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Film Reviews

Star Trek Into Darkness. Dir. J. J. Abrams. Perf. Chris Pine, Zachary Quinto, Benedict Cumberbatch. Bad Robot/ Paramount Pictures, 2013. Film.

The release ofJ. J. Abrams' *Star Trek* in 2009 transformed a moribund franchise into a legitimate blockbuster by rebooting and recasting, returning to the iconic characters that made the original television series a hit in the late 1960s. The frenetic pace and focus on action upset some among the franchise's traditional fanbase, but Abrams' film undoubtedly brought a new audience to the series. The story continues in *Star Trek Into Darkness* (2013), the sequel to the most profitable *Star Trek* film of all time. Following a now-common formula for commercial success, *Star Trek Into Darkness* achieved promotional synergy with a videogame and comic book series *(Countdown to Darkness)* which crafted an expanded multimedia narrative, and a range of merchandising targeted to both children and collectors.

Star Trek Into Darkness begins with a daring mission to save a primitive alien civilization from a natural disaster, reflecting the edict of Starfleet to "seek out new worlds," while also emphasizing the willful propensity of Captain James Kirk (Chris Pine) to violate the "Prime Directive" of non-interference for the sake of what he believes is morally right. The film's principle narrative, however, explores darker material, as the crew of the Enterprise is called upon to respond to a terrorist attack from a mysterious rogue operative (Benedict Cumberbatch). Sent into hostile Klingon space to apprehend the criminal under orders from the duplicitous and hawkish Admiral Marcus (Peter Weller), Kirk and his crew uncover a shocking conspiracy to instigate galactic war. The struggle our heroes face, then, is to defeat an enemy in order to avert a greater conflict. In spite of all its action, *Star Trek Into Darkness* espouses a pacifist message, and, unusually for films in the series, not a single phaser blast or torpedo is fired by the Enterprise in the course of its battle with the monstrously threatening *USS Vengeance.*

J. J. Abrams' strength as a director chiefly lies in narrative pacing; the film builds momentum through the joining of tightly-edited scenes of exposition to breathless action set-pieces. Highlights include a virtually wordless sequence in which a morally compromised father (Noel Clarke) commits a suicidal act of terrorism to save his dying daughter. Brilliantly scored, acted, and paced, these scenes demonstrate precisely the threat posed by a manipulative genetic superman with a grudge against Earth's government. More fun is had later with an in-atmosphere starship chase sequence, culminating in a look at the radically redesigned Klingons, the alien antagonists whose ships now sport a cobbled-together junkyard aesthetic. Adorned with metal helmets covering faces riddled with piercings and jewelry, the Klingons haven't been this menacing since the original television series introduced the species.

Star Trek has always used its action and alien encounters as metaphors, as symbolic representations of contemporary politics and society, or to comment on the human condition. *Star Trek Into Darkness*, though often accused of lacking thematic depth, continues this tradition. The film's most important character is not its ostensible protagonist, James Kirk, but rather the half-Human, half-Vulcan Spock (Zachary Quinto). Spock's character development is the emotional core of the film, and the narrative explores his frustration in forming relationships with those closest to him: his commanding officer and potential best friend, Kirk, and his lover, fellow bridge officer Nyota Uhura (Zoe Saldana). Spock's acceptance of both the risk and reward that comes with caring for people is antithetical to the Vulcan philosophy of logic over emotion, but vital to his self-discovery. Spock is ultimately the most relatable character on-screen. The treacherous Admiral Marcus, meanwhile, represents an obvious metaphor for the public fear of a warmongering government. Kirk's devastating discovery that his own commander-in-chief plans to sacrifice the crew of the Enterprise as collateral damage in order to provoke war reveals a powerful political allegory. Indeed, that the greatest threat to Earth's peace is its own military leader suggests the film might better have been titled *Star Trek: The Darkness Within.*

At the film's climax, it makes direct reference to the franchise's most acclaimed entry, 1982's *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, with an act of personal sacrifice for the greater good. *Star Trek Into Darkness* might suggest that the upper echelons of power are untrustworthy, but the crew

of the Enterprise are individuals capable of great acts of selfless heroism, intensely loyal to their captain and each other. Kirk describes his crew, in the film's final moments, as a "family", and it's clear how greatly he values understanding and acceptance. The utopian optimism of Gene Roddenberry's original *Star Trek* may have been somewhat tainted by the corruption displayed by Earth's leaders in this latest film, but the ideal of cooperation and community is still a meaningful concept.

Star Trek Into Darkness is one of the most critically divisive franchise films in recent memory. Popular with mainstream audiences worldwide (it currently stands as the most globally profitable *Star Trek* film of all time), the film nonetheless disappointed many fans, resulting in a small but vocal backlash against Abrams and writers Roberto Orci, Alex Kurtzman, and Damon Lindelof. This passionate corner of the fan community argue that *Star Trek* has become too focused on action and has lost its sense of exploration, its fascination with the unknown. With Abrams moving on to science fiction's other mega-franchise, *Star Wars*, and a third film in the *Star Trek* "reboot" series confirmed, it remains to be seen how future entries will balance the core values of the franchise with maintaining an undeniably successful commercial formula.

Works Cited

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