

Europa Report: Gripping drama of manned mission to Jupiter's moon

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Europa Report is a genuinely gripping and emotionally engaging science fiction film—a description that can only be rarely applied to works in that genre, which in the hands of Hollywood have tended toward empty spectacle, at best ornamental but with little depth.

The film is presented as the after-action report of a mission to explore Europa, one of the four large moons of Jupiter, long believed to be one of a handful of places in the solar system where some form of life could exist. We are told from the beginning that the mission has been difficult, and a sense of foreboding hangs over the entire narrative.

As the film recounts early on, in 2011 NASA detected the presence of water trapped under methane ice caps on Europa, making it the subject of intense interest and speculation. The Europa mission is launched by a NASA subcontractor, sending a crew of six to investigate the possibility of life.

This reviewer has seen many science fiction films. None of its predecessors has conveyed, as realistically and effectively as *Europa Report*, the claustrophobic and isolated character of the experience of human beings rocketed into space, with long stretches of boredom and routine punctuated by occasional crisis and desperate peril.

As one of the six crew members—Sharlto Copley (*District 9*)—observes just after the spacecraft begins its 18-month trek to the Jupiter system, “There’s so little space in here [referring to the ship] and so much out there.”

Besides Copley, the crew members are played by Michael Nyqvist, Daniel Wu, Anamaria Marinca, Christian Camargo and Karolina Wydra. All have their moments, with the ensemble effectively managed by Ecuadorean director Sebastian Cordero.

Without divulging too much of the plot, a solar storm disrupts communication and compels the crew to rely on their own resources when they arrive in the Jupiter system and go into orbit around Europa, without direction or advice from ground control on Earth.

Budget limitations evidently helped determine the form of the film, which consists almost entirely of footage attributed to the spacecraft’s internal cameras, depicting the crew in action, at rest, in discussion and, at key moments, confronting crisis and danger.

For much of the time, four or more split-screen shots are shown at the same time, a device that makes the viewer long to see it in the theater rather than online. Unfortunately, because the film failed to find a wider theatrical audience after its limited US release in August 2013, it went to Blu-ray and Netflix in October.

Cordero’s film has a number of unusual characteristics, which in this reviewer’s mind, at least, lend it greater realism. The space mission is set just a few years into the future, so the technology is early 21st century. There is little whiz-bang and no magic. When a solar eruption shorts out communications, there’s no miracle cure: only a space walk, depicted as lasting many hours, to carry out tedious and dangerous repairs.

The conditions under which the crew members live and work are mundane—they are shown repeatedly on exercise bikes, a vital necessity when spending a lot of time at zero gravity, with its negative effect on muscle tone.

In a passing remark that underscores the slow and halting progress in the current period of space exploration, one speaker notes that the Europa mission is the first in which human beings have travelled past the Moon. (Actually, no astronaut has gone beyond Earth’s orbit since the last Apollo mission to the Moon in 1973.)

The relations among the crew members are remarkably cordial and collaborative. This is a film saturated with danger and the threat of death in which no human being does violence to another, or even expresses any personal animosity.

The crew members devote themselves to a collective enterprise of scientific exploration. They are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice, not for a flag, a religion or a corporate logo, but to advance the cause of human knowledge.

They work as a team, in the now-standard international array (one of the more attractive aspects of contemporary sci-fi), with a Chinese captain, two Russians and three crew members from Europe or the United States (it is impossible to tell, and the director and actors obviously felt the question was unimportant).

The dangers they face come, not from their own psyches, or even from the social relations on the Earth they have left, but exclusively from without, from a harsh and indifferent nature.

The film is slow-moving, and has a choppy exposition in its first half, before it builds towards a conclusion of considerable tension. A few of the decisions made by the space crew seem unlikely, but not completely implausible, and perhaps necessary for dramatic effect. *Europa Report* was likely overwhelmed by the Hollywood blockbuster *Gravity* when it hit the theaters. That big budget film had spectacular effects and starred Sandra Bullock and George Clooney. Unlike *Gravity*, and entirely to its credit, *Europa Report* does not dabble in pop psychology or mysticism. It is straightforward, realistic and compelling. It deserves an audience.



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