

The Hidden Power of Superheroes

The Ability of Superhero Movies to Influence
Political Attitudes

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Abstract

Although the literature on superheroes has expanded in recent years, it has neglected to examine whether superhero movies can affect political views. This oversight is regrettable given the recent surge in the popularity of superhero movies that engage directly with political issues such as *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Iron Man 3* (2013), and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). After a lengthy historical exploration of superheroes and a thematic analysis of these superhero movies – which collectively demonstrate that superheroes are an enduring cultural phenomenon as well as provide the theoretical underpinnings of their ability to effect attitudinal change – this study used a two-wave panel experiment to evaluate the extent to which superhero movies could cause attitudinal change. Ultimately, this study found that a significant percentage of participants changed their views on various policies related to the war on terror including torture, mass surveillance, military spending, and foreign intervention as a result of watching these superhero movies. These findings demonstrate that further research in this area is essential, particularly so long as superhero movies continue to receive critical and popular acclaim.

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Chapter 1. A New Golden Age: The History of the Superhero and the Rise of the Superhero Movie

The marginalization of comic book superheroes is an integral part of the history of the medium. . . . Yet . . . this long era of marginalization may at last be coming to an end. . . . [S]uperheroes have been growing in popular esteem for a myriad of reasons in recent decades including the success of superhero movies . . . the rise of cultural studies in academia, and the newfound esteem given to previously disregarded aspects of popular culture. – Shawn O'Rourke¹

There has been an explosion in the popularity of superhero movies since the turn of the millennium. Although they existed before this period – indeed, *Superman* (1978) and *Batman* (1989) were both released to critical acclaim and financial success – *X-Men* (2000) was the film that sparked the spectacular surge of this cinematic genre.² In its opening scene, a rainy day at the Auschwitz concentration camp, a young boy, who would later become the supervillain Magneto, is forcibly separated from his parents. He cries out in agony while reaching toward the metal gate looming between him and his family, slowly bending it with his magnetic powers until he is brutally knocked unconscious by a Nazi soldier. This poignant scene immediately differentiated *X-Men* from its predecessors by openly addressing complex social issues and introducing multidimensional characters. Although *X-Men* earned a relatively modest box office

¹ Shawn O'Rourke, "A Brief Historiography of the Age of Marginalization: The Superhero in the American Mind," in *Ages of Heroes, Eras of Men: Superheroes and the American Experience*, ed. Julian C. Chambliss, William Svitavsky, and Thomas Donaldson (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 246.

² *Superman* (1978) made just over \$300 million worldwide against a \$55 million production budget. Its average rating on Rotten Tomatoes was an 8/10 with critics calling it a "deft blend [of] humor and gravitas," and on Metacritic, critics designated the film as deserving of "universal acclaim." *Batman* (1989) earned \$411 million worldwide against a production budget of just \$35 million, making it the fifth highest grossing movie in history at the time of its release as well as the highest grossing movie based on a DC Comics character until the release of *The Dark Knight* (2008). On Rotten Tomatoes, critics called it "an eerie, haunting spectacle [and] dark entertainment." Critics also gave the film "generally favorable reviews" on Metacritic. Neither of these films, however, sparked a wave of superhero movies in the same way that *X-Men* (2000) did, partially because the various sequels to these two blockbusters did not achieve close to the same degree of success. "Superman," Box Office Mojo, accessed March 5, 2018, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=superman.htm>; "Superman," Rotten Tomatoes, accessed March 5, 2018, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/superman_the_movie/; "Superman," Metacritic, accessed March 5, 2018, <http://www.metacritic.com/movie/superman>; "Batman," Box Office Mojo, accessed March 5, 2018, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=batman.htm&adjust_yr=1&p=.htm; "Batman," Rotten Tomatoes, accessed March 5, 2018, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1001781_batman?; "Batman," Metacritic, accessed March 5, 2018, <http://www.metacritic.com/movie/batman>.

total, it was certainly a profitable endeavor, grossing nearly four times as much as its production budget.³

Spider-Man (2002), however, demonstrated that superhero movies could be blockbusters. Audiences were enraptured by its stunning visual effects and relatable characters – particularly Peter Parker, a nerdy high school student who is bullied by his classmates and struggles to gain the attention of the girl of his dreams. Moreover, though filming was largely complete by June 2001, this film resonated strongly with moviegoers still reeling from the devastating terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.⁴ Peter becomes Spider-Man after experiencing a tragedy: the death of his Uncle Ben. He is guided by the notion that “with great power comes great responsibility,” an enduring sentiment in American culture.⁵ Most importantly, Spider-Man protects New York City from the Green Goblin, a villain who uses his glider to destroy buildings and kill innocent civilians. This film broke several box office records, including the highest single day, opening weekend, and per theater average for an ultra-wide release.⁶

The number of superhero movies quickly expanded. Within five years of the release of *Spider-Man*, both *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* expanded into trilogies, the Fantastic Four was featured in two movies, and Batman was given a grounded origin story in *Batman Begins* (2005), the first of *The Dark Knight Trilogy* directed by Christopher Nolan. The Marvel Cinematic Universe began with *Iron Man* (2008) and now consists of eighteen films and more than twenty

³ “X-Men,” Box Office Mojo, accessed March 5, 2018, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=xmen.htm>.

⁴ Jeffery Moulton argues that *Spider-Man* (2002) became a blockbuster in large part because it was an “unintentional allegory” for the events surrounding 9/11. Jeffery Moulton, *The Superhero Response: How 9/11 Changed Our Superheroes and Why it Matters* (self-pub., 2012), 23-56.

⁵ Presidents from Abraham Lincoln to George H. W. Bush have relied on a variation of this theme in their State of the Union addresses. Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan also inserted this quote into her opinion in *Kimble v. Marvel* (2015), a case dealing with patent rights. Lily Rothman, “7 State of the Union Quotes That Sound Like Lines from *Spider-Man*,” *Time*, January 20, 2015, <http://time.com/3664584/american-history-state-of-the-union/>.

⁶ Brandon Gray, “‘Spider-Man’ Takes Box Office on the Ultimate Spin: \$114.8 Million,” Box Office Mojo, accessed March 5, 2018, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/news/?id=1157&p=.htm>.

superheroes. With the release of *Man of Steel* (2013), Warner Brothers launched its own Justice League Universe to compete with Marvel. Collectively, both studios have more than a dozen superhero movies planned for release in just the next few years. As its box office revenues and total market share continue to trend upward, there is little doubt that the superhero movie genre will remain prominent for years to come.

In this context, it is unsurprising that superheroes have increasingly become a topic of academic research. Perhaps the most expansive area of research on superheroes is in regards to their origins.⁷ Various researchers have identified comparisons between superheroes and countless heroes from mythology, religion, and classic literature in an attempt to understand how these captivating figures contributed to the development of superheroes. Some have instead conducted cultural analyses of superheroes, either examining superheroes as a whole or delving into a specific superhero, to explore how they have responded to the political, religious, and cultural views of society.⁸ Still others have evaluated the role of superheroes in advancing propaganda or reflecting fears of the enemy.⁹ A relative few have even analyzed the psychological appeal of superheroes.¹⁰

⁷ Chris Gavaler, *On The Origin of Superheroes: From the Big Bang to Action Comics No. 1* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015); Jess Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger: The 4,000 Year History of the Superhero* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2017); Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin, TX: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006); Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2007); Marco Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, trans. Jamie Richards (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

⁸ Grant Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, And A Sun God From Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011); Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Larry Tye, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* (New York: Random House, 2012); Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

⁹ Christopher Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed?: Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda in America During World War II* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2011); Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books & The Unmasking of Cold War America* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

¹⁰ *Our Superheroes, Ourselves*, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

Although this study incorporates research from each of these areas, this study is distinct from existing research because it aims to assess whether viewing a superhero movie can affect individual political attitudes. As Todd Adkins and Jeremiah Castle note, “popular movies have been largely eschewed in modern media research with the bulk of scholarly attention focused on other media types, such as newspapers, the nightly news, and campaign advertising.”¹¹ Even the limited media effects research that has examined the effects of popular movies on political views has largely been dedicated to “films about politics, political institutions, or political actors” such as *JFK* (1991), *Malcolm X* (1992), and *All the President’s Men* (1976).¹² A few studies have focused on the influence of less explicitly political films on political views. For example, Kenneth Mulligan and Philip Habel found that *The Cider House Rules* (1999) caused individuals to become more favorable toward legal abortion, Michelle Pautz found that *Argo* (2012) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) led to individuals having an improved perception of government, and Anthony Leiserowitz determined that viewing *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) significantly increased individual risk perceptions of the likelihood and severity of climate change in the United States.¹³ However, a thorough Google Scholar search revealed no such studies regarding

¹¹ Todd Adkins and Jeremiah J. Castle, “Moving Pictures? Experimental Evidence of Cinematic Influence on Political Attitudes,” *Social Science Quarterly* 95, no. 5 (2014): 1230; Diana C. Mutz, “The Future of Political Communication Research: Reflections on the Occasion of Steve Chaffee’s Retirement from Stanford University,” *Political Communication* 18, no. 2 (2001); Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News that Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Richard R. Lau et al., “The Effects of Negative Political Advertisements: A Meta-Analytic Assessment,” *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 4 (1999).

¹² Adkins and Castle, “Moving Pictures?,” 1232; Lisa D. Butler, Cheryl Koopman, and Philip G. Zimbardo, “The Psychological Impact of Viewing the Film ‘JFK’: Emotions, Beliefs, and Political Behavioral Intentions,” *Political Psychology* 16, no. 2 (1995); Darren W. Davis and Christian Davenport, “The Political and Social Relevancy of Malcolm X: The Stability of African American Political Attitudes,” *Journal of Politics* 59, no. 2 (1997); William R. Elliott and William J. Schenck-Hamlin, “Film, Politics, and the Press: The Influence of ‘All the Presidents Men,’” *Journalism Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (1979).

¹³ Kenneth Mulligan and Philip Habel, “An Experimental Test of the Effects of Fictional Framing on Attitudes,” *Social Science Quarterly* 92, no. 1 (2011): 93; Michelle C. Pautz, “Argo and Zero Dark Thirty: Film, Government, and Audiences,” *Political Science and Politics* 48, no. 1 (2015): 120; Anthony A. Leiserowitz, “Day After Tomorrow: Study of Climate Change Risk Perception,” *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 46, no. 9 (2004): 26-27.

superhero movies.¹⁴ This oversight is surprising. Superhero movies are among the most popular movies of all time in the United States – indeed, ten of the top thirty highest-grossing films feature superheroes.¹⁵ In a highly competitive media environment in which millions of Americans are abandoning news entirely in favor of entertainment, it is crucial to assess whether superhero movies can affect individual political views.

This study examines three recent superhero movies: *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Iron Man 3* (2013), and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), each of which have received popular and critical acclaim. More importantly, these movies all promote political views regarding various aspects of the war on terror. Specifically, *The Dark Knight* portrays torture and mass surveillance as justifiable policies during the war on terror, *Iron Man 3* argues that the threat of terrorism has been overblown by the military-industrial complex and that military force is relatively ineffective in fighting terrorism, and *Captain America: Civil War* endorses a unilateralist foreign policy for the United States. To evaluate whether or not these superhero movies can affect political views, this study relied on a two-wave panel experiment in which participants completed a survey before and after viewing one of these three movies. Although this study was somewhat limited by the size and composition of its sample as well as the fact that the order of the statements was not reversed, a comparison of participants' responses before and after viewing their respective film demonstrates that a significant percentage of participants changed their views on various policy issues related to the war on terror.

¹⁴ That is not to say that there were no studies on the effect of superheroes on attitudes. Hillary Pennell and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz found that “exposure to the sexualized-heroine images resulted in lower body esteem.” Hillary Pennell and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, “The Empowering (Super) Heroine? The Effects of Sexualized Female Characters in Superhero Films on Women,” *Sex Roles* 72, no. 5 (2015): 211.

¹⁵ Tim Dirks, “All-Time Box Office Top 100,” Filmsite, accessed March 11, 2018, <http://www.filmsite.org/boxoffice.html>.

Prior to discussing the data acquired during this experiment in further detail, this study will devote significant space to exploring the history of superheroes. First, it will analyze how mythology, religion, and classic literature have contributed to the psychological appeal of the superhero. Second, it will delve into the blatant promotion of propaganda by comic books during World War II as a means of emphasizing that the political views expressed by *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man 3*, and *Captain America: Civil War* are more subtle. This lengthy history is necessary for three important reasons. First, it legitimizes the superhero as a topic worthy of academic research. This is not a trivial point; the superhero has faced significant criticism throughout its existence and even today, the superhero is regarded by many as simple and childish. Second, it demonstrates that the superhero is not an ephemeral cultural phenomenon, but one that has existed for decades and will likely endure well into the future. Last, and most importantly, it provides a theoretical basis for understanding how superhero movies have a particularly strong potential to effect attitudinal change, particularly its analysis of why superheroes as characters are psychologically appealing.

The remainder of this introductory chapter will provide early background on superheroes. This chapter will argue that Superman represents the first superhero and thus the beginning of the superhero genre. In doing so, it will defend a workable definition of a “superhero” as well as identify parallels between the Golden Age of Comic Books – during which many of the most enduring superheroes were introduced – and the present surge in superhero movies in order to emphasize the importance of the question addressed herein. This chapter will also evaluate the criticism surrounding comic books and superheroes in the 1940s and 1950s, emphasizing its obstinate persistence. To conclude, this chapter will provide an overview of the three substantive chapters of this study.

Superman: The First Superhero

Nearly eighty years after it was first created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, even as the quality of comic book art has improved substantially and the special effects of superhero movies grow increasingly elaborate, the cover of *Action Comics* #1 (June 1938) remains enthralling (Figure 1).¹⁶ A muscular man with black hair wears a tight-fitting blue costume

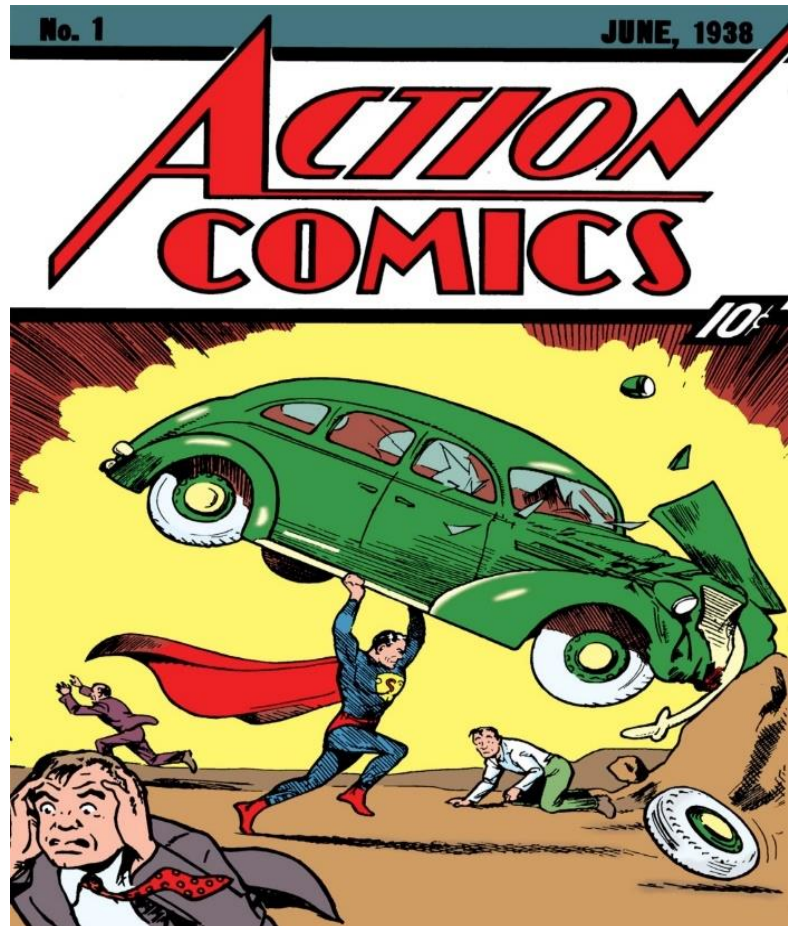


Figure 1. Joe Shuster, *Action Comics* #1 (New York: DC Comics, June 1938).

As he effortlessly lifts a car above his head and smashes it into a rock, two men in business suits flee the scene while another man appears both terrified and dumbfounded at this phenomenal display of strength. Aside from the logo, issue, date, and price, there are no other words; the action is the singular point of emphasis. As a result, readers cannot know whether the fleeing men were thugs or civilians or even whether the superhuman is the hero or the villain of the story. By intentionally omitting context

¹⁶ In modern times, comic book artists not only have more time and experience, but are able to employ better technology, such as computerized coloring, which allows them to incorporate greater detail into their work. Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 13; Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Action Comics* #1 (New York: DC Comics, June 1938).

and instead portraying the climax, readers are compelled to delve into the story to discover the answers to their questions.¹⁷

Readers quickly learn Superman is an alien from another planet and that his remarkable speed and strength stem from the advanced evolution of his species. Because Superman elects to use these powers to help mankind, he is rightly classified as a “champion of the oppressed.”¹⁸ The story proceeds in a frenetic fashion. Superman runs through the night while carrying a bound and gagged woman in his arms. After arriving at the governor’s estate, Superman dumps the woman by a tree and rushes into the house, smashing down the front door and sprinting upstairs to see the governor, ripping a steel door off its hinges on the way. Superman urges him to pardon Evelyn Curry, a woman who is scheduled to be executed in just fifteen minutes, and produces a signed confession to prove her innocence. In an attempt to protect the governor, the butler shoots at Superman, but learns with dismay that bullets simply ricochet off him. After subduing the butler, Superman once again pleads with the governor to call the prison to save an innocent life. Evelyn Curry is ultimately spared and it is revealed that the woman left on the lawn is the true murderer. In the remainder of the issue, Superman breaks up a domestic violence incident, rescues Lois Lane from kidnappers, and confronts a corrupt lobbyist for the defense industry who is trying to embroil the United States in a war in Europe.¹⁹

¹⁷ Morrison, *Supergods*, 8.

¹⁸ Siegel and Shuster, *Action Comics* #1.

¹⁹ *Action Comics* #1 (June 1938) was published just fifteen months after the final hearings of the Special Committee on Investigation of the Munitions Industry. Chaired by Republican Senator Gerald Nye, this Senate committee sought to determine the extent to which the economic interests of the banking and munitions industries contributed to the entry of the United States into World War I. Although they produced little hard evidence to indicate that wartime profits had been a major factor in this regard, these findings did not reduce public support for this view, but rather fueled isolationist sentiments that contributed to the passage of the Neutrality Acts of 1935, 1936, 1937, and 1939. The plot of *Action Comics* #1 involving the lobbyist thus clearly reflects the prevailing national attitude at the time. David J. Cross, “An Historical and Visual Analysis of Superman Comic Books, 1938-1945,” (master’s thesis, Florida State University, 2011), 56-59, 73-74.

Superman was “a hero of the people, a bold, humanist response to [the Great] Depression.”²⁰ Yet he was also secretly someone else: a reporter who had trouble with women. As Clark Kent, he was no longer a superhero; indeed, he was misunderstood and disrespected by Lois Lane due to his nerdish characteristics and his mild-mannered personality.²¹ Although it is easy to criticize the implausibility of Lois Lane failing to recognize Clark as Superman, it is this element of the story that is perhaps most captivating. Superman is a character with whom anyone can identify and attempt to emulate because even though no one can be Superman, they can strive to be like him.

The belief that Superman is the first superhero is widely shared among comics historians, though some disagreement does exist.²² Will Murray explicitly calls Olga Mesmer – who utilizes her superstrength and X-ray vision to help her mother, the immortal queen of Venus, quash a revolt – “The Superhero before Superman” given her brief run in *Spicy Mystery Stories* from August 1937 to October 1938.²³ There are also other candidates: Popeye, who uses his superstrength and indestructability to win prizefights; Hugo Danner, who fights in World War I because of the opportunity to use his powers without restraint; and the Phantom, a costumed crime-fighter who battles pirates and gangsters from all over the world. There are two reasons, however, to ultimately embrace Superman as the first superhero, and thus the beginning of the

²⁰ Morrison, *Supergods*, 6.

²¹ Clark Kent also could have been a reflection of the concerns surrounding masculinity during the Great Depression. As Josep Armengol argues, “the Great Depression caused millions of American males to feel emasculated by their incapacity to provide for their families [because] American masculinity has traditionally linked men’s identity to their breadwinning role.” Josep M. Armengol, “Gendering the Great Depression: Rethinking the Male Body in 1930s American Culture and Literature,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014): 59-68.

²² Julian C. Chambliss and William L. Svitavsky, “From Pulp Hero to Superhero: Culture, Race, and Identity in American Popular Culture, 1900-1940,” *Studies in American Culture* 31, no. 1 (2008): 19, https://scholarship.rollins.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1002&context=as_facpub; Shahriar Fouladi, “Super Savior/Destroyer: Superman, *Smallville*, and the Superhero Genre’s Spectre of Monstrosity” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 2011), 22; Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 8.

²³ Peter Coogan, “Comics Predecessors,” in *The Superhero Reader*, ed. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 12.

superhero genre: (1) he was the first to have powers, a selfless mission, and an identity with a code name and costume (in addition to fulfilling the criterion of generic distinction, thereby meeting the definition of a superhero); and (2) he sparked the proliferation of other superheroes in a way that earlier costumed crime-fighters did not.

Precursors to Superman do not fulfill the most appropriate definition of a superhero. Of course, some categorically reject the need for a definition. In a chapter aptly titled “What is a Superhero? No One Knows – That’s What Makes ‘em Great,” Geoff Klock argues that superhero definitions impose boundaries on the genre as a whole, thereby reducing its potential to tell unique and exciting stories.²⁴ Similarly, Chris Gavaler compares definitions to erasers in a pejorative sense and instead opts to use the following non-definition for superheroes: “ultimate amalgams, all-swallowing über characters.”²⁵ Both Klock and Gavaler are correct to point out that the superhero invokes conventions from many different characters. Simultaneously, though, they possess distinctive features. The danger of sloppy or nonexistent definitions is perhaps best illustrated by considering a parallel with the Western genre.²⁶ If this genre were defined on the sole basis of its setting, for instance, both *True Grit* (1969) and *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1993) would necessarily be classified as Westerns even though the latter clearly is not.²⁷ What this example demonstrates is that an eraser is crucial. Without a definition of a superhero to impose constraints on the already vast superhero genre, scholarship in this area would lack focus and rigor.

²⁴ Geoff Klock, “What Is a Superhero? No One Knows – That’s What Makes ‘em Great,” in *What Is a Superhero*, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 73.

²⁵ Gavaler, *On The Origin of Superheroes*, 3.

²⁶ Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, 59.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Among the many other definitions examined here, most are vague, broad, or overly specific. Both B. J. Oropeza and Jess Nevins merely provide extensive lists of traits possessed by many superheroes without specifying the quantity necessary to be considered one.²⁸ Kurt Busiek claims that to be a superhero is to possess three of the following six criteria: “superpowers, costume, code name, secret identity, heroic ongoing mission, and superhero milieu.”²⁹ This, however, is too broad. John-117 from the *Halo* franchise has superhuman strength and reflexes, a code name of Master Chief that highlights his fighting and leadership skills, and a heroic ongoing mission to save humanity from aliens known as the Covenant as well as a parasitic life form called the Flood, yet it does not seem correct to classify him as a superhero given his close connections to the science fiction genre. Danny Fingeroth believes superheroes differ from other heroic characters because of their “nobility of purpose.”³⁰ Once again, this definition fails to omit characters like James Bond, who clearly has a noble purpose, but is a spy rather than a superhero. Richard Reynolds has the opposite problem; his definition excludes characters who are obviously superheroes. For example, one of his criteria, “being marked out of society,” does not apply to the portrayal of Iron Man in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.³¹ The difficulty of finding a definition for a superhero lies in the fact that it must encompass god-like beings like Superman, soldiers like Captain America, and wizards like Doctor Strange, while leaving out correspondingly similar characters such as Aslan, Jason Bourne, and Harry Potter, all of whom

²⁸ B. J. Oropeza, “Introduction: Superhero Myth and the Restoration of Paradise,” in *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Pop Culture*, ed., B. J. Oropeza (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 5; Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, 6-9.

²⁹ Kurt Busiek, “The Importance of Context: Robin Hood Is Out and Buffy Is In,” in *What Is a Superhero*, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 133.

³⁰ Danny Fingeroth, “Power and Responsibility...And Other Reflections on Superheroes,” in *What Is a Superhero*, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 125.

³¹ Richard Reynolds, “Masked Heroes,” in *The Superhero Reader*, ed. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 106.

appear increasingly similar to superheroes in a time where “the border between the superhero genre and other mass entertainment genres have been smudged.”³²

The definition formulated by Peter Coogan overcomes this challenge with four elements: powers, mission, identity, and generic distinction.³³ Coogan interprets powers broadly to include not only superpowers, but “extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills.”³⁴ Thus, Superman obviously has powers, but so does Batman by virtue of his seemingly inexhaustible wealth, genius intellect and athletic prowess.

The mission is also an essential component of this definition. Superheroes do not seek gain or glory and they are not simply helpful. For example, in this panel from October 26, 1902, Hugo Hercules uses his superstrength to lift a car just to help a couple have an intimate experience (Figure 2).³⁵ Superman obviously has a selfless mission because he has no ulterior motives with regards to his service towards mankind. On the other hand, Olga Mesmer, Popeye, and Hugo Danner do not act selflessly as they clearly use their powers to help their families or themselves rather than society as a whole.



Figure 2. Wilhelm H. D. Körner, “Hugo Lifting a Car,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 26, 1902.

³² Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester, introduction to *The Superhero Reader*, ed. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), xiii.

³³ Coogan, *Superhero*, 30.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Identity incorporates both a code name and a costume.³⁶ In order to satisfy this portion of the definition, though, the code name and costume must emblemize the character.³⁷ The name “Superman” relates to his ideals of being a champion of the oppressed and his costume allows Superman to be quickly identified.³⁸ James Bond, because his designation of “007” reflects nothing about either his powers or his mission, could not claim to have a superhero identity. Moreover, he does not have a costume that demonstrates his identity as a spy. Aslan, Jason Bourne, and Harry Potter also do not satisfy the identity component as they similarly lack both a code name and a costume.³⁹

This definition, however, remains incomplete as there are undoubtedly characters who have powers, a selfless mission, a code name, and a costume who are nevertheless not superheroes.⁴⁰ Thus, as the final element in his definition, Coogan includes generic distinction, which makes one noteworthy qualification: if a character largely fits the first three conventions, *but* clearly belongs in another genre, the character is not a superhero.⁴¹ With generic distinction, Master Chief can be denied a place among the superheroes. Even though he has powers, mission, and identity, reflected in both a code name and a costume, he clearly belongs to the science fiction genre, and is thus not a superhero. Similarly, the Phantom, despite meeting all other qualifications of being a superhero, is not one because the exotic nature of his adventures places

³⁶ Coogan, *Superhero*, 32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 33, 36.

³⁹ One could argue that Harry Potter does potentially have a code name, specifically either “the Boy Who Lived” or “the Chosen One.” Because these names are used relatively rarely compared to his actual name, however, it is clear that Harry Potter does not have a code name. Regardless, he does not have a costume; it is apparent that his wizarding robes are a uniform rather than a costume. As such, Harry Potter is undoubtedly not a superhero under this definition.

⁴⁰ Coogan, *Superhero*, 39-40.

⁴¹ In describing generic distinction, Peter Coogan also suggests that characters who do not fit all three of his conventions, *but* cannot reasonably be placed in another genre should be classified as superheroes. According to Coogan, this is to ensure that characters such as the Hulk, who does not always act selflessly, are classified as superheroes. However, this study rejects this aspect of generic distinction and chooses to exclude characters from being superheroes if they do not meet all three characteristics. Coogan, *Superhero*, 39-40.

him more closely in the genre of adventure fiction.⁴² As such, this element requires a certain amount of subjectivity.

At first glance, this generic distinction may make this definition seem as indeterminate as that of Gavalier. By including powers, mission, and identity, however, Coogan provides much more structure than Gavalier. He only includes generic distinction to address the few exceptions that arise. Given that Olga Mesmer, Popeye, Hugo Danner, and the Phantom all fail to meet the aforementioned standards of a superhero, while Superman clearly fulfills each convention, Superman, by definition, was the first superhero. Because the superhero genre is centered on the superhero, Superman represents the beginning of the superhero genre.

One does not have to rely on a definition, however, to demonstrate that Superman launched the superhero genre. Because he rejects a narrow definition of a superhero, Gavalier identifies as superheroes dozens of “masked and superpowered do-gooders” originating before Superman, ranging from the Gray Champion, an elderly man with a sword and a staff who battled British soldiers, to Zorro, a masked vigilante who fought the government and the rich on behalf of the poor.⁴³ Nevertheless, Gavalier believes that Superman was the first superhero because of his role in sparking the growth of the superhero genre:

Picture superhero history as an hourglass body. . . . The thin middle space where the glass almost touches, that’s Superman. That’s why [he] “invented” the genre. It’s like saying that Sherlock Holmes invented the detective story – untrue since Conan Doyle built upon Poe, Dickens, and Collins, and yet without Holmes I doubt all those paperbacks in the supermarket aisle would exist. After reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, George Eliot said Harriet Beecher Stowe “*invented* the Negro novel.” The statement is equal nonsense since novels by and about African Americans preceded it (including Frederick Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave*, also published in 1852), but Stowe’s popularized the preexisting genre so massively that no novel that followed it could be read without placing it in relation to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. It’s *as if* Stowe invented the genre, even though she was participating in a range of already defined genre tropes.⁴⁴

⁴² Coogan, *Superhero*, 182-183.

⁴³ Gavalier, *On The Origin of Superheroes*, 5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

There are two ways in which Superman can be said to have a similar relationship with the superhero genre: (1) he inspired parody, and (2) he sparked imitation.

Unlike his predecessors, Superman quickly began to serve as a basis for parody, which Thomas Schatz identifies as an important component in the development of a genre.⁴⁵

There are at least two prominent and humorous parodies of Superman that appeared just a few years after the publication of *Action Comics* #1. The first is an animated short released by 20th Century Fox called “The Mouse of Tomorrow” (1942), which saw the debut of Mighty Mouse (Figure 3).⁴⁶ In Mouseville, cats capture all the mice in the town



Figure 3. 20th Century Fox, “The Mouse of Tomorrow,” from a film on October 16, 1942, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxivTJJCVbw>.

except for one who manages to flee into a supermarket. After bathing in super soap, eating super soup, chewing on super celery, and dining on super cheese, this mouse transforms into Mighty Mouse. With the powers of superstrength, invulnerability, and flight, Mighty Mouse successfully rescues the captured mice and defeats the cats. Mighty Mouse is very similar to Superman with

⁴⁵ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 39.

⁴⁶ 20th Century Fox, “The Mouse of Tomorrow,” from a film on October 16, 1942, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxivTJJCVbw>.

regards to his powers, his costume, and his mission: fighting on behalf of mice who are seeking to gain their freedom from their cat oppressors.

The second is a cartoon called “Super-Rabbit” (1943), which was distributed by Warner Brothers and stars Bugs Bunny (Figure 4).⁴⁷ After gaining superpowers by eating a super carrot, Bugs flies to Deepinaharta, Texas to confront a hunter known as Cottontail Smith. Once he arrives, he assumes the identity of a



Figure 4. Warner Brothers, “Super-Rabbit,” from a film on April 3, 1943, *Dailymotion*, <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2mvq3f>.

“mild-mannered forest creature” with glasses, and confronts Smith and his horse.⁴⁸ After the latter eats his super carrots, however, Bugs loses his superpowers. Fortunately, Bugs is able to duck into a phone booth and transform into a “real Superman,” a Marine ready to fight in “Berlin and Tokyo.”⁴⁹ There are multiple instances of parody here. The decision of Super-Rabbit to appear weaker mirrors the dichotomy between Superman and Clark Kent. Additionally, Bugs Bunny changing into a superhero in a phone booth was a convention already utilized in Superman comics. Both of these parodies illustrate that Superman had established a new genre, one that was so quickly understood by audiences that it could quickly result in successful parodies.

⁴⁷ Warner Brothers, “Super-Rabbit,” from a film on April 3, 1943, *Dailymotion*, <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2mvq3f>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Superman also sparked imitation.⁵⁰ Just months after the release of *Action Comics* #1, Victor Fox, who cofounded a comic book publisher called Fox Feature Syndicate, commissioned one of his writers to make him another Superman.⁵¹ The result was *Wonder Comics* #1 (May 1939) featuring Wonder Man (Figure 5).

Unfortunately, this writer did his job too well, which is best seen by comparing the cover of *Wonder*



Figure 5. Will Eisner, *Wonder Comics* #1 (New York: Fox Publications, May 1939).

Comics #1 to that of *Action Comics* #1.

Wonder Man lasted only this one issue before the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit declared the character to be a copyright infringement in *Detective v. Bruns* (1940), arguing that “the only real difference between Superman and Wonder Man was the color of their uniforms,” noting that “the defendants . . . used more than general types and ideas and [instead] appropriated pictorial and literary details.”

⁵⁰ By its seventh issue, *Action Comics* was selling more than half a million copies per month due to the massive popularity of Superman, prompting the launch of *Superman* just one year later. It was the first comic book to feature a single character. Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 9.

⁵¹ Mike Benton, *Superhero Comics of the Golden Age: The Illustrated History (Taylor History of Comics, Volume 4)* (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Company, 1992), 22.

Fortunately for superheroes, however, other publishers would create imitations of Superman that were sufficiently dissimilar to avoid meeting the same fate. The same month of the first and last appearance of Wonder Man, Batman made his first appearance in *Detective Comics* #27 (May 1939). As the grimmer counterpart to Superman, Batman has no intrinsic powers, but is able to fight crime because he “trains his body and mind to the pinnacle of perfection.”⁵² Marvel Comics followed with the Human Torch as well as the Sub-Mariner, Fawcett Publications introduced readers to Captain Marvel, whose popularity would actually surpass that of Superman in the early 1940s, and Wonder Woman made her first appearance in December 1941.⁵³

These popular superheroes as well as scores of minor ones quickly achieved enormous popularity. By 1942, nearly 150 comic book titles were being sold in New York newsstands and national sales had climbed to fifteen million copies per month.⁵⁴ As many as 95% of children between the ages of eight and eleven were regularly reading comic books, and an article in *Recreation* from 1942 found that 75% of the reading done for pleasure by American children was comic books.⁵⁵ The popularity of superhero comic books even extended to adults with readership surveys taken in 1943 revealing that 35% of adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty read comic books.⁵⁶ Undoubtedly, much of this popularity can be linked to the fact that these superheroes successfully protected the United States from Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, thereby representing a form of wish fulfillment in the midst of the existential conflict of World War II.

⁵² Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 17.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁴ “Superman Scores,” *Business Week*, April 18, 1942, 54.

⁵⁵ Oropeza, “Introduction,” 2; “Regarding Comic Magazines,” *Recreation* 35 (1942): 689.

⁵⁶ “Escapist Paydirt,” *Newsweek*, December 27, 1943, 55, 58.

Unsurprisingly, this era has come to be known as the Golden Age of Comic Books, which was marked by the formation of the new and exciting genre centered on the superhero. With the possible exception of the current explosion of the superhero movie genre, superheroes have never again been as popular as they were during this period.

Criticism of Superheroes

The rapid rise of the comic books, however, quickly sparked a public backlash beginning with an editorial written by Sterling North that was published in the *Chicago Daily News* on May 8, 1940.⁵⁷ Referring to comic books as “a poisonous mushroom growth,” North argued that comic book publishers were guilty of taking one million dollars from the pockets of children.”⁵⁸ Contending that comic books were “badly drawn [and] badly written,” North urged parents and teachers to instead encourage their children to read classics such as *Treasure Island* (1883) to ensure that they would not be victims of a “cultural slaughter.”⁵⁹ North also criticized comic books for promoting “Superman heroics . . . [and] hooded ‘justice,’” and warned that they represented a “violent stimulant.”⁶⁰ Because of its sensationalist language and its widespread influence on public discourse surrounding comic books, this editorial can be said to have established each of the four main arguments that would be levied against comic books in the period surrounding World War II, some of which continue to linger decades later.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Sterling North, “A National Disgrace,” *Childhood Education* 17, no. 1 (1940): 56.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ In just two years, the *Chicago Daily News* received more than 25 million requests for copies of this editorial, many of them from concerned parents and teachers. Margaret Frakes, “Comics Are No Longer Comic,” *Christian Century*, November 4, 1942, 1351.

First, comic books were deemed undesirable because they were produced by corporations seeking profits. At the time, elites valued high culture because of its uniqueness and intricacy.⁶² According to North, the mass production of comic books rendered it impossible for them to be distinctive.⁶³ Additionally, he believed the desire for profits incentivized comic book companies to appeal solely to the desires of consumers rather than formulate complex stories. These concerns were echoed by other critics of comic books. During a radio debate in 1948, John Mason Brown of the *Saturday Review* referred to his opponent, cartoonist Al Capp, as merely a part of a “conveyor belt.”⁶⁴ A year later in an article published by *National Parent-Teacher*, Fredric Wertham, perhaps the most fervent opponent of comic books, argued that the competition for profits compelled comic book companies to rely on increasingly gruesome violence in an attempt to outsell their competitors. Indeed, he viewed the commercialized culture for children to be inherently harmful because greedy, powerful businesses were able to easily manipulate them.⁶⁵

Second, it was claimed that comic books rendered it more difficult for children to read and appreciate classic literature. In 1941, Eva Anttonen argued in the *Wilson Library Bulletin* that comic books were mistakenly conveying to children that “the library is a ‘sissy place,’” and warned that the only solution was to “bring out all [the] dragons” in the form of better literature.⁶⁶ That same year, Stanley Kunitz criticized the overly sensational plots of comic books, and George Hill disparaged their simplistic language.⁶⁷ Just one year later, Paul Witty,

⁶² Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 4.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ “Bane of the Bassinet,” *Time*, March 15, 1948, 70.

⁶⁵ Fredric Wertham, “Reading for the Innocent,” *Wilson Library Bulletin*, September 1954, 611.

⁶⁶ Eva Anttonen, “On Behalf of Dragons,” *Wilson Library Bulletin*, March 1941, 567, 595.

⁶⁷ Stanley J. Kunitz, “Libraries, to Arms!,” *Wilson Library Bulletin* April 1941, 670; George E. Hill, “Taking the Comics Seriously,” *Childhood Education* 17, no. 9 (1941): 413-414.

even as he found no evidence suggesting that reading comic books had any discernible effect on intelligence, academic success, or reading levels, indicated that “excessive reading in this area may lead to a decline in artistic appreciation and a taste for shoddy, distorted presentations.”⁶⁸ Although the authors targeted their criticisms at different aspects of comic books, all of them agreed that reading comic books barely represented reading at all and actually reduced the desire of children to read other books. Some librarians and teachers attempted to address this issue by finding reading material to serve as appealing substitutes for comic books.⁶⁹ One teacher, characterizing the endeavor as “missionary work among my comic book heathens,” formulated a list that included *Treasure Island*, *War of the Worlds* (1897), and *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), which ironically contributed much to superhero comic books.⁷⁰

Despite these efforts, comic book sales continued to rise and actually surpassed those of all other books by 1946.⁷¹ This quickly sparked increased attacks against comic books for their supposed lack of literary value. During the 1948 radio debate, Brown devoted a substantial portion of his opening statement towards this argument:

Comic books . . . are . . . not only trash, but the lowest, most despicable, and most harmful form of trash. As a rule, their word selection is as wretched as their drawing, or the paper on which they are printed. They are designed for readers who are too lazy to read, and increase both their unwillingness and inability to do so. . . . As a writer, I resent the way in which they get along with the poorest kind of writing. . . . I hate their appeal to illiteracy and their bad grammar. . . . I detest them . . . because they have no subtlety, and certainly no beauty. They substitute bad drawing for good description. They reduce the wonders of language to crude monosyllables, and narratives to no more than printed motion pictures. . . . [M]ost comics . . . are the marijuana of the nursery; the bane of the bassinet; the horror of the house; the curse of the kids; and a threat to the future.⁷²

⁶⁸ Paul Witty, “Reading the Comics – A Comparative Study,” *Journal of Experimental Education* 10, no. 2 (1941): 109; Paul Witty, Ethel Smith, and Anne Coomer, “Reading Comics in Grades VII and VIII,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 33, no. 3 (1942): 181.

⁶⁹ Stanley J. Kunitz, “The Comic Menace,” *Wilson Library Bulletin*, June 1941, 846-847; Earl J. Dias, “Comic Books – A Challenge to the English Teacher,” *English Journal* 35, no. 3 (1946): 143.

⁷⁰ Dias, “Comic Books,” 143-144.

⁷¹ Ruth Emily Smith, “Publishers Improve Comic Books,” *Library Journal* 73 (1948): 1651.

⁷² John Mason Brown, “The Case Against the Comics,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, March 20, 1948, 31-32.

Brown was not the last to criticize comic books for decreasing the ability of children to understand classic literature. In *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), a book widely recognized as one of the most important examinations of the character of the United States, David Riesman wrote that comic book readers were more likely to overlook complexities in literature because comic books focused so heavily on the simple issue of whether the hero or the villain emerged victorious.⁷³ Wertham focused instead on the significant presence of art in comic books. In *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), an influential compilation of criticism towards comic books, Wertham argued that children who read comic books harm their vocabularies and develop poor reading habits because they are able to follow the story without reading the text.⁷⁴ In short, comic books were widely viewed as anti-educational in the sense that they not only fueled disinterest in classic literature, but weakened reading skills, thereby making it more difficult for children to read these books.

Third, comic books allegedly harmed society by fueling fascist attitudes, a fear sparked by the rise of fascism during World War II. Shortly after the end of World War II, Walter Ong wrote an article for *Time* entitled “Are Comics Fascist?,” which provocatively declared that Superman was a Nazi and that Wonder Woman was a form of “Hitlerite paganism.”⁷⁵ Years earlier, both James Vlamos and Margaret Frakes had made similar claims.⁷⁶ Because public officials were constantly overshadowed by superheroes in comic books, Marya Mannes believed that they reduced the legitimacy of government by convincing individuals that superheroes could solve their problems.⁷⁷

⁷³ David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950), 99-100.

⁷⁴ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart, 1954), 141.

⁷⁵ Walter Ong, “Are Comics Fascist?,” *Time*, October 22, 1945, 68.

⁷⁶ James Frank Vlamos, “The Sad Case of the Funnies,” *American Mercury*, April 1941, 412; Frakes, “Comics Are No Longer Comic,” 1349-1350.

⁷⁷ Marya Mannes, “Junior Has a Craving,” *New Republic*, February 17, 1947, 23.

Finally, comic books were said to promote juvenile delinquency. This was undoubtedly the most damaging argument levied against comic books; indeed, at the time, some viewed juvenile delinquency “more seriously than open-air testing of atomic weapons or school segregation or political corruption.”⁷⁸ In August 1947, the Fraternal Order of Police publicly condemned comic books as a contributing factor of juvenile delinquency.⁷⁹ In the months following this declaration, several crimes occurred that were allegedly inspired by comic books.⁸⁰ In this atmosphere, the research conducted by Wertham attracted significant attention. In March 1948, Wertham presented at a symposium called “The Psychopathology of Comic Books,” where he claimed that comic books taught children that violence was an acceptable means of solving problems.⁸¹ Immediately after this symposium, Wertham was quoted extensively in an article in *Collier’s* where he was able to express his view that comic books were an important contributor to violence because of their tendency to present “cruelty [as] heroic.”⁸² Just two months later, Wertham wrote an article published in the *Saturday Review of Literature* that detailed his clinical work with juvenile delinquents, many of whom expressed their enthusiasm for the violence illustrated in comic books.⁸³ Neglecting to mention the fact that the vast majority of children in the United States who read comic books did not engage in criminal behavior, Wertham argued that comic books had a significant impact with regards to increasing violence among children. In *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham compiled all of his previous ideas, asserting that comic books were not only responsible for juvenile delinquency by

⁷⁸ James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 63.

⁷⁹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 89.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸² Judith Christ, “Horror in the Nursey,” *Collier’s*, March 27, 1948, 22.

⁸³ Fredric Wertham, “The Comics . . . Very Funny!” *Saturday Review of Literature*, May 29, 1948, 6-7.

“suggest[ing] criminal ideas . . . [and] furnish[ing] the rationalization for them,” but that comic books could inspire authoritarian and sexually abnormal ideas within children.⁸⁴

While making these arguments, Wertham targeted three of the most iconic superheroes of the time. According to Wertham, Superman either caused children to idealize themselves as supermen and develop feelings of superiority against others or meekly submit to supermen.⁸⁵ Batman and Robin was “a wish dream of two homosexuals living together” that unconsciously stimulated homosexuality in children.⁸⁶ Wonder Woman was the lesbian counterpart to Batman, promoting anti-masculine sentiments.⁸⁷ To Wertham, as well as many opponents of comic books who preceded him, comic books did not merely impede the ability and desire of children to read classic literature, but rather represented a great danger to society, one that was contributing to political, cultural, and moral deterioration.

Collectively, these arguments had a significant influence on societal views towards comic books. In 1948, a number of children burned comic books at schools in communities including Spencer, West Virginia; Chicago, Illinois; and Binghamton, New York.⁸⁸ Around the same time, various cities and states unsuccessfully attempted to ban comic books from being published or circulated. New York Governor Thomas Dewey vetoed bills in 1949 and 1952 that would have restricted the sale of comic books, and a Los Angeles County law that banned the sale of comic books depicting a crime to minors was struck down by the California Superior Court.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 118.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 192-193.

⁸⁸ “Spencer School Pupils Wage War on Comic Books,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, October 27, 1948; “600 Pupils Prepare Petitions Asking Ban on ‘Indecent Comics,’” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 7, 1947; David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), 117-119.

⁸⁹ This crusade against comic books is, of course, similar to other campaigns against pop culture such as rap and video games. “Comic Book Curb Vetoed by Dewey,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1949; “Dewey Vetoes ‘Objectionable’ Comic Book Ban Measure,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, April 26, 1952; Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 41.

Magazines, newspapers, and academic journals widely praised *Seduction of the Innocent*.⁹⁰ Shortly after its publication, Wertham even testified at hearings held by the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, where he further criticized the comic book industry and implored Congress to pass legislation that would end the sale of comic books to children under the age of fifteen.⁹¹ Yet it was

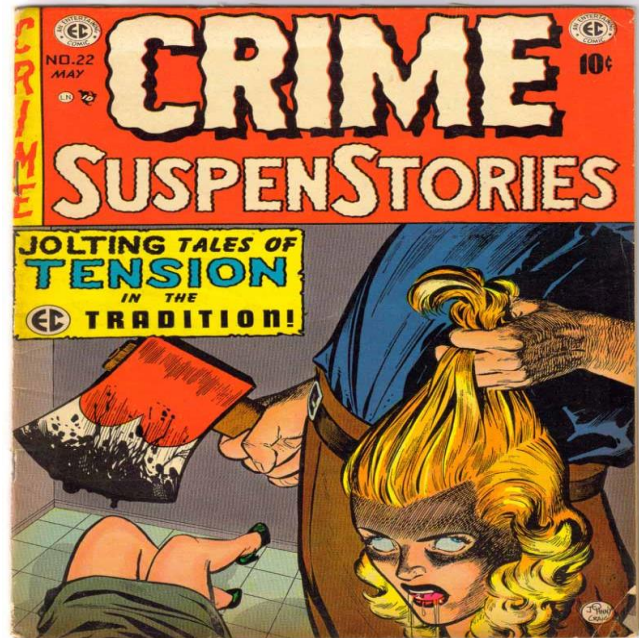


Figure 6. Johnny Craig, *Crime and Suspense Stories* #22 (New York: Entertaining Comics, April 1954).

not this testimony that so harmed the reputation of the comic book industry, but that of William Gaines, the publisher of Entertaining Comics. After Gaines was confronted with the cover of *Crime and Suspense Stories* 22 (Figure 6), this infamous exchange with Senator Estes Kefauver followed:

Senator Kefauver: Do you think that is in good taste?

Mr. Gaines: Yes, sir; I do, for the cover of a horror comic. A cover in bad taste, for example, might be defined as holding the head a little higher so that the neck could be seen dripping blood from it and moving the body over a little further so that the neck of the body could be seen to be bloody.

Senator Kefauver: You have blood coming out of her mouth.

Mr. Gaines: A little.⁹²

⁹⁰ Joy Elmer Morgan, "Seduction of the Innocent," *NEA Journal* 43 (1954): 473; William Wolf, "Seduction of the Innocent," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 8, no. 3 (1954): 547; Anita L. Mishler, "Seduction of the Innocent," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 19, no. 1 (1955): 115-117; Winfred Overholser, "Want a Laugh?," *Saturday Review of Literature*, April 24, 1954.

⁹¹ Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 157.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 159.

This exchange was printed in the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* and inflicted lasting damage upon the reputation of the comic book industry.⁹³ Although the committee did not choose to impose legislation to regulate comic books, the industry – aware that legislative debates were occurring around the country and that a significant majority of the country believed comic books should be blamed for causing juvenile delinquency – agreed to self-regulation in the form of the Comics Code.⁹⁴ In short, it emphasized portraying crime in a negative light, creating respect for established authority, and making sure that excessive violence was purged.⁹⁵ Although opponents of comic books were initially skeptical of the Comics Code, it succeeded in mostly ending the public outcry over comic books.⁹⁶

The Cold War hysteria that contributed to the widespread fear that comic books were responsible for societal decay has long since dissipated.⁹⁷ Much of the research Wertham conducted on the links between comic books and juvenile delinquency has been discredited.⁹⁸ Even the Comics Code recently became obsolete in January 2011 after the last major comic book

⁹³ Peter Kihss, “No Harm in Horror, Comics Issuer Says,” *New York Times*, April 22, 1954; “Are Comics Horrible?” *Newsweek*, May 3, 1954.

⁹⁴ Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague*, 294; Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 53.

⁹⁵ “The Comics Code of 1954,” Comics Magazine Association of America, <http://cblidf.org/the-comics-code-of-1954/>.

⁹⁶ Lopes, *Demanding Respect*, 56.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹⁸ While studying the case records, transcripts, notes, and personal correspondence of Fredric Wertham in the Library of Congress in 2010, Carol Tilley discovered “specific examples of how Wertham manipulated, overstated, compromised, and fabricated evidence – especially that evidence he attributed to personal clinical research with young people – for rhetorical gain.” Interestingly, despite being a dishonest social scientist, Wertham can at least be lauded for being anti-segregationist. He testified in *Gebhart v. Belton* (1952), a segregation case decided by the Delaware Court of Chancery, affirmed by the Delaware Supreme Court, and ultimately combined along with four other cases into *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) in the United States Supreme Court. This case was unique among the five cases because it ordered that African-American children be permitted to attend the schools that were previously only for white people. Thurgood Marshall, the lawyer for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and a future Supreme Court Justice, wrote a letter of gratitude to Wertham, explaining that “the Chancellor in Delaware came to his conclusions largely upon the basis of [his] testimony and the work done in [his] clinic.” Carol L. Tilley, “Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics,” *Information & Culture* 47, no. 4 (2012): 383; Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 93; Gilbert, *Cycle of Outrage*, 101.

publishers abandoned it entirely. Yet the cultural crusade against comic books has had enduring effects on the modern perception of superheroes. Although the belief that superheroes cause children to become more inclined to commit violence or embrace authoritarian views has essentially disappeared, superhero movies are still widely perceived as childish, incapable of telling unique stories or exploring complex themes, even among those who enjoy them.

Study Direction

The modern period of superhero movies has much in common with the Golden Age of Comic Books. First, the superhero movie genre has produced successful parodies, the most notable of which is *Superhero Movie* (2008). In this film, Rick Riker, an unpopular high school student, is bitten by a radioactive dragonfly and subsequently develops superpowers. After allowing his uncle to be shot by a fleeing bank robber, Rick attends a school with mutants such as Storm, Wolverine, and the Invisible Woman, who subsequently convince him to become a superhero. There is also a flashback of Rick remembering the murder of his parents by a thief outside an opera, a scene that loosely resembles the origin story of Batman that is featured in *Batman Begins*. In short, *Superhero Movie* parodies films such as *Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, *Batman Begins*, and *The Fantastic Four* (2005), thereby demonstrating the establishment of the superhero movie genre in much the same way that Mighty Mouse and Super-Rabbit did for the superhero genre as a whole. Second, and far more importantly, the proliferation of superhero movies is similar to the rapid growth of superhero comic books in the 1930s and 1940s. Although superhero movies obviously do not represent the first appearance of their titular characters, many of them provide an origin story that serves a similar purpose: introducing the superheroes to a broad audience such that no one needs to know anything about them to have an

enjoyable experience. By incorporating the roots of these superheroes while simultaneously modifying them so that they remain relevant in the post-9/11 age, superhero movies have achieved immense popularity, much like superhero comic books did decades ago. It is this fact that makes evaluating the attitudinal effects that superhero movies have on viewers so important; they are a major cultural phenomenon that millions of people around the United States consume.

Having established this background on superheroes, this study will proceed as follows. The second chapter will evaluate how the mythological, religious, and literary origins of superheroes have contributed to their psychological appeal. First, it will demonstrate that shamans provided the formula for the superhero genre. Second, it will show that the tendency of the superhero genre to discuss meaningful social themes originated in mythology. Third, it will argue that Judaism provided the basis of the superhero as both a protector and an assimilator. Fourth, it will contend that the strong moral character of superheroes came from Christianity. Fifth, it will emphasize that superheroes responded to the science-fiction superman to become strong supporters of collective responsibility through existing institutions. Last, it will show that the emphasis that superheroes place on individualism emerged from the vigilante.

The third chapter will analyze the political views expressed by superhero comic books during World War II as well as those promoted by *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man 3*, and *Captain America: Civil War*. First, it will demonstrate that writers and artists during World War II intentionally used superhero comic books to promote propaganda. Second, it will analyze the political messages ensconced within *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man 3*, and *Captain America: Civil War*. Last, it will argue that these messages have the potential to persuade those who view the films.

The fourth chapter will provide an overview of the experiment that was administered to determine whether *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man 3*, and *Captain America: Civil War* can influence political views on various policy issues related to the war on terror. First, it will present a literature review consisting of a brief history of media effects as well as research specifically related to the ways in which popular movies can change individual views. Second, it will explain how the experiment was conducted. Last, it will present and discuss the data.

Finally, the fifth chapter will conclude. First, it will discuss the limitations of this study. Second, it will present a few areas for further research. Finally, it will emphasize the implications of the findings.

Chapter 2. Mythical, Religious, and Literary Origins: The Psychological Appeal of the Superhero

[M]ythological and legendary heroes provide the deep background, roots, and prototypes for the superhero. Sometimes they offer immediate inspiration to the creators . . . ; other times they merely serve as a version of the collective “cultural unconsciousness” – the background we all carry with us because of the way characters, motifs, and plot dynamics provide the models of character and narrative that authors draw on intentionally and unintentionally. – Peter Coogan¹

John Cawelti, an author of detective fiction and Westerns and a strong proponent of the idea that popular genres should be held in the same esteem as high literature, has argued that “a formulaic pattern will be in existence for a considerable period of time before it is conceived of by its creators and audience as a genre,” arguing that genres emerge from existing motifs and themes.² The superhero genre is no exception to this. Indeed, writers and artists borrowed extensively from mythology, religion, and literature in formulating their superhero stories. There are two important practical reasons that they chose to do so. First, they attempted to protect their superheroes from the copyright infringement lawsuits that befell Wonder Man.³ Mythology, religion, and literature represented an “inexhaustible reserve of superhuman personalities and adventurous deeds,” which could easily be incorporated into superhero stories.⁴ Second, they sought to bolster the legitimacy of the comic book medium and the superhero genre. After all, North wrote his scathing rebuke of comic books not even two years after *Action Comics* #1 (June 1938) and before the initial appearances of popular superheroes like Green Lantern, Captain America, and Wonder Woman. By drawing on mythological, religious, and literary heroes,

¹ Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin, TX: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), 124-125.

² John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 8; Coogan, *Superhero*, 116.

³ Marco Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, trans. Jamie Richards (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*

writers and artists could “give their disregarded medium a degree of moral and intellectual uplift,” thereby helping to decrease the criticism surrounding superheroes.⁵

Neither of these reasons, however, can explain the persistence of mythology, religion, and classic literature in the superhero genre.⁶ A few examples are useful to demonstrate this phenomenon. In *Wonder Woman* (2017), the superheroine battles Ares, the god of war in Greek

mythology, who seeks to corrupt humans by exploiting their fear and hatred. *Superman Returns* (2006) incorporates Christian themes and imagery, particularly near the end of the film where Superman lifts an island made out of kryptonite into space, much like Jesus carries his own cross to Golgotha, and then plummets back to Earth with his arms



Figure 7. *Superman Returns*, directed by Bryan Singer (2006).

outstretched and his legs together in a crucifixion pose (Figure 7). Christopher and Jonathan Nolan, the respective director and screenwriter of *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), have admitted that their movie draws upon Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) with its depiction of the violent revenge of bloodthirsty populist mobs against the exploitative rich.⁷ Marco Arnaudo argues that myths, religious texts, and literature continue to serve as sources of inspiration in the superhero genre

⁵ Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 53.

⁶ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 11.

⁷ Matt Goldberg, “Christopher and Jonathan Nolan Explain How *A Tale Of Two Cities* Influenced *The Dark Knight Rises*,” Collider, July 9, 2012, <http://collider.com/dark-knight-rises-tale-of-two-cities/>.

because of “narrative or symbolic affinities.”⁸ Although this claim is correct, the objective of this chapter is not to identify the ways in which mythology, religion, and literature shaped the superhero genre, but to demonstrate how these influences have generated the psychological appeal of superheroes.

Mythology and Superheroes

The relationship between mythology and superheroes is quite robust with Richard Reynolds classifying the superhero genre as “a modern mythology.”⁹ Mythological heroes and superheroes both tend to possess immense strength or extraordinary abilities.¹⁰ Moreover, these stories often focus heavily on individual and collective conflict.¹¹ The similarities are even more evident when one considers the classic account of heroic mythology proposed by Joseph Campbell: “a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder, fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won, [and] the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”¹² Superheroes consistently retrace this journey by transcending those around them, emerging victorious against villains, and providing protection to others.¹³

Given these parallels, it is unsurprising that mythology has made specific contributions to the superhero genre that are crucial to its psychological appeal. First, shamans provided the framework for the definitional conventions of the superhero, which ultimately has caused a formula to develop for the superhero genre. Second, the tendency of mythology to present

⁸ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 11.

⁹ Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 1.

¹⁰ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), 23.

¹³ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 12-13.

meaningful themes in unusual contexts extended to the superhero genre, which is demonstrated particularly well in comic books featuring Wonder Woman and the X-Men respectively.¹⁴

Superheroes and Shamans: The Origin of the Superhero Formula

Though the similarities between superheroes and figures from Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology are particularly obvious (albeit often limited to individual superheroes rather than the genre as a whole), Arnaudo argues that superheroes also have much in common with shamans, whose healing and divination skills were believed to originate from their ability to enter the supernatural realm and attain assistance from friendly spirits while battling evil spirits.¹⁵ In fact, shamans contributed significantly to shaping the three main conventions of the superhero: powers, mission, and identity. This can be seen by examining four characteristics that superheroes share with shamans.

The first two pertain to the powers of superheroes. First, shamans and superheroes use science or magic.¹⁶ To successfully access the spirit world, shamans often use hallucinogenic plants or engage in singing and dancing.¹⁷ Generally, superheroes also have powers related to science and magic. After all, Superman is an alien of an advanced species, and Batman is a

¹⁴ C. J. Mackie compares the rivalry between Superman and Batman to that of two ancient Homeric heroes: Achilles from the *Iliad* and Odysseus from the *Odyssey*. Specifically, Achilles and Superman represent transcendental heroes who possess unattainable dominance against their foes, while the heroism of Odysseus and Batman is “founded on their human origins and their greater vulnerability to the attacks of their enemies.” In this pattern of moving from otherworldly heroes to more human ones, these authors argue that the latter has emerged victorious in both the ancient and modern rivalry. Although this is certainly true for Superman and Batman, this study can identify no evidence suggesting that individuals are generally more captivated by vulnerable superheroes. For example, Iron Man, remains one of the most popular superheroes, and while not as invulnerable as Superman, he is a very powerful superhero. C. J. Mackie, “Men of Darkness,” in *Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman*, ed. Wendy Haslem, Angela Ndalianis, and C. J. Mackie (Washington, D.C.: New Academia Publishing, 2007), 83-95.

¹⁵ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 18; Lucy Wright, “Shamans vs. (Super)heroes,” in *Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman*, ed. Wendy Haslem, Angela Ndalianis, and C. J. Mackie (Washington, D.C.: New Academia Publishing, 2007), 132.

¹⁶ Wright, “Shamans vs. (Super)heroes,” 132.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

wealthy industrialist who can easily fund advanced scientific technology. Regarding magic, the Green Lantern possesses a magic ring, and Doctor Strange learns magic from a sorcerer called the “Ancient One.”¹⁸ Although there are certainly superheroes whose powers are instead a product of their divine origins – Wonder Woman, for example, was sculpted from clay by Queen Hippolyta and brought to life by the goddess Aphrodite – most possess powers that are firmly rooted in science or magic.

Second, both shamans and superheroes commonly acquire their powers after traumatic experiences.¹⁹ Indeed, there are numerous instances of shamans who attain their powers after being inflicted with illness or struck by lightning.²⁰ Similarly dramatic incidents often precede the transformation of superheroes. Iron Man suffers a war injury and is forced to build a mechanical suit to save himself, while the Hulk is too close to the explosion of a gamma bomb. Mirroring “a journey from death to rebirth,” this transition is prevalent among shamans and superheroes.²¹

Of course, not all superheroes use science and magic or experience a tragedy in obtaining their superpowers. It is for this reason that neither feature should be included in the definition of a superhero. However, a significant majority of them do, and as such, it is clear that both elements have become crucial to the formula of superhero stories.

The third common trait both shamans and superheroes share is that they are inherently selfless; they risk their lives while successfully battling disease and crime respectively, neither of

¹⁸ The Golden Age Green Lantern found a magic lantern after a railway crash; from this, he was able to craft a magic ring. The Green Lantern from the Silver Age, which marked the resurgence of superheroes following the institution of the Comics Code Authority, had a slightly different origin story, receiving his ring from a dying alien. In both iterations of the character, his powers originate from either magic or science.

¹⁹ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 18.

²⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 11.

²¹ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 18.

which can ever be permanently defeated.²² They strive to benefit humanity even as they inspire both fear and respect.²³ Unlike mythical heroes such as Heracles and Theseus, they do not fight to defend themselves, obtain material goods, or achieve fame and glory.²⁴ As such, it is clear that shamans contributed to the mission convention of the superhero.

The final similarity between shamans and superheroes is also probably the most noticeable; both often wear a costume that serves as a means of marking or channeling their powers.²⁵ For example, some shamans wear eagle feathers to bestow upon themselves the power of flight.²⁶ There are, of course, numerous superheroes who essentially borrow their powers from animals – Spider-Man, Batman, Black Panther, and Ant-Man are among the most prominent of these – which only further cements the connection between shamans and superheroes.²⁷ Although comic book writers and artists often argue in their stories that costumes served a practical purpose for superheroes, namely protecting their identities as well as their friends and families, this explanation does not hold up under scrutiny.²⁸

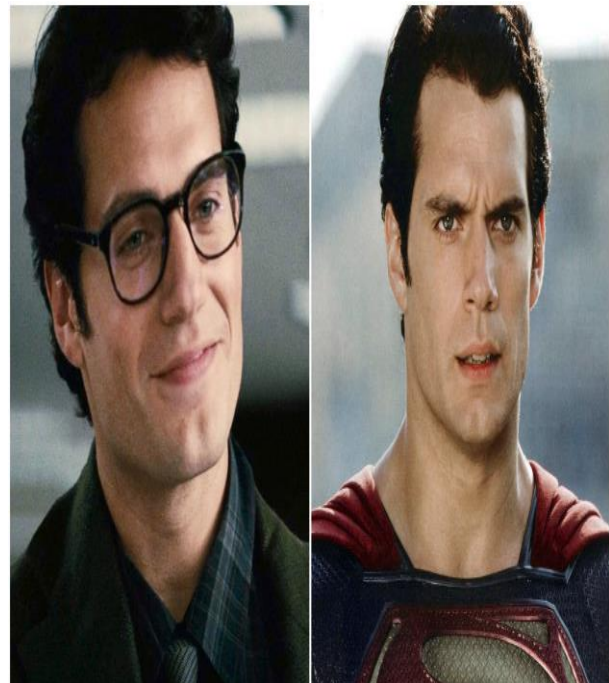


Figure 8. Aaron Pruner, “Henry Cavill Claims the Clark Kent Glasses ‘Are Enough’...But Are They?,” Screener, March 16, 2016, <http://screenertv.com/movies/batman-v-superman-henry-cavill-man-of-steel-instagram/>.

²² Wright, “Shamans vs. (Super)heroes,” 133.

²³ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 18.

²⁴ Jess Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger: The 4,000 Year History of the Superhero* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2017), 25-26.

²⁵ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

The strongest objection to this claim is that many costumes do not actually disguise the identity of the superhero. Clark Kent merely takes off his glasses and changes his hair style to assume his identity as Superman (Figure 8). If he wanted to ensure that no one recognized him, he would do more to change his appearance. Other superheroes, such as the Fantastic Four, do not even have secret identities, but still wear costumes. Thus, this claim appears to be merely an excuse. In fact, the more likely reason for costumes is that they demonstrate the metamorphosis of a human into a superhero.²⁹ The identity convention of the superhero genre thus clearly originated with shamans.

These conventions of the superhero genre have become quite familiar.³⁰ Indeed, one main argument that is often leveled against the superhero genre is that it has essentially become formulaic. Yet this is undoubtedly part of its appeal for three reasons.³¹ First, formulas foster simplicity. Research by Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and Caterina Keplinger on the psychological appeal of the mystery genre found that readers preferred less complex mysteries.³² It is reasonable to assume that these preferences hold for other genres. Second, formulas allow people to easily formulate accurate predictions. Media psychologist Karen Dill-Shackleford contends that part of the reason that people enjoy films is being able to understand the thoughts and motivations of characters. Thus, the easier these are to predict, the more enjoyable the

²⁹ Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves And Our Society* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 60; Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 20; Danny Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 49.

³⁰ Robin S. Rosenberg, "Our Fascination with Superheroes," in *Our Superheroes, Ourselves*, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

³¹ Matt Zoller Seitz, "Things Crashing Into Other Things: Or, My Superhero Movie Problem," *RogerEbert.com*, May 6, 2014, <https://www.rogerebert.com/mzs/things-crashing-into-other-things-or-my-superhero-movie-problem>; Rosenberg, "Our Fascination with Superheroes," 5.

³² Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and Caterina Keplinger, "Murder for Pleasure: Impacts of Plot Complexity and Need for Cognition on Mystery Enjoyment," *Journal of Media Psychology* 20, no. 3 (2008): 126.

movie.³³ Psychologist James Cutting even contends that the ability to predict the plot can be compared to “a sugar high.”³⁴ Finally, formulas are comforting. Even though superheroes are constantly threatened by evil, there is a sense that the tension they face is cathartic, and that they will never be killed, at least not permanently.³⁵ In short, whether consciously or unconsciously, many of the fundamentals of superheroes were borrowed from shamans. Decades later, they remain crucial to the simplicity of the superhero genre, which greatly contributes to its appeal.

Wonder Woman and X-Men: The Embedding of Themes Within Superhero Stories

Before creating Wonder Woman, William Moulton Marston was a staunch feminist and eccentric psychologist. He was influenced by the ideas of feminist leaders such as Emmeline Pankhurst and Margaret Sanger, and he lived with two women – Elizabeth Holloway and Olive Byrne, his wife and partner respectively – who “embodied the feminism of the day.”³⁶ In *Emotions of Normal People* (1928), Marston proposed a model of behavior in which the expression of emotions was a product of how an individual perceived his or her environment, favorably or antagonistically, and could be categorized into four different quadrants: dominance, inducement, submission, and compliance.³⁷ Marston found that men were naturally more

³³ Karen E. Dill-Shackleford, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality: Information and Entertainment Media in Everyday Life*, revised and expanded ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33-38; Jonathan Cohen, “Audience Identification With Media Characters,” in *Psychology of Entertainment*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Peter Vorderer (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006), 184-188.

³⁴ Dyani Sabin, “It’s OK To Love Movies That Are So Bad They’re Good,” *Inverse*, September 1, 2016, <https://www.inverse.com/article/20048-movies-that-are-so-bad-theyre-good>.

³⁵ Rosenberg, “Our Fascination with Superheroes,” 5.

³⁶ According to research conducted by Jill Lepore, William Moulton Marston gave his wife, Elizabeth Holloway, an ultimatum: she could accept Olive Byrne into the marriage or he would leave her. Although Holloway was devastated, she ultimately agreed to the arrangement because she saw it as a way of having both children and a career. Ultimately, Marston had two children each with Holloway and Byrne. Interestingly, Holloway and Byrne continued to live with each other for forty years after Marston’s death in 1947. Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 121; Tim Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound: The Curious History of the World’s Most Famous Heroine* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 12.

³⁷ William Moulton Marston, *Emotions of Normal People* (London: Trench, Trubner, & Co., 1928; repr., London: Routledge, 1999), 107-110.

dominant than women, but he did not believe this to be positive. Indeed, he argued that this caused them to be inherently violent. As such, Marston believed that female leadership would be better than that of males because women were more adept at inducement and submission, and thus could act as love leaders to motivate others to engage in similar behavior.³⁸ The fact that these psychological theories are quite prominent in Wonder Woman comic books is not a coincidence. Recognizing the “educational potential” of the superhero genre, Marston intentionally used Wonder Woman to promote his psychological theories of female superiority to a broad audience.³⁹ In order to demonstrate this, it is useful to examine both the origin story of this superheroine as well as the frequent use of bondage in Wonder Woman stories.

In *All-Star Comics* #8 (December 1941), the first appearance of Wonder Woman, it is revealed that she is just one of a tribe of immortal superwomen known as the Amazons.⁴⁰ Previously enslaved by Hercules, the Amazons were able to escape with the help of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, but were instructed to wear Bracelets of Submission as a reminder of their plight under the domination of Hercules. Because they are “stronger and wiser than men,” and able to develop advanced technology with the help of a Magic Sphere given to them by Athena, they are able to establish a prosperous and peaceful society on Paradise Island.⁴¹ Meanwhile, the rest of the world is suffering from the “forces of hate and oppression” unleashed by World War II; freedom and democracy are under attack.⁴² This dichotomy between Paradise Island and the rest of the world highlights the view held by Marston that the world would be more peaceful if women were the leaders.

³⁸ Michelle R. Finn, “William Marston’s Feminist Agenda,” in *The Ages of Wonder Woman: Essays on the Amazon Princess in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 9.

³⁹ Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound*, 4; Grant Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, And A Sun God From Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011), 41.

⁴⁰ William Moulton Marston and Harry G. Peter, *All Star Comics* #8 (New York: DC Comics, December 1941).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

There is a “staggering amount of bondage” in Wonder Woman comic books.⁴³ During a winter holiday known as Diana’s Day, a moon goddess festival, Wonder Woman leads a bonding activity in which the Amazons chase after other Amazons who are dressed as deer, tying up the ones they manage to catch.⁴⁴ Wonder Woman and the Amazons also regularly bind others. With her golden lasso, an allegory for feminine sexuality, Wonder Woman is able to force villains to completely obey her, thus ending their nefarious plots.⁴⁵ After they are captured, these villains are sent to Reform Island, where they are bound and subsequently taught, often successfully, the benefits of submission.⁴⁶ Bondage used by the Amazons is portrayed as empowering, an essential component of a peaceful utopia.

On the other hand, when men in Wonder Woman comic books use bondage, their cruel and dominant nature causes them to brutally oppress women.⁴⁷ For example, when Dr. Psycho captured Wonder Woman in *Wonder Woman* #5 (July 1943), he “rip[ped] her spirit from her body [and] chained [it] to the wall.”⁴⁸ In short, only women are capable of using bondage in a loving and peaceful way in Wonder Woman comic books, emphasizing once again the radical view held by Marston that women were biologically superior to men.

Unlike Marston, the various writers of *X-Men* were not psychologists. Nevertheless, they consciously featured social issues such as racism and genocide in these comic books because the X-Men, after all, are feared and distrusted by the rest of humanity simply because they are born

⁴³ An analysis conducted by Tim Hanley revealed that 27% of the Wonder Woman panels written and drawn by Marston and artist Harry Peter featured some type of bondage. To put this in perspective, comic books featuring Captain Marvel, another superhero who was frequently tied up, only had bondage in 3% of the panels. Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound*, 44-47.

⁴⁴ William Moulton Marston and Harry G. Peter, *Wonder Woman* #3 (New York: DC Comics, February 1943).

⁴⁵ Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound*, 51.

⁴⁶ In *Sensation Comics* #22, a criminal on Reform Island admitted the following to Wonder Woman: “These bonds feel wonderful! Keep me here in Amazon prison and train me to control my evil self!” William Moulton Marston and Harry G. Peter, *Sensation Comics* #22 (New York: DC Comics, October 1943).

⁴⁷ Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound*, 61.

⁴⁸ William Moulton Marston and Harry G. Peter, *Wonder Woman* #5 (New York: DC Comics, July 1943).

with superpowers. In fact, Stan Lee, the former editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics, has declared the *X-Men* to be an “anti-bigotry story,” an argument that can be illustrated by analyzing the characterization of Professor Charles Xavier and Magneto, the origin story of Nightcrawler, and the plots in “Days of Future Past” (January-February 1981) and *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills* (1982).⁴⁹

It is unlikely that Professor Xavier and Magneto were initially intended to represent Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.⁵⁰ However, Christopher Claremont, whose seventeen years as a writer for the *X-Men* series saw the transformation of the X-Men into enormously popular superheroes, gradually began to “posit Professor Xavier and Magneto as stand-ins for King Jr. and Malcolm X” respectively.⁵¹ Although both Professor Xavier and Magneto aspire to a society in which mutants are accepted, their methods of achieving that objective are drastically different. Professor Xavier endorses peaceful coexistence, arguing that violence only evokes fear and hatred towards mutants. Magneto, however, maintains that a more militant approach is necessary in order to ensure that mutants are not subjugated or even exterminated. Their views are deeply informed by their experiences. Professor Xavier was born in New York City to a wealthy nuclear scientist and earned a PhD from Oxford University, whereas Magneto only barely survived the Auschwitz concentration camp, where his parents and sister were executed by the Nazis – he also later lost his daughter to an angry mob who was frightened of his powers.

⁴⁹ “Stan Lee Reveals Why He Created the X-Men; ‘A Story to Show There’s Good In Every Person,’” from a video on July 30, 2013, ComicBookMovie.com, <https://www.comicbookmovie.com/x-men/stan-lee-reveals-why-he-created-the-x-men-a-story-to-show-theres-good-in-a84477>.

⁵⁰ In the earliest issues of *X-Men*, Magneto did not have the redeeming qualities that he would have in later issues. In particular, his background as a Holocaust survivor had not yet been established. As such, he remained very much a one-dimensional villain until the revamp of the *X-Men* under Chris Claremont. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *X-Men* #1 (New York: Marvel Comics, September 1963); Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *X-Men* #4 (New York: Marvel Comics, March 1964).

⁵¹ Brian Cronin, “You Go Your Way and I Go Mine: Kitty Pryde’s Use of the N-Word,” CBR.com, October 3, 2015, <https://www.cbr.com/you-go-your-way-and-i-go-mine-kitty-prydes-use-of-the-n-word/>.

Like Professor Xavier, King had a relatively comfortable upbringing, growing up in a middle-class household in Atlanta, competing on the debate team in high school, and attending Morehouse College and Crozer Theological Seminary. An advocate of racial integration through nonviolent protest, King implored African-Americans not to satisfy the “thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.”⁵² Malcolm X, on the other hand, was constantly threatened by white supremacists of the Black Legion. In fact, many believe his father, who died when he was just six years old, was murdered by this same group. Forced to hunt game to make ends meet, Malcolm X emphasized black self-reliance and urged blacks to learn how to defend themselves by any means necessary.”

Mikhail Lyubansky argues that this dual metaphor is inaccurate for several reasons: (1) unlike mutants, African-Americans do not have superpowers and thus do not have the ability to end their oppression, (2) Professor Xavier does not advocate directly for mutant rights, and instead focuses on protecting humans from evil mutants, thereby invalidating the ideology of Magneto, (3) Magneto fervently seeks world domination rather than focusing exclusively on mutant rights, and (4) human and mutants are “biologically and genetically distinct.”⁵³ These inaccuracies are undoubtedly valid. As Gregory Parks and Matthew Hughey argue, though, the emphasis on the parallels between the backgrounds and philosophies of these powerful mutants and civil rights leaders suggest that the writers of *X-Men* intentionally employed their mutant

⁵² Clayborne Carson, *Martin's Dream: My Journey and the Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

⁵³ Mikhail Lyubansky, “Prejudice Lessons from the Xavier Institute,” in *The Psychology of Superheroes: An Unauthorized Exploration*, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg and Jennifer Canzoneri (Dallas, TX: Benbella Books, 2008), 73-75.

superheroes as a dual parallel to discuss “the effects of the competing approaches to racism and racial inequality.”⁵⁴

Although the X-Men were originally all white, *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 (May 1975) introduces a significantly more diverse team and features Professor Xavier traveling around the world in search of new mutants to join him.⁵⁵ He finds Nightcrawler, a mutant with the power of teleportation. Attacked by an angry mob of German villagers who hate and fear him because of his appearance, Nightcrawler is



Figure 9. Dave Cockrum, *Giant Size X-Men* #1 (New York: Marvel Comics, May 1975).

only rescued because Professor Xavier uses his powers of telepathy to pacify them (Figure 9).

Though Nightcrawler has done nothing wrong, he faces violence and persecution because of his identity, thus linking mutation to race hatred by demonstrating the struggle of mutants to

⁵⁴ Gregory S. Parks and Matthew W. Hughey, “‘A Choice of Weapons’: The X-Men and the Metaphor for Approaches to Racial Equality,” *Indiana Law Journal* 92, no. 5 (2017): 12-13; Joseph J. Darowski, *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 34.

⁵⁵ Len Wein and Dave Cockrum, *Giant Size X-Men* #1 (New York: Marvel Comics, May 1975).

overcome discrimination based simply on who they are.⁵⁶ The fact that it is a German mob is likely a not so subtle allusion to Nazi Germany.

The *X-Men* series also explored the possibility that the fear and racial hatred directed towards mutants could evolve into genocide. In “Days of Future Past,” a story that occurs in *Uncanny X-Men* #141-142, Sentinels, technologically advanced robots specifically designed to hunt mutants, have killed most of the mutants in the world, and those who survive are confined in internment camps that bring to mind the concentration camps of Nazi Germany.⁵⁷ In *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills*, Reverend William Stryker leads a paramilitary organization known as the Purifiers, who share a striking resemblance to the Ku Klux Klan.⁵⁸ In fact, the story begins with the extremists lynching two African-American mutants. Stryker and his Purifiers kidnap Professor Xavier, forcibly hook him up to a machine, and attempt to use his psychic powers to exterminate all of the mutants in the world. Although the X-Men are able to rescue Professor Xavier and trick Stryker into revealing his genocidal plan, it is somewhat of a “hollow victory” as it is revealed that Stryker has many sympathizers who believe that “only his methods were flawed.”⁵⁹ Both of these stories present a warning, specifically with regards to the horrific consequences that can occur as a result of bigotry.

As has been demonstrated, the creators of both Wonder Woman and X-Men intentionally incorporated political and social issues into their stories, a trend that remains common in the

⁵⁶ Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of America Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 146.

⁵⁷ Chris Claremont and John Byrne, *Uncanny X-Men* #141-142 (New York: Marvel Comics, January-February 1981).

⁵⁸ Chris Claremont and Brent Anderson, *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1982); Jacob Rennaker, “‘Mutant Hellspawn’ or ‘More Human Than You’? The X-Men Respond to Televangelism,” in *The Ages of X-Men: Essays on the Children of the Atom in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2014), 79.

⁵⁹ Claremont and Anderson, *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills*; Rennaker, “‘Mutant Hellspawn’ or ‘More Human Than You’?,” 87.

superhero genre today. Even though comic books and movies featuring superheroes are not particularly complex stories, they can still present meaningful themes that resonate with audiences. Indeed, the fact that they are simplistic makes it easier for individuals to thoroughly understand them, which subsequently increases their relevance and appeal. The insertion of such themes into different contexts, of course, began in myths, which emphasized the importance of “personal choice, sacrifice for the greater good, and [the search for] purpose and meaning.”⁶⁰ As such, it is clear that myths play a crucial role to the psychological appeal of superheroes.

Religion and Superheroes

In his analysis of the origins of superheroes, despite committing nearly half of his discussion to the parallels between superheroes and their mythological predecessors, Arnaudo contends that “the traditions that have most profoundly made a mark on the development of the superhero genre are undoubtedly Judeo-Christian.”⁶¹ Although this study will not attempt to explore the validity of this assertion, in part because Arnaudo provides very little evidence to support it, the broader claim that both Judaism and Christianity have had an enduring influence on superheroes is undoubtedly true. In much the same way that the classical monomyth reveals the similarities between mythological heroes and superheroes, the American monomyth defined by J. S. Lawrence and Robert Jewett in which a selfless superhero carries out a redemptive task to restore a harmonious paradise threatened by evil to its paradisiacal condition emphasizes the extent to which these two religions influenced the superhero genre.⁶² Much like religious leaders and messianic saviors, superheroes fight in an endless battle of good versus evil on behalf of

⁶⁰ Rosenberg, “Our Fascination with Superheroes,” 6.

⁶¹ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 27.

⁶² John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 6.

their communities as they struggle to restore the paradise lost. In short, they relate to the Edenic myth, which Charles Sanford describes as “the most powerful and comprehensive organizing force in American culture.”⁶³

Much like mythology, religion did not become so prominent in the superhero genre merely by coincidence; instead, certain Jewish and Christian influences on the superhero genre endure because they are immensely captivating. First, the origin story of Superman as a superhero who both defends society and integrates into it, a model to which numerous superheroes now adhere, was a reflection of the experience of Jewish writers, specifically their persecution and their aspiration to assimilate into the United States. Second, the striking similarities between the Silver Surfer and Jesus Christ emphasize his strong moral character, a trait that has been and continues to be omnipresent among superheroes.

The Jewish Roots of Superman: The Protector and the Assimilator

That the comic book industry was dominated by Jews is indisputable. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Bill Finger and Bob Kane, and Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, the creators of Superman, Batman, and Captain America respectively, are among the most famous, but there are countless others who toiled away in the disreputable industry to create some of the most enduring superheroes in the United States.⁶⁴ Comic book historians have proposed a variety of theories to explain this phenomenon. Some believe it was simply coincidental; after all, both Jews and publishing were centered in New York, and many other opportunities, including newspaper strips

⁶³ B. J. Oropeza, “Introduction: Superhero Myth and the Restoration of Paradise,” in *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Pop Culture*, ed., B. J. Oropeza (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 5-8; Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, 21-25; Charles L. Sanford, *The Quest for Paradise: Europe and the American Moral Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), vi.

⁶⁴ Fingerioth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 17.

and advertising, were denied to them.⁶⁵ Will Eisner, a Jewish comic book writer best known for creating a vigilante crime-fighter called the Spirit, acknowledges that the comic book industry was “the bottom of the social ladder,” which made it easy for anyone to enter.⁶⁶

Others have contended that Jews were drawn to comic books because of the emphasis the medium placed on communication. Gerald Jones notes that Jews were more literate than other immigrants, and thus possessed the skills necessary to succeed in the comic book industry.⁶⁷

Trina Robbins and Jay Schwartz argue instead that Jews had a strong appreciation for the power of language, which caused them to gravitate towards comic books.⁶⁸

Danny Fingeroth suggests that these explanations are incomplete, writing that “Jews were uniquely positioned to take on the creation of a legion of special beings, self-appointed to protect the weak, innocent, and victimized.”⁶⁹ In order to illustrate the validity of this argument, it is necessary to examine the origin story of Superman and subsequently analyze it within the context of the American Jewish experience during the early twentieth century.

The 1930s were a dangerous period for Jews such as Siegel and Shuster. After Adolf Hitler seized control of Germany in 1933, the Nazis stripped Jews of their political, economic, and social rights, revoked their citizenship, and instigated violence against them. Antisemitism was rampant in the United States as well.⁷⁰ The Ku Klux Klan experienced a resurgence beginning in the 1920s and engaged in violent attacks against Jews, renowned industrialist Henry Ford sponsored an anti-Semitic newspaper that blamed the Jews for worldwide financial

⁶⁵ Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 17.

⁶⁶ Arie Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 29.

⁶⁷ Harry Brod, *Superman is Jewish? How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 3.

⁶⁸ Brod, *Superman is Jewish?*, 3.

⁶⁹ Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 17.

⁷⁰ Sander L. Gilman and Steven T. Katz, introduction to *Anti-Semitism in Times of Crisis*, ed. Sander L. Gilman and Steven T. Katz (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 10.

corruption, and Father Charles Coughlin hosted an immensely popular radio show in which he openly supported many of the policies of Nazi Germany.⁷¹ A pro-Nazi organization called the German-American Bund even engaged in threatening rallies across the United States, including in Cleveland, the hometown of Siegel and Shuster.⁷² In the midst of these perilous circumstances, it is unsurprising that Superman became a type of wish fulfillment, specifically that of a nearly invincible protector of the oppressed Jews.⁷³ There are three connections between Judaism and Superman that validate this claim.

First, the cape worn by Superman does not resemble those of either Victorian melodramas or adventure fiction.⁷⁴ Lacking a clasp, it simply “emerges in a seamless line” from behind his chest, and when Superman



Figure 10. Joe Shuster, *Action Comics* #2 (New York: DC Comics, July 1938).

⁷¹ It is relevant to briefly elaborate on the anti-Semitism of Henry Ford and Father Charles Coughlin. Adolf Hitler and Henry Ford each kept a framed photo of the other on their respective desks, and historian Donald Warren, relying on information from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and German government archives, has determined that Father Coughlin received indirect funding from Nazi Germany. Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017), 1; Albert Lee, *Henry Ford and the Jews* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980), 13-15; Sheldon Marcus, *Father Coughlin: The Tumultuous Life of the Priest of the Little Flower* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 4; Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, The Father of Hate Radio* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 235-244.

⁷² Ethan Lewis, “Mensch of Steel: Superman’s Jewish Roots,” Den of Geek, December 2, 2013, <http://www.denofgeek.com/us/books-comics/superman/231283/mensch-of-steel-supermans-jewish-roots>.

⁷³ Arie Kaplan, “How the Jews Created the Comic Book Industry, Part I: The Golden Age (1933-1955),” *Reform Judaism*, accessed March 21, 2018, <http://reformjudaismmag.net/03fall/comics.shtml>.

⁷⁴ Gary Engle, “What Makes Superman So Darned American?,” in *Superman: At Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend* ed. Dennis Dooley and Gary Engle (New York: Collier Books, 1988), 86.

stands still, the cape does not simply droop behind his shoulders, but rather extends out from them, mimicking the curve of an angel's wings (Figure 10).⁷⁵

Second, the Kryptonian name of Superman, Kal-El, is “Hebraic in origin.”⁷⁶ In Hebrew, “el” can be both a root and a suffix.⁷⁷ As a root, it simply means “God,” while as a suffix, it is generally translated as “of God,” as in biblical figures like Daniel, Ezekiel, and Samuel, or angels like Raphael, Gabriel, and Michael, the last of which was the main adversary of Satan.⁷⁸ “Kal” also has a Hebrew translation that relates to the origins of Superman: “with lightness” or “swiftness.”⁷⁹ It could also be tied to the root “hal,” which translates to “everything” or “all.”⁸⁰ This would translate Kal-El into “all that God is.”⁸¹

Finally, Superman resembles the golem of Jewish legend, “a powerful figure made of clay” who was brought into existence to protect the Jews at the Prague ghetto from pogroms in the sixteenth century.⁸² Like Superman, who initially fought to uphold truth and justice – the third principle, “the American way,” was added by the radio show – the golem is a defender, not a conqueror, “a mythology of survival, not of conquest.”⁸³ Simultaneously, however, the golem is quite frightening.⁸⁴ Although it may initially be difficult to recognize that this characteristic

⁷⁵ Engle, “What Makes Superman So Darned American?,” 86.

⁷⁶ Although it was George Lowther, the scriptwriter for the Superman radio show in the 1940s, rather than Jerry Siegel who created this name – under Siegel, the birth name of Superman was Kal-L – it seems highly unlikely that this was unintentional given the parallels in the name combined with existing evidence. Moreover, Siegel “admits that he might have been unconsciously aware of the Jewish associations when he created the Kryptonian name.” Ben Saunders, *Do The Gods Wear Capes?: Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes* (London: Continuum, 2011), 21; Tom De Haven, *Our Hero: Superman on Earth* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 194; Thomas Andrae and Mel Gordon, eds., *Siegel and Shuster's Funnyman: The First Jewish Superhero, From the Creators of Superman* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2010), 60.

⁷⁷ Engle, “What Makes Superman So Darned American?,” 86.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Fingerroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 23; Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?*, 18, 36.

⁸³ Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?*, 36.

⁸⁴ In fact, Jerry Siegel acknowledged that the creation of Superman was influenced by a movie called *The Golem: How He Came Into This World* (1920), a silent horror film in which the golem is portrayed as a rampaging monster. Andrae and Gordon, *Siegel and Shuster's Funnyman*, 38-40.

applies to Superman, the cover of *Action Comics* #1 demonstrates this trait quite clearly. Other examples abound in early Superman issues. In *Action Comics* #3 (August 1938), Superman discovers a mine owner who refuses to increase the safety of his mine to protect his workers – even after a dozen miners nearly die of poisonous gas.⁸⁵ In response, Superman traps the mine owner underground, only freeing him after he promises to improve the mining conditions. Another example is *Action Comics* #12 (May 1939).⁸⁶ In this issue, Superman gleefully chases down reckless drivers, destroys cars that have been impounded for traffic violations, and assaults a used car lot as well as a factory, claiming that the cars they sell are unsafe. Much like the golem, Superman is willing to terrify his enemies if doing so is necessary to serve justice. In conjunction with this, the evidence conclusively demonstrates that the selfless desire of Superman to defend society from evil was directly influenced by the severe persecution of the Jews.

This, however, was not the only important Jewish influence on the origin story of Superman. In 1924, Senator Ellison Smith gave a passionate speech in support of the highly restrictive and xenophobic Immigration Act of 1924, which was primarily intended to limit the immigration of Eastern European Jews, millions of whom had immigrated to the United States in the past few decades.⁸⁷ Known as the “Shut the Door” speech, Senator Smith warned that the legislation was vital to defend democratic political institutions, imploring the United States to “assimilate . . . and breed pure American citizens and develop [its] own American resources” rather than “allow [foreign] influences to melt the pot.”⁸⁸ Because the objective of assimilation

⁸⁵ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Action Comics* #3 (New York: DC Comics, August 1938).

⁸⁶ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Action Comics* #12 (New York: DC Comics, May 1939).

⁸⁷ Up until the 1920s, immigration was “encouraged and virtually unfettered” in the United States. Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 17.

⁸⁸ Ellison DuRant Smith, “Shut the Door,” April 9, 1924, <https://www.commonlit.org/texts/shut-the-door-speech>.

was to completely transform immigrants into Americans, public education played a significant role in the process.⁸⁹ Public schools emphasized the teaching of English as well as education in civics, which championed the political and economic systems of the United States, and character, which sought to ensure that immigrants possessed necessary moral traits such as honesty, hard work, and respect for authority.⁹⁰ Although assimilation was obviously of great importance to Jews, it was simultaneously an exceedingly divisive process.⁹¹ Gary Engle explains this tension particularly well:

Clinging to an Old World identity meant isolation in ghettos, confrontation with a prejudiced mainstream culture, second-class social status, and impoverishment. On the other hand, forsaking the past in favor of total absorption into the mainstream, while it could result in socioeconomic progress, meant a loss of the religious, linguistic, even culinary traditions that provided a foundation for psychological well-being. Such loss was particularly tragic for the Jews because of the fundamental role played by history in Jewish cultures.⁹²

In the context of the tension experienced by Jews with regards to blending these two competing identities, Superman became an idealized conception of the Jewish assimilation process. Superman is an immigrant; in some sense, however, “it was not Krypton that Superman came from, [but] the planet Minsk or Lodz or Vilna or Warsaw.”⁹³ He completely immerses himself in the United States, changing his name, acquiring a job, and adopting an entirely new identity, to become the “consummate figure of total cultural assimilation.”⁹⁴ What is most crucial about Clark Kent, however, is that he is not real; Superman preserves his Kryptonian roots, and despite being an outsider as Kal-El, he is able to use the unique traits he retains from his previous

⁸⁹ Thomas C. Hunt et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of Educational Reform and Dissent* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010), 59; Engle, “What Makes Superman So Darned American?,” 84.

⁹⁰ Hunt et al., *Encyclopedia of Educational Reform and Dissent*, 60.

⁹¹ Andrae and Gordon, *Siegel and Shuster's Funnyman*, 36.

⁹² Engle, “What Makes Superman So Darned American?,” 92.

⁹³ Jules Feiffer, “The Minsk Theory of Krypton,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 29, 1996, 15.

⁹⁴ Engle, “What Makes Superman So Darned American?,” 85; Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?*, 9; Feiffer, “The Minsk Theory of Krypton,” 14-15.

life to improve his new society.⁹⁵ The reason that Superman is “the ultimate assimilationist fantasy” is rooted in the difficulties experienced by American Jews trying to balance where they came from with where they were going.⁹⁶

This idea of the superhero as both a protector and an assimilator may have originated from Jewish influences, but it has since been replicated throughout the superhero genre. Although there are certainly superheroes who do not seek to be a part of society, the Hulk being one notable example, the prevalence of this framework indicates that this characterization of the superhero has important psychological appeal.⁹⁷ As protectors, superheroes fulfill the societal need for a rescuer.⁹⁸ They may falter, but they rarely quit. As they constantly battle seemingly unstoppable villains and engage in conflicts that threaten the fate of the world, ordinary problems seem less daunting.⁹⁹ So long as superheroes can protect people from nearly insurmountable danger, individuals remain in control of their own destinies. It is equally, if not more, alluring that many superheroes struggle to find their place in society. It is an enduring desire of most individuals to be accepted by others. One of the most significant life challenges for many people is understanding their purpose and determining how they fit into society. Despite their extraordinary abilities, superheroes struggle with these challenges in the same way that those in the real world do, ensuring that they remain relatable and thus retain their humanity.¹⁰⁰ Heavily influenced by the struggles associated with antisemitism and assimilation that were faced by American Jews, Superman was the first superhero to simultaneously embrace the role of both the

⁹⁵ Engle, “What Makes Superman So Darned American?,” 85.

⁹⁶ Feiffer, “The Minsk Theory of Krypton,” 15; Engle, “What Makes Superman So Darned American?,” 85.

⁹⁷ Coogan, *Superhero*, 40-41.

⁹⁸ Rosenberg, “Our Fascination with Superheroes,” 15-16.

⁹⁹ Fingerroth, *Superman on the Couch*, 164.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.

protector and the assimilator. The fact that this model endures, however, is a testament to the fact that it is psychologically appealing to many individuals.

The Silver Surfer and Jesus Christ: The Importance of Moral Goodness

Although Judaism was certainly the first religion to pervade the superhero genre, the influence of Christianity has been equally widespread.¹⁰¹ While the superhero genre has tended to avoid any “explicitly Christian supernatural elements,” Christian themes and symbols are extremely common.¹⁰² The theme from Spider-Man, “with great power comes great responsibility,” is actually a combination of two verses from the New Testament of the Christian Bible: Luke 12:48 – “for everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required” – and Acts 4:33 – “and with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.”¹⁰³ The cover of *The Death of Captain Marvel* (1982) (Figure 11) is very similar to the *Pietà* (Figure 12), a famous work of art by Michelangelo in

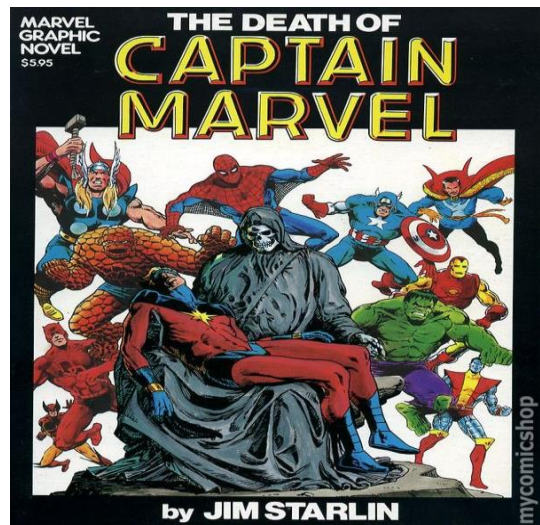


Figure 11. Jim Starlin, *The Death of Captain Marvel* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1992).



Figure 12. *Pietà* by Michelangelo in St. Peter's Basilica.

¹⁰¹ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 39.

¹⁰² Marco Arnaudo expands on this point by noting that Jesus does not appear in superhero comic books – unlike the Norse god Thor, for example – and that superheroes do not receive their powers directly from God as Wonder Woman does from Zeus in *Wonder Woman* (2017). Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 39-41.

¹⁰³ Chris Gavaler, *On The Origin of Superheroes: From the Big Bang to Action Comics No. 1* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 38.

which the Virgin Mary cradles Jesus in her arms after he is crucified, thereby emphasizing the theme of sacrifice.¹⁰⁴ Christopher Knowles characterizes *Kingdom Come* (1996), a comic book series in which powerful superheroes including Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman are forced to battle Lex Luthor and the supervillains of the “Mankind Liberation Front,” as “nothing less than an apocalyptic tract, awash in fiery Biblical wrath,” which heavily draws upon the epic conflict between good and evil within the Book of Revelation.¹⁰⁵ One particularly comprehensive link between Christianity and superheroes, however, is the three striking similarities between the Silver Surfer and Jesus Christ.

First, the appearance and origins of the Silver Surfer characterize him as a combination of the human and the divine, a characteristic ascribed to Jesus Christ as well.¹⁰⁶ The nudity of the Silver Surfer reflects his humanity, while his shining skin emphasizes his divine nature. Indeed, upon first seeing the art of the Silver Surfer, Stan Lee described him as a “space-born apostle, biblically pure and magnificently innocent”



Figure 13. Jack Kirby, *Fantastic Four* #48 (New York: Marvel Comics, March 1966).

¹⁰⁴ In *Superman Returns* (2006), after Superman crashes to Earth, he is cradled by his mother in a way that also very directly mirrors *Pietà*. Director Bryan Singer admits that this was done intentionally. Jeffery Moulton, *The Superhero Response: How 9/11 Changed Our Superheroes and Why it Matters* (self-pub., 2012), 100-101; Eric Michael Mazur, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Film* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 409; Finlo Rohrer, “Is The New Superman Meant To Be Jesus?,” BBC, July 28, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/5223302.stm.

¹⁰⁵ Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2007), 10.

¹⁰⁶ Arnaldo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 51-52.

(Figure 13).¹⁰⁷ He is born as Norrin Radd on the utopian planet of Zenn-La with a family and a lover, Shalla-Bal. Because his civilization is so advanced, it lacks purpose, which leaves Norrin restless and discontented, always dreaming of exploring the universe. These desires, of course, are very much human in nature. Norrin, however, ultimately becomes the Silver Surfer after obtaining part of the Power Cosmic from Galactus, a god-like being who devours planets to survive.¹⁰⁸ Like many superheroes, the Silver Surfer is endowed with superhuman strength and endurance. More relevant to his depiction as a divine being, however, is his ability to manipulate the energy of the universe, which permits him to both create and destroy life, thereby imitating the power of a deity.¹⁰⁹ Also like Jesus, the Silver Surfer can heal others.¹¹⁰ One of the most notable examples of this occurs during a fight with the Hulk, during which the Silver Surfer easily knocks out the powerful superhero and almost completely removes the gamma radiation from the Hulk before he wakes up and prevents the Silver Surfer from completing the process.¹¹¹ This compilation of evidence demonstrates the inextricable fusion of the human and the divine in both the appearance and origins of the Silver Surfer.¹¹²

Second, the Silver Surfer overcomes temptation posed by his arch-enemy, Mephisto, a Satan-like devil who calls himself the “Lord of Evil,” much as Jesus Christ does against Satan.¹¹³ The official description of Mephisto by Marvel states that he is the ruler of “a fiery nether realm

¹⁰⁷ Stan Lee, *Son of Origins of Marvel Comics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975), 206; Arnaudo, *Myth of the Superhero*, 52.

¹⁰⁸ As the origin of Galactus was developed, Galactus was said to have emerged from a space explorer named Galan, the final survivor of the universe that existed before the Big Bang. This further cements the god-like nature of Galactus.

¹⁰⁹ B. J. Oropeza, “The God-Man Revisited: Christology Through the Blank Eyes of the Silver Surfer,” in *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Pop Culture*, ed., B. J. Oropeza (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 159.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Stan Lee and Marie Severin, *Tales to Astonish* #93 (New York: Marvel Comics, July 1967).

¹¹² Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 52.

¹¹³ Oropeza, “The God-Man Revisited,” 164.

that he refers to as Hell . . . [who] delights in impersonating the Biblical Satan . . . [and] often strikes deceptive bargains with the living.”¹¹⁴ Thus while he is not officially the Christian devil, he is about as close as a fictional supervillain can get (Figure 14).¹¹⁵ Seeking to corrupt the soul of the Silver Surfer, Mephisto offers the Silver Surfer riches, women, and even leadership over a galactic empire in exchange for his soul.¹¹⁶ After he is rebuffed by the Silver Surfer, Mephisto makes one final offer, telling the Silver Surfer that he could be reunited with Shalla-Bal if he only surrenders his



Figure 14. Mephisto tricks Shalla-Bal into accompanying him to Earth where he plans on using her to kill the Silver Surfer. John Buscema, *Silver Surfer #3* (New York: Marvel Comics, December 1968).

soul.¹¹⁷ Once again, the Silver Surfer rejects Mephisto, refusing to succumb to temptation.¹¹⁸ This encounter between the Silver Surfer and Mephisto closely mirrors the temptations of Jesus Christ by Satan in the Judean Desert. Both, however, resist temptation, rejecting the allure of earthly pleasures in favor of righteousness.¹¹⁹

Last, both the Silver Surfer and Jesus Christ deliver the world from evil through self-sacrifice.¹²⁰ The Silver Surfer does so on multiple occasions during the Galactus trilogy in

¹¹⁴ The name of this Satan-like demon is remarkably similar to that of Mephistopheles, a devil who, according to the legend of Dr. Faust, serves him after he strikes a deal with Satan: the powers of hell in exchange for his soul. “Mephisto,” Marvel Universe Wiki, accessed March 19, 2018, <http://marvel.com/universe/Mephisto#axzz58eMXVEBj>; Oropeza, “The God-Man Revisited,” 164-165.

¹¹⁵ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 42.

¹¹⁶ Stan Lee and John Buscema, *Silver Surfer #3* (New York: Marvel Comics, December 1968).

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Lee and Buscema, *Silver Surfer #3*.

¹¹⁹ Oropeza, “The God-Man Revisited,” 166.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 156-158.

Fantastic Four #48-50 (March-May 1966), which marked the first appearance of both the Silver Surfer and Galactus. In fact, the Silver Surfer initially agrees to serve Galactus as a means of saving his own world, giving up his freedom in the process.¹²¹ The theme of sacrifice becomes even more prominent as the saga continues. Although the Silver Surfer initially alerts Galactus about the existence of Earth, he later seeks to protect it after he speaks with Alicia Masters, the girlfriend of the Thing, and comes to believe that humans are beautiful and kind.¹²² Deeming the protection of Earth to be “a cause worth dying for,” the Silver Surfer attacks Galactus.¹²³ Although the Silver Surfer is woefully outmatched, he does manage to delay Galactus long enough for the Human Torch to retrieve the Ultimate Nullifier, a weapon to defeat Galactus.¹²⁴ So as to not have the weapon used on him, Galactus agrees to spare Earth, but punishes the Silver Surfer by exiling him, placing an invisible energy barrier around Earth to make it impossible for the Silver Surfer to escape.¹²⁵ Also like Jesus Christ, the Silver Surfer is misunderstood, even hated, by those he attempts to help. All of his attempts to save humanity are believed by the inhabitants of Earth to be hostile instead.¹²⁶ In short, the story of the Silver Surfer is heavily rooted in sacrifice and suffering, linking him directly to the Passion of Jesus Christ.

It would be overly simplistic to assert that Christianity was the sole influence on the moral goodness of superheroes, but what this analysis demonstrates is that it was undoubtedly significant in this regard. Although very few superheroes are as similar to Jesus Christ as the Silver Surfer, they all selflessly defend society and possess a strong moral compass that is psychologically appealing for two main reasons. For one, the morality of superheroes satisfies

¹²¹ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *Fantastic Four* #48 (New York: Marvel Comics, March 1966).

¹²² Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *Fantastic Four* #49 (New York: Marvel Comics, April 1966).

¹²³ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *Fantastic Four* #50 (New York: Marvel Comics, May 1966).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Many Marvel superheroes such as the Thing, the Hulk, Spider-Man, and the X-Men also experience fear and mistrust from those they are attempting to save. Oropeza, “The God-Man Revisited,” 158-160.

the “basic human motivation . . . to divide the world into good people and bad, and to morally praise and condemn them accordingly.”¹²⁷ This is undoubtedly ingrained in human psychology. Historically, humans with the ability and desire to quickly evaluate the morality of those with whom they interacted likely had an evolutionary advantage for two related reasons. First, they were able to successfully avoid those who would seek to murder them or steal their resources, and second, they were able to identify those willing to cooperate and subsequently engage in collective action that provided significant benefits.¹²⁸ Because superheroes almost always possess outstanding moral fiber, the morality within the superhero genre is “exaggerated [and] caricatured.”¹²⁹ In short, as amusingly stated by David Pizarro and Roy Baumeister, the superhero genre represents “moral pornography.”¹³⁰

Perhaps the more compelling reason that the morality of superheroes is appealing, though, is that the moral journeys of superheroes can serve as models.¹³¹ Unlike real heroes such as politicians, athletes, and actors, superheroes are less likely to let us down.¹³² As such, individuals can rely on the moral principles held by superheroes in order to refine and improve their own morality through observational learning, a psychological process wherein people learn by observing the actions of others.¹³³ In short, Christianity undoubtedly contributed to the strong moral character of many superheroes, which represents a significant component of the psychological appeal of superheroes.

¹²⁷ David A. Pizarro and Roy Baumeister, “Superhero Comics as Moral Pornography,” in *Our Superheroes, Ourselves*, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 20.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³¹ Robin S. Rosenberg, introduction to *The Psychology of Superheroes: An Unauthorized Exploration*, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg and Jennifer Canzoneri (Dallas, TX: Benbella Books, 2008), 2.

¹³² Rosenberg, “Our Fascination with Superheroes,” 7.

¹³³ Rosenberg, introduction to *The Psychology of Superheroes*, 2.

Classic Literature and Superheroes

Although it is likely the case that the mythological and religious influences on superheroes are among the most apparent to many individuals, classic literature has had perhaps the most direct influence on the superhero genre. Specifically, Peter Coogan identifies three strands that were particularly vital to the formation of the superhero: (1) the science-fiction superman, (2) the dual-identity, crime-fighting avenger-vigilante, and (3) the pulp *übermensch*.¹³⁴ Before proceeding, it is necessary to explain two changes this section will make to the structure that Coogan presents. First, this section will focus exclusively on the “vigilante” element of the dual-identity, crime-fighting avenger-vigilante not only because this trait is the most common among superheroes, but because it contributes to the psychological appeal of a superhero in a way that the remaining components do not. Second, this section will incorporate the pulp *übermensch* into the analysis of the other two influences rather than analyze it as a distinct progenitor of the superhero. Devoting only a small portion of his discussion to the pulp *übermensch*, Coogan essentially focuses on just two characters within the pulp *übermensch* category: Doc Savage and the Shadow.¹³⁵ Although these pulp heroes were undoubtedly immediate inspirations for the earlier superheroes – Doc Savage for Superman and the Shadow for Batman – they themselves arose directly from the science-fiction superman and the dual-identity, crime-fighting avenger vigilante respectively.¹³⁶ Both of these changes will ensure that this chapter maintains its focus on the origins of the superhero that contribute to its psychological appeal.

¹³⁴ Coogan, *Superhero*, 127.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 158-164.

¹³⁶ Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 80.

Once again, these literary influences on the superhero have not been fleeting, but instead remain crucial components of the genre. First, the development of the superhero as an ardent supporter of collective responsibility through existing institutions was a direct response to the tendency of the science-fiction superman to become destructive, purposeless, or socially alienated.¹³⁷ Second, the emergence of individualism among superheroes can be linked to the characterization of the vigilante. Though this may initially seem to be an unresolvable dichotomy, this synthesis of collective responsibility and individualism actually comprises the essence of the superhero.

The Science-Fiction Superman: Superheroes and Collectivism Through Institutions

According to Thomas Andrae, the science-fiction superman of classic literature was almost always “monstrous, threatening, and socially deviant.”¹³⁸ There are three classic novels in particular that illustrate this trend. Perhaps the earliest appearance of the science-fiction superman was in *Frankenstein* (1818).¹³⁹ After the death of his mother, Dr. Victor Frankenstein uses his scientific expertise to create a creature that possesses superior strength, speed, and endurance, but upon discovering it is hideous, Victor banishes it and flees.¹⁴⁰ After the murder of his brother William, Victor returns home, and finds the Creature in the mountains. Explaining that everyone hates and fears him, the Creature blames Victor and admits that he murdered William and framed his nanny, Justine, as a means of exacting revenge upon his creator. The

¹³⁷ Coogan, *Superhero*, 143-146.

¹³⁸ Thomas Andrae, “From Menace to Messiah: The Prehistory of the Superman in Science Fiction Literature,” *Discourse 2*, (1980): 86.

¹³⁹ Even if Frankenstein is not truly the first science-fiction superman, Peter Coogan contends that he established the conventions of stories featuring this character. Relying on the discussion from the first chapter of this study, this is enough to classify Frankenstein as the first science-fiction superman. Andrae, “From Menace to Messiah,” 86; Coogan, *Superhero*, 127-128; Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus* (London: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones, 1818; repr., New York: Penguin, 1965).

¹⁴⁰ Coogan, *Superhero*, 128.

Creature demands that Victor build him a female so they can live apart from society in the wilderness of South America, warning that he will kill anyone about whom Victor cares should he fail to do so. Though Victor initially agrees to do so, he grows horrified of the prospect of the two monsters reproducing and spawning a “race of devils who might make the very existence of man a condition precarious and full of terror.”¹⁴¹ Although the Creature is a somewhat sympathetic character, alienated from society simply for his appearance, he simultaneously “poses the threat of generational genocide – the replacement of humanity as the dominant form of life on Earth with that of the next and more advanced version of the human genus.”¹⁴² In *Dracula* (1897), the titular character presents a similar threat though the source of his powers is the Devil rather than science.¹⁴³ Dr. Abraham Van Helsing recognizes that the vampire wants to “multiply the evils of the world,” while Dr. John Seward even more directly alludes to the threat of the *Homo superior*, calling Dracula “the father or furtherer of a new order of beings, whose road leads through Death, not Life.”¹⁴⁴ The fact that both Frankenstein and Dracula are literally revived corpses serves to further emphasize the destructive potential of the science-fiction superman.¹⁴⁵ Finally, *The War of the Worlds* (1898) features an invasion of Earth by Martians, who are established to be physically and intellectually superior to humans because of evolution, but simultaneously lacking in moral restraints.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 158.

¹⁴² Coogan, *Superhero*, 128.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Archibald Constable and Company, 1897, repr., Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 1993), 178, 251; Coogan, *Superhero*, 128-129.

¹⁴⁵ Coogan, *Superhero*, 129.

¹⁴⁶ H. G. Wells, *War of the Worlds* (London: William Heinemann, 1898); *Andrae*, “From Menace to Messiah,” 87.

The compelling theme that unites the science-fiction superman featured in these three novels is that evolution is accompanied by inhumanity.¹⁴⁷ This, of course, is strongly tied to the concerns surrounding evolution during this time period.¹⁴⁸ The threat of physical evolution is straightforward; if humans were able to conquer the animal kingdom because of their more evolved status, there was the possibility that superhumans could eventually achieve dominance over humans in much the same way.¹⁴⁹ The significance of this threat, however, was dwarfed by that posed by the theory of evolution. With *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Charles Darwin completely upended the notion that humanity was at the spiritual center of the universe.¹⁵⁰ After all, if humans were merely the product of a complex evolutionary process beginning with single-celled organisms, “the comfort of the [s]upernatural [is] replaced with the indifference of natural selection.”¹⁵¹ Frankenstein, Dracula, and the Martians collectively represent the fear that the *Homo superior* will lose its humanity and focus entirely on propagating its species, replacing humanity in the process.¹⁵²

Even when the science-fiction supermen are very much human, they often are quite destructive. In *The Invisible Man* (1897), a greedy scientist named Griffin successfully uses his

¹⁴⁷ Interestingly, this idea is also emphasized throughout *Also Sprach Zarathusa* (1883-1891), the philosophical treatise written by Friedrich Nietzsche. During a speech given by Zarathusa called “On the Tree on the Mountain,” he indicates that greatness and inhumanity are closely intertwined. Comparing humans to trees, Zarathusa explains that “the more [man] aspires to height and light, the more strongly do his roots strive downward, into the dark, the evil.” Nietzsche is also famous for claiming that humans to the superman represent “a laughing-stock [and] a thing of shame.” Coogan, *Superhero*, 130; Paul F. Glenn, “Nietzsche’s Napoleon: The Higher Man as Political Actor,” *Review of Politics* 63, no. 1 (2001): 139.

¹⁴⁸ Coogan, *Superhero*, 130.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Gavaler, *On The Origin of Superheroes*, 135.

¹⁵² These fears continue to manifest themselves in supervillains today. To justify his plot to transform the leaders of the world into mutants in *X-Men* (2000), Magneto explains that “God works too slowly.” In *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), the Lizard attempts to transform all of New York City into lizards, claiming that “human beings are weak, pathetic, feeble-minded creatures,” that can become “faster, stronger, [and] smarter.” Aldrich Killian, the supervillain in *Iron Man 3* (2013) declares himself to be a “new iteration of human evolution,” and the genetically enhanced Red Skull in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) tells Captain America that they have both “left humanity behind.” Chris Gavaler discusses the connection between evolution and supervillains in greater detail. Gavaler, *On The Origin of Superheroes*, 135-165.

research on optics to become invisible, and subsequently plans to launch a “Reign of Terror.”¹⁵³ Before he ultimately fails, brutally murdered by a mob, it is shown that Griffin ascribes no value to humans outside of the benefits they can provide to him, and thus is incapable of coexisting with them.¹⁵⁴ *The Murderer Invisible* (1931) is similar.¹⁵⁵ William Carpenter uses his invisibility to launch a spree of assassinations and bombings designed to emancipate humans from their inferiority by rapidly advancing the evolutionary process.¹⁵⁶ Another destructive science-fiction superman appears in *Gladiator* (1930) in Hugo Danner, whose superstrength and invulnerability are not enough to prevent him from constantly experiencing failure, most notably when he kills an opposing player while competing in college football and slaughters thousands of men while fighting in World War I without achieving peace.¹⁵⁷ Prior to his death, Hugo ultimately concludes that the superman cannot be a positive influence in society.¹⁵⁸ Far from being an icon of perfection, the early science-fiction superman was a destroyer.¹⁵⁹

This literary trend, though omnipresent, was not universal. Indeed, the science-fiction superman occasionally became a hermit. In *The Overman* (1907), Daniel, a musician who is shipwrecked on a deserted island, contacts people in a utopic, alternate dimension who “communicate with each other by immediate spiritual union” and are vastly superior to humans.¹⁶⁰ Despite being given the opportunity to return to civilization, Daniel decides to remain on the island, entranced by his “miraculous new understanding of the universe.”¹⁶¹ Although this did avoid the conflict that commonly arose between the science-fiction superman and the society

¹⁵³ H. G. Wells, *The Invisible Man* (London: C. Arthur Pearson, 1897).

¹⁵⁴ Coogan, *Superhero*, 129.

¹⁵⁵ Philip Wylie, *The Murderer Invisible* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1931).

¹⁵⁶ Coogan, *Superhero*, 138.

¹⁵⁷ Philip Wylie, *Gladiator* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930); Coogan, *Superhero*, 136.

¹⁵⁸ Coogan, *Superhero*, 137.

¹⁵⁹ Andrae, “From Menace to Messiah,” 87-88.

¹⁶⁰ Upton Sinclair, *The Overman* (New York: Doubleday, 1907), 77.

¹⁶¹ Coogan, *Superhero*, 134.

in which he lived, it was rarely used, at least in part because it was not particularly dramatic. Another possible, though pessimistic, angle of the science-fiction superman is one whose powers cause him to lack purpose in life. In *The Hampdenshire Wonder* (1911), Victor Stott is intellectually superior over his fellow humans, but facing a lack of challenges he eventually drowns himself in a pond.¹⁶² A similar story is told in *The New Adam* (1939) as Edmond Hall attempts to discover ultimate knowledge, but finds himself persistently dissatisfied in this regard, ultimately causing him to arrange his own death.¹⁶³ In short, unless the science-fiction superman was able to exercise his superiority in a constructive way, his dissatisfaction was likely to end in tragedy.¹⁶⁴

Andrae argues that John Carter, featured in *A Princess of Mars* (1912) by Edgar Rice Burroughs, was “the first physical superman of a heroic mold.”¹⁶⁵ Transported by magic to Mars from Earth, John Carter acquired superstrength because of the lesser gravity on the former, thus giving him the ability to defend princess Dejah Thoris from Martians substantially larger than him as well as rescue the entire planet from asphyxiation by repairing the atmosphere factory. Because his adventures occurred on Mars, however, John Carter did not demonstrate how a science-fiction superman could function in contemporary society.

Doc Savage, though, does succeed in doing so. Described as a “man of superhuman strength and Protean genius,” Doc Savage devotes himself to the betterment of society (Figure 15).¹⁶⁶ Although Doc Savage is never explicitly represented as a *Homo superior*, his powers

¹⁶² J.D. Beresford, *The Hampdenshire Wonder* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1911); Coogan, *Superhero*, 134.

¹⁶³ Although *The New Adam* was published in 1939, it was actually written in 1934, thus placing it before *Superman*. Stanley G. Weinbaum, *The New Adam* (Chicago: Ziff-Davis, 1939); Coogan, *Superhero*, 140-141.

¹⁶⁴ Coogan, *Superhero*, 143.

¹⁶⁵ Andrae, “From Menace to Messiah,” 85; Edgar Rice Burroughs, *A Princess of Mars* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1912).

¹⁶⁶ Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, 165.

violate the laws of physics, most notably his ability to hear sounds outside of the range of human hearing.¹⁶⁷ More notably, it is hinted that this superiority is genetic given that both his father and his cousin possess remarkable intelligence.¹⁶⁸ Unlike the destructive science-fiction superman of literary tradition, Doc Savage works on behalf of society, fighting villains, advancing science and conducting charity work, but he neither attempts to replace humanity nor overturn the institutions of society.¹⁶⁹ As such, he has a purpose, and despite his superiority, he never feels disconnected from ordinary people.¹⁷⁰



Figure 15. Walter Baumhofer, *Doc Savage Magazine* #1 (New York: Street & Smith, March 1933).

Beginning with Superman, superheroes have similarly avoided becoming either alienated or obsessed with power. They are sometimes feared and even hated, but they maintain their steadfast pursuit of justice on behalf of society without substantially altering existing institutions. Indeed, even if they disagree with those institutions with regards to how they address challenges, they very rarely attempt to destroy them and assume leadership themselves.¹⁷¹ Even the earliest iteration of Superman, who was no doubt a radical reformer, did not attempt to overthrow institutions. Moreover, he was quickly incorporated into the establishment and now battles criminals rather than social injustice.¹⁷² Though a relatively slow development, it is obvious that

¹⁶⁷ Coogan, *Superhero*, 143, 262.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁷¹ Andrae, "From Menace to Messiah," 98.

¹⁷² Coogan, *Superhero*, 146.

superheroes represent a direct response to the science-fiction superman of literary tradition. Indeed, the influence of the science-fiction superman is responsible for the emphasis that nearly all superheroes place on collective responsibility through existing institutions.

As to why this characteristic of superheroes is significant to the psychological appeal of the superhero genre, it has ensured that superheroes remain inherently conservative, satisfied merely with protecting the status quo.¹⁷³ Indeed, “[t]hey typically do not seek to redistribute wealth, change sitting governments, or otherwise alter the existing social order.”¹⁷⁴ The “normal and everyday” is perceived as valuable, and as a result, superheroes attempt to “preserve society, not to re-invent it.”¹⁷⁵ In short, they adhere to the notion that, ““society isn’t perfect, but it’s pretty damn good.””¹⁷⁶ This is often criticized for failing to promote positive change or implicitly accepting the injustice of the status quo.¹⁷⁷ Yet it is also lies at the core of the psychological appeal of superheroes for two reasons. First, as Fingerroth implies, many people are uncomfortable with rapid, proactive change, fearing that it might worsen rather than improve society.¹⁷⁸ Second, and perhaps more importantly, if superheroes were to act as forces for social progress, devoting themselves to social justice issues, the implication would be that ordinary individuals are not capable of doing so on their own; instead, superheroes protect society against only immensely powerful villains, leaving it up to the people to enact the more fundamental

¹⁷³ Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 77; John C. McDowell, *The Politics of Big Fantasy: The Ideologies of Star Wars, the Matrix, and the Avengers* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 62.

¹⁷⁴ Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 230.

¹⁷⁵ Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 77.

¹⁷⁶ Fingerroth, *Superman on the Couch*, 160.

¹⁷⁷ This sentiment can be captured by a famous statement made by Edmund Burke: “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” Fingerroth, *Superman on the Couch*, 161; Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 77; Vlad Savov, “Superheroes Don’t Exist to Solve Problems, They Exist to Punch Bad Guys,” Verge, November 20, 2014, <https://www.theverge.com/tldr/2014/11/20/7253383/superheroes-exist-to-punch>.

¹⁷⁸ Fingerroth, *Superman on the Couch*, 160-162.

changes in society. As such, the science-fiction superman continues to play a significant role in the psychological appeal of the superhero.

The Vigilante: Superheroes and Individuality

Perhaps the most famous vigilante is Robin Hood.¹⁷⁹ A legendary archer who was wrongfully dispossessed of his land, Robin Hood lives in Nottingham Forest with a band of outlaws known as the Merry Men. Collectively, they are involved in numerous adventures in which they rob from the rich and give to the poor. Because he is opposed by the Sheriff of Nottingham and King John, Robin Hood is obviously a vigilante fighting against injustice and villainy. Much like superheroes, however, he remains conservative; he seeks only to restore the rightful ruler, King Richard the Lionhearted, rather than change the political system of kingship.¹⁸⁰ Robin Hood, though, was not the first “social bandit,” a phrase used by E. J. Hobsbawm to describe “outlaws whom the lord and the state regard as criminals, but who are considered by their people as heroes, champions, avengers, [and] fighters for justice.”¹⁸¹ Indeed, Jess Nevins indicates that this character type can be traced back as far as Ancient Egypt and the Roman Empire.¹⁸² The popularity of Robin Hood, however, means that the creators of the vigilantes that preceded superheroes were influenced by Robin Hood rather than his predecessors.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Coogan, *Superhero*, 147.

¹⁸⁰ Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, 51.

¹⁸¹ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 4th ed. (New York: New Press, 2000), 20.

¹⁸² It is important to note here, however, that Jess Nevins does not claim that Robin Hood was influenced by the social bandits of Ancient Egypt and the Roman Empire, merely that they preceded Robin Hood. Brent D. Shaw, “Bandits in the Roman Empire,” *Past & Present* 105 (1984): 3-5; Thomas Grünwald, *Bandits in the Roman Empire: Myth and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2004): 14-32, 110-126; Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, 31-32.

¹⁸³ Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, 51.

In American literature, one of the earliest vigilantes was the Gray Champion, the titular character in “The Gray Champion” (1835) authored by Nathaniel Hawthorne.¹⁸⁴ This short story is based on historical record. Sir Edmund Andros, the governor of New England between 1686 and 1689, was widely reviled for engaging in many of the same policies that would eventually cause the American colonists to launch a revolution against Great Britain: taxation without representation, seizure of private property, and restrictions of the free press.¹⁸⁵ Because of this, he was overthrown on April 18, 1689 in a bloodless revolt by the colonists of Boston who triumphed against British troops. Hawthorne, however, attributes this victory to the Gray Champion, who appears as British soldiers are advancing on the colonists in response to an individual from the crowd crying out to God for a champion.¹⁸⁶ Described as “an ancient man who wore old Puritan dress, a dark cloak and a steeple-crowned hat with a heavy sword upon his thigh, but a staff in his hand to assist the tremendous gait of age,” the Gray Champion confronts the British on behalf of the oppressed colonists and exclaims that Governor Andros has lost his authority.¹⁸⁷ No longer frightened, the colonists advance on the soldiers who are forced to retreat, and the colonists ultimately imprison Governor Andros.¹⁸⁸ Although the Gray Champion does not directly battle the British soldiers, he serves as a rallying point against a tyrannical government and does so outside the law. Because Hawthorne became quite famous after the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), “The Gray Champion” achieved significant attention from both critics and ordinary readers, strongly suggesting that the creators of the numerous

¹⁸⁴ Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Gray Champion,” in *Twice-Told Tales* (Boston: American Stationers, 1837); Coogan, *Superhero*, 148.

¹⁸⁵ Coogan, *Superhero*, 148.

¹⁸⁶ Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, 100; Coogan, *Superhero*, 148.

¹⁸⁷ Hawthorne, “The Gray Champion,” 17; Coogan, *Superhero*, 149.

¹⁸⁸ Coogan, *Superhero*, 149.

superheroes who engage in vigilantism to defend society were at least indirectly influenced by the Gray Champion.¹⁸⁹

Just two years later, Robert Montgomery Bird portrayed the vigilante slightly differently in *Nick of the Woods* (1837), whose protagonist Coogan calls “Batman in buckskins.”¹⁹⁰ Nick is originally Nathan Slaughter, a peaceful Pennsylvania Quaker. After his family is ruthlessly murdered by Shawnees, however, Nathan adopts a radically different identity and exacts vengeance against any Native American he encounters, leaving them with a tomahawk cloven skull and branding a cross on their chest.¹⁹¹ The end of the novel sees Nick massacre an entire camp of Shawnees and set it to the torch.¹⁹² Notably, Nick does not attempt to protect other settlers; he is consumed entirely by revenge and just retribution, thus assuming the qualities of an avenger as well as a vigilante.¹⁹³ As evidenced by the fact that Mark Twain casually, and without explanation, referenced Nick of the Woods in *Life on The Mississippi* (1883), *Nick of the Woods* achieved immense popularity.¹⁹⁴ As such, it is unsurprisingly his “darker, grimmer, [and] more morally compromised” vigilante approach to justice that becomes commonplace among superheroes, most notably Batman, but including even those as virtuous as Superman.¹⁹⁵

The Gray Seal (1914) is one of the earliest contemporary examples in classic literature of a vigilante who fights crime.¹⁹⁶ Jimmie Dale, “a splendid society bachelor who inherited his

¹⁸⁹ Robert Montgomery Bird, *Nick of the Woods* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea and Blanchard, 1837); Coogan, *Superhero*, 149-150; Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, 8-9, 100.

¹⁹⁰ Nick of the Woods is “derived from “Old Nick,” a name for the Devil,” emphasizing the sense of fear that he sought to evoke among his enemies. Watching any of the movies in *The Dark Knight Trilogy* makes it apparent that Batman was similar in this regard. Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, 101; Coogan, *Superhero*, 150.

¹⁹¹ Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, 101.

¹⁹² Coogan, *Superhero*, 151.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ James David Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 80.

¹⁹⁵ Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, 102.

¹⁹⁶ Frank L. Packard, *The Adventures of Jimmie Dale* (New York: A. L. Burt, 1917); Coogan, *Superhero*, 156.

father's business designing and building safes," engages in crime because of the inadequacy of the police; specifically, he wishes to demonstrate how they can be more successful in combatting crime.¹⁹⁷ The Gray Seal is named such because he leaves behind a diamond-shaped piece of gray paper behind at each of his robberies, during which he only steals stolen goods.¹⁹⁸ Initially, the Gray Seal commits his "crimes" for his own amusement. After he is caught by an unknown woman during a robbery, however, he is blackmailed to engage in war against criminal organizations. As such, he is pursued by both the police and criminals.¹⁹⁹ In the same way that the Gray Seal operates in a world in which law enforcement is portrayed as incapable of stopping crime, many superheroes act as vigilantes in order to make up for the shortcomings of the police.²⁰⁰

Another vigilante worth discussing here is Zorro, portrayed in *The Mark of Zorro* (1920) (Figure 16). Much resembling Robin Hood, Zorro fights against the policies of the corrupt government and aids the poor at the expense of the wealthy.²⁰¹ Like Robin Hood, though, Zorro does not advocate for a political revolution; he merely opposes corruption. There are two important ways in which Zorro influenced superheroes. First, many elements of Zorro were directly borrowed by Kane and Finger in creating Batman, most notably



Figure 16. *The Mark of Zorro*, directed by Fred Niblo and Theodore Reed (1920).

¹⁹⁷ Coogan, *Superhero*, 156.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, 8.

²⁰¹ Coogan, *Superhero*, 157.

his mask and all-black outfit.²⁰² Second, and far more significantly, Zorro mixes his vigilantism with populism.²⁰³ This emphasis on supporting the ordinary people has remained essential within the superhero genre.

The vigilantes who most directly influenced the superhero, however, are the Shadow and the Spider. Originating in the pulps, both the Shadow and the Spider hold strongly nationalistic views, demonstrate a willingness to kill their enemies with machine guns, and are hunted by the police.²⁰⁴ They thus combine features of earlier vigilantes: the vengeance of Nick of the Woods, the skepticism with regards to the effectiveness of law enforcement demonstrated by the Gray Seal, and the populism of Zorro.

Unlike the influence of the science-fiction superman, in which superheroes responded to the fears embodied in the literary character by acting differently, superheroes behave much as the vigilante does. Many superheroes do not coordinate with law enforcement institutions at all, and even those who do often favor drastically different strategies to defeat criminals. For example, during the early years of the Golden Age of Comic Books, both Superman and Batman fought crime outside of the law and consequently generated opposition among police officers. In recent years, an increasing number of superheroes have followed this approach, likely due to the declining trust in political institutions. As opposed to the influence of the science-fiction superman, which led to the focus on collective responsibility, the vigilante influenced the rise of individualism among superheroes. That this emphasis on individualism is psychologically

²⁰² Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, 156; Morrison, *Supergods*, 17-18; C. K. Robertson, "The True Übermensch: Batman as Humanistic Myth," in *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Pop Culture*, ed., B. J. Oropeza (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 49; Coogan, *Superhero*, 157.

²⁰³ Zebbie Watson, "Zorro Was The First American Cinematic Superhero, And He's Coming Back," *Inverse*, May 10, 2016, <https://www.inverse.com/article/15443-zorro-was-the-first-american-cinematic-superhero-and-he-s-coming-back>.

²⁰⁴ The Spider is particularly violent, killing more than 40,000 people during his adventures. Robert D. Sampson, *The Spider* (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, 1987), 75; Coogan, *Superhero*, 153-154.

appealing is fairly obvious. Classical liberalism, a political ideology which emphasizes the protection of individual rights, is deeply rooted in the politics and culture of the United States. In the Declaration of Independence, of course, Thomas Jefferson argues that “all men are endowed with certain unalienable rights [including] Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” The Constitution further enshrines this principle in the Bill of Rights, particularly in the Ninth and Tenth Amendments, which together reserve various rights to the people. Americans deeply value individualism for two important reasons. First, they perceive it as limiting the ability of others to manipulate or control them. Second, they believe it promotes autonomy, which is valuable for two related reasons: first, it allows people to effectively pursue their own interests by experimenting with various courses of action, and second, it conveys some sense of respect for them as unique individuals with different skills and values. By consistently embracing individualism, superheroes lend support to the cherished belief that no challenge is too steep for an individual to overcome. The vigilante caused superheroes to embrace this individualism, which is now a crucial element of their psychological appeal.

Conclusion

To defend themselves from copyright lawsuits as well as against critics who alleged that they detracted from “real” literature and promoted fascism and juvenile delinquency, writers and artists were not hesitant to incorporate literary devices, motifs, and themes from mythology, religion, and literature into their superhero stories. The persistence of such influences in the superhero genre, however, has occurred because they are essential to the psychological appeal of superheroes. This is important for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that superheroes are likely to remain prominent in popular culture for the foreseeable future. Although the popularity of

superheroes has obviously ebbed and flowed, they have seemingly “melded into the cultural consciousness of the United States,” at least in part because of their intimate connection with mythology, religion, and classic literature.²⁰⁵ Second, it provides a necessary foundation for analyzing why superhero movies have the potential to change political views. On the most basic level, it is obvious that individuals would not watch superhero movies unless superheroes were at least somewhat psychologically appealing. More importantly, though, is the fact that entertainment is far more likely to have an impact on political views if individuals are engaged with the plot and captivated by the characters.

²⁰⁵ Alex S. Romagnoli and Gian S. Pagnucci, *Enter the Superheroes: American Values, Culture, and the Canon of Superhero Literature* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 83.

Chapter 3. Propaganda and Political Messages: World War II and Post-9/11 Superheroes

*All art is propaganda. It is universally and inescapably propaganda; sometimes unconsciously, but often deliberately, propaganda. – Upton Sinclair*¹

Superheroes have always been “at their most popular and evocative when they respond to particularly turbulent times, especially those marred by war and social unrest.”² In the process, they have often functioned as propaganda. In order to make this claim, it is necessary to make a clarifying point. Propaganda is not limited to “explicit texts such as the polemical tirade.”³ It is far more accurate to view propaganda as something that “informs many cultural products, including such apparently politically neutral areas as entertainment.”⁴

This chapter will evaluate the political viewpoints intentionally promoted by superhero comic books during World War II as well as those embedded within *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Iron Man 3* (2013), and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). It relies on this juxtaposition rather than solely analyzing the movies for two reasons. First, it shows that superheroes have a long

¹ Upton Sinclair, *Mammonart: An Essay on Economic Interpretation* (self-pub., 1925), 9.

² Although this chapter will focus solely on superheroes during World War II and the war on terror, superheroes have been prominent during other conflicts as well. During the Cold War, many Marvel superheroes reflected the fears of this ideological conflict, developing their superpowers as a result of radiation exposure, fighting in epic battles in outer space, and emphasizing the superiority of American culture by safeguarding individual freedom and the nuclear family. Additionally, both *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Watchmen* (1987) are critical of the foreign policy of President Ronald Reagan. Marc DiPaolo, *War, Politics, and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 1; Matthew Yockey, “This Island Manhattan: New York City and the Space Race in *The Fantastic Four*,” *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 6 (2005): 58; Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 65-68; Robert Genter, “‘With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility’: Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 6 (2007): 956-959; Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of America Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 68; Mike S. Dubose, “Holding Out for a Hero: Reaganism, Comic Book Vigilantes, and Captain America,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 6 (2007): 922; Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 273; Andrew Hoberek, *Considering Watchmen: Poetics, Property, Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 119-120; Christopher Sharrett, “Alan Moore,” in *Alan Moore: Conversations*, ed. Eric Berlatsky (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 53.

³ Nicholas Jackson O’Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

history of engaging with political themes during war. Second, and more importantly, it demonstrates that regardless of intentionality, superhero stories can incorporate political views that subsequently have a chance of influencing individual attitudes.

Superheroes in World War II

Captain America was not the first superhero to enter World War II, but his appearance on the cover of *Captain America* #1 (March 1941), where he is seen punching Adolf Hitler in the face, was one of the most overtly propagandistic and boldest comic book issues of this period (Figure 17).⁵ Although the United States had begun openly selling weapons to Great Britain and France, and the vast majority of the United States favored the Allies, most of the American public simultaneously did not support entering the war.⁶ In an



Figure 17. Jack Kirby, *Captain America* #1, (New York: Marvel Comics, March 1941).

⁵ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, *Captain America* #1 (New York: Marvel Comics, March 1941); Les Daniels, *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1991), 32; Christopher Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed?: Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda in America During World War II* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2011), 30.

⁶ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 427, 434.

analysis of polls taken at the time, historian Lynne Olson explains these seemingly “diametrically opposite views” as follows: “Americans were reluctant to plunge into war unless and until they felt it was necessary . . . [a]nd they were not [yet] convinced it was.”⁷ Indeed, this sentiment was so widespread that President Franklin Roosevelt, despite his belief that avoiding war would be nearly impossible, had explicitly assured voters during his 1940 presidential campaign that he would not send Americans to die in any “foreign wars,” understanding that failing to do so might lose him the election.⁸

Yet *Captain America* #1 immediately became a resounding success, selling over one million copies.⁹ It did not matter to readers that Captain America never punches or even encounters Hitler in this issue.¹⁰ Captain America became popular simply because he was fighting real villains as some superheroes “were still challenging mad scientists or the hoodlums robbing the corner candy store.”¹¹ Despite the fact that this issue was published several months prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, it represents a distillation of three key strands of propaganda in the United States that appeared in superhero stories throughout World War II: domestic production, military superiority, and the vilification of the enemy.¹²

Although it is somewhat more subtle than the remaining propaganda themes that are featured in *Captain America* #1, the critical importance of the home front to the national defense of the United States is still a significant point of emphasis. In the background of the cover, a Nazi facing away from Captain America is watching the explosion of a munitions factory in the

⁷ Lynne Olson, *Those Angry Days: Roosevelt, Lindbergh, and America's Fight Over World War II, 1939-1941* (New York: Random House, 2013), 342-343.

⁸ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 42.

⁹ Jason Dittmer, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 10.

¹⁰ Ella Donnelly, “A Hero for a Good War: Captain America and the Mythologization of World War Two,” (thesis, University of Puget Sound, 2015), 1.

¹¹ Joe Simon and Jim Simon, *The Comic Book Makers* (Lebanon, NJ: Vanguard Productions, 2003), 44.

¹² Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 30.

United States. Because he is holding a microphone, it can be presumed that he just ordered its destruction. Also on the cover, Hitler falls back onto a map of the United States, which is lying next to a pamphlet entitled “Sabotage Plans For U.S.A.”¹³ Within the issue itself, a “wave of sabotage and treason paralyz[ing] the vital defense industries,” is the impetus for the creation of the experimental serum that gives Captain America his powers.¹⁴ By depicting the home front as a major target for the Nazis, *Captain America* #1 demonstrates how crucial the efforts at home are to winning the war.

The superiority of the American soldier is also a prominent theme in *Captain America* #1. Originally a frail young man who was deemed ineligible to serve in the military, Steve Rogers transforms into Captain America, a supersoldier with enhanced physical and mental capabilities. This transition from a weakling to a superhero is an essential component of the origins of Captain America because it “invokes a sort of American idealist version of eugenics.”¹⁵ Rather than exterminate those who did not possess certain desirable characteristics, the United States relied on genetic engineering to create a stronger and smarter human.¹⁶ Another way in which *Captain America* #1 attempts to distinguish between the idealized eugenics that created Captain America and the horrific eugenics of the Nazis was naming the creator of the Captain America serum Professor Reinstein; the eugenics rhetoric of the Nazis, of course, was

¹³ Simon and Kirby, *Captain America* #1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Donnelly, “A Hero for a Good War,” 23; Brian E. Hack, “Weakness Is A Crime: Captain America and the Eugenic Ideal in Early Twentieth-Century America,” in *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 79.

¹⁶ This is not to ignore the repugnant history of eugenics in the United States; indeed, eugenics was quite popular at the time. In fact, the Supreme Court decided in *Buck v. Bell* (1927) that a state could permit compulsory sterilization of the unfit, including the intellectually disabled. In the 1930s, there were nearly ten times as many medical sterilizations per year than in the 1910s. This was an endorsement of negative eugenics, in which the unfit are prevented from reproducing. Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Postwar Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 3.

based heavily on extreme anti-Semitism.¹⁷ By highlighting the strength of its titular superhero while supposedly distinguishing him from the Aryan Übermensch, *Captain America* #1 demonstrates the military and moral superiority of American soldiers.

Finally, the ways in which German soldiers are depicted throughout *Captain America* #1 “demonize them as villains or monsters.”¹⁸ On the cover, the German soldiers firing at Captain America look like mindless thugs as they grimace at the superhero.¹⁹ In the story, a German soldier who destroys an American factory has a brutish and scarred face, almost resembling a beast more than a human.²⁰ While speaking to the president, an Army officer describes the German spies and saboteurs as “vermin.”²¹ In *Captain America* #1, Germans are not only portrayed as enemies of Captain America, but immoral and evil.

This section will demonstrate that these three propaganda themes were commonplace in superhero stories throughout World War II. First, superheroes highlighted the importance of the home front by campaigning for war bonds and stamps, working in factories, and protecting domestic production from sabotage. Second, superheroes emphasized the strength of American soldiers by battling alongside them, praising their courage and resolve, and celebrating their masculinity. Last, superheroes vilified the Germans and Japanese.

Superheroes and the Home Front

Because immense financial expenditures as well as massive industrial production were critical to the United States achieving victory in World War II, it is unsurprising that propaganda

¹⁷ Donnelly, “A Hero for a Good War,” 24.

¹⁸ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 181.

¹⁹ Simon and Kirby, *Captain America* #1.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ As this chapter will discuss later, the use of the word “vermin” to describe the German spies and saboteurs was actually fairly unusual as racist language was generally reserved for the Japanese. Simon and Kirby, *Captain America* #1.

placed so much emphasis on the importance of contributing on the home front. Since the threat of a mainland invasion of the United States was minimal, it was vital to constantly equate the efforts of civilians with the success of soldiers.²²

One propaganda poster shows a soldier waving farewell while imploring his loved ones to “buy more war bonds so we’ll meet again.”²³ Some propaganda was even more direct. In “Killing Time Is Killing Men,” a worker smokes next to

a dead American soldier, suggesting that laziness and inefficiency caused his death

(Figure 18). This link between the homefront and the Army is perhaps best emphasized by a

General Motors propaganda poster called “It’s a Two-Fisted Fight” (Figure 19). Superheroes

heavily contributed to this extensive propaganda campaign for a robust home front.



Figure 18. Reynold Brown, North American Aviation, “Killing Time Is Killing Men,” 1943, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/victory/victory4.htm>.



Figure 19. Fisher Body Division, General Motors Corporation, “It’s a Two-Fisted Fight,” 1942, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/victory/victory4.htm>.

First, superheroes promoted war bonds and stamps. Perhaps the most basic means of doing so was simply highlighting their connection to arms production.²⁴ On the cover of *Batman*

²² Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 126-127.

²³ Lebrecht Music and Arts Photo Library, ““So We’ll Meet Again – Buy More War Bonds,”” Alamy, accessed March 21, 2018, <http://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-wwii-american-war-bonds-so-well-meet-again-buy-more-war-bonds-smiling-83347673.html>.

²⁴ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 60-62.

#12 (August 1942), Batman and Robin urge individuals to buy war bonds while riding in a jeep.²⁵ Similarly, the cover of *Batman* #30 (August 1945) shows Batman handing a soldier a weapon that was financed by a loan.²⁶ Occasionally, propaganda associated with war bonds and stamps would extend beyond comic book covers.²⁷ In *Wonder Woman* #2 (September 1942), Wonder Woman learns about the city of Midland, which has stubbornly rejected campaigns designed to increase the sale of war bonds and stamps.²⁸ Upon being asked why taxes are insufficient to finance the war, Wonder Woman introduces a wounded pilot who crashed in Japan and only survived because of an airdrop delivered by Wonder Woman containing food, a first-aid kit, and a steel helmet.²⁹ Wonder Woman concludes her campaign by explaining that such military supplies save thousands of brave soldiers and that buying war bonds and stamps helps ensure that they are not scarce.³⁰

Another way in which superheroes took up the cause of war bonds and stamps was by relying on nationalism. On the cover of *Batman* #17 (June 1943), Batman and Robin fly on a giant eagle in the



Figure 20. Jerry Robinson and George Roussos, *Batman* #17 (New York: DC Comics, June 1943).

²⁵ Jerry Robinson and George Roussos, *Batman* #12 (New York: DC Comics, August 1942).

²⁶ Dick Sprang and George Roussos, *Batman* #30 (New York: DC Comics, August 1945).

²⁷ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 61.

²⁸ William Moulton Marston and Harry G. Peter, *Wonder Woman* #2 (New York: DC Comics, September 1942).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

midst of the Air Force, “playing on the nationalistic iconography and the concept of freedom embodied in the eagle,” while imploring individuals to purchase war bonds and stamps to allow the eagle to keep flying (Figure 20).³¹ The cover of *Detective Comics* #78 (August 1943) (Figure 21), in which Batman and Robin march with soldiers to join the “Bond Wagon,” bears a striking resemblance to the famous painting called *The Spirit of '76* (1876) (Figure 22) by Archibald McNeal Willard, which depicts the spirit of the American Revolution.³² By alluding to this painting, this comic book issue encourages individuals to buy war bonds and stamps by suggesting that doing so is patriotic.

A final way that superheroes promoted war bonds and stamps was by displaying how they could be used against the Axis. Perhaps the most notable example of this was *Action Comics* #86 (July 1945), in which Superman uses war bonds to bury a Japanese officer, explicitly attributing his success to those who purchased them.³³

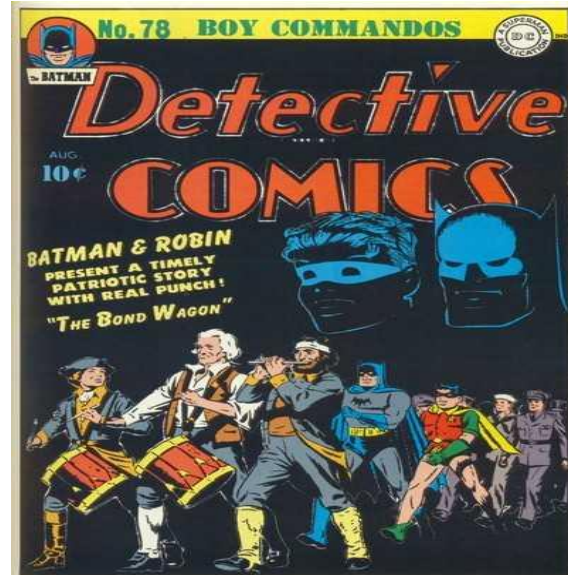


Figure 21. Jack Burnley, *Detective Comics* #78 (New York: DC Comics, August 1943).



Figure 22. *The Spirit of '76* by Archibald McNeal Willard.

³¹ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 59.

³² *Ibid.*, 59-60.

³³ Jack Burnley and Stan Kaye, *Action Comics* #86 (New York: DC Comics, July 1945).

Regardless of which strategy was employed, the fact that superheroes were among the most active promoters of war bonds and stamps demonstrates that they served as propaganda.

Second, superheroes assisted factory workers. In *Action Comics* #55 (December 1942), Superman delivers an engine to workers building a bomber as smoke rises from numerous factories behind them (Figure 23). Although it was unusual for superheroes to work in factories beyond comic book covers, they still served to demonstrate the importance of factory workers, promoting the notion of what Christopher Murray refers to as the “production soldier,” and thus functioning as propaganda.³⁴

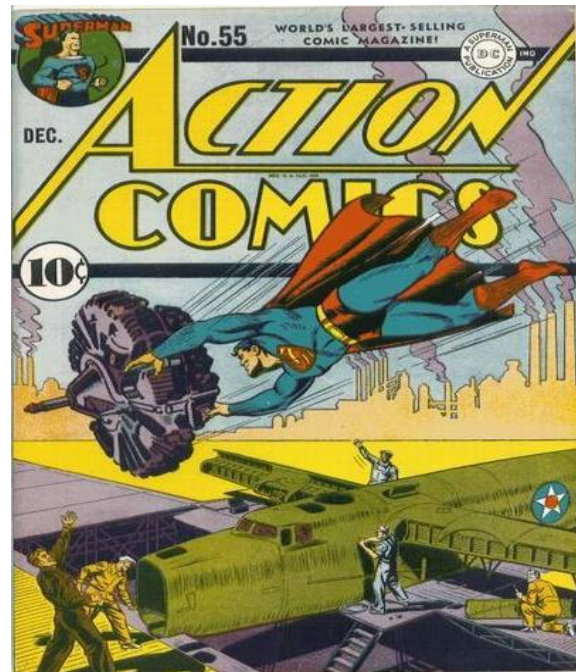


Figure 23. Jack Burnley, *Action Comics* #55 (New York: DC Comics, December 1942).

Finally, superheroes stressed the importance of domestic industry by protecting it from sabotage.³⁵ Indeed, the exploits of a superhero called the Spy Smasher were mainly centered around “uncovering and destroying spy rings that threatened sabotage.”³⁶ Captain America also commonly dealt with nefarious plots directed at domestic industry. *Captain America* #4 (June 1941) begins with a spy ring called the “Unholy Legion” launching a series of coordinated attacks against the defense industry; specifically, they kill the president of a massive munitions plant, a labor leader seeking to advance the defense industry, and two aircraft officials responsible for “turning out thirty planes a day.”³⁷ With great difficulty, Captain America and his

³⁴ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 127-128.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, *Captain America* #4 (New York: Marvel Comics, June 1941).

sidekick, Bucky Barnes, manage to defeat them and protect the defense industry from any further losses. Although stories such as this one “grossly exaggerated” the fears of sabotage and secret invasions, they succeeded in “creat[ing] a sense of urgency and drama in which industrial production became a site of heroic struggle,” once again contributing to a main theme of propaganda that a resolute, hardworking home front was the key to victory.³⁸

Superheroes and the Military Might of the United States

Another important component of propaganda during World War II was the development of a powerful image of the American soldier. This was a means of not only bolstering military recruitment, but boosting morale by persuading the American people that the United States would emerge victorious in the war. Superheroes directly promoted this mythologized depiction of the American soldier.

First, superheroes fought directly with American soldiers, thereby fostering the myth of their invincibility. In *Victory Comics* #1 (August 1941), a superhero called the Conqueror assists American soldiers in defeating the Nazis in vicious hand-to-hand combat.³⁹ Wonder Woman also actively fought in World War II. In *Wonder Woman* #1 (June 1942), she is at the front of a cavalry charge against German soldiers, and in *Sensation Comics* #16 (April 1943), she is a “wedge of fierce, fighting femininity,” courageously leading a battle against the Japanese.⁴⁰ Obviously readers knew that superheroes were not actually fighting alongside American soldiers, but such propaganda firmly established that victory could be achieved.

³⁸ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 128.

³⁹ Bill Everett, *Victory Comics* #1 (New York: Hillman Periodicals, August 1941).

⁴⁰ William Moulton Marston and Harry G. Peter, *Wonder Woman* #1 (New York: DC Comics, June 1942); William Moulton Marston and Harry G. Peter, *Sensation Comics* #16 (New York: DC Comics, April 1943).

Second, superheroes often deferred to average American soldiers so as to avoid overshadowing their efforts.⁴¹ Superman is perhaps the most notable example of this phenomenon. Because of his x-ray vision, he accidentally reads the eye chart in the next room during his eye examination, and the doctor declares him ineligible for military service.⁴² Although Superman is prohibited from fighting in World War II, he still devotes himself to assisting and praising the “everyman hero.”⁴³ On the cover of *Action Comics* #60 (May 1943), Superman delivers supplies to American soldiers fighting in a jungle (Figure 24). The soldier firing a machine gun bears a striking resemblance to a soldier in a propaganda poster called “Let’s Give Him Enough and On Time” (Figure 25). Indeed, both have similar rips in their uniform, but are continuing to courageously man their weapons.⁴⁴ In *Superman* #23 (July 1943), the superhero declares his presence in a training exercise to be irrelevant, stating that “America’s secret weapon [is the]



Figure 24. Jack Burnley, *Action Comics* #60 (New York: DC Comics, May 1943).



Figure 25. Norman Rockwell, “Let’s Give Him Enough And On Time,” 1942.

⁴¹ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 122.

⁴² Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 43.

⁴³ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 121.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 114-115.

courage of the common soldier.”⁴⁵ Other superheroes also made sure to respect the average American soldier. In short, this kind of propaganda emphasized the strong moral character of American soldiers, and emphasized that they would propel the United States to victory.

Finally, superheroes relied heavily on championing masculinity, which was a frequent theme in propaganda during this time period because it demonstrated the physical strength of the American soldier.⁴⁶ Especially early in the war, displays of masculinity were accompanied by sexual boasts, which constituted “a form of therapy for a nation that felt psychologically castrated by Pearl Harbor” as well as an appeal designed to persuade young men to become soldiers.⁴⁷ For example, in “Man the Guns: Join the Navy,” a muscular sailor hauls a massive artillery shell, identified by Murray as a “blatant phallic symbol,” into a cannon (Figure 26).⁴⁸ This imagery is essentially duplicated on the cover of *National Comics* #32 (May 1943) in which Uncle Sam – a superhero modeled after the national



Figure 26. McClelland Barclay, issued by Navy Recruiting Bureau, “Man the Guns: Join the Navy,” 1942.

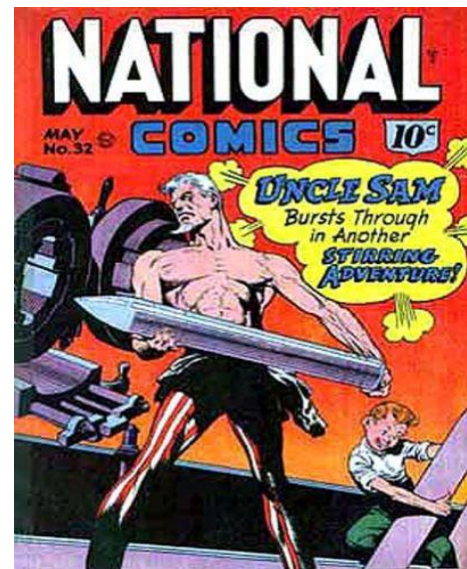


Figure 27. Reed Crandall, *National Comics* #32 (New York: Quality Comics, May 1943).

⁴⁵ Don Cameron and Sam Citron, *Superman* #23 (New York: DC Comics, July 1943); Nicholas Yanes, “Graphic Imagery: Jewish American Comic Book Creators’ Depictions of Class, Race, and Patriotism,” (master’s thesis, Florida State University, 2008), 38.

⁴⁶ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 105; “Powers of Persuasion: Poster Art from World War II,” National Archives, accessed March 21, 2018, https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/man_the_guns/man_the_guns.html.

⁴⁷ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 105.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

personification of the United States, but younger and more muscular – is shown holding a shell at his waist and inserting it into a cannon (Figure 27).⁴⁹ The sexual connotations are further emphasized by the caption: “Uncle Sam bursts through in another stirring adventure.”⁵⁰ Murray argues that both the recruitment poster for the Navy and this comic book cover equate sexual potency with military victory.⁵¹ The covers of *Superman* #18 (September 1942) and *World’s Finest Comics* #7 (September 1942) similarly link sexualized masculinity to military might.⁵² Although sexualized propaganda became less common as the United States neared victory, the emphasis on masculinity continued through sports.⁵³ Historian John Morton Blum identifies multiple examples of a “reportorial emphasis on sports” during World War II.⁵⁴ *Time* implicitly claimed that athletic prowess forged combat skills, noting that a pilot who conducted air raids over France “had played tackle on Alabama’s Rose Bowl team.”⁵⁵ Similarly, *The Saturday Evening Post* published a series of articles called “These Are the Generals,” which attributed the success of military leaders to the physical skills they obtained playing sports.⁵⁶ Although this tactic was certainly used in part because it humanized soldiers, it also stressed masculinity as well as values like fairness and teamwork.⁵⁷ This type of propaganda was also employed by superheroes; indeed, Captain America, Batman, and Superman played baseball, the national sport, on the covers of various comic book issues.⁵⁸ Whether it was through sexuality or sports,

⁴⁹ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 105-106.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁵² Fred Ray, *Superman* #18 (New York: DC Comics, September 1942); Jack Burnley, *World’s Finest Comics* #7 (New York: DC Comics, September 1942); Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 106.

⁵³ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 109.

⁵⁴ John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 57.

⁵⁵ Blum, *V Was for Victory*, 57.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 109.

⁵⁸ Fred Ray, *World’s Finest Comics* #3 (New York: DC Comics, September 1941); Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, *Captain America* #7 (New York: Marvel Comics, October 1941).

superheroes engaged in propaganda focused on promoting the masculinity, and consequently the physical superiority, of the American soldier.

Superheroes and the Vilification of the Enemy

Perhaps the most prominent thread of propaganda during World War II, however, focused on portraying Germans and Japanese as immoral and degenerate villains.⁵⁹ The main purpose of this was to “manipulate notions of ‘otherness’ in order to inspire contempt toward the enemy,” which furthered the myth that the United States was fighting the “Good War,” a kind of Manichean struggle between good and evil.⁶⁰ Because they were subjected to less regulation than official propaganda, superhero comics actually used some of the most hateful imagery and rhetoric with regards to vilifying the enemies of the United States.⁶¹ Ignoring policies and politics, superhero comics were extraordinarily successful at establishing the enemies of the United States as inherently evil.⁶² In fact, a poll taken in 1944 found that 40% of Americans did not understand why the United States was engaged in World War II. Nevertheless, influenced by the hateful propaganda campaign against the Germans and Japanese, almost all Americans supported the war.⁶³

⁵⁹ According to Christopher Murray, Italy, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria were largely ignored by propaganda in the United States as they were perceived as not being particularly committed to the objectives of the main Axis powers, Germany and Japan. Interestingly, prior to the end of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact in May 1941, propaganda in the United States had portrayed Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union as evil. In a short Superman story called “What if Superman Ended the War?”, Superman actually kidnaps Stalin along with Hitler and takes the two villains to the League of Nations to stand trial for their crimes. Eventually, comics sought to “de-other” the Soviet Union by having superheroes lead Russians into battle and focusing on the struggle of the Russian peasant. In short, they attempted to reshape previous propaganda efforts. Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 229-234.

⁶⁰ This, of course, was not particularly difficult given some of the crimes committed by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 102.

⁶¹ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 182.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 183.

⁶³ Blum, *V Was for Victory*, 46.

Although the American public largely despised Hitler and the Nazis for their unprovoked military onslaught across Western Europe, Blum indicates that “the Germans as a people at first evoked relatively little animosity.”⁶⁴ Partially because so many people living in the United States had German ancestors, many Americans perceived the typical German to be not unlike themselves, specifically white and Christian. Seeking to garner support for a military strategy that prioritized the defeat of Nazi Germany, which was undoubtedly



Figure 28. Reed Crandall, *Hit Comics* #23 (New York: Quality Comics, August 1942).

more dangerous than Japan, propaganda sought to instill hatred of Germans among the American public.⁶⁵ Nazi officers were arrogant and vicious sadists such as Captain Nazi and the Red Skull who brutally tortured their captives.⁶⁶ In *Captain Marvel Jr.* #12 (October 1943), Captain Nazi coldly looks upon a woman with tattered clothes and orders his soldiers to torture her, “start[ing] with her face.”⁶⁷ Other covers of superhero comics showed German officers torturing partially naked male victims including *Hit Comics* #23 (August 1942) (Figure 28).⁶⁸ In *Marvel Mystery Comics* #42 (April 1943), the Nazis invent a weapon that literally cooks Allied soldiers.⁶⁹ *Human Torch* #5 (Fall 1941) even identifies Hitler as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, rampaging through Europe with a giant scythe.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, German soldiers were

⁶⁴ Blum, *V Was for Victory*, 46.

⁶⁵ Blum, *V Was for Victory*, 49; Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 195.

⁶⁶ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 199-200.

⁶⁷ Mac Raboy, *Captain Marvel Jr.* #12 (New York: Fawcett Publications, October 1943).

⁶⁸ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 200.

⁶⁹ Carl Pfeufer, *Marvel Mystery Comics* #42 (New York: Marvel Comics, April 1943).

⁷⁰ Carl Burgos and Bill Everett, *Human Torch* #5 (New York: Marvel Comics, Fall 1941).

portrayed as mindless brutes, less psychopathic than Nazi officers, but essentially enslaved by the militant fascism of Nazi Germany.⁷¹ While they were still shown to be capable of atrocities, as demonstrated by the cover of *Exciting Comics* #39 (June 1945) where they are handing poisoned chocolate to innocent children, propaganda in superhero comics directed against the Germans focused largely on the “barbarism and oppression inherent in fascism,” some of which was undoubtedly grounded in fact.⁷²

The viciousness of the propaganda campaign against the Germans paled in comparison to that which targeted the Japanese, who were portrayed as “a treacherous and corrupt *race* who were simply opportunistic murderers of white Americans.”⁷³ In fact, according to historian Peter Stanley, American propaganda posters were “some of the most grotesque produced by the Allies.”⁷⁴ Several superhero comics portrayed the Japanese as a primitive race who could not invent advanced technology, but only imitate it through means of

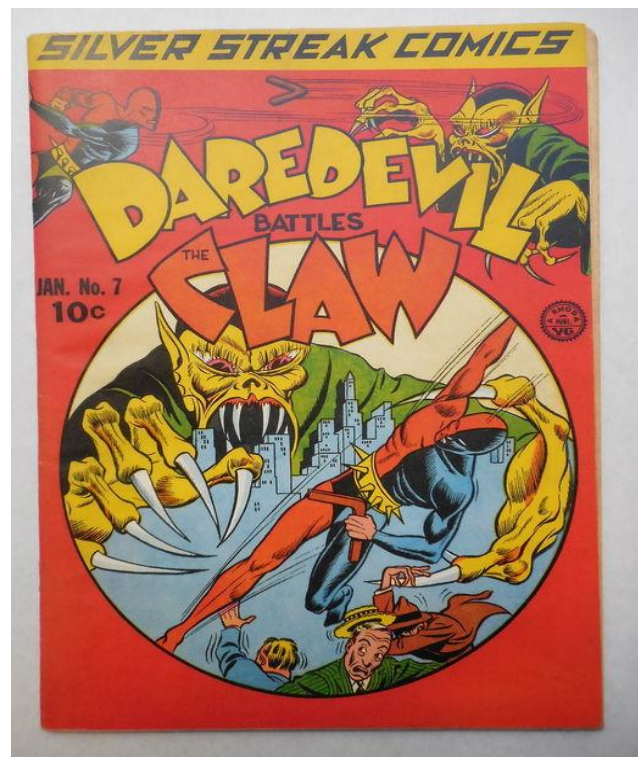


Figure 29. Jack Cole, *Daredevil* #7 (New York: MLJ Magazines, January 1941).

⁷¹ Benjamin L. Alpers, “This is the Army: Imagining a Democratic Military in World War II,” *Journal of American History* 85, no. 1 (1998): 133-136.

⁷² Alex Schomburg, *Exciting Comics* #39 (New York: Better Publications, June 1945); Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 224.

⁷³ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 224.

⁷⁴ Peter Stanley, *What Did You Do in the War Daddy?: A Visual History of Propaganda Posters* (Melbourne, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983), 14.

espionage.⁷⁵ This is connected to those that presented the Japanese as subhuman. In *Captain America #5* (August 1941), a Japanese villain called Captain Okada, who attempts to destroy the United States Navy by inducing a volcanic eruption, is “*literally yellow* [with] small eyes, a weak jaw, and a stubby nose.”⁷⁶

John Dower identifies such traits as essential elements of negatively portraying the Japanese as “apes, lesser men and primitives,” which was a central focus of a broader propaganda campaign against the Japanese that extended well beyond comic books.⁷⁷ Additionally, the cover of *Daredevil #7* (January 1941) features a Japanese villain called the Claw who does not look remotely human with his fangs and long claws (Figure 29).⁷⁸ Unsurprisingly, the Japanese were often subjected to significant brutality in superhero comics. Some particularly shocking examples include the Human Torch burning the flesh off the arm of a Japanese soldier, the Black Terror steamrolling Japanese soldiers while ruthlessly mowing them down with a machine gun, and Captain America crushing Japanese soldiers with a bulldozer.⁷⁹ Collectively, this propaganda sought to inspire contempt and bloodlust among Americans towards the Japanese in order to “encourage a ruthless mentality,” in the Pacific war.⁸⁰ Although this likely would have occurred regardless – there was little alternative if one wanted to survive in some instances – this propaganda campaign certainly made it easier to adopt this mindset.

⁷⁵ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 47

⁷⁶ Donnelly, “A Hero for a Good War,” 28.

⁷⁷ John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 10.

⁷⁸ Gina Misiroglu, *The Superhero Book: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Comic-Book and Hollywood Heroes*, 2nd ed. (Detroit, MI: Visible Ink Press, 2012), 358.

⁷⁹ Alex Schomburg, *Human Torch #12* (New York: Marvel Comics, July 1943); Elmer Wexler, *Exciting Comics #35* (New York: Better Publications, October 1944); Alex Schomburg, *U.S.A. Comics #13* (New York: Marvel Comics, July 1944).

⁸⁰ Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 222.

The Dark Knight (2008), Iron Man 3 (2013), and Captain America: Civil War (2016)

Given that the earliest of these three movies was released seven years after 9/11, it is unsurprising that they were not the first to engage with political issues surrounding the war on terror. In *Spider-Man 2* (2004), the titular character, portrayed as pitiable and vulnerable for much of the film, represents an “allegorical stand-in” for the United States after 9/11.⁸¹ Early in the film, Peter Parker loses his job as a pizza delivery boy after he is unable to make a delivery on time even after changing into his Spider-Man costume. Peter struggles to pay his rent, and he does not even have enough money to buy flowers for Mary Jane Watson during her theater performance. His struggles are not just economic in nature. He is berated by J. Jonah Jameson, his boss at the *Daily Bugle* where Peter works as a freelance photographer, and he is failing his classes at Columbia University. Worse, Mary Jane is engaged and his relationship with Harry Osborne, formerly his best friend, is strained. Overwhelmed by these challenges, Peter briefly loses his powers, thus ceasing to be Spider-Man, before ultimately emerging victorious against Doc Ock, a supervillain who seeks to build a powerful nuclear reactor capable of destroying New York City. Much like Spider-Man, the United States responded decisively to its challenges, embracing its exceptionalism by employing its power to defend freedom and justice around the world.⁸²

Iron Man (2008), released just months before *The Dark Knight*, also responded to the war on terror. The film begins with Tony Stark being attacked in Afghanistan by a terrorist group known as the Ten Rings. Stark is nearly killed during the attack and only survives because fellow captive Professor Ho Yinsen implants an electromagnet into his chest to prevent shards of

⁸¹ Jeanne Holland, “It’s Complicated: *Spider-Man 2*’s Reinscription of ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’ in Post-9/11 America,” *Journal of American Culture* 35, no. 4 (2012): 292, 295.

⁸² Holland, “It’s Complicated,” 289-291, 298.

shrapnel from piercing his heart. With the help of Professor Yinsen, Tony builds a rudimentary suit of powered armor and escapes from the terrorists.

After returning to the United States, Tony becomes Iron Man by developing a better armored suit, which can shoot powerful energy blasts, fire miniature machine guns supported by a precise targeting system, and launch missiles capable of destroying tanks (Figure 30).

Unsurprisingly, Iron Man returns to Afghanistan and easily defeats the Ten Rings – even avoiding any civilian casualties in the process.

Released as the United States was

mired in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, *Iron Man* represents a fantasy of a quick and simple Middle Eastern war with no political complexities.⁸³

This section analyzes *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man 3*, and *Captain America: Civil War* for two reasons. First, they are incredibly popular among both fans and critics. Among critics on Rotten Tomatoes, for example, the three films received a 94%, 80%, and 91%, respectively.⁸⁴



Figure 30. In one of the most iconic scenes from *Iron Man* (2008), Iron Man fires a missile at a tank and calmly walks away from it as it explodes, demonstrating his confidence in the superiority of his armored suit. *Iron Man*, directed by Jon Favreau (2008).

⁸³ Landon Palmer, “‘Iron Man 3’ is the Most Political Superhero Movie Ever Made,” Film School Rejects, May 7, 2013, <https://filmschoolrejects.com/iron-man-3-is-the-most-political-superhero-movie-ever-made-92f6f42470bb/>.

⁸⁴ “The Dark Knight,” Rotten Tomatoes, accessed March 14, 2018, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_dark_knight; “Iron Man 3,” Rotten Tomatoes, accessed March 14, 2018, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/iron_man_3; “Captain America: Civil War,” Rotten Tomatoes, accessed March 14, 2018, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/captain_america_civil_war.

Additionally, each of the three films grossed over \$1 billion worldwide and are within the top 35 in the global box office rankings.⁸⁵ Second, and more importantly, these three films do not address the emotions and desires surrounding 9/11; rather, they grapple with political views on specific policy issues related to the war on terror, providing a consistent means for determining if they can affect change in individual opinions. As such, this section analyzes the political views promoted by these movies.

The Dark Knight: An Endorsement of Torture and Mass Surveillance

In the opening scene of *The Dark Knight*, a criminal mastermind known as the Joker robs a Gotham City mob bank and escapes with the money after methodically killing all of his henchmen. Meanwhile, Bruce Wayne, a billionaire who fights crime at night as Batman, forms an alliance with Lieutenant Jim Gordon and District Attorney Harvey Dent to fight the mob in Gotham by constricting its cash flow. In response, Lau, the money launderer for the mob, takes the money and flees to Hong Kong, assuring the mob bosses in a videoconference that their money will be safe because Harvey will not be able to apprehend him. At this point, the Joker enters the room laughing, warning the mob bosses that “Batman has no jurisdiction,” and will be able to find Lau and “make him squeal.” The Joker proposes to kill the Batman in exchange for half the money, but he is rebuffed. After Batman seizes Lau from Hong Kong, however, the mob bosses change their minds and accept the offer.

In a video recording released to the public, the Joker kills a Batman impersonator and promises to kill more people until Batman reveals his identity. Although Batman prevents him from killing Harvey and the mayor, the Joker murders a judge and the police commissioner,

⁸⁵ Tim Dirks, “All-Time Box Office Top 100,” Filmsite, accessed March 11, 2018, <http://www.filmsite.org/boxoffice.html>.

which compels Harvey to falsely claim that he is Batman in an effort to stop the killings. As Harvey is escorted to prison in an armored convoy, the Joker attacks in an attempt to kill him, but he is captured by Batman and Lieutenant Gordon.

At the police station, though, Batman learns that Harvey and Rachel Dawes, “his oldest friend and the center of a love triangle between himself and [Harvey],” have been captured and tied up in buildings rigged to explode.⁸⁶ Knowing that Batman and Lieutenant Gordon will only be able to save one of them, the Joker tells Batman their locations. Though he intends to save Rachel, Batman is deceived by the Joker and is led to Harvey instead.⁸⁷ Batman manages to save Harvey, but Rachel is killed, and Harvey is left horribly scarred.

After escaping from police custody with Lau, the Joker confronts Harvey in the hospital and “completes his corruption by giving Harvey the opportunity to kill him.” Harvey becomes the villain known as Two-Face and goes on a murderous rampage against those responsible for killing Rachel, flipping a coin to determine whether they should live or die. The Joker then blows up the hospital and leaves with a busload of hostages.

In another video recording, the Joker informs those remaining in Gotham that he controls the city and warns them not to leave via the bridges or tunnels. As two ferries – one full of civilians and the other full of criminals – attempt to escape, the Joker tells them he will destroy both of the ferries at midnight unless one of them chooses to blow up the other ferry with the detonator that he has provided.⁸⁸ Using a mass surveillance device, Batman finds and stops the Joker before he destroys the ferries, but the Joker gleefully tells Batman that the people of Gotham will lose all hope after they learn about the crimes committed by Two-Face.

⁸⁶ John Ip, “The Dark Knight’s War on Terrorism,” *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law* 9, no. 1 (2011): 212.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

Two-Face brings Lieutenant Gordon and his family to the building where Rachel died. Blaming Lieutenant Gordon for her death, Two-Face threatens to kill his son, but Batman arrives in time to save him and kill Two-Face. Refusing to let the Joker win, Batman takes responsibility for the killing spree to preserve the legacy of Harvey as an incorruptible white knight.

Throughout *The Dark Knight*, at least four parallels are drawn between the Joker and the American conception of the Islamist terrorist. First, the Joker is described by both himself and others as irrational. Although the dominant paradigm in the literature on terrorism posits that terrorists are rational, they are not popularly perceived as such.⁸⁹ While a terrorist can be both rational and evil, media coverage of 9/11 rarely focused on rational portrayals of the terrorists responsible for the attacks, focusing instead on the notion that they were solely evil.⁹⁰ After Harvey blames the Joker for killing Rachel, the Joker scoffs at the notion that he has plans and compares himself to “a dog chasing cars,” implying that he does things without really having a reason. After the Joker begins his killing spree, Alfred Pennyworth, Bruce’s butler and best friend, makes a similar claim, warning Bruce that the Joker is “not looking for anything logical [and] cannot be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with,” because he “just want[s] to watch the world burn.”

Second, the Joker is critical of societal values just as Islamist terrorists are critical of the Western way of life. He refers to the morals of society as “a bad joke” and constantly seeks to prove that the people of Gotham will abandon their morality “at the first sign of trouble” – the “social experiment” with the ferries being one example of this. Additionally, the Joker despises

⁸⁹ Martha Crenshaw, “The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Strategic Choice,” in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1990), 7-24; Gordon H. McCormick, “Terrorist Decision Making,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 6, no. 1 (2003): 482; Emily Pronin, Kathleen Kennedy, and Sarah Butsch, “Bombing Versus Negotiating: How Preferences for Combating Terrorism Are Affected by Perceived Terrorist Rationality,” *Basic & Applied Social Psychology* 28, no. 4 (2006): 386.

⁹⁰ Pronin, Kennedy, and Butsch, “Bombing Versus Negotiating,” 386.

those who care only about money. After escaping from prison, he forces Lau to reveal the location of the mob's money only to burn it in front of a mob boss whom he subsequently murders to give Gotham "a better class of criminal."

Third, the Joker releases video recordings to the citizens of Gotham, calling to mind those broadcasted by terrorists, particularly *The Slaughter of the Spy-Journalist, the Jew Daniel Pearl*, released on February 21, 2002, which depicted Daniel Pearl, a journalist for *The Wall Street Journal*, being forced to condemn American foreign policy before having his throat slit.⁹¹ In his first video, the Joker brutally murders a Batman impersonator. Later, as the Joker seizes control of Gotham, he releases a second video in which he forces Mike Engel, the host of *Gotham Tonight*, to inform Gotham that they must obey the instructions of the Joker.

Finally, the Joker does not appear to be particularly interested in his own survival.⁹² When he meets the mob for the first time, he has several grenades attached to his body and threatens to detonate them if the mob attempts to kill him. He allows Dent to hold a gun to his head in the hospital. Moreover, he urges Batman to kill him on multiple occasions and laughs maniacally after Batman throws him off a building near the end of the film – indeed, he is even disappointed that Batman chooses to save his life. Given these similarities between the Joker and the Islamist terrorist, at least as perceived by the American public, it is clear that the Joker is depicted as a terrorist.⁹³

This characterization of the Joker as a terrorist makes it clear that *The Dark Knight* can be viewed as a parable of the war on terror. Because the Joker is such a significant threat, it is

⁹¹ Ron Briley, "The Dark Knight: An Allegory of America in the Age of Bush?," *History News Network*, August 25, 2008, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/53504>.

⁹² Lars Dittmer, "New Evil – The Joker in 'The Dark Knight' as a Prototype of the Post-September 11-Villain," (master's thesis, University of Potsdam, 2009), 77.

⁹³ It is worth noting that President Barack Obama even compared the Islamic State to the Joker during discussions with advisers. Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

portrayed as reasonable that Batman is willing to do anything necessary to stop him – including engage in torture and mass surveillance. As such, the film serves as an endorsement of both of these practices as used during the war on terror.

There are three depictions of torture in *The Dark Knight*.⁹⁴ Two occur shortly after the assassination attempt on the mayor: Harvey questions a henchman of the Joker while threatening to shoot him, and Batman breaks the ankles of mob boss Sal Maroni by dropping him off a fire escape. The third occurs after the Joker is captured, when Batman violently interrogates him in an attempt to discover where Harvey and Rachel were taken. In each of these instances, torture is ineffective. Neither Harvey nor Batman learn anything about the whereabouts of the Joker from the henchman and the mob boss, and the Joker tells Batman where Harvey and Rachel are “not because [the] physical torture has broken him, but because he wishes to make Batman choose whom to rescue.”⁹⁵ This is demonstrated by the fact that the Joker laughs maniacally as he is being tortured and mocks Batman for “hav[ing] nothing to threaten him with.” Additionally, he intentionally provides Batman with inaccurate information, which causes Batman to save Harvey instead of Rachel. Unlike various movies and television shows, *The Dark Knight* does not depict torture as effective with regards to obtaining useful information.⁹⁶

However, this does not indicate that the film condemns the use of torture. Perhaps most importantly, heroes use torture, specifically Harvey – before he becomes Two-Face – and Batman. Additionally, in explaining why he will not divulge information on the Joker to Batman, Maroni explains that it is because Batman has rules, while the Joker does not, in effect telling Batman that he could obtain information if he simply chose to use more intense torture. Because

⁹⁴ Ip, “The Dark Knight’s War on Terrorism,” 216.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁹⁶ *Zero Dark Thirty* and the television show *24*, for example, both portray torture as enormously effective.

The Dark Knight suggests that torture has the potential to be effective in obtaining information, it implicitly endorses its use during the war on terror.

In addition to torture, Batman uses mass surveillance during his relentless pursuit of the Joker. Specifically, he turns every cellphone in Gotham into “a microphone and a high frequency generator-receiver,” which allows Lucius Fox, a weapons expert and the chief executive officer of Wayne Enterprises, to observe all citizens of Gotham without their knowledge or consent (Figure 31).

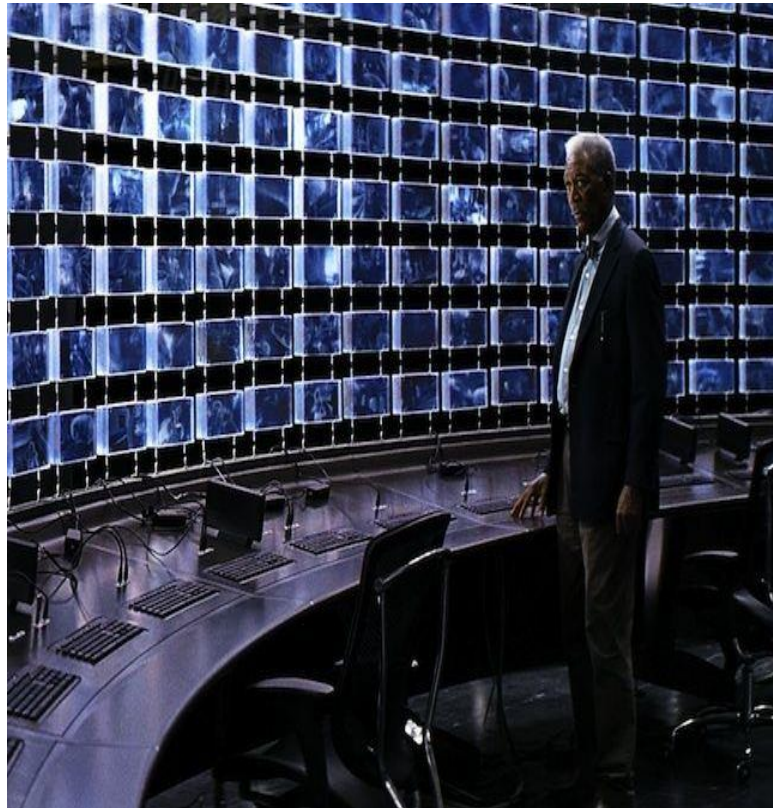


Figure 31. *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2008).

This is a clear allusion to mass surveillance during the war on terror; indeed, Jerry Bowyer describes this surveillance system as a “one-man, supercharged Patriot Act,” which allowed the government to search telephone records without obtaining a warrant (though it is relevant that the Patriot Act was legitimately passed by the government rather than instituted by a vigilante).⁹⁷ *The Dark Knight* clearly endorses the use of this surveillance. Despite deeming it to be “unethical, dangerous, [and] wrong,” Fox nonetheless agrees to use it when Batman requests he do so, and it allows Batman to quickly locate and capture the Joker without further loss of life.

⁹⁷ In 2015, President Barack Obama signed legislation that ended the bulk collection of phone data of Americans with no ties to terrorism.” Jerry Bowyer, “The Politics of Batman: The Dark Knight of the Soul Rises,” *Forbes*, July 19, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jerrybowyer/2012/07/19/the-politics-of-batman-the-dark-knight-of-the-soul-rises/#32dd5bc92b6a>.

Andrew Klavan describes *The Dark Knight* as “a paean of praise to the fortitude and moral courage” of the policies implemented by President George W. Bush during the war on terror.⁹⁸ Although this is an exaggeration, since the torture yields no information and Fox believes the surveillance was unethical, *The Dark Knight* ultimately portrays both torture and mass surveillance as acceptable means to defeat the Joker. Because the Joker is portrayed as a terrorist, the film ultimately endorses their use during the war on terror.

Iron Man 3: The Manipulation of the War on Terror and the Ineffectiveness of Military Force

The film begins with Tony Stark remembering a New Year’s Eve party nearly fifteen years earlier during which he met Aldrich Killian, the developer of an experimental regenerative treatment called Extremis. Tony rejects an offer by Aldrich to join his company and leaves him alone on the rooftop despite promising Aldrich he would meet him there.

Back in the present, Tony has been experiencing recurrent panic attacks ever since the invasion of New York by the alien race known as the Chitauri that occurred during the events of *The Avengers* (2012) during which he guided a nuclear missile through a wormhole to destroy the alien fleet in space. He is dealing with this anxiety by building dozens of Iron Man suits. Meanwhile, a terrorist known as the Mandarin has committed a series of bombings against various cities and military bases, prompting President Matthew Ellis to deploy Colonel James Rhodes as an armored superhero formerly known as War Machine, now rebranded as the Iron Patriot.

After his close friend Happy Hogan is nearly killed in a Mandarin attack, Tony challenges the terrorist to fight him directly. In response, the Mandarin attacks his home with

⁹⁸ Andrew Klavan, “What Bush and Batman Have in Common,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2008, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121694247343482821>.

helicopter gunships. Tony saves his girlfriend Pepper Potts and manages to escape in an Iron Man suit, but he runs out of power and crashes in rural Tennessee.

With help from a young boy named Harley, Tony learns that the Mandarin bombings are not actually terrorist attacks; rather, they are the result of individuals rejecting Extremis. Further investigation allows Tony to track the Mandarin to Miami, where he discovers that the Mandarin is actually an English actor named Trevor Slattery. Aldrich captures Stark and informs him that he has kidnapped Pepper and forced her to undergo the Extremis treatment in an attempt to get Tony to help fix its flaws.

Having previously stolen the Iron Patriot armor from Colonel Rhodes, Aldrich abducts President Ellis from Air Force One. Tony and Colonel Rhodes escape and follow them to a damaged oil tanker. Heavily outnumbered, Tony calls in a fleet of Iron Man suits controlled by his artificial intelligence J.A.R.V.I.S. Colonel Rhodes saves President Ellis, and Tony and Pepper defeat Aldrich. To show his devotion to Pepper, Tony destroys his Iron Man suits and allows doctors to remove the shrapnel from his chest that caused him to become Iron Man in the first place.

Iron Man 3 quickly engages with the war on terror. Early in the film, Tony “experience[s] a severe anxiety attack” after being asked by a young child how he got out of the wormhole during the Chitauri attack on New York. Tony continues to have panic attacks throughout the rest of the film whenever he is asked about these events, often ominously referred to as simply “New York.”⁹⁹ The fact that Tony is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as

⁹⁹ Jim Naureckas, “Iron Man 3 and the Art of Missing the Point,” FAIR, May 8, 2013, <https://fair.org/home/iron-man-3-and-the-art-of-missing-the-point/>; Christopher Comerford, “The Knight is Darkest Before the Dawn: Batman, the United States, and Post-9/11 Gothic,” (PhD dissertation, University of Technology, Sydney, 2016).

a result of an attack that is clearly intended to allude to 9/11 strongly links *Iron Man 3* to the war on terror.¹⁰⁰

There are at least two prominent political messages regarding the war on terror that are ensconced within *Iron Man 3*. The first is that the fear of terrorism can be manipulated by businessmen and politicians for their own gain. In the videos broadcast by the Mandarin, he is depicted as an Islamist terrorist in several ways. First, he simply looks Middle Eastern, “sport[ing] a long, scraggly beard” that vaguely resembles that



Figure 32. *Iron Man 3*, directed by Shane Black (2010).

of Osama bin Laden” (Figure 32).¹⁰¹ Second, he expresses hatred of American culture. While taking responsibility for an attack on the Chinese Theatre, the Mandarin implicitly compares this culture to a fortune cookie, claiming that both are “hollow, full of lies, and leave a bad taste in the mouth.” Third, he targets the oil industry, specifically by killing an accountant of a large oil corporation. Because Islamist terrorists have viewed oil as the “umbilical cord and lifeline of the crusader community” since even before 9/11, the fact that the Mandarin so directly attacks the oil industry further characterizes him as an Islamist terrorist.¹⁰²

Yet in a shocking twist that takes place approximately halfway through the film, it is revealed that the Mandarin is not even a terrorist: indeed, he is not frightening at all and only

¹⁰⁰ This section will not discuss whether Robert Downey Jr. portrays post-traumatic stress disorder well or poorly in his role as Tony Stark, but for those who are interested, clinical psychologist Andrea Letamendi considers this issue. Andrea Letamendi, “‘Iron Man 3’: Does Tony Stark Have PTSD? (Guest Column),” *Hollywood Reporter*, May 10, 2013, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/iron-man-3-does-tony-520868>.

¹⁰¹ Matt Singer, “Defending ‘Iron Man 3’'s Big Plot Twist,” *IndieWire*, May 3, 2013, <http://www.indiewire.com/2013/05/defending-iron-man-3s-big-plot-twist-127985/>.

¹⁰² Arabinda Acharya, *Ten Years after 9/11: Rethinking the Jihadist Threat* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 76.

assumes the role of the Mandarin because it pays well. The real enemy is not a Muslim, but an industrialist. Aldrich effectively uses the Mandarin as a “custom-made terror threat” to generate supply and demand for Extremis so as to reap enormous profits for himself, noting the value of “hand[ing] people a target [like] bin Laden [or] Gaddafi.”¹⁰³ In essence, *Iron Man 3* suggests that the threat of terrorism, though legitimate, has been overblown and is subject to manipulation by the defense industry because “the war on terror is big business.”¹⁰⁴

This film also indicates that politicians may be involved in the manipulation of the war on terror. Shortly before the attack on Air Force One, Tony and Colonel Rhodes call the vice-president to inform him that President Ellis is in danger. Although the vice-president promises to have security lock down the plane, he actually is allied with Aldrich, motivated by the prospect of political power and “the promise that Extremis [can] heal his handicapped daughter.”¹⁰⁵ Julian Darius even argues that “the fact that the vice-president is working with [Aldrich] hints at how Vice President Dick Cheney was the chief executive officer of Halliburton, an oil company that profited enormously from the wars in the Middle East.”¹⁰⁶ Regardless of how convincing one finds this analogy, this film clearly suggests that politicians can be deeply involved with the military-industrial complex and thus that they may also intentionally exaggerate the threat of terrorism to further their own interests.

¹⁰³ Julian Darius, “Why *Iron Man 3* is the Best Iron Man Film to Date,” *Sequart*, May 6, 2013, <http://sequart.org/magazine/21937/why-iron-man-3-is-the-best-iron-man-film-to-date/>.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Darius, “Why *Iron Man 3* is the Best Iron Man Film to Date”; David E. Rosenbaum, “A Closer Look at Cheney and Halliburton,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/28/us/a-closer-look-at-cheney-and-halliburton.html>; Jane Corbin, “BBC Uncovers Lost Iraq Billions,” *BBC News*, June 10, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7444083.stm.

The second main political message in *Iron Man 3* is that increasing military spending is not an effective policy for combating terrorism. There are three main pieces of evidence to support this argument. First, the media mocks the Iron Patriot (Figure 34), particularly its rebranding from War Machine (Figure 33), which was purportedly too aggressive. Joan Rivers suggests that the Iron Patriot represents nothing more than a visceral appeal to patriotism because it is the “same suit.” Bill Maher is similarly critical, indicating that “giving War Machine a paint job” does not change the fact that it is a blunt military instrument unsuited for fighting the war on terror. In effect, this film implies that military force can kill terrorists, but not win the war on terror.

Second, the Iron Patriot fails to capture the Mandarin. During his first strike, the Iron Patriot is given inaccurate information and finds a group of innocent civilians rather than the Mandarin. Later, he is actually captured, which allows Aldrich to use the Iron Patriot armor against Air Force One. The parallels with the actual war on terror here are



Figure 33. This is the War Machine armor before it was rebranded as Iron Patriot. *Iron Man 2*, directed by Jon Favreau (2010).



Figure 34. The Iron Patriot armor is essentially the same as the War Machine armor, but is simply painted red, white, and blue. *Iron Man 3*, directed by Shane Black (2010).

difficult to miss. Indeed, throughout the Middle East, the United States has attempted to arm its allies with weapons that instead ended up in the hands of terrorists.

Last, Tony chooses to destroy his Iron Man suits at the end of the film – despite the fact that he had just relied on them to defeat Aldrich – because he recognizes that even his dozens of Iron Man suits were ineffective at preventing the emergence of terrorism. Indeed, in the opening scene of the film, Tony muses that “we create our own demons,” acknowledging that it was his cruelty towards Aldrich during the New Year’s Eve party that ultimately caused him to attack Stark. Both the beginning and end of the film allude to the argument that the foreign policy of the United States has contributed to its targeting by terrorists and that military force alone cannot easily rectify these mistakes. As such, it is apparent that *Iron Man 3* warns that increased military spending is not a panacea for terrorism.

Unlike *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man 3* constitutes an “extensive critique of the war on terror.”¹⁰⁷ Although it does not dismiss it – indeed, Aldrich is a terrorist in his own right – it does demonstrate that the fear of terrorism can be manipulated by businessmen and politicians who seek money and power rather than the promotion of the interests of the United States. It also presents the argument that the use of military force during the war on terror is ineffective, and can even be counterproductive, in that it allows terrorists to acquire powerful weapons that can subsequently be used to attack the United States. In short, *Iron Man 3* declares the war against terrorism to be exaggerated and criticizes the vast increases in military spending that have accompanied it.

¹⁰⁷ Alyssa Rosenberg, “‘Iron Man 3’ Takes on Drone Strikes, Media Manipulation, and the War on Terror,” *ThinkProgress*, May 3, 2013, <https://thinkprogress.org/iron-man-3-takes-on-drone-strikes-media-manipulation-and-the-war-on-terror-27a493105bb/>.

Captain America: Civil War: The Promotion of a Unilateralist Foreign Policy

In 1991, Bucky Barnes – brainwashed by the terrorist organization Hydra into becoming an enhanced assassin known as the Winter Soldier – is sent to intercept a car transporting a case of super-soldier serum. Ordered to leave no witnesses, the Winter Soldier slashes the tire of the car, causing it to crash directly into a tree, and then takes the the super-soldier serum to a military base in Siberia.

In the present, Captain America leads Falcon, Black Widow, and Scarlet Witch in an operation to prevent terrorists from stealing a biological weapon in Lagos, Nigeria. Although they successfully secure the virus, Scarlet Witch inadvertently kills several Wakandan humanitarian workers. In response, the United Nations implements the Sokovia Accords, which places the team of superheroes known as the Avengers under the supervision of a United Nations panel with the sole authority to deploy them.

The idea of oversight divides the Avengers. Haunted by his role in creating Ultron – an artificial intelligence program that was designed to safeguard the world, but ultimately destroyed much of the country of Sokovia – in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), Iron Man supports any effort to restrain the Avengers. As a result of uncovering a vast conspiracy within a counterterrorism agency known as S.H.I.E.L.D. in *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014), however, Captain America trusts his own judgement more than that of the United Nations.

During the ratification of the Accords in Vienna, an explosion kills several people including King T'Chaka of Wakanda with security footage suggesting that the Winter Soldier was responsible for the bombing. Black Panther, the son of King T'Chaka, vows to kill the Winter Soldier. Knowing that counterterrorist forces will attempt to kill the Winter Soldier, his childhood best friend, Captain America attempts to protect him with the help of Falcon. The

Winter Soldier is ultimately apprehended by the Joint Terrorism Task Force along with Captain America, Falcon, and Black Panther.

Helmut Zemo, seeking vengeance against the Avengers for killing his family in Sokovia, uses a stolen Hydra book to brainwash the Winter Soldier once again. After obtaining the location of the Siberian Hydra base where he took the supersoldier serum in 1991, Zemo orders the Winter Soldier to engage in a murderous rampage. Captain America, however, knocks the Winter Soldier unconscious to deactivate his brainwashing. With the help of Falcon, Captain America sneak away with the Winter Soldier and they go into hiding.

When the Winter Soldier wakes up, he explains that Zemo framed him for the bombing of the United Nations and tells Captain America and Falcon that there are five additional supersoldiers in cryostasis in the Siberian military base. Desperate to prevent Zemo from gaining control over the super soldiers – and knowing that the Accords will not grant them the authority to do so – Captain America, Falcon, and the Winter Soldier recruit Scarlet Witch, Hawkeye, and Ant-Man to beat Zemo to Siberia. Iron Man, along with War Machine, Vision, Black Panther, Spider-Man, and Black Widow, intercept Captain America and his team at Leipzig/Halle airport. Captain America and the Winter Soldier manage to escape with the help of Black Widow, but their other allies are captured and taken to the Raft, a high-security prison in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

After Iron Man is presented with evidence that Captain America is correct and that the Winter Soldier is innocent, he flies to Siberia to help. Yet when they arrive, Zemo explains that he has killed all of the supersoldiers and reveals video footage showing that the Winter Soldier killed Iron Man's parents in 1991. Upon discovering that Captain America was aware of this,

Iron Man attacks him and the Winter Soldier. The vicious fight between them only ends when Captain America disables Iron Man's suit and escapes with the Winter Soldier.

After returning to the Avengers compound, Iron Man receives a letter from Captain America, who apologizes for not telling him the truth about his parents. As he is reading it, Iron Man learns that Captain America is leading a prison break at the Raft, but chooses not to intervene. Meanwhile, Black Panther allows the Winter Soldier to recuperate in Wakanda.

Captain America: Civil War is a clash of two opposing political views on intervention. The Avengers – described by Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross as “enhanced individuals based [in the] United States who routinely ignore sovereign borders, inflict their will wherever they choose, and seem unconcerned about what they leave behind” – represent the United States. Iron Man argues that the Avengers “need to be put in check.” By accepting oversight of the Avengers by the United Nations, he promotes the view that the United States should not engage in unilateral foreign interventions without broader support from the international community. Captain America, on the other hand, criticizes the United Nations as being “run by people with agendas.” Although he acknowledges that the Avengers have not been perfect,” he argues that “the safest hands are still [their] own.” Captain America thus promotes a unilateralist foreign policy free of international constraints. Although Joe Russo, co-director of *Captain America: Civil War*, insists that there was no attempt by those who created the film to enforce any particular political view, this section argues that this film ultimately supports that of Captain America.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Germain Lussier, “*Civil War*’s Writers and Directors Explain Why You Shouldn’t Side with Iron Man or Captain America,” *io9*, May 5, 2016, <https://io9.gizmodo.com/civil-wars-writers-and-directors-explain-why-you-should-1775317717>.

First, the film demonstrates that the Avengers are remarkably effective at protecting the world. Although the Avengers did inflict some civilian casualties in Lagos, it is apparent that in stopping terrorists from acquiring and releasing a bioweapon, the intervention by the Avengers saved more lives than were lost. Much of this can be attributed to the Falcon who uses the weapons system on his



Figure 35. Redwing hovers in the air after killing a terrorist with the machine guns extending out of its wings. *Captain America: Civil War*, directed by Joe Russo and Anthony Russo (2016).

winged jetpack to launch tactical missile strikes and deploys a drone called Redwing, which provides reliable surveillance and kills terrorists with surgical precision (Figure 35). This, of course, represents an idealized view of drone warfare, which in reality has killed hundreds if not thousands of civilians according to a variety of independent sources.¹⁰⁹

Other interventions undertaken by the Avengers also resulted in remarkably low collateral damage: 74 casualties in New York while stopping the Chitauri invasion, 23 casualties in Washington, D.C. while preventing terrorists from launching advanced aircraft capable of

¹⁰⁹ Interestingly, government officials in the Obama Administration have consistently claimed that drone strikes are only approved when there is “near-certainty of no collateral damage.” According to Jo Becker and Scott Shane in *The New York Times*, however, this a result of the United States “count[ing] all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent.” Colin Friedersdorf, “The Obama Administration’s Drone-Strike Dissembling,” *Atlantic*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/03/the-obama-administrations-drone-strike-dissembling/473541/>; Jo Becker and Scott Shane, “Secret ‘Kill List’ Proves a Test of Obama’s Principles and Will,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html>; Jack Serle and Jessica Purkiss, “Drone Wars: The Full Data,” *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, January 1, 2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-01/drone-wars-the-full-data>; Data Team, “How Do Government Numbers on Drone Strikes Compare with Other Estimates?,” *Economist*, July 7, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2016/07/daily-chart-3>.

killing millions of people, and 177 casualties in Sokovia while fighting Ultron. Although Secretary Ross shows the Avengers this data in an attempt to justify the Accords, it seems clear that the Avengers, even in the midst of attacks with the potential to destroy the world, do a remarkable job of protecting civilians. As such, it is portrayed as unreasonable to force them to submit to oversight. This, of course, supports Captain America and his view that it is better to allow the Avengers to operate unhindered by international restraints.

Second, the Accords allow superheroes to be confined in the Raft, an imposing submarine complex that only occasionally emerges from the water (Figure 36). Because it is seemingly located in international waters, the superheroes allied with Rogers can be imprisoned without a trial; the Scarlet Witch is even kept in a straitjacket.¹¹⁰

When Iron Man visits the Raft, he appears shocked at the conditions of the underwater prison, calling it a place for maniacs and telling Hawkeye that he did not expect the Raft to be used to imprison superheroes. Indeed, the Raft seems quite similar to the detention center at Guantanamo



Figure 36. *Captain America: Civil War*, directed by Joe Russo and Anthony Russo (2016).

Bay. Although public opinion on the justifiability of keeping terrorists at Guantanamo Bay is mixed, the fact that the Raft imprisons superheroes ensures that it is meant to be viewed

¹¹⁰ Tom Bacon, “The Political Side of ‘Captain America: Civil War’ You Won’t Have Noticed!,” *Geeks*, accessed March 10, 2018, <https://geeks.media/the-political-side-of-captain-america-civil-war-you-won-t-have-noticed>.

negatively. Because of this, *Captain America: Civil War* suggests that those who support the Accords are in the wrong.

Last, Captain America is portrayed as an individual with strong moral character. This is best demonstrated by an exchange between Iron Man and Captain America shortly after the Winter Soldier was initially captured.

Captain America: If I see a situation pointed south, I can't ignore it. Sometimes I wish I could.

Iron Man: No, you don't.

Captain America: No, I don't. Sometimes . . .

Iron Man: Sometimes I wanna punch you in your perfect teeth.

It is almost as though Captain America has no choice but to do the right thing.

Additionally, Captain America is extremely loyal. Despite the evidence suggesting that the Winter Soldier was the one who bombed the United Nations, Captain America trusted that his friend was telling the truth and he was ultimately proven correct. Had Captain America stuck to the Accords, it is almost certain that he would not have been permitted to pursue Zemo – even though he had the potential to awaken and control five deadly super soldiers. Unlike the United Nations, Captain America places his faith in people, and indeed, it is only fitting that he breaks his allies out of the Raft at the end of the film. By emphasizing his strong sense of morality and steady judgment, *Captain America: Civil War* suggests that his views on intervention are correct as well.

After the battle at Leipzig, Black Widow goes into exile after telling Iron Man that he is wrong on the Accords; similarly, Black Panther abandons Iron Man at the end of the film and permits the Winter Soldier to undergo treatment in a Wakandan medical facility. Because of the success of the Avengers, the negative portrayal of the Raft, and the positive portrayal of Captain America, viewers of *Captain America: Civil War* are prompted to do the same and therefore

agree with Captain America. As such, this film promotes the view that the United States should not be constrained by the United Nations during its interventions around the world.

Conclusion

There are two main pieces of evidence that demonstrate the intentionality of the propaganda promoted by superheroes during World War II. First, the imagery and plots of superhero stories largely mirrored government propaganda.¹¹¹ As this analysis has shown, numerous comic book covers bore striking similarities to propaganda posters. More generally, the themes emphasized in government propaganda closely aligned with those furthered by superheroes. It is highly unlikely that this would have occurred unless superhero writers and artists deliberately sought to do so. Second, various writers and artists have explicitly stated that they used superheroes as a means of assisting the war effort. Among the most notable of these was Joe Simon, who described Captain America as “a political stand” regarding the war against the Nazis, but many others acknowledged that their superhero stories constituted intentional propaganda.¹¹²

This is not surprising for two reasons. First, comic book creators – who, as previously discussed, were mostly Jewish – were quicker to recognize the danger that Adolf Hitler posed to the world.¹¹³ Second, many comic book creators, “unlike contemporary creative individuals,” actually served in the military, thus increasing their support of the war.¹¹⁴ In short, it is apparent that superhero writers and artists carefully and deliberately used their stories as propaganda to

¹¹¹ Simon and Simon, *The Comic Book Makers*, 42.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Yanes, “Graphic Imagery,” 28.

¹¹⁴ Stan Lee, Will Eisner, and Jack Kirby were among those who enlisted in the army during World War II. Yanes, “Graphic Imagery,” 28.

promote the war effort of the United States during World War II by stressing the importance of the home front, emphasizing its military might, and vilifying its enemies.

The Dark Knight, *Iron Man 3*, and *Captain America: Civil War* have also advanced certain political views relating to the war on terror, but there is scant evidence to prove whether this is intentional or unintentional.¹¹⁵ What the juxtaposition of these comic books and these films demonstrates, however, is that intentions do not matter; these superhero movies undoubtedly express specific political opinions to their viewers. Indeed, because they do so somewhat more subtly, they may ironically be even more persuasive because individuals are less likely to resist the views they take away from the movies.

¹¹⁵ Although the directors of these movies have explicitly denied the presence of any specific political message, one should not necessarily hold the directors at their word in this matter. Because they often seek to attract a large audience, directors have an incentive to deny that they intentionally sought to promote political views within their movies. Brian Hiatt, "Christopher Nolan: 'Dark Knight Rises' Isn't Political," *Rolling Stone*, July 20, 2012, <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/christopher-nolan-dark-knight-rises-isn-t-political-20120720>; Lussier, "*Civil War*'s Writers and Directors Explain Why You Shouldn't Side with Iron Man or Captain America."

Chapter 4. Persuasive Power: Experimental Evidence of How Superhero Movies Influence Political Views

No saint, no pope, no general, no sultan, has ever had the power that a filmmaker has: the power to talk to hundreds of millions of people for two hours in the dark. – Frank Capra¹

This study used a media effects experiment in which participants answered a set of survey questions before and after watching one of *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Iron Man 3* (2013), and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) to show that these movies are capable of influencing the attitudes of a majority of viewers towards certain aspects of the war on terror. Before exploring the data in greater detail, this section will conduct a literature review of media effects research, particularly focusing on that which relates to popular movies. Additionally, this section will describe the methodology of this experiment. Last, this section will provide and thoroughly evaluate the data, reserving the conclusion for a discussion of the limitations of this study, areas for further research, and implications.

Literature Review

Before delving into the relevant history of media effects and discussing the current research on the media effects of entertainment, it is necessary to provide a definition of the phrase. The definition of media effects has changed over time.² Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann refer to media effects as “the social, cultural, and psychological impact of communicating via the mass media.”³ Tara Emmers-Sommer and Mike Allen define it as

¹ George Stevens, Jr., ed., *Conversations with the Great Moviemakers of Hollywood's Golden Age at the American Film Institute* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 105.

² Jennifer Lee Poland, “Lights, Camera, Emotion!: An Examination on Film Lighting and Its Impact on Audiences’ Emotional Response,” (master’s thesis, Cleveland State University, 2015), 5.

³ Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, introduction to *Perspectives on Media Effects*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986), xiii.

“independent or predicting variables that involve the mass media and the effects of various independent or predictor variables on media outcomes.”⁴ Neither of these definitions, however, give any indication as to what causes media effects. Elizabeth Perse does somewhat better, contending that those who research media effects analyze “how to control, enhance, or mitigate the impact of the mass media on individuals and society,” but still devotes little effort to what William Eveland, Jr. describes as “explicating what it is about mass media that produce[s] effects.”⁵

Two more recent definitions get at this point. The simpler of the two is presented by Annie Lang, who states that those who study media effects seek to examine “what types of content, in what types of medium, affect which people, in what situations.”⁶ By incorporating content, medium, and situations into her definition, Lang emphasizes that the field of media effects is not simply determining whether media effects occur, but why. W. James Potter provides a broader, though still relatively concise, definition. After stating media effects to be “those things that occur as a result – either in part or whole – from media influence,” Potter proposes six types of media effects on individuals: (1) cognition, or acquiring and interpreting information from media; (2) beliefs, or faith that something is being presented by media in an authentic manner; (3) attitudes, or judgments about individuals or issues depicted in media; (4) affects, or the various emotional responses that accompany media; (5) physiology, or the automatic physical responses triggered by media; and (6) behaviors, or the actions that

⁴ Tara M. Emmers-Sommer and Mike Allen, “Surveying the Effect of Media Effects: A Meta-Analytic Summary of the Media Effects Research in *Human Communication Research*,” *Human Communication Research* 25, no. 4 (1999): 487.

⁵ Elizabeth M. Perse, *Media Effects and Society* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001), ix; William P. Eveland, Jr., “A ‘Mix of Attributes’ Approach to the Study of Media Effects and New Communication Technologies,” *Journal of Communication* 53, no. 3 (2003): 396.

⁶ Annie Lang, “Discipline in Crisis? The Shifting Paradigm of Mass Communication Research,” *Communication Theory* 23, no. 1 (2013): 14.

individuals take as a result of exposure to media.⁷ As Potter notes, each “differ[s] in terms of the part of the person affected or the character of the experience of the effect within an individual.”⁸ Because this study focuses on the shifts in attitudes that occur with exposure to media, specifically *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man 3*, and *Captain America: Civil War*, it will confine its historical examination of media effects research to that which is related to attitudes.

Historical Examination of Media Effects

In the early twentieth century, new mass media technologies, most notably radio and film, as well as the widespread use of propaganda by wartime governments – particularly Nazi Germany – caused Americans to become “morbidly preoccupied with the power of the mass media.”⁹ Convinced that propaganda in the media was decreasing the ability of individuals to think critically, universities began teaching undergraduate courses on identifying and analyzing propaganda in the press and radio, and several prominent academics founded the Institute for Propaganda Analysis.¹⁰ Though some optimistically viewed the mass media as “a new dawn for informed public opinion” and others regarded it as an “evil aiming at the total destruction of democratic society,” both sides agreed that mass media possessed the power to “mold behavior more or less according to the will of [its] controllers.”¹¹

Unsurprisingly, early research on media effects focused on the power of propaganda. In *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, Harold Lasswell argued that propaganda played a

⁷ W. James Potter, *Media Effects* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012), 38, 41-42.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹ Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, “America, ‘Mass Society’ and Mass Media,” *Journal of Social Issues* 16, no. 3 (1960): 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹ Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, “Between Media and Mass,” in *Mass Communication and American Social Thought: Key Texts, 1919-1968*, ed. John Durham Peters and Peter Simonson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 358-359; Denis McQuail, *McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory*, 6th ed. (London: SAGE, 2010), 456.

decisive role in achieving victory over the Germans, comparing the propaganda spoken by President Woodrow Wilson towards the German people to a “subtle poison, which industrious men injected into the[ir] veins.”¹² This book was the source of the hypodermic needle theory, which posited that individuals were “uniformly controlled by their biological ‘instincts,’” essentially rendered helpless with regards to defending themselves against the messages promoted by mass media.¹³

As empirical enquiry developed after World War II, however, researchers began to challenge the hypodermic needle theory.¹⁴ In 1948, Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet conducted a study on the election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt eight years earlier to analyze whether there was a relationship between voting and mass media.¹⁵ Finding that the effects of mass media on attitudes strongly depended on individual characteristics and that “*few* [emphasis mine] people were converted by campaign propaganda,” Lazarsfeld and his coauthors rejected the notion that individuals were unable to defend themselves against the influence of mass media.¹⁶ Media effects research continued to become increasingly sophisticated – more readily accounting for a variety of “social and demographic variables such as age, education, and sex” as well as “social psychological factors such as predispositions, personality type, persuadability, [and] trust in the source.”¹⁷ The result of this was that it became more difficult to quantify the effects of the media on changes in individual views, and media

¹² Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), 215.

¹³ Shearon Lowery, *Milestones in Mass Communication Research: Media Effects* (White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers, 1995), 400; David Croteau and William Hoynes, *Media/Society: Industries, Images, and Audiences*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014), 237.

¹⁴ McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 456.

¹⁵ Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 1-9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94, 101.

¹⁷ McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 456-457.

effects research subsequently became dominated by minimal effects models.¹⁸ By 1959, Bernard Berelson famously stated that the field was “withering away.”¹⁹ Even as late as 1973, Leo Bogart claimed that the enduring weakness of research methodology in the field of media effects made it extremely difficult to “teas[e] out specific [media] effects from the tissue of surrounding social influences.”²⁰

In 1981, however, Gladys Lang and Kurt Lang argued against the minimal effects position, claiming that “the available evidence [gave] no justification for an overall verdict of ‘media impotence.’”²¹ Indeed, they noted that advertisers were wholly aware of media effects.²² Although they acknowledged that the existing research contained significant deficiencies, they emphasized that the solution was not to abandon the research, but merely change its focus.²³ Since then, modern media effects research as a whole has once again embraced the idea that media can have a substantial impact on individual attitudes. Popular movies, however, continue to suffer to a large extent from the stigma of the minimal effects models.²⁴

Media Effects in Entertainment

While there are limited studies on popular movies, there is some notable research on the media effects of entertainment that provides some crucial insight in explaining how superhero

¹⁸ W. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar, “A New Era of Minimal Effects? The Changing Foundations of Political Communication,” *Journal of Communication* 58, no. 4 (2008): 707-708; McQuail, *McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory*, 456-457.

¹⁹ Bernard Berelson, “The State of Communication Research,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (1959): 1.

²⁰ Leo Bogart, “Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That TV Violence is Moderately Dangerous to Your Child’s Mental Health,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1972): 518.

²¹ Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, “Mass Communications and Public Opinion: Strategies for Research,” in *Social Psychology: Sociological Perspectives*, ed. Morris Rosenberg and Ralph H. Turner (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 659.

²² *Ibid.*, 662.

²³ *Ibid.*, 659.

²⁴ Todd Adkins and Jeremiah J. Castle, “Moving Pictures? Experimental Evidence of Cinematic Influence on Political Attitudes,” *Social Science Quarterly* 95, no. 5 (2014): 1230.

movies can influence attitudes. Though it seems obvious, it is essential to begin this discussion by emphasizing that such movies are narratives, which Leslie Hinyard and Matthew Kreuter define as “cohesive and coherent stor[ies] with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end that provide information about scene, characters, and conflict; raise unanswered questions or unresolved conflict; and provide resolution.”²⁵ The literature identifies several ways in which narratives can affect individual views.

First, narratives are able to garner significant attention.²⁶ Because humans largely communicate with each other using narratives, they constitute “a comfortable way of receiving information.”²⁷ Indeed, individuals frequently rely on narratives to understand the world as well as critically examine their views. Hinyard and Kreuter suggest that individuals deem this to be particularly beneficial when considering morality, religion, and their personal values – none of which, after all, can be evaluated solely with reason and logic.²⁸ Unsurprisingly, narratives “foster involvement in the storyline,” which subsequently causes individuals to “direct their attention to the embedded message.”²⁹ This unconscious attention to the message allows the narrative to change attitudes.³⁰

²⁵ Leslie J. Hinyard and Matthew W. Kreuter, “Using Narrative Communication as a Tool for Health Behavior Change: A Conceptual, Theoretical, and Empirical Overview,” *Health Education & Behavior* 34, no. 5 (2007): 778.

²⁶ Robin L. Nabi and Emily Moyer-Gusé, “The Psychology Underlying Media-Based Persuasion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Media Psychology*, ed. Karen E. Dill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 293; Kathryn C. Montgomery, “Promoting Health Through Entertainment Television,” in *Mass Communication and Public Health*, ed. Charles Atkin and Lawrence Wallack (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE, 1990), 126; Bumsuh Jin, “Viewing Factors in Public Health Entertainment-Education Programming,” *Journal of the Northwest Communication Association* 35 (2006): 79.

²⁷ Hinyard and Kreuter, “Using Narrative Communication as a Tool for Health Behavior Change,” 778.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Emily Moyer-Gusé, “Toward a Theory of Entertainment Persuasion: Explaining the Persuasive Effects of Entertainment-Education Messages,” *Communication Theory* 18, no. 3 (2008): 409; Nabi and Moyer-Gusé, “The Psychology Underlying Media-Based Persuasion,” 293.

³⁰ Nabi and Moyer-Gusé, “The Psychology Underlying Media-Based Persuasion,” 293.

Second, narratives often facilitate various forms of involvement with characters.³¹ The two most relevant in the context of superheroes are wishful identification and similarity. Wishful identification occurs when individuals have a “desire to emulate” a character; indeed, they may even look up to the character as a role model.³² This does not mean that individuals forget about their own personal identities; rather, they simply seek to make themselves more like the character.³³ Superheroes in movies can elicit wishful identification in three ways. First, they are generally strong and attractive characters. Second, superheroes seek to both serve and be accepted by society. Last, most superheroes possess a robust sense of morality, serving as righteous and selfless defenders of society. These goals are shared by most people, with the majority of individuals striving to better themselves physically, improve society while finding their place within it, and develop a strong moral character. These positive characteristics drive individuals to wishfully identify with superheroes.

Similarity, on the other hand, is not about judgment; rather, it relates to perception, specifically “the degree to which an individual perceives that he or she is similar to a character.”³⁴ Although this is often in regards to “physical attributes [and] demographic variables,” it can also “refer to beliefs or values.”³⁵ Superheroes emphasize the value of both collective responsibility and individualism, both of which are widely cherished principles. As

³¹ Moyer-Gusé, “Toward a Theory of Entertainment Persuasion,” 409.

³² David C. Giles, “Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research,” *Media Psychology* 4, no. 3 (2002): 289; Subhash C. Lonial and Stuart Van Auken, “Wishful Identification with Fictional Characters: An Assessment of the Implications of Gender in Message Dissemination to Children,” *Journal of Advertising* 15, no. 4 (1986): 4.

³³ Moyer-Gusé, “Toward a Theory of Entertainment Persuasion,” 410.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Keren Eyal and Alan Rubin, in particular, emphasize the importance of similarities in values. Keren Eyal and Alan M. Rubin, “Viewer Aggression and Homophily, Identification, and Parasocial Relationships with Television Characters,” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 47, no. 1 (2003): 80; Moyer-Gusé, “Toward a Theory of Entertainment Persuasion,” 410.

such, it is likely that many individuals who share these values deem themselves to be similar to superheroes.

The persuasive potential of this involvement with superheroes emerges through a mechanism known as observational learning. While introducing this process, Albert Bandura points out that it is an essential cognitive process for humans, noting that “if knowledge could be acquired only through the effects of one’s own actions, the process of cognitive and social development would be greatly retarded, not to mention exceedingly tedious.”³⁶ Individuals do not formulate their views from scratch; rather, they develop them through the observation of models.³⁷ Models are often “as intimate and close” as friends or family members, but they can also be “*as remote as heroes read about or viewed [so]*” long as individuals are sufficiently involved with them.³⁸ In this way, superheroes can serve as “transmitters of values.”³⁹

Last, narratives that are viewed as entertainment limit “traditional forms of resistance” such as selective avoidance, reactance, and counterarguing.⁴⁰ Selective avoidance, wherein individuals intentionally avoid interacting with views that are contradictory to their own, is often driven by inertia: “the idea that individuals prefer not to change their attitudes, all things being equal.”⁴¹ Reactance, however, explains the resistance to persuasion as a psychological response

³⁶ Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 47.

³⁷ Albert Bandura, “Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication,” in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, 2nd ed., ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), 130-131; Moyer-Gusé, “Toward a Theory of Entertainment Persuasion,” 412.

³⁸ M. Kent Jennings and Richard G. Niemi, *The Political Character of Adolescence: The Influence of Families and Schools* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 15.

³⁹ Albert Bandura, “Social Cognitive Theory for Personal and Social Change by Enabling Media,” in *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice*, ed. Arvind Singhal et al. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 78.

⁴⁰ Nabi and Moyer-Gusé, “The Psychology Underlying Media-Based Persuasion,” 293.

⁴¹ Moyer-Gusé, “Toward a Theory of Entertainment Persuasion,” 417; Eric S. Knowles and Jay A. Linn, “The Importance of Resistance to Persuasion,” in *Resistance and Persuasion*, ed. Eric S. Knowles and Jay A. Linn (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 7-8.

to a perceived threat to freedom.⁴² By rejecting a discernibly persuasive message, individuals seek to restore their independence.⁴³ Finally, counterarguing is defined as “the generation of thoughts that dispute the persuasive argument.”⁴⁴

Unlike news or political entertainment shows such as *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*, the selection of narratives perceived as entertainment – such as superhero movies – is unlikely to be based on their political content.⁴⁵ For one, many individuals mistakenly believe that entertainment simply does not have political content. Even those who know otherwise likely do not know what the political messages actually are until they consume the entertainment.⁴⁶ For example, prior to the release of *Iron Man 3*, individuals had no reason to suspect that the Mandarin would be fake and thus no way to know that the film would be critical of the war on terror. As such, individuals are less likely to engage in selective avoidance with regards to entertainment narratives.

Entertainment narratives also reduce both reactance and counterarguing in two ways. First, persuasion in entertainment narratives often occurs because of involvement with characters. Because characters often seem less authoritative, an individual is less likely to believe they are attempting to control his or her views, thereby reducing reactance.⁴⁷ Additionally, individuals are less likely to dispute views promoted by characters with whom they identify through wishful identification or the perception of similarity. Second, entertainment transports

⁴² Sharon S. Brehm and Jack W. Brehm, *Psychological Reactance: A Theory of Freedom and Control* (New York, Academic Press, 1981), 2-4, 121-125, 148-150.

⁴³ Moyer-Gusé, “Toward a Theory of Entertainment Persuasion,” 414.

⁴⁴ Michael D. Slater and Donna Rouner, “Entertainment-Education and Elaboration Likelihood: Understanding the Processing of Narrative Persuasion,” *Communication Theory* 12, no. 2 (2002): 180.

⁴⁵ Jack Gierzynski et al., “The Effects of Science Fiction on Politically Relevant Attitudes” (presentation, Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 11-14, 2013), 4, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283908735_The_Effects_of_Science_Fiction_on_Politically_Relevant_Atitudes.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Moyer-Gusé, “Toward a Theory of Entertainment Persuasion,” 416.

individuals into the story, causing “all mental systems and capacities [to] become focused on the narrative.”⁴⁸ Although many individuals are familiar with being “lost in a book,” transportation is even more powerful during the viewing of a movie because “film – particularly in the cinema setting – has the ability to comprehensively capture the senses of sight and sound.”⁴⁹ As such, Marc Holzer and Linda Slater argue that it “allows for the total suspension of disbelief.”⁵⁰ As a result, viewers are less likely to recognize any persuasive intent, thus reducing reactance. Additionally, transportation makes individuals less critical, making it more difficult to engage in counterarguing.⁵¹ By limiting resistance in these ways, superhero movies have a unique ability to persuade their viewers.⁵²

Research Design

To test this theory, this study devised and carried out a two-wave panel experiment in early 2018, recruiting students at a large public university to view *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man 3*, or *Captain America: Civil War*, each of which was shown separately on three consecutive weekday nights in a moderately sized lecture hall with theater-style seating. After a flyer was designed containing a general description of the research as well as the necessary enrollment details, this study recruited participants in three ways. First, this study asked professors from

⁴⁸ Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock, “The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 5 (2000): 701.

⁴⁹ Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 1-2; Michelle C. Pautz, “Argo and Zero Dark Thirty: Film, Government, and Audiences,” *Political Science and Politics* 48, no. 1 (2015): 121.

⁵⁰ Marc Holzer and Linda G. Slater, “Insights into Bureaucracy from Film: Visualizing Stereotypes,” in *Public Administration Illuminated and Inspired by the Arts*, ed. Charles T. Goodsell and Nancy Murray (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), 77.

⁵¹ Melanie C. Green, Jennifer Garst, and Timothy C. Brock, “The Power of Fiction, Determinants and Boundaries,” in *The Psychology of Entertainment Media: Blurring the Lines Between Entertainment and Persuasion*, ed. L. J. Shrum (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 167-170.

⁵² Nabi and Moyer-Gusé, “The Psychology Underlying Media-Based Persuasion,” 293.

various departments to deliver this information to students in their courses. Second, this study received approval to display flyers in all university residence halls. Third, this study distributed flyers to student organizations. To incentivize participation, this study provided viewers with snacks and drinks during the movie screenings.

Students were permitted to self-select which of the three films they wanted to watch for two reasons. First, the films contain vivid depictions of terrorism, executions, violence, and torture. Second, this made it easier to recruit the necessary number of participants.

Approximately three weeks before the movie screenings, however, fewer students had expressed interest to watch *Iron Man 3* as compared to either *The Dark Knight* or *Captain America: Civil War*.⁵³ Because of this, students who had previously indicated on their recruitment forms that they were available to watch *Iron Man 3* were asked if they were willing to do so. Some students did choose to switch, and the result was that each film had a roughly equal number of participants.

The fact that the participants in this study were college students should not produce concern.⁵⁴ Young adults attend a lot more movies than other segments of the population; indeed, they are precisely the target audience for these particular movies. As such, they are a key population to examine. According to the Motion Picture Association of America, audiences between the ages of 18 and 24 attended 6.5 movies on average in 2016 – more than any other age

⁵³ This was neither surprising nor troubling. Of the three movies, *Iron Man 3* simply received the lowest ratings among fans on Internet Movie Database (IMDb) as well as Rotten Tomatoes. “The Dark Knight,” IMDb, accessed March 22, 2018, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0468569/?ref_=nv_sr_1; “Iron Man 3,” IMDb, accessed March 22, 2018, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1300854/?ref_=nv_sr_1; “Captain America: Civil War,” IMDb, accessed March 22, 2018, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3498820/>; “The Dark Knight,” Rotten Tomatoes; “Iron Man 3,” Rotten Tomatoes; “Captain America: Civil War,” Rotten Tomatoes.

⁵⁴ Adkins and Castle, “*Moving Pictures*,” 1234.

group.⁵⁵ Nearly 20% of all frequent moviegoers, defined as those who attended a movie at least once per month, were between the ages of 18 and 24.⁵⁶ Moreover, this overlooks the fact that many young people are choosing to stream movies at home rather than watch them in a theater.⁵⁷ For this reason, the reliance on college students is appropriate.

Participants were required to complete a survey before and after the screening of their respective film. The survey consisted of five sections: (1) basic information, (2) knowledge of current events and American history, (3) movie attendance, (4) policy, and (5) superhero movie ratings. All of the sections but the fourth were the same for each of the movies. The fourth section contained nine policy statements that were specific to *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man 3*, or *Captain America: Civil War*. Three of these statements were about various aspects of the war on terror, while the remaining six related to unrelated policy issues such as capitalism, genetic enhancement, and political polarization. For each statement, participants were asked whether they agreed or disagreed on a six-point Likert scale: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = slightly agree, 4 = slightly disagree, 5 = disagree, and 6 = strongly disagree.⁵⁸ Their responses before and after viewing the film were then compared to evaluate the media effects of the film.

⁵⁵ Christopher J. Dodd, "Theatrical Market Statistics Report for 2016," Motion Picture Association of America, accessed March 22, 2018, <https://www.mpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2016-Theatrical-Market-Statistics-Report-2.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Dodd, "Theatrical Market Statistics Report for 2016."

⁵⁷ Fred Wagner, "From Netflix to Full Immersion: How the Future of Cinema Lies in Our Handhelds," *Guardian*, June 18, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jun/18/netflix-vod-streaming-future-of-cinema>.

⁵⁸ The six-point Likert scale does not contain a neutral option. Some argue that a neutral option is necessary because some individuals truly have no opinion on particular issues, while others contend that the inclusion of a neutral option simply represents "an invitation to satisfice." For example, Norman Bradburn and Seymour Sudman argue that even individuals with incomplete opinions "still lean in one direction or another," and Abraham Oppenheim contends that many who profess not to have an opinion actually just do not want to do the cognitive work required to commit to one. Using data from nine different experiments in three household surveys, Jon A. Krosnick et al. found that attraction to the neutral option "was greatest among respondents lowest in cognitive skills, for questions asked later in a survey, and among respondents who devoted little effort to the reporting process." As such, Krosnick et al. concluded that the inclusion of a neutral option was more likely to cause individuals to satisfice. Because of this, this study chose to use a six-point Likert scale. Norman M. Bradburn and Seymour Sudman, *Polls & Surveys: Understanding What They Tell Us* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1988), 154; Abraham N. Oppenheim, *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing, and Attitude Measurement* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1992), 129; Jon A.

Priming was limited in this study in three ways. First, participants were given minimal information about the study until they had completed both surveys. Second, the statements about the war on terror were embedded within a set of unrelated policy statements. Last, the survey included a section on ratings, which asked participants to (1) state how offensive they found various types of content (specifically violence, profanity, sexual activity, and negative racial and gender stereotypes), and (2) give their respective film a rating of G, PG, PG-13, R, or NC-17. In these ways, this study sought to minimize the extent to which participants would recognize its objectives.

Results

Before analyzing the media effects data of this study, it is useful to provide a portrait of the participants as a whole. The basic demographics of the 57 total participants (15 for *The Dark Knight*, 17 for *Iron Man 3*, and 25 for *Captain America: Civil War*) largely mirrored those of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where this study was conducted. Approximately 60% of the participants were female. With regards to race, 73% were white, 14% were Asian, 7% were Hispanic, 4% were black, and 2% were Native Americans. Politically, 65% described themselves as liberal or very liberal, 28% labeled themselves as moderates, and 7% designated themselves as conservatives.

The participants came from a diverse range of majors. Although 25% were psychology, political science, or peace, war, and defense majors – which are the majors most closely connected to this study – 23% were other social science majors, 30% were science majors, 19%

Krosnick et al., “The Impact of ‘No Opinion’ Response Options on Data Quality: Non-Attitude Reduction or an Invitation to Satisfice?,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2002): 371, 382-395.

were humanities majors, and 12% were statistics or computer science majors.⁵⁹ This is a reflection of the strategies used to recruit participants.

The survey also asked participants to describe their level of knowledge of American history as well as the frequency with which they followed current events. A substantial majority of participants, 74%, considered themselves to be moderately or extremely knowledgeable in American history (though this, of course, does not necessarily mean they are). The remaining participants described themselves as somewhat knowledgeable or not very knowledgeable – 21% and 5% respectively – with no one classifying themselves as not at all knowledgeable.

Participants reported similarly high levels of engagement with current events. More than half of participants, 58%, indicated that they frequently or very frequently followed current events, and 33% stated that they at least occasionally did so. Just 9% said that they rarely or never followed current events. These findings are not particularly surprising given that the participants were college students who have likely taken classes on American history and current events.

Finally, the survey asked participants about their movie attendance. On average, the participants were frequent moviegoers with 79% indicating that they had attended at least three movies in the theater during the past twelve months. Of the remaining participants, 18% had attended one or two movies, and just 3% had not attended a single movie. A substantial majority of participants, 74%, had attended at least one superhero movie during the past twelve months; indeed, a sizable minority, 14%, had attended at least five, a rather incredible number of

⁵⁹ The fact that these percentages add up to more than 100% can be explained by the fact that many of the participants were double majors.

superhero movies to have attended.⁶⁰ This movie attendance data further demonstrates that college students are an appropriate demographic for a study of this kind.

Classifying Attitudinal Change

This study classifies attitudinal change into four categories: (1) minor intensity change, (2) major intensity change, (3) minor directional change, and (4) major directional change. The direction of a view about a statement refers simply to whether an individual agrees or disagrees with it, whereas the intensity of a view about a statement refers to how strongly an individual holds his or her view. If an individual changed his or her view, for example, from slightly agree to slightly disagree or from disagree to agree, this was classified as a directional change. Meanwhile, if an individual changed his or her view, for instance, from strongly agree to slightly agree or from disagree to strongly disagree, this was classified as an intensity change. Whether the attitudinal change was categorized as minor or major depended on the change in points on the Likert scale; specifically, a change of one point was classified as minor, while a change of more than one point was classified as major.

The Dark Knight

Based on the analysis of this film in the third chapter, the statements of interest for *The Dark Knight* were as follows:

- Torture is effective at gaining credible information from terrorists.
- Torture cannot be justified against terrorists.
- The government may justifiably violate civil liberties in order to fight terrorism.

⁶⁰ Some of the prominent superhero movies released in the twelve months prior to the study included *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Justice League* (2017), *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), and *Black Panther* (2018).

This section will provide and discuss the data for each in turn.

Figure 37. Torture is effective at gaining credible information from terrorists (N = 15)

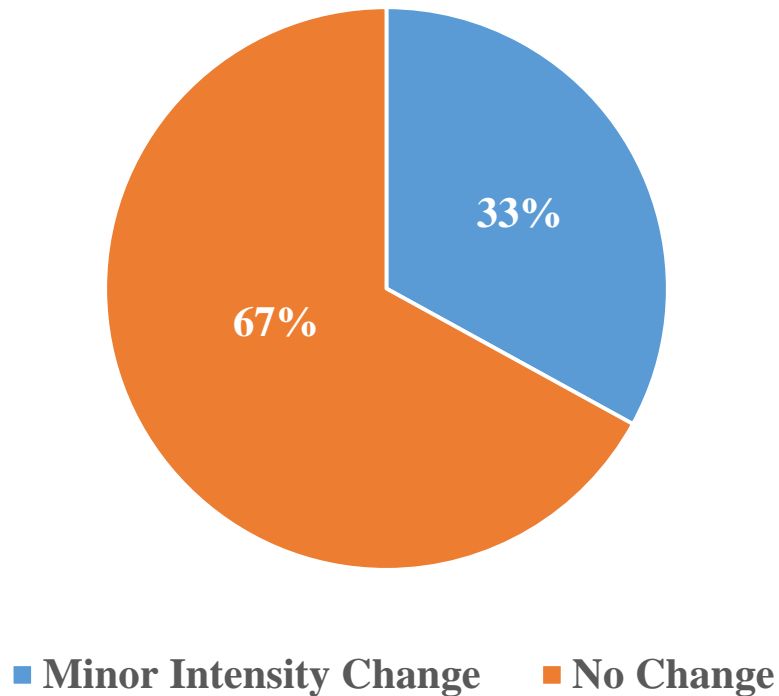
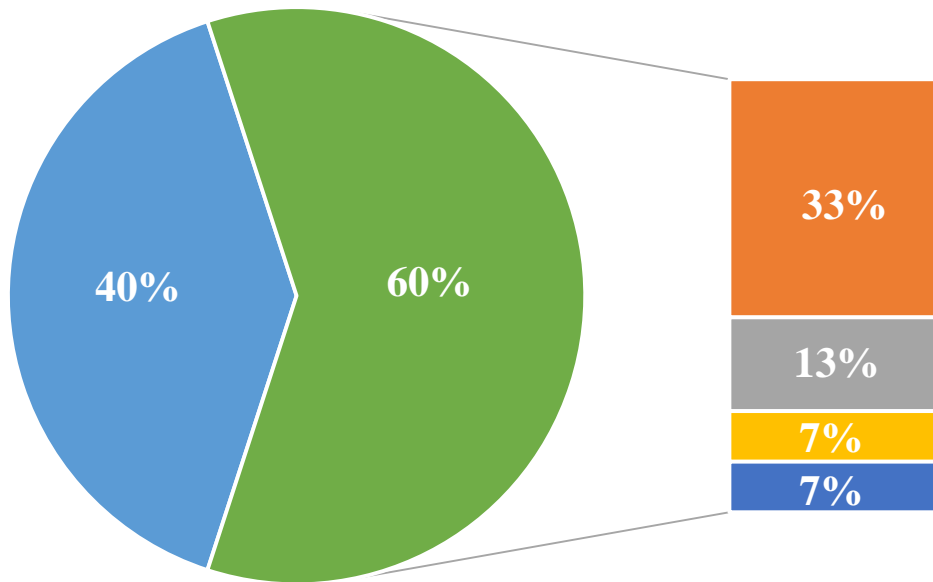


Figure 37 shows that 33% of participants changed their views regarding the effectiveness of torture after watching *The Dark Knight*. The only type of change that occurred was minor intensity change. One reason for this could be that this statement, unlike most of the others, is mostly an empirical one, unrelated (theoretically at least) to personal beliefs and morality.

Figure 38. Torture cannot be justified against terrorists (N = 15)



- No Change
- Minor Intensity Change
- Minor Directional Change
- Major Directional Change
- Major Intensity Change

Figure 38 shows that a significant majority of participants, 60%, changed their views on the justifiability of torture after watching *The Dark Knight*. All four types of attitudinal change occurred with this statement. Strikingly, well over half of the attitudinal change was major and most of the major change was directional in nature. One participant even changed from strongly agree to strongly disagree – a remarkable change in just two and a half hours, particularly when one considers that she described herself as moderately knowledgeable of American history and stated that she frequently followed current events. There was some major intensity change as well with one participant changing from slightly agree to strongly agree.

**Figure 39. The government may justifiably violate civil liberties in order to fight terrorism
(N = 15)**

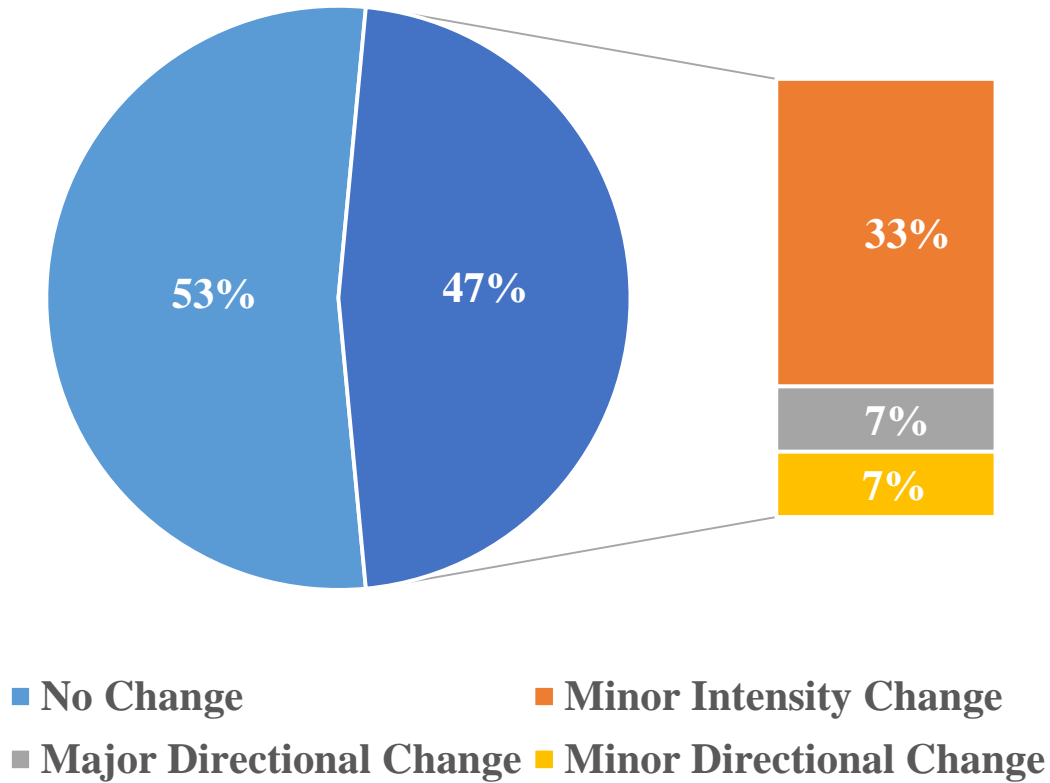


Figure 39 shows that approximately half of participants, 47%, changed their views on the justifiability of civil liberties violations during the war on terror after watching *The Dark Knight*. Three types of attitudinal change occurred, mostly minor intensity change. There was one instance of minor directional change as one participant changed from slightly agree to slightly disagree.

Iron Man 3

Based on the analysis of this film in the third chapter, the statements of interest for *Iron Man 3* were as follows:

- The United States does not spend enough on national defense.
- The threat of terrorism in the United States has been overblown.
- Islam encourages more violence than other religions.

This section will provide and discuss the data for each in turn.

Figure 40. The United States does not spend enough on national defense (N = 17)

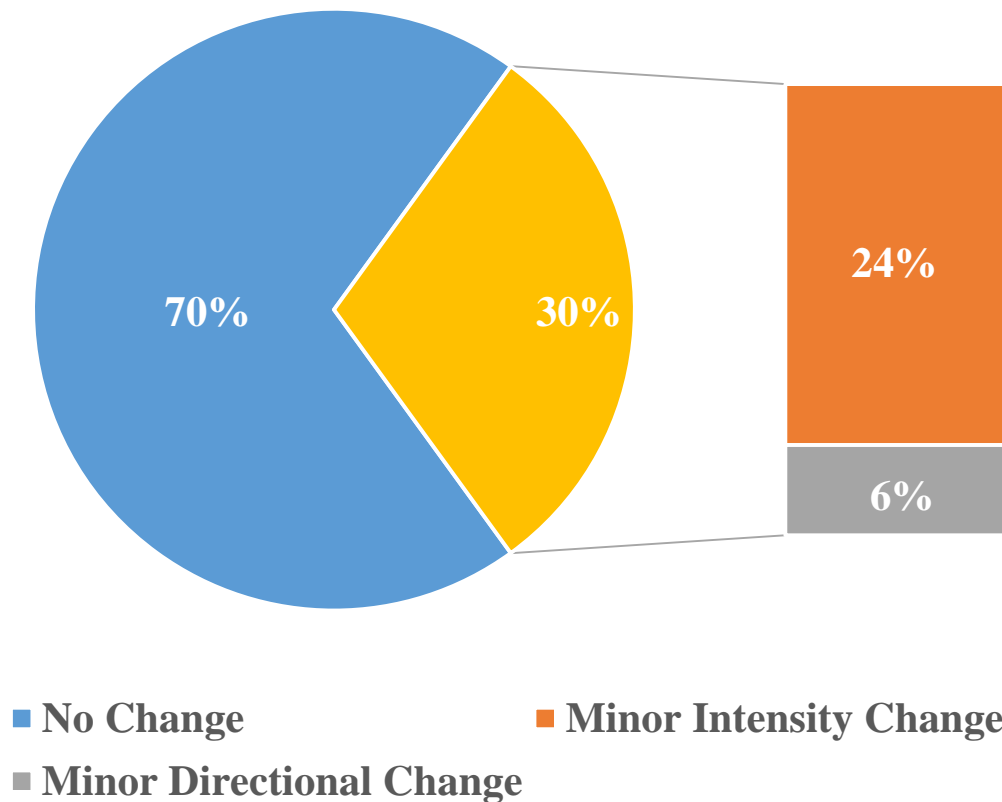


Figure 40 shows that 30% of participants changed their views on national defense spending after watching *Iron Man 3*. Only minor attitudinal change occurred, mostly intensity change. One participant, however, did change from slightly disagree to slightly agree.

Figure 41. The threat of terrorism in the United States has been overblown (N = 17)

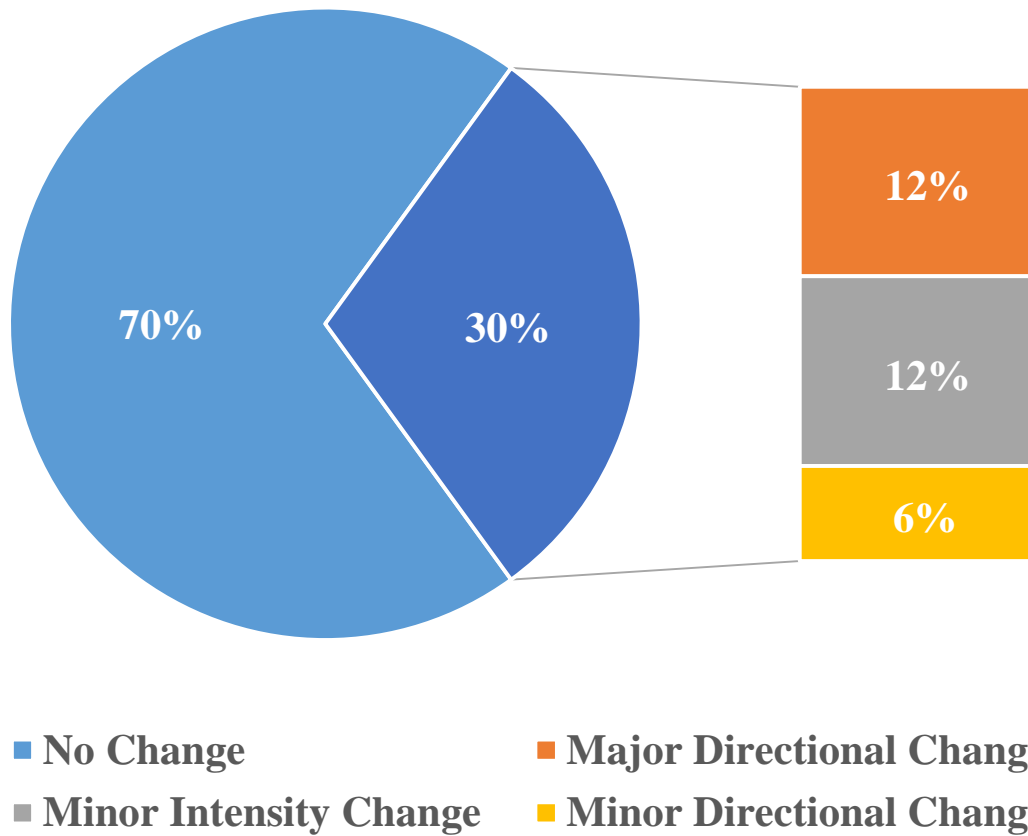


Figure 41 shows that 30% of participants changed their views on the notion that the threat of terrorism has been overblown after watching *Iron Man 3*. Three types of attitudinal change occurred with major directional change occurring at the same rate as minor intensity change. One of the instances of major directional change saw a participant change from strongly agree to slightly disagree, representing three points on the Likert scale. There was also one instance of minor directional change.

Figure 42. Islam encourages more violence than other religions (N = 17)

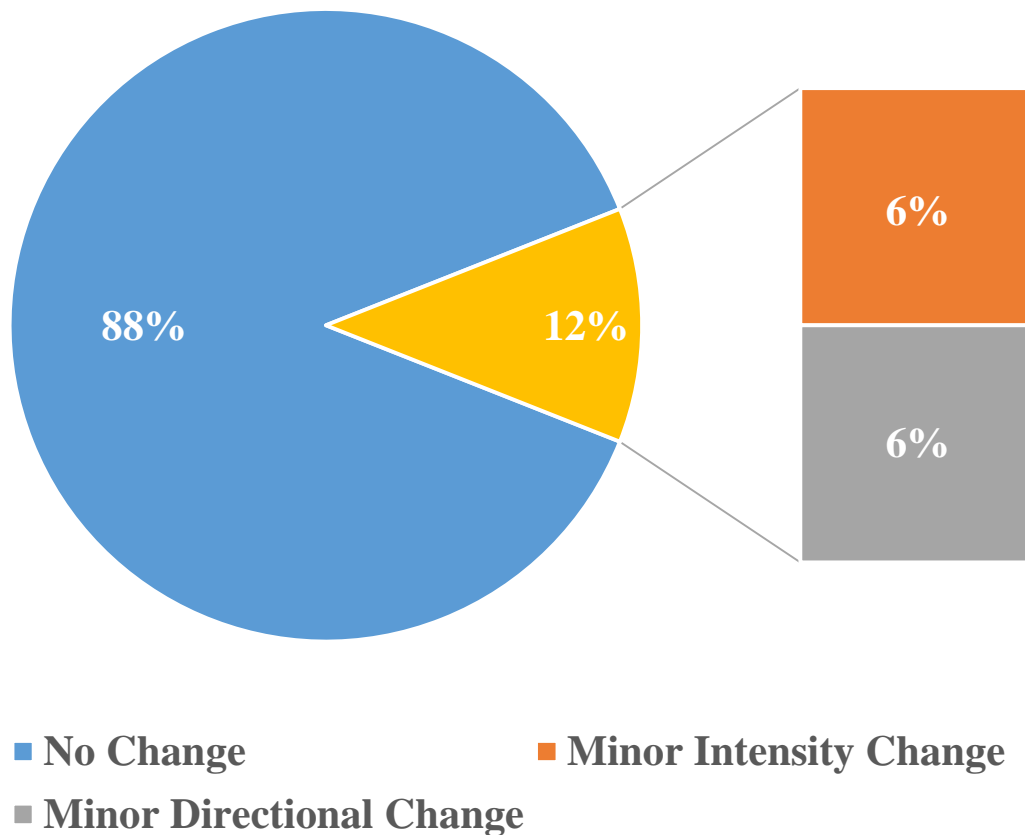


Figure 42 shows that 12% of participants changed their views on whether Islam encourages more violence than other religions after watching *Iron Man 3*. Both minor intensity change and minor directional change occurred. This statement had the smallest amount of attitudinal change in this study. Most participants disagreed intensely with this statement from the offset; specifically, 76% of participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed with it prior to watching *Iron Man 3*. This potentially offers an explanation as to why so little attitudinal change occurred.

Captain America: Civil War

Based on the analysis of this film in the third chapter, the statements of interest for *Captain America: Civil War* were as follows:

- Drone strikes cannot be justified against terrorists.
- The world is better off if the United States takes an active role in world affairs.
- The United Nations does a poor job of solving problems.

This section will provide and discuss the data for each in turn.

Figure 43. Drone strikes cannot be justified against terrorists (N = 25)

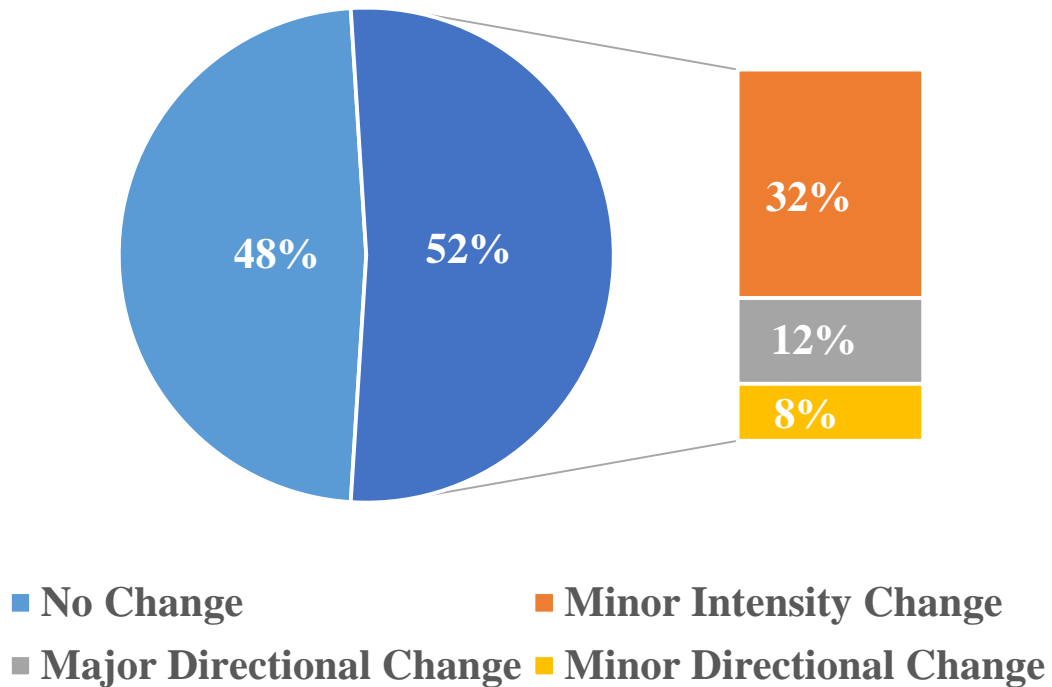


Figure 43 shows that slightly more than half of participants, 52%, changed their views on the justifiability of drone strikes after watching *Captain America: Civil War*. Three types of attitudinal change occurred. Although it was mostly minor intensity change, there was fairly significant directional change as well, including three instances of major directional change.

Figure 44. The world is better off if the United States takes an active role in world affairs
(N = 25)

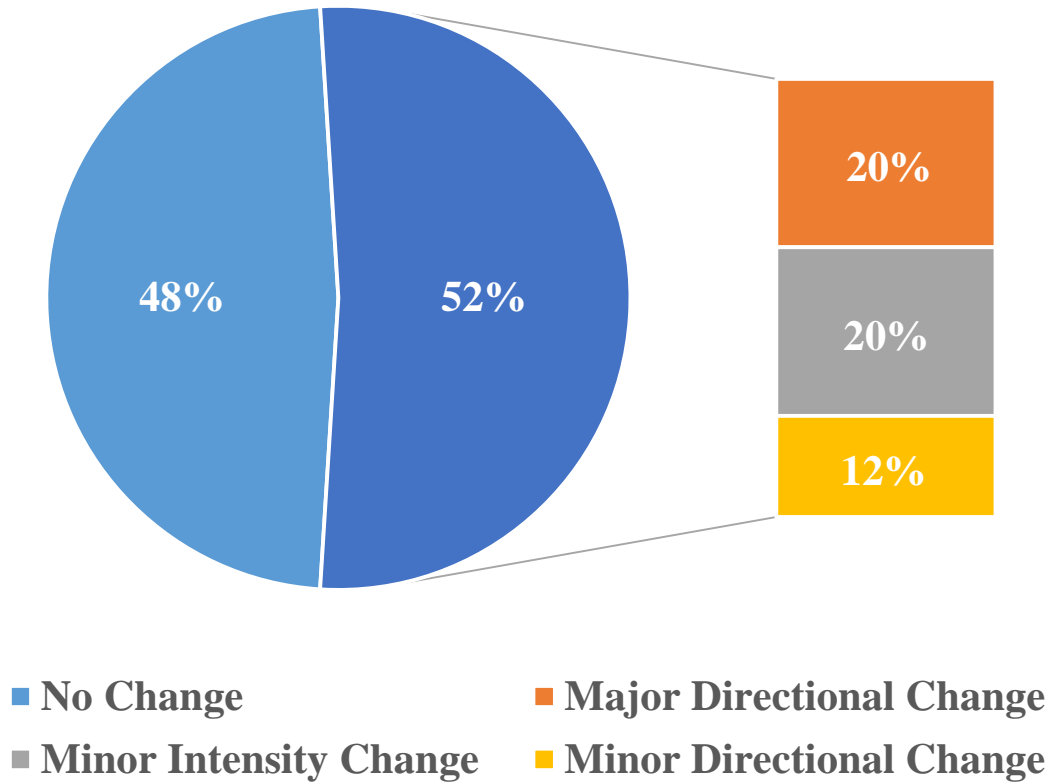


Figure 44 shows that more than half of participants, 52%, changed their views on the statement of whether the world is better off if the United States takes an active role in the world after watching *Captain America: Civil War*. Three types of attitudinal change occurred. More than half of the attitudinal change was directional in nature and the majority of this directional change was major. There was also a lot of minor intensity change in no consistent direction. For example, one participant changed from agree to slightly agree, one participant changed from disagree to slightly disagree, and one participant changed from disagree to strongly disagree.

Figure 45. The United Nations does a poor job of solving problems (N = 25)

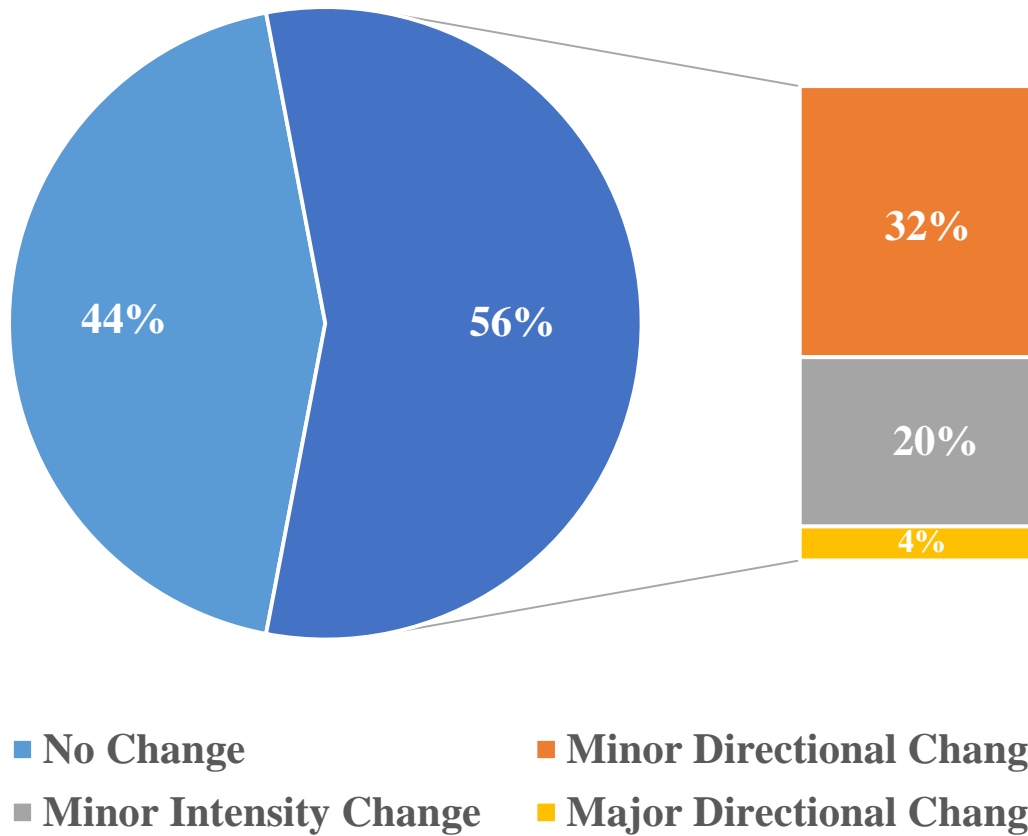
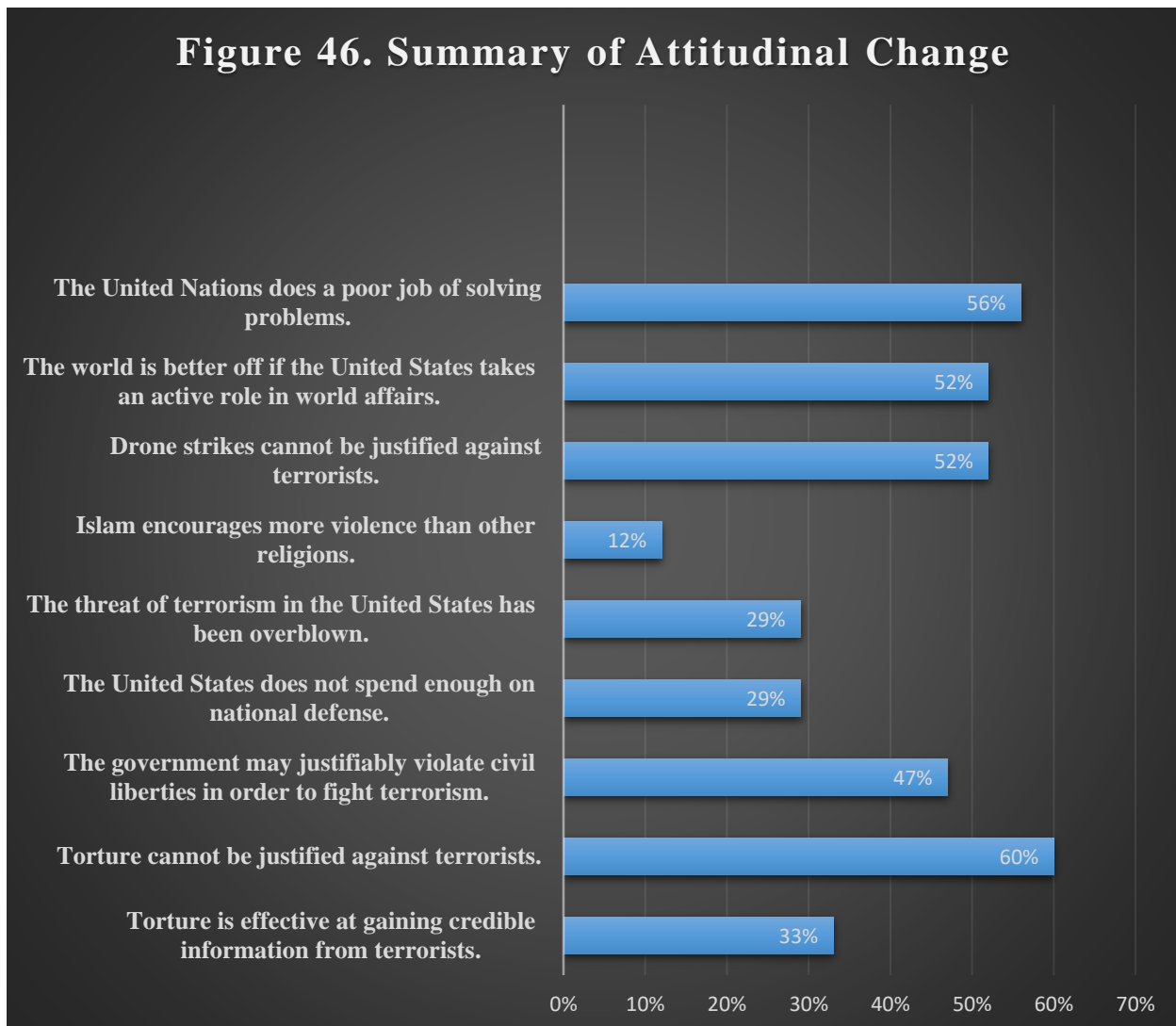


Figure 46 shows that moderately more than half of participants, 56%, changed their views on whether the United Nations does a good job of solving problems after watching *Captain America: Civil War*. Three types of attitudinal change occurred, most notably a significant amount of minor directional change; there was only one instance of major directional change, specifically when a participant changed from slightly agree to disagree. Minor intensity change was relatively common as well. Much like the previous statement, these changes did not happen in any specific direction.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was not to predict exactly how participants would respond to the viewing of their respective film; after all, viewers of a film can interpret their own meanings of what they watch, particularly when the political views expressed by the films are more subtle.⁶¹ Instead, this study simply sought to determine if superhero movies could affect individual political views.



⁶¹ Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers, “The Entertainment-Education Strategy in Communication Campaigns,” in *Public Communication Campaigns*, 3rd ed., ed. Ronald E. Rice and Charles K. Atkin (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2001), 353.

As Figure 46 demonstrates clearly and concisely, there was attitudinal change on all nine of the statements after the respective movie screenings. The percentage of participants who changed their views ranged from 12% to an astounding 60%. Although much of the attitudinal change was related to intensity, directional change occurred for eight of the nine statements and major directional change occurred for six of the nine statements. This is particularly remarkable for two reasons. First, most of the participants, 72%, identified themselves as conservative, liberal, or very liberal. As such, their political views should be fairly well-established. Second, a significant majority of the participants reported that they were knowledgeable of American history and engaged with current events. This would indicate that they have access to relevant knowledge on the political issues featured by the statements in this study. For many of them, however, just one superhero movie was sufficient to cause them to change their political views on various aspects of the war on terror – sometimes drastically. The implications of this become particularly significant when one considers how many superhero movies these individuals watch.

Conclusion

The minimal effects models that long dominated media effects research have led to a severe dearth of research on the influence of popular movies on individual attitudes, especially superhero movies. As entertaining narratives, however, superhero movies have significant persuasive potential because of their ability to attract attention in a competitive media environment, foster involvement with characters through wishful identification and similarity, and overcome common forms of resistance such as selective avoidance, reactance, and counterarguing. Through a two-wave panel experiment, this study demonstrated that *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man 3*, and *Captain America Civil War* caused viewers to change their political

opinions on various issues pertaining to the war on terror including torture, mass surveillance, military spending, and drone strikes. Given the cultural prominence of superhero movies, further research in this area is clearly warranted.

Chapter 5. “With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility”: Concluding Remarks

We love our superheroes because they refuse to give up on us. We can . . . ban them, mock them, and still they return, patiently reminding us of who we are and what we wish we could be. They are a powerful living idea . . . with unknown consequences. – Grant Morrison¹

Despite their box office success, superhero movies have often been criticized for being mere escapist entertainment, lacking any serious content or messages. As this study of *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Iron Man 3* (2013), and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) has demonstrated, however, this is simply untrue. Each of these films promoted specific messages regarding various aspects of the war on terror. This study provided a foundation for understanding how these superhero movies can affect individual political views and conducted a two-wave media effects experiment to gather data on this very question. This chapter will acknowledge the limitations of this study, identify areas for future research, and conclude by highlighting the implications of these findings.

Limitations

Perhaps the most obvious limitations in this study have to do with the sample. This study relied on a fairly small sample size for each of the movies. A related issue is that the participants were not representative of the superhero movie audience; specifically, women and liberals were overrepresented. Although this is unsurprising given the demographics of the university where this study was conducted, it does limit the generalizability of the results. There are at least two other limitations worthy of mention as well. First, the statements could have been worded somewhat more clearly. The statements were crafted as they were to limit priming, but there is at

¹ Grant Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, And A Sun God From Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011), 416.

least some potential that they could have confused participants. Second, and more importantly, the direction of the wording on the statements should have been reversed to increase the strength and validity of the results.

Future Research

This study lays the groundwork for several potential areas of future research. First, and perhaps most obviously, future studies should attempt to replicate the data that this study obtained with larger and more representative sample sizes. These are the most significant limitations of this study. There are two ways that more participants could be recruited: (1) the movie screenings could be held earlier in the semester when students do not have as many midterms or other commitments, and (2) students could be offered extra credit for attending a movie screening.² It is also possible that a study could be coordinated across multiple universities of different types. This would obviously increase the sample size, but more importantly, it would potentially broaden the practical orientation of the subject population by allowing researchers to determine whether the media effects found in this study are linked to any unique characteristics of a large public university population.

Second, future studies could determine if the media effects of superhero movies are affected by various types of individual characteristics including race, gender, political engagement, and nationality. With regards to race and gender, individuals may be more likely to identify with superheroes who look like them, which means that media effects could potentially differ along these characteristics.

² Todd Adkins and Jeremiah J. Castle, "Moving Pictures? Experimental Evidence of Cinematic Influence on Political Attitudes," *Social Science Quarterly* 95, no. 5 (2014): 1233.

Those who do not closely follow news and current events are very possibly more susceptible to attitudinal change after viewing superhero movies because they have less knowledge of the political issues embedded within them. Of course, this study found fairly significant media effects even as many of the participants stated that they frequently followed the news.

Considering the effect of nationality on the media effects of superhero movies would also be quite interesting. Although superheroes are not exclusively American, “no country has produced them in an amount even remotely on par with the United States; Japanese manga and animation and European adventure heroes are too different from the American superhero to permit anything but a superficial comparison.”³ As such, superhero movies are formulated within an American framework that primarily reflect “the anxieties and desires of the American public” (though because these films are released internationally, it is possible that the characters have been tailored to be more acceptable to international audiences).⁴ Thus, it would be interesting to determine if superhero movies have different media effects on subjects from other countries as compared to those from the United States.

Third, future studies could evaluate the media effects of different superhero movies. In particular, these studies could compare superhero movies with more subtle political messages to those with more obvious ones to determine if the magnitude of attitudinal change differs. As evidenced by the lengthy analysis in this study, *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man 3*, and *Captain America: Civil War* contained more subtle political messages. However, the main political message promoted by *Black Panther* (2018) – namely that there are significant consequences to

³ Marco Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, trans. Jamie Richards (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 63.

⁴ Ibid.

isolationism – is not subtle in any way. This is perhaps best evidenced by the mid-credits scene during which King T’Challa speaks before the United Nations to inform them that Wakanda will no longer be an isolationist country, arguing that “the wise build bridges, [while] the foolish build barriers.” As the data obtained in this study show, more understated political messages may be misinterpreted by viewers, but on the other hand, more overt political messages may generate resistance among viewers.

Fourth, future studies could compare the media effects of superhero movies to other types of media. For example, researchers could have one group of participants watch a documentary or news report on torture and another group watch *The Dark Knight* to determine which one more significantly affects individual views on the justifiability of torture.

Fifth, future studies could use a three-wave panel experiment in which participants complete the survey not only before and after watching their respective film, but two weeks later as well. This would certainly be more difficult to administer than a two-wave panel experiment because a control group is required, but it would also be immensely valuable because it would allow researchers to evaluate whether the attitudinal change caused by superhero movies is sustained or merely temporary.

Finally, future studies could replicate this experiment, but follow up with the participants whose responses changed after viewing their respective superhero movie. Specifically, it would be interesting to ask participants to explain why they changed their views in the manner that they did. While it would potentially be difficult to ascertain this knowledge during these personal interviews, it would also potentially yield valuable information with regards to the precise mechanisms by which superhero movies can effect attitudinal change.

In short, this study represents an important, but early, exploration into the media effects of superhero movies. As such, there are many avenues for future research that could better inform understanding of this topic.

Implications

For the past several years, there has been speculation among many individuals that the superhero movie bubble will soon burst due to oversaturation and homogenization. Yet recent evidence does not support this forecast. In 2017, superhero movies propped up an underperforming box office with Tom DiChristopher emphasizing that they were “just about the only safe bet” financially.⁵ Indeed, Mark Hughes even argues that 2017 was “the greatest year for superhero movies of all time . . . in artistic, financial, and historic terms.”⁶ After all, the six live-action superhero movies that were released combined to make more than \$4 billion in the worldwide box office, which constituted “the highest combined gross for superhero movies in a single year.”⁷ Additionally, these movies were well-received by critics with five of the six scoring above an 82% on Rotten Tomatoes.⁸ Perhaps most importantly, *Wonder Woman* (2017) was a cultural milestone, inspiring women around the world by featuring a strong, compassionate, and idealistic female character fighting not to prove herself, but to defend her

⁵ Tom DiChristopher, “Superheroes Are Almost Single-Handedly Saving the U.S. Box Office,” *CNBC*, July 16, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/07/16/superheroes-are-almost-single-handedly-saving-the-us-box-office.html>; Scott Mendelson, “Box Office: Summer Was A Disaster, Save For Comic Book Superhero Movies,” *Forbes*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2017/08/14/box-office-it-was-a-terrible-summer-for-non-comic-book-superhero-films/#4f9ea3296d7d>.

⁶ Mark Hughes, “How 2017 Became the Greatest Year for Superhero Movies of All Time,” *Forbes*, November 27, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markhughes/2017/11/27/how-2017-became-the-greatest-year-for-superhero-movies-of-all-time/#322800f413e6>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

principles as well as those who cannot protect themselves.⁹ Powered by a female audience, it grossed more than \$800 million worldwide, and a sequel is already scheduled for release in 2019.¹⁰

There is every indication that 2018 will be just as successful for superhero movies. *Black Panther*, another cultural milestone that grapples with complex questions related to race and identity, easily eclipsed \$1 billion at the global box office.¹¹ Six more movies await release, including *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), whose ticket presales surpassed the record for Marvel movies previously set by *Black Panther* in just six hours.¹² Right now, the superhero movie genre is as strong as it has ever been. As long as this is the case, it will be crucial to understand how superhero movies can affect the way people think about important political issues.

⁹ Josh Spiegel, “‘Wonder Woman’ Is a Milestone, But It Shouldn’t Be,” *Hollywood Reporter*, June 4, 2017, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/wonder-woman-is-a-milestone-but-shouldnt-be-1010023>; J. Maureen Henderson, “Why ‘Wonder Woman’ Is Winning Big With Female Audiences,” *Forbes*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jmaureenhenderson/2017/06/05/why-wonder-woman-is-winning-big-with-female-audiences/#14df86b51f20>.

¹⁰ “Wonder Woman,” *Box Office Mojo*, accessed March 17, 2018, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=wonderwoman.htm>; Dave McNary, “‘Wonder Woman’: Female and Older Moviegoers Powered Box Office, New Study Shows,” *Variety*, July 6, 2017, <http://variety.com/2017/film/news/wonder-woman-study-box-office-1202488262/>.

¹¹ “Black Panther,” *Box Office Mojo*, accessed March 17, 2018, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=marvel2017b.htm>.

¹² Andrew Liptak, “Ticket Presales for Avengers: Infinity War Have Already Surpassed Black Panther’s Record,” *Verge*, March 17, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/3/17/17133514/avengers-infinity-war-ticket-presales-black-panther-marvel-cinematic-universe-box-office>.

Appendix A: Survey Questions

Section 1. Demographics

1. What is your class standing?

- First-Year
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate/Professional

2. What is your major?

3. What is your race? (Select one or more)

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian (including Indian subcontinent and Philippines)
- Black or African-American (including African and Caribbean)
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White (including Middle Eastern)
- Prefer not to respond

4. What is your sex?

- Man
- Woman
- Other
- Prefer not to respond

5. What is your religious affiliation?

6. How would you describe your political views?

- Very liberal
- Liberal
- Moderate
- Conservative
- Very conservative

Section 2. Knowledge of Current Events and American History

1. Describe how frequently you follow news about politics and current events in the United States

- Never
- Rarely
- Occasionally
- Frequently
- Very frequently

2. Describe your knowledge of American history.

- Not at all knowledgeable
- Not very knowledgeable
- Somewhat knowledgeable
- Moderately knowledgeable
- Extremely knowledgeable

Section 3. Movie Attendance

1. Approximately how many movies have you attended in a movie theater in the past 12 months?

- None
- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5+

2. Approximately how many superhero movies have you attended in a movie theater in the past 12 months?

- None
- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5+

Section 4. Policy

The following questions will ask you to agree or disagree with various statements on a six-point scale: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = slightly agree, 4 = slightly disagree, 5 = disagree, and 6 = strongly disagree.

The Dark Knight (2008)

1. It is the responsibility of government to reduce income inequality.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

2. Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

3. The American Dream is possible and achievable for most Americans.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

4. Torture is effective at gaining credible information from terrorists.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

5. Torture cannot be justified against terrorists.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

6. The government may justifiably violate civil liberties in order to fight terrorism.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

7. The criminal justice system is not tough enough on crime.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

8. There is systematic bias against minorities in the criminal justice system.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

9. Law enforcement effectively protects citizens from violent crime.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

Iron Man 3 (2013)

1. It is the responsibility of government to reduce income inequality.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

2. Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

3. The American Dream is possible and achievable for most Americans.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

4. The United States does not spend enough on national defense.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

5. The threat of terrorism in the United States has been overblown.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

6. Islam encourages more violence than other religions.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

7. Artificial intelligence will have a net positive impact on society.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

8. Genetic enhancement is unethical.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

9. Veterans receive sufficient support from the government after returning from war.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

Captain America: Civil War (2016)

1. Corruption is widespread in Africa.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

2. The government is spending too little on foreign aid in Africa.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

3. African leaders are not effective.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

4. Drone strikes cannot be justified against terrorists.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

5. The world is better off if the United States takes an active role in world affairs.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

6. The United Nations does a poor job of solving problems.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

7. Americans agree on the important issues.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

8. Political institutions worsen political polarization.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

9. Political polarization is not a serious problem in the United States.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

Section 5. Superhero Movie Ratings

The next five questions will ask you to describe how offensive you find various types of content in movies on a five-point scale: 1 = not offensive at all, 2 = not too offensive, 3 = slightly offensive, 4 = moderately offensive, and 5 = extremely offensive.

1. If you happened to go to a movie and it included violence, how offensive, if at all, would you find that?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

2. How about if it included profanity?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

3. How about if it included sexual activity?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

4. How about if it included negative racial stereotypes?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

5. How about if it included negative gender stereotypes?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

6. This movie is rated PG-13, a rating given to movies where some material may be inappropriate for children under 13. Please indicate what you believe the rating of this movie should be.

- G
- PG
- PG-13
- R
- NC-17
- I have not previously seen this movie.

Appendix B: Survey Data

Table 1. *The Dark Knight*: Torture is effective at gaining credible information from terrorists

Key

Green: Towards More Effective

Red: Towards Less Effective

	Pre-Viewing Response	Post-Viewing Response
Participant 1	3	2
Participant 2	6	6
Participant 3	5	4
Participant 4	5	5
Participant 5	4	4
Participant 6	3	2
Participant 7	1	1
Participant 8	5	6
Participant 9	5	5
Participant 10	4	4
Participant 11	5	5
Participant 12	4	4
Participant 13	6	6
Participant 14	4	4
Participant 15	5	4
Participant Average	4.33	4.13

Table 2. *The Dark Knight*: Torture cannot be justified against terrorists

Key

Green: Towards More Justified

Red: Towards Less Justified

*****:** Change in Direction of View

	Pre-Viewing Response	Post-Viewing Response
Participant 1	4	5
Participant 2	1	1
Participant 3***	2	4
Participant 4***	2	4
Participant 5	2	2
Participant 6	4	5
Participant 7	6	6
Participant 8	3	1
Participant 9***	2	4
Participant 10	4	4
Participant 11	2	2
Participant 12	1	1
Participant 13***	1	6
Participant 14***	3	4
Participant 15***	5	3
Participant Average	2.80	3.47

Table 3. *The Dark Knight*: The government may justifiably violate civil liberties in order to fight terrorism

Key

Green: Towards More Justified

Red: Towards Less Justified

*****:** Changed Direction of View

	Pre-Viewing Response	Post-Viewing Response
Participant 1	2	2
Participant 2	4	4
Participant 3***	3	4
Participant 4	3	3
Participant 5	5	5
Participant 6	3	2
Participant 7	3	2
Participant 8	6	5
Participant 9***	5	3
Participant 10	3	3
Participant 11	4	5
Participant 12	6	6
Participant 13	3	3
Participant 14	3	3
Participant 15	6	5
Participant Average	3.93	3.67

Table 4. *Iron Man 3*: The United States does not spend enough on national defense

Key

Green: Towards More Spending

Red: Towards Not More Spending

*****:** Changed Direction of View

	Pre-Viewing Response	Post-Viewing Response
Participant 1	5	5
Participant 2	5	6
Participant 3	5	6
Participant 4***	4	3
Participant 5	5	5
Participant 6	6	6
Participant 7	5	5
Participant 8	6	5
Participant 9	6	6
Participant 10	4	4
Participant 11	6	6
Participant 12	6	5
Participant 13	5	5
Participant 14	4	4
Participant 15	1	1
Participant 16	4	4
Participant 17	4	4
Participant Average	4.76	4.71

Table 5. *Iron Man 3*: The threat of terrorism in the United States has been overblown

Key

Green: Towards The Threat of Terrorism Has Been Overblown

Red: Towards The Threat of Terrorism Has Not Been Overblown

*****:** Changed Direction of View

	Pre-Viewing Response	Post-Viewing Response
Participant 1	4	4
Participant 2	4	4
Participant 3	2	2
Participant 4***	3	4
Participant 5	1	1
Participant 6	4	4
Participant 7***	5	3
Participant 8	2	2
Participant 9	2	2
Participant 10	6	5
Participant 11	2	2
Participant 12***	1	4
Participant 13	4	5
Participant 14	4	4
Participant 15	1	1
Participant 16	4	4
Participant 17	4	4
Participant Average	3.12	3.24

Table 6. *Iron Man 3*: Islam encourages more violence than other religions

Key

Green: Towards Islam Is More Violent

Red: Towards Islam Is Not More Violent

*****:** Changed Direction of View

	Pre-Viewing Response	Post-Viewing Response
Participant 1	3	3
Participant 2	6	6
Participant 3***	3	4
Participant 4	5	5
Participant 5	3	3
Participant 6	6	6
Participant 7	5	5
Participant 8	6	6
Participant 9	6	6
Participant 10	5	5
Participant 11	6	6
Participant 12	6	6
Participant 13	5	6
Participant 14	5	5
Participant 15	6	6
Participant 16	2	2
Participant 17	6	6
Participant Average	4.94	5.06

Table 7. *Captain America: Civil War*: Drone strikes cannot be justified against terrorists

Key

Green: Towards More Justified

Red: Towards Less Justified

*****:** Changed Direction of View

	Pre-Viewing Response	Post-Viewing Response
Participant 1	4	5
Participant 2***	2	5
Participant 3	5	4
Participant 4	5	5
Participant 5***	5	2
Participant 6	5	4
Participant 7	5	5
Participant 8	5	4
Participant 9	6	5
Participant 10	5	5
Participant 11	2	3
Participant 12	2	2
Participant 13	2	2
Participant 14	2	2
Participant 15***	4	3
Participant 16	5	5
Participant 17	4	4
Participant 18	5	5
Participant 19	2	3
Participant 20	6	5
Participant 21	3	3
Participant 22	4	4
Participant 23	5	5
Participant 24***	4	3
Participant 25***	4	1
Participant Average	4.04	3.76

Table 8. *Captain America: Civil War*: The world is better off if the United States takes an active role in world affairs

Key

Green: Towards The World Is Better Off

Red: Towards The World Is Not Better Off

*****:** Changed Direction of View

	Pre-Viewing Response	Post-Viewing Response
Participant 1	2	3
Participant 2***	5	2
Participant 3	3	3
Participant 4	3	3
Participant 5	3	3
Participant 6	3	3
Participant 7***	2	4
Participant 8***	3	4
Participant 9	4	4
Participant 10	4	5
Participant 11	1	1
Participant 12	5	4
Participant 13	3	2
Participant 14	5	5
Participant 15	5	5
Participant 16	5	5
Participant 17***	4	3
Participant 18	3	3
Participant 19	5	6
Participant 20	4	4
Participant 21	4	4
Participant 22***	5	3
Participant 23***	2	5
Participant 24***	4	3
Participant 25***	2	6
Participant Average	3.56	3.72

Table 9. *Captain America: Civil War*: The United Nations does a poor job of solving problems

Key

Green: Towards The United Nations Does A Poor Job

Red: Towards The United Nations Does Not Do A Poor Job

*****:** Changed Direction of View

	Pre-Viewing Response	Post-Viewing Response
Participant 1***	4	3
Participant 2	2	2
Participant 3	6	6
Participant 4***	3	4
Participant 5***	4	3
Participant 6	5	4
Participant 7	5	5
Participant 8	4	4
Participant 9***	4	3
Participant 10	3	3
Participant 11	5	6
Participant 12***	3	4
Participant 13	3	2
Participant 14	3	2
Participant 15	4	5
Participant 16	3	3
Participant 17***	3	4
Participant 18	5	5
Participant 19	3	3
Participant 20***	4	3
Participant 21	3	3
Participant 22	4	4
Participant 23	3	3
Participant 24***	3	4
Participant 25***	3	5
Participant Average	3.68	3.72

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