

Film Feature: Global Hacking of ‘Blackhat’ is the Future of Action Movies

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CHICAGO – “Blackhat” is a hacker’s actioner of high-tech and low-tech genre jolts, but its construction provides a thrill of its own - that of witnessing the next era of the action movie. With “Blackhat,” director Michael Mann introduces the new standards for the everlasting genre as it continues to reflect modern anxieties, giving leading roles to two entities that Hollywood has previously treated as supporting acts, hackers and the nation of China. Incredibly on-the-moment, “Blackhat” recognizes that computer whizzes are becoming the physical heroes our connected world needs, and China is the partner that Hollywood will increasingly rely on for business, especially in selling films that look like “Blackhat.”

Mann’s film is the story of a co-investigation between the United States and China. A Hong Kong nuclear power plant and Chicago’s Mercantile Trade Exchange have been attacked, nonetheless by a no-name, no-motive menace who has hacked into their systems. A Chinese official named Chen Dawai (Leehom Wang) works alongside cyberterrorism agents in the FBI (played by Viola Davis and John Ortiz) to track the menace’s previous coding. Dawai insists on enlisting the person who initially created the code found at the crime scene - his former MIT buddy Nicholas Hathaway (Chris Hemsworth), who is currently serving time in prison.



[Read Nick Allen’s
full review of “Blackhat”](#)

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“Blackhat” introduces the action movie genre to our new world, or what the film’s advertising calls a “new battlefield.” Its opening shots present a strip of land vitally connected by lights. The images following then take us inside a computer, presented more like flying through canyons than looking at computer wiring, exploring our new global DNA - an intricate, endless array of lights and grids rendered assailable to the wrong person’s Enter key. The terrorism that threatens our world in “Blackhat’s” opening scene has a wider scope than our previous impressions of terrorism, as cyberterrorism provides the next step in making the networking of the world a vulnerability. (The villain states himself: “The moment you connect, you lose control,” and also “I can target anyone, anything, anywhere.”)

To battle this menace within the fantasy of action films, we don’t need someone who can simply kill bad guys, to paraphrase what John McClane’s son says that his father does in 2013’s “A Good Day to Die Hard.” We need a new hero. He’s got to be strong, he’s got to be fast (at typing), and he’s got to be fresh for the fight (over the internet).

In brilliant casting, “Blackhat” assigns an indeed larger than life leading action actor, and even People Magazine’s Sexiest Man Alive in 2014, to upgrade the previous side character of the hacker to the forefront. But, this one’s different than the “Matrix” hackers, or Lisbeth Salander from “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo,” or James Bond’s assistant Q, whose skills are associated with fantastical tech wizardry that usually only niche, younger people understand.



'Blackhat'

Photo credit: Universal

With Hemsworth's Hathaway character, an MIT dropout, that niche is now, and the amount of action required is the same. In "Blackhat," the requisite energy of a hacker is still physical, but keyboard mashing is now the most immediate skill. As the action of the story takes place within patches of code that's created and translated like sheet music, it is the concert pianist-like fury of fingers that provide the best tools for Hathaway and co. in keeping up with their menace. Not being able to see through a shady PDF (as Hathaway uses as a trick in the film) is like the new emasculation, akin to not knowing how to properly use a weapon.

Because of this, Hathaway's ability to smash someone's face into a table becomes the type of conceit that tech-savviness might have been for earlier action heroes of muscly importance. When Hathaway smashes his fist hammers "Thor"-style on a few people inside a restaurant, it's a physical ability that comes off like a contrivance; what fight club was he in at MIT? In a culture in which we revere creators who have been able to connect the world, but fear those who attack with the same keystrokes, a new archetype like Hathaway's can be considered our most adequate soldier.

Similar to its perspective on hackers as the heroes of now, "Blackhat" upgrades Hollywood's connections with China, a country that has played supporting parts in recent American action productions, a reflection of their status as the world's second biggest box office. For example, In 2013, "Iron Man 3" filmed a whopping three minutes of China-only footage, with pandering dialogue like, "Tony doesn't have to do this alone - China can help." A year later, Beijing and its mainlands became the third act playground for Michael Bay's "Transformers: Age of Extinction," which was chosen to close the Shanghai International Film Festival. Both films added Chinese supporting characters, played by superstars Bingbing Fan and Bingbing Li, respectively.



'Iron Man 3' in China

Photo credit: AFP/Getty Images

"Blackhat" boasts a savviness to this Hollywood hipness for China, and uses our relation with the country to create a thoroughly international

film of a shared stage. In Chicagoan director Mann’s movie, China has been boosted from its supporting role in those aforementioned American films to a lead role. And when it comes to this American film expressing the power of a wired-in world, China’s urban computer grid serves as the opening shots, its power source the means for worldwide worry. Before Hathaway is even introduced in an American prison, we experience the thoroughly-international “Blackhat” in its two non-English dialects, Mandarin and coding.

“Blackhat” foreshadows a state where America is not the number one priority, even in their own productions. The film is thoroughly a joint cause between American and Chinese talents, even when the list of players is trimmed in the second act. Progressing past its American predecessors, “Blackhat” distinctly does not give China the token treatment seen in “Iron Man 3.” If anyone is the token at all here - offering a kind of goofy, wedged-in nationalism that seems thrown at audiences as ticket bait - it’s Hemsworth, the American. We aren’t going to be number one for much longer.

Mann’s film knows that the size of China is crucial, and [that it’s predicted that their box office will be bigger than ours by 2020](#) [17]. Tentpole-by-tentpole, the Chinese box office becomes a higher priority for Hollywood products, as our projects will progressively mesh. “Blackhat’s” production company Legendary is by no coincidence fashioning that new level now, working on a Chinese/American production of “The Great Wall,” which will be directed by Zhang Yimou, star Matt Damon, and work from a script by a bunch of Americans. A statement of the production’s investment to its worldwide potential, that film is expected to have the largest budget for a film shot entirely in China. And that’s just one of many deals from Hollywood-based studios trying to double down on their film markets with genre fare similar to “Iron Man 3,” “Transformers: Age of Extinction,” and “Blackhat.”

“Blackhat” foreshadows Hollywood going fully global. Our action films, the most successful genre exports on the international stage, will have cyberterrorism to unite us, especially when IP addresses are more traceable than nationalities. Mann’s “Blackhat” is an incredibly “now” film, one that shows the world as a giant grid to be protected by international hackers, our countries connected in causes for personal missions for justice. Trailing action films that don’t share some of “Blackhat’s” focus will only seem like relics in comparison.

 [Read Nick Allen’s full review of “Blackhat”](#) [18]

“Blackhat” opens everywhere on January 16th. Starring Chris Hemsworth, Leehom Wang, Viola Davis, Wei Tang, John Ortiz, Ritchie Coster, and William Mapother. Written by Morgan Davis Foehl. Directed by Michael Mann. Rated “R”.



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