Synopsis: A young man buys a state-of-the-art computer that develops thoughts and emotions and begins to turn its affections toward the man's attractive female neighbour.

<https://watch.plex.tv/en-GB/movie/electric-dreams> - link to film, free to watch.

**Paradigmatic Analysis:**

The film is a romantic comedy. The main theme being the opposition between humanity and machine. This opposition is represented via the struggles between the semi-sentient computer representing and Miles’ relationship with Madeline.

A diagram of a machine

Description automatically generatedThis relationship can be further understood via the construction of a semiotic square. Greimas’ square can be used to analyse paired concepts more fully (Greimas, 1987).

The opposition is presented not only via Madeline and the computer but also the computer and the cello. The computer representing both human and machine simultaneously.

On the complex axis there is the contrary relationship between human and machine, representing a binary opposition. The computer gets champagne spilled on it and gains some human qualities, we can say it is both human and a machine. On the second deixis there is the contradictory relationship between machine and not human. Madeline’s cello embodies this contradictory relationship.

The difference between the cello and the computer is referenced throughout the film. The emotional connection that Madeline has to her cello, crying when it breaks compared to the coldness with which Miles treats the computer, despite the former being totally inanimate. The way in which the cello is useless without Madeline’s skilful fingers compared to the computer’s apparent agency. The computer is framed as being halfway towards human, the cello completely lifeless despite its sentimental value. Miles illustrates this point by saying ‘What made that Cello special was you, nothing else. Whatever came out of it you put into it’. Despite there being a lack of positive emotional connection to the computer it is still anthropomorphised.

**Mise En Scene Analysis**

**Scene 1**: **Miles begins setting up his new top of the range computer at home (5.42-8.22)**

Music starts at a low volume as Miles starts to setup his computer, the music rises in volume as he connects his appliances to the computer. Similarly, the pacing of the scene starts slowly. Cuts become faster and faster incorporating more dynamic movements. The building of the music and faster pacing occurs as Miles connects more and more of his home devices to the computer. This represents his increasing reliance on the computer, becoming more and more helpless in its absence.

As the computer short circuits, the music comes to a sudden stop. There is a slow camera tracking shot of Miles walking. This further signifies Miles’ growing dependence on the machine. In this shot Miles is holding a candle. The candle’s symbolic code in this context is danger, the flickering flame signifying the jeopardy that Miles is about to put himself in he turns the computer on yet again.

**Scene 2: After Miles spilt champagne on it, the computer has gained a greater level of intelligence, it first shows this by emulating Madeline’s cello playing from upstairs (15.41-20.19)**

This newfound intelligence is represented through colour on the computer screen. Prior to this moment the computer has only shown blue, green and black colours. These are icon signs of coldness and lifelessness. These reference between the signifier and the signified is conventional.

The scene cuts between Madeline and the computer as the computer learns to play the piece. The cuts become gradually more frequent, the volume increase and a backing track is introduced. This anthropomorphises the computer, making it an additional character in the film, by creating a parallel between it and Madeline. You see Madeline’s emotions are mirrored in the computer, when she smiles the colours on the screen move rhythmically., appearing to dance, a metonymy for emotion. The song is call and response, they are doing a duet. The bright and varied colours are symbolic of joy, a uniquely human emotion.

**Scene 3: After the computer has made Miles’, pager go off repeatedly at Madeline’s concert he returns to the house very angry. The computer reveals its intelligence to him shortly after. (34.58-41.00)**

In the opening shot we seem Miles’ silhouette against the door in the background and the computer in the foreground. This is a spatial syntagmatic relation, the computer is a character in the story, and has been anthropomorphised.

After he enters the room, we see Miles’ and the computer’s silhouettes against the wall. These are indexical signs, that have connotations unending companionship. This shot implies a two-way relationship between Miles and the computer, once again humanising the machine. This is a foreshadowing of the trouble that the computer will cause Miles later in the film. The shadows also have the effect of making the relationship seem harmful.

There are several back-to-back close-up shots. First the computers power cord next the screen and finally Miles’ eyes. The jump cuts between these shots, the red on the power cord and the building riser sound effect are symbols of the tension at this moment in the narrative. Miles cannot bring himself to unplug the computer, he has become subservient to it already. The solitary desk lamp lighting up the room is conventionally referencing an interrogation. The computer has become a suspect, a character capable of acting.

**Scene 4: Miles returns to destroy the computer only to find that it is about to destroy itself as it discovered it was incapable of love. (1:24:10- 1:28:37)**

The scene is presented as the aftermath of a battle. Smoke hangs in the air. Miles stands in the doorway with an axe ready to kill the computer, however the music does not is not an iconic signifier of violence in any sense. The music is harmonic, signifying peace. It has connotations of heaven and religion; we understand that a resolution has occurred, the battle between man and machine is over.

Miles finds the computer laid on its side. It has lost its ability to speak and so instead displays words on its screen. This is reminiscent of the trope of the fallen solider lying on the battlefield, struggling to get out his last words. This further anthropomorphises the computer, casting attributes like valour and bravery upon it, challenging the denotative understanding of machines as devoid of emotion. Miles replaces the computer’s ‘voice chip’ further extending the metaphor, as if he is helping his fallen comrade by putting pressure on a wound. The computer plays a tune like the last post, a bugle call that signifies the end in military tradition.

There is a change of voice of the computer, it is much more human-like, despite the computer’s acceptance of it especially inhuman existence, this is the most human-like it has come across in the whole film. The voice is weak and raspy like a humans would be if gravely injured. Miles drops the axe signifying the end to the opposition between him and the machine. He initially backs away, but upon the computer’s request he comes forward and embraces it, signifying his acceptance of the computer as sentient. As he closes the physical distance on screen, he simultaneously closes the psychological distance between them in his mind. This is movement is an iconic sign, visually representing Miles’ thought process.

**References**

Greimas, Algirdas (1987): *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory* (trans. Paul J Perron & Frank H Collins). London: Frances Pinter