

The *Divergent* Series: *Insurgent*—More talent and resources squandered

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The second film in the *Divergent* science fiction series, *Insurgent*, set in a post-apocalyptic Chicago divided into factions, seems hell-bent on negating any redeeming qualities displayed in the first film, about which we wrote last year:

“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.”

This installment, directed by German-born Robert Schwentke (*Red*, *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, *R.I.P.D.*), abandons any attempt at nuance or originality and tritely falls back on themes such as teenage romance, family betrayal and grabs for power at the top. Released simultaneously in 3D and regular format, the film is rife with unnecessary and repetitive special effects involving swooping from great heights, narrowly missing sharp edges and slow-motion breaking glass. This is a shame.

What story there is, leaving aside the obligatory budding romance between the main characters, Tris (Shailene Woodley) and Four (Theo James), involves the group of escaped teenagers hiding from Jeanine (Kate Winslet), the leader of a coup in which the Erudite class has taken power. Running from sector to sector, they are eventually pinned down and Tris gives herself up to save a number of young people from committing suicide while under mind control through brain implants over which Jeanine wields power. I wish I were making this up—sadly, this is what it’s come to.

Along the way they encounter Four’s mother, Evelyn (Naomi Watts)—previously believed to be dead—who

has an eye on making a bid for power herself. As in the *Hunger Games* series, the message advanced here is that power, no matter the class holding it, is corrupting and to be shunned. There is no differentiating between those controlling society’s resources—including the power over life and death itself—and those who are struggling to resist oppression and build a different world. Evelyn is as malicious and violent as the established leaders against which the insurgents plot.

For the teenagers, the central issue becomes the need for repeated and narrow escapes and a focus on the possibility of a stolen kiss here and there. This is disappointing, considering that the first *Divergent* film made an effort to suggest that Tris considered herself part of a larger society, however her role was to be officially defined. Here we have a retreat, with Woodley’s character forced into the simplistic role of a martyr.

The effective neutering of this character, after such a promising beginning, deserves to be thought about. While *Divergent* was far from flawless, it suggested some stirrings, some hints of deeper thought than had been typical in the fare aimed at teenagers in recent years. Director Neil Burger (*The Lucky Ones*) may have had something to do with that.

This generation, growing up without the memory of a time when the US was not at war, or threatening to go to war in some quarter of the world, and for whom the economic situation has become increasingly dire—including record and rising numbers of people their own age living in abject poverty—responds very vocally and powerfully to the idea of resistance, and even social revolution. But what do they get instead? Time and again, they are presented with heroes and heroines who engage in fist fights, knife-fights and perilous physical challenges to be solved through

teamwork—but to what end?

In the current wave of films aimed at the younger generations, the upshot for the most part of any change in the political system is simply more of the same. While that may reflect the reality of the moribund two-party system in the US, where one corporate-sponsored warmonger replaces another, it does not offer any way out of the present crisis, and indeed it is not intended to. The protagonists generally elect to delve into matters concerning those directly connected to themselves, to turn further inward and to abandon the wider social world to its fate. On the part of the writers and directors, this expresses some combination of genuine despair and a self-serving, reactionary political agenda.

The number of films and books aimed at this age group that portray draconian—if not openly fascistic—post-apocalyptic societies in which children are pitted against each other for survival by an overclass is staggering and continues to grow.

In each instance, we are expected to swallow another iteration of the story wherein a few escape (for a little while) before coming to recognize that the supposed “revolutionary” saviors are just as dreadful and repressive as the existing rulers. They eventually make some sort of peace with the society that comes after the amorphous, fast-forwarded-through destruction of the one from which they fled. In most cases many of the symptoms are removed (we no longer have to go to The Fight, The Sector, etc.), but there is no explanation of what kind of culture has replaced it, or how.

Teenagers and young adults—and all of us, come to that—deserve better than this. We need characters drawn from life, not super-heroes, not saints, but recognizable human beings with recognizable strengths and weaknesses, in works that hold up a mirror to life. Many young people are entering into opposition, with varying degrees of consciousness, against the existing social order, its inequality, its injustice, its barbarism.

These films and film heroes have fallen far behind.



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