

Lucy: A little knowledge is apparently a dangerous thing

Hiram Lee
16 August 2014

“Life was given to us a billion years ago. What have we done with it?” These are the fairly gloomy and ominous words that open French writer-director Luc Besson’s latest film, *Lucy*.

In Taipei, Taiwan, a young woman named Lucy (Scarlett Johansson) is tricked by her boyfriend into delivering a briefcase to a Mister Jang (Choi Min-sik). Unbeknownst to Lucy, it contains a dangerous new drug called CPH4 and Jang, the head of an ill-defined crime syndicate, is intent on spreading the drug across the globe. He and his gang force Lucy to become a drug mule, surgically inserting a packet of CPH4 into her abdomen. When she is later kicked in the stomach by one of Jang’s henchmen, the packet ruptures. The contents leak into her body, producing unexpected side effects.

While these events are transpiring, Professor Samuel Norman (Morgan Freeman), an expert in neuroscience, is shown lecturing on the brain capacity of animals. He asserts that human beings use only 10 percent of their brains (something that has no basis in fact). Norman presents a number of hypotheses regarding the potential abilities of a human being who has successfully harnessed a far larger percentage of his or her brain function.

It just so happens the CPH4 gives Lucy that capacity. As the drug works its way into her system, she develops startling new abilities. An onscreen graphic keeps the viewer posted on her progress to twenty percent, thirty percent, forty ...

What does Lucy do, having undergone this new leap in human evolution? Naturally, she becomes a cold-blooded killer. Lucy sets off on a course to exact her revenge on the Jang syndicate, stop its other drug couriers from disseminating the CPH4 and, finally, meet up with Professor Norman who will help preserve

the vast knowledge she has acquired.

Besson’s *Lucy* is a strange and unpleasant film.

The titular character is chilly and one feels no relation to her. Her newfound “genius” expresses itself in a special mix of mediocrity and arrogance. The script’s clichés and bizarre rhapsodies pour from Johansson’s mouth in a robotic voice, increasingly devoid of human emotion or empathy. That Besson links up a sudden leap in knowledge—an unprecedented understanding of the universe itself—with the loss of humanity is among the more disquieting aspects of the film. Why should this be the case?

Among Lucy’s new abilities are the power to read minds; to transmit her voice and image to any monitor in the world; to force people to levitate; to change her hair length and color at will; and, apparently, to walk around holding a gun without anyone noticing. For all her supposed insight into the world, Lucy becomes little more than yet another comic book-style superhero.

In a bizarre phone call to her mother, Lucy describes her ability to sense gravity and the rotation of the earth. She can recall every kiss her parents have planted on her face. By the time she tells her mother, “I remember the taste of your milk in my mouth,” one can only squirm. “I’m colonizing my own brain,” she later tells Professor Norman. Is this truly the world’s greatest genius?

Still more disconcerting, *Lucy* takes the notion of an “anti-hero” to new heights, or perhaps new lows. In one of the more disturbing sequences in the film, Lucy attempts to have what remains of the CPH4 packet removed from her body. She strolls into a hospital operating room while a procedure is already underway. After briefly examining the records and test results of the individual lying on the table, she arrives at her own

prognosis and suddenly shoots and kills the patient. “You wouldn’t have been able to save him anyway,” she says before demanding the surgeons proceed to operate on her. Here the Obama administration/ *New York Times* case against “unnecessary” medical procedures is given new and dramatic expression!

Later in the film, when Professor Norman finally encounters Lucy, he worries out loud that humanity is not ready for the kind of knowledge she has to offer. “We’re so driven by power and profit,” says Norman, that one can only fear what mankind might do with it.

Besson (*The Big Blue*, *La Femme Nikita*, *The Fifth Element*, etc.) is indulging his facile (and marketable) fantasies about the essential baseness of human beings. The upper-middle class layers to which he belongs view humanity through a selfish, demoralized prism. In this manner, the reality of social life is self-servingly obscured and evaded. The viewer is left with little more to experience than misanthropy.

In the end, almost nothing in *Lucy* works: neither the science, the drama, the acting nor the direction. An awful individualism permeates everything, as well as an indifference toward real life. In what world does this film take place, after all? Why does a character who has become so sensitive to the planet that she can sense it rotating have no thoughts on war or social inequality, for example?

Those, in the end, are not Besson’s preoccupations or concerns. He provides us instead with quasi-mystical considerations about space, time and matter, intended to trump the “small” problems of such a problematic species as ours.

At the conclusion of the film, its opening lines are restated with a slight change: “Life was given to us a billion years ago. Now you know what to do with it.”

These are disturbing words coming from a character who has spent the previous ninety minutes carrying out a series of revenge killings and arrogantly demonstrating her superiority to everyone she comes across.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact