Man of Steel and Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice: Superhero Narratives in Post-9/11 Era

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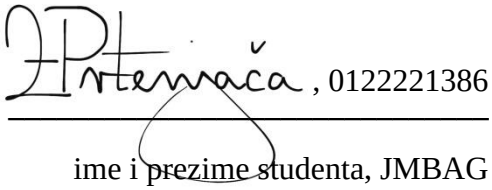

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Abstract

Despite the moderate success of their predecessors produced during the 1970s and the 1980s, superhero films effectively began to dominate the silver screen and shatter global box offices with the release of Bryan Singer's *X-Men* (2000). As they shifted from campy escapism to thoughtful dialectics on contemporary issues, superhero films were inarguably affected by the 9/11 terrorist attacks which severely fractured all aspects of American identity and life. Twenty years later, there is no shortage of superhero films which have implicitly or explicitly grappled with the trauma 9/11 induced, as well as its ramifications concretized by the ceaseless War on Terror. Yet the necessity to gauge the imprints of these decades of disruption on popular culture does not seem to be abating, as purported by Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* (2013) and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016). Therefore, by examining the films' post-9/11 urban and psychological wreckage, this thesis first examines the traumatized state of the films' characters as interrelated with metropolitan destruction in the wake of a historically-redefining tragedy. Taking into account that the titular films coalesce into a singular narrative, the thesis examines its socio-political subtexts with causal links to and a commentary on the post-9/11 American milieu. Finally, the thesis approaches the post-9/11 superhero films as both pop-cultural artifacts and coping mechanisms, aiming to show how *Man of Steel* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* remediate the wounded American psyche rather than reinforce its paralysis in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: post-9/11, trauma, identity, superhero film, Zack Snyder, *Man of Steel*, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*.

Contents

Introduction

The scenes play out like this: Something large soars through the sky and crashes into an imposing skyscraper. A fire breaks out and engulfs the remnants of the building. Large chunks of debris plummet down to the streets. Plumes of smoke billow upwards, muddying the skyline above the assaulted metropolis. Petrified bystanders watch in awe, and then rush headlong into safer areas, wherever they may be. A person somersaults from the collapsing tower. Yellow taxis capsize. Thick ashen flakes cover the faces of the casualties screaming for help from underneath the rubble. Police officers, firefighters, paramedics, and many other first responders come to their aid. Helicopters hover over the site of trauma. The visceral imagery is all too familiar, and the parallels to that painful morning on September 11, 2001 uncanny. Yet they do not refer only to the longest uninterrupted media coverage in American history or an amateur video footage of the World Trade Center toppling and the Pentagon burning, but also retrace the digitally constructed brawl between America's favorite flying superhero and his equally overpowered Kryptonian nemesis, General Zod, during the epic final act of the character's reboot, *Man of Steel* (2013).

Cut to one of the opening sequences in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), essentially a re-staging of the duel between Man of Steel and General Zod from a bottom-up perspective, and a distraught helpless Bruce Wayne can be seen dashing through the streets of a ravaged Metropolis, now enveloped in a thick fog. The allegory for the 9/11 attacks instantly becomes obvious, as does Wayne's helplessness; his is the focal point through which the immersed viewer relives the spectacle of terror and its traumatic consequences. With countless civilian lives lost and billions of dollars' worth of property damage, these two titles and many of their contemporaries codify a genre pre-occupied not only with the overt visual reenactment of America's most recent national tragedy but also with the debate on its immediate reverberations. In this context, the post-9/11 superhero genre has already received some scholarly attention, yet Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* (2013) and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), two recent entries in what Sven Cvek terms "the 9/11 archive" (8), have been somewhat overlooked. This thesis comes about as an attempt to rectify such stance and further explore the films' relevance to the ongoing socio-political commentary on the post-9/11 America.

Chapter one thus surveys the history of the cinematic superhero boom in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy and the genre's various modes of engagement with its repercussions. It briefly explicates the evolution of the post-9/11 superhero film from a patriotic fantasy to a serious

dialectic reflective, critical of the previous two decades in American history, setting up the framework in which the films in the thesis' focus exist.

Chapter two performs a close reading of the titular films' overt reproduction of the 9/11 tragedy *vis-à-vis* James Gilmore's spectacle of "urban wreckage" (54). The evocation of the World Trade Center's collapse, the thesis claims, is transcoded as the urbicide of Metropolis, which becomes a connective tissue between the two films and acts as an emotional trigger for Bruce Wayne's trauma and oncoming frustration with Superman. In hindsight, Wayne's enraged state aligns with America's following the 9/11 attacks, and him framing Superman as the obstructer of *status quo* corresponds to the "Us versus Them" rhetoric anchored in America's "new" national history.

Chapter three expands upon this notion of new national history and forms the bulk of the thesis. It turns to Siegfried Kracauer's concept of cinema as a "mirror" of society and "certain national characteristics" (6) and Jeffrey C. Alexander and Amir Khadem's social constructivist theory of cultural trauma to inspect how *Man of Steel* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* portray and confront the changes which swept over America in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks. Taking into account that these films coalesce into a singular narrative, this case study examines its socio-political subtexts with causal links to and commentary on the post-9/11 American milieu, characterized by judicial re-figurations under the Bush-Cheney Administration, proactive foreign policy and pre-emptive strikes against terrorism, unchecked military-industrial complex, suppression of civil liberties, the Othering of non-Americans in America, and aggressive re-articulation of several of its ideological underpinnings.

Much like the previous chapters, the fourth and the final chapter reads through an intermixture of scholarly analyses, media comments, and popular reactions to the titular films and the genre as a whole with the aim of assessing to what extent these pop-cultural artifacts serve as coping mechanisms for the wounded American psyche in the twenty-first century. This is followed by the summary of the thesis' findings and concluding remarks.

1. Dark Americana: Post-9/11 Superhero Films

All this changed on September 11.
(Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future")

Writing in 1977, a noted cultural historian and film critic Leo Braudy asserted that "genre films essentially ask the audience, 'Do you still want to believe this?' Popularity is the audience answering, 'Yes.' Change in genre occurs when the audience says, 'That's too infantile a form of what we believe. Show us something more complicated'" (179).

On September 11, 2001, when nineteen armed men affiliated with the extremist Islamic group al Qaeda hijacked four passenger airliners and crashed three into the long-standing symbols of America's economic and military might, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the shockwaves of their terrorist acts would ripple not only through the streets of New York but also through the very fabric of American identity and life. Due to the visual nature of the tragedy, which soon came to be likened to a movie in the parlance of popular media, the entertainment industry, most notably filmmaking, was immediately afflicted and radically transformed.

Audiences distanced themselves from "the infantile forms" of disaster and action films as "hyper-violent spectacles that dominated mainstream late 1990s cinema" (Winston Dixon 3), namely because of the emotive and traumatic triggers activated by never-ending scenes of explosions and urban destruction. Instead, they opted for a "uniquely American phenomenon" (MacFarlane 446) which served as "a crutch for American identity, shielding Americans from an unwelcoming world and newly revealed fragility" (MacFarlane 448) – the superhero narrative. As America's retaliation against the 9/11 attackers grew more prominent and darker throughout the past two decades, the post-9/11 superhero film evolved "from merely atmospheric references to re-enactments, from pro-war propaganda to critical self-inquiry" (Riegler 103). This thesis argues that, to understand how *Man of Steel* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* serve as an active commentary on the post-9/11 America, one first has to be familiarized with the mechanics of the genre they belong to. Therefore, this chapter proposes and surveys three identifiable stages of the genre's evolution, each evocative of and engaged with its socio-political and cultural milieu through modes of *retreat*, *response*, and *reaction*.

1.1. Stage I: Retreat

The turn of the century proved to be equally triumphant and challenging for the modern superhero film. The technological advancement allowed for its larger-than-life figures to finally transition from the comic book pages onto the big screen in a manner that did not seem so tongue-in-cheek. Bryan Singer's *X-Men* (2000) and M. Night Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* (2000) did not only shatter box offices but they also interweaved issues related to the Holocaust and the experience of the Other in their discursive allegorical narratives.

Because "superheroes are defined less by their types of costumes than by the type of *narrative* in which they exist" (Dittmer 118), that narrative predominantly being a traumatic one after the 9/11 tragedy, it is unsurprising that superhero films like Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002) immediately both resonated with national anxieties and perpetuated the inherently American values which permeated the then public discourse. In this regard, Dan A. Hassler-Forest rightly concludes that "from *Spider-Man* (2002) onwards, superhero films have repeatedly addressed the trauma of 9/11," either "by de-historicizing the present through the re-creation of a New York City in which the attacks never happened" or "by providing narratives in which catastrophic threats against New York City are narrowly averted, thereby *re-writing* this history as one of triumph instead of defeat" (*Capitalist Superheroes* 113-114, my emphasis). In this sense, it seems that in the early stage after the 9/11, superhero films offered a symbolic *retreat* from the traumatic reality by negating or averting events of mass-violence and destruction.

A case in Hassler's first point is the removal of the Twin Towers from the film's promotional material, and generally from all pop-cultural appropriations of the demolished landmark. Both the teaser trailer, which showcases Spider-Man detaining a group of bank-robbers by drawing their helicopter into a web weaved between the Towers, and the poster, on which the mirror image of the Towers can be spotted in Spider-Man's golden lenses, were withdrawn from circulation. In addition to these paratextual interventions, the World Trade Center was digitally removed from the film's theatrical cut, and two additional scenes were introduced. These scenes can be read as a metaphorical reply to the terrorist attacks because one portrays a group of New Yorkers assaulting the Green Goblin on the Queensboro Bridge with steel bars, bricks, and stones, some even decidedly exclaiming that if he messes with one of them, he messes with all of them (*Spider-Man* 01:44:27 – 01:44:46), whereas the other sees Spider-Man swinging through a gilded New York onto a flagpole, landing just beneath an American flag (*Spider-Man* 01:55:43 – 01:55:49). Not only were these revisions intentionally placed to supplement the importance of collective identity and remediate the psychic trauma

induced a year before but they also solidified George W. Bush's stance that "terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America" ("9/11 Address"). Positioning an all-American icon underneath a national symbol, rather than atop the physical marker of a monumental national tragedy, inducted a "cycle of post-9/11 films" (Westwell 42) which began to reinforce what will become "the neo-conservative discourse" (Westwell 42) of the Bush-Cheney Administration.

Vulnerable, audiences *retreated* into a world of post-9/11 fantasies, wherein protagonists and antagonists aptly fit Bush's Manichean definition of good, "exceptional men" battling evildoers and "enemies of freedom" (Bush, "Address to Joint Session"). Because audiences consciously sought to remove themselves from their painful reality, multiplexes were inundated with "movie storylines that featured easily identifiable heroes and villains" (DiPaolo 18), which may be one of the many reasons why fantasy and family-friendly films (like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003), the *Harry Potter* series (2001-2011), the *Chronicles of Narnia* series (2005-2010), and the early films in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series (2003-2007)), "had such appeal at that time" (DiPaolo 18) in American history. A post-9/11 superhero fantasy which adhered to this mold was Bryan Singer's *Superman Returns* (2006), a nostalgia-ridden sequel to Richard Donner and Christopher Reeve's seminal *Superman: The Movie* (1978), but also an oft overlooked and focused rumination of the character's position in a nation which emerged from smoke five years before its release. In it, Superman casts himself in a quinquennial search for his Kryptonian ancestors, but returns as unsuccessful to a world which initially seems to have no place for the Son of Krypton, judging from Lois Lane's Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial titled "Why the World Doesn't Need Superman" (*Superman Returns* 00:23:59 – 00:24:20). However, what begins as an attempt to deconstruct the Superman archetype for the modern audiences soon turns into a patriotic fantasy. In the film's opening sequence, Superman stops a passenger airliner from crashing into a baseball stadium as "an archetypically American landmark," a scene both "eerily reminiscent" and a hopeful rewrite of "that moment of national trauma" (Hassler-Forest, "From Flying Men" 38). What is more, in one of the film's most poignant sequences, Superman not only foils the urban destruction of Metropolis set into motion by a clearly delineated villain, Lex Luthor, but also saves a man falling down from a building, transmedially repurposing Richard Drew's (in)famous photograph not as a symbol of terror and loss, but hope and life. These re-writes of the tragedy reassure the viewers that the good guys always win and cater to the film's patriotic message, one heavily distributed by the government in the shadows cast by the 9/11 attacks. In addition, as he floats in the atmosphere and contemplates his place in the

world, Superman can hear children screaming, improvised explosive devices detonating, helicopter blades swirling, and an instance of what resembles an Arabic language-sounding war cry (*Superman Returns* 00:53:23 – 00:53:44). As Clark Kent, a reporter for the *Daily Planet*, he even observes a TV newsreel of events similar to the conflicts in the Middle East (*Superman Returns* 00:19:54 – 00:20:06). All of these elements pinpoint his narrative to America's extra-diegetic "sense of failure and abandonment" (Hassler-Forest, "From Flying Men" 138), yet he never engages to abate its causes. By the end of the film, when this ur-American figure restores peace and order usurped by the villainous Luthor, saving Metropolis and all of its residents along the way, the tragedy of 9/11 is rewritten, but the "broader questions of American legitimacy in international interventions such as those undertaken in the post-9/11 era" (Dittmer 121) are never addressed.

Instead, superhero films always fulfilled the purpose required by their audiences, with "supermen" of all kinds standing for truth, justice, and the American way and offering "viewers 'safe' ways to subconsciously reenact, or work through anxieties and traumatic memories for those reluctant to witness more realistic filmic accounts of the actual event of 9/11" (Pheasant-Kelly 8) and its consequences. Even the effectively first post-9/11 superhero films (but only in terms of being entirely produced after 2001) reasserted this with their suggestive imagery. Bryan Singer's *X2* (2003) challenged one of the then prevalent public fears by having a mutant successfully infiltrate the White House and assault the President of the United States, only to be deflected by one of the President's guards. Sam Raimi also returned with *Spider-Man 2* (2004), a sequel in which the friendly neighborhood web-slinger again hindered a distinguishable villain and his plan to wreak havoc across New York, saving many civilians along the way.

1.2. Stage II: Response

The films discussed in the previous chapter are instances of the retreat from reality, as they were not ready to provide a more proactive response to the horrific events. However, such responses, although somewhat ambivalent, came sooner than expected. In 2016, recounting on the darker turn superhero films seem to have taken in the last decade, Carmen Petaccio correctly stated that "9/11 may have been the reboot of the American character," but she largely oversimplified the malleability of the superhero genre to *respond* to its times by claiming that "every year since has been a rehash of an old origin story" ("Twilight of the Superheroes"). Superhero films and their oft eponymous figures certainly do operate within pre-set conventions.

It is a prerequisite of their public exposure and appeal, the "pop" part in pop-cultural artifacts they have come to be. But the genre also allows for its boundaries to loosen and, every once in a while, this breakaway from the norm yields a multi-layered text which challenges its socio-political environment.

Arguably the first post-9/11 superhero film to present such a challenge to the audiences was Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005), a strong reimagining of the character which not only resuscitated a decadent film franchise but also reset the entire genre. Notable for breaking the tradition by "relocating the main threat from inside Gotham to a sectarian rebel militia in the Far East" (Hassler-Forest, "From Trauma Victim" 38), *Batman Begins* abounds with allusions to the 9/11 attacks and the consequential War on Terror which began with Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan (2001) and followed suit with Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq (2003). Yet, the film does not simply narrativise the confrontation between Batman and the League of Shadows' Ra's al Ghul as one of America fighting against extremist Islamic groups such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Rather, it suggests that it may be difficult or even impossible to fully defeat the enemy and save everyone. By the end of the film, Batman successfully averts Ra's al Ghul's plan to wreck the Gotham monorail into the imposing Wayne Tower (a parallel to the airliners crashing into the World Trade Center), but he cannot protect several parts of the city from the ensuing terrorist attacks or the release of Jonathan Crane/Scarecrow's fear toxin (here read as a literal manifestation of public fear following the 9/11 attacks and a biochemical weapon). What is more, he may have killed Ra's al Ghul, but he has not dissolved the League which returns (through Ra's' daughter, Talia, and her second-in-command, Bane) with the same terrorist plot in the trilogy's final installment, *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) (a metaphorical representation of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, as well as their followers and ongoing insurrections even after their deaths). In this sense, the film lacks a "formal closure which can be read to reflect the current situation of American post-9/11 trauma" (Hassler-Forest, "From Trauma Victim" 39); moreover, it can be read as probing the efficacy of the American offensive against the terrorist insurgencies in the Middle East.

Nolan's sophomore take on the Caped Crusader, *The Dark Knight* (2008), and Jon Favreau's *Iron Man* (also 2008), which kick-started the mammoth the Marvel Cinematic Universe has come to be, both extended such approach into a fully-blown, post-9/11 socio-political commentary. In addition to various visual references to the 9/11 tragedy and Heath Ledger's Joker as an embodiment of terrorism's unpredictable chaos, *The Dark Knight* witnessed its "silent guardian" resorting to techniques such as extraordinary rendition of a foreign suspect,

"enhanced" interrogation, and mass surveillance by turning every cellphone in Gotham into a microphone. The film was scrutinized for "valorizing Dick Cheney's NeoCon[1] 'unitary executive' vigilantism" and validating "Bush administration philosophy and policies" (Treat 106), but what the critics failed to realize was that its traumatized titular hero and his morally challenged *raison d'être* pointed to the unethicality of the said politicians' judicial contortions and policies used to "uphold" justice.

The same would happen with Favreau's *Iron Man*, which followed up on *Batman Begins*' geopolitical and ideological traversing. Tony Stark, an heir to a warmongering empire and a brilliant inventor, is captured by a local cell of the Arabic extremist group known as the Ten Rings (with strong parallels to the Taliban and the ISIS) after the demonstration of his company's new WMD (weapon of mass destruction) in Kunar Province, Afghanistan. The group forces him to produce more WMDs for their cause and globally televises their demands, but he manages to escape and re-invent himself as Iron Man, a WMD himself, now intent not on reaping the benefits of annihilation, but rather on helping those he endangered in the past. Because of his extralegal, albeit heroic incursions, the film's "discourse is guided through a military fantasia that reinforces US dominancy" (Muñoz-González 71) and tempts the viewer to perceive only Tony Stark as a representation of the unchecked military-industrial complex in the post-9/11 America. However, the film cleverly subverts this expectation when the true puppeteer of the terrorist schemes in which Stark was entangled is revealed to be his business partner, Obadiah Stane. When the Ten Rings return in Shane Black's *Iron Man 3* (2013), they are represented by the Mandarin, a faux terrorist modeled after the Taliban and the ISIS, who broadcasts public killings and fearmongering videos. As he ultimately "turns out to be a concoction of a Western businessman" (MacFarlane 449) named Aldrich Killian and his accomplice, the fictional Vice President Rodriguez, with the aim "to gin up sales" (MacFarlane 449), the franchise reveals what Jerrod S. MacFarlane sees as "a strange obsession with terrorists controlled by Americans" (448). It also possibly alludes to America coping with the guilt for having provided armaments to bin Laden and the mujahedeen almost two decades earlier (as a part of the covert CIA *Operation Cyclone* during the Soviet-Afghan War). Anyhow, this subtext also allows for a more insightful analysis of the world from which these films materialized, justifying Sally Rooney's claims that:

[1] *Neoconservatism* is an American political movement which emerged in the 1960s, notable for its support of international interventionism and the promotion of democratic tenets through military force ("peace through strength"). Its advocates peaked in position during the George W. Bush presidency (2001-2009) and largely influenced the decisions of his Vice President, Dick Cheney, and the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld.

> Iron Man never really battles terrorists; instead he battles the peripheral phenomena of the War on Terror. The recurrent villain of the Iron Man films is not Islamic fundamentalism, but American fundamentalism: an out-of-control arms trade, aggressive defense policy, and mass public paranoia. These are films concerned with the moral horror of American militarism. (Rooney)

Therefore, as they moved away from de-historicizing America in which the 9/11 attacks are either non-existent or narrowly precluded, these post-9/11 superhero allegories essentially inaugurated "analytical spaces in which reworked conceptions of terrorism, justice, and 'good and evil' can be examined and tested" (Feblowitz).

Of course, that is not to say that every superhero film released after 2008 has grown into what David Martin Jones and M. L. R. Smith call "Dark Americana" (2), that is an astute pop-cultural evaluation of the American response to the War on Terror within the generic conventions of "1) the espionage, crime procedural thriller (*Rendition*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Homeland*), 2) the war as a version of the Western (*The Hurt Locker*, *American Sniper*), and 3) the pseudo-documentary style favored by those like Paul Greengrass and Brian de Palma (*United 93*, *Green Zone*, *Redacted*)" (Jones and Smith 16). However, many more productions that followed Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy* and the *Iron Man* trilogy, including the films in the thesis' focus, "interrogate the dilemmas" of the post-9/11 American policy "while reflecting more broadly on what this says about the current condition of the American soul" (Jones and Smith 18), signaling an obvious shift within the genre worth exploring further.

1.3. Stage III: Reaction

Indeed, Favreau's and Nolan's post-9/11 allegories deposited "a paradigm shift" in the ever-growing bank of superhero films, "but fantasy cannot conscientiously be enjoyed Nolan's way, without any sense of social, historical, or moral consequence" (White). By 2010s, it seems, audiences felt ready enough to consume superhero films which were not "safely divorced from the ethical dilemmas and complications of real-world politics and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan" (Purse 105) as they were in the genre's early stages. Some generic conventions, which later caused the post-9/11 superhero genre to turn towards a more engaging and insightful socio-political commentary, returned to the multiplexes. As stated before, science fiction and disaster films were forsworn on the basis of their visual facsimiles of the national tragedy being too emotional to digest, until "Steven Spielberg pioneered the 9/11 visual parable through heavily

codified imagery with 2005's *War of the Worlds*" (Ellis). Nevertheless, however innovative in his application of the pseudo-documentary and street-level perspective within a blockbuster, Spielberg was criticized by numerous pundits for exploiting and mindlessly capitalizing on the trauma instigated by the 9/11 attacks just four years after they shocked the nation. Paul Greengrass' *United 93* and Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* suffered the same fate a year later, whereas J. J. Abrams and Matt Reeves found success with *Cloverfield* (2008), a found-footage, *cinéma vérité*-stylized disaster film, with visual callbacks to the 9/11 tragedy aplenty. After allowing for a response-type of films that pointed to the possibility of an open or not fully "happy" ending, audiences, it seemed, now felt ready to revisit the "hallowed grounds" and process the pain through their explicit allusions in the superhero narrative as a form of *reaction* to the event.

Joss Whedon and Zack Snyder, directors of *The Avengers* (2012) and *Man of Steel* (2013), took upon Spielberg's formula and conflated it with the superhero narrative to offer the audiences new modes of processing the national trauma. It is not uncommon for either of these genres to convert the cities they depict into "something of a war zone" (Gilmore 60), but their visual analogies to 9/11 seem to be "a constant oscillation between the pleasurable spectacle and the spectacle of terrorism" (Gilmore 60). In this sense, Whedon's *The Avengers* may have stopped the Loki-Chitauri invasion during the Battle of New York, but the immense urban destruction and civilian death toll left behind a ruptured Manhattan. A year later, Metropolis did not fare better, even though "Man of Steel" himself went to inhumane lengths to prevent the Kryptonian invasion-terraforming and defeat General Zod. In the audiences' minds, these super-powered beings defeated the foreign terrorist groups, saved New York from its monumental pain, and reconciled "the 9/11 tragedy on the screen, albeit uncomfortably" (Hagley and Harrison, "Fighting the Battles" 124). Out of that discomfort, new doubts arose, and numerous questions were left unanswered.

When *The Avengers* and *Man of Steel* restaged their cosmic wars "with the intimacy of a terrorist attack" (VanDerWerff), the post-9/11 superhero film slowly transitioned from explicitly alluding to or re-writing the spectacle of terror which occurred on Ground Zero, to slowly beginning to *react* to its reverberations. Acts of high-profile terrorist attacks on the foreign and domestic soil proliferated in the post-9/11 superhero film, and so did various forms of violation of civil liberties. Whereas *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 3* question the corrupt capitalistic tendencies of the unchecked military-industrial complex in the larger scheme of the War on Terror, in the Russo brothers' *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), the eponymous First Avenger

quarrels with Nick Fury, the director of the federal agency called S.H.I.E.L.D., over a covert, nearly omnipotent project called Insight. It is revealed to be a complex satellite surveillance system interconnected with heavily armed warships, the Hellicarriers, as a precaution against another invasion *à la* the Chitauri one represented in *The Avengers*. And while Nick Fury may be all too quip about sacrificing a little freedom for the national security, Captain America does not relent, critiquing Fury's politics of "targeted killing, the ethics of pre-emptive strikes, the USA PATRIOT Act, and the balance between collective security and individual rights" (McSweeney, *Avengers Assemble!* 152), all modeled after America's post-9/11 foreign policy. Even the nation's stupefaction with and the inability to respond to the American Airlines Flight 77 crashing into the Pentagon is revisited when Captain America fails to divert one of the Helicarriers from flying into the Triskelion, the S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters in Washington, D. C.

In Joss Whedon's *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), Tony Stark laments the purpose of his peacemaking/world-policing program and his own pre-emptive striker comes back to haunt him, embodied in the titular villain. In addition, his and the Hulk's duel in Johannesburg evokes what Karen Randall terms the "9/11 aesthetic" (138) of destruction, once again prominent during the final Battle of Sokovia, which acts as a catalyst for the public to fear the Avengers' unilateral, extralegal incursions, considered normative up to that point. The Avengers put a halt to Ultron's plans, but at the expanse of some two hundred lives, including the family of Helmut Zemo, a Sokovian Armed Forces Colonel and the ex-leader of EKO Scorpion, a paramilitary death squad. As he returns to divide the Avengers behind-the-scenes of the Russo brothers' *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), they are barely able to ward off a well-known terrorist from acquiring bio-chemical weapons during the attack on the IFID (Institute for Infectious Diseases) headquarters in Lagos, Nigeria. They completely fail to intercept the bombing of the Vienna International Center during a United Nations ceremony, an assault all too similar to the collapse of the World Trade Center. Issues "about the parameters of security and freedom, regulation and accountability, which undoubtedly are both a reflection of and an engagement with some of the defining issues of the post-9/11 era" (McSweeney, *Avengers Assemble!* 239) thus began to crop up more explicitly in the post-9/11 superhero film, only to be perpetuated within Zack Snyder's *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) and David Ayer's *Suicide Squad* (2017).

An in-depth analysis of the former film, which is to follow in the thesis' subsequent chapters, aims to demonstrate that the long-awaited slugfest between two of the arguably most notable icons in Americana mythology, Batman and Superman, does not simply return to the questions posed by its watershed predecessor, *The Dark Knight*, but also updates them for the

audiences' contemporary socio-political environments. Much like the recent entries in the Marvel Cinematic Universe continuity, both *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* and *Suicide Squad* fit the aforementioned Dark Americana template because they "recognize the gray area morality this era has engendered" and the "ethical ambiguity of political life more generally" (Jones and Smith 18). More specifically, it is the latter that further bends the parameters of post-9/11 legal action with its Cheneyesque intelligence agency director, Amanda Waller, strutting about and establishing a counter-terrorist Task Force X, made up of several convicted felons used as disposable tools for the army's covert, high-risk assignments. Government-sanctioned, this black ops unit resolves "the extraordinary nature of threats in today's world" with extraordinary means, "an argument reminiscent of the debate surrounding the USA PATRIOT Act" (Maruo-Schröder). Additionally, all high-profile political opponents and supposed usurpers of the *status quo* are contained and, it is presumed, tortured within the Louisianan Belle Reve Federal Penitentiary. Diegetically referred to as the "Black Site," an Abu Ghraib-fashioned facility whose prisoners are held without due legal process and clad in orange prison jumpsuits, it eerily echoes "a number of post-9/11 institutions and operations, the prison of Guantanamo Bay being among the more notorious ones," which "operate outside a system of checks and balances, unrestrained by any of the usual mechanisms of control or supervision in place in democratic societies" (Maruo-Schröder). This lack of supervisory mechanisms allows Waller to exploit the judicial system, and her Task Force is immediately dispatched to retrieve an HVT-1 (high value target) in Midway City which, leveled to the point of *The Avengers*' Lower Manhattan, mirrors the 9/11 tragedy in its aesthetics of terror. When Waller is found to be the indirect cause of this urban destruction and the HVT the Task Force X was supposed to rescue, she starts covering her tracks and eradicating her own team members.

Therefore, from state agencies justifying the usage of mass surveillance and pre-emptive strikes, a WMD haunting his own creators, a terrorist driven to extremes because his family was annihilated by the said WMD, to a rich bureaucrat bending the law to her will, all shrouded under the guise of "state protection" and "national security," the post-9/11 superhero genre bids its audiences to *react* to the complex socio-political issues these antagonists and their flip sides continually tackle. In addition, as they are set against morally ambivalent actors and their actions, the "darker, deeper, and more vulnerable" superheroes populate the post-9/11 world brimming with anxiety and paranoia, their "weaknesses . . . exposed like the raw nerve that was America in the days following the 9/11 attacks" (Hagley and Harrison, "The Amazing Renaissance"). Tony Stark and Bruce Wayne continuously suffer from bouts of PTSD, much like

the American soldiers upon their return from Iraq and Afghanistan. In comparison, Captain America and Superman, the paragons of virtue and justice, significantly pale in the eyes of both the domestic and global public as they are unable to prevent fictional terrorist attacks reminiscent of the recent ones in American history (from the historically-redefining 9/11 tragedy to the Boston Marathon bombing, the Orlando nightclub shooting, and the New York and New Jersey bombings, to name just a few).

By this point, the thesis has hopefully managed to articulate that the post-9/11 superhero film has evolved into a highly reflective and critical hermeneutic medium, capable of providing both "allegorical representations that interpret, comment on, and indirectly portray aspects of an era" and "insights into the nature of human beings, social relations, institutions, and conflicts of a given era, or the human condition itself" (Kellner, *Cinema Wars* 14). In this regard, some of the genre's entries correspond to what Sven Cvek calls the "9/11 archive," that are "literary texts … media images, films, and works of visual artists" which encompass "the cultural representations of a post-911 America and its debates about the "global war on 'terror'" (8). The majority of the topics with which this slightly compressed overview of the genre's evolution was preoccupied are interweaved within the narratives in the thesis' focus, but a final point has to be taken into consideration if their analysis is to be successful.

The post-9/11 culture of fear conflated with the trauma discourse and gradually influenced the production of films herein termed Dark Americana. During the last eight years or so, it also inevitably repositioned the post-9/11 superhero film towards a more realistic approach, effectively beginning with *The Dark Knight* and the *Iron Man* trilogies, but fully coming into fruition after the release of *The Avengers* and *Man of Steel*. Because realism is a slippery term in a genre populated with talking raccoons and cosmic Vikings, one should note that there has not been "some sort of overnight paradigmatic shift, but that the diegetic worlds the majority of modern superheroes reside in are quite distinct from the fantasies of the Donner-era Superman films or the Burton/Schumacher-era Batman" (McSweeney, *Avengers Assemble!* 239). Simply put, these postmodern superhero narratives differ from the traditional superhero film in that they self-consciously engage with the real world, evaluative of the era they belong to and critical of its prevalent social, political, and cultural values, which the thesis now turns to analyze.

2. Tumbling Figures

> Our world, parts of our world, have crumbled into theirs,
> which means we are living in a place of danger and rage.
> (Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future")

The 9/11 attacks were the first direct foreign incursion on American soil since the War of 1812 against the British, and nearly three thousand casualties and numerous more injured attest to it being the deadliest one. Perpetuated in the media for days, prolonging the national pain and substantiating that America was not prepared for such an assault, the imagery of the Towers crumbling was physically and psychically seared into the public consciousness. Collectively traumatized, the audiences sought ways to process the senseless chaos that was the destruction of New York and, for the better part of the previous two decades, superhero films managed to fill that void with their reassuring tales and the good-overcomes-evil scenarios. However, by the release of *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), *The Avengers* (2012), and *Man of Steel* (2013), a shift in the raveled correlation between the superhero and the city occurred, constituting a "new and far more complex cycle" of superhero films, "one that acknowledges not just the historic actuality of 9/11 but the omnipresent fear of urban wreckage in everyday life post-9/11" (Gilmore 54). This spectacle of urban wreckage, concludes Gilmore, is relived "at two contrasting aesthetic levels: from the skyline and from the ground" (59), each of which serves a different purpose in relation to the scarred cityscape and the superhero's transforming identity.

The urbicide of Metropolis, this chapter claims, serves as a connective tissue between the titular films' overarching narrative. In *Man of Steel*, "the decimation of the city" (Gilmore 59) is situated as a transcoding of the 9/11 attacks observed predominantly from the skyline, whereas in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, the spectator is on the ground-level, fully immersed not only in the catastrophe's "bodily effects" (Gilmore 59) but also its psychological consequences. These different vantage points allow for an examination of the event instigating the collapse-vengeance-acceptance arc in which the eponymous superheroes are reshaped and reformed for the twenty-first century, much like America in the wake of its national tragedy.

2.1. *Man of Steel*: The Spectacle of Urban Wreckage

Before performing a close reading of the film's third act which serves as a direct invocation of the 9/11 attacks, one first has to briefly consider how it ties the figure of Superman

to the post-9/11 American zeitgeist. Like the nation that was battered on that fateful morning and on a quest for its place in the world in the following decade, Snyder's Superman is but a remnant of Richard Donner's or Bryan Singer's clearly delineated and ever-virtuous do-gooder. In fact, he is only ever once referred to as Superman in the film, and he fully embraces his American identity and the position as the *Daily Planet*'s famous journalist at the end of the film. His appearance in much of the first two acts can be described, somewhat humorously, as a "hobo wandering through small-town America accompanied by Chris Cornell's elegiac 'Seasons' as soundtrack" (Proctor 291). Yet it is an apt portrayal of a man struggling to find his place in the world and a superhero adjusting to his powers and dual identity, a process which the viewer experiences through a disjointed, nonlinear filmic narrative. As Clark Kent simultaneously performs heroic deeds and wanders through America in search of his purpose, his chronicle "drawing upon *Batman Begins* as a template" (Proctor 290), one may conclude that he is reshaped for the contemporary audiences as a post-9/11 superhero *flâneur*. Rather than participating in events, Kent – and every other flâneur – walks and observes the modern life, and, frequently, its injustices. A figure imagined by Charles Baudelaire and further developed by Walter Benjamin, the flâneur can serve various purposes in different times (Livingstone and Gyarkye). In *Man of Steel* it highlights Kent's struggle to come to terms with his American identity. Throughout this complex process of identification, he seems to be immensely influenced by his adoptive earthling parents, Jonathan and Martha Kent. Concerned that his son would be further chastised because of his abilities and the outsider status he experienced as a child, Jonathan Kent even forbids Clark to save him from a tornado strike. Clark strains whether to save his father or not in the scene that ultimately reveals a superhero torn between "the classic version of Superman, … an America in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks and craving the reassurance of one-dimensional comic books and superhero films" (Donovan 26), and "a Superman truly reimagined and representative of a country grappling with a way to redefine itself" (Donovan 26) in 2013.

But it is not with this division that *Man of Steel*'s 9/11 storyline begins to take hold, nor is it with Jor-El's consciousness re-iterating the cosmic destruction of Krypton's over extended empire "as a parallel to the contemporary United States with its costly foreign commitments to wars in the Middle East" (Donovan 24). Aware of his dual heritage, Clark embraces his preternatural aptitude, dons his distinguishably American colors and propels to the sky accompanied by Hans Zimmer's grand theme pregnant with hope, aptly titled "Flight." However, it is the Sword of Rao, a group of militant Kryptonian fundamentalists led by the unrelenting

General Zod, which reformulates Clark's position in the twenty-first century when they arrive on American heartland. Mirroring *Batman Begins*' League of Shadows and Ra's al Ghul and, in extension, al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, Zod's followers broadcast fearmongering videos and apply scare tactics to incite panic throughout the world. They activate two literal weapons of mass destruction, the terraforming devices known as World Engines, to rebuild Krypton on Earth, but Clark successfully dismantles one of the devices in the Indian Ocean, and vanquishes the other and the majority of Zod's troupe into the eternal Phantom Zone opened up above Metropolis. The "visible form that evil assumes" is thus "an attempt on private property" (Eco 22), and the circumstances have forced Clark, who "bears the creed of American exceptionalism," into "a globalized adventure" (Soares 755).

The notion of space now comes into focus: Clark may be a worldly protector, but he is inextricably and concretely tied to an American city. When Zod deliberately attempts to "erase a structure that acts as a substrate for a certain kind of identity or way of life" (Coward 38), the viewer is aware that he is referring to the wanton destruction of Metropolis – dubbed the Black Zero Event – as an allusion to the funerary collapse of the American economic seat and the disruption in national identity. "Raised in Kansas" and "about as American as it gets" (*Man of Steel* 02:09:29 – 02:09:32), Clark flies in to engage in a climactic, "*Transformers*-like CGI" battle royal that "appropriates *War of the Worlds*, down to the giant menacing tripods, along with *Cloverfield* and another 9/11-influenced films, with its *de rigueur* shaky camera shots and civilian masses fleeing the dust, paper, and debris of falling buildings" (Kavadlo 181).

Numerous film critics derided Snyder for his approach to what transpired during this video game-aestheticized sequence, some even branding his film as exploitative of the national tragedy. *Vulture*'s Kyle Buchanan described the film as being "a bloodless massacre of concrete, 9/11 imagery erased of its most haunting factor: *the loss of life*" (Buchanan, my emphasis), whereas for William Proctor the rampant slamming of Metropolis was the film's "final insult … with absolutely no regard for *human life*" (292, my emphasis). The latter even referenced disaster expert Charles Watson's hypothetical model of the Black Zero Event which showed that "it would have cost 700 billion dollars," whereas "9/11's physical damage cost 55 billion dollars, with a further economic impact of 121 billion dollars" (Proctor 292). To an extent, their observations are justified as they solidify the fact that not even the archetypal American figure offers the strategy to process the spectacle of urban wreckage from the skyline, as James Gilmore defined it.

Instead, to open up a space for the viewer not only to relive the traumatic moments of 9/11 but also to cope with them, the post-9/11 superhero film and its main figure have to approach the urban trauma from the ground. In their otherwise one-dimensional *Variety* editorial devoted to the film's depiction of 9/11, Justin Chang and Peter Debruge tread on this very rubble, beneath which they identify the essence of Snyder's mechanics for scaling the cosmic war in the skyline down to the streets of Metropolis. "The strategy to humanizing a mass tragedy, whether it's a natural disaster or a supernatural alien force attempting to alter earth's atmosphere by positioning twin beams on opposite poles," they claim, even if they do not acknowledge it in Snyder's transitional post-9/11 superhero film, "is to relate the experience from the perspective of individuals on the ground" (Chang and Debruge).

In fact, much like how Joss Whedon composed *The Avengers*' final act with the titular heroes not only attempting to avert the Chitauri invasion but also pulling the civilians out of the debris and guiding them to safety, Snyder immerses the viewer in the traumatic experiences of several characters on ground zero; "His trademarked speed-ramping effect," for example, "not only provides kinetic punctuation to action scenes" (Taylor 129) of a Western-fashioned duel between Clark and Zod, be it in a suburban area like Smalville or a metropolitan one like the leveled Metropolis, but it "is also said to emulate the eye saccades" (Taylor 129) of the spectators of these terrifying moments as they unfold. When the World Engines begin to operate, the camera pans down to capture the faces of the several distraught city-dwellers, but Snyder goes on to build upon this as he channels "the specific terror and chaos of 9/11 … in those brief scenes of small planes hitting skyscrapers, and in the lingering shots of ash-covered Metropolitans being pulled, traumatized but hopeful, from the rubble" (Chang and Debruge). Clark's soon-to-be editor and colleagues, Perry White, Jenny Jurwich, and Steve Lombard (all related to his love interest, Lois Lane), become street-level spectator vessels, countering Superman's vantage point from the skyline. The viewer follows along their frantic movements as the surrounding buildings shatter, evoking some of the most recognized and equally painful 9/11 imagery. The frames transition several times between the ash-covered Perry and Steve, and Jenny screaming for help from underneath her concrete grave. Even a glimpse of her viewpoint ensues (see fig. 1 and 2) before Perry and Steve find a ledge to pull her out, barely diverting an unwanted outcome in one of the film's numerous segments which are simultaneously disastrous and intimate. In extension, Perry and Steve's unwillingness to leave Jenny is a testament to the first responders who refused to stop searching for the living underneath the World Trade Center, even weeks after its downfall.

Fig. 1 and 2. *Man of Steel*'s explicit evocation of the 9/11 attacks and the victim's ground-level vantage point. Compiled from: *Man of Steel*. Directed by Zack Snyder. Warner Bros, 2013. and Little, Becky, Brian Howard Clark, and Brian Handwerk. "Remembering 9/11 in Pictures." *National Geographic*, 11 Sep. 2018, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2016/09/september-11-pictures-remembrance/.

While screening fear from the victims' vantage points and creating tension for consumers to process their trauma, Snyder follows in Whedon's footsteps as they portray something rarely (if ever before) seen in a superhero blockbuster – the loss of human life and the accompanying, tortured human experience. In this sense, he "allows its audience to ponder 9/11 from the vantage point of their present, giving them a renewed perspective on their nation's trauma" (Tomasso). The transitional period of the post-9/11 superhero film, as it is referred to in the thesis' introduction, then corresponds to what James Gilmore terms a "post-post-9/11 moment" (Gilmore 54) which introduces a more layered treatment of its characters by following on *The Dark Knight* and the *Iron Man* trilogies.

Gone is the binary differentiation between the faceless, flimsy terrorist and the all-saving, gun-toting hero of James Cameron's *True Lies* (1994). General Zod's motivation to act is comprehensible – although misconceived and unjustified – and his actions stem from a deeply-rooted ideology ingrained upon him by his nation, as evidenced by this monologue:

> Look at this. We could have built a new Krypton in this squalor, but you chose the humans over us. I exist only to protect Krypton. That is the sole purpose for which I was born. And every action I take, no matter how violent or how cruel, is for the greater good

of my people. And now... I have no people. My soul, that is what you have taken from me! (*Man of Steel*, 02:01:13 – 02:02:09).

Even Superman's critically panned act of claiming the Kryptonian's life is both difficult for the member of the same race and understandable given how much havoc this individual wreaked. "Superman would never kill" was the adage dragged out through various critical outlets, but the film goes to great lengths to prove that "the world after the 9/11 terrorist attacks is no longer one in which it's plausible for Superman to save a cat from a tree or reverse time to save a victim of an earthquake" (Tomasso). Instead, the post-9/11 superhero film "rejects the superhero as an urban protector and positions him … as a demythologized tool for the continual confrontation with and the processing of urban trauma" (Gilmore 59). Snyder's film, evidently, juggles between "the last seventy-five years of Superman mythology" and "the 'reboot' of the character for a twenty-first century, post-9/11 audience" (Soares 755). Clark Kent still hovers above the scarred city, sky-high and prone to save the day from the terrorist attacks, but the need to reaffirm his American identity and the position both globally and locally is evocative both of a post-9/11 superhero and America. Likewise, the incessant annihilation he faces and attempts to prevent in the final act only gains momentum when the vantage point shifts to the ground-level victims and their perspective of the spectacle of terror, pushing the viewers from rejoicing in a patriotic fantasy to coping with traumatic experiences via a superhero narrative in which not even the most super of all heroes can save everyone.

2.2. *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*: The Chronicle of Psychological Debris

Nowhere is Whedon's and Snyder's watershed treatment of the post-9/11 American zeitgeist and its troubled nation, allegorically embodied by the superhero, more evident than in the sequels which directly replay or reference the spectacles of urban wreckage apparent in their predecessors. The aftermath of the *The Avengers*' Battle of New York reverberates within the inner-city ruination of *Age of Ultron* (2015) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), whereas "the trauma of *Man of Steel*'s terrorist attack, … akin to our own reality, … becomes a 9/11 simulacrum in a larger sense as it sets up *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016)" (Brown 79). Indeed, this simulacrum fulfills a dual purpose. Firstly, it delineates the same space for trauma-processing as *Man of Steel*, but expands upon the necessity to interpret it from the victim's point of view. Additionally, it becomes a key instigator of a larger story arc which mirrors, to a great extent, the transformation America underwent in the decades post-9/11.

Beginning with what Gilmore sees as a "battleground not only for its diegetic citizens, but also for our collision with these appropriated historical images" (59), the opening derelict *mise-en-scène* in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* consciously fuses with the final act in *Man of Steel*, its vantage point now transferred to the streets of Metropolis, wherein "mankind is introduced to Superman" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:04:51 – 00:04:55). When the byline flashes out, the shift in perspective completely engrosses the viewer's attention through the character of a distraught Bruce Wayne, whose astounded state is accentuated by a "9/11 aesthetic," which affects the "audiences through its special-effects sound and images" (Randell 138). He drives through the streets of a ravaged Metropolis, haunted by regurgitating flames and thick clouds of smog, only to find himself next to an array of firefighters, policemen, and first responders alike, all in awe and helplessly witnessing the unfathomable urban decay that is revolving around them.

Bruce contacts Jack O'Dwyer, his financial director and a close friend, and tells him to get as many people out of the building as possible. O'Dwyer reacts immediately, but manages to whisper only a sullen prayer, invoking: "Heavenly God. Creator of Heaven and Earth. Have mercy on my soul" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:07:39 – 00:07:51). The World Trade Center collapses again, now focalized in the fall of the Wayne Financial Building which crumbles under Clark and Zod's fierce heat vision surges. As helicopter blades swirl and emergency vehicle sirens penetrate the smoke wall, an almost ethereal barrier dissociating the afflicted from those who could help them, Wayne dashes into the debris and "the tracking shot … shows the bodily effect" (Gilmore 59) of the tragedy that occurred before his very eyes. Injured and stunned people pass by him in the rubble enshrouded by creamy fog, as does a teacher with a group of frightened children. Wayne scours ground zero for survivors and stumbles upon a screaming Wallace Keefe, whose legs are severed by a massive beam. With the help of a few nearby survivors, Wayne lifts the beam and runs towards a little girl who is about to be crushed under a monstrosity of reinforced concrete. He pulls her close to his chest to calm her and asks her where her mother is, to which the girl turns around and points to the annihilated building in tears (see fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Parallels to the news footage covering the 9/11 attacks in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Directed by Zack Snyder. Warner Bros, 2016.

What provides additional resonance to this "apocalyptic spectacle of desolation" (Kwasu Tembo 47) and to the film in general, because it functions as "real fiction" (Kwasu Tembo 47), is its juxtaposition to the scenery of Bruce Wayne's primary traumatic experience – the death of his parents in Crime Alley. In a recent live watch party and subsequent commentary, Snyder described the film's intentional 9/11 visual lexicon as an example of "secondary … 'psychic trauma,' not only one that the audience would be attuned to, but also Bruce Wayne" (qtd. in Newby). Because these motivating factors fluctuate between fiction and reality, they invite a reading of this "neurotic repetition of resonant trauma – unresolved and underexplored in realist cinema – that has a power to affect" (Randell 139) both a fictional character and the nation he represents, especially in the wake of its most recent and painful tragedy. This amalgamation of personal and collective wounding is best indicated by Wayne's and the film's opening monologue: "There was a time above, a time before; there were perfect things, diamond absolutes … But things fall, things on Earth. And what falls, is fallen. In the dream, they took me to the light. A beautiful lie" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:00:18 – 00:04:50). Not only do Bruce's introspections denote his ideal life before the event that scarred him forever but they also allegorize the pre-9/11 American hegemony and moral clarity ruptured by the 9/11

attacks. And just like he emerged profoundly different from the well he had fallen into, as symbolically displayed in the film by a swarm of bats lifting him up to "the light" during his parents' funeral, so did America in the weeks following the Twin Towers' collapse.

Therefore, when the queasycam (the shaky camera technique) focuses in on Wayne's visibly enraged face at the end of the sequence, the image of Clark and Zod soaring aggressively through the sky engraved into his memory, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* depicts "an emotional trigger" for Bruce to become "his own agent of terror" (Garner 44). In "blending documentary (or documentary-like) and fictional images" (Cilento 132), the film actually refrains from "simplistic reconstruction of events and becomes concerned with producing what does not immediately appear on the surface" (Cilento 132). Underneath its tragic layers of ashen flakes, bruised bodies, and incandescent fear, the film applies its street-level viewpoint to visualize what Gilmore terms the spectacle of urban wreckage's bodily effects, but it also inspects how the interrelation of the city and the person influences the psychological wreckage of the latter. In the same manner that the Battle of Metropolis (or the Black Zero Event) is encoded with the 9/11 iconography of pain, Bruce's character metaphorically embodies its psychologically and physically devastated spectators and casualties. In this regard, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, in its "intimately and digitally constructed images of scarred cityscapes," provokes "confrontations with our sense of how our national identity and urban trauma" (Gilmore 61) are congruous with the post-9/11 era. Eighteen months later, the viewer learns, the utterly decimated and intricate alleyways of downtown Metropolis are rebuilt, but the collective psyche remains hindered, if not split. Despite those who perceive Superman as their savior and engage in a "Love Affair with Man in the Sky" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:36:21 – 00:36:25), as Perry White sarcastically spouts when brainstorming titles for the *Daily Planet*'s new article, they remain a minority when compared to those who unarguably deem him a source of their trauma, most notably the spiritually and corporeally incapacitated Bruce Wayne and Wallace Keefe, but also the villainous schemer Lex Luthor. These plot mechanisms are well-crafted and naturally accepted by the viewers, but they also carry a deeper meaning because, as Cathy Caruth writes, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event, but rather in the way it's very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4).

Because of this continuous process, Bruce Wayne also functions as a microcosm for the American society and its reaction to the intentional (foreign) sally against the American monomyth. More specifically, much like the American nation drenched in "disbelief, terrible

sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger" (Bush, "9/11 Address") after the 9/11 attacks, Bruce concedes to his buoying belligerence, making no "distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them" (Bush, "9/11 Address"). Blinded by hatred, he narrativises "evil outsiders" besieging "innocent communities" (Lawrence and Jewett 16-17) in Clark Kent, taking it completely upon himself to exorcize this unwanted force from his fatherland and, more generally, existence. His soon-to-be-revealed ethically questionable techniques, adopted so as to track down and eradicate Clark, are precipitated by the Black Zero Event, synthesized from the historical Ground Zero "as the dawn of a *new national history*" (Cvek 29, my emphasis). In this respect, his arc corresponds to a metanarrative "that worked to reconsolidate and homogenize a wounded national body politic through a traumatic return to" and a radical reworking of "national foundations" (Cvek 45). Ipso facto, this metanarrative does not simply reflect the post-9/11 American reality. Rather, it encourages active viewership reinforced by a thoughtful and timely commentary on its socio-political consequences, some of which the thesis will scrutinize in the following chapter.

3. Decades of Disruption

> The sense of disarticulation we hear in the term "Us and Them" has never been so striking, at either end.
>
> (Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future")

In his address to the Congress and the American nation nine excruciating days after the horrific breaking point which ushered in the aforementioned "new" national history, George W. Bush roughly outlined its edges when he stated that "every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" ("Address to Joint Session"). Many post-9/11 superhero films annexed this hard-and-fast stance on the enemy and appropriately weaved it into their narratives, as briefly suggested in this thesis' introduction. However, as the "Us versus Them" rhetoric, which had been over-flooding national media channels and shaping the collective American identity for almost a decade, began to be undermined by the countless revelations of the Bush-Cheney Administration's morally dubious and propagandistic treatment of the War on Terror, even the superhero genre began to ponder the

"master narrative" it whole-heartedly embraced following the razing of the World Trade Center to its ground zero. This master narrative, "a collective understanding" of the 9/11 incident and its immediate and long-lasting consequences, was "an almost sacred one; so central … to national identity that denial of it was considered an act of solecism bordering on the heretical" (McSweeney, *The "War on Terror"* 10).

Effectively beginning with *The Dark Knight* and the *Iron Man* trilogies, the popular superhero cinema, usually discarded as escapist popcorn flicks, became a reflection of the same post-9/11 society in which it was and still is being produced. It essentially came to occupy what Siegfried Kracauer sees as the "mirror" of society and "certain national characteristics" (6), in that "the technique, the story content, and the evolution of the films of a nation are fully understandable only in relation to the actual psychological pattern of this nation" (Kracauer 5). Given that the psychological pattern of the American nation has been redesigned and cinematically relocated to a great extent during the past two decades, it was not surprising for the genre to develop from self-assuring, black-and-white patriotic fantasies to self-reflective, critical inquiries into the nature of the government's ethically debatable response to the consequences of 9/11. From this standpoint, then, "what films reflect are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions – those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness" (Kracauer 6).

The heroes and villains of *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* serve as symbolic representations of those various facets of American mentality and identity, fractured by "a horrendous event" which left "indelible marks upon the group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 1). The ongoing residuum of these cultural traumata is critiqued in the mediating social praxis that is the post-9/11 superhero film. To that extent, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* aligns with the social constructivist theory of cultural trauma as an essayistic, "socially built narrative that assembles the collective grief, shapes it into a tale of virtue against vice, and implements a redefinition of collective identity" (Khadem 194). Therefore, the subsequent chapter aims to peruse several of the film's "paragraphs" in relation to their portrayal of and active commentary on socio-political and cultural reformulations of the American identity and mentality post-9/11.

3.1. The Son of Krypton: Interventionism, Civil Liberties, and the Othering of the Superhero

After the previously explicated rerun of the spectacle of urban wreckage in Metropolis and Bruce Wayne's psychological marring, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* rapidly jumps to a sandstorm-struck village in a fictional Islamic state of Nairomi, run by a local warlord's militia. Lois Lane, Clark Kent's partner, is escorted to an interview with the said warlord by the CIA agent-turned-photographer Jimmy Olsen. Before any of the characters has a chance to speak, the film adheres to Dark Americana's "significant role in making these complex/distanciated spatialities of the War on Terror more visible," "establishing a geography with which every spectator is asked to contend" (Carter and Dodds 108). As the interview proceeds, several tenets of the post-9/11 American foreign policy are contested by General Amajagh, a character who metaphorizes the US government's extralegal interventionist reactions:

> Lois Lane: Are you a terrorist, General?
>
> General Amajagh: What I am, is a man with nothing, except a love of my people.
>
> Lois Lane: Who's paying for these security contractors, General?
>
> General Amajagh: Who pays for the drones that pass over our heads at night? One question begs another. Yes?
>
> Lois Lane: The United States has declared its neutrality in your country's civil war both in policy and in principle.
>
> General Amajagh: These pious American fictions … Spoken like truth.
>
> General Amajagh: Men with power obey neither policy nor principle, Miss Lane. No one is different. No one is neutral. (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:13:05 – 00:14:06)

The discord between falsehood and reality thus becomes obvious; whereas Lois Lane wields only the pieces of information disclosed by her government, which ultimately prove to be incorrect, General Amajagh witnesses the US "neutrality" – providing aid and weapons to Amajagh's Tuareg rebels whilst publicly supporting the Nairomian government – each day anew, literally flying above his head. When the General's head of security, Anatoli Knyazev, discovers that Jimmy is affiliated with the CIA, retaliation ensues and Lois is taken captive,

prompting Clark to act unilaterally on foreign soil. General Amajagh executes Jimmy, whose dying words are that he is "authorized to propose an arrangement" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:14:50 – 00:14:59). As the CIA's operative plan crumbles, it reacts not by dispatching Python, its mounted ground-level unit situated nearby, but by flying in and activating an assault drone, fully aware of the possibility of dozens, if not hundreds of civilian casualties:

> CIA Member: Talon's down, sir.
>
> CIA Supervisor: Python, we have lost our asset on the ground. Repeat, we have lost our asset on the ground.
>
> Python Team Leader: There's still a civilian in the compound. We'll extract her.
>
> CIA Supervisor: Negative. RPA to engage. Stand down and get black.
>
> Python Team Leader: There'll be friendlies in the black zone, so call off the god-damn drone.
>
> CIA Supervisor: Stand down is an order. Python?
>
> Python Team Leader: Let's move! (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:14:59 – 00:15:27)

No longer acting in a "depoliticized public sphere" (Pumroy 765), Snyder's Superman intercepts the CIA's Predator, countering "the virtualization of war" (Pumroy 765) as the only morally-oriented drone to police the skies under the American insignia. Snyder thus uses the figure of the ur-American superhero to critique the desensitized counterterrorist measures shaped by the nation which emerged from its cultural trauma "with an intensified militarism that … generated an era of Terror War, a new arms race, accelerated military violence, … a support of authoritarian regimes, an assault on human rights, constant threats to democracy, and destabilizing of the world economy" (Kellner, *From 9/11* 23).

Furthermore, it is revealed that Knyazev is employed by Lex Luthor to eradicate the General's men with the aim to make Superman complicit in the eyes of American public. When he succeeds, the American government responds via a civil institution titled the Superman Committee, heralded by a junior Senator from Kentucky, June Finch. The lack of accountability present in Superman's unauthorized rescue missions is then problematized by several testimonies

of the victims of his purported assaults. Much like the film's civil institutions, Kahina Ziri is manipulated by Lex Luthor to reminisce of the Nairomian incident and claim:

> Kahina Ziri: The women in the village heard a noise. Like the sky cracked open. He came down, then came fire. Even worse came after. The government attacked. No mercy in the villages. My parents tried to run …
>
> June Finch: The world has been so caught up with what Superman can do that no one has asked what he should do. Let the record show that this committee holds him responsible.
>
> Kahina Ziri: He'll never answer to you. He answers to no one. Not even, I think, to God. (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:19:04 – 00:19:52)

Likewise, Wallace Keefe, whose life was shattered during the Battle of Metropolis not only because his lower extremes were severed but also because he lost his daughter and, later on, his wife, exclaims prior to the Committee's hearing that Superman "has delivered a war here" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 01:25:17).

Therefore, Lex's narratively confusing machinations aside, much of Superman's actions seem to thematically echo the inept, post-9/11 "unilateral US policy" which "has produced an excessive militarizing and inadequate criminalizing of the problem of dealing with terrorism" (Kellner, *From 9/11* 5) in states such as Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, the Philippines, Libya, and the ever-debated "axis of evil," Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. His interventions, although noble in intent, have not entirely protected the helpless or prevented terrorist insurgencies, but rather perpetuated their instances to the point of the process itself being contested by the general public. Of course, "to speak of the peculiar mentality of a nation by no means implies the concept of a fixed national character" as "the interest here lies exclusively in such collective dispositions or tendencies as prevail within a nation at a certain stage of its development" (Kracauer 8). After the collective trauma that was 9/11, the majority of Americans supported the War on Terror as "just" and necessary, a thought-process which later shifted to its critique and, increasingly in the past decade, its condemnation. The same would pour into the post-9/11 superhero film, as concretized in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* by the way the government and the public perceive Superman's international proceedings. He may have saved the world from Zod and Nairomi from Amajagh, but his global interventions yield global repercussions and may cause additional socio-political turmoil. That is not to say that his world-policing is utterly inefficient:

> He is shown to be literally all over the globe, saving a girl from a burning building in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, towing a capsized ship towards safety possibly somewhere in the arctic, rescuing the astronauts from a Russian rocket that explodes during the launch, and, finally, saving people from drowning in a flood in a region not further specified. (Maruo-Schröder)

Herein Snyder uses his distinct cinematic language to evoke Messianic-savior imagery, solidifying Superman as the virtuous paragon of truth, justice, and the American way. But, given that these concepts are continuously questioned in the post-9/11 American landscape and by its public, whose "conscience," according to Perry White, "died with Robert, Martin and John" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:39:27 – 00:39:30), Superman's position in this newly-built world of anxiety is also debated. In extension, Snyder stratifies these complex mechanics of self-reflection as his Superman cooperates with American military and civil leadership to contemplate the radicalized version of American exceptionalism he has come to represent. More specifically, Superman heeds Senator Finch's invite to a Capitol Hill hearing, during which she restates that "in a democracy, good is a conversation, not a unilateral decision" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 01:21:49 – 01:21:53), critiquing the "peace through strength" axiom of the Bush-Cheney Administration's neoconservative foreign policy, which has culminated in the War on Terror and, by proxy, the Son of Krypton's unlawful international arbitrations.

As Superman ponders the after-effects of his incursions in the (fictional) Middle East, Lex uses Wallace Keefe's incapacitation to smuggle a dirty bomb into the city hall. The tragic event mirrors the more recent terrorist acts in new American history, but Snyder does not exploit the scene only for the sake of plot advancement. Rather, he co-opts the traumatic 9/11 visual lexicon to "assign meaning to a horrific occurrence" with the attempt "to inject this newly formed meaning into the collective identity of the group" (Khadem 186-187). Emerging from a self-imposed exile, Superman turns to Gotham to seek Bruce's help, with newfound realization that unilateral interventionism produces dire results and that the conversational aspect of bipartisanship as advocated by Senator Finch may pave a neutral path for politically healthier decisions, no matter how contested it may be by Lex's actions. In this regard, Snyder's film is not "simply a conservative propaganda vehicle," but rather a culturally engaged text which offers "much needed room for a criticism of post-9/11 politics and the ongoing state of exception" (Maruo-Schröder).

Furthermore, Snyder's Superman is not only a critical ideologeme for the post-9/11 American foreign policy or the increasing dangers of unilateral interventionism: "Even without taking the diegetically phenomenal extremes of Superman's psycho-physical abilities into account," states Kwasu Tembo, "the character is *essentially* Other" (43). Superman's identity is unequivocally dual: as Clark Kent, he represents the white-collar worker from Kansas, whereas as the Kryptonian Kal-El, his journey to and on Earth embodies the ultimate immigrant story whose inception, according to Snyder, intentionally coincides with the background story Krypton was given in the first twenty minutes of *Man of Steel*. Not only does it metaphorically warn the viewer against the ramifications of the costly, imperialistic wars America entangled itself into in the twenty-first century but it also seeks to establish "an apt metaphor for the Diaspora" (Knowles 188) and a war-fleeing immigrant coping with the reception of his new identity "in a new technocratic world order" (Knowles 330).

However, when Bruce Wayne gazes in rage as he deems Superman guilty for the urban destruction of Metropolis and his subsequently induced trauma, even though it was mostly General Zod's doing, the viewer is invited to read Clark's character as a "perpetrator of the 9/11 attacks … an irrational 'Other' bent on destroying the West'" (Hassler-Forest, "From Trauma Victim" 39). It is a well-documented fact that, after the events of 9/11, and in line with George W. Bush's Manichean definition of the enemy, "the media simultaneously produced information and traumatization," showing "the full force of its potential for subjectivation and implicit political power" (Cvek 85) in constructing the collective American identity against the threatening, outside Other. Nowhere is this affair more apparent than in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, wherein media screens take up a special place, prompting Snyder to paint them as "the sort of third character in the movie," much like it is "the third character now in all our lives" (qtd. in Boucher 61).

Bruce and Clark learn most about their public faces through the news, and the latter, being a journalist, assumes the position of the defender of civil liberties suppressed by the former, whose actions parallel the racial ostracization of Arab, Muslim, Sikh, and generally South Asian Americans in the post-9/11 era. Sheraz Farooqi further examines *Man of Steel* as "the beginning of Superman's 'Ultimate Immigrant' story" in which he journeys as "an outcast of both Kryptonian and Earth cultures while trying to form a bridge between them," whereas "*Batman v Superman* looks at the socio-political aspect of this experience" (Farooqi). Thus, when Clark Kent scolds his chief editor, Perry White, for not covering the wrongdoings in Gotham, his actions can be read as a critique on the mediated public discourse in new American

history, which perpetuated discriminatory backlash and unjustifiably placed collective guilt on the previously mentioned minorities. In this regard, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* "tackles head on the travails of an increasingly fractured American society, which Snyder holds a mirror to" (Aftab), as is evidenced in the exchange between Clark and Perry:

> Clark Kent: It's like a one man reign of terror. This bat vigilante has been consistently targeting the port and the adjacent projects and tenements, and as far as I can tell, the cops are actually helping him.
>
> Perry White: 'Crime Wave in Gotham'! Other breaking news: 'Water, wet.' Did you file the football yet?
>
> Clark Kent: Why aren't we covering *this*? Poor people don't buy papers?
>
> Perry White: People don't buy papers, period, Kent.
>
> Clark Kent: Perry, when you assign a story, you're making a choice about *who* matters. And *who*'s worth it. (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:38:56 – 00:39:24, my emphasis)

On the contrary, whereas Clark confronts his superior to fight for the oppressed Other, Bruce Wayne, the Bat vigilante referenced, "explicitly racializes the enemy" and "demonizes the racial and cultural Other" (Cvek 85-86). This is best illustrated in their alter-egos' verbal disagreement and initial physical confrontation during Lex Luthor's gala evening:

> Clark Kent: What's your position on the bat vigilante in Gotham?
>
> Bruce Wayne: *Daily Planet*. Wait, do I own this one? Or was that the other guy?
>
> Clark Kent: Civil liberties are being trampled on in your city; good people living in fear.
>
> Bruce Wayne: Don't believe everything you hear, son.
>
> Clark Kent: I've seen it, Mr. Wayne. He thinks he's above the law.
>
> Bruce Wayne: The *Daily Planet* criticizing those who think they're above the law is a little hypocritical, wouldn't you say? Considering every time your *hero* saves a cat out of a tree, you write a puff piece editorial about an *alien* who, if he wanted to, could burn the whole place down. There wouldn't be a damn thing we can do to stop it. (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:50:11 – 00:50:56, my emphasis)

On a political level, the film's media-fueled xenophobia simultaneously perpetuates Bruce Wayne's stance against the alien or the Other and alludes to the Bush-Cheney Administration's pre-emptive strikes against supposed terrorists. An assemblage of statements by real-life media commentators, including Vikram Gandhi, Andrew Sullivan, Charlie Rose, and Neil deGrasse Tyson, grapples with the "Superman Question" and further alienates Clark, powering the state of exception eerily reminiscent of the post-9/11 America. Even Lex Luthor's destruction of civil discourse by detonating a bomb at Capitol Hill "intensifies media speculation about Superman" (Boucher 62), a *mise-en-scène* of unreasonable accusations sustained by the protesters armed with anti-alien signs, some of which bear messages such as "this is our planet, not yours" and "Earth belongs to humans" (see fig. 4 and 5).

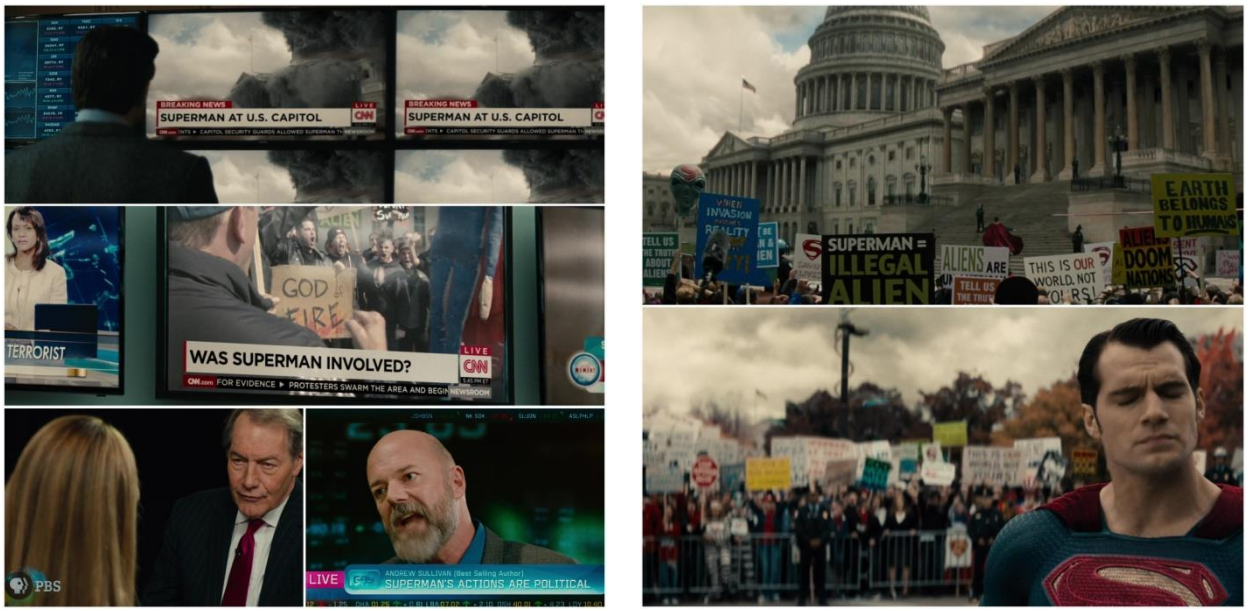

Fig. 4 and 5. Bruce Wayne and the American public are acquainted with Superman's actions through the media. Superman is chastised as a non-American Other. Compiled from: *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Directed by Zack Snyder. Warner Bros, 2016.

Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice "therefore provides clues to hidden mental processes" (Kracauer 7), some of which reveal the xenophobic American mentality in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy. But Snyder's film does not latch onto this mentality as it functions as an "unpleasant lambast of the government and the popular reaction to 9/11" (Aftab) which ultimately abandons the Othering of its superheroes and the minorities they symbolically represent. After an epic

slugfest between the Bat of Gotham and the Son of Krypton, the fractured identities of the American icons (and generally the American nation) blend through a critically panned, yet logically humanizing moment. As Bruce prepares to impale Clark on a Kryptonite spear, the latter utters the name Martha, pleading the former to save his mother and inadvertently activating Bruce's childhood trauma. For the first time during their physical and psychological confrontation, Bruce realizes that Clark is not an outsider, a threatening Other, but rather a human, and their warring ideologies intermingle over a personal common ground. In the film's third act, the Son of Krypton saves the world once more from the monstrous Doomsday, and is given a burial proper for a fallen American soldier. In this sense, Snyder's post-9/11 superhero film does not only critique the unjustifiable xenophobic sentiments against the non-Americans represented by Superman as the ultimate immigrant but it also approaches its subject matter and cultural trauma with the intent to "interpret a calamitous event, redraw the history of this event through that interpretation, and consolidate its newly shaped identity via social practices that uphold certain values in the light of that horrible memory" (Khadem 187).

3.2. The Bat of Gotham: Power, Sovereignty, and Re-Figurations of Law and Justice

Whereas Clark Kent's narrative begins with a humanized God barely able to prevent a Kryptonian fundamentalist's deliberate urban destruction of Metropolis as an overt reenactment of the 9/11 attacks, Bruce Wayne's secondary trauma, induced by the said assault, practically brings him "to the edge of madness, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and addiction to war" (Cilento 133). The final memory of his parents, most notably his father throwing a jab at his murderer and whispering his wife's name with his dying breath, models him into a ruthless brawler against crime, whose twenty years' worth of festering anger escalates with the arrival of a being which he perceives as the threatening Other. Much like America during the fall of the World Trade Center, Bruce is rendered psychologically impotent and physically helpless in "a spectacle of trauma borne virus-like on … media screens" (Rehak 158) and before his very eyes, which burdens him with a "post-9/11 mindset notable for its regressive conflation of masculinity and security" (Rehak 158).

Mirroring reality, "these collective dispositions gain momentum in cases of extreme political change" (Kracauer 9), such as the Bush-Cheney Administration's lobbying to intercept and pro-actively prevent terrorist threats. When the viewer first confronts Bruce, he is clad in his heavily plated and patched up Batsuit, torturing a sex trafficker named Cesar Santos and

extracting any intelligence he might possess in regards to "the White Portuguese," a supposed terrorist who, according to Bruce, wishes to wreak havoc across Gotham. The scene parallels Batman's enhanced interrogation of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, shadows and punches overflowing as Bruce glides away from the two police officers who arrived on the crime scene in the manner of an almost supernatural being. What is more, as one of the Asian female captives exclaims that "*it* saved us, the *devil*" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:21:27 – 00:21:30, my emphasis), and as one of the officers, Rucka, accidentally causes a friendly fire, startled by "*him* … I've never seen him before" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:23:23 – 00:23:26, my emphasis), the *fantastique* urban legend built around the Bat as a symbol of severe punishment is not only succored but also imprinted on the audiences. Scarred by the events in Metropolis eighteen months ago, this is a Bruce who supports preemptive actions against the foreign oppressive power, as accounted for in the conversation he has with the only voice of reason by his side, his butler and father figure, Alfred:

> Alfred Pennyworth: If he is indeed a 'him'. You don't know if he exists. He could be a phantasm.
>
> Bruce Wayne: One that wants to bring a dirty bomb into Gotham?
>
> Alfred Pennyworth: Ah, high stakes round … New rules.
>
> Bruce Wayne: We're criminals, Alfred. We've always been criminals. Nothing's changed.
>
> Alfred Pennyworth: Oh, yes it has, sir. Everything's changed. Men fall from the sky, the gods hurl thunderbolts, innocents die. That's how it starts, sir. The fever, the rage, the feeling of powerlessness that turns good men … cruel. (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:28:09 – 00:29:08)

Via Alfred's poetic impasse, unexpectedly well-placed in a superhero film, Snyder practically echoes the helplessness many Americans felt in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy, but also alludes to the then governmental paranoia of an ever-present threat when Bruce distinctly marks the White Portuguese as a terrorist planning to bring a dirty bomb into Gotham, another prototypically American city. Equating him with Superman, who has already marched into Metropolis and caused tragic destruction and insufferable trauma, Bruce's conceptualization of Gotham as permanently under attack mirrors the Bush-Cheney Administration's perception of America and generally the West as perpetually endangered by Islamic fundamentalism. As it

"becomes the tool used … in his monomania to project and create a specific type of setting within the city" (Lukić), Bruce has to self-rationalize the actions he has undertaken within this dark heterotopia, which become "uncritical reflections of neo-con foreign policy" (D'Arcens). Unlike superheroes as "defenders of the city against corruption and crime, … displayed … as perched atop a canopy of tall buildings with the city below, in full panoramic view" (Wasserman 186), the Bat operates mostly from Gotham's underbelly, assuming the redefinition of justice as proposed by George W. Bush after the 9/11 attacks: "Our grief has turned to anger, and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done" ("Address to Joint Session"). His first appearance is marked by a torturous hunt in the basement of one of the city's destitute neighborhoods, and immediately juxtaposed by his psychological state of flux in the Batcave. Connoting his symbolic fall during the film's opening sequence, this scenery leads the audience to view the Bat not through the prism of a clearly demarcated hero, but rather through his self-imposed title of a "criminal," whose rage has seeped into every crack of his already cracked identity.

Therefore, when Clark Kent, Superman's human alter-ego and the threatening Other, ventures into Gotham to make inquiries about Kahina Ziri, he disrupts Bruce's sovereignty, which is immediately reshaped by Ziri's neighbors and long-time Gothamites, who do not deny that the city's silent guardian has become brutal and unstable. Hearkening back to the Bat's introductory scene, officer Mazzuccheli reprimands Rucka for "shooting the good guys" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:23:29) as the camera lens encapsulates both the fleeting Bat and the criminal he branded. Snyder's visual language herein insinuates that the police and the Bat's fellow city-dwellers support his extralegal incursions because they solidify their security, even at the expanse of suppressing civil liberties:

> Clark Kent: I'm not a cop, I'm a reporter. The young lady living here …
>
> Neighbor 2: She hasn't been back. In fact, if she's smart, then she's got out of this city. And you need to get out of here before dark, unless you want to run into *him*.
>
> Neighbor 1: Don't listen to that nonsense. Only people scared of *him*, people who got reason to be.
>
> Clark Kent: Scared of who?
>
> Neighbor 2: Well, there's a new kind of *mean* in *him*. He is *angry*. And he's *hunting*. (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:37:16 – 00:37:46, my emphasis)

Deriving from this, one can conclude that "the violence Batman commits becomes violence committed by others in his name," laying claim to the same principle which "saw the 'War on Terror' engender Islamophobic crime in the West" (Diamond 225). As already explicated, this brutalization motivates Clark Kent to use his civil position as a journalist to expose the Bat's morally bankrupt policies and the trampling of constitutional freedoms. *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* thus develops into a post-9/11 postmodern deconstruction of "the characters that most powerfully symbolize the virtuous relationship between 'Truth' and 'Power' in the collective psyche" (Sáez Williams 38), urging the viewer not to uncritically take in the titular characters' ideologies, but to objectively engage with their stories and the visuals "as the 'unseen dynamics of human relations,' … more or less characteristic of the inner life of the nation from which the films emerge" (Kracauer 7).

Indeed, as some of Superman's fundamental patterns of behavior prove to be fallible in the post-9/11 era, so do the Bat's excessively forceful techniques, the elements of which call into question the Bush-Cheney Administration's re-figurations of law and justice. The media once again plays a prominent role in the film, in that it is through screens, online journals, and broadcast news that Clark is able to communicate to himself how the Bat violates the basic freedoms contained within the dictum of truth, justice, and American way (see fig. 6 and 7). Most notably, just like the Bush-Cheney Administration's dictatorial sovereignty in castigating supposed terrorists merely on the basis of suspicion, Batman's illegal actions reside in "his conflation of judiciary and executive, visible in the branding of villains before they are legally tried, let alone convicted" (Maruo-Schröder). And even though "it's not 1938" anymore, as Perry White exclaims to signify a post-9/11 zeitgeist unfit for morally conscious superheroes, the viewer "cares for Clark Kent taking on the Bat Man" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 01:11:22 – 01:11:36), probing his lack of moral clarity when he visits the Gotham City Police Department.

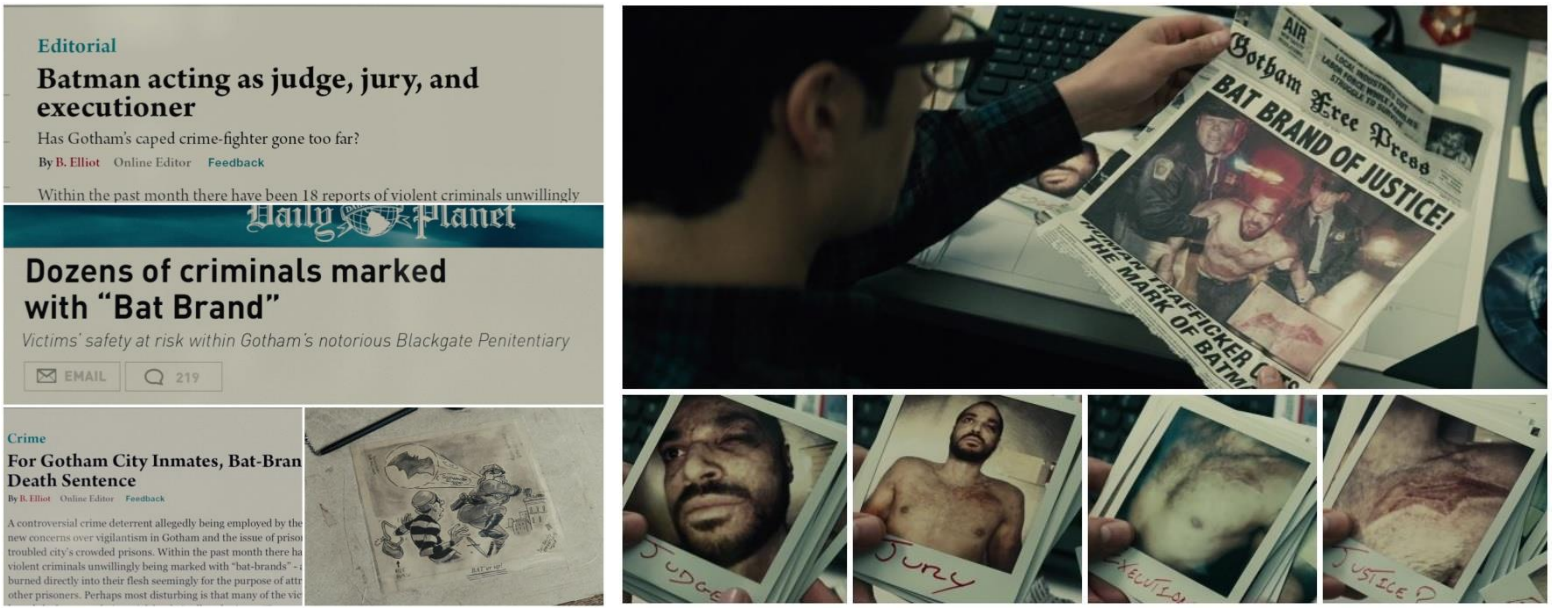

Fig. 6 and 7. The media exposes the Bat's extremely aggressive measures against criminals and supposed terrorists (or those who harbor any kind of information about them). Compiled from: *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Directed by Zack Snyder. Warner Bros, 2016.

Refusing to cooperate, the GCPD officers point him to Cesar Santos' girlfriend, who claims that he may be "a criminal, … but was a father, too," (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 01:13:23) who has been withheld legal processing. The sequence then cuts to Santos being transferred to the sequestered Blackgate Penitentiary, a high-profile prison and the most potent spatial embodiment of the Bat's reckless witch-hunt. Dislocated from Gotham to a separate bay, Snyder's visual and contextual allusion to the Guantánamo Bay or the Abu Ghraib detention camps asks the viewer to interrogate the limits of the Bat's sovereign power, which allows him to "decide when, how, where, and *against whom* violence is acceptable" (Diamond 223). In this context, the film does not question whether its and/or real-life American legal and penal systems function, but, through the character of Cesar Santos, it rather critiques their malleability under given socio-political circumstances, alluding to the Bush-Cheney Administration's maltreatment and degradation of the incarcerated terrorists:

> Cesar Santos: You can't put me in general, man. They gonna kill me. Hey, you can't bring me to general!
>
> Police Officer 2: You should be thanking the tax payers of Metropolis for taking in your branded ass.
>
> Police Officer 1: Sign here, please.

Police Officer 2: He's only a criminal.

Cesar Santos: I'm marked, man. You know what they do to people with this on them?

Police Officer 1: This way! Let's go!

Cesar Santos: They gonna kill me! (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:57:41 – 00:57:56)

However, the Bat's dehumanizing sentiments percolate through the political sphere, as well. "In the chain of motivations," according to Kracauer, "national characteristics are effects rather than causes – effects of natural surroundings, historic experiences, economic and social conditions" (9), so it is to be expected that Bruce's mentality echoes that of the post-9/11 American. It is noteworthy to mention that the threatening Other that is Clark Kent – at least in Bruce's mind – has invaded the Bat's sovereign sphere three times: leaving him traumatized in the Battle of Metropolis, partially devoid of the mythic power granted to him by his dark heterotopia, and temporarily devoid of both his authority and the Kryptonite he planned to steal from Lex Luthor as the only deterrent against this "illegal alien." In many ways, the Bat's arc hence parallels the largely disputed rationale for the US invasion of Iraq (or *Operation Iraqi Freedom*), not only in its causes and effects but also in the nature of its pre-emptive warfare. Much like how the Bush-Cheney Administration called for the necessity to intervene against Saddam Hussein, in particular on the basis of possible utilization of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), the Bat justifies his decisions to steal the Kryptonite from Lex Luthor and fashion it into a weapon:

Alfred Pennyworth: You're gonna go to war?

Bruce Wayne: That son of a bitch *brought the war to us* two years go. Jesus, Alfred, count the dead. Thousands of people. What's next, millions? He has the power to wipe out the entire human race, and if we believe that there is even *1% chance* that he is our enemy, we have to take it as an absolute certainty! And we have to destroy him!

Alfred Pennyworth: But he is not our enemy!

Bruce Wayne: *Not today*. Twenty years in Gotham, Alfred. We've seen what promises are worth. How many good guys are left. How many stayed that way. (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 01:11:49 – 01:12:32, my emphasis)

Aside from reiterating the then Vice President Dick Cheney's infamous One Percent Doctrine almost verbatim[2] to give himself some grounds to act on, Bruce is disillusioned and his blind hatred launches him into an unjust war which can, according to the ever-perturbed Alfred, only end tragically, mirroring what many post-9/11 Americans came to see as an unjust War on Terror. By proxy, then, Snyder encourages the viewer to assess the film as what scholar Philip Bevin terms "a careful study in perspective and the accountability of power, as well as a reflection on how our perception of threats can be rooted in prejudices that are themselves potentially dangerous" (qtd. in Yanes). Given that Snyder's film stands as a post-9/11 deconstruction of the superhero paradigm, it thrusts Bruce's arc of vengeance into the extremes to fully immerse the viewer in what short-sighted dogma can cause. Zealously procedural in his actions after the media has fueled his mind with images of Superman eradicating the Capitol Hill, a nation-wide accepted symbol of congressional and constitutional resolutions, Bruce functions more as a machine than a man. In his aim to restore the pre-Metropolis hegemony, Bruce "operates in the service of myth, not reality … his mission to restore the image of an America invulnerable to attack, to conjure a dreamscape populated by John Wayne protectors guarding little captive Debbies" (Faludi 115).

As he dons an additional layer of skin in the form of "a new Bat-suit, one that resembles Iron Man's armor" (Dudenhoeffer 119), and uses "machine cannons and sonic emitters to slow down Superman … and Kryptonite rockets to depower" (Dudenhoeffer 119) him, the Bat emerges re-masculinized, slamming the Son of Krypton through the dilapidating walls of an abandoned building in Gotham. In his own arena of reasserted sovereign power, the Bat, having bested the source of his secondary trauma and the threatening Other, prepares to impale him on a Kryptonite spear, but the fallen Kryptonian utters by a hair's breadth: "You're letting him kill Martha … Find him … Save Martha!" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 02:11:19 – 02:11:41). Aggravated, Bruce succumbs to his PTSD, but when Lois Lane runs in from the helicopter and explains that the name Martha denominates Clark's mother, his view of Clark changes. No longer is Superman an almighty God with unchecked foreign power, but rather a frail man whose mother is endangered. The motif of falling visually recurs as Bruce's denouement takes shape: he replaces his *hamartia*, the flaring arrogance incited by a misguided ideology, with patience and discourse, vowing to save Superman's mother and refusing to let him suffer the same traumatic experience.

[2] Cheney's original quote is as follows: "If there's a 1% chance that Pakistani scientists are helping al-Qaeda build or develop a nuclear weapon, we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response" (qtd. in Bowyer).

In essence, the personal common ground on which these icons of Americana mythology now tread simultaneously produces a psychological and a political redemption, and its medium "acts as a social apparatus itself, not only mirroring the cultural condition of trauma in a given time, but being part of the social interplay of forces that lead to trauma" (Khadem 187). From its onset, Snyder's post-9/11 superhero film unfolds as "a document of desperation, failure, and loss," but its open narrative "makes the most of its unique capacity to undermine the ideology in which it was conceived by completely immersing us in its extreme consequences" (Cilento 133). As the Bat of Gotham no longer assaults the threatening Other, or the unilateral foreign power without a system of checks and balances, and as the Son of Krypton no longer remains isolated and browbeaten by a law-defying brute who prefers to strike preemptively, Snyder's film becomes "a more nuanced exploration of the complex concept of justice," "reflecting on democracy in a polarized world of manipulated media and xenophobia" (Boucher 54).

3.3. The Devil of Metropolis: Crony Capitalism, the Unchecked Military-Industrial Complex, and Mass Surveillance

By this point, the thesis has hopefully managed to articulate that both the Son of Krypton and the Bat of Gotham symbolically represent the split identities of the post-9/11 American socio-politics, one in terms of fallible unilateral interventionism, and the other in relation to the largely unjustifiable policy of preemptive strikes. In keeping with this interpretation, the thesis now turns to prod the thematic layers behind Lex Luthor's character, the mastermind villain behind the film's initially convoluted narrative and not simply "a mad scientist or petty criminal, but a multi-billionaire Machiavellian capitalist" (Evans 119). From its outset, then, the film establishes Luthor rather eccentrically, but also illuminatingly: having obtained a Kryptonite shard from one of the World Engines, which Clark disassembled during the final act of *Man of Steel*, Lex is intent on weaponizing it as a deterrent against "those like Superman," so he pitches the idea to Senators Finch and Barrows, two politicians at the helm of the Superman Committee:

> Lex Luthor: … You know, Dad was born in East Germany. He grew up eating stale crackers. And every other Saturday, he had to march in a parade and waved flowers at tyrants. So, I think it was providence that his son, me, would end up with this. One of my 'rebuild Metropolis' crews found it. A little souvenir from the Kryptonian World Engine.
>
> June Finch: What's a rock have to do with Homeland Security?

> Lex Luthor: Homeland Security? Mmm, no, no, no … Ma'am. Planetary Security.
>
> LexCorp Scientist: The fragment is of a radioactive xenomineral. We suspected it might have bio interactions, so, we took the sample to AMRIID. …
>
> Lex Luthor: We concluded the mineral could be weaponized, if a large enough sample was found. … Now, Rocky is radioactive, but, what he needs from you is an import license.
>
> June Finch: And why would we want to weaponize this material?
>
> Lex Luthor: As a deterrent. A silver bullet to keep in reserve to use against the Kryptonians. So, the day doesn't come, Madame, when your children are waving daisies at a reviewing stand. (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:29:45 – 00:31:02)

June Finch departs with the possibility of taking Lex's proposal into consideration, but Senator Barrows, clearly enchanted with the idea of gaining the upper hand against the threat proposed by *Man of Steel*'s Kryptonian invasion, returns to privately discuss the matter with LexCorp Industries' chief executive officer: "There are ways we can help each other" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:31:35 – 00:31:40), postulates Barrows, granting Lex the entry to the wrecked Kryptonian ship, Zod's body, and virtually unlimited access to experimental armaments. As Lex menacingly exploits Barrows' bargain, the nexus of politics and the military-industrial complex advances his corporate and personal machinations, distancing him from his powerful position of *only* a Machiavellian capitalist. In this regard, his figure also amounts to a plethora of crony capitalists that have thrived in the post-9/11 era, much how "key players in the Bush administration and their closest corporate allies had enriched themselves through shady businesses and political practices, using the state to gain wealth and power" (Kellner, *From 9/11* 17).

That is not to say that the 9/11 attacks were the dawning event for the development of crony capitalism, but the cultural and collective trauma they generated heightened the American public's sense of fear and, subsequently, the need for institutions which could ensure the security professed to be missing on that fateful morning by both the media and the government. In fact, Homeland Security, the executive cabinet department referenced by Senator Finch and Lex, was established by George W. Bush in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, and transformed into the third largest cabinet department during the War on Terror, a global conflict which infatuated America's increasingly privatized military-industrial complex. In line with

problematizing Bruce's reiteration of the Cheney doctrine, Snyder and the film's writers (Chris Terrio and David S. Goyer, who is also the penciller of Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy) do not randomly place or misuse this denominator related to public security. Rather, they utilize their realm of ideas to orient Lex's character as exploitative of the system through "a corrupted form of democratic capitalism … the dark inversion of a free and competitive marketplace governed by the rule of law and legal justice" (Ballor). Not only do they question how valid and justified Lex's preemptive "silver bullet" actually is, given its creator's misguided ideology and hostile opportunism, but they also raise larger issues about the ethics of warfare and private contractors by "persistently reiterating pictorial and narrative motifs … as outward projections of inner urges" (Kracauer 8) boiling in the post-9/11 America. The film best exemplifies its anti-crony stance with a threefold opposition to Lex's techno-fascistic maneuvers.

Despite Lex's well-entombed political connections alluded to in his introductory scene and underpinned in the sequence depicting his gala fundraiser, Senator June Finch realizes that his intentions are evocative of his "Daddy's fists and abominations" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 01:54:36 – 01:54:38), which ultimately also propel his misotheism, directed in this case toward the Son of Krypton. She denies him his elite, military authority and forces him to resort to violence, becoming the same tyrant his father was revealed to be (despite the Cold War-referenced cultural trauma he endured):

> June Finch: I'm blocking the import license for your mineral.
>
> Lex Luthor: The Red Capes are coming! The Red Capes are coming! You and your hearings … galloping through the streets to warn us. One, if by land. Two, if by air … Do you know the oldest lie in America, Senator? Can I call you June?
>
> June Finch: You can call me whatever you like. Take a bucket of piss and call it Granny's Peach Tea; take a weapon of assassination and call it deterrence. You won't fool a fly or me. I'm not gonna drink it. (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:41:32 – 00:42:32)

As a chair of the Superman Committee and the key decision maker in this congressional process, Finch thus reasserts that "democracy is about accountable, public deliberation and 'conversation' rather than catering to the desires of the economic elites" (Ballor) or personally motivated agendas, a notion with which the post-9/11 America is all too well acquainted.

This is further elaborated by the Bat's alter ego, Bruce Wayne, who is depicted as a humane corporate antidote to Lex's militant cronyism. Snyder's visual language again speaks

more than words: during the film's opening sequence, Bruce lashes down from the helicopter and drives through the concrete jungle that is Metropolis in hopes of reaching his employees in the Wayne Financial Building. Despite the gravity of the situation and the trauma induced, he still runs into the heavy fog of pain and screams to help the remaining survivors, and his company, Wayne Enterprises, even sets up a fund for the victims of the Black Zero Event with monthly aid payments, eerily reminiscent of those allotted for the families and victims of the 9/11 attacks. Bruce's philanthropic socialite clashes with Lex's militant crony capitalist, who all too easily sacrifices the innocent civilians in Nairomi – the killings conducted by Anatoli Knyazev's mercenaries incriminate Superman in the eyes of the public – and becomes a domestic terrorist by blowing up the Capitol Hill, including his inarguably loyal right-hand, Mercy Graves. "The virtuous economic and social influence of Wayne Enterprises" therefore turns into "a kind of competitor and check upon the tyrannical ambitions of the vicious LexCorp" (Ballor) to accentuate the perils of the militant, crony capitalism.

But nowhere are the latter more interrelated to the ethics of American post-9/11 warfare and the abuse of political power than in the journalistic persecution conducted by the established reporter Lois Lane, "who asks questions from the beginning and assists as a mediator in piecing the thriller together" (Boucher 58). As Clark saves her from General Amajagh's retaliation in the opening sequence, Lois is able to preserve a bullet fired by the General's Tuareg fighters, but stumbles when identifying its source, which was the basis of her interview and the original intent behind her article. She approaches Jenet Klyburn, a scientist employed in S.T.A.R Labs, who brings into focus the questionable experimentation with privately produced armaments on foreign soil:

> Jenet Klyburn: An odd little duck. Hmm, I've never seen a metal like this. Could be DARPA black box.
>
> Lois Lane: Who could find out?
>
> Jenet Klyburn: Nobody who'd want to. Maybe they gave them out to the rebels to test in theater.
>
> Lois Lane: Using live soldiers as guinea pigs?
>
> Jenet Klyburn: This what makes you such a good reporter. Stuff like this still shocks you. (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:56:47 – 00:57:16)

Lois then flies out to Washington D.C., appealing to the Secretary of Defense Calvin Swanwick to trace the bullet's source, a plea which he initially declines, but later gives into. When he informs her that "the metal was developed by a private company … LexCorp" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 01:24:17 – 01:24:23), the film, geopolitically mapping the Trans-Saharan front of the War on Terror (the Tuareg rebels are engaged in combat against the US military-supported Malian army) onto its own superhero narrative, turns into a subtle critique of the over-reaching power which the US federal government contractors came to possess in the post-9/11 America. Even though Swanwick refuses to go on record with his findings, namely because of his position, they still prove to be useful both as a narrative mechanism to exonerate Superman and as a civil institution's victory over the unchecked military-industrial complex, given their usage in Lex's final incrimination and imprisonment.

In extension, at the gala evening, when Lex boasts that his "R and D is up to no good" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:51:35 – 00:51:37), meaning LexCorp's department for research and development, he practically verifies his role in shadow interventions on foreign soil, but the filmic narrative unveils that he has intervened in the domestic policy, as well. As the Bat successfully deciphers the data he had stolen during the said gala evening, looking for any usable piece of intelligence on the supposed terrorist codenamed the White Portuguese, he discovers a file titled "metahumans," which is directly linked to the basic tenets of Lex's metahuman thesis: "You don't have to use *the silver bullet*, but, if you forge one … Well, then *we* don't have to depend upon the kindness of *monsters*" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 00:31:24 – 00:31:32, my emphasis). Lex's chillingly delivered words thus embody the Bush-Cheney Administration's policy of stopping threats preemptively and proactively, but as the viewer gets further acquainted with the spectrum of surveillance footage which he can access – from ATM cameras, over civil and military-funded institutions like S.T.A.R Labs, to government-owned unmanned vehicles – his actions encapsulate the largely debated USA PATRIOT Act. "An unconstitutional encroachment on civil liberties" (McSweeney, *Avengers Assemble!* 157), the PATRIOT Act outlined the culture of fear which still resonates through the post-9/11 America, most recently with the exposure of the US National Security Agency's "Prism and other covert programs by whistleblower Edward Snowden" (McNair 653). By the end of the film, Lex Luthor is apprehended and, as already hinted at, the revelations of his foreign and domestic political manipulations consolidate his future imprisonment, but also corroborate the film's "resonance as a timely pop-cultural narrative about the appropriate limits of state and military power in the defense of national security" (McNair 653).

4. Horrors of Ground Zero: Towards a Remedy or Paralysis?

> In Union Square Park, about two miles north of the attack site, the improvised memorials are another part of our response. The flags, flowerbeds and votive candles, the lamppost hung with paper airplanes, the passages from the Koran and the Bible, the letters and poems, the cardboard John Wayne, the children's drawings of the twin towers …
>
> (Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future")

Despite their immensely dark overtones and divisive critiques, *Man of Steel* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* are still perennial narratives of hope. In fact, after the Bat of Gotham and the Son of Krypton have reconciled their ideological differences, they unite with Diana Prince (Wonder Woman's first filmic live-action appearance) to combat a common Doomsday, the monstrous appearance of which befits the prototypical third act in a superhero film. Yet these post-9/11 superhero films' resolving innuendos differ from their genre-counterparts' endings in that they require their titular heroes to sacrifice an inherently fundamental and deeply-woven threads of their identities. In taking General Zod's life, Clark sacrifices his Kryptonian heritage and embraces his American one, which Bruce then challenges throughout *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* until he abandons his dictatorial sovereignty. Religious imagery abounds as Clark grips onto the Kryptonite spear and thrusts it into the abomination Lex manufactured as his last resort, but it is in the aftermath of Superman's noble sacrifice that Snyder issues a profoundly optimistic message for the post-9/11 America, a nation shrouded in culture of fear and paranoia.

The American public honors him as one of their own fallen soldiers in a sequence which visually reiterates John Fitzgerald Kennedy's 1963 funeral procession, but the camera then cuts to the dialogue between Bruce Wayne and Diana Prince after Clark Kent's memorial service in which he vows: "I've failed him in life. I won't fail him in death" (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 02:48:44 – 02:48:50):

> Diana Prince: A hundred years ago I walked away from mankind, from a century of horrors. Man made a world where standing together is impossible.

> Bruce Wayne: Men are still good. We fight. We kill. We betray one another. But we can rebuild. We can do better. We will. We have to. (*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* 02:49:13 – 02:49:53)

The scenery described by DeLillo in the passage above then intercuts this superhero narrative, rounding a story about the birth and the rebirth of a hero who has, much like America in the post-9/11 era, lost his ways almost to the point of no return. Snyder immerses the viewer in the extreme consequences of his actions, but the fundamental American values live on as Superman's Heroes Park memorial message mirrors the very essence of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum (see fig. 8).

Fig. 8. The explicit territorial appropriation and juxtaposition of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum and Superman's Heroes Park. Compiled from *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Directed by Zack Snyder. Warner Bros, 2016. and Little, Becky, Brian Howard Clark, and Brian Handwerk. "Remembering 9/11 in Pictures." *National Geographic*, 11 Sep. 2018, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2016/09/september-11-pictures-remembrance/.

What this brief summary of the film's ending and Bruce Wayne's acceptance stage as the final element of his three-part arc then ascertains is that the post-9/11 superhero film functions not only as "the container of memories, but [also as] the instrument of social act of remembering or forgetting" (Khadem 187) a cultural trauma which has monumentally reshaped all aspects of American identity and life. The genre, as the thesis has argued, sustains this function via two mechanisms. Firstly, "by reflecting images of 9/11 back at us, *Batman v Superman* might allow us to understand them in a new way, even perhaps come to terms with them" (Collin), but as

grieving is not an immediate process, nor does full appropriation and resolution of a certain traumatic experience occur immediately, assimilation happens only "after countless and belated returns to the site of trauma" (Randell 139). As Jeffrey C. Alexander writes, the "trauma-drama emerged in bits and pieces" through "this scene and that scene from this movie and that book, this television episode, and that theatre performance, this photographic capturing of a moment of torture and suffering" (qtd. in Khadem 186), and it was the matter of *why* and *how* these media conveyed their tragic captures that determined their success in resonating with the target audience.

It is challenging not to extrapolate from two genres largely preoccupied with visually reiterating the 9/11 tragedy, the superhero film and the disaster film, that their rewrites of the traumatic experience may turn it into a "glossy mirage, a signifier of events that is increasingly distanced from their actuality" (Brown 79), but when the viewer is purposefully immersed in the spectacle of urban wreckage and allowed to recount it from the victim's viewpoint, new comprehensions of the event itself may materialize. In *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011), when Michael Bay cuts from a gigantic robot – called the Driller – leveling downtown Chicago, to the mass of faceless people panicking on city streets or screaming from within the buildings, the effect cannot be the same as when the viewer is submerged in the rubble with *Man of Steel*'s Jenny Jurwich or dragged through the smoke, debris, pain, and anger with *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*'s Bruce Wayne. The sanitization and dehumanization of consequences does not equal their contestation, a notion with which even the post-9/11 superhero film has had to grapple in the first decade of its existence, as explicated in the thesis' introduction. Yet the purposeful allegorical collision that ensued after the release of *The Avengers* and *Man of Steel* outlined a post-9/11 coping mechanism in which "cyclical and linear time collide" (Gilmore 58). We "may collectively move away from the image event of 9/11," but it has replayed (and perhaps will further replay) "in the genre's cyclical rhythms" (Gilmore 58), namely with the intent to thrust the viewer into progression from the past, and the understanding of what it had brought; "On some level, these images are what we, the viewing audience, want to see," claims Lindsay Ellis, correlating the culturally traumatized, post-9/11 viewers with a "victim of a heinous assault returning to the scene of the crime, but viewing it only from a safe distance, … reliving the moment over and over, until finally we find some meaning" ("Movies, Patriotism, and Cultural Amnesia").

The second mechanism by which the post-9/11 superhero film acts as an instrument of remembering and processing the consequences of its inceptive cultural trauma lies in its ability

to “enable audiences to unconsciously address anxieties arising from 9/11 and the war on terror as well as other new millennial concerns, albeit in ameliorated form” (Pheasant-Kelly 146). Where once the speculative nature of the genre allowed it to re-master the painful event so that no one dies and the morally unambiguous good triumphs over the clearly demarcated evil, it has drastically evolved in the past decade of the postmodern American world which is not “just dealing with the after-effects of 9/11,” but also coping with the nation’s “inability to effectively safeguard itself from everything all of the time” (VanDerWerff). *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* addresses and, to an extent, comments on most of the repercussions contained within this inability, be it the perils of unilateral interventionism and unjustifiable incursions into foreign soil, unchecked domestic policies of surveillance, media-fuelled xenophobic sentiments against non-Americans, or the increasingly financed and equally unethical military-industrial complex.

According to Nicole Maruo-Schröder, “[t]he entanglement of the superhero narrative with anti-terror politics and legal practices” thus goes beyond “the visual references to the by now iconic imagery of the twin towers’ destruction” (“‘Justice Has a Bad Side’”) to critique the morally questionable values perpetuated by the government and the media in the last two decades. Though divisive in their titles and their contents, both *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* and *Captain America: Civil War* see their heroes – each of whom is on the extreme opposite of the ideological spectrum – reach mutual, neutral ground. No longer “purely nationalistic icons” in concord with the country’s socio-political stances, or “manifestations of a particular wish-dream or emotion” (Hagley and Harrison, “The Amazing Renaissance”), these heroes represent split personalities of a collective identity still being defined in the post-9/11 culture of fear and pain.

Resembling the Japanese nation coming to terms with its tragedy incited by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagaski through a monster film and the character of Godzilla, the post-9/11 superhero hero film lends itself as a relief valve for the American anxieties in the post-9/11 era. The spectacle of urban wreckage will certainly return to the screen with new releases, but it remains to be seen whether it will be endowed with the same psychological dimension present in the titular films discussed herein. As the genre enters a new decade, however, seeing the figures whose duty was to rewrite the tragedy of 9/11 finally coping with the same emotions the American nation experienced twenty years ago, seems sufficient. And it certainly feels more like a remedy than a paralysis, “the closing of a loop: a superhero cinema endgame two decades in the making” (Horner).

Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis has sought to establish a meaningful connection between the 9/11 tragedy as a culturally traumatic and redefining moment of American history and its consequential and uniquely pervasive phenomenon that has come to percolate through the very fabric of popular culture – the superhero narrative. By applying the theoretical concepts delineated by Gilmore, Kracauer, Khadem, and Alexander, the thesis has revealed that the post-9/11 American superhero film has journeyed from sanitizing its most recent national tragedy to simultaneously confronting the plethora of its negative reverberations on-screen and offering some form of remediation for the traumatized viewer.

With this in mind, it does not seem baseless to assert that Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* stand the test of time as serious speculative dialectics on the post-9/11 era largely defined by highly aggressive foreign and immensely anxious domestic policy. Be it through the character of Superman, who serves as a contesting ideologeme for the American politics both home and abroad and a symbol of the ultimate immigrant story in an increasingly divisive nation, or via Batman, a broken, post-traumatic stress order-laden man who undergoes an act of reformation despite the pervading consequences of his extremely preemptive and illegal actions, Snyder's superheroic cinematic oeuvre tends to boldly grapple with the gravity of its grim subject matter, only to flesh out a pertinent message of hope. The titular films are no exception, and whereas this study has allotted quite the amount of space to objectively interrogate and explicate these notions, it is only the tip of the iceberg in comparison to the analytic possibilities they and their sub-genre have to offer.

Further study, one much needed given the fact that these multi-layered cultural texts have been somewhat neglected by the academia, may pursue the potent religious and mythological imagery interwoven in the character of Clark Kent, Bruce Wayne's collapse-vengeance-acceptance arc as (post)modern iteration of the classical Greek or revenge tragedy, the interrelation of power, space, and character as apparent in and contrasted by the light heterotopia that is Metropolis and the dark one that is Gotham, the notion of de- or re-masculinization of the titular heroes and villains in concord with their father figures, and many, many more. In addition, twenty years' worth of relevance in the nation and the world which are continuously redefining their identities and positions is a testament in itself for the superhero genre, and one that speaks volumes.

Finally, it is with these changing identities and positions that this thesis reaches its end, hopefully on an optimistic note in the vein of the titular films which have been its case-study subject. If one takes into account the context of the titular films, it seems appropriate to refer to an aptly fitting tweet by Neil Gaiman, which is momentarily circulating the social media. Apparently the studio, which has already made the ur-American superhero figure as relevant as ever for many people, seems to be troubled by the possibility that Superman will not resonate with modern audiences, prompting Gaiman to state that the key is not "to make Superman relevant, but inspiring" (@neilhimself). In an America currently confronted by so many issues, why not give it both?

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