

Vol. 9 No. 2 The Superhero Film

# CINEPHILE

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA'S FILM JOURNAL



Fall 2013

Barna William Donovan on *Man of Steel* Lee Easton on Supervillains

# THE VELVET LIGHT TRAP

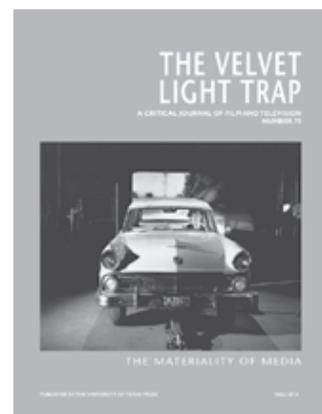
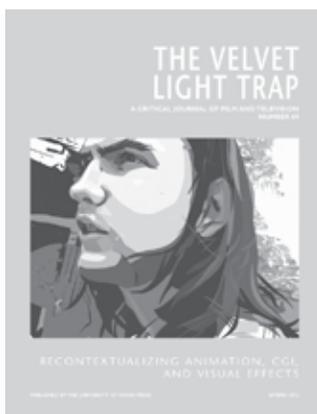
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*The Velvet Light Trap* offers critical essays on significant issues in film studies while expanding its commitment to television as well as film research. Each issue provokes debate about critical, theoretical, and historical topics relating to a particular theme.

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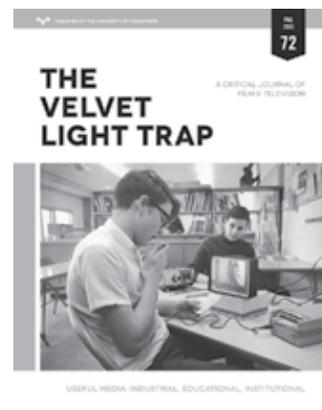
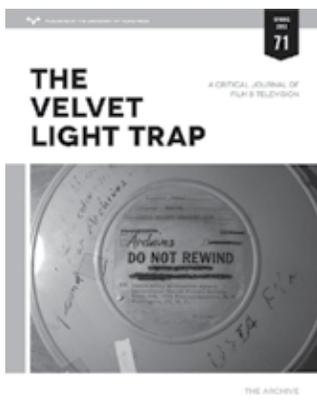


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The Department of Linguistics  
The Department of Political Science

# Editors' Note

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This issue would not have happened ten years ago.

Prior to the year 2000, comic book superhero films were largely dismissed as infantile, B-movie pulp. However, in the past decade the filmic superhero has increasingly grown in presence, to the point of becoming synonymous with the Hollywood summer blockbuster. Initial releases such as Bryan Singer's *X-Men* (2000) and Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002) demonstrated the genre's potential for nuanced and complex resonance amidst populist entertainment, drawing upon both comic book backhistories and socio-political subtext alike. Since then, the genre has exploded in mass popularity. Noteworthy examples such as Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005-2012) and Marvel Studios' intertextual approach to adapting their own comic book properties (beginning with *Iron Man* and building into the much anticipated *The Avengers*, with a steadily growing number of new releases) have unearthed unprecedented critical and commercial success. Contemporary superhero films have redefined audience expectations and industry practices alike, reinforcing the genre as a salient site for both socio-cultural capital and industry innovation.

As Hollywood's output of superhero films remains ever expansive (it is telling that three of the features in this issue pertain largely to films released this year), superhero scholarship is, by necessity, particularly vibrant. While considerable critical attention has been devoted to the genre of late, such discourse remains active and evolving, with several pertinent venues remaining for further scholarly investigation: representations and ideologies of gender within superhero texts, the seemingly fundamental role of American iconicity, identity, and industry in the superhero narrative, and the integral role of cutting edge cinematic technology in infusing comic book subject matter with cinematic life. This issue of *Cinephile* strives to expand the burgeoning scholarly discourse in regards to the superhero film, contributing to and extrapolating from such engaged discussions.

To begin, Travis Wagner theorizes allegories of disability in the *Iron Man* trilogy. Wagner explores how protagonist Tony Stark could have served as a proactive representation of a disabled body, and how the trilogy ultimately

undercuts such potential. Following this, Caitlin Foster examines economic, marketing, and branding strategies employed by the two main entertainment companies dominating the superhero genre, Marvel and DC, arguing that Marvel Studios' more uniform brand identity has translated into greater financial and critical success. Barna William Donovan then investigates the evolution of Superman in film, with an emphasis on the character's latest incarnation in Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel*. Donovan explores the film's subtextual interplay with religion and the contemporary United States military, thereby analyzing how *Man of Steel* addresses trends in audience cynicism by reinventing Superman for a contemporary climate. Next, Dru H. Jeffries interrogates the impossibility of fidelity in adapting the superhero costume from comic book origins to live action, emphasizing the potential for audience disconnect between the superhero in and out of costume, and how techniques of editing and technological shifts foster suture in this transition. Finally, drawing upon queer theories of resistance, Lee Easton re-reads filmic supervillains as disrupting or rejecting the ideological project of 'productive' heteronormative masculinity.

This latest issue of *Cinephile* would not be possible without the tireless help of many people. We extend our foremost gratitude to our authors for their insights and dedication to such topical scholarship, and to our editorial team: Adam Bagatavicius, Chelsea Birks, Andrea Brooks, Oliver Kroener, Molly Lewis, and Paula Schneider. Their patience, persistence, and keen eyes have been invaluable. We would also like to acknowledge the Department of Theatre and Film Studies and our faculty advisor Lisa Coulthard, as well as Deb Pickman, Kelsey Blair and Jocelyn Pitsch. This issue would not have made it to publication without the help of Kristy Dindorf Haryanto and her design and layout skills. Finally, we would like to thank our featured artist, Bret Taylor, for his passion, hard work and talent. You are all superheroes to us.

—Kevin Hatch & Kelly St-Laurent

# Contributors

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**Lee Easton** is the co-author, with Richard Harrison, of *Secret Identity Reader: Essays on Sex, Death and The Superhero*. He and Harrison have co-taught courses related to comics and graphic novels at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta. In addition to his work on comics and superheroes, Easton has also published in the area of Science Fiction with a co-edited volume entitled *The Power of Imagination: Science Fiction and Social Change*. Easton is currently an Associate Dean in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario.

**Caitlin Foster** received her MA in Film Studies from the University of Western Ontario in 2013. This article further explores concepts developed from her MA thesis "Clash of the Industry Titans: Marvel, DC and the Battle for Market Dominance" (2013).

**Dru H. Jeffries** is a PhD candidate at Concordia University in Film and Moving Image Studies, whose dissertation interrogates the remediation of comic books in contemporary cinema. He has previously published in *Cineaction* and *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* (forthcoming). On the side, he is the co-host of *24 Panels Per Second*, a podcast about comic book movies, which can be found on iTunes or [24panelspersecond.com](http://24panelspersecond.com).

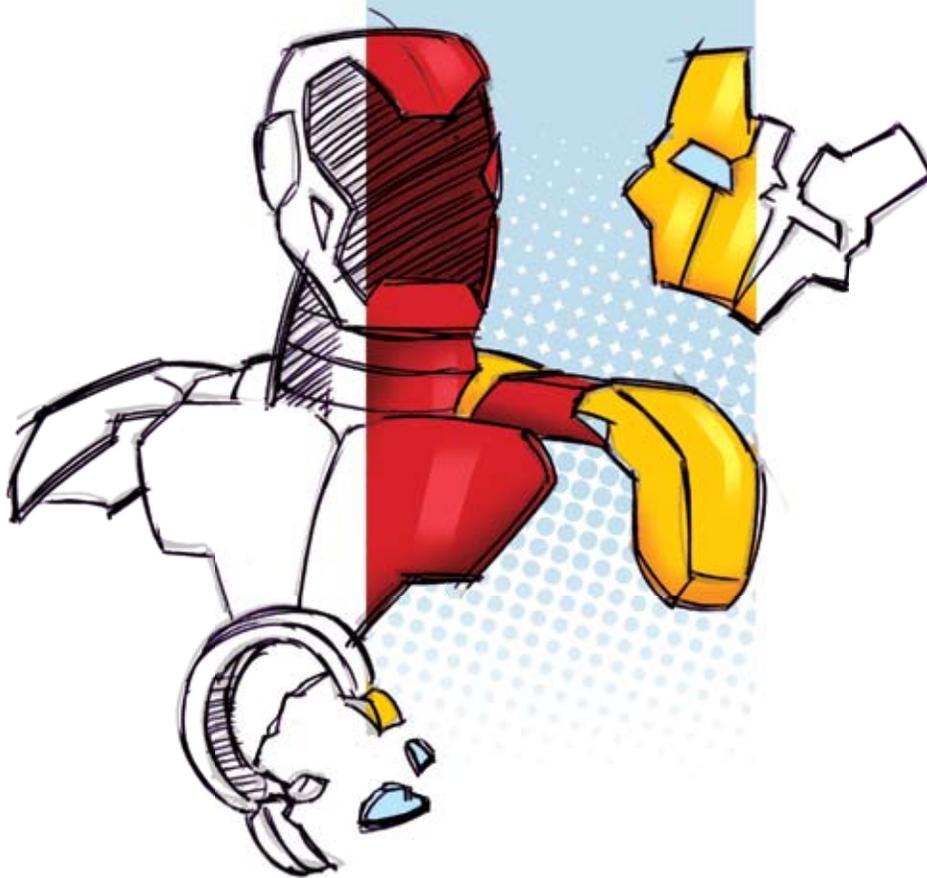
**Bret Taylor** was raised on a steady diet of superheroes. He had a Batman costume all through his childhood, and a new secret identity almost every day. He used to dream of someday drawing for Marvel or DC. These days he's a painter, illustrator, and graphic designer. You can see more of his work at [howyadoingraphics.com](http://howyadoingraphics.com)

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# “My Suits...They’re Part Of Me”

Considering Disability in the *Iron Man* Trilogy

Travis Wagner



***The disabled body has a storied history in cinema, which stretches back to Classical Hollywood and continues to emerge in contemporary film.***

Indeed, the reflective nature of the filmic narrative affords it an ability to portray disability in a very “cognitive” manner, wherein Michael Bérubé believes that disabled bodies and the field of disabled studies can “reread” both films blatantly and indirectly about disability as texts of “self-representation,” even if in purely allegorical terms (576). This exploration of allegories of disability in cinema is highly beneficial for critical endeavors. Such openness to readings means that both traditional depictions of disability that occur in films like *Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1932), as well as allusions to themes of disability in contemporary blockbusters, afford a larger dialogue on non-abled identities. In the past, a film like Browning’s cult classic depicted its characters with great sympathy, while also managing to portray them as what Martin F. Norden calls “obsessive avengers” or monstrously vindictive figures whose desire to be abled-bodied resulted in angry outbursts and violent revenge (113).

While films of this nature are now regarded as exploitative, it remains difficult to find positive representations of disabled identity, let alone literal narratives of learning to live with disability. Within this reality, the emergence of the *Iron Man* films offered an initial promise of a big budget, popular cinematic look into the experience of a figure whose movement from ableness to injury warranted the possibility of an allegorical and filmic look into the disabled body on film. Yet, the *Iron Man* franchise, despite having a character whose body is physically altered and limited after an accident, pulls from the tropes of disabled filmic bodies without ever truly engaging with the disempowerment tied to becoming less than able. Within *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) and *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), along with *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), viewers are provided with a superhero narrative that alludes to disability, establishing Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) as a new form of heroism that appropriates disability tropes only to simultaneously undercut them with Stark’s refusal to accept anything but normative able-bodiedness. In the Marvel comic books, Stark, after a life-threatening wound, relies on his Iron Man armour for survival. However, in the film, Stark is not depicted as debilitatingly disabled, furthering the franchise’s evocation yet rejection of disability. In the film, after his accident, Stark’s privilege remains intact and never reflects the immobility and trapped feelings attached to a representative cinematic treatment of disability. The films, as such, become a study of disability denial, reaffirming its social otherness by the ways in which Stark navigates the films, culminating in his impossibly instantaneous removal

of his own injury at the end of *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013). Beginning with Stark’s constant marginalization of all things ‘other,’ and moving towards an attachment to the hyper-ableness and masculine privilege afforded Stark within his Iron Man suit, what could have been a proactive and exploratory disability narrative is undermined. Instead, the franchise becomes a reminder that heroics and power necessitate hegemonic privilege – a particular irony, considering that superhero films, by their very nature, purport to protect and advocate those without the ability to do so.

Applying an understanding of disability to the *Iron Man* films requires explanation. Understanding disability to mean, as defined by the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), any “physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of [an] individual,” one can begin to glean such a representation within the *Iron Man* franchise, particularly since the titular character’s non-able existence comes by way of accident.<sup>1</sup> Stark, a weapons manufacturer and admitted “merchant of death,” is kidnapped and near-fatally injured during an attack by the terrorist faction “The Ten Rings” while on a military weapons demonstration in Afghanistan. To keep the shrapnel embedded in Stark’s heart from killing him, fellow captive Yinsen (Shaun Toub) creates an electromagnet that keeps the shards inches away from penetrating his heart. At this point, Stark thinks he has lost everything, until he realizes that previously quelled research into his arc reactor energy technology might help him create a suit of armor that would allow him to escape the imprisonment, while also protecting him from his life-threatening disability.

Considering that the only visual signifier Stark has of his injury is his glowing chest piece, one might be hesitant to embrace this as disability, but as Susan Wendell notes, disability does not merely necessitate the visible, considering that forms of disability such as blindness are not immediately obvious (828). As such, Stark should be a figure of non-visible disability, because as the aforementioned ADA definition and Wendell’s arguments suggest, it is not a matter of looking disabled, but becoming impaired from previously accessible spaces and points of access. This understanding is particularly worth noting as Stark, while still privileged, is initially disenfranchised from his previously able-bodied activities (he is forced to carry around a car battery powering the electromagnet in his chest). The cave he is imprisoned

1. Distinguished from the ‘disability by accident’ narrative of *Iron Man* are the other possible considerations of the disabled ‘other’ within the Marvel filmic universe via the X-Men, whose mutant identities result in their own issues of social outcast status. However, their otherness is embraced as a gift, and its “linkage to exceptionality” carries a different, considerably less oppressive, weight than the “violence to the material” that signifies Stark’s disability, one that he constantly strives to undo through mechanized alteration (Bérubé 569).

in proves metaphoric for this immobility. Furthermore, it is not the suit that indicates Stark's possible disability (proving to be a prosthetic extension of his own masculine power) but his arc reactor, working much like a pacemaker, that proves his point of able-bodied limitation. This serves as a central issue within *Iron Man 2*, when the very item that is intended to save his life also doubles as a threat to it. The arc reactor becomes a time bomb of sorts, as nuclear poisoning invades Stark's blood. It is a reminder that Stark's reactor could be his very demise, as the physical sickness it causes becomes something Stark must work to negate.

It is in this relationship to the body and sickness that one can better understand the cinematic assumptions of Stark's disability as a sickness upon his body through an allusion to disability. In her work on body excess in genre film, Linda Williams discusses the ways in which bodies, particularly gendered ones, function in the genres of horror, pornography, and melodrama. While melodrama, as Williams notes, is often attached to "weepies," she explains that much of the narrative friction comes from female characters being "'afflicted' with a deadly or debilitating disease" (3-4). The extension of this consideration to the violent acts occurring within horror films, another genre of excess within Williams' article, makes the figure of Stark particularly interesting. His masculine body has become a point of disease through violence, pulling from a trope of disability, as well as a genre schema of near-fatal debilitation in line with a Classical Hollywood melodrama. Stark does not acknowledge such disabilities, but instead uses his privilege and eventually his Iron Man suit as a means to renavigate his identity, denying his debilitation through technology, and subsequently using his wealth and access to remove the shrapnel with no consequence to his body. Indeed, Stark's miraculous healing falls in line with the melodrama, where his disabled body could stand in for otherness, but ultimately fails to. It instead serves as a thing to reject and vilify. Genesis Downey posits that it is the very "reiterative" nature of blockbusters in relation to the Williams' notion



*The Iron Man franchise, despite having a character whose body is physically altered and limited after an accident, pulls from the tropes of disabled filmic bodies without ever truly engaging with the disempowerment tied to becoming less than able.*

of genre excess that results in such an occurrence. The *Iron Man* franchise is one such example that reminds viewers that, through such reiteration, it cannot be a positive disability narrative ("The Blockbuster as Body Genre").

Martin F. Nordon, in his book *Cinema of Isolation*, defines a series of character tropes to distinguish what he believes to be the various narratives that emerge within the history of disability in film. Of the various identities mentioned, two are of note regarding the *Iron Man* franchise. The first, the "obsessive avenger," is of particular interest to Stark's identity, as it represents a figure who desires to make their power known despite disability, often through aggression. In Nordon's definition, the avenger is usually a villainous adult male. The obsessive avenger is also an "egomaniacal sort [...] who does not rest until he has had his revenge on those he holds responsible for his disablement" (52). While no villain, Stark does embody the egomaniacal aspects of the obsessive avenger, a relationship that is most fitting considering his own membership within the titular heroic team of *The Avengers*. With the group of heroes, Stark constantly asserts his presence upon those around him, vindictively competing against a demigod, as though his arc reactor and threat of immediate immobility necessitate justifying his equality to the other Avengers. Of equal consideration is Stark's own 'moral code' and understanding of his power in regards to the other members of the group, notably his refusal to be one of Fury's (Samuel L. Jackson) soldiers, another factor key to Nordon's understanding of the obsessive avenger (52). It is in this threat of vengeance that Stark's particular disability becomes intriguing. Prior to *The Avengers*, Stark is deemed "hostile" in regards to working with others, yet, seems instinctively closer to Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo) than he does Thor (Chris Hemsworth) or Captain America (Chris Evans). It is in the very nature of both of their accident-based movements towards heroic selves that seems to push forth in their unity. Banner turning into the Hulk when enraged reflects a variant of disability that is based within anxiety. As a hero whose power is predicated upon a mechanized device which also serves a life-sustaining function, Stark possesses an obsession for vengeance in line with Nordon's



notion; however, this vengeance is exacted under the guise of heroics, making his particular super hero narrative reflect another aspect of Nordon's disabled identity tropes.

A considerable portion of the first *Iron Man* film focuses on Stark coming to grips with being Iron Man, accepting that, within the embrace of his suit, he can serve as a heroic presence that can attain a popular status. Upon his return from imprisonment in the caves of Afghanistan, Stark initially masks his injury from Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) and Agent James Rhodes (Terrence Howard) in a sort of shame that doubles as Stark passing as abled. This act is indicative of an individual attempting to suppress disability.<sup>2</sup> This passing proves more difficult as Stark finds himself in situations where he and his Iron Man suit are prominently displayed – when fighting Air Force jets, and more so when he confronts Obadiah Stane (Jeff Bridges) in the city streets. In the closing moments of the first film, Stark states, “the truth is... I am Iron Man,” taking on the status and adoration that comes with the moniker. In doing so, Stark appropriates Nordon's notion of the “civilian superstar” identity. As Nordon explains, the civilian superstar represents a disabled figure whose lack becomes a point of dismissal in their ability to prove socially functional (ie: if one is crippled they cannot work in labour fields). Nevertheless, said figure proves capable of overcoming adversity to save the day and, in most instances, the life of a

2. Stark's passing as abled, evokes imagery of Franklin D. Roosevelt who, despite permanent disability due to polio, planned speeches and engagements in such ways as to avoid confrontations with his wheelchair-bound self and the public, fearing such a revelation would result in his being deemed unfit to run a country during war. Carol Poore suggests that Roosevelt's act served doubly to “exude self-confidence,” while also “avoid[ing] disrupting visual expectation[s] of body normalcy” (67).

fully abled-bodied person (28). As such, Stark becomes a civilian superstar, evidenced in his embrace of the heroic identity one that comes with fandom, including images of children donning Iron Man masks in *Iron Man 2* and *The Avengers*. However, his heroic status is at odds with his obsessive avenger identity, wherein his need to prove hyper-functional results in various occasions where he must fight other heroes and allies purely to assure his worth and retain his privilege. This reflects the larger issue of Stark's desire to completely deny the very disability with which he is obsessed.

The pre-accident Tony Stark is incredibly privileged, as is evidenced by his penthouse lifestyle and constant demeaning of those who he sees as less than himself. Indeed, the franchise takes no time establishing Tony Stark as suave, as his witty one-liners and laid back attitude are admired by the soldiers escorting him through the Afghanistan desert. Stark is dismissive of bodies that contradict his normative male self, as, prior to his accident, Stark is the “self” in regards to all forms of otherness. His form of hyper-masculinity paired with his whiteness and wealth cause him to adorn a “cool cynicism” that extends to considerations of othering in mainstream cinema, wherein male, “white cool” reestablishes a dominant hegemony that affirms all forms of oppression are “here to stay” (hooks 47). Stark, seemingly inclined to reaffirm such dichotomies, interacts with forms of non-normative identity with flippant irreverence, as when he mocks a female soldier for her masculine features and hires pole dancers for an airplane ride. Indeed, both Stark's whiteness and willingness to look at the world through male privilege would assumedly change after his accident, considering that he is now less-abled, if not disabled. This is not the case though, as Stark continues to

exude his privileged understanding of the world, now entrenched almost entirely in his wealth and technological prowess, as a means to continue his identity as the normative self, overlooking and knowingly stifling any potential for a disabled and therefore othered identity.

Jane Gaines posits that mainstream cinematic representations “locat[e]” themselves within a “masculine point of view,” wherein “locating the opposite” becomes more difficult when such a representation moves away from the traditional power-oriented and masculinized notion of the self (60). Understanding the nature of intersectionality and theories of oppression, disability could certainly fall within the parameters. Of particular note, however, is Gaines’ suggestion that film “privilege[s] the position (the gaze) of the male character(s) within the film” (64). Stark, as an extension of the viewer, serves as a body, who, despite his own existence within the spectrum of disability tropes, exists as a filmic figure whose embodiment as a white, masculine figure is predicated on promoting selfhood in juxtaposition to the other. These notions are constantly reinforced by his two closest relationships with Potts and Rhodes, both of whom Stark patronizes and ignores advice from, coding these relationships with clear power dynamics. As such, both find themselves at odds with Stark’s “white” hipness, particularly when Stark maintains such manners during bouts with villains, exacting oppressive actions in a physically violent manner.

Assuming Stark’s power comes from his class-based privilege, he can essentially function as a superhero not because of physical prowess or some mutant power, but from sheer financial privilege. As such, he must constantly affirm his wealth-based privilege when positioned against those

whose power or authority is not predicated upon financial capital. Whether it be the decadent Stark Expo showing off his newly created suits, or his wealth of robots and luxury vehicles, Stark is capable of suppressing the stigma attached to his injury through an accruing of consumer objects, ones that incidentally double as mechanical. This becomes particularly troubling when the condemnation is extended to those whose actions are as well-intentioned as Stark’s, but without his financial mobility. For example, Stark often condemns Rhodes’ reliance on military protocol as a fault, an interaction extended when he reminds the soldiers escorting him in Afghanistan that it is indeed “cool” to be photographed with him, despite his popularity being afforded only through his having inherited a billion dollar weapons manufacturing company. This othering through class occurs quite often within *The Avengers*, wherein Stark ridicules his fellow superheroes, particularly Captain America, as moral simpletons, deeming Captain America’s particular push towards justice as decidedly – albeit literally – antiquated. It would appear as though Stark’s condemnation of other heroes, in the form of soldiers, is one of class-based hesitance, dismissing Captain America, Rhodes, and, in *Iron Man 3*, disabled veterans. It is thus worthwhile to consider how Stark navigates his privilege when the very suit that allows him power becomes replicated without the arc reactor working as protection to their bodies.

Accepting that Stark is suspicious of other bodies than his, masculinity becomes a decided point of power, as well as a something that is at odds with other bodies, particularly when said bodies possess the same suit which Stark’s wealth has manifested. The suit moves beyond its function to protect Stark’s arc reactor, and becomes a means to re-





assert his masculine authority in the face of abled-bodied people. In *Iron Man 2*, Stark's civilian superstar status is appropriated by the American government hoping for Stark's aid in creating the next level in warfare by using a variant on the Iron Man suit to create War Machine, a metallic exoskeleton for Rhodes (Don Cheadle). The film also focuses on former Russian nuclear Ivan Vanko (Mickey Rourke) exacting revenge upon Stark for a feud between their fathers during the Cold War. Vanko and Rhodes arguably serve as divisions of Stark's obsessive avenger and civilian superstar status. To reassert his masculinity, Stark must create a dynamic that places him above his other masculine able-bodied competitors, who also wear armoured suits. This results in the film becoming one of psycho-sexual confrontation, wherein disability allegory falls to the wayside in favor of phallic power confrontations. Indeed, borrowing from Vivian Sobchack, one can understand Stark's suit as a certain form of prosthesis, filling in for "what has been left behind" (208). Here the mobility it affords is one of admiration and power, not debilitating loss; therefore it does not cause Stark to question what he has lost post-accident, particularly in the way of livelihood. However, the addition of the equally armoured Rhodes and Vanko (earlier Obadiah Stane) to this equation demands that Stark establish himself as an equal body in ableness while too appropriating his prosthetic lack. This proves particularly necessary when a semi-armoured Vanko, equipped with arc reactor-powered whips, attacks Stark at a Monaco racetrack. During this attack, Stark is barely able to piece together his suit in time to brace himself for the flailing attacks of Vanko's whips, and is depicted as helpless against this phallic attack. This calls attention to the necessity of his prosthetic suit and the simultaneous safety and power it affords.

It is necessary here to take an aside and consider the issues with the *Iron Man* franchise's seeming willingness to place the entirety of technology embodiment within masculine privilege, as it does help to further understand why Stark later rejects such figures whose own lack and disability could reflect his previous lack. Donna Haraway advocates in "A Cyborg Manifesto" that a cyborg ("a hybrid of machine and organism") affords society a chance to move beyond the dichotomous self/other space into a narrative slippage where "ambiguity" is embraced and "border[s]" are rejected.

To Haraway, the cyborg body, both machine and human, exists in a "post-gender world" (149-151). This is notable because the Iron Man suits, by covering the body of Stark, necessitate a cyborg status. Nonetheless, Stark and the others who don the suits still exert masculinity, whether it be through boxing matches or by denoting the suits as things "to be used" by male characters.<sup>3</sup> The wholly embodying nature of the suits becomes interesting in the ways they welcome separation from other mechanized bodies by their very composition as suits and not bodies unto themselves. In another scene during *Iron Man 2*, Vanko takes control of Rhodes' War Machine armor by computer, effectively using Rhodes as a puppet to attack Stark. This reflects the idea of the militarized body as a "phallic muscle," one whose "manhood" is exerted and "flex[ed]" to verify superiority (Masters 118). Noting the political layer in the Russian Vanko's control over the sexual "muscle" of the American military, the scene suggests that Stark, who uses his Iron Man armor as prosthesis, can only be bested by his own technology. This equally reminds viewers that, even in a push towards cyborg-based warfare, masculinity is privileged as the ideal, negating Haraway's hopes for a genderless cyborg future.

However, reinforcement of Stark's Iron Man suit as the ideal affords him definitive masculine power, differentiated from the bulky replica armours constructed by Stane and Vanko. Indeed, when Rhodes and Stark join forces to take down Vanko, the two extend their phallic weaponry, an extension of Stark's own prosthesis, towards one another with Vanko in the middle. The two shoot orgasmic "repulsor ray" energy beams at Vanko in a techno-sexual celebration of their masculine ability, while also suggesting that their masculine power is privileged and somehow different, regardless of Stark's still ailing body and the decay occurring via the arc reactor and nuclear poisoning. It is in this moment that Stark moves out of the space of obsessive avenger – first to destroy a villain, but also to suggest that his own threat of death and possible disability are different than the non-abled in a more traditional sense, and not worthy of condemnation. This occurrence doubles with his already dismissive attitude towards those he sees as other, explaining how, by the end of *Iron Man 3*, Stark is capable of destroying literal disabled bodies.

*Iron Man 3* finds Stark traumatically altered by his near death experience battling aliens in *The Avengers*, and suffering heavily from insomnia and post-traumatic stress disorder. As such, the third film becomes about Stark removing the threatening disempowerment that usually comes with disability. In the closing moments of the film, Stark unceremoniously has the shrapnel removed from his chest, leaving him to move free about the world, while out-

3. While Potts does briefly wear the Iron Man armour in *Iron Man 3*, it is only by the extension of Stark using it to protect her from injury.

*By the closing of Iron Man 3, Stark has removed the shrapnel from his chest along with the threat of disempowerment he fought wildly to suppress. He finds no moral conflict in destroying disabled bodies, but instead sees them as dangerous and inhumane.*

side of his Iron Man suit. While Stark and the *Iron Man* films have never openly affirmed his disability, they make considerable note of his healing. Mattingly and Lawlor articulate “healing dramas” as comforting, and suggest a “fleeting” quality to all forms of unhealthiness, contrasting the reality where “healing” often “falters or fails” (54). This is illustrated in Stark’s instantaneous removal of his shrapnel. Glasser, like Mattingly and Lawlor, posits that filmic narratives of recovery must look to move away from an is/is not dichotomy, whether it be through recovery or through death (9-14). Interestingly, while the *Iron Man* franchise shies away from labeling Stark as disabled, it does rely on a “healing” narrative to round out *Iron Man 3*, because doing so reminds viewers, and Stark, of what ‘could have’ been his fate.

The third film also focuses on Stark’s confrontations with Aldrich Killian (Guy Pearce), a scientist whose definitive disability has led him to create the ‘Extremis’ procedure, a thermo-nuclear treatment that causes the human body to morph and become malleable, replacing limbs in a similar fashion to plants. Killian finds many of his subjects within a pool of war veterans, verified with graphic images showing men and women who are burned or missing limbs. The methodology implemented by Killian proves hazardous, leading all subjected to such treatments to become uncontrollably prone to spontaneous combustion. These bodies represent a more tangible obsessive avenger, as they are veterans whose injuries have led them to seek treatment that happens to make them hyper-able, as well as enraged. While the disabled bodies under Killian’s sway are shown



through a brief video montage expounding on their frustrations as disabled ‘others,’ little is shown to suggest their anger rooted in anything but villainy. These disabled figures, unlike Stark, affirm the stigma attached to such an identity, therefore creating the very contrast Stark requires to justify their destruction. Indeed, their otherness is not pitied by Stark but made a fiery monstrosity to be destroyed. The technologically savvy Stark is able to hold his threat of disability in sharp contrast to those genetically mutated and disabled, making his otherness less non-normative. This allows Stark to comfortably use his prosthetic Iron Man suit, free from the threat of other masculine cyborg bodies, alongside Rhodes, Potts, and numerous unmanned armours of Stark’s design, to destroy the Extremis-powered war veterans and eventually Killian. In a coup-de-grâce, Stark is able to appropriate his masculinity through his prosthesis to destroy the last reminder of his own possible disablement. At no point does *Iron Man 3* certify the previously human status of Killian and the Extremis soldiers, because to do so would be to negate Stark’s own points of privilege. The act should read antithetical to something attributed to the civilian superstar, but, given the narratively accepted villainy of these extremely disabled bodies, doubled with Stark’s healing from the threat of loss, he remains heroic, if not more so than before. In terms of Nordon’s tropes, the final version of Stark is neither a superstar, nor an avenger, but instead what one might call a post-disabled oppressor.

By the closing of *Iron Man 3*, Stark has removed the shrapnel from his chest along with the threat of disempowerment he fought wildly to suppress. He no longer finds any moral conflict in destroying disabled bodies, but instead sees them as dangerous and inhumane. Now comfortable with the benefits afforded him by his new suit, Stark uses the very armor that helped him to avoid a loss as a means of superhero identity. Yet, when tossing away his arc reactor, Stark claims that his “armor was never a distraction,” but a “cocoon.” This cocoon, as it were, is very much a distraction for Stark, who used the Iron Man suit as a means to negate the possibility of a disenfranchised body. The franchise further averts what could have been a consideration of Stark’s disability by placing his character within a point of privilege and using the Iron Man suit not as a reconsidera-

tion of body identity, but as a technological extension of masculinity, one that uniquely privileges Stark, even when appropriated by other bodies. Stark is somewhat correct in terming the armor a cocoon, as it suggests a narrative of metamorphosis that occurs within the trilogy. However, the change is not an evolution, but a movement between degrees of masculinity, one that begins as an able-bodied figure and ends as a hyper-abled one. The notion of disability between both identities is supplanted and the threat to Stark's well-being seems as though it was never intended to be permanent. Viewers are expected to share in Potts' understanding of why Stark does not "want to give up his [his] suit," because to do so would be to acknowledge that he was momentarily less than physically perfect, now made all the more privileged through his suit. The Iron Man suit allows for Stark, and the franchise, to cocoon the disabled narrative from public spectacle, just as the franchise's reliance on an able-bodied ideal cocoons viewers from acknowledging any disabled figure as heroic.

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# Marvel vs. DC

## Mergers, Acquisitions and Corporate Rebranding in the New Millennium

Caitlin Foster



***Superhero comics, which were once relegated to the fringe subcultures of society, have recently exploded into mainstream popular culture.***

While “[i]n 1998, only two of America’s 50 highest-grossing films were based on a comic book” (Bloom 9), the years since have seen comic book adaptations – specifically of the superhero subgenre – become an integral part of Hollywood’s summer ‘tent-pole’ releases. In order to account for the recent dominance of Marvel’s film adaptations over DC’s, this article will examine how each company’s internal corporate structures, production, and marketing practices have worked in conjunction with recent socio-cultural factors to influence the success of its adaptations. Arguably, one of the most important factors that greatly contributed to Marvel’s success was its ability to use the action blockbuster formula to produce films that resonated with the early post-9/11 socio-political climate. Marvel’s millennial superheroes both directly and allegorically responded to a post 9/11 climate. These narratives, when combined with the blockbuster aesthetic, also provided audiences with classical escapist fantasy entertainment, creating universal stories that would be popular both at home and abroad. Furthermore, instead of conforming to the rigidly pre-modern and god-like heroism perpetuated by DC, Marvel’s heroes often appeared as flawed characters whose powers were the product of hostile socio-cultural environments or the gruesome side-effects of modern science and technology gone awry. This distinctly human and realistically flawed quality of Marvel’s heroes, combined with Marvel’s blockbuster formula for commercial success, also resonated with audiences, inspiring pathos and sympathy with their real world struggles, while simultaneously spawning multi-billion dollar franchises.

The simple good versus evil narratives and depictions of America under foreign attack presented in films such as Marvel’s *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012) and DC’s *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013) remind us that the post-9/11 cultural affect that undoubtedly led to the resurgence of the comic book superhero figure continues to permeate the American cinematic landscape. However, socio-cultural analysis alone seems insufficient to account for the widespread industrial and commercial success of Marvel over DC – a trend that can be traced back well before 9/11<sup>1</sup>. Within the last two decades, Marvel’s continued success in its film adaptations can be linked not only to how its texts have responded

1. By the early 1990s, Marvel had already begun to outsell DC in terms of circulation, capturing over 50% of the overall comic market share (ComiChron.com).

to broader socio-cultural events, but can also be read as a product of the company’s drastic corporate overhauls and its utilization of blockbuster filmmaking practices, generic conventions, and familiar narrative structures. In the mid 2000s, Marvel developed its own independent film studio, Marvel Studios, which marked their transition from the licensors to controlling producers of Marvel properties (Johnson 1). Marvel’s newfound success during this time was also bolstered by its adherence to universally-appealing blockbuster narratives and its use of aggressive cross-promotional marketing strategies. Conversely, after the acquisition of Time Warner by AOL in 2001, DC’s once tightly controlled corporate structure struggled to exploit its new synergistic opportunities. Most of the recent scholarly and historical studies of the comic book superhero have taken one of two critical approaches: they either trace the socio-cultural resonance of the comic book throughout history or they produce historical overviews of the industrial development of the comic book medium. This study intends to demonstrate how the success or failure of a particular superhero adaptation is also a product of each company’s corporate structure and industrially constructed brand of heroism.

Between 2000 and 2006, Marvel had licensed twelve major motion pictures based on its comic heroes and had grossed about \$3.6 billion worldwide (Hamner). In an attempt to recoup more of their profits, Marvel underwent “one of the most radical business-model overhauls in Hollywood history” and redefined itself as an independent film production studio (Hamner). Between 2006 and 2007, Marvel began to develop its new subsidiary, Marvel Studios, by borrowing over \$500 million from Merrill Lynch in order to finance its own filmmaking projects, the first of which was Jon Favreau’s *Iron Man* in 2008 (McAllister et. all 111). Of the films produced after this restructuring deal, Marvel Studios made sure to control their most iconic characters, which included Iron Man, the Incredible Hulk, Thor and Captain America. Marvel’s decision to maintain control over these particular properties was no accident, as the introduction of each character was designed to slowly generate audience and fan excitement that would eventually culminate in the release of Marvel’s *The Avengers* in 2012, which featured all four of these heroes in one highly anticipated summer blockbuster. By maintaining corporate control and creative continuity throughout each of these independent series, Marvel exploited their intricately connected universe of heroes to maximize fan interest, and reaped the majority of the commercial profits in the process. Here, Marvel’s cross-promotional strategies were markedly different from DC’s, whose characters and universes (at least

*This distinctly human and realistically flawed quality of Marvel's heroes, combined with their blockbuster formula for commercial success, also resonated with audiences, inspiring pathos and sympathy with their real world struggles. while simultaneously spawning multi-billion dollar franchises.*

on film) remained largely self-contained. Emerging after a somewhat rocky start, the widespread success of Marvel's early comic book films clearly demonstrated how the company's overarching corporate structure greatly impacted its overall success. After overcoming the corporate turmoil caused by Ronald Perelman's years of mismanagement, Marvel was now more able to cultivate the creative properties it had amassed over the past four decades.<sup>2</sup>

Another major factor that contributed to Marvel's success during this period was its newfound ability to utilize the action-movie blockbuster formula. In addition to exploring the biological and technological anxieties that characterized the early 2000s in the wake of the Y2K scare and emerging debates on genetic modification, films such as Marvel's *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000) and *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002) also relied on big budgets, CGI enhanced action sequences and aggressive promotional campaigns in order to maximize their box office returns. While these franchises were developed by Fox and Sony respectively prior to the creation of Marvel Studios, they are an early example of how Marvel's texts have been tailored specifically for mainstream blockbuster consumption. For example, the marketing campaign for *X-Men*, the first comic book adaptation of the new millennium, featured three trailers, nine TV spots and twelve internet promos intended to target every possible movie-going demographic. While each of these trailers attempted to appeal to slightly different audience groups such as the pre-existing comic book fans or the intellectual sci-fi or drama fans, each trailer also inevitably ended with the same action-packed sequences and special effects driven character introductions. Marvel's manipulation of these promos emphasized their desire to maximize audience interest before the release of the film. The film's synergistic

2. In 1988, Perelman purchased Marvel for \$82.5 million. Under his leadership, Marvel failed to continue capitalizing on its multimedia potential as it had in the 1970s. Instead, Marvel became a platform for selling junk bonds, a near-fraudulent means of generating funds, which eventually led the company to file for bankruptcy protection in 1996 (Raviv 9).

cross-promotion and desire for complete market saturation was also further emphasized by the film's production company, 20th Century Fox. By licensing the film to 20th Century, Marvel was able to utilize "the full promotional power of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp" (McAllister et. all 108). As a result of this licensing deal, the promotional material for Marvel's *X-Men* appeared throughout Fox's network television programs and affiliate stations.

Throughout the early to mid 2000s, Marvel had seemingly recovered from the corporate and financial turmoil of its past. In fact, during the initial comic film boom of the 2000s, Marvel managed to license at least ten adaptations before DC and Warner Bros. were able to compete. Even though DC had typically been the major producer of comic film blockbusters in the 1980s and '90s, they had begun to feel some of the negative consequences of such rapid corporate expansion. One possible explanation for DC's faltering success during the outset of the 2000s could have been the AOL-Time Warner merger that occurred in early 2001 (Craft and Quick 54). This merger seemingly united two of the world's largest telecom giants, yet, unfortunately for the companies and their investors, the 'dot com bubble burst' cost AOL Time Warner \$4.9 billion and plunged DC into disarray (Goldsmith 36).<sup>3</sup> In addition to these economic and industrial setbacks, DC's commercial success and popularity was also impacted by Joel Schumacher's *Batman* sequels produced in 1995 and 1997. While these films adhered to certain blockbuster principles by using big budgets and star-studded casts, some critics argued that Schumacher's over the top style and slapstick antics returned the superhero adaptation film to its campier 1960s incarnation, which may have alienated mainstream movie-going audiences expecting a more conventional action-oriented blockbuster narrative (Lacey C1). Even though DC had been a dominant pop cultural presence in the superhero adaptation market, the company's departure from a simple, more familiar blockbuster structure was one of the major contributing factors to the relative decline in DC's box-office returns during the late 1990s. More importantly, the narrative and stylizations of Schumacher's films also worked against the proliferation of DC's dark and brooding brand-image that the comics and films of the 1980s worked to construct, further alienating both comic fans and the mainstream movie-going public.

In 2004, Warner Bros. and DC finally made their way back to the big screen with the release of *Catwoman*, directed

3. Between the late 1990s and early 2000s, widespread market speculation about the value of new, web-based companies prompted shareholders to invest millions in the burgeoning 'dot com' industry. However, such investments led to the rapid proliferation of industrial competition and not every new company was successful. Many of them failed completely, burning through their venture capital long before making a profit, thus bursting the market bubble (Munro 421).



by Pitof and starring Halle Berry. Unfortunately for DC, this film was a surprising box office disappointment.<sup>4</sup> While it had all the makings of a blockbuster, *Catwoman* also lacked a well-developed storyline and failed to take advantage of the pre-existing comic book fan audience, as Catwoman's character bore little resemblance to the original comic book creation, in which she was part hero and part femme fatale to Batman. Additionally, unlike DC's previous film adaptations, which featured multi-million dollar cross-promotional advertising campaigns directed at the pre-existing comic fan as well as the action blockbuster audience, *Catwoman* lacked such widespread commercial support and did little else to re-establish DC as a major force in the production of authentic or faithful superhero adaptation films. Even Warner Bros. executive Kevin Tsujihara admitted that *Catwoman* was a "misstep" on their part (Gustines).

Determined not to dwell on their box office failures, Warner Bros. and DC continued their attempt to revamp their image, which culminated in 2005 with the release of *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005), and DC's first new logo design since 1976. Here, DC's brand re-launch served two major purposes: first, as Dan DiDio (DC's editorial VP) noted, the release of *Batman Begins* was an attempt to connect DC's characters with the emerging older, more critically-aware audiences. DiDio and other executives hoped that these grittier heroes, inspired largely by the work of Frank Miller and Alan Moore, would appeal to both comic and film audiences that were now looking for "more complexity and depth" from their pulp heroes (Gustines). Finally, to further emphasize their commitment to changing and revitalizing their brand, DC unveiled their new "swoosh" logo "just weeks ahead of the *Batman Begins* opening" (Schiller 6). The inclusion of the 'swoosh' conjured im-

4. Catwoman's production budget was \$100 million, yet the film made only \$40,202,379 at the box-office. (BoxOfficeMojo.com).

ages of constant movement and symbolized DC's desire to move forward and distance itself from both its static heroes and its static "bullet" logo. Ultimately, DC's 2005 re-launch was an attempt to re-define its brand identity and position DC as the producer of serious, introspective heroes. By pairing the release of their new logo with the release of the darkest re-imagining of the Caped Crusader since Tim Burton's *Batman* in 1989, Warner and DC were able to heighten audience expectation not only for *Batman Begins*, but for every subsequent DC film adaptation as well. The success of *Batman Begins* and the following two *Dark Knight* sequels (2008; 2012), also directed by Christopher Nolan, proved that maintaining a tightly organized corporate structure was an important part of Warner Bros. and DC's comeback in both the comic film adaptation market and the publishing market.<sup>5</sup>



The importance of the action blockbuster formula to the success of any comic book adaptation film can be seen not only in the successful films, but in the failures as well. In the films produced by Marvel and DC, the comic films that were less popular with audiences and critics and that performed poorly at the box-office all shared a significant deviation from the action blockbuster formula. For example, Ang Lee's *Hulk* (2003), a quiet, contemplative character study filled with emotional pathos for the misunderstood monster, paled financially and critically in comparison to *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008). This later adaptation brought the character back to his violent conflicted roots, but it was still primarily framed and promoted as an action film. While Ang Lee's *Hulk* does conform to the action blockbuster in several ways, with its heavy use of CGI and action sequences particularly in the final half of the film, these sequences seemed trapped by the "sluggish and over thought" progression of the film's narrative (Holman 72). The film's opening sequence, for example, was an uncommonly slow pseudo-flashback sequence that attempted to establish Bruce Banner's psychologically traumatic childhood. The success of the 2008 *Hulk* reboot can be credited to director Louis Leterrier's radical departure from Ang Lee's ambitious, yet ultimately ill-conceived project that defied both audience expectation and generic familiar-

5. Following DC's brand-image overhaul, DC's market share rose from 32.23% in 2004 to 36.95% in 2006 (ComicChron.com).



*Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003). Below: *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008).

ity. As audiences and critics have noted, the key difference between these two films was the latter's extensive use of the action genre to bring the original spirit of the Hulk comics to life. As Kirk Honeycutt of *The Hollywood Reporter* notes, the film "emphasizes action over introspection, but [...] makes certain the hero still broods over the curse of his cells poisoned by gamma radiation" (14). While the opening of Leterrier's film proceeds slowly to introduce Banner's character, it is also framed by the number of days he has gone "without incident" or without turning into the Hulk. The slow progression of watching Banner try to master his outbursts is countered by the audience's expectation that with every provocation, Banner may explode. With Leter-

rier's film, the audience benefits from Marvel's blockbuster formula which strikes a balance between the drama of its emotionally tortured heroes and the widespread commercial appeal of bringing those comic book action sequences from the page to the screen.

The importance of using the blockbuster aesthetic to cultivate emotional and cultural resonance for the audience can similarly be seen through a comparison between Marvel's *The Avengers* and DC's *Man of Steel*. While the presence of an alien terrorist attack is used in both films to evoke feelings of post-9/11 pathos, nationalistic pride, hope and togetherness, each company expressed these feelings from two rather distinct viewpoints. Many critics have argued that the relative decline in DC's popularity can be attributed to the company's decidedly dark, gritty and ultimately pessimistic world view, compared to the optimism and uplift offered by Marvel's narratives. While *Man of Steel* was definitely the most action-oriented Superman film produced within the last ten years, which undoubtedly contributed to its strong box office performance, its disjointed narrative structure failed to create an emotional link between DC's iconic character and the audience. By focusing too heavily on the cinematic grandeur of high powered explosions and destruction, *Man of Steel* has been regarded by some harsher critics as a "crass attempt by Warner Bros. to cash in on the Marvel magic" (Bardi 72). Conversely, the success of Marvel's *The Avengers* has been credited to the film's unprecedented narrative potential, creating a cohesive universe which provided the audience with multiple, emotionally varied points of access and identification. The relative critical and commercial disappointment of DC's



most recent adaptation may also be linked to the company's overall struggle to maintain a cohesive brand identity in the face of the competition posed by Marvel. Due to DC's desire to showcase the darker, more complex realities of its brand of heroism, many of its franchises shifted to portray heroes that visibly struggled with their actions and roles in society. However, while the anti-heroic treatment of Batman in DC's more successful *Dark Knight* series, despite its inherent pessimism, is used to produce a symbol of hope that the people of Gotham and the audience can identify with, the final battle sequences of *Man of Steel* left Snyder's angst-ridden Superman alienated from American society. While both *The Dark Knight* and *Man of Steel* represented the increasingly pessimistic viewpoints of the late post-9/11 film cycle, the lack of a conventionally uplifting message and a hero with whom the audience can easily identify ultimately caused *Man of Steel* to be less successful than other, more conventional comic book adaptations, especially those produced by Marvel.

Throughout the 2000s, two of the major corporate changes that also had a significant impact on each company's performance were Disney's buy-out of Marvel in 2009, and DC's creation of DC Entertainment that occurred in direct response to Marvel's announcement. In August of 2009, The Walt Disney Company announced its buy-out of Marvel Entertainment for \$4 billion ("Of Mouse and X-Men" 71). Disney's previously established franchising power promised to be a great asset for Marvel. Shortly after Disney's takeover, Marvel began co-producing Disney/Pixar Presents, a magazine that reproduced the animated heroes of Disney and Pixar in comic book form. Even today, Marvel's merger continues to keep the comics and television industries buzzing with excitement over the company's development of a digital comics platform and its release of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* on ABC in September 2013 (Dove 2013). In just a few short years after the merger, Disney's acquisition of Marvel seemed to be the perfect model of corporate synergy at work: Marvel benefits from Disney's extensive network of multimedia outlets, and Disney utilizes Marvel's edgier character bank to "fill a hole in [their] much cuddlier portfolio" ("Of Mouse and X-Men" 71).

In direct response to the media attention as well as the critical and commercial success that Marvel received following the Disney buy-out, DC countered with a corporate restructuring plan of its own. A mere month after Marvel's announcement, Warner Bros. Entertainment announced that it would be "revamping its DC comics franchise into a new company, DC Entertainment" (Wyatt B5). While the deal had been in development in January, before Marvel's announcement, DC timed their re-launch to diminish Marvel's newfound success and media attention (Wyatt B5). On the one hand, this strategically timed re-launch

*The fact that this was DC's third major corporate overhaul in a decade seemed to indicate that the company was struggling to remain relevant in an ever-changing market.*

can be read as an expert corporately-controlled response to Marvel's competition. On the other hand, however, the fact that this was DC's third major corporate overhaul in a decade seemed to indicate that DC was struggling to remain relevant in an ever-changing market. The mission statement of this new company – which was virtually identical to the statement from four years prior – maintained that Warner Bros. and DC were committed to the mainstream proliferation of its comic book characters. However, as a sign of their renewed commitment, this corporate re-design installed Diane Nelson as the DC Entertainment's new president. Nelson, who had overseen Warner's wildly successful *Harry Potter* franchise (2001-2011), was expected to increase Warner's output of blockbuster films and franchises using DC's stable of characters. To Nelson's credit, DC significantly increased its production of comic film adaptations with the release of *Watchmen* (Zack Snyder, 2009), *Jonah Hex* (Jimmy Hayward, 2010), *Green Lantern* (Martin Campbell, 2011), *The Dark Knight Rises*, and *Man of Steel*. Unfortunately for DC, not many of them were successful. *Jonah Hex* was a very loose adaptation of a comic book series that was initially published in 1977-87. It was only revived in 2006 in an attempt to regenerate audience interest for DC's potential franchising opportunities. The critical and commercial failure of *Green Lantern* also points to DC's inability to successfully parlay its lesser known characters to the big screen. In light of these set-backs, DC revamped its brand identity with the release of the DC 'peel' logo.



After "ruining" their company's previous re-brand with a series of unsuccessful adaptations, DC seemingly cut their losses and attempted to distance themselves from their now tarnished image. The company focused instead on its pre-

viously established franchises, and *The Dark Knight Rises* became the first film to carry the new logo.

In the midst of the social and political upheavals of the 2000s, the escapist wish fulfillment fantasies of the comic book narrative flourished in popular Hollywood cinema. While both companies managed to produce films that reflected the various needs of the post-9/11 commercial landscape, the films that balanced meaningful socio-cultural critiques with the action blockbuster genre were the most successful. For Marvel, such socio-cultural impacts can be seen in early post 9/11 superhero films such as *Spider-Man*. While the initial release of the film was delayed in order to alter the New York skyline and remove a scene in which Spider-Man spins a web between the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the film itself actually goes out of its way to avoid any direct political address. Instead, the film used the dangers of technology and biological enhancement to create the villain of the story, while turning Peter Parker (Tobey Maguire) into an All-American boyhood hero that the entire audience could identify with. In Spider-Man's final confrontation with the Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe), the Goblin is attacked by a mob of New Yorkers who are trying to give Spider-Man more time to rescue Mary-Jane (Kirsten Dunst) and the children. While assaulting the Goblin, the crowd shouts slogans like "you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us," which echoed the united spirit of New York City and America as a whole in the wake of 9/11. Without addressing the context of 9/11 directly, *Spider-Man* functioned as an angst-filled coming of age action film in which Spider-Man's unyielding virtue triumphed over evil in a simple, morally instructive tale. In more recent years, with its transition from property licensor to producer, Marvel found success across a much larger number of film series including *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), *The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man*, and *The Avengers*. By maintaining corporate control and creative continuity over their properties, Marvel effectively exploited their characters using the company's intricately connected universe of superheroes in order to maximize fan interest in its films. The creation of Marvel Studios enabled the company to maximize its commercial gain from these properties as well. In addition to these corporate shifts, Marvel marketed its superheroes through the use of the Hollywood blockbuster format and produced action-driven films with straightforward, broadly appealing narratives that expanded Marvel's audience well beyond the fans of the company's original comic texts. As a result of these corporate shifts, Marvel's superhero adaptations have, on average, been more successful at the box office than anything produced by DC.<sup>6</sup>

6. When adjusted for ticket price inflation, Marvel's films gross an average of \$214,347,600, whereas DC averages only 195,605,500 per film (BoxOfficeMojo.com).

As the effect of each company's latest mergers, acquisitions and restructurings continue to be felt throughout the industry, the success of their upcoming projects will play a crucial role in determining whether Marvel will maintain its market lead. Despite its somewhat lackluster critical reception, current box-office reports place DC's latest adaptation, *Man of Steel* as the tenth most popular superhero adaptation of all time, and a number of upcoming sequels, including *Superman vs. Batman* have already been confirmed, suggesting that DC may well be poised for a comeback (BoxOfficeMojo.com; ComingSoon.net). Interestingly, DC's properties with the most potential for a new franchise or series reboot are those that have begun to mimic the blockbuster formula pioneered by Marvel in the last two decades. In fact, it was only after the success of Marvel's *The Avengers* that DC announced the production of its own multi-character cross-over film, *Justice League of America*, which has yet to be further developed. DC's production strategy is indicative of a larger industrial shift toward a hybrid understanding of heroism, in which each company's distinct brand identities are made increasingly similar through blockbuster filmmaking practices.

As the superhero adaptation trend continues to be recycled through the Hollywood studio system, both Marvel and DC are facing some potentially troubling corporate shifts that may affect the production, marketing, performance and reception of these future projects as well. For example, Marvel's buyout by Disney will supersede the company's previous marketing and distribution deals with Paramount Pictures and Hasbro toys, which may have significant drawbacks to Marvel's creative and commercial continuity. Likewise, according to Variety, none of DC's upcoming projects will be financed by Legendary Pictures, which was once DC's primary investor. Legendary was responsible for the production of *Batman Begins*, which arguably sparked DC's major commercial comeback following their relative disappearance after the *Superman* and *Batman* adaptations of the 1980s and '90s (Abrams 24).





Thus, it is not enough for Marvel and DC's properties to continue being culturally relevant or popular among fans in the comic industry alone; each company must maintain the pop cultural visibility of its adaptations through aggressive cross-promotional marketing strategies and corporate structures. However, with Marvel's latest release, *Thor: The Dark World* (Alan Taylor, 2013) already grossing over half a billion dollars worldwide (BoxOfficeMojo.com), and the upcoming release of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Anthony Russo) set for early 2014, it seems as though the Marvel formula will continue to captivate audiences and dominate the box office – especially in the absence of any competition from DC.

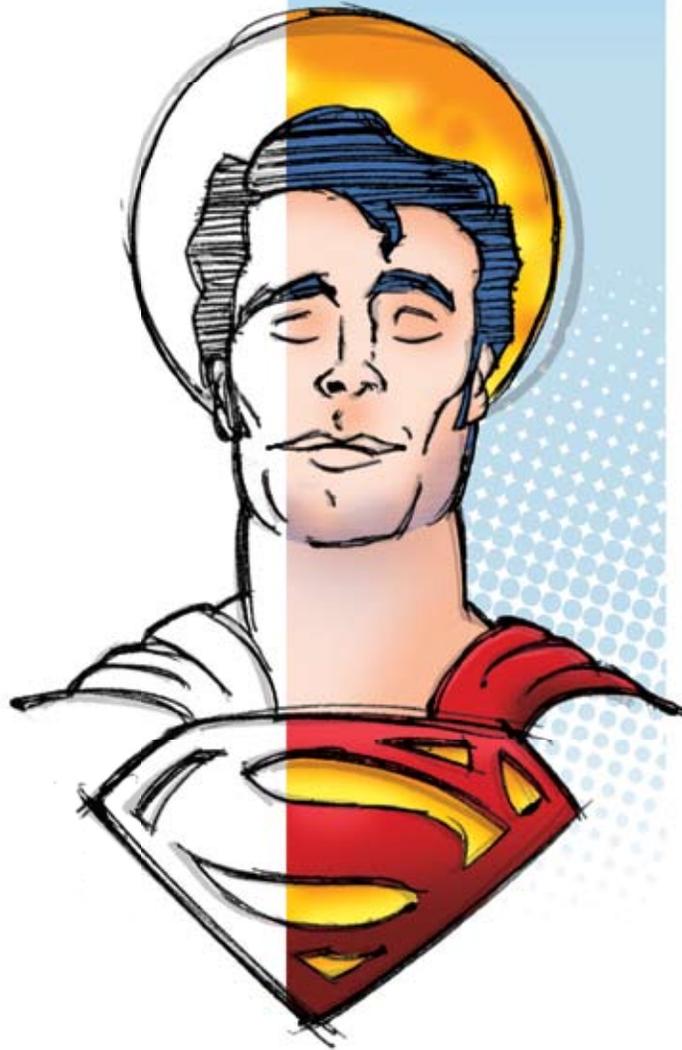
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# A Superman For Our Time

How the *Man of Steel* Tries to Make Superman  
Relevant Again – And Why It Succeeds

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***The world's most recognizable superhero has also proven to be the most difficult for filmmakers to deal with.***

While the 2000s have been a Golden Age for superhero films, with the blockbuster successes of Marvel's *Spider-Man* (2002-2007), *X-Men* (2000-2011), and *Avengers* (2012) franchises, and Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005-2012), a plethora of screenwriters, directors, and producers have repeatedly been stymied by how to achieve the same level of box office success and appeal to comic book devotees and mainstream audiences in bringing a proper adaptation of Superman to the big screen. One of the key elements of a successful superhero film, similar to all genre films, is its timeliness. A genre film, contained by what Leo Braudy calls its "conventions of connection" (435), limits itself to a certain set of archetypal characters and plots in order to function as a symbolic and relevant discourse on a limited set of philosophical and social problems. However, whereas other superhero franchises have melded their fantastic characters with some degree of social relevance, Superman has, for over a decade now, been impervious to this same kind of topical reinterpretation. Most noteworthy is the critical and commercial failure of director Bryan Singer's 2006 *Superman Returns*.

Arguably, this conundrum has been solved with the release of the David S. Goyer-penned, Zack Snyder-directed *Man of Steel* (2013). Making Superman germane again was accomplished by repurposing the traditional storylines, characters, and themes from the comic books for a new generation of audiences in order to comment on the times and the most significant cultural pressure points of 2013. The film did this through a combination of religious and political subtext addressing the American national mood and self-image, along with a stylized, deconstructive narrative format. The end result was the fifth highest-grossing film of 2013, with a \$662 million worldwide box office intake ("Box Office Mojo"), and controversy that, as of this writing, continues to inspire debate in the Superman fan community.

The difficulty of adapting Superman for the past two decades has proven paradoxical. On the one hand, he perfectly fulfills the function of the comic art form, or the generic conventions of connection, to act as what Angela Ndaljian identifies as a "modern day mythology" (3). Comic book superheroes, according to Ndaljian, are the modern world's demigods and heroes, akin to Hercules, Achilles, or Odysseus. Just like these classical heroes, the superhero "is a concrete manifestation of an abstract concept that speaks of the struggle of civilization to survive and maintain order in a world that threatens

to be overcome with chaos" (3). Of these larger-than-life heroes in the modern comic book pantheon, Superman has consistently been critically considered to embody the most mythic resonance. As Larry Tye argues, no one "has a more instinctual sense than Superman of right and wrong. [...] He is an archetype of mankind at its pinnacle. Like John Wayne, he sweeps in to solve our problems [...] Like Jesus Christ, he descended from the heavens to help us discover our humanity" (xiii). "Superman is so indefatigable a product of the human imagination," adds Grant Morrison, as he is "such a perfectly designed emblem of our brightest, kindest, wisest, toughest, selves" (xv). However, this perfection, writes Lawrence Watt-Evans, "is part of what makes him boring sometimes, or at least hard to write good stories about; he's too powerful, too perfect" (qtd. in Yeffeth, 1). He is also not a character audiences can identify with, given his larger than life perfection, and not a character they even want to try and identify with. As Jerald Podair argues, "Superman predates the Cold War, but he really is a Cold War figure, because he fights evil without shadings and without nuance. Once the idea of evil becomes more complicated [...] that's a problem. He's too black and white in a morally gray environment" (qtd. in Leopold). As Zack Snyder explains, a reimagined Superman must be a character audiences could picture themselves as, "rather than this kind of big blue boy scout up on a throne" (qtd. in Vary).

Since 2005, the angry, obsessive, and pessimistic Batman of Christopher Nolan's trilogy has trumped the optimistic and ever-virtuous Superman in terms of cinematic popularity, speaking to the jaded nature of contemporary audiences. Lisa Purse puts this issue into a larger post-9/11 context, noting that controversial initiatives like the war on terror, the Patriot Act, and the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, have been reflected in increasingly morally complex, cynical action heroes (152). External socio-political concerns still need to be fought and kept at bay but, as far as superhero fans are concerned, the job must be done by a hero who feels accessibly mortal, with appropriate fears, neuroses, failures, and shortcomings.

These inherent problems with Superman, however, are nothing new for comic book writers. National Comics (now DC Comics) editor Carmine Infantino explained in a 1970 *Wall Street Journal* interview that the key to maintaining Superman's relevance was in balancing his heroic perfection and his isolation and outsider status as an alien: "Superman was created in the Depression as an icon, a Nietzsche superman. [...] At that time, people needed a perfect being. But now they want someone they can relate to" (qtd. in Berger

146). Moreover, Superman was conceived as a rugged individualist, a self-sufficient man for a time when strength and unyielding willpower were the ideals of masculinity. Such a model of the perfect man has also become outdated and disdained by many contemporary audiences. Essays by cultural commentators Frank Rich and James Wolcott underlined this point when analyzing the DC Comics stunt of killing Superman in 1992, both concurring that the character had to die because he was an emblem of a bygone era. To Wolcott, Superman is a symbol of outdated, pre-feminist machismo (134), while Rich sees the superhero as a relic of Cold War-era conservative militarism (qtd. in Wolcott, 130).

Even the very thematic core of *Superman Returns* is articulated in an article Lois Lane (Kate Bosworth) writes, entitled “Why the World Doesn’t Need Superman.” Throughout the film, Superman saves countless lives from large-scale destruction, fights and nearly dies to prove that he really is worth having around, mirroring Neal King’s analysis of action heroes needing to absorb punishment in order to reaffirm their masculinity (194). As Clare O’Farrell asserts, “[t]his new millennium hero lives in a fortress of solitary and alienated hypermasculinity, bleakly holding on to lost visions of Empire and a lonely sense of his duty to save the world.” Nevertheless, even this attempt at timely relevance was not enough to make the film an unqualified hit in 2006. While Warner Bros. executives speculated that the film lacked enough action (Tye 287), critics charged that the film really lacked timeliness. Some, for example, took issue with star Brandon Routh. New Yorker critic Anthony Lane wrote that Routh “offers not so much his personal interpretation of Superman as his best impersonation of Christopher Reeve playing Superman.” “Fidelity is one thing,” echoed *Las Vegas Weekly* critic Mike D’Angelo, “slavish imitation another.” In looking and sounding so much like the Christopher Reeve Superman films, from Routh’s uncanny resemblance to a



young Reeve to the use of the same John Williams score, *Superman Returns* was received less as a timely, twenty-first-century updating of the Superman mythology than as a relic from the past.

The disappointing box-office performance of *Superman Returns*, however, signaled that even such a nominal attempt at making a Superman film more introspective as intimating at crises in the modern definition of masculinity was insufficient to reaffirm and sustain the character’s appeal. The most logical approach for Warner Bros. studio was to hire a creative team that had already deconstructed and darkened superheroes before. David S. Goyer, who had co-scripted *Batman Begins* (2005) with Christopher Nolan, conceived a new Superman story, helmed by Zack Snyder, the director of *Watchmen* (2009). Snyder’s involvement in the project proved poignant, given that *Watchmen* was the adaptation of the 1980s comic book series from writer Alan Moore that endeavored to deconstruct and critique the very concept of the superhero – reinforcing this as the aim of *Man of Steel*.

*Man of Steel’s* committed attempt at a timely reboot begins with its nonlinear storytelling, recalling *Batman Begins* in its dissimilarity from the traditional cause-and-effect superhero origin story. Such an approach offers appeal even to a generation saturated with Tarantino-inspired hip genre deconstructions, as it acknowledges that Superman’s origin is perhaps the most well-known superhero story in the world, rather than forcing audiences to wait through yet another film to find out what becomes of the infant who arrives on Earth from the planet Krypton. What happens to him as an adult and why a twenty-first century audience should care about and identify with a nearly omnipotent and invulnerable demigod are the more substantial challenges in determining the film’s relevance.

*Man of Steel* approaches the issue by having its main character ask those very same questions of relevance, grappling with his own uncertainties in the world. The very title of the film is notable, in that it does not call



its protagonist (Henry Cavill) “Superman.” The prefix “super” would hint at the sort of self-assuredness that has become unpopular in American culture. Throughout the course of the film, the hero is called “Superman” only once (and it functions as a joke), instead being referred to as “Clark,” “Kal-El,” “Kal,” or “the alien” for most of the story. This hero must define his own identity, learn and accept who he is before he can presume to take on the role of the world’s saviour. This inarticulate self-doubt already serves to make the most powerful man on Earth approachable.

Much of *Man of Steel*’s storyline becomes this exercise in self-definition. As Clark attempts to determine his role in the world, he wanders across the country, taking various odd jobs and answering an instinctive call to do the right thing, help people, and save lives.<sup>1</sup> Throughout Clark’s wanderings, the film highlights the various religious, philosophical, and political interpretations scholars have attempted to graft onto Superman comics. Perhaps more pointedly than any other filmic or television interpretation, *Man of Steel* draws strong religious parallels to its hero; this is appropriate, as the analytical literature on Superman is rife with highlights of Judeo-Christian imagery. From Superman’s mission on Earth (Kozloff 78) to his outsider status and dual identity (Cohen 25), the Christ allegory of a supernatural infant growing up to be the savior of the world is, as Anton Karl Kozlovic identifies, “a protracted analogue of the Jesus story” (4). Others still point out that Superman’s creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, children of Jewish immigrants and witnesses to anti-Semitic bigotry, likely crafted the character’s origin story as an allegory of Moses, the European pogroms and the Jewish diaspora, as well as the immigrant experience (Tye 65-67). In *Man of Steel*, Clark, unlike previous cinematic incarnations of the character, is seen visiting a church. Recalling Jesus’ agony in the garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion, Clark seeks advice from a priest about the course of action to take when Kryptonian villain General Zod (Michael Shannon) demands that he sacrifice himself or condemn Earth to annihilation. Notably, this demand for self-sacrifice takes place when Clark is thirty-three-years-old, just like Jesus at the time of his crucifixion. Furthermore, like Jesus, Clark would rather not face Zod’s punishment, yet is resigned to do what needs to be done to save the people of the world.

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1. Interestingly, this wandering superhero plot device is reminiscent of the 1977-1982 *Incredible Hulk* television series where a superpowered David Banner wanders from town to town, his green alter ego unleashing justice when others are in need of a hero. The Hulk’s and Superman’s conditions are not only very different – Banner sees the Hulk as an affliction he needs to cure himself of, while Clark’s superpowers comprise his innate, unchangeable identity – but Kryptonian powers far surpass those of Banner’s, and Clark’s purpose on Earth is harder to determine.

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Snyder never shied away from explicitly admitting that they wanted to acknowledge the religious symbolism imbedded in the Superman mythology, stating “I just felt like you could be cute with it and pretend like it doesn’t exist, but what that does is hold back the mythology of Superman” (qtd. in Lang). The connection between *Man of Steel*’s Superman and Christianity was thus strongly exploited in the film’s marketing campaign. To make sure the film reached as broad an audience as possible, including the burgeoning Christian-entertainment market, Warner Bros. hired the Christian-oriented Grace Hill Media publicity firm to aid in its marketing efforts. Part of the Grace Hill campaign included special advanced screenings for churches and specialized cuts of trailers where the film’s religious subtext was emphasized (Lang).

This focus on religion is not to say that *Man of Steel* does not also retain the sort of open-text ambiguity about religion that some analysts have also found in the comic books. If anything, the film recalls mythologist Joseph Campbell’s 1988 study of the worldwide monomyth, or how all of the world’s major religious figures and mythical heroes essentially resemble each other and their stories are all about the same journey to redeem the world. As Ndalianis writes, “the hero transcends culture, religion, race, gender, age, and speaks without discretion, to all humanity” (2). Furthermore, as Tye argues, the Superman mythology had always allowed for a very broad range of belief-based interpretations (68), and so does *Man of Steel*. Aside from Jewish and Christian interpretations, some Muslims, according to Tye, have seen a representation of God’s messenger in Superman, a metaphor for Muhammad. For the Buddhists, explains former Superman comic-book-writer Alvin Schwartz, Superman is the Man of Zen who “live(s) entirely in the now [...] He’s totally fixed on a single point. His one defining act [is] his rescue mission (69). Superman’s appeal is not restricted to religious audiences, however, with the potential, as Tye discusses, for agnostics and atheists to equally recognize the character as a secular messiah (71-72). This is evidenced in the way the film, despite its overt Judeo-Christian symbolism, still allows for a humanistic alternative interpretation. From this point of view, the Superman of *Man of Steel* still does not require anyone to worship him. He does not have a set of commandments and dictates no Gospel of Superman.

*This begs comparison to America's involvement in the wars in the Middle East – significant, given Man of Steel being the first Superman film where the character has strong ties to the military, which is depicted as largely wrongheaded and misguided.*

Although his father, Jor-El (Russell Crowe), symbolically “lives” after death as an artificial intelligence hologram and sets Kal upon a destiny to become a superpowered savior of the Earth, Jor-El is certainly not a deity.

Moreover, the otherworldly realm that is Superman's home planet in *Man of Steel* bears no resemblance to any kind of an afterlife from any religion. In fact, this film's version of Krypton is conspicuously the diametric opposite of the white, ethereal, heaven-like vision that has been the dominant conception of Superman's home world since director Richard Donner's *Superman: The Movie* (1978). The Krypton of *Man of Steel* is a physical, deeply flawed environment, plagued by internal strife unseen in the previous Superman films. Kryptonian society here is torn apart by factional violence, political intrigue, and revolution. Its leadership is depicted as short-sighted and often incompetent. Additionally, in a pivotal change from past depictions, this Krypton functions as a sort of technocratic dictatorship. People are genetically engineered for various roles (scientist, soldier, worker) and allowed no free will to determine the course of their lives. Mirroring contemporary socio-cultural fears of environmental degradation and unsustainable consumption, Kryptonians bring about their destruction through the mismanagement of their resources. Their far-flung galactic empire, more than reminiscent of that of the Romans, eventually collapses because of its sheer spread.

This overextension of empire, as a matter of fact, can equally be interpreted as a parallel to the contemporary United States with its costly foreign commitments to wars in the Middle East. The Kryptonians expand their colonies across the galaxy to ensure the survival of their race, much as the United States claimed to be fighting terrorist enemies threatening its existence, yet this very colonial expansion doomed Krypton to collapse. Once again, this begs comparison to America's involvement in the wars in the Middle East – significant, given *Man of Steel* being the first Superman film where the character has strong ties to the military, which is depicted as largely wrongheaded and misguided, save for the more sympathetic Colonel Hardy (Christopher Meloni). The campaigns in Afghanistan

and Iraq earned the U.S. immense casualties and inspired animosity among a host of nations (Mason 2). Ultimately, the Krypton of *Man of Steel* functions more as a mirror of all the mistakes modern human societies can make than a heaven-like ideal.

Nevertheless, *Man of Steel's* aggressively overt – but not unambiguous – religious symbolism failed to inspire support as much as controversy. While the film received some fan backlash for its various alterations of the comic book cannon – the most egregious, some thought, was having Lois Lane (Amy Adams) discover Clark's superhero identity – it was nothing compared to the film's condemnation for mixing religion with violence. The levels of destruction in the film offended many of the target-marketed American clergy. When it came to the climactic killing of General Zod, however, the religious viewers were joined in their outrage by the comic book purists, equally offended by the film's repudiation of the no-killing maxim of the comics. Nonetheless, it can be argued that even this bit of controversy makes *Man of Steel* – although no doubt inadvertently – relevant for its times, particularly for American audiences. In a time of almost unprecedentedly frequent religious debates in American politics and culture, from legislation over abortion to the public funding of contraception, same-sex marriage and the battles over the teaching of evolution and creationism in high schools, that a Superman film should draw heat for its religious subtext is evidence that it speaks to the zeitgeist.

*Man of Steel* ultimately finds its even more pointed and political relevance when it comes to Superman's battles against evil. This Superman is the most conflicted incarnation of the character, repeatedly torn between his instinct for action and his fear of the unforeseen consequences of his actions. In fact, it is ironic that this film ignited controversy over its violence when this is the only cinematic Superman depicted as reluctant to act – or act publicly – because he fears that his well-intended attempts at heroism might dangerously backfire. If one thing has always remained the same about Superman over the character's seventy-five-year career in comic books, TV shows, cartoons, and movies, it has been the way he is the ‘ultimate man of action’. As Alvin Schwartz wrote, Superman is always in the moment, he always acts (204). When Superman had been criticized in the past, he had been accused of being an agent of brute, unthinking, violent passion. As Marshall McLuhan argues:

The attitudes of Superman to current social problems, likewise reflect the strong-arm totalitarian methods of the immature and barbaric mind [...] Any appraisal of the political tendencies of ‘Superman’ [...] would have to include an



admission that today the dreams of youths and adults alike seem to embody a mounting impatience with the laborious process of civilized life and a restless eagerness to embrace violent solutions. (98)

When psychiatrist Frederick Wertham crusaded against comic books in the 1950s with his book *Seduction of the Innocent*, he singled Superman out as the most pernicious threat to young readers. Wertham even outlined an affliction he called the “Superman Syndrome,” a mental state where comic-book-readers are supposedly inspired to derive sadistic pleasure out of doling out violent punishment to others. Wertham’s style of condemning media violence for its direct effects – while criticized itself for being little more than a correlational relationship and not an indisputable causal link (Fowles 17) – remains very much a part of the American cultural dialogue, particularly in regards to violence depicted as without consequence (Sternheimer 101-114). Within such an environment, *Man of Steel*’s offering the first Superman who is reluctant to resort to violence feels particularly apt.

Moreover, Superman’s self-doubt also carries political poignancy in *Man of Steel*. Making the hero relevant to a 2013 audience would entail reaffirming Superman as an embodiment of American culture and

the current American psyche. This is necessary because, as much as the film might be aimed at an international audience as an American one, Superman is still, in the words of Tom deHaven “an avatar of American-ness” – a perception deHaven sees mirrored by global audiences (7). Correspondingly, *Man of Steel* serves as a commentary on the state of American power in 2013. Therefore, Superman’s hesitation in instinctively knowing what evil looks like, recognizing enemies, and reluctance to engage in violent confrontation mirrors contemporary political concerns for the United States. Just like Clark wandering the back roads anonymously, trying to find himself, so the United States is attempting to define itself and its mission in the world (Holsti 169).

*Man of Steel* presents not merely a post-9/11 hero, but a post-Afghanistan and post-Iraq Superman. The hero of this film represents a country that had already rushed into battle, and the film, correspondingly, addresses the perceived need for a direct, uncomplicated reaction to a threat. This echoes the fact that, barely a month after the attacks of 9/11, eight out of ten Americans supported the Invasion of Afghanistan as punitive action against Al-Qaeda (Moore). Similarly, in 2003, seventy nine percent of Americans were in favor of invading Iraq, their support for the war founded in the fear of Saddam Hussein’s

purported weapons of mass destruction (Pew Research Center). The United States, just like in the storyline of a simplistic comic book or action film, defined reality in blacks and whites, epitomized by President George W. Bush's declaration to Congress on September 20th, 2001 that, "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists." Within this cultural environment, the overall superhero genre itself has thrived, both as a theater of compensatory heroics and comfort for a culture that had been attacked. Interrogating the comfort of superheroes in a post-9/11 world, Thomas Pollard asserts heroes "represent stability and order in an increasingly chaotic and dangerous environment" (206). Similarly, Mark DiPaolo argues that post-9/11 superhero narratives function to both reassure audiences and inspire heroics along the lines of the heroism shown by first responders as well as socio-political action and activism. However, according to DiPaolo, these films often carry on a political dialogue about the best way to reach these heroic objectives from left-wing and right-wing perspectives equally, either seeking reconciliation and peace or retribution and violent action (20).

*Man of Steel's* contribution to this cinema is unique because its hero embodies both impulses. The foremost theme of the film is the impulse to justifiable action, tempered by the fear of unforeseen, self-destructive consequences. This is appropriate given 2013 United States audiences living with the aftermath of action and wars, but this time with an ever-growing majority of the American public convinced that both of those wars had been ill-conceived and poorly executed. Addressing such sentiments, in *Man of Steel*, Superman is quick to recognize evil. He, as always, instinctively knows right from wrong. From his childhood into his wandering adulthood, he repeatedly crosses paths with petty bullies, and, imbued with a seemingly innate moralism, firmly understands such people as needing some measure of punishment. Despite this, his Earth father, Jonathan Kent (Kevin Costner)'s diatribes regarding the negative repercussions



of rushing into battle have firmly impacted Clark. From the moment Clark is conscious of his difference from Earth children, his superhuman powers, he is warned that using those powers could lead to unpredictable problems. Jonathan is even willing to go to his death to make the case for restraint, allowing himself to be swept up by a tornado, his last action being to prevent Clark from using his powers to intervene, and thereby exposing himself. The Clark who wants to act is a remnant of the classic version of Superman, the traditions of the comic books, a pre-9/11 America, or an America in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks and craving the reassurance of one-dimensional comic books and superhero films. The Jonathan-Kent-restrained Clark, however, becomes symbolic of America in 2013, of a Superman truly reimagined and representative of a country grappling with a way to redefine itself.

When faced with the genocidal General Zod, Clark is once again guided by his innate, instinctive moralism. Even before Zod demonstrates his true capacity for violence, Clark explains to the priest in the church that he just feels it in his gut that the Kryptonian cannot be trusted. However, Clark soon comes to realize that Zod – a product of Kryptonian genetic engineering, bred to be an uncompromising soldier and nothing else - does not exist in any sort of a moral grey zone. When he first calls upon Clark to surrender, Zod also warns that if Clark does not, he will "watch this world suffer the consequences." What the consequences will be are made obvious in the virtual-reality/dream sequence of Earth being swamped by an ocean of human skulls immediately after Clark does surrender. Zod has come to Earth to replenish the Kryptonian race by exterminating all humans. He cannot be negotiated or bargained with. The genetic engineering that created him and his crew essentially built them as psychopaths. As Zod's second in command, Faora-Ul (Antje Traue) taunts Clark, "The fact that you possess a sense of morality and we do not gives us an evolutionary advantage. And if history has proven one thing, it is that evolution always wins." When facing superpowered enemies with no sense of morality, a conscience, or empathy, no option but a war seems realistic. But confrontation with these villains ultimately exacts an enormous toll on both Superman and the city of Metropolis.

The cost and aftermath of the confrontation is again crucial to a reimagined Superman's cultural and political relevance, and the issue sparked more of the film's controversy. While the big showdown in the middle of the city is a standard trope of superhero films, the climax of *Man of Steel* heralds the genre's most widespread and cataclysmic destruction yet. Unlike in other superhero/



supervillain fights, here, innocents, including Daily Planet newspaper editor Perry White (Laurence Fishburne) get caught in the middle of the melee, and even Superman is unable to save them all. However, this also yielded the film's most ironic bit of controversy. Just as the religious audience was offended by an overtly Christlike superhero being as violent as this Superman, die-hard comic-book-fans were angered by Superman's sudden shortcomings - his inability to stop all the collateral damage. Superman, the character that had lost his hipness and relevance for these fans, was equally deemed unacceptable for not being super enough. The fan dissatisfaction with a fallible Superman is voiced most pointedly by screenwriter Max Landis in his YouTube diatribe, "Regarding Clark." Landis explains that Superman inherently recognizes his godlike powers must be used for good, rather than needing to suffer tragedies like Batman or Spider-Man to figure out that superpowers should be used to help society. As Landis states, "[Superman's] power absolves him from weakness, fear, and greed and hate and all of the weaknesses that stem from human insecurity." Landis chastises *Man of Steel* because Superman is unable to save innocent people from getting caught in the proverbial crossfire during his battle with Zod, undercutting the character's divine-heroism.

This fan outcry reached its crescendo over Superman's climactic and uncharacteristic killing of Zod. Moments before Zod is able to vaporize four bystanders with his heat-vision, Superman finds no other way of stopping him than snapping his neck, and thereby murdering the only other remaining survivor of Krypton. This, however, also violates Superman's comic tradition of never resorting to the taking of life. For Superman purists, the scene diminished their hero, changing the nature of a character Landis also characterized as a God. Superman's ultimate function, according to this perspective, is not merely to overpower his opponents, since he never has any opponents that are stronger than he is, but instead to embody an ideal for humans to emulate. Zod's killing, however, challenged or eliminated the concept of such an ideal. When a godlike being like Superman kills, it implies that moving beyond violence is something mere humans will certainly never be capable of. Consequently, if Superman's internal conflict throughout the film is emblematic of America's struggle to position itself along the spectrum ranging from restraint to violence, then the killing of Zod - no matter how necessary it may seem at the moment - suggests that restraint and peace will always be unreachable goals. Human beings, or entire nations, Superman's act of murder implies, can never evolve to a point of nonviolence - a highly disconcerting,

if not depressing, subtext for audiences of a superhero blockbuster.

These failures and shortcomings, however, concretize Superman's renewed relevance within the film – as a socio-political cipher. No matter his good intentions, even Superman cannot fight evil and do it in an antiseptic, inconsequential romp. Unlike in 1978's *Superman*, this man of steel cannot turn back the planet and reset time if an adventure does not turn out to his liking. This new Superman has profound limitations, but not because he doubts the relevance of masculinity in the way the hero of *Superman Returns* did. In *Man of Steel*, chaos and disorder are still present, just as always in superhero films, and Superman, like always, steps up to fight the chaos threatening to sweep the world. But just like the war-weary culture that repurposed him, Superman is now much more conscious of the true nature and global impact of a war.

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# From the Top of the Cowl to the Tip of the Cape

## The Cinematic Superhero Costume as Impossible Garment

Dru H. Jeffries



***The superhero costume is a subject of great fascination, simultaneously functioning as the iconic embodiment of a character's identity and as a fetishized object of fan desire.<sup>1</sup>***

As is the case for many contemporary films that are adaptations of a previously existing work, fan discussions about forthcoming superhero films are frequently centred around promotional images of the actors in costume. In the late 1980s, Michael Keaton's casting as Batman caused a massive fan protest (comparable to the recent backlash against Ben Affleck's casting in the same role) that was partly assuaged once fans were given photographs of the actor in the suit. Indeed, the marketing of superhero films is largely based around the circulation of such images, from the posters that hang in theatre lobbies to action figures that bring replicas of the cinematic superhero costume into the home. Yet despite the centrality of the costume to the production, marketing, and reception of these films, this generic linchpin has received little critical attention.<sup>2</sup>

Since the creation of and responses to cinematic superhero costumes necessarily involves a dialogic negotiation between the film and comic book versions,<sup>3</sup> the superhero costume is one area in which the concept of "fidelity" in adaptation may actually have some hermeneutic value.<sup>4</sup> Fans' fetishization of superhero costumes suggests

that visual fidelity is a primary criterion of aesthetic value for many viewers, regardless of other considerations (e.g., whether the costume would be functional in the real world); in other words, clothes make the (Super)man. In live-action media, however, the superhero costume presents difficulties that do not exist to the same degree in illustrated formats, such as comics or animation. The most salient issues with regard to the cinematic superhero costume are the material(s) out of which the costumes are made, how the films present (or elide) moments of transformation from civilian clothes into superhero garb, and the overall relationship between the film and cinematic verisimilitude on the one hand versus the stylization of the comic book medium on the other. Fundamental differences between these media must also be considered. Whereas motion is only inferred in comics, it is shown in film, and yet cinematic superhero transformations are seldom depicted onscreen. The motivating factor for this is that the cinematic superhero costume is largely an 'impossible garment,' whose representation in films relies on the kinds of gaps that are built into the formal architecture of comics (known as "gutters"), which necessitates brief yet significant temporal ellipses when transposed to a filmic context. The question of fidelity, then, goes beyond superficial visual similarity and concerns a common mode of representation – one filled with gaps and elisions – between the two media.<sup>5</sup>

In short, live-action superhero costumes are caught in a bind: fidelity to the original comic book designs privileged by fans tend to result in impossible garments, which can create diegetic gaps that prevent audiences from fully accepting the costumed hero as 'real.' Visual fidelity, believability, and pragmatic feasibility are all desirable, but fidelity tends to be mutually exclusive with the other two criteria. The representational gaps that these impossible garments seem to demand only reinforce the palpable disconnect between the live-action body of the actor and the (increasingly) computer-animated body of the costumed superhero. The way out of this problematic is to treat the cinematic superhero as an ontologically hybridized figure – always both man and superman – that requires a hybrid mode of representation that seamlessly

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1. The term "fetish" is used here in both senses, referring both to fans' attachment to how these costumes look as well as the sexual dimension that such an obsession can assume. The central role of the superhero costume in pornographic parody films and fan art speaks to the aspect of this attachment, a topic that is beyond the scope of the present investigation and warrants its own study.

2. That is, beyond the countless Internet posts and "infographics" detailing the minutest differences between iterations of, for example, Superman's chest insignia. Such articles tend to chronicle or visualize different versions, but they are typically quite superficial and fail to account for why changes occur. See Kirsten Acuna, "The Incredible 75-Year Evolution Of The Superman Logo" for a representative example of this phenomenon.

3. Recent films such as *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005) and *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013) have started to employ the symbology of the superhero costume to advance their themes, which represents an attempt to diegetically justify their protagonists' choice to wear fairly outlandish outfits while fighting crime: for Batman, the bat represents using the fear that criminals deploy against their victims as a force for good; for Superman, the emblem that adorns his chest is an alien ideogram meaning "hope." The importance of diegetic motivation will return later in this essay.

4. The issue of "fidelity" has haunted adaptation theory since its inception, much to the chagrin of those who attempt to move beyond it (e.g., Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore [New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2000]: 54-76; Thomas Leitch, "Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads," in *Adaptation* 1.1 [2008]: 63-77). See the first chapter of my dissertation ("The Comic Book Film as Palimpsest," forthcoming) for a thorough cri-

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tique of adaptation theory as an approach to analyzing the comic book film genre.

5. The reliance on montage to produce a diegesis that never existed before the camera as an ontological whole is most famously denounced in the film theory of André Bazin, whose preferred aesthetic is grounded in long takes and montage that preserves the ontological unity of the scene. In this essay, I will be associating the montage aesthetic with comic books rather than with Eisenstein or his like. When referring to cinematic "realism" throughout this essay, it is a Bazinian realism defined by an uninterrupted representation of time.



blends live-action photography and (digital) animation in order to transcend the gutters of the comic book and be fully cinematic. A discussion of the *Iron Man* film franchise will demonstrate how this strategy contrasts with the dominant approach taken in the vast majority of superhero films.

The traditional superhero costume in comic books contains several distinguishing and recurring features, including (but not always or limited to) the following: skin-tight fabric that reveals the hyper-muscular superhero body while also providing some level of armour/protection, but without impeding flexibility or mobility; a mask that transforms the eyes, rendering them a pure, anonymous white; and, lastly, a cape that defies physics in the pursuit of casting an iconic shadow. The superhero mask, in particular, has some plasticity and often reflects the emotions of the face it obscures (e.g., the eyes on Spider-Man's mask can squint in concentration or widen in surprise). The costume as a whole is often revealed to be composed of multiple parts – Batman can remove his shirt, Spider-Man can take off his mask – and yet behaves like a unitard when worn (when Spider-Man puts his mask back on, it seamlessly reintegrates back into the whole). Any one of these features would make the superhero costume impossible to visualize in live-action, and all of them together present a significant creative challenge to the costume designers tasked with outfitting these characters for the screen. Consequently, some of these features are simply discarded: the masks lose their power to emote or to obscure pupils,<sup>6</sup> the conceit that thin, skintight fabrics are kevlar-enforced is eliminated, and capes tend to obey the laws of physics.<sup>7</sup> These are but of few concrete, genre-

6. One exception to this is *Green Lantern* (Martin Campbell, 2011), whose title character's pupils fade almost completely whenever his (computer-generated) mask appears.

7. Again, there is at least one exception: *Spawn* (Mark A.Z. Dippé, 1997), whose title character's computer-generated cape flows and grows

specific reasons why perfect visual fidelity to an illustrated medium is impossible in live-action.

Likely due to budgetary and technological constraints, the earliest superhero films merely attempted to retain the iconic elements of the comic book costumes (minus the colour) using conventional materials. As such, the costumes worn in serials such as *The Adventures of Captain Marvel* (John English and William Witney, 1941), *Batman* (Lambert Hillyer, 1943), *Superman* (Spencer Gordon Bennet and Thomas Carr, 1948) and several others look more like homemade Halloween costumes than the garments of legendary crime-fighters. Costuming Adam West, Burt Ward, and Christopher Reeve with tighter, thinner fabrics for *Batman* (1966-1968) and *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978) represented the next phase of live-action superhero costuming. In their design, these are remarkably faithful to the images drawn in comics, but spandex and nylon do not cling to real bodies the way they do as illustrations. In comics, costumes appear almost as a second skin; they echo, as Scott Bukatman notes, the nudity of classical statuary. He writes,

The superhero costume marks a return to earlier modes of male self-representation by combining Rococo ornamentation (with its flashing colors, flowing capes, epaulets, and talismans) with a classical ideal in which “the hero wore nothing but his perfect nudity, perhaps enhanced by a short cape falling behind him... The hero's harmonious nude beauty was the visible expression of his uncorrupted moral and mental qualities” (87).<sup>8</sup> Purity and performative flamboyance were thus uniquely combined in the superhero's costume. (2003, 215)

Such an ideal is all but impossible in live-action. In the name of realism, the gossamer thin, skin-hugging fabrics depicted in superhero comics necessarily become thicker for film, and the bodies that they put on display cannot help but fall short of the comic book superhero's hyperbolic perfection; even Reeve's considerable muscles are just barely discernible under the nylon fabric of his Superman costume. In this respect, the live-action superhero costume may faithfully replicate certain attributes of the comic book costume (in terms of colour, design, etc.) but the “perfect nudity” of the illustration is inevitably lost when worn by a live action actor.

Beginning in the late 1980s with *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989), the superhero costume addresses this problem by discarding with fabrics entirely in favour of a ‘suit of armour’ approach, using rubber or hard foam

in a decidedly physics-defying manner.

8. The internal citation is to Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits*.

*Fidelity has proven to be an impossible ideal, since even the thinnest fabrics cannot reproduce the “perfect nudity” achieved in comic books and the desire for verisimilitude necessitates that certain changes be made to the costume designs that fans know and love.*

as primary materials. The “nude” ideal of the comic book superhero is, paradoxically, more easily attained with these thicker costumes, upon which musculature can be inscribed. In the *Batman* franchise, the armour became increasingly anatomically correct with each instalment, culminating in the much-maligned ‘bat nipples’ of *Batman Forever* (Joel Schumacher, 1995) and *Batman & Robin* (Schumacher, 1997).<sup>9</sup> Leather costumes become popular with films like *Blade* (Stephen Norrington, 1998), *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000), and *Daredevil* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2003), wherein they provide some utilitarian protection along with a sleek, tough look, albeit without any sculpted musculature. This marks a move away from creating a cartoonish world in which superheroes are merely one fantastical element among many (as in *Batman & Robin*) toward capturing a verisimilitudinous world that is partially inhabited by costumed heroes. Signifiers associated with comic book style – bright palettes, elaborate and colourful costumes, scenery-chewing performances – are hereafter replaced by diegetically-motivated (and hence more ‘believable’) equivalents. Indeed, when Wolverine (Hugh Jackman) complains about the all-leather suit in *X-Men*, perhaps speaking on behalf of the comic book reader, Cyclops (James Marsden) self-reflexively quips back, “What would you prefer? Yellow spandex?” This may be read as an acknowledgement by the filmmakers that visual fidelity to the source material would not, in this instance, make sense within the world of the film.

Around the same time, however, thinner materials make a comeback in films like *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002) and *Man of Steel*. Unlike the flat nylon suit of the earlier *Superman* films, these synthetic costumes are thoroughly textured and embossed to maximize aesthetic interest and painted to emphasize and exaggerate the

9. This costume design is playfully referenced in Zack Snyder’s *Watchmen* (2009), in which Ozymandias’ rubber suit features well-defined pectorals, six-pack abs, and nipples. With such subtle gestures to other cinematic superheroes, Snyder’s remediation of *Watchmen* functions as a commentary on past superhero films as much as on the comic book genre that Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons critiqued in their graphic novel.

musculature of the actor inside the garment. While the raised webbing and mirrored eyes of Spider-Man (Tobey Maguire)’s costume represented minor adornments to the comic book version, Superman’s outfit in *Man of Steel* featured one major change that caused some controversy among fans: the removal of the so-called “red underwear.” Director Zack Snyder has stated that they were removed from the costume because they were not “consistent with the world we were creating” in the film (Zuckerman): in other words, fidelity to the source material and verisimilitude were mutually exclusive in this case. As evidenced here, superhero costumes may take on a variety of forms in the contemporary, post-*Blade* period, so long as the choices made are properly motivated by the characters and the world they inhabit (Spider-Man’s costume is necessarily thin because he values flexibility over protection; Superman’s thin costume is constructed from an indestructible alien material). Thus, while the tone of superhero films today oscillates between the moral, tonal, and aesthetic seriousness of Christopher Nolan’s work with DC characters (both as director and producer) and the more playful spirit associated with Marvel’s output, all are indebted to the paradigm shift toward the kind of generic verisimilitude inaugurated by *X-Men*. The approach may be summarized thusly: fidelity to the way the characters dressed in comics is acceptable only insofar as it can be diegetically justified in the film.

Thus far, I have described some of the different phases that superhero costuming has experienced over the decades in different films and franchises. As is nearly always the case with adaptation across different media, fidelity has proven to be an impossible ideal, since even the thinnest fabrics cannot reproduce the “perfect nudity” achieved in comic books and the desire for verisimilitude necessitates that certain changes be





made to the costume designs that fans know and love. Refusing (or failing) to adhere to the designs offered in comic books, however, does not make the cinematic superhero costume an impossible garment, which is my overarching contention. This impossibility is the result of shifting from a static, “gappy” medium to a dynamic, fluid mode of representation, and is best demonstrated in moments of transformation: of superheroes dressing or undressing. While there are some characters who have the supernatural ability to spontaneously morph between their secret and superheroic identities, the rest of them have to put their pants on, as the saying goes, one leg at a time. The process of putting these impossible garments on and taking them off of actors, however, is not simply a matter of putting legs into pants and pulling shirts over heads; in some cases, it is a matter of having a wardrobe department sew the actor’s body into a suit.

When dealing with impossible garments, filmmakers elide the moments that undermine their believability. Such elisions – which, appropriately, often concern the literal erasure of seams – produce a cinematic equivalent to the kind of representational ruptures that are native to the comic book medium. Jared Gardner describes reading a comic book thusly: “in the passage from one frame to the next, the gutter intervenes, and the message is transformed in countless ways by the syndicated act of millions of readers filling in the gaps between” (Kindle loc. 670). The act of filling in the productive absence between panels known as “the gutter” is, as Scott McCloud influentially claimed, the fundamental act upon which reading comics is predicated (67). Conventional continuity-based filmmaking, by contrast, seeks to eliminate such gaps in order to create a smooth, uninterrupted, and unambiguous sense of immersion in the diegesis represented on screen. According to comics historian Robert Harvey, “A film would show the movements that are [...] lost between panels” (186). During his analysis of a sequence from Will Eisner’s *The Spirit*, he articulates the relevant feature of comics’ narrational mode: “the breakdown of the action

omits the motion between the two images [...] We see only ‘before’ and ‘after’ shots, with speed lines supplying all the sense of the now completed action. But seeing that much is believing. We’re convinced” (187). In short, comics can persuade the reader of an action with less visual information than we would need to see in a film, especially with regard to feats that seem impossible in the real world.

The superhero costume – specifically, the inability to easily put it on and remove it – represents just such an impossibility, creating a problem for filmmakers trying to show the moments lost between panels. As a result, they may either shoot and cut around moments that would ‘give away’ the trick, limiting what we see to the ‘before’ and ‘after’ that we would get in a comic, or they may show it all, including the discrepancies that result. Neither option is as persuasive as the comic. An example of the former strategy can be found in Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002–2007). Throughout the films, the superhero costume is clearly one piece: the mask is seamlessly connected to the rest of the suit below the neck, the gloves are connected to the arm sleeves, the boots are connected to the pant legs. Though the suit looks and behaves as a unitard, the character nevertheless has the ability to remove the mask or boots when necessary (e.g. unmasking to kiss Mary-Jane [Kirsten Dunst]). However, when he puts these items back on, the suit seemingly regenerates itself, once again becoming a single unbroken piece. As in a comic, Raimi omits the “gutter” material, cutting away from Spider-Man before the mask is completely back on, obscuring its status as an impossible garment.<sup>10</sup> But whereas a “gappy” comic book representation would be considered complete for that medium, the gaps that result in the film are jarring. The other approach is demonstrated in *Batman Returns* (Tim Burton, 1992), when Bruce Wayne (Michael Keaton) removes his mask in front of Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer) after the final confrontation with the

10. The same is true of the recent reboot *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012).

Penguin (Danny DeVito) in the sewers of Gotham. Like the Spider-Man suit, Batman's rubber armour is essentially one piece. In order to reveal his identity to Catwoman, Wayne has to tear the cowl off at the neck, effectively ruining the entire suit. Where the *Spider-Man* films ask us to accept that simply placing the mask back on can seamlessly repair the costume, *Batman Returns* makes it clear that such reparations are impossible. In this scene, however, the eyes present a greater continuity issue. Since some skin around Batman's eyes is visible under the cowl, he has to blacken the area with make-up in order to create the illusion that the mask covers more of his face than it does. In the shot-reverse shot pattern the film employs in this scene, Batman's eye make-up is present at first, but when the camera returns to Batman after a cutaway to Catwoman, the black make-up around Batman's eyes has disappeared, displaying the now conspicuously light skin around his eyes. This allows Batman to reveal his identity without consequently revealing his maquillage, but the viewer is confronted with the impossibility of the Batman costume. This cannot be dismissed as a continuity error, since it must have been a deliberate choice; for Burton, not displaying an unmasked Wayne in semi-blackface must have been worth sacrificing shot-to-shot continuity.

Thus it seems that superhero films have good reason to elide moments of transformation entirely. Looking over the history of the genre, transformations are typically on-screen and instantaneous (*Captain Marvel*), on-screen and fragmentary (*Daredevil*), or off-screen entirely (*Man of Steel*). Complete transformations only begin to appear in the digital era with the sophistication of computer-generated imagery, and even now they are rare. With

the introduction of photorealistic CGI, cinema became capable of showing something that comics never could: the transition from civilian to superhero in real-time, without the kind of cuts, gaps, or fissures that undermine continuity and verisimilitude—in other words, without gutters. While the uninterrupted (long) take in cinema conveys continuity and a sense of realism, the gaps between each panel in a comic book necessarily emphasize discontinuity and artifice, even if the narrative meaning is identical to that imparted by a seamless representation. As Bukatman notes, “A single frame cannot illuminate or [produce the continuity and history central to a sense of self]: the sequence alone can do this” (2003, 135). The title characters in *Spawn*, *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003), and *Green Lantern*, as well as Mystique (Rebecca Romijn) in *X-Men* and Venom (Topher Grace) in *Spider-Man 3* (Sam Raimi, 2007), are all examples of superheroes (or villains) whose transformations are seen in full thanks to the integration of live-action photography and digital animation. In each of these cases, actors seamlessly morph into their fantastic alter egos before our eyes.

Morphing, however, cannot be the only way to suture these kinds of gaps, especially given that most superheroes do not morph into their costumes, but rather put them on as one would any outfit. By this criterion, *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) and its sequels are perhaps the most fully realized in all of superhero cinema. Iron Man may be the only superhero who wears a physical suit<sup>11</sup> whose transformations are often shown in uninterrupted takes; given their rarity in the genre, these scenes are among the greatest spectacles in these films. The fully realized machinations of the Iron Man



11. The suit is physical within the diegesis, though in any given shot it may be a combination of practical and CG elements, or entirely CG.

*In 1978, the original one-sheet for Superman promised that we would “believe a man can fly,” but even today superhero films rarely give viewers those crucial bits of footage that allow them to believe that man and superman are one and the same.*

armour as it gradually covers Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.)’s body, climaxing with the lowering of the face shield and the white-blue illumination of his electronic eyes, are cinematically seamless while also demonstrating how the suit’s seams fit together to form an ontological whole. These scenes, already spectacular in the first *Iron Man*, are renewed in each sequel with new armours that assemble in novel and surprising ways: the “suitcase armour” in *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010) is the highlight of the film’s most memorable set-piece, while Stark’s midair transformation in Marvel’s *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012) is an enthralling spectacle which amplifies viewer excitement for the immediately ensuing battle for New York. The franchise’s trend of costuming-as-set-piece culminates in *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013), wherein a partially armoured Stark breaking into the Mandarin’s lair represents the film’s most inventive action set-piece while the climax featuring forty autonomous Iron Man suits is perhaps the most spectacular scene in the trilogy.

Referring to the proliferation of such CG bodies in superhero films, Bukatman writes that “after Tobey Maguire’s Peter Parker pulls Spider-Man’s mask over his face and swings into action, the figure onscreen literally ceases to be Tobey Maguire. This has the unfortunate

effect of severing the connection between the inexpressive body and the liberated, expressive one” (*Poetics of Slumberland* 203). The fully realized transformations shown in films like *Iron Man* reduce this unfortunate effect, allowing the viewer to associate the CG Iron Man suit with the photographic Stark. By contrast, the all-CG Spider-Man reads as inert to viewers in part because of the impossibility of the costume. We never see Maguire become Spider-Man; at best, we see him almost become Spider-Man – cut – and then Spider-Man appears, fully formed. As *Iron Man* demonstrates, seeing the man get into the costume not only legitimates the shots of the all-CG Iron Man, but also the isolated close-ups on Downey’s face ‘inside the suit.’ The long take of Downey becoming Iron Man has a Bazinian effect in this context, legitimizing the isolated close-ups to follow and attesting to their authenticity. Bazin summarizes the two opposing approaches thusly: “The same scene can be bad literature or great cinema depending on whether it is edited or shot with all its elements in the frame” (86). I would revise his assertion to fit the present case study specifically: the same scene can behave like cinema or comics, depending on whether the transformation is continuous and complete or “gappy” and incomplete. By the same logic, the superhero’s hybridity can also be demonstrated or undermined. Eliding the transformation emphasizes the schism between or the impossibility of reconciling the two personas. While such elisions do not disrupt the narrative, they deny us moments of transformation that, when seen in full, legitimize the dual identity of the superhero and allow the viewer to believe the character’s continuity over time in both roles.

In 1978, the original one-sheet for *Superman* promised that we would “believe a man can fly,” but even today



superhero films rarely give viewers those crucial bits of footage that allow them to believe that man and superman are one and the same. As I have demonstrated here, the process of adapting the superhero costume to live-action is fraught with many concerns, of which fidelity may be low on filmmakers' list of priorities, especially compared to the desires of fandom. Indeed, "faithful" costumes may be impossible to bring to the screen in a seamless (or cinematic) way, requiring filmmakers to either shoot and edit around the seams that cannot be shown or to elide showing the transformations entirely, mirroring the gap-filled representational mode of comics. As the *Iron Man* franchise attests to, however, photorealistic CGI gives filmmakers a third option, but even CG-heavy films such as *Spider-Man* or *Man of Steel* tend to opt out of showing transformations from beginning to end, leaving gaps that echo the gutters between comics panels. These films may succeed in convincing audiences that a man can fly, but they fail to convince us of something that seems much simpler: that a man can get dressed on his own.

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# Saying No to Hetero-Masculinity

## The Villain in the Superhero Film

Lee Easton



*The central fascination in the superhero film is the transforming body, whether of hero or villain. Much attention is given to the body's discovery of its own transformation, which explains why superhero films are even more obsessed with origin stories than the comics themselves.*

-Scott Bukatman, "Why I Hate Superhero Movies" (121)

***While Scott Bukatman argues that both the hero and the villain's transforming bodies entrance the film audience, a curious dichotomy has arisen between popular culture and critical discourse.***

In popular culture, the villain seems to prevail more than the hero. As Heath Ledger's performance as the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) underscores, the villain can quickly become the focus of popular attention. Indeed, Ledger's is still the only performance in the superhero film genre to have garnered an Academy Award. In critical analyses, however, the hero, replete with many neuroses and conflicted desires, has tended to draw more attention. This focus seems related to two factors. First, notwithstanding the genre's invasions from masses of uniform, faceless adversaries which might speak to a range of trauma and fears of 'others' which permeate post-9/11 American culture, the superhero film has tended to favor strong interpersonal conflicts between the hero and villain. Second, superheroes and their transformative bodies, especially those of male heroes, have provided critics with a more congenial subject to analyze "how contemporary America (through its most effective ambassador, Hollywood) projects social sexual models as well as ideological postures concerning masculinity" (Roblou 78). Supervillains perhaps are less amenable to that ideological project.

This paper proposes, however, that the male supervillain plays a central role in conveying and challenging the models of masculinity on offer in the superhero film. Partly this centrality comes from the relative scarcity of female supervillains so far represented in the superhero film. With the exception of Jean Grey (Famke Janssen) in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (Brett Ratner, 2006) and Taliah Al Ghul (Marion Cotillard) in *The Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan, 2012), the superhero genre has been far more fascinated with the conflict between the hero and his male nemeses. Some suggest this focus on the male villain might stem from a desire to explore the hero's darker side. However, this approach elides the way the male supervillain, with his Machiavellian plans and powers, perpetually threatens to overwhelm the hero and the aligned structures of hetero-masculinity

which produce and sustain him. If the superhero provides his spectators with a handy checklist of "what makes a man a man" (Roblou 77), then the villain presents the audience with an offsetting guide to "what makes a man unmanly." In fact, linked to excessive greed, irrationality, and characteristics stereotypically associated with homosexuality and/or femininity, the villain primarily serves as a potent representation of a failed masculine subject. No matter how brilliant, powerful or cunning he may be, the villain seems doomed to succeed only in his perpetual failure to achieve his stated ambition, a paradoxical outcome that serves to improve the appeal of the hero and his version of white hetero-masculinity.<sup>1</sup> But, what if the villain's propensity to fail points beyond the hero and his normalizing social structures and to more disturbing possibilities?

Given its interests in destabilizing normative identities and practices, queer theory offers a productive answer to this question. Already positioned as beyond acceptable boundaries of behaviour and morals, the villain easily fits into queer explorations of transgression, disruption, and, more recently, failure. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, for example, Judith Halberstam contends that some apparent failures are actually rejections of hetero-normative notions of success and encourages critics to explore more fully what such failures might also be advocating (2). Following Halberstam, the villain's apparent failures might best be viewed as rejections of heteronormativity, its structures of family, home and nation, and, most importantly, the masculinity the hero embodies. Lee Edelman's work in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* is also useful. Edelman argues the constitutive anti-sociality inherent in queerness offers a rebuttal to the very idea of the social itself. Accordingly the villain's leadership of criminal gangs or global crime syndicates can be read as a rejection of structures based on Oedipal stories of patriarchal succession and advocating subversive forms of organization based on affiliation. More provocatively, Edelman points out that some queers actively reject "the futurch," a form of heteronormative, reproductive futurity embodied by the figure of the Child ("Negativity" 821). The villain too might be seen as resisting the futurch and its totalizing heteronormative vision. After all, no one in the audience thinks the villain is fighting for the children.

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1. For the purposes of this paper, I exclude *Hancock* (Peter Berg, 2008) since my focus is the large number of white heterosexual male superheroes in the superhero film genre. Of course, several African American actors play notable supporting characters in the superhero films including Morgan Freeman (Lucius Fox), Samuel L. Jackson (Nick Fury), Don Cheadle (James Rhodes), and Idris Elba (Heimdell).



## A Villain's Guide to (Failed) Masculinity

The superhero film pivots on the transformative moment where the hero passes from nerdy geek to muscular, masculine hero. Low angle shots emphasizing the actors' transformed, sculpted male torsos affirm their white masculine bodies as ones capable of containing and controlling their newfound power. Chris Evans' transformation of Steve Rogers in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011) best underscores this passage. Using CGI effects to reshape Evans' buff body into a stunted scrawny boy, the film underscores Rogers' inability to fend off larger boys who bully him relentlessly, and from whose abuse he is rescued by his all-American masculine friend, Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan). Only his heroic fortitude and resilience – "I can do this all day" – mark Rogers as possessing sufficient moral character to withstand the transformation into Captain America.

Few such glorious moments attend the unveiling of the villain's body – in fact, his entire body is rarely revealed. Unlike the approbation that attends the hero's new muscularity, when villainous male bodies are transformed, they often become grotesque and abjected. Norman Osborn (Willem Dafoe)'s transformation into the Green Goblin in *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002) underscores this point: his bared chest is emaciated, the exact opposite of Rogers' or Thor (Chris Hemsworth)'s buffed bodies. And, although Loki from *Thor* and *The Avengers* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011; Joss Whedon, 2012) is played by the handsome Tom Hiddleston,<sup>2</sup> we soon learn that his attractive human (Asgardian) body cleverly conceals his 'true' monstrous identity as a scion of the despised, adversarial Frost Giants. Similarly, in *Captain*

2. Hiddleston has a well-documented sex appeal including being nominated as one of the sexiest men alive. Critical reviews of his role in *Thor: The Dark World* often cite Loki's darker tormented character's appeal in contrast to Thor (Chris Hemsworth)'s muscular, macho masculinity. Apropos the argument I am making here, Time critic Richard Corliss observes, "Loki's demeanor bears a hint of the gay outsider, an antidote to the solemn testosterone of most of the Avengers crew" (Fox).

*America*, Herr Schmidt (Hugo Weaving) dons a masculine mask to hide the hideous red skull his head has become in the aftermath of the failure of his own ingested precursor to Captain America's Super Soldier serum. In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker's green hair, garish lipstick smile and uncontrollable body tics stand in stark contrast to the grim, controlled body of Batman (Christian Bale). Notably, unlike Thor or Captain America's white muscled bodies, neither Loki nor the Red Skull possesses such idealized hard bodies. As if ashamed of this failure, they remain enwrapped within their chosen garb, their smaller lithe bodies hidden from view. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bane (Tom Hardy) offers an interesting variation on the villain's failed masculine body if only because his excessive physique seems to suggest that the villain too can attain the hero's masculine musculature. And yet, like the other villains, Bane's harnessed body remains frequently enwrapped in his encompassing coat, as if his grotesque muscularity is not to be seen, and, thereby, coded as obscene. While this attachment to costume suggestively links the villain to masculine drag performance, the villain's bodies more often seem to align with a soft feminine Other.

Interestingly, the etymology of "villain" suggests this link is not entirely accidental, *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes that "villain," a term derived from Old French, originally denoted "a low-born base-minded rustic." However, even as the word eventually came to signify an innate criminality, the term could also describe a woman, although without necessarily imputing negative qualities. Still, connotatively, the male "villain" already seems aligned with what Barbara Creed identifies as the monstrous, a feminine figure that is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not (10-11). Here the monstrous is a feminized male who threatens the clear lines of the hero's white hetero-masculinity. Antony Easthope notably identifies this border-threatening figure in *What A Man's Gotta Do*, where he observed the Joker is "a crudely exaggerated caricature of the feminized male" (30). As Mark Simpson observes, the feminized male – the fem boy who is unable to master the male skills of sport and combat – is "from a straight-arrow, utilitarian point of view [...] worse than useless in the manly scheme of things" (ix). The film *Thor* illustrates how Loki's attributes become associated with the figure of the feminized man. Loki derives his power not from physical bodily strength but rather from trickery – his ability to cast illusions. As a result, other warriors such as Thor's friends Fandral, Hogun, Volstagg, and Sif (Josh Dallas, Tadanobu Asano, Ray Stevenson, Jamie Alexander), dismiss his value in warfare. Interestingly, Sif (the group's sole female warrior)'s treatment of Loki also positions him as less than masculine. For Sif, Loki's actions result

from his personal jealousy of Thor, not from the needs of the (patriarchal) State. Later, she challenges Loki's assumption of patriarchal power, standing defiantly in the throne room when he refuses to return Thor to Asgard. More important, Loki's secret Frost Giant ancestry also links him with the feminine. True, the diamond-hard Frost Giants seem unlikely candidates to be aligned with Creed's monstrous feminine, which focuses on the role of the maternal and abjection. However, the Ice Giants' fluid shape-shifting prowess that quickly turns their frozen limbs into penetrating phallic objects places them in a lineage with other shape shifting figures including *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991)'s fluid murderous T1000 (Robert Patrick), whom critics such as Mark Dery link to cultural fears about feminism, feminization and abjection (Byers 14).

If one posits a spectrum of masculinities, the Red Skull provides another illustration of how the villain queers heteronormative masculinity. Striking an imperial pose in the shadows of his private office, Schmidt theatrically stands for his portrait, controlling the lighting and listening to opera. On one hand, dressed in his military attire, he is a paragon of masculinity. The picture is contradictory however since the opera – Wagner, of course – is not only a high cultural art form, but also, as Wayne Koestenbaum has shown, has had strong connections to gay men and homosexuality. Not so much a picture of androgyny, the Red Skull listening in the privacy of his chambers presents a counterbalancing picture of a butch opera queen, via Tom of Finland.

Paradoxically, a villain's sole success lies in the inevitable failure of his quest. Whether the villain's goal is anarchy (Joker), world domination (Red Skull), or simply "to ruin [his sibling's] big day" (Loki), the hero inevitably foils the villain's plan. While the villain's rout ostensibly provides an approving nod to "the good of social order and control" (Buscaljon 52), his defeat might more properly be positioned within the politics of masculinity. Unquestionably, the villain's loss serves primarily to reinforce a form of desirable heroic masculinity, and, simultaneously, to enshrine the attributes of white heterosexual masculinity as the dominant fiction to which others must bow. As the final scenes of Odin (Anthony

Hopkins)'s restoration in *Thor* illustrate, the hero's victory, no matter the cost, assures the positive values of masculine success, family, and love that reinforce hetero-patriarchy. But what if the constitutive element of the villain – his failures – represents something other than markers of the hero's precarious success – a 'victory' that, like the masculinity it sustains, is tentative, incomplete, exacting? Perhaps the villain is less a failure of hetero-patriarchal masculinity than a rejection of that masculinity tout court. Halberstam notes in the *The Queer Art of Failure* that "success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation" (2). Certainly the hero confirms this definition of success. Even Steve Rogers, who lacks the financial reserves of Bruce Wayne, achieves success when he overcomes his boyish inexperience with women and (finally) kisses Peggy Carter (Haley Atwell). Likewise, Thor's successful maturation is at least partially linked to establishing an ennobling relationship with astrophysicist Jane Foster (Natalie Portman). Recent film supervillains, by contrast, eschew such success, which for them appears defined through acquisition of greater power over others. Remarkably, unlike the heterosexual hero, these villains are depicted as devoid of sexual desires, with priorities oriented to different goals than heteronormative success. Equally, unlike earlier incarnations, recent supervillains do not seem much motivated by wealth accumulation.<sup>3</sup> Neither the Red Skull nor Loki's goals are linked to monetary gain, while the Joker provocatively burns piles of money: "It's not about the money...it's about...sending a message. Everything burns." Indeed, he dismisses those criminals who only seek financial reward, opining, "This town deserves a better class of criminal."

These examples suggest a glimmer of the villain's rejection of several social paradigms, not just those of heteronormative culture. Lee Edelman contends, "[a]s the figure of non-productivity, then, the queer both threatens and consolidates" structures of capitalist hetero-patriarchy ("Antagonism" 821). Certainly the villains in Nolan's *Batman* trilogy seem to have, at best, an ambivalent relationship to late capitalism, especially with Bane's villainous takeover of the Gotham Stock Exchange. As a figure of non-productivity – the villains neither add to the Gross Domestic Product, nor plan to have children<sup>4</sup> – the villain occupies the queer position that



3. Lex Luthor (Kevin Spacey)'s Kryptonian real estate play in *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006) appears to be an outlier in this regard. Space does not allow me to fully explore the complex relationships between capital, villains and Bruce Wayne/Batman in the *Dark Knight* trilogy.

4. As if to underscore my point, in *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bane's villainy becomes nuanced when it is revealed that even he is capable of nurturing a child – even if that child becomes the femme fatale Talia al Ghul.



Edelman identifies. Moreover, Halberstam suggests “the queer subject stands between heterosexual optimism and its realization” (*Failure* 108). In the superhero film, the villain interposes himself in the hero’s narrative of finding true love and happiness. All that stands in Thor’s path to become Asgard’s king are Loki’s machinations, the Red Skull’s plans for world domination ultimately intervene in Steve Roger’s blossoming love affair with Peggy Carter, and the Joker brings to an end Bruce Wayne’s potential for happiness with Rachel (Maggie Gyllenhaall) by killing her.

Further pursuing Halberstam’s assertions, the villain’s pre-destined failures might be viewed productively, as a screen to “more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (*Failure* 3). In this sense the villain and his minions speak to ways of organizing social life beyond that of the family and the nation formation it supports. The Red Skull’s Nazi-derivative sect Hydra and its genderless, black uniformed soldiers illustrate the point. While positioned as the product of the Skull’s fascist inclinations, Hydra is an organization that is based on affiliation, on individual choice as opposed to oedipal bonds of filiation, which bind the hero to family, home, and nation. Likewise, the Joker’s organization of criminals is maintained by affiliated bonds – even if only for the moment of their crimes. Such transitory connections run counter to homo and hetero normative perspectives which see such non-familial organizations as threats to the nuclear family, the metropolis and ultimately the nation.

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### We are not ‘fighting for the children’

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Simply positioning the villain as a mirror of the hero’s darkest impulses (Roblou 84) underplays him as a figure of anti-sociality, one whose central goal is to promote “a path that leads to no good and has no other end than an end to the good as such” (Edelman “Antagonism” 822). Certainly the Red Skull seems to follow this pattern. Although his ultimate goal is never made entirely clear, the Skull does plan to destroy both the Allies and the Axis for no other than reason than they presumably stand between him and world domination. Moreover, Daniel Buscaljon contends that since the Joker manifests all of three of Kant’s levels of evil – frailty, impurity and depravity – he provides a strong representation of Kant’s notion of absolute evil (54). Following Edelman’s arguments that reproductive futurity, at its heart, has a constitutive negativity (“Antagonism” 823), we might say more precisely what Buscaljon calls the Joker’s “preference for its [the moral life’s] negation, living a life of almost impossibly perfect depravity” (55) is more about the challenge that anti-sociality offers to reproductive futurity and its totalizing logics. This Joker ‘queerly’ resists attempts to recuperate him into any logic.

Loki also takes up a position of structural negativity. Upon realizing his ‘true’ identity as the son of Laufey (Colm Feore), king of the Frost Giants, rather than Odin of Asgard, Loki rejects Odin’s plan for a peaceful co-



existence between the Frost Giants and Asgard, therein rejecting the futurity that the All-Father saw in him as an abandoned child whom Odin and Frigga (Renne Russo) adopted and raised as their own. Admittedly, it is difficult to imagine an audience condemning Odin's moment of kindness, compassion and good intentions, especially since it is child Loki who is rescued from Laufey, who has left his defective son to die in the cold. Still, it is exactly this moment that Loki denounces from a position of negativity. Reflecting on his past, Loki re-reads it as a series of slights, which Frigga denies, asserting she and Odin tried hard to love him. Ultimately, Odin's strategy of assimilation is not coded by the film as wrong; rather it is Loki's innate (read: villainous) Frost Giant nature that leads him down his destructive path. Again, I prefer to re-read Loki's rejection of Odin and subsequent usurpation of Asgard's throne not as a sign of Oedipal rebellion or sibling rivalry but as a wish to commit the original Sin itself – patricide. Far from being the actions of a bitter, queer son, Loki repudiates Oedipus and sets out to impose his own anarchistic view of the world onto Asgard and the Nine Realms.<sup>5</sup> It is thus unsurprising that Loki chooses to fall rather than be rescued by Odin or Thor in the film's final moments. Echoing Lucifer from *Paradise Lost*, Loki also chooses to reign in hell than serve in heaven. In a gesture of final rejection, Loki takes his chances on the

5. Although Loki's role in *The Avengers* is not addressed here, it is worth noting that Loki happily extends his anarchistic vision to Earth.

*Far from being the actions of a bitter, queer son, Loki repudiates Oedipus and sets out to impose his own anarchistic view of the world onto Asgard and the Nine Realms.*

void between the worlds rather than return to Asgard's hetero-patriarchy where he has no place.

### The Im/Possibility of True Villainy

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Given the conservative nature of the superhero film, at least in its blockbuster form, it is difficult to imagine that the kind of villainy the Joker enacts could ever ultimately triumph. That would move us far away from the optimism that infuses both the superhero comic and its filmic counterpart and might authorize more open-ended forms of hetero-masculinity than the genre currently posits. Certainly espousing contrarian, potentially violent resistance is not without its dangers.<sup>6</sup> Halberstam recalls the feminist artist Solana who shot

6. Similarly, the 2012 movie theatre shooting at the premiere of *The Dark Knight Rises* in Aurora, Colorado provides a vivid cautionary example of how (even purportedly) embracing the Joker's ethos leads to deadly consequences for many others. Linking copycat violence to representations in films (or videogames) is a dubious business, but it is worth wondering how much of this violence may be linked to frustrations created by the narrow strictures of (white) heteronormative masculinity.

Andy Warhol, and cautions that we must recognize that “this kind of violence is precisely what we call upon and imply when we theorize and conjure negativity” (“Anti-Social” 150). Similarly, while reading Hydra and other queer villainous organization as offering alternative modes of sociality is a useful corrective to otherwise conventional readings, Halberstam usefully cautions readers that the relationship of homosexuality to politics has not always been progressive (“Anti-Social” 150). As a villain explicitly aligned with Nazism, the Red Skull underscores Halberstam’s observation that

the politics of masculinity, as opposed to the politics of gay social movements or the politics of gender variance, names a political strand that can easily incorporate forms of female and male masculinism while casting all feminine identification as a source of inferiority and as contrary to the nation state. (“Anti-Social” 147)

In reading the villain as rejecting hetero-masculinity, we must not simply dismiss the misogynistic and effeminacy-hating patterns that are might play in such rejections. Indeed, the ongoing antipathy to effeminate men still attests to the need to interrogate such rejections carefully.

For these reasons, Edelman’s formulation of the queer negativity remains a productive way to conceptualize the super villain other than just as a masculine failure who ultimately burnishes the hero’s masculine aura further. As Edelman argues in *No Future*, “[q]ueerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it [ . . . ] accept[s] its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure” (3). Accordingly, the villain is more than just the hero’s complement, but rather becomes a sign of queer resistance endemic to the social structures the hero embodies and protects. The supervillain’s persistence in the face of indubitable failure reminds us of the structural negativity at the heart of the superhero film. Edelman proposes a form of queer oppositionality which would even “oppose itself to the logic of opposition” (*No Future* 4). Reading the villain as a fundamental negativity positions him as inescapably queer and a troubling paradox: just as the superhero must optimistically say “yes” to the future for which he fights, the villain intones, “never.” Or, better yet: Loki, in his comic book incarnation, has now been rewritten as a gender-shifting bisexual, more in accordance with classical Norse mythology (Burlingame). Trickster that he is, Loki may yet be the villain we have always wanted and needed.

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