

If confronted with a totally different being, would we try to understand how it differs from us, or how it resembles us? To what extent is our desire to learn how biological life works motivated by personal or social factors? What are the implications of seeing the elements of life as commodities? These are some questions raised by *Splice* (dir. Vincenzo Natali 2010), an intriguing and well-crafted film concerned with artificially produced hybrid life (a warning that this review contains “spoilers”).

The story is in many ways a family drama, cast against the background of genetic research and the financial interests that such research carries for large pharmaceutical corporations. Clive Nicoli (Adrien Brody) and Elsa Kast (Sarah Polley) are geneticists, researching new ways of using cell and DNA technology to develop medical treatments for diseases such as Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s. Besides being research collaborators they are also a married couple, allowing for themes of sexuality and procreation to be crafted into the narrative. In their ambitious attempts to create a new animal hybrid gene, they break protocol and add some human DNA into their gene-mix. The experiment is surprisingly successful and produces a live creature, a female hybrid, composed of human, animal, insect, fish, and bird genes (played by Abigail Chu as a child and Delphine Chaneac as an adult – both performances enhanced by computer generated graphics). This creature not only grows very rapidly, suggesting a short life span, but also seems to have inherited top quality genes from her diverse ancestors, exhibiting intelligence and capacity to learn. She can represent objects through drawing, but she does not master language. However, she is able to recognize alphabet letters by association: in fact, the name she is given, Dren, is an anagram of “nerd,” a word she spells with letter blocks, imitating the print on Elsa’s T-shirt.

Anxious about the repercussions of their transgression, Elsa and Clive hide Dren in Elsa’s family farm, and the central part of the film unfolds around the emotional reactions that Dren’s behavior triggers in the couple. The living conditions resemble a nuclear family arrangement. The couple treat Dren half way between a pet and a child, and like many pet owners (as well as many parents), they react affectionately when their “pet” mimics them and acts in familiar ways, but are not so pleased when it defies their expectations and acts unpredictably. Dren is not treated either as an experiment – objectively following a transparent procedure – or as a fellow sentient being, empathically. Instead, she is used as a canvas that reflects whatever human insecurities and prejudices are projected on it. The fact that Dren is a completely unfamiliar being prevents her creators from behaving in their normal way, and brings out their hidden fears and doubts, especially in the case of Elsa, who

has a more troubled history. “You can’t always get what you want,” Elsa tells Dren, which is an odd reprimand to give the world’s greatest genetic discovery, and indicates that Elsa’s perception of reality is marred by her past.

Frank Herbert has said that the function of good science fiction is to question assumptions, and *Splice* certainly fits the bill. In fact, the film focuses on the role of assumptions in our interactions with the world, and shows how assumptions can mislead, often dangerously. Much of the conflict between Dren and her creators lies in the latter’s fixed ideas about how things work – ideas that Dren repeatedly challenges. For instance, the scientists initially believe that the creature will require specific nutritional components, only to find that she actually has a sweet tooth. Later, when she has a choking attack they think she is suffocating, but it turns out that she has amphibian lungs and needs water. Later still, when she seemingly lies dying, they sit by her bedside and grieve, but soon discover that she is a sequential hermaphrodite and is actually changing sex.

Interestingly, at no time do the two scientists attempt to understand how Dren thinks and how she experiences the world on her own terms. From a narrative perspective, this is achieved by consistently presenting events from Clive’s or Elsa’s point of view. Although Dren is neither animal nor human, she is seen alternatively as one or the other by the two scientists, and we follow their cue. For example, her face shows what could be taken to be basic human emotions, such as happiness, sadness, fear and surprise, but this is an inference – we never know how Dren really feels; we only know what feelings we attribute to her. The film does not attempt to speculate on Dren’s psychology, and this is appropriate because any such speculation would diverge from the film’s main aim, which is to explore the responses of two humans who are thrust into an intimate relationship with an alien creature. Significantly, when the male Dren utters his first phrase, he is soon after dispatched and the film ends. This is a strategic move, because exploring Dren as a linguistic being would entail changing the angle and concerns of the narrative, and going into areas that lie beyond its scope.

The film creatively blends themes that trace their origin to prototypical science fiction stories. For example, the theme “scientist creates being that he cannot handle” is familiar from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), and the theme “intelligent people carry emotional baggage that prevents them from achieving great things” is almost a staple of the popular imagination, with variations ranging from Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* (1961) to Michael Crichton’s *Sphere* (1987). *Splice*, however, makes some interesting improvisations to these themes, which highlight its originality and relevance to current times. In addition to its provocative exploration of interpersonal and human-alien relationships, the film underlines the practicality and competitiveness of much medical research. “What’s the point if you can’t publish?” says Clive at the beginning of the film, when considering the option of doing research just for the sake of learning. Then at the end of the film, the director of the pharmaceutical company exclaims, “We’ll be filing patents for years,” referring to Dren’s genetic material. Thus the narrative is framed by socio-economic factors, which drive many of the characters’ actions throughout the story. It aptly reminds us that idealistic concerns are anchored in social realities.

Vincenzo Natali has directed other films that deal with the interpersonal dimensions of philosophical issues. In the existentialist *Cube* (1997) the characters are trapped in a maze whose purpose and structure they do not understand, and while using logic and mathematics to escape they also have to deal with their own obsessions and irrationalities. In *Cypher* (2002), the protagonist attempts to define himself solely through his actions, bypassing memory. Furthermore, *Splice* was produced by Guillermo Del Toro, the director of *Blade II* (2002) and *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006), who is known for his predilection for narratives that pit themes of personal trauma against impersonal, socio-historical forces. The film’s status as an independent, low-budget production works in its favor, shielding the director from the temptation to comply with science-fictional cinematic clichés, such as elaborate, high-tech

special effects and over-populated, prop-loaded action scenes. Instead, the film's value rests on the ideas that underpin its narrative and on the symbolism of its images, especially the image of Dren.

Dren is an "Animal Plus" (to adapt the transhumanist term "Human Plus"). She is also a mythical construct, and every part of her constitution has symbolic value. Her facial characteristics are mainly humanoid, which allows for expression, and invites the viewer to identify with her and attempt to understand her emotions. Although she is a biped, she has the hind legs of a quadruped, evoking the numerous human-animal hybrids that exist in world mythology, such as centaurs, fauns and adlet. She also has the symbol of animality *par excellence*, a tail, which is equipped with an additional marker of non-human power – a poisonous sting. Finally her wings, besides giving her ornamental and aesthetic appeal, signal the archetypal image of the angel.

Dren's characteristics evoke both vulnerability and danger, and lead her creators (and, by extension, us, since we see from their point of view) to interpret her behavior in terms of these traits. Inherently, however, she remains a mystery, a manifestation of life that cannot attain an identity since she is the only one of her kind. In a daring narrative move, Dren also changes sex – as indeed happens with some marine life, such as mollusks and crustaceans (Kazancıoğlu and Alonzo 2009). This makes any attempt to prescribe her identity in human or social terms even more elusive, since gender is a defining element of the human, from both biological and social perspectives.

Natali was working on the idea of *Splice* for ten years, which gave him ample time to ponder the important scientific developments in genetic research that have taken place since the late 1990s. In many ways, the film was released at an appropriate time, soon after the decoding of the human genome and progress in self replicating cells, developments which are re-defining the distinction between the physical constitution of an individual and the biology of a species (see, for example, Gerstein et al 2007). *Splice* speculates on these scientific developments by staging them in a socio-familial context. A core message of the film is that our understanding of biological life may well be motivated by a sincere desire to learn something new, but it is also inevitably filtered through our experience of society and our own personal past.

References

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