

# Dont go down there! - the fight against tactical realism and plot holes essay

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



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Imagine you're watching a horror movie - the young, blonde protagonist is alone in her home, with the lights out, and she hears a creepy sound from the other end of the house. " Hello?" she cries innocently, while she slowly walks in the darkness toward the sound. As an audience member, you have seen this scenario play out many times, usually ending in the unceremonious and gory death of the woman by a mysterious serial killer or monster, and you can't help but think " Don't go in there!" You castigate the poor woman, who does not have the same information that you do, for walking toward a noise not knowing what she is about to experience. After all, unlike you, she does not know she is in a horror film. On the way out of the theatre, you complain to your friends that " the characters were so stupid, no one made any logical decisions. I would have gotten out of that house." However, the next morning, you think to yourself - if she had gotten out of the house, wouldn't that have just ended the movie?

Films and television are some of the most popular and prevalent forms of art consumed in today's world - according to the Motion Picture Association of Arts & Sciences, in 2013 the global box office for all films released worldwide was \$35. 9 billion, attesting to the medium's popularity (MPAA, 2013).

Movies have become an intrinsic part of pop culture, making it one of the most popular art forms consumed by the vast majority of people around the world. In spite of this, the way we often talk and think about movies can often be limited or short-sighted, which is most evident in the existence of the ' plot hole.' Pointing out plot holes has been a popular phenomenon in film criticism, especially with the advent of the Internet and the popularity of comedy shows like Mystery Science Theater 3000, which made making fun

of movies because of their perceived inconsistencies with itself and with real life amusing and popular (King, 2007).

In addition to plot holes, however, there is a distinct animosity that occurs toward characters in movies when they do not behave in the same way you would if you were to be in that same situation (or so you think). I would like to give this phenomenon the name 'tactical realism,' a school of film viewership characterized by "treating any film as a simulation of some theoretical 'real' event," and thus criticizing it for having characters that are perceived to make stupid decisions in the context of the plot (Brewis, 2009). When viewing films from a tactical realism lens, films like Dawn of the Dead no longer become about watching humanity's own greed and fear of death be symbolized by walking, shambling zombies – it becomes a contest about whether or not you can create a better survival strategy than the characters in the film. In tactical realism, "Almost everything filmic about films—cinematography, symbolism, and even characters' emotional states are discarded as unimportant" (Brewis, 2009). I would argue that this perspective of tactical realism misses the point of many films, and prevents people from engaging with a film on more substantive, symbolic and thematic levels.

Take, for example, the film Prometheus, which came out in 2012 and was touted as the prequel to the classic sci-fi horror film Alien that would explain where the alien itself came from. Instead, the characters of the film (the crew of a scientific expedition) visit an abandoned planet from where humanity's perceived creators come, only to find no real answers and a mysterious 'black goo' that acts as a transformative and destructive force in

varying measures. Some film critics praised the film, saying that it was “ all the more intriguing because it raises questions about the origin of human life and doesn't have the answers” (Ebert, 2012). However, others criticized it for having scientists that performed allegedly ‘ un-scientific’ acts such as approaching clearly dangerous alien creatures like they were cute and cuddly, or taking off their helmets in an uncertain atmosphere with unknown toxins, and so on (Sanchez, 2012). While the former perspective engages with the film’s themes and what the film’s events conclude, the latter perspective of tactical realism simply refuses to understand why scientists will not behave as perfect, logical beings who do not make mistakes. Within the text of the film, many of these questions are actually answered – the entire expedition is a false flag operation to smuggle a dying industrialist to the planet to ask humanity’s creators for more life, so the scientists are not necessarily the best and the brightest anyway, for example. However, the tactical realism perspective would rather find holes to poke in the text of a film in order to, conceivably, ‘ out-smart’ or ‘ beat’ the film by proving themselves smarter than the characters.

The problem with tactical realist arguments like this is that it showcases an inability or lack of desire to engage with the film on its own level. If a character behaves in a way you do not believe you would in that situation, you reject it out of hand and call the film ‘ bad’ or ‘ lazy.’ If the world of the film features different (but usually more dynamic) takes on science and physics, the filmmakers are perceived to simply not know about the real science instead of simply taking dramatic license. By focusing on films as a list of mistakes that must be catalogued, with the worst films being the ones

that make the most 'mistakes,' a film-watcher might ignore Prometheus' ode to Golden Age sci-fi camp films, for example, or refuse to engage with the idea that humanity is purposefully meant to look childish and stupid in the face of universal forces that it does not understand.

As a solution to tactical realism, I suggest returning to a more holistic, thematic way of viewing films as a text. Instead of looking at a plot event, shot or character and thinking, "Why don't they do that other thing? That would make more sense (for me)!" filmgoers should watch an event unfold and think "What does this action say about this character, or what the film is trying to say about its plot and themes?" This would prevent a great deal of lazy, facile criticism of films, and can bring about more substantive discussion and open engagement rather than presumptive complaints about the perceived intelligence of the filmmakers.

Taking on this new perspective is not to say that films cannot be bad, or even have plot holes; there are many works that do fail on their own sense of internal consistency, which can often lead to muddled messaging and uncertain themes and subtexts. Plot holes are absolutely a component of film criticism, and should be factored into one's appraisal of a film. However, my argument is that they do not necessarily act as the be-all end-all of a film's quality. Other factors like cinematography, symbolism, editing, performance and theme must be taken into consideration, with the plot serving as the vehicle for these themes just as much as these other visual and filmic factors. Film is, at its core, a visual medium, and so the preoccupation with strict narrative and narrow perceptions of realism should be more limited than they currently are in the world of film criticism.

Currently, films are evaluated by many in the film-going public not by the beauty of their images, or the richness of their themes, but by a warped sense of realism and skewed perceptions of correct and incorrect behavior. These viewers mistake the errors or inconsistencies of characters and events with the errors of filmmakers, and unfairly judge many films by that criteria. By opening the eyes of film-watchers to examining films on a more complex level than just the perceived plot holes of the story and the differences between what they would do and what the characters would do, a greater, more positive experience of watching, absorbing and talking about films can be achieved. With these new perspectives, tactical realism can be ignored in favor of watching, studying and understanding the events of a film and what it ultimately says; at that point, opinions can be gleaned about whether or not it all ultimately works, or holds up as a film. How we understand art is incredibly important to our development as a culture; we must be careful to make sure we do it in as thoughtful and engaged way as possible.

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