



Film Review: *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), 124 minutes, written and directed by Roland Emmerich, rated PG

The two heroes of this near future sf cataclysm film are played by 24 year old Jake Gyllenhaal (who plays a 16 year old high school whiz), and Dennis Quaid (who plays the boy's scientist father). The story is a hopefully unlikely near-future in which global warming precipitates a global ice age that comes on in a matter of days. One of the horrifying results of this rapid cooling is a brief period in which, at certain points on the earth's surface (remarkably, exactly where the heroes are located), the temperature drops 5° C per second, finally reaching -65° C. Such a rapid temperature drop freezes people dead almost instantly if they are outside. (Surprise, the heroes get inside, and just in time).

Jake Gyllenhaal was the hero of fantasy time-travel movie *Donnie Darko* (2001) which was reviewed in *CyberCozen* in September, 2003. Let's hope that he will make an effort to appear in additional interesting fantasy or sf films, not because he is so good, but because we want to see more such films.

One thing I liked about this movie was a serious effort made to present a complicated scientific idea in a reasonably intelligent manner. The scientific idea is a legitimate worst case scenario (but rather speeded up), actually proposed by some climatological models as a possibility. This intelligent presentation may be because the makers had a political objective: to counter the continuing obstinacy of people all over the world who keep insisting on using more and more air conditioning in summer, and more and more heating in winter, and in having more and more cars. All these things generate more and more greenhouse gases, and for some reason people all over the world think that their personal comfort is more important than the future of the Earth. While the film presents the curious view that only one person in the entire world wants a higher standard of living for every one else, and that is the Vice President of the U.S., I think that the blame is not so easily placed. The Vice President is presented as being singularly unable to understand simple scientific facts, whereas to everyone else they are obvious, and therefore he is solely responsible for the forthcoming disaster.

I almost froze to death in the movie theater here in Rehovot when I saw this movie. The air conditioning was so cold that, even though I was wearing a sweater, I was shivering. Watching people freeze to death on the screen made me feel right in place. I suppose the U.S. VP was responsible for this waste of energy in Rehovot too.

My wife and I enjoyed the movie very much. The special effects are fabulous. She wooed and wowed when a tsunami wave broke over Manhattan. Having flooded all of Manhattan, the water later froze solid. Nice!

There were a few silly things in the plot. The scientist father, having told his son not to go outside, but to stay inside and keep warm, then goes out with three friends to rescue his son in Manhattan, even though – although he doesn't know that – his son has followed his advice and is keeping nice and warm inside by burning books in the New York Public Library. In fact one of the most charming scenes is when the librarian objects to the young hero's burning a book by Nietzsche on the grounds that Nietzsche is one of the greatest philosophers who ever lived. Another young friend with them suggests a simple solution – burning books of tax law instead.

I think that probably many people who saw the movie found it boring. The scientific discussions, the description of painstaking scientific collection of data, and the display and analysis of the results, would bore many people. We liked it, and hope there will be more thought-provoking scientific movies in the future. And we'll be glad to take Jake Gyllenhaal and Dennis Quaid as the heroes.

Book Review by Aharon Sheer

The Fresco by Sheri S. Tepper (2000), 456 pages.

I'd never read anything by Sheri Tepper before and did not know what to expect. At the start it seemed it was conventional left-wing feminist propaganda, built around an interesting first-contact-with-aliens-visiting-earth story. But as I got into it, I saw that the propaganda was less conventional than I thought.

Tepper was born in 1929, so she grew up reading authors like Robert Heinlein. One of the favorable consequences of Heinlein's influence was that I found myself arguing with her as I read the book – something I do when I read Heinlein. For example, one idea I remember from an Eric Frank Russell story from the 1950s was providing all members of an entire population with self operated, easy, immediate suicide buttons. Russell's idea was that mental illness being genetic, making suicide easy and acceptable will in a few generations eliminate mental illness -- the resulting population will be completely mentally stable. This idea seems to be completely in keeping with some of Tepper's ideas (see below). The Russell story is probably one Tepper read in her younger days. So she is not a conventional 21st century left-winger do-gooder.

Tepper's aliens, the Pistach, are charming and with totally good intentions for earth people. Now that humans have sent probes out of the solar system, they have aroused the attention of a galactic Confederation. Earth is offered a choice:

(1) Reorganize your society so that you will be **Neighborly** (another term no doubt popular when Tepper was young), and we'll let you join our Confederation, which will protect you from the bad guys.

(2) Fail to become **Neighborly** and we'll let the nasty predatory hunting aliens have you – they love eating human meat, and there's lots of that on earth, and more being born all the time. However, the Confederation sets some limits:

“...predators are required exercise moderation and not to prey so heavily as to drive any species or its culture into total extinction. The Confederation submits to natural law in which the strong eat the weak, but it does not allow extinctions of any species. We regard those who wipe out other species as being, as you might say, the very bottom of the barrel.” (p. 170)

The charming and good-intentioned Pistach are going to try to impose their way of life on nasty earth people, and letting small numbers of predators run around eating humans here and there will get across that idea that cooperation with the Pistach is desirable.

Here is the Pistach's definition of a "female": "a **receptor** person ... provider of sequential life with or without DNA introduced by another individual or individuals". (p. 9) "Males" are "**inceptors**". Remember that word, "inceptor". The hero of the book is a receptor. Most of the villains are inceptors, by the way. And here is Tepper's description of the Pistach as first encountered by the heroine:

"...about her height, five foot six, though much lighter in build, each with four yellow arms and four green legs, and what seemed to be a scarlet exoskeleton covering the thorax and extending in a kind of kangaroo tail in back, like a prop. ... and they had huge, really huge multifaceted eyes, plus several smaller ones that looked almost human. The mouths didn't look like insect mouths, though there were small squidgy bits around the sides." (p. 9)

Tepper is good at describing alien-looking aliens. She has quite a few very varied aliens described briefly in the book, but she usually doesn't do much with their various features. For example, at a later meeting with the First Lady (the wife of the U.S. President), the same Pistach looks just like an Indian woman in a sari, and calls "herself" Indira. In other words, the Pistach can look (and be touched) and be just like they want you to see and feel them.

When challenged by an American general to show that they can really do what they say they can do, the Pistach prove their power by making the Old City of Jerusalem disappear. You can stand at the edge of where the wall of the Old City was, and look down for miles. If you jump off the edge, you will reappear a few miles away, unharmed (which is what happened to all the residents of the Old City – Old City Jews appeared in Jewish neighborhoods and Old City Muslims in Muslim neighborhoods and Old City Christians in Christian neighborhoods, to prevent slaughter). The Old City is chosen to disappear in order to convince the Jews and the Muslims that they should be more Neighborly. However, the Old City has not been destroyed; it has been saved temporarily in another dimension, and will be returned when the Jews and Muslims have made peace.

The Pistach have other, even more imaginative ways to convince people to be neighborly -- for example, they make all the Muslim women in Afghanistan excruciatingly ugly and smelly (to the men), so that the men will learn to be nicer to them.

The Pistach eventually also provide a sort of definition of what Neighborliness is: "To be a neighbor, Earth must be a world in which children are born to peace and a place of their own, in which all are educated, in which personal freedoms and community civilities are well balanced, in which the environment is respected and unnatural conflict is restrained. Either we will be successful in helping your world achieve this, or we will leave it as it is, building a fence around it so that your people may not leave it." (p. 189) Mightily neighborly of them, don't you think?

Here is Tepper's feminist manifesto, as presented by a Pistach:

“I know, for example, that your young people – and those of mid years, also – often cannot help the sexual foolishness they commit, and assisting them in this matter would be wise. I know your rapists cannot help what they do, but I also know they cannot be allowed to do it. Since the physically stronger half of your race are inceptors, and since they are disproportionately represented at various levels of government, they have elevated inceptorhood above all other states of being, holding it above even the right to live. Inceptorhood is so holy.... You may kill a rapist, but you may not change him into something noninceptorish.” (p. 218)

And here’s one passage from the Pistach with which I fully agree:

“Your newsmen on Earth ... would be regressed and reselected here on Pistach-home. I have seen them sticking their microphones into the faces of the bereaved and of the assaulted and of persons just arrested or survivors of disasters asking them how they feel, as though that were news! It is incivility of the worst sort. We would not tolerate it. One should be met, of course, and welcomed, but quietly, discretely.” (p. 374)

And, since I mentioned Eric Frank Russell’s idea in favor of suicide above, here is a brief quote expressing the personal opinions of Tepper, as put in the mouth of one of the good, kind aliens:

“Persons who are no longer babies should never be saved from themselves! Persons who are self-destructive should be allowed to do so, without hindrance, as otherwise you perpetuate the tendency generation after generation! I have read in a garden book that one saves labor by learning to love weeds. This was written as a jest, but it is true of more enterprises than gardens. Weeds have their own purposes, and so do high death rates among alcoholics, drug addicts, violent persons, gun worshippers, and the perpetually angry. What we Pistach must help you to do is to arrange that the fatalities happen inside these groups, rather than among innocent bystanders.” (p. 230)

Tepper gives the reader a lot to argue with! Let’s take the idea that alcoholism, drug addiction, violence, etc., are genetic, and that letting such people kill themselves off will improve the race. Schizophrenia is a serious mental disease with a high genetic component. (It usually appears in the late teens, or early 20s of the person’s life.) If the two parents are schizophrenic, then there is almost a 50% chance that their child will become schizophrenic. So why should the Pistach let schizophrenics breed at all? Yet non-genetic factors are also involved. In a study in Jerusalem it was found that there is five times the chance of having a schizophrenic child if the father is age 50-54 than if he is in his late 20s at the time of the child’s birth. If the Pistach are sensible, and since they do not seem enthusiastic about inceptors, why shouldn’t they just sterilize all men over 30? That should be simple for them. Why wait until the children are born, grow up, and then become schizophrenic, and only then encourage them to commit suicide? Wouldn’t it make more sense to take preventive action? Or consider the Seasonality Effect. Far more schizophrenics are born in late winter and early spring. The current assumption is that the babies’ mothers contracted the flu in the fall, during the fetus’s second trimester, when the brain is developing. The fetus’ brain is damaged by the flu, and, many years

later, schizophrenia appears. Well, that could be prevented too. Just make all inceptors temporarily sterile during the summer, so that no babies are born in the late winter and early spring. Easy, no doubt, for the Pistach to do. Prevention! Why do we have to let the schizophrenic babies be born, and then when their symptoms appear, hope that they will kill themselves off before they reproduce?

It will take me some time to recover from reading this stuff, but it kept pulling me forward wondering what was going to happen next, and I will probably look for other books by Tepper in the future.

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כל הזכויות שמורות למחברים וליוצרים, כפי שצוינו.

Quote of the Month:

“... a lot of people are convinced that strange aliens, usually with big black eyes and pear-shaped heads like the ones in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, landed a UFO near them, loaded them on board, and took them for a flight round the solar system while carrying out weird experiments, often of a sexual nature, on them. After which they were calmly returned to the very spot from which they had been abducted, as if absolutely nothing had happened.

“The first thing to say is that without doubt many of these experiences are false. Ian [Stewart] once did a radio broadcast which included a woman who had undergone a convincing experience of being abducted – except that she knew she really hadn’t been, because her family told her she’d been asleep beside the fire the whole time. Jack [Cohen] once met a woman who claimed that aliens abducted her and took away her baby. So he asked a question that nobody else had thought to ask, the woman included: ‘Were you pregnant?’

“‘No.’

“The point is that to the victims, the experience *felt* real.”

From *The Science of Discworld* by Terry Pratchett, Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen, p. 290