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PARODYING GENDER AND THE ROBOT APOCALYPSE IN *BIGBUG* (2022)

Review by Chase Ledin

Jeunet, Jean-Pierre. *BigBug*. Performances by Isabelle Nanty, Elsa Zylberstein, and Claude Perron. Netflix, 2022. Film.

Jean-Pierre Jeunet's film *BigBug* (2022) tells the tale of a modern family trapped in a smart house as the human-like Yonyx androids domesticate and force humans to live under an autocratic robotic rule. The film illuminates the eccentricities of suburban life on the brink of an apocalypse. It humorously follows the antics of characters whose larger-than-life personalities resemble the plastic poses of actors on a Blockbuster VHS tape box. *BigBug* takes classic Science Fiction (Sci-Fi) tropes – including robot overlords, simplistic gender roles, and a general fascination with Artificial Intelligence (AI) – and saturates them using farce. Jeunet uses dramatic neon lights, characters directly addressing the camera across multiple screens, and the narrative blurring of the human-android boundaries to unsettle a naturalised viewing practice within Sci-Fi film: namely, the role of heteronormative gender and sexuality. Unlike other recent Francophone Sci-Fi, which reflects on the seriousness of heterosexual relationships in the face of sheer doom, I suggest that *BigBug* upends traditional anxieties about heterosexual gender and sexuality through a parodic reframing of the robot apocalypse.

Fluctuating colours saturate the house's spaces. Rich pastel-coloured walls, neon purple accent lights, and spotlights in the greenhouse are matched with harsh, iridescent lighting that follows the Yonyx androids. This polarising light is an effect often seen in deep-space Sci-Fi narratives. Claire Denis's *High Life* (2018) provides an interesting recent example, which softens the deep-space colour palette but inevitably contributes to the legacy of the high-technoscience drama of the tinned interior. Similarly, from the start of *BigBug*, this lighting contrast establishes a fantasy setting of the 1950s-inspired French home. The lighting and colour provoke levity and laughter as the mother, Alice (Elsa Zylberstein), floats about the house. But this lighting is not simply to set *BigBug* apart from more traditional, hyper-realist Sci-Fi, as in Ridley Scott's 2015 film *The Martian*. This lighting effect creates an absurd space to see and contest conventions within the robot apocalypse sub-genre.

Both the robotic maid Monique (Claude Perron) and the human mother Alice configure gender stereotypes and, through parody, upend more traditional Sci-Fi tropes. By parodic, I mean a "form of imitation or mimicry" which leads to a "doubling" of narrative and visual signification, as in Marilyn Manners and R. L. Rutsky's definition in "Post-Human Romance" (1999 121). In the opening scenes, the viewer sees through Monique's robotic eyes as she measures the increasingly

lavish romance between Alice and her love interest Max (Stéphane De Groodt). The viewer sees Monique's statistical analysis of hormones and (interpreted) emotions, revealing Max's hidden erection. Monique thus visualises the gendered stereotype of the 50s housewife attracting a man. This stereotype is then 'doubled' through Alice's outrageous performance. For a contemporary viewer, the grand gesture of seeing the hand-written journals filled with Alice's emotions and desires saturates and exceeds the boundaries of the robot's statistical analysis. The crossover of the robotic lens and Alice's viewpoint unsettles the idea that Alice's affection manifests as simply a traditional housewife. We see an absurdity that exposes the scene for what it is: a backwards looking farce akin to an alien encounter.

This gender parody is then deepened through the robots' collective effort to identify with the humans – and thus become more like them. Out of earshot, the robots discuss the increasing threat of the evil Yonyx androids. The robots are convinced that they must emulate human emotions to aid the humans in overcoming the impending Yonyx takeover. At first, the humans recognise their uncanny attempts. Monique changes her hair to resemble Alice, seducing Max in the closet. When Max discovers the imposter, he reveals the double gesture of the sexual advance and traditional gender performativity. Monique cannot occupy the same gendered role in any meaningful way to resemble Alice's femininity precisely because her android-ness is exposed through the removal of her hair and the exposure of the coils and wires within. But this scene, like the one above, has a doubling effect. It again shows the absurdity of Monique's and Alice's feminine gestures. In place of focusing on Max's repulsion and later his denial of Alice, Jeunet brings these females together through their absurd gender performances, creating a more-than-human relation – that is, mirroring Monique and Alice, creating sameness – through parody.

This gender parody is not exclusive to female-identified characters. Greg (Alban Lenoir), the malfunctioning workout-turned-sex robot, is a primary example – both literally and metaphorically – of the dysfunctionality of human masculinity. Due to an accident, Greg glitches, leading to several scenes in which he proclaims his love and sexual desire(s) for the neighbour Françoise (Isabelle Nanty). This malfunction is no mistake. Indeed, the glitch highlights a hyper-masculine trope which predominates in Sci-Fi narratives – specifically, a man lusting after the female, often through lavish sexual gestures and dialogue. It also short-circuits this trope when Françoise wilfully turns off Greg to spare herself the embarrassment. The doubling effect, here, is not only this feminist gesture of turning off the hyper-masculine advance. It also highlights the profound effect of women responding to and resisting traditional, male-dominated gender tropes in contemporary Sci-Fi films.

BigBug builds on Jeunet's pronounced history of esoteric filmmaking, especially drawing out unusual representations of emotion and gender. While *Amélie* (2001), in which the eccentric and mischievous Amélie plots to improve the lives of people around her, is a good example, *BigBug* takes Jeunet's esoteric and quirky filmmaking to another level. As seen in televised sequences within the film, the human-faced Yonyx enslave humans as dogs and later grind them into pâté. The emotions represented here are starkly human. Yet they are uncannily robotic, potentially rupturing the viewer's understanding of human empathy and relationships. Where the domestic robots expose their android nature, the Yonyx remain closer to human identity. But it is precisely the proximity

between the Yoynx and the humans that creates a severe division between them – and it is here the androids' learned emotions provide a mechanism to overcome the robot apocalypse.

At its height, the film pits the Yoynx against the human. The domestic robots, in turn, employ their newfound emotions to distract the Yoynx – allowing one of the humans to short-circuit the Yoynx. Nearing the end, and after watching an hour of bizarre seduction between the humans and robots, the viewer might not assume the robotic revolution will lead to the destruction of all humans. I suggest that the dramatic climax is not designed to draw attention to potential enslavement or destruction, despite the warning signs on the television screens and the floating billboards. Rather, the main narrative is built around other kinds of human-android relations. I argue that *BigBug* uses the narrative of emotional growth to foreground entanglements between humans and androids. This narrative reframing of the apocalypse – focusing not on the death of humans but on emotional growth between humans and androids – makes *BigBug* unique. It is also this focus on emerging human-android ties that enables *BigBug* to reinvent the robot apocalypse sub-genre.

BigBug is original in its parody of human-android ties, but other recent Sci-Fi films and television have explored love/ing robots. In the Anglosphere, Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) are key examples of growing interest in emotions, romantic ties, and anxieties surrounding AI technologies. In the Francosphere, Audrey Fouché's television series *Osmosis* (2019) and Alexandre Aja's film *Oxygen* (2021) take an ambiguous approach to human-android ties, ultimately severing them by the end. Jeunet's film is remarkable in its focus on the human-android relation. It uses parody to avoid negating or severing this relationship. Scholars Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora (2019) have raised interesting questions about how humans map their own anxieties and gender biases on gendered and sexualised robots. I would suggest that *BigBug*, through its doubling of heterosexual gender and sexuality, raises similar questions about what anxieties and biases we bring to Sci-Fi imaginaries, and more specifically, the robot apocalypse sub-genre.

BigBug is crammed full of surprising and quirky imagery that upends tropes of gender and sexuality in contemporary Sci-Fi cinema. Specifically, the film uses parody to challenge the severity of heterosexual relationships within the robot apocalypse. It takes a step back to acknowledge the very humanness that emerges from exchanges between AI and humans during a societal crisis. I have paid critical attention to *BigBug*'s parody not simply to remark on its difference from existing Sci-Fi but also to illuminate how this film provides playful methods for reinventing the robot apocalypse sub-genre.

The film's parodic frame foregrounds absurdist gender and sexual relations that are normalised within Sci-Fi narratives generally – and this provides viewers with different ways of seeing and engaging the urgencies and absurdities of the apocalyptic genre. Jeunet's latest film has much to offer the evolving Sci-Fi imagination, specifically through its departure from its severe narratives and anxieties about heterosexual relationships and family-building. *BigBug* highlights and redefines the relationship between humans and androids and, in doing so, provides interesting insight into the embodied human-AI ties that make up the ever-expanding archive of apocalyptic scenarios in film.

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BIONOTE

Chase Ledin is a Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, UK, where he completed a PhD in Social and Cultural Theory in 2022. Chase's work explores the social and cultural dimensions of visual health promotion and the role of culture and media in healthcare and medicine. He is especially interested in the role of imagined futures within technological, scientific, and biomedical innovation.