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The Evolving Thematic Complexities of Superhero Movies

Superheroes, as we know them today, basically debuted all the way back in June 1938 when *Action Comics* #1 debuted the first appearance of Superman. Though the publishers of the comic were worried Superman wouldn’t find success, the book *Superhero Comics of The Golden Age: The Illustrated Age* by Mike Benton notes how, right from the get-go, “The kids believed in Superman and they began clamoring for his magazine. Sales of Action Comics quickly rose.” (Benton, 17). Success inevitably breeds imitators, and from there, the immense popularity of the Man of Steel led to the likes of Batman, Shazam, Wonder Woman and Captain America emerging to solidify comic book superheroes as popular pieces of escapist entertainment, one’s capable of delivering thoughtful messages and social commentary in addition to providing spectacle. Just look at Superman, a character widely interpreted to be a parallel to the Jewish-American experience or Captain America fighting real-life Nazi forces in his fictitious stories. Superheroes continued to incorporate real-life social issues into their comics as the decades passed, so it’s no wonder that some of the most popular movies adapting these superheroes into feature-length form would eventually, also adopt a recurring penchant for incorporating social commentary, albeit it is an adoption that would take years to form and evolve.

To trace the entire process of how superhero movies ended up incorporating heftier themes into their stories, we must go first to earlier superhero movies, which eschewed attempting to use iconic comic book characters as mechanisms of larger introspective exercises and in the process kept some of the earliest examples of this superhero movie subgenre from being as substantive as the best of the comic books they were adapting. This was understandable
in the likes of *Superman: The Movie*, which was attempting to be clear-cut escapism, while the likes of the first few live-action *Batman* movies hardly ever referenced real-world sociopolitical issues. Once Marvel Comics began to get its films adapted into feature films, they too strayed away from becoming too heady in terms of referencing real-world issues, though the first live-action *X-Men* movie did manage to make the plight of the oppressed mutants a parallel to the struggles of the LGBTQA+ community to get basic human rights in this era.

It was 2002’s *Spider-Man* that seemed to indicate that the world of superhero cinema would indeed start to reference the real-world around them. In the film’s climax, the Green Goblin, while attempting to force Spider-Man to choose between saving his girlfriend, Mary Jane Watson, and a group of schoolchildren, is suddenly pelted by garbage and other debris by various denizens of New York City. As they’re doing this, one citizen remarks “You mess with Spidey, you mess with New York”, to which another man notes “You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us!” Being released just a scant eight months after 9/11 had shaken New York City to its core, this sequence of New Yorkers banding together to help save the day took on a whole new powerful meaning. Video essayist Bob Chipman once remarked in his video *Really That Good: SPIDER-MAN 1 & 2* that this scene in question “…wasn’t just wanted, this was needed…Spider-Man arrived in a moment when [New York’s] pop culture heart had had a not insignificant piece ripped out of it. But through this moment, through this movie, you could feel a tiny bit of what was missing start to grow back.” (Chipman, 1:03:16). Spider-Man’s heroism becoming a mechanism for post-9/11 catharsis had shown how merging these larger-than-life characters with real-life events didn’t just not dilute the characters in question, it had a tendency to enhance them.
The superhero movies directly after *Spider-Man*, sans Brad Bird’s *The Incredibles*, mostly avoided grappling with larger real-world issues, but the summer of 2008 brought forth a pair of superhero movies very much in tune with then-current political issues. The first of these was *Iron Man*, the first feature for the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which had its lead character, Tony Stark, generate massive amounts of money by way of selling high-powered weapons in the Iraq/Afghanistan war. More substantively, that same summer’s *The Dark Knight* was widely seen as an allegory for the War on Terror, with the movie’s hero, Batman, who carries out morally murky actions like tapping all of the phones in Gotham City to take down his adversary, seen as a stand-in for America and the moral compromises it had taken its response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Meanwhile, the movie’s interpretation of The Joker represented all of the unpredictable bleak chaos that could generate horrors like 9/11. David Chen’s essay “*Assessing The Themes of The Dark Knight*” remarks that The Joker “…is unpredictable and can’t be reasoned with, nor does he have any broader goals except to create chaos and destruction… [He brings to light how] Americans have accepted atrocities and miscarriages of justice committed around the world as well as right here at home may have consequences beyond what we can imagine.” (Chen). Even a character who represents chaotic evil can still be used to instill the viewer to think about the world around them. Using the characters of Batman and Joker to tell a parable all about how good men can be corrupted when trying to dole out justice in the face of evil resonated in the 2008 political climate and the project generated record-breaking box office while *Iron Man*, though making less than *The Dark Knight*, was no slouch in surpassing all financial expectations and kicking off a cinematic universe in the process.

If *Spider-Man* had shown that it was possible for financially lucrative superhero movies to be conscious of the political climate they were released into, *Iron Man* and especially *The
*Dark Knight* solidified that it was possible to create superhero movie moneymakers and probe real-world issues. Just eight months after *The Dark Knight*, a film adaptation of the graphic novel *Watchmen*, which itself dealt with all kinds of 1980’s-centric political issues, was released while the first few superhero movies of the 2010’s found themselves trying to use their superhero movies to explore larger political issues in an attempt to channel the successful atmosphere of *The Dark Knight* to varying levels of success. *Iron Man 3* reinventing the comic book villain of The Mandarin to be a critique of how corrupt American forces can use xenophobia to distract the general public from the enemies hiding in plain sight was a stroke of genius, while *Man of Steel*’s attempted to be heady but never found a specific political idea or even just broad theme for this new version of Superman to tackle, leaving the project with an incredible unbearable morose tone and little more.

In the decade since *The Dark Knight*, the successful versions of more contemplative superhero movies (the aforementioned *Iron Man 3* as well as *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *Thor: Raganrok* and *Wonder Woman*) haven’t been all that prevalent, with most movies (like 2015’s Fantastic Four or the aforementioned Man of Steel) that chase the success of The Dark Knight instead trying to imitate simply the darker tone of that motion picture without also attempting to bring the level of substance to the table that that iconic Batman feature carried. Interestingly, perhaps the best example of a superhero movie that directly tackles more thematically complex material, even moreso than *The Dark Knight*, is one of the most recent entries in the subgenre, Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther*. The olden days of superhero movies tip-toeing around larger sociopolitical issues feels like a distant memory when watching this film, which has it’s opening prologue set in Oakland, California in 1992, a time of immense racial strife. *Black Panther* only continues to be insightful in handling real-world issues from there as
the primarily Black cast of the project directly reference colonialism, slavery and over-policing of Black communities while the villain of the movie is intended to have empathetic desires related to helping oppressed Black citizens that the isolated nation of Wakanda has ignored for centuries.

*Black Panther* is all about recognizing real-world struggles that are specific to the Black experience, making the themes it explores wholly different from the rest of the superhero movie genre which, aside from the occasional anomaly like *Blade* or *Hancock*, is dominated by Caucasian male leads. *Black Panther* reflects ideas and perspectives seldom seen in the comic book movie subgenre, with the hardships facing specifically Black people across the planet getting to be showcased in a massive-in-scale blockbuster resonating with viewers all over the world. Here is a movie that recognizes how, as explored in the *New York Times* essay *Why Black Panther Is A Defining Moment for Black America* by Carvell Wallace, African-Americans are forced to live with “…no end to the reminders that our lives, our hearts, our personhoods are expendable. Yes, many nonblack people will say differently…But the actions of our country and its collective society, and our experiences within it, speak unquestionably to the opposite. Love for black people isn’t just saying Oscar Grant should not be dead. Love for black people is Oscar Grant not being dead in the first place.” (Wallace).

For too long, that perspective has been exiled from American blockbusters in general, let alone the specific subgenre of comic book superhero movies, and yet here is *Black Panther* making this perspective a core facet of it’s story. Like watching *Spider-Man* delivering a moment of hope and unity to the city of New York in the wake of 9/11, watching *Black Panther* and his various supporting cast members grapple with weighty ideas not explored in other superhero movies is a tremendous experience that reminds one of just how contemplative these
films can be. Now, it must be noted, that a superhero movie doesn’t need to be explicitly tied into real-world sociopolitical issues to be good or even weighty; the pair of *Guardians of The Galaxy* movies don’t really tie into specific political issues yet their incredibly well-realized characters gives those two films immense thematic heft. But when the opportunity arises for these beloved characters to tie their stories into real-world problems, great storytelling can arise when that opportunity is seized properly. Doing just that is the bedrock of the comic books on which these films are based on and has also allowed for the likes of *The Dark Knight* and *Black Panther* to become among the best comic book movies ever created.
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