

## Spiderman

It is summer in America, and we movie buffs either see the films made for mass (young) audiences or have little but some very depressing art movies. I watch these films with a different eye than the thrill-seeking young. I am interested in the recurring themes that the American public relish: primarily a paranoia that society is sick, and the theme that has dogged us for two centuries now: the dangers of science, including the theme of the mad scientist. The third theme is the most ancient of all: the search for a hero, one who can fight evil and win.

Both Spiderman and the Dark Knight fit this pattern, and both were, surprisingly to me, excellent.

Spiderman is a remake of a 2001 film, both based on the comic book teen hero who, when bitten by a laboratory spider, develops spider superpowers. It is known that spiders have enormous power for their size, can climb and swing at will, and the web filaments that they spin are stronger than anything manmade.

Andrew Garfield, who plays teenager Peter Parker, is a sweet, clever boy being raised by his aunt and uncle because his parents vanished when he was young. He is abused by a school bully, has a crush on the school's smartest girl, Gwen Stacy (Emma Stone), and has reached an age where he wants more information on his missing parents. When he finds his father's briefcase, he tracks down his father's partner, scientist Curt Connors (Rhys Ifans), who is experimenting with ways to adapt elements from other species into human beings. He tests one of these on himself—a giant lizard. (Think of Dr. Frankenstein's dreadful experiments and their consequences.)

This film was every bit as good as the 2001 original, and holds promise for sequels. Note that for summer films, very good actors line up to play roles that one would never imagine. Sally Field and Martin Sheen play Peter's aunt and uncle both credibly and endearingly.

## The Dark Knight Rises

This movie presented more of a problem to attend. At the opening midnight show in Aurora, Colorado, a young man put on a show of his own: gunning down 12 moviegoers and injuring scores of others. I overcame reluctance to see it—but now that I did, I thought this was a marvelous film, not just for summer, despite this being its purpose.

The Dark Knight is another comic book hero, Batman. Unlike Spiderman, who acquires super abilities from the spider bite, Batman is just an old-fashioned hero who prefers his fists to armament, and has no advantages other than those of wealth and technology. But even though he is very privileged and wealthy, his passion is to protect his city, Gotham, from evil that besets it. What does all this mean?

Gotham is civilization; western civilization. As such, it has its share of political corruption (democracy is not always wise); but in this movie, it is under assault by a frightening anarchist, a warlord, who has figured out how to bully a civilized population through a combination of violence and promises of a "brave new world" if they obey him. His intent, however, is to destroy it.

It seemed to me that this cuts pretty close to the bone. We have had two centuries of anarchist attacks on civilization, starting with the political assassinations of the 19th and early 20th centuries, one of which launched World War I. The Fascists, Communists, and Nazis were all anarchist movements that wanted to destroy the current civilizations and replace them with imagined brave new worlds. The latest today is Al Qaeda, a movement that imagines a Caliphate that will replace western civilization.

This movie takes up all these themes in three hours that pass like lightning. Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) plays the now reclusive millionaire who eight years before heroically took the blame for the death of Gotham's corrupt District Attorney, who passed for a hero to spare the feelings of Gotham. Wayne has withdrawn from the world, wounded in both body and mind, and his alter ego, Batman, is retired.

However, when a new threat faces Gotham, Wayne's butler Alfred (Michael Cain) and his technology chief, Fox (Morgan Freeman) push him into coming out of his depression and saving Gotham. A beautiful young jewel thief (Cat Woman) played deliciously by Anne Hathaway, a complex police commissioner who covered up his predecessor's evil (played by Gary Oldman), a frightening monster anarchist named Bane (Tom Hardy) with his own army, and an honest young detective (Joseph Gordon Leavitt) are some of the brilliant stars in a huge cast, making this a very special film.

There is an enormous amount of violence in this film, particularly scenes in which thugs, led by the evil Bane, shoot indiscriminately in public places (I winced). But the more memorable violence included scenes of chaos, spurred on by Bane, in which 'Occupy-like' mobs invade the homes of the wealthy, looting, beating, and holding kangaroo courts to execute random 'enemies of the people.' This, of course, is a reprise of the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions.

The movie does not shrink from showing us what anarchy looks like, nor does it shrink from a fascinating Middle Eastern element: a desert pit that evoked Dante's seven circles of Hell, peopled by prisoners and prisoner-guardians who spoke an exotic language. A Russian nuclear scientist is such a prisoner, a popular notion in the summer paranoia about science, scientists, and former Soviets.

This is a very rich film, full of ideas and imagery, and as the third of this Batman trilogy directed by Christopher Nolan, he is to be congratulated.

#### Safety Not Guaranteed

Along with blockbusters this summer came this little independent film that most people will not have seen in a theater. The producers of Little Miss Sunshine, a charmer of a few years ago, have made this odd little film. A trio of Seattle magazine reporters, actually one reporter and two interns, are sent to the boonies to find a man, Kenneth, who has posted a classified ad looking for a companion to time travel with him. The reporters find him; he is a supermarket clerk, obviously a sweet man but terribly paranoid, who believes that he has created a machine that can take him back in time. He is not at all happy with the time in which he is living now.

One of the interns, a very sad young girl, Bridget, is pushed into befriending the would-be time traveler, to see just how nutty he is. Bridget has her own problem; she does not expect happiness in her life, but she plods on anyway. The two of them strike up a friendship that turns into love, as they assemble the parts for his incredible time machine by 'borrowing' elements from locked up federal facilities.

This is not a movie to believe, but to enjoy. The characters are fresh, and their aspirations touching. There was a good deal of humor, irony, and adventure. \305 perfect little Summer movie.