

# Liberals as the Modern-Day Mutant Seeing 'X2' as Political Education

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First appeared May 5, 2003

It was a simple plan, really.

All I wanted to do was see a movie. Pretty straightforward. Nary a string attached. A two-hour escapist vacation in a darkened theatre. No war. No politics. I knew the movie had planes, but I was pretty sure President Bush would not be flying any of them. It would have music, but I was fairly confident that no scenes of counter-protest concerts would be on the reel.

Instead, I got "X2: X-Men United", and I was right back in the thick of things.

I know, I know...it's a comic book movie. It's supposed to appeal to the Ain't-It-Cool-News über-geeks, not the "Meet the Press" core demographic. It's a "movie", not a "film". Heck, even MSNBC didn't like it very much. Even though I knew the central themes of X-Men (racism, prejudice, fear of the "other") to be inherently serious, I still felt I was in for a good summer flick. I certainly wasn't prepared for what may be the most socially relevant blockbuster of our times. (And after an \$85 million opening weekend, I think "blockbuster" is a justified term.)

At their heart, the X-Men movies (as well as their comic-book antecedents) tell the story of the "other" from the perspective of the outsider. The movies do not have as primary narrative device the "normal" coming into contact with the outsider and learning an important life-lesson. (I'm looking at you, "Bringing Down the House".) In fact, very little education occurs between the Majority and the Other. Not for lacking of trying on the Other's part; rather, the Majority's inability to listen prevents a truly harmonious existence between the two sides.

Instead, the X-Men universe deals with people constantly aware of their outsider status. More importantly, they do not seek assimilation. They seek co-habitation; quite a different concern. It's a universe that at its heart celebrates "difference" as a noble (and necessary) quality in society. The Majority's inherent fear is unfortunate, but does not deter the Other's fundamental moral center. Around the mid-point of the movie, Nightcrawler, a blue-skinned, deeply religious mutant played by Alan Cummings, asked the equally blue-skinned mutant Mystique why, if she can take the form of any creature, does she not try to, "...look like everyone else." Without even looking at him, she replies, "Because we shouldn't have to." The movie dares to have a nominal villain expound one of the central moral tenets of the film. To blindly adhere to the social norm is, within the moral universe of the movie, accepting defeat.

The film's moral concerns tie-in closely with another populist, pop-culture institution: Star Trek. Others have touched upon some of the finer points of the Star Trek culture, especially concerning a cultural diversity being a central theme in the futuristic society. ("X2" even tips its Star Trek influenced-hand

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with its last moments, which many people have already shown to be thematically linked to the last moments of "Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan". And I'll stop being a geek riiiiiiight...now.) The X-men universe, at least the celluloid one, has in Charles Xavier an advocate for such a pluralistic, world-wide society.

Indeed, one of the brilliant moves in the movie is the widening of its scope. What was, in the first cinematic installment, a largely North American phenomenon, is now a world-wide one. It broadens the movie's quest for tolerance (and most certainly not assimilation) on a global scale which, to reiterate my earlier point, is keenly in tune with the current political landscape we viewers experience outside the multiplex.

All too heady for a comic book movie, you say? Well, I'd go so far as to say that the movie's social and political pursuit and persecution of mutants has already been occurring in the weeks preceding, during, and after the Iraqi conflict. There are those among us who are different; they are the modern-day Other. They exist among us, sometimes completely undetected. They work in your offices. They shop at the same malls. A small group of Americans have been treated like real-life mutants, regarding with hostility, misunderstanding, and even violence.

No, I'm not talking about Muslim-Americans. I'm talking about liberals.

Yes, the dreaded "L" word.

Let's take the Dixie Chicks. ("Please!" says the Marshall Tucker Band.) The locus of the ongoing controversy surrounding them has been well documented enough. What's interesting, however, is how small a leap it takes to get from Natalie Maines to Mystique. Both represent, within their respective societies, the "other". As Tom Paine rightfully points out, Maines and the rest of the Chicks have long occupied the "other" space within the world of country music. When the Beastie Boys put out a protest song, the only uproar came over how truly terrible their song was. You didn't have hip-hop radio stations announcing "Beastie Boys Destruction" days. A Louisiana radio station held a similar day for the Dixie Chicks, however, and while Paine's assertion that it resembled 1930's Germany may be a tad hyperbolic, it nonetheless stresses how slippery the slope is between patriotism and fanaticism.

In 1984, Bruce Springsteen's song "Born in the U.S.A.", an anti-war song, was co-opted by Ronald Reagan into his campaign theme. In 2003, speaking out against war gets your albums literally burned on the street. The rise of conservatism, both in public opinion and within the media, has served to turn "liberal" into an insult. To be against the war is part and parcel of being against America itself. The Photoshopped images of Maines, arm in arm with Hussein, clearly demonstrates this correlation. There's simply no grey area in this matter for most people. I mean, the conservatives worry about the liberation of a people; liberals bemoan the looting of...art! Right? At least that's how the story goes from some conservative pundits. The road of moral superiority has been suc-

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cessfully hijacked by the conservative spectrum, especially when liberals are painted as caring more for a scroll than a human life.

Of course, that sort of binary rings completely false in actual practice. For the majority of Americans, I'd like to believe that it's not an either/or scenario. It's not "art versus life". Heck, it's not even "conservative" versus "liberal". I tried to argue a few weeks ago that there was a largely unheard moderate voice somewhere between the extreme right and the extreme left that represented a large part of American opinion. However, the stunningly quick defeat of the Hussein regime has only augmented the conservative voice; indeed, as the primary advocates/supporters for an Iraqi invasion, they have succeeded in making the protestors seem incorrect, and, with a none-too-subtle stroke, inherently weak.

While some liberals may indeed see "no war" as the only viable option, that viewpoint is simply as fantastical as...well, as most comic book movies. Where many liberals lost footing (and in the process, credibility), lies in the fact that their ideals were simply that...ideals. Platonic notions that simply can't exist in the reality we face. As such, a slogan such as "No blood for oil!" achieves the same linguistic force as Lewis Carroll's Queen of Hearts consistently shouting, "Off with their heads!" The words become mere sounds, divorced from meaning. It's a sound bite that no longer has any bite. In a country where people deplete Home Depot of duct tape to protect their now-fragile sense of security, the conservatives' strong call for action have rung as a truer form of patriotism that the liberals' call for peace.

But again, "X2" provides a mode of thought and action that liberals would be wise to follow in the upcoming months. What "X2" does, among other things, is show a liberal strand of patriotism which sees democracy as an ideal that is currently imperfect. It's both worth fighting for and worth improving. In this construction, it's no less patriotic to question the shortcomings of our current form of democracy (and in fact more patriotic) than to blindly salute a flag. Again, the movie strains for co-habitation, not assimilation. Liberal and conservative thought, not liberal or conservative thought.

Neither Maines nor Mystique wish to be co-opted against their will into the majority. And there's nothing comic about that struggle.