

Unequivocally, FOR Wes Anderson's *Isle of Dogs* and AGAINST *Avengers: Infinity War*

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The blindness and stupidity of the identity politics-obsessed upper middle class knows no bounds.

War, oppression and poverty do not seriously disturb the sleep of this privileged crowd, but any slight (real or imagined) to gender or ethnic sensibilities ... oh, the outrage, the uproar! The outlook is insufferable, and it infects and afflicts cultural life at present.

This issue comes up most recently in regard to the opposed critical responses generated by Wes Anderson's *Isle of Dogs* and the Russo brothers' *Avengers: Infinity War*.

Isle of Dogs is a stop-motion animated film, set in the future, about a young Japanese boy who goes in search of his beloved dog. The animal has been unjustly exiled—with the rest of the species—to a polluted landfill of an islet off the Japanese mainland. The boy, Atari, allows no obstacles to stand in his way, and his efforts ultimately contribute to the bringing down of an intolerant, tyrannical regime.

Anderson's film is officially promoted as a comedy, and it has some very amusing elements, but *Isle of Dogs* is a darker film than one suspects the writer-director intended it to be or perhaps even now realizes that it is. The brutal "penal colony," complete with rusting industry and tribes of outcasts and surrounded by water, inevitably conjures up images of the ongoing global refugee crisis, in which millions of people have been displaced by imperialist-instigated war and violence.

Anderson (*Rushmore*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*) has made the film with his customary flair and conscientiousness (which occasionally borders on the precious), down to the titles and labels and endless assorted bits of visual business. The filmmakers took immense care in the recreation of their fantasy, dystopian Japan, building more than 2,500 puppets and 250 sets.

Avengers: Infinity War is a mind-numbing, special effects-laden film based on the Marvel Comics superhero team the Avengers. One of the most expensive films ever produced, with a budget estimated at one-third of a billion dollars, it involves the attempt by Thanos, a humanoid creature, to collect a series of "Infinity Stones" that will give him omnipotence and enable him to fulfill his plan of eliminating half the life in the universe. The Avengers and various others attempt to oppose him.

The film, on course to break box office records, has already brought in some \$900,000,000 worldwide.

Avengers: Infinity War is a series of battles between superheroes and supervillains and their respective cohorts, interspersed with scenes of the various "larger-than-life" characters planning, bickering or demonstrating their wit. These interludes are meant to create some point of contact between audience members and the gigantesque, caricatured goings-on they briefly interrupt. However, no genuine or long-lasting amusement or engagement is possible, as the reverential treatment of completely preposterous events and processes is what predominates.

By any definition derived from the history of cinema, *Avengers: Infinity War* does not, properly speaking, offer a film experience. It is not something that the viewer follows (or could possibly follow) carefully or

feels involved with, it is a phenomenon that *happens to* him or her, it is a peculiar, somewhat threatening type of spectacle that keeps itself at a distance. Over the course of two and a half hours, the screen is full of noise, color and shapes, almost none of which are genuinely intriguing. A work like this is not making an argument, or seeking to convince anyone of an idea or even a sentiment, it simply aspires to assert itself, to be an overwhelming presence (and motivate a sequel). At that, it succeeds.

Furthermore, this episode at least is singularly gloomy. The massive evil Thanos overpowers or outwits all his opponents and succeeds in his malevolent plan at film's end. That may well all be reversed in the next installment (or the one after), but *Infinity War* considered on its own is grim and bleak. War and violence are appalling here, but they are also glorified, along with revenge, vindictiveness, sadism, etc.

Audience members with whom I saw the film seemed distinctly distracted and unfocused, as how could they not be in the face of the relentless commotion—and occasional pontificating? That sort of unceasing, dizzying "action" without larger purpose or coherence has the consequence of encouraging the most pronounced apathy and passivity.

Infinity War features some of the finest male performers (in some cases, merely as voices) working in film today, including Josh Brolin, Benedict Cumberbatch, Chadwick Boseman, Tom Hiddleston, Idris Elba, Paul Bettany, Anthony Mackie, Robert Downey Jr., Mark Ruffalo, Don Cheadle, Peter Dinklage, Bradley Cooper and Benicio Del Toro.

The list of female performers is shorter, but also includes well-known and talented individuals: Elizabeth Olsen, Zoe Saldana, Gwyneth Paltrow, Scarlett Johansson, Danai Gurira, Carrie Coon, Karen Gillan, Pom Klementieff and Letitia Wright.

What are these people doing here? Is any paycheck worth the tarnishing of one's artistic reputation and legacy?

Money may not be the chief motive, although it is assuredly one of them. Deeply confused or disoriented about the state of the world and the state of filmmaking—or what it might be capable of—and determined not to be outpaced in the competition for celebrity, the actors evidently feel they cannot be "left behind" when such opportunities arise. Nonetheless, shame on them.

The critics have been generally favorable toward both *Isle of Dogs* and *Avengers: Infinity War*, which is already a commentary. Astonishingly, however, it is Anderson's film that has aroused "controversy." Of the two films, the overwhelming majority of the most harshly critical remarks have been directed toward *Isle of Dogs*. This is where the question of identity politics arises.

Anderson has been accused of "cultural appropriation" and "stereotyping" for his incorporation of Japanese elements in his film. He is also charged with "insensitivity" for his decision to have the Japanese characters speak in their own tongue (sometimes with translation into English), while the group of dog-characters that figure prominently in the first portion of the film (played by Bryan Cranston, Edward Norton, Bob Balaban, Billy Murray and Jeff Goldblum) speak in English. A title

explains that their “barking” has been translated into English. Moreover, the presence of a young American girl student, Tracy Walker (Greta Gerwig), as one of the leaders of the mainland protests transforms *Isle of Dogs* into a “white savior” film, according to the critics.

The critical comments are generally formulaic. Anna Greer at *Bust* writes, “*Isle of Dogs* is a beautiful film from a white, male perspective. You may cry in a couple of places, because humanity doesn’t deserve dogs. You may roll your eyes in some places, because a girl ending a political rant with the realization that she has a crush is a punchline. Viewers have had to put up with good yet problematic films for decades. In the era of *Black Panther* and *A Wrinkle In Time*, we should hold good films to a higher standard and demand more from the stories being told.”

One wonders at times if the various reviewers paid any attention to the film itself or already had their trite thoughts worked out in advance. If by “white males,” Greer means the group of dogs mentioned above (Cranston et al), she apparently fails to notice that their collective role diminishes to almost nothing over the course of *Isle of Dogs* and the determined Japanese boy, Atari, and American girl (both allied with a silent Japanese hacker) come to the fore. Atari, in fact, takes over the film and his impassioned words and actions, only whose general defense of the “underdog” the non-Japanese speaker can understand, become the most moving and dramatic element in the film, by far. More generally, one thinks of a very young, angry generation on the move.

It is worth citing two reviewers whose differing attitudes toward *Isle of Dogs* and *Avengers: Infinity War* are revealing.

Writing of Anderson’s film, Justin Chang in the *Los Angeles Times* observes, “Tellingly, it’s in the director’s handling of the story’s human factor that his sensitivity falters, and the weakness for racial stereotyping that has sometimes marred his work comes to the fore. ... The dogs, for their part, all speak clear American English, which is ridiculous, charming and a little revealing. You can understand why a writer as distinctive as Anderson wouldn’t want his droll way with the English language to get lost in translation. But all these coy linguistic layers amount to their own form of marginalization, effectively reducing the hapless, unsuspecting people of Megasaki to foreigners in their own city.”

“I like Wes Anderson Land; it’s always a fun place to visit. But some parts are less fun than others, and what we see of it in *Isle of Dogs* is finally ugly in ways beyond what even its maker could have intended.”

It is an American-made film and Anderson does not speak Japanese, and it may be that this creates certain challenges *Isle of Dogs* is not entirely equipped to overcome. One suspects that Tracy Walker, the American girl, was not included to provide a “white savior,” but to insert (a little awkwardly) an English-speaking character with whom English-speaking audiences could identify more closely, once the conceit of not translating a good deal of the Japanese had been decided on.

In any event, it would be evident to any reasonably objective viewer that Anderson is a great admirer of Japanese culture and cinema, that his meticulous reproductions and inventions could only be the most sincere tribute. The charge of “racial stereotyping” is absurd and malicious.

“The movie is a fantasy, and I would never suggest that this is an accurate depiction of any particular Japan,” Anderson told *Entertainment Weekly*. “This is definitely a reimagining of Japan through my experience of Japanese cinema.”

Anderson told *IndieWire* that he and his collaborators had long “been talking about wanting to do something in Japan, about Japan, something related to our shared love of Japanese cinema, especially [Akira] Kurosawa.” Moreover, *IndieWire* continues, “The director was also guided by his love for Japanese animation, especially Hayao Miyazaki. ‘I really got interested in Japanese animation in the time before I did *Fantastic Mr. Fox* [2009],’ Anderson said. ... ‘This one, there are two directors who are our inspirations: Kurosawa and Miyazaki.’”

Erica Dorn, the Japanese-born lead graphic designer on *Isle of Dogs*

responded to Anderson’s critics in an interview posted on the Motion Picture Association of America website: “Wes loves Japanese culture, otherwise he wouldn’t have bothered to hire two Japanese graphic designers to do all of the text in the movie,” she says. “*Isle of Dogs* is sort of Wes’ fantasy version of Japan. He made an authentic Wes Anderson film as opposed to imitating exactly what other filmmakers have done. And from my own perspective as a Japanese person, a moviegoer, whatever, I think it’s awesome that our culture is a source of inspiration.” Ken Watanabe and Yoko Ono are also among the participants in the film.

As for the claims made by numerous critics that Anderson renders the Japanese language “alien” by leaving it untranslated, Anderson told *Entertainment Weekly*, “I don’t like to watch Japanese movies that are dubbed into English. I like the performances of actors in Japanese. It’s interesting to me, and it’s a very beautiful, complex language.” One of the purposes here (at a time of increased international tension) seems to be to allow non-Japanese-speaking audiences hear and become accustomed to the language. In the case of Atari in particular this works wonderfully.

This is Chang of the *LA Times*, on the other hand, writing about the drivel that is *Avengers: Infinity War*: “Whatever else it may be—a culmination, an obligation, a staggering feat of crowd control, a truly epic tease—*Avengers: Infinity War* is a brisk, propulsive, occasionally rousing and borderline-gutsy continuation of a saga that finally and sensibly seems to be drawing to a close. ... It is also a carefully engineered and ultimately unsuccessful bid for something that has rarely, if ever, rattled the Marvel cosmos: catharsis.” No controversy here!

Angie Han at Mashable writes about Anderson’s film: “The problem is that *Isle of Dogs* falls into a long history of American art othering or dehumanizing Asians, borrowing their ‘exotic’ cultures and settings while disregarding the people who created those cultures and live in those settings.”

“Tracy [Walker-Greta Gerwig] is a classic example of the ‘white savior’ archetype—the well-meaning white hero who arrives in a foreign land and saves its people from themselves.” Of course, Gerwig, who has been enthusiastic about her support for the #MeToo campaign and equally enthusiastic about kicking Woody Allen every opportunity she has, receives her “intersectional” comeuppance here, not that it seems likely to teach her very much at the moment.

By contrast, this is Han on *Avengers: Infinity War*: “In the closing moments of *Avengers: Infinity War*, Thanos, wielding his now-complete Infinity Gauntlet, manages to wipe out a huge chunk of Marvel heroes ... It’s a jaw-dropping way to end a movie, and left audiences in my theater gasping and crying. But now that we’ve caught our breaths and dried our tears, we’re left with some questions. ...

“The Marvel Cinematic Universe will continue on and eventually return to a more stable and pleasant status quo, because that’s what gazillion-dollar franchises do. But for now, nothing is the same, and no one in it feels like they’ll ever be fine again. That’s something for us, and our favorite Marvel characters, to carry with us for the next year-plus.” Nothing to criticize here.

In the differing response to the two films we see the role identity politics plays in contemporary political, cultural and intellectual life. Under the pretense of combating “oppression,” identity politics justifies it: political reaction, the Hollywood blockbuster machine, the present low level of intellectual culture.

In the “cultural appropriation” arguments directed against *Isle of Dogs* and Anderson one confronts a combination of intellectual conformism and opportunism in the face of the current obsession with race and gender.

However, there is a somewhat larger, although obviously connected issue in regard to the generally friendly, light-hearted attitude taken toward *Infinity War* and the often unsympathetic treatment of Anderson’s film or important aspects of it.

The former film is ultra-violent, militaristic, thoroughly unreal and even

includes its own identity politics moment, a sequence laid in the fictional African kingdom of Wakanda, the setting of the recent *Black Panther*. Moreover, *Avengers: Infinity War* has already helped Walt Disney Studios' share prices increase by two percent. What is there not to admire in this happy mix of mindlessness, bellicosity and profit?

On the other hand, *Isle of Dogs* is an unsettling film, pointedly critical of political demagogues and the treatment of society's outcasts, the marginalized, immigrants, refugees.

Michael O'Sullivan in the *Washington Post*, recounting an interview with Anderson, noted that the film's plot "evokes, among other things, the U.S. internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Ironically, Anderson says he was not consciously trying to evoke instances of bigotry from the past, but rather, from the present."

O'Sullivan goes on, now citing Anderson, "In starting with this idea, we knew that the dogs had to represent a small part of a society that's been ostracized by a larger group, which has turned against them, for its own purposes," he says. "Once you have that, there are so many examples from history, because it's a cyclical thing. We started by looking at the known, 20th-century historical events like Japanese internment. And yet, it became, more and more, that the inspiration had moved from the history books to the front page of today's newspaper, in so many different places. I feel like that theme only started to come in, more urgently to us, while we were making the movie."

These concerns are to Anderson's credit, and *Isle of Dogs* reflects them.



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