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REVIEW

“It is you... always was...”: A Brilliant Message from a First Time Director

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Transcendence (2014)

Genre: Science Fiction

Director: Wally Pfister

Screenwriter: Jack Paglen

Cinematography: Jess Hall

Music: Mychael Danna

Cast: Johnny Depp, Rebecca Hall, Kate Mara, Paul Bettany, Clifton

Collins Jr., Morgan Freeman

Runtime: 119 Minutes

Transcendence is Wally Pfister's first project as a director. He has worked with several renowned directors, and his ingenuity lies in cinematography. Unfortunately, critics are much interested in Pfister's being a cinematographer-turned-into-director. Most of the reviews are misleadingly reflective of the mediocrity of this film. Primarily, some of the critics are overwhelmed with the directorial flaws (see Phelan, 2014, & Clarke, 2014 etc.). In addition, other groups of critics are concerned with Johnny Depp's idiosyncratic (to some extent *odd*) onscreen presence (see Baillie, 2014). Additionally, reviews also cast a shadow of doubt on the purposes of both the actors and the director (see Travers, 2014). However, *Transcendence* is a film with a retrospective plot, and Johnny Depp

in a quasi-negative role. With so many promising films and their not-so-overwhelming plots this year (kindly keep in mind Darren Aronofsky's *Noah*, Jaume Collet-Serra's *Non-Stop*, Neil Burger's *Divergent* etc.), *Transcendence* succeeds in providing a message rich in body studies.

The film starts with a subtle establishing shot accompanied by the narrator Max Waters's (Paul Bettany) commentary. The shot reminds one of a cyber apocalypse, and Max narrates the story of Dr. Will Caster (Johnny Depp) in voiceover. Dr. Will and his wife Evelyn (Rebecca Hall) are both scientists working on a futuristic project on artificial intelligence named PINN (Physically Independent Neural Network). Dr. Will predicts that there will be a “technological singularity,” and he terms it “Transcendence” in a fundraising conference. After his speech, Dr. Will is shot by an extremist group named RIFT (Revolutionary Independence From Technology), which is a part of series attack against government sectors on artificial intelligence. Interestingly, the bullet shot at Dr. Will was poisoned with radioactive polonium inducing a slow-rate death. Desperate to save Will, his wife Evelyn tries to upload Will's consciousness with the help of Max based on the theoretical speculations propounded by Will himself. With some dramatic interventions from RIFT and Evelyn's fanatic pursuits, Will's consciousness is finally uploaded into the cyberspace. Despite of an array of interesting and speculating feats achieved by Will's network, everyone including Evelyn is riddled with the question whether allowing Will to continue his technological pursuits is a good idea or not.

The film has provoked a number of negative criticisms. Although, some shots of the film is nothing less than spectacular, Pfister's talented cinematography is absent in the film. Russell Baillie, echoing this thought in his review, mentions the misuse of the potential characters like Bettany and Freeman; he concludes that they are only “attempting to be the voice of reason” (Baillie, 2014, para. 9). By appraising Pfister's directorial ingenuity, Chris Nashawaty points at the bland script of Jack Paglen that consists of

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“half-explained cyber-nonsense and wheezy, kneejerk man-vs.-technology clichés” (Nashawaty, 2014, para. 2). In addition, Nashawaty points at the waste of a very good cast. Tim Robey outrageously wishes that the script was never written at the first place (Robey, 2014). Matt Zoler Seitz, who points out a number of prospects that the film failed to avail, also points out the depthless script (Seitz, 2014). Interestingly, Richard Roeper credits not only the whole film but also the script, and yet mentions that the script is “dense and fast and wildly imaginative and *sometimes baffling*” (*emphasis added*, Roeper, 2014, para. 17).

Although, a lion’s share of the reviews relegates the film into the category of a wasted big budget enterprise, some critics find the ideas of the film to be riveting. Matt Zoler Seitz and Richard Roeper unreservedly appraise the film. Seitz convincingly argues that *Transcendence* has been a true science fiction after quite a long time aptly befitting the categorical specifications of the genre. After a detailed account of the plot, he provides a somewhat stretched but useful Biblical reading of the film. In addition, his review applauds the ideas that the film accommodates (Seitz, 2014). Not quite like Seitz, Richard Roeper starts his review by mentioning the shadowy influence of masterpieces like *A.I., Invasion of the Body Snatchers, 2001: A Space Odyssey, Blade Runner, and The Matrix* in the film. However, Roeper declares: “And yet. What a stunning piece of work” (Roeper, 2014, para. 7). His review primarily focuses on the non-ethical concerns of processing of cyborg. Roeper points out a weakness of the script and elucidates its baffling aspect. Nonetheless, he remains appreciative in his review, and he even declares that Ray Bradbury and Rod Serling would have appreciated the contents that the film deals with (Roeper, 2014).

Evidently, most of the critics go against the film so vehemently that they fail to appreciate any positive aspects that the film contains; it is rich in ideas specifically related to body studies. Unlike James Cameron’s 2009 blockbuster *Avatar* that demonstrates that even a damaged body can be a lucrative corporate capital, Pfister’s *Transcendence* underscores the linkage between corporate identity

and the necessity of a (perfect) body. According to Lennard J. Davis, the industrial world is solely interested in lucrative productions since ages. Davis demystifies the myths of an able-bodied person or of an active life as a propaganda to amplify and multiply profit by the capitalists (2001, p. 2403). Dr. Will’s reinvention (reincarnation?) of himself in a corporate setting certainly reminds one of the necessities of having a functional body. Will’s uploaded version is constantly misunderstood owing to his inexplicable actions. Therefore, the digitized version of Will reinvents himself in a bodily avatar (like an automated Facebook account creating an owner for its own). Will’s exploitation of the digital world enables him to create a giant corporate empire. In the due course of events, when everybody becomes growingly skeptical of his actions (like his constant surveillance, injecting injured and mutilated bodies with his own source code etc.), Will’s reappearance in a bodily form is impeccably timed. It is, as if, he makes one last attempt to secure his corporate position by dint of his physical avatar.

Will’s such reinvention of himself is necessitated by a basic logic of reigniting Evelyn’s love for Will. The more the story goes deeper in the film, the more Will’s wife Evelyn becomes disillusioned about her husband. She is the only individual in the film who is exposed to the conundrum of choosing between two extremes of either letting Will’s uploaded version live or to destroy its/his source code with a virus. Will’s uploaded version tries its level best to accommodate human Will in its actions, but Evelyn becomes more and more disturbed by those. At the final phase of the film, just the moment Evelyn enters the premises for destroying Will’s source code, Will’s physical presence startles her. Nonetheless, Evelyn ultimately succeeds in breaching Will’s security measures. Will, in attempt to heal Evelyn’s wounded body, injects into her his source code and becomes infected with the virus. Before shutting down completely, Will shows Evelyn the blessings of nanotechnology. Evelyn realizes her fault, and to add to the ambiguity of the script, Will retorts, “It is you... always was...” Therefore, Will’s recreated body attains a romantic rationale in addition to its corporate one.

Not only Will's uploaded version creates a bodily avatar for himself, but also does he repair some other mutilated bodies. Will injects his source code to handicapped people, thus gifting them the bodily abilities that they lacked. Additionally, the injected people achieve the ability to complete tasks that are impossible for normal humans. Moreover, Will is able to control them by doing so, as those people who are injected carry the same source code. Unfortunately, this act sets off the final ripple of terror in the humans. They cannot but contemplate that Will is creating an army of his own in order to overthrow humankind. Furthermore, when Will's cyborgs are led to attack the humans who are trying to control and destroy the facility, the audience seems to release a sigh of relief as the inevitable is about to take place. The script subtly handles the situation with a deliberate ambiguity. Yes, from one viewpoint, the cyborgs attack the humans and overpowering the latter with their machine-like abilities. On the other hand, it seems more like self-defence and the petition for a space for their own.

The idea of self-defence and the craving for space itself echo Judith Butler who, with reference to some of the latest mass demonstrations on streets and squares, relates body with physical space. Butler argues: "They struggle not only for the idea of social support and political enfranchisement, but their struggle takes on a social form of its own" (Butler, 2011, para. 12). The cyborgs that Will creates do more safeguarding of their own premises than attacking human intruders. They are just interested in securing their area from human infiltration. As humans go into attacking position, so do the cyborgs. The idea of carrying source code in physical body is not new; currently we all are carrying source codes in our pockets – thanks to the cellular technology. Therefore, most hauntingly, we are no less cyborg than those who are in the film. The only rudimentary difference is that we do not contain the code inside our bodies; we carry them with our bodies. It is very possible that if a simple device with an operating system can extend our voices and images (cell-phones for example), then the operating system can also amplify our physical abilities *if placed inside our bodies*. In that

sense, *Transcendence* opens up the possibilities and compels us to renegotiate our apprehensive perception of cyborgs the moment they stand up against human aggression.

As evident from the discussion so far, Pfister's *Transcendence* is a film that unfortunately remains underappreciated so far. The critics, in most of the cases, are vocal about the depthless and irrational script, and Johnny Depp's typical and yet eccentric onscreen presence. Surprisingly, very few critics have actually appreciated the film for its ideas. This review focuses on the angles exclusive to body studies. This requires mentioning that the aspects related to body studies are just one of many. The few references of body studies carry an unforgettable depth of critical insights. Primarily, the film reinstates the crucial interconnectedness between corporate identity and the necessity of having a perfect body in order to perpetuate that identity. Then, the film as well touches upon the concept of love with the physical body. Finally, the film beautifully balances out the commonplaceness of such ideas by redefining the cyborgs countering cyber-paranoia. For what these words worth, in a nutshell, *Transcendence* by Wally Pfister is a fine introductory lesson of the complex matrix of body studies.

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