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The Polar Express is an old-fashioned children's tale that tells the story of a young boy's Christmas Eve odyssey to the North Pole aboard a fantastical haunted train. It is the latest film from legendary action flick director Robert Zemeckis, it doesn't shy away from the dark Brothers Grimm style of story telling which has all but vanished from the safe holiday movies of recent years.



Based on the award winning book by sculptor and children's author Chris Van Allsburg, the Polar Express is a straightforward fairy tale, lacking the tongue in cheek ironic detachment of high concept franchise movie's like Shrek or a Sharks tale; yet with enough stark beauty and thrilling scenes to keep adults as well as children entertained.



Zemeckis isn't a director usually associated with the triumph of effects over story, but he is known for having utilized special effects magic with great success throughout his career. Films like the 'Back To The Future' trilogy, 'Cast Away' and 'Matchstick Men', were strong character driven affairs, which always kept perfectly executed action scenes well in their place - as tools to help immerse the audience in the tale. The Polar Express is no exception, as although it features a highly innovative digital effects technique, and is based on a very linear and unsophisticated graphic novel, it keeps its focus on the awe and wonder experienced throughout the journey of its unnamed young central character (a role physically performed by Tom Hanks).



The technique created to produce the film, known as performance capture, allows a loving recreation of Van Allsburg's original oil pastel illustrations - while making it possible for a single actor (Tom Hanks in an accomplished but unspectacular performance) to play several characters, differing hugely in appearance. However performance capture CGI is not without its drawbacks. Van Allsburg's dark paintings have always proved enormously difficult to reproduce in print, and the action on screen can seem at times muddy and indistinct. More worrying is the depiction of the characters, which varies from eerily lifelike, yet simultaneous painterly, to hideously ghoulish. To create the digital animations, motion capture was used to record both the physical performances and the facial expressions, of the actors. Sadly this technology has not yet advanced enough to accurately reproduce the full complexity of human emotional expression, nor the rich aliveness of the eye.



Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori, researching human reactions to robotic design, discovered a phenomena he termed 'the uncanny valley'. Simply put, the uncanny valley means that as a anthropomorphic character becomes more lifelike, it passes from a vague 'cartoonish' similarity we find endearing, to a hideous caricature which terrifies. Thus, when creating digital characters, getting quite close but not close enough to real, can have the unintended effect of making a character corpse like and monstrous.

At times the Polar Express's motley crew of engineer, stowaway, conductor and driver hit the cute mark - appearing as extremely well animated and modelled traditional characters. At other points they veer a little too close to life-like - for example, the conductor's liver spotted face occasionally looks like a rigid death mask; and throughout many of the less well lit scenes, the children can seem closer to horrific dolls than living people.



Eerie technological limitations aren't the only source of frightening moments in the film. The hero has several encounters with the ghost of a hobo who rides the train in secret. Although the character ultimately proves benign, at times he can seem terrifying, both in appearance and demeanour - one scene in particular, during which he uses a marionette to frighten the boy, has the tenor of a nightmare.



Oddly for a contemporary children's film, but predictably for a Zemeckis movie, *Polar Express*'s action scenes are dramatic in the extreme. Visceral sound effects combine with nail biting moments of near calamity as the train veers from one narrowly avoided precipice to the next. Indeed, some of the scenes may frighten younger and more impressionable children - at the showing I attended, several toddlers burst into tears during a sequence where the train veers out of control on the ice. Yet at the same time adults and older children may enjoy it all the more for the visceral nature of the thrills on offer. Indeed, it's hard not to respect a \$165 million dollar children's movie which managed to avoid becoming cloyingly saccharine.

Where they do succeed, the new digital techniques succeed amazingly well. Armed with a free moving virtual camera, Zemeckis creates incredible vistas. North Pole City rises dramatically from the ice fields like a frozen Venice. The elves' factories towards the end of the film are enormous industrial complexes, with a deliciously nostalgic 1950's structural design. The audacious transit of the camera and ambitious construction of forests, mountains, ice fields and of course the *Polar Express* itself, succeed in creating an inspiring festive landscape, and developing a real sense of magic and mystery. One scene, involving the path of a golden train ticket down a mountain, is particularly lyrical and dramatic.



The movie features a few musical interludes, which in the fine tradition of children's movies, vary from the fantastic, a swing number about hot chocolate (complete with supernaturally acrobatic dancing waiters) and the Alan Silvestri composed theme, to the inane (a tacky track sung by an Elf caricature of Aerosmith's Stephen Tyler), in addition to a few Christmas standards.



On the one hand the film is a simple but original Christmas fable, with some memorable characters, a strong egalitarian message (one of the best developed central characters is a

courageous black girl), brilliantly executed set pieces, and a feast of visual treats and imaginative artwork. On the other, it can be a frequently disturbing and overlong movie, with a variety of glaring flaws - from weird wrinkle faced mobster elves, to almost hallucinogenically unsettling scenes, to Hank's bloodless depiction of Father Christmas himself. The film points to a potential future in which a few highly regarded actors may be sought to perform far more roles, potentially being chosen more based on ability than appearance; and restores faith in Hollywood's ability to take chances and produce risky unpatronizing family entertainment.

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The Final Word: Overall The Polar Express is a mixed bag. It can't be wholeheartedly recommended for all the family - though the story should be comprehensible to children of all ages; parents, older children, and ironic teenagers will more appreciate, and be more able to tolerate, the intensity of Zemeckis's vision.