

Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice—Doom and gloom, with capes

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Directed by Zack Snyder; written by Chris Terrio and David S. Goyer

Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice is the latest superhero film from Warner Bros. Entertainment, the studio behind the “Dark Knight” trilogy of *Batman* films, 2013’s *Man of Steel* and other recent films set in the DC comic book “universe” (the pompous word used to describe the company’s intellectual property catalog).

The new film makes use of a number of comic book heroes and villains beyond the titular duo, and is largely aimed at kickstarting a multi-film series with DC characters to compete with Disney’s lucrative Marvel franchise. The Marvel films have grossed over \$9 billion at the global box office.

The film comes at a worrying time for Warner Bros. The production company, one of the oldest in the American film industry, has suffered a string of box office failures, including the recent *Pan*, *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* and *Jupiter Ascending*. The company is under increasing pressure from shareholders to produce a mega-profitable film series to replace the revenue stream from the now-dormant *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* franchises.

The price tag of *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, including production and marketing costs, approaches half a billion dollars, and some analysts believe it would need an \$800 million box office to recoup its investment. According to one media analyst quoted in *Variety*, a box office return of less than \$1 billion would be considered a “disappointment.”

It would be very difficult for any work of art, produced under these circumstances, to be anything more than a crass, stillborn commercial product. As it is, *Batman v Superman* is an interminable mess. Its themes, if it can be said to have any, largely reflect the

mercenary outlook of the filmmakers and the studio that produced it.

The film opens with a ground-level perspective of the devastating battle between Superman (Henry Cavill) and General Zod (Michael Shannon) that served as the climax to *Man of Steel*. Bruce Wayne (Ben Affleck), the billionaire alter-ego of Batman, watches helplessly as the alien combatants soar through the skies of Metropolis, toppling buildings and wreaking havoc in their wake. Clouds of dust and shell-shocked bystanders are featured prominently, clearly intended to evoke the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Wayne rushes about, rescuing bystanders from the wanton destruction, while gazing angrily up at the sky. This event apparently sows the seeds that eventually lead the two superheroes to battle. We are told that Wayne resents Superman’s alien abilities, that he believes no one man should wield so much power. That such a sentiment would be expressed by a multi-billionaire is treated entirely without irony.

For his own part, Batman stalks the night as an extralegal vigilante, beating up criminals and branding them with a bat insignia, apparently with the approval of many in the local police force. News of Batman’s brutal activity reaches the office of the *Daily Planet*, where Superman, disguised as reporter Clark Kent, expresses distaste for the cruelty of his counterpart’s crime-fighting approach. This is the substance of the disagreement between the two characters that is rehashed again and again in the course of the 151-minute runtime.

Lex Luthor (Jesse Eisenberg), here presented as a young tech mogul in the mold of Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg, invites Wayne and Kent to a party where he attempts to fan the flames of dissension between the two. For reasons that go entirely unexplained, Luthor

carries on a personal vendetta against the costumed heroes.

Ultimately, Luthor's machinations succeed, and the two superheroes are manipulated into fighting one another, pitting Superman's alien abilities against Batman's technological prowess. A shoehorned subplot brings Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot) into the fray, and the three ultimately set aside their differences and join forces to battle Luthor and a "Doomsday" monster he has created.

This is a very poor film. The characters are lifeless and flat, with scarcely more development and backstory than one would find printed on the back of an action figure box. The winding, convoluted plot is not grounded in anything resembling human emotion or motivation, but is largely a flimsy framework on which to hang various action set pieces and effects spectacles. The action scenes themselves are poorly choreographed and hard to follow, and *Batman v Superman's* painfully grim and somber tone often lends the proceedings a laughable quality.

All in all, it's a fairly standard effort for director Zack Snyder, whose previous efforts include the ridiculous, hyper-violent *300*, *Sucker Punch* and *Watchmen*.

The cast includes such talented performers as Amy Adams (as Superman's lover and perpetual damsel in distress, Lois Lane), Jeremy Irons (as Batman's world-weary butler Alfred) and Holly Hunter (as a US Senator). These are capable actors who have crafted moving performances in the past. Here they struggle mightily to bring life to the material.

One wonders how any actor could be expected to credibly recite dialogue such as this:

"I don't know if it's possible for you to love me and be you."

"In a democracy, good is a conversation, not a unilateral decision."

"The world only makes sense if you force it to."

Or this gem of an exchange between Superman and Lois Lane:

Superman: Superman was never real; just a dream of a farmer from Kansas.

Lois: That farmer's dream is all some people have.

Have the filmmakers ever listened to human beings actually talk? One cringes with embarrassment for the actors involved.

Batman v Superman has been panned by critics. Yet, the venom with which critics have attacked it is a bit puzzling. After all, there is no plot convolution in this film more absurd than in the recent Marvel film *The Avengers*, and the pretentious musing about the nature of "gods" and "heroism" recalls the cheap philosophy of Christopher Nolan's "Dark Knight" films, all of which were hailed as "masterpieces" by numerous critics.

Though the film aims to be nothing more than mindless entertainment, the filmmakers are still forced to acknowledge, if only in passing, the deepening global crisis in order to retain some shred of credibility. *Batman v Superman* contains bleak images of urban and industrial decay, scenes of mass protest, references to drone warfare and US military machinations. The central conflict between the squeaky-clean, status quo conservatism of Superman and the fascistic brutality of Batman mirrors, in its own crude fashion, the crisis in the US elections.

And yet, these issues quickly fade into the background, and we are left with only a lazy misanthropy and a preoccupation with violent spectacle. Whatever anxieties the film's creators may have about the state of the world, their commercial and career obligations come first.

In addition to Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman, *Batman v Superman* shows or provides glimpses of the Flash, Cyborg, Aquaman, Darkseid and other minor characters. Plans are already in place for individual films starring each of these characters, with release dates scheduled for as far off as 2020. Studio executives are exceedingly optimistic about audiences' ability to tolerate films of this kind for the foreseeable future. Judging by the scoffs, audible expressions of confusion and derisive laughter that accompanied this reviewer's screening, that optimism may very well be misplaced.



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