Not So 'Divergent': The Cookie-Cutter Non-Conformist
by Linda Holmes, NPR

Divergent, the new film starring Shailene Woodley based on the popular YA novels by Veronica Roth, describes a dystopian future in which everyone belongs to one of five "factions": Erudite (cold-blooded intellectuals), Amity (hippie farmers), Abnegation (plain-dress public servants), Candor (people who tell the truth all the time) (?), and Dauntless (bad-ass fighters).

Putting aside the problems of parallel construction — no dystopia that was one-fifth smart people would name one group "Erudite" and another "Amity" — the film presents all these groups as functionally homogenous; one Amity is like another, one Abnegation is like another.

Except, of course, for Beatrice "Tris" Pride, because she's ... DIVERGENT!

Like *The Hunger Games* and the Harry Potter books, *Divergent* makes a fundamental conflict out of a sorting process: the problem of living in one group while having more than that within you. Abnegation, District 12, and particularly Gryffindor are not bad, necessarily, but it is suggested in every case that there is more to a person than a type. Well – in the case of*Divergent*, there's at least more to *some* people than a type.

The basic outlines of the nonconformity plot in *Divergent* are transparent in their significance outside dystopia. Tris doesn't want to be labeled as one thing or another; she's more than kind, more than smart, more than tough. In particular, she's more than the life her gray-wearing, dutiful parents have planned for her. Because she's multifaceted, society won't be able to control her, she's told, and that's what makes her a threat. The story is meant to honor being different, not fitting in, not giving yourself over to the idea that you should be just one thing. (Tris' big line when she's fighting the movie's baddie signifies her pride in her difference.)

It's teenager catnip, meant as a story about individuality in a sea of what are, effectively, people with the life sucked out of them, who are left to just go through the motions as they're told. (And yes, that means it's also a zombie movie, kind of.)

And only The One can save them.

The irony is that every story beat in *Divergent* about not following the herd seems to be mooing along with countless other contemporary movies about The One. What doesn't seem to come out of *The Hunger Games* seems to come out of *Harry Potter* or *Iron Man* or just our generic modern-day monomyth in which accepting your greatness means taking on your heavy burdens in the form of bloody battles and sacrifices and mysterious injections.

There's great appeal in these stories for the younger readers for whom they're theoretically created: who can't relate to the feeling of not fitting in anywhere, not being part of any lunch-table-slash-faction, being weird-slash-divergent, or wanting to be cool-slash-Dauntless? Brutal as Tris' initiation is at times, Dauntless is a kind of fantasy future for a lot of kids: the Dauntless are free, they play games, there doesn't seem to be anyone under 17 or over 30 around, they wear slick black fighting suits, they carry weapons, and they jump and run and eat and compete. Granted, to an oldster, the meal scenes might look like dinner at Violent Slob Jail, but Tris and her friends just settle down and dig in.

But what *Divergent* allows is a highly specific, very ... *conforming* kind of nonconformity that's actually hidden superiority. Tris isn't just different; she's *better*. She can't be controlled. She contains multitudes. She's dangerous to wicked evildoers. Her "divergence" amounts to being gorgeous, super-nice, really smart, *and* a great athlete. She diverges up – ever up, only up – from other people, and her greatest challenge is to stop apologizing for her greatness.

It seems a little bit sad that the only kind of nonconformity that pop culture enjoys feeding kids is the nonconformity of superpowers – that's what *X-Men* is, after all. Mutants, but mutants with special powers. Secretly, you're not different-bad, you're different-great. You're different-*better*.

But what if your divergence is a horizontal move, not a vertical leap? What if you can't demonstrate that you're superior to everyone else and you don't have superpowers? What if you're just ... different? Are all these stories really saying it's okay to be *different*, or are they only saying it's okay to be *special*?

Because ultimately, whether Tris is different or not, the movie feels like every other big-budget movie of the last several years, thrown in a blender and poured out onto the screen. The gray landscapes, the tragic losses, the metal grates, the harsh spotlights, the coolly evil bureaucrat, the training montage, the emotionally insistent score, the portentous dialogue, the arbitrarily evil government, the hallucinations, the bloodless PG-13 gunfire, the overlong middle section, the twerpy frenemy, the hard-edged trainer/guide with the soft heart and painful past, the interchangeable and forgettable friends ... there's just nothing in *Divergent*t hat isn't a collection of bits foraged from other films.

And, perhaps most importantly, within the realm of movie heroines, nothing about Tris is divergent in the least – she conforms to every trope about How To Build A YA Heroine.

Teenagers – perhaps particularly teenage girls, in this case – don't only listen to the substance of the story when a movie like this comes out. They also are constantly aware of the meta-narrative surrounding it, which tells them that this is the kind of story people want to hear, and this is the kind of story you're allowed to tell, and this is the kind of standing out that's considered sympathetic.
It's really hard to convincingly address nonconformity for teenagers, because for teenagers, nonconformity is ... conforming. Performative individuality – in dress, in taste, in style, in carefully curated

quirks – is part of adolescence, and performed in just the right way, it's not punished. "I don't fit into your little boxes, Mom and Dad!" or James Van Der Beek's "AH DON'T WANT YER LAAHFE!" from *Varsity Blues*, is all in the game. It's really hard to make it feel real. It's really hard to make it feel *different*.

Maybe it should have ended with a speech. You know, something like, "What we found out is that each of us is a Candor, and a Dauntless, and an Erudite, and an Amity, and an Abnegation. Does that answer your question?"