Mission To Mars Essay Essay, Research Paper

Summary: My God, it’s full of cliches! (with apologies to the writers of 2010)

A good cast, some impressive special effects, and an experienced astronaut providing technical advice. What could have gone wrong?

Let’s start with the script. It combines every possible sci-fi cliche (look for these movies as they appear in M2M: 2001 and 2010 in a big way, Dune, The Abyss, Apollo 13, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, to name only a few) in a melodramatic, hokey script. Granted, there’s a really good cast hiding in this movie somewhere, but with the script they’re given, they didn’t stand a chance.

If, by some chance, you can overcome the dialogue and the contrived, overdone attempts at drama and suspense, you’re still faced with the background music. Constantly. It never stops. It would be one thing if it were a traditional John Williams score, but this sounds like it was composed when someone threw their cat on the keyboard and let it run free. Remember the score to the original “Terminator”? Mozart compared to this.

The upside: the special effects were not too bad. The technology (ships, Mars hab) portrayed was impressive. I saw the movie with a sneak preview audience of a lot of NASA and aerospace people, and everyone agreed. The shots of the Mars landscape and some of the storms (you see them in the previews) are pretty cool, but nothing we haven’t seen before. On the other hand, I won’t go into the CGI aliens–that would be too much of a spoiler–but let’s just say that Marvin the Martian would have done just as well. Oh, and I didn’t realize that Mars would look so much like Utah…

But all in all, eye candy is only eye candy. Mission to Mars tried to be many things on many levels–action/adventure, quasi-romance, hard sci-fi–and failed at all of them. Save your $8 and go rent 2001 instead. Gary Sinese, what were you thinking?

Mission To Mars boasts a very impressive visual style. Brian DePalma takes his camera and turns it all around in space and gives you the feeling that you’re actually floating around in a Mars bound spaceship. Mars hasn’t looked this good since Total Recall and the sandstorms that occur on Mars are quite spectacular. There are two scenes that really work. The first deals with the first Mars expedition and the ensuing calamity that causes a second mission to the angry red planet. The second good scene is one in which the rescue team has to abandon their ship and try to make it to an orbiting supply vessel. Those scenes, however, are bookended by scenes that go on too long. These scenes are filled with dialogue that goes nowhere. The point is made in the first few lines, but the writers deemed it necessary to have the actors spout it out at every given second. With a cast like Gary Sinise, Tim Robbins, and Don Cheadle, you’d think you’d have it covered. To their credit, they give it all they’ve got, and they do manage to have some fine moments. Too bad they were hampered with lines that didn’t move the story forward. Brian DePalma’s mastery of the visual medium makes for some interesting visuals and he of course borrows things from 2001, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, and Star Wars. Mission To Mars has some interesting ideas, but ultimately, the climax left me feeling cheated. I wanted more. Mars is an alien planet that holds many mysteries. From that thought you can cook up any number of scenarios that are frought with danger. Overall, two really good scenes, some good visual effects and a great production design are hampered by many bad scenes supplied by a weak script that gives good actors some really bad lines.

Summary: Solid sci-fi with Hitchcockian cinematic feel

As a long-time aficionado of “hard” science fiction, both in print and on film, I am mystified at the intensity of negative reviews that have accreted around MISSION TO MARS. Consider the typical criticisms that hard-core fans level at screen sci-fi:

1. “It’s all special effects, and the plot is not ‘character driven.’” Well, this film is all about characters and their very human emotions: wonder, love, loss, frustration, gratitude. If this movie had been any more character-driven, it would have been a Bergman flick.

2. “The writers obviously don’t understand science or simply cheat on the scientific angle to squeeze the budget or get around plotting difficulties.” Again, it seems to me that the producers spared no expense to give good, rock-hard science here. The shots in the Mars-bound spaceship were incredible. One-upping both Stanley Kubrick on centrifuge shots, and APOLLO 13 on free-fall shots, de Palma incorporated both reference frames seamlessly. It’s a brilliant piece of cinematography, directing, and editing.

3. “There’s nothing new here. This was all covered by Heinlein/Asimov/Clarke/Dick by the end of the 1950’s.” Well, I’ve got news for you: \_all\_ literary plots and themes have been covered at some point in the past. Even Shakespeare borrowed shamelessly from earlier works. Actually, there’s plenty that’s new in MISSION TO MARS. The Hitchcock method of continuous panning so beloved by Brian de Palma is used to great effect here–the first sci-fi film to be so shot. For comparision, take a peek at de Palma’s previous effort, SNAKE EYES, to see the same technique.

Although I consider MISSION TO MARS to be a top-notch science fiction film, beautiful to look at and listen to, I certainly can’t give it a perfect ‘10.’ While the physical science is good, the biology is substandard. The ending is relatively weak, but I can’t judge the whole book by its last chapter. I give it a solid ‘8′, and I recommend it for theatrical viewing.