

The Gray Man: A CIA killer on the run

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Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo; written by Joe Russo, Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely

The Gray Man is an action thriller directed by American filmmakers (and brothers) Anthony and Joe Russo, based on the 2009 novel by Mark Greaney. It follows an assassin in a secret CIA program as he attempts to uncover high-level wrongdoing, rescue a young girl and preserve his own life.

In 2003, Donald Fitzroy (Billy Bob Thornton), a top agency official, visits an unnamed prisoner (Ryan Gosling), incarcerated years earlier for killing his abusive father. Fitzroy offers the man the option of joining CIA's Sierra assassination program.

Eighteen years later, "Sierra Six" (Gosling) is in Bangkok assigned to kill a target alleged to have sold "national security" secrets. The victim, before dying, hands Six an encrypted drive with information apparently revealing that another senior CIA official, Denny Carmichael (Regé-Jean Page), is guilty of corruption.

Carmichael then sets about attempting to have Six liquidated, hiring psychopath Lloyd Hanson (Chris Evans), a former CIA agent, to organize the effort. A furious chase through various unusual locales then ensues. Those who have seen a recent James Bond or *Mission Impossible* entry, or one of the *Bourne* films, will find the experience familiar: snippets of witty, cynical, somber or flirtatious dialogue (depending on the franchise) interspersed with scenes of furious hand-to-hand combat accompanied by widespread mayhem, often with portions of entire cities damaged or even blown up.

The CIA or one or another intelligence service—officially or otherwise, named or not—is often at the center of the action. (Greaney is best known for continuing the Jack Ryan character created by ultra-right, pro-CIA novelist Tom Clancy—*Patriot Games*, *Clear and Present Danger*—after the latter's death in 2013.) The protagonist is sometimes a "rogue" element, or sometimes in conflict with "rogue" elements, as in this case. The spy agency usually has a number of "bad apples," or may be even going through a phase of being

dominated by "bad apples."

In these films, US operatives or their accomplices run roughshod over local populations, ignore national borders in their undertakings and pay no attention to local laws or law enforcement, much less the civil rights of their victims. They abuse, torture and kill with more or less impunity. In that sense, *The Gray Man* and others inadvertently perhaps possess a certain "realistic" element. Some particle of the arrogance and contempt with which the American military-intelligence apparatus and upper echelons of US society view humanity, as mere fodder for bullying and plundering, accurately comes through here.

At the same time, in its own manner, a work like *The Gray Man* undoubtedly betrays nervousness and anxiety about the state of the world, depicted as a very dangerous, unstable and threatening place. That sense of trepidation often takes the form of its opposite, the unconvincing on-screen fantasy of CIA and US military omnipotence. This is not new. As American imperialism has decayed and lost hegemony in *life* (and suffered debacles in various corners of the planet) over the past number of decades, it has gained absolute dominance in Hollywood "art," or, rather, pseudo-art.

If there is "realism" in regard to the dream of global supremacy in *The Gray Man*, there is almost none, however, in psychological and social terms. Almost every aspect of the film is improbable and implausible, from beginning to end. Invincible and indestructible heroes, as well as implacable, dyed-in-the-wool villains, do not exist. This is unconvincing, puerile material.

Writing about a popular novel of the 1930s, Leon Trotsky noted that it was "hard to imagine anything more mediocre, contemptible, and crude." He went on to argue that the book did not evince "a shade of perception, talent, or imagination. The adventures are piled on without any art at all, like police records laid one on top of the other." Trotsky added that not "for a single moment did I feel any excitement, interest, or even simple curiosity."

The Gray Man is a very bad, almost instantly forgettable

film. What makes things worse in this case is that the filmmakers, the Russo brothers, *do* possess a degree of perception, talent and imagination. They have evident film sense and intuition. The filmmakers have dissipated and wasted all that, in the process—through their efforts on four Marvel movies in five years—becoming the second most commercially successful directors of all time, behind Steven Spielberg.

The Russos first came to prominence with *Welcome to Collinwood* (2002), about a working class neighborhood in Cleveland, Ohio, their native city. Joe Russo commented at the time: “These characters are underdogs, the lovable losers. I think everybody, to some degree, thinks of themselves as an underdog.” And his brother added, “Especially in Cleveland, in a neighborhood like Collinwood that has had a lot of bad breaks over the last few decades.”

By 2014, the Russo brothers (who in 2002 were looking in cinema history “for models that were straightforward, more honest, more open, more simple”) had graduated to directing *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. Other superhero films followed.

One commentator (at The A.V. Club) took note that the Marvel “universe” had “recruited a surprising number of unlikely directors, from Shakespearean specialist Kenneth Branagh (*Thor*) to the strenuously indie team of Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck (*Captain Marvel*).” It might have been easy to forget, however, the critic continued, “just how implausible that career trajectory once seemed for Anthony and Joe Russo, the brothers who eventually became the [Marvel] franchise’s de facto ringmasters. Nobody who saw *Welcome To Collinwood* back in 2002 likely would have predicted a future in mega-budget F/X blockbusters for its makers. ... The Russos may have become exponentially more successful since 2002, but a different kind of potential has been lost.”

The WSWS commented on this phenomenon in 2015 in “*Terminator Genisys* and the trajectory of American ‘independent’ filmmaking.”

The issue is not that the Russo brothers “sold out.” It is unclear that they ever had any especially radical conceptions. The times in which they came of age and matured intellectually and artistically were very bad, unfavorable for critical-oppositional filmmaking.

Anthony Russo was born in 1970, his brother Joe in 1971. They experienced the Reagan-Bush years and the full brunt of the propaganda in the late 1980s and following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 about the “fall of communism” and even “the end of history.” The

climate of the times did not make them (or many others) into political reactionaries, and there is no reason to believe they are that today, but it did sharply steer artists away from “taboo” social subjects, or rather made social life itself “taboo.”

The barrage of rubbish about the wonders of the market and the eternal triumph of free enterprise had the effect, at the very least, of neutralizing, paralyzing and intimidating. The atmosphere of the times helped produce the devoutly non-committal filmmaker, who doesn’t “judge” or “explain,” but largely records processes around him or her. He or she does not criticize, he or she wallows.

Artists nourished in this socially “impartial” atmosphere, wait-and-see artists, men or women with hands on their hips, have nothing in their outlook that would prevent them from accepting massive sums for comic-book films or directing films that unquestioningly assume the activities of the CIA and US (or British) authorities.

A quick glance at the generation of filmmakers to which the Russo brothers belong provides some indication of the extent of the problem: Robert Rodriguez, Guy Ritchie (1968); Darren Aronofsky, James Gray, Lynne Ramsay (1969); Christopher Nolan, Kevin Smith, Martin McDonagh (1970); Sofia Coppola, Sacha Baron Cohen (1971). Even the more talented and imaginative representatives of the generation—Wes Anderson, Noah Baumbach and Spike Jonze (all 1969) and Paul Thomas Anderson (1970)—haven’t escaped the fundamental dilemmas of the era.

In any event, even if we acknowledge that the problem is an objective one, *The Gray Man* does no one any credit.



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