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Into Darkness: Representing American Anxieties

The film *Star Trek Into Darkness* (Abrams, 2013) examines what it means to be human and the fears that are latent within the American subconscious through layered storytelling coupled with the special effects that are now conventional in big budget studio productions. There are many elements within the film that lend themselves to the intricate narrative weaving including mise-en-scene, sound and especially characters. All of these elements combine to create an engaging science fiction thriller that also subtly comments on America's global status and anxieties about the future.

The complexities of life in a global society are difficult to traverse and the place of the U.S. in the grand scheme of things is unlike any other period in history. American cinema utilizes various means to express the unique position that we find ourselves in today. The science fiction film genre explores the possibilities that lay before us along with the potential that exists within humans. According to John Belton “[a]s human existence becomes increasingly tenuous in the twenty-first century world of global warming [...], AIDS (and other pandemics), terrorism, (...) and financial insecurity, we rely more and more on these genres to affirm the centrality of the human...” (295).

Many of the characters in *Star Trek Into Darkness* can be viewed as representations of humanity in modern society. For instance, First Officer Spock, part human and part Vulcan, depicts the struggle of intuition against logic in the age of technology where rationality takes precedence over emotion. Spock is conflicted by this internal battle of head versus heart throughout the film, which is best seen in the sequence when the team heads to Kronos to retrieve John Harrison. After he notes that the odds of

Harrison attempting to kill them are “91.6%,” Lieutenant Nyota Uhura exclaims that Spock does not care about dying nor does he feel anything. Spock replies with a monologue that expresses his inner turmoil. The low-key lighting corresponds to the sun slowly setting as the characters journey into the atmosphere of Kronos, and the non-diegetic score of violins slowly and tenuously heard in the background work to magnify Spock’s humanity. The poignant speech concludes as Spock explains that after joining with Admiral Pike’s consciousness as he lay dying, he was reminded of the overwhelming emotion he felt when his home planet was destroyed. The pain of that experience is the reason Spock chooses not to feel. It is not the absence of caring that makes him Vulcan, but the abundance of caring that makes him human.



In contrast, Lieutenant Uhura characterizes femininity in American society; she complements Spock’s seemingly cold, rational nature with her overtly emotional disposition. She portrays the nurturing and sentimental aspects of womanhood in contrast to what it means to be a part of “man”-kind today. As Belton states, “[w]hat it means to be human or nonhuman is necessarily bound up with what it means to be male or female, another boundary that is central to [the science fiction genre]” (274). While there is a

latent skirmish between humanity and technology in the film, the characters of Spock, the half-human alien and Uhura, the woman, add the element of struggle between humans as representations of “the other.”



In trying to use a gentle hand to guide Kirk into making the right decision about how to handle the attack from the Klingons, Uhura urges him to use his head and proceed with caution. As the lights of the Klingon ships shine through the windows and the ominous music trumpets behind her words, she pleads with the Captain to let her protect them all by using her linguistic skills to negotiate with the enemy. The emotional flutter of panic and trepidation that she must be feeling is mimicked in the mise-en-scene of stark scenery and wind blown debris while Uhura attempts to reason with the Klingons. The battle sequence that follows, full of special effects explosions and ray guns fired repeatedly, accompanied by the threatening music signifying danger, at first suggests that Uhura is strong enough to stand and fight alongside the men. However, moments later we

see her running for cover which implies that women today are still viewed as the weaker sex in spite of all the progress made in the last century regarding gender equality.

When the battle subsides and John Harrison surrenders, an enraged Captain Kirk begins to beat him to avenge the murder of Kirk's mentor, Admiral Pike. Uhura pleads with Kirk to stop, again demonstrating the feminine proclivity for emotional appeals, in contrast to the Captain's hotheaded and violent tendencies. Captain Kirk is the all-American male who acts first and asks questions later. He relies on his gut instinct to make decisions, which often move the narrative forward. The version of American masculinity Kirk embodies mimics the heroism that was triumphant in the science fiction cinema of the 1950s. Belton illustrates the parallel between these times periods, explaining that "from the 1950s to the present, science fiction films function as barometers of cultural anxiety, addressing many of the Big Ideas facing postwar American society" (289). Kirk, even with his character flaws, represents redemption in uncertain times.

Throughout the film, we see Kirk making rash choices and, at times, acting like a petulant child to get his way. If *Star Trek Into Darkness* is an allegory for American culture in the 21st century, Kirk represents the idea of heroism in a stubborn, young and indignant nation. His nature as both a selfish young man and the underdog hero is best shown in the sequence when Admiral Marcus asks Kirk to release Khan from the Enterprise into his custody. During this sequence, the mise-en-scene, particularly the lighting, creates the effect of Kirk's basic goodness in contrast to the malevolence of Marcus. Not only is the Admiral shadowed in low-key lighting, his face appears sweaty and oily, adding to the idea that the character, who was previously viewed as grandfather

figure to Pike's father figure, is suddenly a looming threat to the Enterprise and its mission. Captain Kirk represents the adaptability of Americans in these inconstant modern times against not only outside threats, but also the remnants of corrupted American values represented by Admiral Marcus.

The many layers of social commentary go deeper still. The American way of life is characterized by both the modern Kirk and the traditional Marcus, while the threats to our way of life are represented by Khan, the Klingons and even the Starship Enterprise. The threats that they respectively represent are ones that Americans have been anxious about for some time, namely, genetic engineering, war with foreign enemies, and technological advancements gone awry. The Klingons most obviously portray our fear of outsiders and the assumption that they will, eventually wish to do us harm. The character of Khan speaks volumes as social commentary— what we fear more than terrorist sects or war with foreign nations is the possibility of a powerful enemy who is the ultimate evil because he is created by humans and cannot be stopped.



Likewise, the *Enterprise* is a man-made vessel which renders the crew helpless throughout the film due to what is initially assumed to be technical malfunctions, although it is later revealed to be the work of Marcus. In another resounding statement on the concerns of American culture, we fear the possibilities of technology and especially its potential to be used against us. A conflicting threat is posed by those like Marcus who cling to the militaristic creeds of the past, and who undermine progress by feigning the threat technology poses to humanity.

The culmination of all of these formal elements and representative characters in *Star Trek Into Darkness* is best explained by Belton:

“[i]n the age of reason, reason replaces superstition and irrationality, initiating the interrogation of traditional spiritual and religious beliefs.... Science fiction arises in response to the dramatic advances in science during the Enlightenment and speaks to the anxiety about the machine and new technology associated with the [...] Industrial Revolutions” (281).

The film showcases many of the dilemmas that are faced by humanity in modern culture. Americans live with greater uncertainty than ever before. Though set in the future, the layered storytelling allows audiences to reflect on contemporary issues. Viewers of *Star Trek Into Darkness* can relate to the representation of anxieties involved in the constant struggle for progress in the face of an ambiguous future.

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