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Review of Kingsman: The Secret Service

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Review of:

Kingsman: The Secret Service (Matthew Vaughn UK 2014). Twentieth Century Fox DVD 2015. Region 1. 2.39:1 anamorphic. US\$10.

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There is an anal sex joke near the end of *Kingsman: The Secret Service* that is so gratuitous and so stupidly juvenile that it threatens to derail any higher-order appreciation of the film completely; the very last shot of the film before the credits, in fact, is a callback to this joke, in this sense enshrining puerility above any other political, ethical, or aesthetic value in the text. The film's would-be Bond-style super-spy, Gary 'Eggsy' Unwin (Taron Egerton), discovers Princess Tilde of Sweden (Hanna Alström) in her cell in arch-villain Valentine (Samuel L. Jackson)'s Antarctic fortress. Tilde, making the most of a very minor role, had previously demonstrated some admirable heroism in refusing Valentine's nefarious plot – but in her return appearance

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this is all undone as she inexplicably offers anal sex to Eggsy in exchange for saving the world. Aggressively unfunny, the joke torpedoes the film's momentum even in its own terms – and furthermore becomes *incredibly* disturbing when taken 'seriously' as a possible token of the abuse Tilde may have endured during her months of capture. It strikes such a sour note in a film that would otherwise appear quite feminist, at least by standards of blockbuster cinema – the most competent agents on both the 'good' and 'bad' sides are both women, neither of whom reduces to the 'Bond girl' stereotype – that it's fair to say that for many the scene essentially ruins the movie; since the film's premiere director Matthew Vaughn has been forced to attempt to defend the joke's inclusion in various media outlets, including *Entertainment Weekly*, with little success.

That critical reception of *Kingsman* must somehow find a way to contend with this throwaway scene is a shame, as Kingsman also contains some of the most politically radical imagery ever seen in a blockbuster action film. The plot involves the recruitment of Eggsy to a 'private intelligence agency' operated as a subsidiary of the Kingsman tailoring firm, which was founded in the wake of the business's heirs all dying in the trenches during World War I. The Kingsman group keeps the world safe; Eggsy's recruiter and mentor, Harry 'Galahad' Hart (Colin Firth), hangs celebrity tabloid headlines on the walls of his flat to remind himself of all the days he saved the world and (blessedly) no one noticed. Eggsy's father was a Kingsman recruit, killed in the line of duty during a training exercise gone wrong; Galahad has felt indebted to the young Eggsy ever since, even as his upbringing in a South London housing estate has aimed him towards a life of petty crime. As the film opens, Galahad bails Eggsy out of jail, and offers him a chance to take what would have been his father's spot on the team as 'Lancelot' – though he'll have to win the spot against a dozen other possible recruits. While Eggsy's training commences, Galahad investigates a string of mysterious disappearances of celebrities, politicians and luminaries, eventually tracing them to Valentine, a Silicon-Valley-style tech billionaire who has offered the world SIM cards that provide completely free cellular and internet service. But the SIM cards contain a secret – when modulated by Valentine, they release signals that cause all nearby human beings to become ultraviolent, driven to wantonly murder each other with no regard to the consequences. It seems Valentine is an

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ecology buff, and has determined that there is no hope for the planet without a drastic, immediate reduction in the human population – and his solution (in a sort of strange mashup of James Tiptree's 'The Last Flight of Dr. Ain' (1969) and 'The Screwfly Solution' (1977), or perhaps *Twelve Monkeys* (Terry Gillam US 1995) and Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse* (US 2009-2010)) is to initiate the process himself. (The 'test' of the SIM Card Solution in a local church in the American South, resulting in an utterly frenzied, frenetic massacre, is one of the best-directed action scenes I've seen in years.)

This returns us to the film's unexpected radicalism. It seems that Valentine has been kidnapping celebrities and world leaders to recruit them to his scheme: either they join up (and accept the implantation of an explosive chip near their cerebral cortex to ensure compliance) or they are disappeared to his Antarctic fortress pending the coming global genocide. In the inevitable high-octane climax to the film Eggsy penetrates the base and is able to activate the explosive chips, killing all of Valentine's mooks and world-famous accomplices in a single go. What we see, in a transcendent montage set to 'Pomp and Circumstance', is the explosion first of Valentine's faceless, Bondvillain mercenaries and then the death of essentially every world leader on the planet: the joint chiefs in the War Room, the President, the Queen, all of the obscenely rich people who have absconded to Valentine's fortress for safe-keeping, protection and drunken celebration during the chaos. It turns out that basically every world leader, titan of industry and trust-fund dilettante was perfectly happy to sign on to Valentine's plan to trim the fat, and kill the rest of us off.

Of course, despite the singularity of this image of Benjaminian divine violence, the film subsequently refuses to actually take this proposition seriously. Galahad kept a record of all the goofy headlines that newspapers could run because his missions were successfully invisible – but Eggsy's inaugural adventure is a colossal failure. Not only does he kill the vast majority of the world's leaders, but he fails to prevent the SIM cards from being activated, resulting in a global orgy of violence for the five or so minutes between their activation and his disruption of the signal. From what we see of the violence, in addition to the loss of most of the world's criminal kleptocrats, tens of thousands (or more) ordinary people will have been killed, including incomprehensible numbers of children left defenceless against their

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now-murderous adult-caretakers – an unthinkable global holocaust that is ignored both by the film's tepid coda and, presumably, will be further ignored by Kingsman 2, projected for 2017. Nor does the film's self-conscious pastiche of the Bond and Bourne franchises have much interest in thinking through its innovation of a fully neoliberalised, 'private' Bond, decoupled from any notion of patriotism or democratic accountability in favour of direct enforcement of the class interests of the rich; while the film teases a democratisation of Bond fantasy through Eggsy's lower-class upbringing and the class-war revealed in his competition with well-heeled Oxbridge recruits, the internal logic of the film suggests that it is *Eggsy*, not the Kingsmen, who must change - even after the snobbish head of the Kingsmen, the M-like Arthur (Michael Caine), is both exposed as possessing lower-class Cockney origins and himself revealed to be corruptly in league with Valentine! Similarly, the film seems calculated to appeal to a progressive audience not only through the aforementioned surface feminism but also through its treatment of race and disability - Valentine, of course, plays a black genius, while his chief henchperson (Sofia Boutella as 'Gazelle') is a woman whose feet have been replaced with prosthetic blades she uses to decapitate her enemies – while nonetheless conspiring in the end to re-centre Eggsy as the traditional white, ablebodied, male action-movie protagonist after all.

The film is a relatively faithful adaptation of the Mark Millar and Dave Gibbons comic, as might be expected given that it names Vaughn as 'co-plotter'. But some differences are worth mentioning. First, the Kingsmen – who are traditional government agents in the comic, rather than a private security company - are far more incompetent than their film counterparts, frequently bungling their rescues or escapes, and often dying due to their own incompetence and lack of genre savvy. The world is likewise saved after that SIM cards have gone off, but in the comic the Kingsmen have instead reversed the polarity of the signal so that it causes people to kiss, rather than kill, each other, significantly dulling the edge of the underdeveloped catastrophe of the film version. The general complicity of elites in the scheme is removed almost entirely as a plot point, and the Kingsman organisation itself remains largely intact rather than totally discredited - or, perhaps it is better to say, the organisation continues on unchanged despite having an unknown number of traitors undetected and unpurged (with their heads yet unexploded) within its

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ranks. The film is more demographically diverse than the comic, a feat it somewhat problematically achieves by race- and gender-bending the villains. Finally, the Kingsmen themselves are left somewhat defanged by the adaptation; in the comic they train men like Eggsy to be superspies through a brutal and dangerous training process that leaves some dead – and which, incidentally, requires the recruit to commit an extralegal execution as a 'final exam' – while in the film version there is always some hidden safety net protecting the recruit from physical or psychological harm. In some sense it is only the comic, rather than the film, that really commits to the fantasy of masculine ultraviolence implicit in the Bond fantasy; the film consistently wants to have everything both ways, cynically deconstructing super-spy tropes one minute while unironically reconstructing them the next.

In a 'making of' documentary that is one of the DVD's few special features (even the director's commentary is reserved solely for the Blu-Ray) Vaughn discusses the narrow line he had to walk between making Kingsman 'realistic' and making it a spoof. Weirdly, recent entries in the Bond, Bourne and 24 franchises – all explicitly referenced in the film, which gives the name 'J.B'. to a puppy to honour all three simultaneously - have been similarly torn between excitement and exhaustion, almost always concluding with a sense that this kind of espionage fantasy is deeply toxic and destructive rather than either exhilarating or comforting. Spectre (Sam Mendes UK/US 2015) in particular swings wildly between cartoonish set pieces (like Bond falling through a ceiling to land on a fortuitously placed easy chair) and bleak disillusionment with the whole Fleming fantasy world (as with Daniel Craig's increasingly fraught portrayal of Bond as a desperately unhappy, broken alcoholic, primarily tasked with cleaning up MI6's own self-created disasters). The weird sadness of the contemporary Bond films permeates Kingsman as well, despite its surface camp, most notably in Firth's surprisingly nuanced portrayal of Galahad, a weary Übermensch who has seen and done too much, who can't retire, can't reform, can't vacation and can't quit. When we first meet Galahad, we see him unleash his special training against unsuspecting civilians in a bar fight, a scene that is played for laughs despite being utterly appalling upon reflection; later, when he falls victim to Valentine's SIM cards in the church massacre, he is both the quickest to violence and the most brutal fighter, seemingly killing the majority of the many people who die in the scene. Here's your

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superman, Vaughn is saying; isn't this what you wanted? The remainder of the film seems to want to unring that bell, but can never escape its revisionist shadow; when the after-the-credits stinger sees Eggsy replicating the exact same bar-fight sequence again, with precisely the same dance steps, it's impossible to escape how tired, and how vicious, and how fundamentally irredeemable the Bond fantasy has become.