AMERICAN MASCULINITY IN CRISIS: TRAUMA AND SUPERHERO BLOCKBUSTERS

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the narrative and visual motifs of the three most successful superhero films of the 2008 blockbuster season. Due to their overwhelming popularity, I read the films *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man*, and *Hancock* as national texts. Building off the work of Benedict Anderson, Susan Jeffords, and Siegfried Kracauer, the goal of this project is to identify the means by which these films help construct a sense of the American national identity in 2008. In order to do so, I employ theories of masculinity and trauma to understand the common tropes of the superhero genre. This genre is defined by emphasizing the narrative convention of trauma as a catalyst for the heroic actions of the protagonist. Visually, these films are rife with the imagery of shattering glass which functions as the “allegorical moment” as identified by Adam Lowenstein because it is reminiscent of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. The combination of these visual and narrative motifs within these films creates the dramatic tension for their plots. The means of resolution for this dramatic tension comes through the use of violence that is both retributive and preemptive. Because the three most successful films of 2008 link imagery and narratives of trauma to violent action, it would appear that America not only values but desires such behavior.

All three films are characterized by repetition of visual and narrative motifs of masculinity in trauma, revealing that America, during this period, was concerned with trauma’s effect on masculinity. Narratively, vulnerability is the ultimate fear within these superhero films, which show traumatized male bodies being protected by masks, armored suits, and isolation. By situating textual analysis within the context of Presidential election campaigning, this thesis attempts to form an understanding of the psychological disposition of America.
DEDICATION

To: EJ

Because you get it.
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INTRODUCTION

In 2008 three of the four top-grossing films in the United States were Superhero Blockbusters. The most successful film of the year was *The Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008), a modern adaptation of the Batman legend. The second top-grossing film, *Iron Man* (Favreau 2008), was also a modern take on a comic book hero. While the third most profitable film of 2008 was the action-adventure continuation of the *Indiana Jones* saga, the fourth was *Hancock*, another Superhero film. The popularity of these Superhero films coincided with the turbulent cultural climate of that summer leading up to the 2008 Presidential Election. During this election, America was engaged in debates over the construction of national identity and gender, made evident by the proliferation of commentary on Senator Hillary Clinton’s candidacy in the democratic primary. This focus on gender seemed to underscore a deeper preoccupation with the role of masculinity within the office of the President of the United States of America. The national obsession with gender and masculinity was reflected in the season’s most successful films, which all dealt, quite overtly, with similar issues of defining masculinity. Even more specifically, the Superhero films of the 2008 season provided representations of masculinity in crisis through narratives concerned with trauma. That the films are concerned with the pairing of trauma and masculinity within a period characterized by discourses on nationality suggests that these themes were key to a process of national identity construction. I argue that this process is linked to the narrative of America, reflecting national discourses that have developed a myth of invulnerability in response to the traumatic experience of 9/11 that is similar to the narratives of these films. Each of these films repeats narrative and visual motifs associated with the trauma of 9/11 and masculinity. The repetition of these motifs works to establish a national memory of traumatic events. This memory then works to inform a construction of a national identity. It is
my contention that the national identity presented by the top-grossing American Superhero Blockbusters of 2008 is contingent upon the memory of 9/11 along with a public discourse on masculinity. Therefore, these films function to establish a national sense of identity through a repetition of representations of masculinity and trauma.

Theories of the Nation and National Cinema

Viewing blockbuster films is a national activity. People go to see films because a friend told them he enjoyed it, their date wants to see it, or a critic they value gives it a good rating. Thus, popular film viewership can be seen as a form of community. This approach of popular film viewership is in keeping with the definition of the nation that Benedict Anderson offers in *Imagined Communities*. Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community” (6). With his definition, Anderson makes the concept of the construction of national identity concrete. There is nothing that is inherently American, yet the construction of the nation through the repetition of cinematic imagery and narrative motifs makes it seem that such an identity is possible. Anderson’s analysis of the construction of a sense of community from the concept of the nation is particularly insightful for a study of popular national films. He says:

Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (7)

For Anderson, the nation is created through a collective imagining that is potentially stronger than any reality binding people together. Ultimately, Anderson’s work identifies language, in
particular print media such as newspapers, as the primary medium of distributing the ideas that constitute the imagined community of a nation.

In recent years, print media seems to have lost much of its influence. National identity within modern American society is constructed by the repetition of imagery. Images seen on the television, on websites, and in films seem to have more popularity and influence within American society than the print media that formerly dominated. Susan Jeffords focuses on the repetition of visual imagery in the process of forming a national identity in her analysis of Reagan Era Blockbusters in *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*. Jeffords was interested in understanding how the popularity of the “hard bodied” protagonist in successful Hollywood films factored into the national character of Reagan era America. Of popular film, Jeffords says:

Film theorists have established that the pleasures of cinema are deeply rooted in psychological, emotional, and personal pleasures, that audience members are able to establish diverse forms of identification with characters and scenarios on the screen. What Jochen and Linda Schulte-Sasse’s comments suggest is that this relationship with the characters and events on the screen can function to promote mass unity as well. In such terms, the cinematic narrative offers two ways to a feeling of ‘mastery’: at the level of the plot, in which the hard-body hero masters his surroundings, most often by defeating his enemies through violent physical action; and at the level of *national plot*, in which the same hero defeats national enemies, again through violent physical action. Viewers can experience personal power by identifying with an individual hero’s victory over fictional antagonists and national power through the ‘pleasurable collective
Jeffords goes on to discuss the imagery of the hard body and its place within the mythology of the Reagan Administration. Although her analysis is specific to a particular era, her theory is applicable to modern America. Ultimately, Jeffords proposes that films are pleasurable not only because the audience members place themselves in the shoes of an all powerful protagonist, but also because this action offers the audience a place within a collective experience.

Jeffords identifies the idea of a ‘pleasurable collective experience,’ but her engagement with this concept ends there. By connecting her analysis with the work of Siegfried Kracauer in his seminal From Cagliari to Hitler (1947), it is possible to begin a dialogue on the means by which a collective experience of blockbuster spectatorship constructs a sense of national identity. For Kracauer, the most interesting thing about film is the way in which it reflects the community of a nation. Kracauer proposes 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). He goes on to suggest that the psychological pattern of a nation is made apparent by the reoccurrence of expression of “mass desires” (5) throughout the nation’s cinema. With this assertion, Kracauer establishes a direct correlation between the community of the nation and the motifs of that nation’s popular cinema. Kracauer’s suggestion is that the community of a nation is built through the mass enjoyment of the same visual motifs within the cinema.

Kracauer’s work is solely concerned with motifs, not box office popularity, while Jeffords is concerned with the imagery within popular film that reinforces her analysis of the “myth” of President Reagan. I combine these two approaches with a focus on both motifs and
repetitive imagery while keeping box office popularity at the forefront in order to build an understanding of not only the existing political climate but also the psychological climate of a nation. In the box office results of the 2008 Blockbuster season the undeniable intersection was between the motifs of the Superhero film genre and popularity with American audiences. This analysis of the three most successful Superhero films of the season is designed to reveal the primary concerns of America during a summer that directly preceded a highly contested presidential election that had an increased voter involvement.

The Superhero Genre

The American psychological disposition in the summer of 2008 can be understood in a Kracauerian sense through an examination of the narrative motifs that characterize the Superhero Genre. As such, it is important to establish how I will approach the genre. Rick Altman’s comprehensive review of genre theory in *Film/Genre* offers many different ways to identify film genre. The one that resonates the most with the approach I am taking towards the films of the 2008 Blockbuster is summarized in this way:

Film genre’s special power is nearly always expressed in terms of stylistic devices or metaphors that figure a special ability to establish connections. According to Thomas Schatz (1981), film genres ‘express the social and aesthetic sensibilities not only of Hollywood filmmakers but of the mass audience as well’. (Altman, 14)

This definition is particularly useful in that it views a genre as a grouping of stylistic devices, motifs, and metaphors. More importantly, this definition identifies these conventions of a genre as the result of popularity with not only the producers, but also the consumers of the films. That which the national public desires to see becomes a means for a genre distinction. The end result of this process is summarized by Altman: “The pleasure of genre film spectatorship thus derives
more from reaffirmation than from novelty” (25). This identifies repeated stylistics of a genre to be a key aspect in the audience’s enjoyment of a film. Ultimately, it is this repetition which makes genre theory so beneficial in an attempt to understand the means by which film works to establish national identity. I agree with Altman that the audience’s enjoyment of genre films derives from repetition, but I would add that the enjoyment also stems from the recurrence of those motifs which the audience finds particularly enjoyable.

According to Kracauer, cinematic motifs have a specific cultural significance. Therefore, looking at the popular motifs of a popular genre will illuminate a cultural disposition. Altman discusses this aspect of genre theory when he looks at the role of ideology in the field. He suggests

…that audiences are the ultimate creators of genres, which function to justify and organize a virtually timeless society. According to this approach, the narrative patterns of generic texts grow out of existing societal practices. From this point of view, audiences have a very special investment in genres, because genres constitute the audience’s own method of assuring its unity and envisioning its future. (Altman, 27) 

Ideologically then, a genre functions to reestablish the goals and desires of the audience. It does so by repeating the most popular stylistics, making them genre conventions. This repetition functions to hegemonically reinforce the status quo. Therefore, in order to understand the future that was being “envisioned” during the 2008 presidential election, an examination of the most popular cinematic genre in America would be particularly beneficial.

But what are the genre conventions that identify the desires of the audience of Superhero films? Peter Coogan offers a few suggestions in his analysis of the Superhero genre in 

Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre. Coogan bases his understanding of the genre on the
definition used by a court case brought against the creators of Wonder Man in 1940. The court
decision, according to Coogan, defines the Superhero genre as following these narrative criteria:
“the definitional characteristics of mission, powers, and identity are central…” (Coogan, 30). As
such, it would seem that the repeated aspects of the Superhero genre would be the common
generic tropes of having a mission, powers, and an identity.

But things are not as simple as Coogan suggests. Prone to oversimplification, Superhero:
The Secret Origin of a Genre fails to take into account the many complexities that characterize
the Superhero genre and its narratives. Even more problematic is the fact that his definition
overlooks one extremely common genre convention: all of the major Superheroes are victims of
some form of psychological trauma. This is a common trend that was noted by Psychiatrist
Michael Brody in his essay “Holy Franchise! Batman and Trauma,” a contribution to a collection
entitled, Using Superheroes in Counseling and Play Therapy. Of the Superhero and trauma,
Brody says:

Like most Superheroes (Superman’s separation from his parents; Spider-Man being stung
by a radioactive spider; the Hulk’s unfortunate presence in a laboratory during an
explosion), Batman has his origins in psychic trauma, a mostly Freudian construct. It is
the sequelae of the trauma that makes for the individuality of each Superhero. The
psychic trauma that these myth-like characters suffer and recover from is also part of a
larger process that promotes increased strength through adversity.” (105)

It takes a Batman fan trained in psychology to identify one of the most common characteristics
of the Superhero that Coogan seems to miss. In this thesis I look further at Brody’s Batman
example in my analysis of The Dark Knight as well as apply his thinking to my analysis of Iron
Man and Hancock as I examine the Superhero genre from the perspective of trauma. Tony Stark
suffers trauma in the wounding of his body with a weapon he manufactured before becoming Iron Man and Hancock experiences persistent trauma as a black man within American society. While Brody’s analysis of the role of trauma in the Superhero is focused on comic and film representations alike, I am concerned in this thesis with cinematic representations. *Hancock*, in fact, has no original source material, and the film seems predisposed towards emphasizing the role of trauma and sequelae in motivating the Superhero protagonist. Based on my observations, I offer this new definition of the Superhero film genre: Superhero films represent a victim of a traumatic event overcoming that psychological trauma by tapping into or acquiring super-human powers that are usually, but not always, the result of their horrific experience and are subsequently utilized in order to enact some degree of vigilante violence in the defense of the greater good for society.

Within this generic definition, plots depend on the experience of trauma in order to spur along the action of the narrative. In particular, a horrific incident causes an extremely heroic response by the protagonist. Dori Laub, in his essay “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle,” offers one analysis which seems to work well as an explanation for how the Superhero develops his power out of trauma. In telling the story of a child survivor of the Holocaust, Laub says:

Many of the things he consequently does, as he grows up to be a man, are desperate attempts to subdue the abandoned child victim within himself. As a high-ranking officer in the Israeli army he becomes known for repeated acts of bravery, risking his life, as he rescues wounded soldiers under heavy fire. In speaking about these brave acts, he will later state, however, that he did not consider them brave at all. They simply partook of his feeling of being invulnerable. He was convinced he could walk in a hail of bullets
and not be hit. In my understanding, this conviction is part of a psychological construction which centered his life on the denial of the child victim within himself. He becomes instead an untouchable and self-sufficient hero. Because he had lost his inner witness and because he could not face his horrors without a witness, he was trapped. He could neither allow himself to experience the horrors nor could he move away from the position of the child victim, except by relentlessly attempting to deny them. (Caruth, 72)

In his analysis of this narrative, Laub attributes the man’s feeling of being invulnerable to the victim’s inability to witness the horrors that he has experienced. For Laub, traumas such as the Holocaust are characterized by a lack of a witness. In this case, the child cannot be self-aware of the horrors that he experienced during the Holocaust; the enormity of such a trauma is too much. The inability to witness the horror of his childhood then causes the child to live his life without any true sense of self. Without this sense of self, he is able to place himself in the midst of extreme danger without understanding the risks he is taking. While this example is tragically non-fiction, it would seem that the fictional genre conventions of the Superhero are drawing on this psychological process.

How this actually works can best be illustrated by another look at the profound effects trauma can have on the victim. In his essay “Notes on Trauma and Community,” Kai Erickson offers the final conclusion that:

The experience of trauma, at its worst, can mean not only a loss of confidence in the self, but a loss of confidence in the surrounding tissue of family and community, in the structures of human government, in the larger logics by which human kind lives, in the ways of nature itself. And (if this is really the final step in such a succession) in God. (Caruth, 198)
Erickson, in his study on the effects of disaster on the sense of community, identifies a sense of hopelessness that pervades the typical survivor’s outlook. Like Laub, he identifies the traumatic event as one that denies the victim his sense of self. But while Laub is interested in how the survivor comes to terms with his self without the possibility of having his own truth, Erickson is concerned with the responses the individual will have to the world around him. Interestingly enough, both responses involve a large amount of emotional dissociation.

If Superheroes are defined by their encounters with trauma, it would seem that they all have similar responses to this experience. Emotional dissociation from self and community is a common trope in Superhero film narratives. It is as if the Superhero has an inability to feel trust and safety towards the self and the community. This distrust is a key factor in Jason Bainbridge’s investigation into narrative themes of the genre in his essay “This is the Authority: This Planet is Under Our Production.” Bainbridge asserts that the Superhero denies the law to opt for “justice,” which he defines as “something that exists outside the legal system” (Bainbridge, 460). This generic analysis suggests that the Superhero’s choice of vigilante violence is the result of an overwhelming sense that the hero, and by extension the viewer, has been disappointed by the law. In each of the texts that Bainbridge interrogates, there is a sense that adherence to strict legality prevents the achievement of justice. Superhero texts thus reveal a sense of betrayal by the legal systems, which the super hero must fight to fix. Yet what is missing from Bainbridge’s text is the understanding that the Superhero’s sense of betrayal by the legal system is caused by the experience of a trauma that the law failed to prevent.

The Superhero feels betrayed by the legal system because the role of trauma in the Superhero genre is characterized by a sense of powerlessness and betrayal of the individual by something greater than himself. Be it his community, the legal system, mankind, or God, the
victimized protagonist shows the same loss of confidence that Erickson identifies in the traumatized individual. While this may be a common response for any survivor of a traumatic experience, the way that the protagonists of Superhero films respond to their trauma is not. The loss of trust in the self and the community and the profound powerlessness of victimization within the Superhero genre is turned into a power, thereby transcending the origin trauma. This conversion constructs the Superhero as no longer a victim of trauma. While their powers and their quest for justice remain a continual reminder of their previous horrific experiences, the characters are able to reassert the power lost through the traumatic experience by engaging in continuous vigilante action.

Within the Superhero genre, trauma manages to make an ordinary man (or at least a man who believes that he is ordinary) into a Superhero. The hero’s experience of distrust towards his community and its legal system then motivates him to take control of justice and use violence to ensure the protection of his community. The distrust of the self inherent in the experience of trauma makes it possible for the Superhero to continually risk his life and well-being in the hopes of stopping crime. Indeed, the experience of emotional dissociation even allows the Superhero to remain isolated from lovers and friends in order to maintain his crusade against violence. Ultimately, the Superhero genre offers narratives in which psychological weaknesses such as dissociation, anger, pervasive feelings of powerlessness, violent obsession, and incapacity for intimacy become strengths.

Culturally, this genre has an extremely important ideological function. The genre functions to turn weakness into a means of accessing power, which is similar to the common role of nationalistic discourse. Rick Altman also finds a parallel in the construction of genre and that of nationalistic discourse, when he says
Nations, like genres, are born through a process that does not disappear with that birth. The imagining of community, like the genrification process, always operates dialectically, through the transformation of an already existing community/genre. (206) Altman argues that genres and nationality are both equally constructed through similar processes. The end result of the construction of the Superhero genre and the established modern nationalism within America both focus on discourses that overcompensate for weakness.

I contend that the popularity of a genre that stylistically and narratively works to compensate for weakness is especially telling of the national psychological disposition of America in 2008. In the following section, I discuss what was going on in America during the summer of 2008 that made such thematic elements so desirable to a mass audience.

The Psychological Disposition of 2008

In America, the summer of 2008 was characterized by the political discourse of the upcoming presidential election. If the nation is an “imagined community” as Anderson says, then a presidential election is one of the means by which that community is given the opportunity to affirm an identity through their chosen candidates. All elections have major issues that form the focus of debates and discourse. While there were many issues that characterized the 2008 election, ultimately they were all underscored by a deep seated tension over the issue of American masculinity. The American cultural climate of the time was obsessed with masculinity (which was not only limited to the discourse about Hillary Clinton’s candidacy), a trend elucidated by the popular films of the period. There are two aspects of the election that seem to particularly resonate with the use of the Superhero genre within the most popular films of the year. First is the lasting effect of recent national traumas (such as 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and continuing threats of terrorism) over the construction of a national identity as
Mason, 13

well as public, political, and military discourse. This brings up the second issue: the debates of
the 2008 presidential election that were characterized by a tension in the construction of
American masculinity; a tension I believe is due to the crisis of American identity caused by the
nation’s response to trauma.

America and Trauma

If we are to understand a nation to have a constructed identity, much like a person, then it
follows that a nation must also have a psychology. As such, it is possible for a nation, just like a
person, to be traumatized. In order to understand how the experience of trauma factors into the
construction of American nationalism, we must first discuss trauma. In her introduction to
*Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth offers a good understanding of the definition of
the experience:

> The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the
> event itself is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its
> repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be
> possessed by an image or event. (5)

Thus trauma is not an experience; rather it is a reaction to, or preoccupation with, an event that
for whatever reason was beyond the survivor’s ability to experience. As such, it would seem that
the attacks of September 11th and all of the horrific traumas that have since resulted function
along this level.

America is obsessed with September 11th. At first, this preoccupation took the form of a
renewed sense of patriotism made visible in concerts and merchandise decorated with American
flags. The news channels discussed the attacks and how they “would change life as we know it
in America.” Even now, nine years later, every fall there are still news stories about how
America is dealing with the attacks. And while there are no longer charity concerts or goods being mass produced proclaiming things like “Never Forget,” America is still obsessed. The obsession has just been moved from the foreground to the background of our cultural consciousness. One of the places in which the persistent memory of 9/11 can be seen is within Hollywood blockbuster films in which the dramatic tension and imagery meant to build suspense hinge on the recollection of the September 11th attacks.

The events of September 11th have changed the way America identifies itself and the culture it produces. Benedict Anderson offers an explanation for this process when he says,

“All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives.” (204)

The narrative that Anderson is identifying is that of a national memory. In his understanding of the construction of nationality, the shock that accompanies a drastic change allows for the space in national discourse to establish an identity. This identity is predicated on a particular remembrance of an event. The problem is that identity and memory are constantly in flux along with the ever-changing sentiments of the nation. This aspect of fluctuation is particularly evident in the case of America with the attacks of September 11th. The progression of events in the seven years between the attacks and the 2008 presidential election were characterized by gross changes in national opinion on everything from wars to torture scandals to the success of George Bush’s presidency. And the process of the constant restructuring of America’s national identity the can be seen within popular cinema. For as Susan Jeffords points out:
A nation exists, in other words, as something to be seen. In such a case, examining one of the chief distributors of images in this country - Hollywood films - offers clues about the construction of American national identity (6).

Jeffords proposes that by examining the imagery of Hollywood films a scholar can develop an understanding of cultural identity. For the purposes of this paper, it is important to understand that visually and thematically, popular cinema has been the site in which the memory of the trauma of 9/11 has been constantly re-inscribed, revealing the changes in the national identity.

Masculinity

Identity politics are traditional particular instable, especially when discussed in the context of nationality. In terms of the 2008 Presidential Election, national identity was especially fluid due to varying discourses. The instability of the national identity also had a profound effect on the discourse about masculinity within the 2008 presidential election. Although American society has many different media figures that function as representations of the national identity, the president is arguably the most important and visible. As such, an election is not only a means of choosing a new leader, but also works to define a national identity. American national identity is constantly changing and the nature of this identity was a key issue in the political debates of the 2008 election in a way that it hadn’t been in previous elections. In 2008 the traditional masculinity that characterized presidential candidates in the past was opened up to new identities. Traditionally, the American president is a rich, white, man above the age of 50. This construction is emblematic of America’s construction as a patriarchal, capitalistic society in which the dominant racial group is Caucasian. Even more so, the traditional construction of American masculinity involves a dependence on the traditional ideals of masculinity. The application of dominant patriarchal ideologies to the presidential identity is
illuminated by Susan Jeffords in her analysis of the effect that the Reagan Presidency’s construction of ideal masculinity had on Hollywood film. One of the means by which Jeffords analyzes the traditional construction of the Chief of State is to utilize a summary of John Orman’s work with the presidential construction of masculinity. Her summary says:

…the mold of what Orman has called the “macho presidential style,” which he defines by the following seven qualities:

1. Competitive in politics and life
2. Sports-minded and athletic
3. Decisive, never wavering or uncertain
4. Unemotional, never revealing true emotions or feelings
5. Strong and aggressive, not weak or passive
6. Powerful
7. A ‘real man,’ never ‘feminine.’

As Orman goes on to say, ‘The macho presidential style places the ability to portray strength, aggressiveness, and power at the top of its demands.’ (Jeffords, 35)

Jeffords and Orman both agree that America’s president is expected to uphold a certain construction of “macho” masculinity. Interestingly enough, this identification of ‘manliness’ does not allow a space for the victimization of trauma. Thus, while it is true that, as Orman proposes, each president embodies this style to a certain extent, it would seem that in 2008 there was a shift in the traditional construction of presidential masculinity due to the presence of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, neither of whom exemplified traditional American presidential masculinity.

Because of this fact, the election has been characterized within dominant national discourses as an altering paradigm shift. One of the major reasons for this shift was the drastic
change in the number of voters who participated in the election. According to the United States Census Bureau:

…Additionally, voters 18 to 24 were the only age group to show a statistically significant increase in turnout, reaching 49 percent in 2008 compared with 47 percent in 2004. Blacks had the highest turnout rate among 18- to 24-year-old voters — 55 percent, an 8 percent increase from 2004. The increased turnout among certain demographic groups was offset by stagnant or decreased turnout among other groups, causing overall 2008 voter turnout to remain statistically unchanged — at 64 percent — from 2004. (US Census Bureau)

The decline of voter turnout in the demographics including people from the age of 24 upwards balanced out the increase in younger voters, it is important to note that there was indeed an increase in the turnout of this younger demographic. Incidentally, this demographic shift also coincides with that of the majority of audience members at a Hollywood blockbuster film. The youngest voters, who were becoming increasingly more political during the summer of 2008, were the same people who were attending the Superhero blockbusters in mass numbers. Interestingly enough, not only was this younger demographic more politicized, but it was also more diverse in its racial composition than in previous years.

While the voting groups were not changing drastically, there was enough of a change to make it worthy of reporting. This change coincided with a drastic change in the types of candidates who entered the presidential race in 2008. Usually there are often third party presidential candidates who are not Caucasian, 2008 marks the first American election with a viable African-American candidate from a major party. And Hillary Clinton’s competitive presidential campaign during the primaries further expanded our nation’s traditional view of presidential candidates by allowing us to imagine a woman president.
Coinciding with the changes in the voters and presidential candidates, the summer blockbusters of 2008 can be characterized as representations of masculinity in crisis. Narratively, the Superhero films that were popular during the summer of 2008 revolve around the tribulations of traumatized men who must protect and rebuild their damaged senses of masculinity. Incidentally, this process often involves a degree of tension between the protagonist and a strong female character, and in the case of *Hancock*, an investigation into race issues. The Superhero genre allows an analysis of how these representations of masculinity and trauma within the films correspond to the issues of race and gender in the political situation in America at that time. While the Superhero genre offers a means to discuss these issues on a narrative level, ultimately the genre deals more explicitly with the issues of masculinity and trauma on the level of the visual. As such, these films also have specific stylistic elements that are indicative of the cultural climate.

**Visual Motifs within the Top Grossing Superhero Films of 2008**

Because this analysis is dependent on Superhero film genre, it is important to look at the visual similarities within the films. As Kracauer cautions,

…what counts is not so much the statistically measurable popularity of films as the popularity of their pictorial and narrative motifs. Persistent reiteration of these motifs marks them as outward projections of inner urges. (8)

I argue that by combining a focus on the most successful films with the most commonly repeated visual motifs in the films, it will be possible to understand the common “inner urges” of the American public on the eve of this presidential election. As such, these motifs can reveal what the American public valued in their 2008 presidential candidates.
In order to understand the role of the visual motif within the Superhero films of the 2008 blockbuster season, it must be situated within the national construction of a unified identity through the repetition and represent of the memory of trauma. In order to contextualize imagery within this national process, I will utilize Adam Lowenstein’s theory of the “allegorical moment.” In his study of nationality, trauma, and horror film in *Shocking Representations: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*, Lowenstein uses a theory derived from the work of Walter Benjamin in order to discuss how visual motifs within genre films can evoke previous national traumas. Lowenstein explains the usefulness of the allegorical moment when he says:

Benjamin’s notion of historical representation as allegory, as a dialectical image of death where the past becomes *recognizable* to the present only through ‘the violence of the dialectic movement within these allegorical depths,’ forces us beyond the constricting theoretical frames placed on representation by trauma studies. Allegory cannot be fully psychologized or interiorized; it insists on the exteriority of the corpse. Allegory resists fantasies of strictly teleological history in favor of fleeting instants where ‘meaning’ is forged between past and present, in ‘the depths that separate visual being from meaning.’

(15)

Because the experience of trauma is the constant reliving of “an event outside the range of experience,” (Caruth, 100) the memory of the event persists long after it is over. Lowenstein finds this characteristic of trauma to be problematic for the application of trauma studies within the discipline of film studies. This is because the films that a trauma scholar identifies as emblematic of the process of a nation working through a trauma are often made years after the actual event. Lowenstein circumvents this problem by treating visual motifs similar to the
dreams that are commonly a symptom of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. According to the fourth (and most recent) edition of the Diagnostic Statistics Manual, which is used by psychiatrists and psychologists in the diagnosis and treatment of their patients, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder includes “symptomatically, there must be at least one of 5 possible intrusive—re-experiencing symptoms. These have the quality of obsessive, recurring, intrusive, and distressing recollections either in the form of imagery or thoughts or in the form of recurrent distressing dreams (First and Tasman, 926). The vivid imagery characteristic of the trauma survivor’s dreams and recollections is equivalent to that within popular cinema. In these moments of visual similarity, Lowenstein finds the past represented in present imagery.

In my reading of the Superhero films of 2008, the image that I argue functions as the allegorical moment is that of shattering glass. This is not to say that whenever the imagery of shattering glass appears within a film it represents the allegorical moment. Shattering glass, and its narrative role of establishing dramatic tension, is a common visual motif of blockbuster films. Instead, the argument is that within the top three Superhero films of 2008, the visual motif of shattering glass is represented in a way that evokes national trauma. Due to the prevalence of this imagery throughout the footage of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center, the imagery of shattering glass can be understood to be an allegorical moment in which the trauma of 9/11 is represented in modern cinematic form. Therefore, I will analyze each of the top grossing Superhero films of the 2008 blockbuster season for their use of the imagery of shattering glass. This is because in each example of its use, I have found that it is narratively linked to the protection of traumatized masculinity. In *The Dark Knight*, the shattering glass functions much like the mask that reveals the Jungian shadow of the trauma survivor. In *Iron Man*, the glass is destroyed at moments in which the hopelessness of the trauma survivor is
manifested physically on a body that despite all attempts to build a protective shield is still powerless. And in *Hancock* glass is shattered as the protagonist literally runs from any weakness (represented within the film by the feminine) in an attempt to maintain his strength and powers. In all of these cases, narrative and visual motifs combine to form an allegorical moment in which the memory of a traumatic experience is represented in a modern cinematic production.

**Thesis Overview**

Although I am writing about the events of September 11, 2001 and the 2008 Presidential election, it is important to note that I am not saying that the films of 2008 are directly related to either event. The primary goal of this thesis is to understand the means by which the negotiation of national identity is inscribed within the recurrent narrative and visual motifs of the most successful films of a particular genre in a particular year. I am referencing events external to both the cinematic world and the time period when the films were produced in order to contextualize the visual motifs. My approach to these films, as already demonstrated, will be extremely interdisciplinary as I combine elements of Trauma Studies, Film Studies, Masculinity Studies, and Theories of Nationality in order to analyze the films.

In the first chapter, I analyze Jungian imagery in *The Dark Knight* in order to understand the national processes of identity construction in the wake of trauma. The primary focus of this chapter comes from the first few minutes of the film during which the imagery of shattering glass is connected to the Jungian imagery of the mask. The film treats the mask imagery not as a means to conceal the shadow, but rather to represent the shadow. As such, I draw a parallel between the imagery of the shattering glass and America’s shadow, the terrorist act that caused trauma and facilitated reconstructing of national identity as dependent on violent retribution for any perceived harm.
In my analysis of *Iron Man* in the second chapter, I utilize theories of the male body to understand the ways in which Tony Stark’s character attempts to compensate for the traditional trauma survivor’s sense of powerlessness. Throughout the film, Stark’s body is continually subjected to encasement by a larger and stronger body meant to protect him, but also to act as a weapon against any further harm. Yet the film seems to identify this sense of safety as a constructed fantasy because Stark’s protective encasement is itself often placed in situations that render it powerless and weak. At these particular moments, the imagery of shattering glass is often present, reinstating the allegorical moment of trauma. This then motivates the narrative to work to further protect Stark’s vulnerable body. I draw a comparison between this narrative progression and the continual recycling of the memory of trauma and the defense against weakness that constitutes the national memory and construction of identity as exemplified by the 2008 presidential election.

In the final chapter, I look at *Hancock*, which is an origin story for a Superhero that never existed in comic form. The film attempts to revise the conventions of the Superhero genre, yet ultimately this approach works to highlight the genre’s treatment of trauma. The film is especially problematic because it seems to have two story lines. One is an origin story in which the anger and self-destruction of a trauma survivor is harnessed and channeled into vigilante heroics. Once Hancock is made into a Superhero, the film begins another narrative of self-discovery in which Hancock learns the truth about himself and his past. This narrative identifies race and gender as major factors in Hancock’s trauma, without ever explicitly identifying them as motivating factors within the film’s dialogue. The film’s solution to the issues presented by Hancock’s discovery of his past is isolation and separation.

Conclusion
Ultimately, the goal of this project is to perform a textual analysis of the reoccurring visual and narrative motifs within the most successful Superhero genre films of the 2008 Blockbuster season. *The Dark Knight, Iron Man,* and *Hancock* will be examined for their treatment of the visual motifs that evoke the memory of September 11th as well as a narrative concerned with masculinity in crisis. The aim of each chapter is to understand the desires of the American public in the midst of a Presidential Election that was characterized by an overt discourse on the construction of American masculinity. This tension will be framed within an analysis of the national dialogue about gender in the light of the continual influence of the terroristic events of September 11th over American domestic and foreign policy as well as media.
CHAPTER I: ‘HOLY MASKS AND SHADOWS, BATMAN!’

JUNG’S MASK, SHADOW, AND 9/11 IMAGERY IN THE DARK KNIGHT

As the most successful film of 2008, The Dark Knight (Nolan, 2008) offers a complex example of the relationship between popularity and the construction of national identity. While the film’s popularity suggests the idea that viewing a film can in itself work to form an imagined community, the complexity of the film is not characteristic of the typical blockbuster film. This complexity is the one element of the film that makes the film a potential problematic case example of how blockbuster viewership could be potentially community forming. As director, producer, and co-writer of the film, Christopher Nolan’s influence on the adaptation of the Batman mythos is profound. Nolan, known for his complex and cerebral films such as the indie classic Memento (Nolan, 2000), is often attributed with the film’s frequently confusing narrative and character motivations. The complexity of Nolan’s work could have had a more divisive effect on the audiences for The Dark Knight. In the end, the intricacy of the film’s plot became a key element to the film’s viewership. Yet this aspect of the film could also be a result of the introduction of Jungian archetypes to cinematic representations of the Batman mythos. In its focus on Jungian archetypes, The Dark Knight tackles the traumatic memories of the September 11th attacks and their effect on American popular memory, thereby establishing an imagined community for its audience. For this reason, The Dark Knight is arguably the one film of the 2008 blockbuster season in which the allegorical moment is the strongest as both Jungian and traumatic imagery are combined in moments which resonate within American culture.

Introduction

The opening of the film The Dark Knight (Nolan, 2008) shows a bank robbery organized by the Joker in downtown Gotham City. The robbery, a highly complex ordeal, is portrayed to
the audience through crosscutting between two separate groups of robbers. Each group is introduced by the same method: a gradual close-up. The first shot of the film is a pan in towards the windows of a Gotham City building. As the camera approaches the building, one of the windows is blown out from the inside. This serves as the introduction for the first group of bank robbers. The second group is introduced by a slow pan towards the back of a man (who we understand is the Joker himself) waiting on a city street corner. In his left hand, down by his side, he holds a clown mask. As the camera moves closer the mask, a soundtrack of tense music swells.

The opening images of *The Dark Knight* place an emphasis on the Joker by focusing on his actions rather than those of Batman. The focus on the Joker is so profound that the other main character of the film, Harvey Dent, doesn’t enter the focus either. This makes the opening sequence solely about the Joker. As intriguing as this emphasis is, what is even more interesting is that this opening makes a connection between the visual imagery of the shattering window and the clown mask. The relationship between these two images is established by a slow zoom. Usually within films, any gradual movement into an object, person, or action signifies importance. Such an introduction connotes the idea that one specific image within the mise-en-scene is more important than all the others. Meanwhile, cross-cutting between two images connotes similarity. The cinematic processes in the opening of *The Dark Knight* establish a mutually shared importance between the imagery of the shattering window and the mask held by the Joker. But what is at stake in the choice of these two particular images, the mask and the shattering glass, as key images?

The importance of the imagery of the mask within Superhero narratives is due to the common plot device of the dual life of the hero. In the late 1980s, several comic book creators
began to incorporate a reflexive understanding of the mask into their work. The Batman mythos with its dark undertones became a key site of this revisionary work. Influential graphic novels such as *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller, 1986), *The Killing Joke* (Moore, 1988), and *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (Morrison, 1989) offer portrayals of Batman that critique traditional representations of the dual identity of “the caped crusader.” Often these representations, influenced by Jungian psychology, focus on the identity of Bruce Wayne as the affected one which the true identity known as Batman takes on in order to survive detection from enemies legal and illegal alike. These approaches to the dual identity of Batman can be seen in *The Dark Knight* as several characters question whether or not Batman will ever be able to stop his vigilantism. Following this train of thought, throughout this analysis I will use the name “Bruce Wayne” for what, in Jungian terminology, could be called, the “persona” component of the Batman identity. Bruce Wayne, the shallow heir to the prosperous Wayne Enterprises fortune is a persona that Batman has constructed to protect his identity as “the caped crusader.” Thus throughout this paper, I will refer to the identity I read as an example of Jung’s concept of the “shadow” as “Batman” while the shallow persona will be identified as “Bruce Wayne.” This identity binary establishes one of the key narrative themes within *The Dark Knight*, the tension between the mask and the shadow.

Distinction between the two identities is important to establish as both Batman and Bruce Wayne are in constant conflict with each other. Specifically, in *The Dark Knight* the struggle between the shadow and the persona is played out through the imagery of the mask. Given the importance of the archetypes of the shadow and persona in relationship to the mask, in order to understand the significance of the mask within *The Dark Knight* it is particularly useful to employ the work of Carl Jung in an analysis of the film. There is precedence for the importance
of Jungian theory on the new Batman series that was started with the character of the Scarecrow in *Batman Begins* (Nolan, 2005). In fact the way in which these archetypes are introduced within the series is particularly suggestive within an analysis of the relationship of Bruce Wayne and Batman. This relationship hinges on the recurrent motif of the mask. The predominance of this imagery within the film is reason enough for the use of Jungian psychology as a theoretical approach to an analysis of the film.

Traditionally, in Jungian psychology, the mask symbolizes the archetype of the persona. The persona is that ordered, respectable, and presentable identity people display to the rest of the world. This representation of the mask and the archetype of the persona suggest that the mask would hide the truth of its owner’s personality. In Jungian terms, this truth would be understood to be that of the shadow. The persona attempts to gloss over the dark realities of the shadow with the use of a mask. Yet in the case of the opening of *The Dark Knight*, the Jungian imagery of the mask does not really conceal anything. When the Joker takes off his mask at the end of the heist, he reveals a face almost identical to, if not more horrific than, that of the mask he had been wearing. Thus the scene establishes the function of the mask within the film not as a means of hiding the presence of the shadow but rather of revealing that shadow to the world.

But what is the shadow revealed by the masks in *The Dark Knight*? The Joker’s mask marks him as a shadow figure, just as Batman’s mask identifies him as a man driven by vengeance to do inconceivable things. But there is more to the use of the mask in the film. The use of the gradual zooms in the beginning of the film makes a visual parallel between the mask the Joker is holding and the window that gets destroyed. Both are the focus of a gradual zoom in, signaling to the audience a mutual importance. Narratively, the mask that the Joker wears functions as a means to hide his identity from the rest of the members of the heist. The Joker
does not opt for anonymity for monetary gain. Rather, the choice seems to cultivate a sense of chaos as each other member of the heist is unaware of the ultimate plan. Thus the entire opening scene is characterized by a frenzy of action and murders culminating in the Joker’s eventual escape after he kills the last gang member. Yet the cinematic emphasis placed on the mask suggests a further importance which can be found in the parallel constructed cinematically between the mask and the destroyed window.

The imagery of the opening shot of the film where a window of a high-rise office building explodes from the inside and causes the glass to shatter downwards, is a common image within the footage of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. While seen on a smaller scale in The Dark Knight, shattering glass falling from high-rise buildings still evokes an extremely strong image within American media. Whether or not the correlation between the beginning of the film and the footage of the 9/11 attacks was something the filmmakers had in mind when filming the film is not really important. Either consciously or unconsciously, the filmmakers drew upon this potent imagery to establish the horror of the Joker’s actions. The imagery reminiscent of 9/11 within the opening of The Dark Knight is visually equated with the mask that reveals the shadow.

Within The Dark Knight, the importance of the visual motifs of the mask and the shattering glass functions to reveal the construction of an American national identity through popular cinema. This is because popular film, whether intentionally or unintentionally, functions to establish ideology. One of the ideological functions of film is to construct and solidify a sense of national identity, and a nation constructs its identity by formulating a national memory. Thus the modern American identity is largely due to the construction of an ideologically driven, unified memory of traumatic experiences such as the terrorist attacks of September 11th. The
constructed memories of such traumas are repeated over and over within popular media, hegemonically reinforcing them.

The imagery of the shattering glass within *The Dark Knight* is an example of the repetition of a national memory for the ideological purpose of constructing an identity. The correlation between the imagery of the mask and that of the shattering glass establishes a relationship between the representations of the shadow within *The Dark Knight* and the use of the memory of September 11th to construct an American national identity. Due to the dominance of this imagery in the film’s opening moments and its direct correlation to the character of the Joker and his Jungian double Batman, the focus of this chapter will be on the relationship between the opening imagery and these two characters. Another intriguing example of how *The Dark Knight* uses physical appearance to manifest the psychology of its characters upon their bodies would be the deformation of one half of Harvey Dent’s face. Dent, already a psychologically divided character, has this characteristic physically presented to the world by his evil persona of Two Face. While it is important to mention this element of the film, (it will not be the focus of this chapter) because Dent does not fit into the binary created by the characters of the Joker and Batman. Rather than being a major element within the struggle of the film, Dent is much like the city of Gotham in that he is one of the casualties or bartering chips of the struggle between Batman and the Joker. And because the opening imagery of the film emphasizes visual motifs that factor so heavily within this struggle, the focus of this chapter is on understanding the role of the mask, the shadow, and the shattering glass for the characters of the Joker and Batman.

Because the film serves an ideological function, it is important to understand how this relationship between characters and motifs relates to the construction of American memory. In order to do so it is important to understand the film’s adaptation of the Jungian archetypes of the
mask and the shadow. Within *The Dark Knight*, the mask does not function to hide the shadow; instead, the mask is revealing. Thus, the use of imagery reminiscent of the attacks of September 11th in *The Dark Knight* reveals the American shadow to be the persistent memory of a national trauma. Because the film is not narratively or allegorically concerned with September 11th, the horrors of that national trauma transcend the film’s diegesis. The imagery of shattering glass, exploding buildings, and “Ground Zero” in *The Dark Knight* reveal the processes of memory and identity construction in American society through the representations of 9/11 imagery within popular film. If America is an entity with a memory (albeit an ideologically constructed one), then the use of shattering glass as the memory of the September 11th attacks reveals that memory to be like the Joker’s mask, the shadow that cannot be hidden. Through an analysis of the use of Jungian archetypes, I read the film as a testament to the persistence of trauma and the moral dilemma its existence poses for the construction of a national identity.

**The Shattering Glass**

Film has never been a static art form. As an artistic product made by a group of people, a film is very much a representation of the cultural climate in which it was made. One presupposition of the field of trauma studies is that life within modern history is inherently ridden with trauma. So if the people of our world are all traumatized individuals, the films that they produce and consume must also be inherently preoccupied with trauma. The application of trauma studies by film theorists often builds on this understanding of film as a cultural product, as it uses a film to gage national reactions to the experience of trauma. In particular, the application of the theories of trauma studies and national cinema are particular helpful in understanding how trauma is used to construct a sense of identity for a nation.
Benedict Anderson proposes that the nation is an “imagined community” (Anderson, 5). In the case of trauma, this sense of community is constructed by a national reaction to a horrific event. Thus, after the attacks of September 11th, America was identified as a victim of trauma. This identity built a community, which motivated a wave of nationalism and patriotism. This movement was most noticeably identified by the consumption of American-flag-covered products and a flood of television concerts. Nationalism, along with the memory of September 11th, was being commodified within the media. But even more, these patriotic products inspired by the attacks revealed that a dialogue had been established about what it means to be American. In particular, the focus became “how do Americans consume?” As time has passed from the events of September 11th, the construction of a national identity has moved away from the products that Americans buy. Recently, identity formation is most strikingly played out within the media through the persistent representations of the traumatic event.

There are many ways in which representations of trauma can affect the memory of the event as it is used for the construction of national identity. Adam Lowenstein’s work in *Shocking Representations* offers one way to contextualize the exchange between representations and memories of trauma. In his application of trauma studies to the horror film genre, Lowenstein utilizes the work of Walter Benjamin to construct the idea of the ‘allegorical moment.’ In describing the functions of the allegorical moment, Lowenstein says:

A shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined. These registers of space and time are distributed unevenly across the cinematic text, the film’s audience, and the historical context. (Lowenstein, 2)
It is possible for cinematic images to transcend narrative and even time itself. The allegorical moment “shocks” the film’s audience into a confrontation with a memory of an event previously thought to be forgotten. He goes on to say that these are moments in which “the past erupts in the present, in the flicker of a cinematic image, in a disorienting turn of a phrase.” (15) Thus it is a cinematic moment that reveals the horrors of the past within the present.

But what are the horrors of the past that *The Dark Knight* reveals? The allegorical moment within the film is focused on representations of terrorism. It is not just that throughout the film, characters refer to the Joker as a “terrorist.” Even the bank heist in the opening of the film is shot in such a way as to evoke the terrorist attacks of September 11th. Indeed, the predominance of themes of terrorism in *The Dark Knight* would suggest that the film is an allegory for the War on Terror. But looking for allegory in any Batman text is impossible. The mythic quality of Batman makes his narratives too complex for the simplicity of allegory. Because of this, it is more useful to utilize Lowenstein’s conception of the allegorical moment in an analysis of a Batman text. This is because the concept of the allegorical moment allows the Batman text to be characterized by moments in which the spaces of the past and present are combined for both cinematic and cultural meaning.

A film may be full of many of these allegorical moments, but *The Dark Knight* makes a habit of repeating one in particular: the imagery of exploding windows and shattering glass. While Blockbuster films are traditionally full of this imagery, the shattering glass in *The Dark Knight* is eerily similar to that seen in the footage of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. When the planes crashed into the Twin Towers, the force of their collision caused an explosion. This explosion blew out the windows on the opposite side of the building sending debris and glass falling to the ground. After several hours, the fire caused by the collision of the
planes and the subsequent explosions caused the collapse of the towers’ infrastructure. As each tower collapsed the fires on the impact floors spread through the falling building. This caused even more explosions. As the buildings fell, the excessive debris from the explosions caused a giant mushroom cloud of smoke and fire. In watching the footage of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center, the most common imagery is that of shattering glass as caused by the impact of the planes throughout the collapse of the buildings.

The fact that one window in the beginning of The Dark Knight is exploded outwards does not make a strong case for the imagery of shattering glass as an example of the allegorical moment. For, as stated earlier, shattering glass is one of the major staples of big budget blockbuster films. But just as the explosions of shattering glass reoccurred during the events of September 11th, The Dark Knight consistently repeats and builds on this imagery. Window upon window is shattered building up toward the climax of the film in which the windows and infrastructure of two warehouses (in which Rachel Dawes and Harvey Dent have been held hostage) are blown outwards from the inside, sending shattering glass and debris out into city streets. The explosion also produces a giant mushroom cloud. All the imagery of these explosions is strongly reminiscent of that of the collapsing towers. Thus the film escalates from the allegorical-moment imagery of shattering windows towards imagery more explicitly reminiscent of the collapse of the Twin Towers. Both the breaking windows and the explosion of the warehouses are dependent upon this visual motif of shattering glass.

Lowenstein’s conception of the allegorical moment provides a means to analyze the recurrent imagery of shattering glass in The Dark Knight. The glass works to bridge the gap between past traumas and present processes of grieving. But it is also important to notice that
this allegorical moment reveals something else, which is why visual connections are drawn between the imagery of shattering glass and the Jungian archetype of the Mask.

**Jungian Psychology: Collective Unconscious, the Mask, and the Shadow**

Carl Jung was a student of Sigmund Freud, and just like Freud’s, Jung’s theories became incredibly influential in literature, art, and film. But Jung’s work began to deviate from his mentor when he started to study a different level of the unconscious, which he identified as the “collective unconscious.” While Sigmund Freud studied the personal unconscious, Jung devoted most of his studies to the collective unconscious. Jung introduced this concept in this way:

This deeper layer I call the *collective unconscious*. I have chosen the term “collective” because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behavior that are more or less the same everywhere in all individuals. It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us. (Jung, 4)

For Jung, the collective unconscious exemplifies all that it means to be human. He explains that this realm of the unconscious is approachable through its representation as archetypes. The archetypes of the collective unconscious are represented in two different ways. One is through dreams, while “[A]nother well-known expression of the archetypes is myth and fairytale” (Jung, 5). Thus Jungian archetypes are not only found within an individual’s unconscious, but they can also be found within a greater, collective unconscious. Myths and fairytales are full of what Jung refers to as archetypes, which signify an individual culture’s collective unconscious. In the case of the Christopher Nolan Batman series, the story of Bruce Wayne and his Superhero identity offers an ideal opportunity to find archetypes within a myth. By reading the film as a myth, full
of Jungian archetypes, it is possible to develop an understanding of the collective unconscious of the society that tells this story.

This process can also be applied to the national, as the collective unconscious seems to be a psychological term for the construct of the imagined community that Anderson identifies. Thus it is possible to apply a Jungian reading of a myth or film to an understanding of a national collective unconscious. This chapter will read the Jungian archetypes within *The Dark Knight* in order to understand the modern American collective unconscious as it has been constructed post 9/11 through media representations.

The Modern American Collective Unconscious

To read a film for its Jungian archetypes is to analyze a film psychologically. But the unconscious that the reader would gain insight to would not be that of the creator but rather that of the society which the creator is in. This Jungian approach to film analysis would seem to work well with Siegfried Kracauer’s theories of national cinema. For as Kracauer says, “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” (6). What Kracauer identifies here as a collective mentality is similar to Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious. Going further along these lines, Kracauer identifies films as satisfying national desires caused by psychosis when he says, “films address themselves, and appeal, to the anonymous multitude. Popular films - or, to be more precise, popular screen motifs—can therefore be supposed to satisfy existing mass desires” (Kracauer, 5). So for Kracauer, national cinema is the reflection of the desires of a nation. Kracauer attempts to understand these desires from a psychological perspective. In his analysis he focuses on the representations of the effects
of World War One on the desires portrayed within the motifs in Weimar Cinema. It should be noted, however, that Kracauer’s use of psychology is based primarily on Freudian psychology.

Kracauer’s use of Freudian theories works well with the approach taken by applications of trauma studies to film. In particular, a trauma study is often preoccupied with issues of the Freudian processes of mourning, melancholia, and repetition.

In “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” (1914) and “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud draws clear distinctions between two different processes individuals may undergo when faced with the traumatic loss of a deeply valued object…In the pathological, unhealthy state of melancholia, the ego refuses to let go of the lost object and instead acts out the loss compulsively, repeating (rather than remembering) the trauma by turning it inward and enacting the loss as self-torment.

(Lowenstein, 4)

In the realm of film, these processes of mourning and repetition are often applied to national cinema. Traditionally, it is understood that films representing national trauma are similar to this process of “compulsively repeating” a traumatic experience. Concepts such as Lowenstein’s “allegorical moment” suggest that a national cinema, much like the dreams of a patient dealing with trauma, reproduces the memory of a traumatic event in an attempt to come to terms with it.

While this is a valid approach, it would seem that given the significance of Jungian psychology in modern adaptations of the Batman canon, a study of The Dark Knight would benefit from the influence of a Jungian analysis rather than one based off the Freudian theories. Despite its difference, this approach works well with the Kracauer’s theories of popular cinema and Lowenstein’s allegorical moment. This is because Jungian psychology is focused on a confrontation with the shadow. It is expected that once a person confronts and accepts his or her
shadow, they will be able to deal with his or her identity and all attendant psychological problems, including their trauma. So to apply Jungian psychology to the allegorical moment, it would seem that the allegorical moment not only bridges the gap between the past and the present, but it also always reveals the shadow.

Archetypes

The shadow, like the mask and the persona, is a Jungian archetype. As a specific representation of the collective unconscious, the importance of archetypal representations is paramount. As Mary Ann Mattoon says in her study of Jungian psychology, “Wherever archetypal images appear - in dreams, waking visions, or events - they tend to arouse intense emotions” (Mattoon, 41). One of the reasons for popularity of archetypes in popular superhero genre cinema could very well be due to this emotional response they can evoke in their audience. Perhaps this response is made stronger by the fact that “all archetypes have positive and negative aspects. They contain paradoxical elements of good and evil; divine inspirations as well as hidden fears of the dark side” (Iaccino 1994, 4). It then makes sense that this archetype would factor so heavily within a superhero film as the genre is dependent upon the conflict of good against evil. In the case of *The Dark Knight*, the good and the evil seem to have an unusually close relationship, constructed by the archetypal representations within the film. Of all the archetypes, the most morally conflicted is that of the Shadow.

The Shadow

The Shadow can easily be confused with Freud’s id, because it is often characterized as animalistic and primal. Yet, like all archetypes, “The shadow can have a positive influence on the individual when properly asserted. By its tenacity and incredible ‘staying power,’ it can drive the person to accomplish wonders and to engage in fruitful and highly creative endeavors”
Thus the Shadow is not simply motivated by negative impulses. In fact, there are two types of shadows that exemplify the duality of the archetype. The most terrifying is that of the “Irrational Archetype.” This evil version of the shadow archetype “appears when the shadow operates apparently ‘without rhyme or reason.’ Like most images, this one does not conform to logical constraints or causal relationships since it reflects unconscious processes…” (Iaccino 1994, 7). The Irrational Shadow Archetype is a chaotic monster that acts solely as an agent of destructive anarchy. Within *The Dark Knight*, this role is filled by the Joker.

Meanwhile, the positive equivalent of this archetype is the “Avenging-God Archetype” which Iaccino defines as,

…the partial containment of the shadow so that its unbridled power can be channeled more effectively into the character’s consciousness and subsequent behavior. The goal behind using the shadow in this way is the quest for vengeance or justice for a wrong inflicted on the principal character. Jung remarked that assimilating the shadow into consciousness provides the individual with an almost “godlike” superiority, allowing him to hold in his hands the scales of good and evil. There appears to be an almost total (even ruthless) disregard for others as the quest for justice is begun. The demands and dictates of the individual may even be imposed on others in a cruel and oppressive fashion to arrive at a level of vengeful satisfaction. (Iaccino, 1994, 9)

This archetype is not as chaotic as its counterpart, but it is just as destructive. The difference lies in the motivation for destruction. The Avenging God Stereotype finds its motivation for action in punishment or a sense of vengeance. This archetype is emblematic of the representations of Batman within *The Dark Knight*. Thus within the Shadow Archetype, there are two equally powerful sides; one that uses destruction for chaotic purposes, another that uses destruction for
justice. Narratively, these shadow archetypes are pitted against each other, causing the plot’s conflict.

In the end, both elements of the shadow play important roles within Jungian psychotherapy. As Jung says of his therapy technique:

The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one’s own shadow. The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well. But one must learn to know oneself in order to know who one is. For what comes after the door is, surprisingly enough, a boundless expanse full of unprecedented uncertainty…” (Jung, 21)

Thus Jung suggests that the end goal of therapy should be to introduce the persona to the shadow, thereby creating a unified sense of self. The idea of unity is crucial to the construction of a collective national identity. Because the collective unconscious is one of the means by which nations establish the characteristics of their imagined communities, Jung’s conception of the shadow is extremely important to understandings of national collective unconscious. The shadow archetype, with its importance in the project of self-recognition and unification, puts the subject into connection with a greater universal experience. Within national popular film, then, the archetype of the shadow allows the audience to become a part of their imagined community. Thus, the Jungian shadow and Lowenstein’s “allegorical moment” are fairly similar. The recognition of the “allegorical moment” acts in a similar manner to the recognition of the shadow. In the allegorical moment, the audience sees all that it fears, such as national trauma and the experience of victimization. Like the shadow, the allegorical moment relates to a greater experience than just the personal. Each audience member looking at a representation of the allegorical moment becomes part of a national process, as national fears and desires are projected
within the film. Within *The Dark Knight*, the shadow, which is represented by the imagery of the shattering glass along with the two protagonists, is a reminder of the national trauma of the attacks of September 11th. Thus the imagery of the shadow within the film allows the audience to come in contact with the American allegorical moment along with the national collective unconscious.

Representations of the shadow always also include representations of the persona. Thus within *The Dark Knight*, the imagery of the mask is a prominent visual motif. The shadow is generally that which people keep hidden (or masked) from themselves, as well as from society. Jung says:

> Whoever goes to himself risks a confrontation with himself. The mirror does not flatter; it faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely, the face we never show to the world because we cover it with the *persona*, the mask of the actor. But the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face. (20)

Thus it is this persona, or mask, that stands in the way of the self and the shadow. But within *The Dark Knight*, the mask and the persona function on a slightly different level.

### The Persona and the Mask

The persona is the most readily visible of Jung’s archetypes, for it is the one that is projected to others around the self. It can be explained as the result of the “process of civilizing the human being leads to a compromise between him and society as to what he should appear to be, and to the formation of the mask behind which most people live. Jung calls this mask the *persona…*” (Fordham, 47). Thus the mask is seen as that which protects the self from revealing its dark, hidden, truth. Jungian psychology assumes that “[M]any people tend to cover up their shadow with the persona, but if they look under the social guise, they will find a brutal primitive
waiting to be unleashed upon the world” (Iaccino, 1994, xiv). Indeed, this approach to the mask and the shadow follows established scholarship on superheroes. In Jungian terms, superheroes are seen as:

> Outwardly, the superhero appears to be a normal, everyday individual who wears a “mask” that does not differentiate him from others in the crowd. But underneath this commonplace persona lies a shadow side that possesses all of the hero’s superpowers and abilities. Usually, the superhero has to keep these strengths hidden from others in order to be an effective crime fighter. There is a price to pay for this anonymity, however. The superhero continually vacillates between the human persona and the shadow side, never living a full existence in either one. The end result is a fragmented person who feels ambivalent about his (or her) superpowers since they prevent the complete expression of the more human identity. (48)

This is the commonly held understanding of the interplay between the persona and the mask within the Superhero genre. The emphasis is placed on the persona as a means of protection. Through the cultivation of a strong persona, the superhero, as a representation of the dual archetypes of the shadow and the persona, is often thought of as conflicted by the interaction of these opposing forces within his character.

While this look at the superhero is valid, this relationship is not necessarily the case within the Christopher Nolan Batman films. The mask that Batman wears does not conceal anything. Rather the mask reveals his shadow for the world to see. Modern cinematic revisions of the Batman mythos suggest that the identity of Batman is the dissociative product of young Bruce Wayne’s traumatic experience of the murder of his parents. This approach to Batman has a long precedent within the comic book representations of Batman. But specifically within *The
Dark Knight, the introduction to the imagery of the mask places an emphasis on its role in identity formation for both the protagonist and the villain. When the imagery of the mask is first introduced, it is not used to conceal identity. Rather the mask worn by the Joker during the bank heist identifies him as a villain. Likewise, Batman’s mask does not hide Bruce Wayne’s identity. For there is no such thing as Bruce Wayne; he is just an act performed by Batman to elude Gotham City’s attempts to control his actions. This is why, later in the film, Rachel Dawes accuses Bruce of never being able to let go of the Batman identity.

A key element to the film’s portrayal of the Batman/Bruce Wayne identity conflict is the emphasis placed on Jungian Psychology. Because this conflict hinges on the motif of the mask, the paradigm of Mask vs. Persona within Jungian psychology is visually investigated within the representations of the superhero and super villain and their masks within The Dark Knight. This relationship is established early within the Christopher Nolan Batman Series and is therefore applicable to both the character of Batman and the Joker.

Christopher Nolan’s Batman Series and Jungian Psychology

Batman Begins and The Dark Knight make a conscientious effort to address the issues of Jungian psychology inherent in the overall Batman mythology. Because both films are the products of extensive collaboration amongst many different creative parties, it would be impossible to attribute a single auteur. However, the differences of modern incarnations of the Batman story from previous film adaptations of the comic book legend require that the films be identified as their own group. To distinguish these two films from their predecessors, I will refer to these films as the “Christopher Nolan Batman Series.”

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Christopher Nolan Batman Series is its reflexivity, a result of the influence of Frank Miller’s 1986 graphic novel The Dark Knight
Returns. One of the ways that Nolan’s series builds on the developments in the comic book world is to self-reflexively incorporate the alternative takes on the Batman mythos by placing emphasis on the Jungian implications of the hero’s story. Graphic novels such as *Arkham Asylum: a Serious House on Serious Earth* by Grant Morrison even make specific allusions to Jung and his work. Following this vein, the Jungian influence on these Batman films is most explicitly emphasized in a later scene in *Batman Begins*. During this scene, Dr. Crane (whose evil alter ego is the Scarecrow), tells Rachel Dawes his reasons for the apparent psychosis of his patient, gangster Carmine Falcone. Dawes, an assistant D.A. and also Bruce Wayne’s love interest, asks why Falcone is afraid of a Scarecrow and Crane replies, “Patients suffering delusional episodes often focus their paranoia on an external tormentor usually one conforming to Jungian archetypes.” It is in this exchange that the film establishes the self-reflexive importance of Jungian archetypes to the character development.

But there is more to this scene than simply establishing that the villains in the series, like the Scarecrow, are Jungian archetypes. Logic would argue that Batman is also implicated as suffering from Jungian delusions. This is because Falcone is not suffering from a psychological problem. He is actually suffering from the effects of a powerful hallucinogen that the Scarecrow administered. Earlier in the film, it is established that this hallucinogen is derived from a flower that was used to impair Bruce Wayne’s judgment during his training to become a vigilante fighter. The film stylistically draws parallels between Wayne’s training with this flower and the scenes in which the Scarecrow doses people with it in its chemical form. In both scenes, the mise-en-scene appears to shake. The similarity to the two men’s experience suggests that the protagonist of the film suffers from a “delusional episode” during his training that is similar to that which Falcone experiences at the end of *Batman Begins*. 
If the audience is to understand Falcone’s bizarre behavior as drug-induced psychosis, then it would seem that the protagonist of the film himself suffers from the same effects. This would then mean that the entire Batman persona, which Wayne creates after being exposed to this drug, is the product of a chemically induced psychotic episode. Thus the film establishes the validity of looking at the Batman persona as a Jungian Archetype. And if, as the Joker suggests within the *The Dark Knight*, Batman and the Joker are really two halves of one whole, then it would stand to reason that a Jungian reading of the Joker would prove helpful to this analysis.

**Batman and Joker as Jungian Archetypes**

Batman is visually coded as the shadow archetype in his consistent portrayal as lurking in the shadows. A great example is in the scene where Barbara Gordon is notified by the police that her husband has been “shot.” Distraught, Barbara yells out in anger at Batman for giving the Joker a reason to attack Gotham. Behind her, her son looks to a shadowy corner of his front porch to see Batman sitting in the dark mourning. This is a common position for him, as Batman often performs bereavement throughout the film.

These reoccurring scenes of mourning help to establish that within the diegesis of *The Dark Knight*, Batman represents the “avenging god archetype.” As such he is the representation of the type of shadow that inspires a person to do unthinkable good. Batman is not motivated by unthinkable evil, but rather by the unbelievable sorrow and the anger of a survivor of trauma. The darkness and evil of his personality stem from a wound that he feels he can only heal through vigilante action. Meanwhile, there is no such noble motivation for the Joker. When Harvey Dent is in the hospital after his hostage situation, the Joker tells Harvey who he really is:

> You know what I am? I’m just a dog chasing cars. I wouldn’t know what to do with one if I caught it! You know, I just *do* things. The mob has plans. The cops have plans.
Gordon’s got plans. Ya know, they’re schemers, schemers trying to control their little worlds. I’m not a schemer. I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are…

With this speech, the Joker identifies himself as the “irrational shadow archetype.” The Joker has no motivations or logic. He is an irrational destructive force that has no beginning or end.

Batman and the Joker, in a Jungian sense, truly do complete each other as the Joker sneers towards the end of the film. They are both equal halves of the shadow, each showing the opposite extremes through which a traumatized individual can come to terms with their experience. Interestingly enough, the only means of dealing with trauma the film allows is either motivated or unmotivated destruction. Peter Coogan elaborates on how this relationship operates within the 1988 graphic novel, The Killing Joke:

*The Killing Joke* argues that villainy and heroism proceed out of the same confrontation with absurdity. The apparent meaninglessness of the world is summed up in the killing of loved ones. Batman was able to deal with these events better than the Joker was, but both have their origins in a single bad day and the way they dealt with its consequences.

(106)

It is one traumatic experience that makes these characters choose between fighting or perpetrating crime. Interestingly enough, Coogan’s analysis posits Batman’s response to his traumatic experience as healthy. In a Jungian analysis, the dominance of the shadow identity of Batman is just as insane a reaction as that of the irrational shadow archetype demonstrated by the Joker. This is because Bruce Wayne’s survivor guilt towards watching the brutal murder of his parents (and not being able to do anything about it) is never resolved. Instead it is morphed into the identity of Batman, the avenging god that will destroy all the evil in Gotham in order to find
Mason, 46

a sense of peace in what has happened to him. At the heart of the Jungian representations of
Batman and the Joker, there is the question of what happens to an individual’s psyche when
confronted with incomprehensible trauma. Ultimately, the fact that representations of Jungian
Archetypes result from trauma within *The Dark Knight* seems to suggest that the only reasonable
response to trauma is to become as destructive.

As a reflection of cultural concerns and psychosis, the popularity of *The Dark Knight*
then suggests that Americans value violence and retribution as responses to attack or harm. In
the modern context of the production and release of *The Dark Knight*, America was in the
process of a presidential election that included, as a major issue, a reassessment of the military
operations started in the Middle East. The Global War on Terror, in particular Operations
Enduring and Iraqi Freedom, was officially motivated by the 9/11 attacks on America. This is
the shadow that the film’s representations of Jungian Archetypes reveal. It is not only the pain
and hurt caused to the American psyche by the attacks of September 11th, but also the violent
retributions at any perceived threat or culpability. Just like the protagonists of *The Dark Knight*,
American foreign policy attempts to hide the horrific aspects of the American experience of
trauma. Thus, America is identified not as a victim of terrorism, but rather as a world-wide
vigilante. But just as within the Jungian representations of *The Dark Knight*, the mask does very
little to hide the shadow. That is not to say that *The Dark Knight* is a film that supports
American military retribution for terrorist actions or a film that was made with American foreign
policy in mind. But as a barometer of the psychological disposition of America during the 2008
Summer Blockbuster Season, the nation’s avid consumption of *The Dark Knight* suggests a
national desire to see narratives that value and desire destructive responses to trauma. And
enjoyment of these violent representations indoctrinates the audience into the American post 9/11 national identity.

The Mask and the Shadow in *The Dark Knight*

The destructive capabilities of the Joker’s Irrational Shadow Archetype are made evident to the audience within the earliest moments of the film. What the audience does not see is his face. Instead, the first time the audience sees the Joker’s face is at the end of the bank heist. He is asked by the bank’s manager what he believes in, to which he replies, “I believe that whatever doesn’t kill you, makes you…stranger!” The film’s audio track cues the audience to the significance of this moment with a swell in the tense music. It is significant that when the Joker shows his real face, it is no different from the mask that he was using to conceal it. In fact, it is in many ways worse. The peeling and erratically applied makeup only barely hide the scars underneath. On a deeper level, that strangeness of the Joker’s scars cannot be concealed. Rather it takes over all aspects of his persona, making it impossible to hide the “strangeness.” The Joker’s mask, which is almost identical to his face, does not hide his shadow; rather it presents it for the world to see. The masks that the Joker chose for himself and his henchmen during the heist are strange, just like the face of the man behind it all. But all of the masks connote the shadow and the shadow only.

The film’s treatment of Batman/Bruce Wayne exemplifies this conception of the mask as revealing the shadow. Indeed, it is Bruce Wayne’s handsome complexion which most effectively functions as the persona’s mask. For when Batman dons his Bat-mask, he visually reveals his shadow for the world to see. His black mask is a physical manifestation of all the anger, sorrow, and violent impulses that drive him towards vigilantism. Visually, the film affirms this in the scene immediately following Rachel’s death. Distraught, Bruce sits, in his
costume sans mask, staring out at Gotham City. As Alfred attempts to reassure him that all his efforts are not in vain, he picks up the mask and places it on Wayne’s lap. Bruce looks at the mask as he expresses his sense of guilt and responsibility for the Joker’s disfigurement of Harvey Dent. The visual image of Wayne looking at his mask as he vocalizes his guilt evokes the Jungian conception of therapy through the realization of the shadow. In the scene, Bruce Wayne is literally confronting his shadow in the physical manifestation of the mask.

Thus, *The Dark Knight* is thematically concerned with the concept of the mask as a sign of the shadow, not as a means to conceal the shadow. To this point, the plot hinges on the Joker’s promise to kill at least one person every day until Batman reveals his true identity. With this plot device, it seems that the film challenges Wayne’s practice of hiding his “true self” behind his mask. Yet within the world of *The Dark Knight*, the mask does not hide anything. So when there is an opportunity in the plot for Batman’s identity to be revealed, the Joker changes his mind. While this plot twist is emblematic of the Joker’s construction as the quintessential irrational shadow archetype; it also reveals the film’s treatment of Batman’s mask. On the phone with the city’s news channel he says, “I had a vision of a world without Batman…and it was so boring. I’ve had a change of heart. I don’t want Mr. Reese spoiling everything…” This speech reveals that the Joker never really cared to know who Batman is under his mask. The Joker already knows who Batman truly is because he has seen the representation of his shadow.

The threat meant to reveal Batman’s identity was just an excuse for destruction. The film proves this when, in the Gotham Police Station, Batman asks the Joker why he wants to kill him. The Joker replies, “I don’t want to *kill* you! What would I do without you?!….No, no. You. Complete. Me.” With this statement he establishes their shared relationship as the two different sides of the shadow. As such, the Joker doesn’t need to know a thing about who Batman is
during the daytime. He already knows who Batman truly is. The mask that Batman wears does not hide his identity; instead it reveals who Bruce Wayne really is: an angry and violent vigilante. This is why when Rachel writes her letter to Bruce about her decision to marry Harvey she says, “When I told you if Gotham no longer needed Batman, we could be together, I meant it. But now I’m sure that the day won’t come when you no longer need Batman.” Batman is more than just a suit that Bruce Wayne puts on for his night job; it is a manifestation of the true depths of his soul.

But in the world of The Dark Knight, the mask signifies more than just the psychology of the main characters. Its visual connection with the imagery of the shattering glass in the opening of the film establishes it as significant to the film’s representation of the American shadow. If the shattering glass within the film serves to signify both the allegorical moment and the American national shadow, then the mask also functions on this same level. Within the film there is a visual and narrative investigation into the means by which identity is constructed within modern American society. America wears the “mask” of the nation that will stop the threat of international fundamentalist terrorism. Yet at the same time, this mask reveals the profound wound the trauma of September 11th has inflicted on the national psyche and construction of national identity.

Conclusion

The repetition of the imagery of the shattering glass and the Jungian archetype of the mask establishes the American preoccupation with its shadow within its national collective unconscious. The shadow that is being represented by this imagery is that of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, specifically those that occurred at the World Trade Centers. This is important because the film, like any other cultural product, has an ideological function. In the case of The
"Dark Knight," the repetition of imagery associated with the traumatic events serves to construct a sense of a national memory of the tragedies. That is not to say that the filmmakers set out to create a fictional film that would have an effect on how its audience viewed historical events. Rather, the imagery that they chose to utilize to portray the Joker’s terroristic actions was very much influenced by previous representations of terrorism as a result of 9/11. Indeed, the imagery of this film will itself influence future representations of terrorism and the national trauma at the heart of the American collective unconscious’s shadow.
CHAPTER II: “A KINDER, GENTLER, MACHINE GUN HAND”

IRON MAN, POST-TRAUAMA ARMAMENT OF THE MALE BODY, AND THE FIGHT AGAINST EXPLOITATIVE AMERICAN CAPITALISM

While The Dark Knight (Nolan, 2008) is the continuation of the origin story established in Batman Begins (Nolan, 2005), Iron Man (Favreau, 2008) is focused on constructing an origin for a superhero. In this origin story, the trauma that motivates Tony Stark to become a hero is caused by his loss of control over his body. Wounded by a weapon of his own making, Tony Stark is traumatized by the victimization of his body, in particular the near fatal wounding of his heart. Stark’s response to this trauma is to build a stronger mechanical body as a protective case for his vulnerable body. Ultimately, this body performs two functions: that of a terrorist-fighting machine and protection against any further attack or injury. Yet the allegorical moment imagery of shattering glass within the film always occurs at moments in which, despite his attempts to protect himself, Tony Stark is vulnerable. Like The Dark Knight (Nolan, 2008), Iron Man maintains the American ideology of violent retribution and defense against any perceived threat. This film suggests that despite all attempts at protection, the body will always remain vulnerable unless there is a massive assault on the system that originally wounded it. The ultimate struggle within Iron Man is a battle of the capitalists as Stark fights his father-figure mentor and business partner Obadiah Stane for control over the Iron Man technology. By defeating Stane and his exploitative brand of capitalism, Iron Man suggests that America, like Stark, has the means to protect itself from both internal and external attack through militarization and armament.

A Brief Synopsis of the Film

Tony Stark is a billionaire genius playboy who owns one of America’s most successful weapons manufacturing companies. He inherited the company from his parents when they died in a tragic car wreck when he was in his teens. Stark uses his genius intellect to develop and sell
the most technologically advanced weapons in the world. Mentored and monitored by his father’s friend, Obadiah Stane, Stark is free to live a life barely touched by responsibility to either his business or the effects his work has on the rest of the world. Instead, he is isolated from repercussions by Pepper Pots, his personal assistant who takes care of his every need with technological efficiency, even buying herself her own birthday gift, and his best friend Colonel James Rhodes, who will begin his career as War Machine, Iron Man’s fighting partner in the *Iron Man 2* premiering in 2010. This isolation all changes when, while on a business trip with Col. Rhodes demonstrating a new weapon to the U.S. Army stationed in Afghanistan, Stark is wounded by his own weapon. When his army convoy is attacked by rebel fighters, the wounded Stark is captured by the terrorists.

Upon awakening after the attack, Stark finds a giant electromagnet in the middle of his chest. Yinsen, an Eastern European genius, is also a captive of the terrorists and in order to save Stark’s life, he has implanted the device. The two men are told to build Stark’s latest weapon for the terrorists, but instead the two work on building a suit of armor so strong and powerful that they will be able to escape their prison. This suit will use the electromagnet within Stark’s chest as an energy source. In the end, they win their escape, but Yinsen dies in the process and the suit is eventually destroyed in the struggle.

Stark returns to America obsessed with rebuilding a new and improved suit in order to hunt down and kill the men who captured him and killed Yinsen. Once the new suit is made, he begins to attack the terrorists. Eventually the terrorists find his original plans for the suit in the debris from Stark’s escape. As they plan to build their own suit, Obadiah Stane comes to their headquarters and reprimands their leader for not killing Stark, as he had ordered. He then steals their plans and has them all killed. As Stane begins to build a new suit, Tony becomes aware of
the threat his father figure presents. Ultimately, this results in an epic confrontation in which the two men fight for control of Stark Industries and the Iron Man suit.

Shattering Glass and the Hero

Unlike The Dark Knight, Iron Man does not draw attention to the persistent reoccurrence of the visuals of the allegorical moment. Instead, the allegorical moment often seems to be within the background of more important narrative developments. While this factor does lessen the cinematic emphasis of the imagery of the shattering glass within the mise-en-scene of the film, I do not think it lessens its impact. Instead, the focus on the narrative developments within Iron Man’s presentation of the shattering glass seems to have a rather insidious effect on the film’s place within the political climate of its release. Introducing the allegorical moment before the audience can understand its narrative implications for the rest of the film subverts its cultural potency. This does not mean that the moment does not work to illuminate past trauma in the present moment. Instead, the emphasis on the narrative rather than the breaking glass strengthens the cultural commentary within the film.

The film ends in a fight between Stark and Stane, with Stark attempting to outwit Stane and believing he has won. As Stark begins to triumphantly peel off his body suit, Stane starts to fight again. With only a portion of his suit on, Stark appears to face certain death; however Pepper Pots blows up the building, killing Stane, while Stark manages to hide from the explosion. Ultimately, the imagery is characterized less by the allegorical moment imagery of the shattering glass than by the dramatic tension of the scene. This is particularly true in the moment in the fight when Stark is facing certain death. Dangling from a beam in the skylight just above a hysterical Pepper Potts, Stark watches helplessly as Stane shoots at him. While
glass is being shattered during this scene, it does not have the same emphasis as is afforded within the mise-en-scene of *The Dark Knight*. Because Stark had earlier pulled out Stane’s targeting device, every bullet misses Stark and instead causes the surrounding glass to shatter. Ultimately the scene is a frenzy of shattering glass and Pepper’s screaming. Just as in *The Dark Knight*, the downward motion of the falling glass is similar to the falling debris from the exploding and collapsing towers of the World Trade Center. Yet the drama increases as the scene’s audio track captures bullets being fired, shattering glass, and Pepper’s screaming.

Instead of drawing attention to the visual presence of shattering glass, the scene makes a narrative focus on Stark’s vulnerability and the eventual defeat of his enemy, rather than the imagery surrounding these actions. Due to the allegorical function of the film’s protagonist and antagonist, this focus on the characters and their conflict makes a compelling cultural critique. Within *The Dark Knight*, the film’s emphasis on the allegorical moment constructs a viewing experience which plays on memories of national trauma to build dramatic tension. Within *Iron Man*, the memory of national trauma is underscored by a narrative devoted to the struggle between two personifications of capitalist philosophy. The result is a film that conflates a narrative explicitly wrestling with the complexities of the American economic situation and a mise-en-scene that evokes national horrors. *Iron Man*’s narrative and visuals suggest that America must control its impulses towards economic excesses to avoid impending destruction. Of course, this reading is dependent upon an analysis of the struggle between the antagonist and protagonist.

Stane vs. Stark
In the final moments of *Iron Man*, Tony Stark battles his nemesis, Obadiah Stane. Narratively portrayed as a struggle to determine superiority in mechanized weapon suits, the fight also has a philosophical place in the film as a battle of the Titans. As Mark Bernard pointed out in his presentation on the film, *The Golden Avenger and the Dark Knight: Superheroes and National Security Cinema*¹, each man, within a cultural reading of the text, symbolizes an alternative construction of capitalism, fiscal responsibility, and rampant exploitation. So while it is a fight to the death for control over the Iron Man suit and Stark Industries, ultimately the fight is over the methods and means of capitalism.

The difference in approaches to capitalism between Tony Stark and Obadiah Stane is physically depicted by the suits they wear. On a basic level, the two men are characterized by the colors of their suits. Iron Man’s suit is “Fire Engine Red” with Gold highlights, colors that speak volumes to the source of Stark’s power, his heart. Imbued with a technological heart that is more powerful than his biological one, Iron Man’s power comes not only from this energy source, but also from his honest desire to better the world in which he lives. This altruistic motivation is signified by his suit’s colors that carry connotations associated with the heart. Both the heart and the blood that it pumps are red, and red is culturally considered to be a powerful and forceful color, often associated with violence. Perhaps this connotation of the color red is also suggestive of the common belief that the human heart is the strongest muscle in the human body. Furthermore, the color red often represents passion and desire, both emotional qualities frequently attributed to the heart. Even the name of the color that Stark chooses for his suit is significant. Fire Engine Red is a color that is associated with the heroics of firemen as well as the childhood toy fire trucks. Thus the name of the color is suggestive of Stark’s emotional

¹ Popular Culture Colloquium November 19th 2009
immaturity which causes him to often act like a child. In combining the imagery or the fire truck with his means of heroics, there seems to be the suggestion that Stark’s decision to become a hero is caused by a childlike optimistic belief that he can change the world for the better.

Meanwhile, the color gold is often culturally associated with the idea of the “heart of gold.” A vernacular saying used to describe someone who is sincerely a good and loving person, the “heart of gold” could easily be used to describe Tony Stark’s character. Even in his callous early stages within the film’s opening, Stark seems to have an innate characteristic of compassion and goodwill for his fellow man. This is best depicted in the scene where he gets to know the soldiers who are transporting him from the demonstration site in Afghanistan. As the first scene in the film, the opening exchange between Stark and his military convoy is a wonderful introduction to not only Stark’s character but also the public perception of him. In a couple of establishing shots, the soldiers of the convoy are seen staring in disbelief at the nonchalant Stark, calmly drinking as he is transported through enemy territory. Stark, uncomfortable with the silence and staring, enters a bantering dialogue which sets the nervous and star-struck soldiers at ease. Then the whole group quickly begins a jovial and bantering conversation. He is so informal and friendly with these soldiers that he reveals secrets about his sex life and even criticizes one of the men for raising his hand to formally ask him a question. Within popular American politics and recent history, the treatment of soldiers has a particular significance. Countless bumper stickers and similar public displays of political opinions profess support for the men and women who fight our country’s wars regardless of whether people politically support those wars. Stark, a weapons manufacturer, profits off of any military involvement and therefore would be expected to view soldiers as means to an end. His ability to bond with the men and women whose life work has made him so wealthy demonstrates his
genuine care for the people he interacts with. Throughout the film, Stark is motivated by this caring instinct and his golden heart to protect the world from Stane’s brand of destructive capitalism.

The negative elements of the coloring of Stane’s suit are quite obvious. Composed of what appears to be Titanium, Stane’s suit seems to be a more mechanized version of Stark’s original model. The color also fits Stane’s approach to capitalism. Cold and austere, there is no semblance of the compassion or love that characterizes Stark’s suit. And just as in the case with Iron Man’s suit, Stane’s suit shows his motivations on an explicitly visual level. The coloring of the suit is similar to the weapons that Stark Industries produces. Even more so, the steel color suggests a long history of capitalist development and exploitation: the inhumane working conditions in the building of the transcontinental United States railroad, the production and working conditions in our nation’s early steel mills, and even early construction practices in the post Industrial Revolution. Ultimately, this Titanium suit characterizes Stane as an amoral, villainous, weapon designed for profit and destruction.

The film’s portrayal of the two men builds on the tropes of ancient texts depicting the battle between brute force and intuitive response such as Odysseus and the Cyclops or David and Goliath. Stane, the antagonist, is characterized by a large mechanized body. At least twice the size of Stark’s already-enlarged form, Stane appears to have the advantage within the fight. Indeed, before the two end up at the Stark Industries factory, Stane appears to have the upper hand in the fight. A lot can be understood from the fact that Stane ordered his suit to be made in such a grandiose manner. Just like Stark’s Iron Man suit, Stane’s suit is developed from Stark’s original design made during his captivity in Afghanistan. Yet, while Stark returned home to build a moderately sized suit, Stane adapted the plans to create a suit that is substantially bigger and
stronger than the original design. Or, as Stane says at an early point during the fight scene, “Impressive! You’ve updated your suit. I’ve made some updates to mine.” This physical characteristic of Stane’s suit is in keeping with the construction of Obadiah as an example of exploitative capitalism. The magnitude and power of Stane’s suit is contrasted with that of the Iron Man suit. Stane’s suit is characterized by hard, robotic edges as opposed to the curved and smooth surface of Stark’s suit. This is indicative of the characterization of Stark’s business approach as a more caring and less exploitative practice of capitalism, and the physical design of his suit, especially in contrast to Stane’s, corroborate this analysis. Although significantly smaller, every physical aspect of the Iron Man suit gives off an appearance of agility. The contours of the metal plates have the appearance of mechanized muscles, suggesting greater flexibility and mobility. Ultimately, the key to Iron Man is the physicality of Stark’s body. In Stane’s suit, the power source is a part of the suit; the Iron Man suit integrates Stark’s body, which serves as its power source. This makes Stark and the suit appear to be one. This union of Stark to his suit is found in the dialogue in one of the trailers for the *Iron Man 2* (May 2010). In response in a Senator’s demand that Stark turn over the suit to the American government Stark replies, “I am Iron Man…the suit and I are one.” This means that Stark’s power is not in the sheer control over the technology that he is surrounding himself with, as is the case with Stane. Rather, Stark’s superiority comes in his ability to literally become the weapon. The film implies that the process of becoming the technological tool for destruction assures that the embodied weapon will be able to prevent the abuse of power characteristic of the disembodied capitalistic expansionism.

Thus, *Iron Man* presents a hero who connects his heart and body to the means of destruction and *becomes* the ultimate power. When the allegorical moment within the film
occurs, Stark is in a state of limbo, neither fully dressed in his Iron Man suit nor fully undressed. By this, the film suggests that the reason he prevails is his ability to unify the technology with his body. Therefore, it would be useful to discuss the male body and the technology influenced body or cyborg, and how they operate within the narrative of *Iron Man*.

The Origin Trauma and the Male Body Made Vulnerable

*Iron Man* is the story of the ideal man made vulnerable, and then compensating for this experience with technology. It is important to understand the way in which the film approaches the male body and vulnerability. Culturally, the ideal male body is represented as invulnerable. The differences between the representations of men’s and women’s bodies in American media can be summarized as “…the woman’s body is open, violable and often violated whereas men’s bodies are closed and private spaces, hardly ever, if ever, invaded” (Huntley, 353). Indeed the characterization of Stark before the attack and kidnapping in Afghanistan follows this analysis. Stark’s body, clothed and protected by body guards, is portrayed as invulnerable. This invulnerability is portrayed in his performance while demonstrating the weapon he is selling to the United States Army in Afghanistan. While all the onlookers duck and cover from the explosion, Stark blithely walks around them, confident that he will not be harmed by the explosion. Indeed, even Huntley’s analysis about the female body in popular media is upheld in the scenes detailing Stark’s life before his kidnapping. When confronted by a reporter who is attempting to probe into his private life and thoughts, Stark manages to seduce her. So while the earlier scenes within the narrative progression of the film portray Stark as the ideal and invulnerable male, his body is later invaded by shrapnel from his very own weapon. This moment moves the film’s protagonist from the status of the ideal man to that of the vulnerable man.
Ultimately the difference between the vulnerable and the ideal man comes down to a difference in the power invested in the body. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault says: “In short this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege’, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated” (27). Foucault does not believe that it is possible for the body to possess power. Yet ideologically speaking, people attempt to gain access to the power that is enacted upon their bodies. Within *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, Foucault suggests that often the struggle for bodily power is within the sphere of sexuality. Thus speaking of sexuality and power, Foucault says:

But there may be another reason that makes it so gratifying for us to define the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression: something that one might call the speaker’s benefit. If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power, he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. This explains the solemnity with which one speaks of sex nowadays. (6)

Foucault suggests that the mere act of speaking about sex can give the speaker a sense of power, which he identifies as “the speaker’s benefit.” There is a sense of control and power in being able to discuss that which has been prohibited. Ultimately, Foucault suggests that even the act of speaking is a means by which dominant power can control and police the body. Later in *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, Foucault says:
But more important was the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail.

(18)
The focus of Foucault’s work within *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* is on the way in which discourses of sexuality enact power upon the body is the. For Foucault, the body cannot have power, especially not in the act of speaking about sex. This is because discourses of power ultimately control that form of expression. Rather, power is enacted upon the body through the means of discourses about sexuality.

Foucault’s focus is on the myriad forms of discourse and their effects on society. And while he admits that it is possible for people to feel as if they do have power when talking about and confessing their sexual practices and history, he quickly moves away from this fact in order to discuss the ways in which discourse influences society and culture. It is this experience of faulty power that seems to be most at stake within the treatment of the vulnerable and the ideal body within *Iron Man*. Following Foucault’s assumptions, there is no such thing as the ideal body, for every single body within the world is vulnerable to the power systems being enacted upon it. The idea that a person’s body could have its own power outside of these systems is a fallacy. Yet within *Iron Man*, there is an attempt to represent this unachievable goal. So while Tony Stark’s body is repeatedly disempowered, Iron Man’s body is increasingly attempting to regain that power and protection against vulnerability.

Jørgen Lorentzen goes into detail about this rejection of the vulnerable within the male body in his essay, “Masculinity and the Phenomenology of the Male Orgasm.” In his analysis of
sexuality and the male body, Lorentzen suggests that culturally, patriarchal societies have a tendency to conflate the biological experience of ejaculation with the emotional and bodily experience of orgasm. This tendency, he argues, results in a minimization in the importance in the male orgasm as it is often assumed to have been achieved once an ejaculation occurs. Ultimately, Lorentzen argues that this cultural assumption works to harm the male body and its experience of sexuality as it constructs a skin that is impervious to the vulnerability of pleasure. Towards these ends he notes that:

The combination of a hard body and the lack of a vocabulary for male sensitivity inevitably results in a dry and unresponsive skin impervious to caresses. Men are developing a parchment-like sensibility, impervious to touch, as opposed to a porous sensibility in which the skin allows for openings and intimacy. (73)

Lorentzen’s analysis is particularly useful for contextualizing the ways in which, culturally, men are constructed as emotionally unresponsive and invulnerable. The rejection of vulnerability is so pervasive that it even occurs on the level of male sexuality.

Indeed, this form of vulnerability that Lorentzen is investigating is the direct antithesis of that which is experienced within trauma. For example, Lorentzen describes the orgasm by saying, “The feelings that flow through the body cannot be articulated. The pleasure of orgasm is without language and therefore indescribable” (Lorentzen, 9). In both the orgasm and the traumatic event, there is a loss of language. Language cannot be used to explain, and therefore master, the event of trauma or orgasm. The loss of language suggests a loss of the rationality that is characteristic of the patriarchal conception of masculinity. While Lorentzen’s analysis of the patriarchal view of orgasms allows a dialogue about the experience of vulnerability in the male body in a way that is similar to the experience of trauma, it is important to note that it is not the same. The vulnerability of the experience of trauma is potentially more dangerous to masculinity in that it is dependent upon a considerable loss of control. The experience of trauma
is characterized by a loss of control (over the body and/or self) that is so horrific, it causes an emotional break. It is this element of loss of control that constructs the vulnerability associated with trauma as “non-ideal.”

Yet our heroes cannot be constructed as “non-ideal.” Narratively, a hero story demands that eventually the hero is ideal and will prevail against internal and external enemies. Thus, in order for Iron Man to defeat Obadiah Stane, Tony Stark must overcome his personal experience of weakness and vulnerability. The result is a narrative that works to compensate for Stark’s experience of trauma in the injury of his body by a weapon manufactured by his own company. In *Iron Man*, the means for establishing Tony Stark’s heroism is the mechanization of the body.

**Defense of the Body/Cyboring the Body**

Tony Stark’s adoption of the Iron Man technology is the narrative’s attempt to account for Stark’s vulnerability. Repeatedly, the technology is used to compensate for the vulnerable situations to which Stark’s body is exposed. In fact the invention of the technology is meant to save Stark’s life after his fatal wounding with shrapnel. While he will always have the pieces of the Stark Industries weapon inside him, he will not be further harmed by them thanks to the technology implanted inside his body. From this moment on the character of Tony Stark is divided between his body and the machinery that protects it. This narrative development is reminiscent of the development in representations of the male body throughout the Reagan era identified by Susan Jeffords in *Hard Bodies* when she says:

> Where the *Rambo* films use violent spectacle to distract audiences from the potentially ambivalent parts of Rambo’s character-combining, for example, his invulnerable body with his tearful confessions of loneliness in *First Blood, Batman* exteriorizes that
ambivalence by dividing the body and the emotions, depicting that body as something to be put on and off at will. (97)

In *Iron Man*, too, there is a rejection of the vulnerable in the ability of the main character to deny the body. From the moment he is implanted with the electronic device, Stark undergoes a process in which the division between his body and machinery gets smaller and smaller.

This narrative progression is in keeping with what Donna Haraway defines as the cyborg in her influential essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto.” Of the cyborg she says,

> Contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs-creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted….And modern war is a cyborg orgy, coded by C3I, command-control-communication-intelligence, an $84 billion item in 1984’s defense budget. (315)

The fact that Haraway’s introduction of the cyborg quickly moves into modern means of warfare is particularly significant for the combination of the human and the machine within *Iron Man*. It is not just that the human body and technology are being combined. The cyborg is ultimately a potential weapon that is utilized to replace the bodies of soldiers with machines controlled by them from a distance. Thus “The Cyborg Manifesto” not only illuminates traditional representations of the human combined with the mechanic, it also speaks to the assumed destructive potential of such a union. As a cyborg, Stark was not necessarily meant to be a weapon. The technology that he is given by Yinsen is meant purely to save his life. Ordered to build a weapon for the terrorists, Stark uses his new “heart” as a power source for the ultimate defensive weapon, the Iron Man suit. Once he returns to America, he updates the suit by linking
it to his home super-computer and the machinery implanted within his body. In the end, he becomes completely synthesized with machinery which eventually makes him a weapon.

Stark’s Body and the American Experience

Despite all the effort Stark undertakes throughout the film to protect his vulnerable body, he is consistently made vulnerable. The culmination is the end fight scene where he dangles helplessly from the skylight as glass shatters around him. Easily identified by the visual motif of shattering glass as the allegorical moment, this scene has significance within American culture and the politics of the summer of 2008. The scene seems to suggest, narratively and visually, that America will never be truly invulnerable and safe until the threat of exploitative capitalism has been vanquished.

The success of *Iron Man* during the summer of 2008 can be summarized by Freud’s analysis of what makes Oedipus a hero in *Interpretation of Dreams* “His fate moves us only because it might have been our own…” (Freud, 308) In the end, the compelling aspect of the origin trauma within *Iron Man* is that it is a story, much like Oedipus Rex, of the fall of a powerful man. Stark’s origin trauma is being wounded by his own weapon. In that moment he becomes a victim of a system that had up to that point made him strong. What is even worse, the film seems to suggest that all attempts to protect oneself and prevent vulnerability are useless until a stronger foe is defeated.

But who, ultimately, is the enemy within *Iron Man*? The terrorists who are directly responsible for Stark’s traumatic experience are easily replaced with a more menacing and insidious antagonist. And while the terrorists are political and national outsiders to Stark’s world, the true villain of *Iron Man*, Obadiah Stane, is the quintessential insider. As an older and
wealthy white male, Stane seems to exemplify everything that the American ideal for masculinity had previously entailed. Indeed, Stane’s characterization is dangerously evocative of the ideal American president. As a father figure to Stark, Stane further fulfills the role of the patriarchal ideal.

Interestingly enough in a period of increasing politicization within the youngest demographics of American voters, *Iron Man* offers a narrative in which the traditional American patriarchal ideal is killed by the young and rebellious son. This seems to be in keeping with Haraway’s explanation of the cyborg’s place within the political climate of their worlds:

The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential. (317)

Within the diegesis of *Iron Man*, Stark’s origins as the protégé of Obadiah Stane serve only as a means of establishing dramatic tension for a few minutes. Ultimately, *Iron Man* is a completely autonomous entity that rejects all that he defends. Stark exemplifies a manifestation of capitalism that is more caring than that of Stane’s exploitative and destructive use of money, power, and technology. Yet Stark does not care about the future of Stark Industries or his financial well being. Rather his interest is in developing the technology to save the world. The more effort that Stark places into his Iron Man technology, the further he moves away from his origins until he is literally fighting to the death with them.

As the film moves Stark further and further from the man he is in the beginning of *Iron Man*, the narrative oscillates between Stark’s triumph and defeat in which the plot is driven by
repetition of a fall from grace. While Ronald C. Thomas’s analysis of Stark’s character is true in saying that Iron Man “derives much of his dramatic tension from his flaws,” (153) there seems to be more than just dramatic tension at play within the film adaptation. As Thomas notes of the comic representations of Iron Man, “Stark follows an arc of guilt and redemption” (157). This thematic progression has a particular cultural resonance given the film’s problematic use of the allegorical moment. As the hero whose fate could be America’s own struggles to defeat the amoral values he has been raised with, he turns to technology and violence as a means to compensate for trauma, guilt, and victimization. This technology gives him the power to battle the evils of his society, yet in the background there remains the memory of the trauma of how easily all the protectionism can be destroyed.

Conclusion

Iron Man was the second most successful film of the 2008 blockbuster season. Unlike the top grossing film The Dark Knight, which emphasized the allegorical moment, Iron Man minimizes it by focusing on narrative developments. The result is that the memory of national traumas is underscored by a narrative struggle between representations of good and bad capitalism. Ultimately, this struggle is wrought upon the male body through the use of technology. The use of technology within Iron Man can best be characterized as compensation. As a result of his traumatic experience, Stark compensates for the vulnerability of his body by making himself a weapon of mass destruction. As with The Dark Knight, Stark’s extreme measures are justified by his role as both ideal American male along with his persistent victimization at the hands of evil and terroristic characters.
Iron Man is a film that is concerned with the issue of building defenses in order to protect the traumatized male body. This concern, while prevalent within The Dark Knight, seems to be lost within the third most successful superhero film of the 2008 blockbuster season, Hancock. While the enemy changes halfway through Iron Man from terrorists to Obadiah Stane, the villain in Hancock is so inconsequential to the overall narrative of the film that he is often very easy to forget. Without the focus provided by an identifiable villain, such as that seen in Iron Man, Hancock is the most problematic blockbuster of the season.
CHAPTER III: “CALL ME AN ASSHOLE ONE MORE TIME”

HANCOCK AND INSIDIOUS TRAUMA

Peter Berg’s 2008 film Hancock (2008) offers a final look at the means by which America has come to terms with the issues of masculinity and trauma. This film furthers the American ideological identity of violent retribution while also constructing an ideological discourse on the construction of masculinity in the wake of surviving a traumatic experience. In the character of Hancock, the audience is introduced to a man who attempts to maintain his masculine power despite having been the victim of a brutal hate crime. It is important to note here that the film never once identifies Hancock’s origin trauma as a hate crime, although the description of the event surely fits the definition. As such, the role of race within the film suggests a national tension about the prevalence of racism made evident by unwillingness to allow it to be a part of the filmic discourse. The fact that a film that treats race in such a problematic manner was popular during a presidential election that introduced race to national discourses on masculinity and the American Presidency is significant and warrants further investigation.

This chapter will examine the role of race and masculinity within Hancock as it analyzes how the film portrays the character of John Hancock as he attempts to maintain his power at the expense of anyone who insults him or those he loves. Interestingly enough, as much as Hancock fights to protect those he cares about, the film’s narrative progression suggests that the only way he can truly protect them is to remove himself from their lives. Thus, at the climax of the film, Hancock throws himself out a window away from those he loves, to save them and himself. The end result is a film that utilizes the allegorical moment in order to construct a national identity of vigilante isolation. Much like The Dark Knight, Hancock suggests that the only
means of achieving and maintaining power is to be found in preemptive violence against any threat, be it perceived or real. And following *Iron Man, Hancock*, seems to suggest that this preemptive violence will only protect the hero for so long. The threat of trauma will persist until he has defeated the ultimate foe. Within *Hancock*, this ultimate foe is the pervasive power structure that makes the trauma possible. While Iron Man’s strength comes from his ability to care, Hancock’s strength is derived from his ability to isolate himself from his loved ones. As a result, the film suggests that caring too much will make an already disempowered person weaker. Instead, the role of caring belongs to those people who are privileged within our society, such as Hancock’s friend and mentor Ray. In the end, the film seems to operate as an elaborate victim blaming as Hancock is punished for his caring and his inability to tolerate the persistence of racism in his life while Ray, the white patriarchal ideal, is rewarded not only for his success in “taming” the black Hancock, but also for his ability to care.

**A Brief Summary of Hancock**

*Hancock* is a film which seems to have two separate story lines, each taking place in present day Los Angeles. The first one introduces the audience to an unconventional protagonist, John Hancock (Will Smith). An alcoholic superhero with a very bad anger problem, Hancock is less famous for his heroics than he is for his erratic behavior. Portrayed as more societal menace than protector, Hancock’s heroics include actions such as lifting an escaping car into the air, smashing it into buildings, impaling it on the top of the Capital Records building, and doing all of this while drunk or perhaps hung-over. But when he isn’t fighting crime, we see a softer side of Hancock. After a failed sexual encounter with a groupie, the audience sees Hancock as a very lonely man with immense amounts of guilt. This all starts to change when he saves Ray Embrey (Jason Bateman), whose car was stuck on train tracks. Ray is a brilliant
Public Relations agent who has lost his prestige in the business world because of his dedication to humanitarian efforts. But after seeing the censure that Hancock receives from the people involved and witnessing the event, Ray decides to dedicate his life to turning Hancock into the kind of hero people want. Ray’s efforts are supported by his son Aaron (quite possibly Hancock’s only fan in the beginning of the film) as his wife Mary (Charlize Theron) attempts to persuade her husband that Hancock is a lost cause. After some deliberation, Hancock takes Ray up at his offer for support in public relations, although his decision seems to be more motivated by the challenge posed by Mary’s expression of doubt over his ability to change than his own desire to better himself.

Following Ray’s advice, Hancock lets the police capture him and goes to jail. During this time, Ray makes a costume for Hancock while working with the hero on his behavior and attitude. As crime rates in Los Angeles continue to rise at a steady pace, Mary brings Aaron to visit Hancock in jail, and warns him not to disappoint Ray. Finally, we begin to see changes in Hancock as he turns down an opportunity to run away from jail and begins to talk during the Alcoholic Anonymous meeting held in the prison. Finally, Hancock is released from jail when a bank heist run by the film’s villain, Kenneth, becomes a deadly hostage situation. Hancock arrives on the scene and acts like a true hero, saving the day without erratic behavior.

Hancock is now a hero and a celebrity, loved by his public and feared by criminals. While most films would end with this success, Hancock continues the progression. During a celebratory dinner after his success, Hancock tells Ray and Mary about his past. Apparently immortal, Hancock has no memory past the 1930s, when he woke up in a Miami hospital with super powers but no idea who he was or how he got there. During this scene, the camera focuses on Mary to show that she has tears in her eyes from hearing his story. This moment suggests that
perhaps Mary has a deeper connection with Hancock than she had previously let on. This thought is reaffirmed in the following scene in which Hancock says goodnight to Mary after putting a drunk Ray to bed. During a sexually charged moment, Hancock and Mary kiss - until Mary throws Hancock out of the house, literally.

The rest of the film details Hancock’s progress in learning the truth about himself and his past. This is a difficult process as Mary, who can remember the past, has little desire to discuss it with him. Throughout the course of several fights, tense confrontations, and dramatic conversations we learn that Hancock and Mary are the last two surviving immortal and super powerful beings. They were designed to pair up with one another, making them uncontrollably attracted to their mate. Once united, the two gods lose their powers and become human. Mary and Hancock are the last two of their kind because all of the other gods had already paired up. Unfortunately, these two have never been able to become completely human because they are always separated. What is never said, though, is that they are separated by racial bigotry and violence. The audience is left to understand that, unlike the other gods, Hancock and Mary have never been able to become human together because he is black and she is white.

The film offers an example their ill-fated romance in the climax of the film, in which Kenneth escapes from prison and comes to kill Hancock. In the hospital because his prolonged exposure to Mary has started to weaken him, Hancock is finally learning about his past when the escaped convict and his henchmen attack. Kenneth is coded as a southern bigot, often addressing Hancock in demeaning and racist ways. The fact that Kenneth and his men attack Hancock when he is with Mary seems to prove the point that Hancock and Mary can never be together because of their racial difference. Yet the film never explicitly identifies race as what is keeping them apart.
During this final scene, as Hancock fights Kenneth, Mary is slowly dying from a fatal gunshot wound. In the end, Hancock, realizing that Mary will die if he stays near her, throws himself out of the window in an act of sacrifice. The film ends with Hancock calling Ray from New York to let him know that he has decorated the moon with the symbol of a charity Ray was trying to start. After congratulating his friend and mentor, Hancock flies off through New York City, presumably to fight crime.

The Allegorical Moment and Hancock

The allegorical moment in the film Hancock is strongest when Hancock throws himself out of the hospital window in a sacrifice to save Mary’s life, as well as his own. The scene is full of breaking glass as practically every window and cabinet on the hospital floor are shattered during the preceding fight. Much like Iron Man, the audio track of shattering glass is accompanied by wrenching screams from Mary at each wound Hancock suffers at the hands of the henchmen, as she endures the pain from her wounds as well as his due to their connection. The fight culminates when Ray helps the severely wounded Hancock defeat Kenneth. Despite this victory, both Hancock and Mary appear to be dead. Several cross-cut shots follow as dramatic music swells over slow motion imagery of the two characters vacant eyes. Then, without any apparent narrative reason, Hancock moves, stands up, and slowly walks down the hospital hall pausing briefly to look at Mary. The film moves into slow motion as Ray and Aaron look up at Hancock, who they thought was dead, walking towards the window. In the next frame we see Hancock in slow motion as he jumps up towards the window, kicking it out with his foot. In a match on action in the next frame, the camera moves to outside the hospital in an upward angle as Hancock falls out of the building in slow motion. The framing of this shot allows the audience to see the glass forced out of the window and the glass falling in a detail that
evokes the opening of *The Dark Knight* as well as the traumatic national memory of the attacks on the World Trade Center. But the angle and the slow motion seem to emphasize these movements more so than the earlier example by drawing particular narrative attention to the action. This moment is narratively important because while Hancock may not be committing suicide, he is offering the ultimate sacrifice. He has made the choice to turn his back on both the romantic love he could have with Mary and the platonic love he could have with Ray, in order to save Mary’s life.

The ideological importance of this scene illustrates this film’s narrative differences from the other two films so far discussed. The biggest difference between the three films is that *Hancock* has no origins in a preexisting series like Batman or Iron Man. While the super heroes from established narratives turn to technology to create their super strength, Hancock is naturally imbued with his powers. *Hancock* is not the story of the origins of super powers; Hancock is already a super hero and his powers do not need to be created or explained. Thus, the film offers an origin story in which the origin trauma is unknown to the protagonist until the end of the film. Even the audience does not get to know what little the protagonist knows until well into the middle of the story. This complication in the traditional superhero genre plot-line results in two simultaneous plot lines. One plot chronicles the development of the super hero persona for Hancock by his friend and business partner, Ray. Narratively, it is explained that Hancock needs the altruistic Ray to aid him in building a super hero persona because, as Ray puts it, “people don’t know the real Hancock.” His actions make people think of him, and often verbally identify him, as an “asshole.” Yet these actions are explained by the narrative as the result of anger and drinking problems that stem from his troubled past. The question of Hancock’s past becomes the focus of the second plot as the new and improved superhero saves the day and that story arc
seems to disappear. Hancock becomes a superhero who is loved by all, and now that his anger and drinking problem have been addressed, he is successful at his work.

After this triumph, the focus of the film changes from taming Hancock’s rebellious nature to Hancock’s search for the truth about his past. This shift is largely due to the dependence of the narrative of Hancock is on the protagonist’s inability to remember who he really is. This is the motivation for not only his anger, but also for his heroic actions. The second story arc of Hancock explains that his memory loss, and subsequent erratic behavior, are both caused by a brutal hate crime that left him hospitalized. Thus Hancock is a victim of a traumatic event, and his actions are explained as those of a man attempting to come to terms with his victimization. The focus on Hancock’s discovery of his identity makes the film’s plot progression work more like a re-origin story. Once Hancock’s self-destructive behavior is controlled by his friend Ray, the narrative suggests that Hancock will never be able to be a good superhero until he knows who he truly is. This is demonstrated when Hancock attempts to seduce his best friend’s wife after his celebratory dinner. When Mary rejects Hancock by throwing him out of the front of the house, the film embarks on a narrative that is devoted to John Hancock’s discovery of his past. The narrative progression suggests that it is only once Hancock understands the truth about his past can he make the ultimate heroic sacrifice and truly become the hero he wants to be.

Released in the summer of 2008, this alternative plot progression is particularly significant. The survivor of trauma plot construction of Hancock identifies the film as a representation of America’s negotiation of the process of survival after the crisis of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. These negotiations are dependent on the trauma victim coming to terms with his/her weakened identity. The film narratively suggests that the only means by which a trauma survivor can regain any sense of power is to isolate
himself from enemies and loved ones alike. Towards this end, the film exhibits a thematic preoccupation with assaults on Hancock’s masculinity which are represented as constant threats to his civil liberties as well as a pervasive fear of sexually violent assault. The narrative of the film establishes Hancock’s ability to sacrifice himself, which is visually linked to the motif of shattering glass as the allegorical moment, as a means of empowerment meant to compensate for feminization through victimization. This power is predicated on a devotion to vigilante violence that exacts revenge for any verbal or bodily harm against him, along with the choice to isolate himself from any emotional attachments. In so doing, John Hancock is able to uphold the fight for liberty his name evokes in American cultural mythology. The end result of this focus on liberty and the freedom to fight for one’s power is a film that constructs a particular ideological message for an America still attempting to come to terms with the events of September 11th. The film, through the treatment of Hancock’s experience of insidious trauma, reveals the racial tensions that seemed to be building in the national discourse over masculinity that peaked during the presidential election of 2008. In the end, this tension is controlled by constructing a narrative of victim-blaming that minimizes Hancock’s heroic role in order to idealize the character of Ray. The result is a film that gives voice to the tensions in the dominant construction of masculinity in regards to race, while still managing to uphold the traditional American ideal. Hancock’s final image of John Hancock sitting with an eagle surveying New York City, suggests that only through strict isolation and devotion to protection against any perceived threats to civil liberties can one establish power. Yet ultimately, Hancock’s power is represented as lesser than that of Ray, the Caucasian male. Ray’s power is demonstrated not only in his ability to mold Hancock into the ideal superhero but also when he defeats the villain that comes so close to killing the protagonist.
Trauma and Memory in *Hancock*

The origin trauma, as previously mentioned, is an incredibly important convention of the superhero genre film. In the film *Hancock*, the origin trauma is narratively explained as an attack Hancock suffers in Miami in the 1930s when he was walking home with Mary after watching the film *Frankenstein* (Whale, 1931). This attack caused Hancock to suffer from amnesia, and he never remembers it. Because of this fact, the film works to subvert the memory of Hancock’s origin trauma. Arguably, the reason for this oversight is due to the nature of the crime. By all accounts it was a hate crime, but the film never overtly states that. Instead, the racist motivation for the attack on Hancock and Mary is coded into the dialogue description of the event. By refusing to ever define the attack as a hate crime, the film avoids any overt discourse on race relations, masculinity, and trauma while still giving off the appearance of addressing these issues. More problematic, the film’s treatment of race and trauma ultimately manages to idealize the uncomplicated Caucasian ideal at the expense of the traumatized racial Other.

When Mary finally tells Hancock what happened to him, she says he was attacked after they went to see *Frankenstein* when they were living together in Miami, Florida in the 1930s. Of the event she says:

And after [the movie] we walked down Flagler Street and you took my hand and you held it so tight. They attacked us in an alley…They hit you so hard. There was so much, so much, blood…They wouldn’t let me ride in the ambulance with you…

This brief narration is full of details, each of which builds one cohesive meaning that is never explicitly said: Hancock was the victim of a hate crime. In the memory that Mary narrates, she and Hancock walk down Miami’s equivalent of Main Street holding hands. While Mary never
makes a connection between their public display of affection and the attack, it is obvious to viewers with knowledge of the cultural climate of the 1930s that Hancock was beaten by white men for holding hands with a white woman.

Ultimately, the question of Hancock’s victimization in a hate crime seems particularly illuminated by the film that preceded the attack. We learn during Hancock’s narration of what he knows about his past, that he had gone to see *Frankenstein* before being attacked. When Ray asks him if he remembers anything from before he woke up in the hospital, Hancock says “Nah. Only thing I had in my pocket was….bubble gum and two movie tickets - Boris Karloff, *Frankenstein*.” Not only does the dialogue draw attention to the specific representation of the monster (Boris Karloff) but also to the film. Several times throughout the film, there is a focus on Hancock’s memento box containing the two tickets to Frankenstein. In fact, when deliberating on whether or not to take Ray up on his offer for his public relations expertise, Hancock looks at those tickets which seem to motivate him to accept Ray’s help, effectively linking the film *Frankenstein* with Hancock’s experience of trauma.

Ostensibly, *Frankenstein* was chosen by the writers of the film for a reason. This reason can be illuminated by Elizabeth Young’s work on race and the *Frankenstein* films in “Here Comes the Bride: Wedding Gender and Race in Bride of Frankenstein.” While Young’s argument is primarily based on the film *Bride of Frankenstein* (Whale, 1935), rather than *Frankenstein*, she does reference the earlier film. Furthermore, the similarity between the two films in narrative construction, producers, and actors; along with a similar cultural climate, makes much of Young’s argument about *Bride* applicable to *Frankenstein*. Of the Boris Karloff characterization of *Frankenstein’s* monster, Young says,
Indeed, in an era when Hollywood hesitated to depict Black characters committing violence, the film’s monster - for all his apparent distance from ‘reality’ - may more fully emblematize the iconography of U.S. racism than any other film, more openly mimetic, could have in this era. (Young, 423)

By looking at the representations of the monster in the film, Young builds an understanding of the Whale films within the cultural context of the 1930s. As such, Young focuses particularly on the racist representations of the monster’s interactions with women. She finds this relationship to be characteristic of the cultural fear of interracial rape. Towards these ends Young says:

…both *Bride of Frankenstein* and its predecessor, Whale’s *Frankenstein*, bear the traces of the racist connection in U.S. culture between race and rape. In one sequence in the earlier film, the monster enters Elizabeth’s room on her wedding night and corners her behind the locked door; the camera cuts away to the other people in the house hearing her screams. When they break into her room, her white dress is disheveled as she lies across one corner of the rumpled bed moaning desperately, “Don’t let it come here.” Although the monster’s crime is officially the penetration of the room, not the woman, his actions are framed precisely according to the stereotype of interracial rape. (Young, 426)

Because the monster is visually represented as a rape threat to all of the women in the films, Young suggests that the monster is then represented as a victim of a mob similar to that of a lynch mob. She describes the re-occurring representation when she says,

In *Bride of Frankenstein*, too, the monster appears as victim, in this case as a fugitive whose repeated escapes from mob pursuit resonate with contemporary accounts of lynching. The first Whale *Frankenstein* film concludes with an extended sequence about the monster’s flight from a crowd of angry townspeople, whose pursuit of him is figured
with all the visual markers—barking dogs, fiery torches, angry shouts—of a lynch mob.

(Young, 424)

Young’s analysis of the similarity of the representation of the mob in the film and that of a lynch mob is further corroborated by research showing a relationship between lynching and movie showings. This account is as follows:

Finally, another newspaper report of lynching from the same era suggest an uncomfortable circulation between horror films and acts of lynching as viewer ‘spectacles’: ‘the lynching site was located across the street from a picture show where a horror film was playing. A number of women emerging from the theater saw the Negro hanging from the tree and fainted.’ This account literalizes the close connection between the movie theater and the setting for lynching, which physically neighbor each other as they offer similar sights of terror. In its evocation of the connection between U.S. racism and Gothic monstrosity, *Bride of Frankenstein* manifestly participates in this representational slippage. Even as it dilutes its horror with comedy and situates it in a zone of apparent ‘fantasy,’ the film yet more strongly invokes— indeed, has more license to invoke— the imagery, narrative, and formal conventions of contemporary U.S. lynching.

(Young, 425)

Ultimately, Young’s analysis of the representations and historical context of Whale’s adaptations of the Frankenstein story identifies a trend of racism. Not only does she identify the film as constructing a racist discourse on rape and lynching through its representations of the monster, but she also makes a connection between the screening of horror films in the 1930s and the occurrence of hate crimes. Thus, the film *Frankenstein*, on at least a visual level, has a strong relationship with the intense racism and violent hate crimes that characterized the 1930s.
While he was not the victim of a lynching, Hancock was the victim of a hate crime. It is arguable that by holding hands with Mary, Hancock inspired interracial rape fears and fantasies in the minds of his attackers. The proximity of the place of the attack to the movie theater that Hancock and Mary had just left also suggests that Hancock was a victim of a hate crime. Yet the film never explicitly states this fact. Rather it is subverted and coded in the dialogue and the choice of the film the couple had seen.

The film’s subversion of the hate-crime aspect of Hancock’s origin trauma is furthered by Hancock’s inability to remember the event in question. In fact, the whole second half of the film seems to be motivated by Hancock’s desire to learn about this event in an attempt to understand who he truly is. This seems to have been the key aspect to Will Smith’s understanding of the character as evidenced by a quotation in the New York Post review of the film in which he says, “Everyday he [Hancock] wakes up mad at the world. He doesn’t remember what happened to him and there’s no one to help him find the answers” (Tucker). While a common characteristic of the experience of trauma is summarized by Cathy Caruth as, “the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs, or the ability to witness the event fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself” (Caruth, 7). In the experience of trauma represented in Hancock, both the event and the self are denied a witness as Hancock cannot remember his trauma or anything about himself throughout the whole film. And while the trauma survivor eventually accesses the event, Hancock is never allowed to remember his experience. Instead, he is forced to learn of the event second-hand from Mary.

Because Hancock cannot remember his traumatic experience, it is difficult to argue that it motivates his heroic actions in the same way that trauma motivates Bruce Wayne in The Dark Knight or Tony Stark in Iron Man. In the previous films analyzed, each of the protagonists has a
strong and painful memory of their traumatic experiences. And after all, that which cannot be remembered cannot be motivation. As such, it would seem that the traumatic force within the film is working on a different level. Rather than being motivated by an event he cannot remember, I contend that the thing that makes Hancock fight is not a traumatic event so much as a persistent traumatic experience. This persistent experience is that of never ending disempowerment. While this disempowerment can include many things, the film’s problematic confrontation with and avoidance of racism suggests that perhaps Hancock is traumatized not by the attack itself, but by the dehumanization of racism. This type of trauma is known as insidious trauma. In other words, Hancock’s origin trauma gets subverted into the continual confrontation with racism characteristic of insidious trauma.

Insidious Trauma

Just because Hancock could not remember he was a victim of a hate crime does not mean he was not traumatized by victimization based on his racial identity. Maria Root revisions trauma theory in her essay “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality” in the feminist compilation Personality and Psychopathology edited by Laura S. Brown and Mary Ballou (1992). Her analysis notes that there are three possible ways to experience trauma: direct, indirect, and insidious. Direct trauma, the first-hand experience of a horrific event, is seen by Root to be the common focus of traditional psychology, which she attributes to the ideological influence of patriarchal values. She argues that study of indirect and insidious traumas give voice to minority and disempowered people. Towards this end, Root laments a lack of scholarship on indirect trauma, the experience of witnessing another person’s trauma. But her real focus is on insidious trauma. Root uses this type of trauma in her attempt to open
conceptualizations of the experience of trauma from a singular direct or indirect event to include continuous and pervasive experiences. As she defines it, this type of trauma is:

… usually associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued by those in power, for example, gender, color, sexual orientation, physical ability. As a result is its often present throughout a lifetime… (Root, 240)

What is especially important about this approach is that it opens up the experience of trauma to include the constant oppression of a member of a minority group in a society where the dominant group is particularly hostile. Laura S. Brown utilizes this theory to analyze trauma and femininity in her essay “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma” for Caruth’s influential volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Brown gives more detail on the process of insidious trauma when she says:

Often the way we avoid these manifestations of trauma is to assiduously rely upon the defenses of denial and minimization: ‘it will never happen to me.’ Insidious rape trauma is part of everyday life for those women whose denial structures are less well padded… For each non-dominant group in this society, similar phenomena operate: the African-American who must constantly anticipate a Howard Beach… (Brown, 107)

While Brown is particularly interested in the effect of insidious trauma on women in a society that is antagonistically patriarchal, she notes that this trauma can be found in any non-dominant group.

Not all members of a minority group suffer from insidious trauma. Brown claims that rape paranoia is a symptom of insidious trauma for some women within American patriarchal society. Brown claims that women who exhibit this fear have an inability to utilize denial as a
defense mechanism. This analysis suggests that in order to survive as a disempowered person within American society, one must have a strong denial mechanism. Because Hancock woke up from his hate-crime induced coma with amnesia, it is safe to say that he did not have the defense mechanisms necessary to process or deny the impact of insidious trauma. Indeed, as already evidenced by the discussion of Frankenstein’s significance within a particularly racist historical context, it would seem that in order to survive in that era as a black man; one would need a substantial degree of denial. A denial, for example, that would make it possible to watch a film such as Frankenstein and not to see representations of lynch mobs attacking a characterization of the Other. Thus Hancock, in his weakened state as a result of amnesia caused by the hate crime origin trauma, fell victim to insidious trauma.

This analysis is supported by further investigation into Hancock’s behavior during the beginning of the film before Ray “cleans up” his behavior. Because insidious trauma is continuous, we can see examples of Hancock’s response to persistent racism within the first few scenes of the film. We are introduced to Los Angeles in the midst of a crisis. Several cops are engaged in a high-speed pursuit of criminals who are shooting at random out of their white SUV on the highway. Already this scene has a substantial degree of racial implications in popular culture, as the representation of a high-speed chase of a white SUV on the Los Angeles freeway has had obvious associations with OJ Simpson for an American audience since 1994. Indeed, the car contains several Asian men, making the film’s treatment of race highly problematic from the very beginning. Hancock is introduced to the audience as a drunken bum sleeping on a city bench. Across the sidewalk from the park bench is a store with a wall of televisions broadcasting the chase. Instead of helping the cops and stopping the dangerous shooting, Hancock sleeps, surrounded by discarded Jameson bottles. He begrudgingly goes to work once awakened by a
child who calls him an “asshole” for not caring about the events that are transpiring, an insult that is seconded by a woman he attempts to pinch as she walks by later in the scene. Hancock’s heroics, once he gets into action, are characterized by drunkenness, or perhaps a hangover, and a profound sense of disinterest in the greater good. Both of these characteristics explain the large degree of damage Hancock manages to inflict upon Los Angeles, and a few unfortunate birds, in his commute to the site of conflict. Once he reaches the scene of the crime, Hancock enters the car and proceeds to make several homophobic jokes. The criminals respond by firing at him. Hancock quickly manages to stop the fleeing car, but because the gunshots broke his Jameson bottle and his sunglasses, Hancock lifts the car into the air, hits it against several buildings, and finally impales it on the top of the Capitol Records building.

In the following scene, Los Angeles Police Lieutenant Dorman gives his opinions on Hancock in the aftermath of his latest act of “heroics” saying, “this Hancock guy is surely on a mission and he’s using our city to beat himself up for reasons known only to him.” This is probably the film’s most compelling analysis into Hancock’s behavior. This moment and the opening scene characterize Hancock as a violently angry alcoholic who behaves badly to insure that everyone around him will hate him as much as he hates himself. This is visually represented in the scene where Hancock seems to willingly invite the censure of a crowd after he stops a train from killing Ray.

Because the film actively attempts to deny the racial discourse it seems to be constructing, Hancock’s behavior is never overtly attributed to any form of trauma. That said, it is extremely common for survivors of trauma to have a considerable degree of anger. As a result of a trauma, a victim may constantly be on edge, waiting for the next threat. This, Maria Root says, lends itself to the trauma victim’s experience of anger management problems, “[A]nger is
both a fighting and protective response to environmental threat. When threatened one may retort or express anger by shouting, name calling, threats, and physical striking out” (Root, 249). In the case of Hancock, all three are visibly present.

These symptoms of Hancock’s trauma are consistently present because his trauma is a constant part of his life. The film does not have any overt representations of racism that would cause Hancock’s insidious trauma behaviors, but after years of living without the denial processes needed to cope with insidious trauma, Hancock has become a completely traumatized individual. He is always in a state of hyper-vigilance, his anger ready to blow. This short-fuse towards himself and others causes what is characterized as “asshole” behavior. Throughout the film, this insult is offered repeatedly, always causing Hancock’s anger management issue to become an issue. Verbal attacks, just like physical attacks, are enough for a trauma survivor to feel threatened; Hancock reacts violently to these insults throughout the film. In fact, it appears that rather than use explicitly racist insults throughout the film, verbal abuse becomes coded within the benign and comedic insult of “asshole.” Interestingly enough, this insult that Hancock seems to loathe so very much is a key element to a pervasive narrative motif linking Hancock’s erratic behavior with a fear of vulnerability. This fear of vulnerability seems particularly evident in Hancock’s obsessive dialogue revolving the issue of “anal penetration.” While I will explore the film’s narrative concerns in depth later, it seems particularly relevant that the offensive phrase “asshole” functions in the film as a substitute for a racist insult. Periodically throughout Hancock, this phrase motivates the protagonist to do some very unheroic things, such as throw a child up into the atmosphere. As such, Hancock’s identity becomes reactionary in that he is constantly waiting for any perceived threat in order to defend himself from attack.

The Signature
Ultimately, identity becomes a primary concern within the narrative of *Hancock*. In the beginning of the film, Hancock’s identity is portrayed as reactive and constantly constructed by the negative opinions of others. Then he meets Ray, who builds a new identity for him: the hero. In the end, Hancock learns the truth about himself from Mary and ends the film with his own sense of self. This narrative theme, while connected to his experience of insidious trauma, is made more explicit by the fact that throughout the whole course of the film, the audience never learns the protagonist’s true name. Instead, Will Smith’s character is identified by the name he assumed after he suffered amnesia as a result of a horrific beating. When asked if he remembers anything, Hancock replies:

> Only thing I had in my pocket was….bubble gum and two movie tickets. Boris Karloff, Frankenstein. But no ID…nothin’. I went to sign out…the, uh, nurse asked me for my *John Hancock*. I actually thought that’s who I was.

The issue of identity becomes the new focus of the film, as Hancock makes frantic attempts to identify himself. Be it the assumption of the name “John Hancock,” the refusal of the identity of “asshole” that is commonly given to him by others, the assumption of the identity offered by Ray, or his persistence in interrogating Mary, it is clear that Hancock is searching for a means of constructing an identity for himself. This establishes the importance of identity, name, and signature within the film. These are also important concerns within scholarship about trauma survivors. Soshana Felman brings up the importance of identity and the signature in her discussion of the Holocaust in her essay in Cathy Caruth’s *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*:

> What constitutes the outrage of the Holocaust…is not so much death in itself, as the more obscene fact that *death itself does not make any difference*, the fact that death is radically *indifferent*: everyone is leveled off, people die as numbers, not as proper names. In
contrast to this leveling, to testify is to engage, precisely, in the process of *refinding one’s proper name*, one’s *signature*. (53)

Felman establishes the importance of the re-establishment of the survivor’s identity. She bases this imperative on the understanding of the experience of trauma as affecting identity formation.

In an interview with Cathy Caruth, Robert Jay Lifton, the influential psychiatrist, says:

> But in extreme involvements, as in extreme trauma, one’s sense of self is radically altered. And there is a traumatized self that is created. Of course it’s not a totally new self; it’s what one brought into the trauma as affected significantly and painfully, confusedly, but in a very primal way, by that trauma. (137)

Lifton is saying that the trauma victim’s identity becomes altered by his/her experience. The process of healing the trauma depends on reconciling an individual’s identity from that which it was before the traumatic experience with the identity that develops after. For Felman, this reconcilement occurs with the return to a name or signature.

*Hancock* presents the process by which its protagonist attempts to heal after his trauma. As Felman suggests, Hancock attempts to reconcile his identities by assuming an identity through the use of a signature. The name he chooses for his new identity is particularly significant. The name John Hancock evokes the struggle for liberty and freedom, as well as any act of signing. Similarly, the fictional Hancock, with his signature, also becomes engaged in a struggle for individual freedom and liberty. This identity conflates Hancock’s true self with his traumatized persona at the same time as it combines his compulsion for good deeds with his new identity.

Isolation and Liberty
Being “Hancock” means a lifetime of isolation this alienation is extremely conflated with Hancock’s perceived threats to his liberties. The key to the interaction of isolation and liberty within the film is found in Hancock’s relationship with Mary. His former lover, like Hancock, is one of the last surviving gods. But more important than her powerful standing is the fact that she is the only character within the film who knows who Hancock truly is. Without this woman, Hancock would be completely isolated. As he says during a press conference before going to jail, “Life here can be very difficult for me; after all I am the only one of my kind.” Separated from Mary, the only other remaining one of his kind, Hancock spends eighty years alone fighting criminals.

At first, the film seems to suggest that Hancock’s motivation for his vigilante actions can be attributed to a severe amount of self-loathing. Indeed, Hancock does have drinking and anger management problems which seem to be the cause of his “heroic actions,” yet as Hancock deals with these problems, he still continues to fight villains, proving these issues to be, rather than the cause, the result of his isolation. What is important about Hancock’s isolation is that the film’s plot is structured in such a way that Hancock can only be alone. If he is with Mary, he and she will be harmed. As she explains it,

Every time we’re together…they come after you through me. You’re built to save people more than the rest of us. That’s who you are. You’re a hero. The insurance policy of the gods. Keep one alive: you. To protect this world.

As long as Hancock is isolated, he remains immortal. With this identification, the film sets up a structure that demands Hancock never truly be with the only person who makes him feel that his whole identity is recognized and complete.
It is not just the threat of mortality that demands Hancock’s solitary lifestyle. Mary emphasizes that “they” are constantly keeping Hancock and her apart. As she says, “they” separate them by hurting her whenever the pair are together. As if to prove this statement, a few minutes later the film’s villain, Kenneth, comes to the hospital and fatally shoots Mary and then begins to attack Hancock. This narrative cause-and-effect progression suggests that the people Hancock is fighting within the film are the very same people who have worked to keep him and Mary apart throughout their existence on earth. Although it is never explicitly said, the audience is left to infer that the reason why “they” won’t let them be together is because of their racial difference. Thus each time in history that Mary and John attempt to live together, they become victims of racially-induced hate crimes. To further this point, Kenneth is even coded as racially prejudiced by his southern accent which has become a stereotype of racial bigotry.

The film makes a causal link between Hancock’s isolation and Kenneth’s prejudice against interracial relationships. This codes Hancock’s motivation for his superhero actions as a fight against tyranny. What the film then suggests is that Hancock is constantly fighting those people who want to infringe on his freedom. Thus Hancock is constantly fighting for liberty; much like the real John Hancock did with his signature on the Declaration of Independence. Just like his namesake, who has become a mythic character in American history symbolizing the individual’s fight for liberty against tyranny, Hancock stands alone against an insurmountable force of racial oppression. Ultimately, Hancock’s noble fight requires him to be alone.

Ideologically, the isolated stand against an infringement of civil liberties is a key theme in American history. Used as a defense for the American Revolution, this argument has become a rally point for American foreign and domestic policy alike. It was recently made visible again in the public discourse on the War on Terror. Operation Enduring Freedom was publicly
attributed to a fight against global terrorism in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. While a preemptive strike much on the level of those advocated by *The Dark Knight* and *Iron Man*, there is also an element of defense of American liberty in the proclaimed fight against the tyrannical threat of Taliban supported al-Qaeda terrorism. It was also present when Operation Iraqi Freedom was defended as a preemptive strike against the tyrannical dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. The ideological use of the concept of the stand against oppression is important in American military policy as well as remaining a huge factor in domestic politics. Political campaigns often use this ideology in order to garner votes. During the 2008 Presidential Election this was a key element of the discourse on the war as well as the maneuvering of the candidates. Warfare has traditionally been constructed within public discourse as a masculine realm. Therefore, political debates surrounding American military policy is often related to masculinity. Within the construction of masculinity in the American patriarchal system, there is a great deal of value for men who stand alone against oppression. Several of our most famous presidents have been made legendary through myths that suggest a solitary fight for freedom. One example would be public discourse on Theodore Roosevelt’s role in the Spanish American War. It is arguable that in each election, America is looking for one man who can stand alone against the pervasive forces of injustice. Indeed, this is what America asks of its heroes within popular cinema, such as Hancock.

**Emotional Dissociation**

Hancock achieves his role as protagonist and hero through his ability to fight for liberty even at the cost of complete and total isolation. In the climax of the film, as Mary is slowly dying, he throws himself out of the hospital window to save her life. As he widens the distance between himself and her, she slowly begins to get better. In the end, by sacrificing his
relationship with her, he not only saves her, but also himself. Dissociation from emotional 
attachments is essential in representations of ideal masculinity as well as the traumatized 
individual.

It is his ability to be alone that makes Hancock so heroic. It is arguable that Western 
society, thanks to the influence of the Judeo-Christian set of ethics, values sacrifice. In the end, 
Hancock’s heroics depend upon his ability to make the ultimate sacrifice. He must accept the 
loneliness of isolation in order to continue helping mankind. Although the film doesn’t 
explicitly say it, it is evident that all of the gods had specific purposes and Hancock and Mary 
were the ones that were meant to help people. It is evident that they each have their own specific 
ways of doing so. Hancock, with his quick temper, was meant to help people through brute force 
while Mary’s role was to love and nurture human beings. If Hancock and Mary allow 
themselves to be together, they will eventually, at the very least, lose their powers and their 
ability to help people. Throughout the film, Hancock struggles with the loneliness of both a 
trauma survivor and victim of insidious trauma. This is perhaps most brilliantly illustrated by 
Smith’s pained facial expressions, affected during dialogue about Hancock’s fears of isolation, 
most notably in the press conference scene where he says “Life here can be difficult for me, after 
all I am the only one of my kind.” His emotional connection to Mary is also evident in Smith’s 
skillful use of facial expressions throughout the film. So in the end of the film, when he leaves 
Mary and goes to New York, Hancock is turning away from the one person who has made him 
feel a little less lonely. This is portrayed as the ultimate sacrifice. Ultimately, sacrifice of the 
things that we hold most dear is considered to be one of the most heroic qualities a person can 
possess within western society.
And while American society obviously values isolationism in both its heroes and frequently its foreign policy, it is arguable that the degree to which isolationism occurs in *Hancock* is a bit extreme. Frequently, a strong anti-social tendency is considered a symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. On a basic level, the traumatized person feels a sense of isolation from themselves and their world. This experience was documented by Shoshana Felman’s description of her traumatized students:

> They were set apart and set themselves apart from others who had not gone through the same experience. They were obsessed. They felt apart, and yet not quite together. They sought out each other and yet felt like they could not reach each other. They kept turning to each other and to me. They felt alone, suddenly deprived of their bonding to the world and to one another. (50)

The basic understanding of the traumatized individual is much in keeping with this description. He is a person who has experienced something so horrific that he has become isolated in some sense from the rest of society. This is exemplified by Hancock who literally spends decades alone after his traumatic experience. Unable to remember the event that caused his isolation, Hancock is an example of the process of departure that Cathy Caruth attributes to the traumatized individual, “trauma is experienced not as a mere repression or defense, but as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment. The trauma is a repeated suffering of the event but it also a continual leaving of the site” (Caruth, 10). It is this process of “continual leaving” that characterizes the traumatized individual’s experience. Departure is a coping mechanism that allows the traumatized individual to function after his harrowing ordeal. The act of departure can also be characterized as empowering, for it allows
Departure as a means of empowerment is not specific to the experience of trauma. The conception of departure is also a key issue in the discourse on masculinity. Indeed, the patriarchal, ideal man is extremely detached. Steve Neale addresses this ideal in his reworking of Laura Mulvey’s conception of the narcissistic viewer position:

The kind of image that Delon here embodies, and that Eastwood and the others mentioned earlier embody too, is one marked not only by emotional reticence, but also by silence, a reticence with language. Theoretically, this silence, this absence of language can further be linked to narcissism and to the construction of an ideal ego. The acquisition of language is a process profoundly challenging to the narcissism of early childhood. It is productive of what has been called ‘symbolic castration.’ Language is a process (or set of processes) involving absence and lack, and these are what threaten any image of the self as totally enclosed, self sufficient, omnipotent. (12)

In Neale’s understanding of the narcissistic identification, the audience idealizes the man who is free of any restriction to his power. In particular, Neale focuses on the threat to male power presented by language, mentioning the idealization of “emotional reticence” in passing. While it is true that it is impossible to be emotionally detached without denying language, it is interesting that Neale does not go into more detail about the ways in which detachment from emotions factor into the construction of an ideal masculinity.

Hancock’s ability to free himself from any romantic attachment to Mary constructs him as a masculine ideal. He is emotionally detached from himself and the world around him, which makes him unaware of the negative effects of his actions. Although lonely, this detachment, as
the film suggests, protects him from any attack on his masculinity. It is once Hancock begins to make emotional connections with the people around him that he begins to lose his powers and his masculinity. The end imperative becomes for him to separate himself from those relationships. While he is still friendly with Ray at the end of the film, Hancock ends the film emotionally and physically separated from that connection.

Masculinity

There is a contradiction inherent to the significant role of detachment in both masculinity and trauma studies. Traditional coding of the traumatized individual focuses on his perceived sense of weakness, often resulting in a feminization of the male characters that fall victim to horrific events. This feminization is most likely due to the previous diagnosis for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as hysteria. Indeed, Sigmund Freud, in his influential study of hysteria with Joseph Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, defines the hysterical condition in relation to trauma. It is said of hysteria and trauma that,

In the case of common hysteria it not infrequently happens that instead of a single, major trauma, we find a number of partial traumas forming a group of provoking causes. These have only been able to exercise a traumatic effect by summation and they belong together in so far as they are in part components of a single story of suffering. (Breuer, 6 – emphasis in original)

Within this passage, Freud and Breuer link the experience of trauma with that of hysteria. It is suggested that hysteria only occurs as a result of a traumatic experience. Furthermore, it is also suggested within this passage that trauma more often than not results in hysterical symptoms. This connection between trauma and hysteria is arguably still evident today in public opinion. This opinion is predicated upon the gender bias afforded discourses on hysteria. Although
several men were diagnosed with hysteria, it was more common for women to receive that diagnosis making the illness excessively feminized. Susan Bordo claims as much in her essay on the disorder, “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity.” Bordo claims that hysteria has “historically been class- and race-biased, largely (although not exclusively) occurring among white middle- and upper-middle class women” (Bordo, 168). Thus culturally, there is a link between trauma and femininity by way of the association of trauma with hysteria. Because femininity is culturally viewed to be weak, this association works to establish a bias against those suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as weak and therefore not masculine. By these standards, there is a tenuous relationship between the detachment of the traumatized individual and the sense of idealized masculinity. American culture values isolation as a behavior characteristic of an ideal man. The difference between the ideal man’s experience of isolation and that of the traumatized individual is that the experience of trauma works to weaken the victim. Because the survivor of a trauma has lost control over his body, situation, or perception of the world, he becomes vulnerable. The following isolation is therefore seen to be imperative - not a willful choice—as it is within idealized masculinity. So while independence is a quality valued by many Americans, the symptoms of emotional detachment experienced by trauma survivors cannot be characterized as exemplary of a cultural ideal.

Indeed, the traumatized Hancock does not seem to be the ideal man. He is rarely silent, often offering sarcastic quips or long monologues. And he often expresses his emotional side, a perfect example being his recounting of past memories. Furthermore, the character is so emotionally and physically traumatized that he cannot access the memory of his origin trauma. Instead, Hancock becomes a man obsessed with the fight against aggressors who he fears will continue to oppress him with the racism that traumatizes him. Hancock becomes a visual
representation of Caruth’s assertion “…that, for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that survival itself; in other words, can be the crisis” (Caruth, 9). In the case of Hancock, the crisis comes in the constant survival in the face of oppression within a society that is perpetually attempting to take away his power.

Disempowered, demasculinized, and traumatized, Hancock constantly fights against threats to his own liberty. Frequently, the film suggests that Hancock views his adversaries as obstacles in the way of his goals and desires. While the narrative thematically suggests that this relationship is based on an attack on Hancock’s freedom on the part of his opponents, the actions of Hancock never seem to identify this problem. So in scenes like Hancock’s first day in prison, the prisoners attempting to threaten Hancock are only treated as barriers in his way to his cell, not as a threat to his freedom or body. He may be told by Mary that restriction of his liberty is the goal of these men, but that is not the threat that Hancock perceives. The only threat that Hancock seems concerned about comes from the insult that is frequently said to him. Because of the recurrence of the insult, “asshole,” and the strong emotional effect it has on Hancock, the character exhibits an extreme paranoia over anal violation. Throughout the film, this concern is repeated to such an extent that it becomes a narrative motif. Hancock warns characters to be vigilant against any attempt at this violation, as seen in the scene in which Hancock warns Ray’s son against allowing bullies to “punk him” because he has left his backside vulnerable to their attacks. He also shows his fear of anal penetration in his aversion to being identified as this vulnerable orifice, as seen in the scenes where being called an “asshole” provokes his anger. As stated before, this anger comes in the phrase’s role as verbal abuse, which stands in the place of racist dialogue. This narrative function of the term links the phrase with Hancock’s experience
of insidious trauma and thus the idea weakness. Finally, Hancock’s preoccupation with anal penetration is exhibited in his continual threats and actual assault of his adversaries with actions of anal violation. The culmination of this aspect of the motif is represented in the prison scene in which Hancock forces one inmate’s head inside another’s anus. While this motif is obviously intended for comedic effect, and the scene in the prison is supposed to be hilarious, not horrific, the preoccupation with a fear of penetration within a film that has so much narrative emphasis on trauma suggests an overwhelming discomfort with the vulnerability characteristic of the experience and survival of trauma.

Leo Bersani’s analysis of the media’s treatment of homosexual men during the beginning of the AIDS crisis in his essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” draws some interesting parallels between the issues of anal violation and power. Paraphrasing Foucault, Bersani says:

There is a legal and moral incompatibility between sexual passivity and civic authority.

The only ‘honorable’ sexual behavior ‘consists in being active, in dominating, in penetrating, and in thereby exercising one’s authority.’ (Bersani, 212)

Bersani goes on to say that “In other words, the moral taboo on ‘passive’ anal sex in ancient Athens is primarily formulated as a kind of hygenics of social power. To be penetrated is to abdicate power” (212). While Bersani’s analysis is looking particularly at consensual anal sex, it is still applicable to the rape and violation that preoccupies Hancock. His end conclusion is that the role of being “passive” during anal penetration can be characterized as a loss of power. Thus Hancock’s fear of being anally violated combines two extremely disempowered scenarios.

This discomfort with the traumatic experience is emphasized in the representation of Hancock. The victim of a horrific hate crime, his memory loss and struggle as a survivor within a persistently racist environment works to constantly disempower him. Furthermore, any attempt
that he makes towards establishing a meaningful connection with a member of the opposite sex (primarily, but not exclusively, Mary) results in a weakening of his powers. In the end, it is as much Hancock’s concern for Mary, as his fear of losing his powers that motivates his sacrifice of throwing himself out of the hospital window.

The Cultural Significance of Hancock

Ultimately, Hancock’s constant disempowerment through his traumatic experience, his response to racism, and his persistent fear of vulnerability works to discredit him as a hero. Even after he makes the ultimate sacrifice and establishes himself as a traditional American hero, he calls Ray to congratulate him on changing the world. It is as if the film places more narrative value on Ray, the character who, albeit less powerful, has less fear. It is Ray and not Hancock who finally kills the villain Kenneth. The persistent thematic concerns of the film, such as the narrative motif focusing on anal violation, suggest that vulnerability is just as horrific as a potential attack.

Just as in The Dark Knight and Iron Man, the focus of Hancock is preoccupied with preemptive and retributive violent action. But the film goes further than previous films in the representation of the protagonist’s fear of vulnerability. While Batman and Iron Man are motivated by their fear of vulnerability, Hancock frequently seems to be paralysed by his fear. It is not nearly enough to defeat all possible enemies; the hero must also protect himself from any possible wounds through isolationism. This much is suggested in the allegorical moment, as Hancock throws himself out of the building surrounded by shattering glass. In that one moment the American memory of the trauma of the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the national obsession with an isolated stand against oppression are conflated.
Perhaps one of the most horrifying accounts of the attacks on the World Trade Center was that of the people, trapped on higher floors, who threw themselves out of the buildings. Searching YouTube for footage of the September 11th attacks is relatively easy. Looking for footage of victims of the attacks committing suicide proves more difficult. Rumors abound of altered imagery that constructs footage of the suicides that never actually occurred. It would seem that whether or not footage of these events exists is irrelevant. If news coverage during the attacks did not include such imagery, the availability of doctored footage several years later is a testament to the influence the events have had on American public consciousness. I believe that a great deal of this influence comes from the role of defiance in the actions of these people. Rather than wait for the fires on lower floors to spread, they killed themselves. Often public discourse about suicide focuses on the element of control characteristic of the choice to kill oneself. Within the public memory of these deaths, there is a focus on the choice made by American citizens who were faced with a decision that had already been made for them. The public sentiment over these deaths follows the American idealization of an isolated stand against any infringement over civil liberties. Ultimately, these events are remembered for the element of defiance in the act of suicide.

The fact that Hancock throws himself out of the high story window rather than be made vulnerable, then, seems extremely culturally significant. During the summer of 2008, America seemed terrified of vulnerability. Of course this paranoia is only natural for any country involved in a war, for vulnerability spells defeat. Furthermore, the election process is often dependent on a fear of vulnerability. A key example of that is the discourse surrounding the media coverage of Hilary Clinton crying during a campaign event in New Hampshire. Behind the critique of Hilary’s public emotional expression lurked a discourse on vulnerability.
Ultimately, the harsh censure Clinton received as a result of the event seems to suggest that America does not value vulnerability, a fact made evident by the rampant consumption of *Hancock*. 

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, *Hancock* is a film whose popularity during the summer of 2008 is suggestive of the American fear of vulnerability along with an idealization of isolationism. Detailing the trials and tribulations of a superhero who was a victim of a hate crime, the film never once identifies the racism that motivates Hancock’s heroic actions. Rather, all reference to racism within the film becomes coded within an elaborate system of disavowal. Hancock’s memory loss is associated with *Frankenstein*, a film that is famous for scenes which can be read as representations of racial violence. This memory loss caused a black man to enter a racially hostile environment without the defense mechanisms necessary to protect him from insidious trauma. Rather than identify the fight against the infringement on civil liberties characteristic of racism as Hancock’s motivation for his heroics, the film subverts this. All racist verbal assaults within the film get coded into the insult “asshole.” The traumatic implications of this phrase are made evident by the protagonist’s consistent association of this term with vulnerability.

Narratively, the film details Hancock’s attempt to find out who he truly is and thereby end his constant experience of loneliness. Yet ultimately, the film suggests that the only key to happiness and survival for Hancock is to reject all sense of emotional attachment in order to become the ideal man. The popularity of the film seems to suggest that America values something within the ideological charged imagery of shattering glass along with Hancock’s sacrificial action of throwing himself out of the hospital. Thus the film speaks to the American
idealization of isolation of the self in defense against vulnerability during the fight against any and all perceived enemies.
CONCLUSION

The repetition of imagery reminiscent of the media coverage of the attacks of September 11th reinstates the national trauma as a part of the American process of identity formation. Each of the 3 blockbuster Superhero films of the summer of 2008 plays its part in this repetition by utilizing the imagery to varying degrees. So while the allegorical moment is particularly weak in *Iron Man* and *Hancock* when compared with *The Dark Knight*, it cannot be denied that all three films utilize similar imagery in moments of particular narrative significance. This accounts for the reason why the repetition of the imagery is vitally significant when taken in the context of the narrative motifs within all three films. The repetition of story lines dependent on survivors of trauma isolating themselves and building up defenses, while common to the definition of the superhero genre film, also seems indicative of the American response to traumatic events. Rather than accept victimization, America’s national response to the events of 9/11 has been similar to those idealized within the films of the 2008 summer blockbuster season. Just like Batman, Iron Man, and Hancock, America has responded with violent retributive action against any perceived or real threat. This reaction to national horrors is not a new response. After all, the attack on Pearl Harbor motivated a violent retribution and America’s entry in World War Two. Yet in recent times, America has moved from simply responding to violent action to making preemptive strikes against any perceived threats of violence. The end result of this change in foreign policy is the proliferation of American violent action in the Middle East.

Ultimately this change in national policy seems to correspond to the changes in national discourses about the definition of masculinity that occurred during the 2008 Presidential Election. And the films that were popular as the election debates began to grow increasingly heated were depicting varying representations of masculinity in crisis. This crisis was
exemplified in *The Dark Knight* by the embodiment of shadow of the two main characters within their Masks. In *Iron Man*, Tony Stark’s vulnerable body is turned into the masculine ideal through a long process of defense building that ultimately constructed him as a cyborg. Finally, in *Hancock*, the film’s narrative is focused on the racial and gender tensions that motivate Hancock and his heroics. Narratively, all these films are concerned with masculinity and its construction. Ultimately, they all find that there is no room within the male body for the signs or symptoms of victimization or vulnerability. Rather, the ideal man is strong, defiant, and heroic. Yet the way in which this strong masculinity is performed is not traditional, as previous American ideals such as John Wayne and his cinematic characters typified. Rather, this strong and ideal man is imbued with a non-traditional sense of morality which justifies any extremist action because only this hero knows what is right for the greater good. This aspect of the heroes of these films is often exemplified during their final challenge. Thus Batman is able to use a wiretap of Gotham City to locate the Joker, Iron Man is able to decide whether or not the Iron Man technology should be used for good or evil and then destroy the man who attempts to misuse the technology, and Hancock is able to turn his back on heteronormative monogamy in acceptance of an anti-social solitary life. It is this quality of the most popular Superheroes of 2008 that corresponds most directly with contemporary American politics. This relationship is further reinforced by the villains of the films. This is because the films suggest that once a man has experienced a traumatic event, the only way he can regain any semblance of power is in the constant fight against all perceived threats to his power, be they in the form of violence or romance. The end result of this narrative focus is that the villains of the films become either perceived or uncontrollable threats.
Both *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* have villains that mirror the protagonist in some manner, yet have allowed those characteristics that bridge between the two characters to grow out of control. The Joker, like Batman is a victim of a traumatic experience so horrible that it is constantly changing. Yet unlike Batman, who harnesses the anger resulting from his horrific experience to help others, the Joker turns his anger against Gotham City itself. Throughout the film, the focus of Batman’s energy becomes a mad scramble to predict the violence of the Joker and defeat him. In an explicit manner, the film portrays the process and problems of an attempt to develop a preemptive strategy to terroristic violence. This attempt to develop preemptive responses is also evident in *Iron Man*. The two representations of capitalism that characterize Tony Stark and Obadiah Stane within *Iron Man* form the basis for the antagonistic relationship that drives the film’s plot. Obadiah Stane’s brand of capitalism without morals needs to be defeated. In destroying Obadiah Stane, Tony Stark manages to preemptively defeat all perceived threats to his American way of life. As he boasts in the trailers for the upcoming *Iron Man 2*, “I successfully privatized world peace.” In both cases, by defeating (or at least fighting) a villain that is all-too-similar to the hero’s self, a preemptive attack on a threat is made—which ultimately reasserts the masculinity and male power of the superhero.

A similar process occurs in *Hancock*, yet the film’s villain is not personified the same way it is in *The Dark Knight* and *Iron Man*, along with other Superhero films of the 2008 summer such as *The Incredible Hulk* (Leterrier, 2008). Kenneth, the film’s villain, appears to be a plot device meant to illustrate the fears that Hancock as a character must face. In fact, the true enemies of the film are racism and romance. If Hancock allows himself to become romantically involved with his soul-mate Mary, he will open himself up to racial violence. Like the heroes of *The Dark Knight* and *Iron Man*, Hancock must find a way to preemptively defend himself
against a perceived threat of victimization. In order to do so, he isolates himself from his romantic interest, Mary, and focuses solely on his efforts as a hero.

These narrative progressions identify the popular superhero films of 2008 as working towards a construction of masculinity which deals with threats in preemptive strikes that are meant to defend the hero’s power. In the case of *Iron Man* and *Hancock* these preemptive strikes are visually portrayed with the allegorical moment imagery of shattering glass reminiscent of that seen in the footage of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. So while Iron Man is fighting to save the world from Stane’s brand of exploitative capitalism, the struggle is visually portrayed in a sequence full of the imagery of shattering glass. Meanwhile in *Hancock*, Hancock’s ultimate act of sacrifice as a preemptive means of protection from victimization is accompanied with shattering glass as he throws himself out of a high-rise hospital window, in a way reminiscent of the accounts of the suicides of workers in the World Trade Centers during the September 11th attacks. Meanwhile, *The Dark Knight* introduces the conflict between the Joker and Batman with the imagery of shattering glass. The film almost suggests that in order for Batman to have defeated the Joker, he should have (as well as potentially could have) preemptively stopped the Joker *before* or *during* his original bank robbery. These uses of the allegorical moments are particularly relevant to processes of identity formation within the American experience of the trauma of September 11th because they show what has become the accepted national response to horrific events, while visually evoking the horrific event at the same moment.

In the course of the writing of this analysis of the Superhero blockbusters of 2008, Operation Enduring Freedom has become the longest war in American history. Even as the war surpassed the Vietnam War in length, more troops were deployed to Afghanistan to aid in the
fight against Taliban insurgents by the president who promised to end the war during his “historic” campaign. The fact that the longest war in American history has been attributed to the terrorist attacks against two symbols of American power, The World Trade Center (which symbolizes financial power) and the Pentagon (which symbolizes military power), holds a great deal of significance. While the Vietnam War was grossly unpopular, the diminutive protest against Operation Enduring Freedom suggests in general, Americans support this involvement, even nine years later. It is not my goal to argue here that there is a direct correlation between the popular films and political policy or sentiment. Yet it cannot be denied that the films of 2008 are characterized by fear and bloodlust. The thematic devices and motifs within the films exhibit a deep seated fear of trauma and the vulnerability it causes. The films demand violent retribution even before a threat is perceived. These films champion heroes whose masculinity stems from their ability to overcome and compensate for trauma. The fact that these films were consumed in outstanding numbers during a time period of such strong political involvement suggests that America wanted to see these representations. Building off of Siegfried Kracauer’s bold claim about the study of national cinema, the Superhero Blockbusters of 2008 demonstrate that, psychologically speaking, America has a psychotic obsession with trauma, vulnerability, and masculinity defined by its ability to assert itself in violent preemptive action.
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