

I've Seen Better Film on Teeth

Shameless reactions to modern cinema

by Leviathan Joe

It gives me no pleasure to pile on to the already-heaping mountain of bad press lavished upon *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, but it is what I must do because the movie is a barrel of dick. Rob Moore, vice chairman of Paramount Pictures, laughed off the reviews, saying, "Come on, it's a movie about alien robots... Audiences get what it's intended to be: a great piece of summer popcorn entertainment." Believe me: I 'get' it. In fact, I'm a major proponent of director Michael Bay's carnage-laden oeuvre. *The Island* is good fun; Nic Cage and Sean Connery made *The Rock* great. Those films worked because they took their time with the characters and built up a head of steam before unleashing the slam-bang goodness. This movie opens with a busy, middling chase sequence through Shanghai and then goes downhill for two hours before fizzling into nothingness. We've always known that action without context, means nothing, and *Transformers 2* is a painstaking illustration of that.

The first film was modestly entertaining, bolstered by its Americana elements and by the charisma of Shia LaBeouf, and by Kevin Dunn and Julie White as his droll, suburbanite parents. The transformations were impressive and made for some good action, although the final set piece went on far too long. If you started to get that shift, anxious feeling (boredom) during that scene in the first movie, strap in; that's what it's like for AT LEAST the last hour of this interminable white-noise machine.

It's two years since the events of the first film, and Sam Witwicky is off to college. He's a normal kid with normal problems. We know because he says so. His parents want to use this time to vacation and try new things. We know because his mother says so. We also know the Dad is excited to kick back and tee off, but why does he need to carry his clubs around the college campus while Sam is settling into his room? Meanwhile, there's a Decepticon overlord called the Fallen who once tried to destroy earth by harvesting the sun for energy or some shit. For millennia he has dreamed of returning to that wretched planet where he too was once betrayed by the Primes. We know. He says so. To activate the sun-harvesting machine, he needs a key called the Matrix of Leadership. It's a shiny, double-bladed prop that turns to dust when Sam finds it. This turns out to be helpful because it can be poured into a sock and transported easily; you wouldn't want to end up running for your life in a Michael Bay film with a sharp, bulky object crammed in your trousers.

The question with any Michael Bay film is how much he gets in his own way. His most annoying tendencies are on full display here. Every set is a runway for female characters to traipse across. Characters hammer away at their one-note personae. Helicopters churn sunsets. The pompous score and vapid rock tunes are on hand to pump up every moment more than Megan Fox's collagen-filled lips.

Speaking of which, I don't think any element is as poorly mishandled as Megan Fox's Mikaela character and her relationship with Sam. They shared some cute moments together in the original ("chemistry" might be pushing it) and she had some color in her cheeks and some grit in her hair. Here she's all dolled up to bland perfection and the first time we see her she's indelibly poised over a motorcycle seat, shot low so we get a peek

under her short shorts at that oh-so-delightful valley where thigh becomes ass. The camera swooshes relentlessly around her and Sam's tepid exchanges (seriously, it goes on for over a minute) and you wonder why Michael Bay won't simply let a moment exist.

The movie is packed with comic relief moments, most of which crash harder than a defeated Decepticon. Don't get me wrong; I'm all for the zany, lowbrow moments. There are some bits involving reefer brownies and Decepticon testicles that amuse on a modest level. Then there are some completely inexplicable moments. There's the lewd and pompous Astronomy 101 teacher who turns his lectures into thinly-veiled flirtations with gorgeous students. That's all well and good, but would he really be doing this in front of the Dean, a stately woman whose presence is revealed at the end of the scene? There's the tacked-on swine flu reference, which is smart move considering that by now, NO ONE is talking about swine flu.

Then there's the stick-in-the-mud state department liaison who asks a fair question: if the Decepticons are at war with the Autobots, wouldn't earth be safer if the Autobots left? And then suddenly *he's* the asshole, and we are supposed to laugh when it seems as if he's going to be thrown out of the back of plane without clear instructions on how to open his chute. Our clever heroes, meanwhile, don't think to ask whether a transforming fighter plane is an Autobot or Decepticon *before* bringing it to life.

No wonder there's a scene in which college library gets destroyed.

I realize I've been a merciless nit-pick up until this point, but I'd forgive it all if only the action sequences were any good, and they aren't. The transformations are considerably more elaborate, but inconsistent. In the heat of a chase, the Autobots transform almost instantaneously. Or, if they feel like showing off, it can go on all full 15 seconds. Once the cars become aliens and start beating the shit out of each other, however, they are considerably less interesting. They toss each other about and break things. There are shots of them shooting rockets at humans. There are shots of humans shooting back. They have incredibly advanced alien weaponry and armor but still can't subdue a small, entrenched unit of humans. When it comes down to it, they can't even outrun humans. And so it goes on and on. Even in context, none of it really seems to be happening. Missiles seem to come from nowhere. We end up in a forest and can't remember how we got there. The movie pours through the mind like a shiny dust through a sieve. There are so many hurried explanations for moving on to the next set piece it feels like the movie is trying to outrun its own logic. And what does it mean? Nobody gets hurt (well, save for the thousands upon thousands that presumably expire in all the helicopters and buildings and aircraft carriers that are gloriously demolished) and at the end, all we're left with is the promise of more to come.

Before I get around specifically to Michael Bay, I must acknowledge that there are some neat moments. Megatron surging up out of the ocean all pissed off-like is one, and another is when a Decepticon in space (I don't know all the names, sorry) takes over a satellite with its tentacles. There's a cool effect involving a Decepticon disguised as a human, although I still don't know what to make of the *Bad Boys II* poster featured prominently throughout that scene.

There's a particular callousness that comes to bear in Michael Bay films. It gave a delicious edge to *Bad Boys II*, a hypnotically shameless R-rated film that played gleefully in human entrails. The sterilized destruction in *Transformers 2* leaves a sour taste. Here our heroes survive boulder avalanches and an impossible drop in a car, without seatbelts.

Meanwhile a while a Navy submarine is dispatched because Megatron nudges it on his ascent up from the abyss, presumably, again, killing everyone.

At a press junket for the first film, a reporter asked Bay if thoughts of 9/11 entered his mind when a plane flies through a building in the final scene. Bay balked at the question, saying “Of course it did,” and muttering, “That’s fucking stupid.” Look, by all means, I think you *should* be able to crash planes into buildings in your movie. But you’d better be able to defend your reasoning, and treat a legitimate question with respect. It’s the same question that came up in my mind during this movie, as the American flag billowed and an aircraft carrier sank, as buildings crumbled and people fell from the upper floors, and meanwhile the writers get to kill and bring back to life

THREE of the major characters.

On the June 23rd *Opie and Anthony* show, Pethouse Pet 2007 Heather Vandeven spoke pointedly of her experience as an extra in *The Island*, adding to rumors of Bay’s hostile, abrasive rapport with the casts and crews of his films. She found his manner “disrespectful” and “grotesque.” This was right after she admitted that she doesn’t mind being slapped around a bit, if it’s sexy.

Look, I know I’ve nitpicked. My own mother thinks I’m indulging my jaded ego and reaching on some of these points. She may be right. Who cares that *Transformers 2* is so bad? Why take it personally?

The thing is that I care about these kinds of movies. There’s a cynic in me, true, but there’s also an ageless adolescent that will gladly part with logic and money for a good jolt. I’ll slog through a mountain of phony sentiment if you only bring the juice. I don’t know if I hate this movie. I’m surprised by it. How can turning Michael Bay loose on the *Transformers* concept with \$200 million result in something this uninteresting? I hate that it made nearly twice as much money on its first day than *The Island* made during its entire domestic run.

Michael Bay, dude, I love you. I know you tried your damndest to make the most entertaining movie possible. You’ve done good stuff. *The Island* was a step in the right direction. I look forward to your future projects. Just not *Transformers 3*.