

'Man of Steel' offers a new generation its own, brooding, Superman

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'?



By Gloria Goodale | Christian Science Monitor - Thu, Jun 13, 2013

As the new [Superman](#) movie "[Man of Steel](#)" prepares to land in theaters this weekend, it's easy to wonder if, indeed, audiences really need yet another spandex-clad, costumed superhero in a big budget summer movie.

But, as fans and pop culture pundits are quick to point out, Clark Kent and his nearly invincible alter-ego are the first, the biggest, the granddaddy of superheroes - and one that retains an enduring appeal for each generation.

The character's basic story doesn't change over time, says Brad Ricca, author of "Super Boys," in an e-mail, "but its place in our collective cultural mindset does."

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Studios understand the need to freshen up a franchise, points out Ricca, who teaches at Case Western Reserve University in Ohio. "There is a kind of dark marketing origin to these endless new versions of [Superman](#)," he acknowledges, but "the end result is that each new generation gets a new version that they can claim as theirs."

Producer [Christopher Nolan](#)'s brooding take on the baby from an alien planet who goes from the US heartland into the global consciousness is just the latest retooling since this tale first appeared in 1938.

"Superman in the 1930s was idealistic - a super New Dealer," says Prof. Peter Coogan, who teaches a course in comic book studies at Washington University in St. Louis.

By the 1950s the caped crusader was a stolid, dependable establishment figure, says Professor Coogan, who adds that in "Superman: The Movie" in 1978 he served as an antidote to the disillusionment of the 1970s. This latest Man of Steel positions Superman as a realistic figure, he says. "He does not immediately know how to use his gifts and needs a period of searching in order to gain the life experience to understand how to use his powers." Like the Superman of the 1930s and early 1940s he adds, this 2013 hero "is greeted with official skepticism by the authorities."

Even his superpowers adapt to different ages, points out CarrieLynn Reinhard, assistant professor of communication arts and sciences at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois.

He started as having some powers, she notes in an e-mail, such as being "Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!" as at least one generation of TV watchers can recite.

"Those powers have grown, changed, weakened through the years - at one point, he was living energy! But what remains at his core is the idea of the ultimate immigrant - an orphan of an entire planet arriving in rural [United States](#) and being able to become successful, as both a reporter and a crimefighter," she says.

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."

“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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