

# Armageddon Time: Growing up in 1980s New York

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*Written and directed by James Gray*

*Armageddon Time* is clearly a personal film, one close to the heart of writer-director James Gray (*Little Odessa*, *The Yards*, *Ad Astra*). Inspired by Gray's own life, it is in large part a child's-eye view of growing up in a Jewish family in New York City as the decade of the 1980s begins.

The film, with an effective cast that includes the admirable Anthony Hopkins, has some of the same strengths as Gray's earlier work. Set in a working-class and lower-middle-class neighborhood in the New York City borough of Queens, it is a realistic look at life as seen by a sixth-grader, and has some moving moments. The movie also suffers from serious weaknesses, however. Like Gray's earlier efforts, it remains very much on the surface of events, and is guided by a fatalistic and complacent outlook shaped over the past 40 years of social reaction and cultural stagnation.

Paul Graff (Banks Repeta), the young protagonist who is based on the filmmaker himself, attends Public School 173. He is having difficulties, both at home and in class. Neither his teacher nor his parents have much patience for the young boy's artistic interests. His father and mother, Irving (Jeremy Strong) and Esther (Anne Hathaway), have different plans for him. Although US-born themselves, their outlook is plainly influenced by Esther's immigrant parents (Anthony Hopkins and Tovah Feldshuh). Irving and Esther want their children, Paul and his older brother Ted (Ryan Sell), to fit in and to acquire the trappings of success in America.

This is the cusp of the 1980s. The story begins in early September, with the start of the school year, and ends a few months later, after Reagan has been elected president. The near-bankruptcy of New York took place only five years earlier. The social crisis is visible everywhere. The Reagan years were to inaugurate an era of brutal austerity, followed by the financialization of the economy and

unprecedented inequality, an era that has been presided over by Democrats as well as Republicans.

A partial exception to those who preach conformism and acceptance of the status quo is Paul's grandfather Aaron (Hopkins). The elderly man tells his grandson something of the young boy's own family background. Aaron's mother came from Ostropol, a small town in Ukraine, a town that still exists. The Jews were frequent victims of murderous pogroms. "We're looking for the Jews!" exclaimed the attackers. Paul's great-grandmother saw her parents stabbed to death when she was 15 or 16 years old. "She had nightmares about it as long as she lived," Aaron explains.

The young woman "got away to Liverpool" and married there. This explains the presence of Hopkins, with a slight but unmistakable British accent, in this role. Aaron explains the roots of anti-Semitism to Paul, the Czarist regime's promotion and utilization of backwardness to bolster its rule.

In grade school, Paul pairs up with another "troublemaker." Johnny Davis (Jaylin Webb) is the only black student in Paul's class, and one of the few in the school as a whole. After one particular scrape, Paul's parents decide to transfer him to the nearby private school already attended by his brother. They consider themselves quite tolerant and liberal—a later scene shows them scoffing angrily as Reagan's election victory is announced on television. At the same time, they consider the black student a bad influence, and are determined to expose Paul to the rigors of hard work and discipline.

The Graffs do not have much money—Irving is a boiler repairman. The expensive tuition will be paid by his grandfather. While Aaron is closest of all the family members to Paul, and he wants above all that the boy find happiness, he also wants him to be "successful," and is willing to help.

Paul transfers to the private school, one without black or

poor students. He continues to hang out with Johnny. This leads to the film's sad climactic scenes, after Paul comes up with the hare-brained idea—these are the early days of personal and schoolroom computers—to enlist Johnny's assistance in stealing one of the latter from the school.

The 1980 setting is well done, including subway cars entirely covered by graffiti, as well as other, less obvious, touches. It is revealing to see the character of Fred Trump (John Diehl), the father of the former president, strutting around the private school, as one of its wealthy benefactors. Maryanne Trump (Jessica Chastain), Donald's sister and the future federal judge, gives a keynote address to an assembly that is noteworthy for its reactionary character.

The central characters are ably and commendably depicted, and that includes the performances by Webb and Repeta. Paul comes across as endearing, imaginative but very much the 12-year-old, still not a teenager. At one point, he somewhat laughably informs Johnny that his mother “runs” P.S. 173. In fact she is only a housewife who is active in the local parent-teachers association, and has spoken of running for the PTA presidency.

Webb is equally fine as Johnny, fun-loving, smart and also rebellious, with a bitterness born of painful realities. He lives with his grandmother and is used to being treated with the contempt that is shown to him by the boys' teacher. The end of the story finds him understandably resentful, but not angry with Paul.

Hopkins stands out among the cast, partly because of the obvious care, affection and detail with which Gray has painted this major influence on his own childhood. While there is sometimes an overly simplistic or even stereotyped quality to some of the other characters—especially the parents, as well as Esther's mother, in a relatively small role—Grandpa Aaron is alive with wisdom, history and also some contradiction. While he may sense that neither this particular private school nor the public school will nurture his grandson's gifts, he has nothing else to offer, not that he should be expected to.

There is some food for thought in *Armageddon Time*. But there are also grounds for strong criticism. This snapshot of New York City in 1980 is limited and a bit too crude. It is a world as seen by the young Paul, but also by the adult he became. And here is where the film comes up quite short.

There is a passivity about the work, a feeling of inevitability. To Gray this story is primarily about “white privilege.” Those who escaped the Holocaust, or whose families perished in the Holocaust, are far better off than

Johnny Davis, and the reason for this, according to the film's standpoint, is American racism.

Paul and his family are relatively privileged, and the movie takes a nostalgic, somewhat sentimental and regretful look back at that time. The regret, and an aura of pessimism, flow from Gray's feeling, unstated but nevertheless clear, that not much has changed in the past 42 years, except perhaps for the worse.

Gray does not fault his parents for wanting opportunities for their son. But he sees this as a world of competition within the working class, a world of stratification and division that is eternal.

The message that nothing has changed or can be expected to change is summed up by Paul's impatient and at times violent father. Seeking to explain what has happened to Paul, the difference between the treatment he has received and that meted out to Johnny, Irving says, “Life is unfair...sometimes people get a raw deal.”

This would appear to be what Gray has taken away from his childhood. Without questioning the writer-director's personal sincerity, the outlook has to be challenged. Gray, the well-known director, has done well, and he perhaps somewhat guiltily contrasts himself to Johnny and so many others. Missing in this “snapshot,” however, are the great majority of the working class, the tens of millions affected by deindustrialization, the transformed role of liberalism and the unions, vast social inequality, the opioid epidemic and today the reality of COVID, the threat of dictatorship and world war.

The issue is not “white privilege,” but class privilege. To miss that is to miss the mainspring of social life, the objective basis for the entire set-up undergoing massive change, and the antidote for demoralized world-weariness.

One film cannot address all of this, of course, but in *Armageddon Time* Gray has chosen to focus on a narrow slice of the past that ignores too much of the history and therefore leaves a distorted picture, one that rests at the level of appearance without getting to the deeper, more complex meaning of these experiences.



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