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## Besson, Luc (1959- )

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## Besson, Luc (1959–)

In *The Divine Comedy* (1321), Dante Alighieri creates a “pseudo-Trinity” of divine women that includes Dante’s deceased love Beatrice, who takes the author on a tour of Paradise and ultimately saves his soul through their romantic and religious love. Although there are limits to Dante’s feminism, the passages laid the groundwork for future artists to suggest that sex is not always an impediment to salvation but may be a means of achieving it. In *Léon* (*The Professional*, 1994), *The Fifth Element* (1997), *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999), and *Angel-A* (2005), French filmmaker Besson created his own Beatrice variations whose love provides salvation for male characters. In *Léon*, an isolated hit man finds new life when he falls in love with an innocent young girl, while *The Fifth Element* features a romance between a grungy cab driver and a female Christ figure. *The Messenger* both deconstructs and deifies Joan of Arc, while *Angel-A* presents a would-be suicide rescued by a gorgeous angel—reminiscent of *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946). For Besson, institutional religion is oppressive and strips people of their dignity; only through love can life’s beauty be reaffirmed. As secularized as she is sexualized, Besson’s Beatrice retains an iconic grandeur and ability to save men from life’s meaninglessness.

Besson’s love of photography and storytelling made him an ideal filmmaker, preferring to focus on female protagonists because he found the stereotypically macho male figures uninteresting, invincible, and without psychological depth. In contrast, women characters could be richer because they often had to overcome a social or physical disadvantage. Although some viewers identify Besson with his male characters, others have identified him in his female characters—a charge he does not deny.

This idea that Besson is *both* his hero and heroine is most obvious in *Angel-A*, about Andre, an expatriate whose citizenship is unexpectedly revoked while he is temporarily in Paris. Penniless,



French director Luc Besson in New York City, 2010. AP Photo/Evan Agostini.

homeless, and in debt to loan sharks, Andre ponders suicide, but at the last second a beautiful woman appears and attempts suicide herself, distracting him with the opportunity to save her life. They spend some time together, and after she scares away the loan sharks she reveals that she is an angel assigned to show him that he is worthy of love. She explains that she is a reflection of his feminine side; if he learns to love her, he will learn to love himself as well. When the angel later invites him to make love to her, he refuses, preferring to wait until his spiritual rebirth is complete. At the end of the film, Andre pleads with the angel to stay and not return to heaven, where she has no memory, no life of her own, and only responds to God's commands to help troubled humans. Should she stay with Andre, she would find independence and love. When the angel sprouts wings and seems pulled back to heaven, Andre leaps up and grabs her, pulling her down to Earth, proving himself worthy of her love. Their love defies God's will, and she is released.

*The Fifth Element* features a similarly incongruous love story between Korben Dallas—a retired marine turned cabbie—and Leeloo, the would-be savior of all life, who is at once the perfect human and the quintessence of life itself. Leeloo's mission is to defeat Mr. Shadow—an evil living planet that threatens to consume everything in its path—and his human agent, Zorg. The film flirts with a pacifist message; traditional military force cannot stop Mr. Shadow, which doubles in size when attacked. However, it is effective against Mr. Shadow's agents, and Korben is particularly good at gunning down Zorg's mercenaries, while Leeloo uses karate (in self-defense) to kill her opponents. Leeloo's priest protector, Father Vito Cornelius—arguably the most sympathetic portrait Besson ever painted of an establishment male religious figure—uses violence and deception to fulfill his mission, yet he is portrayed as the most consistently gentle of the characters and even saves Zorg's life when it would be in his best interest to let him die.

In a particularly powerful scene, Leeloo downloads 5,000 years of human history directly into her memory, resulting in an experience akin to Jesus' suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane when he takes into himself all of the sins of humanity. The burden of human evil destroys Leeloo's resolve, until Korben tells her that romantic love makes life worth living and humanity worth saving. Just when it seems that Leeloo's crisis of faith will result in the destruction of the universe, Korben tells her he loves her and kisses her, generating a divine Light of Creation that destroys Mr. Shadow and saves humanity.

In *The Messenger*, Besson presents Joan of Arc as driven primarily by a hatred of the British, haunted by a form of mental illness, but also praiseworthy for being a highly daring and charismatic figure who wins by refusing to see any obstacle as insurmountable. The film is told primarily from Joan's perspective, and audiences have reacted sharply to this presentation; some have found it captivating, sexy, and

intriguing while others were irritated and offended by it. Male characters in the film are similarly divided; typical of Besson's male characters, La Hire is loyal to Joan because he sees her as bloodthirsty, sexy, and a good leader but also because he believes that her visions are genuine and that she is a messenger from God—the “divine” female. His hatred of the British worries Joan because it mirrors her own, but she civilizes him somewhat by coercing him into giving up swearing.

The film is concerned with the inherent contradiction of the warrior/prophet. Why would a follower of Christ lead soldiers into battle? The Joan of George Bernard Shaw's 1923 play *St. Joan* resolves the conflict by arguing that invading hordes lose their humanity and become demonic figures, justifying retaliation. In contrast, Besson is much harder on Joan and consistently portrays her as a hypocrite, murderer, warmonger, and religious zealot, her early success cementing her faith in the fundamental rightness of her cause until the British finally capture her. Even as she triumphantly outwits and outargues most of the ecclesiastical court judges who question her, Joan has a far more difficult time in her cell responding to “the Conscience”—a mysterious cloaked figure that only she can see. The Conscience dogs Joan about her motivations and her inconsistent words and deeds. She initially assumes that the robed figure is the Devil, sent to shake her faith, but the film suggests two other possible identities—it is either God or Joan's conscience, a deliberate ambiguity that makes the film appealing to both religious and secular viewers.

By the end of the film, the Conscience convinces Joan that her words and deeds are not consistent with the message of a peaceful and loving God. She kneels before the Conscience and makes her final confession. “My Lord, I saw many signs. The ones I wanted to see. I fought out of revenge and despair. I was all the things that people believe they are allowed to be when they are fighting for a cause.” The Conscience grants her absolution, and in the final scene she is burned at the stake. A cross is shown held aloft as her ashes float upward, symbolically linking her to the crucified Christ.

Although the film is critical of Joan's zealotry, Besson's most strident criticism is ultimately reserved for the members of the ecclesiastical court who judge her and choose to execute her. The all-male court condemns Joan for androgyny and heresy, fearing that her claim to communicate directly with God made the clergy redundant. Besson suggests that the Catholic Church's eventual declaration that it made a mistake in executing Joan, and its decision to canonize her 500 years later, was a disingenuous and contemptible political maneuver. However, he does portray several of the priests in the tribunal as complex figures, some of whom believe that Joan is divine, while others are coerced into finding her guilty by the vengeful English, who want to ease their wounded pride by seeing the girl who defeated them burned at the stake.

Perhaps the most complex of Besson's "divine females" is Mathilda, the young heroine from *Léon* whose virtuous love brings redemption to a seemingly irredeemable assassin, Leon Montana. He is an ethical hit man who refuses to kill women and children, refrains from drinking alcohol because he believes assassins have "no right" to drink, and has a soft spot for Gene Kelly musicals. In fact, despite being an effective assassin, Leon is at heart an innocent who should never have become a hired killer. The camera shows a supposedly cold-blooded murderer lovingly tending to a potted plant, drinking milk, and sitting beneath a statue of the Blessed Virgin in his apartment.

Near the end of the film the audience learns that when Leon was 19 and living in Italy, he fell in love with a young woman from a wealthy and respectable family. Her father opposed the relationship but the daughter defied him and secretly continued to see Leon. When her father discovered her disobedience, he murdered her and bribed the authorities, who declared her shooting "accidental." Enraged, the young Leon sought justice outside of the law, killing the rich man and fleeing to New York to begin his career as a "cleaner" for a gangster named Tony. There, he lives a rootless existence, forsaking love and choosing death over life, until he begins a tentative friendship with Mathilda, the young daughter of a drug dealer who lives in a neighboring apartment. Mathilda's father has been withholding drugs from his partners, a rogue group of D.E.A. officers led by the maniacal Agent Stansfield. When her father fails to return the drugs, Stansfield storms their apartment and murders Mathilda's entire family. Mathilda—out buying groceries—returns to the building as the D.E.A. agents are scrambling to recover the drugs. Fearful of being discovered, she knocks insistently on Leon's door.

The rest of the film involves the consequences of Leon's decision to let her in, as he finds himself responsible for the life of a vulnerable young girl despite his attempts to sever all ties to humanity. Leon initially wants to wash his hands of her, but eventually agrees to train her to become an assassin so that she can defend herself and avenge her family. Despite her advances and his own romantic feelings for her, Leon seems determined to preserve her innocence and encourages her to behave more respectably. In turn, Mathilda helps Leon to mature; she teaches him how to read and write and she reawakens his heart by teaching him to love again, both as a father figure, a friend, and a potential love interest. The blurring of these roles often makes the film an uncomfortable viewing experience. For most of the film, Leon refuses to touch Mathilda, sleeps in an armchair alone, and behaves in a shy and innocent manner around her, especially when she becomes flirtatious. In one scene, she lies down on his bed, her arms spread out mimicking Jesus on the cross, as she announces, "Leon, I think I'm falling in love with you." It is at once a confession, an expression of innocence and naïveté, an invitation to sex, and a foreshadowing that she will ultimately be Leon's salvation. By the end of their

time together, Leon embraces life and hopes to find roots and happiness. When Stansfield tracks them down and it seems as if Leon will be killed, he reveals to Mathilda that she has finally taught him how to live. "I love you, Mathilda," he says, before sending her off to safety so that he can face Stansfield alone.

Far from being traditionally religious, Besson's worldview celebrates the importance of seeing things as they are instead of through the distorted lens of ideology. Arguably, Besson's use of the divine female muddies the truth in its own way by romanticizing and deifying women. However, for Besson, these "supernatural" women represent the possibility of transcending self-doubt and hatred and of fighting back against a corrupt society by rediscovering oneself in the act of falling in love.

*Marc DiPaolo*

*See also:* Angels; Clergy; Devil; End-of-the-World Films; Europe (Continental); God; Heaven; Joan of Arc; Science Fiction; Women.

### Further Reading

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### Bible Films

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Surprisingly, the Bible film is difficult to define. On the one hand, virtually all critics agree that *The Ten Commandments* (1956) is a Bible film. After all, it follows the life of Moses, arguably the central character of the Hebrew scripture. With depictions of famous biblical events like the burning bush and the golden calf, what else could this be but a Bible film? Its foundation in scripture notwithstanding, in order to fill out the film, quite a bit of extrabiblical material was added. Significant creativity was used, for example, in depicting the early life of Moses, including the addition of a fiancée and a childhood rivalry with Pharaoh that is absent in the biblical text. Such changes stretch and distort the biblical narrative, but somehow not enough to make the film "unbiblical" in the eyes of most audiences.