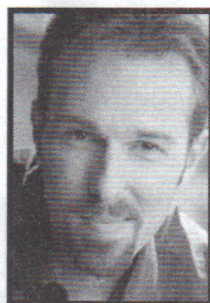


Finding God in *Oblivion*

It was supposed to be nothing more than an opportunity to relax and unwind, to be entertained. I hadn't been to the movies in months, and I enjoy science fiction for its creativity more often than for its message. The review I had heard on the radio suggested *Oblivion* would be fine, but several notches short of special.

But less than 24 hours later, I found myself scratching out notes on my church bulletin between opening hymn and prayer, between offertory and anthem. *Oblivion* had more to it than I had anticipated.



RYAN HARRISON

The story takes place on a post-apocalyptic Earth ravaged by war and left desolate and dying. A large, pyramidal object suspended in Earth's orbit oversees the work of two humans—Jack (Tom Cruise) and Victoria (Andrea Riseborough)—who are responsible for patrolling what used to be the Eastern Seaboard. While Victoria guides him from their futuristic home, Jack monitors, repairs, and maintains weaponized drones that ceaselessly patrol the skies ensuring that the many large machines hovering over—and literally sucking up—the Atlantic ocean continue to operate despite the scattered presence of the remaining aliens (referred to as “scavs”). These machines transmute seawater into energy used, ostensibly, by the vast number of humans who fled the planet upon its demise to take refuge on one of Saturn's moons. Jack and Victoria are thus in selfless service to all of the remaining displaced members of humanity . . . or so they think.

Nearly half the movie has elapsed before your grasp on the story is quite suddenly wrenched loose. (Spoiler alert!) Here's my attempt at making the resulting complex story quickly

digestible: You learn that, in fact, the giant pyramid is not of human design, but alien. You also learn that the “scavs” are actually human refugees in hiding, and that Jack and Victoria are two of a countless number of identical clones created by the alien presence and sent to Earth under false pretenses.

Knowing all of this is important, because it supports an anomaly: the fragments of memories and flashbacks that Jack has experienced from the film's outset, despite the “mandatory memory wipe” prior to the start of his mission on Earth. As the truth unfolds before him, Jack is confronted by the complete upheaval and reversal of his worldview. In an instant, he is changed from humanity's hero to its unwitting fool, complicit in the Earth's demise and its people's destruction. He wrestles with the reality that he has been used—thousands of times—as the clones made from his DNA were employed by the alien as its brainwashed and well-armed invaders to conquer his own planet and its people.

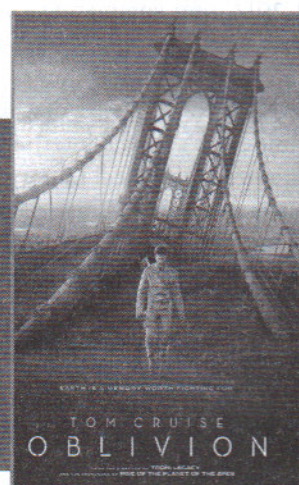
Take a breath. Now, finally, I think I can help explain why I consider this film “spiritual cinema.” Within *Oblivion* hide a number of “theophilosophical” gems.

The first of these that came to my mind was the reminder of the Earth's preciousness and our part in preserving the planet's health. The alien presence came to Earth not for its people, knowledge, or culture, but for its resources. Once the invader has spoiled or stolen them, the planet is transformed into something dreadfully inhospitable, devoid of life and, therefore, of value.

A clever dichotomy deepens this theme. By using countless clones of Jack and Victoria as its army, the alien successfully manipulated humans into appropriating Earth's natural resources in support of its own needs at the planet's catastrophic expense. And yet, Jack also harbors a secret: a

ABOUT THE MOVIE

Title: *Oblivion*. **Theatrical release:** April 19, 2013. **DVD release:** August 6. **Running time:** 124 minutes. **Director:** Joseph Kosinski. **Screenplay:** Karl Gajdusek and Michael Arndt. **MPAA rating:** PG-13. *San Francisco Chronicle* critic Mick LaSalle says, “After a slow start, this is the rare film that gets better as it goes along. The story, about two scientists working in a post-apocalyptic New York, deepens and builds an intense rooting interest. The action sequences are too much out of a video game, but this is intelligent science fiction—and it benefits enormously from Tom Cruise in the lead role.”



hidden, sheltered oasis of green, with healthy plants and clean, potable water. It is to this paradise, found in the midst of self-inflicted destruction, where Jack slips away to relax, rejuvenate, and be at peace. This is where he wants to remain the rest of his days, despite his careful "programming" and given mission. This dual message—of human as hapless destroyer and sensitive inhabitant—is a strong reminder that we are too often unconsciously at odds with the planet, while wholly supported by and dependent on it.

In a way, God also makes an entrance in *Oblivion*. At the film's climax, as Jack displays the indomitable spirit of humankind by flying into the cold, dark heart of the alien pyramid-like structure on a quest to destroy it, he faces the alien itself. "I made you, Jack," the alien voice explains. "I am your God." In response, Jack detonates a bomb, sacrificing himself (and the hundreds of thousands of his clones) and immolating this "false god" in its own sanctuary.

The longer you allow your "ear to hear," the more deafening the spiritual overtones to this scene become. Jack's thousandfold sacrifice of himself saves the Earth from a false god that had used him to destructive ends. This alien "god" had created Jack and Victoria—analogs of Adam and Eve—but lacked a divine connection with them, and was incapable of originating life or of generating the kind of diversity found in authentic creation. Where Adam and Eve were created to be in careful stewardship over the Earth, Jack and Victoria were created to subjugate the planet, not to take care of the Earth, but to facilitate its exploitation. Theirs was not to glorify God by growing, learning, and co-creating their lives, but to serve mindlessly, unquestioningly, and to have a singular, insipid fate, clone after clone. This relationship with a "false god" could not last. Accordingly, the counterfeit deity was destroyed, bringing the freedom of true creativity back to humankind.

One could say much more about *Oblivion*. For example, I've only hinted at the film's portrayal of the incalculable depth and power of the human spirit, illustrated by the inheritance of memory and resolve through genetic code alone. (Is humankind's search for truth embedded into our very cells?) Suffice it to say that *Oblivion* is not necessarily solely entertainment for entertainment's sake. Unless, that is, you choose to remain oblivious. **W**

Ryan Harrison attends La Verne (Calif.) Church of the Brethren where he started and led monthly Spiritual Cinema Circle gatherings for more than five years. He now works as the director of Resident Life and Wellness at Hillcrest, a Church of the Brethren retirement community, and is completing his doctor of psychology degree at the University of the Rockies.



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