

Captain America: Civil War—A waste of resources, technology and human skill

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Directed by Anthony and Joe Russo; screenplay by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely

Captain America: Civil War is the latest Hollywood superhero film. It is the 13th film from the “Marvel Cinematic Universe” alone. (There are more on the way.) The new *Captain America* is now the most commercially successful film of 2016, with its global box office revenue having reached \$1 billion this past weekend. It cost approximately \$250 million to make.

The story of *Captain America: Civil War* involves a dispute within the group of “enhanced” creatures known as the Avengers over whether they should accept United Nations supervision of their efforts to combat threats represented by various “supervillains.” Governments worldwide have become concerned about civilian casualties, “collateral damage,” resulting from the Avengers’ destructive activities.

Captain America / Steve Rogers (Chris Evans) leads the faction that opposes signing an agreement accepting UN regulation of the superheroes’ conduct. Ironman / Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) heads up those in favor. A terrorist attack that is falsely attributed to Rogers’ friend Winter Soldier / Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan), the victim of insidious brainwashing years ago in Siberia, becomes the source of further conflicts among the Avengers, hence the “Civil War” in the film’s title. It turns out that someone is deliberately stoking the bitter discord in the group, hoping to fracture it permanently, because of his own personal grievances.

Joe and Anthony Russo directed *Captain America: Civil War*. The action sequences, and there are many of them, are often difficult to follow. The relationships are simplistic and clichéd. There are a few amusing lines in the nearly two and a half hour film. There is also the nearly inevitable, vaguely anti-Russian angle. Overall,

it is impossible to care about anyone and anything in this work.

There are no coherent or significant themes here. *Civil War* seems to be suggesting that the thirst for vengeance is unquenchable and self-defeating. Every forceful action—even in a good cause—produces new, perhaps accidental victims, and those who attempt to avenge the latter inevitably perpetuate the cycle of violence. If this is meant to apply to the current geopolitical situation, to the wars in the Middle East and the terrorist attacks in Europe, it is less than meaningless, since it conceals the reality of relentless US and European military violence and neo-colonial aggression.

With its fleeting, essentially inconsequential references to the deaths of innocent civilians, the Russo brothers’ effort deserves inclusion among those films and novels that accept—sometimes in allegorical form—the framework of the “war on terror,” but suggest that “good people” (or whatever form of life they may be) can “step over the line” and that there may be a price to pay for the overzealous pursuit of “evildoers.”

If Captain America is taken to be the leader of some sort of pumped up US Special Forces unit, i.e., death squad, then the film is more sinister. Rogers’ refusal to accept any supervision is apparently intended to demonstrate the depth of his independence and quasi-“libertarian” commitment, even his anti-authoritarianism. But he and his team could be looked at differently, as murderous paramilitary vigilantes, if one chose to take any of this seriously ...

In any event, the issues and dilemmas facing the characters, the gestures in the direction of “psychology,” are mere scaffolding for a large-scale money-making operation. What passes for film

criticism is so prostituted in the US at this point that hardly anyone can state the obvious: that this is a bloated, pointless and dull film, which simply kills (truly murders!) a few hours in the viewer's life.

Laughably, Justin Chang in *Variety*, the trade publication, calls it the "most mature and substantive picture to have yet emerged from the Marvel Cinematic Universe." More cynically, the *Hollywood Reporter* comments, "Call it 'civil war' or call it brand extension; call it a 'cinematic universe' or a corporate behemoth—the latest Marvel extravaganza furthers the studio's cross-pollination of action franchises in a way that's sure to satisfy devotees. Posing serious questions about violence and vigilantism while reveling in both, *Captain America: Civil War* is overlong but surprisingly light on its feet."

These comments are simply a form of product endorsement. The American media, instinctively subservient to corporate interests, treats the studios and their blockbusters as invaluable national assets that are "too big to fail." It is a truly dreadful situation.

Last July, in a comment on *Terminator Genisys* (2015), we pointed to the phenomenon of so-called independent filmmakers moving "into the 'blockbuster' vortex" as something worth "taking note of."

The Russo brothers were cited in that article as an example. They wrote and directed their first film, *Pieces* (1997), while still graduate students at Case Western Reserve University, in their hometown of Cleveland. Joe Russo told an interviewer that this initial movie "was a French New Wave-influenced, non-linear art piece that had no absolutely no appeal to anybody in commercial filmmaking." He told another interviewer, "It was a genre-bending movie. It was about a heist, but completely absurdist in the style of a [Jean-Luc] Godard film," and "[W]e grew up on foreign films, art house films. [François] Truffaut was a huge influence on us."

Thanks to Steven Soderbergh and George Clooney, who had a production company together, the Russo brothers made their first feature film, *Welcome to Collinwood* (2002). It was set in a rundown section of Cleveland and based on Italian filmmaker Mario Monicelli's memorable comedy, *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (*I soliti ignoti*, 1958), about a group of small-time thieves who horribly botch a burglary. William H.

Macy, Sam Rockwell, Isaiah Washington, Luis Guzmán, Patricia Clarkson, Jennifer Esposito and Clooney himself featured in the amusing work.

(Oddly enough, another "independent" filmmaker who has found himself directing bombastic fare, Alan Taylor [*Thor: The Dark World*, 2013, and *Terminator Genisys*], also began his career by directing a movie, *Palookaville* (1995), loosely inspired by Monicelli's film.)

The Russo brothers apparently played a role as well in developing the comic television series, *Arrested Development* (2003-06), eventually directing 15 episodes between them. After working on a number of other series, the Russos graduated to directing *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), and now this. They are slated to direct two more Avengers' films, *Infinity War, Part I* and *II*, to be released in 2018 and 2019, respectively.

All one can think about is the terrible waste of resources, technology and human skill represented by a film like *Captain America: Civil War*. The performers, for instance, include many talented individuals, among them Evans, Downey Jr., Scarlett Johansson, Anthony Mackie, Don Cheadle, Jeremy Renner, Chadwick Boseman, Paul Bettany, Elizabeth Olsen, Paul Rudd, Daniel Brühl, William Hurt, Martin Freeman, Marisa Tomei, John Slattery, Hope Davis, Alfre Woodard and others. What are these people doing in this film? Is there any major film actor at present who would say "No" to this sort of project?

In any event, the ultimate source of the problem lies in "bad times," not bad people. What exists at present will be replaced by something very different, its opposite in many respects.



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