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A Review of *Aquaman* (2018)

Reviewed by Stuart Spear

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AQUAMAN; OR FLASH GORDON OF THE SEA

Review by Stuart Spear

Wan, James, dir. *Aquaman*. Perf. Jason Momoa, Amber Heard, Patrick Wilson, Nicole Kidman, Willem Dafoe, Temura Morrison and Dolph Lundgren. Warner Bros. Pictures. 2018. Film.

If there is one lesson to take away from the new DC Extended Universe (DCEU) superhero film it is this: subtlety is overrated. While over the years Marvel Studios has found ever-increasing commercial success, DC's cinematic universe has been struggling. The mediocre *Man of Steel* (2013) was a bad way to start; *Batman vs. Superman* (2016) was ugly and miserable; and *Suicide Squad* (2016) was simply a terrible mess made by committee. Then came *Wonder Woman* (2017) which was confident, assured, warm, and fun. Suddenly there was hope after all for DC to be successful like Marvel. Then *Justice League* (2017) happened and spoiled it all. So it felt like a lot was hanging on the aquatic shoulders of DC's next instalment.

In *Aquaman* lighthouse keeper Tom Curry (Temura Morrison) discovers Atlanta (Nicole Kidman), the queen of Atlantis, washed up on the rocks after evading an arranged marriage. They fall in love, live together and soon have a son, Arthur. But their happiness does not last when Atlantean heavies finally track Atlanta and demand she returns undersea. For her rebellious behaviour, and for birthing a half-breed on land, Atlanta is sentenced to death leaving her other son King Orm (Patrick Wilson) to preside over Atlantis. Orm seeks to unite the historic Seven Kingdoms of Atlantis and retaliate to what he sees as the crimes committed to their world by the humans on the land. Adult Arthur (Jason Momoa), who has since become the meta-human Aquaman, is reluctant to fully submit to the hero role and even more reluctant to engage with the happenings in Atlantis. After the idealistic Atlantean Mera (Amber Heard) helps Arthur save his father from Orm's warning shot to the surface he agrees to help Mera restore order to Atlantis and the Seven Kingdoms.

What follows is a high-pomp melodrama turned up to eleven.

Aquaman has many shortcomings, from the sloppy writing and character arcs to its patchy structure, but believes if it can distract you with its imagery you will ignore where it stumbles. It is a film that peddles the familiar tropes: a hero eventually proving he is worthy to lead, a search for a mythical item that will unlock said hero's true identity and steer their fate, a sibling rivalry at the nexus of power, and cross-kingdom politics and machinations. These tropes, as well as the narrative beats, operate in such a by-the-numbers manner the screenplay almost feels like it was written using a script template document by an intern. There is no real deviation from or subversion of the generic hero narrative formula; instead we have clunky dialogue – which is predominantly exposition – from two-dimensional characters in a plethora of lavishly realised locations.

Ultimately, the spectacle replaces character development. There are plenty of opportunities for development, but every scene where this could happen has to be interrupted after ten minutes with something exploding in someone's face. While Arthur and Mera display good chemistry when together, these moments are too brief; but it is Orm who suffers most. Like most superhero films, the villain is underwritten and given very little to do (other than yell) and this is partly down to the introduction of a secondary villain, Black Manta, who robs Orm of useful screen time where his character and motives could have been fleshed out. Through Orm's motives there is the promise of ecocriticism - his plan for revenge stems from the humans' littering and poisoning of the oceans. His warning display involves throwing decades of pollution and discarded ships back on to the land; this causes massive devastation globally but is swiftly forgotten about narratively - an important and topical issue is being addressed, but done so almost as a token gesture. Black Manta is wholly unnecessary in this film and offers no real menace, he is just another man in a weaponised suit blowing stuff up, acting as a pawn for the main antagonist (in this film at least, the post-credit scene tells us he will return in the sequel). His inclusion in the film is a major factor in its bloated running time and yet he adds next to nothing to the narrative; worse still, it is difficult to get excited about his return in the sequel based on his introduction here.

In short, this film is a cobbled together big budget hodgepodge that drapes colourful clothing over a tired skeleton - and I really enjoyed it.

Aquaman is a character who manoeuvres on a tightrope between daft, cheesy fluff and daft, escapist fun; and here the film is bolstered by a well-cast Mamoia who is clearly having fun shifting between the physical and powerful fighter and the light-hearted buffoon with a heart of gold. It is also a welcome reversal of the recent problematic whitewashing where instead a prominent white comic book hero is portrayed by a Polynesian actor.

It was also a shrewd move to enlist James Wan as director as he has an incredible track record for producing hugely successful films that cater to a cross section of audiences and has proved so again, *Aquaman* is now the highest grossing film based on a DC character - not just of the DCEU canon, but of all time. This success is vital for the studio when their cinematic universe was seemingly faltering before it even got running, but I think it is easy to see why it succeeded. This film just has so much to enjoy: death by red wine; riding into battle on killer whales; Nicole Kidman in some sort of weird *Monster Hunter* cosplay; Mera's woodwind serenade to the ocean while Arthur recovers; Julie Andrews as a massive, incredibly powerful gatekeeping sea creature; the Brine kingdom whose captain is a crisply spoken British crab (of course); characters genuinely wanting the title "Ocean Master"; and a Jules Verne dinosaur land at the centre of the world. They threw almost everything into this film and for the large part most of it works just fine.

It all culminates in an insanely chaotic battle but the third act felt far less tiresome than in most superhero fare. Yes, it is a large computer-generated imagery brawl but the sheer spectacle of an underwater Helm's Deep is bewildering fun that does not go on and on - often in both DC and Marvel films these battles seem interminable. And while the characters are somewhat flat, the film is

a visual delight. The fluorescent colours dazzle – Atlantis rendered as a pulsing neon kingdom under water, and there is a fantastic shot of Trench creatures pursuing Mera and Arthur into the depths – and it is evident that DC are trying to break away from the dark grey/black palette that has mired some of the earlier outings. *Aquaman* feels like a comic book put on to the screen, which has to be a massive compliment.

Rupert Gregson-Williams' score finds the right balance between swelling horns, strings, and chorus alongside pulsing synth melodies; a soundtrack that amply compliments the narrative theme, the visual energy, and the sheer scale of the film. However, being *Aquaman*, it has to throw in a few bum notes here and there, such as Pitbull's "Ocean to Ocean," which samples Toto's "Africa" playing as they fly over Africa because, you know, subtlety be damned. Or when Mera's encounter with the joys of the surface world is accompanied by Roy Orbison's "She's a Mystery To Me," a combination so on-the-nose cheesy it borders on the parodic – this scene also plays out like some sort of Sicilian Tourist Board advert for an Italian town just as much fairytale as Atlantis. Also, fittingly for a film as patchy as this, Arthur's signature guitar motif which plays whenever he does something badass is completely dropped after about fifteen minutes of the film (it re-surfaces amidst the hubbub after his final encounter with Orm).

This is a film that overwhelms. It is an underwater pantomime as bright, bloated, and entertaining as they come. The DCEU has started to recognise what works: a more colourful mixture of levity, action and a modicum of character. These changes are having a far deeper impact on audiences than the dour, brooding, smashing borefests that came before. Perhaps the greatest lesson has been to take the franchise out of the hands of Zack Snyder (and Joss Whedon) and to emulate the aesthetic of Marvel's more irreverent and brash releases - most notably *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014). Whether *Shazam!* (2019) maintains this new enjoyable, albeit formulaic, resurgence is yet to be seen at the time of writing, but fingers crossed. For though it is important and compelling to have superhero films that question the uses and/or abuses of power, the conflict between a private and public persona, or our place in a universe populated with intelligence and ability beyond our means, sometimes plain old stupid is better, and they do not come much more enjoyably stupid than *Aquaman*.

BIONOTE

Stuart Spear is a recent MA Graduate from Lancaster University, UK. His interests include Science Fiction, eco-criticism, Modernism, and the Gothic. He is currently based in Bristol.