

# Justice League Movie Set Visit: New Gods & A New Tone

We were on the set of the Justice League movie with Zack Snyder Ben Affleck, Gal Gadot, and more to discuss the DCEU epic!

[David Crow](#) March 25, 2017



Photo: Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

*This article will contain some minor **Justice League** movie spoilers.*

He stands alone on the rooftop waiting, always waiting, in a context that should be as familiar to moviegoers as the blinding floodlight behind him, which shines its bat-shaped insignia into perpetual darkness. His name is James Gordon and he has been here before, hat and moustache in hand,

patiently anticipating that distant thunder to finally roll up in the shape of a Dark Knight. Yet, something is different about this scene, for as the lightning cracks ever closer, it becomes apparent that he awaits not one superhero but *four* who manifest in a flash of light.

Suddenly, the police commissioner is face-to-face with three fabulously costumed do-gooders he's never met before. It is in this moment that Batman, Wonder Woman, the Flash, and Cyborg are at last working together in what appears to be near the end of their film's first act. And lest the vision of rain-soaked rooftops and lightning-illuminated sets remind you too much of last March's ***Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*** and its ominous tones, this ***Justice League*** sequence immediately lets observers know they're playing a whole different ballgame.

After all, when Gordon becomes confused by Wonder Woman uttering the word "Parademon," Batman explains with perfect deadpan, "Flying Monkeys." Just like that, you know you're no longer in the DCEU's version of Kansas.

Of course, this is not actually on a rooftop at all, but rather one of the many soundstages devoted to Zack Snyder's ***Justice League*** at Warner Brothers' Leavesden Studios in England. It's day 31 of a 111-day shoot, as well as the first time J.K. Simmons has been onset with a moustache, trench coat, and fedora that appears to have been loaned out by a ***Detective Comics*** panel. And this is simply one of the many eye-catching things that I and a few other journalists were allowed to spy in an instant this Friday afternoon in June.



Certainly more gothic than anything seen in Christopher Nolan's vision of Gotham, the GCPD rooftop is surrounded by a sea of green screen that will undoubtedly be replaced with cityscapes every bit as operatic as the

gargoyles that hang out above the cast from a rounded terrace in the center of the building made of glass and rusted steel. Appearing as almost like a lighthouse shipwrecked on top of the building, it is the entrance to a steam-filled exterior that has the surreal combination of Ben Affleck, Gal Gadot, Ezra Miller, and Ray Fisher all in-character and in-costume (or in Fisher's case, a gray bodysuit that accompanies the red lights glowing from one of his eyes and chest).

During this scene, Gordon has called in Batman to help with the disappearance of eight missing scientists in Gotham and Metropolis that have all been kidnapped by creatures from another world. Actually, make that nine scientists, as Fisher's Cyborg reveals when materializing separately from the other three heroes, much to Wonder Woman's surprise and delight. He mentions a ninth disappeared PhD of obvious personal importance since he was stolen from S.T.A.R. Labs. In this moment, Wonder Woman knows well about the insectoid beasts responsible, and the Jack Kirby-styled MacGuffins that they seek: Mother Boxes.

With four heroes now on a quest to stop the Parademons from discovering these items' location, three of the heroes do the full-Batman and vanish on Gordon while his back is turned. When the police commissioner whirls around, however, the Flash lingers as equally perplexed as Gordon about his colleagues' absence. "What, they just left?" Miller's superhero smirks. "That's rude."

It might be, but the line is one of the many moments that would appear to signal the DCEU's new temperament.

"There's definitely room for more humor," Ben Affleck tells us between set-ups. Coming over to the journalists unprompted and happy to chat, the Oscar winning filmmaker still has on much of his Batsuit and the black

raccoon eyes that appear when the mask comes off. He does still remark though that his multiple pounds of leather makes him envy Fisher's "silk pajamas."

On his original point, Affleck continues, "DC movies are, I think, by their nature still a little more gothic, or a little bit more mythic, rather, than some comic book movies are. But [**BvS**] was a heavy, dark movie, because it was really rooted in **Dark Knight Returns**, which is a heavy, dark book. This [movie] is not that... it's about multilateralism and it's about hope, and it's about working together, and the kind of conflicts you have trying to work with others."

Indeed. If there seemed to be one theme reiterated again and again during our incredibly detailed set visit, by talent both in front of and behind the camera, it is that **Justice League** is about turning a page from the darkness of the last DCEU picture, and finally bringing this franchise out into a sun as shiny as the Flash's new red costume.



## A Tonal Shift That Comes in a Flash

Prior to this set visit, **Justice League** has been at the epicenter of an online culture obsessed with rumor and innuendo. While **Batman v Superman** broke March box office records by earning \$166 million in its first weekend, this follow-up has seen some behind-the-scenes changes that have caused the internet to speculate about similar transitions in the film. However, from top-to-bottom, the **Justice League** team presents the picture of a movie that was always naturally progressing towards a lighter, more optimistic tone—elements that were perhaps then doubled down upon after this past spring's critical reception.

For his part, director Zack Snyder seemed at ease with the process of blockbuster moviemaking, if exhausted at the end of a long day's shoot, when he addressed a room full of reporters with a mojito in hand.

"I'm like, obsessed with tone in the movies," Snyder says when considering the creative and perhaps commercial choices made in producing **Justice League**. "Tone has always been like the main thing that I go after with a movie. And I really wanted the tone of the three movies to be different chapters and not be like the same note that you strike... I really wanted that and I do believe that since **Batman v Superman** came out, and we really wrapped our heads around what **Justice League** would be, I did think that the tone has—because of what fans have said and how it was perceived by some—that we have really put the screws to what we thought the tone would be, and I feel like just crushed it that even little bit closer."

For Snyder, this is exemplified in how he sees this film as being about creating a team from disparate personalities who offer different qualities and cinematic flavors than we have previously seen in the DCEU. Comparing his film to **The Magnificent Seven**, the director insists that he always intended the story to be a very different animal. In this go-round, Batman gathers a team of superheroes together, as opposed to trying to tear another one down. Consider that while Bruce Wayne wanted to kill Superman in **BvS**, in **Justice League** he remarks to Jim Gordon that there are now not enough of them around in the world.

On that very note, Zack Snyder, as well as producers Deborah Snyder and Chuck Roven, presented at the end of the day a newly edited together scene of Ben Affleck's Bruce Wayne meeting Ezra Miller's Barry Allen.

The sequence itself plays like almost a distant cousin of that time when Tony Stark introduced himself to Peter Parker. In this new sequence, Ezra Miller's

Barry (with a newly shorn haircut after **BvS**) comes home to a decrepit warehouse that has been retrofitted into some kind of loft with his homemade Flash costume hanging on display with its own mini-spotlight. Michael Wilkinson, who also designed Henry Cavill and Affleck's previous superhero suits, took special pride in how un-slick it appears with its multiple pieces (148 in total). It is also fascinatingly wrapped in conduit wires that will light up with electricity when Flash gets up to his true high speeds.

Still, at the moment, it is hanging from a wall in full-display for Bruce Wayne, who sits in Allen's chair expectantly. "I do ice dancing," Barry demurs as Bruce studies the design. Eventually, the increasingly graying billionaire loses his patience and throws a batarang at Barry's head, which the young superhero admires as the world slows to a crawl and the bat-weapon drifts by; he then plucks it out of the air, just as in shock at the revelation that Bruce Wayne is Batman as Bruce is at confirmation that Barry is the fast kid he'd previously seen on a CCTV feed.

Having apparently been burned by some "noes" before this moment about building a team, a truly in awe Bruce Wayne reluctantly begins his sales pitch: "I'm putting together a team, people with special abilities. You see, I believe enemies are coming—"

Bruce isn't able to finish his second sentence before Barry blurts out, "Stop right there. I'm in." Now even more confused by this kid's existence, Bruce persists, "Are you sure, just like that?!" But Barry shrugs. He needs friends.

The scene might seem basic in print, but so much of it works based on how pitch perfect Ezra Miller's delivery is both on-camera and off. In fact, it is easy to see that the filmmakers already know they have **Justice League's** scene-stealer on their hands, and this little scene goes a long way towards already being more fun than anything in this past Easter weekend's

superhero extravaganza.

For his part, Ben Affleck is open to comparisons between his Batman and Miller's Flash with the natural chemistry between our Batman and fun-loving Robin in the comics.

"There's an element of that to it," Affleck says. "There's a quality to really what Ezra does that is young and fun, and full of life and excited about what they're doing that's so in contrast to who Batman is. It's a little bit of that natural yin and yang to playing scenes with him. So, there's not the ward aspect to it, but there is kind of a little bit of the mentor." Perhaps that is why a cardboard cutout of Flash's shinier, more metallic final costume left out, accidentally revealed to us that Bruce Wayne and Alfred will later design a costume upgrade for Barry (the costume's image has a "Wayne Tech" logo).

Indeed, Deborah Snyder spoke to us separately about how she thinks both Miller's Flash and Fisher's Cyborg will open **Justice League** up to younger audiences that might not have found as much to enjoy in **Batman v Superman**, particularly those that did not care for that film's the deconstructionist approach.

"We hear what everyone has to say because we care what the fans say," she reflects about that latter film's reception. "At the same time, each story that we're telling is a completely different story, and I think what's really great is where we're going is kind of what the audiences wanted. We just had to take the characters from somewhere to bring them up to where they are. That was kind of our journey."



## Building a Bigger DC Universe

And to continue that journey, Deborah Snyder and Chuck Roven also introduced us to an office filled with a bounty of concept art, as well as more than a few props (on a personal aside, it is a pretty geeky thrill to hold Wonder Woman's Lasso of Truth or fail to comprehend the ancient Greek lettering on her new sword and shield). In this setting, the basics of the plot were laid bare.

Slated to take place a few months after the events of ***Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice***, the death of Superman has left Batman in a place of soul-searching. Whereas he began the last film at the end of his career, he and Gal Gadot's Diana Prince have a renewed purpose of putting together a team to honor Kal-El's memory... which might not be a moment too soon since Roven and Snyder confirmed that the DC comics fiend Steppenwolf would be the villain of the piece, though he has yet to be cast.

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Hardly a surprise since the evil alien's digital silhouette appeared in a deleted ***BvS*** scene, the inclusion of Steppenwolf confirms that Jack Kirby's New Gods and planet Apokolips (the intergalactic hellscape synonymous with Darkseid) will play prominent roles in ***Justice League***. Indeed, Deborah Snyder referred to the Mother Box technology as "Apokoliptian" and dating



back further than just the events in the last several films.

At some point in ***Justice League***, there will be a flashback to what Roven calls the time “before history.” In this sequence, which if effective would appear to resemble the prologue from ***Fellowship of the Ring***, the races of mankind, the Amazonians, and the Atlanteans will gather to divide the Mother Boxes amongst themselves. The red one will go into the possession of the Amazonians, the silver Mother Box will belong to the Atlanteans, and finally the black Mother Box will be left with humanity, as we saw glimpsed in the found footage origin of Cyborg in ***Batman v Superman***.

It is the location of these Mother Boxes which leads the Parademons to kidnap the scientists as mentioned in the aforementioned GCPD scene. However, their presence will go to some much stranger places if the concept art is to be believed. In the flashback, ancient Atlanteans and Amazonians will be gleaned, including Zeus, the Greek god who is the father of Wonder Woman (at least in recent DC Comics). The Amazonians themselves look fiercely feral with simple leathers and cloths hiding little skin—or their blades and arrows. But more daunting in its ambition is the concept art glimpsed from Atlantis.

***Justice League*** will be going under the sea, and by the looks of the images provided, filmmakers are planning to explore more than a simple half-crustacean band down where it’s wetter. One especially grandiose piece depicts Jason Momoa’s Aquaman controlling a shimmering Mother Box in his Secret Grotto while his Atlantean guards look on—mermen guards to be exact.

Also, we were able to glimpse the actual costumes Momoa will wear as Aquaman, Amber Heard (who according to concept art will have red hair) will don as Queen Mera, and finally the silvery aesthetic intended to garb Willem

Dafoe, who costume designer Michael Wilkinson revealed would be playing Vulko, an ancient Atlantean adviser to Aquaman and Mera. All have a translucent and elastic armor of different colors that when backlit glow like the gnarliest fish living in the Mariana Trench.

In one piece of concept art, it is revealed Aquaman eventually joins the Justice League team by entering Batman's Flying Fox (an aircraft vessel big enough to house the Batmobile) as it emerges from underneath the lake outside of Wayne Manor.

Yet, the most curious discovery amongst all of these images is the lack of Superman in action with the team. In fact, not even director Zack Snyder could confirm that we would see Henry Cavill's Superman, even though he spoke about how important it was to build to this film where Superman could become more like the character fans love.

"I wanted to get to a Superman that had a reason to be Superman, you know?" Zack Snyder says while explaining his reasoning for the Man of Steel being so morose in previous films. "Like a reason to feel the way he felt about humanity or the way that we all understand from the comic books, as far as his moral compass goes, he's pretty much [been]. But I feel like he had to go through something to be that." Snyder then stops himself to add with a laugh, "And I'm not saying he shows up in this movie."

Perhaps not, but the filmmaker also went on to compare his two most recent movies by saying, "Death is darker than, say, resurrection or team-building." So, make of that what you will.



## The Flying Fox and the Knightcrawler

Yet, in the absence of a man who you might believe can fly, there will be plenty of other airborne spectacles. Of particular delight will probably be the Flying Fox, which according to concept art will look more like a flying tank, similar to Zack Snyder and production designer Patrick Tatopoulos' Batmobile from *Batman v Superman*, only bigger and with wings.

"The funny thing about this is it is [similar] to a B-52," Tatopoulos says when remarking on its massive size. "A bomber usually has a cockpit in the front, you have a long cargo. So the first design I did for it, the cockpit was in the front, so it looked like a bomber. And it just didn't really work, and I took the cockpit and slid it all the way to the back. And suddenly, it became like the Batmobile."

He adds, "Pushing everything back and making it look like knuckles, it's not a slick plane, it's just a massive Batman plane like the car."

According to the concept art, it will be more lethal than knuckles as well. Big enough to store the Batmobile in its mid-section while still having room for troops beneath the cargo hold, and a bridge on top of that, the front of the Flying Fox also has a gun turret that would not look out of place in a Star Wars movie. Presumably, it will be a useful weapon if flying Parademons attack.

While most of the Flying Fox has yet to be built, whether on a stage or in a computer, we did visit the set of Bruce Wayne's new hangar in the film that will store this massive Spruce Goose. As a reference for the set, Tatopoulos used submarine factories and bunkers from the First World War. Likewise, the production designer imagines the space to be a mixture "of modern and ancient technology together." Filling in the slanted walls is a black, industrial aesthetic every bit as aggressive as any piece of metal on Batman's car. Small water pits also punctuate the floor in the center of the room, near

grading and a work table.

Unconnected to the Batcave, this location may yet serve as Bruce Wayne's new base of operations in the film with a bank of computers sprawled in one corner, each playing in loop the video origins of the other Justice League members teased in ***Batman v Superman***; there is also a Batmobile sitting comfortably next to the sloping metal walls. The bottom of the Flying Fox dangles above the main work table, apparently controlled by futuristic tech that will be added (along with the rest of the jet) in post by CGI. Around the set, there are curious nuggets of Bruce and Alfred's latest obsessions, including ancient parchments with foreign texts and drawings devoted to sea creatures hidden deep beneath the waves.

But as impressive as the set is, it is dwarfed by the one Tatopoulos designed for the tunnels below Stryker's Island.

Previously appearing for half a second in ***Batman v Superman*** as the landmass situated directly in the center of Gotham City and Metropolis' shared bay (it's where Doomsday landed after falling from space in the third act), it will play an even more pivotal role in ***Justice League***. As it turns out, there is a decrepit brick and mortar tunnel that serves as a byzantine monument to the art deco style underneath these dark waters. It was a tunnel meant to connect Gotham and Metropolis that began construction in 1929 before being abandoned for mysterious reasons in the 1930s.

This is also the location of a massive action sequence since Parademons have set up a nest down in this subterranean labyrinth. It's Tatopoulos' favorite set, and he showed off several immersive parts of it. The first is a ventilation tower, made of crumbling brick and shattered, dusty glass. Climbing up the steps and reaching a cement floor that feels suspiciously like rubber, it is not hard to imagine an action sequence taking place in this

area, which is several floors below what would be a giant fan. A hole in one of the brick walls is also a curiosity.

Further, the set includes a massive tunnel with abandoned and unfinished subway tracks that are submerged in their gravel. One wall is also of brick, and the other is to be finished by computers, but the tunnel is just wide enough to drive a Knightcrawler through.

The Knightcrawler will be Batman's other new toy that unlike the Batmobile can go underground and make its own tunnels since it consists of a cockpit large enough to hold four superheroes, as well as four massive crab-like arms that will be perfect for punching through walls. While I was only able to study the cockpit in-person (the arms will be added in post-production), plenty of concept art exists that shows Batman, Wonder Woman, the Flash, and Cyborg in the vehicle as it climbs through tunnels that look, perhaps not so coincidentally, like the sets we visited.

In this sequence, there are striking images of Wonder Woman exiting the Knightcrawler to slaughter a Parademon with a sword while inside a ventilation tower, the Knightcrawler roasting another Parademon with a flamethrower, and all four heroes escaping the Knightcrawler as it drowns in a flooded tunnel.

Instantly, it becomes clear that we might have walked into the climax of either the first or second act: Batman, Wonder Woman, and the rest meet on a GCPD rooftop to figure out that Parademons are kidnapping scientists and hiding in the tunnels beneath Stryker's Island. Upon Cyborg's arrival, Flash quips, "Now that he's here, I don't think we can all fit in the car." Batman responds, "I've got something bigger."

But what happens after that Knightcrawler falls beneath the flooded tunnels? I imagine the Flash could suggest they need a water guy (or a bigger boat).

But as it stands, the scope and ambition of the film's new style is an intentional world away from what has come before, and the DCEU is definitely growing.

As Snyder explains it, "I think that the nice thing about working on **Justice League** is it is an opportunity to kind of really blow the doors off of the sort of scale, and the bad guys, and team-building, and all this stuff that I think I can justify as [being] a big, modern sort of comic book movie."

In terms of scale, Snyder and Warner Bros. are definitely already there.

*Justice League hits theatres on Nov. 17, 2017. This article was first published on June 21, 2016.*

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