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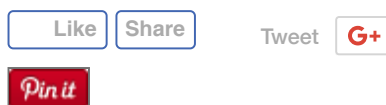


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Film Review: At Eternity's Gate

Flouting the usual conventions of the biopic, this ravishing, light-struck portrait of Van Gogh's time in Arles is squarely camped in the heart and mind of the artist.

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Nov 13, 2018



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Consider the irony: During his lifetime Vincent Van Gogh received too little acclaim too late—yet today he's become almost over-popularized, his work commodified, chewed up and regurgitated into tacky reproductions that reliably adorn the walls of dentists' waiting rooms. What a delight, then, that *At Eternity's Gate* by painter/*auteur* Julian Schnabel, a rumination about Van Gogh's later years, revitalizes this legendary artist and invites us to view him from a fresh optic.

Far from a biopic, this portrait of Van Gogh, anchored by a shattering, career-defining turn from Willem Dafoe, flouts the usual narrative conventions. Schnabel's film is not so much *about* the artist as a journey into his inner being, so we experience the world in much the same blissed-out, tormented and chaotic way he himself did.

Drawing heavily on the trove of letters Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo, the film opens with the artist reeling from the scornful reception of a show of his paintings in a dingy Paris restaurant. "Go south," his friend Gauguin (Oscar Isaac) advises. Van Gogh relocates to Arles in southern Provence, setting up shop in a bare-bones, chilly room, where he immediately takes brush to canvas to memorialize his worn shoes set by the bed (familiar from the painting). Roaming the countryside, wooden easel strapped to his back, Van Gogh enters a furiously productive period.

The ecstasy the sun-struck landscape inspires in him and his visionary zeal in transmitting its light to canvas—a light he regards as divine—are pretty much the kernel of the film. It's notably devoid of incident, but not the poorer for it. "When I see a flat landscape, I see eternity," the artist says. Van Gogh also paints the townsfolk of Arles, including the local doctor (Mathieu Almaric) and Madame Ginoux (Emmanuelle Seigner), who shines with an unassuming dignity. Thrillingly, as he paints these faces, they morph into the visages we all know from the portraits on museum walls.

But madness dogs the artist: his crazed insistence that a local girl pose for him; the famous ear-severing business (which occurs off-stage, and is explained as his protest over a perceived abandonment by Gauguin). At different intervals he gets tossed into the asylum at St.-Remy. "I have visions," he says, "angels and flowers talk to me. What I see no one else sees." His brother Theo (Rupert Friend, luminous) both supports him with a monthly stipend and with his devotion when Van Gogh goes off the deep end. In Schnabel's hands, the secondary characters—including a priest played by Mads Mikkelsen, who fails to "get" Van Gogh's work—convey a rare thoughtfulness and rich inner life. With an insolent disregard for narrative shibboleths, Schnabel gives them no additional business and simply lets them live and breathe and ponder onscreen.

The handheld camera of cinematographer Benoit Delhomme is a marvel. In a repeating motif, it captures the artist's feet marching through tamped-down ochre fields, the camera sometimes tilted sideways or spasming to convey his inner turmoil. In a pan across a field, the bottom of the image goes all blurry. There's a heart-stopping long shot of wintry dead sunflowers, their heads black. The film feels captured on the fly, spontaneous, lived. The periodic fades to black might suggest the opacity of Van Gogh's mind—or simply exist according to the filmmaker's whim. It's been objected that at 63 Willem Dafoe is a bit old to portray the 37-year-old Van Gogh. Yet, given that the film is no conventional biopic, the age gap feels irrelevant. As well, 37 was not so young in those days, as Dafoe has pointed out, "particularly if you're drinking absinthe every day."

Usually, attempts to show painters painting are pretty hokey—but Schnabel, as an artist himself, is working from the inside out, at one with the rhythm of Van Gogh's brush as he stands at his canvas slathering on the impasto. Not only does the *auteur* flood the screen with Van Gogh's delirious yellows and ochres, he places color and light at the center of his film. Remarkably, he captures such intangibles as the *urgency* of creative energy. At one point, Van Gogh is advised to calm down. "I don't want to calm down," he replies, "the faster I paint, the better I feel."

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