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# ФИЛМОСОФИЈА • PHIL(M)OSOPHY

# ФИЛОЗОФИЈА И ФИЛМ

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# PHILOSOPHY AND FILM

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Preface** .....7

### **APPROACHES**

**Serdar Öztürk**

CINEPHILOSOPHY: A NEW WAY OF DOING PHILOSOPHY .....13

**Senka Anastasova**

FEM FILMOSOPHY: AESTHETICS OF DOCUMENTARY CINEMA AND  
SOCIAL REPRODUCTION THEORY IN POST-PANDEMIC TIMES .....25

### **STRUCTURES AND NARRATIVES**

**Dominique Chateau**

THE FILM IS NOT ROUND:  
MILCHO MANCHEVSKI'S *BEFORE THE RAIN* (*PRED DOŽDOT*, 1994) .....41

**Damir Smiljanić**

WHAT MAKES A DREAM SEQUENCE PHILOSOPHICALLY RELEVANT? .....53

### **CONCEPTS**

**George Arabatzis and Evangelos D. Protopapadakis**

LUC BESSON'S *THE FIFTH ELEMENT*  
AND THE NOTION OF QUINTESSENCE .....69

**Darko Štrajn**

THE QUESTION OF TRANSCENDENTALISM AND CINEMA .....77

### **EXPERIENCES**

**John Ó Maoilearca**

CONTINUITY ERRORS AND THE INDIVISIBILITY OF CHANGE  
ON CINEMATIC TIME TRAVEL .....87

**Niall Kennedy**

FILM MAKING IN THE SUBJUNCTIVE:  
FANTASY IN THE FILMS OF NACER KHEMIR ..... 97

**ARTS**

**Tijana Petkovska**

THE SUBLIME, THE TERRIBLE AND THE UGLY:  
AN EXPLORATION OF COSMIC HORROR IN FILM AND LITERATURE .....109

**Boshko Karadjov**

CINEMATIC ICONOGRAPHY OF MOVEMENT AS A MODEL  
FOR UNDERSTANDING ONTOLOGY OF GRAPHIC LITERATURE  
AND COMIC BOOK ART .....123

**FIELDS**

**Slava Yanakieva**

*THE TREE OF LIFE* BY TERRENCE MALICK AND ITS JOBIAN THEME .....133

**Sasho Kokalanov**

THE ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS OF *HONEYLAND* ..... 159

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## **LUC BESSON'S *THE FIFTH ELEMENT* AND THE NOTION OF QUINTESSENCE**

### **Abstract**

*The Fifth Element* (1997) is a French science-fiction film in English, directed and co-written by Luc Besson. The title and the plot of the film refer to a central notion of Greek philosophy, that is, *pemptousia*, or *quintessence*. Pre-Socratic philosophers such as Thales, Anaxagoras, Anaximenes and others, were convinced that all natural beings – in fact, nature itself – consist in four primary imperishable elements or essences (*ousiai*), i.e., fire, earth, water, and air. To these four, Aristotle added *aether*, a fifth essence (*pemptousia*). The introduction of *aether* gave birth to a great tradition in late Antique and Medieval philosophy, and eventually it came to signify not an additional primary element, but the core-essence of all beings, their fundamental ontological structure. Besson's film draws its inspiration on this philosophical tradition but its cinematographic rendering of the concept of Quintessence is typical of the contemporaneous views on the core characteristics of matters. The modernity that stimulates the film is equally anti-transcendentalist and anti-essentialist. Thus, the fifth element of the film is existentially personified and genderized making the traditional philosophical significance of the term to be adjusted by modernity in an immanent and temporal context where in addition aesthetics plays a crucial role.

### **Keywords**

The Fifth Element, quintessence, Aristotle, Pre-Socratics, Roger Bacon, Galileo, Immanuel Kant, Technological Spirit, Metaphysicism, Iconological Turn

It is always justifiable to assume several affinities between philosophy and cinema, especially when it comes to seminal philosophical films such as Ingmar Bergman's *Autumn Sonata* and *The Seventh Seal* (Hibbs, 2016), or Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (Tumanov, 2016; Reeh-Peters, 2021, 111ff). Movies may also be regarded as an excellent way to illustrate complicated thought experiments, as it is with Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (Bragues, 2008; McGregor, 2014), or *The Prestige* (Mencik, 2020). When it comes to blockbusters though, more often than not, the spectators entertain no high expectations as to any rich philosophical background, or complex philosophical connotations.

*The Fifth Element* (1997) is a science-fiction cult classic, directed and co-written by Luc Besson, featuring, among others, Bruce Willis, Mila Jovovic, Gary Oldman, and Prince. The title and the plot of the film refer to a central notion of Greek philosophy, namely *pemptousia*, or *quintessence* (*quinta essentia* in Latin), the fifth element (Heilbron, 2015). Pre-Socratic natural philosophers such as Thales, Anaxagoras, Anaximenes and others, were convinced that all the natural beings – in fact, nature itself – consist in four primary imperishable elements or essences, namely fire, earth, water, and air (Barnes, 1982). To these four, Aristotle added a fifth element, *aether* (*quintessence*) (Barnes, 1982, 253ff). The introduction of aether as a fifth element gave birth to a great tradition in late Antiquity and Medieval philosophy, and eventually, it came to signify not an additional primary element, but the core-essence of all beings, their fundamental ontological structure. It is exactly this philosophical tradition that Besson draws upon, but his understanding of the concept is typical of contemporaneity and the ways it tends to explain the riddle of existence. Thus, the fifth element in the film is portrayed as existentially personified, and also even gendered, adjusting thus the traditional philosophical import of the term in accordance with modernity into an immanent and temporal context where aesthetics plays a crucial role additionally.

The plot is the most typical of the kind. In a somewhat dystopic future, earth is in great peril due to the imminent prevalence of the invincible forces of evil. The only hopes of mankind rest on some extraterrestrial being, who returns to Earth every five thousand years to make sure that humans are protected by means of four stones which restore balance and

equilibrium, and each one stands for one of the four elements: fire, water, earth, and air. These may only be activated by the alien being, thus, presumably serving as the fifth element. The plot twists when the spacecraft that carries the fifth element back to earth gets attacked and destroyed by the forces of evil, and only what is left of the fifth element surfaces on earth. Happily, the remains are collected, and a team of scientists manage to rebuild the fifth element in the form of a perfect female being under the name Leeloo. When Leeloo manages to escape, she stumbles upon the taxi driver and former elite commando Major Korben Dallas, who helps her to escape. Leeloo asks him to help her accomplish her mission. The forces of evil – as well as their local proxies on earth – spare no effort to retrieve the four elements and annihilate the fifth, but are hindered by a resolute Korben Dallas. When Dallas and Leeloo finally reach the temple where the four elements may be activated, and place the four elements in their proper positions on the altar, they discover that there is still something missing to activate the weapon that would destroy evil. The fifth element appears to be something else, and not Leeloo. It was not until Galileo, who changed the acceptable way of talking about matter and its motion by introducing one and only corporeal element, that is, matter, that the Aristotelian universe lost its standing. Up to Galileo, Aristotelian, Neoplatonic and scholastic cosmology distinguished neatly between the super- and sublunary regions. The superlunary region and the celestial bodies within it were composed entirely of aether. This “fifth element” or quintessence was devoid of all change other than that of perfect, unending, circular motion. The sublunary region comprised the remaining four elements fire, air, water, and earth, which by nature observed finite linear motion upwards or downwards. In addition to finite local motion, bodies composed of the sublunary elements continuously underwent generation and corruption. In these respects, the superlunary region was superior to the sublunary one. Indeed, even within the sublunary region, according to many authors, the four elements were organized hierarchically, with earth as the dullest and grossest element at the centre of the cosmos, and fire as the nimblest and subtlest sublunary element, akin to the neighbouring celestial region. The fifth element, aether, is still present in Bacon’s cosmology in the form of *active* or *pneumatic matter*, relevant to the celestial realm, in contrast to *passive* or *tangible matter*, that is akin

to the terrestrial realm. Even Immanuel Kant finds the inclusion of aether rather convenient in his master's thesis *On Fire* (Kant, 1986, 1:369-384). To Kant aether can be established *a priori* as an all-encompassing element, an elastic medium that permeates the molecular interstices of bodies and makes possible the emission of heat and light (Lugovoy, 2019).

Leaving all particular explanations aside, some of which tend to be evidently queer, the introduction of aether by cosmologists and physicists serves the purpose of explaining phenomena that at times seemed impossible to be dealt with, be it the emission of light and heat, or the existence of a seemingly unchangeable celestial cosmos that surrounds terrestrial beings that are subject to constant change and obey the irresistible forces of matter. In a word, the notion of aether has been introduced as the only possible solution to an impossible problem, not at all unlike the assumption of the Higgs boson, the particle of God, by modern physicists. Science advances based upon what is tangible and sensible, but also by assuming what escapes observation and proof, but has to be existing if the system, any given system, is to be explained and proved. In that sense, aether indeed permeates and consists all as the ultimate solution to the riddle of existence, and the way Besson portrays it, is absolutely accurate, save for aether in this case is unconditional, desperate love that eventually saves the day. In a sense, Besson claims that what makes the world possible, and this is the heyday of his story, is love – and this is his answer to the riddle of existence.

The question about the cinematic form is central here. The cinema-goer enters the world of spectacle through channels which are rather familiar to him and are often none other than his well-known cinematic genres. The various legible genres (e.g., adventures, westerns, romance, comedy, detective fiction, etc.) involve the sense of intimacy that is necessary to tune in to the rhythm of cinematic visioning that some film critics see it close to the process of hypnosis. The titles of the film intro together with the musical theme, in addition to the information they provide, serve to calm the soul and the body of the viewer and to facilitate the basic psychological functions of watching a film, such as identification. Thus, a film, in a hypnotic environment, approaches very much the dream world, even in the waking state, as well as the desired images that are not

missing from the common life but are inserted in even the most ordinary activities (Metz, 1982).

Among the most popular cinematic genres is that of science fiction although in recent years it tends to be sidelined by the genre called fantasy. As a genre, science fiction has a special interest as it is associated with the "world" – "cosmos" in the two meanings that the term has had since ancient times. The world, first of all, refers to the physical species and bodies that make it up, to the forces and energies that are expressed and exercised within it. In the second sense, the world-cosmos, as it was understood later in antiquity, is the mass of people, the municipality, people. These two concepts are still valid today in everyday Greek language. As for the cinematic science fiction, it really connects the cosmological interest with the collectivity and has the applause of the society (see the great success of the *Star Wars* series).

There is, however, another idea by which science fiction is associated with the world. That is the critical and, sometimes, satirical mood with which it treats the social world around it. The future, the interplanetary action depicted in the films is often nothing more than a commentary on current social action.<sup>1</sup> From this point of view, science fiction is particularly suited to the cinematic medium which, as we know, is characterized by its realism although in cinema, realism means the imitation of movement in terms of renaissance perspective, which in Western culture has taken the obvious feature of naturalness (Comolli, 1986). In addition, the realistic nature of cinema, which one may perceive as ideology, allows for a much more dramatic performance of special film effects, for example, the ones related to the stellar space. Thus, a script for a spaceship that begins its journey in space, when captured on the screen acquires real operative dimensions (Chapman, 2013).

The fifth element of the film relates to science-fiction in a semi-carcatural, semi-loyal manner, and its genealogy of the metaphysical in a highly technical culture covers the metaphysical function of its technology. It is important to understand more widely that the most powerful rise of techno-science, such as the one depicted in the film, goes beyond European

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<sup>1</sup> On this point, the novels *1984* by George Orwell, and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley constitute the flashing evidence.

modernism and is part of a long history. It is the history of the institutionalization of the technological spirit. This institution, on the other hand, is a purely metaphysical movement (Ellul, 1964).

Modern science, as is well known, does not allow for itself any ultimate purposes (such as, for example, universal happiness) but captures and engages in processes of producing scientific objects under conditions of refutability rather than verifiability. Techno-science, on the other hand, sets clear historical aspirations such as man's domination of nature either as an intellectual superiority that brings man closer to God or as a simple domination of the human species over other natural species on the big stage of the world. Techno-science, thus, replicates the world in order to construct a world compatible with the desires of a subject of dominant action, conventionally called the human subject such as the film spectator. In this way, techno-science begins by constructing a world-image or, in other words, by constructing a system of general representation and, therefore, is in fact a metaphysics.

Human culture is distinguished by the transformation of natural species into cultural beings. In techno-science, however, this transformation is colored by destructive tendencies that lead to a kind of solipsism of the human species and in the medium of film it may be parallel to voyeurism. Nowhere else is this solipsism as obvious as in the modern development of the *iconosphere* or the dominance of the media. As time goes on, it becomes more and more obvious that one of the goals of critical philosophy should be the study, analysis and normative determination of the new pictorial universe. In this way a new development in the critical effort has appeared, going from the linguistic turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the iconological turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Mitchell, 2021 and 1994). The *Fifth Element*, in the light of the above, is contributing to the metaphysicism of the image and its often caricatural identification of metaphysical quintessence with love is situated on a field beyond criticism, in a space that is both cinematic-typical and semi-romantic.

It is true that the film in its newly hedonistic romanticism, with its adventure and special effects' commercial panoply does not allow for any measure of *distanciation*. Yet, it is also true that the identification with the conditioned imaginary of the film is never total. There is a part that remains

irreducible to cinematic control that would take the form of the techno-science of film viewing. There is still the nostalgia for the child-like universe of wonder and also the desire for the body of the young woman protagonist. The cinematic complementarity of these two elements, the splitting and duality of the fifth element, in its paradoxical nature, produces the part that remains safe beyond cinematic framing.

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