


'Man of Steel' offers a new generation its own, brooding, Superman (+video)

To each American generation, its Superman. But will audiences get what they need from another spandex-clad, costumed, immigrant superhero in this summer's 'Man of Steel'?

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Beneath this constant reinvention lies the key to his enduring appeal – he is us, the prototypical American, says Villanova University's Susan Mackey-Kallis, author of "The Hero and the Perennial Journey Home in American Film."

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"As an immigrant and an orphan he is iconic of what makes America, to many, so special. Unapologetic and without a shred of irony in his demeanor he is a throwback to a more unselfconscious era when America, for many, was the shining city on the hill and the battle lines between the good and evil seemed clearly drawn," she says via e-mail.

Superman also speaks to the Judeo-Christian roots of the US, points out Tom Morton, a pop culture strategist for the New York ad agency, Goodby Silverstein & Partners. The boy who flies from Krypton to Cleveland is like Moses, the boy in the bulrushes, he says, adding in an e-mail that he's also "a secular Jesus figure: not only does he stand up for good, he stands for good."

And as a Christ-figure, adds Professor Mackey-Kallis, "he represents the hope both that we are

not alone in the universe and that there is meaning and destiny for America once again."

However, she adds, Nolan's darker take on the tale may be appropriate. "Is such a vision still relevant in today's age, an age of satirical, doubtful, even dark heroes, and battles with shifting battle lines, changing allegiances, and unclear moral objectives?" she asks.

This tweaking around the edges of the character's psyche is fundamental to feeding the future of a long-lived franchise, says Rob Weiner, popular culture librarian at Texas Tech University. In this version, Superman will be viewed with suspicion because he is "not of this earth" and "all powerful," he says via e-mail. "That is the direction the franchise should take to relate to audiences in 2013 since we are more cynical."

Despite that darker national mood, however, the appeal of the superhero endures for a good reason, says Allan Austin, professor of history at Misericordia University in Dallas, Pa.

“Superheroes, even if often dismissed as nothing more than low-brow entertainment, are powerful representations of who we think we are and who we want to be,” he says.

Adds online advice columnist April Masini, the costume itself tells a story. “Anyone wearing a Superman costume sees himself – or wants to see himself – as the guy who'll save you from evil and enjoys his day job at the equivalent of The Daily Planet,” she says.

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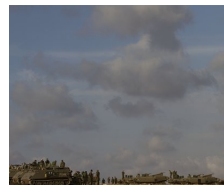
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