

The Avengers: Not at all the way truths can be explored

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The *Avengers*, directed by Joss Whedon, screenplay by Whedon and Zak Penn, based on the comic book by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby; *Dark Shadows*, directed by Tim Burton, screenplay by Seth Grahame-Smith, based on the television series by Dan Curtis.

Since its release in the US in early May *The Avengers* has brought in nearly \$500 million at the domestic box office, setting a record for the speed with which that mark was reached. Worldwide the movie has exceeded the \$1.2 billion mark.

Joss Whedon's effort, based on the Marvel Comics original, is one of Hollywood's biggest spectacles to date (at a cost of \$220,000,000). It involves a group of superheroes, The Avengers, combining to help save the earth—Manhattan in particular—from an alien supervillain, his demonic agent and an army of mechanized gargoyles.

Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), director of the global “peace-keeping” agency S.H.I.E.L.D., is charged with retrieving the Tesseract, a powerful energy source and potential weapon of mass destruction that has opened a portal to outer space. It has been taken by the Asgardian demi-god Loki (Tom Hiddleston), a Lucifer-like figure, on behalf of his alien overlord in order to subjugate the human race.

Fury gathers his superhero squadron that eventually includes Iron Man (Robert Downey, Jr.); Captain America (Chris Evans); The Hulk (Mark Ruffalo); Thor (Chris Hemsworth); Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) and Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner). “If we can't protect the world, we'll avenge it,” becomes their motto.

Marvel Comics' rise to prominence had a certain association with the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. Marvel prided itself on presenting the characters' complexities and even serious failings, in opposition to the more stolid, one-dimensional Superman and Batman of DC Comics.

Thus each Avenger in Whedon's film has his or her individual dilemma. The Black Widow wants to make up for past misdeeds; Thor has to settle accounts with his fallen, evil brother, Loki; after being encased in ice for decades, Captain America wonders whether there is a place in the 21st century for him and his old-fashioned patriotic gung-ho; Iron Man Tony Stark needs to prove that he is more than a selfish billionaire playboy; Dr. Bruce Banner, who when angry becomes The Hulk, is ministering to the poor in India when we first meet him, an undertaking he reluctantly abandons for the planet-saving mission.

And so on. None of this character development, however, goes beyond a few introductory lines of dialogue or bits of action. The audience quickly learns what to expect from each and every character, even taking into account the plot's inevitable twists and turns.

The Avengers also have their internal conflicts as a group. The revelation that Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D. were developing their own weapons of mass destruction creates divisions. The team members also differ and bicker over what strategy to pursue against Loki. Moreover, one of their

number, Hawkeye, initially falls under the sway of Loki and threatens to help enslave the planet. Will the Avengers come together in the end, with all their strengths and weaknesses, to save humanity?

The film, primarily a series of individual and large-scale combats, is a spectacle of contemporary film technology and special effects. One impossible feat follows rapidly on another, separated by interludes of largely clichéd dialogue, pieces of plot exposition and rather labored attempts at humor.

One hundred and forty-three minutes of head-pounding bombast, *The Avengers* is an exhausting experience. The filmmakers make certain that the viewer has as little time or space as possible for reflection and critical thought.

The story and characters flow inevitably toward an all-out war with Loki and the aliens as the only alternative to the destruction of the human race. The creatures with whom the superheroes do battle are the embodiment of pure unreasoning evil. Negotiations are out of the question and if Loki engages in conversation it is only for the purpose of manipulating one Avenger or another, or malignantly stalling for time.

The movie's final segments are saturated with 9/11 imagery—firefighters and policemen to the rescue of wounded and soot-covered civilians, followed by collective mourning. Captain America, a World War II veteran, brings “a little old-fashioned stars and stripes” to the party and tycoon Tony Stark demonstrates that the top one-hundredth of one percent can be a force for good. Whedon's film omits the fact that Stark Industries is a weapons manufacturer and Stark's past nemeses have included Arabs and Persians arranged in West-versus-East combat.

In the wake of 9/11 and the proclamation of the “war on terror,” and in the midst of a relentless drive to war with Iran, what is the overall message and impact here? There is no reason to impute to the filmmakers deliberately retrograde political motives, but have they thought *at all* about the implications of their work?

Why has the film caught on so strongly, if perhaps fleetingly, with the public?

The Avengers does contain an elegant, seductive performance by Hiddleston (*The Deep Blue Sea*), a very talented performer, and a few comic, though increasingly stale quips from Downey.

Unquestionably, Whedon is more gifted than some of the other blockbuster directors. As foolish as it often is, the story in *The Avengers* has a certain coherence and many of the effects are eye-catching marvels.

Furthermore, the gargantuan box office figures are partly attributable to the abysmally poor selection of films currently gracing America's cineplexes.

Those who maintain that the population gets “what it wants” self-servingly forget that audiences have no say in the production of the mass entertainment inflicted on them. Giant conglomerates make all those decisions, and work at every point within the framework of their financial and ideological interests.

The resurgence of superhero films in particular is the result of various

factors and really deserves its own special study. Economic, social and artistic issues come together here.

If it could, presumably each Hollywood studio would make one or two colossal films a year that would earn billions. Intriguing human stories and artistic presentations of life are inconveniences for studio executives, which they dispense with as much as possible in an effort to get to the business of emptying their customers' pockets.

As numerous commentators have pointed out, film adaptations of comic books have the advantage of built-in popular familiarity and bases of support. In addition, a successful adaptation may generate a vast amount of cash in terms of product tie-ins (clothing, games, fast food restaurant items, toys) and so forth for the fortunate entertainment giant in question.

Taking no chances, the filmmakers have made sure that *The Avengers* is star-packed, and in numerous cases (Johansson, Downey, Hemsworth, Ruffalo, Jackson and even Gwyneth Paltrow in a small part, Clark Gregg and Cobie Smulders) the performers have a genuine following or popular appeal.

But there is more going on here.

Again, a number of critics have pointed to the manner in which superhero films dress up American reality, brutal American imperialist reality in particular. A 2008 article, for example, at the Cleveland Indy Media Center, opines that “[t]hese superheroes have been harnessed in support of our dying imperial project, promising a renaissance through which our superior strength, and unrivaled human wisdom, are finally and fully unveiled for the world’s adoration and humble acquiescence.”

Along these lines, a blog by Tom Hiddleston on the *Guardian* web site is highly suggestive. “[S]uperhero films,” he writes, “offer a shared, faithless, modern mythology, through which these truths can be explored. In our increasingly secular society, with so many disparate gods and different faiths, superhero films present a unique canvas upon which our shared hopes, dreams and apocalyptic nightmares can be projected and played out.”

We have no desire to pick on Hiddleston, as noted, an excellent actor. In any event, one suspects that the comment reflects the thinking of the filmmakers and sections of the film industry, insofar as they care to articulate their thoughts. However, this is a terribly wrongheaded conception.

How can significant truths be explored through comic book-based films, cartoons, childish dreams? If someone thinks about this for an instant, surely it must produce misgivings.

The very nature of the form operates against, although it does not make impossible, the working through of the intensely complicated problems of modern life in a mass society.

Why is it not possible to present an accurate picture of the world and its complexities without legends, superheroes and superheroines? This genre is not working through *any* serious issues in an honest way. It mythologizes in dishonest ways.

Moreover, Hiddleston makes no reference to the social and class issues. But *The Avengers*, so to speak, does. Its view of humanity—at a time when wide layers of the population are beginning to return to the global political arena—is that of a helpless, faceless horde. Clearly, film industry executives in general and the political-media establishment have a less than selfless interest in skewing social reality and diverting people’s attention from it.

Decades ago, superhero movies and television shows were tongue-in-cheek. Today’s films present their comic book characters with a high degree of self-seriousness. They have a different tone and mood than their cartoonish ancestors. Even though it has a certain playfulness, and allows all sorts of physical mauling to go on, *The Avengers* still treats its characters with undue reverence.

The rise to prominence of the superhero comic book trend in film, putting aside for the moment the question of its artistic value, has an

objective significance. It coincides with the global economic decline of the US and the deteriorating social conditions of the population. Unwilling and intellectually too impoverished to look reality in the face, Hollywood increasingly resorts to “solving” America’s and the world’s problems through simplistic fantasy. It makes up for the military fiascos and social disasters it can’t and won’t represent by inventing cartoonish successes and triumphs that should convince no one.

Such films, insofar as they have a major impact, which is questionable, tend to reinforce and exacerbate the wishful thinking and illusions of a somewhat stunned population that has not yet for the most part consciously grasped the real causes of its predicament.

“And there came a day, a day unlike any other, when Earth’s mightiest heroes and heroines found themselves united against a common threat. On that day, the Avengers were born—to fight the foes no single hero could withstand! Through the years, their roster has prospered, changing many times, but their glory has never been denied! Heed the call, then—for now, the Avengers Assemble!”—from the prologue to the Marvel comic book.

Hopefully, another day will come when cinematic comic book retreats will no longer dominate the cultural landscape.

Tim Burton’s *Dark Shadows*

Based on the gothic television soap opera that ran from 1966 to 1971, Tim Burton’s *Dark Shadows* is an erratic movie without core or conviction. Although the film is not as poor as *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007) or *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), Burton is largely going through the motions here as well. Almost entirely lost are the humanism and sympathy that made *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and *Ed Wood* (1994) endearing.

Dark Shadows relies heavily on the talents of Johnny Depp, as well as a soundtrack of familiar 1970s songs, to cover over the identity crisis of its lackluster screenplay. Confusion about whether it’s a comedy-horror, or horror-drama with a bit of comedy, produces a few casualties, among whom Michelle Pfeiffer is the most prominent.

Depp plays Barnabas Collins, born in Liverpool in the 18th century, whose family moved to New England and became rich in the fishing industry. A jilted lover and witch, Angelique (Eva Green), turns him into a vampire and buries him. In 1972, his coffin is uncovered by a group of construction workers and Barnabas is set free. The film’s quasi-comedy stems from Barnabas’s encounter with the 1970s, including a discussion about the Vietnam War with a vanload of hippies, who soon after become the victims of his bloodlust (not amusing).

Collins also discovers his descendants to be in financial distress, having fallen prey to Angelique’s business empire. There is a showdown, a reincarnated true love, etc, etc.

While Burton can resurrect Barnabas, no amount of dark Burton-type visuals can resurrect the cheesy but enjoyable original Barnabas (Jonathan Frid who died in April) and the silly television series.



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