Black Panther: Wakanda Forever: An empty, generic sequel to an already-empty original

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Directed by Ryan Coogler; written by Coogler and Joe Robert Cole.

Black Panther: Wakanda Forever, directed by Ryan Coogler (*Black Panther*, *Fruitvale Station*) and starring Letitia Wright, Lupita Nyong'o and Tenoch Huerta, is a poor film. It is the sequel to 2018's *Black Panther*, also directed by Coogler and starring the late Chadwick Boseman as the titular superhero, King T'Challa of Wakanda/Black Panther.

Boseman was a gifted performer whose life and career were tragically cut short by cancer in 2020, during the production of the sequel.

The film begins in the aftermath of T'Challa-Boseman's death from an unspecified illness. His sister, Shuri (Letitia Wright), the Wakandan royal family's resident expert in technology and science, is unsuccessful in saving her brother. This sets the stage for one of the film's "moral" issues: will Shuri accept the loss of her brother or remain mired in angst due to it, potentially contributing to the Wakandan empire's downfall in the process?

In the new film, the fictional African kingdom of Wakanda—with its infinite supply of the equally fictional super-metal vibranium, endowing its holders with superhuman abilities—has emerged from its seclusion and isolation to become a global power.

This has stoked envy and intrigue among rival foreign nations. In the opening minutes, Wakanda's elite female guard rebuffs an assault on its facilities by a French special forces team. "We mourn the loss of our king. But do not think for a second that Wakanda has lost our ability to protect our resources," warns Queen Ramonda (Angela Bassett) to a gathering of world leaders.

This sets off an "arms race," with other countries seeking an alternative source of vibranium in order to rival Wakanda. The hunt for the metal reveals the existence of yet another vibranium-rich hidden kingdom, the underwater world of Talokan. The country is ruled by the demigod Namor (Huerta), who demands Wakandan leaders' loyalty in his war on the surface world for having indirectly brought about the discovery of his kingdom. If not, Wakanda will be the first to fall.

The film's plot is predictable as well as absurd and implausible. Why should all of the world's nations, with a centuries-long history of social development, commerce, trade and technology, face ruin at the hands of an army of "merpeople" riding on the backs of whales? Why should Namor suddenly wish to destroy Wakanda? Why are the two most advanced societies on earth depicted as despotic monarchies? The cartoonish qualities of the film fatally undermine any references it makes to social and political realities.

If one accepts the fantastic and fictional qualities of vibranium, which has allowed its owners in Talokan and Wakanda to forgo the need for international commerce or social development (the *World Socialist Web Site* referred to Wakanda in the first *Black Panther* as "in essence, a fragile mono-cultural society in which a military camarilla led by a king hoards" its precious resource), what's left is a standard, bombastic action film. The superficial references to modern geopolitical conflict and colonialism are buried and lost in techno-spectacle and fight choreography.

(In terms of the cultural slightness of the film and the backwardness of some of its participants, it is worth noting that Letitia Wright, who plays the scientist main character Shuri, created controversy in 2020 after tweeting videos associated with COVID-19 denial and anti-vaccine theories).

The new film has earned nearly three-quarters of a

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billion dollars in theaters internationally. According to the *New York Times*, this has ended "one of the worst box office droughts on record… reaffirming Disney-owned Marvel Studios as Hollywood's reigning blockbuster factory."

The *Times*'s Brooks Barnes worries that, while *Wakanda Forever* "was gladly received," it was "far from a panacea." He explains, "Aside from October 2020, when many theaters were closed because of the coronavirus pandemic, this was the worst October for Hollywood in 21 years, ever since the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks."

Even Disney, which owns Marvel Studios, had begun a "rigorous review of the company's content and marketing spending," stated former CEO Bob Chapek, in comments to *Variety* days before himself being ousted by Disney's board last month. Executives cited the company's low earnings as a factor behind his removal.

With many careers riding on *Wakanda Forever*'s success, the film predictably relies heavily on its action sequences, the star power of its current (and former) cast members, as well as its use of personnel from different racial, ethnic and gender backgrounds.

The film goes to great lengths to associate itself with former lead Chadwick Boseman and his character, T'Challa. According to the *Atlantic*, *Wakanda Forever* must let "characters grieve the passing of the character T'Challa and [give] viewers the space to grapple with Boseman's absence," all while being "a crowd-pleasing blockbuster."

To do this, the film creators purposefully chose not to recast T'Challa, elevating other characters in the plot while establishing "the necessary markers for future MCU projects," according to CNBC. Such is the cynical send-off to a fallen performer in the money-driven Marvel Universe.

The media and entertainment industry has dutifully sprung into motion to promote the film and its "assets." *Entertainment Weekly*'s Leah Greenblatt gushes that the largely female and African American cast's "shared vision of Afro-futurism feels lush and joyful and beautifully specific set against the usual white noise of Marvel fanfare."

In short, the film has made it possible for sections of the upper middle class to continue to make money as "diversity consultants," "gender representation specialists" and other such hangers-on.

No doubt many talented individuals involved in the production of *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* as well as in the viewing public genuinely believe the film will help to address historical and social injustices. Even if imperfect, the argument goes, a film which features people from marginalized backgrounds as kings and queens *must* do some good.

Addressing this, the WSWS pointed out in the review of the original *Black Panther* film that the "presence of blacks (or women) at the head of capitalist states, from the US to South Africa, has done nothing to improve the lot of the masses of working and poor people, black or white."

This racial and gender criterion for supposed social progress takes its most dangerous form in politics, in the elevation, for example, of the fascist Giorgia Meloni to the office of Italian prime minister.

Meloni, hailed in the capitalist press for being the country's first female leader, is a member of the Brothers of Italy, the political descendant of Mussolini's National Fascist Party, and is viciously anti-immigrant and anti-worker. Similarly, in the Philippines, Sara Duterte, the daughter of fascistic former president Rodrigo Duterte, serves as vice-president to Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., whose father oversaw a bloody dictatorship for nearly 20 years.

A genuinely progressive artistic breakthrough will not be associated with cheap theatrics, invincible "supermen" (or women) and racial exclusivism. Genuine drama and social critique will inevitably emerge from great social movements against the existing order and its poverty, war and dictatorship.

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