

Kick-Ass 2: Frat boy ethics, and worse

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Written and directed by Jeff Wadlow, based on the comic books by Mark Millar and John Romita Jr.

The superhero comic was once largely an adolescent fantasy retreat, containing entire worlds free of social complexities and moral ambiguity. The “good guys” assumed physical and moral omnipotence, with significant character flaws worked in for the sake of melodrama (and series longevity).

Though the bulk of the comic pantheon took as its departure a naive and often reactionary assessment of modern society, it could also be counted on to impress upon its audience a stringent code of moral uprightness that corresponded to the prevailing liberal-reformist attitudes of the time.

What remains of these two-dimensional stalwarts in a “post-heroic” era? Even the garden-variety superheroes have undergone acute transformations to keep step, allegedly, with shifting social realities—primarily the rise of the so-called War on Terror and its cultural appendages. The chaste and often campy qualities previously associated with the superhero genre have largely been replaced with cynicism and carnage. Reboots of the major superhero franchises, dripping with darkness and brooding, have taken place in the shadow of a long-running campaign to induce fear in the hearts of ordinary people.

Kick-Ass 2, for all of its disclaimers, holds entirely to a foul blueprint. Barely intelligible as a slice of Hollywood action cinema, it is representative of the decay of the milieu from whence it comes.

Writer and director Jeff Wadlow has billed the film as a “love letter for fans of superhero movies” that “pushes boundaries of the superhero genre.” Studio marketing executives and industry shills alike proclaim it an anti-hero “satire” that dispenses with the unrealistic and outmoded righteousness of yesterday’s caped crusaders. But replacing one childish social conceit with another, and using the language and

sensibility of a college drinking party to do so, leaves *Kick-Ass 2* well beneath the already low standards set by its predecessors.

The film’s story begins shortly after the events of the original *Kick-Ass* (2010), as the eponymous hero Dave Lizewski (Aaron Taylor-Johnson), after a brief hiatus, once again enters the realm of vigilante “justice.” Enlisting the help of his former collaborator Mindy Macready, alias “Hit Girl” (Chloë Moretz), and a collection of derivative superheroes with names such as “Colonel Stars and Stripes” (Jim Carrey in possibly his least whimsical and amusing role) and “Battle Guy” (Clark Duke), *Kick-Ass* goes to war against the dregs of society. The genuine dregs, however, i.e., bankers, corporate sharks and war criminals, are nowhere to be found.

Instead, *Kick-Ass* and his motley crew face off against “The Motherfucker” (Christopher Mintz-Plasse), a diminutive gangster with a personal army who pursues a vendetta against the heroes. The film as a whole is a series of brutal mutilations followed like clockwork by snarky insults, punctuated here and there with glances and platitudes that set the stage for yet more bloodletting.

No viewer would consider this a paean to the comic book art form, or any other art form, as Wadlow so disingenuously contends.

What little dialogue transcends the juvenile is stilted and delivered unconvincingly by actors who deserve better, such as Taylor-Johnson and Carrey, in whose wooden performances one senses their humiliation (Carrey has officially distanced himself from the film’s extreme violence). So contrived is the story’s entire premise that one gets the sense that the masquerading strongmen scarcely buy into their own professed directives.

In the lead-up to the film’s release, Wadlow reflected: “I know what it takes to be an adequate

director ... maybe even slightly above average.” Here, at least, he is merely punching above his weight, and not being preposterous.

As the WSWS often contends, the audience has an obligation to demand films that treat these tumultuous times with intelligence and sympathy. There is an exasperating imbalance in popular cinema weighted towards the trivial and obscene, and adding one more movie to that miserable sum only worsens matters.

Once upon a time, notable filmmakers treated social issues like crime with a certain amount of sincerity and wit. In his 1961 vigilante classic *Yojimbo*, Japanese director Akira Kurosawa managed to comment on the provincialism of municipal politics—and the contemporary perils of inter-imperialist rivalry—in the guise of a comical allegory about a gang feud. Such films are now few and far between.

Though Wadlow and his lot may not comprehend it, their inability to produce anything of artistic value is a reflection of a living social process. The affluent middle class that operates the levers of pop culture and the mass media has over the past several decades moved sharply to the right and has very little to say.

The picture of society offered by these layers is not so different than that presented by the numerous talking heads that plague the corporate airwaves: crime is rampant, the streets crawling with scoundrels who would snuff out a life at the drop of a hat. The police are ineffectual and nowhere to be found. The masses of working people, if they emerge from their dwellings at all, are cowardly and boorish. Teenagers who are simultaneously stirred by social injustice and their changing bodies are driven instinctively to violence.

Even stripped of hyperbole, this depiction bears little semblance to real life. Crime and poverty are inseparable. *Kick-Ass 2* lamely attempts to portray this antithesis by showing its crime fighters doing their penance at a soup kitchen, but the very next scene is once more awash in fists and knives. *Can the heroes be certain that the heads they now knock together are not the very same they fed last night?* This perhaps most fatal weakness of the superhero genre is compounded in Wadlow’s film.

In this context, *Kick-Ass 2* cannot be passed off as just one more harmless superhero film. It treats its subject matter too flippantly, and its frivolous and grisly aspects too seriously. What its fans term “edgy”

is just an excuse to lather the screen in blood and severed limbs. Far from “exposing the consequences” of vigilante justice, as Wadlow disingenuously put it, one gets a strong impression that his is a vainglorious wallowing in it all, in the style of Quentin Tarantino. The camera, rather than recoiling from the goings-on, closes in and relishes the carnage.

Much more can and will be said about the commercialized “geek culture” that continues to churn out such navel-gazing residue, and this filmgoer earnestly hopes that readers of this web site will help contribute to a wider analysis of these trends.



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