

## Document Citation

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## AMERICAN/BRITISH

SOUND ERA

### DESTINATION MOON

(U.S./1950) 95 minutes color \$35.00

Directed by Irving Pichel - Screenplay by Rip Van Ronkel, Robert A. Heinlein, James O'Hanlon, based on the novel by Heinlein - Cinematography by Lionel Lindon - Edited by Duke Goldstone - Production Designed by Ernst Fegte - Astronomical Art by Chesley Bonestell - Special Effects by Lee Zavitz - Music by Leith Stevens - Produced by George Pal for Eagle Lions Films Release. Players: John Archer, Warner Anderson, Tom Powers, Dick Wesson, Erin O'Brien-Moore.

In the late 1940's, the future "Dean of American Science Fiction," Robert A. Heinlein, arrived in Hollywood intending to write the initial film script about the first trip to the moon. This picture was the result.

It might seem a little strange that so skilled a writer should produce such an idiotically simple-minded script (in which, for example, a Woody Woodpecker cartoon convinces the titans of American Industry to underwrite the cost of the trip). But Heinlein is the man who once interrupted a novel to give his readers a ten-page lecture on how space-suits *really* work, and it was he who was the technical adviser on the film as well as the co-scriptwriter. Obviously, the plot is just there to provide an excuse for the special effects, and the special effects are there to make the film as *scientifically* accurate, informative, and convincing as the budget allowed. The spaceship *Luna's* orbit, for example, was actually plotted by Doctor Robert S. Richardson\* of the Mount Wilson and Palomar observatories and would have been good enough to get a real rocket to the right place on the moon.

There were three basic situations that had to be faked: take-off, free fall, and conditions on the lunar surface. The problem in showing the take-off was to show the effects of the six gravities' acceleration on the crew members so that they would appear to weigh over half a ton apiece. The effect of this "terrible acceleration" was simulated by gluing a thin membrane to each man's face which could be drawn back to distort the features as if they were being pulled out of shape by the acceleration.

Then there was the problem of simulating the weightlessness of free fall.

Some of this was done with animated puppets, but most of it was done, predictably enough, with wires (about thirty-six for each heavy object, none of which was supposed to show in the final product, though a few do). When a balsa wood "oxygen bottle" was being used as a rocket outside the spaceship, the escaping gas was simulated with a small CO<sub>2</sub> cartridge—the problem here being that after a few seconds the cartridge would begin to produce carbon dioxide snow, which would fall straight down and utterly destroy the illusion of weightlessness. Most of the attention lavished on the film went towards finding ways around such details, while keeping the illusion intact.

The scenery on the moon started out as a thirteen-foot oil painting by Chesley Bonestell based on a Mount Wilson Observatory photo, and eventually evolved into a sound stage and numerous other paintings of the same scene from differing perspectives. Once again, the effects of the lighter lunar gravity had to be faked.

Then there was the problem of lighting. The stars in outer space should have been brilliant points of light against an utterly black background. This proved to be impossible: not only is Technicolor film unable to register light with the same sensitivity as the human eye, but a point source of light shows up on any film as a haloed circle of light due to the surface diffraction of the multiple lens elements. The problem proved insoluble and automobile headlight bulbs were finally used. Finally, the problem of depicting sunlight on the moon, where—with no blue sky overhead to diffuse the light and fill the shadows—everything is either completely illuminated or utterly dark, was also difficult to overcome; there was no single light in existence which could do the job properly. The problem was solved, but not quite satisfactorily, by using banks of the most powerful arc lights in existence.

The interest in *Destination Moon* does not lie in either the story or the characterizations, but in what was, for 1950, the most painstaking attempt ever made to portray accurately the true physical conditions present in outer space

—Scott Baker

were consulted about the accuracy of this review and they stated that Dr. Richardson was not involved with the production. This is in disagreement with Mr. Heinlein's comments at the time the film was initially released.

Kit Parker, 1979 -KP

\* Editor's note: Mr. and Mrs. Bonestell