

IN THE DARK

A beaming cast and special effects can't hide *Star Trek's* wobbly plot

STAR TREK: INTO DARKNESS: Directed by J.J. Abrams. Written by Roberto Orci, Alex Kurtzman and Damon Lindelof. Cinematography, Daniel Mindel. Editors, Maryann Brandon and Mary Jo Markey. Music, Michael Giacchino. Starring Chris Pine, Zachary Quinto, Benedict Cumberbatch, Zoe Saldana, John Cho, Simon Pegg, Karl Urban and Bruce Greenwood. Paramount Pictures, 2013. PG-13. 132 minutes. ★★☆☆☆.

Four years ago, J.J. Abrams' *Star Trek* reboot pulled off a slick little trick. A shiny, whizbang movie with an excellent ensemble cast, the 2009 *Trek* restarted the series timeline, giving Abrams and company endless freedom to boldly go to entirely new places, unencumbered by the history writ in the TV shows and earlier films.

What have they done with that freedom? Why, revisited beloved *Trek* plots, of course! *Star Trek: Into Darkness* borrows from the highest of old-*Trek's* high points, but large swaths of its plot have a limp, warmed-over feel, which considerably lessens the stakes.

But those stakes are, at least at first, ever so high. After a goofy, rule-breaking jaunt on a primitive planet, James T. Kirk (Chris Pine, handily referencing but not imitating Shatner) finds his captaincy revoked — thanks to a report turned in by First Officer Spock (Zachary Quinto). Before his demotion really goes into effect, disaster strikes: A huge explosion in London leads to a smaller attack in San Francisco, which leads to an angry Kirk demanding that Admiral Marcus (Peter Weller) let him run off to the far reaches of space to hunt down the man responsible.

This man, former Starfleet agent John Harrison (an excellent, creepily graceful Benedict Cumberbatch), happens to be hanging out on the Klingon Homeworld, a plot point which seems very relevant but is quickly dropped once Harrison is on board the *Enterprise*, where

he reveals his true identity and does some rich villainous monologuing. Meanwhile, Scotty (Simon Pegg) quits his post when Kirk demands he bring on board some mysterious torpedoes; a mysterious science officer, Carol (Alice Eve), joins the crew; and Spock and Uhura (Zoe Saldana) squabble a lot, mostly over the fact that Spock acts like the half-Vulcan he is. Uhura sees a little more action this time around, but *Trek* is still a boys' club, a fact underscored by Alice Eve's character. Supposedly a weapons expert, she's really there as eye candy and gets a bogglingly stupid underwear scene to prove it.

Into Darkness's last third is one long, explosive, lens-flare-laden sequence in which everyone almost dies. Repeatedly. Lots of people *do* die, but they are only random crew and are never mentioned again. Despite the issues of morality, ethics and loss that occasionally dog the characters, few actions actually have consequences.

While you're watching this, it's plenty entertaining, all shiny surfaces, pretty people and the delicate tinkle of ice crystals in space, occasionally punctuated by a perfect

"Dammit, man!" from McCoy. It's also built of gossamer, and a tiny wisp of thought will blow it all away (or at least make you think of *Galaxy Quest*). Once you start asking questions, *Into Darkness* dissolves into inconsistency.

Sure, in the last movie, the bad guy's ship had space balconies and the entire crew of the *Enterprise* thought it a good idea to hang out next to a black hole; this isn't exactly new. But is it unreasonable to expect that the film's writers might have put a little more thought into their sequel? Maybe: If you look past the fantastic cast, Daniel Mindel's sleek cinematography and Michael Giacchino's button-pushing score, you'll find the wizards behind the curtain, waving their hands and hoping the high-gloss effects distract us. Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman wrote two of the *Transformers* movies. Damon Lindelof co-wrote the asinine *Prometheus*. All three are among *Cowboys and Aliens's* eight writers. That *Into Darkness* reaches for relevance while ringing hollow should come as little surprise, but that doesn't stop it from being disappointing.

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