The failure of superhero films.

So, every day I pray for a hero.

By this point, most of us are aware (at least to some degree) that our surroundings in modern society are bloated and saturated with stimulus designed to exploit our natures to the end of producing a sale, a vote, or in some other way manipulate us into the surrender of the self. From nearly the moment we wake to the moment we are asleep, we face volley after volley of advertising. Like a slow and relentless mugging, the shadow of greed stalks us, endeavoring to transfer every last scrap of our wealth, power, and autonomy into the cold clutches of some corporate ledger, and ultimately into the hands of people who are neither our friends nor family, nor even view our existence favourably. We know that the tactics of conquest used against us, more often than not, require our weakness to succeed; that is, our inability to resist the lure of instant gratification, particularly in the base realms of food and sex, but also ego and comfort. However, not every campaign against us succeeds by simple moral failing. Some of the most insidious exploitation is not that which is set against the lowest parts of human nature, but actually the highest. One such case is the current prevalence of the superhero genre in film, primarily through Marvel and DC.

Mankind needs heroes. Or rather, I should say, mankind needs to *believe* in heroes. Yes, heroic legend is a requirement of the soul. The first form of education ever available to man, was simply the experience of other men, retold, as stories. As countless generations around the campfire pass, the best deeds (heroic) and worst deeds (villainous) are naturally selected, as the numerous mediocre are filtered out, providing a guiding light to survival. The result is oral tradition, and the very fundament of culture. From it, we learn what can be, and from knowledge of what can be, we begin to distinguish good from evil, which ultimately guides our actions, and over time, translates into identity. The campfire becomes a hearth, and the home is built around it, just as oral tradition is written down and society is built around it.

> “Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon.” - G. K. Chesterton

A culture which does not have heroes and villains does not have identity, and as such is not really a culture at all. Post-modernism is this absence of culture. It is a bestial state. Open, but empty,

confused, and terrified; each person out alone, staring into the void. No hearth. No warmth. No guiding light. Everything, and ultimately nothing. Modern man seeks the bonfire for even just a whisper of the path that greater men before him have taken, because modern man's greatest and most painful need, is to be shown how and why to live. And make no mistake, where there is a need, there is a market.

Enter, the superhero hero film: a rude caricature of ancestral wisdom, designed to capitalize on modern man's desperate search for guidance. In the Marvel film, the soul detects a faint glimmer of the essence of good and evil, but only a bare minimum, and the majority of the film’s substance is useless fluff. The analogy that comes to mind is a Szcehuan chicken ball in a recession, where some meat is technically there, but all you taste is dough. Junk food marketed as junk food is less evil than junk food which postures itself as nourishment. Modern superhero films are the latter. It is one thing to say, “I taste good, I alleviate hunger quickly, and I am effortless" and say nothing of your deficiencies, like the marketing for a bag of chips (crisps) or candy. It is another thing altogether to claim that your deficiencies do not exist, like the chocolate covered granola bars or processed peanut butter or sugary breakfast cereals that market themselves as health food with words like “nature" or irrelevant phrases like “part of a complete breakfast" or “gluten free". Corn syrup is gluten free. “One-serving contains 17% of your daily folic acid requirement" as though this were special or significant. No, the Nature Valley chocolate covered granola bar is a worse evil than the Oh Henry candy bar, because in addition to its failings as nourishment, it is also a liar. A pretender. False. Deceptive.

Superhero films fail us by operating on a scale so unbelievable, that they become unrelatable. The best myths, the ones that keep us inspired in perpetuity, are the ones which stretch the truth, only just beyond what we perceive as our natural limitations. This germinates the seed of potential, because such a thing, may after all, be achievable… I would believe a hero, who in an hour of incredible need, jumped higher and farther than any man ever had, if only by a foot or two, but I would not believe, for an instant, a hero who flies. One could make me value the labour of training to jump, but the other will never inspire me to try to fly. Rather than being motivated to greatness, we come away with a sense of being hopelessly ordinary in comparison.

Heroic myth and incredible labour are inseparable. The heroic journey shows us that the hard road is usually the best road (or the only road that leads where one needs to go), and that innate advantage MUST be combined with incredible effort and discipline in order to overcome. The journey to power in modern superhero media is often horribly under-represented. Too often superheroes gain their power through happenstance/chance, rather than through work and effort, or the work and effort is underdisplayed. Training montages are better than nothing, but not nearly enough. To be a lab accident, or a test subject, or a one in a million anomaly, and become immortal is just a power fantasy; to face your fears, to conquer the self, and work relentlessly is heroic. If power is not associated with strength of character and resolve, the story is worthless.

Keep in mind that, not every film is equally bad. Some have far more redeeming moments than others, (For example, occasionally, true self-sacrifice occurs), but the bottom-line is that the genre as a whole offers very little in the way of actionable example. If you witness great deeds and attributes but these deeds and attributes offer zero hope of being replicable, you are simply watching false gods, and at the end your position in the universe will feel just as small and

meaningless as it did before, if not more so.

Men need heroes, so that they may have hope and purpose in themselves, and be inspired to grow, learn, rise, and overcome, and thus build identity. In the modern world, our grotesque lack of identity has triggered and amplified this need, but the storytellers who have stepped in to fill the void, are marketed to us with profit as the primary goal. Like fake health-food, we are sold fake heroes, stories that are all screen flash and CGI and no character building substance. What starts as a search for guidance, becomes an addiction to ludicrous power-fantasy, and a higher desire is transmogrified into a base desire, and the cycle continues until we all raise our standards and just say no.

There came a young man, much like you and I, to a movie theatre one night with his friends to watch the latest marvel film, until about halfway through he began to hear a still small voice inside himself, pleading,

“You must go. Get up and leave this place. You are called to better things. You must go.”

And he clenched his jaw and shut his eyes for a moment, and decided. His friends tried to stop him, to pull him back down, saying,

“Aww, you can't go! At least stay and get your money's worth! Don't abandon us!”

“My time is worth more than the ticket price”, he replied and, with resolve pushed past them.

This young man hadn't found fulfillment in his usual activities with his friends for quite sometime, and he had finally reached his limit. Lost and a little forlorn, he exited the theatre, pulled his hood over his head and began to walk - not with a destination or direction in mind, yet with a sense of purpose, as though he *must* walk. Though he didn't know what he was looking for, he knew he would never again spend money on a marvel production. He crossed several bridges on that fourty block walk before a paper sign in a book-store window caught his attention.

“Classics over-stock sale, all soft-covers $1”

The same voice inside him that had caused him to leave the theatre was speaking again. With clear enthusiasm it said,

“Go in. Here, this is it, this is the place. Go in.”

It took about ten minutes of the young man reading titles before the shopkeep spoke up,

“You look a little lost son, can I help you with something?”

“Well, I uh… I sort of just ditched my friends at the new marvel movie… been wasting a lot of time lately… long story short, I think I might need a better hobby.. or something.”

The shopkeeper gave an understanding nod,

“Listen, you like superheroes, huh?”

“Well I mean.. I used to..”

“I think we can find you some new heroes. They are old heroes, but they will be new to you. Listen, how much was your movie ticket?”

“I think, like, fifteen dollars?”

“Do you have another five on you?”

“Uh, yeah I guess.. why not?”

“You give me five, and I'll choose five books for you. After each one you read, bring it back to me, and if you thought it was a waste of your time, I'll buy it back for five dollars.”

If the young man was puzzled before, now he was downright baffled. What had led him here? The shopkeeper was grinning now as he dropped a copy of Beowulf into a bag.

“So what is the catch?” the young man said.

“You are the catch, son. You left a comfortable theatre with your friends to pursue something you don't yet understand. Your type is rare, and I know you aren't going to stop at five books. You'll be back for more, and by then you might just have the strength to bring some friends with you. You see, this bookstore, we're about to go under. This whole thing really.. reading, I mean… knowledge, thought, civilization, all of it is about to go under. So, every day I pray for a hero. And everytime someone walks through that door of their own accord, I have take the chance that my prayers have been answered.”

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