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The Rise Of Post-Plot Cinema

'Guardians' Is Latest Flick In Which Plotting Is Marginalized



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Like many people this past weekend, I went to see "Guardians of the Galaxy" at a nearby multiplex. I bought some concession snacks, donned a pair of 3-D glasses and sat through the half-hour of previews that preceded the James Gunn romp with a fair bit of anticipation, stoked by my returning to the U.S. after three weeks of work abroad to a stack of effusive reviews, as well as email bulletins that the Marvel movie was killing it at the box office.

In many ways, my high expectations were met. Chris Pratt brought the right amount of swashbuckler to his prototypical boyish dolt, the wisecracks and meta references landed with some frequency, and the action set pieces looked cool and seemed like they'd be fun to live through.

But about 30 minutes in, and for nearly every minute after, something else became increasingly clear: The movie had no clear or compelling plot.

Hard-core Marvel enthusiasts, versed in the 1960s comic where it all began, may disagree. And maybe even some fellow Marvel newcomers might feel differently. For me, from the first moment a Yondu was dropped and a Ronan was feared and a Thanos was intoned — all of them playing Very Important Roles to the people in the movie but, it seemed, amounting to little more than a mythic mishmash to those of us outside it — I was turning up my hands.

I don't mean to suggest there aren't discernible narrative developments in the film. Yes, there's an important orb whose owner controls the fate of the universe. And there are various factions trying to get their hands on it, each with varying degrees of financial, psychological and megalomaniacal motivation. And characters have, in a number of cases, some coherent or even moving back story. But it is not easy to explain, crisply and without descending into a certain kind of obfuscatory mumbo-jumbo, what is actually happening. In fact, it's far from clear that the characters can explain, crisply and without descending into a certain kind of obfuscatory mumbo-jumbo, what is actually happening.

More important, I'm not sure we're supposed to be able to explain it. The way the film is structured, coherence of any kind — why people are literally doing what they're doing, or what the plausible psychological explanations are for what they're doing — seem beside the point. This all seems to be less a question of whether "Guardians" makes sense as first place. The movie was built to be consumed and enjoyed without any holistic understanding of what's happening or why — without any sense that one should want a clear understanding of what's happening or why. (There is a strange, perhaps supermeta irony in the film making frequent reference to cinematic classics like "The Maltese Falcon," "Raiders of the Lost Ark" and "Star Wars," all movies in which storytelling matters very much.)

This is not a new trend in big-budget filmmaking, though it is a particularly notable example of it. In fact, "Guardians" seems to be the logical convergence point of two distinct trends that have been growing for a number of years now — in which spectacle on the one hand ("Godzilla," "Transformers" et al.) and quippy reference on the other take pride of place, effectively crowding out traditional storytelling. "Guardians" just happens to do each of them really big, and at the same time.

That Hollywood's other major outsized success this year — "The Lego Movie" — is characterized by this same marriage seems like no coincidence. (I was tempted to say it does seem like a coincidence that both movies star Chris Pratt, but the fact that he's not a traditional story-centric hero who you nonetheless want to spend time with suggests it may not be.) Like "Guardians," "Lego" which I saw several times and rather enjoyed - involved some misfits who go on the run, have lots of quippy fun and get mixed up in some big action set pieces whose actual import doesn't matter.

Nor did this all of this just begin. Despite the hate mail some of you may send, I'd put "The Avengers" the most popular of popular commercial movies — in this category too, with only a few hesitations. The film had a number of virtues. But quick, what was its main plot twist? What were even its main plot points? If you're a hard-core aficionado, you can probably cite them after thinking about it for a minute. I mostly came up with an orb-like item that some people really want. Breaking down the story in the same way as you might, say, "E.T." or "Star Wars — or even films in more recent franchises like Sam Raimi's "Spider-Man" or Christopher Nolan's "Batman" — is nearly impossible. To even try to do so feels like it misses the point.

(I also don't think it's an accident, by the way, that a number of these post-plot films exist within the expansive but ultimately hermetic Marvel Studios universe. While before

Glenn Close is Nova Prime Rael in Marvel's "Guardians Of The Galaxy." (Marvel/MCT)

"Guardians" few of such movies produced by the Disney-owned company (the "Spider-Mans" of the world of course are not) offered quite as many jokes?, these movies' stock-in-trade is nonetheless a kind of inbred mythic reference that's not entirely conducive to conventional storytelling. And of course there are the "Transformers" and other mega-tentpoles of the world, which are often plot-agnostic beasts in their own right.)

You could sense a lot of critics perhaps struggling with these competing impulses in evaluating "Guardians." We've all spent years thinking that commercial filmmaking, ever since the modern form came into being, depended at least in part on strong storytelling — "Jaws," The Terminator" and countless others. And yet here was a seemingly pleasurable commercial film in which the storytelling didn't seem to matter at all.

So in their reviews critics used deft language to describe this apparent paradox — "encourages you to enjoy yourself even when you're not quite sure what's going on" (my colleague Kenneth Turan), "an interlocking passel of villains I couldn't begin to explain" (Salon's Andrew O'Hehir), "confusing and generic by turns" so maybe best to just "shake off the bonds of narrative coherency" and allow "the weird words — Yondu, Necrocraft, Sakkaran — (to) just slide right past you" (the New York Times' Manohla Dargis).

Some filmgoers may similarly want to just let the whole idea of a post-plot film slide right past them; enjoyable is enjoyable, no matter the reasons. There's something to that. But I can't help noticing that there's also something clever about the whole enterprise. A strain of worldweariness has permeated cinema in recent years — evident in the crowing/laments about how great stories have migrated to television but really in a sense pre-dating it — a belief that there are simply no new filmic stories left to tell. These sorts of comments usually lead to a heated back-andforth about supposedly great new movies that either do or don't tell a new story.

"Guardians," though, has done something different — it has slyly obviated the whole question. Who cares, it asks, if any of this is new or even a story as long as there are cool visuals and laugh-worthy quips and references — as long as there are people, in the end, who are fun to hang out with? (There seems to be a parallel of sorts across the cinematic aisle in the rise of the post-joke Hollywood comedy, documented brilliantly in this Adam Sternbergh essay from a few years back.)

There's another clear advantage achieved by the post-plot film, though I'm not sure it's entirely conscious on the part of its creators: constructing a film that has utter immunity to the dreaded spoiler.

Some of the best narrative efforts of earlier chapters of this modern filmmaking era — "The Sixth Sense," "The Usual Suspects" — relied on us not knowing a critical detail until the end of a film, and then, once we did, looking at all the scenes that came before it differently.

In "Guardians," the critical details revealed at the end not only don't make us look at all that came before differently - they don't even make us look at the scene in which they're revealed differently. The two main reveals in "Guardians" (I would say spoiler alert - though, again, I'm not sure the term applies) include a shopworn switcheroo you could see coming from a planet away and an emotional payoff involving the opening of a childhood gift that has to be the least illuminating or surprising of emotional payoffs in the history of emotional payoffs. If you attempted such a reveal in a screenwriting class.

your teacher would have you rewrite it.

Yet this lack of narrative surprise doesn't matter, and in fact it may be a good thing as far as the release of the film is concerned. In an age when pervasive coverage on fan blogs and social-media can sometimes ruin the fun of a good movie, what better way to get around the problem than to make sure the fun literally can't be ruined? You could spend an hour trying to spoil the end of "Guardians" for someone you don't like and still not succeed.

There is, of course, still plenty of room in big-budget Hollywood for story-driven films (though there may be something to the fact that the most lauded indie movie of the year, "Boyhood," traffics in its own kind of plot-defiance). Nolan's "Interstellar," to take one example, suggests from its marketing materials that traditional storytelling is alive and well.

Still, a great swath of big Hollywood entertainment used to consist of story with other trappings hung on it. Now it's been reversed — the story can just be tacked on wherever you find room. And if it doesn't fit, no big deal, since it's not really what people are looking for anyway. It also hardly seems like an accident that "Guardians," a movie with one of the least coherent plots of the summer, nonetheless earned one of the highest CinemaScores of the summer.

All of this is, depending on your point of view, either a tragic sign of the movie apocalypse or the ultimate postmodern trick that deservedly has fans laughing all the way out of the theater. Hollywood, though, has already made its choice. And given "Guardians'" success, it will no doubt continue down that path, with literal sequels and plenty of spiritual heirs to follow. In that regard, this is the same old story — not that we need one.