Enya Meng

ENL160

Formal Film Analysis Essay

7/13/15

Professor Jessica Jordan

Word Count:1260

Splice: A Horrific Take on Science and its Moral Repercussions

In a world of advancing technology, *Splice (2009)* is the story of two scientists who do the unthinkable and commit the ultimate taboo: create a human-animal hybrid. In a twist of sci-fi and horror, the film explores the consequences of “playing God” and the responsibility behind creating life. The lines of morality are blurred as the creature, Dren, develops to display human-like expressions and mannerisms. The compelling family dynamic between the scientists Elsa, the wife, Clive, the husband, and the otherworldly “progeny” Dren, twists and contorts the standardized nuclear family model, enveloping the family in layers of incest when it is discovered that Elsa used her own DNA as the human element in Dren. The film explores themes that prod at the human conscience, provoking disgust and horror through its cinematic techniques and powerful acting; it delves into the reaches of science and its moral consequences and the attribution of the alien to birth and the maternal body.

The 2000s marked a rapid advance in technology and scientific breakthroughs such as the Apple iPhone debut and the retail availability of the personal DNA testing kit, commercializing human genotyping. Along with any gain in technology comes the accompanying fear of the unknown. When the cinema was in its developmental stages in the early 1900s, the fear of these novel moving pictures resulted in warnings of its satanic themes and the imminent breakdown of community Christian values. With each new invention, Americans are wary of the long term effects of these “unnatural products” on human society. *Splice* is the epitome of the old adage of “just because you can doesn’t mean you should” and the creation of Dren parallels the creation of the monster in *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley.

In the name of revolutionizing science and blurring the lines between life and death, the creators in both *Splice* and in *Frankenstein* make morally ambiguous decisions in order to fulfill their dreams, and ultimately end up with more than they've bargained for. Unable to control the creation’s actions, Elsa and Clive's expectations of their creation are broken at every turn, from the discovery of Dren’s amphibian lungs to her sex change in lieu of her death. In the novel, Frankenstein is horrified by his monster from the onset of its awakening, and from then on, loses control of it. Though the couple plan on eliminating their creature, once Elsa realizes that it’s alive, she pushes to keep their creation and to raise it in secret for the sake of scientific discovery.

Elsa is sympathetic to Dren, treating her as a substitute daughter, while Clive is much more reserved about the genetic anomaly, constantly wavering about their decision to keep Dren alive, and even attempts to drown the child. While readers had a glimpse inside the monster’s mind in *Frankenstein* to sympathize with its child-like wonder, confusion, fear, and anger, the viewers are outsiders to Dren's emotions. The subjective camera takes the view of Elsa and Clive, and the scientist duo project their own interpretations of Dren’s reactions and emotions. In the reaction shot as Elsa slaps Dren for Dren's causal murder of the cat, the camera focuses on Dren's face as she hisses in anger, tackles Elsa to the ground, and seems to threaten Elsa's very life. But at the last moment, Dren's dangerous stinger takes the key from the stunned Elsa and makes to flee from the barn. Through this segment, the viewers have no access to Dren's thoughts and motivations, only to Elsa's horror as Dren callously kills the cat. It's hard to determine whether Dren's disobedience to her human parents is part of her nature or if her behavior is a byproduct of her stifling confinement. Frankenstein's monster takes retribution on his creator when the monster's demands for a companion are not met; the story of creator and creation in an eternal struggle of chaser and the chased in Frankenstein parallels the closing scenes of *Splice* as the film diffuses into a frantic escape from the predatory Dren.

The theme of the fear of the unknown in advancing science and technology is inevitably intertwined with the mystery of the human body. Without the medical advancements and the improving understanding of DNA of modern society, the human body was very much alien, inscrutable in its perplexity, especially in the fields of childbirth. Viewers take in a fluid filled world at the opening credits, watching as scales peel off the fleshy walls in a dimly lit space as the camera flows from one credit to the next. The peeling of scales is a symbol of aging and degeneration, but also of reptilian rebirth. The next scene opens up to a very literal birthing as the camera has an iris lens from the point of view of the birthed creature, the only shot in the film from a genetically modified creature. Dren is incubated in a womb like sac enclosed in a tank. When she emerges, she appears as a typically horrific otherworldly alien, fleshy colored with a single arm-like structure wildly thrashing about. Its first reveal in the film looks like a relic of another world, a pale skinned embryo-like creature, looking half developed, topped with two antennae; it is alien in every sense. In the scene where Clive has sex with Dren, the idea of an otherworldly creature is cemented by her wings sprouting from her back and the regrowth of her poisonous stinger as she writhes in the throes of ecstasy.

The actors, Adrien Brody playing Clive, the sex deprived husband who is leery of the moral implications of their experiment, and Sarah Polley playing Elsa, the wife less cautious about breaking the rules and seeming to harbor a deeper motivation to mothering Dren, are the forces that make *Splice* possible. The tension is tangible between Clive and Elsa as they argue over fate of Dren, and Elsa’s superb acting reels in the audience, especially with her shaky smile when she asks Clive about his knowledge of Dren’s amphibian lungs. However, the actors flip flop on their feelings regarding Dren, an emotional switch that is hard for viewers to relate to as Elsa coldly removes the stinger and Clive succumbs to Dren's seduction.

The buildup behind Clive's frustration and ultimate surrender to copulating with Dren could have been explored further by the film. Filming moments where Elsa blatantly refuses Clive intimacy, and pushes him literally into Dren's embrace would have added more substance to the escalation of Clive’s fall and enhanced the anticipatory emotion for the viewers. As they discover that Dren is very much alive after her temporary “death” and has undergone a sex change, the film dissolves into a chase scene, the crane overview camera angle drinking in their fleeing forms into the dark forest, interposed with flashes of wings and the face of a reborn Dren. No solid reasoning is given behind male Dren's sudden urge to procreate with Elsa and the horror of the rape scene seems like an inadequate story twist to add horror and disgust, even as the eventual impregnation of Elsa wraps another layer of incest to their dysfunctional family.

The message that Splice leaves with the audience is a cautionary tale: the telling of an imminent destruction when humans cross moral lines and perverse natural order. The themes that Splice plays with are more than just the typical alien and horror elements; it brings home the very real fear of today’s society, the old age fears of a new century of technology: the limits of science and its capacity to destroy.