

Attack the Block Study Notes



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Directed by: Joe Cornish
Certificate: 15
Running time: 88 mins
Release date: 13 May 2011

Synopsis:

Some teenagers are mugging a nurse on Guy Fawkes' night when their South London estate is invaded by aliens plummeting from the sky. The boys launch themselves into an exciting, occasionally horrific and often very funny mission to save their estate from these unwelcome visitors.

These Study Notes are designed for use in Film and Media Studies and related subjects at GCSE, A Level and equivalent.

Before Viewing

Attack the Block represents an interesting challenge for film distributors. It tries to straddle fantasy and realism, and combines genre elements from both comedy and horror. What is more, the film's five lead actors are all unknowns.

Watch the film's trailer and look at copies of promotional posters for the film on the internet.

- What genre elements can you identify?
- What tends to dominate: comedy or horror? Do you think there is a danger that comedy fans will be put off by the horror elements or that horror fans may be put off by the comedy elements? Are the distributors successful in balancing both?
- What strategies are used to compensate for the absence of a recognisable star?

After Viewing

***Attack the Block* – The Missing Back-story**

Attack the Block covers the events of a single night in a single location. Only at the very end of the film when we find out about Moses' family do we get any sense of back-story.

- In what ways do you think the absence of back-story helps give the film a lightness of touch, or do you feel that it limits your ability to engage with and relate to the characters?

Although we discover next to nothing about their backgrounds, Moses, Pest, Jerome, Biggz and Dennis all have clearly distinct personalities.

- Write a brief character sketch for each member of the gang.
- In what ways do the tensions between these different character types contribute to the development of the narrative and to the film's comedy?
- Try to create a back-story for one (or more) of the main characters. Try to think of ways in which the personalities of the characters may have been formed by their backgrounds and experiences.
- Try to write, or storyboard, some sequences which could have been added to the film to provide an audience with some sense of back-story. Where might these have fitted within the film's structure?

Attack the Block – Morally Irresponsible?

The film's heroes are first seen mugging an innocent and vulnerable nurse. The Daily Telegraph's review criticises the ways in which 'all too quickly' the film sweeps the mugging aside and 'all is forgiven' as they take on the aliens. ¹ Similarly, Ben Walsh in The Independent argues that the mugging is 'tricky to get over'. ²

- To what extent do you agree that the mugging 'skews your judgment' (Walsh) and makes it difficult for you to feel sympathetic towards the characters?
- Could you argue that the seriousness of the mugging is lost and somehow trivialised by the film's comedy?
- Why do you think the director, Joe Cornish chose to start the film with this episode?

Attack the Block – Attacking Stereotypes?

Joe Cornish has argued that the film has a social dimension and explores '*...the way we think about kids like that and the way we think about people who live in places like that*'. ³

- To what extent do our perceptions of the characters change as the film develops?
- If audiences' perceptions change, is it because they are having to overcome their own prejudices? In what ways does the mugging conform to our stereotypical ideas of 'hoodies' and the rest of the film go on to challenge many of these stereotypes?

Cornish has defined the film as an '*Escapist fantasy film that in some way connected with the reality of life but also provided an escape from that reality*'. ⁴

- In your view do the elements of escapism and fantasy obscure any sense of social realism or social commentary, or is Cornish successful in his attempts to combine both?
- Steven Spielberg's *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) was an inspiration to Cornish, in part because of its blend of fantasy and realism. ⁵ Watch it and compare this (and other aspects) with *Attack the Block*.

The film pokes fun at the affected street talk of the feckless white, middle-class, university-educated Brewis. The boys also make a sly dig about Sam's worthy boyfriend volunteering to help children in Africa, rather than working with deprived kids in England. Towards the end of the film Moses starts to question whether '*...the government bred these creatures to kill black boys*'.

- Do you think the film has anything important to say about class or racial tensions?
- Do we understand anything new about gang culture or does it actually obscure these important issues by veiling them all in comedy?
- How are the physical spaces in *Attack the Block* lit and shot and how does the film challenge stereotypical images of estates?

***Attack the Block* – Budgets, Ambition and Creativity**

Joe Cornish has admitted that *Attack the Block* is an unusually ambitious first film. He relished the energy and creativity that came from having ambitious ideas but limited budget.

- The aliens themselves are designed to challenge the dominance of digital/CGI monsters in recent films. They are more physical and real than effects-driven creations in recent films. At the same time, they are almost a bit laughable. How did the design of the aliens contribute to the film's overall impact?
- Why do you think Cornish used unknown actors for the main parts who had no 'stage school' background?

1. *David Gritten, review of Attack the Block, available at*
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/8510145/Attack-the-Block-review.html>
2. *Ben Walsh on Attack the Block, available at*
<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/attack-the-block-15-2283089.html>
3. *Interview with Joe Cornish on Attack the Block for FilmFour, available at*
<http://www.film4.com/videos/article/attack-the-block-film4-interview-special>
4. *Interview with Joe Cornish on Attack the Block for FilmFour, available at*
<http://www.film4.com/videos/article/attack-the-block-film4-interview-special>
5. *As above*

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