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ABRAXIS AESTHETIC ANALYSIS

by

TYE WILSON

B.A., Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2010

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

ABRAXIS AESTHETIC ANALYSIS

By

Tye Wilson

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Approved by:

Walter Metz, Chair

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

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TITLE: ABRXIS AESTHETIC ANALYSIS

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Walter Metz

The creation of cinema has been paralleled by the analytical study of motion picture since the birth of the art form. In regard to my thesis film, *Abraxis*, I have provided creative commentary through my paper. This commentary discusses my creative motivations, influences, and overall thematic description of the narrative structure in the film. The film and paper explore the human relationships to the hostile environment of space in comparison to the romanticized western, technology, and war. Within this context the paper will explore my creative voice while providing perspective on my influences and cinematic goals with the project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
EXPLICATION OF THESIS FILM	1
VITA	13
REFERENCES.....	14

The themes forwarded by my thesis film, *Abraxis*, have been the subject of many films and works of art throughout history. For example, why do filmmakers persist in placing the human species in the hostile frontier of space? Within my own film I have concentrated on concepts dealing with space as a hostile frontier, technology and its relationship to the human condition, and a universal critique of the American soldier and his or her relationship with the country.

We typically associate space with the science fiction genre and the western plays a significant role in the narrative of this film. The fascination our culture has always had with space resembles our interest in moving west when our ancestors began to migrate through the rest of the untamed country. We find it enticing to romanticize the danger and hostility of the unknown and gravitate towards stories and films depicting those intrepid enough to brave the plains. Here within this context, the western and space films walk hand in hand in structure. The environment is extremely dangerous and unpredictable; full of potential perils characters must overcome to reach their goals.

The garden variety western usually championed a lone gunslinger hero that wanders into town. Here the hero meets the villain and endeavors to contend with him on some dusty street to win the day and save the town from peril. *Abraxis* embraces this aesthetic in blocking of the characters, specifically the creature and Issacs as a way to build suspense. The creative concept was to place the hero and villain on the ship in a figurative street staring down each

other, waiting to draw their pistols for a final shootout. As mentioned earlier this was less of a commentary on the western genre and more of a cinematic tool and tribute to the parallel between space and the west.

Another creative decision was made to place our hero alone to face the trials of the narrative, thickened by a long history of combat and a troubled past. Many western heroes enter the town with such a history and long list of regret that they intend to rectify by their latest endeavor. In *Abraxis* Issacs is plagued by the memory of his parents' untimely death at the hand of the Maria creatures and the resulting childhood existence that followed. This ultimately led him into the military where he fought all the way through the war, eventually winning it and attempting to move on with his life. Here Issacs appears to have achieved the accommodation of his parents' demise by winning the war but now is motivated by the damsel in distress, another common western narrative plot.

However I made it a creative point to break from western romance whenever I could and found this to be just as interesting to the plot of the film. Reality strikes hard when Issacs describes his time in space as being isolated, cold, and dangerous. This is a character that has many scars and fought in this environment, leaving him emotionally crippled in some aspects. Issacs in this more developed stage of his life realizes the reality of danger in space and doesn't speak of it as romantic in the slightest. After all he only accepts this new job to protect his girlfriend's maiden voyage based upon his won traumatic experiences throughout the solar system. Through postproduction I even drained the color from the scenes to compliment the icy shell of space that surrounds our

character, locking him into his tomb. There are no beautiful landscapes and brilliant hues found in the film to romanticize the environment; the ship in space visual represents everything Issacs describes in the film to Alyssa.

Another major subject that was injected into the film was the interpretation of our species and our relationship to technology. Social media has changed the fabric of human connection and communication; there is a relative reason to believe that it will continue to do so in the future. Personal relationships have shifted from personal and intimate to distant, bearing in mind sites like Facebook and online dating sites. Steven Spielberg directed a film, *Minority Report*, where the very personal space we are naturally given is defied by eye recognition that sparks advertisers to personalize ads for you as a person walks by the store. This completely breaks down a personal social wall and sense of privacy, while contemporary social media creates more personal distance. These two concepts have been reflected in *Abraxis* in a couple different lights.

In my film the only personal interaction Issacs has is with the creature throughout the film and finally Alyssa for a brief moment toward the conclusion. The rest of my main character's interactions are through his helmet computer via audio or video feeds, even when Issacs tells his girlfriend he loves her is through a microphone. In this future landscape people are constantly separated from each other by the technology and this locks their social skills in a different setting than our own. Now this may be seen as a creature of circumstance in the film, however, Issacs has an opportunity to tell Alyssa he loves her when he sends her off to the escape pods. Instead Issacs stands there watching her leave, the

words he wanted to say lost in the back of his throat. The flashbacks provide, hopefully, a rare found opportunity in the future where Issacs makes a point to lay out under the stars and have a more personal relationship with Alyssa. Issacs, however subjective in the context of the film, talks to his computer Gladus like they have a relationship of their own. Although this may be a working relationship, Gladus sometimes finishes Issacs' sentences as if it knows what he is going to say. In Issacs' background it was considered that every soldier has a standard computer system in their helmets, but Gladus was designed and customized by Issacs himself almost as if he designed himself an objective friend. This only came through in the film subtly due to time restraints for the narrative structure but shows through their conversations during the unfolding action. Thus one of Issacs' main relationships through his adult life has been with a piece of software, a concept touched upon in the film "The Sixth Day" with Arnold Schwarzenegger. In that film our main character's best friend has a girlfriend that is a digitally projected woman that is driven by software designed from a perfect girlfriend. The summarizing point of these collected examples is the commentary on our technology effecting personal relationships between human beings.

Another technological aspect of interest in the film is the mode of probing the mind. Issacs is forced to undergo a psychological profile before boarding the Abraxis ship. Here, once again, technology has broken down the personal barrier and allowed interpersonal conscious and subconscious thoughts to be accessed. *La Jetee* was a creative inspiration here, and subsequently *12 Monkeys* as well.

In these two films, and my own, you never really see the technology that performs either the time travel or the mind probe. The goggles certainly resemble those worn by the character in *La Jetee* and have prevalence in my film, covering the eyes of the creature and dehumanizing it. Here the physical attributes of the technology take a back seat to the intertextual concept that the eye is the open window to a soul in a human being and when taken away, removes the person. *La Jetee* was shot using still images as well and prompted me to use the sound effect for still cameras to cue my own flashbacks, creatively thinking it an appropriate homage to the French film while traveling back into my character's past. It was mentioned after screening the film that circles were constantly focused on in the film; here I definitely attempted to make the eye more significant. The human eye has been shown in close ups in the film but is the one thing that must be covered in order to access the mind. Strangely enough Issacs is plugged into the same machine the creature was, tying the two together to suggest that Rogers has utilized this to control his soulless corpse. This has a practical application in the film also since the creature is essentially a corpse of a human that is animated by an artificial Maria creature. Within the context it is established that the creature enters through the human eye socket to gain access to the brain, and control of the human host.

Animation of inanimate objects has always found its way into cinema due to our fascination and fear of control. The very concept that an alien can enter our body not only creates a primal fear but also is well entrenched in our fear of disease and feelings of helplessness. In *Abraxis* Issacs and Rogers describe

the Maria creatures as creatures that use the human body as a puppet master would a doll. The fear of such a loss of control of our own body transcends into the zombie films as well, but finds many roots in space thriller films such as *The Thing*, *The Faculty*, *Alien*, and so on. This motivated the history of the Maria in the film so that they are an intelligent species but the creatures are a very real primal threat to humanity by using them as puppets.

The frontier is an item on a long bucket list of concepts romanticized in cinema and on in particular is war. Throughout my work I have provided commentary and subtext on our soldiers and their relationship to war and their country. Hollywood films and clever campaigns lure many soldiers into the military to fight the glamorous conflicts our country has found itself in. I certainly want to render the right idea on my creative and personal opinion on this subject. I come from a long history of military in my family and want nothing more than to support the individual soldier's struggle and sacrifices on behalf of our country. A lot of my films, including *Abraxis*, deals with how young men and women are naïve towards the horrors of war until they are in the thick of battle. In baptism under fire many soldiers return home changed people with a different perspective on the conflict they fought in and the country that receives them. Issacs is a man who fought in a major war in his time. Throughout his childhood he was motivated by revenge to reconcile grief bestowed upon him by the Maria attack on the colony on Earth's moon. Issacs depended on the military to restore his life and give him a motivated purpose in the world. This is a case found with many young men and women who are recruited from high school that don't have the

means for college and hail from low-income families. The military promises funds for college and sign on bonuses and skills that can be a competitive edge in the civilian work force. However this doesn't seem to be the case since many veterans, some I know personally, finish their duty to the country and even get injured in the service and can't find a job. Furthermore veterans have the intention to go to college based upon the promises of funds from the federal government and end up waiting and fighting for years to obtain it, funds they have been promised and have a right to. Now this particular subject was not touched upon in *Abaxis* but the "State" was mentioned many times throughout the film. This concept is that in this future there are no separate countries but a single unified government running the world. This is something that would be covered if this film were to have been or made into a feature length film. In *Abraxis* I focus on Issacs' past heavily but on his time spent being a veteran and war hero in the unified governmental world but snuck into the film that he was wrongfully discharged from the service for his heroism. In this world, like the film *Starship Troopers*, deviance of any order given by the state whether it is for the right cause or not is not tolerated. The landscape that Issacs comes from could and would be set up to critique a government with too much control and not enough commitment to the interest of taking care of their veterans. After all there is certainly something wrong with this country now if we are more than willing to send our youth off to the horrors of war but our convoluted and bureaucratic government does sufficiently compensate their service and sacrifices.

I stated above that Issacs returns after his time in the service a changed man. His character background dictates that, although he never expresses this in the short film, he is discontent with the government. Again if this project were to be a feature film I would concentrate more on the citizens and how they receive their veterans. We all like to think that we take care of our own and it gives us pride to see people picketing against the recent conflicts our country is involved in and view commercials about people going out of their way to care. I certainly believe there are many individuals out there who care for our veterans but also believe there are not enough of them. As a collective country we can have the power to change men and women in office and influence policy, however, why has there been no push for upgrading compensation of veterans' service? Unfortunately this is not much of an upgrade from our collective idiocy from the 1960's during the war in Vietnam. Soldiers don't make policy but many people found it appropriate to spit on and yell servicemen getting off planes. Why does a man in a uniform who has served his country have to feel ashamed and outcasted by the medals on his chest? This very same thing happens today; I have friends in the Navy who were spit on people while in their uniform! These narrow minded people have marginalized the soldiers and folded them into the government policies they stand against. This, once again, is another topic that would be focused on in a feature but was subtly added to the short film. Doctor Rogers towards the conclusion of *Abraxis* finally reveals his evil plan to build a Maria army to replace the human soldier and use Issacs as a combat test for the experiment. It is true that Rogers has other personal motivations when

considering his feelings about Issacs, however, has marginalized his life sacrifices down to being a random sequence of numbers for combat data. Rogers, like some of our own citizens today, have stripped the significance from Issacs' service and sacrifices and downgraded him from hero to numbers. It is true that many soldiers come back with a very different political mindset after they serve but many stereotype soldiers as conservative rednecks hell bent on being Republican till the day they die. I wanted portray Issacs as a complicated man but also a man who despite is unfortunate loss of his family, is intelligent and bares a significant load of common sense. Politics didn't weigh into Issacs' frame of thought when joining the military, which is true for many young men and women today. Politics seem to creep in later into the time of service and it drowned in the beginning by the promises of the government and training you receive in basic. Issacs in the short film comes off indifferent to politics and the world as it is but there is a lot of room in his complicated past to elaborate such concepts.

Overall, *Abraxis* forwards my commentary on our nation's impoverished stance on veterans' affairs. Politicians dictate the policy that sends them to fight and how they are treated when they return home. I believe political concerns have overridden the ethical treatment of our soldiers and veterans. This sorry state of affairs has inevitably led to substandard care for our most heroic citizens. Issacs is a strong willed individual who believed in the cause of his country. The message I intend to send via *Abraxis* is that any leader of a nation must as

strong as the men and women he or she is sending out to die. This rule should firmly apply to the American context as well.

Finally I would like to address the section of *Abraxis* where we “see” inside Issacs’ mind. If there is an experimental concept in the whole film, it is found here. I am primarily a narrative filmmaker but do create and watch experimental work as well. I certainly attempt to walk a line between these two modes of filmmaking and find experimental imagery and concepts to be a great story telling tool. This, in my opinion, is the best way to entertain an audience with a picture, but also provide them with a stronger creative voice from the author and simulate more complex thoughts and reactions.

Maya Deren is a filmmaker whom I have studied for years. Her films, *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *At Land* have influenced my experimental structure in *Abraxis*. In the beginning of the film, Issacs wakes in the artificial forest, confused and suited up in his battle suit. At the beginning of *At Land* Deren’s character is washed upon the beach and lays in a similar fashion. Deren appears to have been birthed by the sea into this confusing landscape, which she is destined to tread through the film. Issacs was birthed again through battle and once again finds himself away from Earth and waking in an artificial forest. Here the relationship to technology and the organic world comes into play and resembles the topic of technology and our relationship to it. However, both characters awake in a strange place where their journeys are set to begin and both characters are led back to the place where they started. As the films near their conclusions, Issacs finds himself back in the artificial forest at the end while

the ship is crashing, to contend with the creature and achieve his closure by making his last stand. Deren's character comes back to the shore and at the end of *At Land* runs parallel to the birthing sea, eventually returning to the place that birthed her.

Deren tends to play with space in her film work and in *Meshes of the Afternoon* this creates the dreamscape, riddled with flowing and sometimes confusing thought. Deren uses this in *At Land* as well to visually transport herself to different locations, creating a visually stimulating transition to creative expression. In *Abraxis* when Rogers digs through Issacs' mind the same transitions of space occur. Thoughts are seldom organized and dreams are even more incoherent at times and this seemingly random cinematic structure best fits the description of the human mind. It takes effort to turn the thought process into a logical stream of communication, even something writing a paper or making a film. Deren, and hopefully this part of *Abraxis*, visually represent this process while providing respective commentaries on subjects at hand. In *Abraxis* we are digging through Issacs' repressed past and childhood traumas, including his forced isolation and first moments with his girlfriend. In this part of the film we get a better understanding of the significance of the moon and the relationship it has with the main character. Issacs seems to be drawn to Alyssa who is fascinated by the things that have traumatized Issacs in his past. In the theatre the random sequences of footage from the 1960's and our race to the moon appear as random as the thoughts are in the mind when recalling the past. Here in this future the psychiatrist has a different task of sifting through visual deception than

they would now with our limited technology. Again technology has broken down another personal barrier when considering human-to-human interaction. I can't imagine this would be a good thing considering as human beings we function to keep thoughts and events locked away in our minds. If any person could simply access this at will I would venture to say this could very damaging to our psyche. This shouldn't suggest repression is healthy but in healthy doses this privacy of thought is necessary.

Overall *Abraxis* functions as a typically structured narrative film, which also comments on contemporary issues of importance to me. Although a narrative film, it utilizes the tools of experimental cinema to document my own interpretation of the world around me. I believe strongly that technology will lead to a new and more complex set of relationships for our species as we explore space further. Our cinema should represent these changes as they occur, helping us to make sense of the new experiences, which will be produced.

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