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'United 93' is intense, compelling filmmaking

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You watch "United 93" from first frame to last with a knotted stomach, a level of real-world dread that I can remember having with no other movie. Well, maybe the ones about John F. Kennedy's assassination. But they weren't so intense from the opening seconds.

It's not that "United 93" is so technically proficient. It's photographed with handheld cameras, a style that can be dreadfully inadequate, and it's edited with a cinematic chaos that is passed off as the chaos of reality. May the gods of simple good taste restore sculpted cinematography.

The business of art, and even commerce in this case, is to make something more comprehensible by imbuing order, insight and visual clarity -- not by obfuscating.

"United 93" succeeds as compelling filmmaking to the degree it does partly because of its striving for veracity in detail and performance. It works most of all, though, because of what we bring to it -- the need to make sense of something that has caused us overwhelming grief and concern.

The film runs less than two hours. It depicts events that took place over three to four hours on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

Writer-director Paul Greengrass ("Bloody Sunday," "The Bourne Supremacy") begins with shots of the hijackers praying before they leave for Newark Liberty International Airport to catch United Airlines Flight 93 -- the last of the four hijacked planes to take off, and the one that crashed in Shanksville, Somerset County.

Our plane, as we've come to think of it.

At first, there's a business-as-usual tone among the air traffic controllers, the crew and most of the passengers, save the tension apparent in the faces, stiffened movements and exchanged glances of the hijackers.

The departure of Flight 93 from Newark, bound for San Francisco, is delayed until 8:42 a.m., four minutes after the hijacking of American Flight 11 from Boston is reported.

The hijacker who seems to be in charge hesitates repeatedly, seemingly waiting for an opportune moment amidst breakfast service and fast-moving cabin attendants.

We're never introduced to anyone by name. We get no backgrounds, even though every actor was cast with a specific character name and look. Most plane dialogue is incidental ("She's got a crush on that maintenance man"). In the main, for all of the picture's excruciating intensity, we don't get to know anyone.

You can tell which of the people at Air Traffic Control Center in Herndon, Va., and other ground sites are portraying themselves because, ironically, they're the least natural. There's a telltale formality in their behavior.

There's so much going on at ground level that the pulse quickens steadily as you hear everyone incredulously trying to grasp the notion that these hijacked planes, like no others in U.S. history, are flying deliberately into targets -- not heading for foreign countries as in the past.

One plane? Two planes? Both World Trade Center buildings? And now communication has dropped out on a third plane? And frantic messages are being relayed from passengers on a fourth plane? What the hell is going on?

Only the hijackers know. They're all flying first class. And they know they're behind schedule and off course. It was never to be about Shanksville. And no American was to have a fighting chance.

The deficiencies of "United 93" notwithstanding, the picture delivers some of the knockout punches inherent in the crisis.

It's never more powerful, though, than in a montage of passengers crying farewells into cell phones.

"I love you more than anything," says one.

And suddenly there's Wilkesburg native Jodie Lynne McClintock, playing passenger Marion R. Britton, saying, "I love you, too, Fred. Call your people."

And that brings home the horror more than anything.

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