More Human Than Human Essay, Research Paper

More Human than Human

How meaning is constructed in the film The Fifth Element

The Fifth Element is a futuristic action move, which was produced in 1997 by the famous French moviemaker Luc Besson. Also known for films like Leon, Nikita, The Big Blue, and Atlantis. Besson was just twelve years old when he wrote the original script of the movie. I was just a kid in boarding school, I mean boring school, dreaming about science fiction and the movies Besson (cited in Ryan, 1997, p.29) recalls. Little did he know then, that twenty years later his script would turn into one of the most visually beautiful films made in the 20th century.

The Statement.

A film cannot be understood. We viewers can only construct our own meanings based on our own intelligence, experiences, and feelings. One can argue that all films has a certain message, as any contemplated action has, but the original meanings or messages are irrelevant due to the millions of totally or slightly different interpretations they are given. Therefore, meaning is not constructed by the filmmakers, but interpretations are, by the audience. In other words, I cannot tell you how Luc Besson constructed meaning, but I can show how I interpret the signs given.

The Plot.

The year is 2259; a planet-sized sphere of supreme evil is approaching the earth at relentless speed, threatening to destroy the earth. It cannot bee defeated by usual methods like weapons violence only makes it stronger. The only thing that can save earth is divine light which is generated by four ancient stones, each representing the elements earth, wind, water and fire combined with a mysterious fifth element. The story is spawn around the search for the five elements, which introduces us to Korben Dallas (the hero), Leeloo (the Supreme Being, alien), Zorg (the villain) and numerous other characters.

The Methods.

In order to successfully interpret a film, that is, to achieve a relatively high level of understanding of what is generally believed to be the original message(s) of the filmmaker, one have to take a close look on how the narrative is represented. A narrative is how the way a story is told, that is to say, a story with a beginning, middle, and an ending. Humans are narrative creatures; we need the three factors in order to create a meaning (Turner, 1993. 68). When David Wark Griffith (1875-1948), the man believed to be the developer of narratives on film, started to arrange his films like narratives, as they would be written in a novel, he got a lot of criticism. The producers did not think the audience would understand anything when the story was jumping around (Cook, 1996. 65). History proved quite the opposite. In fact, the right usage of narrative arrangement and the implemented tools that can be used within it extends the filmmakers opportunities for sending a message, and the viewer s prospect of interpreting it. This includes the structural role of the characters, the genre, the hierarchy of discourses, and ideology, amongst others.

We can also involve binary oppositions in the treatment to increase the general knowledge in further analysis. O`Shaughnessy explains binary oppositions like this, Each word or concept is defined by its opposite and only make sense if we understand its opposite as well (O`Shaughnessy, 1999. 126). Further he sites Aristotle thesis Everything is either A or not A . However, it is important to understand that by implicating opposition or duality in the analysis, can lead to intricate questions rather than unmitigated answers due to the lack of universal truths in the world of ideal concepts. Take for example good vs. bad , good is explained throughout the idea of every one agreeing of the concept bad . If one is to revise Nietzsche, one would maybe get another apprehension on good since he reveals that the concept bad beyond a doubt is not universal (Nietzsche, 1887. 14-18).

The Treatment.

As mentioned, The Fifth Element takes place in the future. We encounter spectacular technology, strange aliens, new designs, and so on. These factors make it easy to put T5E in the sci-fi genre. However, Besson diverges from the regular portrays of the future and in a way remakes the genre. He paints a positive future, a future that is bright, funny, wealthy and full of hope, apposed to other films in the sci-fi genre like Metropolis, Blade Runner, Mad Max, Water World, 12 Monkeys, The Postman and so on.

The way the story is represented, or the narrative structure in this film, has a classical pattern. O`Shaughnessy shows this diagrammatically: (O`Shaughnessy, 1999.107)

stabile situation disruption stabile situation 2

(enigma, desire, goal) (resolutions)

However, this can also be argued since we learn that the sphere of supreme evil comes every five thousand years, and thus the story is set by determination. In addition, the story does not even start of with a stabile situation. The reason we can say this film has a classical pattern is that the main character (Korben Dallas), one of the characters from who we see things from (point of view), fulfil the demands of the classical pattern. The story does not really start before we meet him. This also shows the importance of Korben, we are presented with a seemingly unsolvable problem until he appears. This happens in the taxi scene, where Leeloo literally falls into Korben`s car, which also is one of the most important scenes in the film. This is also where we become introduced to the two points of views. First Leeloo`s, she is the alien, we identify with her in the way that things are new and unfamiliar, we do not know how the world is in the year 2259 and neither does she, so she reacts how we maybe would in that setting. Seeing some the world from her view explain things that otherwise maybe would be left unsaid. The other point of view is Korben`s. he is totally unaware of the crisis at hand. He is the searcher, our detective, even if we know more than him, he ends of solving the enigma. Further more, the scene is important because it tells us a lot of the story and themes. Korben proves all ready in that scene that he is a hero by helping Leeloo without really knowing how to help her or having any particular reason to do so. We also encounter the struggle between technology and man in the sense that Korben outsmarts the cop s with all their high-tech equipment.

All the characters in a film have a specific purpose. Some of them contribute with certain information, some develop the story, and other supplies us with meaning and so on. What is interesting is that big characters (much screen time) sometimes have nothing to contribute regarding neither meaning nor story, and vice versa. A good example of this is Ruby Rhod. He does not influence anything regarding the development of the story; he is just the clown of the film. The characters different structural positions are called the hierarchy of discourses . I have created an outline over this where I have ranked the characters according to their influence to the development of the narrative.

Love is dead

T5E can be read as pure entertainment. Nevertheless, by analysing the way certain topics are represented in the narrative can help us see things a little more profound. The central theme in the film is love. This is signified throughout the whole movie. The only thing that can save earth from pure evil is seemingly an organic weapon (Leeloo) created by aliens. Nevertheless, as we see at the ending, she is not able to accomplish anything before Korben acknowledges his love fore her, thus the fifth element is love. Knowing this, there is no explanation given why not humans alone could be the catalysts for love. And when we interpret that, we can conclude that the main message is; love as we humans know it is dead or dieing, and only an outsider, an alien can bring it back. And not only any alien, she is the supreme being , she is gorgeous, strong, charmingly na ve, pure at heart, she possesses all the good qualities humans have, and non of the bad, she is perfect and thus, more human than human.

The fact that only love could save the world brings us to another theme. Take the binary opposition technology vs. the primitive fore instance. We saw in the film that humans with all their new equipment and knowledge like the ability to travel at light speed or re-generating cells into full functional beings could not save the earth, rather the opposite. Technology represented through weapons only made the enemy stronger, while the primitive emotion love defeated it. This is a classical theme, dealing with the issue that while we search for new knowledge and explore unknown frontiers, we forget what is important, which is to protect life through love. The cherry scene in Zorg`s office expresses this view very clear when Zorg chokes on a cherry and has no one to help him but his sworn enemy.

Some other obvious binary opposition in the narrative:

Characters Leeloo vs. The sphere

Korben vs. Agnot

Cornelius vs. Zorg

Characteristics innocence vs. culpability

ignorant vs. wise

beautiful vs. ugly

strong vs. weak

Settings earth vs. space

past vs. future

Themes good vs. evil

hate vs. love

technology vs. man

war vs. peace

Law and order is a relatively big issue in the film, and is to a certain degree combined with technology. We get the impression that big brother always sees you. Everything is monitored: where you are, how you drive, what you say etc. not very unlike how the situation is today, but to a more extreme extent. Luckily for the good guys , the technology has its flaws and can be outsmarted, as shown in the taxi scene. Another known film that deals with this theme is Gattaca.

The only couple in the film, Leeloo and Korben are represented in such a remarkably simple way that analysing it further than the fact that they found each other and fell in love, will be to read something in to the text rather than out of it. And maybe that love sometimes can be uncomplicated is a message in it self.

The Conclusion

I have shown how I have constructed meaning based the methods named above. Even though T5E do not have a deep story, I have tried to illustrate different interpretations of the signs given by the filmmaker without overanalysing or reading things into the text. I have also questioned some of the methods used in an attempt to demonstrate that there is no right or wrong way to read a text, only different interpretations. However, I must say that I do not like the idea of analysing a film in an academic way. By doing that I think we somehow take away some of the sole which every good movies has. Fore example, I cannot express how I feel when I see some of the extraordinary sceneries or even start to describe the atmosphere of certain scenes. It can be like poetry, it is not meant to be understood in a specific way, but to be felt in an individual way.

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