Culture



"Jurassic World Rebirth" is a science fiction tale about the hubris of humanity and our attempts to wrest control of nature away from God. It's also great cinema. (Universal Pictures)



by Kevin Christopher Robles

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"God creates dinosaurs. God destroys dinosaurs. God creates man. Man destroys God. Man creates dinosaurs."

When Jeff Goldblum said those words in the original "Jurassic Park" film, he summarized well what makes the franchise so unparalleled: It is, at its core, a story about mad science — a science fiction tale about the hubris of humanity and our attempts to wrest control of nature away from God.

This tension is at the heart of the latest entry, "Jurassic World Rebirth." After the events of the last two "Jurassic World" films, dinosaurs have been let loose from the parks and become part of the world's ecosystem, though largely limited to a tropical band around the equator.

A pharmaceutical company hopes to develop life-saving drugs by taking blood samples from three megafauna, all of whom are located in and around a mysterious island that once housed a test site for the original park. To accomplish this, the company hires Zora Bennett (Scarlett Johansson), Duncan Kincaid (Mahershala Ali) and the paleontologist Dr. Henry Loomis (Jonathan Bailey). Martin Krebs (Rupert Friend), who is as slimy as they come, represents the pharmaceutical company.

Along the way, and as things inevitably go awry, they rescue and are joined by a family caught up in a dinosaur attack at sea.

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"Rebirth" takes the franchise back to its roots, with characters once again trapped on an island, contending with dinosaurs and trying to escape — though this one is buoyed by the protagonists' clear goal (collecting the blood samples) that propels them to take more risks. Much like "Alien: Romulus" — another standalone entry in a different science fiction series — the film does not attempt to revolutionize what you can do with its legacy franchise, but simply delivers exactly what viewers want. By that measurement, "Rebirth" passes with flying colors.

One of the great legacies of the original "Jurassic Park" is its massive contribution to the field of visual effects, something its sequels have inconsistently lived up to. "Jurassic Park" almost singlehandedly ushered in the use of computer generated imagery in popular cinema, but what is often missed is that the original film and its two immediate sequels combined that with smart use of practical effects, particularly of animatronics and stellar production design.

"Rebirth" might be the best-looking "Jurassic" movie since "The Lost World: Jurassic Park," which was the last film in the franchise to have been directed by Steven Spielberg. While Spielberg is only an executive producer here, director Gareth Edwards — exceptionally talented at scale (see 2014's "Godzilla" and 2016's "Rogue One") — pays tribute to Spielberg's directorial style. This is a superbly good-looking blockbuster with incredible verisimilitude; the island feels alive.

Unlike its "Jurassic World" predecessors, "Rebirth" remembers that "Jurassic Park" was not originally an action-adventure franchise, but a horror-thriller. "Rebirth" has moments of high-intensity thrill (the Mosasaurus sequence is a standout), but many more of quiet dread (one section involving a T. rex and a life raft, adapted from a similar scene in the first novel, is one of the best parts of the movie).



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Of equal importance is its memory of wonder and awe as integral to the franchise's success, most notably carried by Bailey's Dr. Loomis. While the rest of the characters are hapless victims or hardened mercenaries, Dr. Loomis sees just how wondrous these creatures can be; Bailey is able to hold both the character's intelligence and childlike joy. The scene where he reaches out and manages to touch a Titanosaurus almost made me cry.

Are there flaws? Sure. The mutant dinosaur element feels a tad undercooked, and the not-so-subtle messaging on the evils of Big Pharma and our tampering with nature feels stale and basic. Still, it's nice to see the "Jurassic" franchise has gone back to its roots as a pro-environment, pro-animal rights story (the characters take care not to kill or injure the dinosaurs over the course of their mission).

Some side characters are underdeveloped, but the main characters are well acted and have just enough backstory to make them compelling, a credit to writer David Koepp.

"Rebirth" is an explosively good time at the cinema, and, at the end of the day, isn't that all we really want from our dinosaur movies?