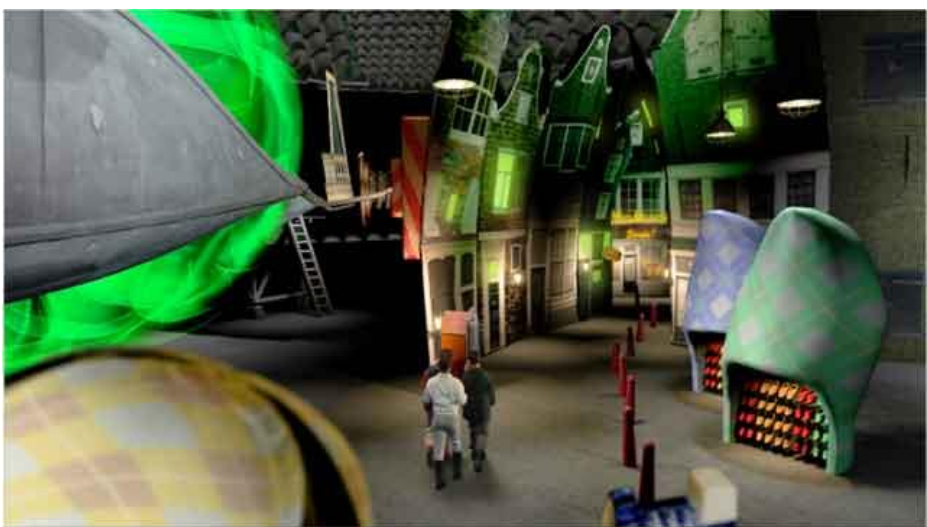




AMSTEROID

Written & directed by John Higbie

1 hr. 38 mins.

LOGLINE:

Reality and fantasy collide in the struggle of two ill-matched brothers in an asteroid city controlled by evil mind control magnate Bob Van Horus.

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THE TAXICAB

Short synopsis:

Two brothers, one dreamy and starry-eyed, the other earthy and rational, are in search of their mother in the asteroid city of Amsteroid, where she's being held captive at the headquarters of the evil mind control empire of Bob Van Horus. On the run from Van Horus' goons, they fall in with a group of teenage hustlers working to blow up the asteroid.

Less short synopsis:

Filip Visser is a dreamy teen with delusions of stardom; his brother Wouter is a scrappy realist, are the two sons of a feckless, hard luck dark matter miner. On the godroid mine Nefertem, their family lives under the thumb of evil mind control magnate Bob Van Horus, who takes his pleasures with the boys' mother Alice, who has no choice but to comply for their sake. The boys decide to act on their own when Van Horus kidnaps Alice and takes her to his lair on Amsteroid, where the dark-matter is processed into mass mind control transmissions.

Along the way the two boys find themselves on the run from Van Horus' goons. Without options, they fall in with a group of young hustlers who have been trying to destroy Amsteroid and bring down Van Horus' wicked mindware empire.

As natives of a dark matter mining colony, Filip and Wouter are heavily dosed with the dark matter of the extinct god. This, together with their struggle against Van Horus, forces a crisis of identity for them, and the possibility of transcendence from their meager roots.

Full synopsis:

In the world of Amsteroid, extinct gods, known as godroids, are mined for their essential dark-matter by unscrupulous operators. The dark matter is fuel for managed reality “mentah,” a kind of mind control technology popular among lower classes and others seeking cheap comfort from harsh realities. Bob Van Horus’ Magic Mentah company is the largest and most notorious such operator. His miners are mostly ex-cons or other down-on-their-luck types such as Roelf Visser, who lives on the mining colony of Nefertem with his wife Alice and two sons Filip, a delusional teen with dreams of stardom, and Wouter, a scrappy realist.

Van Horus takes his pleasures with Alice, who sees her compliance as the price for keeping a roof over her family’s head. But when Alice disappears with Van Horus to Amsteroid, the two boys decide to take action to track her down and bring her home. They finagle passage on a ship, leaving their feckless father behind. On the way to Amsteroid, they run afoul of Van Horus’ security goons, who have detected the heavy doses of dark matter contamination in their bodies. They manage to hide as stowaways, but once on Amsteroid the hunt is on again.

Without options, Filip and Wouter fall in with a group of young hustlers, who have their own issues with Van Horus. As on the mines, the underclasses on Amsteroid are all but slaves for the mentah outfit. Here, people can sell their physical bodies as nodes in the mindware grid, the great machine that broadcasts the mentah transmissions throughout the solar system. But while their bodies are comatose components of the neural grid, their minds are fully active and living in a fantastical managed reality within Amsteroid. Filip and Wouter find they can escape Van Horus’ goons by signing up as grid nodes, effectively signing over their dark matter-logged bodies to Van Horus.

But the high concentrations of dark matter in these two nodes overload the neural grid, disrupting all managed realities. The trauma shakes Filip from his dreamy complacency, and now the two brothers renew their struggle against Van Horus. This means coming to grips with the implications of their status as “darkies” for their identities, and for their quest to bring down Van Horus.



THE NEURAL GRID



THE DARK MATTER FURNACE



WOUTER ON HIS RECAPITATOR

Full cast:

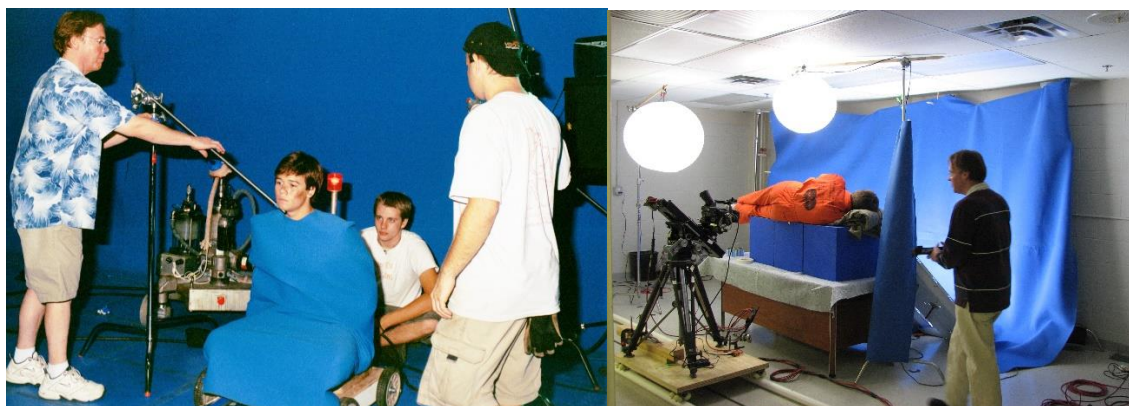
Michael J Russo	as	Filip Visser
Derek Jinks	as	Wouter Visser
Tamara Heaton-Bauer	as	Alice Visser
John DeMerell	as	Roelf Visser
Mark Bernstein	as	Bob Van Horus
Jack Wells	as	Bas
Jared Withrow	as	Kaspar
Garrett Clayton	as	Sander
James Taylor, Jr.	as	Ambrosius
Peter Grain	as	Van Horus' lawyer
Jeff Priskorn	as	Van Horus' receptionist
Cathy Lardas	as	Anke
George Valenta	as	News reporter
John "Bam-Bam" Katinsky	as	Security goon
Nancy Florkowski	as	Magic Mentah receptionist
Russ Prince	as	Senator Fitch
Godwin Obeng	as	Pet vendors
Jason Caminsky	as	Sentry
David Beaulieu	as	Shuttle pilot
Norm Roth	as	Manager Cooper
Nancy Schuster	as	Widow #1
Mary Lou Blanchard	as	Widow #2
Gunhild Giil	as	Harried mother
Ethan Helmann-Scherrer	as	Small boy
Carl Hanna	as	Kip Vogel (gods' lawyer)
Maggie Patton	as	Security exhibitor
Alan Madlane	as	Conventioneer #1
J. Michael Morgan	as	Conventioneer #2
Mike Ancrile	as	Bouncer
David Bomar	as	Testifying miner
Canton Belanger	as	Maintenance manager
Ronald T. Robinson	as	General Mentah voice

About the production:

Except for lead Michael J. Russo and d.p.'s Michael Karp and Bruce Manning from Los Angeles, all cast and crew were local from southeast Michigan. Principal photography took place in the summer of 2006.

Additional photography and vfx post spanned subsequent years until the film was completed in late 2018.

The film is entirely semi-virtual-set; all scenes were shot in front of a blue screen with minimal sets. Most of the vfx work in post was done by writer/director John Higbie.



About writer/director John Higbie:

John Higbie has a 25-year career in visual effects production for such films as "Titanic," "The Fifth Element," "Journey to the Center of the Earth," and many others. "Amsteroid" is his directorial debut, with principal photography in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 2006, followed by 12 years of vfx post-production, done almost entirely by Higbie. He lives in Ann Arbor.



About producer Diane Cheklich:

Diane Cheklich, president of Cheklich Enterprises, has a body of artistic film work that has won several awards over the years, including a 2014 Kresge Artist Fellowship. Ms. Cheklich's films include both features and shorts.

John Higbie on Amsteroid:

"Amsteroid's" theme of mind and reality control by governments and evil actors motivates explorations into fanciful virtual environments. The grim existence in this dystopian world is thinly veiled by the meager illusory worlds peddled by the corrupt mindware companies. Pathetic and fanciful, these environments are a crutch considered an essential part of normal life. Their lock on society is cemented by the crony capitalism of opportunistic politicians.

The expressionistic visual style of the film invites the audience to share the cognitive-emotional experience of the denizens of Amsteroid by distilling the environments to their bare essence. The stark contrasts between reality and fantasy realms, and the limited ability of people to move between the two, mirror the parallel theme of entrapment in the economic and political realms.

I've long been inspired by early German expressionistic films like "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari." There are bits of Fritz Lang's "Metropolis" in "Amsteroid" too. Also, there's the photographer Sandy Skoglund, whose work I discovered in high school, and have never been able to get out of my head. She would stage these tableaux in an expressionistic, minimalist style, and I've always wanted to adapt that to filmmaking. On Amsteroid, the realities are manufactured, but I'm also doing such treatments with the real-life side of this world. This just give me more flexibility in visually reinforcing the differences between the two realms, and also I think it emphasizes the disconnect that mentah users have from their real world. They only experience the real world in broad strokes, in impressions.

Q&A with John Higbie:

Q: Why did you make this film?

A: In film, especially with modern tools, an artist can fill that rectangle with anythinghe or she desires to tell the story and communicate themes. I wanted to see how far I could take that, and I sought to create a story that would make maximum use of that goal. The themes of warped realities and mind control have always fascinated me. Then you have this aspect where reality is different for the different characters, as it is with all of us in real life, and how that affects how we run our lives.

Q: Who and what were your influences?

A: Visually, I'm really drawn to the classics of early German cinema, like "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari," and "Metropolis," and also visual expressionism generally. The photographer Sandy Skoglund has done these wonderful stylized tableaux where she would construct a physical scene using sort of minimalist techniques, but which still communicated powerfully. I really wanted to explore that. There are also a lot of gags in the visuals, as well as the story. I've always had an off-beat sense of humor, which I guess comes from watching a lot of Monty Python.

Q: What are some of your favorite things in the film?

A: There are some lines in the script that still make me smile. Also, there are some shots that I'm really proud of technically. I'm proud of the fact that I didn't go full c.g. with the effects. We had rod puppets, some practical miniatures and even motion control.

Q: What would you do differently if you were doing this now?

A: There's a long list. We got started with our d.p. Mike Karp late in the process, and it would have helped to have him involved with some of the technical testing that was done prior to the shoot. As it was, some of the technical choices I made cost extra time in post. For example, we shot with all blue floors, and practical floors would have been better and easier. I'd probably try to put more money into technology both on-set and in post, but I was really trying to put the emphasis on what was in front of the camera. We had over thirty talent and as many semi-virtual locations. But visual effects shows also have special needs that strictly live-action ones don't.

Q: "Amsteroid" is your first dramatic film. How was the experience? Any regrets?

A: I had the help of a lot of great people. I don't know if the movie would have gotten made without my first a.d. Marty Shea. He really kept things together on set. As for my own work, it did help that I'd been working on movie sets and related jobs for a couple decades, even if not as a director. I had already developed a good respect for the different roles on set and what to expect from people working from me. I worked really hard to show people respect and support and I enjoyed the same in return. Many of the talent were young actors, but they worked really hard for me. The more seasoned talent were amazing to watch. I was really fortunate to have a strong lead in Mike Russo. He was actually a big help to me as a new director. After the wrap, the crew gave me a photo album, and looking through it it's obvious that people were enjoying their time on the project. I'm so grateful for that album because there's stuff in there that I was completely oblivious to at the time, I was so consumed in my own job.

Q: What was it like shooting with actors and a crew in a blue void?

A: Well fortunately, we usually had some furnishings or bits for people to orient themselves to. But very often there was nothing at all. After the shoot, one of the actors remarked that it was disorienting not to have sets to help him follow his blocking, but everyone seemed to welcome the challenge and let me do my thing, which was great. I had some c.g. previsualizations for various locations, but not for every shot. I was aware going into it that I wouldn't be able to precisely design every shot ahead of time because of the constraints of the space. We didn't know what the space was going to be like- didn't even have it lined up until less than a month before the shoot. There was a fair amount of risk in that, logistically and creatively.

Q: What kept you going through 12 years of post?

A: It turned out that through all the ups and downs of everything else going on in my life, that the AMSTEROID project was one thing that was constant. In a way, it kept me grounded and was an element of stability in my life. I'm going to miss that now that it's over. I should probably get into another project.