

Born again: *Gravity* directed by Alfonso Cuarón

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Gravity is a visually arresting and deeply suspenseful work about an astronaut stranded in space following a catastrophic accident. After an inescapable wave of debris crashes against her shuttle and claims the lives of her shipmates, Dr. Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock), an inexperienced crew member, finds herself entirely alone.

On a spacewalk when the debris field comes through, Stone is left floating freely in space, and running out of oxygen. With little time left, she must find her way back to the damaged ship and do what she can to survive. She will encounter fires and explosions, extreme temperatures, mechanical failures and even language barriers as she struggles to utilize the equipment she finds on spacecraft belonging to other countries.

Having been left demoralized and directionless in her life on Earth following the tragic and sudden death of her young daughter, Stone must now summon up all her strength and will power to make her way back home.

Mexican-born director Alfonso Cuarón, whose previous works include *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001) and *Children of Men* (2006), as well as an entry in the popular *Harry Potter* series (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, 2004), has crafted a tightly wound suspense film. He knows how to tell a story. Thought has gone into the pacing of the drama and the visual composition. Cuarón's camera not only frames people but *considers* them. This certainly has its appeal. *Gravity* has been well received by audiences.

Bullock also gives a compelling performance, having more to do here than in most of the relatively lightweight comedies one has seen her in recently. George Clooney, who appears in the first part of the film, also provides a certain amount of warmth in a

story that offers little in the way of human interaction.

There are certain farfetched elements as well in *Gravity*, as one might expect in a film set in space and dealing with the survival of a single individual. More problematic than this, however, are many of the themes underlying the work.

In the way that Stone speaks of her daughter's death and in the way in which her own challenges are presented, one is left with the impression that life is all chance and dumb luck. In the face of blind fate, one must soldier on and nourish within oneself—and entirely by oneself—the will to carry on. In space, there is nothing. There is only Dr. Stone, a Robinson Crusoe, left to her own devices and her own inner strength.

Here is a consideration of the human spirit totally abstracted from any objective social or historical context, from any of the forces that act on and shape it. Almost inevitably, certain religious themes begin to make themselves felt in *Gravity*. In one difficult moment, Stone begins to lament the fact that she never learned how to pray. No one ever taught her how, she mumbles to herself over and over again. In another more victorious moment, as things begin to work in Stone's favor, Cuarón's camera focuses on a small statue of a Buddha with its hands clasped in prayer, sitting on top of a control panel Stone is using.

Images suggesting birth or rebirth are also plentiful in the work. In one scene, Stone floats inside an airlock in such a way as to evoke a fetus in a mother's womb. There is also the baby crying in the background of a garbled communication from Earth.

In this and so many similar stories of survival under extreme adversity and isolation, an intellectual or scientific figure at the heart of the story must necessarily have a kind of spiritual-religious awakening before his or her life may be saved. It is as though such

characters are punished for their arrogance or for having missed something essential about life that a scientific outlook has caused them to overlook.

In the end, Stone must learn to accept things, whatever their outcome and just appreciate the “ride” she’s on, for better or worse. There is a kind of conventional wisdom and a banality under the surface of the film. One is excited by the more suspenseful aspects of the work, but never really moved by the human drama wrapped up in it. *Gravity* is one of several spiritually minded survival films now cropping up. Recently, there was also the *Life of Pi* (2012), from director Ang Lee, which also had its religious themes. Prior to the showing of *Gravity*, a trailer for an upcoming film directed by J.C. Chandor (*Margin Call*, 2011) was shown, in which Robert Redford is cast as a man stranded at sea. Redford is said to be the only cast member and little dialogue will be featured in the work. The title, perhaps revealingly, is *All Is Lost*.

One gets the sense that these filmmakers are overwhelmed to a certain extent by the current state of human affairs. Against tremendous odds, there is little one can change outside of oneself, these films seem to say. All one can do is cultivate a sense of strength within oneself. There is a pessimistic quality bound up with this turn toward relatively narrow tributes to the human spirit.



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