The Divergent Series: Allegiant review

The third Divergent film, Allegiant, may be the best of the lot but sadly, that's not saying much...

This is a spoiler-free review of Allegiant, but it does contain plot details from the previous two Divergent films, so if you're not up to date, proceed with caution.

It's that time of year again. It may still be stomping around in the too-big shoes of the Hunger Games movies, but The Divergent Series: Allegiant marks the third of four instalments in the series of movies based on Veronica Roth's trilogy of novels. You'd never know it from the way it's been presented, but like Katniss and Harry Potter before, we're in Part One and Part Two territory for the first half of Roth's climactic story.

If you haven't been back since 2014's Divergent, you needn't be too concerned with jogging your memory about the series' convoluted caste system, in which a walled-off Chicago is divided into factions based on their predominant personal characteristics - bravery, intelligence, selflessness, honesty and, er... happiness - in the aftermath of an apocalyptic event. In essence, it's what might happen if a Zimbio personality quiz took over the world.

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However, the films are moving on. Having discovered at the end of the previous film that the city is the subject of an elaborate social experiment, the divergent Tris (Shailene Woodley) and her beau Four (Theo James) are eager to go out and rejoin humanity. However, the despotic Jeanine (Kate Winslet in the previous two films) has been replaced by Four’s mother, Evelyn, who is enjoying popular support in the honeymoon of her own fascist dictatorship and forbids anyone going beyond the wall.

Along with a motley crew of allies, (series regulars Ansel Elgort, Miles Teller, Maggie Q and Zoe Kravitz) Tris and Four bust out and discover an advanced city in the midst of the radioactive wasteland, which is headquarters to a Bureau of Genetic Welfare. The administrator of the city, David, (Jeff Daniels) is thrilled to meet Tris, the product of his experiment, but as tensions between Evelyn and the burgeoning Allegiant faction simmer in Chicago, she discovers she’s not out of the woods yet.

If you’re completely lost by this point, it’s either because you’ve never seen any of the films or you don’t remember much of this from last year. Director Robert Schwentke returns for this one and continues what has been a gruelling and very gradual incline in quality over the course of the series so far.

Over two films, the far-fetched futuristic trials have gone from looking like ITV’s The Cube to looking a bit more like The Matrix, thanks to the success of the first film and an up-tick in the sequel’s budget. The visual and thematic influences here are more diverse - it goes from Logan’s Run to The Truman Show inside half an hour.

Some of the most impressively realised sequences in the film take place in the space between the two sites where the story is really taking place, in the burnt orange wasteland where the mix of arid devastation and futuristic aircraft looks like nothing so much as Mad Max on Gallifrey. Although there’s still some dodgy CGI and it’s never in danger of doing anything original, it’s still more exhilarating and better told than the previous exposition-heavy instalments.

While the dramatic shifts in tone between films have made the series a more interesting proposition than it ought to be, we haven’t really followed the characters through in a way where we care for them. The series’ biggest recurring problem is that it always feels like they’re underusing Shailene Woodley, even though she’s the protagonist. Like Kristen Stewart in Twilight, she feels miscast, but she’s already doing other better projects while coming back to spin her wheels as Tris once a year. Even with nothing to work with, she’s by far the most watchable part of the film.

Three films in, the rest of the characters have left naught but footprints in the snow. Teller’s deadpan snarker Peter sneaks into the centre of the action once again to deliver withering asides and at least makes something of an impression, but characters like James’ Four has all of the dynamism of a baked potato. An arbitrary stakes-raising death lands in the first half hour and even though it’s a character who has been in all three films, you find yourself going “Wait, who was that?”

It makes complete sense when we find out that the unlikely faction system was no more than a massive social experiment, the divergent Tris (Shailene Woodley) and her beau Four (Theo James) are eager to go out and rejoin humanity. However, the despotic Jeanine (Kate Winslet in the previous two films) has been replaced by Four’s mother, Evelyn, who is enjoying popular support in the honeymoon of her own fascist dictatorship and forbids anyone going beyond the wall.

To their credit, screenwriters Noah Oppenheim, Adam Cooper and Bill Collage have made this the most watchable part of the film. Schwentke has performed a Herculean feat to bring up the series average away big spoilers. Action figures and LEGO sets are giving clues to big movie spoilers - even before the films concerned are released. But why?

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