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Ad Vitam

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Ad Vitam

Abstract

This is a film review of *Ad Vitam* (2018), directed by Thomas Calley.

Keywords

Science Fiction, Afterlife, Existentialism



Ad Vitam (2018), dir. Thomas Calley

What counts as a “film” is up for grabs, even at the Toronto International Film Festival. This year’s gala opener was the Netflix original movie *Outlaw King*, billed as a sort of latter-day *Braveheart*, spliced with *Game of Thrones*. With all the proliferating screens laying claim to our eyeballs in the late 2010s, why should cinema claim aesthetic priority? How wonderful then to duck into a downtown Toronto multiplex to watch a French sci-fi TV show. How jarring, in the middle of a two-hour screening, to be jolted by a cliff-hanger ending and credits—only to be sucked back into the cinematic darkness by the roll of another episode.

Ad Vitam is set in the medium future (around the 2070s), in a world in which humans can live forever. The series opens onto a global birthday party for the world’s oldest person, a woman in Japan turning 169. We see her prancing on TV sets, not just spry but downright youthful: she looks thirty. As we gradually learn, her apparent immortality has been achieved through medical science. To stay young into your 100s, you just need to dip into a contraption that looks like a coffin or a cryogenic sleep chamber; they’re clean and white like an Apple product, and they make

a weird booming sound while they dial the clock back on your aging flesh. Buy one for home use, or just schedule a regular appointment at your local regeneration spa.

Immortality, however, comes at a price. The young resent the eternal youth of their parents. With old people refusing to die—they're partying and shagging in stairwells well into their second century—there is simply no space left for the newly living. Hence the impending referendum on whether the government should restrict birth rates. *Ad Vitam*'s dueling generations are divided by a specific birthday. For medical reasons, you cannot start your technologically-induced eternal life until the age of thirty (happy news for the demographic killed off in the 1976 sci-fi classic *Logan's Run*). Consequently, people under thirty do not trust their elders. It doesn't help that the latter's eyes flash a creepy techno-blue when they emerge from their coffins.

Revolution is clearly afoot, and it's a revolution couched in religious terms. Our rebel youth rally around a quasi-Christian suicide cult, evidence of which brings the series' opening sequence to a grim end. As a reveler urinates in the ocean, he suddenly realizes that he is surrounded by the face-down corpses of dead teenagers. Yikes. The next morning, with the party over, we find ourselves in a police procedural. The show will follow a detective (coming up on 100 years with the force), as he tries to solve the mystery of these deaths. To infiltrate the suicide cult, he enlists the help of a young woman involved in an attempted mass suicide a decade earlier. She then explores the dark underside of their shared world, encountering "the Church of the Glorification," attending a death ceremony (complete with acoustic guitar), and popping a pill that induces near-death experience.

This plot lends itself to copious meditation on the relationship of death to the human condition. One character quips that, in a world where life has become the absolute value, the desire for death assumes a transgressive significance. Another muses that death can be conquered only

by confronting it, not by fleeing it. The result is very French. The dialogue is laced with conversational zingers like “*C’est une horreur ontologique!*” In an interview, the director said that, like Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, *Ad Vitam* aspires to be “*très existentiel.*”¹ Dear reader, it succeeds.

More interesting is how the show tailors its existential musings to our contemporary moment. Old people stay in their jobs forever while youth go unemployed: this is hardly a sci-fi conceit. Nor is the idea that new medical technology might soon be able to “solve death”—or, at least, its outlandish fictionality is very much of the present. There are, after all, techno-utopians who claim that persons alive right now will live to be a thousand.² As scholars have argued, the technological drive toward self-perfection is, in significant ways, a religious drive, a secularization of the Christian impulse toward the transcendence of the flesh.³ *Ad Vitam* picks up on this story and adds a new twist. The secularized Christianity of modern techno-utopianism finds its ultimate foe in a revived Christianity, now a cult of mortal imperfection.

The show’s use of religion is interesting. But its overall political vision feels oddly constrained (at least in the two episodes screened at TIFF). Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* (2006) did much more to think through the extreme social disruption that would surely result from a fundamental change in humanity’s relationship to mortality. Class, in particular, is strangely absent in *Ad Vitam*. If it does come to pass, medicalized immortality will likely be available only to the super-rich; Silicon Valley investors are, after all, bankrolling much of the current research in this field. *Ad Vitam* doesn’t seem interested in this question, although its fancy regeneration coffins couldn’t be cheap. Instead, it lets the generational conflict between concerned parents and rebellious youth stand in for social conflict per se. This feels vaguely anachronistic—the ghost of ‘68 perhaps (never trust anyone over thirty). The political imaginary here might be plausibly described as “teen-angst Foucault.” Youth object to a world designed to “survey” and “discipline”

them, rendering them “docile” subjects awaiting machinic conversion to adulthood (these are actual quotes). The show is about biopolitics, but in it the biological (i.e. the white bourgeois family unit defined by heterosexual descent) manages to displace all other forms of power relation, fusing seamlessly with society as a whole.

Still, with its existential detectives and Sartrean suicide terrorists, *Ad Vitam* offers an interesting snapshot of our ever-shifting human condition. The show’s most striking visual leitmotif is the jellyfish, a totem animal for the new immortals. This is presumably because of the creature’s regenerative abilities. As the website “immortal-jellyfish.com” helpfully explains, “The good news is that you can become immortal. The bad news is that you have to become a floating blob of jelly to do so.”⁴ Hannah Arendt couldn’t have put it better. Death is part of what makes us human, and we “solve” it at our own peril. Silicon Valley take note!

¹ Brigitte Baronnet, “Ad Vitam, la série SF et policière événement d'Arte se dévoile,” <http://www.allocine.fr/diaporamas/series/diaporama-18670384/>. February 1, 2018.

² For a bemused recent account of these would-be immortals and their cyborg kin, see Mark O’Connell’s *To Be a Machine: Adventures among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, and the Futurists Solving the Modest Problem of Death* (New York: Doubleday, 2017).

³ David Noble, *The Religion of Technology* (New York: Penguin, 1997).

⁴ “Immortal Jellyfish.” <https://immortal-jellyfish.com/> Accessed 11 Sept 2018.