COMICS

Not Your Average Superhero Movie: Seven Offbeat Comic Book Adaptations

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Feeling a bit beaten down by the constant stream of big-budget, blockbuster superhero films that have been ruling the box office for the last fifteen years or so? You're not alone. After many years of global dominance, superhero films are still going strong...but there seem to be some signs of fatigue; while innovative films like *Spider-man: Across the Spider-Verse* are still met with rapturous applause, there seems to be a bit less enthusiasm for the inevitable live-action superhero sequels regularly coming down the pipeline.

But there's good news: there are plenty of other films based on comic books and graphic novels already out there—and not all of them feature superheroes! The next time you're looking for something a little different, or just need a break from the latest revamped origin story or gritty reboot, check out these seven boffo films adapted from comics/graphic novels—most of which prove you don't need to have a superhero around to tell a fantastic story!

The Mask (1994)
Source: *The Mask* (Dark Horse Comics)

Take a red-hot actor of the moment (Jim Carrey) and turn him green (not for the last time for future Grinch Carrey, then riding a wave of success that began with *In Living Color* and *Ace Venture: Pet Detective*) and what do you get? One of the nuttiest performances any actor has ever given. Ordinary schmo Stanley (Carrey) discovers a wooden green mask that turns him into a wacky prankster when he wears it. He's also able to animate himself—and his surroundings—whenever he likes. In 2005, *Son of the Mask* brought back the rubber-faced oddball (though not Carrey), but the magic, if not the mask, was gone, and it sank at the box office.

Men in Black (1997)
Source: *The Men in Black* (Malibu/Marvel)

Fans of the original comic series were in for a bit of a surprise when Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones stepped into the roles of Agent J and Agent K. For one thing, the comics—focusing on special agents assigned to monitor and conceal extraterrestrial activity on Earth—were super macho and very serious, while the film that started the whole franchise (which includes two sequels and a 2019 spin-off, *Men in Black: International*) was much lighter, meant to be goofy and fun (while still a bit weird and gross, on occasion). The weapons are also quite different; in the comics, the agents employed the usual arsenal of Earth weapons to take down aliens (and occasionally witnesses), but in the film, they're equipped with all kinds of big, flashy weapons and over-the-top gadgets, befitting the more comedic tone.

Nick Fury: Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. (1998)
Source: Marvel Comics

A decade before Samuel L. Jackson slipped into the eye patch of the lead agent of S.H.I.E.L.D., David Hasselhoff took on the character in this super-cheesy TV adaptation. In the film, Fury takes on a terrorist organization called HYDRA, in this less-than-awesome tale of super spies featuring Hasselhoff, future Real Housewife Lisa Rinna, and a script by David S. Goyer, who went on to write screenplays for the *Blade* trilogy, Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy, *Man of Steel*, and *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice.* "I think the film was pretty mediocre, but Hasselhoff turned out to be the best thing in it," Goyer said in 2000. "He got the joke. The script was meant to be very tongue in cheek and Hasselhoff understood that." So you can add this one to give your Goyer collection of comic book films if you're a completist, or just want a glimpse into a wild alternate dimension version of what might have been…

Mystery Men (1999)
Source: *Flaming Carrot Comics/Mystery Men Stories* (Aardvark-Vanaheim, Renegade Press, Dark Horse Comics, Image Comics, etc.)

CGI was progressing by leaps and bounds by the turn of last century, but it wasn't quite ready to animate or digitize a character who wore a giant carrot on his head. "This giant flaming carrot head was preposterous. In order to ride in the car, he'd burn the ceiling. It was a joke unto itself," writer/illustrator Bob Burden told Syfy Wire. Rather than focusing on Flaming Carrot, the movie adaptation centers on Burden's other Mysterymen, "blue-collar, mill-town" superheroes, all doing their best with an array of second-tier abilities. The film features an incredible cast (including Ben Stiller, Hank Azaria, Janeane Garofalo, Eddie Izzard, William H. Macy, Tom Waits, Paul Reubens, and Geoffrey Rush), and satirized everything from conventional comic book tropes to celebrity culture and capitalism. (It was also has the dubious distinction of being the first film to prominently feature Smash Mouth's "All Star," so take that, Shrek!)

Ghost World (2001)
Source: _Eightball_ (Fantagraphics Books)

Before becoming an actual comic book superhero as Black Widow, Scarlett Johansson starred opposite Thora Burch and Steve Buscemi in the wonderfully weird *Ghost World*, based on the 1993-97 comic by Daniel Clowes. Enid and Rebecca are friends in the liminal space post-high school graduation, with one taking a remedial art class while the other tries to set up a lonely older man on dates. Clowes co-wrote the screenplay with director Terry Zwigoff—the man behind *Crumb*, the 1995 documentary about comics legend R. Crumb. "The actual film itself is very different from the script we wrote," Clowes stated in 2017. "We ended up jettisoning the last twenty pages and rethought the whole thing as we were filming. It was really held together by hair and spit."

American Splendor (2003)
Source: *American Splendor*/*Our Cancer Year* (Dark Horse Comics, DC Comics)

Whether you think of the source material here as a comic book series or graphic novel (or don't bother to make a distinction at all), there's no mistaking the irascible Harvey Pekar, who began chronicling his mundane life in Cleveland, Ohio in irregular issues starting in 1976. He enlisted comic legend Robert Crumb to contribute art (other artists including Gary Dumm, Greg Budgett, and Brian Bram also illustrated over the years). The movie adaption follows the episodes featured in *Our Cancer Year*, cowritten with Joyce Brabner, in which Pekar battles lymphoma with support from his wife; they adopt a daughter, and he retires from his job, now cancer-free. The story is told partly in live action and partly through animation, with Pekar, Brabner, and other real-life figures in the story appearing in documentary-like sections, while other events are dramatized with actors playing the people involved (including Paul Giamatti as Pekar).

The Death of Stalin (2018)
Source: *La Mort de Staline* (Dargaud)

Based on the 2010-12 graphic novel series by artist Thierry Robin and writer Fabien Nury, this satire about power and toadying is one of the great overlooked films of 2018, starring Steve Buscemi, Paddy Considine, Rupert Friend, Michael Palin, and Jason Isaacs (to name but a few), and was directed and co-written by *Veep* creator Armando Iannucci. In the film, Stalin suffers a stroke while hosting members of his Central Committee at his home, and (dark, sometimes absurdist) hilarity ensues during the power struggle to see who will take over running the USSR. As one might expect from a movie that mines humor (and strikingly timely satire) from the demise of one of the world's worst dictators, though embraced by critics, the film was banned in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

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What are your favorite lesser-known movies based on comics or graphic novels? Let me know in the comments below!

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