



January 2024

Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story

Dereck Daschke

Truman State University, ddaschke@truman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Daschke, Dereck (2024) "Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 28: Iss. 1, Article 56.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.28.01.56>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol28/iss1/56>

This Sundance Film Festival Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story

Abstract

This is a film review of *Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story* (2024), dir. Ian Bonhôte and Peter Ettedgui.

Keywords

Christopher Reeve, Superman, Comics, Spinal Cord Injuries

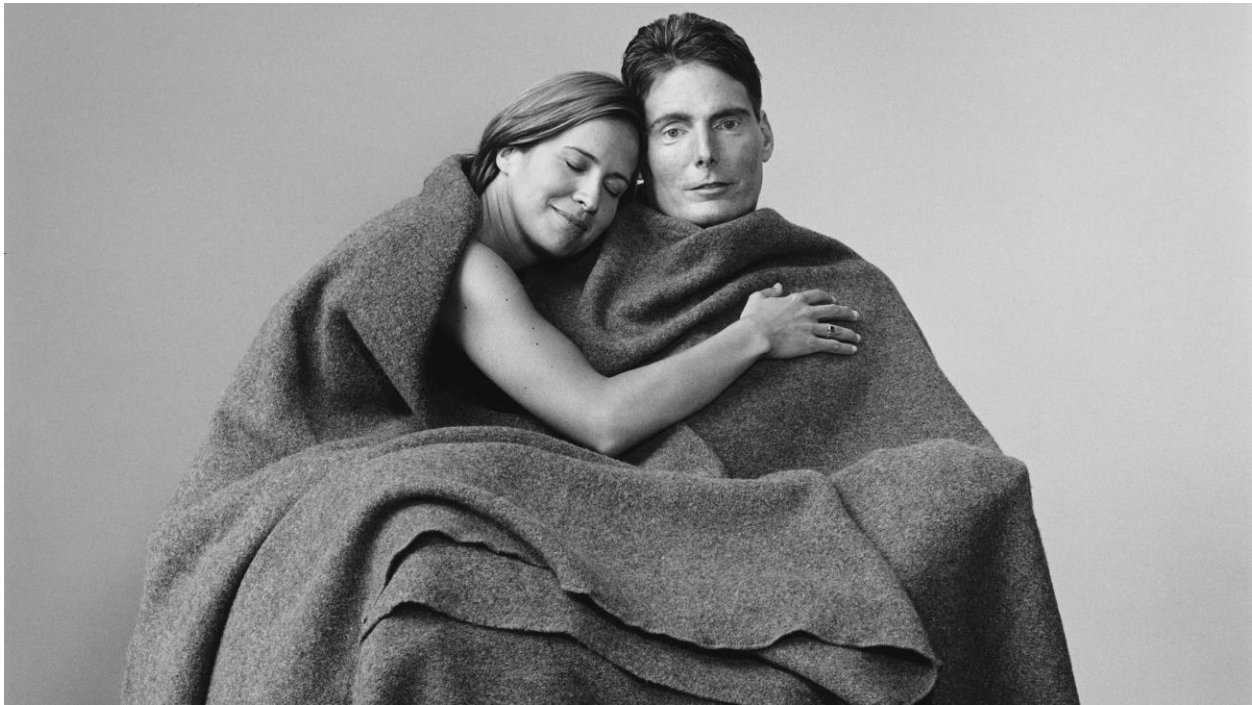
Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Author Notes

Dereck Daschke is a professor of Philosophy & Religion at Truman State University and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Particularly interested in the intersection among religion, psychology, and wellness, his academic work over more than two decades has analyzed the transformational breakdowns and creative buildups in the form of apocalypses, mysticism, new religious movements, psychedelics, the Bible, Bob Dylan, and, of course, film. He regularly teaches “Religion and Film” at Truman and has overseen a number of student research theses that have contributed to the conversation about just why it is that movies capture our meaning-making imaginations in the way they do.



Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story (2024), dir. Ian Bonhôte and Peter Ettegui

The classic DC comics character, Superman, has been part of the American (and world's) imagination since his first appearance in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938. Superman's origin story, famously created by Jewish writers Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, describes the efforts of Jor-El of the doomed planet Krypton to send his son Kal-El to a distant planet called Earth, orbiting a yellow star. Earth's gravitational and solar properties give Kal-El superhuman qualities, which he chooses to use for "Truth, Justice, and the American Way." But he must forever conceal his true identity, and thus goes undercover as mild-mannered Clark Kent. The Moses-Jesus parallels are unavoidable, and the idea that the most powerful being in the universe and the key to our salvation could pass undetected in ordinary society has captured people's imagination for nearly a century. The emerging media of film and television opened new venues to tell the Superman story. George Reeves became the face of Superman on TV from 1952 to 1958, but to truly show what made him a superhero required a big screen and special effects to match. Audiences would need to wait two

more decades for the presentation of Superman to be *super*, and the actor who made them believe a man can fly was Christopher Reeve.

1978's *Superman* arguably paved the way for the current ubiquitous environment of the superhero blockbuster, and no one was more responsible for its success than Reeve. Bearing an uncanny resemblance to the comic book icon in both look and personal demeanor, it was virtually impossible not to assume that there was something “super” about Reeve. But even the indestructible “Man of Steel” has a tragic weakness: kryptonite, the radioactive green shards of his home planet that turn him back into a mere mortal, leaving him vulnerable to the nefarious plans of his galactic enemies. Thus, when a horse-jumping accident paralyzed Reeve from the neck down in 1995, the tragic turn felt to his fans like a twist right out of the comics: the paragon of strength and protector of the weak suddenly stripped of his powers in the blink of an eye, by something no one saw coming. But unlike comics or movies, there was no third-act reversal, no turning back time to avert disaster. Yet Reeve's way forward was no less extraordinary and, in its own way, superhuman.

Just as Superman stories are driven by the dual nature of Superman/Clark Kent and the degree to which they are, ultimately, the same being, *Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story* tells the tale of two Christopher Reeves, the ones before and after the accident. Even though the contrast between the two couldn't be greater—just like the difference between weak, insecure Clark and powerful, confident Superman—after years of living with his condition and using his fame and the good will extended to him to fight for advances in treatments of paralysis and spinal cord injuries, Reeve himself concludes that there is no him before and after; it's all one continuity. The film covers how his injury affected his family, especially two of his children, Matthew and Alexandra, with his first partner, Gae Exton, and his son Will with his wife, Dana. In fact, *Super/Man* is largely narrated by Matthew and Will, and their telling of their family's story, along with interviews with Gae and Dana, indicates that Reeve's accident, as well as his indomitable will

to walk again or help others to do so, brought both halves of Reeve's family together. One of Christopher's lasting legacies was his leadership role in the American Paralysis Association, which was renamed the Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation. When Reeve died in 2004, after regaining some control over his fingers and toes and feeling around his body, Dana took over the leadership of the foundation—only to succumb to cancer herself in 2006. Since then, all three of Reeve's children have been actively promoting his legacy for the betterment of the world.

However, the film does capture the unexpected controversy around Reeve's efforts in paralysis research, after he appeared to walk (through CGI) in a video advocating for stem cell research. The opprobrium came not mainly from those against stem cell research but from disability activists, who felt that Reeve's position was that disabled people are lacking until they're "fixed." While Reeve never backed down from his push for medical science to be aggressively challenging the limits of what's possible for the treatment of spinal cord injuries, Dana became the foundation's advocate for the dignity and value of people living with those injuries in their own right. Perhaps as a way of reconciling those two halves of himself—the quadriplegic actor and the man who desperately wanted to walk again—Reeve directed *The Brooke Ellison Story*, about the first person with quadriplegia to graduate from Harvard University. It aired on A&E in 2004, just weeks after Reeve's death. *Super/Man* also draws inspiration from the lifelong friendship between Reeve and Robin Williams, his Juilliard roommate. The film reveals that both Christopher and Robin struggled with depression and helped each other manage it, and suggests that losing Reeve may have been a factor in Williams's own death by suicide ten years later.

Super/Man is the emotionally wrenching, bigger-than-life story of a man thrust into a world he barely understood, who, with the support of millions who loved him, tapped into inner reserves of strength to lift himself and others up. Comic hero or no, Christopher Reeve inspired people to believe in the impossible, and now the impossible is more and more possible for thousands living with paralysis and spinal cord injuries, because of him.