

DR SMASH'S FILM CLUB, EPISODE FIVE MARVEL'S WEEPING EXECUTIONER: THE PUNISHER



BY Alex Adams BROADCAST 2 April 2021

URL <https://www.mixcloud.com/RepeaterRadio/alex-adams-dr-smashes-film-club-05-marvels-weeping-executioner/>

Hello and welcome back to Dr Smash's Film Club, the Repeater Radio show where I, Alex Adams, talk about movies, popular culture, politics and ideology.

In this episode, I'm going to discuss the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or MCU, which is one of the most popular film and multimedia franchises in the world. I'm going to talk about militainment, the politics of propaganda and pleasure, and, in particular, I'm going to talk about The Punisher, which is one of the highest-profile popular cultural icons to become ingrained into fascist ideology and discourse.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is one of the most profitable and popular multimedia franchises of all time. Constituting over twenty films and almost ten multi-series TV shows, all of which draw on volume after volume of comic books and graphic novels, the MCU is a multiheaded behemoth that embraces space opera, science fiction, comedy, fantasy, musicals, thrillers, and horror. It also engages and explores many contemporary political themes in incredibly bold and accessible ways, and that's why I'm interested in critiquing it.

If you've listened to my previous episodes, you'll know that I'm generally pretty cautious about throwing around terms like propaganda, and that I try to rather laboriously acknowledge the multivocality and generativity of cultural texts, which can appeal to many people in different ways

at once by being open to multiple styles of reading and interpretation. In general, I feel that calling pop culture propaganda is more of a provocative, reductive, and polemical critical gesture than it is an effectively analytical or explanatory way of approaching the study of the nuanced and complex politics of cultural production. Sometimes, in short, using the term feels flippant and unearned. But sometimes, not using it is in fact a failure to recognise and acknowledge what is actually going on in the production and circulation of narrative entertainment.

I include this throat-clearing here because I'm going to state now that I consider the MCU to be definitely propaganda. The Pentagon had direct involvement in the early films, for example, in particular the *Iron Man* and *Captain America* trilogies, and [the American military openly acknowledge that they maintain a close relationship with Hollywood filmmakers](#),¹ in order to ensure that the military is represented with what they call accuracy, trading access to military technology for the right to consult on scripts. In short, if you want to put a military helicopter in your film, the DoD gets to veto aspects of your story that they don't like. Marvel have definitely been the recipients of such mentoring and steering.

But even if it were not the case that Marvel were the recipients of direct military intervention in their storytelling, the films of the MCU would still perform an astonishingly effective propaganda purpose. By showing almost any conceivable problem as solvable by technology, force, and a strong moral commitment to doing the right thing, they articulate a central tenet of contemporary imperial capitalist ideology. Even if it is hard, even if it requires tragic sacrifice, the people who have been gifted extraordinary powers should use them to do good in the world, even in the universe. From tackling street crime in Hell's Kitchen to restructuring the fabric of the galaxy, Marvel's one-size-fits-all solution to social and existential problems is the responsible exercise of force by people who are strong enough to do so, no matter what the law or anybody else says.

In broad terms, the major themes of the MCU are power, justice, and violence. Its bold, fun, vivid storytelling, its chaotically inclusive approach to genre, its embrace of romance, action, humour, and science fiction, its pioneering use of visual effects, its Tarantinoesque use of pop music, and its accessible, enjoyable tales of right and wrong, love and war, and chaotic struggle, all are in service to this narrow but endlessly variable handful of themes. Superheroes supplement conventional justice, completing the task when the institutions of liberal democracy fail or fall short. If the law was able to deliver effective and satisfactory justice, after all, we would not need superheroes.² Perhaps this is behind the colossal appeal of the MCU in the 21st century – public trust in institutions is, after all, in short supply, particularly in the US and UK, so the thrill of seeing extralegal justice effectively dispensed by confident, competent people is particularly acute.

What is perhaps most important is that the MCU repeatedly shows violent intervention – whether in street crime or in matters of intergalactic importance – as the only durably meaningful solution to any problem. Mob extortion, mugging, human trafficking? Daredevil will punch the criminals concerned until it stops. A cosmic disagreement between warring Gods? Thor will wallop the problem with his hammer until everything is solved. Half of all life in the universe exterminated

¹ Katie Lange, 'How and Why the DoD Works with Hollywood', *US Department of Defense Website* 2/28/2018 <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/Inside-DOD/Blog/Article/2062735/how-why-the-dod-works-with-hollywood/>

² Cassandra Sharp, "Riddle me this ... ?" Would the world need superheroes if the law could actually deliver "justice"?, *Law Text Culture* 16:1 (2012), pp. 353-378. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc/vol16/iss1/15>

in one second? Simply kill Thanos and invent time travel. Most of all, the MCU films are about the legitimacy and necessity of a permanent, ever-changing war.

But the business of propaganda and militainment – by which I mean militarized entertainment – is not always about showing thumping success. Very often, for example, the MCU foregrounds the doubts and sacrifices of their characters, notably in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), in which the Avengers disagree over whether it is morally right for them to use their powers to intervene in world affairs without the backing of international law or any substantial governments. This inclusion of doubt is one of the more interesting elements of twenty-first century propaganda. Critical perspectives are not simply ignored – they are confronted head-on, incorporated, and demonstrated to be wrong. Tony Stark, the billionaire weapons manufacturer and inventor of the Iron Man suit, whose character was apparently modelled on Elon Musk, very often reflects on the moral consequences of the way that he has turned his genius to the use of firepower. Nonetheless, his inventions routinely save the day. This has several important effects – it shows our hero as a reflective, sensitive person who only uses force as a last resort when he really has to, it shows technology as infallible, or at least potentially effective in almost any situation, and it shows arms dealers as a force for good in the world. Crucially, foregrounding doubts about superhero violence only to defuse them and prove them wrong shows these doubts as half-baked and shows superheroes as, ultimately, always in the right.

In certain extreme situations the law is inadequate. In order to shame its inadequacy, it is necessary to act outside the law. To pursue natural justice. This is not vengeance. Revenge is not a valid motive, it's an emotional response. No. Not vengeance. Punishment.
The Punisher (2004)

So now I will turn to the Punisher. before I get stuck in, I'll give you a quick contextualizing explainer.

The Punisher first appeared in Marvel comics as an anti-hero side character in other major titles such as *Spiderman* and *Captain America* in the mid-1970s. The character gradually increased in popularity until he was given his own standalone comic series and, eventually, movies, merchandise, and a Netflix show. There have been three feature films to date featuring the Punisher. In 1989, he was played by Dolph Lundgren, in 2004, he was played by Tom Jane, and in 2008's *Punisher: War Zone* he was played by Ray Stevenson. Most recently, the Punisher as portrayed by Jon Bernthal joined the modern MCU as a supporting character in the second season of Netflix's *Daredevil* (2016), and then returned for two seasons of his own show in 2017 and 2019 respectively.

In simple terms, the Punisher is a crime-fighting vigilante. His civilian name is Frank Castle, and his backstory is that of an elite US soldier. He is not so different in many ways from other comic book characters, Daredevil or DC's Batman, for instance, who willingly embrace darkness and tough, violent measures in order to fight crime for the greater good. The major difference with the Punisher is that there is no supernatural or sci-fi element at play. He is not imbued with magical powers by any experience; his background as a US marine has imbued him with extreme military prowess, but aside from this training and a high pain threshold, he is just an ordinary mortal. His distinction comes in his eagerness and ability to inflict pain and to kill, and his utter and uncompromising commitment to his violent cause. There is little more to the Punisher than this

fantasy of violent retribution, but nonetheless, like many comic book adaptations, the many variations on the central theme keep his fans coming back for more.

He is most often positioned as a dark hero, both a figure of dangerous and uncontrollable violence and a sympathetic, emotionally available protagonist. Though some of the comics have been wild, featuring time travel and so on, most of the high-profile popular culture incarnations of the Punisher character have been staged in the tradition of gritty realism that is meant to position the stories as serious engagements with its themes. The two seasons of the Netflix series, for instance, are positioned as meditations on serious matters such as PTSD, military corruption, betrayal, grief, friendship, and so on.

His traumatic backstory is one of the most important elements of his story. His entire family is slaughtered by an organised crime ring of some kind – the precise perpetrators of this killing changing from text to text – and this shattering experience is what initiates, and justifies, for him, his relentless campaign of revenge and punishment. He is convinced, too, that he only kills evildoers. Indeed, the events of *Punisher: Warzone* are initiated by his profound horror at discovering that he has accidentally killed an undercover FBI agent. The accidental death of one policeman is enough to undermine, for Frank, his entire crusade.

This tragic foundation to the character, and his very strict moral code, means that texts featuring the Punisher tend to have a very stark tonal contrast at their centre. I'll return to this later, but I want to flag up here that the two major emotional textures that you can expect to encounter in any Punisher story are red mist fury and abject, sentimental sadness.

Plenty of critics and scholars have examined the politics of the Punisher, and have concluded, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the character and his stories are political nightmare fuel. In a 2020 article for *Truthout*, Gregorio León writes that "[Frank Castle was created as an antihero. He was a villain and a cautionary tale. Over time that was forgotten. From the moment he was given his own series, it was used to push reactionary ideas and dangerous fiction.](#)"³ Elsewhere, in an earlier article, Kent Worcester writes that the Punisher's oeuvre of fictional escapades repeatedly "makes the case for the notion that white-hot rage, channelled into the right kind of self-generated military campaign, has redemptive social value. For the Punisher, anger is not a feral emotion that should be expelled from the political or legal realm. Instead, it is a dissolvent that allows us to apprehend things as they really are."⁴ For the Punisher, rage is a clarifying agent which allows us access to the truth. In my previous episode, on *Saw*, I noted that violence has been a key experience for generations of conservative philosophers. Pain, suffering, and anger, in conservative philosophy and thought, clarify the nature of reality and subjectivity itself, giving us access to the unfiltered and unadulterated truth of the world.

Nazi legal theoretician Carl Schmitt famously wrote in his 1932 book *The Concept of the Political* that the distinction between friend and enemy is the fundamental structuring principle of all political interaction. So it is for the Punisher. Everybody in the world can be divided into one of

³ Gregorio León, 'Marvel's "Punisher" Was a Hate Symbol Long Before Police Co-opted His Character', *Truthout*, 8/8/2020. <https://truthout.org/articles/marvels-punisher-was-a-hate-symbol-long-before-police-co-opted-his-character/>

⁴ Kent Worcester, 'The Punisher and the Politics of Retributive Justice', *Law Text Culture* 16:1 (2012), pp. 329-330. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc/vol16/iss1/14>

two categories: the good, who need to be protected, and the evil, who need to be exterminated. The Punisher and his weaponry are the crucial mediators between the two groups. In addition, many of his antagonists in the classic comics are defined by their race, as he guns down scores of Mexican cartel members, black gang members, Japanese crime families, and so on. Pushing the position that social problems can be solved with righteous rage and firepower directed towards specific groups, the Punisher fairly clearly has a fascist ideological character.

Those who do evil to others. The killers, the rapists, the psychos, sadists.
You will come to know me well. Frank Castle is dead. Call me the
Punisher.
The Punisher (2004)

So what is the Punisher's political program? Well, put simply, he's a law and order conservative's wet dream. He is, naturally, an advocate for the death penalty. The only way, according to Frank Castle, to stop criminals reoffending is the finality of a painful death. Naturally, too, some of his fictions work to oppose gun control. Season one, episode ten of the Netflix show could work as an advertisement for the NRA in this regard. In this episode, a senator who wants to introduce gun control is saved from unhinged armed assailants by the Punisher, who leaps into the path of a would-be assassin's bullet before resolving the entire situation through violence. Gun control opponents are fond of smugly claiming that the only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun. This episode of *The Punisher* stages that situation as a literalized metaphor, as a dramatically enacted gotcha to the liberal senator who has his own stupidity explosively demonstrated to him in the form of a colossal shoot-out.

But once more, the Punisher's stories are not uncomplicated, cartoonish advocacy for reactionary positions. Or at least they're not *only* that. Indeed, his appearance in season two of *Daredevil* is particularly interesting, because his rationale for his retributive storm of violence is challenged directly from the outset. Daredevil debates the ethics of vigilante killing with him, emphasizing his belief that though criminals should be confronted they should also be given the opportunity to reform and to lead good lives once they have realised the error of their ways. Frank Castle, of course, then gives his side of the story, and Daredevil's objections ultimately function as a platform for Castle to articulate his own battle-weary warrior poet philosophy about the necessity of exterminatory execution.

In episode seven of that season, the Punisher is put on trial for his crimes. This episode functions as an explicit debate over the legitimacy of the Punisher's controversial approach. This following sample comes from a scene in which potential jurors are asked to own up to any pre-existing opinions they may have about the Punisher's tactics.

You mean the Punisher? I think he's an animal. A sick, twisted, venal –
Hero. That's what we should be calling him. Doing the things the cops
won't do, Frank castle is a –
A grotesque insult to the second amendment, a fascist without the
authority. If you ask me, people like Frank Castle ought to be –
Applauded for putting all the thieves and muggers and rapists in the
morgue, where they belong. Let those bastards feel scared walking down
the street for a change.
Daredevil, s2e7

The golden age of TV in which we presently live has been celebrated for enabling sophisticated engagements with ideas to become part of our everyday viewing habits. Here, the show acknowledges the complexity of the issues that *The Punisher* engages with, showing the many objections to his tactics among the New York public alongside spirited defences of the way he hammers down on criminals. Importantly, however, the nuance that is introduced in these dialogue-heavy sections is quite often steamrollered over in the action spectacle sections, which are often given much more dramatic emphasis. For the action scenes have their own non-verbal persuasive character, and in them, the Punisher is never the villain for long.

But what is crime? What, exactly, does the Punisher punish? In much comic book fiction and cop drama, crime is presented as a naturally occurring phenomenon, like weather, or a part of someone's personality, a decision or preference or career choice like any other. In the Punisher's fictions, this is taken to an extreme, with crime shown as an overwhelming avalanche of vindictive, depoliticized evil which leaves conventional law enforcement powerless. Writing about *Dirty Harry* (1971), critic David Sterritt writes that crime is often shown as "sadistic violence, so arbitrarily chaotic that it seems as illogical and inescapable as a force of nature".⁵ Much the same could be said of the ways that Punisher stories depoliticize crime at the same time as they hyperbolically fetishize it, showing violence as an elemental force that needs not to be understood, explained, or sympathized with but simply and decisively confronted. Criminals are a separate subhuman species, an evil breed of irrationally monstrous victimizers dwelling among us, ever ready to strike at the most vulnerable. The institutions of the law are shown as bureaucratic obstacle courses designed to frustrate justice, kindergartens full of kid-gloved do-gooders who are more interested in the human rights of savage criminals than they are with protecting the victims of crime. As a consequence of this reactionary and oversimplified conceptualization of the root causes of criminality, vigilante violence is shown as the only real solution, the only way of meeting the challenge meaningfully, with any chance of a permanent and decisive victory. Of course, this is a profoundly warped view of criminality, justice, and the social and political causes of crime. But it has the virtue of being simple, emotionally powerful, and, importantly, what we might call *solution-focused*. If we think about crime in this way, as an epidemic of senseless evil, we can position punitivity as a one-size-fits-all remedy to every conceivable social ill. We can use violence, we can break the gordian knot with the sword – or the machine gun – rather than having to unravel it and actually deal with what is at stake.

Perhaps this paranoid appeal to a Manichean view of good and evil in which the forces of good are besieged by incomprehensible savagery is, most of all, why the Punisher has so much appeal for right wing groups such as the online alt-right, Blue Lives Matter advocates, the January capitol rioters, and many people in police and military communities. Like *The Centurions* (1960), *Devil's Guard* (1971), and *300* (2006), texts which romanticize the civilizational conflicts faced by French paramilitary torturers, SS soldiers, and Spartan warriors respectively, *The Punisher* has a substantial military fanbase. In each of these texts, the entire world order is endangered by overwhelming threats embodied by, of course, specific racialized groups. It is no wonder, then, that racists in the armed forces would find these stories, in which apocalyptic violence is a way out of problems, resonant and attractive.

⁵ David Sterritt, 'Bad Mixings: Dirty Harry, Social Anomaly, and the Gospel of Healthy-Mindedness.' *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 32:4 (2015), p. 405. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2015.1012936>

For example, in his memoir *American Sniper* (2012), Navy Seal sniper Chris Kyle admirably describes Frank Castle as “a real bad-ass”, and notes that his platoon in Iraq nicknamed themselves “The Punishers”. His praise for Frank Castle is unqualified and unequivocal. “We all thought what the Punisher did was cool: He righted wrongs. He killed bad guys. He made wrongdoers fear him. That’s what we were all about. [...] We wanted people to know, *We’re here and we want to fuck with you. [...] Fear us. Because we will kill you, motherfucker.*”⁶

Perhaps the most demonstrative sign of this intersection of military and crypto-fascist admiration for Frank Castle’s brutality is the variety of adaptations that can be found of the Punisher’s distinctive Totenkopf symbol. It is crazy enough that a major popular character would have an SS emblem as their identifying logo, but this bold death’s head design has been adapted by fans to feature US and UK flags, military slogans, and even a Trump haircut. It’s a crowded field, but for my money the grimmest I’ve seen so far are the adaptations that feature variations on the theme of the slogan ‘infidel’, which of course references the Islamophobic and racist embrace of this term. Racist figures such as Tommy Robinson have self-identified as ‘infidels’ in order to signal their objection to Islam and immigration, a racist position which they describe as a reasonable opposition to Islamic extremism but which actually attempts to demonize Islam and Muslims.

Actor Jon Bernthal, who plays the Punisher in the Netflix series, has publicly condemned the appropriation of the symbol specifically by the Capitol rioters, saying that right-wing nutjobs who use the symbol [don’t understand what Frank is really about](#). But whilst it might be true that Frank Castle has no interest in overthrowing the government like the Capitol rioters claimed to have, to say that right wing people don’t understand the Punisher is, frankly, fucking ridiculous. The Punisher has been a right-wing wish-fulfilment fantasy for years, almost since his inception.

In addition, if Marvel wanted to stop people using the Punisher logo in this way, they could do so. In 2019, they refused permission for [a grieving father to use an image of Spiderman on his son’s grave](#), but they have nothing to say about the use of the Punisher logo as a crypto-fascist icon and appear to have taken no action against the many people on sites like eBay and etsy who make plenty of money from selling this merchandise.

I’d like to end the episode by talking about the role of sentimentality in *The Punisher*. As I mentioned earlier, the two most prominent emotional tones in Punisher stories are rage and grief. First of all, I’d argue that both of these are forms of sentimentality, based as they are on very strong, even extreme, emotional content. Both percussive violence and cloying sadness place powerful affective demands on audiences, and require strong identification with the character in order to be dramatically effective.

In addition, Frank’s grief is emotionally appealing. It strongly suggests that you, the audience, or we the audience, rather, should side with Frank due to the legitimacy of his grievance. If your family were killed by armed criminals, after all, wouldn’t you feel justified in becoming a one-man death squad? This victim position is a potent persuasive element in the political task undertaken by Punisher stories. By giving Frank a harrowing insight into bereavement and pain, this gesture places him in a sympathetic position, which functions to justify his violence. His status as a bereaved father makes him seem to be punching up when he attacks criminals.

⁶ Chris Kyle, Scott McEwen and Jim DeFelice, *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in US Military History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), p. 263. Emphasis in original.

Finally, this focus on grief is a cynical appropriation of PTSD. Many military fictions, from *Rambo* (1982-2019) to *Black Hawk Down* (2001) to *Battle for Haditha* (2007), feature representations of weeping, traumatized soldiers who are overwhelmed by the horrific emotional and physical demands of war. The representation of PTSD as a serious affliction has its roots in the fiction of the First World War, much of which aimed to show what was then called ‘Shell Shock’ as a terrible and meaningful problem and as something that civilians should take seriously rather than dismiss as cowardice. As such, the representation of military PTSD has its roots in the attempt to generate compassion for soldiers, many of whom were conscripts, as three-dimensional human beings who are capable of suffering as well as killing, and to challenge harmful militarist stereotypes that insisted that soldiers should be considered weak if they showed pain. Today, however, whilst representations of military PTSD still tend to make soldiers emotionally relatable, they often flesh out the humanity of Western combatants at the expense of the humanity of their opponents. So, whilst John Rambo is shown as a complex, suffering being, his Vietnam or Soviet captors are shown as soulless, dehumanized tormentors.

Much the same can be said of the Punisher. His trauma is foregrounded in order to facilitate the dehumanization of his enemies and the legitimization of his exterminatory campaigns of vigilante justice.

So this concludes the fifth episode of Dr Smash’s Film Club. Thank you very much for listening, as ever, and, once more, I’d like to recommend that you check out my writing website atadamswriting.com and my music website milkandmedicine.bandcamp.com. I will see you next time for the last episode of Dr Smash’s Film Club of this run, which will be about *The Human Centipede*.

Don’t make me ask twice. Where is Francis? [gunshot] You made me ask twice.

[singing] *Sexy motherfucker!*

Tell me where your fucking boss is, or you’re gonna die!

[singing] *Sexy motherfucker!*

This is not going to end well for me, is it?

This is not going to end well for you, no. Where’s your boss?

I can tell you exactly...

A da da da da da! Oh you’ll tell me, but first – you might want to look away for this – now, this little piggy went to [scream].

Thank you, Agent Smith.

Deadpool