

Twisters: Social disaster as empty spectacle

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Twisters, directed by Lee Isaac Chung, is another big budget “blockbuster” from the Hollywood franchise machinery. It is a sequel to 1996’s *Twister*, directed by Jan de Bont. Like the original, the new film concerns itself with “storm chasers” encountering dangerous weather during a major tornado outbreak.

Kate (Daisy Edgar-Jones) is a young student, part of a team researching tornadoes in Oklahoma. During an attempt to launch a material into a tornado that could potentially “tame” it (reduce its intensity), several members of the team are killed, leaving only Kate and Javi (Anthony Ramos) alive. Kate blames herself for the deaths and quits storm chasing altogether.

Five years later, Kate works as a meteorologist in New York. Javi arrives, now working for a private company that studies tornadoes using advanced radar technology. He offers her a weeklong job with his team in Oklahoma, insisting that the knowledge they will gain from the effort will help save lives. Kate reluctantly agrees.

Tornado season draws out not only Javi’s team, but a whole slew of storm chasers, including the “tornado wrangler” Tyler (Glen Powell), a brash YouTube personality who performs dangerous stunts for online videos: anchoring his truck to the ground while a tornado rolls directly over it, shooting a tornado with fireworks, etc. Kate initially finds him annoying, but one can be assured that his cowboy-with-a-heart-of-gold persona, straight out of a supermarket romance novel, will win her over.

Eventually, it is revealed that Javi’s outfit is funded by a predatory land developer who purchases land in areas that have been destroyed, only to resell it at high prices. Meanwhile, Kate revisits her “tornado-taming” project, with Tyler’s encouragement. The final showdown between Kate and a massive tornado is typical visual-effects-laden spectacle.

The story, filled with pseudo-scientific nonsense, is

little more than a flimsy excuse to string together a series of action sequences of tornadoes wreaking havoc. There are occasional flashes of visual excitement to be had. One feels a genuine sense of danger and threat from the menacing storms, which is more than can be said for the cartoonish antics of superhero movies. Chung is content to film everything with beer-commercial slickness, replete with breezy shots of roaring pickup trucks set to country music.

Still, there is something grotesque about *Twisters*’ repeated shots of mass destruction left in the tornadoes’ wake. In reality, the dangerous growth of extreme weather, and the toll it takes on human society, are the undeniable result of capitalism’s destruction of the global climate, a reality that receives a single shame-faced insinuation during the film, when Kate’s mother remarks that, “I keep seeing more and more tornadoes, and floods and droughts. And the price of wheat and seed going up and up and up...”

At the same time, victims of so called “natural” disasters are in fact victims of a social order in which human life and well-being amounts to nothing when weighed against the profit interests of the super-rich. Resources to prepare for and mitigate the effects of extreme weather are instead wasted on wars and the extravagant lifestyles of the wealthy. Federal and state agencies like FEMA treat the loss of life with criminal indifference and provide next to nothing to rebuild shattered communities.

All one has to do is consider the current disaster in North Carolina and Tennessee in particular. Hurricane Helene produced “Biblical” amounts of rain and terrible flooding, resulting in hundreds of entirely unnecessary deaths. The tragic fate of workers at Impact Plastics in Erwin, Tennessee, who were told to stay at work until it was too late for them to escape the rising waters, would be a fitting subject for a drama. But such things cut too close to the bone for wealthy

film financiers ...

In any case, the land profiteer character in the new *Twisters* hints at how social relations amplify the destructiveness of natural phenomena, but this development is little more than a plot device to create interpersonal conflict between the characters.

There is no indication that the filmmakers have spent time thinking much about any of this, nor do they expect the viewer to. This is a work that insists, quite aggressively, that the viewer leave his or her brain at the door and simply absorb the empty spectacle.

Still, a thoughtful viewer might look at *Twisters*' scenes of refugees wandering through the ruins of their destroyed homes and ask, "Why?" One can imagine the generally blank stares and shrugs in response from everyone involved in creating this film.



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