

# IONISPHERE 33

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Printed and edited by John Thiel, Bureau Chief, residing at 30 N. 19<sup>th</sup> Street, Lafayette, Indiana 4790 4. email [kinethiel@mymetronet.net](mailto:kinethiel@mymetronet.net) .

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## STAFF



Jeffrey Redmond, 1335 Beechwood NE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49505-3830. [redmondjeff@hotmail.com](mailto:redmondjeff@hotmail.com) .

Jefferson Swycaffer, Post Office Box 15373, Dan Diego, California 92175-5373. [abontides@gmail.com](mailto:abontides@gmail.com) .

Jon Swartz, 12115 Missel Thrush Court, Austin, Texas 78750. [jon\\_swartz@hotmail.com](mailto:jon_swartz@hotmail.com)

John Polsell, 264 Chestnut Hill Road, Chepachet, Rhode Island 02814.

Heath Row, 4367 Globe Avenue, Culver City, California 90230. [kalel@well.com](mailto:kalel@well.com) .

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## EDITORIAL



### **Where Do We Go From Possum?**

The title of this editorial may be confusing, but an explanation should take care of that. Down by the Okeefinokee Swampland, where Walt Kelly's POGO characters dwelt, the lingo was basic, as is reflected in the books of Pogo, which have had great popularity with, and great influence upon, some segments of science fiction fandom. See for reference the book G.O. FIZZICLE POGO, which kept up with the scientific event called the International Geophysical Year. Kelly is the writer of the famous line, "We have met the enemy and he is us", with which he replaced the earlier confederate Civil War statement "We have met the enemy and he is ours." The meaning of the title is "Where do we go from starting with the basics", "Possum" being the outstanding basic premise position in a codified animal hierarchy where concepts are represented by animals. Where do we go from the down-to-earth position which we might assume?

We might like this basic position because it is down to the fundamentals, grounded in practical reality and purged of everything that isn't essential, so to speak. When you are on the ground, everything else is Up. The way up is best evaluated from being down. There have been a lot of losses suffered in this, our modern age, but we can take hold of what little we still have left and begin to rebuild without the danger of having something funny get in our way. The Civil War affected our nation and there are things

like the Civil War affecting us today, including the Civil War, according to Ward Moore's "Bring the Jubilee", published in an early issue of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, a new venture in its time. The Battle of Bunker Hill is not far away; if you travel in the right direction you will see a hill. The hill represents our progress being impeded.

This issue of Ionisphere is failing in some of its resources, notably the possibility of interviews becoming a dry well; we have gotten most of what we can scan out, if no one knows of any other such resource, and most of the possibilities that still exist show a leaning toward not providing one, a sort of nix, nein that lets us know that the potential volunteers have something else to attend to. There is some possibility of discussing some of the interviews we have printed retroactively, now that the ink's dry on them, and there may be an interpretive retrospective on the interviews we have had coming up, in which case we can email the interviewees another copy of IO, and perhaps gain further interest from them, and they are all pros. Also we have not a chinaman's chance of gathering news items relating to fans, pros, and their interrelationships, and I have sought to rectify this absence by providing a link to news sources, which is the fanzine Ansible, the best news source I have found other than Mike Glycer's news zine, which has not shown friendliness to the N3F. The link to Ansible news is:

<https://news.ansible.uk/>

This will be regularly available in Ionisphere.

When you are in a place with no identity, as is so in so much of today's world where cultures are overlapping and overrunning one another and where so much of the vital essence of existence is missing (if only speculators of the Nineteenth Century could get a glimpse of us now, whatever would they think of what they are looking at?), you are looking at a vacuity which must be filled (as it is said, "nature abhors a vacuum"), and the thing to do is to create what is to be and what should be part of your existence, out of any materials at hand. You might want science fiction fandom and science fiction itself to be more of a society, as I do, and you might want to refigure all of it from zero. In this way you are doing something, rather than idling around looking at the turbulence of the present-day world. No way of existence is presented to you, so make your own. And if you are with fantasy and science fiction, you may want to help resurrect them and make your own place in the doings. That is what I would encourage in N3F activity. Do NFFF activity and whatever else you have with which you can identify well, and combine your activities into an individual lifestyle which you might find of

interest to those around you. A solid home foundation would be a great help in NFFF activities, and as I have been noting lately, it is helpful in correspondence also to have a basis for yourself and for others to have a basis also with which to have a meaningful contact with the fan organizations.

Hopefully this editorial will prove of benefit to its readers.

## BEHIND THE SCENES

### *Hollywood's Science Fiction Problems*

By Jeffrey Redmond



*A look at where so much science fiction activity is at*

As fans of science fiction, it is often exciting to us when Hollywood decides to make a sci fi movie. Or at least it used to be. These days it seems exceedingly rare that science fiction feature films are any good. At best they're lackluster or confusing. At the worst, they make us want to throw things at the screen.

This was brought to light recently if we saw ELYSIUM. On paper, Elysium should have worked. It was a film from Neill Blomkamp, who wrote and directed DISTRICT NINE. It dealt with issues of class and immigration at a time when these things were on the forefront of many Americans' minds. It had mostly believable science.

But Elysium ultimately failed for numerous reasons. It lacked subtlety. It was full of plot holes, and it devolved into a simple slugfest by its climax. It was a dumb movie, and that seems to be the common output from Hollywood these days. For every decent movie we can think of, we can name at least three bad ones. And then there is a middling layer of mediocrity usually including the more traditional action fare.



Elysium

But because all of this is subjective, you'd think you deserved a baseline—what movies qualify as good science fiction? We have our own tastes, but we can consult several online lists and come up with a number of movies that tally with each other's. Some of the top movies (2001, Blade Runner, Alien(s), Terminator 1 and 2, Close Encounters, Back to the Future) seem to make most of the lists. The majority of these movies were from a couple of decades ago at least.



Blade Runner



Alien



Terminator



Close Encounters



**Back to the Future**

But why do so many recent science fiction movies stink? There are a few theories which we can share with you. A lot of these points are related, but here's what we think:

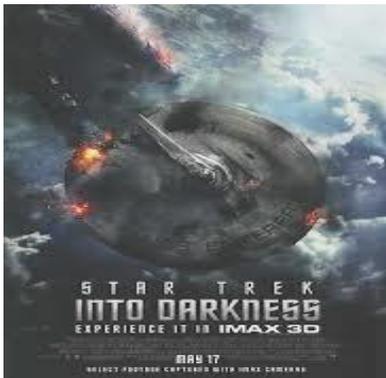
### Ignoring the Science Part

Don't be a stickler who thinks that everything in science fiction has to be restricted to our current scientific understanding. That would mean no faster than light travel, no time travel, and a lot less fun. But Hollywood is notoriously bad at being scientific. One has only to watch some MYTHBUSTERS to see that. What's the big deal? you might be asking. Movies are meant to be fantasy—we watch them for entertainment, not necessarily for education. But in science fiction much of the world that's being built—futuristic societies, alien cultures, advanced technology—depends on a believable backbone. And once you start removing pieces of real science that backbone crumbles like a Jenga tower.

There should be a general level of scientific accuracy whether we're talking physics, biology, mathematics, geology or whatever. Real world animals should react like the real animals act, unless they've been altered or infected or mutated. Physics should work as it usually does unless there's something to explain why it should act otherwise.

STAR TREK INTO DARKNESS opens with a scene with the Enterprise submerged beneath an alien planet's ocean. Even if you make up some justification for how the ship could withstand the pressure of the ocean, especially without snapping off those thin nacelles, the power required to lift such a mass out of the ocean and into space would be incredible. Even worse, it wasn't necessary to hide the ship. All they needed to do was

to stay in orbit. It's clear that the shot was more an example of unnecessary special effects.



### Focusing on the Special Effects

We can firmly believe that one of the reasons science fiction films are so popular is for their special effects. Whether it's spaceships or explosions or lasers or robots or aliens, special effects come into play. Most of the time these days it's handled by CGI, but of course in the past filmmakers have used models or clay or matte work. And it's impressive. As lifelong readers of science fiction, we can love seeing spaceships and warp drives and outer space and aliens and advanced technology portrayed on the screen.

But that's not enough on its own. After PROMETHEUS came out, people kept talking about how pretty the movie was. And it is a beautiful film. But it's stupid as anything, too. And all the visuals, no matter how impressive, can't change that.



**Prometheus**

Additionally, this focus on the razzle dazzle means that the focus is often taken away from the characters. Don't be anti-CGI by any means, and it can always be use to great

effect in moderation. But CGI-heavy movies, like the Star Wars prequels, tend to feel a bit lifeless after a while.

### Focusing on the Action

Character is an important aspect of any film. Just because a movie is science fiction, there is still no indication that it can get by with weak characters. We can like action. There's nothing wrong with it. But too often action is used as the chief way to create drama or conflict. Elysium, for example, tries to play with all kinds of social issues, but in the end the conflict comes down to two men in powered exoskeletons bashing on each other.

This is suitable for some films, of course. PACIFIC RIM, for example, is all about mechs bashing on kaiju. The Star Wars movies aren't complete without a lightsaber battle in the climax. But both of those examples pair the combat with character moments. Luke facing the temptation of the Dark Side, for example, in RETURN OF THE JEDI. And while we can love action movies, science fiction should bring something more to the table.

### Faulty Worldbuilding and the Resulting Plot Holes

As any writer of science fiction will tell you, the moment you start creating new worlds and advanced societies and new technological innovations, you start opening those worlds up to scrutiny and questions. These can be overcome with a little thought and some rigor. And you can even get away with some handwaving. But these kinds of holes aggregate and can lead to the audience having too many questions. If the film opens the door by positing a technological innovation that changes the world, the viewer is going to walk through and start thinking about the ramifications of those changes. Start throwing a bunch of concepts together and you open the door for far more questions. And if you haven't thought all of those questions through, then you end up with plot holes.

And even if everything doesn't add up completely, there should be some internal consistency to the world. If it's a future where everyone has the ability to instantly transport anywhere they want to, then that should affect the way that business is done, since it would completely change the way goods are imported or exported. Maybe instead of local stores, people would teleport themselves to huge warehouses that would serve the whole country. And what would that do to the concept of nationality? These are all things that could be explored, but if the world largely looks like ours, with

this technology, that's lazy writing.

This is where a movie like PRIMER succeeds so well. It looks at one specific technological innovation, in this case a time machine, and deals with its ramifications on a relatively small scale. The fact that it's so small a scale is part of the point. Sometimes a smaller scope keeps things on track.

### Too Many Cooks in the Kitchen

It's no secret that big budget Hollywood movies have vast numbers of people involved in their creation. And because the budgets these days are in the order of tens of millions of dollars at the least, the people spending that money want to have their say in what the movie is about. This often dilutes the essence of the movie. It's not uncommon to have multiple rewrites on science fiction movie scripts. Even when a script is "final", the director might decide to change something, or perhaps the high paid lead actor wants to alter the character or dialogue.

Contrast this to the smaller budget, ore independent science fiction movies, where the number of people involved is less, and the amount of money on the line is smaller. These smaller movies tend to be some of the best science fiction films of our time. Take Moon, for example, which was, for the money, one of the best science fiction movies of the past few years. Moon was co-written and directed by Duncan Jones, and had a budget of \$5 million. \$5 million! To put that into context, Elysium, After Earth, and Prometheus had budgets of \$115 million, \$130 million and \$120 million, respectively. With a relatively small budget, the filmmaker gets more control.

### Dumb Character Syndrome

In many of these movies characters do stupid and questionable things, and it's obvious that these things are only done to advance the plot. Sorry to pick on Prometheus yet again, but that movie was filled with this. Scientists visiting an alien world remove their helmets, and start poking around with potentially dangerous fauna, without taking any precautions at all. A corporate expedition goes in without security or weapons. As if no one could imagine that there could be some kind of security system or even some creatures that might be running rampant inside the alien installation.

Elysium is another offender. Aside from thing just not making sense, another consequence of Dumb Character Syndrome is that we can't really be invested in someone like that. You start thinking that they deserve what they get. And character is

an important aspect of any film. Just because a movie is science fiction it isn't certain it can get by with weak characters.

These are just theories, of course. But they do make some kind of sense. Feel free to disagree and argue your own points in the comments. We'd love to hear your thoughts on the best and worst science fiction movies of all time.



**Crew launch, NASA TV**



**NASA inner workings**



**Caught in muh seat belt.**



## **LETTERS OF COMMENT**

**Will Mayo:** Thanks for Ionisphere. Jeffrey Redmond's discussions of race relations in science fiction was especially informative.