

STAR TREK II: THE WRATH OF KHAN

Directed by Nicholas Meyer
Produced by Robert Sallin
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 1982

Nicholas Meyer didn't want to direct the second Star Trek movie. A project of his own that he was developing fell through and he was resigned to lick his wounds.

But the admonition of a trusted friend changed his mind. If he wanted to be a director, then he better direct. Meyer had already helmed *Time After Time* (1979). He was also a writer of some renown, author of [The Seven-Per-Cent Solution](#). But he had never directed a large-scale project that found its basis in someone else's concept. He was not a Star Trek fan, but found elements of it that he could relate to. He just refused to treat Star Trek like a holy relic. He insisted on using these characters dramatically. He knew that the franchise couldn't coast on epic interstellar vistas, nor dialogue laden with exposition and philosophical digressions peppered with technobabble. There had to be action. There had to be hate, passion, love, humor, sacrifice, and he knew he had to make it cheap and he knew he had to make it good.

In addition to his considerable (un-credited) improvement of the screenplay, Meyer directed the film with an economy of grace that is rarely seen. Consider some examples:

- Upon our introduction to Khan, he removes one glove, but not the other; and he never takes it off.
- When Dr. McCoy is exploring the space laboratory, he is unnerved by a rat. He continues to look around uneasily, and the camera holds on his back, backtracking with him, so we cannot see what he's about to run into. The automatic doors he has just passed through are closing very slowly, like the space station is running out of power. A strange pulsing sound emanating from the equipment flares up, then...Dr. McCoy turns right into the dangling hands of a dead crew member.
- As Chekov and Captain Terrell are explaining Khan's scheme, once Terrell takes over from Chekov, actor Walter Koenig stares right at the camera for thirty seconds, not blinking at all. If we're watching him rather than Paul Winfield, we are given a major clue that Khan still controls these men. Koenig ends his feat in a flurry of blinking, immediately before turning back to Kirk—Chekov must resume his performance.
- When the crew of REGULA 1 is arguing about what to do, the camera glides behind the partitions that partially enclose a central work area, periodically denying us a view of the scientists, making a static scene more dynamic and forbidding.

- Enduring harsh words from Carol Marcus about his cavalier ways, Kirk stares straight ahead, an appropriate, but highly unusual posture for this iconic man of action.
- After the ENTERPRISE has escaped the Genesis blast, we cut to a shot of Spock's empty chair and we are reminded of Spock's peril and Kirk is finally made aware that it is Spock who saved the ship, the empty chair being the perfect means for this realization as, with Spock's death, it will be vacant.

Of course, knowing what stylistic touches a director is responsible for is often very difficult. At a minimum, he will be responsible for performances, staging, and camera movement. We can be certain, however, that Nicholas Meyer had little to do with the ending of *Star Trek II*.

Realizing that the picture they were crafting was, indeed, not the end of the series, actor Leonard Nimoy and the producers thought it wise to allow for the possibility that Spock could return. But director Meyer protested that Spock's death (which was a story element long before Meyer came on board) would have no meaning if he could be resurrected in the third film.

It just goes to show that a director's control only extends so far.

The characters in the story have no idea Spock can come back. That's why it still works. We see the sacrifice of Spock and we see his mourning comrades. But we have a hope that they cannot understand. We know something is afoot, because of the short "remember" bit where Spock performs a mind-meld on McCoy (producer Harve Bennett's idea), the lingering shot of the torpedo/coffin on Genesis (shot by Industrial Light & Magic, as Meyer was opposed), and the final monologue given voice, for the first time in the franchise, by Spock. This is one of the best endings to any movie, ever.

First, the character giving voice to this famous summons to explore is, himself, dead. This immediately tells the audience that we are in a suspended time-void; or that Spock is not really dead, but disembodied, perhaps. Or, and this is really reading into it, the greatest exploration we can accomplish is upon our demise, in the journey into the hereafter. Regardless, dead or un-dead (he's not quite alive, is he?), Spock is saying, "Press on—this was my life's work and it should continue for its own sake," or he's saying, "Press on—FIND ME."

Second, no one has recited the famous prologue before but Kirk. It is one of the best-known aspects of the franchise. It is an extraordinary honor for Spock to utter these cherished words. The filmmakers are acknowledging the huge importance that Spock has to the Star Trek universe. His is the most original, and satisfying, character.

Third, Spock pauses before saying the last word, "before." Just prior to that word, the camera begins propelling us forward into space at a tremendous speed. We've just heard the word "gone," which is the past participle of 'go,' and we're going forward. So it's as if we are moving forward at Spock's command.

Fourth, we travel past the stars and are lost in a black void for a moment. This, of course, is the transition to the credits, but it has the emotional effect of taking us into another dimension, somewhere just on the other side of outer space. Is it death, as Spock is experiencing it? Whatever the interpretation, it is a powerful, mysterious moment.

To the franchise's credit, Spock did not just bound out of his coffin and raise an eyebrow. His path back to life was examined over the course of the next two films, and generated valuable ruminations on the joys of living and the nature and costs of friendship. Moreover, this is science-fiction, not soap opera. If a character's death and return can be handled intelligently (the regenerative capabilities of the Genesis device providing the necessary 'hook'), and with a degree of plausibility, then that kind of bold storytelling conceit makes for quality drama. Meyer was right in some ways, but the subsequent films proved him wrong. Spock's death was not a shock device that exploited an impassioned fan base. It was a means to highlight the importance of a character indispensable to the Star Trek mythos. And it helped take the Star Trek franchise to new heights of wonder.

Indeed, this film very ably sets up a thematic arc carried through the two subsequent films. In *II*, man is shown to have developed such titanic scientific prowess that he can negate creation and re-make worlds as he sees fit.

However, in *III*, we learn that the Genesis planet is falling apart. Man's re-creation cannot endure and his arrogant presumptions are revealed to be foolhardy.

In *IV*, it is nature, or creation, that is the savior of man. If our intrepid heroes cannot bring humpback whales to the 23rd century then the human race will be stricken from Earth. So technology doesn't save man, and he is helpless to stop the threat; only the whales can sustain us. We are so powerless, we don't even know what they say to the probe.

In *Star Trek II*, Carol Marcus frames the Genesis proposal as a way to combat overpopulation and dwindling food supplies. Science's answer is always technology. But this three-movie arc shows the limits of man's abilities to control his environment and his future. There is no allowance in science for the idea that some things can only be left to God, that there are some problems that we can never regulate, subjugate, or eradicate.

The destructive potential of the Genesis device, as represented by the malevolent Khan, is addressed, but unrealized. This would be a whole different direction the films could have gone. McCoy pondered in *II* whether man has the wisdom to use the technology he so blithely races to blindly advance. The stories could have shown how the Genesis device (strong parallels to our ongoing nuclear-weapon dilemma) would be used to destroy that which is already alive (rather than support life as nuclear power, indirectly, does). And with *IV* more emphasis would be placed on man's shortsightedness in killing off the whales, we presuming they would only be useful for dining and lighting.

Nicholas Meyer would probably welcome this change in emphasis as he directed, the year after *Star Trek II*, the highly-regarded television movie *The Day After*, which dramatizes the aftermath of a nuclear war. Indeed, for every human advance we seem to be subject to a corresponding reversal. Technology advances, but so does hubris. Morality declines, the hidden evil breaks out in the open, and we have to start again. That's what *The Day After* is about, and, in a vague way, so is *Star Trek II*. The arrogant presumptions of our race, producing genetically enhanced supermen, still cause havoc for Kirk and his crew hundreds of years later. From our best intentions much disaster is derived.

But we all have the choice of Spock. If we are willing to sacrifice to restore that which has been lost, if we are willing to put the needs of the many ahead of the needs of the one, then we have a chance to survive, and, God willing, endure.