

Zach Snyder's Justice League: a Four Hour Ayn Rand Fantasia

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Still from Zack Snyder's "Justice League."

It might strike some as odd to claim one of the most eagerly-anticipated films of 2021 was originally formulated as an Objectivist epic. Shock might be further compounded upon learning that this film exists thanks to a grassroots campaign not featuring the usual suspects from the Libertarian milieu (Ron Paul supporters, bow-tied dweebs of the Cato Institute/Tucker Carlson mold, operatives within the Koch network, *Reason Magazine* subscribers and AntiWar.com readers) but instead regular comic book fans, whose politics are normally more progressive-leaning owing to the social democratic inclinations of the genre's heavyweight publishers, enterprises founded by interwar New York Jewish-American entrepreneurs steeped in (though not necessarily actively engaged in) the Old Left cultural milieu.

And yet here we are, one year into an extremely weird annum that seems to oftentimes reflect Objectivism's worst implications, and *Zack Snyder's Justice League* has plopped into our midsts.

The film's plot is the same as the previous iteration released four years ago. After the death of Superman, Bruce Wayne races to build the Justice League, including Wonder Woman, the Flash, Cyborg, Aquaman, and eventually a resurrected Kryptonian. Their major antagonist is Steppenwolf, an extra-terrestrial with magnificent strength and abilities that is seeking to gain control of and then unite three Mother Boxes in service of a larger scheme that was intended to branch across two *Justice League* sequels that now may never be actually produced but (confoundingly) were foreshadowed in not one but two films. The major difference in the picture boils down to tone, length, and magnanimity.

Prior to any serious engagement on a textual and critical level with the motion picture in question, it behooves me to open with an acknowledgement of the concrete realities underwriting the cinematic auteur at hand. Recall the following exchange from a Congressional hearing on October 23, 2008.

REP. HENRY WAXMAN (D-California): The question I have for you is, you had an ideology, you had a belief that free, competitive — and this is your statement — "I do have an ideology. My judgment is that free, competitive markets are by far the unrivaled way to organize economies. We've tried regulation. None meaningfully worked." That was your quote.

You had the authority to prevent irresponsible lending practices that led to the subprime mortgage crisis. You were advised to do so by many others. And now our whole economy is

paying its price. Do you feel that your ideology pushed you to make decisions that you wish you had not made?

FMR. FEDERAL RESERVE CHAIR ALAN GREENSPAN: Well, remember that what an ideology is, is a conceptual framework with the way people deal with reality. Everyone has one. You have to — to exist, you need an ideology. The question is whether it is accurate or not. And what I'm saying to you is, yes, I found a flaw. I don't know how significant or permanent it is, but I've been very distressed by that fact.

WAXMAN: You found a flaw in the reality...

GREENSPAN: Flaw in the model that I perceived is the critical functioning structure that defines how the world works, so to speak.

WAXMAN: In other words, you found that your view of the world, your ideology, was not right, it was not working?

GREENSPAN: That is — precisely. No, that's precisely the reason I was shocked, because I had been going for 40 years or more with very considerable evidence that it was working exceptionally well.

Alan Greenspan, originally appointed to the Fed Chair by Ronald Reagan and kept in that position by three successive administrations, became an acolyte of quack philosopher Ayn Rand in the early 1950s, a friendship that lasted until the author of *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* died. He made Randian Objectivism hegemonic in the halls of American (and therefore worldwide unipolar) economic governance.

Less than 20 years later, the world economy cataclysmically imploded because of the Fed's refusal to regulate any part of the market, including the highly-volatile derivatives that pierced the housing bubble of the late 'aughts. We can draw a direct tautological line from the Objectivist Fed to the increase of "deaths of despair" such as the opioids crisis, the ascendancy of the Tea Party and later Donald Trump, and any number of other horrors over the past thirteen years. If it were not so frighteningly true, the super-villain Alan Greenspan and his evil fortress at the Federal Reserve would have been laughed out of a comic book publisher's office in 1975 for sounding so extremely hyperbolic it beggared belief from authors known for mundane characters like the gaia-gobbling Galactus and a Speedo-sporting walking pile of gravel known as Thing.

All this bears mentioning because *Justice League* director Zack Snyder is an Objectivist. Over the past twenty years, he has adapted a series of comic titles, including Frank Miller's *300*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*, and now a trilogy featuring Superman, Batman, and the larger Justice League, that mask Randian fantasia under the auspices of "gritty realism." While the recent three-picture adaptation of *Atlas Shrugged* (thankfully) failed miserably at the box office, Snyder's DC Comics films apparently have done more than a quality adaptation of Rand's dreary novels could ever hope to. The filmmaker has created a high-demand Objectivist action film franchise, a Promethean feat for the hard right of American politics.

This is by no means a *de facto* outcome from adaptation of the DC Comics pantheon. Richard Donner and Christopher Reeve created a Superman that clearly exemplified the values of Jewish-American socialism in the 1970s, inflected through a New Left lens that included sharp emphasis

upon feminist, environmental, and anti-militarist values. (The first film is a thorough indictment of land speculation and exploitative rentier economics while the final picture features the Man of Steel tossing the entire worldwide nuclear weapon supply into the sun!)

Tim Burton and Joel Schumacher both portrayed Batman as a psychologically-complicated vigilante whose post-traumatic survivor's guilt catalyzed an aspiration towards crimefighting. Both filmmakers, in their own ways, queered their storylines and characters, delivering tacit indictments of normative cis-/hetero-sexism that baffled and repulsed pubescent teens inculcated by Reagan-era puritanism.

The long-running animated television franchises, beginning with Bruce Timm, Paul Dini, and Mitch Brian's groundbreaking *Batman: The Animated Series*, grappled with heavy ethical, existential, and political questions about the liberal democratic social contract during Fukuyama's supposed decade-long "end of history."

Since the latter half of the 1980s, DC Comics films and television shows leaned in a distinctly liberal-progressive direction, partially due to the influence of its longtime crosstown rival Marvel Comics, whose titles more openly discussed the Civil Rights movement and other elements of the Culture War, and partially as a result of ideological aftershocks of the Reagan-Bush era. The Warner Bros. animation franchises, some of which were heavily-financed by Democratic Party fundraising luminary Steven Spielberg, had a distinct aspiration to shift the cultural discourse "from the inside," reflecting many of the multicultural dreams of Clinton-loving liberals and Gramscian social democrats who imagined the first post-Soviet American presidency as one that might exploit the peace dividend in a positive fashion.

But then things changed because of two significant developments.

First was the release of Christopher Nolan's 2005 blockbuster *Batman Begins*, a film with a distinct strain of regressive neoliberalism. Nolan purged the protagonist of all those weirdo psychological tics and oddities, transforming him into a paragon of normativity. While Michael Keaton had an undeniable rubber and leather fetish, most pronounced in his haunting courtship of Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman (sporting a costume that would make Foucault envious), Christian Bale looked like he fit naturally onto a *Forbes* magazine cover. His romances were utterly heterosexual ones with partners embodying stereotypical white middle class Clinton-style feminism and his opponents were aberrations in the neoliberal social contract, one wherein Bruce Wayne and Wayne Enterprises were positioned as the valiant charitable benefactors of a state that was hopelessly corrupt, deficient, and obstructing progress. To borrow a phrase from Ralph Nader, this is a Gotham City where only the super-rich can save us.

In 2006, the death knell came for these superheroic politics with Brian Singer's pitiful *Superman Returns*. The director's hyper-obsession with the Donner-Reeves franchise led him to Quixotically attempt a quasi-reboot/tribute/time traveling transplant of the older films. He failed follow the lead of Donner, who had breathed fresh air into the story with a character that was both a postmodern, self-referential spoof of the source material's hammiest bits (Reeve's portrayal always worked best when there was an implied wink-and-nod at the audience about how ridiculous the proceedings were, a Pynchon-esque picaresque deflating the underlying fascistic elements of the incarnate Übermensch narrative) *and* had an epic stature that reached for De Mille-like grandeur (Mario Puzo's story, written when the author was riding high on *The Godfather*'s popularity, nears Homeric proportions when the Last Son of Krypton literally

reverses the earth's rotation to turn back time). Instead, audiences were given a strange homage that tried to impose a story that carried a distinct 1970s time-stamp into the 21st century, the cinematic equivalent of a classic rock performer onstage well past their prime who is blissfully unaware of their painful ontological self-parody. The results were calamitous.

Superheroic social democratic politics were dead. Instead, the money had gone for a film starring an actor who, only a few years before in *American Psycho*, had (in an ironic turn the fans could call a retcon) shown how morally bankrupt such a reified and valorized political economy was. This was passed off as "gritty realism" by the Warner Bros. marketing department but in fact it is a deeply-defined endorsement of an ideology that has caused demonstrable harm to the globe over the past thirty-five years. While Nolan's neoliberalism was a mainstream British Blairite New Labor flavor, Snyder's was even more grotesque and reactionary.

In her valuable 2019 polemic *Mean Girl: Ayn Rand and the Culture of Greed*, Dr. Lisa Duggan asks:

How can the work of this one novelist (also an essayist, playwright, and philosopher), however influential, be a significant source of insight into the rise of a culture of greed? In a word: sex. Ayn Rand made acquisitive capitalists sexy. She launched thousands of teenage libidos into the world of reactionary politics on a wave of quivering excitement. This sexiness extends beyond romance to infuse the creative aspirations, inventiveness, and determination of her heroes with erotic energy, embedded in what Rand called her "sense of life." Analogous to what Raymond Williams has called a "structure of feeling," Rand's sense of life combines the libido-infused desire for heroic individual achievement with contempt for social inferiors and indifference to their plight...

Rand's contrasting sense of life applies to those whose fantasies of success and domination include no doubt or guilt. The feelings of aspiration and glee that enliven Rand's novels combine with contempt for and indifference to others. The resulting Randian sense of life might be called "optimistic cruelty." Optimistic cruelty is the sense of life for the age of greed. Ayn Rand's optimistic cruelty appeals broadly and deeply through its circulation of familiar narratives: the story of "civilizational" progress, the belief in American exceptionalism, and a commitment to capitalist freedom.

Her novels engage fantasies of European imperial domination conceived as technological and cultural advancement, rather than as violent conquest. America is imagined as a clean slate for pure capitalist freedom, with no indigenous people, no slaves, no exploited immigrants or workers in sight... Their logic also depends on a hierarchy of value based on racialized beauty and physical capacity—perceived ugliness or disability are equated with pronounced worthlessness and incompetence.

*Through the forms of romance and melodrama, Rand novels extrapolate the story of racial capitalism as a story of righteous passion and noble virtue. They retell *The Birth of a Nation* through the lens of industrial capitalism. They solicit positive identification with winners, with dominant historical forces. It is not an accident that the novels' fans, though gender mixed, are overwhelmingly white Americans of the professional, managerial, creative, and business classes.*

Perhaps I might buttress this with a point raised by graphic novelist Alan Moore, who said in an interview “Save for a smattering of non-white characters and non-white creators, these books and these iconic characters are still very much white supremacist dreams of the master race. In fact, I think that a good argument can be made for D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* as the first American superhero movie, and the point of origin for all those capes and masks.” (Ironically, Moore’s famous Rorschach, the antihero of *Watchmen*, was intended as a pitch-black spoof of Randian Objectivism, a point that apparently escaped Snyder when he directed the film adaptation, perhaps suggesting the auteur is either an idiot or a sociopathic narcissist *par excellence*.)

If we refract the film projector showcasing Zack Snyder’s trilogy of DC Comics adaptations through this lens, a truly troubling analysis emerges. Contra the norm of the Marvel films, which by and large have been rather bland action-comedies, Snyder opted for an ultra-serious quasi-Wagnerian soap opera about our heroes as archetypal deities walking among the living. (It is not accidental that he selected as the antagonists a set of creations authored by the legendary Jack Kirby literally named *The New Gods*, led by the universe-conquering Darkseid, who is intent on gaining control of something called “the Anti-Life Equation” that can grant the bearer control of everyone’s minds, including even Superman.) Rand was not shy about pointing out her affinity for Nietzsche and the fascistic tendencies her thoughts align with, though her apostolic apologists plead that her Russian Jewish heritage (somehow) inoculates her from such critiques. (The neoconservative book critic Whittaker Chambers once quipped “From almost any page of *Atlas Shrugged*, a voice can be heard, from painful necessity, commanding: ‘To a gas chamber — go!’”)

There is an ironic consequence to all this, however. The “gritty realism” is quite obviously an antithesis to the campy and sometimes openly-parodic nature of the earlier *Superman* and *Batman* pictures, epitomized when Joel Schumacher’s *Batman and Robin* (1997) seemed throughout its entire runtime to be doubling as a high-budget tacitly-gay romantic comedy informed by Warhol’s aesthetics.

But by veering so far in the opposite direction, creating an utterly humorless universe, Snyder, whose style is so bombastic and self-important to write its own rebuttals upon viewing (witness the plethora of internet memes derived from his earlier films), inadvertently creates a film that cannot be called anything but ridiculous. *The Justice League* title and its predecessor, *The Justice Society of America*, were not authored by some visionary Homer-like poet at DC Comics. Instead, both were originally developed and published as the most narratively-shallow cash cows by editors and publishers responding to epistles from child readers who wrote “GO DO MAKE SUPERMAN FIGHT BATMAN BOOM!” What kind of standard can you possibly erect for such a project? How would one evaluate a cinematic adaptation of *Moby Dick* wherein Ishmael is played by Popeye and Ahab by Bluto?

Subtlety is as foreign to Snyder’s *misé en scene* as humor and the results are so exhausting you cannot help laughing at the sheer lunacy of his pretensions. (Anyone familiar with the differences between Francis Ford Coppola’s *Godfather* and the tawdry pulp source novel will understand that this is not exactly an unfamiliar dynamic for American cinema.) After the tenth Riefenstahl-referencing slow-motion action shot, complete with enough testosterone to power an entire professional wrestling Pay-Per-View special as part of its implicit Cult of the Body, the campiness is impossible to avoid.

For mature viewers, this creates a sort of reflexively voyeuristic impulse, akin to watching a slow-motion car accident or reruns of the 2016 presidential debates between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, so obscene and grotesque one cannot turn away. But for the general public, easily conned by Rand's grift and Snyder's hyperbolic hyper-macho hypnosis, one cannot help to worry about what impact this might have in the body politic.

The film itself is a strange case of the Director's Cut, which says something for a sub-genre composed of some of the most counterintuitive moments in cinema history. Snyder originally signed on for a three-picture deal, delivering the lugubrious *Man of Steel* (2013) and then *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), whose titular resemblance to a civil tort perfectly reflects what a migraine the viewing was. While producing *Justice League*, Warners executives began to push back against the increasingly-nihilistic edge of the series, which had alienated fans and lowered subtotals on box office receipts. (I fondly remember a bilious, apoplectic negative review by my former colleague/former comic book store owner Steve Ahlquist of the latter picture.) When the director's daughter tragically passed away, he and his wife, producer Deborah Snyder, gracefully stepped aside and surrendered post-production to Joss Whedon. The longtime *wunderkind* of American nerd culture had been a significant creative force in the rival Marvel Cinematic Universe, including directing their tentpole pictures *The Avengers* (2012) and its sequel *Age of Ultron* (2015), and Warners saw him as a late-in-the-game saving grace. Known for his witty postmodernist dialogue and dynamic characterizations, Whedon brought a much lighter tone to the proceedings.

And the results were still awful.

The final product, released in 2017, not only was as jarring as the disparity between the work of Richard Donner and Richard Lester in the older *Superman* pictures (itself a legendary piece of film lore), Whedon's reshoots looked downright terrible. Superman actor Henry Cavill was in the midst of filming a *Mission: Impossible* picture when asked to return for reshoots. Forbidden from shaving off a mustache by the other production, the special effects team instead digitally-erased the facial hair, with laughably bad results. The tonal differences between directors were obvious. Whedon decided to use the picture to work through his own ire regarding dismissal from the Marvel franchise, stubbornly transposing *Avengers* plot points into the revised script in a sort of meta-textual temper tantrum. And to top things off, word has recently broken that Black actor Ray Fisher felt antagonized on racial grounds by the new director, who is now facing his own reckoning for a multiplicity of chauvinist behaviors after carrying on for over two decades as an aspiring ambassador for high-minded, self-righteous Secular Humanism and liberal feminism.

As a result, cultish film fans began a viral #ReleaseTheSnyderCut campaign, going as far as renting advertising and airplanes to force Warners' hand. With the advent of COVID, the studio found its release calendar stalled for a year due to shuttering of movie theaters. Quicker than you can say "easy money," the studio granted this wish to fans, delivering Snyder a pile of cash to finish the film as he originally envisioned.

Reading a quickly-published nonfiction tie-in by reporter Sean O'Connell, *Release the Snyder Cut: The Crazy True Story Behind the Fight That Saved Zack Snyder's Justice League*, it is blatantly obvious that the fans behind this campaign have, putting it politely, lost all grip of their critical faculties (the number of people who call the director "Zack," as if they are on a first-name basis with him, is rather telling). Testimonials from participants absolutely gush with

unbridled love for two ultra-reactionary motion pictures that, upon their release eight and five years ago respectively speaking, were reviled and rejected by the majority of genre fans. These are not the sorts of cinephiles that have a certain distance from the art they enjoy so to elaborate upon nuanced critiques that acknowledge textual shortcomings. Instead, these are religious fundamentalists singing hosannas to undeniably Objectivist films. When I read O'Connell's multiple interview transcriptions claiming *Man of Steel* and *Batman vs. Superman* as quasi-divine revelations that provided emotional and psychological anchors for these people in an increasingly-frightening world, I take serious pause and ruminate for a long time about what kind of social alienation, marginalization, and intellectual/psychological vulnerabilities within the populace such claims evince. (It seems no coincidence that, in the nation-states serving as nodes for the grassroots social media blitz, this odd campaign was chronologically and geographically simultaneous with the ascendancy of right wing authoritarian elected officials such as Orban and Bolsonaro.)

The pivotal question for me is whether Snyder has adjusted his personal politics in the lead-up to this production. While he still remains interested in remaking the original Ayn Rand screenplay of *The Fountainhead* that is owned by Warners, two major life events could have substantially adjusted his perspective. The first was the death of his daughter of suicide, a terrible manifestation of complex phenomena that might lead a parent to re-conceptualize their understanding of the welfare state and the social safety net that can play a role in reducing such mortality rates. Shakespeare proclaimed "all the world's a stage" and the COVID-19 created a kind of yearlong tragic simulation of what a Randian elimination of the public health infrastructure looks like, with deadly results, the second potential ideological modifier. Interestingly, in the past few years, his creative output included an intricate tee shirt design, based upon the Kabbalah's Tree of Life to explain the aborted *Justice League* sequel plots, that was sold as a fundraiser for a suicide prevention charity. Does this signal a turn towards a more organic Jewish spirituality and mysticism that was absent from his earlier pictures? And if so, is this the celebrity-friendly corporate Kabbalah favored by Hollywood capital? Or is it the Marxian-inclined mysticism of Walter Benjamin?

Gal Gadot plays Wonder Woman, the famous Amazon from Themiscyra. An Israeli actress and therefore also a veteran of the Israeli Defense Forces, she was a military trainer during the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war and later expressed endorsement of the 2014 slaughter in Gaza, Operation Protective Edge. Although comic book sticklers will protest mightily and insist that the mythical Amazons of the hero's origins are derived from Bronze Age Greeks, I cannot help but note the convergence of several strains of settler colonialism. Gadot hails from a nation-state whose continued existence is explicitly predicated upon the erasure of its Indigenous nationalities predating the Zionist project. By selecting a fictionalized, idealized European characterization rather than opting for a South American Indigene actor hailing from the Amazon basin, the film valorizes and reifies a form of American and Israeli whiteness that is quite common to Classical Hollywood Cinema. Her famed Lasso of Truth of course resembles a similar utility belt item relied upon by the American cowboy, the archetypal settler-colonist of the Western Frontier mythos. This is further buttressed by how the film affirms American policing, both implicitly (the Justice championed by this League is that of bourgeois property relations) and explicitly (Lois Lane, played by Amy Adams, hand-delivers a daily cup of coffee to her favorite cop on the beat with a smile).

Ben Affleck's turn as Batman was an intentional break from the Nolan trilogy, a portrayal of someone who has spent two decades defending Gotham City and wearied from the rugged experience, which has included his arch-nemesis Joker murdering Robin earlier off-screen. "I'm rich," he responds when queried about his super-powers, certainly in line with the Objectivist subtext. The character has a certain sexuality that was written to engage multiple women simultaneously, including a flirtation with Wonder Woman. Bruce Wayne undeniably has always been a playboy millionaire, that was designed to be part of the disguise to mask his Caped Crusader alter ego. But this is also synoptic with Rand's sexual ethos, predicated upon a world wherein romantic love and fidelity are not so much bourgeois cis-/hetero-normativities as signs of intellectual and moral weakness. Dr. Duggan writes:

Rand's fiction is rife with romantic triangles and quadrangles, with adultery and divorce, with homoerotic bonds among a heroine's multiple lovers... The sex scenes feature conquest and eroticized physical struggle as powerful women submit to dominant men. But they do not then cling, depend, or nag—only the weak and the wives do that. And the romances emphatically do not end in marriage. These are fantasies for the New Woman that cut in multiple directions. Aspirational creative and professional freedom, circumscribed within a context of consensual, ecstatic sexual submission to heroic men, is available to the superior single woman producer. All the other women are either nagging parasites or starving primitives and incompetents... These are the qualities of superior individuals that, when constrained by an egalitarian revolutionary ethos, are twisted to antisocial and destructive ends..., qualities revealed via powerful physiques fit for imperial and class rule. The other categories of characters...demonstrate varieties of unfitness: the scheming ambitious party [and state] apparatchiks, the greedy and double-dealing speculators, and the brutal, envious mob.

Ray Fisher's turn as Cyborg, a nano-technological Frankenstein rescued from the brink of death by the intervention of his estranged father (played by Joe Morton), is the first moment in the text that suggests a shift away from Randian philosophy. The character has an omniscient connection to the worldwide web of computing technology, including the ability to effortlessly hack into financial, security, military, and other mainframes underwriting the state infrastructure. In the midst of learning his superpowers, he discovers an impoverished single mother who has been evicted from her apartment with an \$11 bank balance. Instantaneously, he uses his hacking talents to inject tens of thousands of dollars into her personal account, a novel spin on Marx's notion of fictitious capital. In the Objectivist universe, single mothers hard on their luck are little more than parasitic nuisances who should have known better and had an abortion instead (Rand's reproductive praxis is blatantly eugenicist and Social Darwinist in the most brutally cruel expression possible). While undeniably maudlin Dickensian fluff, complete with a benevolent intervention from the well-meaning individual rather than a social policy seeking to ameliorate misery, it also bears mentioning that such gesture would have given Ayn Rand convulsions of rage. Fisher's character trajectory furthermore seems to reflect upon two marginalized experiences, the differently-abled and African American struggles. His arc of development starts with visceral horror at his post-traumatic body and ends with acceptance/glorification of his abilities (though admittedly this does maintain an unveiled utilitarian scale of body valuation). His relationship with his parents, including some brief but important references to the daily degradations of interpersonal racism that everyone in the family unit experiences, while not as pronounced as *The Black Panther* film, is a major spine of the entire film's plot and antithetical to Objectivist philosophy as well. (The disgusting revelation that Fisher has been blacklisted by

the DC/Warners production unit for speaking out about on-set racism by Whedon during reshoots makes this film a tragic retroactive swan song for a character that, in a future picture under more competent direction, might have become a significant Black cinematic hero, perhaps surpassing Robert Downey, Jr.'s very similar Iron Man.)

Jason Momoa's Aquaman is a brooding loner, ambivalent about both his own heritage as a monarch of Atlantis and the notion of building a superhero team. While rather thin in comparison with other characters, this aversion of collective struggle is an Objectivist narrative trope surmounted. Rand's alpha males have always reified the triumph of individualist will over a miasma of collectivism. He plays the consistent Devil's Advocate, opposing many of the innovative and risky ideas that can (and actually quite often do) cause certain chaos.

Ezra Miller's turn as The Flash is the most shallow of the bunch because his character was always just a useful comedic foil. His challenging relationship with an incarcerated father is given little serious attention, his quips are lame, and it is obvious that he is really just being introduced for a follow-up solo picture. His function as the nerdy youngest member of the team is less of a character arc than a setup for a new film franchise that is currently in production.

Snyder has been rather explicit about his subscription to the Hero's Journey narrative developed by Joseph Campbell, demonstrated in the aforementioned Kabbalah-inspired artwork. In a minor row that erupted in the pages of *The New York Review of Books* starting in September 1989 when literary and architectural critic Brendan Gill denounced the recently-deceased anthropologist, then seeing a brief posthumous pop culture superstardom due to the success of a PBS miniseries with Bill Moyers, as a bigoted quack whose rather shallow, essentialist analysis of worldwide mythology "sanctions selfishness on a colossal scale—a scale that has become deplorably familiar to us in the Reagan and post-Reagan years. It is a selfishness that is the unspoken (the studiously unrecognized?) rationale of that contemporary army of Wall Street yuppies, of junk-bond dealers, of takeover lawyers who have come to be among the most conspicuous members of our society." That *NYRB* episode elaborated on how Campbell's narrative arc easily lends itself to Objectivist ethos, a rather telling insight about *Man of Steel* and *Batman vs. Superman*.

In some alternative reality, had Snyder never exited the production in 2016-17, he *still* would not have been allowed to release this gargantuan gunk. Film studios and cinema booking agencies are very practical and a four hour block of time holding up a multiplex auditorium is heretical. It becomes even *more* controversial when the director in question has previously delivered two earlier entries in the same series that failed financial and critical expectations. This is not just an alternative version, it is Zack Snyder's cinematic masturbation session. Absolutely every single excess, no matter how jaw-droppingly garish and mind-numbingly self-important, is blasted in the face of the viewer. (Had I not watched it on a small screen, I fear not so much having to exit the theater to pee but instead having a photo-sensitive epileptic episode.) The gore and violence is amplified to the extreme degree, most notably in an epic flashback battle scene set in the Bronze Age that blatantly plagiarizes the opening of the first *Lord of the Rings* picture, with the diabolical Darkseid shamelessly borrowing battle tactics from Sauron. Witless fans of this stuff do not seem cognizant of how this middle finger to the film's producers is one that includes in the tell-off to any and all who might pause and ask aloud "Who in their right mind could possibly want *any* movie this long?" (I wonder if they realize the irony that the last time American cinema was graced with a similar four hour "director's cut", the film was titled *Kenneth Brannagh's Hamlet!*)

It does not advance a critical development in the genre or cinematic storytelling, instead the viewer is expected to gorge themselves on tropes, gimmicks, and archetypes that stopped being novel more than 75 years ago.

This is the most regressive and pernicious development of this exercise. Fifty years ago, when Coppola, Scorsese, George Lucas, and their New Hollywood peers began producing their classic films, they fused Popular Front-era pulp texts with radical New Left critiques of the American social contract. *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* were not classic gangster movies of the Cagney variety, instead they were subversive explosions of those inherited norms and archetypes. *Raging Bull*'s Jake LaMotta is such a masterful performance *precisely* because he was not a rehashed heroic sports star like The Gipper, he is a grotesque misogynist thug drunk on the toxic, paranoid masculinity inherent to the sport itself. The closest that the superhero genre has ever gotten to this sort of subversion was M. Night Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* (2000), produced a year before this current wave of films began, which concludes by showing that comic book fans are frighteningly sociopathic monsters capable of grotesque crimes so to serve their shallow conception of social engagement and human life itself, a rather sharp retroactive meta-commentary on the #ReleaseTheSnyderCut communicants. Even though this film is being hailed as somehow having a punk-ish elán, it in fact is a very loud endorsement of the most conformist tendencies in American society.

And yet, despite all these qualms, I still personally desire to see Snyder return to the DC franchise and produce the films he planned out years ago. The film ends with a damnable not one but two teasers for the multi-part *Justice League* sequel that was intended to complete his five-film arc when he first commenced production over a decade ago.

While he claims in multiple interviews that he is walking away from the series and DC/Warners, it seems that these sequel teases are intended to leave the door open for his reentry. Part of this must be sheer ego, he invested seven years of his life into building not just a multi-part narrative but an entire leviathan to rival one of the most successful franchises in world history, the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Unlike the MCU, controlled by producer Kevin Feige, who fields individual productions out to directors he controls, Snyder was positioned to build the entire DC narrative ecosystem, functioning as a Walt Disney-like overlord for one of the most successful intellectual properties in America. It bears mentioning furthermore that Snyder played no small part in stoking the fires of the #ReleaseTheSnyderCut cult, teasing in the past four years about the film's existence with tantalizing pictures of screen shots and film canisters that signaled to fans "It exists and you can urge the studio to make this happen!" Now that the cult has mass-converted to their #RestoreTheSnyderverse phase, one can only imagine his reaction.

Yet part of this has to be a genuine desire to complete a project that might have given some substantial resolution to the problems like authoritarianism, structural oppression, and alienation that he teases out in the films. In this hypothetical *Justice League* trilogy, could Snyder have intended to defenestrate the Objectivist mythos that he introduced in his first two pictures? In *Man of Steel*, Jonathan Kent (Kevin Costner) repeatedly urges the young Last Son of Krypton *not* to reveal his powers to the public, even if that means letting a bus full of school children drown or allowing a parent to be swept away in a Kansas tornado (both scenes disgusted audiences to no end upon original release for reasons that encourage hope for the species). The adopted father's logic is a pure distillation of Rand's endorsement of selfishness above egalitarianism.

But in these hypothetical sequels, might this Superman have chosen to *reject* Objectivism? Could Snyder have created this Objectivist fantasia in his first two films so to knock them apart in the latter three? Contra Jonathan Kent, Superman's Kryptonian father Jor-El (Russell Crowe) consistently espouses a much more self-sacrificing praxis, directing his son to not so much engage in a Christ-like savior mission as *inspire the masses to a more enlightened, egalitarian vision of/for society, fundamentally saving themselves*. This maxim is almost Leninist but, disturbingly, does not adamantly guard against the Cult of Personality and other well-known Soviet abuses, something alluded to in the earlier films. Perhaps Snyder was trying to balance Rand's critique of socialism against a concomitant progressive critique of Objectivism?

From what we know of these hypothetical sequels, the major arc was based around Superman turning to evil in fury over Lois Lane's death *precisely because* his conception of relationship to her and the wider world was constituted through Jonathan Kent's Objectivist lens. Winning him back from arch-villain Darkseid's service would necessitate a full-scale rejection of Objectivism and embracing a more Kryptonian ethos, with the archetypical Objectivist alpha male Bruce Wayne/Batman journeying through his own arc leading to a self-sacrifice that likewise renounces Rand's valorization of these class/gender roles. Was the Hero's Journey supposed to be one away from Jonathan Kent towards Jor-El (read: the Jewish-American social democratic milieu of Depression-era comic book artists like *Superman* creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster), reconstituting our understanding of mankind (and perhaps manhood?) on an ideological level that tacitly condemns what Alan Greenspan and Ayn Rand's philosophy have done to humanity? We see such threads being teased out in this newest film when Ma Kent (Diane Lane) sees the mortgage to the family farm repossessed by the bank, clearly a nod to the 2008 housing bubble's implosion. Such an ideological contradiction does not find its synthesis in proletarian revolution by default, instead Hollywood has consistently suggested liberal democracy.

But it is a very different world from when Snyder first commenced production in October 2010. Populist upsurges in the United States, whether congregated around Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump or nationwide protests of all political orientations, have obviously shaken the ruling elite in a deep and profound way. This development is a longtime focus of Marxian film critics, the base-superstructure contradiction within the relationship of the audience to the film studios as a component of cultural reproduction/hegemony. While certainly problematic for a number of reasons, the #ReleaseTheSnyderCut project is a perfect simulation of this critical intervention and will serve as grist in the academic film studies mill for years to come. Where it will go next is an inquiry that cannot be simply written off as a mere weirdo fan cult (although it undeniably is that also). As they Tweet forth into the aether, Zack Snyder will continue to grapple with the discourse relative to the individual and society's role in their protection, both as society mourns the COVID-19 pandemic and as the family mourns his daughter. This picture is soaked in parental relationships and, as many other critics have pointed out, it is impossible to not read a certain auteurist subtext about regret and grief regarding the tragic loss of a child. Could his completed *Justice League* trilogy further explore his own political evolution?

The ball is in Warner/DC's court and it is a strange position. Ray Fisher is out of their good graces, as are Whedon and Snyder. Yet they also have a massive fan-base hyped to Evangelical fervor on a holy crusade. It is rather sickening to off-load to a mega-corporate media enterprise any hope for justice, whether it be in the titular sense of this franchise or remediation of racialized grievances. Yet Ray Fisher, who delivered a satisfactory performance as a Black superhero that touches upon important topics in his national experience, deserves to have this

film start something that might become important, particularly since the passing of *Black Panther* star Chadwick Boseman. And he has been adamant that, owing to the racist behavior of Warner/DC executives, he only will return to the franchise if Zack Snyder is involved. That condition feels important enough to reflect upon seriously. Should we desire such a return for Snyder?

This feels like the cliff-hanging climax of a comic book!