

Venom: Childish science fiction and superheroes abound

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7 November 2018

Directed by Ruben Fleischer; screenplay by Scott Rosenberg, Jeff Pinkner, and Kelly Marcel

October 2018 saw the theatrical release of *Venom*, a superhero film based on the Marvel comic-book character Venom, who first emerged in the *Spider-Man* series. As one might expect, the drama—directed by Ruben Fleischer (*Zombieland*, *Gangster Squad*)—is unconvincing, the characters are simplistic and superficial and the performances are dull and unremarkable.

The film centers around protagonist Eddie Brock (Tom Hardy), a muckraker-type journalist who conducts investigative reports for a prominent television network in San Francisco. His reporting brings him into contact and conflict with Carlton Drake (Riz Ahmed), a wealthy, power-hungry inventor who uses his resources to fund medical and space research via dubious ethical practices.

During their explorations of space, Drake's minions come across a comet swarming with symbiotic life forms, a few of which they bring back to Earth for experimentation. The globular beings cannot survive in Earth's atmosphere outside of human hosts, and Drake's hope is that humanity can escape Earth's environmental crisis by merging with these life forms and living in space or on other distant planets.

Brock ascertains that Drake is using human subjects in his tests, selecting emotionally unstable individuals who he can coerce and many of whom die in the process. Brock inadvertently becomes host to one of the symbiotes, which reveals itself to Brock through internal communication as a being called Venom. The symbiote can take control of Brock's body and—using internal alien appendages and biology—perform superhuman feats.

Brock learns that Venom and his fellow creatures

have intentionally come to Earth to feed on humans and destroy the planet, but, for inexplicable reasons, Venom has a change of heart through his interactions with Brock and decides to help prevent his brethren from arriving on Earth. Together, the two end up fighting Drake, who is host to a rival symbiote named Riot, in order to prevent him from launching a rocket set to bring all of the symbiotes from the comet to Earth.

The story is both ludicrously contrived and predictable. Early in *Venom*, Brock loses his job at the television network for provoking Drake, who owns a share of the station and apparently much of San Francisco, including the police. He then proceeds to lose his girlfriend Anne (Michelle Williams), who immediately starts dating a doctor who, in turn, ends up treating Brock when he is taken over by Venom. They thereupon discover that playing sounds of a certain frequency is lethal to the alien beings ...

The important issues that plague modern society like war, poverty and environmental disaster are raised by Drake when he coerces his test subjects, but they are treated shallowly and without substance. Apparently humans themselves, like the symbiotes, are just parasites who suck the life out of the planet. This is the sort of tired and misguided theme that appears again and again in modern blockbuster science fiction films.

Actors such as Hardy, Williams and Ahmed are not able to bring their talents to bear on the poorly written and trivial project. The dialogue is filled with cheap one-liners and laborious dramatic pauses, and *Venom*'s internal monologue with Brock could have appeared in the pages a junior high school student's journal. The whole enterprise is puerile even though it is wrapped up in a borderline R-rated package.

Even those who normally champion blockbuster films have not reviewed the film favorably. Perry Nemiroff

of Collider, one of the newer entertainment web sites and YouTube channels popular among young adults, wrote about *Venom* that it has “worthless” supporting characters and a nonsensical plot. The film’s approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes is currently 29 percent based on 272 reviews.

Despite generally negative reviews from critics, *Venom* has still been a box office success. The film has grossed \$198.7 million in the United States and Canada and \$344.4 million in other territories, for a total of \$543.1 million. The film’s budget was in the \$100-116 million range, and *Venom* was only expected to debut to \$160-175 worldwide. It was the top film in every country but one during its opening week and set box office records for October.

From the “artistic” point of view, a work such as *Venom*, relying on bombast and special effects, speaks primarily to the crisis and exhaustion of the American film industry, whose major efforts have nothing of any value to say to the population. They continue to draw in younger viewers in particular, who have grown up in the current emptiness and know nothing else, and who are looking for some distraction from their everyday problems.

The studios have increasingly bound the Marvel and other superhero films released over the last decade together by connective tissue (plot elements, characters, etc.), thus helping ensure that moviegoers feel they need to watch even the weakest entries in the overarching “epic” so as not to miss out. Superhero films also now use cameos by other popular characters as a cheap way to draw crowds.

Rather than fitting the story into the ongoing release of Marvel superhero films that cross over and connect with one another, Sony has launched *Venom* as the first in its own film series, with its own “independent universe.” The studio has indicated it may link the *Venom* series with future *Spider-Man* films, and Hardy has reported that he signed a contract for two more *Venom* films. This is for the business pages, however, not the arts review.



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