Transformers

Talent: Shia LaBeouf, Megan Fox, Josh Duhamel, Rachael Taylor, Jon Voight, John Turturro, Hugo Weaving (voice).

Date of review: Thursday 28th June, 2007

Director: Michael Bay
Duration: 140 minutes
Classification: M
We rate it: Four stars.

Well, here it is – the American cinema’s Summer Blockbuster, made for something approaching two hundred million dollars – and it’s the kind of no-holds-barred, gleefully over-the-top CGI spectacular that no American holiday season can do without. This year, the film that fits this particular slot is the live-action feature version of the 1980s animated TV series, Transformers.

The Transformers (as those of us old enough to remember the cartoon series will recall), were a special kind of sentient robot from outer space whose particular method of camouflage involved rapidly transforming themselves into other machines, in order to blend in with human technology. The transformations from machine to robot were done before our very eyes, with the seemingly ‘innocent’ truck or airplane sprouting metallic legs, standing up and unfolding into an enormous walking, talking, ultra-sophisticated robot. This was the gimmick of the series, and the narrative that worked around it was a traditional good vs. evil setup, with the robots coming from a distant planet whose badguy, Megatron, wanted to dominate the Universe, while its good guys, led by Optimus Prime, were the defenders of all things right and good.

For this new live-action version, the same simple, mythic sci-fi story serves as basis for all the action. The film’s story sends us back to a time long ago, when the source of the Transformers’ power, a mysterious space-bound cube, was knocked out of its orbit and crash-landed on planet Earth. Numerous subplots bring us to the present day, where the Transformers’ battle has moved to our shores, and the robots begin to wage their epic struggle here. The setup though is of utterly secondary importance; what the filmmakers really want to do is thrust the audience straight into the film’s mile-a-minute action sequences.

Michael Bay, director of unapologetic popcorn fare including both Bad Boys films (the first one entertaining, the second one appalling), the turgid Pearl Harbour, the
explosive but silly Armageddon, and Nic Cage’s tough-guy romp The Rock, here pulls out all the stops to make Transformers as breathlessly explosive and as wildly entertaining as it can possibly be. Producer Steven Spielberg, as well as helping to secure the enormous budget required to make the film, has also brought his connections to the world’s most sophisticated special-effects houses to the project, and the CGI wizards have been instrumental in making the film as eye-popping and jaw-dropping as anyone could have hoped it would be. There is so much to look at and listen to in this film, and so much to be frankly astonished and exhilarated by, that singling out particular sequences for mention is rather beside the point. There is very little in the film’s two-and-a-half hour running time that isn’t enormously spectacular. From suburban car-chases to gargantuan city-bound battle scenes between robots the size of skyscrapers, Transformers presents us with digital mayhem on an astonishing scale. With an energetic and talented human cast and a script that is at times surprisingly witty, Transformers is bubblegum moviemaking at its most feverishly enjoyable.

Nick Prescott