

Cannes 2015: The Sea of Trees (Gus Van Sant, 2015)



It is difficult to deliberate upon *The Sea of Trees* in the manner in which Gus Van Sant would like you to. Supposedly, it is life affirming; an example of how journeys and courage can pull you through and make you a better person on the other side. The issue with this? We've seen it all before and it rarely goes right. Regardless of the attached names or the seemingly 'mysterious' setting, *The Sea of Trees* winds up being much like its lead character: plodding, lazy and a total cliché.

Deep in Japan's Aokigahara Forest, Arthur holds a bottle of pills, intent on ending his life. A turbulent life and relationship has led to this point, and he has never been so sure until he comes across Takumi – a man wandering the woods with slit wrists desperate to find a way out. Together, they fight against the elements to escape and see life in a better light.

The excessive hype for this film stemmed from the names of its renowned director and lead star – Gus van Sant and Matthew McConaughey. The latter labeled this “the best script [he had read] in the last five years.” Having just come off the back of the emotionally scarring and beautifully written *Dallas Buyers Club*, people expected great things. So when the first press screening ended in a gathered heckling, people were understandably surprised. McConaughey claimed that the script read like a series of haikus, and he's correct. It has this uncomfortable whimsicality to it, with suggestions of spirits and magic in the forest. Considering the subject matter never mind the fact that the forest itself actually exists, it can't help but come across in juvenile, bad taste. The character of

Arthur, supposedly stuck in a rut, does not depict any real suicidal tendencies; his character development is next to non-existent.

When McConaughey and Ken Watanabe's character are not endlessly discussing life's greatest misfortunes in the context of spirituality, they are careering down waterfalls and cliff slides in torrential rain. It could be suggested that neither of them have any common sense, but the real problem lies in the fact the film has no common sense. What is intended to be a drama some times feels more a kin to The Goonies.

During the occasional flashbacks in which we are not treated to this magical place, we are shown Arthur and his wife Joan, played rather woodenly by Naomi Watts. The situations in which they find themselves in pushes past hyperbolic into the utterly preposterous; a notion that continues through the film's nonsensical final chapter.

A film discussing subject matter as stark, important and dangerous as suicide deserves a treatment that cannot be misconstrued as tasteless. Although its timid nature manages to avoid this as best as possible, van Sant's alternative is something that goes beyond uncomfortable; it's down right ridiculous.

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The Sea of Trees had its world premiere on May 16th at the 68th Festival de Cannes