

Moon: Back to the future in science fiction

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Directed by Duncan Jones, screenplay by Nathan Parker, original story by Duncan Jones

The new science fiction movie *Moon*, directed by Duncan Jones, was apparently released to coincide with and capitalize on the fortieth anniversary of the first landing of humans on the Moon. Though set in the “not too distant” future, the movie turns out to be something of a retrospective on the last four decades, in more ways than one.

The movie centers on a lone astronaut-space miner, Sam Bell, played by Sam Rockwell, who is nearing the end of a three-year contract as the sole human operator of a base on the far side of the Moon. The base is a surface mine, engaged in extracting highly valuable “Helium 3” from Moon rocks. He3 is the fuel for fusion reactors on Earth, which have solved the planet’s “energy crisis.” The base’s owner, and Sam’s employer, is what the viewer infers to be a vastly powerful “megacorp” named Lunar Industries.

Sam is a regular working stiff who, we learn, signed up for this job to show responsibility and make a new start with his family, a wife and daughter, left back on earth. His only companion on the base is a one-eyed computer-robot named GERTY, whose voice is provided by Kevin Spacey. Already, the viewer with any knowledge of science fiction films of the last four decades will have noticed several allusions to older movies, i.e., *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Silent Running*, in particular.

References such as these populate the film. So much so that *Moon* gives the impression at times of being a senior thesis in which the student is intent on displaying his knowledge by citing every reference to old SciFi movies he can think of. Indeed, this is director Jones’s first full-length movie, so the analogy to a senior thesis may be more than metaphorical.

In any event, the boredom and monotony of life on

the Moon are starting to fray Sam’s nerves. The isolation is made all the worse by a satellite failure, which makes real time communications with Earth impossible (remember the base is on the moon’s far side, so no direct transmissions are possible). Messages are relayed via distant satellites, making each episode a one-sided affair only.

Sam’s stress appears to be manifested in several hallucinatory visions of a young girl, which he attributes to the effects of his long isolation, but keeps from GERTY. The last of these visions leads to a crash of Sam’s rover with one of the huge harvesters, leaving Sam injured, unconscious, and pinned inside his vehicle with no apparent means of rescue (GERTY’s robotic apparatus is part of the base, not independently mobile).

Inexplicably, however, Sam wakes up back in the base’s infirmary being nursed by GERTY. Aside from physical weakness, Sam has suffered some loss of memory, which means he has no recollection of the accident. Upon recovery, Sam begins to notice some deviations from the base’s routine. One of the harvesters is not functioning, and he catches a portion of a supposedly impossible live conversation between GERTY and representatives of the megacorp on Earth. Sam wants to leave the base and check on the non-functioning harvester. However, GERTY has instructions from corporate headquarters not to allow Sam to exit the base until he is fully recovered. It is also revealed that there is an apparently unnecessary “rescue” mission on its way to the base. With some minor sabotage on Sam’s part, and a promise that he is only going outside the base’s hull to check on a supposed leak, GERTY relents and allows Sam to exit.

The mysteries are compounded when Sam, upon reaching the immobile harvester, finds a crashed rover with an injured, unconscious driver who looks like a slightly older and scruffier version of himself. Sam

retrieves the injured driver (a reference to *2001*) and returns him to the station where GERTY now tends to the “old” Sam. The paradox of the two “Sams” forms the crux of the story. Without revealing the entire plot, key elements include a cloned workforce with planned obsolescence (reference to *Blade Runner*), an evil corporation that is willing to manipulate and even sacrifice its employees in pursuit of profit (reference to the *Alien* series, at least), and a desperate race to prepare for the arrival of the ominous “rescue party,” complete with periodic shots of a countdown clock (reference to *Outland*, which is itself a remake of the famous Western *High Noon*).

The repeated allusions to *2001* are especially notable. One of the clearest plays on the ambiguous analogy between that movie’s computer HAL and *Moon*’s GERTY. In the earlier film, released shortly before the 1969 moon landing, the initially benevolent HAL turns murderous and manages to kill all but one of the spaceship’s crew, the last murder effected by luring one of the two remaining astronauts outside the ship. With this as a reference, the viewer of *Moon* is kept in a state of uncertainty regarding GERTY’s true nature. Is this a “good HAL” or a “bad HAL”?

The play on the HAL theme is brought down to nuance by the contrast between the camera-eye of each computer. In *2001*, HAL’s eye is reddish and unblinking. These characteristics are increasingly emphasized by long close-ups of the eye as HAL engages in its evil deeds. One notices, however, that GERTY’s eye does blink, at least the diaphragm opens and closes. Furthermore, GERTY has a small video screen with an “emoticon” face that changes expression to reflect GERTY’s moods. This more empathetic artificial companion becomes key to the plot’s ultimate denouement. There is even a short reprise of the famous *2001* “psychedelic ride.”

Aside from the fun of trying to identify all of *Moon*’s cinematic allusions, this film is, in effect, a stringing together of a whole series of these references that ultimately produces one long cliché. Perhaps, since this is Duncan Jones’s first feature film, one should be satisfied that this collage is artfully done and hope for better things to come “after graduation.” One other notable retrospective aspect of this film is that, in contrast to most recent SciFi movies, the special effects are largely accomplished by physical models rather

than by computer graphics. This gives *Moon* a rougher, “retro” look reminiscent of older films such as *2001*.

Ultimately, however, given that the realms of science fiction and space exploration present the artist with the possibility of examining and commenting on many aspects of society and human existence by placing them in unusual contexts, the fact that this film only cobbles together elements of the past leaves one unsatisfied.

The topic of the interaction between intelligent machines and humans, raised by the HAL-GERTY contrast, is one of those that could have been pursued more fully to provide greater substance to the film. In the *2001* sequel, *2010*, we learn that HAL’s murderous behavior was the result of an impossible conflict between basic instructions to help the crew, on the one hand, with newer instructions to investigate the “Monolith” on the other, which he could not reveal to the crew. GERTY has a similar conflict between loyalty to the megacorp and instructions to provide support and companionship to Sam.

What we are left with as the central theme is the lone individual, even if in this case there is more than one of them, against the big, bad megacorp, which simply reprises a well-worn, indeed worn-out motif. We are now and will always be pawns of the rich and powerful, so we’d better get used to it. As another review observed, this film implies that “the odds are fairly good that the future will be exactly like today, but more so.”

Perhaps it’s not too much of a stretch to find an analogy with the film’s release on the anniversary of the first human landing on the moon. The limited progress that has been made in space exploration over the last 40 years, exemplified by the continued reliance on old technology (Soyuz capsules, aging space shuttles, and a return to Saturn-style booster rockets for NASA’s “new” Aries launch system), seems to find an echo in *Moon*’s construction out of old parts.



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