

## Journey to 'Elysium' Lacks Sci-fi Smarts

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on August 5, 2013 - 3:27pm

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – “Elysium” is a blunt instrument. It contains all the subtlety of franchise-killer “Terminator: Salvation.” Where Neill Blomkamp’s “District 9” was surprisingly sleek and refined given its low budget and rookie creator, the follow-up proves that more is very often less.

With broad caricatures everywhere but the center of the film, a tone that teeters between satire and sci-fi, awkwardly staged action scenes, and more emotional manipulation than a Red Cross commercial, “Elysium” is one of the biggest disappointments of the year. Matt Damon grounds the piece in yet-another solid performance and Sharlto Copley has some fun as the over-the-top bad guy. Everything else ranges from mediocre (the script) to truly awful (the worst performance by an Oscar winner you’ll see all year).



Elysium

*Photo credit: Sony Pictures*

Blomkamp’s script reimagines the growing chasm between the haves and the have-nots as something that will involve space travel next century. It is 2154. Earth is essentially one planetary slum with little health care, no road or building care, and such extreme poverty that Max (Matt Damon) is ridiculed by locals for even having a job in the first place. Why bother? There’s nothing to spend the money he’ll earn on at the end of the day. Robots have replaced human police and parole officers, crime is rampant, and those who do try to escape this literal Hell on Earth are usually unsuccessful.

Those with enough power and money have moved to Elysium, a massive country in the sky, protected with an iron fist by Secretary of Defense Delacourt (Jodie Foster). On Elysium, no one ever gets sick because science has developed Med Bays that can heal any wounds.

Sick people on Earth try to escape to Elysium with the help of a rebel named Spider (Wagner Moura). They usually fail.



Elysium

*Photo credit: Sony Pictures*

Here's where Max comes in. The former criminal turned good guy watches his life spiral out of control when he gets into a nuclear accident at work, one that leaves him with five days left to live. Unless, of course, he can get to a Med Bay on Elysium. Spider convinces Max to kidnap the Elysium citizen (William Fichtner) who runs his company, download the data in his head, and lead an assault on the city in the sky. When they download, they find a lot more than they bargained for. A homicidal lunatic named Kruger (Sharlto Copley) is sent to hunt Max down while a nurse from his past named Frey (Alice Braga) gets tossed back into the story for emotional manipulation.

Clearly, Blomkamp doesn't suffer from a variety of ideas but "Elysium" often feels cluttered when it needed to be streamlined. The dialogue centers entirely around explaining ad nauseum what each character has to do and why. The opportunity for satire with Elysium citizens who apparently spend all of their days poolside is wasted. The potential to comment politically is completely gone although I do think Foster's totally bizarre, nasal accent was probably inspired by F. W. de Klerk (given Blomkamp's South African descent). The hints at comedy, such as in Damon's robotic response to his automated officer or Copley's exaggerated lunacy, work better than any of the melodrama, which simply drags the piece down every time that it threatens to take off. The fact that Blomkamp, who showed he's a smart writer with "District 9," went to the manipulative well of a dying child is truly disappointing.





Elysium

Photo credit: Sony Pictures

Matt Damon grounds the piece with a nice everyman-turned-cyborg quality and Copley seems to get the B-movie nature of the better flick buried within this one but everyone else falters or fails entirely. Jodie Foster has never been worse. She's gratingly bad. Fichtner and Diego Luna are ineffective and poor Alice Braga might as well be playing a character called "manipulation." None of the protagonists in "Elysium," even Max, engender any sort of concern on the part of the audience. I remember Wikus Van Der Merwe and how he unexpectedly became the bridge between the human and alien races in "District 9" from four years ago more than I remember the details or characters from "Elysium" that I saw four hours ago.

Should we compare "District 9" to "Elysium"? It's arguably unfair but the films share such thematic commonalities that it's something that audience members are inherently bound to do. When a filmmaker makes such waves with his debut work that he makes Forbes' list of the most powerful celebrities from all of Africa, it could be argued that the sophomore slump is inevitable. Plenty of great talents have debuted high, fallen far, and risen again. I have little doubt that Blomkamp will be back since it's not like the failures of "Elysium" are that of a hack. There's passion here, for sure. It just has nowhere to go.

*"Elysium" stars Matt Damon, Jodie Foster, Sharlto Compley, Alice Braga, Diego Luna, Wagner Moura, and William Fichtner. It was written and directed by Neill Blomkamp. It opens on August 9, 2013.*



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