The director told another interviewer that his *Hamlet* and *Tesla* were both stories "of an alienated individual swimming against the tide, framed by a sense of America as a bright, cruel, self-assured empire, with capitalism and consumer culture snuffing out quaint ideas of love and honor."

The ahistorical approach, according to which everybody has always been the way "people" (i.e., middle class people) are today, generally yields meager results.

In any event, it is worth recalling Tesla's optimistic speech at the Niagara Falls opening ceremony on January 12, 1897:

We have many a monument of past ages; we have the palaces and pyramids, the temples of the Greek and the cathedrals of Christendom. In them is exemplified the power of men, the greatness of nations, the love of art and religious devotion. But the monument at Niagara has something of its own, more in accord with our present thoughts and tendencies. It is a monument worthy of our scientific age, a true monument of enlightenment and of peace. It signifies the subjugation of natural forces to the service of man, the discontinuance of barbarous methods, the relieving of millions from want and suffering.



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