

“SUPERHEROES” and “SUPER” (Fantasia Double Review)

Written by Ariel Esteban Cayer
Friday, 22 July 2011 09:03



Please allow me to break my usual format in order to bring you a comparative review of two of the most interesting films of this year's [Fantasia festival](#). Whoever programmed SUPERHEROES to play the week before SUPER knew exactly what they were doing: genius programming.

These two films complement each other in ways that are truly illuminating, one film giving the other profound resonance in reality, making it more than the darkly comedic superhero variation it sets out to be. In fact, SUPER might just be one of the most realistic narratives of this type ever put to screen, and the only way I could've come to that conclusion was having first attending SUPERHEROES, programmed as part of the Documentary from the Edge section.



Fitting in with the recent onslaught of real-life-superhero/vigilante films like SPECIAL (2006), DEFENDOR (2009) and KICK-ASS (2010), Michael Barnett's HBO documentary SUPERHEROES takes us into another world where people like you and me take to the streets to fight crime...except it is all real and happening right now. One might easily scoff at this fantastical thought, but while watching the movie, it becomes quickly evident that the RLSH (Real Life Super Hero) movement is more widespread than anyone would have thought, and that, while these people are extremely varied in personalities and shades of sanity, they all share common traits—which are brought to full cinematic life in James Gunn's brutally realistic SUPER.

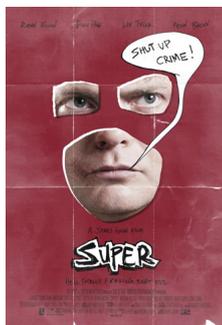
Focusing on about a dozen heroes, Barnett examines a subculture which, while inspired by heroism, is shaped and populated by psychologically scarred individuals, most of whom prove to be interesting study subjects exhibiting varying degrees of particular mental and social conditions. Veering from the selfless and harmless altruism displayed by heroes such as Life and Zetaman to the gripping case of social rejection and isolation that Mr. Xtreme (sole member of the Xtreme Justice League to boot), SUPERHEROES also reaches into the

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chillingly organized neighborhood watch The New York Initiative—which, channeling a striking Black Bloc vibe, is composed of ex-criminals and goes as far as subtly inciting hate crimes in hopes of “ambushing” potential rapists, robbers and assailants.

Straight-up nutcase goofballs are also given considerable screen time—as they should—notably the hilarious Master Legend, who thinks God gave him superhuman abilities. It becomes clear that unlike their comic-book inspirations, who are usually pillars of mental sanity (we can talk about Tony Stark’s alcoholism at another time), these real-life superheroes have been spawned from a place of traumatic events and psychological predispositions beyond that of the normal “origin” stories found in KICK-ASS, DEFENDOR or other similar vigilante narratives.



SUPER (also coming to DVD and Blu-ray August 9 from IFC/MPI), to my immense surprise and pleasure, builds from there. In telling the fascinating story of Frank D’Arbo (an amazing Rainn Wilson), who has his wife taken away from him by the boss (played by Kevin Bacon) of a gang of drug-handling criminals (including, most notably, Michael Rooker), the film is a touching character study echoing elements of some of SUPERHEROES’ most interesting cases, while managing to be its own eccentric dark comedy. Following his wife’s departure, Frank, a devout Christian with hallucinatory predispositions, falls into an understandable depression which subsequently leads him to be touched by the gigantic finger of God—in a graphic scene you will not soon forget! Inspired by Christian public-access TV superhero the Holy Avenger (fan favorite Nathan Fillion), he decides to become the crimefighting hero the Crimson Bolt, and reclaim his wife from the thugs and drugs that took her away from him.

SUPER stands well beyond and apart from its popular counterparts by offering a totally unforgiving, brutal and realistic descent into the world of capes and masks, whose balls-to-the-wall, insane, take-no-prisoners attitude I would’ve attributed simplistically to Gunn’s horror background and knack for offbeat or gory humor, he having penned the live-action SCOOBY-DOO films, TROMEO AND JULIET, the DAWN OF THE DEAD remake and the great SLITHER, which he also directed. SUPERHEROES has you constantly thinking about the stupidity of taking the streets unharmed and inexperienced, as well as the imminently somber outcome of—in most cases—such a dangerous lifestyle. While other films have touched on

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these concerns, SUPER addresses them brilliantly.

Wielding nothing other than a big wrench as a weapon and blindly propelled by his delusional vigilante fantasy, Frank goes around clobbering people to a pulp, which in any other narrative would occur without consequence. Under Gunn’s pen and direction, the events of SUPER flow with striking realism, and when he is joined by a reckless and naive comic-book clerk (a stunningly unhinged Ellen Page) as his sidekick Boltie, one knows SUPER’s story is a beautiful wreck waiting to happen. Cathartic and relentless, SUPER’s third act will have you gasping for air, offering perhaps one of the best conclusions to any superhero story ever put on screen. SUPER, like SUPERHEROES, is populated by emotionally distressed individuals, and that’s what is so great about both films.

Forget KICK-ASS’ good-intentioned Dave Lizewski and caricatured Hit-Girl—The Crimson Bolt and Boltie are where it’s at. Some will be put off by the film’s uncomfortable tonal shifts and violence, but to me, these are undeniably part of the appeal, and I’d be very disappointed—and surprised—if the unease and sadness I felt leaving the theater was an unintentional mishap. SUPER offers a lot to think about regarding the issue of heroism in America, while being as high-octane action-packed a dose of premium entertainment as anyone could ever wish for.

You should also definitely catch SUPERHEROES when it airs on HBO August 8. The slickly produced documentary offers a rare glimpse into a strange world which you will undeniably think about the next time you open a comic book. Had I not seen it before seeing SUPER, my appreciation of the latter would’ve been completely different, and I’m more than grateful to Fantasia for providing this thought-provoking double feature for me to chew on.

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Day 5 of Fantasia also offered RETREAT, which will be reviewed shortly, and yesterday (Day 8) saw not only the Montreal premiere of SUPER but the second showing of Takashi Miike’s mind-boggling NINJA KIDS!!! Expect that, as well as everything in between and more, as Fantasia 2011 kicks into its second week and consistently blows my brain to shreds.

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