

Wonder Woman: Humanity is pretty rotten, but the Germans are the worst of the lot

David Walsh
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“I recently attended a showing of *Wonder Woman* exclusively for women and women-identifying viewers ... While there was a man in attendance who began to ruin the experience for me and those around me, the hurt feelings got lost once the movie started. We were in this together, and we all united over our shared excitement for this amazing female-led and -directed superhero movie that means so much to us for so many reasons” (Carrie Wittmer, *Business Insider*).

“*Wonder Woman* offers what no other superhero can: an essentially female-power fantasy. Close your eyes and imagine an island with achingly gorgeous vistas in which a diverse group of intelligent, strong women have created an immensely more advanced society. No men. No sexism. No capitalist burden to perform that leaves women, especially women of color, vulnerable” (Angelica Jade Bastién, *Slate*).

These comments were presumably written by adults.

Wonder Woman, directed by Patty Jenkins, is a trite, often tedious, special effects-laden film based on a comic book. The story involves an Amazonian princess/demigoddess who makes her way, in the company of an American Allied spy, from her island paradise to Europe and the Western Front toward the end of the First World War.

Appalled by *German* brutality, Diana Prince/Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot) intervenes on the side of the Allies and prevents the dastardly “Huns”—and a fascistic Gen. Erich Ludendorff (Danny Houston) in particular—from developing a new and devastating weapon. In the course of things, she also has to take on and defeat her half-brother, Ares, the god of war, who is bent on destroying the human race.

Wonder Woman passes along a considerable amount of undigested American and British World War I disinformation. A portion of the film takes place in Belgium and it echoes the official Allied claims of the time about German aggression against “poor little Belgium.” Terrified survivors in a small town tell Diana and her American colleague, Capt. Steve Trevor (Chris Pine), that the Germans have “enslaved” their fellow villagers. Ludendorff and the German forces subsequently murder the remaining townspeople with a new, deadly poison gas.

In short, the film is not antiwar, it is anti-German. The Americans and British, for the most part, are high-minded and

peace loving, although they end up massacring more Germans than the latter do Americans and British. Capt. Trevor says he wants to “stop the war,” but, in fact, he wants to win it for *his side*. And “his side” is identified with normalcy and civilization. Wonder Woman’s supposed contributions to “peace,” including “liberating” the Belgian village by almost single-handedly wiping out a German battalion, are contributions entirely to the Allied cause. She says, “I will fight, for those who can not fight for themselves,” but, in fact, she fights on behalf of the British ruling elite and its interests.

Piercing through a lot of the nonsense and bombast, this is pretty crude nationalist and pro-war propaganda. Does the sudden reemergence of Germany (and *not* the Nazi regime) as the bestial, sadistic enemy have an ideological significance in the given climate of increased tensions between the US and Europe? Only time will tell.

The dialog and characterizations here are banal and perfunctory in the extreme. If they are less banal and perfunctory than the dialog and characterizations in other comic book films, and this is one of the chief arguments being made in *Wonder Woman*’s favor, that seems like faint praise.

The relationship between Diana and Capt. Trevor is as lifelike and convincing as one might expect, given the circumstances: a mythological creature and a heroic, self-sacrificing American fighter taking on the forces of darkness in wartime Europe, in the peculiar company of a heavy-drinking Scottish former sharpshooter (Ewen Bremner), a French-Moroccan con artist (Saïd Taghmaoui) and a Native American smuggler (Eugene Brave Rock). This is the level of the dialog:

Diana Prince: You’re a man...

Steve Trevor: Yeah ... I mean ... do I not look like one?

* * * * *

Steve Trevor: Have you never met a man before? What about your father?

Diana Prince: I had no father. My mother sculpted me from clay and I was brought to life by Zeus.

Steve Trevor: Well that’s neat.

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Steve Trevor: [to Diana] I can save today. You can save the world.

Diana sums up the film’s wisdom at the end: “I used to want

to save the world, to end war and bring peace to mankind. But then I glimpsed the darkness that lives within their light. I learnt that inside every one of them there will always be both. The choice each must make for themselves—something no hero will ever defeat. And now I know... that only love can truly save the world. So now I stay, I fight and I give—for the world I know can be. This is my mission now, for ever.”

Insofar as one takes this last bit at all seriously, it is reactionary twaddle.

The actors are not to blame, but there is nothing much to be said about them. But what is British actor David Thewlis, who has appeared in serious films such as Mike Leigh’s *Naked* (1993), doing here flying around in Ares’ giant-warrior armor?

The comments cited at the top of this article are typical of the overheated praise for and excitement surrounding *Wonder Woman*.

In certain (quite confined) quarters, the appearance of a female superhero film is one of the major cultural events of the year, or perhaps in recent years.

The critics either share this excitement or are intimidated by the clamor.

Richard Brody of the *New Yorker* writes that *Wonder Woman* “is a superhero movie, and it fulfills the heroic and mythic demands of that genre, but it’s also an entry in the genre of wisdom literature that shares hard-won insights and long-pondered paradoxes of the past with a sincere intimacy.”

In the *Guardian*, Zoe Williams headlines her review, “Why *Wonder Woman* is a masterpiece of subversive feminism.”

“What lingers ... is the feeling of hope that the movie brings, that it someday might be possible for female rationality to defeat male brutality,” comments Mick LaSalle in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

And A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* suggests that *Wonder Woman* “briskly shakes off blockbuster branding imperatives and allows itself to be something relatively rare in the modern superhero cosmos. It feels less like yet another installment in an endless sequence of apocalyptic merchandising opportunities than like ... what’s the word I’m looking for? A movie. A pretty good one, too.”

The critical consensus, according to one review aggregator web site? “Thrilling, earnest, and buoyed by Gal Gadot’s charismatic performance, *Wonder Woman* succeeds in spectacular fashion.”

I wonder, when I read these comments, whether I’ve seen the same film.

This is not the occasion to go into the question at any length, but there must be a connection between how upper middle class layers have made large amounts of money in recent decades and the terrible intellectual laziness that prevails.

The reliance on an apparently endless upward movement of stock prices and, in many cases, real estate values, the extreme parasitism of the economy, the almost “automatic” character of money-making in certain spheres, the relative ease with which,

frankly, a great number of extremely limited human beings (in some cases, downright imbeciles) have made fortunes ... to all this correspond certain retrograde moods and sentiments.

To many, it has seemed as though critical, painstaking thought no longer had any value. Identity politics plays its own role here too. The validity of one’s positions is no longer determined by rational argumentation, by objective facts, but instead by biology or ethnicity, sexual orientation. “I am a woman ... an African American ... a gay person, therefore what I have to say is *a priori* valid or true.” It’s an extremely harmful approach for all involved.

Or take the anti-Russian hysteria that has seized not merely the American political establishment, but certain sections of the comfortable middle class.

Settling on the “Russian nemesis,” which also involves sneering at the need for “proof” of “Putin’s interference” in the elections, absolves certain layers of the need to seriously take stock of the right-wing character of the Democratic Party, the advanced decay of the economic and political system, the wretched conditions under which tens of millions of people live in this country. “The Russians did it!”

There are good reasons why these quite disparate phenomena—the identity politics mania, the “excitement” over *Wonder Woman* and other such cultural trivia, the anti-Russian frenzy—exist on the same historical plane.

It is not the same for the working class. Whatever the ideological difficulties, workers, like the residents in Flint, Michigan, have had to go on making continually more painful and difficult decisions. They do not have the luxury of the empty-headedness and self-indulgence of the upper middle class. They are objectively driven toward the truth about society.

I attended a public screening of *Wonder Woman*. There was occasional amusement, some interest in the spectacle, some disappointment too that the film did not live up to the media buildup, but none of the “thrilling” and “shared excitement” that the official commentators report.



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