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Apocalyptic Visions - Beyond Corporeality

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Apocalyptic Visions - Beyond Corporeality

Abstract

In a world where technology has become the center of the universe, traditional religious teachings regarding the creation or manipulation of human life are at risk. Science and technology challenge and appropriate the divine prerogative to create life, even human life as we know it. In a course called, "The Film Experience", I use two films to raise a variety of issues about the creation and manipulation of life. Although this is not a course on religion and film, two of the movies I use are especially good at raising questions about science, religion, and both the creation and manipulation of human life. Will science bring an end to human life as we know it? Is this result of science and technology good or evil?

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In a world where technology has become the center of the universe, traditional religious teachings regarding the creation or manipulation of human life are at risk. Science and technology challenge and appropriate the divine prerogative to create life, even human life as we know it. In a course called, "The Film Experience", I use two films to raise a variety of issues about the creation and manipulation of life. Although this is not a course on religion and film, two of the movies I use are especially good at raising questions about science, religion, and both the creation and manipulation of human life. Will science bring an end to human life as we know it? Is this result of science and technology good or evil?

The two movies I use are the 1984 version of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (originally released in 1926, now revised, colorized, and including a rock music soundtrack) and Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner* (1982, based on Philip K. Dick's story, "*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*"). As science fiction movies, students find these two films both interesting and provocative.

What I hope to accomplish in the discussion of these two movies is both to help students see beyond the superficial seductions of a film (film as mere entertainment) and to introduce to their "secular", non-academic discussion of the movies, questions about what is most valuable and "sacred" in human life.

Metropolis is controversial and somewhat flawed. It is unclear as to which of its many themes predominates. The ending is sentimental as it tries to resolve three major plot lines: the conflict between capital and labor; the excessive power of technology; and the struggle of male and female against evil. Yet the symbolic and metaphorical characters and sets in the movie are useful practice in decoding the ideologies about gender, class and power that are usually covert in films. And the film's evident Christian symbols are a good teaching tool for awakening students to religious referents in popular culture.

Freder, the hero, for example, is a Christ figure, even to a scene where he falls back exhausted with outstretched arms as if crucified. The image of Maria, the heroine, plays a double role. As a human person, Maria is the embodiment of pure virtue, both virgin and mother. The mere sight of her converts Freder from his hedonistic, playboy lifestyle. Yet, later, a robot is modeled in Maria's image and this robot is the archetype of evil.

Many students have already seen *Metropolis* on the "Much Music" video channel. They like it for the rock music and imagery, yet do no analysis of its content. As passive consumers of films, viewing them as mere entertainment, they resist reading them as multi-layered texts which use visual and other referents. I encounter initial resistance when I explain that what you see in any feature film frame is there because someone has made a decision to put it there. I meet similar

resistance to my claim that even the stated purpose, once the film is "out", is subject to viewer re-interpretation based on an individual's cultural knowledge and experience.

Before screening the film, I prepare students by discussing types of symbolism, identifying roles that the main characters exemplify, and even telling them what kinds of themes are explored - but not in detail. After viewing, we discuss what kind of ideas have been conveyed, especially visually.

Lang's brilliant imagery plus the emotive acting style of a silent film exaggerates the conflicts between two views of good and evil. Machines as the product of human creativity are celebrated in the modern style and comforts of the upper city. In the underground city, the regimented choreography of the workers illustrates their oppressive working and living conditions. The famous scene where an industrial accident transforms the megamachine into the open maw of a pagan idol receiving human sacrifices proposes that technology is an evil monster (god) which can escape human control and destroy us. In spite of the fact that we know the workers are exploited by the capitalistic greed of the Master of Metropolis, Joh Fredersen, Lang's powerful sets focus our attention on machines as the culprit.

A more theological question is suggested: does our technological creativity infringe on the realm of the divine? Is the evil scientist, Rotwang, playing god when

he steals away the good Maria's soul to transform his robot into a human? The chaos unleashed by this false Maria in both the upper and lower worlds indicates that it is an evil act. But why does evilness take the form of sexual debauchery leading to destructive violence? This and other implications about the personification of evil as a woman are insightfully examined in an article by Andreas Huyssen, "*The Vamp and the Machine*". (New German Critique, Fall/Winter, 1981)

Students have an even harder time identifying religious referents in *Blade Runner*. The two films are linked, however, both visually and thematically. It is no secret that Ridley Scott's sets were inspired by Fritz Lang's. The effects of pollution, something unimaginable in 1927, is the major difference between the two visions of the future. In Scott's film, evil is more sophisticated and the Christian symbolism less blatant. The power and riches of the Tyrell corporation are directly linked to its ability to create replicants so like humans that only special agents, "Blade Runners" like the hero Deckard, can identify them. Whereas in *Metropolis* having a soul distinguished humans from the robot, in *Blade Runner* emotions are the discerning feature.

Tyrell's god-like status is enshrined in an executive sunlit temple suite above the clouds of pollution. An owl flies around his office. Is it the bird of wisdom or of sorcery? Or is it a death goddess? Later, a snake is used by a replicant in her striptease act. Is it the snake of Eden or the goddess? The religious referents evoked

by both animals illustrate the film's ambiguity about good and evil, religion and cybernetic technology.

Even Tyrell's executive assistant, Rachel, does not know that she is a replicant. She has implanted memories and, presumably, no "termination" date. This was a safety feature programmed into earlier models lest they develop emotions in the face of death and become indistinguishable from biological humans. Interestingly, photographs are used as proof of the accuracy of Rachel's memories. (see Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag).

The genius, J.F. Sebastian, who designs the replicants, is depicted as harmless and exploited rather than as the evil scientist. He lives in the wreckage of a luxury apartment building surrounded by his toy friends, recalling the elaborate mechanized creations of the Renaissance. While his creatures never age, he is afflicted with a disease which prematurely ages him. (see Guiliana Bruno's article in *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film*, ed. by Christopher Sharrett).

Through introducing general themes before viewing the film and through thorough discussion afterwards, I hope to help students gain insights and see beyond the superficial seductions of a film. I hope to introduce to their "secular",

non-academic discussion, questions about what is most valuable and "sacred" in human life.