



REVIEWS



BATMAN V SUPERMAN: DAWN OF JUSTICE

| Matt Zoller Seitz

March 22, 2016 |

"Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice" is state of the art epic superhero filmmaking. That's a compliment if you prefer these movies to be ponderous, disorganized and glum, but a warning if you prefer tonal variation from film to film and scene to scene, and have a soft spot for storytelling that actually tells, you know, a *story*, as opposed to doing an occasionally inspired but mostly just competent job of setting up the next chapter in a Marvel-styled franchise.

The story begins with yet another flashback to young Bruce Wayne witnessing his parents'

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murder by a gun-wielding mugger, followed by a bracketing trauma, his encounter with a flock of bats in a cave near stately Wayne Manor. As co-written by [Chris Terrio](#) and [David S. Goyer](#) ("[Blade](#)," "[Dark City](#)") and directed by Zack Snyder ("[Man of Steel](#)," "Sucker Punch," et al), this sequence initially plays like one more visit to a dried up well. But it makes sense when you get to the next scene, a replay of the Metropolis-leveling "Man of Steel" showdown between Superman ([Henry Cavill](#)) and General Zod (Michael Shannon) from the point-of-view of Bruce Wayne/Batman ([Ben Affleck](#)), who sees hundreds of members of his adopted professional "family" killed when Wayne Industries' Metropolis office is damaged in the super-fight. (The sequence also portrays Wayne as a somewhat detached one-percenter who's ashamed at having taken his work "family" for granted—a thoughtful touch.)

This is the film's most affecting and original sequence, in large part because it takes a persistent complaint against "Man of Steel"—that the supposed Boy Scout from Krypton was callously oblivious to collateral damage—and retrofits it, so that it looks like something "Man of Steel" always meant to do, the better to provide strong, simple motivation for Bruce. Re-traumatized by a 9/11-style disaster that kills dozens of his employees, including a young girl's mother, he channels his anger and helplessness into a preemptive war against Superman, to be carried with biomechanical armor and Bat-tech fortified by Kryptonite. He sees Kal-El as a clueless and careless false god whose powers must be neutralized, lest humans get so comfortable with worshipping "aliens" that they set the stage for a takeover by more Zods.

I keep referring to the cowed hero as Bruce because, more so than any Batman picture, "Batman v Superman" treats the Caped Crusader as a scary-awesome manifestation of ordinary neuroses, practically a lycanthropic rodent-beast who emerges at night, summoned by his own monogrammed spotlight-moon. In comparison, Superman seems a more balanced character: aside from the presence or absence of glasses or a cape and the stress of maintaining his cover story (he gets so preoccupied by an unauthorized investigation of Batman's vigilantism that he starts screwing up his regular duties at the *Planet*), Clark Kent and Superman are essentially the same guy.

The title promises an even distribution of screen time. But despite the presences of touchstone DC characters—including a smarmy, psychotic, tech-douche version of Lex Luthor ([Jesse Eisenberg](#), fidgeting and yammering like [Jeremy Davies](#)); ageless Amazon warrior Wonder Woman ([Gal](#)

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Gadot); ace reporter and Superman gal pal Lois Lane ([Amy Adams](#)); Alfred the Butler (Jeremy Irons); *Daily Planet* editor Perry White ([Laurence Fishburne](#)) and Ma Kent ([Diane Lane](#))—this is ultimately an overstuffed, overpopulated, awkwardly plotted Batman picture that relegates the Man of Steel to a glorified supporting role. (If industry reports are to be believed, this was a last minute decision by Warner Bros., which preferred the financial safe-bet Batman to the recently revitalized Supes.)

Unfortunately, the script's early promise recedes as the movie unreels. "Batman vs. Superman" is a disorganized, lead-footed movie that carries itself with unearned confidence; you see every card it's about to play ten minutes before the movie plays it, yet Snyder doesn't just slap each one down on the table with gusto, he keeps pointing to it and telling you what rank and suit it is. We surely would have surmised that the identical first names of Bruce's dead biological mother and Kal-El's adoptive mother—Martha—would come into play eventually, but the film is so worried that somebody might not get it that it has Thomas Wayne croak "Martha" with his dying breath, then finds ways to keep repeating "Martha" over the next two hours, building toward a reprise-flashback of Bruce's parents' murder that will bring latecomers up to speed.

There are other repetitious touches along these lines, including multiple, vocal assurances that the characters are fighting in depopulated areas—a clumsy defensive strike against "Man of Steel" hand-wringing. It all seems pointless when you realize how little effort has been devoted to embellishing the characters in Snyder's "[Nashville](#)"-sized cast, none of whom come alive as they did in [Tim Burton](#)'s or [Christopher Nolan](#)'s or even [Joel Schumacher](#)'s Batman pictures. Eisenberg's Luthor might have been a fascinating third panel in the movie's gallery of lonely and haunted man-children (in a harrowing moment, he rails against "daddy's fist and abominations"), but he mostly comes off as a 21st century brogrammer, all tics and threats and unwanted physical advances. Adams' Lois Lane is once again reduced to a poker-faced damsel in distress. [Jeremy Irons](#)' Alfred isn't a patch on [Michael Gough](#)'s or [Michael Caine](#)'s. Gadot, a lithe beauty with a musical accent and a steely demeanor, is granted less depth than a typical Bond girl. The movie shows little interest in explaining or justifying its knotted-up subplots, and its detours into franchise-building are often self-defeating. The most misguided is a dog-leg near the end: just when the story starts building up a head of steam, it pauses for a recitation of the DC heroes we can expect to see in the first full-on Justice League movie.

"Batman v Superman" tries to compensate for these flaws and others through sheer scale and volume. It's two-and-a-half hours long, louder than an airstrip at O'Hare, gins up "excitement" with shaky-cam footage and hyperactive cutting, and has both figuratively and literally dark images. Even its daylight scenes seem to occur at dusk, thanks to the way Snyder and his cinematographer Larry Fong bleed the color out and shroud the characters in smoke. Luthor's mutant Kryptonian monstrosity Doomsday—spoiler warning not required; its presence was revealed in PR photos and promotional footage weeks ago—is a generic hell-beast, all ropy muscles, spiky encrustations, and Rancor-like teeth. Reports of a forthcoming "R"-rated DVD version aren't surprising: the movie's juicy stabbings, brandings-by-Batarang, close-quarters gunshots, scenes of sadistic kidnapping and torment, and generally despairing tone are Urban Thriller 101. The film is more effective when it's channeling expressionist horror movies by filming action from disorienting angles and letting blood seep from strange nooks and crannies. When it borrows iconic designs and situations from its primary inspiration, Frank Miller's politically satirical, meticulously plotted graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*, it's like a kid stumbling around in dad's boots.

There are a few brilliantly realized moments, the acting is mostly strong despite the weak script (Affleck and Cavill are both superb—Affleck unexpectedly so), and there's enough mythic raw material sunk deep in every scene that you can piece together a classic in your mind if you're feeling charitable; but if you aren't, "Batman v Superman" will seem like a missed opportunity. At times it might make you long for Christopher Nolan's delicate touch. Those last four words have never appeared side-by-side before. Life's funny that way.

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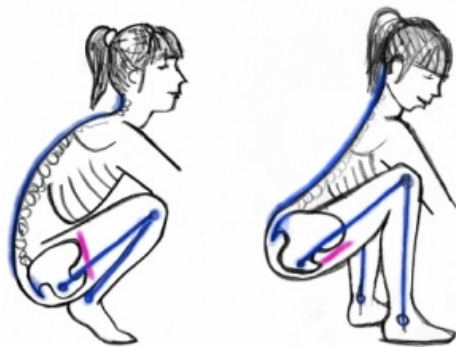
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Ben Affleck	as Bruce Wayne / Batman
Henry Cavill	as Clark Kent / Superman
Amy Adams	as Lois Lane
Jesse Eisenberg	as Lex Luthor
Diane Lane	as Martha Kent
Laurence Fishburne	as Perry White
Jeremy Irons	as Alfred Pennyworth
Holly Hunter	as Senator Finch
Gal Gadot	as Diana Prince / Wonder Woman
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Ray Fisher	as Victor Stone / Cyborg
Jason Momoa	as Arthur Curry / Aquaman
Scout McNairy	as Wallace Keefe
Jeffrey Dean Morgan	as Thomas Wayne
Michael Shannon	as General Zod

Lauren Cohan as Martha Wayne
Director
Zack Snyder
Writer
Chris Terrio
David S. Goyer
Writer (Batman created by)
Bob Kane
Bill Finger
Writer (Superman created by)
Jerry Siegel
Joe Shuster
Cinematographer
Larry Fong
Editor
David Brenner
Composer
Junkie XL
Hans Zimmer
Action, Adventure, Fantasy, Science Fiction
Rated PG-13 for intense sequences of violence and action throughout, and some sensuality.
151 minutes

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