

Captain America—The Winter Soldier: So much noise and action you almost fall asleep

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Directed by Anthony and Joe Russo; screenplay by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely, concept and story by Ed Brubaker, based on comic books by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby

Captain America: The Winter Soldier, directed by Anthony and Joe Russo, is the latest film installment featuring Marvel Comics' character Captain America, one of the most prominent and patriotic superheroes introduced in American comic books in the World War II era.

The film is largely a noisy mishmash, which in part attempts to cash in on the widespread unpopularity of such phenomena as NSA spying and presidential "kill lists." Any effort to follow the convoluted storyline, however, is not time well spent. This "thriller" is neither especially entertaining nor politically astute. And most of its vague, confused criticisms are buried in the technological train wreck.

In *The Winter Soldier*, Steve Rogers, a.k.a. Captain America (Chris Evans), has been revived after decades of suspended animation. He is dispatched with Natasha Romanoff, a.k.a. Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson), a former Russian KGB agent, to rescue hostages on a pirate-hijacked *S.H.I.E.L.D.* ship. *S.H.I.E.L.D.* is an American espionage and law enforcement agency. But Natasha's real mission is to retrieve vital data from the vessel for the agency's director Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), who fears its security has been breached. This then involves the overt and covert machinations of *S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s lead bureaucrat, Alexander Pierce (Robert Redford).

Steve is briefed by Fury about the government program "Operation Insight": three "Helicarriers" linked to spy satellites, designed to preemptively eliminate threats (Steve: "This is not freedom. This is fear....").

Eventually, Steve and Natasha discover a secret *S.H.I.E.L.D.* bunker in New Jersey, where they activate a computer containing the disembodied consciousness of arch-villain Dr. Arnim Zola (Toby Jones), who reveals that the Nazi organization *HYDRA* has been embedded in *S.H.I.E.L.D.* The fascists' strategy is to sow chaos as a means of forcing humanity to surrender freedom for security.

The predictable fight between good and evil ("holding a gun to everyone on earth and calling it protection") and to defend the planet and its custodian, the World Security Council, engages not only Steve and Natasha, but Sam Wilson, a.k.a. Falcon (Anthony Mackie), a former military pararescueman who now sports an impressively powered wing-pack. The heroes are pitted against the Winter Soldier (Sebastian Stan), a brainwashed, re-engineered assassin with a bionic arm, who was once Steve's childhood friend and military buddy.

Since every Hollywood blockbuster must trump its hyperkinetic predecessor, *The Winter Soldier*'s fight and chase scenes are pumped up on computer-graphic steroids. The actors are pawns in the dramatically impoverished bedlam. And of course, the movie contains the requisite nationalist and anti-communist (and anti-Russian) undertones.

The filmmakers, Joe and Anthony Russo, have previously written and directed mainly for television—with the exception of the 2002 independent film, *Welcome to Collinwood*. In an interview with *Mother Jones*, Joe Russo sheds light on the brothers' leap into the world of mega-budget superhero cinema:

"[Marvel] said they wanted to make a political thriller, so we said if you want to make a political thriller, all the great political thrillers have very current issues in them that reflect the anxiety of the audience....

That gives it an immediacy, it makes it relevant. So [Anthony] and I just looked at the issues that were causing anxiety for us, because we read a lot and are politically inclined. And a lot of that stuff had to do with civil liberties issues, drone strikes, the president's kill list, preemptive technology."

Elsewhere, Anthony Russo explains: "[W]e're also very pop-culture-obsessed and we love topicality, so we kept pushing to [have] scenes that, fortunately or unfortunately, played out [during the time that [Edward] Snowden outed the NSA. That stuff was already in the zeitgeist."

It is difficult in such comments to separate out the elements of self-delusion, on the one hand, and mere confusion, on the other. It apparently hasn't occurred to the Russo brothers that once a filmmaker embraces the comic book extravaganza format and the accompanying need of the film studios involved to earn hundreds of millions of dollars at the box office, the possibility of creating an intriguing and complex political thriller, with something compelling to say, for example, about NSA spying and preemptive war, has already more or less flown out the window.

What the studios want (and obtain) in such cases is bombast, impersonality and sociological simple-mindedness. The brothers may think they are subverting Hollywood with their hard-edged, "immediate," "relevant" approach, but it is the film industry that has far, far too easily absorbed them.

In any event, the makers of *The Winter Soldier* by and large accept the US government's arguments and the framework of the so-called war on terror. After all, isn't their red-white-and-blue protagonist, who was originally conceived in 1940 as an anti-Nazi combatant, now (70 years down the road) sporting a shield as tarnished as the reputation of the country he is supposed to personify? The Russos and the liberal Hollywood establishment may be squeamish about the dictatorial tendencies of the White House's current occupant. But they are not genuine opponents.

In relation to Barack Obama's program of targeted assassinations, Joe Russo asks, "The question is where do you stop? If there are 100 people we can kill to make us safer, do we do it? What if we find out there's 1,000? What if we find out there's 10,000? What if it's a million? At what point do you stop?"

The answer is, the entire process is illegal and

unconstitutional, and has nothing to do with making anyone safer. It is the foundation (and walls) of a police state, ultimately aimed at the American population itself.

Films like *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* are not genuine entertainment. They are largely marketing and propaganda vehicles. To create a broader popular appeal, their creators are obliged to inject them artificially with a certain anti-establishment content. The mainstream critics (the vast majority of whom have praised the Russos' film) play their own part in bolstering an increasingly discredited industry. Anyone who thinks about it seriously will recognize that this type of film is nonsense, entirely out of touch with reality. Citizens of the future, if they take the time to watch the current crop of comic book-superhero films, will merely shake their heads in amazement.



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