

GI Joe: The Rise of Cobra—yet another celebration of militarism and war

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Replete with often indecipherable action sequences, Stephen Sommers' *GI Joe: The Rise of Cobra* is a mélange of fight scenes, hackneyed dialogue, and irredeemably soppy or angry flashbacks. Based on the children's television show from the 1980s, which was itself based on the Hasbro toy line, this movie brings the franchise into the 21st Century with a very noisy, unfocused bang.

The plot, such as it is, revolves around tracking down four missiles filled with “nanomites,” which were manufactured by MARS industries, an international weapons supplier, and then stolen from the US Military convoy charged with transporting them. Duke (Channing Tatum) and Ripcord (Marlon Wayans), the soldiers responsible for the missiles, are saved by the classified GI Joe team after the evil Cobra organization robs them of their cargo with the use of genetically enhanced soldiers, pulse weapons, explosives, and, of course, hand to hand combat.

Duke, Ripcord and the “Joes” will have to steal the weapons back from Cobra before they unleash their destructive power on several major cities throughout the world.

The film, simply put, is a mess. For the most part, it is poorly acted and directed. When talented actors like Jonathan Pryce do suddenly appear, one wants to ask, “What are they doing here?”

There are loose strings everywhere. Where there are opportunities for plot development, the filmmakers never seize upon them.

For instance, the head of MARS, McCullen (Christopher Eccleston), is the direct descendant of an arms dealer shown in the opening sequence (set in 1641) who ends up being fitted for an iron mask for dealing arms to both sides in a war. McCullen has continued the family business, as it were. While this

situation could have been played out interestingly, it is used here to set up a banal exchange about not getting caught ‘double dealing.’ Of course, it would take far more serious and sensitive filmmakers than those involved here to make something of a social type such as McCullen. As it stands, the film has very different things on its mind.

The terrorist organization Cobra's mad scientist has developed a breed of soldiers who are impervious to pain, remorse, conscience, and who are extremely loyal. They have been rendered nearly invincible through the addition of “nanomites” to their blood and neurological systems, and will fight ruthlessly to their deaths. Once switched on, these human killing machines cannot be switched back off. One fears the filmmakers are making a comment on the current enemies faced by the real US military in the Middle East.

As for the “good guys,” the GI Joes have always been the most suspicious of superheroes. The first GI Joe toys debuted in 1964. They were 12-inch tall “action figures,” apparently an attempt at making a kind of Barbie doll for boys. There were four different dolls, each representing a branch of the US military. The toymakers designed their action figures as World War II-era soldiers, rather than connect them with the then escalating war in Vietnam.

The toys underwent a number of changes in the next two decades before toy company Hasbro relaunched the line as “GI Joe: A Real American Hero” in the 1980s. Comprising a line of much smaller action figures, these toys—and the subsequent cartoon series designed to promote them—provided a storyline in which the “Joes” fought against Cobra, a “ruthless terrorist organization determined to rule the world.” This storyline, along with elements drawn from another Joe series entitled

“GI Joe: Sigma 6,” provides the basis for Sommers’ film.

The Joes’ leader, as always, is General Hawk. But the filmmakers have added a new detail to his biography. Upon first meeting Hawk, Duke points out that the general has served as a commander in Afghanistan. “Yeah,” says Hawk cavalierly, “that was my old job.” Why make such a repulsive type into a hero? Is this simply irresponsibility on the part of the filmmakers, or something worse?

This is not the only instance in which the filmmakers have provided elements of the original story with a more contemporary propagandistic edge. The cartoon series of the 1980s ended each episode with a public service announcement. One of the GI Joe characters would find children in trouble and teach them about everything from water safety, to what to do if your house catches fire, to how to treat a nose bleed. At the end of each PSA, the Joe would say “Now you know, and knowing is half the battle.”

This motto is completely distorted in the new work in which the Joes repeatedly intone “knowing is half the battle” in connection with espionage and intelligence gathering. For example, they run a photo of Cobra’s “Baroness” (Sienna Miller) through a worldwide database of faces while one of the Joes points out that “everyone has been photographed in public” at some time. This is presented as nothing more than a handy tool, completely ignoring the sinister, anti-democratic nature of such a device.

There is a clear attempt to sanitize, rehabilitate, or otherwise glorify militarism and the tools at the disposal of US imperialism. General Hawk has a penchant for swing music, which is no doubt meant to bring to mind the “Greatest Generation” and connect the soldier and his mission with a “good war,” just as the original Joe toys invoked World War II even as the Vietnam conflict was reaching new levels of violence.

The high-tech warriors in *GI Joe* are extensively and expensively equipped and funded, sent on missions that break the law, and given leave, it would seem, to destroy cities and lives in pursuit of their goal. When the members of the Joe team are recalled by the governments of their respective home countries after public awareness of their activities becomes an embarrassment, General Hawk chooses to defy orders in the decisive heroic moment of the film. The Joes will

continue fighting and save the day whether their governments like it or not. In other words, the civilian authorities are simply a nuisance; the military knows best.

With such sentiments animating the work, it almost goes without saying the film is awash in violence. It is difficult to choose which one of the extended fight scenes is the most egregious. Certainly, consideration must be given to those between the Joes’ Snake Eyes (Ray Park) and Cobra’s Storm Shadow (Lee Byung-hun), both martial arts experts. Given that the target audience of the film is boys between 8-15 (despite the PG13 rating), the scenes between these two as children of no more than ten years old stand out as particularly disturbing. The children fight viciously with fists, feet, knives, and myriad other weapons. These childhood flashbacks take up quite a bit of time—the fights going on for as long as those between adults. The children’s faces are filled with rage throughout. The feud is carried on into adulthood.

For all the bodily destruction, there is surprisingly little blood in the film. Many people are stabbed, shot, blown to bits, but like the cartoon on which the film is based, it is all stylized so that viewers may enjoy the acrobatics and special effects free from worry and, above all, without having to acknowledge how very destructive so much of this is. One sees all the action and ‘glory,’ and none of the consequences. One’s final impression is that this is a decidedly pro-war film.



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