Written by **Thomas R. Eddlem** on August 10, 2013

Elysium: A Skippable Dose of Dystopian Nonsense

Elysium is a campy, dystopian film by writer/director Neill Blomkamp (*District 9*), starring Academy Award winners Matt Damon and Jodie Foster. The film is marketed as an action-genre blockbuster, but moderately impressive special effects don't save it. Neither do the obviously talented acting staff, who are not given a script which allows them to ply their trade convincingly.

The script is littered with wooden characters that are more comic book stereotypes than story-telling. Only Damon's character is developed enough to the point where his last name got mentioned, or at least that's how it seemed. I didn't stick around for the credits, but Damon's character seems to be the only one that merited a last name.

Part of the problem is the over-the-top leftist worldview the film presents. "*Elysium* doesn't have a message," Blomkamp claimed in a *Wired* magazine interview. But how is the viewer to take such an opinion seriously?

The film is set in the year 2154. The rich have left Earth for Elysium, a moon-sized, wheel-shaped satellite orbiting the earth. On Elysium, there is perfect health and luxury, but the rich have kept the poor out. The viewer is not told why that is, beyond a captioned one-line explanation at the beginning of the movie. "In the late 21st century the Earth was diseased, polluted and overpopulated." And thus, the rich fled the Earth. Nothing political about that, right?

All that the viewer needs to know is that the rich on Elysium are indifferent to the plight of earthlings at best, and deliberately malicious at worst. Why? Well, "why" doesn't matter to the story. Damon's mad Max is forced to choose between the only two career options left to rubble-dwelling Los Angelinos in his century: grand-theft auto or working in the city's one factory, which makes police robots called "droids." These are the same bully-bots that break Damon's arm in an example of thuggery straight out of the worst excesses of the Jim Crow South. "The rich" on Elysium also somehow hold down the raggedy-clad and dirty-faced Angelinos to early 21st century medicine technology, or perhaps even lower than that, since nearly everyone who isn't a gun-toting criminal is a cripple or has contracted cancer.

The plot? Damon just has to get to Elysium in five days, or he will die of radiation poisoning after he is exposed in an industrial accident at the robot factory where he works. The bosses at the company have no concern for Damon, and apparently no safety standards for radiation exposure. Meanwhile, the rich — represented by Security Minister Jodie Foster — plot power grabs among the elite, promising 200-year government contracts to arms dealers in exchange for their support.

Lest that political message be too subtle for his audience, Blomkamp's poor people who fly up to

Elysium are labeled "illegals," hinting at the U.S. immigration debate today. Indeed, just about everyone in Neill Blomkamp's dystopian Los Angeles is English/Spanish bilingual. Elysium is also bilingual, though its residents instead seamlessly float between English and French quips to distinguish themselves from les miserables on Earth.

Wired explains that when Blomkamp says Elysium is not a "message" movie, he still intends to get his message out without a sermon:

> Blomkamp insists Elysium isn't some sort of filmic Paul Krugman op-ed piece. It's important for him that his movies grapple with things that matter, in this case economic disparity, immigration, health care, corporate greed. But he disdains prescription-happy "message" movies—that's what documentaries are for, he says—and intends Elysium to be first and foremost a mass-appeal, summer popcorn flick. Allegory, satire, and dark humor interest him; providing pat answers to society's woes does not.

Elysium isn't politically preachy only in the sense that there's no sermon, like Dennis Quaid in *Day After Tomorrow* or Bill Pullman in *Independence Day*. In every other aspect, it's a plot straight from the dimmest and most paranoid minds among applicants for producer jobs at MSNBC.

Some might argue that I'm being too harsh on Blomkamp for his propaganda. It's science fiction, one might argue, and moviegoers who take the sci-fi part of the plot too seriously are bound to be disappointed. Indeed, what's the point in *Star Trek* without the transporter (how does it work again?) or the light sabre in *Star Wars* (how can it absorb laser strikes?). In science fiction, it's best to just accept the science and move on to the characters. And as a lover of the sci-fi genre, I know there's something to that kind of thinking. But there are no characters to move on to.

And Blomkamp doesn't even make the storyline match up with itself — repeatedly. There are a number of holes in the plot, including multiple debilitating injuries Damon's character incurs — from which he mysteriously bounces back apparently unscathed. Then there are the superhuman robots called "droids" which appear early in the movie to bully Damon's character Max, and keep the huddled masses on Earth in order. But as soon as the action starts, Jodie Foster relies instead upon a scabby coterie of mercenaries led by a lunatic with a South African accent to track Damon down.

A moviegoer can suspend his disbelief only so many times before he loses interest. I have a high tolerance for those kinds of plot pitfalls, and nearly reached the point of losing interest — but not quite. This isn't a must-see movie, and it isn't even a DVD/Blu-Ray rental. But for sci-fi lovers, it might be okay when it reaches free television on a night with nothing else to do.

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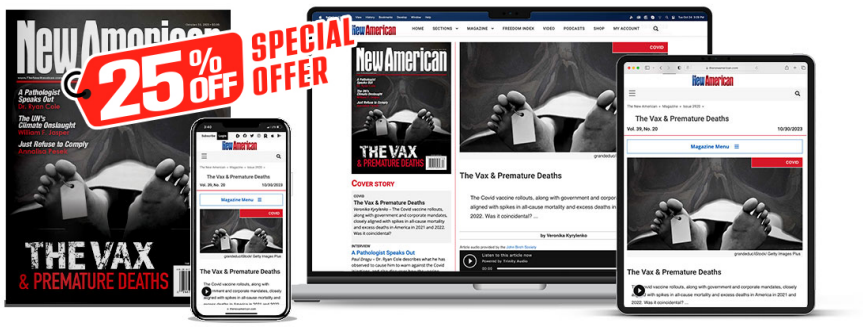

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