

Tom, Thanks for Apollo 13

April 8, 2020

APOLLO 13 (1995)

Directed by Ron Howard

Written by William Broyles Jr. & Al Reinert

Starring Bill Paxton, Kevin Bacon, & Tom Hanks as Jim Lovell

To live is to collect your own iterations of era-defining experiences, unique perspectives on unifying moments that not only stay with you forever, but are used as universal touchstones for all associated moments and experiences. Everything from "I remember because I wasn't drinking beer that summer" to "I must have been ten because 9/11 had just happened" is a milestone of age more identifying than age itself. When we experience these moments together, they're in our bones. I was 22 years late for the moon-landing, but in terms of tectonic world changes, I remember Diana dying, I remember 9/11, I remember Hurricane Katrina, I remember Harry Potter, I remember the advent of social media, I remember the election of hope and the election of nope. I remember COVID-19, and like you, I always will. Something I learned when watching Apollo 13, is that not having personally experienced some of the most essential culture-changing moments doesn't preclude me from experiencing the changes thereafter, and it doesn't preclude me from relating to the stories of those experiences through moments I *have* seen. Before Jim Lovell (TH), Fred Haise (Bill Paxton), and Jack Swigert (Kevin Bacon) board their spacecraft, they bid their loved ones goodbye from opposite sides of a wide strip of pavement. Lovell's wife Marilyn tells their children, "We can't go across that road. We don't want daddy to get our germs and get sick in outer space, do we?" Maybe never has a movie so decidedly stopped to make sure I was paying attention.

Apollo 13 marked a significant transition for TH as a film actor, as the first time he portrayed a real person. This is something he seems to do almost exclusively now, deploying his time-tested method of evoking a figure's sensibility rather than impersonating them exactly. Granted, it's easier to elicit relatability if the subject isn't known for any particular cadence or air (such as Mr. Rogers). TH is a movie star and not what they call a "character actor," so, when he portrays Jim Lovell (or Charlie Wilson or Ben Bradlee or Captain Sully, etc.), he's essentially just Tom Hanks, and that, per the very premise of this log, is entirely satisfactory. At the start of the film, when he's watching with wonder as his fellow man is stepping where no man has stepped before, his expression is both juvenile and wise, both baffled and eager. He turns to look up at the night sky, and shows his dreams to be bigger than the moon itself by placing his thumb directly over its tiny beacon. This is resolved later when, after accepting his lunar dreams have been dashed, he envisions himself prancing gaily in the anti-gravity and turning to thumb-over the Earth in his dust. It takes a performer we trust to feel welcomed inside such an intimate moment, and here, he's just becoming that performer.

Above all, Apollo 13 is about two things: insatiable curiosity and bad luck. The random chaos of bad luck and whether or not such a thing even exists stands alone to explain why a return mission to the moon has never been completed, and the true events of this story explain that in detail. In the year following Neil Armstrong's history-making walk, Apollo 13 was launched with the intention of continuing the adventure (as Jim Lovell states, "Imagine if Christopher Columbus discovered the New World and nobody returned to retrace his steps"), but on the way, a mechanical failure forces an early end to the mission, and an emergency trip home filled with tense moments and close calls. It's revealed that the error occurred, at random, months before Lovell was even attached. It was nobody's fault and it could not have been prevented. The film ends with a monologue instead of traditional biopic on-screen graphics. In these, Lovell expresses his lasting curiosity: "... when will we be going back, and who will that be?" It's been half a century since Apollo 13's successful failure, and as it stands there is a plan to finally return to the moon in 2024, but we'll be forced to only wonder until, at last, that day arrives. And then we'll wonder about the *next* time.

I'm not sure what the intended emotion is for an audience of this film. Is *American* an emotion? TH has been at the center of plenty more rousing thrillers involving travel not going to plan; seriously, it's like all of his movies. Even without a lot of built-in knowledge about how this true story would resolve, I never felt personally endangered by the immersion of the movie. Still, I cared that Swigert not be blamed for the malfunction, I cared that Haise not die of interstellar motion sickness, and I cared that Lovell exhibited steadfast leadership while he nursed a shattered heart. Why that is, I can't say, but I know it's good filmmaking. The use of a soundtrack with only songs about

flying, in this case, is good filmmaking. The use of big sound and broad visuals to tell of one of the great unlikely American triumphs is good filmmaking. The casting of Tom Hanks is, as always, good filmmaking.

I desperately insist on belonging to shared experiences. It's why I'll drink more beers than I know I can handle, why I'll watch series finales of shows I never followed, why I'll occasionally go to the beach. It's not even that I hope I'll enjoy the shared experience itself, it's that I want to be able to say I was there. But this one? All this that's been going on? The random, chaotic, unavoidable failures, the sudden ending of dreams, the keeping of loved ones a galaxy apart? I don't want to be able to say I was there. I do not want for it to have happened. But it is happening, and with any random luck, maybe our next shared experience will be an unlikely triumph. Until then, Houston, boy, do we have a problem.

Thx!