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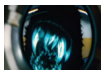

With SUPER 8 and ATTACK THE BLOCK having been released in theaters, the time is right to take an in-depth look at these horror/sci-fi flicks. Both movies share a similar and simple premise: kids vs. aliens. But although these pictures have comparable concepts, they’re entirely different versions of the same idea because of the imagination and viewpoints of their directors.

In J.J. Abrams’ SUPER 8, young Joe (Joel Courtney) and his friends are filming a Super 8 horror film when they unexpectedly witness a pick-up truck veer off into the tracks and collide into a moving train. During the explosive train derailment, a dangerous alien creature is released from one of the compartments. In Joe Cornish’s ATTACK THE BLOCK, Moses (John Boyega) and his gang, all in their early teens, are in the middle of mugging their neighbor, Sam (Jodie Whittaker), when a meteorite containing an alien invader suddenly crashes into a parked vehicle.

Both films explore the kids’ family units. In SUPER 8, Joe’s best friend and next-door neighbor, Charles (Riley Griffiths), has a wide nuclear family. Charles lives in a house and is lovingly surrounded by his parents and many noisy sisters. However, Moses and his gang in ATTACK THE BLOCK are all neighbors in an urban apartment complex, where they either live with a single parent, uncle or grandmother.

Similarly, both movies share social commentaries about class systems. Joe’s father is the Sheriff’s Deputy, and occasionally police officers gather around in his kitchen. Moses and his buddies recognize their social identity, as they belong to the lower class. Though the gang is foulmouthed, they’re disappointed when Sam, a well-educated nurse, shouts profanity, as if they expected more from her. And while hiding during the alien invasion, Pest (Alex Esmail) asks Sam where her absentee boyfriend is. She explains that he’s in Ghana, taking care of poor and needy children. Pest raises an eyebrow, wondering why the kids of South London don’t deserve such attention as well.

As for influences, Abrams was clearly influenced by Steven Spielberg (a producer on SUPER 8), particularly THE GOONIES (which Spielberg produced) and CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND (which he wrote & directed). Cornish came up with the idea for ATTACK THE BLOCK after a real-life mugging, as portrayed in the opening sequence. Cornish noticed how the street kids were afraid, even while they were stealing from him. And while ATTACK THE BLOCK’s kids may be petty hoodlums, Cornish understands that they aren’t that bad, especially when compared to the local crime lord. LOCK, STOCK AND TWO SMOKING BARRELS’ Guy Ritchie is another major influence when it comes to ATTACK THE BLOCK’s hip dialogue. Both Ritchie and Cornish have a knack for slang, and Moses and his gang deliver their hilarious one-liners with high energy.

The music is another major highlight of both films. Michael Giacchino composed a vibrant score, full of orchestral strings and horns, with themes reminiscent of LOST. The soundtrack to ATTACK THE BLOCK, from Basement Jazz and Steven Price, is a terrific mix of horror, hip-hop and funk. This unique blend of music captures the urban world these inner-city kids live in and the menacing threat of an alien invasion.

The presentation of the aliens is also quite effective in ATTACK THE BLOCK and SUPER 8. The former’s budgetary constraints work in the film’s favor, as Cornish only shows the alien baddies in silhouettes, except for their glowing fangs. Abrams certainly had a much bigger budget, but smartly chose, like Spielberg did in JAWS, to build suspense by initially keeping his creature hidden from view. Then, towards the third act, the extraterrestrial is presented in full detail, from top to bottom.

Both films also share a positive message about coming-of-age. In ATTACK THE BLOCK, Moses develops from a hoodlum into a hero, and as the death count rises, he finally understands that his actions have consequences. In SUPER 8, Joe learns to let go and move on after the death of a loved one. Each film has a redemptive character arc that is subtle and somewhat truthful.

SUPER 8 and ATTACK THE BLOCK tell the story of a group of kids defending themselves against a deadly outer-space menace. Through Joe and his friends, Abrams depicts adolescence with affection, almost as if it were whimsical. Through Moses and his gang, Cornish portrays puberty as an ambiguous journey, with no clear-cut answers. Viewers will not be disappointed with either film, as both SUPER 8 and ATTACK THE BLOCK are tremendously fun experiences.