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Fingernails

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Fingernails

Abstract

This is a film review of *Fingernails* (2023), directed by Christos Nikou.

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***Fingernails* (2023), dir. Christos Nikou**

Fingernails, written and directed by Christos Nikou, is a satirical exploration of the consequences of unquestioning faith in technology and choosing the certainty provided by machines over the uncertainty of human feeling and instinct. In this retro-futuristic setting, humans have developed a medical test that is able to determine if two people are truly in love by violently ripping off a fingernail from each partner and running the nails through a machine resembling a 1980's microwave. Only three results are possible: a 100% result means both partners are certifiably in love and meant to be together; a 50% result means that only one partner is truly in love; and a 0% result means that neither truly loves the other. The contemporary wisdom that surrounds such a device in this alternate future is that the inner workings of the heart manifest in one's fingernails. To be certifiable in love is the ultimate goal for couples.

The main character of the film, Anna (Jessie Buckley), has achieved this ultimate goal as she and her partner Ryan (Jeremy Allen White) took the test three years prior to the story's beginning and received a positive result. Despite the outcome, it is apparent that Anna and Ryan have little chemistry and connection. Seemingly in an effort to better understand love and her own

relationship, Anna secretly takes a job at the Love Institute run by Duncan (Luke Wilson), which runs a program designed to foster intimacy between couples to prepare them for the fingernail test and achieve better results. Anna begins to work alongside Amir (Riz Ahmed), a coach at the institute, taking couples through a series of absurd activities (like singing to one another in French or finding each other through a sniff test) to achieve the goal of making a solid love connection. Instead of the new job at the institute helping Anna to better understand love and connect with her partner Ryan, she develops an attraction to Amir, which leads to further doubt and confusion. If the technology has ensured her that Ryan is the one she loves, why does she have feelings towards Amir and why does she harbor so much doubt about her relationship with Ryan? For much of the film, Anna cannot fathom that the test itself could be the issue.

The machine therefore has become a dominant force controlling a central part of human existence. There is no explanation of the science behind this technology that can determine love in human fingernails, nor are the ideological underpinnings of such unquestioning faith in the test clarified. However, two things are made clear: there is significant social pressure for couples to take the test to be certain of their compatibility and there is a broad acceptance of its accuracy. Many couples in fact fail the test, and as a consequence lose faith in their own relationship and break up, and there is vague mention in the film of a global crisis that occurred following the invention of this technology as a result of the fallout from numerous negative outcomes. What is puzzling is that couples are not obligated to take the test, nor are they obligated to dissolve a relationship as a result of a negative test. Furthermore, positive results like Anna's lead to couples remaining in empty partnerships completely devoid of intimacy because they are 'certifiably' in love. What really drives the outcome following either a negative or positive result, therefore, is

unwavering belief in the machine's ability to read the heart's true feelings, and that the outcome of the test will seal the fate of a relationship.

Through Anna's failing relationship with Ryan and her developing feelings for Amir, the film explores several important themes such as human dependency on technology, the determinism of a test versus individual agency and instinct, and what constitutes the truth of love. At first, Anna's faith in the test is strong as she is completely conditioned by the established ideology around the love technology, believing her fate is sealed with Ryan. As the film progresses, signs that she is possibly falling for Amir (and he for her) chip slowly away at her trust in the fingernail test and the messaging promoted by the Love Institute. Though her mind accepts the science of the machine, other parts of herself scream that there is more to measuring the truth of love than this—that love is felt instinctually rather than abstracted and measured scientifically. The cognitive dissonance and internal conflict resulting from her commitment to the prevailing ideology around the technology and her instinctual and affective knowledge about love lead to a striking conclusion to the film.

Fingernails presents a really interesting premise with a cast of highly talented actors. The film also offers genuine moments of humor, particularly during the Love Institute's ridiculous connection-building activities. Nevertheless, the comedic genius of the movie wanes in the second half and the comedic skills of actors like Luke Wilson are underutilized, and I felt Nikou could have pushed the absurdity in the film further to better illustrate how society's dependence on love-measuring technology has indeed spawned a crisis of love and happiness. There are also things left unexplained such as the reasons people put so much faith in this technology, and why a single test at one period in time in a relationship is a measure of the strength of long-term commitment with its necessary ebbs and flows of love and intimacy. Despite its charming moments and interesting

exploration of love and human dependence on technology that raised very thought-provoking questions, the film falls short of its full potential, so that I found myself uninterested as it progressed and unsatisfied by the ending.