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King Arthur: Legend of the Sword (Movie Review)

Abstract

"First, I really liked this movie, and, second, I think it says something really interesting about the nature of evil."

Posting about the movie *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/king-arthur-legend-of-the-sword/>

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King Arthur: Legend of the Sword

 [all in allthings.org/king-arthur-legend-of-the-sword/](http://allthings.org/king-arthur-legend-of-the-sword/)

May 31, 2017

Donald Roth

With the movie looking to be one of the [biggest financial flops in recent cinema history](#), and with iAt's resident snarky film critic, Josh Matthews, out of town, you might wonder why I would be volunteering to write a review of this movie (aside from a borderline-pathological need to write that makes this my 50th piece for iAt). Well, I have two primary, non-addiction-related reasons: First, I really liked this movie, and, second, I think it says something really interesting about the nature of evil.

Giving Arthur a bit of Razzle Dazzle

I will admit off the bat that I do not have a refined palate when it comes to movies. I feel that life has enough dourness and darkness on its own, so I prefer films that are loud, witty, funny, and dynamic. If you like Guy Ritchie movies, you know he typically brings those things in spades, and *Legend of the Sword* is no different.

At the same time, I have always been a fan of fantasy, myth, and historical fiction. If you're looking for something that is more than impressionistically faithful to Arthurian legend or which tries to create a more historically-believable legend, then this is not a movie for you. *Legend of the Sword* is gleefully anachronistic, almost like Ritchie took the blue-collar hustlers from *Snatch*, had them throw on tights and a jerkin, then handed them swords and kicked them out into the streets of Rohan.

That may sound like a criticism, but it's not. This movie is slick and self-aware without sliding into satire. Some critics disliked Ritchie's take on Sherlock Holmes because they felt that the director's style was too over-the-top when combined with Robert Downey Jr., an actor whose roguish demeanor is almost always winking at the camera like he knows he's in a movie. This combination could draw the audience out of the experience of the story like if Jim Gaffigan spent his whole comedy routine in his nasal-voiced meta-commentary mode.

However, Charlie Hunnam is more Abbott than Costello, and when Ritchie is working with a straight man, the slick banter and self-aware style comes off with a more winsome sincerity. There's no doubt that this movie proceeds at a frenetic pace, but the chemistry and bravado of the leads allows for some emotional blows to land and resonate in a way that would be impossible if the audience couldn't connect with the characters.

This is not to say that the movie doesn't have its flaws. My suspicion is that one factor that lost many audience members is just how fast this story moves. The film walks the fine line of presenting just enough exposition to allow certain story elements to seem both relevant and mysterious without being so vague that it comes off like fantasy mumbo jumbo scrawled on the back of a fourteen year old's Dungeons & Dragons character sheet. In a market where most movies focus on detailed world-building to prop up planned cinematic universes, this may have been a costly direction for Ritchie to go.

For me, though, this direction still works in the same way that E.E. Howard's Conan short stories could resonate while making only vague nods to the larger world around the main characters. At the same time, Ritchie puts on a master class in how to use a montage sequence to show the progression of time without skimping on character development. In fact, given how often and how effectively Ritchie uses dramatic slowdowns, flashbacks, and smash-cut accelerations, one might describe his signature style as Gallifreyan. ¹ Ultimately, some critics viewed this film as style without substance, but I would disagree, especially because of my next point.

Vortigern, Evil, and the Nature of Providence

You may want to check out here because I'm getting more philosophical. You may also want to pause because this

section inevitably includes some spoilers. If you've seen the movie, or if you don't care to, proceed.

The real issue that made me want to write about this movie is how it deals with evil.

If you wanted a cinematic parable embodying the vanity and foolishness of the wicked man of Ecclesiastes or Proverbs, you would be hard-pressed to find a better example than Jude Law's Lord Vortigern. While showing genuine love and affection for his wife and daughter, Vortigern allows his own greed and jealousy to be his undoing, even as he pays a ghastly price to secure his power through a deal with the devil.² However, a central theme of the story is how Vortigern's own machinations sow the seeds of his undoing, and he comes to this realization in an ending that starkly portrays the utter vanity of all of the villain's plotting and cruel sacrifices.

Further, while the providence working against Vortigern is affiliated more with the natural order than the Divine, there's not a sense that this is some natural force restoring a neutral "balance" of good and evil.³ Instead, *Legend of the Sword* has the force of good working a subtle but inexorable providence that sees to the undoing of great evil. It would be too much to call this a Christian message, but it added a dimension of hope and a resonance with my faith that I found refreshing.

Overall, *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* is not high art, and it's certainly not shaping up to be high profit, but I think there is worthy art to be found in it, and it was a profitable experience for me. If your taste in cinema resonates with what I've described above, I'd highly recommend taking the time to take in this film.

Footnotes

1. I'm implying he's a Time Lord. Yes, it's a Doctor Who reference, and yes, I'm a big dork. [↩](#)
2. Well, a gross squid-lady thing, but it's more or less the devil. [↩](#)
3. The myth of neutrality or its desirability runs wild through the sci-fi and fantasy genres, most notably as a central conceit in explaining Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader's role in the Star Wars universe. [↩](#)