

## **AirSpace Movie Club: Superman**

Emily:

... by the way, America, he mentions that a couple of times, like, "I'm here to be this thing for America."

Christopher Reeve:

I'm here to fight for truth and justice the American way.

Emily:

And I was like, "He sent you to planet earth, aren't you supposed to be doing more international diplomacy?"

### *Musical Intro*

Nick:

Welcome to AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museums' homes. I'm Nick.

Matt:

I'm Matt.

Emily:

And I'm Emily.

Nick:

This is the second in our series where we watch movies and then break them down to discuss some of the real science, some of the real history, and a lot of just kind of what we all thought about it. We are still all at home looking for safe ways to fill the days while scrolling through endless streaming menus. And in this episode, we're rolling it back to 1978 with the first iteration of the Man of Steel on the big screen, Superman: The Movie, this was back when you had to put "The Movie" after things so that people understood what they were going to see at the movies.

This star is Christopher Reeve, and it is not currently on any of your Netflixes or your Hulus, but it is kind of rentable almost everywhere that you see movies because it's universally loved, right? Didn't everybody love this movie? You guys love this movie, right? Emily?

Emily:

I got my \$3 worth.

### *All laugh. Music Transition*

Nick:

So it should go without saying, but we will say it now, that none of us are Superman scholars and Superman scholar is a real thing that people are, that's none of us. Although, I know I've seen this movie

a thousand times growing up. Many people have someone who has not seen it, though, and can give us a fresh take on the original comic book blockbuster. Emily, what did you think of Superman: The Movie?

Emily:

So I have a lot of feelings about the movie, but certainly, perhaps the most unexpected part of this movie, to me, was the sort of layout of the storyline. I was excited about it because this is like origin story Superman, which is kind of the way a lot of comic book movies have gone in the last 10 years or so, kind of the OG storyline. So I was excited about that aspect of this film.

However, I did not expect it to play out the way it did play out. So, movie starts with, so far, as of yet, inexplicable trial by jury situation of three mysterious people. Never see that again. Move towards guy trying to convince a bunch of people that the entire planet is in jeopardy and they need to evacuate. And he's ignored. Followed by a little tiny naked baby being put on a spaceship made out of what looked like gypsum crystals to this geologist, and then traveling to earth to then, wait for it, not done yet, meet teenage Superman who's teased in high school, whose dad dies, and then he leaves home to go to the Arctic. Wait, that's just the first hour.

And then in the second hour, Superman is a thing and a human-ish type alien person who then flies around trying to save Lois Lane from various scrapes. And oh yeah, and there's a guy named Lex Luthor. The end. I mean, seriously, that is the film.

Nick:

Yep. And that's also kind of the story of Superman, which-

Emily:

But I was ill prepared for four different storylines to happen before Superman started working at The Daily Planet.

### *Music Transition*

Matt:

We're going to spend a lot of time talking about what we kind of don't like about the movie or what it got wrong. I want to, before we do that, just talk about why I actually love most of this movie. So if you remember, in the very beginning of the movie, before the plot even starts, it's like a black and white screen, an old style theater with the curtains opening. And it says it's the 1930s. And that's sort of a nod to when Superman first was created and the era in which that happened.

And what I love about what follows that, which is totally like the first third of the movie, is like a campy science fiction movie on this other planet, completely different from earth. The weird trial that Emily described and this weird social structure that we don't really understand, it's totally out of these sort of campy sci-fi movies that had been kind of of that era and the 1940s and '50s as well. Because that sort of sci-fi pulp literature world and then campy movie world is really where Superman came from. His original creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were both part of that sci-fi world. And Superman was born out of science fiction, the idea that aliens exist and that they might one day visit earth. But what if that alien turns out to be our savior?

### *Movie Clip*

Margot Kidder:

The problem with man of steel, there's never one around when you want one.

Emily:

And having seen no Superman movies ever until this one, including all the new ones, I honest to goodness don't know why they didn't actually just do Superman leading up to him starting at The Daily Planet and leaving Lois Lane until later, because there's so much there there.

Matt:

Yeah. So here's where I think we should probably point out that this was the first big budget blockbuster superhero movie, pretty much, ever. There wasn't a real culture of superhero or comic book movies at this point, at least not of this scale. So there wasn't this sort of formula, that we're all now familiar with, for how a superhero movie works or how an origin story works. So this is, it kind of became the prototype for what was just in the same way that Superman as a superhero also was sort of the prototypical superhero of the comic books world having been created as, sort of, one of the very first superheroes in the 1930s.

Emily:

As a non comic book reader, having read zero comic books in my life, when it comes to origin stories and character introductions, how many comic books does it usually take to get from birth to full-blown superhero status?

Matt:

Okay. So we weren't going to go too deep into this, but since you asked, in the original Superman-

Emily:

Well, I'm trying to not go too deep into it by finding out, are we talking about like the first hour of this movie is like one comic book or the first hour of this movie is like four years of comic book.

Matt:

The first hour of this movie was essentially the first page.

Emily:

Stop!

Matt:

In the very first appearance of Superman, there was very little backstory, they weren't given much room at all for it.

### *Musical Transition*

Nick:

One of the things that we wanted to touch on today goes back to why Superman has his powers. And the place that we should start there is the planet that he comes from and the star that it orbits. So what do we know about Krypton?

Matt:

Well, based on what Jor-El says in one of those first scenes, it sounds like the planet and the people in that solar system, maybe the whole solar system, are somehow more molecularly dense than Earth and Earth's inhabitants.

Lara (Susannah York):

He'll defy their gravity.

Jor-El (Marlon Brando):

He'll look like one of them.

Lara:

He won't be one of them.

Jor-El:

No. He's dense molecular structure would make him strong.

Lara:

He'll be odd, different.

Jor-El:

He'll be fast. Virtually invulnerable.

Nick:

Yep. The one thing that we know about this star from the movie and also from Superman canon is that it's red. And that's an important element, the fact that his star is a different color than ours for how he gets his powers. But first, the star is an important part of why he ends up on earth in the beginning. So what happens to this star? It just kind of explodes in the film, right?

*Movie clip of explosion*

Emily:

Right.

Matt:

It seems like it.

Emily:

And the redness is important though, because when you consider the different kinds of stars that exist out in the universe, red ones can be dwarfs, they can be red giants. Let's ignore what kind of star this may or may not be. But the star getting ready to explode is really this thing that Jor-El is trying to warn everybody about. And when stars explode in real life, typically they're going to do something called supernova, which is really just... let's just call it exploding because I don't want to be technical, I'm not really an astronomer. And it's something that happens. It's certainly going to happen to us in like four to 10 billion years. Our star's going to get a little too big for its britches, and we're going to get engulfed by the star. But to a small degree, what they were talking about in terms of the destruction of Krypton is loosely based on stellar evolution.

Nick:

We talked a little bit about why it's important that his star is red. It's old, it blows up, his parents die. Moving on. He comes to earth. Our star is yellow and something about that makes him sort of a demigod. So-

Matt:

He's solar powered, man!

Nick:

Let's unpack. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So Superman is effectively living by photosynthesis. Why is he doing it so much better than other entities?

Matt:

And why is he able to do it at night? This has been my question my whole life is like-

Emily:

He's got lithium batteries up in there. He's storing it up.

Matt:

Yeah, I guess so.

Nick:

Why does Superman work at night, says Matt. So our star has different radiation and that's part of it. And as we all know, radiation in comic books, doesn't make you sick, it gives you superpowers.

### *Musical transition*

Emily:

So the one thing that you guys held out on me, right, this movie, we decided to talk about it because we were like, oh, well, he's an alien and it starts off in space. And the 1978 movie really kind of delves into that early history of Superman, which is right in our alley. What nobody talked about, and I don't know if it's because you all forgot or what, you guys were just too enamored with the space. But the cool thing

about what I do is I'm a space geologist. And you all just like skipped right over the amount of egregious geology in this movie.

Nick:

Yeah. Let's talk about shooting nuclear missiles at continental fault divides.

Matt:

The San Andreas Fault. Yeah.

Nick:

So Matt, do you want to give one sentence on that third act of the movie and where the tension comes from? And then we will just throw to Emily for a big meditation on that?

Matt:

Right. So Lex Luthor apparently is a real estate speculator in addition to being a super villain. So he's bought a bunch of desert property with the idea that he's going to sink California into the ocean-

Emily:

No, no, just half of California.

Matt:

Half of California, sorry, by sending a nuclear missile to the San Andreas Fault and blowing it up. So that then of course, that will trigger a chain reaction and that whole plate will move off into the ocean, somehow.

Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman):

Everything on this side of the line is just hundreds and hundreds of miles of worthless desert land, which just so happens to be owned by...(smacking noise)

Otis (Ned Beatty): Lex Luthor, Incorporated

Lex Luthor: Now call me foolish, call me irresponsible, it occurs to me that a 500 megaton bomb planted at just the proper point

Superman (Christopher Reeve): would destroy most of California. *Clip fades under*

Emily:

Yeah. *sighs* I just wasn't expecting this idea that by activating this gargantuan earthquake all along the San Andreas Fault, that half of California would just fall into the ocean, as he says, thus raising real estate prices in the other half of California, that is now coastal property, which is great. Well, that's just not how plate tectonics works. We're not going to get into it. But there was so much other stuff happening in terms of the rockfalls and the landslides and Superman diving through the San Andreas

Fault to re... I don't even know what he does down there. He lifts up the soil to like fuse the fault back together. But there was just so many rocks doing things that rocks don't do.

*Exit music up*

Nick:

So we have not actually decided what film will come up next in the AirSpace Movie Club as we're not calling it. And if anyone listening along at home has any ideas, anything they think we'd love, anything that you know we'd hate. Anything that you want the three of us to dig into, please suggest it at AirSpace Podcast on Instagram. This has been AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum with help from PRX. AirSpace is produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart, mix by Tarek Fouda

*Music out*

Emily:

You didn't even get to talk about the waif of Lois Lane.

Nick:

Oh my God, yeah. I'm glad that we didn't talk about the proto-Aladdin sing song, flying together. Also he dropped her.

Matt:

Yeah. He did.

Nick:

I get that you can retrieve her, but you dropped her man.

Audio Logo:

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