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Gravity

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Gravity

Abstract

This is a film review of *Gravity* (2013) directed by Alfonso Cuaron.

Alfonso Cuarón's high tech 3D space film is an against-the-odds zero gravity survivor tale that opens with the statement "life in space is impossible" but then proceeds to show us the wonders of science, which for all intents and purposes render that statement a lie. It turns out that science has conquered the impossible; we do have life in space, albeit a still fairly precarious life. But beneath the impressive technical dazzle, Cuarón's tale is haunted by an array of religiously evocative questions. When science runs out of answers what are we left with? How much suffering can one person bear? Ultimately, how soul-destroying is it to find oneself radically alone? While the film never explicitly engages any one religious tradition in its exploration of these kinds of questions, the presence of a range of religious symbols—a Saint Christopher icon here, a prayer, an afterlife reference there—serves to remind the audience that we are in the terrain of religion. Beyond the miracle of human ingenuity, the miracle of science, there are still profoundly human questions that science can't answer. If life is suffering and in the end we are all radically alone, what is the point? For Mission Specialist Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock) this is the question that drives her journey, a journey that takes her from the stultifying emotional death that has been the effect of having lost her child to the brink of her immanent physical death and ultimately to a renewed engagement with life.

Unlike the special effects, the plot is somewhat formulaic. Dr. Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock), a medical engineer on her first shuttle mission, is tasked with a high stakes repair of the Hubble telescope. Circling untethered in the background is veteran astronaut, Matt Kowalski (George Clooney), who is taking the opportunity of his last mission to fool around with a jetpack. Suddenly Houston cuts in with an announcement that the Russians have shot down one of their own satellites resulting in an accidental

debris tsunami that is heading their way. In short order communications with Houston are lost, the debris has done its damage and our two surviving astronauts have ninety minutes till the debris cycles back for another opportunity to prove the film's opening line.

While Stone and Kowalski survive the first debris wave, in the melee Stone is cut loose from Explorer and she finds herself vertiginously tumbling into darkness head over foot. It's one of the film's most powerful and terrifying scenes, sickening in the visceral dread it evokes. Stone's breathing, rapid and desperate, becomes the soundtrack and her terror is ours as she repeatedly calls to Kowalski. This is an encounter with the infinite no one wants and it's the first of a series of scenes where our awareness is intensely focused on the vulnerability of bodies as they are pounded, tumbled and assailed by a profoundly inhospitable environment. Counterbalancing these scenes are moments where the body recedes and the existential reflections on the meaning of existence begin to take over. The film perpetually stages the bodies of the astronauts against either the vastness of space or the vastness of earth and we are left painfully aware of how small each individual life is against the whole. Eventually Kowalski finds Stone, and they return to Explorer only to find it a scene of catastrophic destruction. There are no survivors and their only chance now is to use Kowalski's jet pack to get them to the International Space Station. During this lengthy and physically wrenching trip, Kowalski coaxes from Stone the bare bones of a life story in which we hear there is no one waiting for her back on earth, no Mr. Stone, and her four year old daughter died by falling and hitting her head at school. It is a meaningless and senseless death; since then, Stone, our otherwise rational scientist, has clearly been as emotionally adrift as she is now physically, lost in a world dominated by

suffering. This is the film's fundamental thesis; radical solitude, even for scientists, is affliction, deep and profound, and it orients one towards death not life.

Arriving at ISS turns out to be no easy salvation. It too has been damaged and its crew have evacuated. As Stone and Kowalski approach, with the return of the debris now imminent, they find themselves entangled in the lines of the parachute of the remaining Soyuz landing module, which has accidentally deployed, thus rendering it useless to get them home. With the lines of the chute her only anchor to ISS, Stone reaches desperately for Kowalski whose momentum is pulling them both away from safety. This is it for Kowalski; let go of the line and Stone has a chance, hang on and they will both die. He lets go against the desperate pleas of Stone urging him not to leave her, and now the question of solitude really ratchets up. With Kowalski gone, Houston silent and no astronauts on ISS, Stone's aloneness here achieves unimaginable and literal expression. If the film has a spiritual apex, this is it.

Eventually, Stone does manage to get herself onto the Soyuz in the hope of returning to earth but a series of obstacles render this hope pointless and she must confront the reality of knowing that she is out of ideas and that she is actually going to die up there in space, not some time in the near future but within hours. This newly enhanced encounter with imminent death sets off a series of reflections that extend and develop the film's thesis that radical solitude is affliction. As she shuts down the lights and turns off the dwindling supply of oxygen, surrendering to the inevitability of death, she muses about who will be left to remember her and she asks who will pray for her soul. She even goes so far as to suggest that soon she will be seeing her daughter again,

though one wonders where this afterlife might be in which her daughter is apparently waiting.

Noting that she has never prayed before, these spiritually inflected death reflections set the scene for the most unlikely of salvation motifs. An apparition of the presumably dead Kowalski unexpectedly appears, lets himself into the Soyuz and proceeds to remind Stone that she has a choice - she can let it all go now and enjoy this last ride or she can fight. Sure, life is meaningless, sure, she lost her daughter but the challenge is not what has happened, he says, it's what she's going to do about it now! Had the film been more meaningfully embedded in a spiritual framework this would have been a profound moment. But nonetheless, Kowalski's very presence, albeit in the form of a God-like apparition, is itself a relief from her relentless aloneness. In a very meaningful sense, Stone is not actually alone, as she can and does carry the presence of others within and it's perhaps this realization more than Kowalski's actual 'you can do it, you can choose' speech that sets the tone for Stone's survivorship. What matters more than Stone's actual moment of literally facing death here is her spiritual orientation towards it - something that has been provoked by the profound suffering she has endured in losing her daughter. In this moment Stone's orientation towards the past shifts and it's this that grounds her renewed interest in her own life. The closing scenes of the film with her safe arrival back on earth make literal this motif of rebirth as she drags herself ashore, wet and barely able to stand. It's as if she is returned to a state of infancy herself. While Stone is still literally alone in the closing scene, she is surrounded by the voices of others, namely Houston, hinting that this is a solitude transformed. Emptied of the spiritual affliction of alienation, we are left instead with the sense of renewed hope and promise in

Stone's survival. As her life now seemingly opens onto the unknown future, she carries those she has loved and lost as life affirming memories rather than death orienting ghosts.

While *Gravity* is not always wholly coherent in its exploration of religious themes they are nonetheless consistently present. Alongside the themes of solitude and the mystery of human suffering in particular is the constant presence of the motif of birth and re-birth, invoking questions about the mystery of life. One scene of Stone in a fetal position in zero gravity tumbling gently inside the ISS surrounded by cables that look like umbilical cords is just the most obvious example of this birth imagery. Another that is key to her moment of reorientation towards life comes just before Kowalski's reappearance: she has shut down the life support systems on the Soyuz having accepted that she is about to die. In the background are the quotidian sounds of an Inuit fisherman singing lullabies to his crying baby. Stone has accidentally locked onto his radio signal in her attempts to make contact with Houston and in the moment of hearing the baby she is reminded of her daughter's infancy. These tropes of maternity, birth and re-birth end up functioning as the underlying architecture of the film's reflections on death and solitude. They help to enrich its religious dimensions and set up the framework that puts into dialogue the mystery of life against the inevitability of death. While the film undoubtedly explores questions of life's meaning - how can a four year old die just by hitting her head while playing? - its greatest spiritual insight has more to do with showing the effects of radical alienation as a response to the inevitability of human suffering. In the end, the film seems to be suggesting that in fact it is radical solitude, in its orientation towards death, that is perhaps more lethal to life than even space.