

MONTHLY MOVIES

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This is 2022 in movies ... so far

By T. Rob Brown

If Wednesday is hump day, then June is hump month. We near the halfway mark for the year and it's time to take a look at the year in movies ... so far.

Since the pandemic, the movie front drastically changed. No longer do we look at just films that hit our local cinemas, but also those appearing on a wide variety of streaming services. Our definition of first-run film mutated on us faster than a new strain of COVID-19.

It doesn't look like that business model is changing anytime soon. All of the major streaming services contract out major stars (and directors) to bring home exclusive films to keep streamers entertained and subscribed.

For this article, I'm going to talk more in-depth about three films and briefly mention some others. The three of this year's releases I'd like to examine the most are *The Batman*, *Dr. Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* and *Turning Red*.

The Caped Crusader returns to the big screen with yet another new face. This time, Robert Pattinson (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, *The Lighthouse*, *Twilight* and *Tenet*) brings a new style to the Dark Knight as he portrays Bruce Wayne and Batman during the superhero's second year of striking fear into the seedy underbelly of Gotham City. *The Batman* released on March 4, 2022.

Pattinson's portrayal of Wayne is quite different than other takes; for the first time, his post-traumatic stress in dealing with the loss of his parents—gunned down before his eyes as a child—

becomes realized on the big screen. We can actually see how messed up Wayne is in this film. After all, no one completely sane climbs around buildings at night to fight crime in a bat suit. It's important that we see this side of Wayne—especially so early in his career when the villains he faces continually remind him of the one who took his parents' lives.

Not only that, but another triumph of this film is that it actually shows Batman embrace his role as “the world's greatest detective.” Batman made his first appearance in May 1939's *Detective Comics* No. 27. His work as a detective should always be a big part of how he solves crimes. In most other Batman live-action films, his detective side is often just glazed over.

This film is dark. It's definitely one of the darkest entries in the Batman live-action films yet—not just in terms of the subject matter of the film but also in the low-light levels and darkly lit cinematography. Yet, the cinematography is still another triumph of this film; it pulls from old cinema noir, which is a perfect fit for a detective film. I continue to recall the amazing camera work as Oswald “Oz” Chesterfield Cobblepot (better known as the Penguin, played by Colin Farrell) looks out from his overturned vehicle—in an upside-down camera shot—to see the upside-down reflection of Batman walking over standing water with flames behind him. The whole shot is a masterpiece that deserves praise.

If I had to pick the best live-action Batman film to date, I'd have a difficult time deciding between *The Batman* and *The Dark Knight*. I think *The Dark Knight* still wins out in the end, but *The Batman* is a strong entry in the Caped Crusader's filmography and in my opinion, even surpasses some of the Christopher Nolan entries.

This film takes the characters seriously and in an excellent, yet darkly artistic direction. For me, the only issues revolved around a somewhat confusing plot—it wasn't always clear what was going on, but this wasn't a deal-breaker for me since I like to be kept somewhat in the dark during a detective story. The unraveling of the mystery, after all, is why we watch a noir detective story. The ending, though, was a little lackluster in that it felt like Batman didn't really win.

One of the criticisms this film took revolved around its long runtime. Honestly though, even though the pacing was a bit slow in certain parts, the overall film doesn't really feel like it's almost three hours long.

The Batman, rated PG-13, was directed by Matt Reeves and stars Pattinson, Zoë Kravitz, Jeffrey Wright, Farrell, Paul Dano, John Turturro and Andy Serkis. It received a Certified Fresh 85% Tomatometer score and an 87% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 7.9/10 on the International Movie Database. It runs for a lengthy 2 hours and 56 minutes. It brought in \$369.3 million at the domestic box office for Warner Bros. Pictures.

Batman wasn't the only superhero returning to the big screen this year. Marvel's Dr. Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) appeared in his second solo outing on May 6, 2022. Well, if you can call it a solo outing with Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen), Wong (Benedict Wong) and America Chavez (Xochitl Gómez) all along for the ride.

This film held a lot of surprises, which I don't want to spoil in this writing.

For me, it was not perfect but still great on several levels.

First, Cumberbatch is quite possibly one of the most talented actors in all of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. So, it was great to see him return as the lead in another film. This actor continues to prove himself time and again taking on popular, historical and artistic roles across his career. He even worked with Laredo director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon when he starred in *The Current War* (2017) alongside his MCU co-star Tom Holland. I recently purchased and watched *The Courier* (2021), another of Cumberbatch's strong films.

Secondly, a Latina superhero! Chavez makes her cinematic debut, pulled from the pages of Marvel Comics' *Vengeance* (2011). One thing the MCU lacks is a strong Latinx presence. Our first significant Latino character was the hilarious Luis (Michael Peña) in *Ant-Man* (2015) and *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (2018). Luis isn't a superhero, though. We saw our second major Latinx character when the wonderfully talented screen legend Salma Hayek joined the MCU as Ajak in *The Eternals* (2021)—our first one with super powers, but then (spoiler alert!) they killed her off and the MCU returned to one major Latinx character until this film changed that. Gómez is more than just a new face to the MCU, she offers an innocence and sincerity backed by a lot of power—something the MCU really needs now with the loss of Steve Rogers and Tony Stark.

Third, Sam Raimi. Yes ... THAT Sam Raimi: the legendary director of the *Evil Dead* series of films (1981, 1987, 1992) and its TV series (2015-2018), the first *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002, 2004, 2007), the Liam Neeson superhero film *Darkman* (1990) and so much more. This film is the MCU's first foray into the darker side of superheroes—into the dark arts of magic—into supernatural horror. Raimi was certainly an excellent choice for this endeavor. Some of the scenes just flowed with Raimi's unique style, backed by a Danny Elfman soundtrack. As I've mentioned before in my columns, Raimi and Tim Burton both lean toward Elfman to score almost all of their films.

Interestingly enough, I saw this film twice, back-to-back at Alamo Drafthouse on the Friday of opening weekend. Two of my friends, unknown to one another, bought my ticket to go see it so we would have opening-weekend seats. Luckily, I was able to attend the film with both friends. That made for an interesting night.

Overall, I really enjoyed this film. It was a lot of fun. My only complaints center around how far they took Scarlet Witch's character. (Spoiler alert: I'm not sure if Wanda Maximoff can ever be redeemed after the events of this film.)

Dr. Strange and the Multiverse of Madness, rated PG-13, was directed by Raimi and stars Cumberbatch, Olsen, Rachel McAdams, Wong, Gómez and Chiwetel Ejiofor, plus several surprise cameos. It received a 74% Tomatometer score and an 86% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 7.3/10 on IMDb. It runs for 2 hours and 6 minutes. It brought in \$388.6 million at the domestic box office for Walt Disney Pictures so far.

On March 11, 2022, Disney+ released Pixar's newest film on the streaming service: *Turning Red*. Unfortunately, none of Pixar's films have made it to the big screen since *Onward* (2020), which was in cinemas when the pandemic began to get heated in the U.S. It's as if Disney is somehow out to punish Pixar for the pandemic. *Soul* (2020) and *Luca* (2021) also released straight to Disney+.

With the critical success of *Turning Red*, I think Disney made a bad call sending this one straight to its streaming service. A cinematic run could have earned Disney some serious financial returns, as well as add more credibility for one of Pixar's strongest entries in some time.

Young American teens and early 20s folk are highly interested in the world of K-Pop and Korean culture in general. It's a no-brainer that a Pixar-quality film that engages audiences with this culture could be a big win for the animation studio.

Not only are the themes and characters of the film influenced by Korean culture, but even the animation style resembles popular Asian animation.

Another reason this film is so good is that it's a heartwarming coming-of-age story, filled with humor and isn't scared to tackle real-world situations that might make parents uncomfortable to talk about with their children—such as puberty. For some, this film might go too far in that direction and for others it may not go far enough, but I applaud Pixar for being bold in this manner.

This film reaches out to teens or tweens and parents alike. Ultimately, it's about family relationships and learning to be OK with our bodies—even if we feel weird about those natural changes.

Turning Red, rated PG, was directed by Domee Shi and stars Rosalie Chiang and Sandra Oh. It received a Certified Fresh 94% Tomatometer score and an 72% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 7.0/10 on IMDb. It runs for 1 hour and 40 minutes.

Other notable films or streaming shows I liked this year: *The Adam Project*, *The Book of Boba Fett*, *Moon Knight*, *Stranger Things: Season 4* (first half), *Obi-Wan Kenobi* (first four episodes so far), *The Boys: Season 3* (first three episodes so far) and *Ms. Marvel* (first episode so far). The second half of *Stranger Things: Season 4* releases in July on Netflix.

Notable films that are still on my plan-to-watch list so far this year: *Top Gun: Maverick*, *The Northman*, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, *The Lost City*, *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore*, *Uncharted*, *Jurassic World: Dominion*, *Death on the Nile*, *Minions: The Rise of Gru*, *No Time to Die* and *Hustle*. Eventually, I'll finally get around to seeing *Morbius*. Wait, there's a Bruce Willis movie titled *A Day to Die* and it's not a *Die Hard* film? Sounds too similar to *A Good Day to Die Hard*. People are asking this question online and I can certainly see why. I also want to see *Only Murders in the Building* with Steve Martin and Martin Short and *Westworld: Season 4*.

My future must-watch list for 2022: *Thor: Love and Thunder*, *Lightyear*, *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, *What If...?: Season 2*, *The Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special*, *Avatar: The Way of Water*, *Black Adam*, *Shazam! Fury of the Gods*, *Star Wars: Andor* series and *Tales of the Jedi* animated series.

"The show must go on."