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Revolutionaries in Space? A Counter-Review of *Interstellar*

Abstract

Should the radical Left interpret the Nolans' *Interstellar* as a tribute to (neo)liberal expansionism or should we view it as a cautionary tale about a future that is just around the corner, which won't be solved by worm holes or time travel? This review takes the latter position against the recent Jacobin review, which argues the former. Here, I show that *Interstellar* can be productively reinterpreted as a film about a series of things that will NOT save us from our-late-capitalist-selves.

Keywords

Interstellar, Critical Review

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In a recent online post, *Jacobin* magazine, the emerging voice of the young radical Left, published a very harsh review entitled [“Reactionaries in Space”](#) by Eileen Jones of the Nolan brothers’ newest blockbuster *Interstellar*.¹ Overall the *Jacobin* review was on point, arguing that the film was more or less a propaganda piece for Manifest Destiny and Western imperialism as cure-alls to the ecological problems we are currently seeing the early stages of and consistently alluded to—though never fully explained—in the movie. There is nothing wrong with this critique, and is probably very accurate and at least well-argued in Jones’s review. We can even assume this is more or less the sci-fi Western that the Nolans were trying to make. *Interstellar* was visually and auditorily entertaining (especially in IMAX), and though it had a few flashes of intellectual merit in terms of the plot, was a very underwhelming film on the surface. I do however think that there is a potentially different interpretation of this movie available to us, the “We’re just about to be completely fucked—but not yet” interpretation. Assuming that the *Jacobin* piece gets us closer to what the Nolans intended the film to convey: pessimistic hope, faith in humanity and the American spirit in the face of catastrophe, belief that technology can save us, humans as complex, complicated, sometimes reckless but well-meaning beings, this review is a Barthesian “Death of the Author” style review.

I think Jones’s *Jacobin* review missed three important points in her effort to write a very critical review. First, the review comes off as ignoring the idea that technological advancement is an essential aspect of radical Left progress (which the review only sarcastically alludes to). It missed a great opportunity to talk about the importance of technology for the Left, which culturally often comes off as anti-technology. The problem with technology is how we use it, what we make with it, as well as the ecological costs of unbridled, unrestrained extraction of resources for the production of certain technologies—typically for consumer electronics—not necessarily the technology in and of itself. As McConaughey’s character quips, MRIs are a pretty great invention (if only more poor people actually had access to them). Though Jones is absolutely correct that *Interstellar* fails to adequately express the human cause of the blight, it is

¹ <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/12/interstellar-review/>

not completely ignored. It is addressed problematically by the female school teacher in the parent-teacher conference: she tells Matthew McConaughey's character that the conspicuous excesses of the past and the fetishization of technological advancement got them into the situation they currently face.



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Second, there is also an implicit critique of our early twenty-first century bourgeois lifestyles here as well. Though it is problematic because of this teacher's conspiratorial view that the 1960s and 70s lunar landings we faked, her character makes it possible to see that this propagandistic view is the result of a pragmatic decision to keep people, especially children, focused on addressing the problems facing planet Earth and not looking to the stars. There is a further, again minimalistic and subtle critique of capitalism from John Lithgow's character, Donald the father-in-law. After the parent teacher conference, Lithgow shows no nostalgia for the days when a new gadget came out every day, sometimes without even knowing what the use of the gadget was, but people were always excited about the next new thing. They thought they were in a paradise. He tells McConaughey that their current situation isn't necessarily worse. This short dialogue is an understated critique of conspicuous consumption, consumerism, and seemingly 20th and early 21st century capitalism, but you do have to dig through the masturbatory space travel parts of the film (which to be fair is about two-thirds of the film).

Thirdly, however, the meaning of the movie is not that human ingenuity represented by the American flag will save us from ourselves, but rather that Space-travel will NOT save us (regardless of what actually happens in the movie). Just think about all the entirely unlikely things that happen in *Interstellar*, most of which we have no reason to believe are or ever will be scientifically possible (time-travelling communication through a trans-dimensional bookcase in the center of a black hole and worm holes in general, just to name a couple examples). The point of the movie is that we need to not fuck up the Earth so badly now while we still can change our future, because in reality we won't be able to change our future once it becomes our past.

The roadblock, which is actually acknowledged by those two characters I mentioned earlier: is globalizing, totalizing consumer capitalism. If we look at what motivates all the characters in the film (even the "evil" brother and Matt Damon's pitiful Last Man-esque character), there is no

profit-motive. There is no competition. There isn't even greed in the contemporary sense. There are all the different dimensions and potentialities of human psychology, motivational and regressive emotion, but there is little to no exclusively capitalist ideology represented in the behaviors of the characters. Unfounded, retrograde faith in the colonization of other worlds to save our species? Yes, and although this has historically been an important structural and ideological component of capitalism, the movie separates it out (whether this is the neoliberal bias of the film's writers' belief that imperialism is NOT the highest form of capitalism)—we know from the stories of many blue collar farmers who moved West during the early and mid-1800s in the US, they really were just often looking for a better more viable life for their families—though the result was colonizing of Native American land and the westward instantiation of capitalism. Let us be fair to history though, much of the slave trade and imperial colonization preceded the development of capitalism (but it surely enabled it). The point regarding imperialism I believe is exaggerated in Jones's review for *Jacobin*. Overall though, what this film does do exceptionally well is construct an awe-inspiring, imagination-tickling aesthetic experience, which if anything occasionally felt more like an extended cheesy advertisement for NASA more so than a reactionary tribute to neoliberalism.

There is a Leftist, materialist-utopian element (in the Blochian sense) in the film, but it is not the unfounded belief that the future will eventually work out for humanity because we invent time travel after we learn to control and understand five dimensions of reality. Instead the utopianism is that we are not in a situation as bad as the one the characters in *Interstellar* face, at least not yet. The utopian element is our current reality. We are still temporally prior to mass ecological catastrophe. We can still change our future. We can live differently. We can still be differently. This film portrays what happens if we let capitalism run its "natural" course. If we let capitalism kill itself, it will kill us too. This is the utopian dimension of *Interstellar*: We are not quite completely screwed just yet.