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Walter C. Metz

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wmetz@siu.edu

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“Eye I Aye”

A Review of *I Origins* (Mike Cahill US 2014). Fox Searchlight.

By Walter Metz

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Mike Cahill's 2014 New Age science film *I Origins* begins with a series of close-ups of eyes. In voiceover, molecular biologist Ian (Michael Pitt) explains that his research focuses on the connection between the human eye and that other lens-based technology of vision, the camera. His personal scientific quest is to use the eye to disprove the creationist theory of intelligent design by breeding an organism with no eyesight into one possessing fully evolved, complex eyeballs.

The opening montage of eyeballs in *I Origins* links the film to cinema's long fascination with eyes as the windows to the soul, a history the film directly evokes. The quintessential New Hollywood sf film, *Blade Runner* (Scott US/UK 1982), after all, begins with a close-up of a cyborg's eyeball as he (Rutger Hauer as Roy Batty) descends to the Earth from the heavens to which he had been banished. He spends the rest of the film murdering in a mad quest to reunite with his creator, Tyrell (Joe Turkel), whose eyes he finally pops out like those of Oedipus, in retribution.

I Origins makes other tactical intertextual references to eyeballs that help structure the film's melodramatic interrogation of the relationship between science and spirituality. At the beginning of the film, Ian meets a masked woman, Sofi (Astrid Bergès-Frisbey) at a Halloween costume party. After they make love, she disappears from his life. Obsessed with the mystery woman, he uses the photographs he's taken of her eyes to attempt to track her down, and finally does so when he sees her eyes on a huge billboard in an advertisement for make-up. Once reunited with Sofi, they fall in love, and get married.

The use of the billboard evokes the famous “eyes of T.J. Eckleburg,” a prominent image in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Advertising an eye doctor, F. Scott Fitzgerald's billboard arises out of “the valley of ashes,” a no-man's land of poverty and misery bordering the domain of the rich and privileged, who work in Manhattan and live in mansions on Long Island. Fitzgerald uses this image to lament the depletion of connections between human beings intensified by the greed of American capitalism. *I Origins* employs this same symbol in a new register, lamenting our loss of spiritual connection at the hands of positivist science.

Narratively, the film also reinvents *Vertigo* (Hitchcock US 1958), which begins with a close-up of a maddening spiral emerging from a woman's eye. As in Hitchcock's film, the opening of *I Origins* uses the eyeball close-ups to establish a melodramatic mystery, which like Hitchcock's film explores the duplicity of love. In *Vertigo* evil Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore) has preyed on his former college chum so that he can get away with the murder of his wife. Knowing private investigator Scottie (James Stewart) will not be able to climb a bell-tower because of his vertigo, Gavin stages an elaborate hoax: he hires Judy (Kim Novak) to pretend she is Madeleine; Judy then allows Scottie to fall in love with him, inducing him to follow her to the bell-tower where she then apparently commits suicide. In the second half of the film, a devastated Scottie runs into Judy on the street, shocked to find his beloved Madeline's doppelgänger. In an effort to solve the mystery and exorcise his

demons, Scottie ultimately takes Judy back to the scene of the crime, atop the tower, where a nun frightens Judy, causing her to plunge to her death. A devastated Scottie ends the film standing atop the tower, crucified by the unbearable torture of having lost his love twice in an identical fashion.

I Origins repeatedly invokes *Vertigo*, albeit in science fiction terms. Ian's puppy-dog search for the lost Sofi not only recalls Scottie's pursuit of the wandering Madeline in the first half of Hitchcock's film but also replicates Scottie's own forlorn aimlessness at the beginning of the second half, after Madeline's death. Midway through Cahill's film, right after their marriage, Sofi and Ian get stuck in an elevator. Ian tries to pull Sofi up onto the next floor to safety, but the elevator slips, gruesomely killing Sofi. After Ian and his lab partner and new wife, Karen (Brit Marling) discover an organism they can experimentally breed to prove the natural evolution of the eyeball, they have a baby, Tobias. Another science researcher, Dr. Simmons (Cara Seymour, fulfilling the catalyst role of Gavin Elster in *Vertigo*), does biometric iris-recognition tests on the infant Tobias that initially match him with a recently dead adult. The uncovering of this mystery ultimately causes Ian to discover a child in India bearing the dead Sofi's exact eye patterns.

In India, Ian tracks down the child by returning to the Dr. Ekleburg motif: he purchases a huge billboard of Sofi's eyes, asking for anyone who recognises them to contact him. He eventually meets a poor girl on the streets, Salomina (Kashish), who has Sofi's exact eye pattern. The camera tilts down from a shot of the billboard to reveal Ian first setting eyes on Salomina; the camera swirls 360 degrees around Ian and the little girl, replicating a shot toward the end of *Vertigo*, when Scottie and Judy kiss in her hotel room. Cahill thus repurposes the romanticism of *Vertigo* to articulate the swirling contradictions between science and religion.

Ian takes the starving girl to his hotel room. After feeding her strawberries, he begins doing tests, trying to establish the transcendent spiritual link between Salomina and Sofi. When she only gets 44% of the questions correct, an outcome little better than random chance, it seems Ian has become convinced that positivism is correct after all and that there is no way Salomina could be Sofi reincarnated. However, at two different times during the film, the elevator at the hotel has been associated with a mysterious American wearing a cowboy hat who frequently comments on religion; as the devastated Ian takes Salomina to this elevator to return her to the slums, she screams in terror when the door opens. Her intense fear convinces Ian that Salomina is in fact the reincarnated Sofi after all. However, when Ian hugs the girl to console her, we see a mysterious smile emerge on her face. Is she really remembering a past life, or is she simply upset that the man who has been kind to her and fed her is about to abandon her?

An after-the-credits scene finds Dr. Seymour now running iris recognition tests on high-quality photographs of famous figures from the twentieth century, ostensibly using the biometric facial recognition technology that located Salomina to find their reincarnated selves as well. The test subjects range from great artists and scientists (Elvis Presley, Albert Einstein, John Lennon) to the great heroes of political history (Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela) to its monsters (Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein). Mysteriously, only some of these figures can be located: Hitler, Hussein and Margaret Thatcher are "not found," suggesting

perhaps some sort of moral calculus governing reincarnation, but neither is John Lennon, Nicola Tesla or Mahatma or Indira Gandhi. A sequel further complicating this narrative situation, based on the 2011 screenplay to which *I Origins* was written as an explanatory prequel, is reportedly in the works.

Despite its limited release and cultural impact, *I Origins* is a terrific science film, one that has learned from the artistic ambiguities of great art. Cahill ably demonstrates that the story of scientific certainty needs to be tempered by the beautiful equivocations of human storytelling.