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First Man (Movie Review)

Abstract

"*First Man* is somewhere between *The Right Stuff* and the titan of 20th century movies about space, *2001: A Space Odyssey*."

Posting about the movie *First Man* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/movie-review-first-man/>

Keywords

In All Things, movie review, First Man, Damien Chazelle

Disciplines

American Film Studies

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

in things

November 9, 2018

Movie Review: “First Man”

Josh Matthews

Title: “First Man”

Directed by: Damien Chazelle

Starring: Ryan Gosling, Claire Foy, Jason Clarke, Kyle Chandler

Written by: Josh Singer and James Hansen

Music by: Justin Hurwitz

Dear Damien Chazelle,

It has been over a decade since I walked out of a movie theater. Sadly, the latest movie you directed, *First Man*, broke my streak.

You know that scene you included where Neil Armstrong, after spinning endlessly in the multi-axis training chair until he passes out, vomits into the toilet? And then, his fellow astronaut enters the restroom and vomits into the same toilet because he, too, took a turn in the chair? This is exactly how your movie made me feel.

I am not speaking in metaphors. About 80 minutes in, I began suffering from dizziness. There is so much spinning and shaking in your movie, in extreme-close shot after extreme-close shot, without any let up on the spinning and shaking and extreme closeness, that my inner ears could not tell me what was up from down any more.

It was either leave your movie and go home, or stay at your movie and imitate Armstrong after his purgative go-round in the spinning chair.

I blame myself in part. I seem more sensitive than the average person to carousels, car rides on curvy mountains roads, and turbulence on flights. I would never dream of riding a Tilt-O-Whirl.

The only other movie that made me physically ill, using a style very similar to *First Man*, was Danny Boyle's space-based movie *Sunshine* (2007). Does anyone remember this movie? No, unless it made them sick.

You have made a genuine "what would it be like?" movie. *First Man* is a kind of g-force simulator. You are trying to make us experience what it would be like to be Neil Armstrong in a jet or a spaceship. But again, there is a good-sized portion of the population, including me, that just can't tolerate the incessant spinning and whirling in your movie.

Your movie says very clearly that Armstrong (Ryan Gosling) was remarkable because he, unlike almost anybody, could withstand endless spinning to such a degree that he always maintained control, calmly averting several catastrophes at 120,000 feet plus. You try to show that his family life was a vertigo-inducing vortex—or at least that is why I think you use shaky cameras that never stop moving, even in calm scenes that involve nighttime strolls or husband-and-wife chats at the dinner table.

The odd thing is, I not only tolerated but enjoyed the movies that *First Man* reminds me of: *Apollo 13*, *Interstellar*, *The Tree of Life*, and, in a strange way, Darren Aronofsky's *Mother!* All of these, in terms of visual grammar, are somewhat similar at times to what you have done in *First Man*.

But the key with all of them is that they use only limited doses of extreme close shots, quick cutting, and a spinning or shaking camera. Your movie, unfortunately, never stops. It is as if your camera was on during an unending earthquake, while almost every shot is ten inches away from whatever it's focused on.

Since this movie features Neil Armstrong in the 1960s, I think, you are inadvertently in dialogue with a book that I cannot tell if you have read: the late Tom Wolfe's masterpiece *The Right Stuff*. You show many of Wolfe's scenes and

ideas, including the extreme anxiety of astronaut wives and the bizarre training regimens of the astronauts.

First Man is somewhere between *The Right Stuff* and the titan of 20th century movies about space, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. There is a little of both in *First Man*, but not enough of either. In homage to *The Right Stuff*, your movie might as well include a lot more character development, by which I mean even a little character development, because *First Man* has almost none in its first 80 minutes. Or else, imitate Kubrick and just deal with space by eliminating the humanity from the human characters entirely.

I should have been the core audience for your film, as I am a sucker for movies about the space program. Even clunkers like *Capricorn One* and *Space Cowboys* engross me. But I am unable to recommend your unwatchable mess of a movie. A movie can be about vertigo, but it should not create vertigo.

First Man offered a first for me. It was the first time I have ever needed to take drugs after a viewing. Time now to go pop a Dramamine pill because my head will not stop spinning.