Bright proves that Netflix can do blockbusters — but most blockbusters aren't that exciting

When Netflix first began producing original television shows, it wasn't clear how well the service would do. It was easy to think of internet-only video as being on the low end of the content spectrum, but with shows like *House of Cards*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Stranger Things*, and countless others, the company has transformed from a streaming service that happens to make some shows on the side to a true prestige television power-player.

Its feature film ambitions, on the other hand, haven't gone as smoothly. Netflix regularly acquires documentaries and arthouse films, and it released the acclaimed *Okja* earlier in 2017, but it hasn't really tried to dive into the Hollywood blockbuster business just yet. That changes on December 22nd with the release of *Bright*. A $90 million-plus fantasy and action adventure film from *Suicide Squad* director David Ayer, it seems to have a little something for everyone: gritty action beats, a fantastical, magical world full of orcs and elves, and the still-undeniable star power of Will Smith. That's a lot to throw into a cinematic blender, but *Bright* undeniably proves that Netflix is capable of churning out the same kind of high-concept, tentpole movies that modern Hollywood is built upon. The downside: it also proves Netflix isn't immune from Hollywood blockbuster problems.

[embedded content]

Smith stars as LAPD police officer Daryl Ward, who's coming back to the force after getting shot in the line of duty.

There’s a bit of tension between Ward and his orc partner Jakoby (Joel Edgerton), whom Ward blames for the incident. The presence of orcs is *Bright*’s big hook: it takes place in what seems like modern-day Los Angeles, except it’s a version of LA where fairies are a common, insect-like nuisance, orcs are societal outcasts, and elves dominate Beverly Hills as the top 1 percent of the top 1 percent. It’s also a world full of magic, and when Jakoby and Ward stumble upon a rare magic wand being carried by an elf named Tikka (Lucy Fry), they end up on the run from orc and human gangs, their fellow police officers, the mysterious Magic Task Force, and the wand’s true owner, the murderous Leilah (Noomi Rapace).

Writer Max Landis injects some timely, resonant themes into the script

Bright is a high-concept feature, and writer Max Landis (*American Ultra*, *Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency*) injects some timely, potentially resonant themes into his script. Early on, the movie attempts to address racism and the social caste system, with elves taking on the roles of the elite, and the orcs filling in for the racially profiled minorities and the lower classes. There’s an inherent tension between humans and orcs due to a long-ago war, and the two rarely mix and mingle. Someone like Jakoby, however, is stuck in the middle. Edgerton plays him like the happiest, most naive police officer in the history of film, and while he’s estranged from other orcs, he also can’t fit in with the rest of the cops who resent his presence in the LAPD as part of a diversity program. None of this is particularly subtle, but the basic dynamics echo our world cleanly enough to offer up some real ground to explore. And then the movie abandons its attempts at allegory altogether.

When the hunt for the magic wand kicks in, the real problems start. *Bright* is clearly intended to set up a sprawling, alternative world that could be revisited in sequel after sequel, but that world’s mythology is downright confusing. The

title describes people who can wield magic wands, but the hows and whys of that are never clearly explained. There's talk of a shadowy, big bad figure on the horizon, though he's clearly just being set up for an appearance in some hoped-for sequel. Rapace's Leilah is an incredible fighter, and excels at strutting around like someone who's watched the *Underworld* films one too many times, but there's little sense of emotional connection. *Bright* is a series of disconnected action vignettes that work as standalone sequences, but don't hang together in any kind of meaningful way. It's impossible to not think of *Suicide Squad*'s similar failings as *Bright* barrels from one dark, noisy scene to the next.




Photo: Netflix

The true bright spot is Edgerton's performance as the orc cop Jakoby. While he's hopelessly clueless when it comes to reading a room and realizing how despised he is, a youthful sense of hope and innocence about the character breaks through, which is even more impressive, given Edgerton's layers of prosthetic makeup. Ward and Jakoby's banter isn't anything spectacular – it's mostly Smith insulting the orc to his face – but the pair do wade through their expected journey toward grudging admiration, and eventual acceptance, in a satisfying way. Jakoby is even involved in one particular moment of hocus-pocus that feels legitimately magical, and it gives all the talk of special powers some real significance and weight, even when *Bright* does eventually devolve into chaos.

The HDR presentation creates a dark, gritty world that pops off the screen

Given that *Bright* is Netflix's bid to convince viewers that they can enjoy a theatrical blockbuster without the theatrical experience, it's even more important than usual to dive into

how the movie looks and sounds. The company is touting *Bright* as a title that takes full advantage of high-dynamic range video and Dolby Atmos sound. For some members of the press, the film was screened in a cozy, living-room environment on a high-end 4K OLED television and Atmos setup. (Generally, critics' screenings happen in conventional movie theaters.) The HDR presentation was unquestionably impressive, with Ayer and cinematographer Roman Vasyanov taking advantage of the format to create a dark, gritty world that nevertheless pops off the screen with bright, lifelike highlights. The level of detail is becoming familiar from theatrical formats like Dolby Vision and IMAX Laser, but is otherwise hard to accomplish at home. Press were also shown footage of the film with standard dynamic range, and it's certainly beautiful there, as well — but nothing compared to the vivid nature of the HDR imagery. Amusingly, there was one downside to the HDR presentation: the subtitles when orc or elf characters speak in their native language. The pure-white words were so overpowering due to the brightness of the TV itself that they tended to overpower the rest of the image.

The technology lets *Bright* work as the proof of concept Netflix needs, while the film itself incorporates enough different genre elements that it should have a little something for everyone. (The company is already taking advantage of the film's variety of genres through a customized, algorithm-driven marketing campaign.) But the calculation and strategy may be more interesting than the movie itself. Traditional theatrical blockbusters swing for the fences, and if a movie doesn't perform like *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* or *Thor: Ragnarok*, it could be considered a failure. That kind of blow-out performance requires positive word of mouth and plenty of repeat visits, something that could be a challenge for a movie that has the weaknesses that *Bright* does. But a Netflix film doesn't play by those same rules. It just needs to be one title among thousands that might speak to a given user on whatever day they have a casual desire to

watch something with action, magic, and a couple of actors that they enjoy.

Netflix still has every reason to try to create the movie version of something like *Stranger Things* — a property that dominates the cultural conversation and creates a powerful, dedicated fandom of its own. But having lower stakes for most of its projects will allow the company to experiment and take risks. That could very well end up being the secret to long-term success for Netflix's film ambitions. Whether it's a worthy goal or not, Netflix has shown it can produce its own middle-of-the-road action blockbuster. Now can it do better than that?

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