

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky. This is part one of a two-part episode on villains:

JOKER: Is it just me, or is it getting crazier out there?

The movie everyone was buzzing out this Fall was Joker.

JOKER: Do you think men like Thomas Wayne know what it's like to be men like me?!

Just the idea that The Joker got his own movie, with a sympathetic backstory, and no Batman to punish him, sparked a lot of anxiety and articles about whether the Joker has become a hero to toxic trolls.

The movie was a huge box office hit. Joaquin Phoenix might be the second actor to win an Oscar playing the Joker, but I don't think he's a villain that a lot of people actually sympathize with.

JR: You know, I don't know anyone who didn't love Heath Ledger's performance as The Joker, but I also don't know anyone who would want to be in the same room as him.

JR Forasteros is a preacher, writer and podcaster who focuses on fantasy worlds.

JR: I don't know anyone that would want to be a part of The Joker gang because he's as often killing his gang members as he has anyone else.

And the Joker is a nihilist. He doesn't really have an ideology. He doesn't want to take over the world. Then again:

JR: I just want to take over the world's not that interesting anymore.

Yeah.

JR: We're sort of, I think most of us have realized that would just be a lot of work. So give us something that is more believable.

That's very true. That's very true. That's actually, yeah, that would actually be a poison pill for anybody. (Laughs)

A few years ago, I did an episode called Evil Plans about one of my pet peeves: when villains have evil plans that are so convoluted, I can't root for the hero to stop them because I don't even understand what the villain is trying to accomplish.

But there are four villains that I keep thinking about – not the Joker – four other villains that have broken out of their movies to become culturally important.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions, and when villains have good intentions that reflect our own hopes and concerns --- that's an uncomfortable position to be in, when we're wondering, does anyone else think those villains are actually making sense?

I will reveal their evil plans while you're tied to a chair, and then leave you to my incompetent henchmen, just after the break.

BREAK

A heads up, this episode is full of spoilers. So whenever I mention a movie or TV show, I'm going to reveal all sorts of plot details, so listen accordingly.

I was talking with Bruce Leslie, who is a fantasy writer and podcaster. He mentioned something about villains that never occurred to me.

BRUCE: Something that my eyes were open to a couple of months back when I was at a writers meeting where a guy was sort of talking about writing for comic books and he said in most traditional kind of set up superhero comic books, you have to think of the hero as the antagonist and the villain is the protagonist because it's the hero who's trying to defend the status quo while the villains trying to come in and rock the boat so to speak.

That kind of blew me away because people who push for change are usually cast as heroes. People who try to preserve the status quo are not, they're obstacles at best. So if villains are pushing for change and heroes are defending the status quo, are we misunderstanding heroes as villains and vice versa? Or are villains being used in these stories to vilify the idea of change to keep us complacent?

The biggest example of that question is Thanos, the very muscular purple alien guy from the Marvel movies. Beginning with the first Avengers film, Thanos was teased as the big bad that they were eventually going to all face.

When he finally puts his evil plan into action, we learn that he doesn't want to get the all-power Infinity Stones just to be powerful. He's an eco-warrior who believes that overpopulation is draining the universe of its natural resources. He sees only one solution: acquire omnipotent power so he can eliminate half the living beings in the universe with the snap of his fingers.

This is personal for him. He watched his home planet die from overconsumption. Then he tried this experiment on a smaller scale, on the planet of his adopted daughter Gamora.

THANOS: Your planet was on the brink of collapse. I'm the one who stopped that. Do you know what's happened since then? The children born have known nothing but full bellies and clear skies. It's a paradise!

GAMORA: Because you murdered half the planet.

THANOS: A small price to pay for salvation.

GAMORA: You're insane.

THANOS: Little one, it's a simple calculus. This universe is finite. Its resources are finite. If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist.

And the way that Josh Brolin plays Thanos, you can feel his sadness, even his reluctance to do something that he sees as his responsibility.

And after the plan goes through, even Captain America – while he's still in mourning -- admits to Black Widow:

CAP: You know I saw a pod of whales when I was coming over the bridge

NAT: In the Hudson?

CAP: Fewer ships, cleaner water.

NAT: You know if you're about to tell me to look on the bright side, I'm about to hit you in the head with a peanut butter sandwich.

CAP: Hmm.

Again JR Forasteros.

JR: Thanos wasn't wrong exactly. Like we have been living on our planet in a way that's destructive to our planet and you know, for him, of course by extension the whole galaxy. And, and by having to go for five years with his vision for the world enacted, we see, well, like again, he's not, he's not wrong. Uh, maybe, maybe he went about it in a wrong way, but, and of course, I'm not holding my breath that we're going to get a Marvel movie that examines the deep philosophical implications of the Snap. And we see, did people really change their ways? You know, because of this traumatic event, like they're just going to go on and we're going to get Spiderman 15 but whatever.

I think Thanos speaks to a feeling of helplessness that a lot of people feel around climate change. It doesn't seem like there is a political solution in sight. We know we're screwed, we just don't know how screwed we are. It sucks to think whatever disasters are our future, we're just going to have to live with them. So if a character wants to take unilateral action – it's horrifying, but I get it.

Which brings me to the second villain I've been thinking about: Adrian Veidt, a.k.a. the superhero Ozymandias in the graphic novel Watchmen.

Watchmen came out in 1986. Just like Thanos, Ozymandias had lost faith in humanity's ability to stop an apocalypse from happening -- in this case nuclear war. So he hatched an insane plan. He invents a giant squid-like creature and made it look like this creature has emerged from a parallel dimension to destroy Manhattan. The shock of this event brought the U.S. and the Soviets together in fear of a larger, common enemy. And when other characters learned the truth behind the hoax, most of them decided to keep quiet for the sake of world peace.

The reason why I've been thinking about Adrian Veidt is because he's back. The new HBO series Watchmen takes place 30 years after the graphic novel. Veidt is played by Jeremy Irons.

VEIDT: I envision a stronger loving world, committed to caring for the weak, reversing environmental ruin and cultivating true equality.

In many ways the world he molded is more fair than our world, in terms of social justice. They've passed a ton of progressive legislation including reparations. But it's sparked a racist backlash, and this left wing government has become just as fascist as the original Watchmen.

SUSPECT: I want my lawyer

LOOKING GLASS: Yeah, we really don't have to do that with terrorists

SUSPECT: I'm not a terrorist.

Like in this scene where an ex-cop turned masked vigilante interrogates a suspect in an isolation chamber.

LOOKING GLASS: Are you a member of or do you associate with members of the white supremacist organization called the Seventh Calvary?

SUSPECT: No

LOOKING GLASS: Do you think that trans dimensional attacks are hoaxes staged by the U.S. government?

SUSPECT: I don't know, maybe. (FADE OUT)

Charles Pulliam-Moore writes for the sites iO9 and Gizmodo. He thinks one of the reasons why Adrian Veidt's plan is still a villainous is because it's governed by fear.

CHARLES: Yeah. I mean like everyone, like everyone on the planet has a shared trauma that they can't escape from. Right. Everyone, everyone knows that the squid descended on New York City and even if you weren't there, you've read about it and you've, you haven't read about it. And it's this kind of like lasting testament to a moment in this world's history where the world stopped turning and millions of people died and more and more people are just living with, they're still living with the like the devastation and the fallout of it.

There are even support groups for people who can't get over the giant squid attack.

CLIP: There's this thing, genetic trauma, basically if something really bad happens to your parents, it gets locked into their DNA, so when my mom got hit by the blast, even though I wasn't born until 11/2, it's like I inherited her pain!

Charles thinks unresolved trauma is a key factor that motivates a lot of these "evil plans." He's particularly fascinated by villains that come from marginalized groups because their desire for social justice from personal experience.

CHARLES: I think that the real interesting thing about villains right now is that more people are beginning to understand that villains and heroes are more or less the same in a sense that like there are people who went through similar kinds of traumas but just like came out differently, right. They have sort of responded to whatever the traumatic event in their lives was, um, in just like drastically different ways.

Which brings me to villain number three: Eric Killmonger from Black Panther. He was a member of Wakanda's royal family but he was orphaned, abandoned and left to fend for himself in the diaspora.

T'CHALLA: What do you want?

KILLMONGER: I want the throne! (LAUGHTER) Y'all sitting up here comfortable. It must feel good. There are about 2 billion people around the world look like us, but their lives are a lot harder. Wakanda has the tools to liberate them all.

T'CHALLA: What tools are those?

KILLMONGER: Vibranium. Your weapons.

T'CHALLA: Our weapons will not be used to wage war on the world.

Charles says Wakanda's policy of extreme isolation is their original sin. They did it for the sake of self-protection, but they also turned a blind eye to slavery and oppression.

CHARLES: It is not something that Black Panther fully sort of like explorers. Killmonger obviously brings it up and sort of makes it part of the reason that he wants to fight. It is not something that Black Panther fully sort of explorers. Killmonger obviously brings it up and sort of makes it part of the reason that he wants to fight. But it's not something, um, it's not something that the movie really delves into, but it's something that you as an audience member just sort of implicitly understand. And the thing that, one of the things that I love about the movie is that doesn't really settle on like a place for you to land, right? It sort of, it leaves, it leaves it up to you to be like, all right, like work through this. Like, how do you feel about this?

Well, what did you think of the hashtag Killmonger was right?

CHARLES: I get it! The whole Killmonger was right thing. What it ultimately is tapping into is fact that like, yes, America is a country that has been defined by anti-black racism. That's may sound like a controversial thing to some people, but that's just like the reality of it. It's only in those moments where you see him really sort of showing his hand and showing the fact that he's not on the level and he will kill people who have like supported him. In those moments you sort of like

feel like, oh, maybe this Killmonger guys not really as someone that I want to be down with. But in terms of like the big picture, what he's ultimately fighting against is just like black oppression. Um, and it's kind of hard to not want to cheer for him.

Which brings me to: Magneto.

CHARLES: With Magneto and the X-Men it's a little different. Um, because like Charles Xavier is like, to me, my X-Men, let's make friends with the humans. And then the humans are like, look at these sentinels and, and with Magneto it's like he's always like, Charles, what are you doing? I told you, I told you, I've told you time and time again, they're going to try to kill you. Why do you look surprised? What's wrong with you?

JR Forasteros thinks the conflict between Magneto and Professor X taps into the same issues as Black Panther.

JR: I think about uh Abraham Kindie who writes a lot about race and uh, the history of racism. Uh, he, he talks about a particular category of racism called assimilationism, which is the idea that um, you know, whiteness is considered normative and that, uh, what, what is communicated to non white people is that if you just try hard, you can become white and then you'll be fully human. And so essentially that is what Professor X is arguing for with the mutants is that if we just try really hard, we can demonstrate to the humans that we're human, just like them and then they'll accept us. And what Magneto argues and what Dr. Kendie argues, uh, is that because it's a prejudice, it's, it's, it's non rational. You know, the most that'll happen is, is what Kindie calls exceptionalism, which is, which is the, the phrase, you're one of the good ones.

MAGNETO: You'll have to kill me Charles. And what will accomplish? Let them pass that law, and you'll be in chains with a number burned into your forehead.

PROFESSOR X: It won't be that way.

MAGNETO: Then kill me and find out.

Magneto's villainy comes from personal trauma as well. He's not just a mutant, he's a Jewish concentration camp survivor. In the prequel movie, X-Men First Class, he responds to Professor X's plea for peace with post-Holocaust mantras.

PROFESSOR X: There are thousands of men on those ships! Good honest innocent men! They're just following orders!

MAGNETO: I've been at the mercy of men just following orders. Never again!

CHARLES: He has a very clear-sighted view of his own trauma that he never forgets. And it's always right there. And I think that like there's a way in which a lot of these stories, the heroes in them sort of admonish the villains for not letting go of their pain and they're like, Oh, like you should be able to grow past this. But the thing that makes the villains really kind endearing is we don't always move past things. There are times where you can't let something go and it's, you know, it's, it's very nice to pretend that you can be the bigger person and you can sort of transcend your trauma. But there are moments where it's like, no, like this, like you did this thing to me and I can't let it go. And it's always going to be, it has become a foundational part of my identity.

And like Erik Killmonger, Magneto inspired his own hashtag, Magneto was right, after the movie Logan came out -- which took place in a future where humans had wiped out most of the mutants.

JR says the comics are going in that direction too.

JR: To the point that I don't, I don't know how if you're following current X-Man continuity, but they just did a big re-launch with Jonathan Hickman as the writer. And it, it, it sure looks like now that we're like three months into this re-launch that Professor X has abandoned, uh, his optimism and it looks like now the mutants are all just pursuing some version of Magneto's vision.

I think one of the reasons why these villains resonate with us is because we can put controversial ideas in their mouths. The construct of the villain is like a safe space for us to explore those darker thoughts and emotions we don't want to admit that we've had.

JR says there's a name for that: monster theory.

JR: Monster theory says that there are ideas about ourselves cult-like, so culturally speaking at a sociological level that don't fit into the master narrative that we're telling ourselves. And so if we were to have to confront them, they would make us ask hard questions about ourselves. And so we attribute the qualities that we don't like about ourselves to an ex like this vulnerable population. Then once we've done that, we literally scapegoat them, we exercise

them, we turn them into monsters because we have cast the monsters out from among us. They've taken that quality that we don't like and metaphorically removed it from us. And again, it's, it's all smoke and mirrors, right? Because the problem was us all along so it didn't actually fix anything. It just made us feel better about not confronting those things. So we can continue to live unjust and inequitable lives without having to feel that tension.

Kareem Abdul Jabaar writes a column for the Hollywood Reporter that's always interesting. And in one of his columns, he argued that these quote morally woke villains are a reaction to something that's happening in the real world. It feels like classic villains like Lex Luthor or Ernst Blofeld have broken out of fiction and taken over our lives but there's no Superman or James Bond to stop them. In the movies, taking over the world may feel like a hackneyed cliché but it's scary when it happens in real life.

And if we all band together to try and topple them -- there's still a fear that they'll figure out a way to corrupt any change brought about by consensus. So we want to imagine a villain who can fight fire with fire, because the ends justify the means. And then they've really won because they've dragged us down to their level.

That's why I think the most hopeful stories are the ones where the villain changes the hero's mind – to a point. Like in Black Panther, T'Challa recognizes that hashtag Killmonger is right. And as king of Wakanda, he has the power to end the status quo, and take a bold step in the right direction.

T'CHALLA: Wakanda must not work from the shadows. We can not. We must not. We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on Earth should treat each other.

So if the hero sees merit in the villain's plan, and if the villain is motivated by altruism or trauma -- can the villain be redeemed? And if they can be redeemed -- can we forgive them for all the evil that they've done?

We'll explore that in part two of our villains mini-series in the next episode.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to JR Forresteros, Bruce Leslie, and Charles Pulliam-Moore.

I chose to focus on these four villains. Which villain motivations did you identify with? Which of their plans actually made sense to you on some level? You can post it on the show's Facebook page. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. My website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org. You can get the full archive of over 100 episodes of Imaginary Worlds ad free – including my episode on nonsensical evil plans – on Stitcher Premium. Your first 30 days of binging is free if you use the promo code Imaginary.