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Age of Failure

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What is the purpose of going to the movies? For me, it's to escape from the real world for

a little while, be told a good story, and be entertained. It doesn't take much to do that, depending

on who is watching the movie. Personally, I love action. Give me a good fight scene, a

moderately interesting plot, and a reason for the fighting, and I am hooked. The bigger, more

important question asks whether the story tellers have a responsibility to adhere to when telling

the stories. Should a writer worry about what message he or she is sending out to the masses? Or

should a writer be focused on the profitability of the product? Should he or she just throw

together some things that an audience wants to see and not worry about it making sense?

I fancy myself a bit of writer, so I have strong opinions about these questions. When

people go to see a movie, they are opening themselves up to new ideas and letting their mental

defenses down. Some would argue that agendas should not be pushed and that movies are meant

to be entertaining and nothing more, but I disagree. I think that artists, no matter the canvas, has

a responsibility to use their platform to reach their audience and teach them, not just entertain

them.

Unfortunately, it is often the case that a movie is released more for profit than for the

sake of storytelling. The most common instance that a movie is used for money making, rather

than proper storytelling, is in the case of sequels. In 2012, *The Avengers* was released, and I got

exactly what I wanted. There was fighting with a reason, the characters were true to character, and there was a message—not just entertainment. Three years later, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* was released. This was supposed to be the epic sequel to the first movie, but it failed on more than one note. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* was inferior to *The Avengers* because the plot was incompetently constructed, women were poorly represented, and the gender role message it sent was negatively aimed at women.

As far as storytelling goes, *The Avengers* was a pretty simple story to tell and easy plot to follow, if the audience had seen the former *Marvel* movies. Loki (God of mischief), played by Tom Hiddleston, wants revenge against his brother Thor (God of thunder), played by Chris Hemsworth. Loki comes to Earth to take the tesseract, a blue cube with great power, and use it to take over the world. Loki's reason for revenge is laid out in the movie *Thor*, so Loki showing up on Earth and demanding to rule it makes sense. This plot is consistent throughout the movie.

The Avengers wastes no time in introducing all the main characters. Loki attacks the site where the tesseract is being studied and places Hawkeye (agent Clint Barton), played by Jeremy Renner, and a few others under his control. The head of S.H.I.E.L.D., a secret government agency, by the name of Nick Fury, played by Samuel L. Jackson, works on gathering his agents and a group of superheroes. Agent Natasha Romanov, also called the Black Widow, is played by Scarlet Johansson. Romanov is a master assassin and close friend of Barton. Captain America (Steve Rogers), played by Chris Evans, is a super-soldier. Iron Man (Tony Stark), portrayed by Robert Downey Jr., is a billionaire in a metal suit of armor. Mark Ruffalo plays Dr. Bruce Banner who can turn into a large, green monster called the Hulk. With all the main characters being brought together early in the movie, the plot is focused on the actual story and making sure that it flows well.

Each character's motivation is either explained through background information in former films or information provided in *The Avengers*. Thor wants to protect Earth because he likes the people of Earth and he loves a woman who lives here. They met in the movie *Thor* when he was banished to Earth. Steve Rogers is portrayed as a man who always puts others first and stands up for those who cannot stand for themselves in *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Tony Stark has been playing at being a superhero for a while, but he has a second motivation. During a major fight in the movie, a man Stark considers a friend is killed by Loki. Banner allows his angrier side to take hold when he sees all the destruction caused by Loki and his alien army. Romanov states that she wants to make up for all the lives she has taken in the past, and Barton wants revenge for being made into a slave by Loki. The explanations for each character's motivation, including the villain's motivation, makes *The Avengers* an interesting and easy movie to follow.

Regrettably, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* is full of plot holes in the form of missing background information. Wesley Morris, long-time movie reviewer, writes in the article "Nerd Plus Ultron: There Has to Be More to 'Avengers: Age of Ultron' than Printing More Money," published in 2015 in *Grantland*, that the movie was hard to follow by plot. When he tries to explain the plot of the movie, he says "one of them anyway," referring to the multiple plot points that rarely crossed.

Ultron opens to the team—Iron Man, Black Widow, Hulk, Thor, Hawkeye, and Captain America—running through the woods of a small European country to take out a Hydra base. This is acceptable enough because Captain America's purpose in *Captain America: The First Avenger* is to beat Hydra, though knowing that the heroes had been taking down Hydra bases for an unspecified amount of time before jumping into a poorly filmed battle would have been

helpful. In the July 2015 edition of *Sight & Sound*, Kim Newman, movie critic for *Sight & Sound,* writes in the article "Avengers Age of Ultron," that the main story line was poorly emphasized. Ty Burr, movie critic and author of "Avengers Assemble Again in Heavyweight Sequel" from an April 2015 edition of the *Boston Globe*, mirrors Newman's sentiment by saying that most of the movie is spent trying to convince the audience that the movie matters at all.

The plot becomes even murkier when "the twins" are introduced. Anybody who has ever read the *Marvel* comics knows that Pietro and Wanda Maximoff, Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch, are the children of Magneto (a villain of the X-Men in the *Marvel* universe), but ownership rights caused *Marvel* to choose a new origin for them: human experimentation. Newman also speaks to how the movie struggled with the addition of new characters. Just as with the unspecified time that the team has been hunting Hydra, the audience is simply thrown the idea of human experimentation to excuse the twins' existence and never given any background information on the testing as a whole. Most characters in *Marvel* movies are introduced with their own movie, but the twins were introduced quickly; their background, what little the audience gets, is revealed far into the movie in pieces and long after people are confused.

Character motivation is another big problem with *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. When Stark and Banner mistakenly create Ultron, an artificial intelligence program with instant connection to the world wide web, things become more convoluted. According to Rebecca Pahle, author of the June 2015 *Film Journal International* article "Avengers: Age of Ultron," Ultron is plagued by "muddled character motivations." Ultron has a deep hate for the Avengers and is consistently heard speaking about evolution and meteors, though the reasons for these traits are never told. Pahle also states that there are "half baked ideas that either should have been cut or fully developed" throughout the plot of the movie.

Renner's Hawkeye is an example of a half-baked idea. Hawkeye is a smart-mouthing commitment-phobe in the comics, but the movie portrays him as a family man. He has been married for years and has a farm where his wife and children stay in secret and away from danger. The closest the audience comes to understanding this new twist is when he tells the others that he kept them secret to keep them safe. While the idea of Hawkeye having a loving home and family to go return to after a long and difficult mission is nice, the addition of the secret family did not actually push the story forward at all. Morris writes that he worried for Renner's health when he saw how much emphasis was put on Hawkeye; it was as if the movie was a tribute to him. Morris also points out to how the farmhouse scene was not useful to the plot of the overall movie.

Another character who is badly portrayed is Black Widow. Throughout the first installment, her motivations are clear. She works for a spy organization and she has killed people as an assassin in the past. She is trying to make up for all the people she has killed. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, though, she is flirty with Bruce Banner. Newman says that there is no "precedent in the comics" for this romance. There is no background given for this relationship to exist, and there is no reason for it. Frankly speaking, it is demeaning to the character. Black Widow having a romantic interest is another example of a strong, independent female character being put in a relationship to justify her being. Her romantic feelings are not the only way the character was failed in the movie, though. She discusses, midway through the movie, that she is incapable of having children. Black Widow is not motivated, in any of the *Marvel* movies she has appeared in, to become a mother. Only in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* is this useless motivation added to the character; once again, a baseless change to a character is made that does not move the plot forward at all.

The Avengers does not offer a large female presence, but the women in it are no pushovers. Cobie Smulders plays agent Maria Hill and is sent after the stolen tesseract on her own, which means she has to go up against Barton and Loki. Black Widow defeats three armed men while she is tied to a chair. Another woman seen in the movie, though in a smaller capacity, is Gwenyth Paltrow's Pepper Potts. She may not be a superhero, but she is the owner of Tony Stark's company and she is given credit for the idea of Stark Tower. Throughout the movie, women are portrayed as strong and independent from the male characters.

With *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, there is an even smaller female presence than in *The Avengers* and, when women are seen, they are used as boosters for the male characters' development. Hill is no longer seen fighting, but is a secretary for Stark. Black Widow, who is seen fighting aliens hand-to-hand in the first movie, is mostly on screen as a captive or nurse. Smulders asks in one scene where all the girlfriends of the male characters are. It is outlined in its own plot that the movie is missing women. One major example of a lack of female presence is when all the boys have a go at lifting Thor's hammer. Black Widow does not take part in it; according to Morris, "Scarlett Johansson's Black Widow smells a pissing contest and chooses to hold her nose." Morris, speaking to a moment where a woman was used in the movie to push a man's character development, states that "Linda Cardellini shows up as Mrs. Hawkeye" and "can't help but play as though she were married to Mike Brady." The situation Morris is referring to is when Cardellini is trying to be supportive of her husband's decision: to avenge, or not to avenge. The women of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* are little more than support characters.

The message pushed by *Avengers: Age of Ultron* is one of traditional gender roles. The point and goal of life is to have children. Everybody knows this, everybody accepts this, and everybody wants this. This idea sounds a bit outdated, doesn't it? Unfortunately, *Avengers: Age*

of Ultron pushed this idea. In *The Avengers*, none of the women—or men for that matter—showed any interest in being parents, but the sequel made one of the team members a secret father and degraded the strongest female character of all. Black Widow, after telling Bruce Banner that she was sterilized when she was younger, calls herself a monster. This negative message to women is heavily pushed by that fact that the team is in the home of the only married team member, his pregnant wife is introduced in the kitchen, their kids are seen as always being taken care of by the mother, and she "prevails upon her super guests to repair tractors and chop wood, reinforcing gender stereotypes (Morris).

Overall, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* fails to live up to the standard set by *The Avengers*. The sequel's plot, or plots, has too many open holes. Many of the characters were out of character or, if they were women, missing. The movie also supports traditional gender roles and even dehumanizes women who cannot have children. *The Avengers*, though not full of female characters, does still support strong women and the movie makes sense. It is clear that the second installation is meant solely for profit and that story-telling was not a factor in the production of the movie.

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