

Ad Astra: Traveling long distances but not getting very far

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Directed by James Gray; co-written by Gray and Ethan Gross

The science fiction adventure film *Ad Astra* is directed and co-written by James Gray (*Little Odessa*, *The Yards*, *We Own the Night*, *The Immigrant*, *The Lost City of Z*). Featuring Brad Pitt and Tommy Lee Jones, the movie is a space odyssey in which an astronaut son searches for his long-lost astronaut father.

The drama is deliberately elemental and overtly “universal.” Gray, as he explains in numerous comments, has little interest in the concrete conditions that may exist on other planets or uncovering the secrets of the physical universe. He proposes instead a renewed concern with the “inner life.” According to the film’s logic, human society for the most part merely transports its afflictions and ugliness to outer space. The alternative, argue the filmmakers, is a preoccupation with family and personal relations firmly rooted on planet Earth.

As *Ad Astra* opens, the Solar System is being convulsed by destructive electrical surges, occurring due to radioactive bursts, that threaten human existence.

Phlegmatic, imperturbable Major Roy McBride (Pitt) is tapped for a mission to Neptune, considered the source of the surges. McBride’s father Clifford (Jones) headed up the Lima Project—a quest for intelligent life—decades earlier and may still be alive on the great blue planet.

First stop in the voyage is the Moon, where Roy must survive an attack by pirates (“Here we go again. Fighting for resources. What the hell am I doing here?”). His escort and also his father’s best friend, Colonel Pruitt (Donald Sutherland), is not so fortunate. Next comes the underground SpaceCom on Mars, where he meets the facility’s disgruntled director Helen Lantos (Ruth Negga). The latter is put off at times by the disrespect of her male colleagues and always frustrated by her confinement to the planet.

When Roy goes off script during the recording of a

message addressed to his father and makes an emotional appeal, he is judged unfit for the Neptune trip and slated to be returned to Earth. Helen intervenes, however, showing Roy classified footage in which Clifford admits to killing mutineers, her parents numbering among the victims. She helps Roy sneak back into the nuclear-armed, Neptune-bound vessel. Roy, acting in self-defense, is forced to kill the small crew. He begins a long journey. Vast distances no longer separate parent and progeny.

Unfortunately, despite the considerable talent involved in its production, *Ad Astra*, Latin for “to the stars,” turns out to be a weak and often tedious film.

What are the filmmakers’ central concerns?

For one thing, they object to the loss of emotional life that the explorers of outer space are apparently condemned to. The farther human beings travel in space the more distant they become from their own humanity. Astronauts like Roy are required to excise their feelings, resulting in low pulse rates. Indeed, Roy’s marriage to Eve (Liv Tyler) has been sacrificed on the altar of low pulse rates.

The film proudly eschews great concerns and goals. In the end, Roy is propelled to his destination and his destiny by a father complex (“I do what I do because of my dad”) and not the imminent destruction of life on Earth. In the course of the voyage, the filmmakers provide an excessive number of close-ups of the protagonist’s blank visage while he inwardly articulates relatively demoralized and often banal thoughts, such as “most of us spend our entire lives in hiding,” “That’s it. We go to work, we do our jobs and it’s over,” “I’m so selfish ... I’m so selfish ... I’m so selfish ... I’m a selfish person” and “Why go on? Why keep trying?”

Unhappily, the banalities pile up. Says Gray in the production notes, “Roy is thinking he knows what he wanted and even got a little of it, but there’s something seriously lacking. There’s a hole that needs to be filled

inside and he can't verbalize it yet."

"So," the filmmaker goes on, "the whole point of the movie is, how to fill that hole."

One of the difficulties is that *Ad Astra* is a space movie with a fundamental lack of interest in what's out there, in the form of intelligent life or otherwise. This lack of interest communicates itself to the viewer. Space travel is largely a device through which an "eternal" family drama plays out, as individuals literally tether and untether themselves, physically and emotionally. Also, we are told early on that human activity in space is a "recreation of what we're running away from on Earth," which must account for the bleak and colorless landscape.

Director Gray's interests lie firmly earthward. He told an interviewer, "I have an incredible wife and three beautiful children. That makes me connected to the world. That's what gives me joy. What doesn't give me joy is the idea of some f---ing alien."

The production notes cite Gray's further comments along these lines: "I was anxious to explore the fact that as human beings, we're not really meant to be in space. We're not designed to be floating around 250 miles outside the atmosphere. We're not built for that, and we're never going to be built for that. And that is going to have a cost."

This from a man who has just supervised the making a film that cost between \$80 and \$100 million devoted to space travel!

There are striking images in *Ad Astra* and the filmmakers have ambitiously drawn from Homer, Joseph Conrad and Herman Melville, as well as less happily from Carl Jung admirer and mythology scholar Joseph Campbell. Filmmakers Stanley Kubrick, Andrei Tarkovsky and Terrence Malick also appear to be influences. But a coherent narrative that speaks in some persuasive manner to our current conditions has not emerged from all this.

Each of Gray's films has had intriguing moments or entire sequences and each has been, ultimately, unsatisfying. About *The Yards* (2000), for example, centered on government and corporate corruption in New York City, we praised Gray for directing "some of the best scenes in an American film this year," in a work that ultimately "falls short and damagingly so."

The filmmaker (born 1969), from a Russian-Jewish family background, has eyes in his head, but his seems a severe case of an artist maturing in a reactionary, stagnant period, the Reagan-Bush-Clinton years. One feels that he attempts to hold his characters and their psychological

development so tenaciously apart from social life out of fear that the latter can only contaminate them.

Society and history, and perhaps the entire solar system as well, one has the impression, have only proven disappointments for the director. A skepticism about science and human progress, a dread of the unknown, which might only produce horrors, and a vague misanthropy prevail. The fate of an enraged baboon in *Ad Astra*—a research animal who escapes its cage and brutally murders the ship's crew members—provides a further opportunity for Roy's reflections: "I've seen that rage in my father, I've seen that rage in me."

(Foolishly, certain considerations about "maleness" and "masculinity" have also been thrown into the mix. Pitt: "And so for James and I, it was really a discussion of vulnerability. What is vulnerability? What is strength in a man? Where does strength really come from?")

The difficulties of the last several decades seem to weigh all the more heavily in that Gray is not without the power of social observation. In an interview with *Metrograph*, he stated interestingly: "I think that we underrate the death of the Soviet Union, because when that happened, obviously communist or socialist dictatorships were not positive, functioning, excellent things for the world, but it was at least some kind of alternative ideology to the market, as such.

"And when that went away, you have just the market, uncontrolled, and something that's all-powerful can never be good, and it's why real wages are frozen, why there is this disparity of wealth, why you have the opiate crisis as a consequence. There are broader implications to the all-powerful market, and [the state of Hollywood] is just one of many symptoms."

So what's left? The turn inward. "I kind of believe that true terra incognita is the human soul," Gray says, citing author Kurt Vonnegut. "When you talk about the soul, you're really talking about the conscious, the unconscious, the subconscious... it's almost like a series of layers. You keep peeling the layers, but you can never get to the center."

On the other hand, the image we have in mind is of someone running in place and never getting much of anywhere.



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