The Silent Sea on Netflix: A barren Earth, a mysterious Moon

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Directed by Choi Hang-yong; written by Park Eun-Kyo

The Silent Sea is an engaging science-fiction thriller that, like many current products of South Korean television, features terrific acting and effective atmospherics—in this case literally, since it is set largely on the Moon.

The eight-part series tells the story of a team of astronauts sent to a Moon base abandoned after an unexplained disaster killed its entire staff five years before. The purpose, however, is not to learn the causes of that tragedy, but to recover and return to Earth the material that the base staff had been investigating.

The initial premise of the story is a post-apocalyptic society on Earth, where climate change has wiped out the oceans and left a barren planet in which water has become the most precious commodity. The entire society is stratified based on the amount of water to which people are entitled, with a "gold card" (unlimited access) representing the highest level. The social consequences are brutal: riots on water lines, and a bitter struggle for higher water credits.

(This premise of environmental devastation and violent social conflict accounts for much of the social media vilification of the series since it first became available for streaming, as right-wing climate deniers and anticommunist trolls do their work).

The title of the series has a double meaning. The Moon base is located on the edge of the Mare Tranquilitas, the Sea of Tranquility, the site of the first human landing, by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, in 1969. This is one of the dark areas on the surface of the Moon that ancient observers once described as "maria," Latin for "seas," before telescopes and other modern instruments showed them to be flat and barren. At the same time, in the story, the seas on Earth have themselves become waterless and "silent."

Many of the crew of seven are directly motivated by economic concerns. They are not primarily engaged in this project, at colossal risk, for glory or adventure, or even out of scientific curiosity. They want to improve their water credit standing, in some cases for extremely compelling reasons—the captain and leader (Gong Yoo, also featured in *Squid Game*) has a daughter with a life-threatening condition who is not eligible for necessary treatment because his credit status is too low.

The central figure is the chief scientist on the mission, played by the wonderful Bae Doona. In a previous popular mystery series in Korea, *Stranger*, also now available in English, she portrayed a police lieutenant with an outgoing, iconoclastic and even somewhat goofy personality. Her character here is quite different, reserved, secretive, brilliant. Only the underlying humaneness and force of personality are the same. All this is conveyed through a face seen mainly through a spacesuit helmet in several episodes.

Most of the action takes place at the Moon base, where long corridors and tight spaces convey a claustrophobic and even menacing environment. From their first steps inside, the astronauts confront the possibility of a biological threat, derived either from an alien presence or the consequences of the previous work at the base.

This review will not give away the plot twists and other details that comprise an effective mystery. Suffice it to say that, as is to be expected from the premise, the issues of what happened to the original staff of the base and its connection to the water-deprived society on Earth are at the core. Given that this is a mystery, there are hidden agendas and secrets to be uncovered, some fairly predictable, others quite surprising, even thought-provoking.

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Again inflaming right-wing objections, both the government and a giant corporation are portrayed as ruthless and even criminal. This is appropriate in a series that aims to appeal to a popular audience in the second year of a global pandemic that has displayed both traits to the fullest.

The characterizations are not one-sided. Those members of the crew who play an ignoble role are highly conflicted. The top officials who remain on Earth but direct the mission are depicted as human beings, not monsters, even though they have been driven to carry out actions that have monstrous consequences. The official who oversees the whole affair is even titled “Director Choi,” a playful reference to the series’ own director.

There have also been objections voiced over supposedly unscientific aspects of several plot elements—the accident that befalls the astronauts as they travel to the Moon seems inexplicable; the Moon base has Earth-normal gravity inside it, without an apparent physical cause; things fall on the Moon faster than they should; several intersections of biology and physics violate current understanding.

Some of these complaints may have validity, or point to weaknesses that reflect budgetary limitations or the inexperience of the director, known only for his direction of the same story as a 2015 short film rather than an eight-part series.

But if one has grown up reading and enjoying science fiction, as this reviewer did, such objections seem largely beside the point. Virtually all science fiction incorporates premises that violate the laws of physics, biology and chemistry as presently formulated. If they didn’t, the result would be pretty dull, as our present understanding is quite rudimentary, even with the enormous breakthroughs of the past century, and the possibilities offered are quite limited.

In particular, the focus of much of science fiction and fantasy writing, humanity’s expansion beyond the Earth and the development of extra-terrestrial, galactic and even inter-galactic societies, would appear to have little chance, given such constraints as the speed of light, the possibilities of rocket engineering, and the lifespan of human beings.

What matters is whether the “science” in the science fiction is internally consistent, allowing the actual content of the “fiction,” that is, plot, character and setting, to be developed convincingly and effectively.

From that standpoint, *The Silent Sea* has some flaws, but it is well worth the time to be invested. It is infinitely superior to the cartoonish trash of the Marvel Universe and other movies derived from adolescent comic books, where highly paid stars, frequent explosions and other computer-generated special effects substitute for such humble considerations as plot, character, intelligence, even logical consistency.

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