Shame (2011) – a film produced by Steve McQueen depicting the life of Brandon Sullivan (played by Michael Fassbender – Dangerous Method) and his struggle with sex addiction. Brandon is an attractive and seductive man who is well-dressed and groomed. Early on in the film portrays a scene where Brandon is travelling on a train when he notices a married woman. It is clear that he instantly finds her attractive, albeit on a physical level, and the two start flirting. When the train reaches one of the stations the unknown woman gets off the train and disappears before Brandon could establish contact with her. Contact that clearly would have led to a sexual encounter.

From this point on in the film Brandon’s maladaptive need for sex and sexual gratification become overtly clear as he is seen to engage with prostitutes and strangers in bars, and when he is not able to find someone to provide instant gratification he turns to pornography and masturbation, at home and at work. The
train scene also showcases his sexual prowess and demands on others – he sees women as sexual objects, for the purposes of gratification first, before he sees them as anything else, in addition to hoping to have a quickie with them. The film’s focus on Brandon’s sexual cravings and addictions are intensified by the use of frequent full-on nudity and frontal views of Brandon. In addition to his urges the film also displays Brandon’s propensity towards structure and control of his environment, control that serves to hide what can only be described as a tortured and fragmented soul. Brandon is clearly obsessive-compulsive and he lives out his sexual urges in a compulsive and impulsive manner that is in stark contrast to his structured work life and home environment. Although any appearances of control seem very superficial it is his sexual urges and drives that control him in the end.

In the midst of Brandon’s explicit sex life and behaviour his sister Sissy (played by Carey Mulligan – *Never let me go*) arrives for an unexpected, and for Brandon, a rather inconvenient visit. Sissy pays this unexpected visit after numerous unsuccessful attempts to reach him by phone. We are introduced to Sissy in an interesting scene of nudity and anger. He arrives home, and hears noises coming from inside his apartment. He arms himself with a baseball bat and enters the bathroom only to be greeted by a naked Sissy who was busy taking a bath. His sister’s arrival causes Brandon’s ordered and structured world to collapse. Sissy tries her level best to connect with her brother and form some kind of closeness with him, while at the same time dealing with her own emotional issues that she clearly has. The troubled relationship can only be indicative of a dark and troubled past about which viewers are left to speculate about. She attempts to get his attention through her uncontained and erratic behaviour. She desperately seeks his approval and affection, which is met with coldness and rejection. Brandon comes across as rigid and in control, emotionally detached and unavailable, uncomfortable with physical closeness with his sister as displayed by his lack of affection when his sister attempts to hug him.

We are witness to his daily struggles as his once well put together character unravels with the rollercoaster relationship he has with his sister. She dreams of becoming a singer, and while performing in a bar one night she is introduced to Brandon’s boss, Dave Fischer (played by James Badge Dale). They engage in a sexual relationship that clearly leaves Brandon uncomfortable. We see his discomfort while all three ride in the back of a taxi, Sissy and Dave kissing and Brandon staring out of the window. Brandon tries hard to mask his clear discomfort at his sister’s liaison with his boss by a show of detachment and avoidance of emotion in this particular scene. Later on in the film he arrives home and is greeted by sounds coming from his bedroom that are clearly bedroom talk. Sissy and his boss, we assume, are busy fornicating in his bed, and Brandon is again distressed beyond containment and exits his apartment to go for a run. In another scene Sissy walks in on her brother masturbating in his bathroom. Masturbation is Brandon’s outlet when his urges threaten to overwhelm him and when his emotions become too intense for him to handle. At work Brandon is
stressed when technicians remove his personal computer due to viruses, and his boss informs him later on that a great deal of pornography was found on his computer. Brandon is clearly shamed by his boss’ comment and ashamed by his behaviour and compulsions, and he disappears into the work bathroom to masturbate.

Brandon has a seductive and attractive persona, confident and able to seduce any woman with his charm. However, viewers are exposed to his struggle with his sex addiction as we watch him engage with strangers. His addiction takes him to dark alleys and the depths of his tormented soul where he was once able to control his sex addiction and keep it under wraps. Now Brandon’s demons surface and he struggles to contain his impulses and urges. Desperation drives him to all sorts of seedy places, and he ventures into a gay bar where he receives oral sex from a stranger. Straight after this he visits an apartment where he continues his ‘drug usage’ by engaging in a threesome. This scene is explicitly portrayed in the film. In the threesome act his pain and demons are clearly etched onto his face, and the more he continues with the sex act the more it seems to elicit darkness and pain for Brandon as opposed to gratification. The once sought after act, sex, is now associated with pain, and the viewer is left feeling dreadfully sorry for an inept individual who has lost all forms of restraint and control, having given himself over to his sex addiction and the psychological pain that it causes. On his way home, he listens to the many voice mails that his sister left on his mobile phone, and as he surfaces from the underground, panic takes hold of him and he races home. What happens next we will leave to you the viewer to discover.

The film *Shame* ends with an interesting twist. Brandon finds himself travelling on a train again, and he spots the same married woman with whom he was flirting with at the beginning of the film. Another flirting session ensues between the two. When the train comes to a stop and the doors open, the film ends, leaving the viewer to speculate whether Brandon was able to control his urges or not. Michael Fassbender delivers a brilliant performance in his portrayal of an addicted and tormented individual who struggles to maintain any form of control in his life, especially following the appearance of his sister who represents his troubled past. A must see film that pushes the boundaries of cinematography and challenges the viewer on physical and intellectual levels.

**Title:** Shame  
**Director:** Steve McQueen  
**Production:** Co produced by Film4 and See Saw films  
**Date:** September 2011  
**Runtime:** 99min
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Nicola Themistocleous is a registered clinical psychologist and lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of South Africa where she is involved in Psychological Assessment and Psychopathology, as well as supervising Clinical Master’s students at the Unisa Psychotherapy Clinic. Nikki also runs a private practice at Bellavida Centre in Bryanston where she works with children, adults and families.

Franco Visser is a registered clinical psychologist and a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Unisa. He specialises in the areas of Forensic and Neuropsychology. His interests include DVD / film reviews, art and gemology. He is currently engaged with his doctorate studies in Serial Violent Crime.