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I Want To Talk About Thanos and Not The Marvel Industrial Complex, Give Me a Real Movie Review

Samuel · Wednesday, May 2nd, 2018

The recent reviews on *Avengers: Infinity War* by *The New York Times* and *New Yorker* were disappointing because they over-intellectualized the task of reviewing a movie. Reading them, I had flashbacks to literary criticism class in college where each professor—and dotting students—wanted to outsmart previous comments by trying to say something new about the text, and in their preening, talked more about what others are saying about the text than the text itself. Criticism quickly flew off into the la-la land of meta-criticism, critical about the critical tools employed. We read Milton's *Paradise Lost* and never talked about the motives of Satan or the tension between Adam & Eve; rather we got lost in the factors in Milton's life that could have led him to make Satan such a likable guy. It almost felt like the professors were trying to justify their debt-burdening Ph.D. degrees by talking in greater abstractions and ridiculous academic lingo. The more they tried to sound intellectual the more gibberish their talk became.

I wonder if that is what we are getting at these highbrow newspapers; these reviewers needing to say something you can't read in any other plebeian journals, reaching for grandiose insight but grabbing only air. So they talk about how this latest Avengers movie was just an advertisement (bet you wouldn't get that insight anywhere else) for previous Marvel movies, a long and loud commercial to get you to gobble up blu-rays once you are done and keep the profit machine churning. Or how about this line: "This synergistic expression of the corporate interests of Marvel Studios and the Walt Disney Company — which now include 19 feature films and much else besides — has come to be less a creative or commercial undertaking than an immutable fact of life, like sex or the weather or capitalism itself." Wow! You are definitely worth your salary when you can talk about immutability, sex and capitalism in a sentence talking about a hero movie.

In the midst of reviewers showing off their intellectual dexterity (or impotence), no one talked about the narrative twist of this first of two-part movie. I don't want to talk about the meta-meaning of blockbusters, but about the damn story, and the character that looms large over the story. I want to talk about Thanos.

Infinity War really isn't about the heroes. The writers didn't fail when they made Captain America feel like an extra because the movie wasn't about his comeback at all (the 2nd part might fill that narrative). The character that stands above all (literally) is Thanos. In the first fight scene, he humiliates Hulk so thoroughly that Hulk doesn't show up the rest of the movie, choosing to hide behind Banner. All heroes are extras to fill out the story of Thanos.

Marvel writer and director are actually interested in the villain! I love it! The villain is not a punching bag on which their heroes can exhibit their powers and moves all while making zingers to make you laugh in an inconsequential action scene. You want a good movie, make a good villain. Thanos is fleshed out, massive and complex in body and mind.

Thanos is the one character that appears in all the scenes. Of course, there are other motives for having the Avengers scattered and teamed up in different dynamics; it satisfies the wanderlust of the comic fanboy who daydreams about different partnerships. But the variety of hero team-ups is a setup to flesh out Thanos, how Thanos interacts with all these different personalities. He is the centerpiece, the main character who walks through all the scenes, even the ones where he is not in sight. Even when he is not speaking, someone else is always speaking about him.

His pure physical strength is what impresses you at first, but as you get to know him you understand that what props up his massive bulk is his indomitable will. He has a goal. As strong as he is, he doesn't have the power to accomplish his goal. It will take near divine power. So he pursues it relentlessly. Where some of the heroes wish they could return to whatever they were doing before the engagement — Spidey to his bus—Thanos marches on. In one scene, the combo of Iron Man, Dr. Strange, Spiderman and the Guardians of the Galaxy nearly defeat Thanos and is about to pull out his Infinity gauntlet when Peter Quill loses control and, in his need to defend his manhood (albeit driven by his loss of his girlfriend, Gamora, his sadness is mixed with ego for he himself actually pulled the trigger on Gamora), punches Thanos, ironically, back into form. For the heroes, everything is way too personal. For Thanos, he is ready to sacrifice his personal well being for the greater good, which is what makes this person so powerful and fascinating and dangerous.



His madness is not diminished by his logic and his absolute commitment to it. In fact, that consistency is the very sign of madness, that he would follow logic, no matter its consequence, without consideration of context or doubt. For him, overpopulation leads to death, a Malthusian purist. We are not immune to this fear of diminishing resources. Our wall building, anti-immigration laws, white nationalism is all about the fear of too many and too little resources thus protecting the privileges of the few. In real-world politics, the judgment of who gets the resources is grounded on prejudices, those who already have, those of purer skin/doctrine/ethnicity and so on. Thanos sticks adamantly to fairness. Half must cease to exist; selection must be pure randomness. What is madness if that decision of who gets to live became necessary? Randomness or prejudice?

Thanos has good reason to be a Malthusian purist. Titan, his once luscious home planet has turned to Mars-red wasteland because of over-consumption. Life was not sustainable. The leaders of his homeworld could not make the hard decision to save more by sacrificing some. To him, it was simple math, everyone dies or half dies so life can go on. He chooses salvation.

To our ears, it's genocide, and evil.

And if we are going to be shocked—and we should—at Thanos' seeming utter apathy to the individual life, then we should be equally horrified at the story of Noah. The children's version focuses on all the animals coming in pairs and how cute that everything on earth has a partner. But the unimaginable horror is that God wants to bring balance because evil has overtaken everything like the weed; his method is unloosening his wrath by opening the floodgates and drowning not half of humanity but all of them except for a single family, so the earth can start all over. No

wonder Noah got drunk with the firstfruits of his vine. How can anyone live with that survivor's guilt?

Thanos, he explains himself to Gamora, is merciful because he doesn't want to cause pain. He wants to do it quick, with a snap of his finger. He is more merciful than the God of Noah, balancing the universe with less suffering and far less death.

Even more, he is also a man of empathy; another narrative twist. His absolute discipline to his cause is not the lack of apathy. He is not a psychopath. He is capable of imagining the lives of others. He knows Tony Starks, the man hiding behind the armor that is now nearly his skin. He desires a good death for Tony, not needless suffering.

He is capable of tears. When Gamora gloats that his plan failed because he loves no one and thus cannot make the sacrifice required for him to obtain the soul stone, she is shocked, as we are, to discover that Thanos actually loved her. We know it wasn't a show because the sacrifice of her soul got him the stone. And if that trade-off sounds atrocious, we should recall the story of the sacrifice of Jesus and the atonement theory theologians wrap that story around, that the father sacrificed his son to save the world. In Thanos, we are faced with the fusion of Judaism and Greek mythology; he is Jehovah taking the shape of Zeus, one who enacts his will through a humanoid body. Whether Milton intended Satan to be such an interesting character, the fact remains that Satan's monologues and actions arrest us more than Adam's platitudes. Satan's resonance with the tragic heroes before him — ready to "rule in hell than to serve in heaven," — makes him a character we hate to love and love to hate. Thanos is a tragic hero.

In the end scene, Thanos sits with his goal accomplished and, as was his desire, enjoying the simple beauty of a setting sun. The universe is in chaos with half of the sentient beings vanishing, but he has no doubt the chaos will lead to new order just as a forest fire leads to new vegetations. So for him, it was a day's work done. But is he really enjoying it? Is there a slight opening in his airtight logic especially when he sees his doting little Gamora? This story, like all good stories, is about characters, and the changes forced on them by challenges bringing self-discovery. And my hunch is that Thanos will be his own undoing. The salvation of others — restoration to life — will hinge upon Thanos' own transformation. And that's a damn good story!

Images courtesy Marvel Studios.

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