

Consider It Science Fiction

Kiley Walters

Course: English 102

Instructor: Andree Cosby

Essay Type: Argument

As Southeastern Louisiana University's Science Fiction Film Festival approaches, there is still the dispute among the committee about what films should be considered science fiction and which films will be shown. Being a committee member, I have taken the liberty of evaluating one of the questionable movies brought to our attention. After much time and observation, I feel that *Vanilla Sky* should be one of the films shown at the festival.

In this film, there are six main characters. David Aames (Tom Cruise) is the most important character in the film. He plays a man who has it all—money, success, a nice car, women, and anything else a person could want. He is sexually involved with a woman named Julie Gianni (Cameron Diaz), who he feels is just a friend with whom he can have casual sex. However, she becomes more involved with him every time they are together. David has a good friend, Brian Shelby (Jason Lee), who attends a party with David one night and brings a date named Sofia Serrano (Penelope Cruz). As soon as David sees Sofia, he falls in love with her. After some of the plot evolves, David and Sofia become close and Julie feels very envious towards Sofia. Julie convinces David to take a car ride with her, and she runs the car off a bridge. This wreck kills Julie and leaves David needing several plastic surgeries to restore his face to normality. Sometime after the wreck, David's life seems to become worse and worse. His face is now severely scarred. He loses his confidence and his social life dwindles, so David signs a contract with L. E., or Life Extension, a company that takes David's body, freezes it, and lets David's mind maintain a dream-like state, living in a "perfect world." To the viewer, it is never

clear when David's real life turned into his "lucid dream." In David's lucid dream, he continues life right where he left it, having Sofia and living his normal life. However, David's dream becomes a twisted nightmare. His mind has taken his perfect world and made it into a horrible place. In his dream, David kills Sofia and is in jail for murder. Eventually, David remembers signing some sort of contract with Life Extension. He remembers tech support, a source of help if it is ever needed while in the dream. Edmund Ventura is David's tech support. David contacts him, and Edmund explains to David that a "glitch" has occurred in his dream. Edmund gives David the choice of continuing the dream after the glitch has been repaired or waking up from the dream and living a normal life again. David chooses to wake from his lucid dream. He opens his eyes where he is back to his normal life, and this is how the movie ends. While some committee members argue that this film is not science fiction, I have found that it is; it has an atmosphere of scientific credibility, an alternate ending, and a record of human response to technology and science.

After viewing *Vanilla Sky*, I feel that it more than represents an atmosphere of scientific credibility. In the film, Life Extension, or L. E., is what separates David's real life from his lucid dream. This company is giving him a chance to trade in a bad life for perfection. In the film, Rebecca Dearborn, a representative for Life Extension, tells David, "Soon, heart ailments, cancer, will be a thing of the past. Very simply, your anguish, your discontent, even your death is no longer necessary, in a traditional sense. Whatever malady hides behind that mask, it's temporary." This is how Life Extension sells their idea. They let clients know that whatever is wrong with them, in David's case, a severely scarred face, no longer has to exist. After a client's body is frozen, their dreams will allow life, as they know it, to be perfect. A demonstration of how the body is frozen and preserved is shown in the film. The process appears very believable.

The idea that something like Life Extension could really exist seems very realistic to the viewer. After David began the dream, his life seemed to continue in a normal way with normal people and normal activities (at least until the dream became a nightmare). Norman Spinrad says in one of his works, "So what science fiction should be is one of our culture's main means for pondering not only the future consequences of what we are doing now but the effects of these inevitable, unpredictable changes on the human spirit" (222). I believe that is what this film does. Cloning and other experiments are already evolving in today's time, and, as a result, an idea like Life Extension may be the future consequence. Whether or not the effects of this consequence would be good or bad is the question to be pondered. If something like Life Extension and the lucid dream were created, and someone involved in this program had his or her dream turned into a nightmare, what would be the effects? With Life Extension appearing so real, and showing what effects it had on David, this film gives a viewer the opportunity to really think about the future consequences of what our society is experimenting with today. With cloning and human experimentation being adventured with, Life Extension and similar programs seem very believable.

It is obvious, especially toward the end of the film, that David's present life has been altered. That is the purpose Life Extension serves in the film. David chooses to have his body presently frozen while he lives out a life in his dream. In this dream, he will never age or grow older, but will remain at his current age, living a life that fulfills his every want, but, in fact, is not real. In David's real present, his body is frozen and held by Life Extension. However, in David's dreaming present, he thinks he is carrying on a normal life. While dreaming, David does not know that the life he is "living" is not real. He thinks that the occurrences taking place everyday truly are happening. During a presentation that Life Extension shows David, he is told

that, "Life Extension offers you the answer. Upon resurrection, you will continue in an ageless state, preserved, but living in the present, with a future of your choosing." This is exactly what happens to David. In reality, his body is not out in the world living his life. In his preserved body, however, David's mind is convinced he is living normally, just like everyone else around him appears to be. His present is greatly altered. In *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of*, a book dealing with science fiction in the modern world, the author says:

To my mind, a "realism of the future" has been the ambition of most good [science fiction] writers. The worlds they describe and the events they narrate may have a surreal quality at first glance, but as the story unfolds, such surrealities come to have a naturalistic basis in an altered but real world. (Disch 218)

I feel like *Vanilla Sky*, even though it is not a novel, could have this quotation applied to it. When the viewer first finds out that David's "life" has really been nothing but a dream, it does seem a bit surreal. After Life Extension is explained, however, the viewer finds that the idea is not so unbelievable. The viewer can see that David has, in fact, been living in "an altered but *real* world." His mind is altered, but he is really living, just not how he thinks he is.

Also, I feel that this film greatly represents a record of human response to technology and science. After David sees what technology has done to his mind, he wants to come out of the dream and live his normal life. In his dream, David experiences horrible encounters. From murdering someone, to being in jail for his crime, to losing his friends and the woman he loves, David's "perfect life" is, well, far from perfect. After speaking with tech support, David knows that there has been a terrible glitch in the program. With their technology, Life Extension should have made David's life perfect, when, in fact, it only complicated his mind into believing

horrible things. If David had not remembered tech support, he may have lived out his dream in prison instead of having the perfect life he was promised. After David finds out about the glitch in his dream and told it has been repaired, he is given an offer. Edmund Ventura tells David, "It's now your moment of choice. You can return to your lucid dream and live a beautiful life with Sofia or whomever you wish. Or, you can choose the world out there." With little hesitation, David chooses to go back to his real life and do away with Life Extension. It is at this point that the viewer sees the character's one of the many response to technology. David is not pleased with the scientific program and wants to go back to being normal again. Christine Brooke-Rose says, "Amis defines science fiction as 'that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology...'" (72). In *Vanilla Sky*, this is what seems to take place. In the film, science and technology are different than they are in the real world, and this is how something like the idea of Life Extension is created. The film allows viewers to see that if technology like this did exist in our future, Life Extension could take place, and, if it did, our response to that technology might be similar to David's.

Some members of the committee may still argue that this film is not science fiction. Some think that viewers of this movie could never allow their minds to grasp the idea of giving their lives to a company like Life Extension to be frozen so that they could dream the rest of their lives. Committee members may think that the ideas presented in this film are just too far beyond the realm of being remotely believable. In this film's defense, I would like to think that with technology growing and expanding to new lengths every day, something like this may very well come to pass in our time. As mentioned before, with cloning and various ideas constantly coming into play, *is* the idea of Life Extension *that* difficult to believe?

Science fiction is clearly defined throughout this film. With its atmosphere of scientific credibility, alternate setting, and response to technology, I feel that this film more than fits the criteria to be shown at SLU's Science Fiction Film Festival. Also, on a broader outlook, maybe we should not only allow this film to be shown, but also evaluate the possibility of how soon something like this could come about. Every day, we are pushing science to whole new limits, but after viewing this film and seeing the results this type of technology could have, maybe we should reconsider some of our scientific ideas and ask ourselves if we are really ready to take such big risks.

Works Cited

- Brooke-Rose, Christine. *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Disch, Thomas. *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of*. New York: The Free Press, 1998.
- Spinrad, Norman. *Science Fiction in the Real World*. New York: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990.
- Vanilla Sky*. Dir. Cameron Crowe. Perf. Tom Cruise, Penelope Cruz, and Cameron Diaz. 2001.
- Kiley Walters in an Elementary Education major.*

Ms. Cosby's Comments: *Kiley's assignment was to evaluate a film that she selected from a list of non-traditional science fiction movies. She was to argue, based on criteria agreed upon by the class, whether Vanilla Sky could truly be categorized as science fiction. Kiley is an excellent writer and did a great job with her argument and analysis.*