Feature-length Review: **JAF1395**

SUICIDE SQUAD, *DEADPOOL*,
AND THE RISE OF THE COMIC BOOK ANTIHERO

a feature-length film review of
Suicide Squad
Directed by David Ayer

(Warner Brothers, 2016)

and
Deadpool
Directed by Tim Miller

(Twentieth Century Fox, 2016)

Something is changing in the way our culture is portraying comic book superheroes. Have you noticed? In 2016 alone, we have seen *Deadpool*, *Batman vs. Superman*, and now *Suicide Squad* on the big screen (together raking in over $2 billion worldwide), as well as *Lucifer* and *The Preacher* on TV. What all of these movies and TV shows have in common is their portrayal of morally compromised superheroes who are willing to lie, steal, torture, and even murder bad guys. What are we to make of the rise of antiheroes?

A Brief History of Antiheroes. There is a long tradition of heroes who work outside the bounds of the law, but they were generally still portrayed as "good guys." Often these heroes are forced to become outlaws by a corrupt government (such as Robin Hood or

Zorro). Even Jesus can be seen as a kind of outlaw, in that He came into conflict with a corrupt legal system.

Likewise, when it comes to comic books, there always has been a range of superheroes. Superman is the typical hero, and Batman is more the antihero type. But traditionally even Batman was still a hero who didn't kill indiscriminately. Although it is a standard comic book trope that heroes are often misunderstood by the police and are falsely considered outlaws (Spiderman, Daredevil, etc.), they still bring their foes to justice, sending them to prison.

Gradually, however, we have seen the emergence of antiheroic superheroes. One of the first comic book antiheroes was the Punisher, introduced in 1974. He was a true vigilante who didn't hesitate to murder bad guys instead of taking them to prison. Yet his methods were presented as morally compromised and rejected by the other superheroes within the story (such as Spiderman or Daredevil). He wasn't uncritically praised by the comic book creators, though he was increasingly considered "cool" by fans.

A major shift in comics was Frank Miller's hugely influential nihilistic Batman graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986. Miller had experimented already with this darker tone in his reboot of the character Wolverine in 1982, and he went on to write the hyper-violent and sexually explicit comic *Sin City* throughout the 90s. After the publication of *The Dark Knight Returns*, other comics became darker, more violent, and morally ambiguous, no doubt contributing to the 1987 creation of *Suicide Squad* in which actual villains from other comic books are treated as heroes in their own story.

During this period, comics started appealing to an older readership. No longer for little kids, comics were now being read mostly by young men in their twenties and thirties. This aging demographic had an appetite for darker content. By the 90s, comics were dominated by antiheroes such as Wolverine and the hugely popular Spawn. Spawn, like fellow 90s-era characters John Constantine of *Hellblazer* and Jesse Custer of *The Preacher*, was portrayed as literally demonic. The 90s also saw the creation of the foul-mouthed "pansexual" mercenary Deadpool. Introduced as a minor character in 1991, Deadpool gradually grew in popularity until he got his own ongoing comic series in 1998.

Comic Book Movies Today. In contrast to the comic books, superhero movies remained fairly traditional in their portrayal of their characters as heroes—at least until now. In the past two or three years, we have seen a marked shift in superhero movies toward an embrace of antiheroes and also a celebration of violence as enjoyable entertainment for its own sake. Hints of a new kind of superhero movie appeared on the horizon in 2010 with the release of the extremely violent R-rated film *Kick-Ass* presented as an alleged "satire" that asks us to laugh at people being killed in gruesome ways.

The shift toward antiheroes began with *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) and *Ant-Man* (2015), both of which take a humorous tone and star criminals turned heroes. Yet while Guardians and Ant-Man are technically antiheroes, they are likeable, good-at-heart rogues, along the lines of Han Solo. We only know that they are criminals because the movie says they are. We never really see them do anything evil, and they make the right choices when called on for heroism.

By 2016, things have gotten considerably darker. Starting with Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy, Batman movies had taken some inspiration from Frank Miller's morally compromised version of the character. But Nolan's Batman was still a hero who could be counted on to do the right thing. It wasn't until 2016's *Batman vs. Superman* that we got the full Frank Miller Batman—one who tortures people, brands them like cattle with the bat symbol, and tries to kill Superman.

Then came the *Deadpool* movie.

***Deadpool*'s Depravity.** During just the first ten minutes of the movie, this "hero" kills countless people in gruesome ways (I lost count at twenty), joking about it the whole time, literally squashing one man like a bug with its guts splattered everywhere—all in the name of revenge. Deadpool encourages a taxi driver to murder a romantic rival (which is portrayed as a humorous example of Deadpool being a friendly guy!), and we are expected to believe it is evidence of "true love" when Deadpool engages in all sorts of sexual perversions with his girlfriend. We are far beyond introducing character flaws in order to make our heroes more "realistic." We're not being asked to think Deadpool is a hero *despite* his flaws; we're being asked to think he is a hero *because of* his flaws.

One of the points of the movie is to ridicule the idea of heroism. After the opening scene, Deadpool turns to the camera and denies being a superhero, saying, "Well, I may be super. But I'm no hero." Throughout the film, Deadpool repeatedly denies being a hero, and he repeatedly rejects an offer to become part of a superhero crime-fighting team. The audience, knowing the clichés of superhero stories, expects that he will learn to become a hero by the end of the movie. We are fully aware of how the story is supposed to go when, at a climactic moment, Colossus (a genuine superhero) delivers a speech to Deadpool about the true nature of heroism and those "moments when you're offered a choice to make a sacrifice, conquer a flaw, save a friend, spare an enemy." Deadpool, however, consciously chooses petty revenge instead of heroism. It is supposed to be funny because it subverts the genre expectations.

In other words, Deadpool's murder of his enemy is supposed to be funny because heroism is cliché—boring and unbelievable. "See?" Deadpool concludes, again speaking directly to the viewer, "You don't need to be a superhero to get the girl." We have moved from classic moral idealism through modern moral complexity to nihilistic mocking of morality and the need for redemption.

***Suicide Squad*'s Surprising Moral Depth.** *Deadpool* was so successful—it is the second-highest-grossing R-rated film of all time, just behind *The Passion of the Christ*—that Hollywood is promising many more movies in the same vein. The first of these post-*Deadpool* movies is *Suicide Squad*, which was marketed as having the same type of humorous antiheroes that made *Deadpool* and *Guardians of the Galaxy* such big hits. And it worked. *Suicide Squad* beat those two earlier films' opening weekend box-office numbers.

Fortunately, *Suicide Squad* actually is not as morally reprehensible as *Deadpool*. It is a lot closer to *Guardians of the Galaxy*, though it is not nearly as good of a movie as *Guardians*. *Suicide Squad* has major storytelling and character development problems. Reportedly the studio ordered last-minute reshoots to make the movie funnier and more like *Deadpool*. What we're left with seems like several different movies put through a wood chipper and glued back together. But *Suicide Squad*'s approach to antiheroes is actually quite good.

Writer-director David Ayer is not a typical Hollywood liberal. He is an ex-serviceman who respects the military and the police (best seen in his film *End of Watch*), though he is not afraid to portray their failures and corruption honestly (as in *Training Day*). Moreover, he is openly Christian and strives to portray religion as a normal part of life for some of his characters (most notably in *Fury*). So Ayer believes both in the sinfulness of humanity and in the possibility of redemption. His characters are morally compromised antiheroes, but Ayer is not interested in reveling in depravity for its own sake. Instead, he wants to explore the conditions in which flawed people whether LAPD cops, WWII tank soldiers, or super-powered criminals—become genuine heroes. And for Ayer, the key is friendship and the way comrades-at-arms band together into a family-like group during hardship.

The characters in *Suicide Squad* are supervillains who have done horrible things and have been captured by Batman or other superheroes. A shadowy government agency has decided they can use these convicts as an expendable (and disavowable) strike squad for dangerous suicide missions against other superpowered villains. This is basically the same premise as *The Dirty Dozen*, but Ayer adds an interesting twist to the story. The characters he chooses to focus on (Rick Flag, Deadshot, El Diablo, and even Harley Quinn, in her own way) are all motivated by love of their family members to be better than their villainous past. They know they have done wrong, and they want to change.

Moreover, the film portrays friendship as the path to moral improvement. Learning to rely on others, making yourself vulnerable and accountable to them, fundamentally shifts your orientation outward away from the self. At the climax of the film, the supernatural villain called Enchantress offers to give the heroes their heart's desire if they "worship" her. They are each tempted by visions of being reunited with

their families. But this is a false redemption that doesn't require moral transformation. They are being tempted to do nothing, to go along with the worship of evil, in order to gain a superficial happiness. What an insightful portrayal of temptation and sin!

At least one of the characters seriously considers the offer before thinking about the effect of such a choice on friends. *Suicide Squad* charts a trajectory of love from self, to family, to friends, to humanity. But friendship is the key step. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his *friends*" (John 15:13 KJV, emphasis added). In the end, it is friendship that functions to teach these thieves honor and transform villains into heroes.

Biblical Heroism. *Suicide Squad* does not fall into the trap of glorifying depravity. The characters recognize their own immorality because they see themselves through the eyes of their friends and family members. And they are not portrayed as heroes until they decide to repent. Contrast *Deadpool*, which makes fun of teamwork. Deadpool never learns to work with others, apart from attempting to corrupt them and bring them down to his level of wickedness. And his family does not lead him to improve himself. Rather, his loved one reinforces his perversion and inspires him to new heights of violence and revenge.

Suicide Squad is far closer to the biblical view of heroism. Focusing on antiheroes is not necessarily bad. The Bible probably has more antiheroes than heroes. People such as Jacob, Samson, Jonah, and even Peter don't really do much that's actually heroic at all. And even the most heroic figures in the Bible often do bad things, too. Noah gets drunk and curses his son; Abraham passes his wife off as his sister so she can join the Pharaoh's harem; Moses kills a man; David commits adultery; Paul persecutes Christians; the list continues. There is nothing wrong with telling stories of flawed people. The problem is when we celebrate these flawed people as heroes *because* of the flaws and hold up their flaws for emulation or entertainment instead of for condemnation and lament. The Bible never praises the patriarchs for their sin. Rather, the point is that God can redeem them from their sin and work through even the most flawed vessel to bring about His purposes.

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