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Morbius Review: Marvel Vampire Movie Is Lifeless

Quick, someone drive a stake into Morbius before he rises for a sequel!



By [David Crow](#) | March 30, 2022 |

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Photo: Sony Pictures

About midway through Sony Pictures and Marvel’s ***Morbius***—a monstrous union of bottom of the barrel intellectual property and fiscal year planning—Jared Leto’s title character is in the belly of the beast. Before this moment, Dr. Michael Morbius (Leto) has traded in his rare blood condition for a case of vampirism, a Faustian bargain that’s led the NYPD to finger him for murders throughout the five boroughs. Whether guilty or not, Michael reaches for Bill Bixby levels of grandeur as he broods and in a hushed whisper warns the coppers, “I’m getting hungry. Believe me, you wouldn’t like me when I’m hungry.”

My good doctor, we don’t like you now! And nothing

that occurs before the credits roll changes that.

This might seem harsh for what on the surface is intentionally light entertainment—an attempt to mingle the bloodlines of modern superhero flicks with the far older lineage of vampire cinema. There are, indeed, elements that have as much to do with Bram Stoker as Stan Lee. During the opening sequences set in the jungles of Costa Rica, a then-disabled Dr. Morbius is told repeatedly by locals that he should *not* be traveling after sundown. Victorian chillers are echoed again when a container ship washes up ashore in New York harbor with (almost) every soul aboard drained of blood.

Nevertheless, the conflations and contortions of this

mash-up exercise never feel better than rote. It's a mechanical product constructed from the ruins of other, better movies, and all in an attempt to make a Spider-Man movie without Spider-Man. On a certain level you must pity the committee room where *Morbius* was designed (likely repeatedly during post-production). After all, you can't just make multiple franchises starring different Spider-Mans, right? Then again, after the success of *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, C-suite executives at Sony are surely second-guessing exactly that. Nothing about the version of *Morbius* they've unleashed on the world suggests they should do otherwise.

As yet another Spider-Man villain origin story without the Web-Head, *Morbius* begins at a point of intrigue in the Costa Rican rainforest and then jumps back in time. From there, we go through all the familiar beats. First we meet Michael as a young boy as he dreams of one day doing great things after being born with a disease of the blood that leaves him pale, limping, and staring down the barrel of a short lifespan. As a kid, he also meets his instant best friend at a clinic, "Milo," who conveniently has money and a devil-may-care attitude that perhaps covers up a dark side. Surely, that will not be relevant later.

When the boys grow up, Morbius is now a bearded Leto while Milo is a callow malcontent played by Matt Smith. Both are still desperate to find a cure as time is running

out. Luckily, Michael is close to cracking that miracle drug alongside Dr. Martine Bancroft (Adria Arjona, wasted) at a lab Milo is funding. So once Michael realizes the cure may lie with splicing their DNA with that of vampire bats, well, what could go wrong? Just hire a team of ~~blood bags~~ security personnel and conduct the experiment in international waters.

Faster than you can say Tobey Maguire, Leto is showing off a shirtless physique post-transformation, even as the film attempts to hand-wave away that he has to trip over more and more dead bodies to stay ripped.

A film that's been delayed and delayed again, *Morbis* belatedly arrives with a lot of curiosity and perhaps a fair degree of schadenfreude. But truth be told it's not any worse than last year's audience darling: the wretched *Venom: Let There Be Carnage*. Both movies are produced by Avi Arad and Matt Tolmach, and both feel like relics from the archaic days when mediocrity was treated as "good enough" by the fanboy community. Think *Ghost Rider* (2007) or *Elektra* (2005). And honestly, *Morbis* might be marginally better than that lot, including *Venom 2*, if only for not being quite so visually garish.

However, the key reason audiences seem to have responded to both *Venom* mediocrities isn't due to the prowess of storytelling or even the strength of shoddy CGI; it was to gawk at whatever the hell Tom Hardy was

up to while playing to the cheap seats. Unfortunately, ***Morbius*** has no such ghastly-yet-entertaining performance to hold up this house of sticks.

Perhaps remaining a wee bit sensitive due to the fair criticism aimed at his ambitious but flaccid Joker performance in 2016's ***Suicide Squad***, Leto plays Morbius relatively straight. He is neither fish nor fowl as a protagonist whom the audience is meant to root for as he searches first for a cure to his illness and then for his vampirism. But the role of a sympathetic vampire demands something of the operatic: a Jonathan Frid flash of charisma if not Tom Cruise's full wattage. Instead Michael Morbius is, much like everything else in his film, perfunctory. Which leaves audiences with nothing to cling to as the monotony drones on courtesy of a tedious script that collects banalities as if they were seashells.

Worse served, however, is Smith. Generally a fascinating character actor who makes clever choices in his television projects, be it as the title character in ***Doctor Who*** during that series' glory years or as the Duke of Edinburgh on ***The Crown***, Smith continues to be saddled with thankless villain roles in his Hollywood endeavors. And they don't come much more thankless than Milo, a character defined by one characteristic—desiring a cure—and little else beyond a general smarminess. With echoes of the worst cinematic version of the Green Goblin in the Arad/Tolmach-

produced *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, here is a poor little rich kid caricature who just does things so there can be a paper villain to knock down in Act Three.

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Such poor choices reveal a startling lack of imagination on the part of the filmmakers, who set out to make a vampire/superhero hybrid and wind up settling for two CG blobs hitting each other at the climax. In any vampire story, the central undead figure should be the star, even if he is an antihero. But unwilling or unable to step away from the same template as *Venom* and so many other superhero movie bottom-feeders, this picture's vampire conceit is wasted for a Hot Topic variation on a movie we've already seen done better and, maybe, worse.

Director Daniel Espinosa and his team of CG animators have a few amusing flourishes—such as a CG black shadow trailing Morbius whenever he goes into superhero/vampire mode. The effect wouldn't look out of place in a '90s era *Mortal Kombat* arcade cabinet. But when the whole movie is also just a beat 'em up, no

digital gimmicky (or bafflingly hackneyed post-credits scene) is going to hide how little life there is left in this bloody mess.

Morbius opens in theaters on Friday, April 1.

Rating:



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