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Film Discussion Group
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First Man (dir. Damien Chazelle, 2018)

Leads

Neil Armstrong: Ryan Gosling: My favorites are *Half Nelson* (06) and *Blue Valentine* (10)
Janet Armstrong: Claire Foy: *The Crown* (TV 16-17), *The Girl in the Spider's Web* (18)

NASA Bosses

Deke Slayton: Kyle Chandler: *Carol* (15), *Manchester by the Sea* (16), *Bloodline* (TV 15-17)
Bob Gilruth: Ciarán Hinds: *There Will Be Blood* (07), the recent *Woman Walks Ahead* (17)

Astronauts and Families

Ed White: Jason Clarke: *Chappaquiddick* (17), *Mudbound* (17), *Zero Dark Thirty* (12)
Pat White: Olivia Hamilton: this summer's *Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot* (18)
Buzz Aldrin: Corey Stoll: *The Seagull* (18), Ernest Hemingway in *Midnight in Paris* (11)
Elliot See: Patrick Fugit: *Almost Famous* (00), *Saved!* (04), *Gone Girl* (14)
Gus Grissom: Shea Whigham: small gems *Take Shelter* (11), *All the Real Girls* (03)
Dave Scott: Christopher Abbott: *Hello I Must Be Going* (12), *James White* (15)
Mike Collins: Lukas Haas: the little boy in *Witness* (85), coming up in *Widows* (18)

Off Camera

Director: Damien Chazelle: the youngest person ever to win the Best Director Oscar
Screenwriter: Josh Singer: *Spotlight* (15), *The Post* (17), and this... not a bad first trio!
Cinematography: Linus Sandgren: won the Oscar for *La La Land* (16); *Battle of the Sexes* (17)
Film Editing: Tom Cross: won the Oscar for *Whiplash* (14); *The Greatest Showman* (17)
Production Design: Nathan Crowley: *Dunkirk* (17), *Interstellar* (14), *The Dark Knight* (08)
Costume Design: Mary Zophres: virtually all of the Coen Brothers' films since *Fargo* (96)
Original Score: Justin Hurwitz: Oscar and Tony for *La La Land* (16), *Dear Evan Hansen* (17)

Other films directed by Damien Chazelle...

Guy and Madeline on a Park Bench (2009) – Chazelle's debut is a modest, up-and-down, interracial love story between a jazz trumpeter and a woman to whom he keeps returning

Whiplash (2014) – Chazelle's Oscar-winning, Sundance-winning breakthrough about a jazz drummer terrorized by his teacher and by his own obsessive temperament and fear of failure

La La Land (2016) – Often remembered as an effervescent Technicolor musical but worth remembering how much of it is about disappointment and hurdles that prove insurmountable

Some more good movies that overlap with *First Man*...

The Right Stuff (1983) – Adventurous, exciting story of the Mercury space missions from 1961-63, manned by the first seven NASA astronauts, including John Glenn, Gus Grissom (who dies in the Apollo 1 fire in *First Man*), and Deke Slayton (who runs the astronaut program in this film)

Apollo 13 (1995) – Set one year after *First Man* ends; clear parallel in its emphasis on engineering smarts, problem-solving, and the precarious, nuts-and-bolts technology that got us to the moon

From the Earth to the Moon (1998) – Tom Hanks' first producing project was this 12-episode HBO series that helped re-brand the network as the next two decades' leader in "quality TV"

Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World (2003) – Another exercise in technically ingenious, myth-busting historical recreation among task-oriented men of relatively few words

Flags of Our Fathers (2006) – Clint Eastwood's drama focuses on how the men who planted the flag on Iwo Jima chafed at their homefront celebrity and couldn't even agree on what happened

In the Shadow of the Moon (2007) – Buzz Aldrin, whom Corey Stoll plays as so obnoxious, and Dave Scott, who is Neil Armstrong's co-pilot on the Gemini 8 lunar-docking mission that goes haywire, are two interview subjects in this definitive feature-length documentary about NASA

The Tree of Life (2011) – Kaleidoscopic meditation on our place in the cosmos, linked to one quiet family's negotiation of faith, intimate mourning, and unmet ambitions in the midcentury U.S.

Gravity (2013) – Another drama of the ingenuity required to save a space mission, plus a story in which grief for a lost child is both what inspires and distracts an astronaut on her mission

Facts about *First Man* you may appreciate...

Biographer James Hansen, a professor of History at Auburn, befriended the famously taciturn and press-shy Neil Armstrong later in his life and wrote the book that inspired this film. He also co-produced the movie and has an uncredited cameo. Hansen helped director Chazelle and screenwriter Josh Singer meet Armstrong's sons, who appreciated the artists' commitment to detailed accuracy and thus cleared them to make a movie of this never-filmed story. That zeal for detail applied as much to the recreation of the Armstrong family home as to the scenes in space. (Janet Armstrong, who divorced Neil in 1994 after 38 years, only just died this summer.)

As much as humanly possible, and in tribute to all the practical problem-solving performed by the NASA astronauts, Chazelle and his team tried to mount the whole film without "green screen" shots or other fakery. The light of the sun when Armstrong's crew lands on the moon derives not from any digital sources but from a 200,000-watt lightbulb designed especially for the film. The "moon" itself was a rock quarry in Georgia where the coarse-grained dirt is gray in color.

Most of the training scenes at NASA and some of the homefront scenes were shot on 16mm stock to more closely resemble documentary footage of the 1960s and the grain of home movies. Other scenes in the astronauts' neighborhood in Houston were largely shot in 35mm, which was the standard format for Hollywood cinema for many decades before digital photography. As Neil steps onto the moon, the movie switches to 70mm celluloid, the kind used for classic epics like *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago*, and was also filmed on IMAX cameras, for an immersive audience experience and a *Wizard of Oz*-style moment of sudden transformation.

Broad conversation topics...

Twosomes and Teams: *Whiplash* is technically the story of an entire jazz ensemble in training, but the duel between the drummer and his teacher becomes so all-consuming that we barely meet the other members. *La La Land* introduces us to a sister, a boyfriend, some roommates, and a slew of other subsidiary players but, to a degree unusual for a musical, confines its storytelling attentions almost completely to the lead pair. I'm curious what you felt about the boundaries around *First Man*'s storytelling, which at once try to evoke a whole community of astronauts, supervisors, and families around Neil Armstrong but also stays so close to Neil's point of view, with only his wife emerging as another figure we get to know well.

Limited Point of View: Related to that issue, it's important to acknowledge how even at the visual level, *First Man* clear doesn't want to tell an overtly "epic" or panoramic story. This is the only astronaut movie I can think of where our view of outer space is almost entirely limited to the very small windows in the capsule and the readouts on various screens, at least until the moon-landing sequence. When the Gemini 8 capsule can't find its docking vehicle right away, Chazelle won't show us how close or far it might be; when that same vehicle goes into its life-threatening, out-of-control rolls, we only experience those from inside.

Self-Effacement: Beyond just a series of formal challenges and a unique engagement with genre (how do you tell a space movie with so few shots of the ships, or of space?), we could equate these artistic strategies with the characterization of Armstrong, who was such an unshowy worker-bee that you can see why his biography might refuse the usual level of visual flash.

Artistry: We might see *First Man*, a seeming departure for Chazelle, as more related to his other movies in its content than is immediately apparent. While a tremendous amount of care and premeditation goes into these space endeavors, the movie also stresses the amount of "jazz" improvisation required from Neil and the other astronauts to respond in the moment to drastically changing circumstances. Even beyond the movie's fondness for Neil's love of music and showtunes, there's a sense, too, in which his feeling for numbers and complex problem-solving is an innate talent, almost an artistic genius (though it also hits its limits).

Karen and the Armstrongs: After *Gravity* and *Arrival*, this is the third outer-space movie in just a few years that doubles as an allegory for withstanding unresolved grief over a lost child. How fully did you read Armstrong's exploits through the film via the lens of his mourning? When he gets the call from NASA that he's been recruited into the Apollo team, Janet immediately describes this opportunity as a "fresh start." The film uses fantasy visions of Karen, the lost daughter, to suggest how fully she is on his mind throughout training, and he obviously thought of her front-and-center as he packed for the trip, despite his refusal to discuss her with anyone. Given all this, and other issues besides, how did you read the final shot of Neil and Karen separated by the wall of glass while he remained in quarantine, following his one giant leap?

Pomp: When *First Man* debuted at the Venice Film Festival, its decision not to stage the planting of the U.S. flag sparked ire among conservative media and then from politicians like Marco Rubio. Its box-office and buzz haven't been what the studio had projected, and some feel this controversy killed it. Did you think the movie underplayed the element of patriotic triumph?

Specific touches worth contemplating...

Image and Editing: Our first full close-up on Neil, as he pilots the X15 into space and then has to save himself from “bouncing” off the atmosphere, shows the gorgeous reflection of the planet as a bright blue arc right across Ryan Gosling’s eyes, inside his helmet. This is such a beautiful distillation of Neil’s attraction to space that it could have been the poster image, but as per usual in *First Man*, we don’t cut to the expected view of Earth itself as a sapphire orb out in space... only the *idea* of Earth as reflected in Neil’s head. There’s also irony in this image, since this thin, beautiful line of azure atmosphere is exactly what almost kills Neil, when he cannot get this weirdly rattle-trap vehicle to accelerate fast enough to fly back down.

Sound: The first establishing shot we get of the Armstrong family home is accompanied by the very loud squall of young Karen, in pain from the cancer that is killing her. That match links the whole household to the experience of Karen’s suffering, which isn’t just something that happens *inside* the house but instead *suffuses* and *defines* the whole house from the outset.

Irony: During the post-funeral wake for Karen at the Armstrong family home, we see an almost-full moon hanging in the sky, even amid daylight. Neil sees it, too. The image works triply as a crystallization of the goal that will keep him focused (and possibly distracted) as he grieves his daughter, as a way for *First Man* to ensure that the moon quest and the mourning process are always tightly linked, and as an emblem of the nonsensical, topsy-turvy tragedy of a young child’s death, as incongruous to our sense of What Should Be as a moon visible at daytime.

Mood: When Neil gets the call from NASA that he has been selected for Apollo, the often-dense soundtrack of the movie is absolutely quiet: we don’t even hear the NASA official’s voice over the phone, making our experience much closer to Janet’s, as she watches her husband take the call, than to Neil’s, whose headspace and temperament usually guide the film. Furthermore, they seem to be eating dinner with all the lights off, giving the household a markedly funereal look at the moment of receiving this prestigious news. Neil is also in separate visual frame from Janet and their son for most of this scene, suggesting the family separation that his new job will entail but also the sense that he is already somewhat separate, in a world of his own.

Music: As the Armstrong family decamps to Houston, we hear the first (or one of the first) uses of the theremin, a strange 20th-century instrument activated by moving one’s hands in the vicinity of two radio antennas and amplifying the eerie reverberations. This instrument was crucial to the score of any number of cheesy alien-invasion and space-adventure movies from the 1950s and 1960s, from which *First Man* differs in every other way. Ryan Gosling apparently learned during his research that Armstrong liked this instrument, both for its sound and for its uncanny engineering, which inspired its incorporation in the score. We can also see this choice, which returns several times in the movie, as a sonic parallel to the prevalence of grainy, 16mm, home-movie style photography in the movie, using mid-century aesthetics for a mid-century story.

Production Designer: In the scene where Neil has to remain in the madly spinning “multi-axis trainer” until he passes out, and then has to run to the bathroom to lose his lunch (as does Ed), the bathroom itself is notably disgusting: unmopped, bare of furnishings (including stall doors), and replete with rust stains and mold. NASA is clearly not anybody’s budgetary priority.

EVA: Ed White absorbs a nasty blow when he learns during a party that the Soviets have once again outpaced the US and achieved the first Extra-Vehicular Activity (or “EVA”), meaning a cosmonaut has successfully departed from the craft during outer-space flight and survived. Ed was slated to be the first American astronaut to achieve this feat. I shouldn’t have smiled during this scene, but I did, upon realizing why the female robot in *WALL•E* was named Eva!

Music: During a pool party for the astronauts’ families, Neil’s already-disclosed enthusiasm for show tunes manifests in the blaring of “Oklahoma!” on the soundtrack. It’s kind of witty how, of all musicals, this frontier-set romance is the choice of a man who’s so enmeshed in the task of pursuing the “final” frontier. Even the musical that Neil apparently wrote in college, about the mythic land of “Egellocc,” combines his love of music with his fantasies of far-off realms.

Music: Another recurring musical motif in the film sounds a lot like a harp, but seemingly played on a Moog synthesizer rather than plucked on an actual harp. This instrumentation often emerges in scenes where Neil sees Karen or is otherwise reminded of her—a clear enough pattern that, even at moments where this association *isn’t* made obvious, we should imagine that Neil is quietly preoccupied by thoughts of his daughter. By making the sound just a little synthetic, the score cushions what might have been a schmaltzier link of the deceased girl to the harps of the angels, and it echoes the theremin in its use of mid-century sci-fi instruments.

Sound: Because *First Man* so tightly restricts our visual access to outer space, even limiting our glimpses of the spacecraft from the outside, the soundtrack has to shoulder a great deal of the work in evoking takeoffs, journeys, and landings. The launch of Gemini 8 is a case in point, characterized by a massive wall of roaring, rattling noises and what sound like a series of explosions, as we see clouds, smoke, and eruptions of flame through a small, quickly damaged window in the capsule. Only during this sequence did I realize that, from the astronauts’ point of view, a successful takeoff probably sounds no different from a catastrophic one.

Race and Political Context: You might recall how *Whiplash* and *La La Land* caught some flak for telling stories about jazz that marginalized black musicians almost completely, and how *La La Land* stoked additional controversy for framing Los Angeles as a nearly all-white space. *First Man*, which seems to employ almost every white male character in Hollywood and has no memorable speaking parts for actors of color, may seem to sustain that pattern, though it also tries to mark this exclusion as a historical fact of NASA at the time and as a symptom of the team’s total absorption in their tasks and consequent inattention to everything else happening in the country. Only because Janet watches TV do we see footage of the Vietnam War and related debates. Later montages disclose public gatherings of the pan-Latin American activist group La Raza and antiracist protests, including the early hip-hop artist Gil Scott-Heron performing his track “Whitey’s on the Moon,” though I gather he wrote it *after* the landing.

A Legend Is Born: Related to *First Man*’s distaste for conventional pageantry, it keeps sequences of global fascination with the moon missions to a fairly tight minimum, which is why the press conferences following NASA’s failures or in advance of major launches seem so discordant when they happen. This pattern reminded me of the way *A Star Is Born* related to the legions of Jackson and Ally’s fans: we get just enough to know they are huge presences in these artists’ lives, but the movie is much more interested in evoking their lives more intimately.