12 Monkeys

Collette Sweeney

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch

Part of the Broadcast and Video Studies Commons, Digital Humanities Commons, Nonfiction Commons, and the Visual Studies Commons

Archived from http://switch.sjsu.edu/archive/nextswitch/switch_engine/front/front.php%3Fartc=208.html. Documentation of the preservation processes used for this collection is available at https://github.com/NickSzydlowski/switch. Metadata for this item was created and augmented by Brandon Ly, Spring 2022, Art 104

Recommended Citation
Sweeney, Collette (1996) "12 Monkeys," SWITCH: Vol. 3: No. 1, Article 4. Available at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch/vol3/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in SWITCH by an authorized editor of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.
12 Monkeys
Collette Sweeney on May 1 1996

Movie Review of 12 monkeys directed by Terry Gilliam

12 MONKEYS

Director: Terry Gilliam Starring: Bruce Willis, Madeleine Stowe, Brad Pitt, Christopher Plummer, Frank Gorshin, David Morse, Jon Seda Screenplay: David Webb Peoples and Janet Peoples Inspired by the film "La Jetee" by Chris Marker Producer: Charles Roven Music: Paul Buckmaster Cinematographer: Roger Pratt Costume Design: Julie Weiss Universal/Rated R for language, and violence

Movie Review by Collette Sweeney

How much more self determined are we beyond the extent that we can control our environment? We sleep, dream, live, procreate, avoid pain, seek shelter, eat regulary, and live more or less as most other animals, with the exception of possessing intelligence. What we claim to share and know about each other as indisputable is a short list of the stuff required to survive and prosper. To get from here to there. Generally we choose to be alone in these shared endeavors, tending towards social connections in order to provide for each other. These shared aspects of what it means
to be human are repeated in most storytelling. The same story gets told many times over. Movies are condensed and exaggerated, or they enlighten versions of the same story or themes (love, meaning of existence, greed or want, good and evil, etc.) meant to provide commentary on our culture, or just blow smoke. Movie directors like Terry Gilliam, set a whole new stage by asserting their particular notion of the future. Unlike conventional films, movies in this genre are exceptional and can be especially creative. But even so, they often adopt the American Western formula, complete with a showdown shoot-out between the good, the bad, and the ugly at the OK Corral, or the intergalactic OK Corral. Ever ask yourself if executive producers hand over a warehouse key to the director, as soon as the movie contract is signed, a key with a label that says: neat-o dazzle-o robo-to-macho-futurist props and corny special effects, plus super cool guns? Although films in this genre might share the same look, each takes a different approach and it's certainly worth examining why the same ideas are employed by directors and continually responded to by moviegoers with intrigue and enthusiasm. The delightful part of movie watching is suspending belief long enough to be convinced, persuaded, and so on. Not much in this film prevented me from this kind of surrender despite some of the obvious corny-techno gadgets. The bar code imbedded in the skull was believable. After all it is an item found at the supermarket and one of many innocuous automated information surveillance gadgets that commands yet another bit of our everyday existence. The film's evil menace is a virus. The virus is pure, silent, odorless, deadly, indestructible and a scientifically perfect tool of evil; an invention that is every bit a fearful and executable product of recent genetic research. Engineered viruses are the new bombs. But a virus is certainly not as theatrical and dramatic as the good old graphic guts, gore, and guns flavor the movie industry prefers. A great deal of the stuff we see in futuristic movies is at arms length away, it is believable because it plays on existing knowledge and experience, something not too big a conceptual leap. But whatever techno devices await us in the distant future, these devices are likely to appear outside our present frame of reference. A native of Borneo would not know what to do with an electric shaver. The real techno gadgets of the future might very well appear the same to our current frame of reference. But Hollywood need not concern itself with this much of a technical leap, (that warehouse key would be useless.) Entertaining and compelling as it is to elaborately play out the future on celluloid, it is often only the dazzling toys and creations (the look and feel), that directors and producers choose to place their cash bets on. And not on much else. For Gilliam this doesn't seem so. His characters appear at first as a round-up of some of the usual suspects found in techno pop films, i.e., fascist scientists, lone warrior, sensitive struggling female love interest, and nest of cronies. But Gilliam develops these characters in a manner that plays on a less common notion about technology. He seems to be saying that the greatest fear is uncertainty and uselessness. His main characters are really just onlookers, same as the audience, awed by the sight and power of technology simultaneously gripped with anxiety. 12 Monkeys has every bit the same kind of look as other films of its kind, but Gilliam's dispossessed and anxiety-ridden characters are not so typical, not the usual heroes. Is Gilliam asking his audience to look at what it might mean to control the environment to a degree that effectively rules out the need for an entire segment of people? If labor required for productivity, will this rule out the need for any human input into production? Might we reach a level of artificial intelligence that reduces the need for a human reasoning process? Opinions, management teams, organizational groups won't be as reliable in solving particular types of problems, etc. Well then, who gets to sit on the platform? Who's in the pit? Gilliam seems to be showing moviegoers his idea of who sits on that platform. 12 Monkeys opens with a scene portraying the colonizing of a great number of people, who for reasons not entirely explained, are expendable, exploitable, irrelevant, and outcast. They are housed in what appears to be a penal colony. Willis plays Willis. He plays the lone standard character. His task is to unravel the mystery of people who make up a class which the dominant group exploits in the same manner a scientist might utilize a lab rat. Willis is drugged, thrown in the loony bin, scrubbed, hunted down, shot at, disinfected, and at one point, outfitted in a $1.48 plastic pocket raincoat. He sits in a chair that rises and falls to the tune of those in control; he learns to learn in the way they tell him. So...Gilliam might want us to ask just who will those guys be? You know...the ones running around with sunglasses and sterile lab coats looking bloodless and sitting on elevated platforms as godlike commandos? His characters take a few side trips to the past and here we get to see faith eroding with the loss of the self. Willis meets up with the same kinda guy in Pitt, a frenzied, hyper, clutter-minded psychopathic rebel who turns circles inside himself. Both these guys act out an assortment of anxieties, illusions, and paranoia. Wailing like a babe in a plea to remain in the present, to exist without finding the ultimate answer, Willis' character seems to be saying he prefers not to know the future. Can technology be an ugly wheel in motion? 12 Monkeys is an exception to most films of its kind, and so of course, is Gilliam as a director. His past work raises our expectations, pushing into view what we might not be comfortable recognizing. In effect, he asks the movie-going crowd to "entertain" ideas of our future we might do best to take as a warning.
::CrossReference

last 5 articles posted by Sweeney

:: 12 Monkeys - May 1 1996