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Landscape With Invisible Hand

Abstract

This is a film review of *Landscape With Invisible Hand* (2023), directed by Cory Finley.

Keywords

Aliens, Dystopia, First Contact, Global Capitalism

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Author Notes

John Lyden is the Department Chair and Blizek Professor of Religious Studies at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



Landscape with Invisible Hand (2023), dir. Cory Finley

Usually, movies about invading aliens portray them as violent conquerors, fought against bravely by courageous humans who defend their planet. *Independence Day* would be the exemplar, offering a retro-fantasy that acts as a cipher for American exceptionalism and imperialism as the US President leads the world in a united effort against the aliens. In *Landscape with Invisible Hand*, however, the aliens are apparently benevolent, as they allegedly bring the benefits of peace and prosperity to the world, but they mirror human empires in their promises which conceal a global capitalism that benefits some but not others.

We see this from the outset of the film as human teachers are replaced by virtual alien ones, and one downsized teacher chooses to blow his brains out in front of the school. Many people are homeless and impoverished, their careers rendered obsolete by the aliens. Those who choose to live in the alien cities that float above the Earth may make a good living by serving and entertaining them, but the rest of the planet struggles just to get by. The aliens, who resemble slimy coffee

tables with eyes on stalks, communicate by rubbing their paddle-like hands, making a sound more like sandpaper than a voice—and all this only enhances how alien they are to the human world.

High school student Adam (Asante Blackk) is more fortunate than many in that his mother Beth (Tiffany Haddish) owns a house, so that he can offer a place to the homeless family of classmate Chloe (Kylie Rogers), in whom he has taken an interest. Beth resents this, however, and finds Chloe's family intrusive, especially Chloe's father (Josh Hamilton) who is bitter about his own inability to provide for his family. Adam and Chloe find a way to generate income for their families when they start a "courtship broadcast"—something the aliens will pay to watch, as they reproduce asexually and are fascinated by romance. But this plan goes awry as Adam hates performing their relationship before an audience, finding this demeaning and exploitative. When the aliens catch on to the fact that their romance has cooled, they are sued by the aliens for deception, which could result in the loss of everything for their families.

Beth then makes her own attempt at placating the aliens, offering to be a wife for the alien's child which enjoys performing the role of husband. There is nothing sexual about this (given the absence of gender or sex in the aliens) but it acts the part of the traditional husband from the old television sitcoms it has seen in which the wife stays home and is subservient. Tiffany Haddish has a hilarious scene in which she finally rejects this role and asserts herself—and ironically this does not result in disaster, as Chloe's father takes on the role of "wife" for the alien (and the alien may not even know that he is a different person, as we all look alike to them). He accepts this degrading position in order to have prosperity, which he believes is the only way to survive.

Adam, however, has a different way of surviving, as he is an artist. He chronicles the occupation and the experiences of his family not with hopes of making any money but, like many an artist, out of a need to express what he sees. When the aliens take an interest in his art, it appears

that this may mean prosperity for him, but it comes at a cost when it is revealed that they will “edit” his work to put the alien presence in its best light. Their edited version of his mural of the occupation looks like Soviet realism, offering nothing but positive images of the aliens and their effect on human life, removing all suggestion of the poverty and inequality they have introduced.

Director Finley adapted the novel by M.T. Anderson in some ways, and was keen to avoid reducing the ending to a “nihilistic shrug” where everything is a commodity and human dignity is lost. Instead, he wanted to present a story of a family that was “quietly heroic” and offered hope even while there is no simple escape from their situation. Adam’s art provides the centerpiece to the plot as he can speak truth to power even if he cannot change reality.

Like many sci-fi stories, this story is really about our own world, sketching a portrait of a global capitalism that claims to be for the benefit of all when in fact it benefits the few. Whole populations are reduced to poverty, and those who can succeed may do so at the cost of their dignity and self-respect. At the premier, an audience member asked Haddish (who is also an executive producer of the film) whether she found it ironic that this critique of global capitalism is being distributed by a major studio. In her response, she noted that Finley did not compromise his vision, even as Adam refuses to compromise his art. She knows that a film can have something to say even if it is entertaining enough to garner support and audiences, which should be a good thing: and this film is certainly a welcome addition to “alien invasion” narratives, as it provides some spot-on critique of our own world which we would do well to hear.