

EVIL DOES NOT EXIST

Monday, June 24, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Lee Marshall | Screen Daily | Not Rated | 106 mins.

According to writer/director Ryusuke Hamaguchi, the genesis of *Evil Does Not Exist* was a request from musician Eiko Ishibashi for some original film footage to accompany a live concert she was planning. But although the result feels like a cinematic sonata rather than a full symphony, this is no side project from the director of the Oscar-winning *Drive My Car* – which was another Ishibashi-Hamaguchi collaboration. It's a fully realized minor-key joy, an eco-fable set in a rural part of Japan a couple of hours' drive from Tokyo. Ostensibly centered on the locals' opposition to a woodland 'glamping' site, it becomes a nuanced reflection on our destructively needy rapport with the natural world.

Audiences hungry for more Hamaguchi, or simply curious to see a talented director dealing so nonchalantly with the weight of expectation of an Academy Award for Best International Feature Film, should line up for the cinematic *Evil Does Not Exist*. With its daringly abrupt final act, Hamaguchi's latest does not quite deliver his previous drama's big emotional journey, and may fail to expand much beyond mature arthouse markets. But it is an absorbing film of quiet power.

Evil Does Not Exist opens on a long tracking shot through a forest, accompanied by Ishibashi's wistful soundtrack which drifts back and forth between the analogue and electronic. Soon, in real time, we're watching Takumi (Hitoshi Omika) chain sawing logs outside his house in the woods, then splitting them expertly with an axe before loading them into a wheelbarrow and stacking them. It is a scene that gets a droll reprise later on, one that makes us reinterpret the earlier sequence. Just like the two talent agency employees with their city ways who call on Takumi while he is collecting his daily quota of firewood, we, the audience, are being taught to wait. Out here in the country, life – and films – move to a different rhythm; as does Omika's nicely understated performance (an assistant director, he was cast after standing in for Takumi in trial shots).

Takumi is a man of few words and, it is suggested, a deep understanding of the natural world. He lives with his eight-year-old daughter Hana (Ryo Nishikawa) on the edge of a rural village. We see him, with a friend who runs a soba noodle restaurant, filling jerrycans with fresh water from a spring. Later, as he and Hana walk home through the snow-dusted forest after school, he quizzes her on the names of trees. They find a pheasant feather, see the carcass of a shot deer. The hunters' gunshots we hear in the distance are not the only threat to this sylvan idyll; a more immediate one is the glamping site that a talent agency from Tokyo wants to create in the forest.

Why is a talent agency getting into glamping? It's all to do with lucrative post-pandemic subsidies. A consultation meeting with skeptical residents to discuss the project is revealed to be no more than a PR exercise. The two hapless agency employees sent from Tokyo to meet the villagers, forty-something Takahasi (Ryuji Kosaka) and his young female colleague Mayuzumi (Ayaka Shibutani), have been sent to act as punchbags for frustrated locals who have been cut out of the decision-making process. The pair can offer nothing except grudging admissions that, yes, when at capacity the site will pollute the local water supply and, yes, the lack of provision for a night watchman constitutes a fire risk.

But *Evil Does Not Exist* is not an us-against-them story of a rural community rebelling against environmental marauders from the big city. It is a film of quiet humanism and thoughtful irony, one that spends time with those marauders, Mayuzumi and Takahasi, to reveal, with touches of gentle humor, that they too are just cogs in the machinery. These things are complicated, Hamaguchi suggests (though the title may also hint that a relativistic world-view in which there are no real baddies can be very convenient for the baddies). Even the village, we learn, is a post-war creation, a farming community created ad hoc in the middle of nowhere. With great economy of means, the film touches on issues such as overtourism, global warming with its attendant water wars and devastating fires, ownership of the countryside, and the impact of the current fashion for restorative forest retreats among stressed city dwellers.

Gradually, though, it becomes clear that there is also a magical realist element, one centering on the relationship between father and daughter. It is set in relief in the most delicate way by a single tracking shot, a single photo we glimpse inside the house they share, and a single-color choice: Hana's blue jacket and saffron yellow gloves, which glow like beacons in the wintry forest. Not every viewer will be prepared for the sudden emergence of this oneiric strain in a finale that feels like a full stop at the end of the second act. But it's just the last surprise of a film that, beneath its placid surface, is full of them.

In Japanese with English Subtitles.

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To kill a Mockingbird

Monday, July 15, 7:30 pm

With Special Guest Host, Mike McCellan

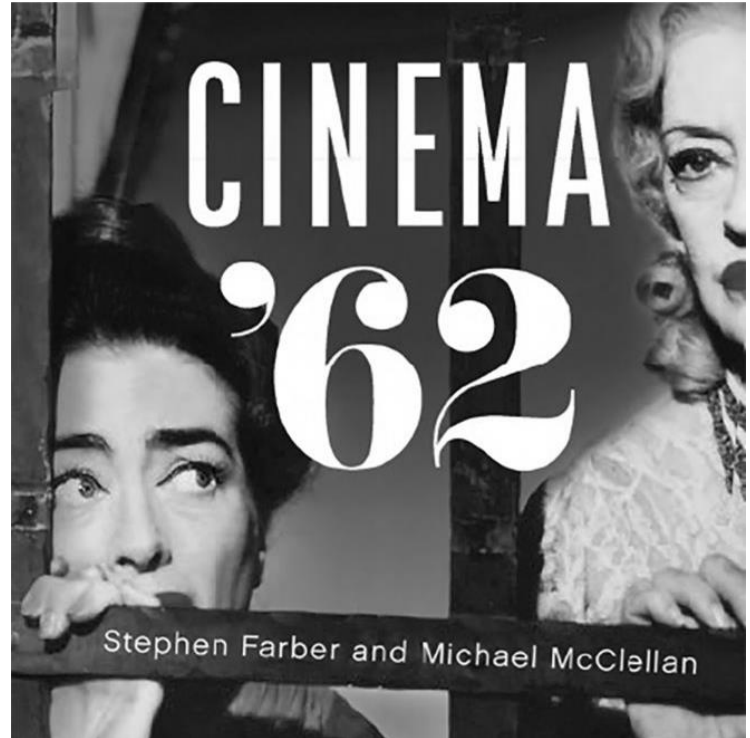
Reviewed by Todd Gilchrist | IGN | Rated PG | 130 Mins.

As number 16 on IGN's list of the Top 25 Dramas of All Time, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has won many moviegoers hearts since its initial release in 1962, when Gregory Peck stepped into the role of Atticus Finch and offered a resolute hero behind whom anyone - and eventually, everyone - could rally. Today, it not only serves as a glorious example of human fragility - both in peril and rescued from moral depravity - but as an influential work for directors of all ages and disciplines: Cameron Crowe references it liberally in *Almost Famous*, and other recent morality plays have stood in its estimable shadow trying to exemplify its even-handed sense of justice without resulting either to cheap sentimentality or overwrought sermonizing. So needless to say that when the opportunity arose to check out an all-new remastered version of the film in Universal's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Legacy Series Edition) DVD, IGN leapt at the chance; and while we have no excuse why this hasn't already been reviewed and reviewed thoroughly, we remains steadfast in our celebration (late as it may be) of this wonderful film, which looks beautiful and comes packaged with enough extra materials to start one's own Atticus Finch (much less Gregory Peck) Fan Club.

Peck plays Atticus Finch, frequently acknowledged as one of the silver screen's greatest-ever characters - a lawyer who takes on an unwinnable case against a black man (in the rural South) who is accused of raping a white girl. His children, played by Mary Badham and Phillip Alford, provide an objective viewpoint for the proceedings, which take numerous turns into danger both for Finch's client and themselves. Thankfully, however, the film never slips into cheap melodrama, and ultimately offers a remarkable portrait of humanity at its best and worst, not to mention an ideal to which all people should aspire. Peck deservedly won an Academy Award for his performance as Finch, lending quiet gravitas to a role that could easily have been played as a civil rights rabblouser; dealing in delicate measures with his children, his client and the frequently unlikeable denizens of the small Southern town in which he lives, Peck never presents Finch as superior - either morally or intellectually - to the other characters.

While some of the other portrayals occasionally veer into parody - if only for the purpose of some measured comic relief - the majority of

the cast support Peck and prove game collaborators. As novice actors, Badham and Alford bring credulity and sensitivity to their roles, always seeming like real rural kids rather than constructed Southern clichés massaged into existence by studio-cultivated junior thespians, and provide a beautiful, poetic fulcrum for Atticus' dealings as a father and attorney. Ultimately *To Kill a Mockingbird* isn't just a great movie, but one of the finest films ever made. There are plenty of dramas that have attempted to match its intelligence, sensitivity and effectiveness, but as a great tale of moral rectitude or simply a compelling, heartbreaking but ultimately life-affirming yarn, its charms surpass its competitors and imitators and prove lasting even many years later.



About Mike McClellan: Michael McClellan is the former SVP/Head Film Buyer for Landmark Theatres, and served on the appeals board of the Classification and Ratings Administration of the MPAA. He currently co-produces a classic film series in Los Angeles, and is the co-author of **Cinema '62: The Greatest Year at the Movies**. He spent his early career as a film buyer with General Cinema in Chicago and returns to introduce the screening of our screening of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

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"A Hard Day's Night"

Monday, July 29, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Jake Cole | Slant | Not Rated | 87 Mins.

Between 1963 and '64, the Beatles made an impact on the world that transcended mere entertainment. The open social rebellion of their image, and their fans' need to see them as well as hear them, made a movie deal a kind of inevitability, just as it was for Elvis Presley when he arrived on the music scene. United Artists signed the Fab Four to a three-picture contract, but the paltry budget and shooting schedule allotted to the first of them, *A Hard Day's Night*, suggests that executives felt that they had to cash in as quickly as possible. The rushed production reflected a move to make a profit off the group before their transatlantic market saturation peaked and the mop-topped Icari plummeted back to Earth.

This should have spelled disaster, but the film excels in part because of its limited means. Rock movies of the era capitalized on their stars' success with young listeners but catered toward respectability: Consider the breeziness of the films that ultimately neutered Elvis, or frothy Cliff Richard vehicles like *Summer Holiday*. The last thing *A Hard Day's Night* has on its mind is respectability. Written by Alun Owen and directed by Richard Lester through his typically satirical lens, the film bucks the trend of rock movies cleaning up sex symbols for teens to introduce to their mothers. If anything, its manic energy feels like a regression from Ed Sullivan back to the band's drunken, prellie-fueled apprenticeship in Hamburg clubs.

Heading off detractors at the pass, the film answers the question posed by adults, "How did these scruffy, hare-brained vulgarians become so popular?" with "Your guess is as good as ours." In contrast to a movie like *G.I. Blues*, in which Elvis experiences the existential displacement of being Tulsa McLean hearing Elvis on a jukebox, *A Hard Day's Night* expressly concerns the shenanigans of John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr as they cope with fame. The famous opening sequence, of the Beatles running, hiding, and disguising themselves from a shrieking horde of fans as they attempt to make their train, sets a precedent: The film isn't only a product of Beatlemania, but a concentrated study of it, driven by an anarchic sense of humor that pokes fun at the band's image.

It's impossible not to love their fresh-faced boyishness, but their wry, self-aware behavior allows the Fab Four retain their edge, a feat that their peers, especially Elvis, never previously enjoyed on the big screen. Throughout, the jokes cater to each Beatle's personality: John and Paul, then the group's ironclad songwriting team, share the same laddish sense of humor (Lennon in particular fires off several risqué one-liners), while George is more sardonic and quietly witty. Ringo often acts as the butt of other people's jokes, yet he engages in a kind of long-con, Socratic game of playing dumb and getting the last laugh.

Their individual quirks come to the fore in the film's best comic sequence, of the band members separated in a press conference and responding to reporters' simplistic, often condescending questions with uniformly sarcastic responses. "How did you find America?" one journalist (Marianne Stone) asks John. "Turn left at Greenland," John

replies. The same reporter asks Ringo, "Are you a mod or a rocker?" "Oh, no," he says, "I'm a mocker."

Throughout, the band's carefree energy is matched by Lester's direction. Lester and the rest of the crew had to keep things raw, and many of the film's most charming visual moments are accidental. *A Hard Day's Night* even opens on one such flub, with Ringo and George tumbling over each other in the first shot, a mistake left in the final cut for its energy and comedy. The other great visual sequence, of the band frolicking in a field to "Can't Buy Me Love," employs film speeds redolent of silent-era works—not out of conscious effort, but because the camera's battery was dying and so the frame rate slowed as the operator shot the band.

This stripped-down style also amplifies the social subtext that makes *A Hard Day's Night* such a key document of the pre-counterculture '60s. The Beatles constantly run afoul of disapproving adults, such as the reporters who perfunctorily yet invasively cover them, as well as the officious veteran (Richard Vernon) who rides in their train compartment and casts aside majority rule to insist they close the window and turn off the radio. "I fought the war for your sort," the man snaps at the lads' sarcastic taunts. "I bet you're sorry you won," Ringo fires back. The greatest source of irritation is Paul's disapproving grandfather (Wilfrid Brambell), whose stiff upper lip thinly conceals a certain randiness that has been warped by a culture of self-denial and is far more dangerous for it than what the puckish Fab Four represent.

A Hard Day's Night takes place against a backdrop of repression, where adult men can't indicate that someone has gone to the toilet unless it's through winks and nudges. The Beatles, seen here as both the prototypical rock stars and the first ironic take on that image, represent a liberation that the sneering adults are right to fear. Their revolution is heard in the hormonal screams of the teenagers they set alight with their charisma and star power.

Indeed, if the film has fun with the idea of these four goofballs becoming a phenomenon, it also gives context for their whirlwind success. Even when the band plays away from private eyes or songs simply play over disconnected footage of them having fun, the strength of their songcraft is stirring. *A Hard Day's Night* leads up to a performance in a TV studio nearly drowned out by screaming fans, seen in rushing montages that settle on faces long enough to capture girls mouthing the names of their favorite members, or sometimes just rendered catatonic by the psychological impact of sharing space with the band.

The Beatles are synonymous with images of such girls, but the cutting of this finale hammers home the sheer level of their cultural influence. The opening sequence is one of the most quoted set pieces in movies, but it's never been effectively parodied because, as the rest of the film shows, the Beatles really did live up to the hype in a way no one did before or has since.



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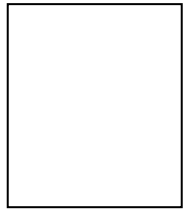
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EVIL DOES NOT EXIST

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—David Rooney, *Hollywood Reporter*

Monday, June 24 at 7:30 pm

"A humane, hopeful embrace of everyday life."

—*Variety*

Monday, July 15 at 7:30 pm

To kill a Mockingbird

"A Hard Day's Night"

"It enables us to recapture exactly the delightful sensations felt all those years ago when we and the world were young and exciting together."

—Kenneth Turan, *Los Angeles Times*

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