

Divergent: A different sort of dystopia

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Directed by Neil Burger; written by Evan Daugherty and Vanessa Taylor; based on the novel by Veronica Roth

Released to positive reviews and a \$56 million opening weekend, *Divergent* offers an intriguing and worthwhile story.

The director of *Divergent*, Neil Burger, was responsible for the “Books: Feed Your Head” campaign on MTV in the early 1990s and takes a healthy and encouraging approach to literature. As well, he has a respect for his younger audience that comes through in *Divergent*, making it an engaging work.

Set in a future Chicago decimated after a war that took place a hundred years or so earlier, *Divergent*’s society is divided into five Factions, each with particular characteristics and specific duties. Beatrice (Shailene Woodley) was raised in the Faction of Abnegation, which emphasizes service to others and an effacement of the self. The film opens on the day of the testing that will determine in which Faction she will continue her life.

Entranced by the antics of the kids from Dauntless (the brave—who guard the fence around the city and act as military and police) on the way to the test, Beatrice is visibly undecided as to where she should be. The scenes surrounding the test and choosing ceremony which follow capture very well the struggles faced by young people as to where they should go and the pressures under which they are put to make life-altering decisions before having a chance to fully—or even partially—explore their options and desires *for* life.

Beatrice finds herself in the dreaded and possibly deadly position of having test results (and abilities) that place her in multiple Factions. Her test administrator is horrified and tells her she’s putting her down officially as Abnegation and warns her not to tell anyone otherwise.

Ultimately, Beatrice chooses to join Dauntless, while her brother joins Erudite (the intelligent, who pursue knowledge), and they go on to their training. “Faction before blood” is emphasized, and it would now be impossible to return to Abnegation if they wanted to. If they fail in their chosen Factions, they will end up among

the Factionless, who are largely homeless, and do the menial labor of society.

Beatrice, now Tris, barely makes it through the first section of brutal physical training. During the second, psychological, section, she is discovered by her team leader, Four (Theo James), to be Divergent. He is as well, and helps her pass the tests, which involve being forced to face one’s fears and get out of various situations in a mental simulation viewable by a panel of judges.

At one point, Four tells Tris that he doesn’t want to be just “one thing,” that he wants to be brave, and smart, and kind—it’s a powerful and important scene that could have been terribly hackneyed in less skilled hands. The relationship that develops between Tris and Four is believable and provides some relief from the love triangles so prevalent in films aimed at this age group.

Along the way, a plot by Erudite to seize power from Abnegation is alluded to, and Tris takes it upon herself to visit and warn her brother. The views of the mostly darkened and still war-battered Chicago skyline and primitive living conditions of both Abnegation and Dauntless contrast with the clean and modern sector in which Erudite live.

The portrayal of the divisions in the society is realistic and subtle. The contrasts are not as brutally presented as in the *Hunger Games* franchise—to which *Divergent* has been compared—but they are definite, and the audience is allowed to discover them along with Tris as the story unfolds.

Erudite’s use of Dauntless as a shock force against Abnegation is chillingly portrayed. Through Dauntless’ isolation from the rest of society and the use of neurotransmitters, initiates of the Faction are turned into obedient robot-like soldiers who drag everyone out of their houses into the streets and are prepared to gun them down to a man, woman and child, if the order is given.

The uses of dividing society in order to “maintain order” are at times awkwardly articulated (primarily by Kate Winslet’s Jeanine, a leader in the nefarious operation), but firmly presented. The film takes a healthy

stand against this.

Tris is a compelling character; though very much focused on herself, as teenagers can be, it is with an eye toward what her place in society will be. Rejecting being pigeonholed into one Faction or another, and stepping up unbidden to fight against the injustice she sees developing—without, it must be added, the use of super powers or other such filmic gadgetry—she displays a bravery uncommon in literature or films for young people (or at all) of late.

Lionsgate, which produced *Divergent*, has also been responsible for the teen-aimed *Hunger Games* and *Twilight* franchises. The heroine and story, however, are very different in this work. The low-key presentation when compared to the bombastic action scenes and spectacle of *Hunger Games*, and the broader outlook of the heroine than those of either set of films sets *Divergent* apart—and above. It is not a perfect film, there are areas of uneven acting involved (primarily and surprisingly on the part of Winslet), but there is an honesty here that eludes both *Hunger Games* and certainly *Twilight*.

Author Veronica Roth is to be congratulated for creating a character who shows that the ordinary person is capable of extraordinary courage. Her books have become quite popular not because they are the “next *Hunger Games*,” but because they speak to young people—offering a view of the world that encourages the reader to resist the increasing pressure to conform and to stretch themselves outward. Unlike many futuristic films aimed at teens and adults, the decimated society here is not presented as an end point; all is not lost, most importantly humanity’s willingness and ability to improve even under dire circumstances.



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