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The Beautiful Mind of Ron Howard

Mackey finally could contain himself no longer. His voice was slightly querulous, but he strained to be gentle. "How could you," began Mackey, "how could you, a mathematician, a man devoted to reason and logical proof... how could you believe that you are being recruited by aliens from outer space to save the world? How could you...?"

Nash looked up at last and fixed Mackey and with an unblinking stare as cool and dispassionate as that of any bird or snake. "Because," Nash said slowly in his soft, reasonable southern drawl, as if talking to himself, "the ideas I had about supernatural beings came to me the same way that my mathematical ideas did. So I took them seriously" (Nasar 11).

John Forbes Nash Jr. is recognized as one of the most intelligent men in history. He is a Nobel Laureate (Charles 21). He is a holder of an honorary appointment in mathematics at Princeton University (Nasar 310). He is the man character of a film that ended up winning the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2000 (Oscar Legacy: Past Winners). By the way, he has also been diagnosed with schizophrenia (Nasar 16). It is a shame that such a brilliant man could acquire an illness that only one percent of the

global population carries (Begley 44). However, his ability to see things that others couldn't was part of his gift as well. That's why he was able to make so many important contributions to society. His work with game theory was revolutionary and his invention of the game Hex was pretty cool as well (Nasar 76). His life was filled with drama and he still ended up successful in the end. His story is one that truly deserves to be immortalized on film. However, films are hardly ever completely accurate. Blockbuster films such as *A Beautiful Mind* are created to make money and Ron Howard, the director of the award winning film, accomplished this task and more by using his creativity to slightly twist the true story of John Nash in order to make him more appealing to a broad audience.

John Nash + Ron Howard = Charismatic and Heroic Nash

Howard had the challenging task of converting Nash's hectic life to film. He also had to bear in mind that for most movies to work, there needs to be some sort of a connection between the audience and the main character. I feel that movies are usually more successful when the audience has someone to cheer for. It works out even better if the good guy ends up winning at the end of the movie. Justice must be fulfilled in order to create a sense of completeness. This is the formula for success in a Hollywood blockbuster. Can you name a popular movie where the hero dies at the end without accomplishing anything? In every successful movie, order is restored in the universe. Movies such as *Independence Day*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, and *Star Wars* all have "happy endings." I've had people tell me that the highly successful film *Braveheart* had a very sad ending since the main character was ultimately tortured and

beheaded. However, justice was still gained in this movie because the goals of the protagonist were ultimately fulfilled. This is not an idea that Howard is oblivious to. He realized that in order to create a hit movie, a good director must create a movie that appeals to the audience by allowing the audience to feel content and pleased with the ending of the movie. This is exactly what Howard did in *A Beautiful Mind*.

There were many aspects of Nash's life that were not fully or not at all acknowledged in the motion picture. For example, the movie made no mention of how Nash and his wife had a divorce in the middle of their marriage and have only recently remarried (Nasar, "The Man Behind a Beautiful Mind" 52). The movie made no mention of how Nash fathered an illegitimate child or even that Nash showed signs of homosexuality when he was younger (Nasar 169). Furthermore, the movie does not display how Nash believed that extraterrestrials were sending him messages and that Nash had been denied a full professorship at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology because he believed that it would be more advantageous if he became the Emperor of Antarctica (Nasar, "The Man Behind a Beautiful Mind" 52).

One could argue that Howard left these facts out of his movie because of the great difficulty in transferring an individual's entire life to film. While I believe that this is partly true, I feel that Howard left many of the fact of Nash's life out of the movie because he wanted to compel the audience to appreciate Nash and to feel sorry for all of the pain that he had gone through in his life. In general, it's pretty hard for such a mass audience to cheer for a man who bears an illegitimate child and has shown homosexual tendencies. Howard was smart enough to realize this fact which compelled him to create a movie in which Nash was a victim who persevered through various difficulties as

opposed to a movie that portrayed Nash as a person whom most people would not think of as a role model. In Sylvia Nasar's award winning biography of Nash, *A Beautiful Mind*, she acknowledges the comment of a fellow student of Nash's at Princeton University, "He had a way of saying 'trivial' to anything you might have regarded as nontrivial. That could be taken as a put-down (Nasar 67)." There are moments in the film where Nash is having a conversation with his roommate on top of a building and he talks about how he feels that classes are unnecessary and that he shouldn't be bothered studying "the weak assumptions of lesser mortals." He justifies his refusal to attend classes by saying that classes will dull the mind and ruin the mind's potential for authentic creativity. Most people will admire Nash's bravado and audaciousness (this is shown by the great success of the film) and Howard plays off this idea to manipulate his audience. To his credit, Howard created a very captivating film. However, Howard apparently didn't feel that Nash's true success was enough so he purposefully twisted the true story of Nash so that Nash would be portrayed as more of a heroic, rebellious figure in order to draw the audience even more into his movie.

Advantageous Madness

The movie does a very good job of portraying Nash's struggle to deal with his schizophrenia. His relationships with his friends were damaged and the illness almost completely destroyed his academic career. When Nash was incarcerated in 1961 at Trenton State Hospital, he was injected with insulin and put into a coma daily for six weeks by physicians who hoped to shock Nash's brain back to health (Nasar, "The Man Behind a Beautiful Mind" 52). Later on, Nash was treated with antipsychotic drugs such

as Stelazine. Nash himself said that the insulin shock was comparable to torture and that the Stelazine made his mind foggy (Nasar, "The Man Behind a Beautiful Mind" 52). Howard used these experiences in order to make his film much more dramatic, which is what a good director should always do. The movie includes a scene where Nash is receiving shock treatment while his distraught wife looks on and the background musical score becomes even more intense. This is another example of Howard's creativity on display in order to create a film that will grip the audience. It is a scene where Howard stays true to the actual experiences of Nash. Howard took advantage of these experiences to the fullest.

Howard's creative mind attempted to turn the story of John Nash into something more. I once read that the goal of most directors is to create the "complete movie." Howard takes full advantage of Nash's illness by elaborating upon Nash's schizophrenia to create an even more complete movie. Directors will often attempt to encompass different genres in their movie so that they will attract the largest possible audience. The end result is often a film that includes such elements as time travel, kung fu, guns, car chases, explosions, aliens, a love story, spies, code breaking, and psychos. Thus, you'll have a movie that is part action, part drama, part horror, part love story, and part comedy, and this leads to an incoherent movie just because the director tried too hard to please his or her audience.

For example, most people who have seen Kevin Costner's film *The Postman* will agree that it wasn't very gripping. The film ended up becoming a huge flop. The reason why it did so poorly with audiences is because Costner tried to do too much with the film. The movie was about a mailman in a post-apocalyptic setting who

eventually leads a band of rebels in a war against an oppressive gang in order to save what is left of the United States while also finding time to have a love interest. In my opinion, Costner just tried to pack too much into his film and that ended up hurting the film's appeal with audiences nationwide. I believe that Howard slightly becomes a victim to this same idea in *A Beautiful Mind*.

Howard tried to involve all sorts of ideas, not just mathematical ideas, in his film so that the movie would be accepted by a greater number of people. This is what I mean when I say that Howard used the specific illness of Nash in order to appeal to his audience. Howard included scenes of extreme tension, such as when Nash's wife discovers her husband's collection of magazine and newspaper clippings in the shack behind their house. At this point in the movie, the viewer starts to feel that Nash might actually be cured of his illness. However, his wife ends up discovering that Nash has secretly been continuing his delusional work because Nash believes that he has a mission to decode messages hidden within periodicals in order to help save the country.

Howard also manages to find a way to include guns in a movie about a Nobel Prize winner. This is because Nash's delusions justify the use of seemingly out of place events in the life of a mathematician. In the film, there is a scene where Nash stands at gunpoint of a group of Army soldiers who somehow found their way to his backyard in the middle of the night in order to make sure that Nash continues his work breaking codes for the government. However, the audience knows that this is just another one of Nash's delusions. Another example of an action-packed scene is one where Nash believes that he is involved in a car chase where his pursuers are agents who feel that Nash knows too much on his way to saving the country by taking the role of a spy. Howard does a very

good job combining all these elements of car chases, code breaking, and espionage in order to create a movie that will be appealing to an extremely broad audience. Although I feel that Howard didn't have to add these action elements into *A Beautiful Mind*, those very same elements displayed his creativity as a film director who is aware of what audiences want to see on the big screen.

Creativity and Madness

I have pointed out many different aspects of Howard's creativity. Another facet of his creativity involves how he portrayed the thought processes of the main character of *A Beautiful Mind*, John Nash. It could be said that Nash was creative because he was so driven to succeed. However, Howard believed that Nash's passion for success and desire to be recognized is what helped lead to his mental illness. At the beginning of the film, there are several instances where Howard displays the significance of recognition to Nash. Nash is shown to feel that achievement and recognition mean the same thing. This is pointed out when Howard presents a scene where another professor is being honored by the Princeton faculty in the "pen ceremony." This ceremony involves the Princeton faculty paying homage to one of their colleagues by giving him or her a pen signifying respect. Another important scene that Howard creates is the one I talked about earlier where Nash and his roommate Charles are standing on top of a rooftop and are discussing how Nash was never really appreciated by others. Nash feels that the only way that he'll ever matter is through his work in pure and applied mathematics. This shows that there is more driving Nash than just his desire to come up with a totally

original idea in mathematics. Howard is trying to give the impression that Nash wants to succeed in mathematics mainly because he wants to be recognized by his peers.

People sometimes underestimate the value of recognition and companionship. It really does hurt to be lonely. In the movie, Nash is being tortured by his loneliness and he feels that he can bring an end to his loneliness if people realize just how intelligent he really is. This is shown in a scene where Nash's colleagues urge him to play a game of the board game Go. Nash gladly accepts the invitation because he feels that he can win just because he feels that he is smarter than everyone else there and imagines winning will lead to respect. However, Nash ends up losing and he lurches away in embarrassment. Howard effectively demonstrates that Nash had a hard time making friends. This fact is actually very accurate. Nasar includes a quote from a fellow Princeton graduate student of Nash in her biography: "Nash was out of the ordinary. If he was in a room with twenty people, and they were talking, if you asked an observer who struck you as odd, it would have been Nash. It wasn't anything he consciously did. It was his bearing. His aloofness (Nasar 73)." Howard portrayed Nash as in such dire need of companionship that he was willing to give up his sanity in order to gain friends. Thus, Nash's conjuring of Charles, Nash's unreal roommate, is due to Nash's horrible loneliness. Marilyn Charles, a writer for the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, writes, "The resulting solitude and isolation probably exacerbated his desire for recognition and also served as an impetus for the 'companions' he devised as he became further and further divorced from reality (Charles 21)." After Nash meets his wife, it is too late. His mind had already suffered tremendous emotional pain and he has to live with his mental illness for the rest of his life. Nash now has to live with seeing things that others can't

see. Howard did an excellent job of portraying the suffering of Nash as he dealt with his illness.

Howard also did a great job of showing how intelligent Nash was. For example, there is a scene in the movie where Nash is brought in by the military to break a code and he immediately gets to work by doing nothing but staring at the code until he solves it. He then immediately tells the officer that he needs a map because the code is actually a list of coordinates. This is an example of the creative mind of Howard at work.

However, Howard did not need to be creative when it came to Nash. Nash's true intelligence was stunning in that he was able to solve problems that some of the smartest men on Earth didn't even know how to approach. Charles writes, "His obsession with patterns brought him into intimate relationship with numerology and codes in which insanity and brilliance rubbed shoulders, with no clear dividing line between the two (Charles 21)." Nash was a genius on and off the screen. However, it took a creative mind such as Howard's in order to make the story of John Nash appealing to the people of the world. The success of *A Beautiful Mind* is just a testament to the beautiful mind of Ron Howard.

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