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All that survives is love

Martin Amis finds United 93, a film about the passenger revolt aboard a 9/11 flight, unremitting, stark and utterly moving:

Of the 3,000 who died on that day, only those on board the fourth plane had no doubts about the fate intended for them. The director of *United 93*, Paul Greengrass, is right: they were “the first people to inhabit the post-9/11 world”. They rise up, and the plane comes down. At this point, 106 minutes in and with only seconds to go, you will find yourself, I am confident, in a state of near-perfect distress — a distress that knows no blindspots... Your mind will cast about for a molecule, an atom of consolation. And what you will reach for is what they reached for. Like the victims on the other three planes, but unlike them, because they knew, the passengers called their families and said that they loved them. It is an extraordinary validation, or fulfillment, of Larkin’s lines at the end of *An Arundel Tomb*:

...To prove

Our almost-instinct almost true:

What will survive of us is love.

United 93 begins with the desolate, self-hypnotising drone of early-morning prayer by the four hijackers. Soon they are among the passengers and are being processed to the gate. We are in the familiar, and suddenly painful. And it is here, in the departure bay, that Greengrass makes his one major divergence from the known: Ziad Jarrah, the pilot and leader (and literally a different breed from the “muscle” Saudis), says six words into his mobile phone — “I love you. I love you.”

Greengrass may have other sources. According to a footnote in the 9/11 Commission Report, Jarrah did make a final call to his fiancée, Aysel Senguen; but he called her from the hotel. Thus the moment in the departure bay, though broadly justifiable, is hugely anomalous, and for this reason: it is artistic. And elsewhere, while Greengrass cannot banish his talents of eye and ear, he refuses, quite rightly, to be artistic. Those six words hang in the air, and are balanced and answered by the tearful protestations of the doomed passengers. In this reading, Jarrah, too, knew what would survive of him.

Greengrass doesn’t spare us — but he spares us something. When was the last time you boarded an aeroplane that had no children in it? *United 93* has no children in it. It is hard to defend your imagination from such a reality. “What’s happening? You see, my child, the men with the blood-stained knives think that if they kill themselves, and all of us, they will go at once to a paradise of women and wine.” No, I suppose you would just tell him or her that you loved them, and he or she would tell you that they loved you too. Love is an abstract noun, something nebulous. And yet love turns out to be the only part of us that is solid, as the world turns upside down and the screen goes black. We can’t tell if it will survive us. But we can be sure that it’s the last thing to go.