

# How to Make Superman Interesting

by Jonathan Baldie

It's no secret in Hollywood that it's hard to make a good Superman movie.

But why have so many directors struggled? And how have others managed to work past this?

It's because you can't make an interesting character without flaws.

And in case you hadn't noticed, Superman has no flaws. In fact, his defining characteristic is that he is flawless!

Why is The Dark Knight such a good film? Mostly because Batman is pushed to the limits of his moral code, and we see him struggle with impossible dilemmas. The Joker is the perfect antagonist to Batman because he pushes the right buttons and serves as the complete opposite to Batman.

Also, Batman is a human, relying on nothing more than intellect and hard work. Oh, and he can die.

This is why we like the character of Batman in general. In a world of invincible superheroes, Batman is like us. He's a fallible human who can die. And we admire his moral code that he infallibly lives by.

Superman, on the other hand, cannot be physically tested. He's invincible. And too often he's not tested as emotionally hard as he should be.

Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice had some great moments but overall had a poor story. People called it boring because there were no defining plot points to carry the story along.

Also, Superman, one of the main characters, was emotionless and unmotivated throughout the film. Without sitting down for the ridiculous long three-hour Extended Cut, we see no reason why he should want to fight Batman at all.

He has no arc, and is killed off at the end in a messy splat for CGI.

There is an easy way around this though. A way we can take Superman, or any invincible superhero character, a vulnerable and interesting character.

## **Give Him Problems He Can't Solve with His Powers**

We can't test his physical strength, but we can test his inner strength.

Test Clark Kent, not Superman.

This is the most important part of this essay, and it's why the Man of Steel film was better than expected.

The 2013 film shows him going through problems he can't solve with his super-strength or laser sight. In fact, it throws them at him relentlessly.

His adoptive dad is killed by a tornado as he implores his son not to intervene. This eats Clark Kent up from the inside with inner torment, but it's an important lesson that he doesn't seem to use in later films.

Then we get the a-hole at the bar pouring beer over Clark's head. He can't fight the man, but he can destroy his truck.

This is actually good because we the audience empathise with Clark in this infuriating situation. Empathy is the single most important part of a story character, be it a protagonist or antagonist, and this seemingly innocuous plot point has a disproportionately large impact.

Yes, it's a petty act, but it's something we've all felt the desire to do when someone annoys us. This is what creates the empathy.

However in Batman v Superman (BvS) we actually dislike Clark throughout most of the film, because there's nothing to prompt us to empathise with him.

In fact, Snyder goes so far to make a 10 minute sequence of his funeral and mourning, which falls completely flat. It goes to show that the film writers had no idea how to make his character interesting enough for us to care.

What we as an audience of human beings can empathise with, are tests of our inner strength.

So how do we do this? There's one obvious way.

## **Give Him an Enemy He Can't Kill**

This is a development of the above point that I think deserves its own section.

Superman can defeat any enemy. At least with all the other Kryptonians dead, there's no one left in the known universe strong enough to challenge him.

And if used lazily, I hate the use of kryptonite. It's a cheap way of making Superman physically vulnerable.

That being said, it was used well in BvS, at least at the start of the fight. Batman uses it to bring fear and human emotion to Superman, who struggles with intense anxiety as he feels physically vulnerable for the first time in his life. This is kryptonite used correctly.

What Superman needs to make the climax of a story interesting is an enemy or antagonist he can't kill.

He needs an antagonist whose death at his hands would also kill him too, in an emotional sense.

BvS did this in a sense by creating a contrived plot where he couldn't kill Lex Luthor, because doing so would mean the death of his loving mother.

This was one of the strong points in the movie for Lex Luthor's character, and it's exactly what Lex Luthor should be doing in a Superman story!

Clark can't just straight-up murder him, and that makes for an emotional battle that tests his inner strength.

In fact, Batman does more good in this part of the story by taking down the goons one-by-one with nothing more than his wits and brute strength.

The only thing Superman serves to do is to kill the arbitrary giant evil monster at the end.

How are we supposed to connect with this character? We don't care that he dies, in spite of how much Snyder wants us to, because we've actually been made to dislike him for most of the movie!

Why not make him have to fight someone he loves? That would make for an incredibly difficult conflict. I would love to see a tragic story that pushes Superman past his breaking point.

Here's a story idea. Lex Luthor drives Lois Lane away from Clark Kent. Make her fall out of love for him. There are many different plots we can construct to do this. It would be an immense test of Superman's inner strength, and a tragic story.

I don't think this has been done in a strong enough way in movie form. Can Superman cope without Lois Lane? That's a test I want to see on the big screen. And it's something he can't fight his way out of.

## Okay, How Do We Achieve This?

So what can we take away from this? How can we use this to improve our stories and make Superman interesting?

Here are some specific ideas I've come up with to achieve this:

## **Give Superman dilemmas that test his inner strength**

A dilemma is not the same as a problem. A problem can be solved with enough mental energy. A dilemma is an impossible choice that only results in pain, whichever choice is made.

The Dark Knight is one of the best movies ever made because of the impossible dilemmas that force Batman to show his true character to the audience. Let's see some of that with Superman already!

## **Force Superman to not rely upon Lois Lane**

I am tired of seeing the same old trope play out of Clark in love with Lois, and doing anything to save her. Why not mix things up and make her leave him? Or taking this to the extreme, why not even make her a pawn of the villain, or the villain herself?

A tragic twist on the same old Clark/Lois love story would make for a different and interesting story. Seeing Clark have to live without Lois would also be a great test of his inner strength.

As an extension of the previous point, make Superman choose between his principles and Lois Lane. Does he have any principles? We don't have a clue because it's never shown to us in the movies! I hope this changes soon.

## **Give Superman an enemy we care about**

Erik Killmonger is the best antagonist in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, because we care about him and understand where he's coming from. At the time of writing, The Black Panther has just been released, so I won't spoil anything else, but I can tell you he is the best antagonist Marvel has created.

In Batman v Superman, Lex Luthor is unhinged and silly with very weak motivation. There's no clear statement of his motivation. Maybe he dislikes the idea of God? I don't know because it's never made clear.

It doesn't have to be Lex Luthor, but a compelling and empathetic antagonist would make a more interesting battle with Superman. I don't want to see a grey one-dimensional Steppenwolfe, I want to see an emotionally empathetic Killmonger.

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Thanks for reading my essay. Do you have any more ideas on this? I think I've only scratched the surface here.

Here's some ways you can get in touch with me:

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Best regards and thank you again,

Jon Baldie