

# *Star Trek Into Darkness*: Militarism in space

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*Directed by J.J. Abrams; written by Roberto Orci, Alex Kurtzman and Damon Lindelof; based on the television series created by Gene Roddenberry*

The twelfth installment of the *Star Trek* franchise, and the sequel to the 2009 film with that original title, *Star Trek Into Darkness* has made over \$438 million in ticket sales as of this writing and is the most profitable installment of the series yet.

However, the latest film is largely joyless and tedious. The secret behind its financial success has less to do with its remarkable qualities as entertainment and more to do with the fact that moviegoers are offered little choice other than to attend one or another blockbuster in the overall summer wasteland.

The plot of the new film concerns the crew of the USS Enterprise and more of their assorted exploits in space. After Captain James T. Kirk (Chris Pine) is stripped of his command of the Enterprise, following a mission that violates established protocols of non-interference with primitive alien life, the so-called “Prime Directive” of the *Star Trek* universe, Admiral Christopher Pike (Bruce Greenwood) is reinstated as the ship’s commanding officer.

Meanwhile, a Section 31 building in futuristic London is bombed. Section 31 refers to a secretive intelligence organization in the *Star Trek* series—a relatively recent addition, one must add, that is accountable to no one and implicated in various war crimes. Where have we encountered this before?

The commanders of Starfleet meet to discuss apprehending the perpetrator of the attack, John Harrison (Benedict Cumberbatch), a former member of Starfleet. The meeting is attacked by Harrison, and Admiral Pike and others are killed.

Predictably, Kirk seeks revenge and is reinstated by Admiral Marcus (Peter Weller) to command a mission to find and kill Harrison, without the benefit of a trial.

Kirk is accompanied by Spock (Zachary Quinto), who raises moral and ethical objections to the expedition. The precise motives of Harrison, as well as that of the pursuing crew and their commanding officers, will be called into question as the seemingly simple operation begins to fall apart once the Enterprise (almost) reaches its destination.

In an interview, actor Simon Pegg, who plays Montgomery Scott in the film, was asked about the film’s broader themes: “I think it’s a very current film, and it reflects certain things that are going on in our own heads at the moment; this idea that our enemy might be walking among us, not necessarily on the other side of an ocean, you know. John Harrison, Benedict Cumberbatch’s character, is ambiguous, you know? We [the characters in the film] don’t know who to support. Sometimes, Kirk, he seems to be acting in exactly the same way as him [Harrison]. They’re both motivated by revenge. And the ‘Into Darkness’ in the title is less an idea of this new trend of po-faced, kind of, everything’s-got-to-be-a-bit-dour treatments of essentially childish stories. It’s more about Kirk’s indecision.”

The last comment, in particular is revealing. Pegg is referring to the latest adaptations of *Batman* and *Superman*, both of them juvenile paeans to authority and the forces of law and order. As a matter of fact, the main problem with *Into Darkness* is precisely that it also takes itself far too seriously.

The plot is overly complicated, the characters are hardly developed. The dialogue and acting are trite. Certain “emotional” scenes, where the audience is supposed to feel something for the characters, unfortunately make one want to laugh out loud instead. The problem is not so much with the cast and crew, many of whom are very talented, but with the filmmakers, including director J.J. Abrams, and their conceptions. They have chosen “to go with the flow,”

so to speak, and insert retrograde ideas (targeted assassination, revenge, etc.) into an overly bombastic piece of work.

If the material were at least presented competently or seriously, with thinking adults in mind, that would be one thing. Then one could at least argue over the film's themes and how truthfully they corresponded to reality. But *Into Darkness* is not that sort of film. Three-quarters or more of the movie, it seems, consists of people running, shooting, exploding, fighting, jumping and falling. Added to all that is the recurring use of "lens flares" (the usually unwanted effect when a camera lens is pointed at a bright light source), Abrams' personal and annoying touch.

The special effects are presumably the *raison d'être* of the latest *Star Trek*, but they don't add any real depth or excitement to the story.

As for the themes of revenge and militarism featuring so prominently in the film, albeit superficially, all one can say is: what would Gene Roddenberry think?

The original *Star Trek* television series (1966-1969), for all its faults and limitations (and occasional outright silliness), contained at least some underlying humanity and humor. Premiering on television during the era of the Civil Rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War protests and the US-Soviet race to the Moon, *Star Trek* was not about military missions, but *exploring* space. Even the Klingons and Romulans, alien races functioning as stand-ins for US rivals in the Soviet Union and China, appear in only ten episodes over the course of the original series' three seasons.

The future presented in the series was one where—at least within the "United Federation of Planets" to which the protagonists belonged—war, racial prejudice, religious ignorance, even poverty and the profit motive, were things of the distant past. It is not a mystery why the original series is still held dear by a great number of people. Moreover, the storylines at least aspired to provoke thought in the audience.

For some years now, the *Star Trek* franchise has adapted, in its own manner, to the trend of "dark" re-adaptations of various comic books and the like. For example, Section 31, the aforementioned intelligence organization was consciously introduced in the late 1990s as a CIA-like antipode to the "squeaky-clean" democratic and egalitarian image of the Federation. The generally utopian and optimistic character of the

television series was apparently deemed unfashionable or somehow irreconcilably at odds with "true human nature."

Such cynicism is neither new, nor insightful or interesting. In fact, it reflects the accommodation of a layer of artists and intellectuals to the general brutalization of cultural and political life. The lawlessness of US foreign and domestic policy, reckless militarism, and cultural backwardness are all more or less taken for granted and find expression, largely undigested, in the vacuous bloody-mindedness of much of Hollywood filmmaking at present.

It should not come as a great surprise that the final credits of this latest affront to *Star Trek* read: "This film is dedicated to our post-9/11 veterans with gratitude for their inspired service abroad and continued leadership at home." When will such bootlicking end?



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