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The Martian: A NASA-tionalist Utopia

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The Martian: A NASA-tionalist Utopia

Abstract

The Martian presents the audience with a near-future that is a pervasively depoliticized neoliberal utopia—and what is scariest is that it does so very successfully. That is, *The Martian* is a very well-made and largely entertaining film that is also one of the shallowest movies likely to be considered for an Academy Award, though the competition for that will likely be strong.

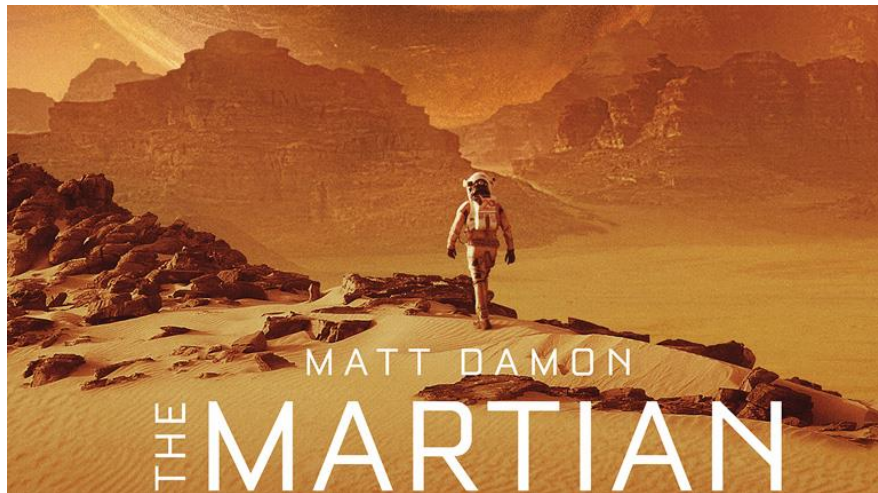
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(Source: Google Images)

The audience is presented with a film about a massive government, publicly-funded (to the tune of \$18 billion in FY 2015¹) agency with nearly no mention of government. The audience is presented with a film about an agency that serves as a publicly-funded test ground for the military-industrial complex and the weapons industry with nearly no mention of corporations, the military, or any discussion as to where their massive funding comes from. The audience is presented with a highly entertaining glorification of the use of massive amounts of public funds (also with no mention of the public, except as an object of public relations manipulation through a number of press conferences) all for the ostensible benefit of a small group—really, one man. All this happens with no mention of any group or person suggesting “Hey maybe we shouldn’t blast all of this money and these resources into outer space to save one life.” The only “public” the audience ever sees is a few clips towards the end of drone-like bipeds gathered together in major US and Chinese cities in tense support of the Mars recuse mission that serves as the main plotline for Ridley Scott’s newest blockbuster, and two-plus hour NASA advertisement, *The Martian*. *The Martian* presents the audience with a near-future that is a pervasively depoliticized neoliberal utopia—and what is scariest is that it does so very successfully. That is, *The Martian* is a very well-made and largely entertaining film that is also one of the shallowest movies likely to be considered for an Academy Award, though the competition for that will likely be strong.

The film is not utopian because Mark Watney (expertly played by Matt Damon) uses his own vacuum-sealed feces to grow *deus ex machina* potatoes on Mars. It is not utopian because Watney flies through space “like Ironman” during the climactic rescue attempt high above the thin Martian atmosphere. The utopian dimension to this excellent film has nothing at all to do with the scientifically well-researched fictionalized astro-physics. The utopian elements are found in everything that the audience never sees or hears. The utopia that *The Martian* presents is explicitly not a dystopia, unless of course you are one of the likely billions of starving people that are completely ignored in the film, continuing to suffer the worst deprivations imaginable while the political and economic elites continue to contrive manipulated support from the citizens of the world’s wealthiest pseudo-democracy to find new and exciting ways to irrationally squander our planet’s and our peoples’ resources—and when that failed, don’t worry, China, the worst largest authoritarian capitalist regime, was there to bail them out. We are

¹ <http://spaceflightnow.com/2014/12/14/nasa-gets-budget-hike-in-spending-bill-passed-by-congress/>

presented with a capitalist's utopia. No resistance. No need to reflect on the trade-offs of hugely expensive scientific exploration while there is so much extreme poverty in the world. Is there still poverty? Homelessness? Perhaps those problems were solved the year right before the movie began. I doubt it though, and I doubt Ridley Scott, Matt Damon, or the millions of people who have seen this movie, care. Mars—and NASA apparently—is no place for politics or social justice.

NASA is presented as an agency whose only public service is providing us with cool plots for new movies and the occasional opportunity to gather mindlessly together in support of a patriotic cause, that for once doesn't involve gathering our billion dollar pitchforks and torches to invade another unsuspecting country. *The Martian* is itself an ironic representation of NASA, though on a slightly smaller scale. This movie, when all is said and done, will have involved nearly half a billion dollars (a \$100 million-plus budget and probably eventually \$400 million in gross revenue) and for what? Two hours of watching Matt Damon grow potatoes on Mars, while making admittedly humorous side-comments?

As I left the theater, I thought to myself, "Yeah, that was a pretty good movie," but on the drive back to my relatively cushy Miami apartment, I felt pretty disgusted with myself, and I only spent three hours and \$15 on this movie. It's like when you see a Ferrari or a Maserati drive by: it's cool for a moment and then you think, "The guy driving it is probably a superrich financial criminal of some kind." Maybe it's just me who thinks that....In any event, *The Martian* is that Ferrari or Maserati; it is aesthetically charming and eye-catching on the outside, but through and through, it epitomizes the worst excesses of late capitalism.



(Source: Google images)

Without spending any screen time discussing the following concerns, the film does offer a few avenues for critical self-reflection that I imagine have nothing to do with the current 93% positive rating *The Martian* has on Rotten Tomatoes. First, around the middle of the movie NASA and its scientists are trying to figure out a way to keep Watney alive on Mars until the next planned mission. Even with his fecally-farmed potatoes, he would need more food and supplies to survive until that next mission arrives. The plan is to send an unmanned rocket to Mars with the necessary supplies. Well, the rocket explodes because—as was foreshadowed with the subtlety of a space shuttle launch—the engineers had to skip the pre-flight safety inspections in the interest of time. When the rocket predictably explodes, the characters are rightfully melancholic. It meant that they probably wouldn't be able to save Mark Watney. Imagine

explaining that plot event to a starving homeless person, of which there are currently over 500,000 of in just the United States.² Imagine their response: “So you’re telling me the reason to be sad isn’t because the US government just wasted millions of dollars trying to send a bunch of food and life-saving supplies across the solar system—and failed, thus destroying all the food and supplies?” Okay, so this hypothetical person probably has an unrealistic level of knowledge about NASA, but still the point stands. There wasn’t one person in the room at NASA who was thinking, “Why the fuck are we spending all of this money shooting food into space to save one guy when that money (and food) could be used here on Earth to take care of 100,000 people?” Even if democracy were infused into this situation, the movie makes it very clear how easily consent can be manufactured.



(Source: *The Onion*³)

Second and more optimistically, *The Martian* shows us precisely what collectivized resources and collectivized effort towards a cause can produce. In the film, there is no profit motive driving these people. They are trying to save a friend and colleague, and because they have the resources of NASA to do it, they can accomplish it. When human beings work together towards a common goal, regardless of profit or self-interest, they can do incredible things. This movie *does* show that, but it also shows what happens when those resources and efforts are used for completely undemocratic and completely irrational causes. We end up blasting food into space when there are billions starving on this planet. Mark Watney seems like a great guy, but why doesn’t he ever suggest that maybe, just maybe, coming to save him isn’t the best use of even NASA’s resources, never mind the planet’s he was originally a resident of? Probably for the same reason most people don’t question NASA’s \$18 billion budget now. Ignorance.

² <http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/the-state-of-homelessness-in-america-2015>

³ <http://www.theonion.com/article/nasa-announces-plan-to-launch-700-million-into-spa-1950>

Manipulation. Self-interest (if you're a Texan or Floridian especially). In order for democracy to work, and to work for the people, it must be conditioned towards rational, just goals—not goals that are provided by Boeing and Lockheed-Martin—or the plutocratic government they've purchased. Space travel isn't the problem, space travel under conditions of extreme poverty, exploitation, and injustice is.

Third, we see the oh-so-common gross human disregard for ecology. We see Watney dig up a radioactive shuttle reactor that was buried on Mars when the crew had originally landed, with the explicit intention of leaving it there forever. Don't worry any person with any knowledge of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, this reactor was buried a few feet under the sand. So relax. Also, what in God's name happens to all the shit that Watney strips off of the shuttle in his attempt to get off of Mars? He just leaves it there, along with the rover he drove across the barren planet to get to his new launch site. This is a capitalist's wet dream: a vast, unregulated landscape where we can pollute, plunder, and litter as much as we want without any possible foreseeable (read: legally relevant) consequences. I'm not saying there will be climate change on Mars, but the problem is not ecology of Mars. The crucial point is that this is exactly what happens on Earth right now and for the past, I don't know, four hundred years or more.

And as is the case with all good ideologically-rooted cultural products, none of these reflections drawn from this film have anything to do with the movie's success. In fact, the movie succeeds because it doesn't weigh down the audience with any explicit ethical concerns that actually matter. Please, debate more about whether we should tell the crew that left Watney behind that he is still alive, but please don't debate whether we should blast whatever money we haven't already wasted, into space to save him. For all these reasons, *The Martian* isn't science fiction, it is fantasy—the lived fantasy of the 1%.