

LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS, season 1

Michael Pitts



LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS. Blur Studio, distributed by Netflix, 2019.

CURRENTLY in production of its second season, *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS* is an anthology series produced by Netflix. Bringing together the talents of different casts and creative teams, the series consists of standalone episodes exploring diverse themes of the science fiction genre. These episodes, which do not exceed 20 minutes in length, reflect disparate genres such as cyberpunk, alternate history, and dystopia while covering themes from AI and transhumanism to colonization. They raise, for example, questions concerning the future of humankind, the destructive consequences of colonial expansion and capitalism, the threat of a nuclear holocaust, the privatization of space travel, and the dilemmas of robotic consciousness. Yet, while the series offers some interesting explorations within each of these fields of interest, it is problematic in its traditional framing of issues related to sex and, more specifically, its catering to the male gaze.

A re-imagining of Tim Miller and David Fincher's initial plan to remake the animated science fiction anthology film *Heavy Metal* (1981), *Love, Death & Robots* continues its predecessor's efforts of legitimizing adult-oriented animation and genre fiction. Like *Heavy Metal*, it utilizes advanced and diverse animation techniques, pushing the genre into new territory. Led by Miller's Blue studio, which is known for its hyper-realistic, video-game style aesthetics, and produced using a variety of animation tools, the show is characterized by vivid, realistic details and cutting-edge animation. Uniting the disparate aesthetic styles of the episodes is their depiction of tropes common to the underground comics of the 1970s, which in turn influenced the production of *Heavy Metal*. Like the 1970s adult-oriented graphic fiction that skirted censorship rules, *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS* centers explicit content including sexuality and violence.

It is this intermingling of sex and violent content that makes the series, like its comics and *Heavy Metal* predecessors, problematic. Like *Heavy Metal*, the program caters to heteronormative male viewers through its presentation of sex and the female body. Though it occasionally presents non-normative sexuality, for example, these

portrayals of queer characters frame female bodies within patriarchal conceptions of desirability. Each female character populating these episodes acts, as Laura Mulvey puts it in her influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” “as an erotic object for the spectator within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (62). Women in *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS* are therefore predominantly portrayed in accordance with the desires of a heteronormative male audience. Also, like *Heavy Metal*, the program frequently depicts violence towards women and emphasizes gratuitous sexual and violent details. Female characters, for example, are brutally hunted and murdered, such as in “The Witness,” or brutalized and mutilated, such as in “The Secret War.” Other episodes, such as “Beyond the Aquila Rift,” are suddenly interrupted by sex scenes clearly developed and included to appease heterosexual male viewers. While the program caters to the male gaze and includes toxic portrayals of women and violence, a few episodes do divert from this patriarchal framing of sex and gender. “Good Hunting,” for example, follows the plight of a female *huli jing* or fox spirit as she escapes sex slavery and mounts an attack upon the patriarchy in early 20th-century Hong Kong. Another episode, “Helping Hand,” similarly diverts from this catering to heteronormative male viewers in its centering of a female protagonist who demonstrates incredible courage and strength in the face of eminent danger. Overall, however, though it includes these limited, non-patriarchal presentations of female characters, *Love, Death & Robots* problematically frames women, sex, and violence.

To a limited extent, the show also comments on other issues such as colonialism and capitalism. “Good Hunting,” for example, emphasizes the legacy of colonization and its effect upon women through its portrayal of women sold as sex slaves as a result of colonialism. “Suits,” on the other hand, undermines traditional stories of American individualism and self-reliance by revealing that the farmers upon which the episode centers are actually colonizers attacking the indigenous alien species of the planet they desire to control. “Helping Hand” imagines the consequences of corporate space exploration upon astronauts whose labor is exploited at great cost. As these examples illustrate, the series builds upon pre-existing trends and themes of science fiction and occasionally offers interesting insights into topics pivotal to the future of humankind such as environmental concerns, space travel, labor practices, the expansion of human civilization, and transhumanism. Overall, then, while *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS* offers occasional commentary on issues common to science

fiction, the brevity of its episodes, its patriarchal framing of issues related to sex and violence, and its catering to the male gaze limit its potential as an innovative work of SF.

Works Cited

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminism and Film Theory*, edited by Constance Penley, Routledge, 1988, pp. 57-68.