



Viewing guide for *United 93*

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United 93- Pre-viewing guide

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1. Overview/Introduction

The film *United 93* (Greengrass, 2006) was released in April of 2006. Immediately following its release the film experienced a great deal of attention from general audiences, people who experienced the events first hand, film critics, news reporters, and even the government. Everyone seemed to have some opinion on the film whether it be good, bad, or neutral. The film tells the story of the fourth hijacked plane on September 11th 2001. Four commercial U.S. airliners were hijacked by terrorists that day, three of which reached their destinations crashing into the two World Trade Center buildings and the Pentagon. This film tells the story of the fourth plane which never reached its intended target because the terrorists were overtaken by the passengers and crew of United flight 93. The film was made in close to real-time, and follows the stories of the terrorists, the passengers, the flight crew, and military and flight controllers on the ground. The entire day, up until the crash is documented, however the bulk of the film takes place in the air aboard the plane.

United 93 was written and directed by British film maker Paul Greengrass. Greengrass created *United 93* with the intent of creating a film that ensured sensitivity and respect to the victims and their families, but also that portrayed the events realistically and candid. Greengrass put in many hours of research and interviewing time in order to create as realistic and true-to-life recreation as possible. The film stars mainly unknown actors and actresses which avoids giving it any type of Hollywood appeal. The only familiar faces in the film are those of characters who agreed to play themselves such as air traffic controller Ben Sliney.

Greengrass displays a very skillful use of cinematography in the film, and as a viewer you really feel as though you are there with the people throughout the entire experience. It is a difficult film to watch because of the tragic and sensitive nature of the subject matter, but it is none the less a very well made film. For the purpose of this viewing guide I will refer to *United 93* as a documentary film, however it important to note that the films genre is hard to define, and since its release it has been placed by different reviewers in several different genres. Some of which include documentary film, docudrama, history, drama, and action.

United 93 is just one of several of a cluster of films released around the same time concerning the events of September 11th. In comparison to the other films *United 93* has received some of the most positive and respectful comment and criticism. Greengrass does a superb job of recreation and an even more impressive display of cinematography. Both combine to make a very effective and emotional film, which lasts for a total of 111 minutes of intense action, and tragedy.

2. Questions to keep in mind before watching the movie

- Greengrass argues that the movie stays as close to “real-time” as possible; especially once flight 93 has taken off. What effect do you feel this has on the film as a whole? Do you think it makes it more effective or less effective?
- Pay close attention to Greengrass’ skillful use of cinematography (lighting, camera shake, ect.). The main goal in the use of cinematography for this film was to make it seem realistic, and to

allow the audience to feel like they are actually there. Do you think that the cinematography was excessive, not enough, or an effective amount?

- Think of other films you have seen concerning the events of September 11th (such as The World Trade Center, Flight 93, Loose Change, ect.) What were ethical or moral concerns you had with these films? Do you have the same considerations/frustrations with United 93?

3. Where to obtain copies of this film

- Amazon.com
- Ebay.com (new and used copies)
- Hollywood Video
- Blockbuster
- Netflix

United 93- Post-viewing Guide

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1. Overview

This Post-viewing guide is intended to allow audiences to further engage in the film United 93. By examining additional resources concerning the events of September 11th in general, information regarding the documentary film genre, glossaries of useful film terms, film reviews, and academic treatment of the work, the audience will hopefully be able to engage much more actively in observing the film, its purposes, goals, and effects on audiences.

This viewing guide is targeted to anyone who is interested in or was affected by the events of September 11, 2001. It is mostly directed at an American audience because it is coming from an American perspective. The target audience for this guide is really not limited to any age category because the events of September 11th which are dealt with in the film United 93 are events which all Americans of all ages should have experience with, and understanding of. It was without a doubt the most traumatic event I have experienced in my lifetime has affected all generations living in America today. The guide is targeted to anyone interested in further exploration of the film, the events of September 11th, and their effect on our country.

This guide can be used in many ways to help audiences. By looking through the sources listed under section a, viewers can learn some of the more official and factual information surrounding the events of September 11th and can therefore put Greengrass' film to their own test to make opinions about his use of facts and attempt for accuracy. The information about the documentary films genre can be helpful when watching United 93 because that was the type of film Greengrass intended to create, therefore it will help viewers understand his goals and reasoning for why he filmed the way he did. The glossaries of film terms can help broaden viewers understanding of some of the more complicated terms used in discussing the making of the film.

Looking at movie reviews and academic treatments of the movie can be very helpful in exploring the different opinions and reactions different viewers have to the same film. In such a controversial film it is very important to assess a variety of audience reactions and opinions when analyzing the film.

This guide can be used to help audiences become more actively involved in analyzing this film and the messages it portrays. United 93 has received so much attention because it is a film which handles one of the most traumatic and devastating events in American history. This has made for a great amount of interesting debate and discussion concerning the movie- much of which can be found through out this viewing guide.

2. Useful resources

a. Related resources about the events of September 11th

Kean, T. 9/11 Commission Report. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004.

This book was compiled and written by the 9/11 Commission panel. The book reveals and examines the facts concerning the tragedies of September 11th. However the book not only reveals facts but also provides insight into lessons we have learned from the attacks, and gives recommendations on how we as a country can better defend ourselves in the future from attacks of terrorism. This book is

probably the single most effective and official source available to the general public to discover whatever knowledge the government is willing to reveal about the terrorist attacks of September 11th.

Longman, J., & Rimer, S. "Pennsylvania Crash." New York Times. 12 09 2001: A-16. The Historical New York Times.

This article comes from the New York Times and was published on September 12, 2001, the day after the terrorist attacks and the crash of United 93. The article discusses last minute phone calls made by the frantic passengers minutes before the crash, discusses the crash site, the experience of air traffic controllers and other personnel trying to figure out what was going on during the flight, and other details explaining what is known from the flight and crash of United 93.

Scheufele, D. (2006). September 11 News Coverage, Public Opinion, and Support for Civil Liberties. *Mass Communication & Society*, 8, pp. 197-218.

This article discusses the impact of news coverage (both television and written reportage) surrounding the terrorist attacks of September 11th. It discusses how the news and media shaped certain perceptions of the events and the people involved in the events.

b. Related resources about the documentary film genre

Rosenthal, A., & Corner, J. New Challenges for Documentary: Second Edition. New York: Manchester University Press, 2005.

This book describes many of the different styles used within documentary film making. It discusses the different modes and how each is used and to what affect. The book also discusses the genre of docudrama which is especially important in relation to the film *United 93*. Additionally, there is a section on the representation of history in documentary films in which limitations and problems are discussed, which also relates directly to the film.

Rotha, P. Documentary Film. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1966.

This book provides basic insights into documentary films and documentary film making. It is helpful to gain a more general knowledge of the genre as a whole. The book also has a section discussing the influence and function of the producer and director in the making of documentary films. The book also provides a brief history of the genre.

Butchart, G. (2006, 11). On Ethics and Documentary: A real and actual truth. *Communication Theory*, 16, pp. 427-452.

This article from the Communication Theory journal discusses ethics in documentary film making which is very relevant when discussing documentary films made about tragedies such as that of September 11th. The article discusses not only ethical considerations but also the limitations these considerations can sometimes have on the films.

c. Glossaries of useful film terms

Schlemowitz, J. (1999). A Glossary of Film Terms. Retrieved 12 06 2006, from http://cepa.newschool.edu/~schlejoj/film_courses/glossary_of_film_terms/glossary.html

This is a glossary of film terms made by Joel Schlemowitz in association with the New School's film production department. It is intended to supplement any film course and has simple and easy to understand definitions for common film terms.

Oakey, V. (1983). *Dictionary of Film and Television Terms*. New York: Barnes & Nobel Books.

This book is a 206 page glossary of helpful film and television terms. The book covers about 3,000 terms. The book not only provides terms but provides cross-references and examples as well.

Mercer, J. (1979). *Glossary of Film Terms*. Carbondale: University Film Producers Association.

This book is a 92 page glossary of film terms. The terms are defined concisely and briefly. The majority of the terms defined in this glossary are advanced film terms but the definitions are easily understood.

d. Film reviews

Burr, T. (2006, 04 28). [United 93 Movie Review: Terror, in real time](#). *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved 10 09 2006, from <http://www.boston.com/movies/display?display=movie&id=8807>

This review discusses the effect and the ethical issue concerning the making of the film. The review praises Greengrass and his attempts and speaks highly of the movie. The article also discusses and praises Greengrass filming techniques and use of cinematography. He also points out other effective choices made by Greengrass such as casting decisions and the choice to try to remain apolitical.

Denby, D. (2006, 04 24). [Last Impressions](#). *The New Yorker*, Retrieved 10 10 2006, from <http://www.newyorker.com/critics/cinema/articles/060501crcicinema>

This review discusses the realistic feel that the movie has. Denby also discusses the research efforts of Greengrass, which led to a film which contained accurate facts and representation of characters. Denby also notes the "real-time" filming used and the effects that has on the experience for the viewer, making the viewer feel as though they are actually there. Denby respects the unconventional approach that Greengrass takes in making his film.

Hornaday, A. (2006, 04 28). [Raw Courage](#). *The Washington Post*. Retrieved 10 11 2006, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2006/04/27/AR2006042702390.html>

Most of Hornaday's article discusses the ethical and emotional considerations regarding United 93. She addresses both sides of the issue and reminds her audience that while many viewers will be offended and see the movie as morbid, that many other viewers will also see the film as very necessary and respectful. She comments on Greengrass' "unflinching tact, control, and aesthetic rigor" in making the film, and regards Greengrass as superb filmmaker. She reveals her opinion of the film was that it was an excellent film but one that she did not like.

e. Scholarly treatments of the film

Samantha Morganroth (2006). "A candid reality on film: *United 93*." Undergraduate term paper for the course "Communication 3325: Documentary Film." Trinity University. December, 2006. See: <http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/documentary/papers.html>

This is a link to my paper analyzing the film *United 93*. In my paper the main focus is in exploring this thesis: "In the film *United 93* Greengrass constructs a docudrama in which film viewers can experience a seemingly realistic, objective, and true-to-life recreation of the events of September 11th; while at the same time honoring the tragedy's victims" (Morganroth 2006). I will argue this thesis but also provide opposing arguments and my response to them.

Rosteck, Thomas. (2001, 05). Why Docudrama? *The Review of Communication*, Vol. 1. Issue 2.

This essay discusses the film genre of docudrama, which is arguably the best description for the genre of *United 93*. The article discusses the advantages and purposes of creating a docudrama over other types of film.

Elisabeth, Anker. (2005, 03). Villains, Victims and Heroes: Melodrama, Media, and September 11. *Journal of Communications*, Vol. 55. Issue 1.

This article covers a broad range of topics concerning media coverage of September 11, 2001 and the effect it had on the American society. The article discusses the issue of media turning victimization into heroism which is a huge point of controversy concerning the film *United 93*. The article also discusses moral and ethical issues/problems concerning creating these types of possibly "false" or misleading identities.

3. Video-clip analysis

a. Explanation and set-up

The clip I have included comes from the final chapter of the film *United 93*. The entire clip takes place aboard the plane, which I found to be the most compelling footage through out the film. However it is really not until the final few chapters in which Greengrass stops flashing back and forth from the ground scenes to the in-flight scenes. The clip takes place right after the passengers have just found out about the other planes hitting the world trade centers, and have come together to form a plan to take over the plane. Greengrass employs many effective techniques in this scene- his representations of characters and his skillful use of cinematography are arguably two of the most outstanding.

b. Link to video clip pending. (CHAPTER 19 on DVD) 1:34:30 - 1:40:42

c. Analysis

This scene is arguably the most dramatic and affecting scene in the film. It is in this scene where Greengrass makes his most clear efforts to portray the passengers of *United 93* as honorable victims, who showed courage and bravery but none the less remained imperfect and flustered human beings. If Greengrass was attempting to portray some sort of hero he likely would have allowed their plan of taking over the plane to be carried out in a somewhat smoother manner, or with at least a little more effectiveness. Rather he simply shows intense chaos, disorder, and violence- which is what most people would guess the actual scene was like.

At the very beginning of the scene one of the male passengers is attempting to collect everyone together to begin taking over the plane. The first time you watch the film you might not even notice this line. The man says to the other passengers around him “Let’s roll”. This quote came directly from an actual voice recording recovered from the plane, and has been identified to have come from a specific passenger even. While Greengrass chose to include the line, he did so very subtly, and did not choose to make any Hollywood catch phrase out of it- which he easily could have done. Efforts similar to this seem to come up all through out the film.

This scene also has some of the most nauseating and intense camera-shake of the entire film. This makes it difficult to watch but also gives it a more realistic feeling. The sound in this scene also contributes to its realistic feeling in the no voices are louder than others, and at often times it is hard to make out anything any specific character is saying, which in such chaotic moment in real-life is often what we experience as well.

This scene is arguably one of the best made in the film as well as one of the most difficult and traumatizing to watch. It shows many of the effective techniques which Greengrass used through out the entire film, and also is a scene in which he achieves many of his goals he set out to achieve in creating this film: To display a recreation that was realistic, and as true-to-life- as possible (which clearly has many undeniable limitations), and to honor the victims but not create an unrealistic vision of saviors or heroes.

4. Discussion questions

- Do you personally feel as though the characters in the film (most specifically the passengers on United 93) were portrayed as heroes or simply honored as victims? This is one of the more controversial topics debated concerning the film.
- Did you feel the lack of vilification of the four terrorists made the film less patriotic or gave it more credibility because it did not blatantly try to make the terrorists look like evil vilified people? What other groups do you see represented and do you feel there are any other subtle stereotypes in the film?
- Greengrass’ purposes in creating the film United 93 were to create as realistic and true-to-life of recreation as possible of the events of September 11th, and to honor the victims and their memory. Do you feel as though he achieved these goals? Also, do you feel as though he had any other motives which he fails to reveal to media (such as inspiring nationalism, ect.)?
- What different genres could you argue United 93 could fall into and what genre do you think it actually is? Do you think this genre was the most effective way to present the material, why or why not?

5. Closing thoughts

United 93 is a devastating and difficult film to watch. Even 5 years after the tragic events which take place in the film have occurred the effect is none the less powerful and emotional. In my opinion, Greengrass has done a very respectable and effective job at creating a film which recreates the events of September 11th, and specifically that of the crash on United flight 93. However it is understandable that there will be many conflicting opinions concerning such a topic and that is why it is important to use resources such as this viewing guide to really explore all the different aspects which make up the film,

and the different reviews of the film. I enjoyed the film because I thought it was well made, effectively realistic, and a respectful tribute to the victims. However, it is at the same time, understandable to me how certain critics and viewers can view the film as morbid, too-soon, or an overly patriotic experience. In analyzing any documentary film it is important to do your own research and make your own opinion, because after all, all a documentary film is, is the opinion and representation established by one filmmaker. United 93 is a movie I would recommend to anyone to watch- but only with the disclaimer that while it is an excellently made film, based on detailed research of actual events, with a skillful use of cinematography and film making skills, it is none the less a completely devastating and difficult film to watch.

6. About the author of this guide

Samantha Morganroth, the author of this viewing guide, is originally from Portland, Oregon but is currently living in San Antonio, Texas going to school at Trinity University. She is currently a sophomore and plans to major in communications with a minor in communication management.