

Not-Even-Close Encounters: “Super 8”

Written by Mike Schulz
Sunday, 12 June 2011 16:57

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SUPER 8

Though many of us might agree with the sentiment, saying that writer/director J.J. Abrams’ *Super 8* stumbles in its last half hour isn’t entirely accurate. For one thing, “stumbles” implies a relatively minor disruption, and what happens to this Spielberg-influenced sci-fi thriller as it nears its climax is hardly minor; the movie, in its final 30 minutes, doesn’t stumble so much as fly off a cliff, fall onto a bunch of land mines, and explode.

Yet “stumbles” also suggests that Abrams’ outing was chugging along fine *before* its concluding scenes. And while I’d love blame my disappointment with *Super 8* on an ill-considered third act, I can’t; to my mind, just about *nothing* here works, at least on a narrative level. There are lovely, naturalistic performances by leads Joel Courtney and Elle Fanning, and some impressive visuals and period details, and even the occasionally evocative, eerie moment, as when a pack of terrified dogs charges down the street for no discernible reason. But practically from the start, this homage to, and mélange of, *E.T.*, *Close Encounters*, *Jaws*, *War of the Worlds*, and other Spielberg productions – with Spielberg himself serving as *Super 8*’s co-producer – proves well-meaning but almost stupefyingly ineffective.

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I take no pleasure in conveying this, because Abrams’ affection for his cinematic hero’s *oeuvre* is so touchingly apparent that you really

want

to like

Super 8

; I’d say a good 20 minutes pass before you begin to realize that something isn’t right here – that Abrams is giving you the Spielberg flourishes without making them cohere in any meaningful, or even logical, way. Set in a small Ohio steel town in the summer of 1979, the film concerns a group of young teenagers working to complete their low-budget zombie movie. One night during shooting, the teens witness, and barely survive, a spectacular locomotive crash that one of their teachers appears responsible for, and in which some ...

thing

... appears to have escaped one of the train compartments. Fearing the wrath of their parents (and the confiscation of their movie), the pubescent film crew agrees to keep their presence at the site of destruction a secret, but quickly discovers that the mysterious railway accident is leading to greater mysteries. Why are so many of the community’s electronic devices – particularly microwave ovens – suddenly missing? Why have all of the dogs seemingly hightailed it out of town? And why have a band of grim-faced military men, led by a typically untrustworthy Noah Emmerich, descended on the sleepy burg?

This is all kind of fun, for a while. While the dialogue between the half-dozen wannabe filmmakers sounds less like unforced, 1979 teen-speak than the polished, *Goonies*-style repartee of practiced child actors, the kids are amusing enough, with the soulful Courtney and Fanning far

better

than amusing. While the rocky, estranged relationship between Courtney and his father, played by Kyle Chandler, is a too-obvious set-up for later sentiment – mom having recently perished in a steel-mill accident – it strikes the right, requisite notes of parental abandonment so prevalent in Spielberg’s early work. (Fanning’s character is also without a mother, a coincidence that

Super 8

, oddly, never really addresses.) And while many,

many

shots are direct lifts from similar compositions in

E.T.

and

Close Encounters –

hilltop views of the quiet suburban community, faceless men running around with flashlights – you’re still curious to see how Abrams will wind up employing these visual nods for his own, original take on a traditional Spielberg production.

Sadly, “original” is about the *last* adjective you’d use to describe *Super 8*, though “confused,” “foolish,” and “borderline-laughable” might all make the cut. That locomotive wreck, visually

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extravagant (and stunningly loud) though it is, is confounding enough; the collision that initiates the crash could *never* lead to the rain of demolition that follows, with train cars shooting in the air and landing hundreds of feet from the tracks. But afterward, the movie’s narrative progression is so awkwardly presented that it feels like every other sequence is bizarrely *out* of sequence, or missing entirely.

Chandler’s sheriff’s deputy rails at Emmerich’s military official for refusing to explain what’s going on, saying that he’s dealing with a whole town of frightened, paranoid citizens, but we have no idea what *brought* Chandler to this state of high dudgeon; prior to this scene, we weren’t even sure that Chandler *knew* about the military invasion. Courtney puts up a bulletin-board notice about his missing dog, which we watch being placed alongside dozens of *other* missing-dog notices, and in the next scene, the kid walks in his house and asks Chandler if he’s maybe seen their pooch; wouldn’t the kid ask his dad about the dog *before*

putting up that leaflet? A lengthy sequence, à la *Close Encounters*

, finds the community being corralled into buses and evacuated from the area, but once inside a bus, a few of our heroic kids – in an attempt to save one of their pals – realize they have to return to town. How do they perform this miraculous feat, with armed military officers at every turn? We’re never shown.

In deference to its advertising campaign, which (in a welcome change of pace) doled out precious little advance information about the film, I’m trying to be circumspect about details. But as the movie progressed, I found myself getting angrier and angrier with Abrams’ liberal borrowing from the Spielberg catalog with so little regard for how *Super 8*’s puzzle pieces might fit, or *if they’d* fit.

And by the climax, not only have all claims to narrative sense been completely chucked – in effect, the movie turns into a sci-fi

Jaws

with the shark played by E.T. – but absolutely none of the numerous tugs on our heartstrings have been earned; the noxious shamelessness of the huggy, tear-stained, staring-at-the-skies finale almost has to be seen to be believed. (Oh yeah, and Abrams’ signature lens flares, which pop onscreen even when characters are sitting in dark rooms? Irritating as hell.) Despite Abrams’ inarguable sincerity, or perhaps

because

of it,

Super 8

is a maddening experience. It usurps plot points, images, character and storyline arcs, and – with composer Michael Giacchino doing his best John Williams imitation – music cues, and still,

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somehow, delivers nothing in the way of actual Spielberg-ian magic.

For reviews of Midnight in Paris and Judy Moody & the Not Bummer Summer, see "[Oui, Oui!](#)"

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