



Star Trek: Yes, Boldly Go

The latest *Star Trek* movie is the 11th movie in a franchise that has also seen five extended television series (if you don't count the animated cartoon series in the 1970s, and I don't), and it is by far the best of the lot. That's perhaps a dubious compliment, in that some of the feature films were barely watchable.

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But dubious compliments are unnecessary for this movie. It's a first-class action film with solid acting performances from the entire cast, and even stellar performances from some of the minor characters. Bruce Greenwood particularly shines as Christopher Pike, and Faran Tahir makes a strong impression in just a few minutes as Captain Robau. Zachary Quinto (as Spock) is also getting rave reviews, and it's tough for Quinto to play a mostly unemotional character with pointy ears. I realize that — absent pointy ears — this pretty much sums up Arnold Schwarzenegger's entire film career. I'm simply trying to point out that Quinto would've had an easy job if he didn't have to contend with franchise expectations that he match Leonard Nimoy's Spock (and Nimoy has a bit part in the film) in both appearance and mannerism.



The new *Star Trek* is a prequel to the original television series, beginning with a flashback to the birth of James Tiberius Kirk (played by Chris Pine) and covering the time period leading up to when he becomes captain of the starship *Enterprise*. Director J.J. Abrams adds some depth to the sometimes hollow characters from the television series, particularly Karl Urban's dead-on portrayal of "Bones" McCoy. Abrams is better known for producing hit television series (*Lost*, *Alias*, *Fringe*) than for his films (which included the dud *Mission Impossible III*). His reworking of the franchise is most of the reason he had the second highest box office weekend opening of the season (\$79.2 million) thus far, second only to the popular Marvel comic franchise *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (\$85 million).

I liked the cheesy (by today's standards) original Gene Roddenberry '60s television series for its often thoughtful treatment of controversial topics, and even the *Next Generation* series that began in 1987. But I never considered myself a "Trekkie" and the whole franchise lost me when it moved to *Deep Space Nine* and the ridiculous costuming for the evil "Ferengi" capitalists.



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on May 12, 2009

The movie doesn't imitate the television series in that it doesn't try to tackle deeper philosophical issues. The original series, as just about every other reviewer has pointed out, included the first televised interracial kiss and covered anti-war issues as the Vietnam conflict was winding down. And it often presented these ideas in thoughtful ways.

The presentation of controversial ideas didn't always work well for freedom lovers. *Star Trek* is, as Chris Pine (Kirk) [explained](#) in an interview, "the United Nations of Space." That latter point is one of the more irritating points of the whole franchise. The "Federation" of the world is a spiffy universal government that never seems to malfunction except in minor bureaucratic ways, and all we ever see is the military side of that government (i.e., "Starfleet"). Starfleet is some odd combination of the Air Force and NASA. Starfleet is an essential part of the franchise, but how realistic is it to have a competent national government — let alone a competent world government?

At least in the more weakly-scripted *Wolverine*, the bad guys were from the federal government. But in *Star Trek*, the heroes who save humanity are a part of a world government. It's just part of the franchise that viewers who believe in small government have to stomach.

Bruce Greenwood's Christopher Pike delivers both the best and the only distasteful lines of the movie in rapid succession to each other. The good line I won't spoil, but it's related to Pike's other remarks urging Kirk to join Starfleet with an invocation to "do something better." Except for the way it was scripted in this movie and the extraordinary way Greenwood delivers it, Pike's comment almost sounds like an Army recruiting commercial asking us to "be all you can be," or to be an "Army of One." Pike's line should ring hollow on whoever is repeating it, whether it is President Obama touting national service or Captain Christopher Pike recruiting for Starfleet. There's nothing implicitly wrong with serving your country, but the implication in such statements is that only in service to the state can one truly be noble. Forget about helping the poor like Mother Theresa did or volunteering in a soup kitchen, only state service can complete a man. Despite this errant line, the movie does not preach the way the franchise sometimes did under the direction of Rick Berman.

I could criticize the movie for being "lightweight," which it is in a philosophical sense. This is just a well-written action film without any pretense of offering the viewer any insight to the meaning of life or any principle of the human condition. It's a two-hour exercise in healthy escapism. For the *Star Trek* franchise, that's both good and bad news. The series sometimes hit the viewer over the head with leftist and humanist agitprop over the years, but it also occasionally offered real insight to the human condition. Great fiction has been said to involve complicated plots, complicated morals, and complicated characters, and by that standard *Star Trek* is lightweight. But it's certainly deeper than most of the fare that can be found in theaters across the land today. Consider, for example, that it's competing against *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* and *17 Again* and the *Hannah Montana Movie* at the box office right now.

The movie is also cleaner than most of what Hollywood producers distribute these days. Admittedly, that's a dubious distinction and a product of falling moral standards in this country. The movie is rated PG-13 primarily for its violence. In addition, there is some foul language and two improper sexual situations (though no nudity).

So if you're an adult in need of a few hours away from the troubles of the world, this is a good choice. Yes, boldly go. Just make sure you bring a wingman, and leave that empty seat between you. You don't want people talking.



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