

APOLLO 13 [1995]

by

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In an attempt to duplicate the success of Apollo 11, Apollo 13 takes off into space with a crew of three: Jim Lovell (Tom Hanks), who was Neil Armstrong's backup on Apollo 11, Jack Swigert (Kevin Bacon), and Fred Haise (Bill Paxton). There is tension within the crew because of the last minute replacement of one man, Ken Mattingly (Gary Sinise), because he has been exposed to measles. They take off, but the media ignore the event. A day into the six-day mission, an explosion causes the loss of a goodly amount of oxygen and power. With the help of engineers on earth, the crew works hard, improvises new techniques, and faces impending death with dignity. Suddenly, Apollo 13 is at the center of media coverage. At the same time, the crew fight amongst themselves and learn to cooperate. With the help of Mattingly, working with an Earth-bound simulator and the people at mission control, each problem is identified and solved: the falling cabin temperature threatens to freeze the crew, the excess carbon dioxide threatens to poison the crew, a minor error in the delicate reentry course correction threatens to fry the crew. Eventually, of course, they return safely to earth. (PG)

There is a large group of films that surreptitiously comment on the social politics of the day. Rarely is the plot placed in the time on which they comment – they almost all take place in the future or the past to disguise their political content, since audiences want entertainment, not lectures. A good example is the 1943 film, *The Ox-Bow Incident*, which, to the unwary viewer, is simply a better-than-average cowboy film. However, when considered in the political context of the time in which it was made (1943) rather than the time in which the story is placed (1875), it becomes an obvious warning against mob violence . . . just at the time the Japanese were being interred into camps on the West Coast and the Germans were being ostracized, or worse, in the mid-West and on the East Coast.

Films can also document the changes taking place in society on a much broader scale. This can often be detected in films long before it can be seen as clearly in other areas. *Rocky* is an example, appearing in 1976, significantly America's bicentennial year. *Rocky* is a boxing film that people rarely think reflects anything but the dubious pleasure of watching a good beating. Yet, I consider this a pivotal film, not because of its artistic value (unbelievably, it was graced with three Academy Awards), but because, in retrospect it so clearly reflects ongoing radical changes in the American psyche.

Before *Rocky*, American ideology (as represented in film at least) averred that the Average Joe, willing to bust his butt, would win. Hollywood subscribed to this view so strongly that it became a formula which became associated with certain stars; Henry Fonda, Cary Grant, and James Stewart top that list. But *Rocky* both challenged and

changed all that. *Rocky* may be the most misremembered film in history. Ask almost anyone and they will tell you that Rocky won the boxing match against Apollo Creed. Not true – he lost! But that is not the *feeling* we get from the film. When I first saw the film in 1976, the audience left the theater elated, almost dancing in the aisles. And even today, *Rocky* seems to inspire.

But inspire what? Rocky lost. We see in *Rocky* an elevation of the concept of private success with a simultaneous lowering of more public, material expectations. It is as if public consciousness regarding success suddenly turned from extroverted to introverted, from conforming to society's expectations of material gain, recognition and power to internal, self-determined goal-setting. (There have been other films of lowered expectations, *The Graduate* [1967] or *The Big Chill* [1983], for instance. But these films, in their day, were at the edge of filmmaking; while popular, they still were seen as experimental and did not capture the public imagination like the mega-hit *Rocky*.) While in and of itself, this may not be unhealthy, in the context of a boxing film, it is nonetheless curious. Rocky goes the distance with an overwhelming opponent. His victory is over himself – he can look in the mirror in the morning and no longer see a “bum.” He loses and is beaten to a pulp, but, according to the film, he is the victor. *Rocky* recognizes a major shift in American consciousness regarding success.

Apollo 13 is remarkably similar to *Rocky*. Why didn't they make a film about Apollo 11? The accomplishments of Neil Armstrong and his crew placed America on the top of the world, it was a major “victory” over the Soviet Union in our technological Cold War, and it opened a future for all Americans that is even today celebrated daily by millions upon millions of viewers of Star Trek. By filming *Apollo 13* rather than 11, the filmmakers shift our focus from the technological and global to the personal. Yet the bottom line of *Apollo 13* is that, like *Rocky*, it celebrates failure and magically turns it into success.

To understand the reasons for this, we must remember that a film made in 1995 placed in 1970 is really about what is going on in 1995. And in 1995, America once again found itself at a crisis point regarding our collective self-esteem. So, almost exactly two decades after *Rocky* and its reevaluation of the meaning of success, *Apollo 13* clearly speaks both to the problems we faced in 1995 and the changes taking place at that time.

If *Apollo 13* was chosen over 11 to stress human values, then *Apollo 13* must be seen as a paean to high technology peopled by characters from a Norman Rockwell painting. Everything and everyone is clean, pure, and purely American. The only possible flaw – aside from a case of measles that never blossoms – is one of the unmarried astronaut's womanizing. But this is demonstrated in the first few minutes of the film and never mentioned again. Like a Rockwell cover for Saturday Evening Post, *Apollo 13* is a two-dimensional display of idealized American values. These boys don't even swear – a bit unbelievable considering the fix these space cowboys find themselves in. But what exactly are the values paraded in this very handsome, very expensive, very exciting, and very well put together film?

The gender politics are remarkable, even for 1970. The men are surrounded by faithful and devoted wives and mothers. The role of the feminine is about as traditional as one could imagine, *kinder und kuchen* has been replaced with only a minor variation: wife as a faithful and adoring groupie. As pointedly missing from *Apollo 13* as some recognition of the 1970s feminist movement are references to the Civil Rights Movement or the Vietnam War.

But, surely real Astronauts and their families weren't quite so squeaky clean. Certainly in film lore, *The Right Stuff* [1983] or *Terms of Endearment* [1983], for instance, they are seen otherwise – not the all-American cardboard cutouts of *Apollo 13*, but flawed human beings with emotions and desires, foibles, and shadows. But *Apollo 13* has broader repercussions than those caused simply by sweeping personal and social politics under the carpet. It seems this is the way America now wants its heroes and its self-image.

In 1997, America seems to have lost almost everything it once prided itself on except its right to the claim of being the world's technological leader. (I am writing this article (in 1997) on a computer smaller than a cheap dictionary which has more computing power than all the computers onboard *Apollo 13*; I am also listening to radio reports of non-assertive trade treaties with Japan and impotence in Bosnia.) America seems to perceive itself on a downward road to economic impairment – domestically, with the threatened radical cuts in social programs in order to balance the national budget and the ennui of the X-generation, and internationally with, for instance, the world-wide fall of the value of the dollar. It seems what is left intact of traditional American national pride is American technology and Yankee ingenuity – exactly what *Apollo 13*, despite the obvious failure of the moon landing, celebrates.

Apollo 13 also shows the benefits of group efforts. Gone is the notion of the lone hero working alone to succeed. This film is much more realistic for our technology inundated age. Today it is almost unimaginable for a single person to accomplish anything. Furthermore, the symbol of the cooperative effort is interesting. It is using a traditional feminine technique to accomplish a traditional feminine symbol – the moon.

Apollo 13 is also a comment on the current state of the media, which, according to the film has changed little from 1970. The first moon walk was news, the third is not. Yet it is no less an accomplishment. It is only when disaster threatens that the media – reporters, commentators, politicians, experts – suddenly become interested. Is the public really so bloodthirsty that the media simply supply what the viewers demand? To reconfirm this, we need simply watch a typical TV news program – the highest rated have more than their share of disasters, murderers, corpses, and victims. Rarely does the “news” have anything really new! *Apollo 13* does a good job of condemning not only the system of the media and the public that watches it, but also the fact that little has changed in two decades.

A film about *Apollo 11* would have put America on the top of the world, a place where in 1997 it is very obvious not. *Apollo 13*, on the other hand, is a film about success

drawn from failure. The astronauts never got to the moon, but – according to the film – they got something much better: a victory of self. The goal was changed from walking on the moon to simply getting home in one piece. *Apollo 13* is about the triumph of the human element tested under the worst of conditions – and this certainly deserves celebration. But what also deserves note is what *Apollo 13* has turned its back on: America's self-perceived and frightening slippage from the international pinnacle.

Apollo 13. Directed by Ron Howard. Screenplay by William Broyles, Jr. and Al Reinert. Based on the novel "Lost Moon" by Jim Lovell and Jeffrey Kluger. Music by James Horner. Art Direction by David J. Bomba and Bruce Alan Miller. Set Decoration by Merideth Boswell. Distributed by Universal Pictures, 1995.