

## Science Fiction: Unobtainium to The Core

By Dennis Payton Knight

A science fiction movie that takes us on thrilling, impossible adventures is perfect for a night at the movies. The best sci-fi flicks build the fiction around good science. *Blade Runner* from 1982, for instance, or *Star Wars, The Empire Strikes Back* from 1980, and 1968's *2001: A Space Odyssey* are critically acclaimed movies that are not only great stories but scientifically plausible.

But who says there cannot be a little more fiction than science in our diversions? Sometimes one comes along that is so schmaltzy it becomes legitimate entertainment. *The Core*, released in 2003, qualifies nicely for that distinction. It is an American disaster film in which the Earth's core has stopped spinning. Disasters are appearing all over the world: Birds acting crazy, powerful thunderstorms and people dying when their pacemakers quit working.

Dr. Josh Keyes and his crew of five drill to the center of the Earth in a vessel made of impenetrable unobtainium. Their mission is to set off nuclear explosions and start things up again or mankind will perish. At one point the inner-space ship encounters its own version of kryptonite in the form of a diamond the size of Cape Cod, as it is described in the movie review site, *Rotten Tomatoes*.

Elvis Mitchell, a reviewer for *The New York Times* wrote, "The brazen silliness of *The Core* is becalming and inauthentic, like taking a bath in nondairy coffee creamer." *The Los Angeles Times* critic Kenneth Turan was nicer, saying "...it is an enjoyable one if you're in a throwback mood. After all, a film that comes up with a rare metal called unobtainium can't be dismissed out of hand."

What is that metal again, you ask? According to my research, quite scientific I might add, aerospace engineers have actually come to use the term unobtainium when referring to a material that is perfect for their needs in all respects except that it does not exist. Likewise, in science fiction movies, unobtainium is a substance from which to build some device critical to the plot, but which does not exist in the universe as we know it.

So the word had already been coined and legitimized, and it was right there readily obtainium when the producers of *The Core* needed something exceeding mere titanium to build the impervious hull necessary to navigate through clay, granite and magma all the way to the center of the earth.

Returning to the scientific premise of *The Core*, however, one can only speculate on what would happen here in Colorado if our core stops spinning. To me, the principle of inertia would suggest a correlation between movement of a sphere's nucleus and its cover. If somehow our vital core were to jolt to a halt, wouldn't Pikes Peak fly off into space? It seems to me we should fasten things down, and I am not sure if ropes and chains would do it. We had better obtainium some unobtainium.