

Letters on two recent films

1 October 2009

On “*District 9, an attempt at serious science*”

Regarding *District 9*, it began as a clumsy and belated criticism of apartheid but everything else in the movie we have seen many, many times before, especially the senseless bloodshed. It does little to undermine stereotypes, such as South Africans are racist, Nigerians are involved in scams, and of course the sadistic and unstoppable sergeant. Most of the subtleties were lost on me because of the overused template of this movie. The movie *Gattaca* was far more effective, in terms of science fiction.

I agree with Hiram Lee on the depiction of most of the aliens as animalistic; this is unacceptable. No attempt is made to mobilise the aliens in an organised protest or offensive. Christopher Johnson was moving in his horror at the alien experimentation and his patience and empathy with Wikus. The direction and style of a sequel will be completely dependent on the political and social orientation of the filmmaker (and the whims of the studio bosses).

Stan
New Zealand
24 September 2009

I am a young college student, not even 20 years yet, but my overall opinion of entertainment and art, if only that which is present in the US, has become, or should I say has developed to be, most unfavorable. So much so that often I am accused by friends and peers, if only in jest, that I hate everything. But my response is more one of conditioning, than of a genuine belief that there is no good art to be had, that somehow human creativity has ended, to be a distant memory in the past. It is that currently, art, entertainment, even culture are so poor and lacking.

It is almost a knee-jerk reaction for me, upon seeing the latest flashy movie trailer to feel contempt for it, an almost immediate dislike of it. I have seen so many short clips promising a revolutionary new movie, a new idea or analysis or adventure, something different, only to be disappointed that it is precisely as its predecessor. Certainly, with the mark of its own director, but overall the same petty philosophies, half-thought ideas, flat, idealized characters, circumstances and environments each touting this or that thing, coming, at most, to some pseudo-reformist conclusions of “potential” or, at worst, to some cynical expression of the “what will be will be” attitude. Television, comic books, magazines everything seems so lacking in meaning, intellectual rigor or any attempt at genuine creation.

This I say, naturally, as a general statement, not to exclude the inevitable outliers. Nevertheless, I have seen only the many products of the current day, one after another, an endless stream of consumerist pomp, half-baked philosophy, undefined problems and their equally stupid resolution. And particularly in the last few years, a seeming

trend in cinema which attempts to add meaning to its works by making them as gritty, violent, dystopian and anti-social as possible. I would mention *Watchmen* and the *Dark Knight* as examples, which simply by virtue of painting human society as something less than the former Middle Class ideal, gain merit, meaning and accomplishment.

Such films have apparently stumbled on some truth! Life is not perfect after all! There are problems to be had! But even then, they stop short of any analysis, any criticism, any deviation from their predecessors.

This elaborate introduction, of course, brings me to *District 9*. The first time I saw the previews for it, I immediately assumed the worst. Another half-thought work with half-hidden references and the like. It will take itself too seriously, speak in a self important manner. Nevertheless, despite my initial reservations, as I have mentioned they occur with nearly every observation of such clips, I went to see the movie. Partly as entertainment, as hollow as that term has become, partly with hope at seeing a diamond in the rough, or, at least, a shinier piece of well-cut coal.

I found it, in the end, a fairly interesting film, at least when it is compared to the competition, and the first science fiction film of the summer which had at least some merit. (I say this with obvious reference to *Star Trek* which, under the helmsmanship of JJ Abrams and his ilk, took the final plunge into the abyss of mindless, meaningless action, covered with an especially thin-stretched veneer of a “plot”, “reimagining” and “creativity”.)

Your review of the film shared many of my opinions. It began interestingly enough, and I was especially surprised by the characterization of the alien habitat District 9. And while at least the first half was fairly interesting, it did lack any deep penetration, other than the introduction of a few social questions. I was particularly bothered by the fact that having characterized the living situation of the aliens, having made a point to mention that they are “workers,” and then talking about the crime-wave that was apparently disturbing the city, the movie made absolutely no connection between these different facts. The aliens, I was left to conclude, were simply prone to being thieves and the like, the argument of the bad apple came to mind. Even if one were to accept that they were simply mindless “workers”, the *deus ex machina* of an insectoid caste-system, how can one really avoid drawing a parallel between such terrible living conditions and the rise of crime? Additionally, as you mentioned, the almost complete lack of introduction of any of the citizens of the District worked to the film’s detriment. As always, a few great heroes are charged to take on the mantle of action from the masses of inept peasants and workers, who cannot fend or think or act for themselves!

That being said, the second part was an entirely predictable, once it started, return to cinematic form. There was an almost palpable line of separation between the long, drawn out plot bits with relatively little action in the first half, and the second half which included an almost non stop stream of action sequences which I found particularly

graphic, unappealing and, in the end, unenlightening. It was as if they were trying to make up for all the plot they had to introduce in the beginning, that tiresome characterization of the environment and its inhabitants.

In conclusion, I say thank you to the WSWs, for its tireless commitment, not only to the cause of international socialism, but to spreading genuine, critical and truthful articles to people. Your every publication credits your statement that there are no “political corpses” either in the WSWs or the SEP.

Thank You Comrades!

FR

Georgia, USA

26 September 2009

On “Star Trek: Boldly going where no man has gone before, again”

I have been a long-time fan of the *Star Trek* series, though I started with the “Next Generation”, the original having been about 30 years removed from me. I became fond of it, to the point of discussing the minutia of the internal canon with friends, playing through what-if scenarios which were given the weight and consideration of real world possibilities. But while doing such things was often amusing, it was not the sole reason for my fondness of the series. *Star Trek*, as I think of it, has always had a certain critical and serious tone about it. Its world has always been complex, its characters well rounded and well motivated, and its resolution to problems equally reasonable. There were, for the most part, no one-sided villains, no one-sided heroes and no one-sided situations. Characters had motivations, virtues, flaws, ideals, strengths and weaknesses.

The problems that arose too were relatively complex, and treated with the appropriate complexity, and often times related to real world problems. References to terrorism, social change, religious conflict and police-state witch-hunting have been handled by the series, among others, with what I consider greater sensitivity than what was common in programming at the time.

One specific example jumps to mind. In an episode where a peace treaty between the Federation and the Cardassians, a militaristic regime, is threatened by a rogue Federation captain intent on exacting revenge based on dubious evidence, a conflict emerges between one of the Federation officers and one of the Cardassian officers. The Federation officer who had fought in the war has grown to hate Cardassians, because of the brutal tactics their military employed. Today, most television shows would end here, the officer would be completely justified in his hatred. But that is not the case. The Cardassian is characterized further. Having been present at one of the more brutal battles at the war, he informs the Federation officer that he was told a different story by his leadership, that he was not completely informed of the situation, and that he had been subject to an endless stream of propaganda. He too, however, was shocked upon realizing what he had done, and showed remorse. I am at pains to find something similar in much of the other entertainment present. Especially with television shows such as *NCIS* and *Law & Order*, where people's behavior, and subsequent damnation and descent into depravity, is solely the result of their own poor choices, completely unconnected with their environment or society or even experiences.

Such were the reasons why I grew to like *Star Trek*. It stood in stark contrast to most other programming, which was filled either with endless action or uncritical one-sidedness. To be sure, *Star Trek* was not the embodiment of critical analysis, nor was it the height of artistic achievement, but it was an often times entertaining and sensitive attempt to address problems in the world and make a genuine attempt

to understand them, even within its limited bounds.

This latest movie, however, was a complete and quick destruction of everything that had previously elevated *Star Trek* above other television or cinema. I had my initial reservations about seeing the movie when I noticed the many canonical inconsistencies in the trailers, and the clip of young Kirk driving a car off into a canyon. But *Star Trek*, I thought, is more than just the internal canon; it is a view and analysis of the world in its own manner. It is, in the very least, a more intelligent criticism of society than what is available the vast majority of the time. If it is kept up, it would still make a good movie.

So I went to see it with that thought, only to be gravely disappointed. The manipulation of canon, I could understand, were it in the service of something more profound. To remove past canonical constraints would allow for a generation of a new environment, a new take on old characters, perhaps a better introduction of exciting problems or situations. But this was not the case. Instead, there was only the mindless, endless action sequences and the poorly defined characters and the complete removal of any humanity which may have been part of *Star Trek* in the past. There may have been a plot in there, but I could not notice it through the many bright explosions. Any relation I could make between this film and *Star Trek* was that it took place in space, on a ship, with some people with familiar names and there was Leonard Nimoy. Aside from that everything was completely alien. And yet the greatest irony is that this film was praised by virtually every critic as “intelligent,” “phenomenal,” “creative” at the time when it thoroughly destroyed what creativity and intelligence there was in the series!

In the end, a mediocre film, a mediocre plot, a mediocre world filled with mediocre characters and, as always, the JJ Abrams signature, a very, very, very mediocre internal logic. (The last remark being directed towards, but not limited to, a scene where Kirk orders the ejection of the one “warp core” and we see several “warp cores” exiting the aft section of the ship. Such a suspension of disbelief is required in Abrams films!)

It was a very unpleasant movie, but as the WSWs has, on many occasions, shown, it is hardly an isolated incident, but part of a greater social situation. The subjugation of creativity, analysis and criticism by the profit motive leaves nothing safe. And so, I have written this response, both to share my view and to thank the WSWs for its continued publications. Your tireless determination to explain and characterize and analyze the world stands in the starkest contrast to the prevailing trend in media and is one of the greatest tools of the working class!

SI

27 September 2009



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact