

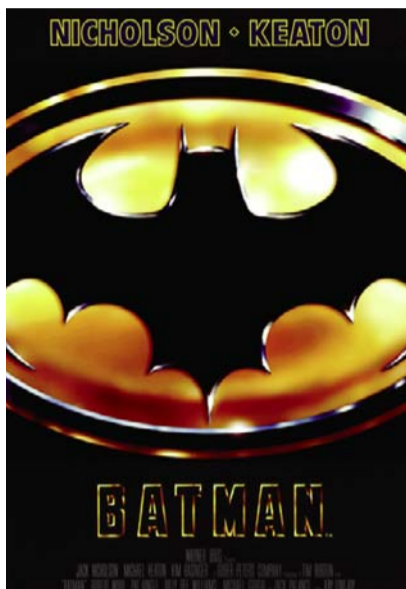
BATMAN FOREVER (1995)



One can draw a fairly direct line from the 1966 Batman to Joel Schumacher's mid-series reboot: Garish colors; some tongue-in-cheek dialogue; the presence of Robin to draw in the young'uns. This may not be a great Batman movie, but it is a successful one - drawing in a legion of new viewers while shifting the series away from the twisted mindscape of Tim Burton (whose movies weren't totally representative of the comics anyway). And if you were the at the right age, there was nothing more fun in 1995 than this (except perhaps getting a PlayStation). It's "Bigger, battier and better," wrote Susan Wloszczyna for USA Today.

BATMAN (1989)

One of the most hyped movies in Hollywood history, and one of the finest examples of movie tie-ins and cross-promotion (so successful it made t-shirt bootleggers filthy rich), Batman is also one of the weirdest event pictures of all time. Director Tim Burton jettisoned the plots (if not the dark tone) of Bob Kane's original comics, and came up with a picture with set designs reminiscent of Fritz Lang's Metropolis and freakish, brooding characters similar to... well, a Tim Burton movie. Particularly compelling is Jack Nicholson as the Joker, who gleefully relishes his plan to kill the citizens of Gotham City with lethal gas. Michael Keaton makes for a subdued Dark Knight, a hero who dispenses vigilante justice while living a morose existence in Wayne Manor. A precursor to more complex comic book adaptations, Batman made piles of money, and the bat-logo was ubiquitous in the summer of 1989.



BATMAN RETURNS (1992)

Tim Burton has said he always sympathized with monsters, and so, for his sequel to Batman, he gave audiences not one, but two empathetic, pitiable villains. The Penguin (Danny DeVito) is a deformed orphan who leads an army of aquatic, flightless birds from the bowels of Gotham City. The Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer) is a frumpy secretary who is killed by her boss (Christopher Walken) after she learns of his evil schemes, but is brought back to life by a group of cats. Teaming up against Batman, the pair plans an assault on the city above. Batman Returns is so cold and dark it makes the first installment look like Amelie by comparison, but that's not necessarily a bad thing; it still made a killing at the box office, and was Burton's favorite of the two Batman movies he helmed. "Of all the Batman pictures, this is the most striking, atmospheric and effective," wrote David Keyes of Cinemaphile.org.



MAN OF STEEL (2013)

After coming down from the nostalgic rush of Superman Returns, studio execs decided that instead of a sequel, yet another reboot was in order, and they handed the reins to Watchmen director Zack Snyder to make it happen. The result was 2013's Man of Steel, starring Henry Cavill as the latest take on the broad-shouldered Kryptonian orphan and Michael Shannon as his first nemesis, the villainous General Zod. Snyder's revisionist take on the Superman mythology definitely had a special effects advantage over its predecessors, but a large number of critics took issue with other aspects of the movie, particularly what many saw as a rather cavalier approach to violence - summed up by Superman's decision to commit murder in the final act. Still, even if few would argue that Man of Steel was an entirely successful attempt to apply a dark layer of post-Nolan grit to the franchise, plenty of writers appreciated seeing a fresh spin on a familiar character.

SUPERMAN RETURNS (2006)

If you're any kind of film buff, you're already familiar with many of the twists and turns that Superman endured at Warner Bros. during the '80s and '90s - heck, they've even inspired their own documentary - so suffice it to say that after Superman IV tanked, the franchise was more or less frozen at a crossroads for years. Talk of another Reeve-led sequel stopped after the 1995 horseriding accident that left him paralyzed, and despite the best efforts of a long succession of screenwriters, directors, and would-be stars, our Kryptonian hero spent the better part of 20 years waiting for a hero of his own to rescue him from development hell. Help finally arrived in the form of director Bryan Singer, who was handed the keys to the franchise after proving his superhero mettle with X-Men and its first sequel; in the summer of 2006, Superman Returns rebooted the story, with newcomer Brandon Routh wearing the cape, Kate Bosworth playing Lois Lane, and Kevin Spacey chewing up the scenery as Lex Luthor.



BATMAN BEGINS (2005)

With his lack of superpowers and a vast fortune at his disposal, Batman was always the most plausible of heroes. With Batman Begins, director Christopher Nolan shucked off the direction of the previous big-screen incarnations and boiled the Batman mythos down to its essence, resulting in one of the most realistic superhero movies ever. Thankfully, Nolan didn't skimp on action-paced pyrotechnics, and as the suitably suave and tortured Bruce Wayne, Christian Bale added a greater emotional heft to the Caped Crusader (he was also ably abetted by the likes of Morgan Freeman, Michael Caine, Liam Neeson, and Gary Oldman). Batman Begins signaled a bold new beginning for the franchise, and was a huge hit with audiences and pundits alike. "It's a wake-up call to the people who keep giving us cute capers about men in tights," wrote Kyle Smith of the New York Post. "It wipes the smirk off the face of the superhero movie."