

When Superman deconstructs

Many have criticized the new film's twist on its hero's origin story. I found it powerfully resonant.

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David Corenswet as Superman (Courtesy of Warner Bros.)

For many of us, the arrival of another superhero summer blockbuster is an occasion for mixed emotions. The market has become so saturated with tales of web slingers, flying warriors, multiverses, and end-of-the-world stakes. Many of them have been, to put it plainly, uninspired. Yet the well has not been fully tapped, and a new iteration of *Superman*, directed by James Gunn of Marvel's beloved *Guardians of the Galaxy* trilogy, soared to a \$217 million global box office opening.

A bit worn but hopeful, I joined the throngs of theatergoers last week to see if this Superman (portrayed by David Corenswet) could rise above the noise. Some tired superhero tropes remain: Mass destruction, violence as conflict resolution, and universe-threatening plots take center stage. But I was delighted to also find space for reflection on identity, deconstruction, and the narratives handed to us amid the action-packed chaos.

Despite Superman's longevity as one of the most recognizable cultural icons of the last century, he's a hard character to get right on the big screen. The youthful earnestness and unwavering commitment to justice of Metropolis's soaring superhero can easily feel trite when he isn't given enough grounding. In Superman's previous iteration (portrayed by Henry Cavill), Zack Snyder overcompensated by darkening the hero, downplaying his vibrant humanity and upping his propensity for superhuman violence. Gunn's film, the beginning of a revamped DC film universe, is more in line with the Christopher Reeve films of the '70s and '80s—filled with comic book color, wit, and a Superman who balances strength and compassion, quirkiness and earnest conviction.

To be sure, Gunn's adaptation has its trite moments. (At one point Clark tries to convince Lois that finding the beauty in everyone is "the real punk rock.") But Gunn chooses not to tell a saccharine Smallville origins story. Instead, the film begins with a defeated Superman—bones broken, internal organs compromised, struggling to breathe—who must be dragged back to his Fortress of Solitude by his dog, Krypto, to be healed.

Now is a good time to offer a major spoiler alert. Rather than being an all-powerful God figure, this Superman can be overpowered. He needs healing—and he willingly receives the support and goodness of others. This character trait is largely informed by the final transmission he received from his Kryptonian parents, who sent him to Earth as Krypton's sole survivor so that he could "do the most good" and "live out Krypton's truth." This is a well-known part of the Superman mythology, echoing the words of Jor-El in the 1978 film when he says of humanity, "They can be a great people, Kal-El. They wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way."

In Gunn's telling, however, this transmission was damaged in transit to Earth, leaving the whole of Krypton's truth to be discovered and then weaponized by Lex Luthor (portrayed by the impressively menacing Nicholas Hoult). Luthor, a vindictive billionaire tech mogul engaged in war profiteering, mass propaganda, and political

coercion, discovers the real reason the Kryptonian “alien” Kal-El was sent to Earth: His parents believed humans to be “simple and profoundly confused, weak of mind and spirit and body.” The conclusion of their transmission calls on Kal-El to lord over the earth, to take as many wives as he can, and for the “dispatch of anyone unable or unwilling to serve [him].”

It’s a major twist in the mythology. It’s also a disorienting moment of disillusionment for Superman, who hears the conclusion of this message through a television news report.

While this change to Superman’s origin story has proven controversial for some, it was this moment that resonated most powerfully with my own experience, causing me to reflect on my journey of faith, identity, and deconstruction. Like many others, I was raised with a fragmented transmission from my Euro-American Christian tradition. I was taught that Christians have been bearers of light, agents for goodness and justice and salvation. No doubt, this is part of the story. Yet it glosses over the history of violence, colonialism, and White supremacy that have accompanied Christian efforts across the centuries, not least in the United States.

Acknowledging that our ancestors have not always been pure in heart, recognizing how Christian imperialism has caused or been complicit in profound brokenness in the world—these are hard, sorrowful tasks. It’s even harder to stomach that we have, knowingly or not, been agents of that brokenness. For many, it’s reason enough to question our whole identity and the faith we thought we held. I’ve experienced it firsthand. I still experience it often. Yet the traditions, values, and callings we inherit are not all-encompassing. They do not determine our identity, nor do they tell the whole story of our faith.

As Superman returns to his adoptive parents in Smallville to wrestle with these truths, his father, Jonathan Kent (portrayed by Pruitt Taylor Vince), reminds him, “Parents aren’t for telling their children who they’re supposed to be.” Rather, “we are here to give y’all tools, to help you make fools of yourselves all on your own.” Superman’s world, like ours, is filled with enough questions of ethics and justice to cripple a person. Yet there is a grace in knowing that our identities are not static, given to us once and for all at birth. Growth, renewal, repentance, and forgiveness are possible as we deconstruct, reconstruct, and struggle toward wholeness together in Christ.

Unfortunately, the film soon returns to worldwide conflict and big superhero action sequences. While fun, this doesn't afford Superman the narrative space necessary to meaningfully grapple with his identity and the tools he's been given. Still, Gunn's tale of the Last Son of Krypton offers a surprising invitation for us to reflect on the traditions, values, and callings we inherit—and to grapple with them, discern the truth in them, and reframe them in the service of justice and human flourishing in a fractured and politically complicated world.