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ENTER

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CAST

Meera Rohit Kumbhani Annie Nick Thune Dave Adam Busch Gordon James Urbaniak Harry Frank Caeti Boom Operator Scott Narver Cameraman Stephanie Allynne Brynn Kristen Vangsness Jane Scott Krinsky Leonard Timothy Nordwind Greg John Hennigan The Minotaur Rick Overton Hobo Kamilla Alnes, Drew Knigga Flemish Tourists Etienne Eckert, Brittney Deutsch, Jessica Graves Shadow Dancers Christine Papalexis Puppeteer

CREW

Directed by Bill Watterson Screenplay by Steven Sears & Bill Watterson Story by Steven Sears Produced by John Charles Meyer & John Chuldenko Executive Producers Carlos Cuscó, Emerson Machtus Associate Producer Etienne Eckert Cinematographer Jon Boal Editor David Egan Production Designers John Sumner & Trisha Gum Art Director Jeff White Visual Effects Supervisor Cam Leeburg Costume Designer Daniel Selon Music by Mondo Boys Sound Designer Ugo Derouard **Opening Credits Animation Kangmin Kim** Closing Credits & Additional Animation Musa Brooker & Platypus Pictureworks

MAZE EN ABYME: THE POETICS OF BILL WATTERSON'S DAVE MADE A MAZE (2018)

by Anton Bitel

THE POETICS OF DAVE

"I built the maze because I wanted to make something," declares Dave (Nick Thune) direct to camera, "and if I could just finish it, I just know that it would be great, or true, or real!" He also apologises for any part that his construction may have played in what happened to "the people that died, yesterday or today - I don't know what time it is."

Dave is clearly lost - and that sense of disorientation, the desired effect of any maze, is also being reproduced in the viewer. For this opening scene of Dave Made A Maze is also, chronologically speaking, the centre point of the narrative, so while we know that this is Dave speaking, we do not yet really know who Dave is, or indeed, given that he is being filmed in close-up with the background out of focus, where he is. This dislocation of the prologue's events from their proper time and place is as much a mystification as a sneak peek of what is to come - but we can already at least infer that Dave is an artist. that through his art he is on a quest for something (even if what precisely that something is - greatness, truth, authenticity - remains nebulous), and that his art has the capacity to affect lives and even to be dangerous. We might also suspect that Dave is not very good at following through on his ideas ("if I could just finish it...") - and this suspicion is confirmed by the following animated credit sequence, in which we see a cartoon version of Dave left alone in his apartment for the weekend, and spending the time working variously on a painting, a synthesiser composition, novel writing and some carpentry, while getting distracted from each of them before he can ever finish. All this is to the accompaniment of a song on the soundtrack which, tellingly, contains the repeated lyric, "I had a slight diversion". Cartoon Dave looks at his to-do list ("Finish concept album; Make ultimate Sabbath mix; Fix front door"), but once again gets sidelined by glancing at an ant farm and having vet another creative idea.

That idea, we assume, is to make the maze (inspired by the ant farm in which insects walk about freely but can never escape). Three days later, when Dave's girlfriend Annie (Meera Rohit Kumbhani) returns, she finds in the middle of the living room an elaborate



structure of cardboard boxes, with Dave audible, but not visible, inside. "I'm lost", he tells her, half-proud of what he has accomplished, and half-anxious about the consequences, even dangers. Soon Annie will enter the maze with a search party consisting of Dave's best friend Gordon (Adam Busch), filmmaker Harry (James Urbaniak), his boom operator (Frank Caeti) and cameraman (Scott Narver), some other friends, and a pair of Flemish tourists. What they will discover is a paradoxical construction, bigger on the inside than on the outside, where origami birds come to life, where perspective plays tricks, where people can be turned into animated cardboard models or become black and white, where the normal rules of physics simply do not apply, and where a vicious Minotaur releptlessly seeks both human flesh and escape.

At its centre is Dave, who made this place, complete with obstacles and lethal booby traps ("just for fun", he explains), out of cardboard and ticker tape and yarn. Dave may have lost control of his maze, may have lost his way in its intricate and ever-evolving passageways - but he nonetheless remains its creator and poet (from the Ancient Greek *poiētēs*, literally 'maker'). Bill Watterson's hilarious feature debut, which he co-wrote with Steven Sears, uses Dave's creative urge - his poetics - to explore all manner of human preoccupations, big and small.

THE MAZE OF METAPHOR

The middle of *Dave Made A Maze* shows a fuller version of the interview with Dave which opened the film. "I just wanted to make something," Dave says, "and I can't sit on my couch and watch TV or think that the Internet's going to inspire me, because I'm fucking 30 years old and my parents are still giving me money and I bore the shit out of them. And I work jobs that I hate, that I have to beg to get. Do you know what it means to be broke? It means that you are broken, that you don't work."

For Dave, the maze is an expression of both his aspirations and his frustrations - as an artist, as a millennial, and as a human being. The maze's inventiveness, its surprises and its sheer scale are testimony to Dave's untapped, unnoticed creative potential, while its *trompe-l'œils*, its dead ends and the traps and monsters within all reflect Dave's anxieties about where he is - or indeed is not - headed. Dave's parallel love and hate for what he makes, his twin desires to stay within his own imaginative space and to put it forever behind him, his use of his work as a comforting buttress against external realities that are nonetheless already right inside there with him and always on his tail, his perfectionism that precludes ever finishing anything, and his realisation that the complexities of his work have taken on a life of their own beyond his original vision - these are motifs that will

chime with artists of every kind, struggling to deliver their conceptions fully formed (one of the tunnels in the maze leads to a giant vulva, the ultimate locus of procreation and birth).

At the same time, the pressures on Dave will be familiar to a Millennial generation trapped between nineties slackerdom and the more hostile environment that has followed the credit crunch. Dave is a stay-at-home dilettante, college-educated and full of ideas, but lacking any skills transferrable into satisfying, well-paid work - and without the love of Annie (who has a career), one suspects that Dave would be out on his feet. Gordon mocks Dave as a "sell-out" for recently shaving off his beard for an interview (no doubt for another McJob) - but one of the futures that Dave sees for himself is as a homeless vagrant, like the 'hobo from the street' (Rick Overton) who enters the apartment after Gordon confuses his should ge of cardboard for an expertise in mazes. No surprise that Dave's hipster friends should end up equally lost in this particular socio-economic maze.

More broadly, Dave's maze is a metaphor for life. Long before he builds this structure, Dave is already trapped, both in never-ending, never-ended ideas, and in an apartment whose front door has lost its handle. After the Minotaur snatches away Dave's friend Brynn (Stephanie Allynne), it replaces her with an unnervingly cheery cardboard puppet which becomes a mouthpiece for the maze. "Life is a series of incomplete moments from which there is no escape," Puppet Brynn states (between manic requests for high fives). "You are free to roam, but not to leave." These chilling words come with an obvious existential resonance, in a world of Dave's making that, for all its apparent novelty, merely reconstitutes the rubbish and detritus of Dave's everyday living.

DA[V]EDALUS' BASIC MATERIALS

Like a child's craft project gone mad, the maze is a glorious DIY edifice where everything - pipes and cogs, blood and guts, birds, people sometimes, even fire - is made from the basic materials of paper and cloth. Dave says of the maze: "I wanted to make something that people would see and say, 'That's cool, like, why didn't I think of that?'" While there certainly is a miraculous quality to the materiality of Dave's (and Watterson's) creation, its visual originality does not entail a complete lack of precursors. On the contrary, with its Minotaur, the film evokes the myth of the Cretan Labyrinth whose design, at least according to Ovid, was made so intricate by arch-creator Daedalus that even he was barely able to get back out. Similarly the subterranean surrealism of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is conjured by the section of Dave's maze decorated all over in playing cards. Likewise the way in which the film alters the reality of a domestic space, transforming it into an arena for dangerous child's play, revives the spirit of Joe Johnston's *Jumanji* (1995) and Jon Favreau's *Zathura: A Space Adventure* (2005). The reconstruction of a world (and a journey)



from everyday household detritus recalls Paul King's *Bunny And The Bull* (2009), while the home that conceals within itself a TARDIS-like labyrinth suggests Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House Of Leaves* (2000). Finally, the replacement of one of Dave's hands with a substitute makes him a hero like *Hellboy* or Ash from the *Evil Dead* franchise, while the emergence of a giant hand from a pit in the ground assimilates Dave and Annie's apartment to Drew Goddard's *The Cabin In The Woods* (2012).

MAZE EN ABYME

"Oh, for God's sake," complains Gordon, "did you build a maze inside your maze?"

A mise en abyme is a smaller artefact placed within a larger one that reflects the outer whole, like the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet*, or the television show *Terrance and Phillip* in *South Park*, or indeed the mini-maze that Dave has made inside his bigger maze (both, of course, are equally incomplete) - or the lo-fi student film once made by Harry and the others that is found projected inside the maze (and inside the film about the maze). "I just couldn't get the story to come off the page," Harry says of his film, reflecting Dave's own artistic anxieties.

Dave's maze is in itself a *mise en abyme* of the film that contains it. "The interesting thing", Dave tells Gordon of his maze-making methodology, "is that I started in the centre and built outward." This also describes the centrifugal architecture of Watterson's film, which similarly opens with a scene from its narrative middle. So when Dave and Annie race back, in the climax, to the maze's centre, it makes perfect sense that the handmade object which Dave is only now placing at the maze's 'heart', and which he expressly calls the maze's 'chrysalis', should be a complicated cardboard zoetrope, that spinning animation device that marks cinema's fragile, pupal beginnings. From here, both the maze, and *Dave Made A Maze*, were born.

THE METAPOETICS OF DAVE

In fact, *Dave Made A Maze* brims with self-referential moments of metacinema. In the opening scene, Dave's declaration of his labyrinth-building poetics is in fact being shot by Harry and his crew, who are attempting to turn this rather undemonstrative ensemble of characters into heroes of an amped-up documentary. So even as Watterson's film unfolds, we are simultaneously watching the making of another film. Director Harry constantly tries to put words into the mouths of his subjects (even, significantly, of the Puppet Brynn), or to get them to act differently ("More childlike wonder!", he demands of Annie).

For a while Harry's sensibility risks taking over Watterson's own film. At the precise point where Harry says, "We'll put some music over this, it'll be a montage, it'll be awesome," *Dave Made A Maze* adopts a rapid, noisy montage style with split screens. What is more, Gordon, who is perhaps the most naturally laid-back of all the characters, takes to playing up to Harry's camera and delivering the most absurdly inauthentic lines ("It's time to make some motherfuckin' bull burgers"), as though he were the macho lead in an action film, rather than the sidekick in a quirky indie comedy.

Dave and Annie, however, resist the pressure to be the stars of someone else's work, which is how, in the end, they create something great, true and real of their own. For they find their way not only out of the maze, but out of the clichés and conventions that are the basic materials - and the trappings - of cinema itself. Their emergence is strange, sophisticated, singular - and utterly endearing.

Anton Bitel is a freelance film critic, writing regularly on genre cinema for Sight & Sound, Little White Lies, SciFiNow and VODzilla.co. He blogs at ProjectedFigures.com. He has little sense of direction.



ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Dave Made A Maze is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.00:1 with 5.1 audio. The film was supplied in 2K by Screen Media.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by James Flower, Kevin Lambert Executive Producers Francesco Simeoni, Kevin Lambert Technical Producer James White QC Manager Nora Mehenni QC Alan Simmons Blu-Ray Authoring & Subtitling The Engine House Media Services Artwork & Design Obviously Creative

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Anton Bitel, Stacey Hanks, Mike Hewitt, Rebecca Howard, John Charles Meyer, Jasper Sharp, Bill Watterson

