

Scenes from *CAPRICORN ONE*, now in release from Warner Bros. Middle: Mission director (Hal Holbrook) explains to astronauts James Brolin, O. J. Simpson, and Sam Waterston why they must fake their Mars mission. Right: On a television stage, Brolin descends from the Mars lander as the TV cameras simulate in slow motion the condition of Martian gravity. Left: The astronauts make a hair-breadth escape in a Lear jet in an attempt to blow the lid off the cover-up of the mission failure.



CAPRICORN ONE

CAPRICORN ONE A Warner Bros Release. 6/78. 124 minutes. In Color & Panavision. Written and directed by Peter Hyams. Produced by Paul N. Lazarus III. Director of photography, Bill Butler, ASC. Music by Jerry Goldsmith. Film editor, James Mitchell. Production designer, Albert Brenner. Associate producer/unit production manager, Michael Rachmil. Art director, David M. Haber. Set decorator, Rick Simpson. Costume designer, Patricia Norris. Special visual effects by Van Der Veer Photo Effects. Key special effects, Henry Millar.

Robert Caulfield	Elliott Gould
Charles Brubaker	James Brolin
Kay Brubaker	Brenda Vaccaro
Peter Willis	Sam Waterston
John Walker	O. J. Simpson
Dr. James Kelloway	Hal Holbrook
Hollis Peaker	David Huddleston
Walter Loughlin	David Doyle
Betty Walker	Denise Nicholas
Elliot Whitter	Robert Walden
Capsule Communicator	Alan Fudge
Judy Drinkwater	Karen Black
Albain	Telly Savalas

CAPRICORN ONE begins at T-minus-30-minutes and counting in the NASA \$4 billion project to land three American astronauts on Mars. It will be a first in history. At T-minus-3-minutes and counting, the astronauts—James Brolin, Sam Waterston, and O. J. Simpson—are taken from the capsule atop the steaming rocket and splintered away from the launch site by van, helicopter, and Lear jet. No one, not even NASA, in the immense Houston launch center, but a small coterie of men led by Hal Holbrook, the head of the U.S. space program, knows. Sometime later, after Holbrook has explained that a defect in the life-support system would have killed them three weeks into the flight, the three astronauts, detained in an unused base in an unused hangar find themselves staring at the surface of Mars.

Unlike the film's space flight, *CAPRICORN ONE*, written and directed by Peter Hyams, has not one giant defect but many small ones. The idea is spectacular—thought up by Hyams, who used to be a reporter, who then tried unsuccessfully

for many years to sell it to a studio—, but it is never quite brought to fruition.

Hyams's most compelling theme in the film, although it is never fully or subtly worked out on all its available levels, is technology. The awesome power of it—and at its strongest, it seems uneasily leashed by man, its creator—and its sheer evanescence are exhibited in nearly every scene of the film. Hyams carefully details the massive amount of technology needed to bring off the still somewhat inconceivable feat of a space mission (any space mission), and by the same token, the amount needed, as marshalled by Holbrook's forces, to play a dirty trick on it. Technology has no feelings, and it can't *think*, which are two reasons why it is so easy to fool.

Hyams also looks at a slightly different kind of technology, more earthbound, as practiced by the skilful hands of Holbrook's "other people out there," the kind that can, for instance, effectively erase the entire existence of the technician who notices that something is wrong. (His fate foreshadows that planned for the three astronauts once their roles are played; they know too much and at the proper time will be "burned" to a crisp, and celebrated as selfless heroes for the rest of history, due to a "heat shield separation" problem in "reentry.") The erasure is complete, smudge-free, right down to all the mundane details like the subscription labels on the magazines on the coffee table of the "real" tenant, who innocently acknowledges having lived there for a long while, in the technician's apartment when Elliott Gould, a TV reporter, knows damn well she hasn't. The most chilling part of *CAPRICORN ONE* may be the technology's mind-altering power—to which inanimate objects like cars are comparatively easy to "fix"—is so huge that the tenant really *believes* she has lived there all that time and could probably pass a lie detector test and produce countless witnesses, including all the neighbors, to prove it.

The movie occasionally reaches satisfyingly into a complex absurdity: we must believe that only one mere technician of

hundreds begins to doubt that there really are men on board the craft. The crux of the film rests on a problem of perception; the film is realistic in that the Mars flight, as well as our own historical space flights are *real*, yet the "realness" of both is verifiable *only* by the clattering evidence of machines behind which humans, with their limited senses and intelligence, look pretty small indeed.

CAPRICORN ONE, as well as several other '70's pictures, have completely eradicated the '30's and '40's notion of heroics and natural justice, that if a wrong is brought to the attention of the "law" or "the people," by a crusading reporter or a courageous cop, for instance, it will be righted. Our cynicism is too prevalent and well-founded for that, which is why at the end of the film, Gould and Brolin *must* turn up at the astronauts' memorial service covered "live" by television and radio. These TV cameras, swiveling from Holbrook to focus on the pair, represent the ultimate safe proof of Holbrook's deception and Brolin's plight—the surfacing of truth. And once again it is due to technology. The irony is that earlier TV cameras were used to "lie," in the faked "live" transmissions supposedly from another planet but actually only from a relatively nearby movie-like set (which looks, incidentally, in its blocky surface, like an homage to the "set"-y lunarscape of *DESTINATION MOON*, one of the very first characteristically "realistic" '50's science fiction movies).

Yet despite these intriguing ideas, the basic problems of *CAPRICORN ONE* are on the script level. One wonders why all the Sir Lew Grade projects are so curiously similar, in that all are excellently budgeted, as productions are all technically proficient, internationally star-casted (sometimes incongruously), and all suffer from the same thing: weak or inadequate scripting. Here, in *CAPRICORN*, the plot contrivances crucially subvert the film's necessary believability, and like all '70's science fiction pictures (excepting the rosy fable *STAR WARS*), the film rests entirely on its believability. *CAPRICORN*

by David Bartholomew



“The idea is spectacular, but it is never quite brought to fruition.”

ONE's contrivances include: the presence of only *one* defect in the sophisticated, interdependent construction of the craft; the flight is so routine that the tapes recorded during simulation exercises suffice in keeping Houston unaware of the true situation (and how are the *nine months* of tape able to be physically stored onboard and transmitted over such a long period of time on cue?); the one technician who discovers the hoax just happens to be Gould's dearest friend; Gould and Savalas in the pokey bi-plane immediately find Brolin (at a desert gas station that looks like the same set used in DAMNATION ALLEY) when Holbrook's forces have been looking without luck for days; Gould easily finds Brolin's medal in the rubble of the huge hangar/set, proving Brolin's having been there (and how did it get there, in the Mars dust, to begin with, as we last saw Brolin use it to pry off the door bolts in an office area of the building?) And there are more.

Our knowledge of the plot makes insupportable and tedious the protracted scenes of Vacaro's wife-and-mother mournfulness, particularly the bed-time reading of the Dr. Seuss *Fox in Socks* story (a deftly witty tongue-twisting exercise that CAPRICORN should may well have used as a conceptual model) and those of Holbrook's smooth hypocrisy.

Many of the film's ironies, such as the President's pre-taped message at the landing and Brolin's first-steps "journey of peace" speech, are self-conscious and lack subtlety. Hyams also strangely handles the "landing" sequence, which is shot and edited for traditional science fiction movie suspense, from the point-of-view of the waiting wives, and it doesn't work at all. We know far too much for this ploy to work; I'm surprised that Hyams would attempt it. Even if meant as irony, it is far too over-blown and extended.

Make no mistake, the film is thoroughly American, even down to the paradox of the storybook heroics and at-all-costs initiative displayed by Gould and Brolin which when shown by the technician only gets him liquidated. Actually, Holbrook functions, more than the other

two, as the more true American "hero" in the film, as even a cursory reading of U.S. history would bear out. (More often than not in the U.S., it's the scoundrels who persevere and win.) Holbrook operates from an understandable blend of patriotism (the U.S. must succeed in the world's eyes) and pragmatism (the space program is a political football drifting away from public interest and congressional support, which an expensive "busted" flight would likely harm if not end). If part of his long speech to the three astronauts yields a message of "There's nothing left to believe in," Holbrook remains very much an idealistic figure, stretched out by a post-Watergate mentality that allows for any means being justified as long as a universally acknowledged good end is reached.

One of the problems of the film is that there are indeed no outright villains. We have no one to blame for what happens. More to ease the plot than anything else, Holbrook drags in an amorphous, all-powerful, never identified network of evil: "There are people out there...grown-ups." But representing them, we have only the pair of cleverly anthropomorphized helicopters buzzing after the trio like deadly mosquitos. At about its midpoint, the film feels over, and it turns disappointingly into a pair of Man Vs. The System simple-minded adventures, carried out, ultimately successfully, by two combatants on two different levels: Gould's dogged investigative reporting and Brolin's elemental physical survival in the desert. (At that, CAPRICORN is better off than THE MEDUSA TOUCH, which similarly wound up a whopping good story, then ran out of imagination and turned into a feeble disaster picture.)

The acting is fairly acute and involving, with Holbrook and Brolin coming off well, and Gould, trimmed down and energetic for once, is convincing as the reporter. (He is slow to rouse—can you imagine him as the Beatty character, also a reporter, in PARALLAX VIEW?—, especially after, in quick succession, his best friend worse than disappears, his car runs away with him trapped behind the wheel, and he's shot at, especially for a guy who has

apparently made a career of crying "Wolf!" by sighting Patty Hearst twice and uncovering a second gunman in the JFK assassination.)

Hyams' dialogue interestingly wavers between technological jargon and human repartee (the latter particularly good between Gould and Black and Gould and his long-suffering assignments editor).

There are a few shrewd directorial touches, chief among them, Hyams showing us most of the flight *only* on a pair of monitors in the space center, which is how we view "real" flights at home, on TV. It's a nice paranoid-inducing touch, because it implicates *us* in the movie (i.e. we all may have been similarly fooled already. . .).

And what covers up a lot of the scriptural defects is the often extremely effective sweaty-palms stuff, and here Hyams excels in several action sequences: Gould's accelerating runaway car, shot with a low-level camera; the three astronauts' takeoff/escape from the base (although the sequence is ruined by Warners incorporating most of it in the movie's TV trailers); and the mid-air, canyon-flirting duelling of Savalas' crop-duster and the helicopters.

The film seems to want desperately to be pessimistic (and perhaps the idea requires it for full effect, beyond the quickly forgotten deaths of Waterston and Simpson). But Hyams, Grade, and Warners all know that the realities of U.S. and world boxoffice decree a happy ending (although it yields yet another plot contrivance: Gould and Brolin too quickly drive an enormous distance to turn up at the memorial service).

However, Hyams may have put an edge on it after all by his use of ever-slower slow-motion as the pair run toward the grave site. And having them end in a freeze-frame (perhaps significantly, *before* they reach the group), Hyams seems to imply a certain failure to their efforts, perhaps in a larger historical sense, or at the least, a futility. After all, Holbrook's "people out there" are still *out there*, all around us, invisible, ready to act whenever needed. □