

Stranded Far in the Precarious Unknown

(By Toshio U.-P.)

After following NASA's recent Artemis II mission, which sent humans further away from planet Earth than ever before, I became interested in analysing the basic narrative structure of contemporary American sci-fi cinema in which film characters are put to the ultimate test while exploring the often precarious unknown. Going back to a highly influential film by James Cameron from the late 1980s called The Abyss (1), a noticeable narrative pattern arises in the plot when a group of oil rig scientists are pressured into helping the U.S. military explore the ocean depths to locate the wreck of the USS Montana nuclear submarine in order to retrieve the heavily destructive warhead in its cargo. While the mission appears to be simple in nature at first, a violent hurricane off the coast complicates things when the oil rig called Deepcore—which is used as an underwater base for the search and rescue mission—loses its tethered connection to the ship on the surface called Benthic Explorer and descends into the uncharted lower depths of the Caribbean's Cayman Trough. With limited oxygen and little heat deep below the surface, scientist Lyndsay Brigman and her expert crew struggle against armed mercenaries in a race to disarm a nuclear weapon with five times the power of Hiroshima with the help and backing of a mysterious underwater alien life form which shares similar concerns about escalation in the US-Russia military arms race.

A similar narrative pattern appears in recent sci-fi blockbuster Project Hail Mary (2), when astronaut Ryland Grace awakens from an induced coma light-years away from Planet Earth on board the Hail Mary spaceship. After exploring his daunting and hermetic surroundings, he begins to recollect his role in the space mission to save humankind from an impending Ice Age caused by the mysterious dimming of the sun's energy by a micro-organism known as Astrophage. After struggling to accept that he will most likely not return back to his home planet, the underdog biochemist turned high school science teacher establishes lines of communication with a deep space alien life form known as an Eridean whose spaceship happens to be in the Hail Mary's vicinity in the distant constellation harbouring the star known as Tau Ceti. Working together with "Rocky" who has the common goal of studying ways to counter Astrophage's consumption of solar energy in his own far-off star system, Ryland miraculously finds a way to send datasets and samples of an Astrophage predator known as Taumoeba back to Planet Earth via guided probes.

While sci-fi exploration narratives in American cinema represent tenuous and precarious situations that would more often end in failure and tragedy for the severely stranded and often disconnected characters, a hope exists in finding ways to achieve the goals of preserving Planet Earth for future generations. Peaceful alien life forms often are introduced to these narratives to aid humankind and create connection and continuity in an otherwise doomed situation far off from a place called home.

Film Sources:

1. The Abyss (1989). Dir. James Cameron. 20th Century Fox. USA. 140 min.
2. Project Hail Mary (2026). Dir. Phil Lord and Christopher Miller. Sony Pictures Releasing International. USA. 156 min.