

THE NET [1995]

by

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The film begins strangely: an undersecretary of defense kills himself because he falsely believes he has AIDS. The hero, Angela Bennett (Sandra Bullock), a computer expert, works at home, solving problems for various software designers and corporations. She receives what she believes is a diskette of a computer game with a virus. She discovers that the “flaw” gives her access to unauthorized governmental and industrial information. What has accidentally found its way into a computer game is a key to opening secret governmental and corporate files. This key has been secreted into a program that ostensibly has been designed to protect these files. The designers now attempt to recover the disk and kill her. These underground terrorist hackers use their tricks to alter her whole official existence – credit cards, driver's license - and even saddle her with a criminal record. After avoiding them, enlisting the aid of her only friend, who is killed, she finally confronts the villains and informs the FBI of their plot: they are selling a computer protection program that actually gives them access to the very data it should be protecting. In this way, they can control the government – as they did by falsifying the undersecretary's medical reports. Some of the villains are killed and some are arrested. (Rated PG-13)

As *The Net* begins, it almost suffocates us in symbolism. A man speaks [communication] on a cellular telephone [impersonal communication] to his son [a possible future] about doing more homework [to be able to function in a future in which education is necessary for survival] in exchange for a few extra hours of playing computer games [the skills of

the youth are the path to survival – or so claims this film]. He tells his son not to tell the mother [the exclusion of the feminine is the downfall of many of the characters in this film]. The man then shoots himself before a large outdoor sculpture of a half-buried figure [most of the characters, especially male, actively hide great portions of themselves from view]. A flock of white birds takes off [a classical image from Renaissance painting symbolizing the soul] and fly into the sky [the soul goes to heaven]. On the table, before the man, is a half-eaten apple. [Ah, there's the rub – this one reads two ways, both of them important. The first, and most obvious, is the apple in the Garden of Eden, the apple of knowledge and of good and evil. And this certainly describes the character who commits suicide: he finds that he has AIDS and, being a homophobe, kills himself. On the other hand, today the apple is a common symbol in the world of computers – Apple Computers. And just about every computer in the film is made by Apple. And the symbolism is just as relevant here, for the computer that gives him his medical test lies – he really doesn't have AIDS. Is this the tree of knowledge from which the new apple has fallen?]

Unfortunately, this fascinating and dense use of symbolism, contrasting ancient symbols and their newly acquired, technological implications, doesn't continue. Occasional flashes are entertaining, like a hapless victim standing next to a bait shop with a large, glowing neon hook in the background, making a cellular telephone call that is instantly traced. But the Greek Chorus effect of the opening scene is, unfortunately, quickly dropped in preference to a more mundane chase thriller. With one very interesting exception.

This is a chase thriller with a female hero. Being a recluse, she has no friends, male or female. She is completely on her own. In fact, this is the only film I can think of with a female hero in which a man doesn't rescue her. (There *is* one rescue scene: She is in jail with no hope of escape. Her psychiatrist's FBI friend comes to bail her out. BUT . . . he is an impostor, actually the villain's emissary, bent on killing her.)

Perhaps this is calculated to add to the techno-paranoia that pervades the film, a hero completely on her own can no longer trust the machine-generated environment into which she has so willingly and so deeply submerged herself, *nor* any of her human friends. However, her competence and resourcefulness win out in the end.

As a thriller, *The Net* has its ups and downs. The action and chase sequences are fun and exciting, but the expository necessities between are slow. The romance is totally ineffective. The best action sequences are not original. Are they homages or rip-offs? You decide. The carousel sequence, probably the best piece of film in the whole story, is a direct lift from Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* [1951]. As a matter of fact, the villain's name, Devlin, is pilfered from Hitchcock's *Notorious* [1946]. The meaning of Devlin (= Devil In) as the villain of *The Net* is pretty obvious. However, Hitchcock's use of the same name for his *hero* is a far more complex piece of work.

Actually, the whole story has a Hitchcock flavor: an ordinary person, through no fault of her own, is suddenly drawn into a world which she doesn't understand but in which she must find a way to survive. There is little difference between receiving a diskette in the mail, as in *The Net*, and trying to send a telegram to mother, as in *North by Northwest* [1959] – it gets you into trouble. There are also references to *The Conversation* [1974], in terms of electronic eavesdropping and the nature of truth discovered in an untruthful way, and *The Parallax View* [1974], in terms of a gigantic conspiracy that is about to set up the hero as the victim (in addition to the final confrontation on a catwalk above a large arena).

The film uses a clever simile to make its point about computers gone awry. Bennett's mother suffers from Alzheimer's Disease and the implication is that the computer machinery of the brain has gone bad, so that the mother cannot recognize the daughter's identity in the same way as the outer world, dependent on physical computers, cannot recognize the hero's true identity.

Unfortunately, most of the film is preoccupied with the hero trying to survive various assassination attempts by the villains. That she survives is a foredrawn conclusion, so we must look elsewhere for something interesting. Actually, the film's milieu is more interesting than the action that devolves from it. This is a condemnation of the computerization of America.

Technophobia is nothing new. In the 1950s we feared the bomb and were given endless films of the consequences of radiation, fallout, and giant insects. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, we have had computers as tools of villainy and, sometimes, as the villains themselves (as in *The Demon Seed* [1977] in which a computer impregnates a woman in order to have a son). *The Net*, along with a number of recent films like *Virtuosity* [1995], *The Terminal Man* [1974], *Batman Forever* [1995], takes this a step further and deals with the *information* that the computers are handling rather than the machines themselves.

The title of this film, *The Net*, together with the other currently popular terms used in the world of computer information transfer, The Internet and The Worldwide Web, imply some sort of global arachnidization of data. And the spider symbolism is not a bad one. The myths of the spider have primarily negative associations in cultures around the world. These refer to a creature capable of spinning a web and laying in wait to paralyze its hapless victims and suck them dry. The idea of a net or a web has always been associated with catching or capturing in accordance with normal use. However, in India the net-like web of the spider is symbolic of cosmic order, and, because of its radial structure, for the radiance of the divine spirit. (This, of course, is the aspect those currently enthralled with computers – nerds – would like us to see.) Furthermore, the spider's web also symbolizes the illusory world of the senses, *Maya*: it captures the weak, but the wise can tear it apart. And this, basically, is the action of *The Net*.

These descriptions of the spider and the web refer well to our current fear of information technology. Conspiratorial hackers suck the hero's personality dry – they take her identity, her car, her house and all her belongings. They control all those places in our

modern culture that reconfirm our view of ourselves, our Personas: the DMV, the IRS, the Post Office, the Police. Further, they control the very insides of our bodies – they are able to change a prescription from health giving to poisonous, they are able to redirect hospital treatment from beneficial to lethal. In the opening scene, a man is psychologically manipulated via computer to commit suicide. All this by controlling the information managed by computers.

This film obviously deals with popular paranoia. However, films from previous eras have also exhibited a paranoia about new technologies and we must ask ourselves if all this is to be taken seriously as an expression of popular consciousness or simply as a compensation for our self-perceived over-dependence on these clever little machines (on one of which I am now writing). All this is modest fun to think about, but there is a darker side to *The Net*.

The hero begins the film working in her own house, never going out, communicating only by telephone, computer, and mail. We are set up for her narrowness by her name – Angela Bennett. The initials of her name encompass the narrowest possible range of the alphabet, from A to B. She is a recluse. One of the points made by the film is that no one can identify her. A comment on life in the big city, perhaps, but the film implies it is her fault that no one knows her after living in the same house for four years.

If an adventure film is a metaphor for psychic growth, then comparing and assessing the hero at the beginning and the end of the film should reveal what the hero's flaw, the flaw that the adventure supposedly cured. At the end of the film, Bennett's mother now lives with her and Bennett leaves her precious computers to go out into the garden to help her mother plant some flowers. As I see it, the bottom line of *The Net* is that the hero is punished for being an introvert. Being an introvert myself, it is at this point I cry “unfair,” and push the reset button on the computer.

The Net. Directed by Irwin Winkler. Written by John Brancato and Michael Ferris.
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