

# No, this won't do at all

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*Spiderman 2*, directed by Sam Raimi; *The Terminal*, directed by Steven Spielberg; *The Stepford Wives*, directed by Frank Oz

A cartoonish “coming-of-age” story, tepid liberalism, limp satire. Given the current state of things, this is dangerously weak material. And to argue, as film studio executives have for years, that the public deserves what it gets won't wash either.

*Spiderman 2* is an adaptation of the Marvel comic book about young Peter Parker who, through a freak accident, becomes endowed with the powers of a super-arachnid. In this sequel, Parker is beset by difficulties and pressures: his best friend hates Spiderman for killing his father; Peter has lost his girl-friend because he doesn't want to expose her to danger; the yellow press has labeled Spiderman a “masked menace”; Peter's only family member—his aunt—is consumed with grief over the death of her husband. Faced with these problems and others, Parker decides to abandon his Spiderman role and lead a normal life.

Turning his back on crime and injustice, however, proves even more untenable. When an ambitious scientist, through another freak accident, turns into a creature with four powerful tentacles attached to his body and embarks on a project that endangers masses of people, Parker finds himself, unwillingly, called on to return to the battlefield. In the end, Parker sorts out his internal conflicts, his girl-friend accepts the dangers of being his partner and the super-hero returns to his post.

In the end, who cares very much? The shallow indictment of corporate power, the platitudinous declarations of social responsibility, the formulaic love story—it doesn't add up to a great deal.

Whether a comic book about a superhero could ever become a viable basis for a penetrating film is questionable. Until the 1970s or 1980s, such fare would have been turned into children's films or Saturday

morning cartoons. Marvel produced vaguely countercultural comic books, specializing in melancholy anti-heroes. But one shouldn't make more of them than they merit. This is fun for 14-year-olds, and there's nothing wrong with that. In the post-modern age, however, in which all texts became equal, comic books began to be treated with unwarranted seriousness. The results, on film, have not been good.

Sam Raimi is a talented filmmaker, with an observant eye and an anti-establishment bent. *Darkman* was a more intense work, *A Simple Plan* more perceptive. Raimi, like the Coen Brothers, like Wes Craven, like others, could do serious work, genuinely (and not superficially) provocative work, and he chooses not to.

*Spiderman 2* cost \$210 million to make, another \$60 million to market; it has already earned \$255 million globally and no doubt will earn hundreds of millions more. And it will have no discernible impact on anyone or anything. A waste for the most part. There's little more to be said.

*The Terminal* is Steven Spielberg's latest film. It concerns a man from a fictional former Soviet republic who arrives at Kennedy Airport in New York just as his native country erupts in civil war. His passport and visa are no longer valid. Prevented from entering the country, but unable to return to his homeland now suffering under a military junta, Victor Navorski becomes a resident of the international lounge at JFK Airport.

Over time, Navorski becomes the hero of the blue-collar workers at the airport and the nemesis of the local Homeland Security bureaucrat. Victor invents a job for himself for which he's paid under the table. A beautiful flight attendant falls for him. He cleverly avoids various traps set for him by the cold-hearted immigration official.

But this is satire and social commentary without the slightest punch. In the end, of course, Navorski and the

“real America” triumph over the arbitrary and unreasonable rules and regulations of the unwelcoming and “un-American” bureaucrat. The purpose of Navorski’s visit to the US, which he has kept a secret, is a further opportunity to tug at our heart-strings.

Spielberg no doubt feels genuine concern over the conduct of the Bush administration and its recourse to anti-democratic measures. One of the first scenes concludes with a meaningful close-up of the Homeland Security logo. But the director lives and breathes a thousand miles away from real hardship and suffering. In whatever condition the material may have started out, and there’s no reason to imagine in this case that it was ever particularly hard-hitting, in Spielberg’s hands it passes through a series of filters that eliminate everything complex and demanding. The ultimate product dissolves in the mouth like cotton candy.

The facile references to the basic goodness of the American people in *The Terminal*, also present in *Spiderman 2*, are really not much use under conditions where the film simply panders to illusions and complacency. There are democratic instincts deeply lodged in the population, but they have to be aroused and made conscious by bringing out in the sharpest form the dangers posed by the present situation. The essential argument and feeling of Spielberg’s film work in an opposite direction: “There are problems, but everything will turn out fine in America.” We’ve heard this before, and it hasn’t helped.

*The Stepford Wives*, directed by Frank Oz, is a mess. The film is a remake of the 1975 science-fiction satire (based on an Ira Levin novel), which contemplated in a fantastic form a possible backlash against feminism—a conspiracy to turn one suburb’s women into smiling, conformist, submissive housewives (robot replacements, in fact). The original was not that memorable, except perhaps for the performances of Katharine Ross and the underused Paula Prentiss, and a sinister appearance by the late Patrick O’Neal.

The new version cannot decide what it wants to be, a comedy, a satire, a thriller, and ends up being none of those. Oz’s film, which apparently had various parts rewritten and reshot, doesn’t cohere. It’s not possible to make out in the end something as elementary as whether the women in this new Stepford are robots or not. The film ends unexpectedly, without having explained much, but by then the spectator has lost

interest.

This is simply inept.



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