

Iron Man 2 and the sad state of American filmmaking today

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The state of American filmmaking at the moment is pretty appalling. In hardly a single recent Hollywood film do we find a hint of life as it is lived by millions of people in the United States and internationally, and certainly no hint of social opposition.

We have entered extraordinarily tense and convulsive times that would seem to demand the most serious attention from film writers and directors, however that might find artistic expression. Where is the filmmakers' response? Their anger, their ideas, even their interest? At a time when films—dramas or comedies—animated by the desire to get to the bottom of things are sorely needed, audiences instead by and large confront superficial, complacent, and light-minded works. The professional cynic, of course, will blame the viewers—as though they had any serious choice in the matter.

A glance at the current "USA Top 10" at the box office reveals the fare Hollywood is presently inflicting on a mass audience. There is, first of all, *Iron Man 2*, the latest comic book blockbuster, and a sequel. This is followed by yet another (and not a promising) version of Robin Hood, a few tepid romantic comedies that come and go indistinguishably, a computer-generated cartoon about dragons, remakes of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Clash of the Titans*, along with something called *Furry Vengeance*. By and large, these are dismal, unimaginative offerings for which no one should feel obliged to settle.

In regard to *Iron Man 2*, the emergence of so many comic book and superhero films following the events of 9/11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq has been one of the least attractive phenomena in recent filmmaking. These works, in which super-powered police figures—and in the case of Iron Man, a highly militarized policeman—battle pure evil on a global scale,

often carrying out the bloodiest acts of violence and vengeance, as fantasy-like as they are, no doubt speak to a real phenomenon: the extent to which a whole social grouping, including prominent and wealthy figures in the entertainment industry, has signed on to the "global war on terror" or the Obama version of that. That is to say, they identify with, more or less openly, or at least find no reason to object to America's drive to dominate the globe. (It is not inappropriate, of course, that such stupid fantasies should be done in cartoonish style—it would be difficult to make them believable in more down-to-earth surroundings.)

Iron Man 2 is the second installment in a planned trilogy about the Marvel Comics superhero. In this episode, Tony Stark (Robert Downey, Jr.), the wealthy CEO of Stark Industries who also fights crime in a high-tech armored suit, has almost entirely rid the world of war. Now he faces a new foe: the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Subpoenaed to appear before the committee, Stark is told his Iron Man suit is a weapon and must be handed over to military authorities. No such weapon can be left in the hands of one person, he is warned.

In a scene worthy of free enterprise fanatic Ayn Rand, Stark defends himself, telling the committee that Iron Man is his own creation, cannot be considered as separate from himself, and that he will not relinquish it. As Stark storms out of the hearing in victory, he declares, "I have successfully privatized world peace!" We are meant to congratulate him.

There continues to be something genuinely repulsive about the Stark/Iron Man character. As the first film established, Stark is the billionaire CEO of a weapons manufacturing corporation who, as a militarized superhero, fought against "terrorists" in Afghanistan during his earlier adventures. Now, he is the subject of

worldwide adulation, a fact that makes the egocentric playboy even more of a narcissist. The filmmakers clearly want us to admire or find amusing the recklessly self-centered exploits of the character, but one simply can't go along with it.

While Stark struggles to keep his armored suit out of the hands of the government, he must also contend with a new super-nemesis. The son of a Russian physicist who claims his experimental breakthroughs were stolen by Stark Industries decades earlier, Ivan Vanko (Mickey Rourke), a physicist like his father, constructs his own power suit and goes after Stark. Defeated by Iron Man in their first encounter, Ivan joins forces with one of Stark's competitors in the weapons industry and creates an army of drones in preparation for their next battle.

In a film filled with markedly unbelievable moments, it is perhaps especially difficult to believe that Ivan Vanko is a physicist; the hulking, tattooed Rourke looks as though he could still be wearing his make-up from *The Wrestler*.

This is not the only feature of the film that is, unintentionally, absurd. One is treated to scenes in which Downey, clad in his Iron Man armor, snacks while seated in the giant donut atop Inglewood, California's well-known Randy's Donut shop, or becomes drunk at a party and dances wildly while shooting at bottles thrown into the air by party-goers with rockets contained in his armor; it is virtually impossible to take any of this seriously.

Actress Scarlett Johansson also joins the cast in this segment of the *Iron Man* trilogy, appearing as a super-spy called Black Widow. She performs complex martial arts maneuvers in a skintight suit and is asked to do little else. Also coming aboard for this film is Don Cheadle, who plays Stark's friend James Rhodes. Rhodes dons his own armored suit during the film to become the superhero known as War Machine (the name is revealing). Just what are Johansson, Cheadle and, for that matter, Downey, doing here? It would do everyone a lot of good if some of these actors would simply learn to say "No."

As with most films of this kind, the special effects and action are center stage, while the dramatic scenes placed in between—only because they have to be—are forced, unconvincing and built around the most exhausted banalities. One's eyes glaze over when

forced to watch such material.

Unhappily, there are several more superhero films on the way. The entertainment press reports on films in the works starring such comic book favorites as "The Green Lantern," "Thor," "Captain America," "Batman," and "Spider-Man"—and the list goes on. We can hardly wait.



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