

SUPERMAN REDUX

In *Superman III*, Kal-El, in his Clark Kent guise, takes on Kal-El in his Superthug guise. It's the junkyard brawl. Clark wins, putting an end to the internal conflict that had left the citizenry bewildered and scared. With the release of *Superman Returns*, we now have two cinematic Supermans to compare. But that's easy. Brandon Routh is excellent, just a notch below Christopher Reeve.

The movies are tougher. *Superman III* and *Superman IV: The Quest For Peace* are passingly enjoyable, but strip the superhero of his stature and dignity. Emerging from the junkyard brawl of development hell, *Superman Returns* helps supplant the more disagreeable impressions left by *III* and *IV*. The first two movies, still highly regarded, serve as the template. Accordingly, *Superman Returns* further develops the introspective themes of *Superman II*, the film in which Kal-El aspired to be human. *Superman Returns* seems to pick up somewhere after *Superman II*, but any critical approach to *Superman Returns* must consider the example of the original, *Superman*, released in 1978. Both that film and its 28-year junior set the parameters for what the cinematic Superman is. And with *Superman Returns* we've gone one step forward and two steps back.

Superman is a flawed classic, sharing with *Superman Returns* a penchant for wandering narrative threads, but the original stands superior for its witty dialogue and its score. The cast for this sequel is of equal caliber to the original's. James Huntington brings a little more maturity to the Jimmy Olsen role than did Mark McClure. But both characterizations work, because in the original Clark Kent was the new guy, feeling out of place, which is exactly how young Jimmy felt. And so they bonded. Now, with several years behind them, they've both grown more comfortable on the job. Frank Langella could match Jackie Cooper on the Perry White role if Langella was given more to do than just stare and brood in his office while the world falls apart outside. Parker Posey does an admirable job as Luthor's worthless moll, her character maintaining the glamour of Valerie Perrine's Miss Teschmacher, sans the stylized sex appeal. Posey's character, Kitty Kowalski, takes some interesting turns near the end. We think she'll save Superman (just as Miss Teschmacher did) but she ignores her conscience until she, sobbing, abandons the invaluable crystals. Her character is actually at its best in her first scene, in which she's posing as a maid in the Vanderworth mansion. She's beautiful, mysterious, and amusing, relieved to drop the whole charade at last.

Kevin Spacey bests Gene Hackman only because Spacey is willing to shave his head. They're both great as Lex Luthor. And Kate Bosworth adds Superman-weariness to the established world-weariness of the Lois Lane character. She displays the same reckless fever to snare the Big Story, but now she's got more people to think about than herself. And, thankfully, she no longer treats Clark like a piece of gum stuck on her (four-inch platform?!) shoes.

For the big man himself, Routh can't seem to channel into his characterization the mythic stature of Superman, but actually bests Christopher Reeve in the Clark Kent department, making the character less a caricature of the man from the farm. This Clark Kent is the real

man, more so than the one with the tight blue suit and boots. Routh complements Christopher Reeve's interpretation without negating it.

But too often the film plays like one big homage to the original movie. Half of the good lines are lifted from *Superman*. Instead of outrunning a locomotive, now young Clark (in flashback) leaps over not-so-tall buildings in a single bound. Lex still wants land and Lois still can't spell her lurid headlines. Clark still says "swell." And Marlon Brando makes a cameo appearance from the grave. The credit sequence has similar swooping titles, but insists on taking us on a dizzying roller coaster ride through space instead of majestically drawing us into the story. Much of that cherished *Superman* score is worked into *Superman Returns*. However, John Ottman's own themes don't resonate, and John Williams's original music blasts through the directionless underscore like a trumpet playing "Taps." The more Williams's music is referenced, the more Ottman's suffers in comparison.

Like *Superman*, this film could do with a little cutting. What should go is some of the early scenes with Luthor. The blackout and Lois's capture drag and drag, because we already know what is going on. If we had left Luthor in the fortress, only knowing he had arrived there by helicopter, and had seen him steal the crystals but not knowing to what end, we would enjoy some delicious anticipation. Once the electronic-pulse blackout happens we would guess it has to do with Luthor but would still be allowed to imagine the explanation. This is audience empowerment at its best. Indeed, all the model railroad scene gives us, besides beautiful toy trains, is the idea that Lex has unusual intelligence and his gang should respect him. Okay, so *they* may need to learn it, but since Luthor shrewdly cons the old lady early on, and especially since this movie is just the continuation of earlier ones, *we* don't need to see it. Preserve the mystery, help our identification with Lois by giving the audience and the character the same goal—discovering the cause of the blackout. Tirelessly digging, Lois is told by the electric company the address where the problems started. (And neither the utility nor law enforcement care to look in on what was going on there?) This lazy screenwriting continues with Lois's decision to investigate the yacht, with her son. This could have been terrifically exciting. Remember, Luthor bilked the old lady in a mansion and we saw in that mansion a model of a yacht. That's enough for us to know that when Lois pulls up to the mansion, Luthor is lurking about.

So Lois searches the yacht with her son. (After all, when she's captured, the screenwriters consider, the son has to be along so he can demonstrate his super-powers to the audience and so Lois Lane's lover can rescue both of them for a bracing reunion.) But Lois, though intrepid and a little reckless, surely would not put her son in danger like this. She doesn't know who or what is on that boat. And we can't explain away her behavior. She worries about little Jason, and does not blithely trust in his super-pedigree. She offers Luthor anything he wants (including her body, we infer) if Luthor will let the boy go. Cut all of that earlier mess out, in the mansion and on the yacht, and Luthor is more unpredictable, his schemes are more shocking, his threats are more menacing; we'd be pulled into the story rather than left to observe it from a distance. And we'd save ten or fifteen minutes.

But the failings of the script do not end there, sadly.

Moving through the film, the idea that Superman has been gone to check out Krypton is totally empty. We're told astronomers found evidence of its remains and Superman decided to check it out. This took many years. And yes, we know that he wants to learn more about his past and yes, we realize he probably wanted to escape the daily torture of the Daily Planet newsroom, always wrestling impotently with his feelings for Lois. But Superman should have discovered something up there, or the whole matter should have been clearly revealed as a hoax designed by Lex Luthor to lure Superman away from Earth, in order to free Lex from prison (when Superman is not around to testify).

Superman crashes back to Earth after we follow the kitchen routine of Martha Kent. In this and a subsequent scene talking with his adoptive mother on the couch, we learn nothing. Apart from the joy of seeing Eva Marie Saint in a major motion picture, it's all a waste of time. Particularly bothersome in these Smallville scenes is Clark's decision to deny the family dog a game of catch by throwing the baseball miles away. He never apologizes to the dog, it's too predictable to be funny, and so he comes across as indifferent and playfully cruel before the story's even started.

Soon after this, Lois is trapped aboard a plummeting airliner, which provides a personal motivation for Superman to get back into action. She is bounced around a lot—with no purpose, because she emerges unscathed! Just keep her strapped in like everyone else because what we've got here is just dumb show.

The magical crystals which contain unfathomable amounts of information are stolen by Luthor from the Fortress of Solitude. Luthor explains the power of the crystals to his skeptical hoods. This is necessary exposition in light of the story's big idea—Luthor using Superman's technology to dominate the earth. It's an agreeably ironic conceit, but with Luthor's explanation, believability and mystery drop precipitously. *Superman* showed us an advanced civilization with simplistic technology. What this technology could accomplish was extraordinary, but fully believable (in the context of the story) because we could not see the mechanism that made it happen. Nothing is explained, we're just witness to it, documentary style. As a result, we cannot judge whether the technology makes sense. And so, we can enjoy the story more fully. The crystals supplanted the perfunctory 'blinking lights' super-computer-driven world of '60s and '70s science-fiction films. For the first time an advanced civilization was portrayed as having advanced into sheer simplicity. This and the turning back of the world are the two original ideas in *Superman*. But now, with Luthor having to explain what the crystals can do and why they can do it, the magic is lost.

Even more galling, in the original movie a single green crystal possessed the power to unleash the catatonic forces that produced the Fortress of Solitude. In *Superman Returns* the clear crystals have the same power to bring forth land. This is a cheap sleight of hand for filmmakers otherwise determined to maintain consistency with the original film.

And so, lured to Lex Luthor's dour Atlantic landmass, our hero doesn't seem to pay any thought to the threat of Kryptonite. First of all, Superman should have quietly ensured that all known Kryptonite be removed from the earth. It's the only thing that can touch him, Luthor has used it before, but Superman rushes right in. Okay, so he can't feel himself weakening when he walks across the Kryptonite-laced landscape. Fair enough, but why does Luthor, after stabbing Superman *once*, allow him to fall into the ocean? In the water Superman can drown

(again echoes of the original) but he will be further away from the Kryptonite-laced rock. The only way to work it is for Luthor to stab Superman one hundred times and wait until he dies, and then cut his body up in little pieces and set them on fire. And if that's too violent for the picture, then the confrontation between hero and villain requires a different setting.

And last, a huge problem is Superman's recovery. Nothing gets him out of the hospital bed. Lois visits with their son, but he doesn't rally. He departs, off screen, after they have left. What was it that saved him? Medicine is a boring reason, and if it is a result of Lois's visit, then this should be obvious. The whole episode at the hospital is entirely wrong for the character. If he's going to be near death, he should be alone or with someone he loves—Lois or Mother Kent. With all the medical personnel crowding around his prostrate form, the sequence takes on the flavor of *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* where the creature is fruitlessly attended to by ignorant physicians. In fact, *Superman Returns* not only copies the original *Superman*, but *Goldeneye* (the expectant pause while a plane that may crash passes out of frame), *Terminator 2* (bad guy destroying police cars from a rooftop with a Gatling gun), and *Armageddon* (numerous shots of ethnically diverse masses staring helplessly into the sky, silently pleading for salvation).

Superman may best *Superman Returns* by default, on the basis of originality, but in addition to the afore-mentioned dialogue and music, *Superman* is also better looking, and won a Special Achievement Academy Award for visual effects. That movie looks real, while half of *Superman Returns* looks like a Superman cartoon. After all these years, computer graphic images still don't match up to the real thing, and on a film that cost \$200 million, it's very doubtful using all those computers saved the producers money. There is no excuse.

Sometimes the old ways are better. And rarely does a sequel best its predecessor.