



“Divergent”: Futuristic Society Tries to Eradicate Human Nature

Imagine a world in which people must choose a single characteristic within themselves on which all other aspects of their lives will depend. Citizens in this world are segregated into five factions; and on their 16th birthday, the young must choose the faction to which they will belong: Dauntless (brave), Abnegation (selfless), Erudite (intelligent), Amity (serene), or Candor (honest). On the other hand, if you find that you have components of each of the factions within yourself, and dare foster each of them rather than just one, you are considered “Divergent,” and therefore dangerous.



This is the world in which we find ourselves in the exciting futuristic book *Divergent* by Veronica Roth (the first volume of a trilogy that also includes *Insurgent* and *Allegiant*), as well as the film adaptation of *Divergent*, the subject of this review.

Set in a dystopian Chicago, *Divergent* specifically focuses on a teenage girl named Beatrice Prior (Shailene Woodley), whose family belongs to the selfless faction, Abnegation. It is her time to choose a faction and the choice is a difficult one — to choose to remain in Abnegation means that she would be able to live out the rest of her life in the security of her family’s faction, but this choice would also mean a life without adventure or excitement. She finds herself instead considering the Dauntless faction, but fears that she will not have what it takes to survive the initiation process for such a strong and fearless group.

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Prior to the choosing ceremony, children are required to take an aptitude test of sorts that is intended to help them decide which faction is best for them. It is during this test that Beatrice first learns of Divergence, and to her surprise, learns that she may in fact be Divergent herself. Her test administrator informs her to keep it a secret, warning that she would be in grave danger if anybody in the government were to find out.

When it is time to make her decision, Beatrice chooses Dauntless, and very quickly, we witness the transformation of a humble, unsure girl to a confident and brave young woman. She even adopts a new name for herself: Tris.

Tris makes some new friends, as well as enemies, during her initiation, and cannot help but feel an intense attraction to her leader, known to the group as Four (Theo James). She continually surprises herself by testing her own boundaries and discovers she is much braver than she would have ever believed.

She also learns that she must do well during her initiation, as the Dauntless recently instituted a new



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rule that ranks initiates, with those who rank lowest being eliminated from the faction and becoming factionless, a frightening fate considering that the factionless are little more than homeless pariahs.

No sooner does Tris make it to the end of her initiation, however, than she discovers that key leaders in two of the factions are orchestrating a nefarious plot that threatens the lives of those she cares about. And she determines that this murderous plot, which is actually a shadowy enforcement arm for the regime, must be stopped. The plot is headed by Jeanine Matthew (Kate Winslet), the leader of the Erudite faction.

As a Divergent, Tris is a particular target for suppression. The Divergent are not easily controlled and therefore pose a significant threat to the established order. While almost all of us in the real world would be classified as Divergent because it is basic human nature to experience a multitude of emotions and characteristics, human nature in this warped world is molded and controlled by the regime through eugenics, drugs, and conditioning. Yet despite the regime's best efforts, human nature cannot be completely suppressed, and those who do not fit the mold threaten the regime and its faction system. This is particularly the case with those who refuse to be pigeonholed into the factions and who dare to resist.

Tris' discovery of the government plot, her efforts to stop it, and the government's efforts to suppress her and all those classified as Divergent is the story of the first book in the trilogy. *Divergent* ultimately lays the foundation for the major action to follow in the second and third books. As a story, it introduces and then abandons various elements that will be developed later in the trilogy, but is exciting enough to keep audiences interested regardless.

While much of the film and novel focus on Beatrice's journey through the initiation process and the interaction of the new arrivals, there is a dark and more profound element to the story — it is a portrayal of what happens when a government attempts to play God.

The story raises a number of significant questions. Is it fair for people to have to choose a single attribute to perfect and abandon all other characteristics of their humanity? What sort of fate awaits those who are identified as Divergent, and why are they such a threat to the government? How does one become Divergent? What lies beyond the walls that surround the city wherein the factions are found?

Many of the questions are not answered in the first installment of the trilogy, but viewers who enjoy the film should consider reading the remaining books of the series as they patiently await the second and third movie adaptations. The trilogy explores mature themes dealing with tyranny, eugenics, and government overreach, as well as classic literary themes such as selflessness and sacrifice.

While *Divergent* is classified as science fiction, there are plenty of elements of realism, making it a sort of frightening warning. The foundation of the society in which Tris and her friends find themselves can be traced to eugenics and the notion of creating the perfect race of people. People like Margaret Sanger would applaud the efforts of the leaders in this film.

Likewise, in the film those who support the faction system and who do whatever it takes to maintain it continually adhere to talking points about the "greater good" and "keeping peace." They justify killing and other violations of inalienable rights as necessary means to an end, in much the same way that tyrannical regimes throughout history always have.

In this light, the film is less science fiction and more historical fiction.



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It is worth commenting on the comparisons being made between *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games*, with *Divergent* ultimately losing the battle. But this does not mean that *Divergent* is not worth reading or seeing. *The Hunger Games* trilogy was brilliantly written and quite profound, but any other film or novel that dares to fall into the same genre should not have to pass a *Hunger Games* “litmus” test. Not every futuristic science fiction political thriller is going to be *The Hunger Games*, just as not every love story will be Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

On its own, *Divergent* is a very exciting story that deals with significant themes in a way that can be easily understood by younger audiences. It is critical for young people to learn the downfalls of blind loyalty to the system and a failure to question authority, and *Divergent* illustrates these downfalls clearly. It stands apart from similar stories in its genre as a variation on the sort of futuristic tyrannical societies we have seen in recent years, in both books and films. The element of the faction system in this story is a unique one and offers interesting commentary about the deception of choice. While the people in the factions are made to believe they have choice, the choice is quite illusory. After all, they may choose only one of five paths.

Truthfully, the difference between *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* is that the latter is more of a coming-of-age story than the former. *Hunger Games*’ Katniss is a compelling and wonderful protagonist, but her story never overshadowed the major theme in the backdrop, dominated by significant political undertones. In *Divergent*, however, the politics are much more implicit and do not appear to be a major plot point, at least not until the very end of the film. As a result, younger moviegoers may better relate to *Divergent* than older ones. In the movie version, this is reinforced by the soundtrack, which at times undermines intense moments with cheery teenie-bopper musical interludes.

Simply put, *Divergent*, unlike *The Hunger Games*, is a bit more melodramatic than dramatic. And although this changes somewhat in the sequels to *Divergent*, the overall focus of *Divergent/Insurgent/Allegiant* is simply different from that of *The Hunger Games*. While *Divergent* is more likely to be appreciated by younger audiences, *The Hunger Games* can be appreciated by a more varied demographic.

Still, in no way does any of this take away from all that is good about *Divergent*. The movie is fascinating, exciting, and thrilling, and it does a good job of staying close to the novel.

And the role of Tris proved to be a great one for Woodley, who is quite convincing as a young female who is unsure of herself and yet willing to forge on. Her humility and slow progress to success make it easy for audiences to root for her. And her virtuous nature and unwillingness to be sexually indiscriminate are qualities to be valued.

The chemistry between Woodley and the brooding and tormented James is powerfully portrayed, and the moments they spend on screen together are some of the most captivating scenes in the movie.

Overall, *Divergent* is a worthy film in a genre that appears to be expanding. There is an increasing hunger for stories about out-of-control governments and the tragic and lethal effects those governments have on the daily lives of people. The new additions to this genre — whether in print or celluloid — should serve as proper warnings in the same way that books such as *1984* and *Animal Farm* did for older generations. Hopefully, many of those who see or read *Divergent* or *The Hunger Games* will “graduate” to reading *1984* and *Animal Farm*.

And hopefully, many, many more will grasp and apply the anti-totalitarian message than in the past — enough to recognize and eradicate the evils of totalitarianism in our own world.



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Photo of Shailene Woodley, Theo James, and Kate Winslet: divergentthemovie.com



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