# FIRST MAN

Directed by Damien Chazelle
Produced by Wyck Godfrey, Marty Bowen, Isaac Klausner, and Damien Chazelle
Distributed by Universal Pictures
Released in 2018

Compared to other NASA-centric efforts like *Apollo 13* or *The Right Stuff*, *First Man* is more cerebral. We get a look at the family, the chummy astronaut neighbors, but we're denied what we're encouraged (ironically enough) to seek—a complete understanding of Neil Armstrong. Still, we're privileged to be right there with him all the way. The movie works best when we're not cutting back to Mission Control—we can hear the flight controllers buzzing in Houston, but we can't see them. No, we're smashed in the space capsule with Neil and David and Neil and Buzz and we're sharing their wild swings between exultation and terror. This limited perspective helps us recover the mindset that Apollo 11 was not a foregone conclusion, that it easily could have ended with two astronauts stuck on the moon until their air ran out.

While there is a giant mass of scientists and technicians behind our hero, it's clear that this is his triumph. It's his life on the line—the guys back in Houston won't get killed if the mission fails. When Ed, Gus, and Roger are dead, and Neil has narrowly escaped immolation in the LLRV, and he insists that we have to "fail down here so we don't fail up there," Manned Space Center Director Bob Gilruth gets cold feet, grabbing his shoulder and demanding, "At what cost…huh?" Neil's steely reply: "At what cost? Well…it's a little bit late for that question, isn't it, sir?" Neil comes home, his face torched. His wife, horrified, wants to know what's going on. Instead of unburdening himself, Neil makes up an excuse to leave the house, and drives away as fast as he can. Accordingly, the pre-launch kitchen-table farewell may be the best thing in the film, because we are seeing Janet tear down the wall Neil has erected, while forcing him to take responsibility—it may be his life he's laying on the line, but his sons care about him more than he cares about himself!

The framing device for all of this is Karen. After the gripping edge-of-space teaser, we suffer vicariously as Neil fights to save his daughter from a brain tumor. Her death all but destroys him, and he must force himself to find a new reason for living. These harrowing scenes permit us to bring our own feelings to bear—a mutual love of children, vicariously suffering when they suffer, endear us to a cryptic lead character. We soon discover that he never talks about her. But at the film's climax, on the Moon, our hero—who outwardly eschews all sentimentality (and emotions in general)—deposits his daughter's bracelet in Little West Crater, in silent memorium.

The prominent use of the Les Baxter's "Lunar Rhapsody" on the soundtrack reinforces the idea of an inner journey—a journey of imagination preceding, and accompanying, the journeys superintended by NASA. And it links Neil with Janet in a way we're not privileged to observe through his words and actions. But the spell is broken with the press conference, the White House reception, and the "Whitey on the Moon" interlude. If there's one weakness to *First Man* this is it. Just the penultimate scene, with the astronauts surveying the media interpretations of their triumph, would be sufficient. We don't need the reaction of outsiders to

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these protean feats. Let other films provide the 'proper perspective.' The intense focus on Neil Armstrong is the film's very *raison d'erte*. And at the end of this cinematic excursion through the stars, when Neil intones, "That's one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind," we're just beginning to grasp the true price of greatness is, while being forced to acknowledge—in admiration, not jealousy—that we can never really understand the cost.

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