

The Beauties of Gravity

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Abstract

This article looks at the effect of modern-day science fiction and dystopian narratives on modern audiences, focusing in particular on *Gravity* (2013).

Keywords

Dystopia, science fiction, daydreams, fantasies, alternative realities

I watched *Gravity* when it first came out and I still remember feeling lightheaded upon exiting the theater, like I was still floating in space like the protagonists were doing for the 90 bloodcurdling minutes that the movie lasted. The biggest shock for me and one that instantaneously pulled me out of the trance in which I found my mind to be when the movie was finished was when I exited the theater and entered the main area of the mall which accommodates the theater - seeing all those people walking around, window-shopping, chatting and generally having a good time made me realize that my feet are on solid ground, that I am back in familiar territory - because I was too, like Bullock and Clooney, trying to find my way back to safe harbor.

Last time a film travelled me so much by immersing me in an enchanted, hypnotic world was six years ago with *Avatar* and many years before that with *The Lord of the Rings*. The difference however with the worlds depicted in the latter films compared to the one presented in *Gravity* is that the former are fantasy worlds, a product of the fertile imagination of the screenwriters, while space, a world-outside-our-world, although inaccessible by 99,9% of the population, does not hold the hope that the viewer has of visiting it one day at bay - with space tourism on the horizon, one cannot help but succumb to the temptation of daydreaming that, one day, ordinary people will conquer the final frontier and experience the

best view money can buy, a view which is currently only the privilege of expertly trained astronauts. In the meantime, *Gravity* is the closest thing to visiting space without boarding a spacecraft since it very realistically mimics that feeling. And, for the price of a cinema ticket, everybody can partake in the experience.

Director Alfonso Cuarón seems to have mastered the art of submerging the viewers into the action of a movie through his filming techniques and innovative camera angles - like in *Children of Men* where he employs a realistic, *cinema-vérité* directorial style and he forces the viewer to experience what the protagonist is experiencing, similarly in *Gravity* he sets up his cameras in such a way as for the viewer not to miss even the most microscopic molecule of debris that hovers over the struggling astronauts, while at the same time paying due respect to the laws of physics. One cannot help but tune in on the same emotional wavelength as that of the protagonists - I am sure that, had skin conductance tests been carried out on viewers while watching *Gravity*, their cortisol and adrenaline levels as well as their pulses would be through the roof as a direct result of the agony shuttled in copious amounts to the viewer's mind by Cuarón.

The movie is absorbing and, at times, the viewer needs to look away from the screen to reassure himself/herself that he/she is not 100 kilometers above the surface of the earth, struggling to survive by any means necessary. Upon exiting the theater, I remember overhearing somebody entrusting to his companion that he only managed to enjoy two palms full of popcorn during the first five minutes of the movie since, for the remaining 85 minutes, he was unable to do anything else but watch, vision enhanced through the 3D glasses and all the other senses activated through the bombardment of stimuli that *Gravity* unleashes - even senses that do not actively participate in the theater are tricked into being pseudo-activated - eventually, you can 'smell' the stale air in the spacecraft and 'touch' the cold control panels - it's all in the spectator's mind that Cuarón so beautifully manages to manipulate. 3D technology helps in immersing the viewer deeper into the movie (and, for that matter, into space) without making any excessive use of it for the sake of cinematic excitement - the latter stems naturally from the masterful cinematography of Cuarón and the breathtaking surroundings of the protagonists coupled with the grave situation which they find themselves in during the first few sequences of the film.

Gravity gives new meaning to "claustrophobic cinematic experience" - movies like *Open Water* and *Frozen* have managed to effectively convey

The Beauties of *Gravity*

this unnerving feeling to the viewer, however *Gravity* uses space instead of the ocean or a cable car. And one of the most frightening things about space, on top of being infinite, is that, wherever you are, you can see the earth from it...in the open ocean you cannot - and the fact that the earth seems to be so close, yet knowingly being so remote, instills fear and anguish to the unlucky astronauts that found themselves stranded up there. In one of the most emotionally-charged, heart-wrenching sequences of the movie, the character of Bullock picks up a signal from earth on the spacecraft's radio and feels utter gratefulness for being able to establish a human, earthy connection from the remotest of locations - her body language, as she comes to the realization that the man on the other end of the spectrum cannot help her, is chilling - she asks him merely to go about his business while keep talking on the radio - and, as he tends to his dogs and puts his children to sleep, Bullock is ecstatic - she grasps on the earthy voice and sounds like an emotional life jacket and holds on for dear life, sending chills down the viewer's spine who now finds himself in awe of the human spirit (and mind) in terms of how much it can take before being broken.

The performances of Bullock and Clooney are so powerful that they would have eclipsed a third actor, had there been one. The camaraderie exhibited by Clooney throughout the mission and the mental and physical bravery exuded when catastrophe hits, forcing him to grasp the psychological and emotional reins of the mission is awe-inspiring - he is one of those natural leaders that you would follow everywhere, to the most dangerous of territories. In *Gravity*, Clooney uses less to achieve more - he is the alpha male that is commonly encountered at Westerns, a John Wayne of space who won't hesitate to harshly reprimand you if you don't obey his instructions and the next minute befriend you by sharing and/or asking personal details on a first-name basis to take your mind off the imminent danger. Bullock is more vulnerable - a medical engineer who is broken inside and constantly embarks on journeys of the mind that are supposed to heal her heart. A dedicated scientist, the character of Bullock shows fear and courage contemporaneously, two omnipresent elements that fuel her inexorable desire to set foot on earth again, although a third element, namely pain stemming from her traumatic past, seems to be keeping that same foot on the brake, watering down her longing for anything earthy. Strangely enough, the very same soul wound that holds her back will eventually put fuel in her desire tanks and reignite her heart, a true testament to the relentlessness of the human spirit and to the refusal to surrender. After the

viewer gets up from his seat, throws the half-eaten popcorn in the waste basket and hands back the 3D glasses, he may realize, after he allows enough time for the film to sink in, that this is the takeaway of *Gravity*, to never give up hope, no matter what. And, since nowadays the public is barraged by hardships of every imaginable kind, instilling hope to people is as crucial as ever with movies like *Gravity* being an instant pick-me-up; a remedy for dark moods and blue hearts. It is in movies like this, movies that revolve around catastrophes that we make the largest emotional investments since, by experiencing the worst-case scenario of a given situation (especially as vividly in sensory terms as in *Gravity*) one cannot help but appreciate his/her own personal situation which, more likely than not, will be light years away (pun intended) from the one depicted.

So go watch *Gravity*. In any kind of mood. You are guaranteed to find yourself better-off, in emotional terms, at the end of the movie than you were at its beginning. But make sure that you sit next to persons that you know – friends, family, loved ones. After all, you don't want to be grabbing strangers when you will be struggling to make your way out of space and back into earth!

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