

Trying to have it both ways

Spiderman, directed by Sam Raimi

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Spiderman, based on a 1960s Marvel comic strip, tells the story of a young man using his spidery powers to fight crime in New York. The 2002 release of this movie has achieved remarkable popularity and, as the mass media never tires of mentioning, box-office success. Cinema executives and pundits seem somewhat surprised: Amy Pascal, the chairwoman of Columbia Pictures, said: “Everybody identifies with him [Spiderman] ... Lucky for us.” *Time* noted on May 20 that of those who saw the movie on opening night, “95% said they would recommend it to a friend; 70% said they would have to pay to see it again. (You usually have to bomb Baghdad to get that kind of approval ratings).”

Without agreeing with the *Time*’s callous appraisal of Americans’ zest for Iraqi deaths, one agrees on seeing the movie that it has some legitimate appeal. Tobey Maguire plays Peter/Spiderman, an orphan staying with a struggling working class family, secretly in love with his neighbor MJ (Kirsten Dunst). He acquires unusual spider-like powers (sticking to buildings, shooting spider webs from his hands, unusual sensory ability, etc.) and superhuman strength from the bite of a mutated spider. After graduating from high school, MJ and Peter try to find work in New York City. Peter works days as a newspaper photographer and nights as Spiderman, the crime-fighter; he soon has to deal with a police campaign against Spiderman run by his own newspaper boss.

In the meantime, their buddy Harry Osborn’s father [Willem Dafoe], the CEO of a defense firm, facing the loss of an army contract and dismissal by the board of directors, ingests an untested serum, becomes crazy, and makes off with all his futuristic weapons. He incinerates the unsupportive generals and the treacherous board and finally turns to terrorizing

common New Yorkers, whom he considers inferior. Spiderman now has a villainous foe, and also a romantic competitor for MJ’s affections in the young Harry Osborn.

Among the famous American cartoon superheroes, Spiderman has the reputation of being the most down-to-earth and humanly flawed. Unlike Superman (the well-off-farmboy-turned-naïve-but-successful-journalist) or Batman (the brooding multimillionaire), the story of Spiderman (the working superhero) forces certain realities on those who would retell it.

This fact—as well as director Sam Raimi’s instincts—perhaps partially saved the movie from the conformist impulses of the Hollywood executives: amidst the daredevilry of swooping around skyscrapers attached to spiderwebs, the movie must deal with certain aspects of contemporary working class life. Even though the movie often depicts rather passive reactions—Peter’s aunt seems particularly unconcerned when his uncle announces that he has been fired—one nevertheless gets the feeling that people struggle to get by. The main characters live in small houses with wire fences, get stuck in jobs they do not really want, and have to deal with greedy bosses.

Although the acting and the script are far from uniformly perfect, they are better than those of many other blockbusters. Maguire portrays a timid high school student with success; he and Dunst have some appeal as a pair of lovers held apart by circumstance and the pushiness of their wealthier acquaintances. When MJ lets Peter know that her job as a waitress is disagreeable, that she wants to be an actress, but that directors are telling her at auditions that she needs acting lessons, one feels real sympathy for her. This is a rarity in Hollywood films.

The movie develops a cartoonish if not inaccurate

picture of the US ruling classes. The generals are gruff and interested only in obtaining as much destructive power as possible at a minimum cost. The emotionless, ominous boardroom where the CEO Osborn is sacked features a black table, black chairs, board members in black suits, and a chairman of the board with a black mustache—even Osborn’s favorite color is black, as Harry tells MJ. Osborn the father tells his son Harry that MJ is too low-class for him, recommending that he use her for sexual gratification and then dump her. Peter’s employers—an exploitative wrestling manager and the cynical, money-grubbing newspaper boss—do nothing to salvage big business’s sinister image. The police principally appear in the movie as foot soldiers in the newspaper boss’s campaign against Spiderman, who are forced to relent due to Spiderman’s growing popularity with New Yorkers.

Spiderman presents a certain image of heroism, of the brutality of class relations, and of love despite all obstacles. In the absence of any serious exploration of these issues in the mass media, the movie can, despite its occasionally superficial exploration of these questions, tap deep if semi-conscious feelings and needs in the population. These are the social roots of *Spiderman*’s mass appeal.

Despite this, the movie ultimately cannot escape the realities of Hollywood filmmaking, especially now that executives openly admit to meeting with Bush administration officials to determine how best to help the “war on terrorism.” It goes beyond the fact that “fighting crime” principally means beating up faceless gangs of men, clad in an unvarying uniform of black pants, sweaters and hats, who are assaulting innocent people in the street for no apparent reason. (Couldn’t some of them be old high-school buddies of Peter’s who are down on their luck? After Enron, does anyone seriously think that street crime is the only form of criminality in the US?) The wave of official patriotism that is rolling through American films did not spare *Spiderman*.

As the crime-fighting rolls on, one begins to suspect that the movie is trying harder than usual to draw everyone into fighting crime. In one completely improbable scene, Green Goblin (the CEO Osborn’s evil monster persona)—who has been obliterating entire apartment complexes—hovers motionlessly as a crowd of people pelts him with stones, shouting something

like “If you hurt one of us, you hurt all of us.” At this point in the movie, it is perhaps not entirely clear under which political banner this action is taking place; one can only say that the director is desperately and implausibly trying to enlist the entire population in the fight against Green Goblin.

As if to dispel any doubts, the director none-too-subtly shows us at the end of the movie that for him Spiderman is the last line of defense against enemies of the state: Peter dons his Spiderman costume and goes out into the New York night to perch himself atop a skyscraper. For a brief moment as he jumps towards the top of the building, he passes by an American flag that fills up the screen. The movie then ends, as Spiderman, holding on to the flagpole, gazes out over the New York skyline, alert to any sign of trouble.

Spiderman, like flag-waving patriotism, sits astride an uneasy ambiguity—does the American flag stand for the liberties and aspirations of Peter and the common man, or for rallying unquestioning support for the government’s latest war? Faced with the need to secure mass appeal and government approval, *Spiderman* tries to have it both ways—in that, it is no different from other Hollywood productions. However, to gain mass appeal, Raimi and the screenwriters chose to include details and characters that attack the US ruling elite, giving some semblance of social critique. Behind this choice lies the changing mood of the masses of moviegoers—this cannot fail to ultimately attack the ambiguity of flag-worship and its papering-over of class tensions in American society.



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