

HARBINGERS



This continues the recently instituted "Harbingers" section. A harbinger is a forerunner presaging or signaling the approach of an event. All readers of the Manoa Journal are invited to submit full reviews of books and films for possible inclusion in "Harbingers." In doing so, please be sure to summarize the main argument or theme of the book or film. In the case of books, provide the complete facts of publication and indicate the likely audience or audiences for the book you are reviewing--v.k.p.

SPACE EXPLORATION

"Contact (film review)

by Vincent Kelly Pollard

The film "Contact," released in summer 1997, is based on a novel by Dr. Carl Sagan, the late scientist and television personality. After a gripping beginning, "Contact" starts taking itself unduly seriously, sometimes losing its way--unable to resist teaching too many political lessons.

Seven thematic tensions are interlaced throughout the two-hour film: a female scientist and her allies versus a male-chauvinist scientific establishment; normal science versus paradigm shifts; adventurous astrophysicist versus clueless bean counters at the National Science Foundation (NSF); astrophysics versus the National Security Agency (NSA); "intuition" versus "hard facts"; astrophysics versus scientific illiteracy; and astrophysics versus an intolerant politicized religious Right.

Inspired visionary. Jodie Foster plays Elie Arroway, a courageously visionary scientist focused on the study of extraterrestrial intelligence (or SETI). Like "Dr. Who" of the TV rerun, Arroway exhibits just enough "street smarts" and has just enough allies to avoid being totally frozen out of the decision making loop by the science-military-politics warriors.

Arroway and her dedicated colleagues receive a radio transmission from an intelligent extraterrestrial source they are led to believe is light-years away in Vega. Once decoded, the transmission includes a blueprint for a machine whose purpose is less than obvious. Dr. Arroway surmises that it is a benign device for transporting Earthlings to Vega. Once the news gets out, a three-ring circus of predictably jerky political and bureaucratic opponents gain control of her SETI project. Despite the suspicions of the evil-looking, evil-sounding NSA advisor (played by James Wood) that the machine is intended to blow up the planet Earth, others are eventually persuaded of Arroway's interpretation. In an ironic twist, one of the SETI project's bureaucratic opponents then connives to have her bumped only to be permanently bumped when a Christian terrorist bomber blows him up along with the first of the two "launch sites."

A bad joke? Left unresolved is whether astrophysicist Arroway has traveled to Vega. Has Dr. Arroway been extravagantly deluded by a death-wish hoax of scientist and business person S. Haddon? The question appears to be answered affirmatively. Haddon's relationship with Arroway is both benevolent and manipulative with hints about his manipulateness gradually accumulating towards the end of the film.

Lost its way? The answer to the question whether Dr. Arroway HAS traveled to Vega ultimately depends on whether one is willing to suspend disbelief over claims of initially unverified experiences on the chance that they may eventually be verified later on

After all, the manipulative Haddon has downloaded the

astrophysicist's memory and, thereby, is well-positioned to manipulate her perceptions. That probability is emphasized in a public hearing organized to investigate Dr. Arroway's claim that she had, indeed, traveled to Vega. In response to direct questioning, she admits that she has no evidence that meets the scientific method in which she has been trained. Instead, she is reduced to insisting on the validity of her recollections of an intense experience traveling to Vega. In a getaway scene after the public hearing, Arroway's laid-back boyfriend (who doubles as Clinton's spiritual counselor) responds supportively to a skeptical reporter's question, "I, for one, believe her." His statement is framed against a visual background of placard-waving supporters of people who fervently believe her--and which mirror the fervently placard-waving Christian opponents of SETI shown twice earlier in "Contact."

Has a deception been woven into the fabric of "Contact"? Or has the director simply lost focus by having tried to please too many disparate audiences?

"Contact-2"? On the one hand, enthusiastic reviewers might counter my criticisms by claiming that the writer and director anticipated my criticism by having giving themselves an ambiguous "escape hatch" to explore in a possible sequel. A secret NSA report, we are told at the very last minute, reports an odd eighteen-minute interval. Those unexplained eighteen minutes of data were recorded by a single instrument during a period on the (second) launch site when all other instruments measured phenomena as occurring during sixty seconds. Having escaped investigation by the NSF and NSA till the end of the film, the mysterious eighteen minutes may become a pretext for a sequel.

Credibility. On the other hand, some viewers will dismiss that tortured excuse as a stretch--smacking of deus ex machina contrivances in ancient Latin plays--unless mind-travel or some other form of communication with life on Vega is possible within a one-minute sequence of Earth-time. However, if there is a basis in theoretical physics for part of that scene, no effort was made to explain it. The director might have heeded a book chapter by Carl Sagan entitled "The Fine Art of Baloney Detection."

Cinematography. Less stunning than "2001: Space Odyssey," cinematography in "Contact" is, nonetheless, pleasing. Among special effects, Bill Clinton was entertainingly morphed into press conferences. (The White House ungenerously complained about being coopted into a sci-fi flick!) Dr. Arroway's (mental?) trip from the launch pad through the "worm" (to Vega?) was riveting.

Technique aside, "Contact" dabbles in too many social, technical and moral issues. Individual parts of this internally inconsistent film outshine the movie as a whole. Contact verges on an oxymoronic blending of a PBS special, a recycled version of "The Right Stuff" or "GI Jane") and a didactic political conscience in the background. The ambivalent conclusion of "Contact" shoots itself in the foot, diffusing the sharp focus of inspirational values and vision celebrated earlier in the film. A film of two hours' length might have attempted

to do less and to do it better. With a matinee discount, some moviegoers may be able to overlook these shortcomings.

Bottom line. Taken as a whole, the likely contribution of the agend-heavy "Contact" to the cause of space exploration appears questionable. On the other hand, those who remember only the parts of this film that most impressed them may have a different assessment.

Vincent Kelly Pollard has taught political science courses at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa and, more recently, has been a Visiting Teacher in classes taught by many of his colleagues at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. A former Visiting Research Fellow at the University of the Philippines, Pollard contributes to the professional literature with journal articles and book and film reviews.

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