

The Origin of Costumed and Masked Heroes: Zorro

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How It Started

Historically, there does not seem to be any historical record of heroes wearing costumes and masks to fight crime. Only villains seemed to dress in such a way. Masked heroes seem to be a literary creation of the twentieth century, which included historical fiction as well.

“El Zorro”

Zorro (Spanish for "Fox") is a fictional masked character created in 1919 in “The Curse of Capistrano,” by American pulp writer Johnston McCulley, and set in a fictional Pueblo of Los Angeles during the era of Mexican California, 1769–1821. “El Zorro” was like an early California Batman, doing good deeds without asking for any compensation.

The Historical Zorro



There is a historical basis for the “Zorro” character. While there are many potential candidates, the best seems to be a priest named Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, 1753–1810. He was even called “El Zorro” in his lifetime. He fought for the independence of Mexico from Spain. He was executed by a firing squad for his deeds. He never wore a mask.

The Movies



There have been many versions of Zorro in film and on television. The first starred Douglass Fairbanks in 1920, as McCulley's ink had scarcely dried. Fairbanks set the cinematic criteria for "El Zorro" with feats of sword fighting and gymnastic stunts. The concept of the "secret identity" had been established and would be repeated seemingly endless times for a century.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6oeByilcpw>

"The Mark of Zorro" set a new standard in 1940. It starred Tyrone Power, Linda Darnell, and Basil Rathbone. It even credited Johnston McCulley. The established "Zorro" image was featured in the theatrical poster, but Tyrone Power altered it with a mask for his lower face. The film was featured in one Batman comic book, as the movie Bruce Wayne's parents attended the night they were killed.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtcZKmi_Knc

Badly Done Zorro

Republic Pictures played free and loose with the Zorro story in 1939 with “Zorro’s Fighting Legion,” which was a Saturday matinee serial. Though it was in the right historical period, it gave no credit to Johnston McCulley. Being a serial meant it suffered from stereotypical action and unrealistic fight scenes that were typical of serials. Of course, it was in chapters that ended in cliffhangers. It also had a typical serial villain who wore a disguise. It wasn’t even placed in Los Angeles.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOy0N7FGuII>

Republic also produced “Zorro Rides Again” in 1937, “Zorro's Black Whip” in 1944, the “Son of Zorro” in 1947, and “The Ghost of Zorro” in 1949. These all took place in the Wild West, and were filmed on the Iverson Movie Ranch in Chatsworth, California. “Zorro’s Black Whip” was different because it featured a woman in the role.

New Versions of Television

Versions have been on television for a long time, and are still being released. I quit keeping track of them all. My favorite was the 1990 version with Duncan Regehr as Zorro. This version even featured an episode where Zorro went to France to help a friend. There, he was known as “Le Renard.”



Duncan Regehr was especially romantic as Zorro.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gL5NIcRuEc&list=PLpNzRWsEo1dSC-EujTC0LrsW4-AQBk3OG>

Big Budget Movies

There were two big-budget movies starring Antonio Banderas, a true Spaniard, and Catherine Zeta-Jones. “The Mask of Zorro” premiered in 1998. It was very popular, with spectacular action and intertwined special effects that created over-the-top action. It was followed later by “The Legend of Zorro” in 2006, which failed to garner the fame of the 1998 movie.



Fantastic, over-the-top romantic chemistry was created between Antonio Banderas and Catherine Zeta-Jones.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bw7GnKjkThQ>

Comic Relief

In the 1975 comedy series, episode 2, of “When Things were Rotten,” the temporal barrier became skewed, and the legend went full circle, when Robin Hood disguised himself as Zorro.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sh-pHGzmELg> at 19:30.

The 1981 movie, “Zorro the Gay Blade,” George Hamilton played Don Diego de la Vega, who became the new Zorro, after his father was murdered. After a series of escapades, Don Diego becomes a suspect for the outlaw Zorro; then he feigned being injured to avoid suspicion.

Don Diego’s gay brother (also played by Hamilton), Ramón de la Vega, stepped in to take his place. However, Ramón is a master of the whip, not the sword. Ramón also wears diverse, colorful outfits that add to all the hilarity.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1oATJBaWfg&list=PLuN65XN NweIFJfEOWt4CGpdU77AVveNwT>

Zorro has been overdone, so I think it’s wise for me to stop here. Still. I need to explain exactly what “Zorro” represents. He is someone who “rescues” people from desperate situations in which they’ve become trapped. In a sense, he is a savior. In Buddhist terms, this is a form of theism, in which an external rescuing power or force arrives in the last minute, just like the cavalry. It’s a fantasy, since people need to learn to deal with their issues themselves.