

Tom, Thanks for Captain Phillips

November 20, 2019

CAPTAIN PHILLIPS (2013)

Directed by Paul Greengrass

Written by Billy Ray & Richard Phillips

Starring Barkhad Abdi, & Tom Hanks as Captain Rich Phillips

I've had a stomach ache for something like two years. We're in the process of getting to the bottom of why, whether it's a food intolerance or a stress-induced reaction, but the cataloging of possible solutions is slow and often discouraging. Sometimes I catch myself wondering if I'm not ailing from anything other than years-spent; maybe this incessant after-meal bloat and guttural pressure is just how 28 year-olds feel, and I'm spoiled to presume I should avoid it. I don't really think so, but when you're accustomed to high pressure, it tends to restandardize your threshold for what to expect.

My workaholicism is similar; I give myself all these projects to better establish to myself and others that I am, if nothing else, not lazy. Then, once I've built a lifestyle around those many projects, I start to worry I'm not doing enough, so I add more. This very blog is the next in a long line of affirmations. I think we dream of the accomplishment or event that, once and for all, cures this insecurity and proves our worth. I've always dreamed of writing books, for example. I've done it now, but it's not enough until they're published, and when they are, it won't be enough until they're read, and so on and so forth. There is no act of valour in self-satisfaction. There's no way to convince yourself you're entitled to the patience required by a victim of your own trauma.

I only get so serious here today because the highest pressure I experience is auto-applied. It towers over the pressures of career and mortgage and personal relationships, but it's not even in the ballpark of that experienced by Captain Rich Phillips, both in this movie and in real life. In *Captain Phillips*, TH stars as a career commander of American cargo freighters, like the *Maersk Alabama*, which he'd recently taken over at the time of its real-life hijacking, by Somali pirates in 2009. In the film based on true events, four men stock the ship in a crude speedboat, are unsuccessfully evaded, and board before aggressively threatening Phillips and his crew. He's then taken hostage in the *Alabama's* lifeboat, where the pirates attempt to trade him to the US Navy for a multi-million dollar bounty and their freedom. When the situation can sustain no further pressure, the three men detaining Phillips are expertly assassinated, and the fourth is jailed. Phillips is freed, and the pressure he's managed for days is finally released, via one of the most heartbreaking single-scene performances I've ever seen. Holy God, Hanks is a genius.

There's a narrative surrounding the real Rich Phillips that's not quite as heroic. Apparently his crew aboard the *Alabama* found him to be less of the saviour he was depicted as in the film. But in reality, the man was attacked and kidnapped by those pirates and survived a days-long military stand-off, with water water everywhere and not a drop to drink. For what it's worth, I've found myself enamored by marine disturbances this year, and thus I've learned a lot about the ethical codes by which a sea captain must conduct him/herself. I can't speak for Captain Phillips or his crew, but I do know that if I was *the captain now*, I wouldn't be so breezy under this kind of pressure either.

I gather this is a film about leadership as much as it is about pressure, and what little I understand about both is that the better the leader, the higher the pressure they feel. It's a specific kind of pressure that impresses upon a leader his/her lone responsibility for the best interest of the team at large, and this essential consideration does not exist in everyone. We're not all born to be leaders, and those of us who aren't would find this a lot easier to accept if our culture wasn't so obsessively built around an arbitrary heirarchy of role and responsibility. I know, at least at this stage, I'm no leader. But I should be proud of that self-awareness, not guilty. If not for this pressure to achieve at the highest level, we would have far fewer bad leaders covetting leadership roles. In this system, we all seem to rise to exactly one rank beyond the one to which we're best suited; and here we stay, and here we stumble.

The more I like a movie, the fewer observations I bother noting. I was too captivated by the constant tension of *Captain Phillips* to waste time connecting dots within the Notes app on my phone, which speaks to the leadership and steady hand of a great filmmaker. It's also a unilaterally focussed and literal story. But a few minor items: the

continuity of sweat markings on Phillips' blue polo is fabulously consistent; there are essentially no women in this movie, apart from a brief Catherine Keener cameo in the beginning, and I'm not sure what that means, but it's worth mentioning; the closing medical examination scene, featuring TH's portrayal of a trauma victim in a state of shock, is exactly why I do this blog, and it's exactly why taking on yet another project is worth it.

Everybody has a limit for what they can handle. It's built into us, and though we may train ourselves to reach beyond those borders, there's a fundamental biology that can't be fought. I used to be the kid at sleepovers who had to plead for a movie that's not too scary because I knew what I could handle. Now, my intolerances tend to relate more to abdominal discomfort. What I usually believe I can handle is *just a little more*; just one more thing on the work pile to, hopefully this time, convince myself I deserve my place in this world, as a leader or otherwise. If nothing else, maybe some pirates can overthrow my laptop and there will be an occasion to which I may rise.

Kidding. Please don't hack me.

Thx!