

**You're listening to Suspension of Disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.**

**December 1988. I went to see Mississippi Burning, which was not a good movie – but anyway, this trailer comes on. And this is unusual for the time there was no narration. No one says, “In A World where...” It was just these shots pop on screen -- flames burning out of a militarized Batmobile. Batman is wearing a black rubber suit. The Joker is twisted and grotesque. I had stopped reading comics in junior high so this un-Super Friends Batman was a total shock to me. I thought it was something Tim Burton came up with. But soon I learned that I had missed this whole renaissance in comic books where these characters had gotten more dark and complex. So I devoured every bit of information I could until June 1989.**

**But as I was watching the movie, there was someone else taking up a lot of screen time: Kim Basinger. Joker and Batman seemed to be more obsessed with Kim Basinger than they were each other. And her character was not in the comics. She seemed like she had wandered on the set from another movie, and wouldn't leave.**

**CLIP: Are we going to try to love each other?**

**We used to joke the only reason she was there was to squash those rumors about, you know, Batman and Robin. I didn't realize what I was seeing was the beginning of a formula. In superhero movies, there always had to be a love interest. And the love interest always had to fall -- and scream – before the hero swooped in and save her.**

**MONTAGE: FALLING AND SCREAMING**

**After 25 years, the pattern became kind of fascinating because these writers and directors clearly don't care about the love interests – and they're badly underwritten. So what do they keep putting them in there?**

**So I put these questions to Carr D'Angelo, who runs a comic book shop and also used to be a development executive.**

**CARR: I developed a lot of superhero and comic book projects for Universal and a writer named Bob Gale who was the writer for Back To The Future among other things, one of the things he said about comic book movies and superhero movies is that the third act always has to have the choice where the hero who**

normally chooses other people's interests – he normally puts other people's interests ahead of himself, that's what makes him a hero in the first place –where he's going to decide am I going to help myself or am I going to help everyone else? Do I save my girlfriend quote unquote, or do I save the populace at large?

CLIP SPIDER-MAN

**I mean, this is an ancient formula. Think about the first movies ever. A girl is tied to the railroad tracks. The bad guy twirls his moustache. The hero rides in on horseback and saves her in the nick of time.**

CARR: It all came from the same place and it's you know the cowboy doesn't really kiss her until the end just to say hey I saved the town. But the love interest is supposed to represent what the hero is fighting for.

**ME: That's interesting and it's true in film noirs, the girl is supposed to represent what's good about this town and the detective is fighting what's bad about the town.**

CARR: Right, and one of the women might be a femme fatale who lures the hero in – which is more a Catwoman or Selina Kyle.

PILAR: Women traditionally whether in literature or in film if you let them get a little kooky, suddenly they were interesting. You know, let them go mad, right? And Catwoman is slightly crazy, albeit in a really sexy way, but why can't a female also be interesting and not completely cross over the dark side? Why does she have to go Looney Tunes to finally be free?

**That is Pilar Alessandra. She also used to be a development exec. Now she's now a screenwriting teacher with clients all over the world.**

PILAR: You know in the screenwriting world, when you're dealing with something from scratch, what people like me are trying to talk to writers about is, what's her story? She doesn't exist to support anybody. She exists within her own movie with her own agenda.

My 13-year-old daughter was railing about this today. Her big thing is, these women know what they're in for if they're dating a superhero. Why don't they have some skills?!

**At this point, I asked Pilar if we could get her daughter to join us on Skype.**

PILAR: Eric, I'm so sorry, she won't come out of her trailer!

**I guess in L.A. that's how they say, "she won't come out of her room."**

PILAR: She's doing the no, no, no, she's pretending she's shy.

**We tried.**

**Pilar thinks the love interests are actually getting more interesting because we are swamped with a glut of superhero movies. Take Iron Man. In the first movie, Pepper Potts is basically The Girl. But then you get to Iron Man 3, she's running the company and she saves him in the end.**

PILAR: The origin story they exist to be the emotional stakes for main character. When you're coming up with a 2 or a 3 or a 4, you can't ignore someone on screen and have her be the damsel in distress over and over again. It forces the writer or producer to use this character in a more active way.

**But settling down and getting married is not what superheroes do. And I'm not talking about the reasons that the superheroes give – my enemies will destroy the people I love, or they need to be called away at moment's notice, they're always in danger. The writers hate these relationships. It's not even a guy thing. Batwoman, who is a lesbian, was supposed to get married but the executives at DC nixed that storyline at the eleventh hour.**

**Here's screenwriter Craig Fernandez fan.**

CRAIG: Peter Parker will chase Mary Jane for 10 years, and when they eventually marry -- because the writers got old enough that they understood that's what came next, they felt that the character was destroyed. And then how do you get rid of her? Once you marry her off, how do you get rid of her? Because now she's in the way. They wrote a story in which the devil – Peter has to make a deal in which to save his aunt, his marriage with Mary Jane gets erased from history.

**That's why DC Comics rebooted their entire universe from scratch. The writers were sitting around complaining that Superman's marriage to Lois Lane was boring. The only way they could undo it was unraveling everyone else's storylines.**

CRAIG: I think there is a problem in general in not caring about women.

**Craig says any writer who is bored with Lois Lane is lacking imagination.**

CRAIG: Lois Lane is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist. She takes her life into her hands every day, and if you made her just covering the city beat, she would go up against corrupt politicians, mob bosses, but their inability to make that an interesting character – she’s dating an alien, keeping it a secret within a newsroom, what that would do to her brain not being able to tell the greatest secret in the world. Do you think she wouldn’t sit down with every superhero, now everyone’s story?

**There was even a meta-moment in the comic book Animal Man, where the writer Grant Morrison starts commenting on the limitations of the love interest storyline.**

CRAIG: They even play with the trope of his family being murdered and it has the character hunt down the writer of the comic book and say why would you do that?

**ME: Really?**

CRAIG Yeah, there’s a story where Animal goes to God, essentially finds Grant Morrison and Grant Morrison brings his family back at the end of the story and says, yeah –

**ME: Does God look like Grant Morrison?**

CRAIG: Yes.

**ME: Ha!**

CRAIG It’s.... interesting.

**I have my own theory as to why superheroes can’t commit to their love interests, and I came up with this idea while I watching the animated film, Batman: Mask of Phantasm – which as I’m saying it outloud sounds like a bad movie but it’s actually good.**

**Bruce Wayne has fallen in love with a woman named Andrea. She has a dark past like him, and she can hold her own. She has skills -- as Pilar’s daughter would say. In this scene, Bruce admits to Alfred that being emotionally content would dull his anger and his drive, which is the only thing he has going for him besides money.**

CLIP: BEING HAPPY

**If Bruce is always fighting for his dead parents, then he's always their child. Getting married is a way of growing up, replacing them. Running around in a cape, wearing underwear over your pajamas and fighting bad guys – that's not what adults do.**

CRAIG: Comic books are written for little boys, so all the characters are created with the premise that they're going to read them from 8 to 12 and at 12, they're going to get interested in girls and sports and stop reading comics. It's hard when you're looking up to Clark Kent, and then you are Jimmy Olson, and then you're Clark Kent and then one day you're Perry White and you're like, oh fuck. What happened? Because when you're Jimmy Olson you should stop reading comics and get a job, but no now you're Perry White and you're still reading the same stories.

**ME: I mean that's the strange thing too is we are the first generation that for some reason never out grew comics. I mean it's kind of weird, every generation did and we just didn't.**

CRAIG: Well, a couple things that are kind of weird about it. You know if you're reading in the '70s, it's the first time you get the second-generation comic book readers that are now writing them, so the stories started bumping up. Then you got people like Frank Miller and Alan Moore that started deconstructing like '79, '80, '81. And then you started getting all the alternative stuff. Love and Rockets pops up. Maus appears. So now we're a generation that saw literature – we saw what the medium could do at a very early age and we kept looking for the comic books to achieve that. And you get these great moments, these great runs of characters where they get it and a new writer comes on, kills off characters, goes on a completely different direction. Yeah, you just get perfect moments. That's all you can hope for with any comic book character.

**You want to hear my perfect moment? It was the 1978 Superman film. It's a moment I really appreciated an adult.**

**Margot Kidder as Lois Lane has just met Superman – by falling off a building of course, and screaming until he catches her. But then she interviews him for the Daily Planet.**

CLIP: ARREST EVERYONE IN CONGRESS

**The ad campaign for that film was, "You'll believe a man can fly." At this point in the movie, Lois has accepted that a man can fly. What she can't believe is that a man in 1978 still has faith in Congress. What I love about**

**that moment is it's so idiosyncratic. That has nothing to do with superheroes but it has everything to do with her character.**

**Of course even as a kid I didn't believe that Christopher Reeve was flying. But in that moment, I believed these two characters were feeling something towards each other, something that was real and scary and exciting. Which made me care about them. Which is the only special effect that really matters.**

**That's it for today's episode. Thank you for listening.**

**CREDITS**