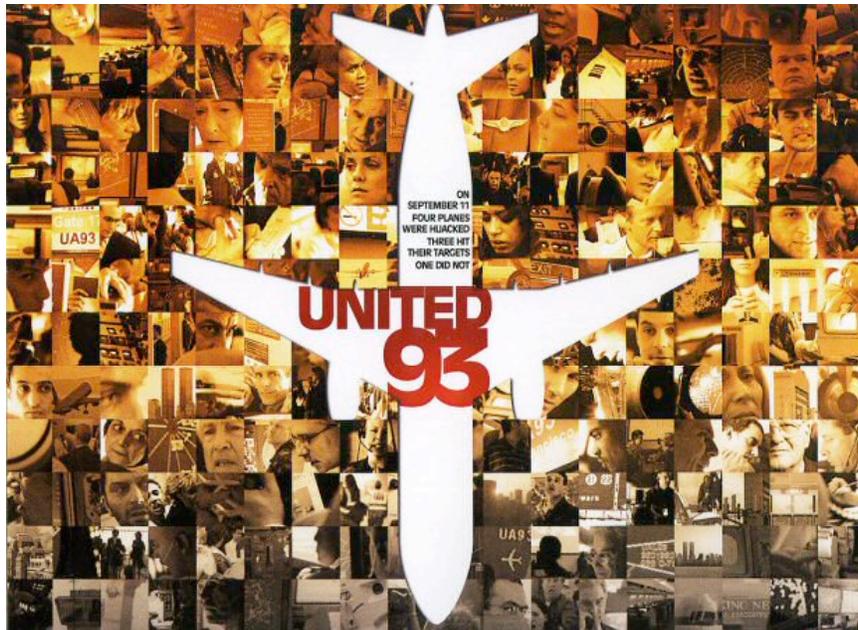


United 93

Phillip French

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When you re-create actual events for the cinema, and the prospective audience is presumed to know the outcome, there are a variety of strategies available to the film-maker. One is that used by the producers of *The Longest Day*, the 1962 movie about the 1944 Normandy landings, and *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, the 1970 picture about Pearl Harbor: you have an all-star cast of familiar faces to play the wide range of characters; you flash up the names, ranks and functions when each of them first appears; and you have the people involved talk of how momentous they feel the occasion to be. Another method is that followed by Roger

Corman in his 1967 reconstruction of *The St Valentine's Day Massacre*: you use a portentous narrator to introduce the figures involved and to give a sense of fateful inevitability to the proceedings

British writer-director Paul Greengrass, best known for his docudrama, *Bloody Sunday*, and most commercially successful as director of the political thriller, *The Bourne Supremacy*, has eschewed both these processes in *United 93*. This, as everyone will know by now, is a controversial, scrupulously researched reconstruction of what happened on the morning of 11 September 2001, when four Arab terrorists took over United Airlines Flight 93, a Boeing 757 flying from Newark, New Jersey to Los Angeles, with the intention of using it as a bomb to destroy a target in Washington DC. Of the four planes hijacked that day, it was the only one not to reach its target, which the film suggests was the Capitol.

Except for a prologue in which we see the four terrorists praying in their hotel room and then travelling to the airport (passing a large roadside sign saying 'God Bless America'), Greengrass restricts himself to the airport and the aircraft, and to a variety of ground control centres. The function of the opening is to isolate the hijackers from their victims, but we are told nothing of their backgrounds. There are no names flashed up to identify anyone's function, nor any familiar faces. Members of the aircrew are played by actual stewardesses and pilots, and several key figures at the civil and military control centres are played by the real people concerned.

The movie is gripping from first to last, partly because, like a Greek tragedy, we are only too aware of where everything is heading and partly because we are simultaneously taken back to that day that shook the world and experience the events through the eyes of the innocent passengers and the puzzled observers on the ground.

The other hijackings occur before Flight 93 takes off, and there's a terrible irony in a young man rushing down the corridor to board the plane just before the doors close, and a chilling frisson in the view across the Hudson River from the Newark control tower to the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, which are soon to be issuing plumes of smoke.

What we go through again with the controllers is the gradual apprehension of the unspeakable, unprecedented horror of what is afoot. They haven't had a hijacking for years. With the passengers and crew on Flight 93, we re-experience the discovery that we're living with a new kind of enemy. This isn't one of those hijackings where the perpetrators are seeking a ransom or a flight to freedom. On the ground, the technicians are fumbling to adjust themselves to the beginning of a new era. As at Pearl Harbor, they're unprepared and confused, talking about 'rules of engagement and discovering that there's nothing they can do until word comes from the President who, like the Vice-President, is incommunicado. The movie manages to be lucid in its presentation of chaos

The hijackers, their eyes and body language revealing their nervousness, do not show their hand until an hour into the film. From then on, the movie works in more-or-less real time as the brutal takeover is followed by the shocked passengers and stewardesses coming to appreciate the horror of their predicament. As in most movies today, and as in life, mobile phones play a key role; in communicating with families and ground staff; receiving information about the fate of the Twin Towers and the Pentagon; and sending last-minute communications, mostly declarations of love, to family and friends. Both hijackers and their victims are praying to their different gods, and the urgency, fear and indecision is conveyed by hand-held camera work and rapid cutting. A man in his thirties, speaking with a German accent, urges co-operation with the terrorists, believing common sense will prevail. Even after the critical consensus to fight back has been made, he continues to plead for calm and has to be suppressed. By this point, I was engaged as intensely as I have ever been with a film - tears in my eyes while hearing those last messages, admiration for the passengers' resolve to go down fighting like the defenders of the Alamo. Would I have done the same? I hope so. From the moment one of the leaders says: 'Let's roll', the movie is gut-wrenchingly visceral, right up to the final seconds, as we in the audience urge them on, hoping that history might be changed.

Written by Phillip French, © The Observer

Some questions to consider after watching the film

When the film was released early in 2006 many people wondered if it was not too soon to be making a film on such a distressing topic. Having watched the film what do you think? And how does this film compare, for example with Oliver Stone's World Trade Centre?

How successful was director Paul Greengrass in involving us in the events on board Flight 93 on that memorable day?

While there were many professional actors in the film there were no stars. How do you think this effected your enjoyment or understanding of the film?

Equally, several of the key ground personnel in the air traffic control centres played themselves in the film: for example Ben Sliney - the senior controller at Herndon and Major Fox at NEADS were two of several nonactors 'acting' themselves. Was this a successful idea?

Do you think the film was typical of the way we might have expected an American financed film to present the hijackers?

The final horrific minutes of the film are obviously informed speculation - no one survived so we can never know how accurate any of the events presented are. Is this kind 're-enacting' guesswork justified do you think?

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