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The Mountain Between Us: The Prison of Vertical Lines

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From *Castaway* to *The Grey*, it's a story older than the phrase "Mayday, mayday!" People take a risky flight over the mountains, plane crashes in a storm, people fight for survival in the wilderness. But while the story's outline is well-worn, it's the unique writing and cinematography that keeps these films fresh and appealing to audiences. In director Hany Abu-Assad's latest plane crash masterpiece, *The Mountain Between Us*, the contrast of vertical and horizontal camera positions is used to convey a much deeper meaning. What happens when a home is found within a horror? Where does one go when a once safe place now feels like a prison?

Based off the novel by Charles Martin, *The Mountain Between Us* stars Kate Winslet and Idris Elba as two strangers who find themselves stranded in the mountains of Idaho after the pilot suffers a stroke and crashes their small, private plane. Alex, played by Winslet, is a free-spirited photojournalist and Ben, played by Elba, is a neurosurgeon who believes solely in the logic of the brain, claiming that, "the heart is just a muscle." Though the two appear to be polar opposites in the beginning, Alex and Ben soon discover that they both carry emotional baggage and, ironically enough, find love and freedom in the mountains that could lead to their deaths.



tears bring spears right to the gut, showing the frustration of a doctor who has suppressed years of emotion and a man who fears losing the woman he loves. But though the acting is superb, it's the cinematography that really makes this film stand out.

During Ben and Alex's time trekking through the mountains, cinematographer Mandy Walker uses diagonal camera angles to show times of distress, like when Elba is slipping down the side of the mountain, but Walker also uses horizontal angles (or lines) in the film to show calmness and peace, like when Winslet is snapping photos of the sunset on the mountainous horizon. Even the cabin where Alex and Ben find refuge is built with horizontal wood siding and the American flag placed in the window is made up of horizontal red and white stripes. It's here that Ben and Alex form a bond and release the burdens that have weighed them down for so long.

However, when Ben and Alex are rescued, a new part of the story begins with vertical lines showing that the two characters now feel trapped in their normal lives, despite having been saved from certain death. Elba is shown having a breakdown in a tall, vertically shaped shower, and in the following scene Winslet is displayed between two vertical doors in her home, contemplating whether or not to marry the man she's engaged to. The next time we see horizontal angles, Alex and Ben are shown sleeping sideways on their bedroom floors because they no longer feel comfortable in their beds.

This is an astounding use of storytelling through visuals. Though it's implied by Elba's final quotes at the end of the film, the contrast of horizontal and vertical lines



unsteady. Hats off to Abu-Assad for creating a movie where the message is not only meant to be heard, but also seen.

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