

REVIEW: 'Thor: Ragnarok' - Relentless, messy, and the MCU at its most entertaining

🕒 November 3, 2017 👤 Chris Compendio (<https://mceuexchange.com/author/chriscompendio/>)

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Thor and Bruce Banner are on the distant planet of Sakaar—take deep breaths, Thor tells Banner, on the verge of panicking from his first off-Earth experience. This is a “place designed to stress me out,” as Banner describes it, with too many sources of visual and audio stimuli, colors everywhere, and things literally flying into his face.

This is what watching *Thor: Ragnarok* was like.

“Relentless” is the word that keeps coming to mind when I think about this film, and I will likely overuse it by the time this review is over. The film never slows down with gags, and there is always something new and weird that the film wants to show you. As Thor wanted Banner to do, I wanted the movie to slow down and breathe, but never did it really do that. While this leads to some flaws, the breakneck pace of *Ragnarok* ultimately ended up forming the absolute funniest and one of the most memorable experiences of the Marvel Cinematic Universe thus far.

It was director **Taika Waititi's** goal to make Thor the most interesting character in his own movie (this was certainly not the case in **Alan Taylor's** *Thor: The Dark World*), and the *What We Do in the Shadows* director mostly makes good on his promise. I can see why Waititi's main influence for this film was *Big Trouble in Little China*—that film also had a crazy, relentless pace, but more importantly it had a protagonist (Kurt Russell's Jack Burton) who was a good combination of confident and buffoonish. Like Burton, it seems at first that Thor just can't get a break, finding himself in absurd, fantastical and often inexplicable predicaments.

And gone is the Shakespearean-like prose that Kenneth Branagh forged in the first *Thor* movie (and Joss Whedon ran with in *The Avengers*), with Thor having the vocabulary and disposition of an American teenager (most of the characters in this film are like that, but it all fits in with Waititi's style of filmmaking and dialogue). But it makes sense the more you think about it, with Thor being more settled in with Earth during *The Dark World* and *Age of Ultron*. Buffoonery aside, Thor has come a long way since we first met him, being fully determined to stop the evil forces that be, formulating risky plans, and even finally getting wise to Loki's usual trickery—Thor even has a brief monologue to his adopted brother about the need to change over time.

But despite this film's differences with its predecessors, the familial theme still remains in the Thor series—with Thor in particular, through Odin, he harnesses a power that he had within. This is a movie about what is beneath the surface, and this manifests in multiple ways. Bruce Banner obviously has his usual Hulk issues, but on a larger scale the characters explore the hidden history of the Asgardian royal family, and what the heart of Asgard truly is (admittedly, it's a bit difficult to discuss those themes without spoiling the damn movie).

The juggling act of supporting characters by the film was far from perfect, but there is something to like about everyone in the film. Thor and Hulk were not characters who interacted too much in the *Avengers* films, but the chemistry between **Chris Hemsworth** and **Mark Ruffalo** is apparent from the get-go. Waititi has Thor and Hulk bicker like angry roommates, with silly dialogue despite the dire situations in the background. **Tom Hiddleston** is usually a joy to watch in these Marvel films, and while I was initially afraid that Loki was just shoehorned into this film due to his popularity, the film surprisingly does explore the depths of his character—but as always, expect some very predictable treachery from the guy. And **Anthony Hopkins** is finally given something to do as Odin, after doing essentially nothing in *The Dark World*.

But it's the new characters who really give this unique MCU installment some edge. **Tessa Thompson**, who I felt was excellent in *Creed* and mediocre in *Westworld*, is a force to be reckoned with as Valkyrie. My fear that she would just be a lazily-written stock "strong female character" (I have low expectations from hack Hollywood writers these days) were assuaged from her very first scene. Her energy throughout the film was astounding to watch. And finally, we have an MCU character who can beat Jessica Jones in a drinking contest. For the Grandmaster, I really believe that **Jeff Goldblum** had no lines of dialogue written for him, and after make-up and costume was directed by Waititi to just be Jeff Goldblum. I can't even decide on what my favorite quote from him was. **Karl Urban** certainly had his moments as the side-swapping and conflicted Skurge, but even after making a successful Shake Weight joke in 2017, the character has very little effect on the plot, save for literally one moment at the end; almost all of his screen time is looking very guilty and confused. But Waititi's own character of Korg was a joy—every line that came out of the Kronan's mouth was hilarious and memorable.

With **Cate Blanchett** as Hela, I certainly had some mixed feelings. Blanchett really chews on the scenery in every frame that she is in, and she never bores. But she's a much more interesting villain to watch on-screen rather than read on paper, because despite a fascinating backstory, her goals and motivation are as basic as really any MCU villain. The movie flips between Sakaar and Asgard so often that I actually forget about the Goddess of Death and her machinations every so often—cutting from the middle of the Thor/Hulk gladiator fight to an exposition-heavy Hela scene is one of the many jarring transitions in the film.

It was a movie that often felt like two movies at once, the A-plot being Thor's excursion in the gladiatorial world of Sakaar, and the B-plot somehow being the titular *Ragnarok* event—I think it is safe to guess that audiences will gravitate towards the latter more. Compared to the bleak scenario in the same old Asgard that Branagh introduced to us, the Sakaar shenanigans pop out more, being a *Flash Gordon*-esque 1980s romp. The jokes are absolutely relentless, and upon a re-watch of this film, I'd like to mathematically calculate the number of jokes-per-minute. This is a Taika Waititi film, and his voice is strong through its entirety. Most of the gags involve the subversion of "movie moments," tropes and cliches, something we saw a bit in **Shane Black's Iron Man 3**, but is far more prominent in *Ragnarok*.

From a Marvel Studios production, I expect some pretty swell (maybe not the *best*) production quality. Some of the visuals were a bit wonky, such as some of the green screen effects in the field in which Mjornir meets its end. But the choreography was quite excellent, one of my favorite moments being a brief spat between Loki and Valkyrie. But in essential action scenes such as the big gladiator fight between Thor and Hulk, the choreography takes a back seat to the character work, which is actually kind of a good thing. And since we spoke of the '80s in the last paragraph, how about that score from **Mark Mothersbaugh**? The Devo frontman was an inspired choice for this film. We live in a period of '80s nostalgia, with highly rated pieces of pop culture like *Stranger Things* and silly schlock like *Kung Fury* exploiting that nostalgia. No matter how you do it, just make sure you got the synthesizer handy. And even surprisingly, there were some brief musical callbacks to **Brian Tyler's Age of Ultron** and *The Dark World* contributions, and a reference to **Patrick Doyle's** superior *Thor* score.

By being a Taika Waititi film, I expected *Ragnarok* to mostly ignore such callbacks, but MCU references were done quite expertly—mainly by adding to the humor and levity of the overall film. Remember that Infinity Gauntlet easter egg in the first *Thor* that makes no sense in retrospect? The film has a funny moment with that. Visual gags from previous MCU films (gags that I will not spoil) are reprised in *Ragnarok* with hilarious results to long-time fans. And expect to see a funny re-enactment of a pivotal scene from *The Dark World*, a la "The Ember Island Players" from *Avatar: The Last Airbender* or the theatre troupe in season 6 of *Game of Thrones*. This is probably the most self-parodic the MCU has ever been, and I'm very okay with it.

So the relentless nature of the film worked out in its favor, for the most part. But let's talk about the pitfalls of the movie's absurd pace.

So Asgard's gone, eh? Real bummer. But even with a few shots of some extras crying, this monumental moment had little impact—earth-shattering moments barely register because of how quickly the movie moves. Remember the Warriors Three? Seeing them offed by Hela so quickly was unbelievable, with **Zachary Levi** having no lines of dialogue, only a yell before being unceremoniously killed (good luck with *Shazam*, my guy!). **Matt Damon** had more lines of dialogue in this film. It makes sense, as **Kevin Feige** said that this established Hela's threat, these were "noble deaths," but really only Hogan, who actually put up a fight, had that luxury. The audience had no time to fully take in those significant deaths, and the characters never take the time to acknowledge them.

Odin dies in our first proper scene with him, conveniently when Thor and Loki finally locate him. But even Frigga had her time in *The Dark World*, whereas in *Ragnarok* we zip straight into Hela's entrance and the shattering hammer, as we've seen over and over in the trailers. And while Bruce Banner doesn't "die" per se, turning into the Hulk when the possibility of Banner never coming back isn't made too big a deal at the end. Banner's decision to Hulk out seemed more impulsive rather than coming from any profound character arc.

You can tell which elements of the plot were already in place before Waititi jumped on board, and this film has some major repercussions for the *Thor* franchise characters, and likely the Marvel Cinematic Universe as a whole. Along with being a great Taika Waititi film, this film is pretty well-connected to the previous MCU offerings, even though *Ragnarok* mostly makes fun of them ("Sun's getting real low" got many laughs at my screening). But the "big" events, particularly the *Ragnarok* itself, seemed less interesting to Waititi, which take a backseat to the '80s-inspired Sakaar storyline.

The Verdict: Taika Waititi's contribution to the Marvel Cinematic Universe is brimming with so many (perhaps too many) things—color and humor are prevalent, but more importantly, fun ideas and profound character moments come out at the end. Not everything in this film will work for everyone who watches it, but the shotgun strategy of the film of shooting everything at you in a wide, random spread will guarantee that there will be something in *Thor: Ragnarok* that you will absolutely fall in love with. It certainly has major issues that are impossible to ignore—it isn't airtight as say, a *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*—but the amount of fun gained is so overwhelming, that in the end, who really cares about those flaws?

As I finish writing this, I cannot wait to see *Ragnarok* again.

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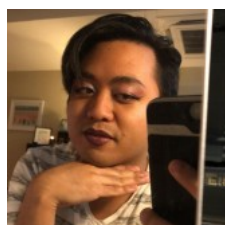
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My mission in life is convincing the world that "The Winter Soldier" is one of greatest movies of all time. I studied screenwriting at Carnegie Mellon University, and taught a class about the MCU and its creative influences. I write opinion features and record podcasts about popular culture for my website @BadHaircutProd, I interned for Paste Magazine, and am also writing for Flixist. Secretly hoping to be the next famous "Chris" in the MCU.



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Ian Fleming · 2 years ago

Saw Thor:Ragnarok last weekend here in the UK and I thought that it was a lot of fun. Taika Watiti's sense of humour is very similar to my own so I had no problems with the jokey tone. The score was excellent. The only thing that I didn't like was the squandering of The Warriors Three. And Heimdall. And the no show of Lady Sif. But other than that I would definitely say that I got my money's worth.

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Max452 → Ian Fleming · 2 years ago

I like the movie quite a bit, it was a blast. I also like Sif a lot, so I am glad she wasn't in Ragnarok to be squandered like The Warriors Three were. Hopefully she will be in Infinity War at least. The movie will need to explain her absence, like maybe Loki had sent her on a mission off Asgard since maybe she was the only one that started to realize something was off with "Odin."

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Ian Fleming → Max452 · 2 years ago

I'll happily go along with the "Loki/Odin sending Sif off on missions" scenario (I'm an AoS fan so I know that there is precedence for it on that show) because otherwise her rather inopportune absence from the fight to end all fights is jarring to say the least.

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Wynne Richport · 2 years ago

From everything I've heard, it kinda sucks that they've killed/ignored every single character from the past Thor movies except for Heimdall and Loki, just because the last two movies weren't all that well-received. The Warriors Three are Thor's best friends, and as far as I know, he doesn't even find out they perished! Sif was banished from Asgard by Loki (as Odin), and this is never even addressed in the film, despite being confirmed by Kevin Feige! I can understand the absence of Jane, Darcy and Selvig due to not being on Earth, but in a comedic movie, I feel like Darcy really would've shined. And Selvig is always a pleasure. And with a well-written script, maybe someone could've finally given Jane something interesting to do.

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Kamarul kir · 2 years ago

The movie is fun, colourful & exciting!! People may ask why Thor has a quite different character this time,my answer is that he's been a little bit crazy because all the adventure in search of Infinity stones.. About Warriors Three death,I've read articles on various site stating that they want to make Hela very powerful-first, destroyed Thor's hammer,then banish both Thor & Loki to Sakaar (maybe she thought that she's killed them) & then easily killed Thor's friends. I can accept it now but at least mention it when Heimdall said she's stronger everyday on Asgard.Maybe Thor should say like"Yeah.She murdered Warriors Three violently & I will avenge them somehow"..On Heimdall, good for Idris Elba to have lighter costumes,more screen times & arc but I want to see on screen how he was framed & ditch those cool golden armour & become Bishop-like in flashback screen..Skurge was a waste of character & talent of Karl Urban.He too killed easily but at least redeemed.I would like to see more of him in the future but even the Infinity stones seems cannot to have him back..As for Hela,she is formidable, dangerous & look hot. A good impression as MCU first proper female villain(feel sorry for Maya Hansen in Iron Man 3 because of Marvel's higher-up decision) & she's not dead isn't she? Because I think I saw she managed to escape Surtur's sword.

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Alving · 2 years ago

One thing that I found odd is that there was no Soul stone, I was totally expecting it, I had come to like the Heimdall theory or the fact the maybe Hela had it

somehow but oh well, no big deal, I guess we'll have to wait, maybe it'll be in Black Panther, an idea that makes sense but that I don't love, specially because of all places in the universe, there's yet another Infinity Stone on earth... really? And the idea being that the Soul stone is the reason why past Black Panthers can communicate with T'Challa is a little silly, considering that this is a freaking Infinity stone we're talking about, is the stone just sitting somewhere? Has no one ever figured out the other things it might do?... I don't know.

And on the other hand, waiting to introduce the Soul stone in Infinity War seems difficult considering how busy that movie must be, maybe Heimdall does have it and they'll find out in that movie or Avengers 4?

Oh and Ragnarok was good, don't mind my Soul stone rant. Good review, I always enjoy Chris' articles, I agree for the most part specially that part at the end, I also can't wait to see Ragnarok again.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



oh8four · 2 years ago

Can't believe we're done with 2017 as far as MCU movies are concerned! I expected these three to be in the top half in the whole lineup and they didn't disappoint, though it's significant to point out how light-hearted all three films are. I'm wondering if that's something we should expect for the rest of phase 3 or if Black Panther and Infinity War are going to give us balance with more serious tones.

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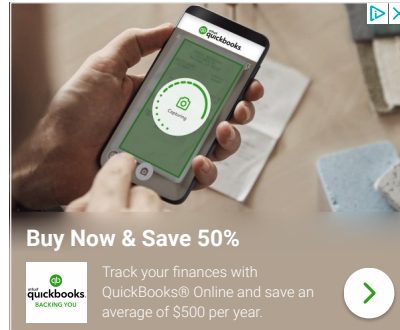
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