Fresh off his review of Superman Returns, Mitch takes a look at the best and worst comic book adaptations to the silver screen in his latest piece. How does he rank the Batman, Superman, and Spiderman movies against some of the other comic book films? In addition to being a great read, this column also gave me an excuse to feature a pic of Jessica Alba on the front page ... as Sin City makes one of Mitch's lists.

The only genre that seems to be more popular with movie makers right now than remaking stupid old TV shows is adapting comic books to the big screen. This summer, as everyone knows, is dominated by X-Men and Superman, hot off the huge successes of “Batman Begins” last year and “Spider-Man 2” the year before. In the next few years, the floodgates will really open. “Spider-Man 3”, “Iron Man”, “Wolverine”, “Ghost Rider”, “Watchmen”, “Batman 2”, “Captain America”and “Fantastic 4 Part II” are all scheduled to be made. In addition, studios are looking at making films of “The Silver Surfer”, “The Flash”, “Wonder Woman”, “Green Lantern”, “The Avengers”, “Dr. Strange”, “Ant-Man”, “Thor”, “Nick Fury” and “Green Arrow”.

The reasons for their successes are obvious. There is a built in audience of millions of people who are familiar with these characters. Combine that with the simple fact of life in Hollywood that action fantasies sell…if done right and the advances in CGI and you have the formula for Big Box Office.

Unfortunately, this perceived Golden Goose can lay some seriously rotten eggs sometimes. Studio executives make the naïve assumption that just because some name actor is running around in front of a green screen in a tight outfit, they're guaranteed millions in profit…and it just doesn't work that way. Poor writing ("Fantastic Four"), directing ("Hulk"), or acting ("Daredevil") can bring down a superhero film faster than Kryptonite KOs Clark Kent.

So with that, let's look at the Ten Best and Five Worst Comic Book Adaptations. You will notice that no film was released prior to 1978. I'm really not an expert on the types of older comic book fantasies like "Flash Gordon", and won't get into the campy special effects of the day, case in point being the old "Superman" movies. To compare apples to apples, I'm going with the modern day films that are able to seamlessly integrate special effects into the story line.

Note that once again, these are just my opinions, and feel free to disagree. But if you write back to tell me that I should have had "Elektra" on my Top 10 list…you're not going to gain much "street cred" with me.

Top 10

#10 Batman (1989) – Tim Burton's unusual view of the surrealistic Gotham City truly was Gothic…and a polar opposite of the established Superman franchise. Dark and twisted was the cityscape, the villain, and the hero. I never really agreed with the casting of Michael Keaton as Bruce Wayne/Batman, although to his credit, Keaton did an excellent job…he was just wrong physically for the part. Jack Nicholson stole the show as The Joker in one of his best performances. A very good film, but I don't like having the villain being the main character at the expense of the hero…a habit this franchise kept up to it's own detriment, with Danny DeVito, Michelle Pfieffer, Christopher Walken, Tommy Lee Jones, Jim

Carrey, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Uma Thurmond all taking turns upstaging the Caped Crusader.

#9 Superman Returns (2006) – Bryan Singer is a great director of this genre, having three films in my Top 10. Here he's hamstrung by the iconic image not only of the "too good to be true" hero, but also the iconic image of the man who first played him, Christopher Reeve. Even with his hands metaphorically tied behind his back, Singer still made an excellent film breathing new life into the franchise, although he spent too much time re-hashing what we'd seen in the 1978 film.

#8 Spider-Man (2002) – I can hear the screaming for putting this box office smash "this low"…but bear with me. The direction and acting are what made this a very good film, as the writing was a bit stilted, and the CGI was actually quite poor. As far as the writing goes, that might be a bit understandable, as it was necessary to spend a good deal of the film showing how Peter Parker became Spider-Man, and therefore the movie didn't really take off until the last half. This introductory problem plagues many superhero movies. Some handle it well ("X-Men", "Blade"); some don't ("Fantastic Four", "Hulk"). And some even make the "how they became who they are" the focus of the entire film. You'll see some of those later in the list.

#7 X-Men (2000) – Bryan Singer's first foray into the land of superheroes was an undeniable success. Singer did an extraordinary job in handling the complex task of introducing seven major characters and four important supporting ones while still keeping the action and suspense at a high level. Having two actors with the experience and pedigree of Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart alongside two actors breaking out as stars (Hugh Jackman, Halle Berry) also helped. The plot was a bit weak, but it hardly mattered as the world immediately took to the story of superheroes not worshiped for their abilities, but feared and hated.

#6 Superman II (1980) – Interesting to note that other than “The Godfather”, comic book movies seemed to be the only type where sequels can be just as good (and often better) than the original. This one was actually superior to the original in regards to storylines; Superman’s confessed love to Lois Lane, him giving up his powers for her, and the threat of not only the buffoonish Lex Luthor, but also from General Zod and his compatriots. Who amongst us didn’t cheer at the theatre when he showed up outside the window of the Daily Planet, powers restored, and told Zod “care to step outside”?

#5 Spider-Man 2 (2004) – With no additional exposition needed, Sam Raimi was able to get right into the meat of the story, detailing Peter Parker’s exhausting effort to maintain his life as a college student and a superhero. There is, of course, a super-villain; exceptionally portrayed by Alfred Molina as Doctor Octopus, but the conflict between Spider-Man and Peter Parker was the highlight of this film. Having read the Spider-Man comics for many years, I was among those concerned at first that Tobey Maguire was the wrong choice for the part. This movie definitely proved those concerns unfounded as he has the character completely nailed in all its facets.

#4 X-Men United (2003) – As with Spider-Man 2, once you get rid of the need to take 45 minutes to explain the basics to the audience, you can wade right into the story. And with X2, it was even better because they took the unusual step of making the villain of the first film, Magneto, into a position of being an ally in the second as the mutants battle against a maniacal government agent. Bryan Singer also did a masterful job once again of juggling a large ensemble cast giving almost all the players sufficient screen time (other than Cyclops…an oversight almost no one regrets). My personal favorite was the introduction of Nightcrawler), a complex and tragic character wonderfully portrayed by Alan Cummings. Among the flaws of “X-Men: The Last Stand” was not having Nightcrawler involved, along with not introducing the new characters like Colossus and Kitty Pride in the same manner.

#3 Sin City (2005) – The only one of my picks that is an adaptation of a Graphic Novel as opposed to a standard comic book series. Frank Miller's fame came from his first Graphic Novel, the heralded "Dark Knight" series which chronicled a 60 something Bruce Wayne donning the cape once again after years in retirement. In Sin City, three stories were told, all of them stark, riveting, and extraordinarily violent. Mickey Rourke gave a career performance in extensive facial prosthesis as the noble goon Marv, avenging the death of a prostitute. Bruce Willis and Clive Owen excelled as an over the hill cop protecting a young girl (Jessica Alba at her hottest), and a ex-con/ex-cop drug into a turf war between hookers and a corrupt police force. The most interesting casting was Elijah Wood as a near super powered mute cannibal. Seriously creepy…and one of those movies that you either love or hate.

 # 2 Superman (1978) – "You will believe a man can fly." That was the tag line from the movie, and they were right. Leveraging off the same advances in technology first exhibited in "Star Wars", Superman was like nothing you'd ever seen before. Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman were the "stars", but the movie belonged to a previously unknown skinny soap opera actor named Christopher Reeve. The origin became the story, detailing life on the doomed planet Krypton, the young Clark Kent's early life and the discovery of his true roots, and his introduction to the world as Superman. I still get a chuckle every time I see the scene where Superman first comes out of the spinning revolving door in his costume (after not being able to find a real phone booth), and the pimp exclaiming "Woo! That's a Bad Out-Fit!" And this was a Bad Genre Establishing Movie…the One that started it all.

#1 Batman Begins (2005) – If "Superman" started it all, "Batman Begins" showed that the genre could truly be excellent dramatic film making. Borrowing from the four part series "Batman: Year One", the film was like Superman as it chronicled the introduction of Batman into the world. In this case, following the journey of a very disturbed, obsessed young man trying to find his place and role in the world after his billionaire parents were murdered in front of his eyes; an event he blamed on himself. Director Christopher Nolan and star Christian Bale excelled in getting into the heart and soul of the tormented Bruce Wayne, and Bale's portrayal of a

man teetering himself on the edge is probably the best acting job I have ever seen in this genre.

Honorable Mentions: “Darkman”, “Hellboy”, “Blade”.

Bottom 5

#5 Supergirl (1984) – Swizzle stick sized Helen Slater as the strongest woman in the world? Yeah…that worked real well. Stupid plot, bad special effects, and “what the Hell am I doing here?” acting from Peter O’Toole, Faye Dunaway, and Brenda Vaccaro. Someone should have dropped a ton of Kryptonite on whoever green lighted this project.

#4 Batman and Robin (1997) – The film that almost killed off the comic book genre entirely. George Clooney was still under the opinion that he could be Doug Ross from “ER” his entire career and get by on just his looks and a few head bobs. Ahnuld’s Mr. Freeze was about as stiff as someone frozen would actually be, but even he wasn’t as wasted in the film as was Uma Thurmond as Poison Ivy. The only good thing to come from this movie was the halt of having the dreadful Chris O’Donnell and Alicia Silverstone foisted upon us as “stars”.

#3 Van Helsing (2004) – Or as most like to call it, Van Helstink. This was just stupid on so many levels that I couldn’t explain them all without a bottle of Excedrin Migraine. Exhibit “A” on what happens when you decide to spend all your effort on making eye popping visual effects and then try to add in a few lines of dialog in between the action and think that constitutes a plot.

#2 Catwoman (2004) – Now would be a good time to ponder why it is that women suffer so much when it comes to these types of movies. This one was a complete mess from start to finish; with the biggest faux pax being having Catwoman NOT be the Selene Catwoman character from the Batman comics, but an entirely different entity. The scriptwriters from this movie made those that penned "Van Helsing" look downright Shakespearean in comparison. So we have this mess, "Elektra", "Supergirl", Batgirl from "Batman and Robin", and throw in Charlize Theron's bomb "Aeon Flux" as well to demonstrate that Hollywood just doesn't know how to make Superhero movies with women as the central character.

#1 Hulk (2003) – If you've read my opinions regarding "Brokeback Mountain", you know I lay 90% of my disapproval of that movie at the feet of Ang Lee, who is a total hack of a director…yet is still adored by many of the Hollywood Elite. I have no idea why, as this movie was a complete disaster…so much more the pity as it had so much potential. Eric Bana is a terrific actor, and a great pick for Bruce Banner. But the plot twists, writing, and special effects were so strange, and the directing so disjointed that it became an unwatchable debacle. Nick Nolte probably gave his worst performance of his illustrious career as Banner's whacked out father. Nick took that a little too much to heart, as he was filming this movie when he had his most "famous" photograph taken after another DUI arrest.

Dishonorable Mentions: "Elektra", "Fantastic Four", "Daredevil", "The Punisher".

Best Actor in a Superhero Movie: Christian Bale, "Batman Begins"

Best Actress in a Superhero Movie: Natalie Portman, "V for Vendetta".

Best Supporting Actor in a Superhero Movie: Alfred Molina, "Spider-Man 2"

Best Supporting Actress in a Superhero Movie: Famke Janssen, “X2: X-Men United”

Worst Actor in a Superhero Movie: George Clooney, “Batman and Robin”

Worst Actress in a Superhero Movie: Halle Berry, “Catwoman”

Worst Supporting Actor in a Superhero Movie: Tommy Lee Jones, “Batman Forever”

Worst Supporting Actress in a Superhero Movie: Faye Dunaway, “Supergirl”.