

George Clooney's *The Midnight Sky*: Not doing a good job of looking after the planet

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Directed by George Clooney; screenplay by Mark L. Smith, based on the 2016 novel Good Morning, Midnight by Lily Brooks-Dalton

The Midnight Sky is a post-apocalyptic science fiction film directed by George Clooney, based on the 2016 novel *Good Morning, Midnight* by Lily Brooks-Dalton. Done with some care and sensitivity, the movie ends up primarily and unhelpfully as an exercise in resignation.

The book jacket of Brooks-Dalton's work contends that the novel is a "haunting debut novel about the search for meaning at the edges of human civilization. *Good Morning, Midnight* is the unforgettable story of two outsiders grappling with love, sacrifice, and regret at the end of the world." If the "end of the world" has arrived, doesn't this diminish somewhat "grappling with love" and everything else? In short, both book and film have muddleheaded premises.

It is 2049, "three weeks after the event," proclaims the movie's opening title. The apocalyptic "event" goes unnamed and unexplained. As radiation rapidly poisons Earth's atmosphere, crew members and their families are being airlifted out of an Arctic space center, the Barbeau Observatory. Augustine Lofthouse (an aged Clooney, sporting an impressive beard), a terminally ill astrophysicist, stays behind.

Lofthouse takes considerable pains to contact the Aether—a vessel that has traveled across the solar system to K-23, a newly discovered moon orbiting Jupiter, to find out whether it can support human life. The scientist is determined to warn the spacecraft's crew not to return to their contaminated home planet.

Grimly, he hobbles around the space station, downing whiskey and chemotherapy pills and self-administering transfusions. Soon, a frightened and mute little girl (Caoilinn Springall) appears in the observatory kitchen. Augustine names her Iris because of one of her drawings. Is she a hallucination?

Flashbacks show a young Augustine (Ethan Peck), seeker of alternative planetary habitats for humanity, involved in a

brief love affair that, unbeknownst to him, produces a child.

In outer space, the Aether and its five astronauts are returning from the inhabitable K-23 moon. The crew is a neatly balanced mix of ethnicities and genders. Sully (Felicity Jones) is pregnant by Commander Adewole (David Oyelowo). They are supported by Maya (Tiffany Boone), Sanchez (Demián Bichir) and Mitchell (Kyle Chandler). A cheery, compatible lot, they make continual efforts to contact Earth, as they maneuver through meteor showers and other life-threatening menaces.

Back in the Arctic, the antenna at Barbeau is not powerful enough to transmit to the spaceship. So Augustine loads up Iris and his medical gear in his high-tech snowmobile, setting off on the creature-filled tundra being engulfed by radiation in order to reach a weather station with the appropriate equipment.

While Augustine faces terrors on Earth as the ice melts beneath him, the Aether also confronts tragedy. In the end, however, Augustine experiences an emotional epiphany of sorts.

The Midnight Sky, like many other entries in its genre, boasts impressive technical bells and whistles, with cinematographer Martin Ruhe creating some stunning visual effects. Unfortunately, the score by well-known composer Alexandre Desplat is fairly intrusive and heavy-handed.

It was not apparently an easy movie to shoot. In an interview, Clooney describes filming on a glacier in Iceland: "It was like 40 below, 60-70-mile-an-hour winds, and it's tricky because you could get lost 15 feet away from the camera. So we had to have string tied to ourselves and to the crew so that we couldn't get too far away. But while we were shooting, I lost like 25 pounds [for the part], so I was pretty weak in general and I'm also directing a big film and you need energy. I was pretty beat up."

But despite the considerable and dangerous efforts involved, the question remains, all this to what end?

The viewer is meant to imagine the consequences of a catastrophe causing the deaths of billions of human beings. However, according to the filmmakers, this life-ending

cataclysm is not worth accounting for! Was the planet destroyed by nuclear war, ecological disaster, nuclear accident? Who was responsible—which governments, military forces or other parties? We are left entirely in the dark.

The Earth's demise, to say the least, must have far-reaching political, social and technological causes and consequences. We are expected to believe that masses of people have passively gone to their graves apparently sharing the viewpoint of the filmmakers that such a catastrophe was the nearly inevitable outcome of irresponsible mortals. When Augustine-Clooney finally communicates with the Aether, he quips: "I'm afraid we didn't do a very good job of looking after the place while you were away."

What is the viewer supposed to be alerted to? What steps should urgently be taken so that Earth can avoid this fate? Not a word, not a hint here. Just, one supposes, the general, banal advice to "look after" the planet better, ride a bicycle, not leave a carbon footprint, not vote for Donald Trump and so forth. Better luck next time, humans!

For that matter, even Trump is not an earthshaking problem for Clooney. The actor-director told the *New York Times* that if Trump had pushed for wearing masks "the whole country would have gotten behind him and he would have been re-elected. But he thought it would affect his economy, so he chose to say it didn't exist. And now we're going to have 350,000 people dead ... Donald, for all of his immense problems as a human being, is a charismatic carnival barker."

In the proper circumstances, Clooney is an appealing and often amusing performer, even a throwback to earlier Hollywood magnetism. After the 2000 election and the ascension of Bush-Cheney, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and accompanying tragedies pushed him to do some valuable work, as an actor, a director, or both: in particular, *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005), *Syriana* (2005), *Michael Clayton* (2007), *Burn After Reading* (2008) and *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (2009).

The election of Barack Obama had the effect on Clooney, as it did on the liberal film industry milieu as a whole, of largely sealing up whatever was critical in his psyche. Clooney, a frequent visitor to the Obama White House, became an unofficial member of the administration, a spokesman on "human rights" issues and advocate of UN and US intervention. Not much has been heard from him in recent years.

It might be useful to contrast *The Midnight Sky*, a gloomy, rather empty-headed work, with Stanley Kramer's 1959 *On the Beach*, a science fiction film set in an Australia about to be fatally poisoned by nuclear fallout—the result of a conflict

between the superpowers. The movie fairly grippingly depicts what the reality would be in such a disaster. In any event, it was compelling enough to deeply disturb the US government and military.

In line with its Cold War rhetoric and the growing power of America's military-industrial complex, Washington vigorously worked against *On the Beach*, as the WSWS explained in a 2014 review of a documentary, *Fallout*, devoted to the making of the film.

As the WSWS noted, an essay by Murdoch University academic Mick Broderick had recently pointed out there had been "an elaborate and orchestrated campaign" by the Eisenhower administration to undermine the "cultural and political impact" of *On the Beach*. This included high-level discussions involving Vice President Richard Nixon, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Atomic Energy commissioner, and the heads of the US Information Agency (USIA) and the Office of Civil Defense Management.

The USIA and the State Department, in conjunction with the Pentagon, even drew up "infoguide" notes about Kramer's movie for leading government officials. The notes stressed that it was necessary to counteract "the film's strong emotional appeal for the banning of nuclear weapons," which could "lead audiences to think in terms of radical solutions to the problem."

Broderick's essay concludes: "There are few other documented examples, if any, of US Cabinet level deliberations detailing White House directed interventions in an attempt to mould the public reception of a Hollywood film."

There is no reason to believe that *The Midnight Sky* has or will—or should!—elicit any such reaction. It is chiefly concerned with personal and family reconciliation, despite, yes, the end of human life as we know it. While not a malicious film, more than anything else, it is unserious.



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