

Wheel in the Sky Keeps on Turnin': "Elysium"

Written by Mike Schulz

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ELYSIUM

In Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium*, the sophomore sci-fi effort from the writer/director of *District 9*, the Earth of 2154 is a poverty-infested hell-hole that the richest of humans have evacuated for the gleaming, rotating space habitat of the film's title. An orbiting gated community of luxury, privilege, and (from what we can tell) almost universally white people, it's the utopia that our hero, Matt Damon's steelworker Max, longs to escape to, particularly after a fatal dose of radiation limits his time left on Earth to five days. (Medical advances on Elysium have eradicated disease completely; after one cycle through a futuristic CAT-scan machine, even cancer cells are killed.) The unaddressed joke of Blomkamp's film, however, is that Elysium – with its sterile mansions and perfectly mowed lawns and vacuous non-entities sipping champagne from crystal flutes – looks like a dismally dull place to be compared to the lively, recognizably human

Earth, even in its decimated state. What's less of a joke is that

Elysium

itself, once we land on the titular site in its last half hour, is also dismally dull – or at least, dishearteningly formulaic – compared to the Earth-set goings-on of the film's first 70 minutes.

The disappointment of the film's third act, with its expected race-against-the-clock plotting and (in our present movie climate) even more expected climactic slugfest pitting man against metal, wouldn't be so pronounced if what preceded it wasn't so bloody good. Filled with wondrous, evocative visuals and delightful future-trash details – the planet's parole officers are now old-timey, porcelain carnival figures, like the one that granted Tom Hanks' wish in *Big* – *Elysium*

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Imagine Earth as an environmental wasteland, but not an altogether grim one. Most of the children we see on-screen are happy ones, and Blomkamp allows Max some endearing, affectionate camaraderie with a buddy (Diego Luna) and some flirtation with a flame from his past (Alice Braga); Blomkamp is smart and shrewd enough to let lightness routinely permeate the darkness. He also sets up his numerous narrative threads, including a central plotline involving the literal stealing of another man's thoughts, with expert economy and finesse, and keeps the beautifully edited street chases and robot attacks rolling with a forceful intensity that never turns into mere, mindless action noise.

It's on Elysium, as the disparate storylines begin to converge, that mindless action noise becomes the movie's default position, the formerly sharp script begins to boast too many clichés, and Jodie Foster, portraying the movie's tightly wound defense secretary, goes from being a mildly unappealing presence to a wholly annoying one. (Playing "comically haughty" without the jokes necessary to support such an interpretation, it's almost as difficult determining what style Foster is going for as it is determining what accent she's going for.) But *Elysium* – with its commanding performance by Damon, its thoughtful futuristic renderings, and its exquisite directorial showmanship throughout – is still easy to recommend. I just wish I could recommend it without also recommending that you watch its last 30 minutes with your eyes half-closed, thinking of the more original, and ultimately more satisfying, science-fiction epic you hoped it might be.

For reviews of *Planes*, *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters*, and *We're the Millers*, see "[Air, Sea, and Land Travels](#)

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