

Gravity

Michael Dequina

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- ¹ Gravity is such a sleek, smooth, immersive, and rather overwhelming spectacle of economy, efficiency, and all-around proficiency that one would almost be forgiven to not immediately recognize just what a truly astonishing cinematic undertaking director/co-writer (with son Jonás) Alfonso Cuarón has pulled off. After all, the barebones premise is as simple and, frankly, as unoriginal as they possibly come: two people fighting to survive as they are lost and literally adrift--in this specific case, in outer space, orbiting the Earth. But even with such a film-familiar setting and scenario in place, Cuarón makes his film not only feel like something completely new, but something new not only as a film but as an immersive, transporting experience. Though many a film before (and most certainly many more after) have been set above, around, and outside planet Earth, never has it quite felt so real, thanks in large part to Cuarón's expert marriage of state-of-the-art effects and Emmanuel Lubezki's terrific cinematography with 3D, the latter (especially in IMAX 3D) never more effectively employed in service of storytelling. The slim plotting and all the fancy, flashy digital tools on display make it too easy and thus understandable for it to be dismissed by some as "just" a technical exercise.
- ² But the "technical" achievement extends beyond its most obvious connotation of the technological, for Cuarón's movie making mastery extends to all other areas--most crucially, casting. With the admittedly slim narrative comes a similarly streamlined arc for the lead character of mission specialist Dr. Ryan Stone, who harbors a long-held personal trauma on top of having this, her first space mission, go horribly awry. The characterization is hardly as innovative as the visual razzle dazzle, but having a popular star and capable actress like Sandra Bullock play the part is efficient shorthand to forge an instant and strong emotional connection with the audience, which is crucial when the film runs only a tight 90 minutes, and hers is the only face one sees for most of them. For all the literally rough-and-tumble physical work involved, from being tossed around by the impact of space debris to swimming through the zero-G air in maze-like spacecraft, perhaps Bullock's most demanding task is to convey volumes of emotion through silent facial expressions, which has always been one of her most undervalued gifts. The only other actor seen, George Clooney, is also wisely cast, his famously affable persona a perfect fit for jovial veteran astronaut Matt Kowalski and his penchant for cracking wise to put Ryan's anxieties at ease.
- ³ Those anxieties, however, only intensify before they only subside, owing to what will be the Cuaróns' most overlooked technical accomplishment of them all: the careful structuring of the screenplay's series of events. Unlike a film with similar scenario such as *Buried*, the deck isn't so heavily stacked against someone to the point of near-futility. Ryan finds herself in a remarkably dire situation, but it's one where there are always some reasoned and smart ways out of as each new setback occurs. Thus the proceedings are that much more suspenseful and tense because there is always a realistic backdoor sliver of hope, and the stakes and investment only increase as she learns more and more, and her reserves of strength and courage prove their depth.
- ⁴ And that's why *Gravity*, by its final, breathtaking frames, lands with the unstoppable, inescapable force of its title--every aspect of filmmaking, from the urgent sensory pleasures of its remarkable visual imagination and Steven Price's soaring score right down to the concrete backbones of the

page and performance, converge into a viscerally and emotionally exhilarating experience far greater than the sum of those already impressive individual parts.

Generic “Gravity”

Richard Brody

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- ¹ It’s hard to recall a movie that’s as viscerally thrilling and as deadly boring as “Gravity,” a colossal and impressive exertion of brain power aimed at overriding—at obviating—the use of brain power. Seeing the movie in 3-D and close to the screen (as I did) delivers the sensation of jetting about in a space walk, and then, when catastrophe strikes, of floating untethered in space, with a breathtaking immediacy. The free-floating camera is a glorious trick; when satellite debris blasted toward the camera, I ducked.
- ² But the movie involves a far more menacing emptiness than the physical void of outer space: the absence of ideas. The drama is a stark and simple tale of survival. A crew working outside a space station faces deadly high-powered blasts of metallic junk (Russia has exploded one of its own satellites, and its debris has caused a chain reaction of celestial collisions) that knocks out communications with Earth, destroys the ship, and kills the entire crew except for the specialist Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock) and the commander Matt Kowalski (George Clooney), who fight for their lives in the face of fearsome obstacles (including lack of oxygen, lack of fuel, and inexperience with certain equipment).
- ³ The director, Alfonso Cuarón, imagines the minutiae of these dangers—a metal bolt that doesn’t drop but floats, a spark that sends bobbing balls of fire aloft, even the physical terror of momentum in an empty medium that, unlike the sea, can’t be paddled against—if this constitutes imagination. Rather, he has done his job studiously, and his very studiousness is a part of the movie’s generally favorable critical reception. Cuarón has done a formidable job of piecing together a plausibly coherent material world of space, of conveying the appearance of that setting and the sensations of the characters who inhabit it. But he has created those sensations generically, with no difference between the subjectivity of his characters and the ostensible appearance to a camera of those phenomena. He offers point-of-view images that are imbued with no actual point of view. The movie, with its near-absolute absence of inner life, presents a material fantasy that flatters the studious humanism of critics who honor the attention to so-called reality—which they define in terms of physical phenomena and everyday people—as an aesthetic endowed with a quasi-political virtue.
- ⁴ It’s notable that the movie is called “Gravity,” which, of course, is what’s lacking in outer space. The effort to return to Earth entails the effort to reënter its gravitational field. It’s worth recalling that the grand climax of “2001” is also the entry into a gravitational field (Jupiter’s) and that its colossal force gives rise to one of the most hallucinatory visions in the modern cinema. “Gravity” makes explicit reference to that scene (jittering in the seat, reflections on the mask of a helmet) and leaves out the visionary aspect. Gravity itself gives a hard, hot ride; Cuarón conveys the feeling of taking the ride but doesn’t dare to offer anything like the distortions of inner experience. (There is exactly one moment in the movie that depicts a mental phenomenon—but it’s less a fantasy than a [cheap escape] that offers a laughably on-the-nose resolution to a character’s pointedly practical problems.)
- ⁵ [“Gravity”] treats human participants like environmental furniture, devoid of inner lives, nonexistent apart from the task at hand. “Gravity” offers each of its characters a single, one-dimensional, deterministic, and plot-centric element of backstory. These characters may be, in the

physical sense, people—but Joss Whedon’s Avengers have more psychological density and idiosyncrasy, more unruly humanity.

- ⁶ “Gravity,” ultimately, is a perfect example of the cinema of excitement, of entertainment that’s self-congratulatory in its choice of method and perspective. It rigs the rooting by fixing its meticulous gaze on characters endowed with fine feelings that admit of no wild excess, filtering out any troubling desires and controversial ambitions. It celebrates humanity by reducing the spectrum of human life to a narrow consensus of decency. “Gravity” is a thriller that passes muster of seriousness, but its amazing technological extremes are yoked to the service of a musty, mild worldview. Neither vulgarity nor fantasy, neither visionary scientific ambitions nor strange personal impulses intrude on its earnest methodical complacency.