

Of Movies and Money

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Abstract: *The commercial aspect of the film industry is becoming more prominent than its artistic concern in the global community. As a representation of the American film industry, the biggest film industry in the world, this paper will study the commercial aspects of the comic-based superhero movie The Avengers. Superhero movies often prove blockbuster hits and make mind-boggling amounts of money even though they have very loose plots and little artistic value besides the use of special effects. Here, I will discuss Frederic Jameson's critique of postmodernism for promoting schlock or kitsch and for being pro-capitalist. The paper will talk about the cultural implications of these Hollywood blockbusters and the money-making processes beyond the tickets sale such as gaming, toys and other merchandise. It will argue that the film industry has become the biggest cultural industry today run by media moguls and capitalist giants in the light of Stuart Hall's notes on popular culture. Finally, I hope to show that mainstream or popular movies make more money now because they are part of a hegemonic culture created by certain power groups.*

Keywords: *postmodernism, Hollywood movies, money, popular culture, film industry, cultural industry, hegemony*

Introduction

Today, we live in the world of the cinema. Whether we are buying tickets at the multiplexes or spending money on DVDs, we are all glued to this magnetic power which draws us into its virtual 2D¹ world of fantasy and forgetfulness. With the advancement of technology, there are now 3D² movies and the more the fantasy, the more enjoyable the effects of 3D. That is why, probably, comic-book movies have become so popular nowadays. Computers can capture the world of fantasy in the comic books more precisely and perfectly than has ever been done on celluloid.

With its immense money and power, the American film industry, Hollywood, has been able to develop and exploit technological aspects of movie-making better than anyone else. Over the last forty decades, Hollywood's action and science-fiction genres have catapulted sky high and half of these have been comic-book related. Names like *Superman*, *Batman*, *X-Men*, and *Spiderman* are renowned in every corner of the world not for the comics which are their origins but more for the movie adaptations. These comic-book movies are often highly computerized and they make millions of dollars solely depending on their use of special effects.

Gone are the days when movies happened to be realistic or artistic representations of social and political drama. The element of entertainment was there but the message was more important. However, in this twentieth century of increasing capitalism the whole motive behind movie-making seems to be earning money. This “whatever works” attitude can be called postmodern but does it mean that these meaningless movies are what we, the audience, want to see or are we made to think we want to see them. Is there a cultural domination caused by capitalism? If so, then how does it work in the film industry? To find answers to these questions, this paper will examine the most famous comic-book movie of recent times, *The Avengers*, and its commercial and cultural impacts on mass audiences.

The paper is divided into five sections: the introduction, a short historical background of comic-book movies in Hollywood and summary of *The Avengers* plot, an analysis of the postmodern aspects of *The Avengers* and Frederic Jameson’s criticism of postmodernism from his essay “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” a discussion of the categorization and influence of *The Avengers* as popular culture in light of Stuart Hall’s essay “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’,” and a comparison of the film industry with other cultural industries.

Historical Background of Comic-Book Movies

Comic-based movies have been popular since the 1970s after Richard Donner’s *Superman* (1978) starring Christopher Reeves proved a major critical and commercial success. Why the 1970s? Somdatta Mandal explains it as “a narcissistic phase of American life when people turned their backs on social issues to become absorbed in their own emotional and material well-being” and comic-book movies are easy options of doing so (88).

Though *Superman*, of the DC Comics, was the first major big budget feature film that did well worldwide, today the film industry is ruled by its competitor Marvel Comics. Initially, Marvel was having trouble competing with DC in the film industry but it all changed after the release of Sam Raimi’s *Spiderman* trilogy (2002-2007) followed by the *X-Men* series (2000-2006). Marvel did not look back and within a decade that saw comic-book movies revolutionizing Hollywood, it not only left behind its competitor DC but also became one of the biggest producers in Hollywood, threatening Twentieth Century Fox, Sony, and Universal. Marvel’s success story continued and flourished in the 2010s with one box-office hit after another such as *Iron Man* (2008, 2010), *Thor* (2010), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), and finally the movie that broke all records, the mega ensemble, *The Avengers* (2012).

What happens in *The Avengers*? The Norse god Loki, Thor’s evil adopted brother, finds the tesseract, a fictional powerful stone, to destroy Earth. To stop him, the superheroes Thor, Iron Man, Captain America, Hulk, Hawkeye, and Black Widow team up as The Avengers³. There is basically nothing more to the plot except several action scenes leading up to the climactic scene where Loki creates a cosmic gateway above Stark Tower for his alien friends to come and attack humans. The robot-like aliens are stopped by The Avengers in an action-packed finale that shows the multiple superheroes fighting bravely, each using their special powers or weapons, till finally Iron Man flies a nuclear missile into space blasting the alien ship and saving earth. It is pure entertainment or a “popcorn selling” movie with star power like Robert Downey Jr. as Iron man, catchy dialogues, stylish costumes, grand settings, and, most importantly, highly computerized action sequels that appeal to the imagination of the masses.

Does it show anything worth learning or taking away when we return to our real world? I do not say that movies have to be educational since the idea of education puts the burden of schooling and reading on them that makes them sound high-brow or high culture. The Motion Picture Production Code or, the “Hays Code” after Will. H. Hays, however, specifically says:

Most arts appeal to the mature. This art appeals at once to every class—mature, immature, developed, undeveloped, law-abiding, criminal. Music has its grades for different classes; so has literature and drama. This art of the motion picture, combining as it does the two fundamental appeals of looking at a picture and listening to a story, at once reaches every class of society. (qtd. in Tratner 3)

Yet, there must be something to make them valuable beyond the ticket price. Also, if this meaningless grand party like those of Jay Gatsby’s⁴ was a one-time phenomenon, it could be ignored but if it becomes a series of ongoing

propaganda to trick the masses, then we must study its roots and motives to be fully aware and armed. Even Gatsby's parties were not so meaningless after all. The next section will follow up on this idea of emptiness or hollowness in *The Avengers* despite all its "sound and fury"⁵ in respect to postmodernist theories while the argument of high culture and low culture will be further discussed in section four.

The Avengers as Postmodern and Jameson's Criticism

The Avengers is a postmodern movie if we think of Ihab Hassan's definition of the term. It has the qualities of 1) urbanism showing the city, here New York, as the "global village" with indications of "world totalitarianism" by Loki and then "world unification" by *The Avengers*; 2) technologism which includes futuristic impossibilities from "thought control to the conquest of space" (418); and finally 3) anti-elitism since one does not have to be very knowledgeable to understand the plot or actions. It is a perfect blend of anarchy and fantasy, horror and humor which makes it postmodern. Living in today's world, this is probably what we want to see or we think we do and so these movies become so successful. This success, however, is related to money. This is what Frederic Jameson criticizes in his essay, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." According to him, movies like *The Avengers* are *schlock* or *kitsch*, that is, they are absolute rubbish and yet they are famous worldwide because postmodernism is populist. They make no distinction between high culture and mass or commercial culture but form part of the popular culture.

This popular culture is a highly dangerous thing to Jameson because he realizes that it acts like anodyne, taking people's minds off present reality and making them dwell in a virtual world, albeit momentarily. Jameson condemns the superficiality or "depthlessness" of postmodern works like *The Avengers* movies which makes the world "a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density" (568). He also points out postmodernism's complacency with capitalism which is nowhere clearer than the film industry. This brings Mandal's comments to mind:

Hollywood is currently one of the largest and most profitable sectors of the U.S. economy. In a few decades it transformed itself from a dying company town into a merchandising emporium of movie games and licensed characters. And it is quickly moving into cyberspace, virtual reality, and digital imaging. (90)

It will not be an exaggeration to say that *The Avengers* is now the emperor of that "emporium," the Hollywood film industry. Now, what is an industry? In dictionary terms, it involves all kinds of economic activities needed for the production and distribution of goods. Then, what about the cultural industry? The range of cultural industry includes "... internet delivery of recordings and song lyrics, and video cassettes of movies for purchase and rental" (Hirsch 2-3). In addition, there are "a small number of powerful 'intermediate' organizations producing and distributing the movies ..." (Hirsch 3). These "intermediate" organizations play a major role in the promotion of movies nowadays, especially if it is a comic book movie like *The Avengers*. They create a sense of attachment and familiarity with the characters in the movie so that people become more and more enthusiastic about the sequels.

Because of this "sequel" factor, filmmakers need to sustain and even increase the spell created the first time. That is why American films are no longer confined to the movie screen but have made inroads to faraway places where essentials like food and education may not have reached but posters of Iron Man or action figures of Thor have. For a film like *The Avengers*, money is not limited to the ticket sale but comes from different directions like gaming, toys, and other merchandise, all of which boost each other's profit shares. By merchandise here, we understand action figures and similar toys. However, the market has now expanded to making almost everything that children, teenagers, and even comic-fan adults use in their day to day life such as plastic cups, aluminum cans, head caps, stickers, key-rings, watches, storybooks, school-bags, pencil-boxes, water-bottles, etc. The list of merchandise includes innumerable things from clothing to stationery with images of *The Avengers*. As a result, a child in some remote developing country is seen wearing a t-shirt with his or her favorite Avengers superhero or playing with its action figure even though he will not be benefitted by Marvel's financial gains.

While almost every household, whether in the East or West, have something or other associated with this iconic though meaningless movie, the capacity of the dominance of its cultural products becomes most evident on

occasions like the Comicon festivals where fans dress as their favorite comic characters. As more and more fans buy masks and costumes of their favorite superheroes, they contribute to the profits of the ancillary industries which in turn helps the big players in the capitalist market. For example, after Marvel's acquisition by Disney in 2010, the profits of all original goods related to *The Avengers* franchise go to Disney. There are, of course, duplicate ones, especially in the sub-continent, which are available at lower prices and benefit local investors. But the more people consume these products, the more excited they become about the movies and vice-versa, even though Marvel Studios executive Justin Lambros "proposed a creative hierarchy in which Marvel's filmmaking operations trumped anything developing in other markets" and this is due to the fact that the movies "command larger audiences and build greater exposure for Marvel's characters" (Johnson 3). The creative and thereby cultural domination of the movies is quite explicit in his comment.

The Avengers as Popular Culture and Hall's Definitions

The previous comment reminds us of the relation between art and money – a dilemma that has been bothering humans from the earliest of civilizations. Today, it is quite impossible to think of producing art without money. From a very economic point of view, if we think of art as just any other commodity then naturally it needs capital or investment for production and then profit for the continuation of that production. But is art an economic product? Can artists act like other members of the economy selling their creativity and should they? For other forms of art like painting or theater, these questions may have controversial answers, but for movies, especially Hollywood, the answer is very straightforward as articulated by Mandal. She calls American films "a medium of entertainment, an economic venture – a business-oriented project like any other industry mainly targeted at profit-making" (80). So, commercialization of art in Hollywood is an accepted fact.

Now comes the question of high and low culture. Is *The Avengers* a high or low culture movie and what difference does it make? Historically speaking, there was no strict distinction between the two till the first half of the nineteenth century. Rob King notes:

Art forms such as Shakespearean drama and opera appealed to audiences both popular and elite, while "high art" was not as yet insulated from more popular forms and genres. American opera houses were centers of entertainment ... By the turn of the century, however, America's genteel middle class sought to impose distinctions between high and low cultural forms, creating prestigious and exclusive cultural institutions – such as art museums and opera houses – that contrasted markedly from venues catering to the masses. (5)

However, with the advent of postmodernism this distinction was stripped away once again and what emerged was the combination of the two as popular culture and *The Avengers* belongs to the category of popular culture.

Stuart Hall gives three definitions of popular culture in his essay, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'." Of the three, it is the first definition which is most relevant for this study. The first definition, he says, is "the most common sense definition meaning: the things which are said to be 'popular' because masses of people listen to them, buy them, read them, consume them, and seem to enjoy them to the full" (446). In this sense, *The Avengers* is a movie of the popular culture because it is watched and enjoyed by a mass number of people worldwide. The high box-office collections are proof of its immense popularity. However, Hall says that this definition of popular culture is "associated with the manipulation and debasement of the culture of the people" (446).

This brings us back to Mandal's commentary on the attitude of audiences in the '70s when there were no *The Avengers* but other science fiction movies like *Star Wars* which she calls "simply pure entertainment – people go to see them possessed by a great yearning for diversion, to put aside unresolved and pressing matters, to relax and get away from it all" (88). Therefore, as Hall says, people who watch and enjoy such movies must be "living in a permanent state of 'false consciousness'" but immediately refutes this idea saying that "the notion of the people as a purely passive, outline force is a deeply unsocialist perspective" (446). He defends the masses by arguing that "ordinary people are not cultural dopes" (447). Even Mandal's views reinforce this idea that the cultural domination is one of hegemony and not of ideology, that is, people willingly agree to live in the virtual world of *The Avengers* and where there is consent there is always possibility of dissent". Hall stresses this idea saying:

The cultural industries do have the power constantly to rework and reshape what they represent ... they don't function on us as if we are blank screens ... there is a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle, by the dominant culture, constantly to disorganize and reorganize popular culture ... There are points of resistance; there are moment of suppression. This is the dialectic of cultural struggle. (447)

Two important points to note here are that culture is always changing and that popular culture is low culture since it is being reformed by the dominant culture constantly. The first is easy to grasp since we all know that yesterday's *Star Wars* is today's *The Avengers* and tomorrow it will be replaced by some other blockbuster movie. The general trend among the masses is that just as they become excited very easily, they get bored just as easily. So, cultural industries have to keep up with the fast-changing moods and tastes of people, and if they cannot, they will be quickly forgotten and discarded, ceasing to remain part of the popular culture. Thus, the masses are not as helpless as we often tend to think.

Secondly, while postmodernism advocates the elimination of divisions between high and low culture, merging them into what we know as popular culture, it is worth noting from Hall's essay that popular culture is rather inferior or secondary to what he calls dominant culture. Therefore, despite postmodernist slogans, anything to do with the masses seems to remain low, mass or popular culture. However, definitions and views may vary over time. Shakespeare was part of popular culture during the Elizabethan period because his plays were enjoyed by the masses but now they are considered high culture because only a segment of people related with academics and arts are interested in them. Similarly, when we consider that *The Avengers* cannot be accessible to all classes of society given the money needed to buy expensive tickets, it becomes high culture. (Illegal downloading or piracy has solved this problem for many but that is an issue beyond the parameters of this paper.) At present, we would be satisfied with the consideration that where access is possible, the movie can be easily understood and enjoyed by anyone, regardless of class, creed, or nationality⁷ and that makes it popular culture.

Conclusion

In no other field of the arts, be it literature, theater, or painting, is there so much money and cultural domination involved as in the movies. The only other form which can probably compete is the music industry. Books, plays, or paintings often do not make as much money as movies or music, except, of course, on rare occasions. Here again comes the clash between high and low culture. Reading a book, watching a play, or appreciating a painting is still considered high culture because it requires a certain level of education and taste. It is also a matter of economics, that is, demand and supply. A painting is expensive because it is not produced in mass amounts like music or movies, and though books may be printed in large amounts, not everyone can read or likes reading.

Plays are a bit different since they can be both high and popular culture as we have seen in the case of Shakespeare. Plays and movies work in a similar fashion, appealing to all classes of people, or at least they did before the computer. The key word is technology. Movies can be reproduced innumerable times by machines unlike a play which is performed by live actors. This reproducibility or notion of simulacra⁸ gives movies the benefit of mass productions and distribution, thereby overshadowing a play.

Music comes in second place to movies because, firstly, while songs appeal to our hearing, movies appeal to both our auditory and visual senses. But while musicians often perform their songs in live concerts, beside the sale of audio CDs, movie actors never need to perform their stunts in front of a live audience. So, like a play, music is a performing art while movies are not. Therefore, again, musical concerts cannot be mass produced. Thus, it is quite clear why and how the film industry is the largest cultural industry today.

In conclusion, it can be established that *The Avengers* is a true postmodern movie of the popular kind. It may not have much depth, but being pro-capitalist, it adheres to Jameson's argument. But it supports Hall's ideas as well. While it has great cultural domination escalating its commercial benefits, it does not make complete fools of us. On the contrary, it has to toil hard to please the consumers if it wants to keep on making the big bucks.

Notes

1. 2D refers to traditional two-dimensional screens in movie-theaters.
2. 3D refers to newly developed three-dimensional screens which require special glasses for viewing.
3. The italicized *The Avengers* refers to the name of the movie whereas the non-italicized the Avengers refers to the team in general.
4. Jay Gatsby is the eponymous hero of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*. He throws grand parties in the hope of seeing his long-lost love Daisy.
5. The words "sound and fury" are part of Macbeth's speech in Act 5 Scene V in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.
6. Ideology refers to a state of "false consciousness" according to Marxist theory and hegemony refers to "spontaneous consent given by the masses to dominant groups" as suggested by Antonio Gramsci.
7. Movies are often dubbed in different languages or provided with translated subtitles thus overcoming language barriers.
8. The concept of simulacra (copies) was given by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard

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