

“APOLLO 18” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold

Friday, 02 September 2011 13:21



The late Gene Siskel frequently gauged a movie’s quality with a question that has come to be known in the critical lexicon as Siskel’s Test: “Is this film more interesting than a documentary of the same actors having lunch?” A similar thought is begged by APOLLO 18, which strikes this reviewer as less interesting than a documentary about its creation would be.

I have no idea if any of APOLLO 18 is comprised of real, treated or untreated NASA footage, though given the light it inevitably presents the government in and the way events transpire, I would imagine not much. (Before I go further about the film itself, this is too good not to share: A query to distributor Dimension Films about the possibility of interviewing director Gonzalo López-Gallego a couple of months back was turned down with the explanation that he was too busy assembling all the actual NASA film and video that the whole of the movie allegedly presents.) The making-of segment that will presumably accompany APOLLO 18’s disc release, revealing how the environments of the moon and the capsule that lands there were realistically recreated and the shots given their many and varied found-footage appearances, are likely to engage the viewer in the way the generic story does not, some occasional chilly highlights notwithstanding.



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In the scenario by Brian Miller (with reported, uncredited rewrites by PRIEST's Cory Goodman), NASA didn't abandon the Apollo program after its 17th mission due to budgetary concerns, as everyone thought. A secret 18th expedition took place in 1974, and an opening title informs us that what we're about to see is culled from many hours of footage recently uploaded to www.lunartruth.com. The team consists of Ben Anderson (Warren Christie) and Nathan Walker (Lloyd Owen), who touch down on the moon's surface in the lander, and John Grey (Ryan Robbins), who remains in the orbiter. And that's pretty much all you get to know about them, beyond a few glimpses of their personalities in early clips showing them with their families and preparing for the flight. The most memorable discussion between them on the way to their landing is a raunchy anecdote (necessary in all movies these days, apparently) about how one guy once got jalapeño acid on his genitals.

Once they arrive at their destination, what begins as a routine if unusually secretive mission quickly goes south, in ways that recall the plots of both ALIEN and THE THING. The “secretive” part is familiar too, and is developed in conventional ways that don't fully exploit the topicality of the times (beyond one of the men dropping a quick reference to Watergate). For the first two acts, what tension there is is generated through the way López-Gallego exploits the claustrophobic, confined space of the module and the arid, lonely surface of the moon, as editor Patrick Lussier actively cuts among the many lenses'-eye-views to distract from the fact that nothing of great dramatic interest is going on. The most notable members of the technical team, though, are sound designers/editors Wylie Stateman and Harry Cohen, who create an evocative audioscape of snaps, crackles and beeps and assorted ominous noises.

How you respond to APOLLO 18 before its action really gets cooking will depend on how much you enjoy the vérité horror style in general. If you're not into it, you'll likely lose patience well before the movie reaches its horrific point; this reviewer found it at least watchable, if not especially engrossing, along that way. All three of the lead actors have extensive TV experience, in and outside the horror/sci-fi genres (Owen was Henry Jones Sr. in THE YOUNG INDIANA JONES CHRONICLES), and credibly embody guys who are both Everymen and skilled astronauts, even if they aren't given distinctive personalities. Like the classic killer-extraterrestrial sagas cited above, APOLLO 18 is a movie that attempts to define its characters by the way they respond to the threat they face, though even then, they're not given much to do except suffer or express varying degrees of concern and panic.

The threat itself does have its moments, though, and López-Gallego effectively teases with hints of its nature and fleeting glimpses before giving us a few (though effectively brief) better looks as the action reaches its climax. Movies of this documentary-style type in general tend to be exercises in long buildups to scary payoffs, and APOLLO 18 can be said to succeed in

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getting you to jump or cringe once things eventually get really bad for its imperiled astronauts. In Ron Howard’s APOLLO 13, Tom Hanks as Jim Lovell describes a session in a lunar-module simulator as “three hours of boredom followed by seven seconds of sheer terror”; adjust both feelings so they’re a little less harsh, and you’ve got the experience of watching this moon shot.

