

I saw the movie, Contact, earlier today. I comment about it briefly here because it is not only good science fiction, but also seems to be a good depiction of what an interesting portion of modern astronomy is actually like. I will spare standard review comments, save only to say that the movie's special effects and philosophical bent are more in the vein of 2001: A Space Odyssey, than of anything that has followed. That is welcome in more ways than one -- the canonical jump to lightspeed has always seemed too tame, and I always did wonder who built those black slabs.

Watching the movie was very personal. I felt a long, long, way out of it, and at the same time I thought I was going home. I do not own a television set, and my lack of acculturation to the society about me is a fine source of humor for my friends. Yet I had not before seen Bill Clinton or Jay Leno as anything other than a still photograph, nor wanted to, and about half the other characters credited with playing themselves, had names I had never heard of at all.

No matter. I kept saying, "I've been there -- I know these people," and it was so. In graduate school at U. C. Berkeley, I was on cordial terms with Jill Tartar, who is now the director of the SETI Institute in Mountain View, California -- it may have been imagination, but I think Jodie Foster worked some of Jill's mannerisms into her movie character. I was acquainted with Kent Cullers, the blind graduate student in another research group, who also works there now. And I am even passingly acquainted with one of the extraordinarily wealthy high-tech entrepreneurs, who has been privately funding some of their work, since federal SETI funding was pulled a few years ago. I'll play the game, and won't say who.

I did an insignificant bit of that kind of work myself -- I wrote some early signal-processing FORTRAN for Stu Bowyer's SETI project, SERENDIP, in the 1970s. Stu was my Ph.D. thesis advisor. That work continues, though I hope with better code than I wrote, and with better machines to run it on -- we started with a simple autocorrelator and an early PDP-8 computer, I think the model known as "CADET", which was reputed to mean "Can't Add, Doesn't Even Try", for it did four-bit arithmetic by look-up table. Years later, writing microcode for a highly parallel supercomputer, the MasPar MP-1 and -2, just down the way from Mountain View, I knew it would make a wonderful signal processor, but I could never make a connection to see if there was some under-the-table way to help.

Some of the sets and scenery were familiar, too, from the Vehicle Assembly Building and the crawler walkway at Kennedy Space Center, to the arid plains of the New Mexico desert. They are as they are, and

were well-depicted.

So from the enthusiasm implicit in mismultiplying millions and listening to the signals on a headset, to the tee-shirts, coffee cups, and personal idiosyncrasies of the characters, to the details of technology -- both hardware and software -- I found *_Contact_* entirely real. I thought you might like to know that, because the movie is in some ways very idealistic, and might seem too good to be true. It's not. Communication with intelligent extraterrestrials is not reality, at least, not yet, but there are people in the scientific community who are as competent, as dedicated, as ethical, and as concerned about the issues, as were the best of the characters portrayed in *_Contact_*. I am glad they are there, and I am glad, too, that someone has done a good job of telling the theater audience what those people are like, and what it is that they do, and how they go about it.