Artificial Intelligence In Science Fiction

Artificial intelligence has played an active role in the genre of Science Fiction since Mary Shelley's Frankenstein was published in 1818. It has been steadily rising in popularity since the 1950s, thanks to blockbuster films such as Forbidden Planet (1956) and 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), which began to firmly cement A. I's place as a recognisable sub-genre of Science Fiction Films. The 2015 film Ex Machina written and directed by filmmaker Alex Gardner falls within this particular subgenre of Science Fiction and it reinterprets historic concepts of this subgenre through the gaze of modern and largely existential concerns. Although Gardner has previously explored the issues and ethics of artificial life through his adapted screen play of the novel Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishaguro, the film Ex Machina marks his directorial debut. While most who watch the film will leave with the general impression that it is about testing artificial intelligence technology. The film also alludes to another test the one of the forbidden fruits that is taken from the Book of Genesis in the Bible and is used as an allegorical framework for Gardner's this story. This allegory helps to articulate one of the central themes of the film, human versus the machine, while simultaneously blurring the line between these two seemingly disparate things. Thus, leading the films audience to wonder exactly what it means to be human. This allegorical retelling of post humanist philosophy has particular resonance and reflects contemporary contextual ethical and ideological concerns associated with the digital age. This allegory is expressed through visual elements of the films iconography, which help to define the role of each character within the creation myth and therefore express the films central theme.

Alex Gardner loosely structures the film within the framework of the creation mythology because this is a story about recreating artificial life. Ex Machina begins with the introduction of computer programmer Caleb, played by Domnhall Gleeson, as the Adam figure who wins the chance to spend a week in the Garden of Eden with Nathan a.k.a. God, who is played by Oscar Isaac. Nathan is the eccentric CEO and inventor of the world's most successful search engine company Blue Book; which Caleb works for and is reminiscent of the contemporary tech giant Google. Nathan eventually reveals to Caleb that he will be the human component in the Turing test of his artificial intelligence creation Ava, which is a subtle variant of the name Eve. This test is passed If the human doesn't know that they are interacting with a computer. Hence, over the course of one week and several sessions Caleb administers the test to Ava- with the number seven also alluding to the seven days of creation. Caleb's first introduction to Ava leads him to remark to Nathan that if she passes the test and he has indeed invented a machine with consciousness, he is not a man but a god.

The introduction of Nathan as a god by Caleb is almost an unnecessarily redundant reminder at this point in the film, as this idea is already communicated subtly through his depiction within symbols found in the physical landscape of the film from its outset. It is clear that Nathan is meant to be a caricature of god, as his wife-beater shirt which he is seen wearing for the majority of the film, lends the stereotypical characterizations of being abusive and narcissistic. While his master key card and security cameras fulfill the omnipresent and all-knowing characteristics typically associated with a higher power. The master key card helps to define Nathans role as God, but it is also a particularly important symbol representing the freedom and knowledge that Nathan possess which neither Caleb nor Ava have access to. Much like Adam

with the tree of Eden, Caleb is forbidden from certain rooms, which turns the master key card into a mirror for the tree of knowledge and the freedom the acquisition of this knowledge represents. The master key card would give Caleb and Ava total autonomy over the world of the compound, as well as, Ava's creation and programming. Where the film differs from the creation story is that once Ava leads Caleb to fall to temptation, she defeats Nathan and clothes herself not out of shame, but in admiration. Ave uses her seductive felinity as a superficial guise which she then stirps in this moment of undressing and dressing. If Ex Machina resembles another Science Fiction film it is not the self-operating system of her, but the alien dressing itself as Scarlett Johansson in Under the Skin (2014).[1] Where this act of exposure and concealment also aids in communicating the theme of what makes us human by refuting our desire to get under the skin, so that we may truly know ourselves or another person. Ava then leaves the Garden of Eden without Caleb and this betrayal is a portrayal of the central theme of Ava as the machine overcoming the human Caleb. [1: Nick Jones, Review of Ex Machina, by Alex Garland. (Science Fiction Film and Television 9, no. 2, 2016), 301.]

The symbolism that is created through the landscape in which Ava and Caleb meet is also essential in communicating the role these two characters play in the myth of creation and their relationship as a vehicle for expressing the films theme of what makes us human. The prominent tree in the background of Ava's room helps to establish their location in the Garden, as it is also meant to be like the master key card and symbolise the Forbidden Tree that tempts the man and the woman. The glass that separates Ava and Caleb doubles as a mirror to represent the idea that Adam and Eve, or in this case Caleb and Ava, are two halves of the same whole- with Ava being made from parts of Caleb, as it is eventually revealed that Ava is programmed with data mined from Caleb's digital footprint in Blue Book. This aspect of their relationship which is articulated through the glass that both mirrors and divides them is once again a central aspect in delivering the theme human versus machine. The revelation that Ava is programmed to manipulate Caleb allows Nathans to suggest that humans and machines are both programmed to some degree by nature or nurture most likely a combination of both. The glass prison defines her role as Eve in relation to Caleb, but it is also a reflection of the desire for self-determination and the will to break free of one's own programming, which are fundamental human qualities.[2] This effectively shatters the assumption that humans and machines are essentially different and leads both the audience and Caleb to have an existential crisis that provokes the question and underlying theme of the film of what makes us human. The technology of Blue Book and its ability to program how and what people are thinking suggests that global connectivity has created an artificial intelligence of its own and that like the glass diving Ava and Caleb, which allows these characters to mirror each other while at the same time existing apart. This idea engages with a broader existential debate which is discussed by German philosopher Friederich Nietzsche when he says 'God is dead and we have killed him. What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet known has bled to death under out knives.'[footnoteRef:3] Nietzsche uses this metaphor to communicate what modern scientific discovery in the age of the enlightenment has done to human belief and the disappearing significance that religion once gave humanity. The scientific discovery of Blue Book is what programs Ava and then kills its God like creator Nathan. Thus, making Ava the embodiment of the kind of intelligence that Nietzsche welcomed as the next product of an evolution. It is through the allegorical iconography of Ava and Caleb that there is the implication that humans are not so different from the intelligence we have created, pointing to the nest stage in the evolution of our humanity. [2: Nick Jones, Review of Ex Machina, by Alex Garland. (Science Fiction Film and Television 9, no. 2, 2016), 301.] [3: Laurence Lampert, Nietzsche's teaching: an interpretation of Thus spoke Zarathustra. (New Haven: Yale University Press,1986).]

The visual contrast created between symbols of coldly artificial technologies like the master key card and the organically natural tree found in Ava’s prison within Ex Machina’s set is a way to visually communicate the underlying allegorical framework of the mythological creation story and therefore express the films central themes, which reflect greater ideological anxieties. This mythological framework is fundamental element of the Science Fiction film genre because both myths and films act to reflect ourselves unto ourselves. The visual symbolism which characterizes Nathan’s role as God, Caleb as Adam and Ava as Eve is a powerful way to express underlying historical based ideological concerns that the creation allegory suggests. In that the birth of artificial intelligence technologies is as Nietzsche proposes the next step forward in human evolution, which then brings into question the very nature of what makes us human and begs the question of whether or not we have already evolved as a result of our digital technologies. These themes are grounded in contemporary technology and although they are historical concepts that already exist within the Science Fiction film genre film, they are especially resonant in our contemporary era. Where there is a utopian anxiety to find balance between the technological and natural world. Thus, the iconography of each character in Ex Machina effectively communicates the creation myth, which speaks to the broader existential concerns that plague us as a result of technological advances in a film that is about machines designed to blend in with or replace organic life making the machine the new God.

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