

Eyegasmic ‘Oblivion’ With Tom Cruise Wins Your Optics, But Loses Your Brain

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – “Oblivion” is a Pyrrhic victory that wins its battle, but loses the overall war. While this is the kind of visual production value you’d expect on a \$120 million budget, an ostentatious steak dinner in the special effects department never makes up for a story that tastes more like cheap ramen noodles.

In an expensive film of this grandiose scale, neither can it afford to insult you with oversimplification nor overly complicate itself beyond your ability to reasonably comprehend it. While “Oblivion” from “TRON: Legacy” director Joseph Kosinski definitely doesn’t pander to the simple minded, its slipshod story devolves into a sci-fi discombobulation that gets lost in its own twists and turns.



Jack (Tom Cruise) cautiously approaches a drone in “Oblivion”.

Image credit: David James, Universal Studios

“Oblivion” draws inspiration from more than two handfuls of other major films. For starters, “Prometheus” – though its story line is literally in another world – feels similar to “Oblivion” in terms of its majestic environments and its overall loneliness. Though both films feature vast imaginary lands with few primary characters, “Prometheus” succeeds in one key area where “Oblivion” fails: it inspires you to ask questions.

When “Oblivion” complicates itself with two Tom Cruises and two Melissa Leos and how they interact with one other, you might be willing to

remain misunderstood without caring to find a clear understanding. By contrast, a film like “Prometheus” – or other sci-fi masterpieces like “Star Trek,” “Star Wars” and “Alien” – inspires you to question deeply controversial curiosities about science, god, religion, faith and other lifelong debates.



Olga Kurylenko in “Oblivion”.

Image credit: Universal Pictures

In “Oblivion,” all along you get the feeling you’re dealing with an “I, Robot”- or “Eagle Eye”-esque artificially intelligent supercomputer that’s barking out commands from the mother ship. And in “Oblivion,” it’s hard to enjoy Melissa Leo’s Sally character because you have to constantly question why Andrea Riseborough’s Victoria and Tom Cruise’s Jack never do.

Victoria and Jack – and Olga Kurylenko’s delightful Julia – are among a handful of people left on Earth. They feel bored while carrying out just two remaining weeks of their unnecessary clean-up mission to fix drones that are battling mysterious “scavengers”. The rest of the human race is on a space station waiting to be shipped off to a moon on Saturn or they’re already there.



The Bubbleship rests on its launch pad at Skytower in “Oblivion”.

Image credit: Universal Pictures

Nevermind the weak back story of why humans had to ditch our planet in the first place. Nevermind the understanding of what these “scavs” are. And nevermind the fact that we never feel like the film’s primary characters still need to be on Earth in the first place while they do pointless things that just give the film an outlet for spending its \$120 million production budget.

Sure, “Oblivion” certainly invokes “Star Wars”-esque fly scenes. “Oblivion” features a couple scenes in particular that blow even “Star Wars” out of the water with a Tom Cruise-driven spaceship versus mechanized drones. This film literally looked fun to be among the conceptual designers who created the futuristic weapons, communication technologies, floating houses, spacecraft and costuming.

But in place of anything “Oblivion” offered up as eye candy, I wanted just one thing it never made me feel: curiosity.



Andrea Riseborough in “Oblivion”.

Image credit: Universal Pictures

The film is billed with Tom Cruise as the lead and you know the Morgan Freeman name, but that’s misconceiving. It’s really all eyes on Tom Cruise with co-stars Melissa Leo and, most importantly, Olga Kurylenko. While Freeman never disappoints in his own abilities to absorb a character, he’s much too easily forgotten in his “Oblivion” role as Beech. The film’s writers are to blame.

“Oblivion” is Joseph Kosinski’s product. He serves as director, writer, producer and comic book guy, too. But unlike in “The Shawshank Redemption,” which wouldn’t have been anything without Freeman, this time Freeman could have been someone else and we’d have been fine with it. He neither adds to nor detracts from the film, which ultimately leaves his presence a disappointment because we should have gotten much more mileage out of him.



Tom Cruise (left) is grilled by Beech (Morgan Freeman) in “Oblivion”.
Image credit: David James, Universal Studios

Olga Kurylenko, on the other hand, can be newly seen in “To the Wonder”. If you’re not yet aware of her, you will be now and you’d better pay attention. She’s a star who captures your eye, curiosity and your heart in her co-starring “Oblivion” and “To the Wonder” roles.

In all, “Oblivion” features a grade “A” special effects department, lead actor and supporting characters – but its steam dissipates within a grade “C” script that should have spent much more time understanding the plot successes of the gold-standard sci-fi classics.

“Oblivion” stars Tom Cruise, Morgan Freeman, Olga Kurylenko, Melissa Leo, Zoe Bell, Andrea Riseborough, Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, Abigail Lowe, Isabelle Lowe and David Madison from writer, director and producer Joseph Kosinski and writer Michael Arndt and Karl Gajdusek based on the comic book by Joseph Kosinski and Arvid Nelson. The film, which has a running time of 126 minutes an opened on April 19, 2013, is rated “PG-13” for sci-fi action violence, brief strong language and some sensuality and nudity.



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By [ADAM FENDELMAN](#) [19]
Publisher
HollywoodChicago.com
adam@hollywoodchicago.com [18]

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