

Iron Man: Just what sort of hero is this?

By Hiram Lee
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Iron Man is the latest in a barrage of comic book superhero films to come to the big screen in recent years. Like a number of the others, it is done very well for itself at the box office and with mainstream critics. While all of these movies, from *Batman Begins* to *The Fantastic Four*, have been slight and drawn on thin sources, hardly any have been adapted from a source as repulsive as *Iron Man*.

The Iron Man character first appeared in *Tales of Suspense*, issue number 39. Published in 1963, the comic told the story of Tony Stark, a wealthy playboy described as “the dreamiest thing this side of Rock Hudson” and an inventor of high-tech weaponry for the US military. In the comic book, Stark is injured during an explosion in the Vietnamese jungle and captured by Wong-Chu, “the red guerrilla tyrant.” Ordered by Wong-Chu to build an advanced weapon for his own army, Stark instead creates the first Iron Man armor which he dons to become an invincible opponent of the evil “red” and everything the latter stands for.

It is striking that this profoundly anticommunist character, who was used to promote illusions about capitalism in general and the brutal US role in Vietnam in particular, should find a screen adaptation at the present time. At a moment when the American government is mired in both Iraq and Afghanistan, Iron Man once again steps forward to fulfill his role of attempting to foster illusions about United States’ neo-colonial adventures, secretive intelligence agencies, terrorism and capitalism. It is a film so divorced from reality one can hardly believe one’s eyes.

The movie, directed by Jon Favreau (*Elf*, *Zathura*) transplants Iron Man’s origins from Vietnam to a more modern setting. We first meet Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) as he is riding in a military convoy in Afghanistan. He has just demonstrated, with considerable arrogance, his latest weapon designed for

the US military. When the convoy is suddenly attacked by terrorists, Stark receives near-fatal injuries from a rocket made by his own company, Stark Enterprises, that has somehow fallen into enemy hands.

Replacing the ‘red tyrants’ of the original comic book, a terrorist group whose power mad leader idolizes Genghis Khan captures Stark this time. The essential details of his captivity remain the same. Told to build an advanced weapon for the terrorists, he instead creates Iron Man and makes his daring escape.

Having returned to the US deeply affected by his experiences, Downey’s Stark immediately moves to shut down the weapons program of his vast Stark Enterprises. He cannot, he says, go forward knowing these weapons have fallen into the wrong hands. “I saw young Americans killed by the very weapons I created to defend them and protect them,” he tells the press. This is a curious line which deserves some thought. Was this budding superhero not bothered by the horrors inflicted on the people of Afghanistan by his weapons? It appears not. Stark has doubts about his profession, but not the role of the US military in Afghanistan. His conscience extends only so far.

From here, the movie continues along the path well established for superhero films. Stark will build and test new armor and equipment, take his first awkward flights through the night sky before mastering his new abilities and find himself in various battles that grow in intensity until the final clash with another superpowered being. Virtually nothing comes as a surprise.

One battle worth noting takes Stark, in his Iron Man persona, to a village in Afghanistan where the terrorist group he encountered in the beginning of the story is now threatening the lives of the local inhabitants. The CEO-superhero quickly dispatches them with the small arsenal hidden away in his armor. There is something unseemly at work in the cool way Iron Man strolls

away from an enemy tank he has just blown apart with a rocket.

What are we to make of this militaristic superhero? While Iron Man is a fantasy, it is still a fantasy with its basis in reality. One cannot ignore the setting of the film and all the implications that go along with it, nor the context in which this film has been made and released.

The US has been pursuing a colonial-style war in Afghanistan for more than six years now, resulting in thousands of deaths. Just within the past week, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported on plans to build a \$60-million prison near Kabul capable of holding up to 1,100 prisoners, a facility in which one can be certain the brutal treatment and torture of Afghan prisoners housed in other locations will continue.

This week also brought word, in the form of a preliminary United Nations report, of widespread civilian deaths in Afghanistan, with many occurring at the hands of the CIA and other intelligence agencies working with the US occupation.

What is one to think, then, of a film released in the same month showing an armor-clad weapons manufacturer, an ally of the secretive government agency SHIELD, fighting off ‘terrorists’ and saving the innocent civilians of one village from their attacks? It simply turns reality on its head. The comic-book superhero revival of recent years has clearly been something of an unhealthy trend, but never has this been clearer than in the present case.

The fact that the film is so dreadful and dishonest has not, however, kept critics from praising it. A.O. Scott, writing for the *New York Times*, while compelled to acknowledge that “it all plays out more or less as expected,” nevertheless glowingly comments about the film that “Within the big, crowded movements of this pop symphony is a series of brilliant duets that sometimes seem to have the swing and spontaneity of jazz improvisation.”

Richard Corliss, with *Time Magazine*, writes that *Iron Man* possesses “lots more intelligence than the genre usually demands,” adding that the work has yanked “movies and the worldwide box office out of its months-long doldrums and into the stratosphere.”

“Fallible, ordinarily engaging, human-size, earthbound characters just don’t measure up when the weather turns warmer,” says Corliss, “We need another

hero, and lots of ‘em, the bigger, stronger and cartoonier the better.”

Newsweek’s David Ansen spoke favorably of the film’s political stance and its depiction of terrorists, “Though they use Afghanistan as a backdrop, [the filmmakers] carefully avoid any political specifics—you won’t hear the word Muslim uttered here—and the bad guys, led by the nasty Raza (Faran Tahir), are generic power-hungry villains who could have been plucked out of a James Bond movie of any era.” It is remarkable to observe a critic praising filmmakers for creating generic and two-dimensional characters.

Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* went a step further than Ansen, not only doing away with his own critical faculties, but also urging audiences to do the same. “Don’t question,” he wrote, “just lap it up.”

The list goes on, shamefully. If nothing else, *Iron Man* has at least provided us with a good long look at the wretched state of so-called film criticism with which we are presently plagued.

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