

Assignment 4: Visualising the 'other'

Introduction

Assignment Four of the Understanding Visual Culture course requires the student to choose one or more topics covered in *Part four: Looking and Subjectivity* and to write a formal academic essay critiquing a chosen text in terms of these topics. My essay focuses on Richard Dyer's ideas on 'whiteness' and Laura Mulvey's thoughts on 'gendering the gaze'.

The Text

My chosen text is the 1956 film *Forbidden Planet* directed by Fred M Wilcox. The stars of the film are Walter Pidgeon, Anne Francis and Leslie Nielsen. The characters and plot of the film are thought by many to be based on Shakespeare's *Tempest*. It was the first science fiction film to be based entirely on another planet away from Earth. On its release it failed to capture the imagination of audiences but now it is a cult classic, and is seen as a precursor to many subsequent science fiction films.

The plot of the film revolves around an expedition sent from Earth to the planet Altair, 17 light years away. The expedition is led by Commander Abrams (Nielsen). The mission is to discover what happened to a colony of settlers on this planet. When the expedition arrives they find that Dr. Edward Morbius (Pidgeon) and his beautiful daughter Altaira (Francis) are the only survivors. Morbius does his best to persuade them that they are not needed on the planet. Abrams and his men, believing that the settlers are in danger, land against Morbius's wishes.

It emerges that Morbius has discovered a lost highly intelligent civilisation, the Krell, who had found a way to enhance intelligence and to create physical objects by thought.

However, the planet is plagued by an unseen monster, which killed all the earlier settlers apart from Morbius and his daughter. Following Abrams' arrival the monster reappears and starts to kill members of the crew. A battle ensues and the monster is temporarily rebuffed. Abrams deduces that this creature has been created by Morbius's unconscious mind and uses this knowledge to overcome it.

Altaira beguiles members of the crew providing a romantic sub-plot and scopophilic interest for the male characters and male viewers of the film. By the end of the film Abrams has fallen in love with Altaira. He rescues her, saves his crew and finally, following Morbius's instructions, destroys the planet and along with it the monster. Morbius goes down with the planet.

Topics to be explored

There are two topics, covered in the Understanding Visual Culture course, which I will explore in my critique of this film. The first is Richard Dyer's ideas of 'whiteness' as set out in his text *White* (Dyer 1988). The second is the way in which the female character Altaira is presented. Here I will be referencing Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey 1975). Dyer's and Mulvey's texts were republished in *Visual Culture: the reader* (Evans et al, 1999) and I have used this as my source for references. I also briefly consider the way in which the film also uses some of Freud's ideas to develop the plot.

Whiteness

In the opening sequence of the film a narrator states '*...and so at last Mankind can begin the conquest and colonization of deep space....*'. The film pans to the control room of the space ship and we get our first glimpse of the crew. All are white American males. There are no women and no ethnic groups represented. The idea of 'white' male driven colonialism is embedded within the film from the very start.

In his essay Dyer tackles the illusive nature of 'whiteness'. As a professor of film studies his chosen texts are from the cinema. In this essay he references the 1950s Dirk Bogarde film *Simba*. He demonstrates how the film is organised around a rigid opposition of white and black. Emphasis throughout the film is on this division, which is depicted visually with very clear boundaries between the two. Everything about the native black people is primitive, dark and threatening, whereas the white characters are generally represented as reasonable, rational and conciliatory.

In the *Forbidden Planet* white once again stands for reason, rationality and order but this time it is set in against what Abrams calls the '*mindless beasts of the subconscious*'. As indicated above, the monster in the film is created by the unconscious mind of the unwitting Morbius. This twist in the plot has its origins in Freud's idea that the subconscious ID is '*...is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality.... we call it a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations... It is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts, but it has no organization...*' (Freud 1933, pp. 73)

The mission of the Abrams spaceship is to rescue the settlers on Altair and he and his crew are presented as a force for good. The crew is clean cut, rational and disciplined. They are dressed in identical military style uniforms. They obey orders (for the most part) and are brave and organised in the battles against the monster. We do not see the monster as it is invisible but its actions are violent, terrible and out of control.

The capacity to control the primitive urges of their subconscious is presented as the factor that differentiates good from evil, and by implication the white colonialist from the primitive other. The Abrams makes the point that 'we are all part monsters in our subconscious'. This he says is why 'we have laws and religion'. He defeats the monster by thinking through how it has come into being. So good defeats evil and the rightness of the civilized white colonialist is confirmed.

The complete absence of any ethnic group other than whites in the film is striking in today's world. This was by no means unusual, however, for films and TV at the time when *Forbidden Planet* was produced. Stephanie Greco Larson points out that '*In 1952, only an estimated 0.4 percent of television performances were by blacks.*' (Larson, pp 22). The same would no doubt also be true of the cinema.

The approach of excluding blacks denies them even the status of other and is consistent with Franz Fanon's statement '*I feel I see in those white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus. Why, it's a Negro!*' (Fanon 1967, pp 140) It seems that in 1950s Hollywood was in tune with the prevailing white sentiment of the time that blacks should not be considered part of 'Mankind'.

Gendering the Gaze

The film's only female character is Altaira (Francis), daughter of Morbius. She makes her first appearance when Morbius is meeting Abrams and two crewmembers, shortly after their arrival. Her appearance is a surprise for both the crew and her father. She is young and beautiful. She is dressed in a figure hugging dress with a very short skirt. Her hair and make up are immaculate.

She is dressed to be seen. And seen she is! The three crewmembers are shown standing in row ogling her. There

is no pretence that the way she is presented is for any reason other than the scopophilic pleasure of the male characters and male spectators of the film. Mulvey proposes that the '*cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.*' This is most certainly the case in Altaira's opening scene in the Forbidden Planet.

Altaira has a passive role in the taking forward the main narrative of the film. This is consistent with Mulvey's perception that 'The presence of woman in an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line' (Evans et al, pp 384). She seems to be there to participate in a romantic sub-plot (appealing to women) and to provide voyeuristic pleasure (appealing to men).

She is presented as a highly desirable woman. She is innocent yet willing and submissive. One of the crewmembers tricks her into kissing him. Although this is unknown to her, she is very willing to learn. The inference here is that she is that she is sexually naïve, but also sexually available. This undoubtedly appeals to male fantasies involving the seduction of a virgin.

Opportunities are taken throughout the film to find ways in which Altaira can be looked at into a 'spectacle'. Abrams suggests to her that her short skirts are too revealing and that she should dress more modestly. Here again the virtue and 'goodness' of the white colonialist is being demonstrated. Altaira responds by getting 'Robbie the Robot' to make her a new long dress. This new outfit does cover her but in reality leaves nothing to the imagination. It is a close fitting and clinging gown, which she models for the pleasure of the male spectator.

In another scene Abrams finds her swimming naked in a pool. She has no sense of shame about her nakedness. Abrams averts his gaze, as a 'good' man should. The male viewer of the film however is presented with voyeuristic glimpses of her nakedness.

In Mulvey's terms, she 'performs' for Abrams and the crewmembers, masquerading as the perfect 'to-be-looked-at image' (Evans et al, pp 388). For male viewers she is there for their scopophilic pleasure. For the female viewer she is a beautiful role model who also gets her man - the hero of the film, Abrams.

Male spectators will also identify with the leading male actors in the film seeing them as what Mulvey calls a 'more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego' (Evans et al, pp 385). Here Mulvey is referencing Lacan's concept of the Mirror Stage. This is concerned with the formative exposure of a young child to the images from the outside world. The child sees an image of itself in a mirror and recognising it as an image of itself, as a cohesive whole. Although it recognises itself, it also perceives the image as other, a form of idealised self or as Lacan puts it an Ideal-I. This is the beginning of what becomes a lifelong preoccupation with the idealised self-image. Visual culture is a rich source of such imagery. Abrams and Altaira provide just such a role models for the male and female spectators respectively.

Freud's Structural Model of the Psyche

As indicated above the film uses Freud's concept of the unconscious id. Freud proposed a structural model of the psyche, which comprises of three theoretical constructs, the Id, ego and super-ego. The Id is the part governed by primitive instinctive drives. The ego has a moderating role on these instinctive drives calling on the super ego, which plays a moralizing and critical role.

In the film the idea is presented that the advanced 'lost' civilisation of the Krell have found a way to create things using only the mind. Morbius has dabbled with their mind improving machines and has become a highly intelligent being. The monsters terrorising the planet however are found to be a product of Morbius's unconscious mind, driven by the instinctual drives of his id. The film actually uses this term but at no point is mention made of Freud.

Of course the film's interpretation is simplistic and isolates a single dimension of model, but it is an inventive way to present the opposition between good and evil or white and black.

Summary

Forbidden Planet has proved to be an excellent case study for discussing Dyer and Mulvey's ideas. Although it was a highly original film, it still incorporated the typical approach to race and gender prevalent in films of its day. I confess that I was a little surprised by this but nonetheless pleased to find such a rich source of material for review.

References

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