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The Pod Generation

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The Pod Generation

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Pod Generation* (2023), directed by Sophie Barthes.

Keywords

Dystopia, AI, Reproductive Technology

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Author Notes

Dereck Daschke is a professor of Philosophy & Religion at Truman State University and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Particularly interested in the intersection among religion, psychology, and wellness, his academic work over more than two decades has analyzed the transformational breakdowns and creative buildups in the form of apocalypses, mysticism, new religious movements, psychedelics, the Bible, Bob Dylan, and, of course, film. He regularly teaches “Religion and Film” at Truman and has overseen a number of student research theses that have contributed to the conversation about just why it is that movies capture our meaning-making imaginations in the way they do.



The Pod Generation (2023), dir. Sophie Barthes

Playing quite like a feature-length episode of *Black Mirror*, Sophie Barthes’s technological eu/dystopia imagines a future society close to when computer technology and artificial intelligence will achieve Singularity (roughly 2045, according to futurist Ray Kurzweil). Virtually every part of our lives is managed by Alexa- or Siri-type digital assistants. Fluctuations in our serotonin levels or gut biome prompt wellness recommendations; breakfast is 3-D printed; our digital assistants are poised to take over the essential functions of our jobs—prompting one concerned corporate colleague of Rachel’s (Emilia Clarke) to worry, “Are we at risk of becoming redundant?” The theme of technology displacing nature, up to and including those very things that make us human at all, runs throughout the film, albeit too often in fairly heavy-handed ways. But then, when your film is about offloading reproduction to a corporation called Pegasus, whose representative (Rosalie Craig) declares that for the first time in history, humans are not subject to biology and

that the “uterus is a political issue, perhaps the most political issue of all time,” you’re not really going for subtlety in your message.

Rachel’s husband, a university botanist named Alvy (Chiwetel Ejiofor) at first represents the old-school human fighting the good fight to retain our connection to nature. He is, of course, resistant to the idea of anything other than a natural childbirth, which has started to be *déclassé* and a mark of downward economic mobility. But in a tense and somewhat funny scene, when Rachel’s A.I. therapist (which is a disembodied voice coming from a giant eye on a wall) challenges him to define “What is natural?” and, when he demands that whatever wants to look into his soul should have one itself, it counters with the observation that consciousness is a “grim companion” weighted down by the fear of death, Alvy has a complete change of heart. In fact, once he decides to support Rachel’s decision to gestate their child in one of Pegasus’s pods, he becomes the primary “parent” while Rachel is at her corporate job, bonding with the embryo in its egg-shaped container, playing it music, taking it to his greenhouses and even to the forest in a strap-on pouch. This role reversal is complete when Rachel, who is supposed to be liberated by not having to physically carry a baby to term, feels so excluded by Alvy’s complete devotion to the pod child that it starts to cause problems at work. Meanwhile, Pegasus’s corporate control over the pod becomes alarming, as the developing baby is subject to its own agenda, including data mining and an accelerated date of birth due to consumer demands for the pod. “The child is yours, but it’s in a womb that we own,” Alvy and Rachel are informed. Oh, and by the way, the baby’s birth requires a password that only Pegasus can provide. Like all technologies, it pays to read the fine print of the user’s agreement.

Rachel states early in the film, “At some point we decided to make nature a commodity.” The corporate control of birth might just represent the ultimate demonstration of that trend, which

is nigh inescapable even in our own time. If films from *Frankenstein* to *Jurassic Park* to *Ex Machina* have taught us anything about science and technology, it is to be very careful in playing God; we may think we are smart enough to control nature, but we are not wise enough to know what to do when control slips out of our grasp. When that inevitability is wedded to corporate greed and myopia, certainly one may fear that the worst of both worlds is at hand. As a film raising these issues, *The Pod Generation* is an imperfect vehicle – too obvious in some places, pulling its punches in others. But as a (black?) mirror reflecting the ways we already regularly give up our human autonomy and agency for the sake of convenience with corporate technology, it is fair to say that it successfully raises many questions that, as a civilization, we may not have good answers for.