

Hidden Figures and *Passengers*: One official story, and another trite one

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Hidden Figures, directed by Theodore Melfi, screenplay by Melfi and Allison Schroeder, based on the book by Margot Lee Shetterly; *Passengers*, directed by Morten Tyldum, screenplay by Jon Spaihts

Hidden Figures

Directed by Theodore Melfi, *Hidden Figures* recounts the story of three brilliant African-American female scientists who made extraordinary contributions to NASA—the National Aeronautics and Space Administration—in the 1960s. The movie is based on the book by Margot Lee Shetterly, *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race*.

The film centers on Katherine Goble Johnson (born 1918), a physicist and mathematician who excelled in computerized celestial navigation for Project Mercury, the first US human spaceflight program (including the flights of Alan Shepard and John Glenn) from 1958 through 1963, the 1969 Apollo 11 flight to the Moon and the Space Shuttle program. She was also involved in the early plans for a mission to Mars.

Additionally, Melfi's film features Johnson's colleagues Dorothy Johnson Vaughan (1910-2008), a mathematician who worked for NACA (National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics), the precursor to NASA and Mary Winston Jackson (1921-2005), a mathematician and aerospace engineer at NACA/NASA.

In certain regards, *Hidden Figures* is a moving, intriguing account of these pioneering women who rose to the highest echelons of the aerospace program during the Cold War and the attendant space race between the US and the USSR. And, furthermore, as Shetterly states in her book, "The social and organizational changes occurring at Langley [NASA's Langley Research Center, in Hampton, Virginia] were buoyed by the civil rights forces gathering momentum in the country."

But any merely or largely "official" version of the political and historical issues bound up with these events, such as the filmmakers adopt, is fraught with contradictions.

The movie opens in Hampton, Virginia in 1961. Katherine Goble (Taraji P. Henson), Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer) and Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe) are on their way to work at NASA when

their car breaks down. A cop pulls up behind them and is astonished to learn that the agency hires not only women, but black women! Overcoming his shock, he accompanies them to their destination.

In her book, Shetterly writes: "Getting hired by the laboratory as a professional mathematician had been an important and groundbreaking stride for the black women—for all of Langley's women, of course. Their employment represented an expansion of the very idea of who had the right to enlist in the country's scientific workforce. ... Dorothy was proud of the way she had navigated through the days of racial segregation, proud of whatever small share she might claim in contributing to the demise of that backward practice."

Hidden Figures establishes early on that Katherine is a mathematician of virtually unequalled skills, while Mary is a brilliant engineer, although without an engineering degree because of her race and gender. Dorothy already supervises, but without the administrative title, the African-American mathematical women's department at NASA. She reports to the officious, unsympathetic Mrs. Mitchell (Kirsten Dunst), who bristles at the black women's ambitions and talent.

The heads of the US space program, as well as the American government, are apoplectic over news that the Soviet Union has put the first human, cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, into a single orbit aboard Vostok 1 on April 12, 1961.

NASA's Space Task Group is run by a fictionalized Al Harrison (Kevin Costner), who, unlike many of his colleagues, is entirely colorblind when it comes to "beating the Russians." He soon recognizes Katherine's gifts and places her under his lead mathematician Paul Stafford (Jim Parsons), who is not as oblivious to race as his boss. Katherine, now in another location than the rest of her black female co-workers, finds out that the nearest "colored" bathroom is in a distant building.

Meanwhile, giant IBM computers are installed and Dorothy knows that her job as well as those of her fellow "human computers" depend on their ability to master the new technology. She accomplishes this with such expertise that she outshines the bewildered IBM technicians.

Greatly respected by her Polish-born departmental leader, Mary—whose supportive husband Levi (Aldis Hodge) is a staunch civil rights activist—is nonetheless required to take advanced courses only offered at a white segregated high school. She successfully challenges this injustice in the courts.

With fierce intelligence and determination, Katherine finally wins the right to attend the meetings of those in charge of the space program and in that rarified milieu is even able to push the program forward.

“Spaceship-flying computers might be the future,” asserts Shetterly, “but it didn’t mean [astronaut] John Glenn had to trust them. He did, however, trust the brainy fellas who controlled the computers. And the brainy fellas who controlled the computers trusted their computer, Katherine Johnson. It was as simple as eighth-grade math: by the transitive property of equality, therefore, John Glenn trusted Katherine Johnson.”

It is to the filmmakers’ credit that they have brought this episode to light. All the actors are up to the task. *Hidden Figures* is assisted by Pharrell Williams’ lively score, particularly his track “Runnin.”

Attempting to answer why the fascinating story of Johnson, Jackson and Vaughan is so little known, director Melfi told an interviewer that we “celebrate the astronaut, but we don’t celebrate all the scientists and researchers and mathematicians that did the work to put a man in space, and then the last thing is that a lot of this stuff is classified. The entire program was classified for the longest time, especially during the Cold War where their deep fear over Russian spying and Russian hacking which strangely enough is even more relevant today than it was then. So everything was classified, top secret.”

This uncritical acceptance of the US government version of the Cold War, as well as the American establishment’s current anti-Russian propaganda campaign, helps explain some of the film’s weakness. (Significantly, Shetterly notes that Mary Jackson began working at NASA on April 5, 1951, the same day a New York federal court handed down a death sentence against Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, the couple accused of spying for the Soviet Union at the height of the anticommunist hysteria.) *Hidden Figures* is very much the state-sponsored story, and suffers from the untruth of that story.

Whether the filmmakers have thought it through or not, the implication of this particular brand of liberal identity politics is that America needed during the Cold War—and needs today—to overcome its internal racial problems and achieve “national unity” so as to confront its greater enemy, Russia, or some other power. The movie displays a noxious and unthinking patriotic attitude towards the US governmental, military and intelligence apparatus—an apparatus at war with the world’s population.

Of course, this is not the fault of those who worked at NASA, but that the filmmakers have swallowed the US government’s line whole makes at times for a quasi-embalmed drama. The goings-on are often slightly static and stiff: the racists are hopeless and the black scientists are canonized—“separate but equal” forces in an uneasy truce to guarantee American’s space supremacy. Moreover, when *Hidden Figures* goes beyond science and attempts to deal with the central characters’ personal lives, it takes on a constricted and unreal character.

Furthermore, it is absurd to pay homage to NASA’s space program without including the fact that it was largely demolished by George W. Bush’s government, then more or less put in its grave by the Obama administration. The end of the manned space program, along with the ongoing war by the US ruling elite on

scientific knowledge, testifies to the long-term decline of American capitalism. None of this crucial reality animates the creators of *Hidden Figures* and it weakens the much-deserved tribute to Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson and Dorothy Vaughan.

Passengers

The science fiction thriller, *Passengers*, directed by Morten Tyldum, is, like many current movies of this genre, visually imaginative. But also, like much of today’s fare, its ideas and drama are insufferably banal.

The starship *Avalon* is on a 120-year journey to Homestead II, organized by a private corporation that markets its destination as “The jewel of unoccupied worlds!” As Earth is overcrowded, there are many partakers in the colonization of an uninhabited planet. The *Avalon* has on board more than 5,000 passengers and crew, all put in deep hibernation until the spaceship reaches its objective.

For some reason, however, the pod containing Jim Preston (Chris Pratt) fails and he awakens 90 years too early. A good thing he’s a mechanic and has the company of an android bartender called Arthur (Michael Sheen). But after some time without human companionship, Jim’s mental state deteriorates until he figures out how to awaken a beautiful female passenger, Aurora Lane (Jennifer Lawrence).

Alone in their ultra-luxurious and massive machine, the couple have a wonderful time until Arthur tells Aurora that her hibernation was deliberately interrupted by Jim. And seeing that there is no way to re-hibernate, she views his actions as tantamount to murder. But when the pod of a crew member (Laurence Fishburne) also fails, and a number of the ship’s systems begin to malfunction, the three become aware that the ship has been damaged by a collision with an asteroid. (Why the designers of a vehicle set to travel 120 years in space have not anticipated possible collisions with debris and why no technology for re-hibernation is in place are only two of the numerous holes in the narrative.)

The movie’s silliness and predictability are occasionally offset by visual set-pieces. In one such, the water in a pool where Aurora is swimming erupts like a volcano when the *Avalon* suddenly loses gravity; the scene of her rescue mission outside the ship is also very striking.

There are vague anti-corporate (and anti-airline) digs here against the *Avalon*’s classed-based services and the mega-profits raked in by the sponsors of the voyage. As an exploration of human isolation and a moral fable about personal freedom, however, *Passengers* is threadbare and trite.



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