

# CAUGHT ON FILM

BY DAVID T. LINDSAY

## What makes for a great superhero?

Is it obsession so that the law is interpreted literally? Well, that describes Inspector Javert from *Les Misérables* as much as it does Batman, whose parents were gunned down by underworld thugs through no fault of his own, causing his lifelong crimefighting to become an obsession to duty.

Is a superhero one who sees humanity as incapable of defending itself? Who, with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men, can bend steel and change the course of mighty rivers? Superman can do the laws of physics and stop a moving locomotive, so he's more of a god.

The difference between those superheroes and the characters from Marvel Comics is that Marvel reigned its heroes in with science. Before the gamma bomb turned Dr. Banner into the rampaging Hulk, he was a scientist. Before Reed Richards was bathed in cosmic radiation to become leader of the Fantastic Four, he was a scientist. And Peter Parker, bitten by that radioactive spider, was a student studying chemistry and science.

Spider-Man, the movie by director Sam Raimi, nails the comic book. That much is generally agreed upon, but it's not the look or the way he swings across the Manhattan skyline that gets me excited. Co-creator and artist Steve Ditko refused to sign over his rights to the character unless he had creative input into this movie. Ditko infused his Objectivist philoso-

phy into his characters. Rooted in absolutes, independent of emotions and fears, dedicated to reason, Spider-Man is unique among superheroes.

The line in the movie that everyone remembers and responds to is, "You're not Superman, you know!," which is as much an aside to the audience as it serves as advice to Peter. Spider-Man has black & white principles motivated by a sense of justice instead of humanism. He has a spider's sense, is able to crawl on the ceiling, and has the strength of ten men. That's it—everything else depends on his brain to think and reason his way out of situations. In the comic book, Parker had to build a web-shooter to spray sticky goo. It's rumored that movie test audiences couldn't buy that a teenage would have the smarts necessary to build such a contraption.

Director Sam Raimi is veteran low-budget. He is a master at making virtuous force against absolute evil seem fundamental. That's the basis for his *Evil Dead* pictures and is the essence of *Spider-Man*.

When Peter Parker first realizes that he has these powers, his first inclination is to profit from them. He wants a car to impress Mary Jane, so he enters an amateur "tough man" competition. He wins. He's cheated and in the process the event promoter is robbed. Parker steps aside, allowing the criminal a means of escape, choosing neutrality and non-intervention. His action proves to be disastrous, resulting in the robber killing his

uncle. No other superhero is responsible for the evil that affects those around them, but Spider-Man suffers lifelong angst because of his own actions. It's neutrality that enables criminality, and evil, to succeed.

We see this same sort of thing on a daily basis in international politics. Look at passive Switzerland, a country opposed to aggression and war, neutral among the super-power nations. Yet tiny Switzerland allows every despot and murderous gangster to secure their plundered loot in Swiss banks. Their neutrality equates good and evil, allowing bad guys to live comfortably at the expense of those in their way. If *Spider-Man* has a theme, it's that neutrality is a philosophy of cowardice, and just as culpable as any criminal. The scene that just astounds me for having been added to Raimi's movie, a scene which was not from the comic book but serves to crystallize Steve Ditko's influence and principles, shows Spider-Man watching as the murderer who killed his uncle falls to his death.

If it were Superman, or to a lesser degree Batman, a reluctant helping hand would've been extended, because in the comics humanism demands that all life, even the life of a vicious murderer, be spared and treated as sacred. It's the purpose of "the law" to punish evil.

Spider-Man, however, chooses to balance his earlier neutrality with a conscious, definite inaction not to save the bad guy. He lets him die. In *Spider-Man*, it's the innocent, the



righteous, the just-minded, the honest and the good that are rewarded with his protection. Bad guys choose their own path of destruction. This tells us that *Spider-Man* is a movie about justice, not the law.

When Norman Osbourne, the wealthy father of Peter Parker's best friend, offers Parker a job at his research lab, Parker turns him down cold. The glint in Osbourne's eyes suggests that he wishes he were connected to Parker's integrity, and feels closer to him than he does his own son because Osbourne is a good scientist who has made unusual philosophic concessions to secure a government grant. He's morally compromised.

The Green Goblin's offer for Spidey to join him on his criminal quest is virtually the same offer Osbourne's made for Parker to come work for him: it's a seduction to compromise.

There are always two sides to every issue. One side is right and the other is wrong, but the middle is always pure evil. The man who is wrong still retains respect for the truth, if only by acknowledging a choice exists. But the man in the middle, the neutral party, blanks out any truth to pretend he has no choice.

All Steve Ditko super-heroes, from Dr. Strange to Mr. A, stand alone, having learned the price of compromise.

Noeman Osbourne isn't the lunatic that is Batman's nemesis The Joker. He's not even the megalomaniac Magneto out to save mutants in *The X-Men*. Norman Osbourne is simply Peter Parker without any principles.

It comes as no great surprise that the majority of film critics don't think in philosophic terms, just as they can't relate to Peter Parker's refusal to make Mary Jane his girlfriend. Most critics are committed to neutrality, and have never had a serious relationship with a woman.

Spider-Man is far and away the best superhero comic book movie adaptation because not only does it look right, and it wasn't simply cast right, but it captures and maintains the philosophical flair behind the character.

Spider-Man is the comic book, but I sure miss The Green Goblin's purple stocking cap. **B**

Spider-Man is rated PG-13, and is currently playing in Atlanta theaters.