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Do Androids Dream of Bad TV?: Un/originality in Neil Burger's Voyagers

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Do Androids Dream of Bad TV?: Un/originality in Neil Burger's *Voyagers*

Cover Page Footnote

We are grateful to Ludi Price, Lyn Robinson, this article's reviewer, and the participants of FanLIS for their generous feedback; to Heather Sparling; to the staff of Cape Breton University Library and Dalhousie University Libraries; to Cape Breton University; and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Callum McNutt thanks his mom and dad.

Voyagers (2021), directed by Neil Burger, is not a great film. Much like his earlier outings, including *Divergent* (2014), it received negative reviews from critics and audiences alike. The consensus is that the film lacks originality and that it feels more like a collection of tropes and clichés drawn from the dystopian genre rather than an interesting investigation of them. The film received a critic score of 25% and an audience score of 55% on *Rotten Tomatoes*, the review aggregator Web site. Its premise is familiar. Our planet is doomed, and our hope rests on an intergalactic mission to scout for and to colonize a habitable planet. Since the trip takes 86 years, scientists decide it best to people the crew with children conceived from genetic donors, Nobel Prize laureates and the like. The rationale that the “best” would automatically produce the “best” overlooks the importance of social advantage, which may be partially responsible for the “best” getting ahead, and the fact that the “best” may also comprise some heavily individualized peoples who may or may not be team players. It assumes, furthermore, that since the children have no experience with Earth, they would not be curious about the planet; and that they would commit to the mission and want their grandchildren to see it to completion (Figures 1 and 2). The children’s growth is closely monitored and controlled. Years later, on the *Humanitas*, Christopher (Tye Sheridan) and Zac (Fionn Whitehead) refuse to drink their rationed blue fluid when they discover it to contain T56j, a medication that makes them dull and docile, that eliminates their sexual desire and sensation, and that decreases their pleasure responses (Figure 3). The T56j was designed to impose order upon the *Humanitas*, and the spaceship’s rejection of it quickly leads to changes in its social fabric. This drug exposes a core conviction of the genre: the teens may be a “perfect crew” and the last hope for humanity, but they are not trusted by the society that created it. As the distance between the ship and Earth lengthens, so too does the lag time in communication between the two. The crew can report back to Earth, but the reports fall upon deaf ears: they are never responded to or meaningfully engaged with. Any help that Earth can provide would come far too late.

Things look bleak indeed, and as this quick synopsis reveals, there are more problems than there are solutions. None of what appears here, we might think, is particularly original. Would it have been more ethical for AI to have written this film, and others, as opposed to subjecting writers to the creation of “pretty bad” (Callum McNutt) or “casually mediocre” (Tom Ue) ones like this? With the insatiable demand for films to fill the catalogues of streaming services and the thirst for new holiday specials every season, would it not be more ethical to spare the human labour behind them? As much as we may lampoon these less-than-original films, however, they represent work and income for writers. A move to AI would, no doubt, precipitate significant unemployment in the film industry. Creatives may or may not take pride in their work in often overdone genres, but it does put food on the table, in a field where work is becoming increasingly scarce.



Figures 1 and 2. Burger's set design recalls George Lucas' in *Star wars: Episode II—attack of the clones* (2002). Jeannette Catsoulis (2021, April 8), Germain Lussier (2021, April 7), and Gregory Wakeman (2021, June 29) have all praised the film's aesthetics. Jeff York (2021, April 9) takes a different view.

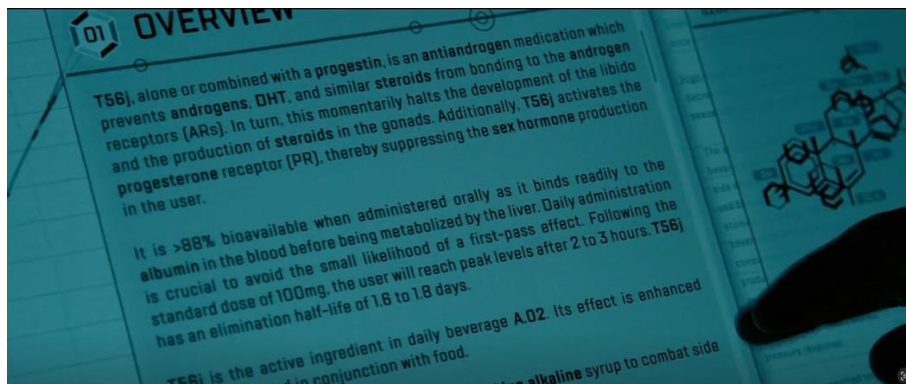


Figure 3. Christopher and Zac discover what's in the blue.

Furthermore, these films, though less than fresh, can still carry the possibility of real innovation, while AI, as it currently exists, would only be able to produce a collage of existing works. *Voyagers* could've been a sequel to Ernest Cline's (2020) *Ready player two*, the end of which finds Parzival, an AI copy of the protagonist Wade Watts, leading other copies and "[b]illions of digitized human souls, which were to be kept stored in suspended animation for safekeeping" (p. 362), on a mission to colonize Proxima Centauri, a trip that's expected to take not 86 years, but approximately 47. As Wade puts it, early in the novel, "There, we would search for a habitable Earthlike planet where we could make a new home for ourselves, our children, and the frozen human embryos we were going to bring along. (We'd been accepting embryo donations for over a year by this point, from every country around the world, with the hope of ensuring genetic diversity)" (p. 41). Elsewhere, Tom Ue (2024) has expressed concern over the significant baggage on Wade's and the High Five's shoulders in face of the world's uncertain future (p. 120); and Ue and Callum McNutt (2024, forthcoming) have investigated, through readings of George Lucas' *Star wars: Episodes I-III* (1999-2005), the waste of and by people.

Burger takes a different direction. He retreats to, and draws inspiration from, William Golding's *Lord of the flies* (1954), and he explores many of the same kinds of questions regarding individual wants, collective needs, and civilization's future. Alison Willmore (2021, April 8), Jeff York (2021, April 9), and Matthew Jones (2023, August 8) sum up the view of many a critic in the titles of their reviews when they note Burger's debt to Golding. According to Willmore, the film "walks a fine line between the philosophical and the frothy, managing with impressive precision to avoid being smart *or* fun" (original emphasis)—though it's not without some promise. "Rather than show the potential for both brutality and order in the human psyche, even in characters who've essentially started as blank states," Willmore finds, "*Voyagers* ends up presenting Zac as an aberration leading the crew into a bout of hysterical overreaction. As allegories for the last few years go, it's not one that offers much by way of compelling insight." York goes further to identify the film's equivalents of Golding's characters. Self-professed to be "overly cynical about" the whole thing, Jones is similarly disappointed, declaring *Voyagers* not "a tense, story-driven, lost-in-space sci-fi thriller starring Colin Farrell" but "a shallow teen drama that steals its most 'profound' ideas from a book on every student's required list." For his part, Burger recognizes his debt to both Golding's novel and Peter Brook's film adaptation (1963). As he (2021, April 8) explains, in his interview with Brent Lang:

"Lord of the Flies" is very much about those boys reverting to male British behavior involving hunting and war. In our case, the crew of young men and women have no cultural references at all. When we strip away everything, what we're looking at is human nature in a vacuum. They're not

reverting to any cultural stereotype. This allows us to think about ideas like, at our core, who are we? Are we naturally good or are we just animals looking to satisfy our appetites?

Acknowledging, in his interview with Glenn Kenny, how Richard (Farrell) has affected the children's behaviour so that they were never in a vacuum—"he's also human and what the kids pick up from him, [sic] include his secrets and his own doubts about the mission"—Burger (2021, April 8) nevertheless sees the ship as a useful laboratory for studying human character. He asks: "[D]o we have a core set of values, a core set of sensibilities? Who are we? Are we good? Are we bad? Are we just animals? Are we evil? Do we tend to the good? And so I wanted the movie to be an exploration of that sort of, as I said, human—is there such a thing as being a pure human?" Readers of Golding (2022) will agree with Burger: the boys are well versed in adventure stories (see, in particular, p. 33 and p. 110), and boys and men view the English and British as superior (p. 42 and p. 224). All the same, the boys are never reasonable enough to make informed judgment. The truth of this statement is borne out by the narrator, who explains why they elect Ralph as their chief:

None of the boys could have found good reason for this; what intelligence had been shown was traceable to Piggy while the most obvious leader was Jack. But there was a stillness about Ralph as he sat that marked him out: there was his size, and attractive appearance; and most obscurely, yet most powerfully, there was the conch. The being that had blown that, had sat waiting for them on the platform with the delicate thing balanced on his knees, was set apart. (pp. 18-19)

Lacking Piggy's savviness and Jack's demonstrated ability to lead—he's "chapter chorister and head boy" and he can even sing a C# (p. 18)—Ralph prevails on the strength of his looks and his having blown the all-important conch. If Jack can sing *as high as* C#, i.e. his vocal range goes up to C#, presumably that above the staff, it is very high and would be impressive for anyone to reach. An alternative reading is that Jack can sing the pitch C# without any reference point, which would suggest that he has that rare quality in a musician: perfect pitch.¹ Jack's vocal muscles may come in handy with barking at the boys to submission, but his range and his pitch are otherwise irrelevant to his claim to leadership.

As Burger points out, and as both Germain Lussier (2021, April 7) and Brian Truitt (2021, April 29) observe, *Voyagers does* raise some profound questions that are well worth asking. The former directs our attention to the *Humanitas* mission itself: "Can you really make kids do this? Won't they get restless? How would you feel if you realized your entire life has been cut off from reality and your purpose is merely to have babies and die? Would you consider saving humanity an honor

¹ We are grateful to Heather Sparling for her insights here.

or a curse?”² By the end of the film, Christopher and Sela successfully expel Zac from their ship, bringing about order and heralding fresh beginnings for one and all. The children elect Sela as their Chief—we are uncertain why—and she informs us and her audience on Earth how things will now be run: “We are voting on everything now. Trying to reach consensus. It’s not easy, but it’s how we want to move forward. And we’ve decided to not go back on the blue. We feel that it is the best course of action. That we can do better.” A montage reveals that things *do* improve, and that the mission proves successful. In this, the film does what so many dystopian projects don’t: show that things can go right if we only trust the new generation. As Blake Hawkins (2021, April 22) indicates, “the children were forced to choose good for themselves—and they did. *Voyagers*’ choice to break away from its source material is significant because it, unlike *Lord of the flies*, places faith in humanity that it can and will choose good.” And yet. It was never a unanimous decision to get rid of Zac. For all Sela’s (and the film’s) commitments to democracy, they are determined that he’s to have no part in it. The *Humanitas* mission’s success is predicated on the expulsion, figurative and literally, of its most vocal critic—to follow Willmore, “an aberration”—as if he is the cause for rather than a symptom of the ship’s discontent. With Zac’s removal, Christopher and Co. can better prioritize the mission’s needs over their individual wants—to become, what Roxana Hadadi (2021, April 9) calls, “essentially sacrificial lambs”—and overlook all sorts of problems including the mysterious sounds that they keep hearing on the ship and the fact that the guns on board may be anticipatory of heavy conflict ahead. “How do we make sure it doesn’t happen again?” Sela wonders aloud to Christopher. He doesn’t answer, for he can’t—and neither can we. Even the most derivative of films, our reading of *Voyagers* reveals, ought to give us pause.

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² Brian Truitt (2021, April 29) similarly wonders: “Wouldn’t you be irked, too, if you were tossed on a spaceship you’ll never leave, had your natural impulses dulled and *maybe* your kids’ kids will make it to safety if everything goes perfectly? And the thought of 30 people all having to deal with a major hormonal shift at the same time is pretty much the ultimate season of ‘The Real World’” (original emphasis).

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