

Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium*: To have or have not

David Walsh
13 August 2013

The principal challenge in writing about a film like *Elysium* is to make neither too much nor too little of it.

Neill Blomkamp, the South African-born director (*District 9*, 2009), sets out certain provocative premises for his new film. By 2154, according to a title, the earth's "wealthiest inhabitants" have "fled" to an orbiting space station, Elysium, some twenty minutes away by space shuttle. There, under sunny skies, gleaming mansions with luxuriant lawns and swimming pools prevail. Everything is light and elegant and clean. Medical science has developed equipment (Medi-Pods) that repair broken bones and cure even the most lethal diseases instantly.

The earth (whose scenes were shot in Mexico City), on the other hand, resembles a giant polluted, overcrowded slum. Its inhabitants are prevented, as undocumented "non-citizens," from entering the paradise in the sky. They have little or no access to elementary social services such as health care. Police-state methods prevail, with armed robots controlling and brutalizing the seething, poverty-stricken population.

Max Da Costa (Matt Damon) works in a factory owned by Armadyne, the conglomerate that has built Elysium. An industrial accident, due to the company's ruthless speed-up and drive for profits, results in his being contaminated by radiation and given five days to live. Much of the film is taken up by Max's attempts to reach Elysium and provide himself with a cure for his condition.

Max's predicament and his struggle to stay alive intersect with a crisis on Elysium, where Delacourt (Jodie Foster), a fascist-minded government official in charge of "Homeland Security," who uses a vicious mercenary (Sharlto Copley) to liquidate "illegal immigrants" arriving from earth, is planning a coup that will place her in power. She justifies her plan on the grounds of the need to "protect our liberty." At a certain point, Delacourt has a powerful motive for getting hold of Max and the information he (literally) carries in his head.

Max also encounters a childhood friend and former sweetheart, Frey (Alicia Braga), with whom he shares

important memories. She too has compelling reasons for reaching Elysium: to obtain medical care for her daughter, suffering from an advanced stage of leukemia.

The events unfold in a violent, dense fashion.

There are numerous interesting things here: in particular, the focus on social inequality and its connection to political reaction and repression. In *Elysium*, as in life, the defense of the elite and its immense wealth requires intense violence against the disenfranchised, impoverished mass of the people. The references to Homeland Security, "Big Brother"-type surveillance, mercenary-like contractors, the plight of the undocumented, industrial murder, corporate corruption and malfeasance and anti-democratic conspiracies have an obvious significance. The events of the past two decades did not pass unnoticed, even in artistic circles.

Blomkamp grew up in South Africa during the latter stages of the struggle against the apartheid regime and attended film school in Vancouver, his current home. He seems a bit distant from the contemporary American film industry and its stifling, stagnant atmosphere, and thus capable of allowing realistic elements to enter into his work. A colleague explained, "He [Blomkamp] grew up in a racist, fascist empire, watched it be overthrown, collapse into chaos, all while walking to school every day. Imagine the impression that leaves on you."

Elysium has elicited a well-deserved venomous response from ultra-right commentators, who have referred to it as "Matt Damon's Sci-Fi Socialism" and "socialist trash," along with other insulting phrases. A spokesman for the right-wing Media Research Center told Fox News, "This is just the latest of several Hollywood movies this year to try and co-opt Occupy Wall Street plotlines into their films."

Other media outlets have somewhat more objectively registered the film's concerns. The Associated Press headlined a piece, "In *Elysium*, a cosmic divide for rich and poor." The *Los Angeles Times* wrote of "Inequality at the movies." In its review, *Variety* asserted that *Elysium* advances "one of the more openly socialist political agendas of any Hollywood movie in memory, beating the drum

loudly not just for universal healthcare, but for open borders, unconditional amnesty and the abolition of class distinctions as well.” When was the last time *Variety* used the word “socialist” in reference to a major studio film?

Blomkamp told the *LA Times* that sections of contemporary Johannesburg, along with Bel-Air and Beverly Hills in the Los Angeles area, inspired his vision of Elysium. He commented to ScreenCrave, “I don’t think the film is speculative science-fiction. It’s so much more a metaphor for today in my mind.”

In an interview with Reuters, Matt Damon noted that the film’s premise was not far-fetched: “If you look at the difference between the bottom billion people on planet Earth and the top 10 million, the contrast is as stark as living on a space station and living in a third world urban centre.”

Blomkamp further explained to the *Times*, “Most of the time I just walk around annoyed. Would I describe myself as relatively happy, I suppose, but society gets to me. ... If there isn’t a deep core reason for a film existing, what is the point? ... For me to be known as a filmmaker that makes films that have a point, I’m stoked.”

It is to the filmmaker’s credit that he has his eyes open and thinks about the way the world is. (An ominous score, by Ryan Amon, and some impressive special effects make their contribution as well.)

Elysium, as a result, has some genuinely moving moments. The factory sequence in which Max receives his fatal dose of radiation is effective and convincing. The unfairness of Frey’s situation, her child dying while the affluent receive the most advanced medical treatment without having to think about it, is compelling.

However, such moments are the exception. Much of *Elysium* takes the form of a relatively tedious action film, dominated by a great deal of noise and mayhem, to no great effect. There is hardly a single figure who deviates from his or her predictable course. The dialogue is largely uninspired, and uninspiring. The exposition of the complicated plot, given at top speed by the characters, often seems awkward and unconvincing.

Spider (Wagner Moura), a Che-like figure, and his entourage seem almost entirely extraneous, except as a device to move the unlikely story forward. Foster’s Delacourt and Armadyne chief John Carlyle (William Fichtner) are so icy, villainous and without nuance that they might well have stepped out of a comic book. The scenes of the Los Angeles slums have, at times, that almost hysterical, inauthentic look one associates with a dark and skeptical view of humanity. Generally speaking, cartoonishness never helped anyone.

Perhaps most damagingly, Max is transformed from an individual whose situation shows dramatic promise into,

alas, a conventional, unreal “superhero,” possibly the most boring of all fictional creations. As a consequence, one loses a good deal of interest in his particular fate, and even his final act of self-sacrifice is largely unmoving.

One of the difficulties is that Blomkamp has chosen to reproduce identifiable social and political elements of contemporary life without seriously turning his attention to the content of everyday life, to the drama of it, to its relationships and emotions. *Elysium* presents a peculiar combination of accurate physical and institutional facts, on the one hand, and contrived, overblown, schematic relations between its human figures, on the other.

Both Blomkamp and Damon have gone out of their way to deny any particular social message in the film. “The first order of business for a big summer popcorn movie is to make a kick-ass movie with great action,” says the actor. Blomkamp told the *LA Times*, “To be pigeonholed into political films, I would put a gun in my mouth if that’s how my career ended up.” No artist wants to be pigeon-holed, but the director’s over-reaction reflects an accommodation to a retrograde industry climate.

It is not astonishing, one supposes, given the pressures that a \$100 million budget inevitably generates, that the filmmakers seek to “reassure” potential audience members that nothing much will be asked of them. Not astonishing, but not terribly worthy either. *Elysium*’s marketing is some reflection of its production: there is a pandering here to preconceptions about what an audience will or will not accept. In my own view, Blomkamp has weakened his film and made it *less appealing* to audiences through his insistence on dull, pumped-up action sequences. Hollywood at one point made enormously popular and insightful films that were something other than “big summer popcorn movies.”

Without offering excuses for the filmmakers’ failings, who, after all, do present some intensely intriguing material, one has to take into account as well the general political situation. Although many are only waiting for the other shoe to drop, there has not yet been a major social explosion in response to the catastrophic social inequality and attacks on the lives and livelihoods of millions. That remains the decisive issue, both for social development as a whole and art in particular.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact