

James Mangold's *Logan*. The end of a legend

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Abstract

The film *Logan*, a twilight road movie, supposes the end of an emblematic character in the world of superheroes. It brings a trilogy based on said hero to a close, as well as an anthology associated with a group (X-men) of which he was a member. The present article analyzes the way in which the character is constructed, the staging around a trip that leads to the death and passing through a world marked by a zeal to control monsters.

Key words: Road movie; Cinema; Cinematographic analysis; Superheroes.

*A man has to be what he is, Joel.
They don't break molds. When you've killed...
You can't go back...
Wrong or not, it's a brand. A brand can't be erased.*
Shane

Logan, released in 2017, and directed by James Mamgold, is the last movie in the *Wolverine* trilogy, following *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (Hood, 2009), and *The Wolverine* (Mangold, 2013), and the tenth in the *X-Men* saga. It is based on the *Old Man Logan* comic (Millar & McNiven, 2008), and is protagonized by actors who gave life to the most legendary mutants for over ten years: Hugh Jackman, in his role as Logan, also known as Wolverine or Lobenzo, and Patrick Stewart in his tole as Professor Charles Xavier, both in their last appearance on the big screen as these characters.

The year is 2029, and we are with an old worn-out Logan who drives a limousine for a living and stays as far from the spotlight as possible. Retired in the Mexican city, El Paso, he cares for Professor Charles Xavier, who is old and infirm, and lives confined in an old steel tank. Caliban, the albino mutant with the ability to track other mutants, lives with them and serves as a nurse and care-taker for Professor X, when Logan is gone. All of his life is relatively calm, and only changes when he drinks in excess (which happens quite often). His life becomes uncontrolled when a child called Laura, also known as X-23, played by Dafne Keen, comes and destroys his attempts to remain hidden. Laura, who has powers very similar to his own is

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chased by an organization that seeks to eliminate her. This leads Logan toward a journey from the border with Mexico to North Dakota, where another group of children, apparently mutants, hide from this same organization.

Logan is the ending that no fan wants to see, especially for a character that has suffered as much as him. The film, as such is quite similar to an action classic, and shows a skilled, ill-tempered, and on occasions, drunken, protagonist who lives from day to day and needs to protect the defenseless. It is this same need that always gets him into trouble, and for which he winds up being chased by a series of assassins, all adapted to the road movie style.

From refugees to *western* to the road

Although at first glance, this is an action film, it also has clear elements of science fiction, as it is based on a comic, the topic of mutants, and its evolution in the future. It further combines the basic characteristics of *road movies*: a road trip with an established destination, relationships between characters. In this case, in a familiar environment that begins with enmity, and ends with strong attachments between protagonists. The opposing personalities, exclusion of some individuals by society, identity crisis, the harshness of life and civilization, among others (Correa, 2006), present a profoundly American movie, in which the protagonists are the road and errancy.

On this tape, the intertextuality is practically literal. According to Correa (2006), the *western* is the main precursor to road movies. Of all of the references found in *Logan*, excepting those of *X-Men*, the majority are related to this genre. The most obvious appears when they are in the hotel and the professor speaks to Laura about her favorite movie while they watch *Shane* (Stevens, 1953), which is an American *western* classic, which premiered in 1953 and was awarded an Oscar. *Shane* is one of the tapes used by Mangold as inspiration, so much so that the line used by Laura to bid Wolverine farewell is taken from one of the final scenes that, oddly, is a phrase that could be well-applied to the story *Logan*.

Similarly, the elements of violence, the horses, country music, dusty roads, and deserts, are characteristics of the *western*, taken from other films such as *The cowboys* (Rydell, 1972), *Unforgiven* (Eastwood, 1992), and *The Wrestler* (Aronofsky, 2008). We observe a very typical *western* aspect when X-24 appears for the first time, Wolverine's clone, who addresses the farmers. In this scene, one of them says "Here, I am the law", while pointing a pistol at him, a typical scenario in the genre. According to the director himself, in a web portal interview:

All (of these movies), in one way or another, are about a hero, as I described previously [...] a man is as far from being a hero as possible, a lost hero, or who carries a ton of shame on their back, escaping from a past, hiding (Page, 2017, s. p.).

However, the peculiar part of this film, produced by *Marvel Entertainment* and distributed by *Fox*, is that it is very different from conventional *Marvel* films and stories, in that it is a *road movie*. Therein lies the charm of the film *Logan*. This story, instead of showing a hero who advances and develops his powers each day, beating a number of villains, it steps away from

this perspective and shows us a hero in decline who plans to die in a world in which mutants are just a story, a legend, obliged to mix with society as social misfits after having been the saviors and idols of many. It is a response to the questions ‘and then what?’, ‘what happens to them?’, ‘do they live happily ever after?’, ‘how do they die?’, etc., that were never answered at the end of *Marvel* movies.

This itself is what the director sought when using other genres, not just in *western* productions, but also in other movies, such as *Paper Moon* (Bogdanovich, 1973) and *Little Miss Sunshine* (Dayton, 2006). The influence of these films is just that which lends its principal characteristic to *Logan*: being as far as possible from the typical *Wolverine* story. In this aspect, we can see that the tape uses minimal CGI, or computer generated effects, which are very common in superhero movies. Similarly, it was filmed in locations with natural light and scenery, which the director sought, and has more to do with his style. On this topic, he indicates:

...they are the opposite of what I consider to be the general aesthetic of modern movies based on comics, which would be an enormous amount of work on the green screen, false bottoms, stylized, and shiny. All of this was what I was trying to avoid (p. 2017, s. p.).

In this sense, we find a world situated in 2029, in which there is a market social conflict (which is occurring in the present), not over some mega villain who came to take over the world, but over the issue generated by immigrants, refugees, borders, and walls. These topics are not discussed directly on tape, but we do see an ideological background in the sense that the new characters are mostly Latin, and a part of the events occur on the Mexican border. Further, *Logan* is a character who has represented the abnormal, social misfits and the “unnatural”, which goes against the social and systemic norms that frame his nature.

Beyond the *cowboy* genre references, there are also the obligatory *X-men* references. As a special mention, one of the most exciting and iconic scenes is at the end, when Laura turns the cross on her father’s tomb so that it becomes an X. There are also references to the first *X-men* installments and the comics.

The rawness and violence that generate human suffering

The narration and the story, far outside the cinema superhero norm, present the most unexpected end for a hero. As previously mentioned, it is an end that nobody wants, especially for their favorite superhero. There is latent doubt about the end of the movies, when all of the tension with the villain has ended and our hero won. What’s left to do? It is uncommon that the end or the death of a superhero is shown, or even that we imagine their end, regardless of how idyllic it may be to have the power that makes them invincible. We forget something, though: they too are human. This film shows a painful and raw side of a character who became a legend.

The greatest success of *Logan* is that it is real. It is a movie authentic to the character, as its name indicates. It gathers all of the consequences of a life of suffering, pain, neglect, and

loss together. For a character who had always been characterized as aggressive and wild, there could be no other, less violent or less sentimental, end. For this reason, the *R* rating (restriction for those under 17 years of age) was accurate, because to be able to understand the character and his motives, it was necessary to show all of the rage and anger, accumulated for years, reflected in *Wolverine's* violence. Hugh Jackman explains this in an interview, in the same way in which it was explained to him by James Mangold:

James explained it beautifully when he said: This is a man who has watched all the people he knew and loved die. He has always been surrounded by violence—he himself is a weapon, the greatest force of destruction. But this has a cost, a price, and for him, this external armor. He is strong and annoyed, but one must understand the effects that his life, disappointments have had [...] all that which has occurred in his life explains his rage (Medela, 2017, s. p.).

Among the things that definitively must be highlighted is the acting work. Hugh Jackman, Patrick Stewart, Dafne Keen, Boyd Holdbrook (who plays the antagonist, Donald Pierce), Stephen Merchant (Caliban), and the remaining actors do stupendous work, as if they had done it before, as if it were the first time. One of the aspects that helps *Logan* to be such a good, fluid movie is that the characters are well-embodied in all settings, whether physical or emotional. Similarly, all characters are well-constructed, such that they support the plot, but do not steal Logan or Laura's thunder. The villains and secondary roles complement the story without excessive, unnecessary, exaggerated intervention.

Let's not forget that Laura, as she was created with wolverine genetic material, and being young and inexperienced, she has the same aggressiveness, violence, impulsivity, and savagery. We are the witnesses of stark scenes that would normally not be represented by a child, but which, again, are necessary. Dafne Keen's role is authentic to the substance that runs through her veins, the rage she expresses, her explosiveness, and general distrust of everyone (save Professor X). These are logical reactions for a child like her, who, in reality, is a lab experiment and who was treated as such, was intervened, shut away, and tortured.

All of the events that occur in *Logan* are necessary for the story. Pain is experienced not only by the protagonists, but is intensely transferred to us, the audience. One of the most impactful scenes is the tragic death of Professor X. However, had this not occurred, Logan would not have felt the anger that led him to attack his clone, X-24. Also, we mustn't forget Caliban. It is interesting that they would choose this character to serve as a helper and play an important role in the current life of the werewolf and Professor X. Surely, without him, the "bad guys" would have devised a way to find Logan and the girl, but the fact that he appears on screen, with an equally tragic death, causes us to think that they reaffirmed the idea that all "heroes", one way or another, meet their end, which reinforces the plot, showing that no one escapes death.

In terms of technical aspects, we consider the movie to be postmodern, as it is based on a comic and set in the future. However, it is a mixture between postmodern and classical. In this sense, the special effects employed are bare-bones. The first shot, general shots, and especially the low-angle shot, which is frequently used in the film, are combined with the

speed of the action scenes themselves. The staging is linear, transparent, and classical. In this sense, it should be underscored that it requires no artifice characteristic of postmodern visual saturation to make the story more interesting. It is exciting to see the way in which father and daughter unite to fight a common enemy, and the way in which the violence emanates from each of their pores to form a lethal duo in very natural scenes.

One vital aspect that differentiates *Logan* from other *X-Men* films is that it uses time linearly. Here, there are no cuts to the future or the past. And they are unnecessary. It is a simple story without precedents, and which seeks to lend a dignified and well-deserved end to a legendary character. The first images of a physically and mentally-deteriorated Logan are striking, compared to what we're used to. We see old, spent, and sick characters, in all aspects. Not only in their physique or personality, but in all that surrounds them: where they live, their clothes, their movements, their dialogues, and the objects that represent each of them (Logan's katana, Wolverine's dog tags, Professor Xavier's wheel chair, etc.).

The staging evokes the feeling that everything is old and spent. The fact that the events occur far from civilization reflects the protagonist's need to hide himself, to go unnoticed. There is significant make-up work, which shows an image of an old Logan. The same occurs with Professor Charles and Caliban.

One of the most exciting moments, as discussed previously, is the death of Professor Charles Xavier. It is not only because of the dialogues or context in which it occurs, but due to what happens before and after. The director did well with the staging, as before a tragic moment, there were times in which the characters were sitting or experiencing something they would have liked, this causes the loss to be felt even more strongly. This is among the most sentimental scenes in the *Wolverine* saga. It is gratifying that Logan, Laura, and Xavier could have a moment in which they were nearly a family, in a home environment filled with joy. Following the tragic events of that night, when Logan says goodbye to the professor and buries him in a small forest near a lake, we are shown that the human side outweighs the mutant side.

In the plot, there is only one weak spot: the lack of strength in the justification of why Logan decides to take Laura to North Dakota when he was already convinced that Eden was an invention from a comic book. He may have been moved by his newfound fondness for the girl, but it would seem that there were no reasons beyond that which he wished to show the girl about a place that did not exist. The decision was made in the midst of a discussion between two strangers with evident enmity.

Solitude and obscurity

As we have repeated throughout this essay, *Logan* captures a very raw side of the human condition: The way in which all living things age, become sick, and die. It also captures a dark side of the being considered an idol or hero: the loneliness that accompanies power, and the consequences of carrying such great weight throughout one's life--the need to protect the defenseless.

In terms of the movie's production, it is unexpected if compared with its predecessors in terms of narration scene construction, staging, technology use, etc. However, it remains true to the protagonists and shows its deepest facets. We think that because they have powers, they'll have happy endings, but the reality is that having this power has conditioned his life on earth and makes it an element at the service of others. Saving sometimes means killing. For Wolverine, such a wild character, killing is in his blood. It is logical that he lacks hope after having experienced what he did, that everyone who once loved him has died or disappeared. *Logan* is the story that we needed to understand such a complex character, to understand his motives. The success of this tape is that it is authentic, real, and shows the complexity of human suffering.

Laura comforts us, and reminds us that his legacy remains despite his death in exile. Almost forgotten, this girl lends our hero one of the feelings he had never experienced: love. She helps him to feel what Professor X always wanted him to feel. X-23 is loyal to her essence, and thanks to her, we know that the mutants have not died out. To conclude, we can say that the movie is fantastic, and is a look at the dark, sad side, but which mixes all of the necessary elements to understand not only the life of an extraordinary being like Wolverine, but also to give him a dignified end to him and all of his fans. As Professor Xavier said: "This is not the first time I've hurt people. Until today, I didn't know. You wouldn't tell me. So we just kept on running away from it [...] I think I finally understand you Logan" (Mangold, 2017).

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