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Psychoanalytic and cognitivist dramas in contemporary Science Fiction films

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Abstract | Contemporary Science Fiction films engage audiences in numerous dramatic ways. This diversity can problematize academic approaches to cinema which tend to encourage specific monolithic interpretations of film that stress certain dramatic contexts at the expense of others. A critic's *a priori* suppositions may dictate the ways in which any given film is interpreted. In particular, the still unresolved conflict between psychoanalytic and cognitivist approaches to film (in which filmmakers and spectators are understood either as unconscious subjects of ideology, or as rational independent agents) means that there can be little agreement about film's potential effects. This essay explores how recent Science Fiction films such as *Godzilla* (2014) and *Terminator Genisys* (2015) exploit *both* of these theoretical hermeneutic contexts. They manipulate, both consciously and unconsciously, dramatic pleasures that proponents of psychoanalysis and cognitivism traditionally think of as being mutually exclusive. They do this, furthermore, using the same filmmaking techniques in a symbiotic manner. As such, the Science Fiction blockbuster demonstrates the ways in which film can omnivorously utilise whichever aesthetic, ideological and dramatic tools are available to elicit diverse audience responses.

Keywords | Theory, Blockbuster, Spectacle, Psychoanalysis, Cognitivism



Resumo | **

Palavras Chave | **





Contemporary Science Fiction blockbusters manipulate audiences with highly flexible combinations of different dramatic contexts. It is now perhaps a truism that these films often feature, and appeal to, multiple genders in a manner very different to earlier examples of the genre (Tasker), despite accusations that these films frequently perpetuate atavistic gender conventions (King and Krzywinska 37-43). This essay locates the multiple dramas of contemporary Science Fiction cinema within the context of different academic approaches to film theory. Exponents of both psychoanalysis and cognitivism, diametrically opposed paradigms, claim monopolies on explaining how film engages spectators, and such claims frequently use preferred film texts as exemplars. So, while film *x* demonstrates how audiences are unconsciously manipulated by patriarchal ideology, film *y* is a good example of the spectator as rational agent, actively decoding information and speculating about potential outcomes. Typically, these claims are mutually exclusive, and offer holistic explanations of how narrative film (variously called realist, classic or classical) engages audiences. This essay claims, however, that contemporary Science Fiction provides a heightened example of how filmmakers manipulate multiple forms of audiences' dramatic interest that have traditionally only been associated with one theoretical paradigm. Both unconscious motivations *and* rational deductions and speculations operate simultaneously, using the same filmmaking techniques. These multiple dramatic contexts manipulate audience pleasures that have hitherto only been associated with a single filmmaking motivation which is thought of as being irreconcilable with the rival academic paradigm's account of that motivation. The following is an account of these rival theoretical claims, and examples of their dramatic manipulations in two contemporary Science Fiction films: *Godzilla* (2014) and *Terminator Genisys* (2015).

Although theoretical approaches to film contain many nuances there has been, historically, a significant epistemological conflict between two broad paradigms which, for the sake of clarity, can be identified as psychoanalysis and cognitivism. The former, psychoanalysis, is an explicitly subjective and political approach, which is sceptical about the autonomy of the human mind. The individual is first and foremost a subject whose consciousness is (at least in part) determined by economic, social, cultural and historical conditions. The influence of these conditions is obfuscated in various ways, including through ideological apparatuses such as literature and film (Althusser; Baudry). Consequently, all cultural activity is political – realist film is a tool of capitalist and patriarchal ideology, with both filmmaker and spectator unconsciously complicit. Academic criticism can be a means to expose and challenge this ideology. My subsequent analysis will



focus on two aspects of this broad psychoanalytic approach. The first is Freud's Oedipal drama, which explores children's unconscious desires towards their parents (*Interpretation*). The second approach is indebted to both Freud and Lacan, and focuses on how film generates a masochistic form of pleasure by suturing over its inevitable grammatical inconsistencies, and thereby positioning the subject-spectator into a passive position in relation to the ideological film text. Stephen Heath calls this the "drama of vision" (514).

Cognitivism, conversely, focuses on an active, rational filmmaker and spectator. Both of these forms of human agency are involved in complex cognitive processes which translate automated, non-conscious stimuli into conscious schemata of assumption, expectation, recollection, hypothesis and confirmation (Bordwell 335). My analysis here will focus on one aspect of this approach which Noël Carroll calls "erotetic narration" (130). This is an oscillating narrative structure that "proceeds by generating a series of questions that the plot then goes on to answer" (130). I will call this the 'drama of knowledge'. Three dramatic manipulations of audiences, then, operate in contemporary Science Fiction. The first two, the Oedipal drama and the drama of vision, operate unconsciously, both in terms of filmmaking motivation and audience pleasure. The third, the drama of knowledge, operates consciously, both for filmmakers, who attempt to manipulate audiences' desires to uncover the reasons why narrative events unfold in certain ways, and by the spectators enjoying the schemata they employ to decode the erotetic structure.

Godzilla demonstrates the close interaction of these various dramas. These interactions occur at both the film's narrative and cinematographic levels. In terms of the former, the first character to explore the causes of the strange phenomena that will subsequently be attributed to the eponymous monster, Joe Brody (Bryan Cranston), is used by the filmmakers to exploit various dramatic contexts that can be associated with both cognitivism and psychoanalysis. When Joe's son Ford Brody (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) despairs of his father's quest for knowledge, Joe outlines how he has used echolocation devices to investigate the quarantined zone where they used to live:

Two weeks ago I'm tuning in... and, oh my God, there it is! Whatever *it* is... that's in there. Whatever it is they're guarding so carefully... started talking again. And I mean *talking!* I have to go back to our house, I need my old disks if they're still there. I need the data to be able to prove a base-line here, that this isn't a fantasy, that I'm not... what you think I am. I'm gonna find the truth, and end this, whatever it takes.



The exchange is filmed according to the conventions of the shot/reverse shot structure, with the camera moving closer in to each face as a visual reinforcement of the dramatic crescendo. As Ford rolls his eyes at his father's eccentricity his gaze falls upon newspaper and other written cuttings posted on the wall, and the camera moves across these snippets of as yet unexplained information. The subtle information music (Gorbman) begins to build towards a slow climax as the exchange goes on. These various verbal, visual and aural cues are all consistent with Carroll's "erotetic narration" (130). Filmmaking here attempts to exploit spectators' inbuilt desire to resolve that which is temporarily unexplained.

But the scene does not culminate in this erotetic exchange. Ford responds to his father's claim that 'I'm gonna find the truth, and end this, whatever it takes', after an appropriate dramatic pause, with:

FB: Why can't you just let her rest?

JB: Because I sent her down there, son. This wasn't just a reactor meltdown.

FB: I don't wanna hear this.

JB: I know. I know you don't. But you can't keep running away. And son, you can't bury this in the past.

Joe refers here back to the film's prologue, set fifteen years before, in which, while supervising a nuclear power station, he sent his wife Sandra (Juliette Binoche) to her death in an attempt to prevent a rupture in the reactor, which had been caused by the unseen movement of Godzilla. The young Ford had watched the power station explode in the distance as he was evacuated, unsure if his parents were alive or dead. This element of the exchange is conducive to an alternative theoretical context than the prior cognitivist one, and exploits a different dramatic context to the erotetic. It is principally Oedipal – the father (who soon dies) is blamed by the son (who represses his feelings for his lost mother), and the recovery and spousal replacement of the lost mother is emphasised in visual terms by both Joe's relationship with his wife Elle Brody (Elizabeth Olsen), and their son Sam Brody's (Carson Bolde) relationship to his mother. At the end of the film this new mother figure is also lost, amidst the confusion of Godzilla's rampage, and the father Joe and son Sam are left alone. The mother's return, first noticed by the son, is shot in a medium close-up which mirrors the close-up of the reunion of husband and wife that soon follows. The prologue's separation of the tight patriarchal unit is thereby restored.

The most important element of the erotetic-cum-Oedipal exchange between Joe and Ford is the fact that both potentially rival theoretical elements fit seamlessly together in terms



of the filmmakers' underlying dramatic intentions. Indeed, the scene's visual and aural patterns support the verbal synthesis of these different dramas. The individual components of the shot/reverse shot structure continue to get closer to the two characters' faces as the drama shifts from the erotetic to the Oedipal, and the same music continues to build towards its climax. Traditional cognitive and psychoanalytic approaches to this scene would each apply their own theory, and focus on the half of the scene which best fits with their own suppositions – the cognitivist stressing the drama of knowledge in the first half, and the psychoanalyst focusing on the Oedipal drama of the second half. The filmmakers, though, use the same filmmaking techniques, both consciously and unconsciously, to exploit the two theoretical contexts for two different dramatic purposes, and overlap these dramas in a way that a singularly cognitivist or psychoanalytic approach could not recognise.

The Oedipal drama, however, is not the principal unconscious pleasure that contemporary Science Fiction offers its audiences. Heath's drama of vision is a more ubiquitous, as well as more complex element of the genre. Heath develops Lacan's claim that the illusory positions which human subjects adopt are never entirely consistent. Subjectivity exists in Lacan's Symbolic Order, in which the subject attempts to reconcile the individual with illusory positions designated within the linguistic realm of rules and prohibitions, but in which such attempts are based on a misrecognition that is doomed to failure (although not to an *end* in failure, because the misrecognition and the attempted reconciliation is an interminable *process*). The incomplete illusion of subjectivity is echoed by the incomplete nature of the cinematic illusion.

The inevitable movement of the cinematic camera, and of the *mise-en-scène* which it films, means that film unavoidably and repeatedly reveals its artifice as characters move from a world that seems real towards and off a frame that suddenly marks the boundaries of that world. In so doing the camera temporarily shows the cracks and fissures in the ideological system which creates the film, and which positions and constitutes the subjectivity of the spectator, before suturing over that revelation through continuity editing and mechanisms of identification (Heath). This is how realism engages audiences – following the logic of Freud's *fort/da* game (*Beyond*), in which a young child repeatedly throws and retrieves a cotton reel (to pre-emptively demonstrate a mastery of loss), the spectator's unpleasure created by the temporary revelation of artifice is a necessary part of the pleasure of the *suture* back to the concealment of the artifice. Heath calls this "the jubilation of the final image" (514), which is analogous with the retrieval of the cotton reel after the self-inflicted loss of its casting away (the prior revelation of cinematic artifice). The process, therefore, is



masochistic – the acceptance of a temporary, painful revelation that not only is film an illusion, but that an ideological system positions the spectator as a constituted subject within that system. The pleasurable resolution of this unpleasure, back to the concealment of the cinematic artifice, and back to the spectator’s illusion of individual agency within an ideological system which in fact constitutes subjectivity, is enhanced by the temporary unpleasure. Realist cinema then, for Heath, both foregrounds and contains the revelation of its artifice, and of its role in hegemonic ideology. The pleasure of this masochistic oscillation, moreover, is so strong that it is allegorised into narrative and visual form; the “drama of vision becomes a constant reflexive fascination *in* films” (Heath 514, original emphasis). Realism’s oscillation between grammatical consistency and grammatical inconsistency is manipulated into a repetitive pattern of stable narrative and visual continuity, threatened by the suggestion of narrative and visual disruption, and a sudden shock which temporarily disrupts the narrative and visual continuity, before a return back to continuity. For Heath this narrative and visual structure is characterised by a “play on the unseen and the unforeseeable, [...] and the moments of violent irruption” (514). This masochistic narrative and visual oscillation is the drama of vision.

Godzilla demonstrates filmmaking’s manipulation of this (meta-)dramatic principle and, again, the ways in which a psychoanalytic interpretation of drama work closely with a cognitivist explanation. This is most clearly demonstrated in a brief lull in the film’s climactic action sequence. Here, the eponymous monster’s prehistoric nemesis activates a natural electromagnetic pulse. Marines aboard an attack ship are shown, their power disabled, and the cause verbally identified by one of their number. A helicopter shot of the city shows lights turning off block by block, before a cut to the interior of an ambulance shows Elle, within, at work with a colleague. Responding to the loss of lights and siren noise, she steps out, bemused, the only sound now that of pouring rain. Looking up, she notices something begin to appear from the foggy sky; a moment later a parachuting pilot slowly materialises from the fog (figure 1). The next shot reverses this perspective; Elle is shown staring up at the parachutist. Suddenly, the parachutist’s powerless airplane smashes into a tall building behind her (figure 2), juxtaposing the rain’s white noise and the gentle movement of the gliding parachute with the speed and loud sound of the crash. Shocked, Ella turns to witness the devastation.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Both cognitive and psychoanalytic hermeneutics can explain the scene. There is an erotetic element, with the questions ‘what is moving in the fog?’ answered by ‘a parachutist’, and ‘where has the parachutist come from?’ answered by the crashing plane. There is also evidence of the drama of vision, with the parachutist acting as a foreshadowing “play on the unseen and the unforeseeable”, and the parachutist’s crashing plane acting as one of the drama of vision’s “moments of violent irruption” (Heath 514). The previous scene I discussed, between father Joe and son Ford, combined two dramas, but even though it used the same filmmaking techniques to achieve its effects, it had a relatively distinct divide between its erotetic and Oedipal elements. In the plane crash scene these dramas are much more tightly entwined. The drama of vision’s oscillation is also erotetic. The lull element of the “play on the unseen and the unforeseeable” (514) is both question (what is emerging from



the fog?) and answer (a parachutist), and a further question (where has the parachutist come from?) which is answered within the parameters of “the moments of violent irruption” (514) (from a plane which is hurtling downwards). Rival epistemologies can only explain film in terms of their own internal logics. *Godzilla* suggests, however, that filmmakers are happy to exploit the dramatic premises underpinning both paradigms, and to do so in ways that combine and reconfigure the dramas of vision and knowledge into dramatic manipulations that go beyond the understandings of either in purely theoretical terms. The spectacular nature of contemporary Science Fiction facilitates these complex manipulations.

Terminator Genisys demonstrates the extent to which *Godzilla*'s dramatic manipulations are typical of contemporary Science Fiction, as it contains an almost identical bundling of the dramas of vision and knowledge, and of the Oedipal drama, although *Terminator Genisys*' Oedipal drama is extended into an Electran drama consistent with the shift towards a female action hero protagonist in (some of) the *Terminator* franchise. This Electran element, derived from Carl Jung's revision of Freud's approach to female psychosexual development, appropriates the male child's patricidal and sexual desires towards his father and mother, and produces the female child's matricidal and sexual desires towards her mother and father.

Terminator Genisys continues the franchise's time travelling revisioning of the original *The Terminator* (1984). In the latest iteration, John Connor (Jason Clarke) leads the human Resistance of 2029 in a final onslaught against Skynet, the artificial intelligence that seeks to destroy humanity. He is ostensibly successful, although Skynet manages to send a T800 Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger, with Brett Azar as body double) back in time to 1984 to kill John's mother Sarah (Emilia Clarke), and therefore destroy the Resistance before it could be born. John's right-hand man, Kyle Reese (Jai Courtney) travels back after the Terminator to protect Sarah. This is all the backstory to the original film, which is the account of Kyle and Sarah's fight against the Terminator in 1984.

Terminator Genisys revises the original events in a number of ways which tightly intertwine the three dramas of interest here. The scenes in which the Terminator and Kyle first materialise in 1984 are intentionally shot in an almost indistinguishable manner to the original film. Because time travel means that anything not encased in living material is destroyed, so that the time travellers must be transported naked, the Terminator, in both films, approaches three loitering 1980s punks in order to obtain their clothes. The editing and *mise-en-scène* of the two scenes are almost identical. *Terminator Genisys*' revision, however, sees a further time traveller's appearance, another T800 Terminator, again played by



Schwarzenegger who, it is shortly revealed, is protecting Sarah in this new time line. The change is marked in erotetic terms, but not in terms consistent with the drama of vision, in this first instance. When the first Terminator tells the punks, as he does in the original, ‘your clothes, give them to me’, he is interrupted by an off-screen voice, in Schwarzenegger’s unmistakable Austrian accent, saying ‘you won’t be needing any clothes’. The original Terminator, in medium close-up when this line is delivered, turns and moves slightly to reveal a figure in long shot, obscured by shadows moving forwards. The shot reverses to reveal the original Terminator furrowing his brow enquiringly, before showing a point-of-view of the robotic gaze which identifies, in the form of the computerised brain’s onscreen text, that the approaching figure is another T800. The camera then cuts to a medium shot of this figure, who lifts the hoodie which still temporarily conceals his features, to reveal, indeed, another T800 played by Schwarzenegger.

Each of these elements manipulates the drama of knowledge. When the foreknown sequence with the punks is interrupted, the dramatic nature of the questions about who is interrupting, and how and why another Terminator has travelled to disrupt the first Terminator’s mission, is enhanced by slowly answering the questions. These answers come in an oscillating pattern; the recognisable voice suggests who is interrupting, but the next long shot of the shadowed figure reinstates ambiguity; the original Terminator’s point-of-view then identifies the figure as a T800, but the next medium shot obscures the second Terminator behind the shadow cast by a hoodie, before that hoodie is pulled back to conclusively identify the second figure as another Terminator. Because this is the first reveal of a new timeline, and because the filmmakers want to drip-feed ambiguity about the presence and motivations of the second Terminator, there are no enhanced forms of the drama of vision here. The second Terminator’s interrupting dialogue may be something of a surprise, within a sequence that many audience members will already know, but the second Terminator does not violently interrupt the scene. He talks to his enemy before he begins to shoot at him.

Kyle’s revised arrival scene, which follows this, and in which the fact that a new timeline is taking place has already been established, combines the dramas of knowledge and vision much more closely. As in the original, Kyle is pursued by police into a closed clothes store. In the revision, the first policeman who pursues Kyle is a T1000 Terminator (Lee Byung-hun) in disguise. In the ensuing fight Kyle briefly escapes, but is cornered, with a real policeman, by the T1000. As the enemy closes in for the kill the narrative is definitely erotetic; the question about how Kyle might survive is enhanced by the policeman’s question to him, ‘we’re screwed aren’t we?’ The answer to this question, as in the parachutist scene in



Godzilla, is part of the drama of vision as well as the drama of knowledge. A bus bursts through the glass windows, knocking the T1000 to the ground. Just as the policeman's question is the first part of the drama of knowledge, with the answer being 'Kyle will be saved by the arrival of rescuers in a bus', so too the policeman's question is the first part of the drama of vision, a "play on the unseen and the unforeseeable" which foreshadows the bus arrival's "moments of violent irruption" (Heath 514).

The film's most heightened admixtures of these two dramas occur, though, when they are joined by the third, Oedipal/Electran, drama. The franchise already had some complex familial interactions prior to this film – Kyle travelled back in time because he was in love with a photograph of Sarah, and there he fathered John, who in the future will be his mentor. *Terminator Genisys* extends these relations. After an opening sequence in which the adult Kyle narrates the events of the machines' war against humanity, and talks about the world before Judgement Day, which his parents described to him, the young Kyle (Bryant Prince) hides from the machines in a dark maternal tunnel. A Terminator appears, and is about to kill him when John, whom Kyle has not yet met, abseils in through a manhole, kills the Terminator, and takes the boy under his wing. Later, when Kyle experiences visions of possible pasts while travelling through time, a montage directly connects John's intervention in the tunnel with Kyle's real parents, as the same shots of the boy about to hide in the tunnel are intercut with scenes of a possible happy home life that exists in a different timeline.

The film's Terminators, too, are cast in the role of both a parent and a murdering son. In *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) Sarah (Linda Hamilton) remarked that the T800 which the future John (Michael Edwards) had programmed to help her made a good father figure for the young John (Edward Furlong). In *Terminator Genisys*' alternate timeline, Sarah's own parents had been killed by a T1000 sent back to 1973, and she had been saved by a T800, the second Terminator in the scene with the punks in 1984, whom she thereafter calls 'Pops'. The future John, meanwhile, is abducted by Skynet, implanted with nanotechnology that turns him into a T3000 Terminator, and sent back in time to kill both Sarah and Kyle, his mother and father/adopted son. This T3000/John's attempts to kill his parents tightly combine the dramas of knowledge, of vision, and the Oedipal drama.

The T3000/John tracks Sarah and Kyle down to a hidden bunker outside San Francisco. The two escape, with the help of Pops, in a school bus. John emerges from the bunker and spots the bus from a distance. The film then enters the lull element of the drama of vision's oscillation, preceding the violent irruption which shortly completes the oscillation. The protagonists in the bus enter a tunnel, and discuss tactics. When they emerge from the



tunnel there is the violent irruption, as John, on a motorbike, suddenly lands on the roof of the bus. This is both erotetic and suturing, both an answer to an established question, and the violent irruption following the “play on the unseen” (Heath 514). These previous elements were established in the shot following John’s point-of-view of the escaping bus. When he emerges from the tunnel he walks past lines of parked motorbikes. After he spots the bus, he is shown in medium close-up, without the bikes in shot, but the sound of a bike’s engine revving off-screen can now be heard, and John turns his head away from the bus and towards this sound. The erotetic element, then, operates as Q1) how have the antagonists escaped? A1) in a bus; Q2) how will John catch up with them? A2) on a motorbike. The answer to this second question is pre-empted by the shots of the bikes, and the medium close-up of John hearing the bikes, and confirmed by his leap onto the bus, on a bike. These erotetic elements also work within the context of the drama of vision. The clues about how John will pursue the bus pre-empt the violent irruption which they foreshadow, operating as both the “play on the unseen” and the “moments of violent irruption” (Heath 514). An irruption without these earlier clues would not sufficiently narrativise film’s masochistic oscillation between grammatical consistency and inconsistency, just as it would be an answer to a question that had not been previously posed. In both cases it would not fully exploit the dramatic potential of two different theoretical accounts of audience pleasure.

The bike’s violent irruption, however, is only the first part of this sequence’s erotetic and suturing oscillations. Sarah, driving the bus, swerves, and the bike crashes to the ground, although John is not on it. Pops and Kyle start shooting into the roof where they suspect John may still be. Sarah vocalises this uncertainty – ‘where is he?’ ‘I can’t see him,’ Kyle replies. The answer to this question, and the violent irruption to this “play on the unseen” (Heath 514), will shortly be given, but the filmmakers defer the resolution to these two dramatic oscillations by cutting to a shot from the side of the bus, a mobile helicopter shot establishing that the bus is about to go onto the Golden Gate bridge, a shot of a police car approaching the bus from behind, an interior shot of the police driver talking on his radio, and a cut back to the interior of the bus with relatively lingering shots of each of the three protagonists looking up towards the roof. When the violent irruption/answer to where John is finally comes, it demonstrates how the prior lull was as much a “play on [...] the unforeseeable” as on “the unforeseen” (Heath 514), as John’s hand bursts through the floor of the bus, grabbing Pops’ leg, and catching the bus’ inhabitants and the audience unawares. Ambiguity about John’s whereabouts has been established in such a way, here, that anticipation builds towards an expected climax, but in a somewhat unexpected manner. And, given that the oscillation about



John's whereabouts once he has landed on the bus was preceded by a similar oscillation about how John would catch up with the bus, the pattern of this sequence follows two dramatic logics that, at the theoretical level are mutually exclusive, but at the filmmaking level work in symbiotic harmony. These two dramas, moreover, are enhanced by an underlying third, Oedipal, drama, as John attempts to kill his parents, who are defended by a guardian robot nicknamed Pops.

These two films demonstrate the ways in which contemporary Science Fiction filmmakers exploit symbiotic dramas to elicit numerous audience responses, and use similar filmmaking techniques to elicit those responses, with the audience reaction to one drama able to enhance the reaction to another drama. The inter-paradigm debates between psychoanalysis and cognitivism have therefore misunderstood how the interpretative strategies they employ operate; it does not matter whether psychoanalysis or cognitivism offers the more convincing explanation of how film operates if filmmakers themselves can exploit the underlying pleasures of both theoretical contexts to better facilitate desired audience responses which can include the dramas of knowledge and vision, and the Oedipal drama, all at the same time, without their being mutually exclusive.

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