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## REVIEWS



MAN OF STEEL

★ ★ ★ | Matt Zoller Seitz

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The title "Man of Steel" tells you what you're in for when you buy a ticket to this immense summer blockbuster: a radical break from the past. The absence of the word "[Superman](#)" tips us off that this new picture is less a standard reboot than a top-to-bottom re-imagining. Whether you approve of the result will depend on what you think Superman is, or should be. Either way, this is a 2013 version of the story: big, dark, convoluted and violent, chock full of 9/11 style imagery of collapsing skyscrapers and dust-choked disaster survivors. It's goodhearted and sincere but not particularly funny or sweet. It's Superman all butched-up, alienated and frustrated, chiseled and hunky but not inclined toward courtly romance, defending a planet so terrified by conspiratorial evil and apocalypse threats that it figures anyone who presents himself as good guy must have ulterior motives. Steel is what you need to have in your spine if you're going to be super in this world.

Directed by [Zack Snyder](#) ("[Watchmen](#)," "[Sucker Punch](#)") and overseen by producer-filmmaker [Christopher Nolan](#) (the Dark Knight trilogy, "[Inception](#)"), the movie delivers on the promise of its title and then some. "Man of Steel" largely abandons the sunny spirit, sly charm and kooky humor of the Christopher Reeve-starred '70s and '80s films (as well as Bryan Singer's dutiful homage to them, 2006's reviled "[Superman Returns](#)"). It brings the character in line with the recent fashion for gritty, brutal, rather morose tales of superhuman or super-talented loners struggling to defend a world that doesn't appreciate their pain or their sacrifices. (This time out, the big guy's suit isn't Dick Tracy red, blue and yellow, and it's made of what looks like high-tech chain mail that's described as battle armor as opposed to a uniform or costume, and he wears his underwear on the inside, thank you very much.) All in all, the movie's as serious as a heart attack. When humor bubbles up, welcome though it is, it feels odd, like a tonal mistake. Scene-for-scene, it's a first-rate example of a Hollywood fantasy released in the early 21st century, a state-of-the-art, latest-model, new-car-smell summer blockbuster. It has wobbly handheld camerawork that signifies "authenticity," a glum color palette, high-tech hardware whose designs crib from "[Alien](#)," "[Dune](#)," "[Independence Day](#)" and Spielberg's "[War of the Worlds](#)," skyline-shattering super-fights, and a detailed mythology that's meant to carry the story through a Dark Knight or Marvel-style series with motifs, Easter eggs and interlocking subplots.

"Man of Steel" also breaks with past "Superman" films in how it tells its story. The script, which is credited to [David S. Goyer](#) of the "[Blade](#)" films, begins with a prologue on Krypton, envisioned here as a John Carter-style, fantasy-inflected, heavily CGI'd land of towering hyper-structures, slate-dark "Matrix"-looking hovercraft, and winged beasts. Superman's father Jor-El ([Russell Crowe](#)) and mother Lara ([Ayelet Zurer](#)) are fighting two battles at once: to convince the planet's government that its environmental recklessness is causing the planet's core to melt, and to contain a rebellion led by General Zod ([Michael Shannon](#)), who's outraged that Jor-El dared to violate Krypton's biological breeding protocol and conceive a son, the future Superman, the old-fashioned way. Zod and his followers are exiled into the Phantom Zone in ships that look mortifyingly like the hero's spacecraft in the 1970s porn spoof "Flesh Gordon" (the film's design is a riot of phallic and vaginal imagery, as most post-"Alien" sci-fi films are). Krypton explodes. Kal-El zips off to earth and is raised by Ma and Pa Kent ([Diane Lane](#) and [Kevin Costner](#)), in idyllic prairie surroundings that call for an Aaron Copland score (though [Hans Zimmer](#) does just fine). After the very Christ-like timespan of 33 years, we pick up Kal-El/Clark's story just in time for him to unlock the destiny that his father and

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mother insisted on keeping a secret. Their motives were good: they predicted the suspicion and hostility he would encounter once he put on his tights — sorry, armor! — to fight Zod and prevent Earth from being flattened to re-create Krypton. (The plot to create a resurrected or zombified Krypton is but one of many echoes of "Superman Returns," though given that film's poor reception, I'm sure the filmmakers would prefer that nobody pointed them out.)

[Henry Cavill](#) plays the adult Clark as...well, the hero. Cavill's not bad; in fact he's quite likable, and spectacularly handsome, natch. But there's no Reeve-like radiant comfort in his acting, because the character as imagined here is even more of a blank screen for our projections than most movie superheroes. Like Christopher Nolan's Batman series, the Goyer-scripted "Man of Steel" reveals key moments in the hero's development through flashbacks triggered by present-day traumas, and it sprinkles them throughout the story in an offhand way that makes sections of the film play like a trailer for itself. A few parts almost seem to be unfolding along simultaneous timelines. This is not just defensible but appropriate, considering that so much of the story is about having to function day-to-day while carrying around the crushing weight of your own past, as well that of a long-extinct motherworld whose inhabitants you never got to know.

The most striking scenes show the young Superman struggling to make sense of the powers that his adoptive parents know he can't display for fear of being labeled a freak or a monster. One astonishing early sequence shows young Clark zoning out during a school lesson because he's overwhelmed by all the data Hoovered into his brain by his super-senses. When he looks at his classmates and teachers, he sees their bones and veins and organs through their skin, and because he hasn't mastered the art of filtering sound, he hears a cacophony of voices in his ears, like the burbling of a crowd at a ball game. There's a touch of "[The Incredibles](#)" in the scenes of Jonathan Kent explaining why Clark can't reveal the full extent of his specialness. Costner is superb in these moments, projecting an unforced, Old Movie-style decency that may remind fans of his performance in "[Field of Dreams](#)." (It's as if Ray Kinsella, the adult son in "Dreams", has become the father in this one — an icon of kindness, yet sad-eyed and mysterious; "worn down by life," as Ray described his own pop.) When Clark, who's passed the years on a fishing boat while rocking a "Perfect Storm" beard, finally heads north and gets his own pad, the Fortress of Solitude, he acquires a second father, his biological daddy Kal-El. Supes the elder becomes a present-tense spirit guide or Obi-Wan figure, advising and arguing with Clark (and later, Zod!).

This is all good stuff — though it was done less ostentatiously in the TV series "Smallville" — but it's all a setup for the film's second and third acts, which juxtapose Clark's transformation into Superman with Zod's return to earth on a mission of vengeance and world-building. And it's here that the film loses something, I think. It's not that what's onscreen isn't involving; for the most part it's splendidly realized, even though the muted color palette, shaky camerawork and mostly secondhand design concepts won't win any prizes for originality. I like how Snyder, Goyer and Nolan bring together Superman's embrace of his destiny and Zod's arriving on Earth and assuming the mantle of visionary warrior-leader that Jor-El denied him back on Krypton.

The notion that politics is personal gets a workout here. Zod isn't as amusingly effete and sadistic in "Man of Steel" as he was in "[Superman II](#)", but he's not without humor, sometimes inadvertent. Shannon, an expert in projecting self-defeating macho rage, makes Zod less of a straightforward evildoer than a tragically misguided antihero. There are times when his rivalry with Clark/Superman recalls the tension between Hawkeye and Magua in Michael Mann's "[The Last of the Mohicans](#)," in that the villain is only a villain if you're looking at him through the eyes of the people he's steamrolling. You don't condone his actions, but you understand his motivations. In his own twisted way, he's trying to preserve and continue the legacy of a vanished world, and something in Cavill's beefy Boy Scout performance suggests that Superman gets this — that he understands Zod even though he knows that he has to destroy him. The hero's struggle not to give into rage and pettiness against bullies like Zod, to use his power to heal and save rather than destroy, is explored with more finesse than you might expect.

And what of Lois, played here by [Amy Adams](#)? Well, here's where things become really unfortunate: she's portrayed as a capable reporter, much more so than in previous screen incarnations, but I didn't detect much chemistry between her and Clark, even when you factor in the ungodly pressure they're both under. While Clark is dealing with his demons and the world's, she's uncovering a government conspiracy to hide evidence of a buried Kryptonian spacecraft, then struggling against her *Daily Planet* editor Perry White ([Laurence Fishburne](#)) for the right to publish the truth she can feel in her bones, even though she doesn't have all the facts to prove it. There are flirtatious moments between her and Clark, but they're few and far between, and I'm not convinced that the apocalyptic events surrounding the couple are the only reason for this.

The most striking and curious aspect of "Man of Steel" is the way it minimizes and even shuts out women. Lois is an important character, but only for how she furthers Clark/Superman's attempts to understand himself and claim his destiny; she's ultimately much less of a fully-realized, freestanding human being than the kooky, narcissistic Lois Lane played by [Margot Kidder](#) in the Reeve films, or even Kate Bosworth's Lois in "Superman Returns," a melancholy figure defined by her capacity to move on after the hero's abrupt departure from Earth. Adams' Lois is tough and smart but has no personality, only drive, and she's not as integral to the action as she seems to be on first glance; it's telling that this film gives equal or greater weight to the story of an understandably distrustful general (Chris Meloni) whose relationship with Superman lets him become the stand-in for a doubting Earth, a role filled by Lois in the 1978 film. "Man of Steel" is driven almost entirely by machismo. Ma Kent is endearing, but she's simply not as powerful a presence in the story as the doomed Jonathan. The hero's birth mother vanishes from the picture after the prologue, her absence explained in a throwaway line that Crowe seems embarrassed to have to deliver. The uncharitable might notice that when a stupid question has to be asked, or a trivial remark made, it's often delivered by one of a handful of women in a room full of burly guys; they may also note that while every significant male figure in "Man of Steel" is given an option to be physically brave under horrible circumstances — even grey-haired Pa Kent and Perry White have their moments — females exist, for the most part, to be saved, or to have things explained to them.

Considering that every previous "Superman" movie put the courtship dance between men and women at the heart of its action — particularly "Superman: the Movie", "Superman II" and "Superman Returns" — the fact that "Man of Steel" has a No Girls Allowed sensibility seems like a deliberate creative choice, a way to reassure young male viewers accustomed to the glib swagger of "[Iron Man](#)" and the dire self-pity of Nolan's Batman that this hero is very much in the same wheelhouse. There's no possible way anyone can mistake this new movie for a Chick Flick. (Zod's right-hand woman Fajora-UI, [Antje Traue](#), is a powerful presence, but she's even more desexualized than Lois; her character's main trait is a pathological hatred of men.)

Again, that's state-of-the-art, very much in line with the way superhero movies are done now. But this modernization feels retro because it comes at the expense of an important and under-acknowledged part of Superman's appeal: virtually alone among big-name superheroes, he's a romantically and sexually mature man who seems to truly like and be comfortable around women. If you're wondering why I could say so many positive things about "Man of Steel" and only give it three stars, the preceding two paragraphs are your answer. In some ways this movie represents a step forward for Superman on film, but in this one significant respect, it takes the series at least two huge steps back. Viewers who predicted that Warner Bros. and DC Comics were trying to turn Batman into Superman were right, sort of. "Man of Steel" is in many ways an astonishing movie, but it won't do anything to quell complaints that the big-budget superhero genre is basically adolescent, that its creative development has been arrested for decades and might not budge anytime soon.

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MAN OF STEEL (2013)

Cast

Henry Cavill as Superman / Clark Kent

Amy Adams as Lois Lane

Diane Lane as Martha Kent

Russell Crowe as Jor-El

Michael Shannon as General Zod

Kevin Costner as Jonathan Kent

Christopher Meloni as Colonel Hardy

Laurence Fishburne as Perry White

Jadin Gould as Lana Lang

Director

Zack Snyder

Producer

Christopher Nolan

Screenplay

David S. Goyer

Story

David S. Goyer

Christopher Nolan

## Characters

[Joe Shuster](#)

[Jerry Siegel](#)

## Original Music Composer

[Hans Zimmer](#)

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