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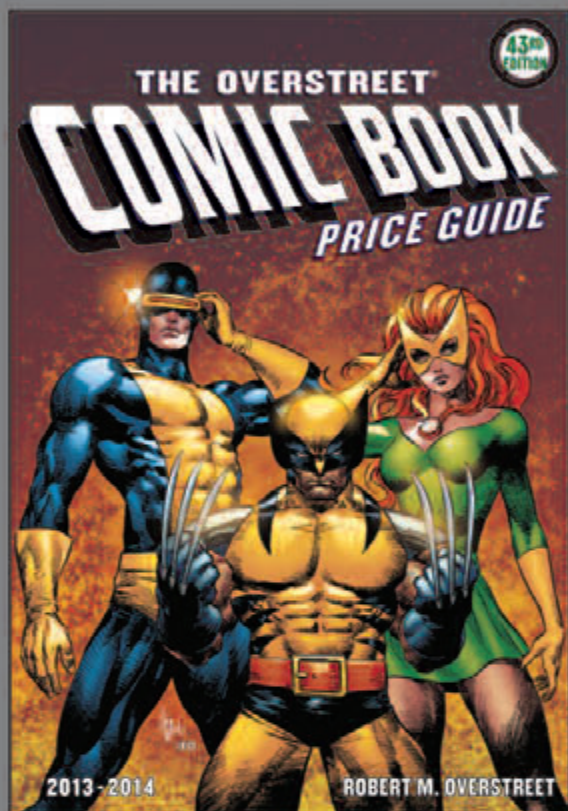


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SUPERMAN

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Comic Books at the Movies



By Brandon G. DeStefano

From the earliest animated efforts to the modern, big budget, special effects-driven blockbusters, comic characters have always been an important part of cinema history. What was once exclusively kid's stuff, though, now seems to hold the key to box office success.

The Movie Serials

One of the earliest forays into adapting comic books, comic strip and pulp magazine characters to the silver screen came in the form of movie serials, short films shown in chapters generally appearing

before or after the main features at local cinemas. Usually told in 12 to 15 installments, theaters would most often show a new chapter each week. The action almost always ended in a cliffhanger except for the final chapter. Interested audiences -

generally kids – would then have to return the next week to find out if the hero or heroine would escape to fight another day.

Many different genres including westerns, science fiction and action-adventure were represented, but superheroes serials in particular offered the first chance for live interpretations of leading characters. Studios such as Columbia, Republic and Universal all produced movie serials as early as 1912, but popularity soared to amazing heights when they began to utilize comic characters.

Superman, Batman, Captain Marvel, Blackhawk, Congo Bill, Captain America, Brick Bradford, Spy Smasher, The Green Hornet, Dick Tracy and others leaped into live-action adventures, as did Tarzan, Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers and The Spider. Terry and the Pirates, Mandrake the Magician, The Phantom and Brenda Starr, Reporter also took their bows on the silver screen.

Some of the most celebrated comic character serials of this era, noted as the Golden Age of Serials, included *Flash Gordon* (1936), *Dick Tracy* (1937), *Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars* (1938), *The Lone Ranger* (1938), *Dick Tracy's G-Men* (1939), *Mandrake the Magician* (1939), *The Drums of Fu Manchu* (1940), *The Green Hornet* (1940), *The Shadow* (1940), *Dick Tracy vs. Crime Inc.* (1941), *The Adventures of Captain Marvel* (1941), *Spy Smasher* (1942), *Batman* (1943), *The Phantom* (1943), *Captain America* (1944), *Zorro's Black Whip* (1944), *Brenda Starr, Reporter* (1945), *Superman* (1948), *Batman and Robin* (1949), and *Atom Man vs. Superman* (1950).

Animated shorts and features also grew during this period, with Fleischer Studios' *Superman* cartoons leading the way. They, like their live action counterparts, were considered children's fare.

By the mid- to late-1950s, most studios had halted their

production of movie serials to focus on bigger budget films. Audiences began to get their short stories fill from television and expected more when they left the house for movie theaters. This early era which brought the beloved characters from the four-color page to the big screen had ended, only to be revived decades later in a renaissance of creativity and revisited with the advent of DVD technology.

The Small Screen

When discussing the place of comics on the big screen, it's hard to ignore the role of the small screen in their development. Television became a haven for superheroes in the 1950s. *The Adventures of Superman* ran from 1952 through 1958 with George Reeves as Clark Kent/Superman, Phyllis Coates (Season 1) and original film "Lois" Noel Neill (Seasons 2-6) as Lois Lane, Jack Larson as Jimmy Olsen, and John Hamilton as Perry White. While there were some lighthearted moments, the action was played serious.

Not so for *Batman*, which ran from 1966 to 1968 and inspired a short-lived but widely noted Bat-craze. The show starred Adam West as Bruce Wayne/Batman, Burt Ward as Dick Grayson/Robin, Alan Napier as Alfred Pennyworth, and Neil Hamilton as Commissioner Gordon. Superstar guest villains included Cesar Romero as The Joker, Frank Gorshin as The Riddler, Burgess Meredith as The Penguin, and Julie Newmar





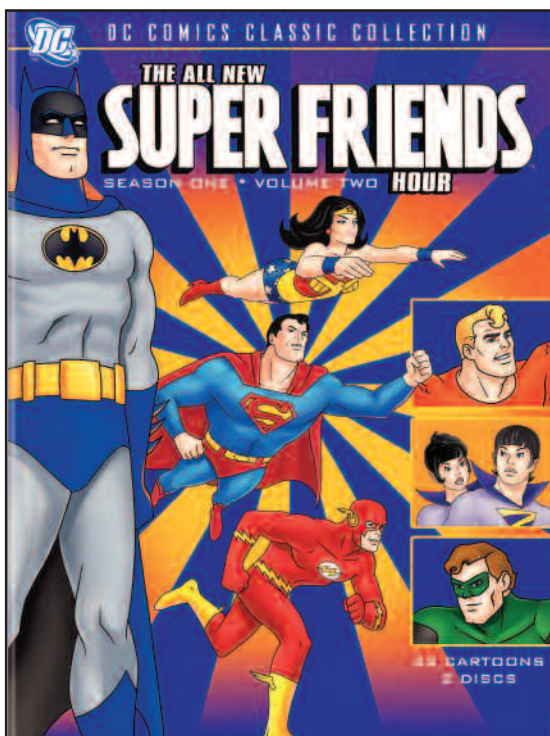
There were other attempts at live action (including two *Captain America* tele-films and a *Doctor Strange* pilot), but other than these notable shows, success was largely confined to the world of animation.

The Justice League of America appeared on *The Superfriends*. Aquaman, Tarzan, The Lone Ranger, Spider-Man, The X-Men, The Fantastic Four, Captain America, Sub-Mariner, Iron Man and others were featured on cartoons for years with varying degrees of success. Superman and Batman particularly had a healthy number of long runs in animated form. Still, Hollywood craves the splash of the feature film.

Return to the Big Screen

While the '50s, '60s and '70s offered superheroes on television, it wasn't until Superman returned to the movie theaters in 1978 with *Superman: The Movie* that the genre began to enjoy the type of box office success now expected of it. The film starred Christopher Reeve as Clark Kent/Superman, Margot Kidder as Lois Lane, Gene Hackman as Lex Luthor, and Marlon Brando as Jor-El.

The film told the origin story of the last



as Catwoman, among many others. The series also spawned a feature film in 1966.

Wonder Woman appeared as a pilot film which aired on ABC in 1974 and starred Cathy Lee Crosby as Wonder Woman/Diana Prince. Another, more faithful take, launched in 1975 with *The New Adventures of Wonder Woman* (called *The New Original Wonder Woman* in its first season). Starring Lynda Carter as Diana Prince/Wonder Woman and Lyle Waggoner as Steve Trevor, it ran for 55 episodes from 1975-1979.

Spider-Man came to live-action TV in 1977 in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, a one-hour, made-for-television movie starring Nicholas Hammond as Peter Parker/Spider-Man. Thirteen episodes followed, but the show was soon cancelled.

The Incredible Hulk debuted as a pilot film in 1978 and a series quickly followed. The show starred Bill Bixby as David Bruce Banner and Lou Ferrigno as the Hulk, transforming the tale of the title character into a version of *The Fugitive*. The show ran for four seasons and spawned three made-for-television movies.

son of Krypton, his arrival on Earth, his upbringing in Kansas, and arrival on the scene in Metropolis. It brought a modern take to the character, which was then 40 years old. With the tagline, “You’ll believe a man can fly,” filmmakers used then-cutting-edge special effects to make that belief possible.

Warner Brothers had from the beginning seen the potential for Superman to be a film franchise. As producers Alexander and Ilya Salkind had done with their earlier *The Three Musketeers* and *The Four Musketeers: Milady’s Revenge*, they filmed a substantial amount of the sequel during production of the first film. However, tensions lead to Richard Donner being replaced by director Richard Lester, and much of *Superman II* (1980) was re-shot (in 2006, *Superman II: The Richard Donner Cut* was released and offered the film much as Donner had intended). Regardless of the intrigue, it was another hit.

Further films in the series, *Superman III* (1983) and *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (1987), are generally considered to have lost their way. It would be 20 years before *Superman Returns* (2006) was made as an unofficial sequel to the first two, dismissing the third and fourth films. It was the last Superman movie until this year’s *Man of Steel*.

Warner Brothers was



not without its superhero hits, though. Tim Burton directed *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992). *Batman* starred Michael Keaton as Bruce Wayne/Batman and Jack Nicholson as The Joker. *Batman Returns* saw Keaton return with Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman and Danny DeVito as The Penguin. Both did big business, but Burton did not return for the next sequel, *Batman Forever* (1995).

Director Joel Schumacher’s film included Val Kilmer as Bruce Wayne/Batman, Chris O’Donnell as Dick Grayson/Robin, Tommy Lee Jones as Two-Face, and Jim Carrey as The Riddler.

Schumacher’s *Batman & Robin* (1997) with Batman again re-cast, this time with George Clooney, also featured Uma Thurman as Poison Ivy, Arnold Schwarzenegger as Mr. Freeze, Alicia Silverstone as Batgirl, and the returning O’Donnell, was generally viewed as a franchise-killer and kept the Caped Crusader off the big screen until *Batman Begins* revived things in 2005.

During the early days of this period, Marvel’s luck with feature films wasn’t that great. In fact, it was mostly bad. New World Entertainment released *The Punisher* starring Dolph Lundgren in 1989. It went nowhere. Next up was *Captain America* (1990), which mercifully never

made it to theaters. It featured the Red Skull as an Italian instead of a German, and starred Matt Salinger, son of author J.D. Salinger, as Steve Rogers/Captain America. It eventually escaped on video.

The Fantastic Four (1994) was their next film that wasn't. According to several different sources, apparently the film was never intended for release and was just being made to keep the film rights secured for its studio. It was never released theatrically.

Stepping outside the realm of DC Comics and Marvel Comics characters, other comic book characters began to see screen time, including: *Dick Tracy* (1990) and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990), which was part of a huge franchise including comic books, collected editions, cartoons, action figures and more.

Walt Disney Pictures released *The Rocketeer* in 1991. The character first appeared on the comics scene as a back-up story in 1982's *Starliner* #2 from Pacific Comics and was a tribute to the pulp adventure characters of the 1930s and '40s. It starred Bill Campbell as Cliff Secord/The

Rocketeer, Jennifer Connelly as his love interest, Jenny Blake (based on real life pin-up queen Bettie Page in the comic book version), and Timothy Dalton as the actor/Nazi spy, Neville Sinclair. It was a modest success at the time and was issued in 2011 on a 20th anniversary Blu-ray disc.

Other comic book films included such hits and misses as *The Crow* (1994), *The Shadow* (1994), *The Mask* (1994), *Judge Dredd* (1995), *Tank Girl* (1995), *The Phantom* (1996), and *Barb Wire* (1996).

Big Box Office

In 1998, Marvel's first box office hit came from a property that few in the general public knew was based on a comic book. New Line released *Blade*, with a vampire hunting title character spun out of the pages of *Tomb of Dracula* and played by Wesley Snipes. Two sequels and a short-lived TV series would eventually follow.

Twentieth Century Fox released the first *X-Men* movie in 2000. Directed by Bryan Singer, it starred Patrick Stewart as Professor Charles Xavier, Sir Ian McKellan as Magneto, Hugh Jackman as Wolverine,



Mystery Men

What happens when you do a brilliant send-up a decade too early? The answer is *Mystery Men*. Based on Bob Burden's comic book work, *Mystery Men* was a star-studded, brilliant, loving, spot-on send-up of the superhero genre. Its one real failing – a critical one – was that it came out in 1999, a decade before there was a decade-long success of the movies it parodied.

And when we say "star-studded" cast, how about Ben Stiller (Mr. Furious), Hank Azaria (The Blue Raja), William H. Macy (The Shoveler), Janeane Garofalo (The Bowler), Kel Mitchell (Invisible Boy), Paul Reubens (The Spleen), Wes Studi (The Sphinx), Greg Kinnear (Captain Amazing) and Geoffrey Rush (Casanova Frankenstein), along with Lena Olin, Eddie Izzard, Claire Forlani and Tom Waits?

If you love superhero movies and haven't seen it, do yourself a favor and do so.