

This October, Michael Fassbender will join Ashton Kutcher in the alumni to have played Steve Jobs. The Aaron Sorkin-written movie adaptation of Walter Isaacson's biography is one of many dramatizations of the life of Apple's co-founder, leaving fans to debate casting choices and creative license.

This week sees a quieter yet more authentic release in Steve Jobs: The Man in the Machine, releasing September 5 in theaters and iTunes from Magnolia Pictures. Rather than offering a straight biography, lauded documentarian Alex Gibney sets out to answer a question: why were we so moved by the death of someone who he describes as "ruthless, deceitful, and cruel"? If we loved products that came from someone unlovable, what does that say about the man?

To solve that mystery, Gibney narrates as he investigates Jobs and the people whose lives he directly influenced. Unlike more dramatic films, this movie's Steve Jobs is played by Steve Jobs, courtesy such archival footage as the 1995 "lost" interview, his 2008 deposition, his Stanford commencement speech, and his many MacWorld and WWDC appearances, including his last in June 2011. Original interviews include employers and colleagues such as Atari founder Nolan Bushnell and 1984 commercial mastermind Regis McKenna; former lover Chrisann Brennan and travel buddy Dan Kottke; pop culture expert Sherry Turkle; and reporters from Gizmodo and Fortune. Absent are any current Apple employees, such as Tim Cook, Jony Ive, or Steve Wozniak; and family, including Laurene Jobs and Lisa Brennan-Jobs (although an actor reads an excerpt of the latter's "Confessions of a Lapsed Vegetarian").

Jobs didn't seem willing or able to connect with humanity — so he instead created a company that connected with people, and which helped them connect with each other. Said Jobs, "People sometimes forget that they're unique. The whole computer industry wants to forget about the humanist side and just focus on the technology. Can we do more than just spreadsheets and word processors? Can we help you express yourself in richer ways?" It's almost as if Apple were a proxy for something Jobs lacked in his own life: if consumers loved Apple, then it's almost as if they loved him, even if they couldn't love him back. Said Kottke, Apple employee number 12, of Jobs being adopted at birth, "That was clearly a very defining image in his life: both that he was rejected and he was special." That dichotomy would continue to resonate throughout Jobs' life.

But it wasn't just his products that people connected with: the people in his life fell under his spell as well. Bob Belleville, director of engineering for Macintosh, 1982–1985, was the most emotional of Gibney's guests. Describing Jobs as a cross between James Dean, Princess Diana, John Lennon, and Santa Claus, he reflected, "It's easy to make chaos, and if you're comfortable with it, you can use it as a tool [as Jobs did] to get other people involved in his schemes. He's seducing you, he's vilifying you, and he's ignoring you. You're in one of those three states." The demands of launching the Macintosh cost Belleville his wife and children, but in hindsight, it seems a price he was willing to pay: "It was a life well and fully lived, even if it was a bit expensive for those of us who were close."

Jobs, who believed simplicity was the ultimate sophistication, fell short in this area as well — but the film does not. When playing an old interview with Kobun Chino, an early mentor of Jobs', the film makes a one-time transition from live action to animation, using simple black-and-white line art to depict master and student. This sequence is both jarring and elegant: it stands out for being so different from the rest of the film, yet the transition to and from this sequence and the slower, simpler pace represent something Jobs never achieved. It dovetails with Brennan's observation that Jobs sought and attained enlightenment yet retained his ego. "He blew it," she sighs — referring not to his commercial or design success, but to his humanity.

Retellings of Jobs' life often omits details of his 12 years away from Apple; after all, "Apple was a 30-year sitcom, and Steve was the main character," said McKenna. Likewise, with the exception of a brief interview with NeXT engineer Michael Hawley, The Man in the Machine glosses over that era and how it affected Jobs. We instead return to Apple, where Andy Grignon, senior manager of the iPhone, paints Jobs as a Godfather-like figure one crossed at one's own peril.

Yet for all these damning recollections, the film is balanced by letting Jobs speak for himself. Whether he's enthusiastically introducing the iMac to a reporter, presenting the iPad to a crowd, speaking candidly with Walt