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On CGI and the Best Superhero Movie Yet

by *Laurence Maslon* October 24, 2013

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Margot Kidder and Christopher Reeve in 'Superman II'/Image © Warner Bros.



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Editor's Note: Laurence Maslon is an associate arts professor and associate chair at NYU's Graduate Acting Program. He has written the companion volumes to Michael Kantor's documentary series, Make 'Em Laugh and Broadway: The American Musical, in addition to writing several other books about the theater and

editing three volumes for the Library of America. He is the host of "Broadway to Main Street," a weekly radio show and lives in New York and Long Island with his wife and son. His latest book is [Superheroes! Capes, Cows, and the Creation of Comic Book Culture](#), companion to the PBS documentary "[Superheroes](#)."

With all the attention placed on big blockbusters in the superhero genre, it's easy to forget that this CGI-enhanced, million-dollar budget, billion-dollar box office trend is only that – the latest trend in putting great comic book characters up on the screen. The serials of the 1940s put crude black-and-white versions of Captain Marvel, Batman, the Phantom, Captain America, and Superman into movie theaters every Saturday. The late 1970s gave us an explosion of somewhat uncomfortably rendered adventurers on the television console: Wonder Woman, Spider-Man, the Hulk, Captain Marvel again (under the "Shazam" title). Goodness knows these versions often bore little resemblance to the comic books that readers loved at the time, but if you were in the right demographic – and you had the right actor in the role – you readily suspended your disbelief. Despite laughable special effects (and effects designed to make you laugh), when I was growing up in the 1960s, no one could tell me that George Reeves and Adam West *weren't* Superman and Batman respectively (or that Frank Gorshin wasn't the Riddler).

Still, the mastery of CGI has revolutionized the superhero film genre from a cozy fandom footnote to a phenomenon that can be enjoyed by audiences "of all ages" – especially if they are still kids at heart. For my money, the Marvel characters have turned out best in the last decade or so: Films such as "Spider-Man 2," "X-Men: First Class," and "The Avengers" really caught the "zing" of a comic book. They had great action, great characters, and a great sense of humor when the

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I know Jennifer Lawrence would be to young for the role, but I can't help but picture her as Bernadette.

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We were created. I believe in Jesus. "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' ...

moment demanded it. (The latter may simply be more of a Marvel “trademark.”) I loved the prison breakout sequence from “Watchmen” and a few moments from *Batman Begins*, such as the climatic train scene (but why do the Nolan films have so much Bruce Wayne and so little Batman? Adam West spent a lot of time in *his* longjohns).

But, as Stan Lee, who knows a thing or two about adventure narrative put it in our companion book to PBS’s “Superheroes”: “It’s really very simple. It depends on the person who’s written it, and directed it, and acting in it. When you get all of the elements together and it’s well done, it works.” In my opinion, the superhero film that got all of it together was made thirty-three years ago: “Superman II.”

Released concurrently with the terrific 1978 blockbuster, it actually ups the ante. It has a great plot (will Superman turn his back on his heroic destiny in order to achieve mortal happiness?); it has great characters in the Phantom Zone criminals; it has great dialogue (“Kneel before *Zod!*”); super action (for the time) as the Kryptonian adversaries toss MTA buses at each other (one of them advertises “Evita”); and the incomparable Christopher Reeve had honed his groundbreaking interpretation with gravity, humor, and even tragedy. CGI may come and go (actually, of course, it’s here to stay), but comic book fans and movie fans alike always relate to characters and their conflicts first and foremost. As Gene Hackman, the toupeed Lex Luthor in “Superman II” allows himself to say (accidentally) toward the film’s conclusion: “Superman! Thank God!”

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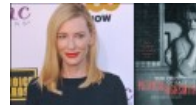
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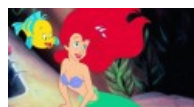
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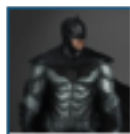
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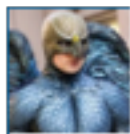
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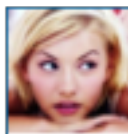
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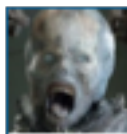
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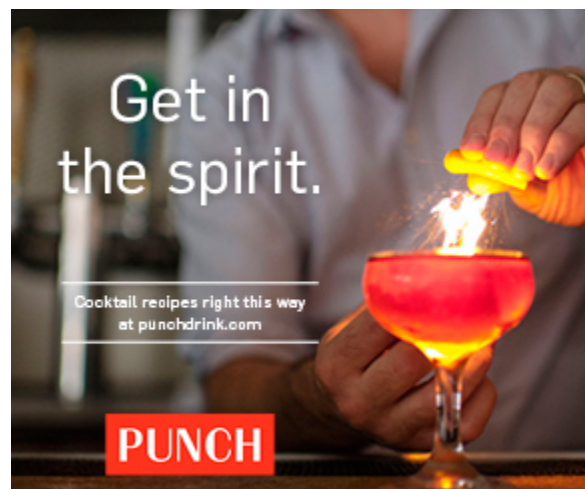


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