

SUPERHEROES AND MONSTERS: THE TRUTH IN TODAY'S BLOCKBUSTERS



[poster graphic via IMDb]

For a change of pace, let's talk about superheroes.

Like Superman. Batman. Iron Man. The Avengers. Spider-man.

We've been inundated with superheroes at the box office for the last several years. We eat them up, based on box office ticket sales. But why?

Filmmaker Peter Webber tweeted,

Glut of superhero movies is because of 2 things

1. We sense impending eco-catastrophe
2. We seem unable to alter course to save ourselves

There's something to this if we look at the history of the oldest superheroes recently

reprised. Superman was “born” in 1933 and Batman in 1939, during the Great Depression. The public latched onto the escapist fantasy that some incredibly powerful force would rescue them when most needed.

Perhaps there’s something to the nature of these two superheroes in terms of timing: Superman originated earlier in the Depression, when any outside force with supreme powers for good might be welcomed eagerly. Batman originated later in the Depression; his alter ego, Bruce Wayne, heir to wealthy industrialists, was willing to wield his fortune to save Gotham as both collective identity and individuals. By the late Depression with recovery underway and a new world war looming, the public may have wanted a more realistic, human hero rather than an outsider, though both Superman and Batman remained popular figures.

Today we see the reverse order, Batman reprised first by Christopher Nolan in his Dark Knight trilogy of increasingly crypto-fascist persuasion, and Superman renewed most recently as Man of Steel after Batman has “died.” In the last Batman movie The Dark Knight Rises, collectivism for the common good is completely upended and perverted so that its leader, Bane, is the villain. The public can blame the ills befalling their municipality on the masked man with the strange voice, “the other” who makes himself out to be the defender of the people:

“...We take Gotham from the corrupt! The rich! The oppressors of generations who have kept you down with myths of opportunity, and we give it back to you... the people. Gotham is yours. ...”

How is this not a corruption of the Occupy Wall Street movement’s mission?

Superman’s latest iteration as Man of Steel redeems the iconic common man, though, with a serious departure from the original canon Clark Kent-as-journalist. In the most recent version,

Kent is presented first to the audience not a college educated smartie in a suit but an itinerant worker of midwestern farm roots, willing to brave what appear to be mortal threats to save others. We've come back around from the rich industrialist's hobbyist rescuer to the alien-man from the former Dust Bowl – now drought-blighted Kansas – as savior.

Because right now, we can't rely on the rich guy, or the distorted collectivist. Our ills are so great, we're so very desperate we need a "super man" to save us.

In this respect, Peter Webber is spot on; we don't appear to be able to change our course and are now betting on outside forces as salvation.

Where one might take issue with Peter's premise is eco-catastrophe. It's huge, of that there is no doubt. The problem of climate change is so very massive and ugly that the American public has been unwilling to wrap their heads around it, too eager to lap up the propaganda offered by petrochemical companies like Koch Industries and Exxon Mobil.

In this is the real problem, the reason why we cannot effectively tackle the eco-catastrophe we can see looming behind us in the rear view mirror. It is the ongoing assault on our sensibilities by corporate forces, demanding we continue our rampant consumerism, that keeps us from saving ourselves. We remain addicted to petrochemicals in spite of what they do to our environment and to our world in terms of the political price we must pay to maintain our supply, tethered mortally to our corporatist dealers and pimps.



[graphic via i09.com]

We know the scale of the problem, even if we are unable to come to grips yet with its true roots. We see the scope reflected in the other genre of films recently emerging – the monsters.

Witness Warm Bodies' and World War Z's zombies; Prometheus' xenomorph; Beasts of the Southern Wild's aurochs; Pacific Rim's kaiju, as well as the impending Godzilla kaiju variant (release date 14-MAY-2014).

The threats posed by these creatures are so large either in their spread or physical presence they require responses at national and global scale, and/or ultimate sacrifices on the part of individuals to save the planet. We're eating up movies about these epic monsters because they temporarily appear to dwarf real life threats – like our flagging economy and long-term unemployment, failed democracy and its corporatist overlords, and the massive menace that is our reliance on carbon fuels and climate change.

In each case, the monstrous threat is eventually thwarted by knowledge and will, individual and collective in nature. Beasts of the Southern Wild pointedly attributes the rise of aurochs to climate change, with the tiny protagonist

staring the monsters into submission once she has acquired awareness.

Pacific Rim mentions climate change as a form of terraforming that prepared earth for alien kaiju invasion. A religious group within the movie attributes the rise of the kaiju threat as a sign that the gods are unhappy with humans' treatment of earth. Only a globally-funded, militarized collaborative effort supporting extremely diverse teams required to literally work together as one mind will resolve the kaiju threat.

Zombies and xenomorphs present similar challenges, though they may arise from different sources. The ultimate questions posed regardless of monster are existential: are we aware of the threat, and are we willing to work individually and together to save ourselves and our planet?

One might say that the film industry is propagandizing through film. Having rubbed shoulders with authors, screenwriters, and filmmakers, I don't believe so, though they have personal perspectives and ideologies just as journalists do, just as other media do, just as we all do.

When so many of our fellow citizens here on earth present us with similar visions – problems so monstrous they beg for response bigger than any man can offer alone – we should snap out of our torpor.

When so many of us pay good money to watch these superheroes and monsters, we need to see this collective choice for what it is: we are beginning to recognize the monster, and we are looking for the superhero and the solutions in ourselves.