

Man of Steel: Superman returns...again

By Hiram Lee
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Directed by Zack Snyder, written by David S. Goyer and Christopher Nolan

When it was released in 2006, *Superman Returns*, directed by Bryan Singer, the first film to feature the most famous of all comic book superheroes in two decades, failed to meet studio expectations, as it took in “only” \$391 million at the global box office. The decision was then made to scrap a proposed sequel to the film, along with cast and crew. A new “reboot” of the Superman franchise was set into motion, and the result is *Man of Steel*. It is said to be the first in a new trilogy of Superman films.

Warner Bros., the studio responsible for *Man of Steel*, hardly pretends that the new film, directed by Zack Snyder, is anything but a market product on which a great many financial hopes are riding. *Variety* reports that “Warner Bros. motion pictures group president Jeff Robinov went so far as to predict it [*Man of Steel*] will be the studio’s highest performer ever.” Such a success would mean the film, which cost \$225 million to produce and another \$150 million to market and release, would earn more than \$1.3 billion around the world. *Variety* continues, in its inimitably crass manner: “The potential business impact of a ‘Man of Steel’ windfall could be profound for Warner Bros., which needs to build new franchises that can yield the kind of reliable profits that sprang from the now-retired ‘Harry Potter’ movie series.”

To discuss the artistic merits of the film in this context seems largely an irrelevancy, but... *Man of Steel* begins by retelling the familiar story of Superman’s origins, with minor variations. The war-torn planet Krypton is about to be destroyed by an unstable core. Before disaster strikes, scientist Jor-El (Russell Crowe) sends his infant son to Earth so that he will not perish with the rest of his race.

As the ship carrying his son is launched, Jor-El is killed by his rival, the corrupt General Zod (Michael

Shannon), who is banished to the “phantom zone” for his crime. When the planet explodes, it frees Zod and his imprisoned cohorts. They go in search of the last son of Krypton and the genetic blueprints of their people, believed to be in his possession, hoping to rebuild Krypton anew on Earth.

The film then picks up with the adult Clark Kent (Henry Cavill), not yet the “mild-mannered reporter” for the *Daily Planet*, as he wanders the US, trying to make sense of his place in the world. He uses his powers to help those he meets along the way. Flashbacks give us a glimpse into his adolescence, the discovery of his super powers and the need to keep his identity a secret.

The uncovering of an alien ship buried in the Arctic provides the adult Clark with further clues about his past and an understanding of the role he is to play on Earth. *Daily Planet* reporter Lois Lane (Amy Adams), tracking the story of the mysterious Kent and the people he has saved, finally locates the anonymous hero and is faced with the choice of protecting him or revealing his identity to the world. A relationship begins.

When General Zod arrives on Earth and threatens to wreak havoc if the son of Krypton does not surrender to him, Kent, as Superman, must defeat him and save the planet.

Audiences have turned out to see *Man of Steel* in large numbers, hoping to see something lively and entertaining. Unfortunately, the film is anything but that. Zack Snyder’s work is a mostly tedious and mind-numbing affair.

For the most part, comic books and their movie adaptations paint with big strokes of primary color. This tends to be true not only of the ink in use, but of the ideas. As if to acknowledge the weakness of their source material, the filmmakers have said they set out to make a Superman film more rooted in reality.

Christopher Nolan, the director who took a similar approach with the recent Batman trilogy of films, served as co-story writer and producer on *Man of Steel*.

However, in their efforts to bring some kind of “realism” to the work, the *Man of Steel*’s creators (and other makers of contemporary comic book films) only succeed in making their heroes more brooding and their films more self-important (and silly). As recently as the *Superman* series featuring the late Christopher Reeve and Margot Kidder (1978-1983, directed by Richard Donner and Richard Lester), the filmmakers and performers had the good grace not to take the goings-on any too seriously.

In any event, the moral quandaries the central characters face in today’s superhero films never rise above cliché or scratch the surface.

There are, one might add, certain dramatic limitations inherent in a story about a virtually indestructible, near-infallible hero. One doesn’t hope he saves the day so much as one merely waits, patiently or impatiently, for him to do it. *Man of Steel*’s action sequences, including countless mid-air fistfights, take up most of the film’s running time and seem especially brutal. It is unpleasant to watch as the characters again and again rain the most punishing blows on one another. Like two missiles, Superman and General Zod hurtle through the sky, careening off of this or that obstacle, leaving the latter in ruins. Much of the action occurs at such a furious pace one can’t even begin to understand the images flashing across the screen. There is not much in the way of tension or suspense.

As the super-powered heroes and villains battle in the skies, the helpless, dust-covered humans on the streets below can only watch in horror and work their way out of the resulting debris. Many of the images are reminiscent of survivors and bystanders seen in footage of the September 11 attacks. Such imagery now appears in a great many comic book hero films. The connection between those events and the social changes that have taken place, on the one hand, and the proliferation of films containing ultra-violent, super-powered law-and-order figures exacting revenge on behalf of the injured masses (generally American), on the other, would be worth exploring further.

It is also worth noting one other striking and unexpected moment in *Man of Steel*. In one scene,

Superman knocks a surveillance drone out of the sky. It falls in front of the vehicle carrying a leading US military official. Superman then reassures the military brass of his thoroughly American credentials. They will have to learn to trust one another and work together, Superman tells him. He works hard to convince them he is their ally throughout the story. Never has the hero seemed more from another world.

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