Casting Children for a Computerized War

Mass murder as a test for the reflexes, innocence as a prerequisite for effective imperialism: Gavin Hood has adapted Orscon Scott Card's grim and complex novel with Asa Butterfield, Ben Kingsley, and Harrison Ford.

By Dietmar Dath, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

What does a strategist look like when invasion plans or the extensive destruction of urban centers by cluster bombs no longer depend on the balance of material power, but on the flow of information? What kind of military commander sees his neural pathways as an extension of fibre optic cables, the tips of his fingers on touch screens as ballistic probes, the electric impulses in his brain as signals steering drones?

Big, gloomy eyes, a pale, small but pretty mouth, a smooth forehead, soft, pale, translucent skin. The boy moves with economy – this is an adult in a child's body, a child who doesn't want to be in command, but who is trained and forced to be by actual adults. This is Andrew "Ender" Wiggin, played by Asa Butterfield, who, with his simultaneously anxiously restrained and constrictively present portrayal of the titular character impresses us even more than he did in Martin Scorsese's admittedly more complex Hugo.

Orson Scott Card invented Ender and told his story in *Ender's Game* (1985). In his book, Card dared to make some astonishing predictions, which have since come utterly true. Ender's siblings, for instance, use computer networks to influence public opinion on social and military matters. […] Gavin Hood's film version omits the prediction of the blogoshere and the more extensive discourses about it – a bold decision, but one to his credit because it proves that he, unlike other film makers who dabble in Science Fiction because it's fashionable, knows exactly what kind of genre he has gotten himself into with Ender's Game. Because what's important in Science Fiction, as in any fantastic genre, is not that it knows about traffic lights or submarines before the audience is confronted with them, but that it finds and reflects on special metaphors for socio-political conditions that the audience is already experiencing but doesn't have a name for yet.

Zero gravity, for instance: when Ender and his fellow cadets fall through the heart of battle school, push off each other and cling to each other, that's an allegory in that their disorientedness immediately reminds us of the fact that school children are not yet integrated into the social processes of production and reproduction, that they have no "sense of direction" just yet. If, however, you live in a society in which your worth depends on how connected you are to the moment and to the knowledge that defines it, then you spend your whole life as a school child trying to find, but never finding, your way. This stage of free fall, which is supposed to be limited to the early phase of your life, becomes the rule. No stability, nowhere.

The only difference between children and adults in this world, then, is that this harried existence of constant self-optimization has made the adults tired, cynical, very lonely, and, if they aren't stupid, melancholy. Ben Kingsley as the physically supple, emotionally hardened war hero and trainer who teaches his student that "there is no teacher but the enemy" is the cold version of this sort of maturity. Harrison Ford's recruiting officer Colonel Graff is the hot version.

Especially Ford (whom we haven't seen so lively in anything in a while), with a rumpled, faded, creaking kind of dignity that is absolutely worth watching, manages to embody this scorched earth of emotional capacity in which hope and affection are only present by being absent, only hinted at by an occasional flicker in his eyes or bursting out of his chair - displays of an oddly bashful pride in his brilliant protégé.

Gavin Hood's directing style is consistently competent, functional, and unremarkable. The movie mostly follows the letters of the book. The first part of the story ends with Ender, shocked by what he is becoming in the cadre factory of war that is battle school, trying to refuse further compliance. A soft, slightly sappy scene between Ender and his sister, a character who unfortunately remains flat (which is not the fault of actress Abigail Breslin), leads into the in every respect intense second part of the movie. The tears of children may be a rather weak adhesive when it comes to seamlessly connecting the coming-of-age story of the first half of the movie with the political nightmare of the second, but since the second part is even more imperatively combustive than it is in the book, one does not really mind.

[…] As soon as Earth's fleet approaches the home world of the insect-like aliens, *Ender's Game* turns into a juvenile power fantasy the likes of which already boys in 19th century imperialist countries enjoyed through so-called "Boys' Magazines:" naïve, cruel, arrogant. Card[…] takes the naïve, the cruel, and the arrogant in the story seriously enough to be able to trace them to their logical convergence point, where the armed self-righteousness of the self-appointed warden of universal order destroys itself. [Card's book can be found on the reading list of the US marines and yet is, at the same time, also admired by leftist and liberal critics.] The lessons in strategy will likely appeal to the marines; the ending of the book as well as the movie, however, bears down on the kind of political practice that tends to justify military and economic action with references to "practical issues" and "levels of information," and invalidates both arguments.

The story destroys the most horrible self-delusion of the adults who co-opt children for their games, their operations, and even their killing. No, it's not true that you colonize the young because they have better reflexes, and that you reluctantly accept their ethical immaturity as the downside of the whole affair. It's actually the other way around: you turn children into customers and killers because you don't care about reflexes, but the immaturity is what you seek. It is the birthmark of a new kind of human that you are trying to breed, whose decisions can keep up with the speed of technology, until no-one knows anymore if these are still your kids or the ones of the machines.