ABSTRACT

“WHY SO SERIOUS?” COMICS, FILM AND POLITICS, OR THE COMIC BOOK FILM AS THE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY AND NARRATIVE IN A POST-9/11 WORLD

by Kyle Andrew Moody

This thesis analyzes a trend in a subgenre of motion pictures that are designed to not only entertain, but also provide a message for the modern world after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The analysis provides a critical look at three different films as artifacts of post-9/11 culture, showing how the integration of certain elements made them allegorical works regarding the status of the United States in the aftermath of the attacks. Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern theory of simulation and simulacra was utilized to provide a context for the films that tap into themes reflecting post-9/11 reality. The results were analyzed by critically examining the source material, with a cultural criticism emerging regarding the progression of this subgenre of motion pictures as meaningful work.
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CHAPTER ONE: COMIC BOOK MOVIES AND THE REAL WORLD

At 8:46 am on September 11, 2001, New York City awoke to the sight of American Airlines Flight 11, hijacked by members of terrorist group al-Qaeda, crashing into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Less than 20 minutes later, United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into the South Tower, and both buildings eventually caved into the ground 110 stories below. American Airlines Flight 77 flew into the Pentagon at 9:37 am, and United Airlines Flight 93, estimated to be targeted at either the White House or the United States Capitol, crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania at three minutes past ten o’clock. The passengers on UA 93 overpowered their hijackers, who were members of the terrorist organization al-Qaeda, the group that engineered the hijacking of all four flights. Leaving 2,974 people dead, along with all 19 hijackers, it was the worst terrorist attack on American soil in history, exposing the United States’ vulnerability to enemy assault, along with the inefficient security in ports of travel. It irrevocably changed the direction of the country, and the national mood initially became one of unity and faith. The resulting effect on U.S. government policy became aggressive conflict against nations that harbored terrorist suspects, particularly in the Middle Eastern nations of Afghanistan and Iraq. For many Americans, it was the defining moment of the 21st Century, and has affected industry, political direction, and culture.

When America changed on September 11, 2001, the American way of telling stories changed with it. The fantastic events of the day demanded a new story develop as a way of coping with the tragedy. There emerged a post-9/11 narrative, one that still has yet to be fully defined. Yet one can hear it in the way people talk about America’s “enemies,” those who hate freedom and all this nation embodies. One can feel it in the descriptions of terror that followed when lives once defined by certain paths undertook new, sometimes ambiguous, meanings after the towers fell. One can see it in the images and narratives in media, particularly in the way that superheroes are portrayed onscreen, as the phenomenon of superhero movies moved from the cult status it never broke from to major motion pictures. Entire movie studios became dependent on these films for audience and money. Ever since X-Men became the first film that signaled the rise of the
comic book movie in the new millennium (the film hit theaters in the summer of 2000), and the first *Spider-Man* film shattered box office records its sequels have yet to challenge, there has been a large summer movie with its roots in the comic book world every summer since 2002. Only now are we starting to see the full effects of the September 11 attacks being explored in these films.

After the events of September 11, audience identification with superhero characters – particularly those that remain within the real world, or even simply New York City – has led to an increase in the release of films with superhero comic book origins. This is evidenced by the growing popularity of the superhero subgenre of fantasy action, which earned $1 billion domestically in box-office ticket sales in the United States in 2008. A question that is problematic for critics is: why was Hollywood unable to connect these characters with a much larger fan base before the first Marvel Comics movies of the modern era became hits [witness *Spider-Man*’s earnings of $403 million in 2002] (“Box Office/Business for Spider-Man”)? Though Superman and Batman existed in film adaptations before the events of September 11th, their films were often brought down by influences that stripped the promise of reality – or perhaps verisimilitude – from the final products. Moreover, though there was an influence of the real world in earlier franchise works, it soon was replaced by a reliance on fancy and fantastical elements that emerged from the outlandish nature of the science fiction stories being told in comic books.

Both *Superman* and *Batman* film franchises stumbled artistically and financially in their third and fourth outings; among fans, the fourth installment in each of these series is considered bad enough to be impossible to watch due to a number of factors (poor plotting, pacing, special effects, overly campy elements). Can one attribute the failures of the *Superman* and *Batman* franchises pre-9/11 to a lack of believable technology, character development, real-world scenarios, or poor construction? Or was it merely a lack of competition among the pictures? An answer certainly is possible, but this doesn’t explain why even poorly constructed character pieces such as *Daredevil, The Punisher, Ghost Rider* and Ang Lee’s much-maligned *Hulk* were able to connect with audiences in a way that defies conventional Hollywood logic.
There is something more that defines how these movies work for audiences across the spectrum. Even movies that don’t have their roots in specific comic books are able to connect with people across age brackets, demographics, and ethnicities; movies such as *Hancock*, *The Incredibles*, and *Sky High* focus their energies on creating characters based upon successful and recognizable archetypes from the pages of comic stories, and have reaped benefits at the box office. 2009 brings the long-awaited adaptation of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ monumental creation *Watchmen*, a work focusing on darker versions of these archetypes, and this graphic novel has often been considered impossible to film. Perhaps the massive successes that studios have enjoyed with superhero films this decade have caused the public to be more amenable to films featuring revisionist protagonists who question the political system, or at least the superhero’s role in government relations. This is a far cry from the actions of Superman and Batman, both of whom were promoting the purchase of war bonds during World War II, as well as fighting unscrupulous corporate profiteers (Scott 328).

Out of the top 100 highest grossing films released domestically by August 2008, according to *Variety* (a magazine that compiles box office data for various research purposes), fifteen were films that had their origins in comic-related material, and twelve were released after September 11, 2001. The phenomenon of superhero movies, once a subgenre without any support from industry executives, reached its zenith in 2008, when many genre films were released to massive international acclaim and earnings. Recently, the late Heath Ledger won an Academy Award (Best Supporting Actor) for his iconic and masterful portrayal of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, only the second posthumous award that the academy has made in its 81-year history (Peter Finch won the first one for *Network*).

How do the events of September 11 affect the mainstream American acceptance of comic book film heroes? While the first X-Men movie earned over $100 million ("All-Time Domestic [$80m Domestic]"), the premise focused very closely on portraying Magneto as a comic villain, rather than the “terrorist” he becomes at the end of *X2: X-Men United*. The ending of the first film takes place on the Statue of Liberty, with many international diplomats being threatened with the prospect of being turned into a flawed version of the “other” that the mutants represent, the ultimate result being death. The
second film, released in 2003, takes place far away from Ground Zero, setting its climax in the wintry lands of Alaska, and though the lives of every mutant and human are in jeopardy, the ultimate resolution takes place at a distance away from direct contact with bystanders. Nonetheless, an assault on the White House occurs within the opening sequence, when the mutant Nightcrawler (Alan Cummings) comes perilously close to assassinating the President of the United States of America. Perhaps not coincidentally, the second X-Men film earned more than its predecessor, $214 million (“Box Office/Business for X2: X-Men United”).

Justification for this study is the cultural value of the work, which is arrived at by examining the popularity of this particular subgenre, along with the visual information conveyed by these popular works. Rather than conveying meaning via the mythic structure of the comic book superhero, American films have changed to incorporate superheroes in a way that reflects current and traditional values, arriving at a sort of hodgepodge compromise of the two. Newer films like Iron Man and The Dark Knight speak to the American value system via success stories of their altar egos – Tony Stark and Bruce Wayne, respectively – and their box office earnings. Therefore, it is prudent to examine what these films represent for the larger American culture, since it may provide insight into the greater success of these films over others. More importantly, it may reveal elements of American mythology that have been cultivated through the change in the superhero film.

**Purpose of Study**

The first real comic book film adaptation to acknowledge and integrate the events and themes of September 11 was 2006’s V for Vendetta. Based upon a graphic novel created by Alan Moore and David Lloyd during the 1980’s, the film changed the time and details of the script to make the film reflect then-current events in a political tone that was thematically condemnatory of the policies of the Bush and Blair administrations, although it was couched in metaphor within the narrative. When asked if one could watch the film and see it as a representation of the Bush administration, V for Vendetta director James McTeigue replied, “I think whatever baggage you bring into the movie, you can read into it. To be fair, I say ‘yes’ flippantly” (Aames). This reveals that the intention of
the filmmaker was to include imagery that would directly link the content of the film to the Bush White House and/or the Blair administration in England. McTeigue was probably not alone in wanting to use these ideals and content in his adaptation of a storied work; in attempts to create parallels with modern society, it is almost impossible to avoid these issues when recreating classic stories for a new audience.

The success of the adaptation arguably paved the way for future films dealing with themes of terror, including Iron Man and The Dark Knight. This thesis seeks to shed light on a topic of debate, which is the changing nature of the comic book movie in the wake of September 11. Research will cover a set of movies that focuses on a character or set of characters, and these movies will show how, from its/their comic book iterations, the character arc of the protagonist has evolved, adapted to, and incorporated themes and issues from the events of September 11. The original comic as source material would have its primary production set before the eventful day, allowing it to present an arc that was closer in spirit and characterization to the original comic book creation itself. The movies would take place before and after the events of September 11, thus showing how a character or story was changed following those events. Common themes will include a larger sense of nationalism, careful selection of a hero or villain, and settings that reflect events that have occurred in our nation and world post-September 11. By analyzing films with other media theories such as Baudrillard’s Simulations (11) [the symbols of the superhero are detached from their stable meaning of origin, and reflect an uneasy time in both America and the world in their characters’ actions], this research will examine how the narrative of the superhero has changed to become a post-9/11 narrative. The superhero has undergone a change since the concept has moved into the real world in film adaptations, and today’s features are vastly different from the 1978 Richard Donner film Superman, which stands as Hollywood’s first attempt to place the superhero within the context of a “real” world (Wright 259).

The primary research question is thus as follows: How did the superhero film change after September 11? Beyond the financial understanding of the superhero in the filmic context, the research surrounding the superhero does not account for the arrival of the hero in such a manner. The study will take a look at what makes the superhero trope work within this environment, and apply it to the context of culture after September 11,
2001. In this case, the research will include a focus on movies that take place in the context of the events of that day, along with its aftermath — *V for Vendetta, Iron Man, and The Dark Knight*. *The Dark Knight*, besides being the highest-grossing film released domestically since September 11, uses allegorical imagery to capture images and emotions that we relate to the fateful day’s events. This is a perfect example of the change that has developed since the superhero has moved into the real world in film adaptations.

For the purpose of this analysis, the thesis will focus on how the film superhero has evolved over a period of time. This will be fleshed out through subsidiary questions, such as: Has there been a shift in his/her disposition, or his/her status in society? Is it the way that his/her origin reflects the times? How does the character relate to the world at large, outside of the theater? A secondary question will ask how much source material contributes to this identity. Does a superhero’s origin merit change to reflect the new times that have arrived?

**What is a Superhero?**

According to Fingeroth, a superhero has “some sort of strength of character (though it may be buried), some system of (generally-thought-to-be) positive values, and a determination to, no matter what, protect those values” (17). Yet these qualities can also be attributed to several other heroes of classic literature and other visual media, not excluding comic book superheroes; even villains often carry this sort of strength of character, being beholden to a set of principles that define their personalities. For the purpose of this analysis, Fingeroth’s definition of the superhero has been appropriated to allow the inclusion of a character such as V, whose actions sometimes border on the villainous. Unlike the classical literary heroes Tarzan and John Carter from Mars, along with the iconic film character Indiana Jones, these characters have had something occur to them that acted as impetus for them to enter a life/time of heroism. *V* is the result of government imprisonment and experimentation, *Iron Man* comes from Tony Stark’s captivity in Afghanistan at the hands of terrorists who have appropriated his weapons, and *Batman* is the culmination of Bruce Wayne’s training after witnessing his parents being gunned down in front of him. Yet it is not every person who emerges from these
terrible events to become heroes in their stories. Often a villain will emerge under similar circumstances to punish those he/she believes caused his/her misfortune in life.

Perhaps in order to become a superhero, one must also possess skills and traits that normal people do not have. Fingeroth claims that this is true, noting that even “so-called normal heroes like Batman…leap(s) – unarmed – into gunfire and mutant-powered muscle – coming out with nary a scratch” (17). This ability to survive what would surely be a devastating scene of combat makes the character a superhero in his own way, since we are to assume that he has trained in places outside of normal human reach in order to achieve this skill. In fact, that is exactly the point of the early training sequences in *Batman Begins*.

Moreover, V is a person with skills outside of the normal human set, which is a result of the experimentation done to him by the government in the production of the AIDS-like St. Mary’s Virus. Able to defeat several men in combat while another crucial player reloads, V is perceived as a superhuman in this sense. Though his experiences in government torture and prison have made him potentially a villain, the audience sees a hero emerge in his treatment of potential rape victim Evey, saving her from assault by corrupt government officials. Even his torture of her, malevolent as it is, is a way for her to free herself from the shackles of the Norsefire Party and its ideologies. Finally, Iron Man literally becomes who he is due to technology, since his Arc Reactor becomes his literal battery for both his heart and suit of armor. His ability to fly and lift large, heavy objects are based on the suit that he wears, making him able to stand apart from other human characters. Thus, the subset of having unique skills and/or technology apart from other humans make these characters separated from other classic human protagonists.

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the definition of the superhero will be as follows: a superhero is one who, having had events in his/her life that could be qualified as tragedies or terror, bears enhanced or extraordinary abilities that set him/her apart from normal human beings. They are a member of the audience in that they are human, yet they possess skills and abilities that set them apart from normal humans; whether these skills are caused by training (Batman), technology (Iron Man), or government experimentation and enhancement (V).
Literature Review

There has been extensive scholarly research into comic books and their film adaptations, but most works do not make the influence of September 11 their primary focus. Rather, most of these texts are centered on the adaptation of the heroes from their original text, the comic book. There have been analyses of the hero from the ongoing series, and much has been made of the ongoing superhero series as being unwieldy in its storytelling provisions (Wright 283). Despite the rise of independent comics in the film adaptation realm (Ghost World, Road to Perdition, American Splendor, A History of Violence, to name the most recent), much of the discussion has been on the superhero and the use of mythology within the realms of film, including the X-Men and Spider-Man franchises (Housel 75; Evans 166). The discussion of the superhero almost always focuses on his/her origins, never really anticipating that the characters can change due to the need to reach a modern audience. Not only are comic book movies ignored as the largest film trend to emerge since September 11, but also there has not been a larger exploration into the changing role of superheroes since the events of that fateful day.

While discussions of popular film and comic icons largely ignore the political implications of their adaptations in the modern age, there has been extensive research on comic books and comic films within mainstream culture. Literature on comic book film is largely concerned with the philosophical implications of the heroes in the real world, and discussion of the political aspects of these characters usually is discussed in cursory terms.

The focus of this literature review is primarily upon work on mainstream and comic book movies with study of the development of the characters within the modern world, issues of political agenda, and imagery with special focus on the adaptation of these works. A review of selected research on comic books is also included.

Issues of Method and Theory

For the purposes of this study, it is important to include the focus of postmodernism, since much of what will be discussed comes from a postmodern perspective. The works of Jean Baudrillard provide a theoretical basis for the implementation and alteration of the real world with the presence of superheroes. While Baudrillard never had the experience of seeing any of the films on which this thesis
focuses its energies, his writings on the relationship between media and society prove invaluable to a discussion of film’s close relationship with society. For Baudrillard, superheroes and their stories would represent another formation of simulation/simulacra within the subset of genre film.

A French postmodernist, Baudrillard posits the belief that there is no objective reality, only the social construction of man’s own making. Reality is an ideology, a mask to conceal the fact that reality as it stands does not really exist. Reality has been converted into, and replaced by, signs as the primary mode of the producing/organizing principle of society. Baudrillard, in his influential work *Simulations* (containing the theoretical crux of this work, “The Precession of Simulacra”), explains that, in the postmodern world, the boundary between image or simulation and reality implodes, and with it the very experience and ground of “the real” disappears (Baudrillard 57).

The precession of simulacra then becomes the focus of Baudrillard’s work, and can be easily illustrated through characters and actions from *The Dark Knight*. The precession is the reflection of a basic reality (filming the scenes in real locations in Chicago); it then masks and perverts a basic reality (placing the characters of Batman and the Joker); masks the absence of a basic reality (the Joker in his speeches); and bears no relation to any reality at all (the placement of the “work of fiction” tag at the end of the credits for the film). Baudrillard uses the map of Borges as an example of basic simulacrum, since the area the map covers becomes more real than the actual territory that is within the empire. It is the map that precedes the territory, the illusion that comes before the real, if any real existed at all. At the final stage, reality no longer exists; there is only the simulacrum (Baudrillard 11-12; Best and Kellner 120).

The media are the main reason for the simulacrum’s existence, at least according to Best and Kellner (120-121). Therefore, the need for a superhero originates within the symbolism inherent in the media creations of superheroes, which are then easily transferred onto film. The goods of a superhero function as needs created by iconography and commercial imagery, and reflect a simulation of reality within their production and creation. The simulacrum thus becomes more important than the reality of the events, as the audience witnesses the transformation of real events into simulated versions on film that play out in familiar tropes and outcomes, friendly for mass audience
consumption. These films function as a new map of reality, much like that of Borges, as boundaries between information and entertainment, and images and politics, implode (Best and Kellner 120).

Baudrillard (1981) argues that “all messages functionalized by the media, like the operation of a referendum, controls rupture, the emergence of meaning, and censorship” (171). Thus, if film is a one-way communication model, where the message is coded within a piece or artifact of media, and the audience must decode and interpret the message that the creator embedded within the artifact, then it becomes easier to embed those messages within films that reach a mass audience. The superhero film is noted for its iconography, since many of the most culturally and economically significant superheroes function with a great deal of symbolism that is driven by the values of their creators and companies.

Baudrillard notes that a relationship between symbols results in a system of exchange, where meaning can be inferred and transferred. The system of exchange refers to the masks that the characters wear in their comic book and film representations. The audience accepts these masks on their protagonists, since they can imagine their own faces underneath them. Thus, the viewer is drawn into the work with greater intensity, exchanging time for the values that are shared by producer(s) and audience of film or comic works.

*Issues in Source Materials*

The influx and influence of comic book movies has expanded prodigiously within the last decade, and this has been the richest time in history for production of the subgenre. Through production comes a specific agenda for these movies, which is to reach the largest number of people possible via technique and marketing. Richard Barsam places under the microscope films made after September 11, arguing for their artistry against earlier works considered iconic, and how films today can be marketed and interpreted differently than ones before. Characters are represented onscreen with a specific agenda to reach a broad audience, yet doing so in a way that allows the audience to identify with particular elements of the superhuman, such as casting the maniacal Jack Nicholson to be the Joker in Tim Burton’s version of the story (Barsam 153).
Robert Warshow argues for a more liberal critique of the popular culture he witnessed during his lifetime, and argues that comics may be a greater art form than their critics claim (54). His son’s reading of the EC comics line and Mad! magazine is his glimpse into the world of comics during a time of tumult, before the work of Dr. Frederic Wertham on the alleged effects of anti-social themes in comics would destroy much of what the young man would consume on the newsstands. Warshow recognizes that comics represent a colorful form of literature that, though he may not classically appreciate it, speaks to the taste of younger viewers (60), and does not specifically produce the effects categorized by Dr. Frederic Wertham (65).

Influential Works on Film Adaptations

In the 1980’s, the mainstream comic book superhero was deconstructed by writers and illustrators, a practice that would prove influential in future film adaptations of these heroes. In his work The Dark Knight Returns, Frank Miller places Batman in the context of the real world, and shows how superheroes impact the world around them, giving credence to Batman’s place as an immutable, almost mythic, force of society (Wright 267). In Miller’s eyes, Batman deals with the government much as a terrorist does, showing the ineptitude and inefficiency of the Reagan presidential administration. Miller includes extensive documentation of what he wanted to accomplish through the first work, setting the stage for the anarchic agenda of the sequel in its introduction. Commissioner Gordon, at the funeral of Bruce Wayne/Batman, decries the state of the world, and blankly states that, “We’re in trouble deep. We need him. We need Bruce Wayne” (Miller 11). There is explicit depiction of a plane crash engineered via a nuclear explosion that played off Cold War fears. This provides a simulation from which the film version of Batman will draw inspiration, thus giving life to Baudrillard’s claim of simulation/simulacra, since the symbol soon becomes a reality that masks the fact that reality does not exist.

V for Vendetta is Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s treatise on terrorism and its positive effects in a world gone mad. The work is a complex narrative surrounding the character V, whose true identity is never revealed. V becomes something greater than his identity; he is a menagerie of ideas, brought together in a force of a man whose values hold together in one powerful symbol. He is a rebellion against the Status Quo, and
largely stands as violent enactor of adjudication, spawning an heir in his captive-turned-comrade, Evey. V is the one who cleans off the debris of the previous government, creating a bold new world for the survivors of his vendetta. The pursuit of a better world free of violence drives Iron Man and Batman in their respective comics and films, keeping the protagonists focused on utilitarian solutions to their problems. According to James Keller, *V for Vendetta* is not a superhero comic in the larger sense, but rather a statement of what the comic book hero, and iconography overall, represents in the modern world, and the benefits of having a mythological figure – a literal icon – standing up for the common people.

**Subversion, Politics, and Icons**

The comic book, though not classically recognized as a harbinger of popular culture values and adolescent cool, was being debated by Congress long before Elvis Presley and his peers changed the face of youth culture in the 1950’s, thus placing the comic book at the forefront of cultural revolution during the turbulent decade (Hajdu 7). The subversion of authority, though never a staple of comic magazines, became self-regulated by the Comics Code Authority. The Authority emerged with the publication of Dr. Frederic Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* and the subsequent Congressional hearings on violence in comics. The belief that these materials would provoke juvenile delinquency during a politically contentious time in America’s history only confirms the symbolic power within the stories and iconography of comic books. Tony Stark, recognizing the need for a symbol, institutes Iron Man as a bodyguard for himself and his company in the original comic series, and the very existence of a superhero within the Stark Industries ranks gives the company a boost in sales. Iron Man’s existence as a superhero within his universe gives him power through symbolism, and this value is communicated back to the reader. Moreover, the film version of his character features reinforced characteristics of “being cool,” at the same time showing the precarious nature of performing illegal actions in foreign countries, a sort of subversion of authority that would never have been allowed in the days of Wertham, but is also a strong political metaphor and visual in the aftermath of September 11.

The superhero began to recapture the focus of the American public in the early 1980’s, with the *X-Men* comic franchise becoming a crossover success among the once-
lost female fan base (Wright 263), and covering more realistic themes (Wright 272-273). The potential of “revisionist” superheroes, or ones who are implicitly rooted in reality, to cross over to a larger audience outside of regular comics readers appealed to companies, which began implementing more violent stories into their works. Instances of success with Miller’s own Daredevil and Batman projects are indications that comic creators were capturing new audiences outside of the original comic readers, and updating these characters to reflect newer, more violent sensibilities that appeared in print and film (Wright 266-269). There also emerged a political element in the works that, instead of alienating a large section of the audience, was able to appeal to people who ordinarily wouldn’t read comics, and showed that mature content had a place within the larger realm of sequential art. The movement to bring more reality and mature content into comics through the “revisionist” superhero meant that believable superheroes existed, and the symbolism inherent with superheroes crossing into the real world meant that their place in greater popular culture as icons was ensured (Wright 277).

Frank Miller has had perhaps more impact on the last thirty years of comic and comic-related film production than any comic creator before him (Walker 266) (apart from Stan Lee), even stating on record that he, an avowed child of the Sixties, saw the flag as an anachronism (“That Old Piece of Cloth”). In interviews given after the attacks, Miller stated that he would be focusing his influential energies towards a campaign for stronger American power in his works. Miller admitted to Gary Groth (110-112) that the September 11 attacks shapes the characters and creators of comics and films, since the superheroes experience this event with the producers of comic fiction. This is a reflection of the larger industry’s movement to recognize the changes wrought by September 11 for their audience, as the real-life villainy now eclipsed anything that Miller and other creators could conceive. Miller and Groth recognize these characters as cultural icons, and Miller’s plan to use these archetypal figures as analytical centers for the country was realized in the comic films that have emerged after the attacks (Groth 115). The characters become affected by single events in their lives, and spend their lives fighting to right the wrongs done to them via costumed heroics. This could easily be applied to Miller’s work post-September 11, since his personal beliefs were changed by terrorism, and his work is a response to it (Groth 110-112). The audience’s beliefs have
also changed as a result of the news coverage and imagery of the attacks, and the response of an audience that now faced an existential menace is one that looks for existential heroes to stand for the society at large (“That Old Piece of Cloth”).

Superheroes and the Real World

The superhuman has always stood as a larger metaphorical and moralistic treatise within society, and the American people largely see superheroes as mythic outgrowths of themselves. Batman has always been an extension of the audience, because any one of his readers could potentially become Batman if he/she is good enough (Fingeroth 67). The very fact that he wears a mask allows the reader to delve even deeper into his psyche, for one could hide his/her face beneath the mask as well. The connecting tissue of *V for Vendetta*, *Iron Man*, and *The Dark Knight* is the mask that the characters wear, all of them acting as armor against the world, protecting their identities from those who would do them harm. These characters exist in a world that refuses to make sense, and confront it via their masked personas, cloaking their actions and anger in all types of rationalizations and codes of behavior that they have established (Fingeroth 121). The world of Batman and his successors in the comics is one both familiar and foreign to readers, where anger is the most rational reaction to the insanity (Fingeroth 132). This world bears many similarities to the media landscape after September 11, which impacted the American public’s perception of the world that was right outside their door. Thus, using familiar iconography from the media, it is easier to imagine oneself in a place of power, able to rectify the wrongs and not ultimately remain powerless, possibly even seeking vengeance for transgressions.

Superheroes dealing with the real world have been a common practice ever since the medium took hold among the reading population, and *The Dark Knight Returns* is one of the most popular ways that this version has appeared in print. It simultaneously grounds the fictional story with real values while deconstructing the very superhero upon which it is based. The influence of the elder Batman on the populace is a comment on reality, since the ethical dimensions of vigilantism forces the reader to reconsider his/her understanding of the character (Skoble 33). Vengeance is a popular theme in the wake of the September 11th attacks, and the prospect of vigilantism holds sway in the population (Skoble 62). Therefore, the use of vengeance as a motivating factor in superhero films is
propelled by origins of the superhero characters, along with entrenchment in values emerging from the aftermath of the attacks.

The very nature of the superhero has been called into question after the horrific events of that fateful September day. Conceived as an identity that will strike terror into the hearts of men who would do evil, Batman’s nature is problematic under the definition of a hero, since he is a protagonist who sometimes does bad things. Batman’s films involve his complicity in the death of Ra’s Al-Ghul and Harvey Dent/Two-Face, and often the character can justify these through utilitarian means. Bruce Wayne is driven by personal tragedy to eradicate crime within Gotham City in the comic books and movies based on his character, making him something of a vengeful anti-hero, though closer to the superhero in action (Spivey and Knowlton 55). This is a familiar trope in the comic book hero, and holds true for Iron Man and V, though V wishes to destroy a totalitarian government that holds absolute sway over its citizenry. America as an anti-heroic country could be argued from this point of view, since the nation moved against its enemies, and has done things that may conflict with larger legal conventions, in order to pursue justice for the crimes committed against its citizens.

Violence and Aggression

Batman displays an aggression towards evil and criminality borne out of the death of his parents by a thief one evening (Tate 139). In The Dark Knight, one only needs to see how the character throws crime boss Sal Maroni off a fire escape and breaks his legs in an attempt to interrogate him to understand his connection with torture. As Tate noted, “Few conclusions are possible other than the Batman enjoys this violence on a personal level and likes to indulge himself” (142).

The question of torture also becomes important in the films and comics of V for Vendetta and Iron Man, since they prove important factors in the origins and methods of the characters. Whereas Tony Stark doesn’t enjoy violence when dispatching his enemies, he is still a product of the torture he received at the hands of the Ten Rings terrorist camp, and performs an illegal operation in Afghanistan in the Iron Man armor that kills a large number of terrorists (“Iron Man”). The product of biological terrorism by the state, V utilizes violence in a manner befitting one seeking revenge after imprisonment and torture at the hands of an oppressive government (“V for Vendetta”).
American politics are both promoted and questioned in these works, and the audience is pushed to cheer the hero in all three films, even when he utilizes methods that may be questionable in relation to the larger political context in which they are based.

**Terrorism and Superheroes**

The events of September 11th were explored by scholars in great detail, with attention going to symbolism and tone in popular works made after the events. The process of altering the superhero to fit in this new world where the concept no longer seems relevant to actual terrors relies on accepting the comic book superhero as part therapy and healing, which was a departure from the previous realm of creating a fantastic universe separate from our own (Nyberg 179-182). This affirms the need to place heroes in the context of September 11th. Iconography becomes a focal point for the stories told after the events, and largely has become emblematic of these characters since their inception. Therefore, their use in popular fiction, be it comics, television, or film, is not surprising. Iconography has always been, and will remain, the arbiter of successful superhero stories, and those that strongly reflect the American experience will resonate more with an audience shaken by these events, reflecting an ideology that is more pronounced than in any other form of media (Lovell 164).

The greatest impetus for the changing role of the hero in American comic book mythology was the actual heroism on display in the media (Nyberg 179). The policemen, firefighters, and emergency workers who were the primary assistants on the scene become mythologized through the same method and medium as the superheroes that populate comics in America. Comics were made about these people, some volunteers, who gave their lives on September 11. In others, the audience witnesses children, often thought of as the primary audience for comic books, eschewing the costumed crusaders of their comic books by wearing shirts and uniforms representing the New York Police Department and the Fire Department of New York (Nyberg 181). The superheroes even admit their powerlessness in these moments, claiming that Earth will be all right without their presence in the real world, and it stands as a larger monument to heroism when a metaphor for strength such as the Hulk is cowed by the devastation surrounding him after the attacks. Only the perseverance of an aid worker to rally him to help proves enough for the fictional creation to work again (Nyberg 178). This is an example of the changing
role of the superhero as reactive instead of proactive, and this alteration soon affected comics across all the major publishers, including DC and Marvel (Nyberg 179). As comic book movies began taking hold across America, the changes in the comics eventually crept into the film adaptations of these heroes, reflecting the new status quo of heroes and superheroes in American culture.

There are many forms of propaganda, and the most effective ones are those that promote ideals through symbolism and recognizable tropes, uniting people for a common cause through recognizable imagery and text (Scott 328). The superhero is not untouchable in regards to propaganda; witness the initial creation of Captain America, who was set up as a direct attack on fascism and Adolf Hitler (Scott 334). This “classic” version of Captain America is not the same one that exists in the most successful version, the modern iteration in Marvel’s Ultimate comic line. The Ultimate universe Captain America is set up in familiar clothing, including a color scheme that resembles his costume in the 1940’s, but it is now placed on top of military armor that resembles troop combat gear in Afghanistan, and chats with President Bush about being “cool” and freeing hostages from Middle Eastern terrorist cells in operations that are condemned as predatory by the rest of the world (Scott 337). As the comic unfolds, Bush and Captain America are ultimately correct in the obliteration of these cells, since the successors of violence soon move against the United States in a siege reminiscent of the World Trade Center attacks, with Captain America and the Ultimates (the “revisionist” take on Marvel’s popular superteam Avengers) defeating the terrorists and reinforcing American dominance. The shifting of propaganda messaging moves away from cleanly labeling a nationality of people as being dangerous, such as comics creators denouncing Germans and the Japanese during World War II, to the unification of all people underneath the allies of America. Likewise, the shifting role of the superhero is a reflection of the needs of the country during times of war, and these colorful and visually exciting characters can be used to send strong visual messages to other citizens (Scott 327-328).

Many critics, such as Sean Burns of the Philadelphia Weekly, have argued about the political message and actual execution of the adaptation and moralizing in the 2006 film version of V for Vendetta (Burns). The film adaptation changes the characters, setting, and narrative of the book to fit a more contemporary mold. The “hero” V is a
revolutionary terrorist, whereas the British government in the film and book engages in “state terrorism” (Keller 47). The differences in revolutionary terrorism and state terrorism are a factor in not only the film V for Vendetta, but also Iron Man and The Dark Knight. Keller defines terrorism, and thus the character of V and subsequent creations, as being “meaningless without an audience, its purpose to direct the populace toward radical action or fundamental change, whether it be the suspension of civil liberties in the interests of national security…or the consolidation of popular respect and support for the revolutionary cause represented by the terrorist act” (Keller 46). There is an audience for the superhero, one that is informed by the events of September 11 and its aftermath; therefore, the characters become agents of change through their personal actions, the consolidation of popular respect focused on the recreation of these events in their own environments.

The very focus of this work is the narrative that is being told within the comic book film, and how it reflects the larger context of the American experience in the wake of September 11. Characters like Batman and Iron Man “not only amuse us, but in many cases they have become part of our lives” (Berger 109). The superhero is one of the first heroes and/or heroines whom generations of readers grew up with, and, in the case of avid comics readers, followed for many years of their lives (Berger 108). The importance of visuals and symbols within popular stories reinforces the superhero as a cultural icon for a mass audience, since one does not need to see politics written out to understand the actions of a character drawn on a comic page.

**Scope of Study**

This work will focus on the superhero film, what the characters do and/or say, and how the characters and/or the films reflect or symbolize the “real” world in relation to the events of September 11 and/or terrorism and its effects. The traditional superhero film depicts a fanciful world that comfortably exists outside the realm of the real world through its fantastic protagonists and unbelievable situations. The revisionist superhero film avoids many of the trappings of previous iterations of the character, moving instead into a solid understanding of what would happen to society and the character were they
introduced simultaneously. At this point, given the fantastic events that have occurred at the turn of the century, it is imperative to determine the voice of the superhero as redefined by mythical qualities to figure out where we have arrived in our society. Three films have effectively moved their characters into the “real” world after September 11, using the events of the day as a way of changing the characters for the film adaptation. These films are *V for Vendetta* (2006), *Iron Man* (2008), and *The Dark Knight* (2008).

*Iron Man*

An example of the larger *modus operandi* of this study would be an examination of the origin of Iron Man, using a critical eye to analyze what this character represents for the audience. *Iron Man* reflects a newer ideology, since it was released almost six years to the day after the initial *Spider-Man* film, the first superhero movie to be released in the wake of the September 11th attacks. Tony Stark is a billionaire industrialist whose specialty is weapons manufacturing, and his latest invention is a Jericho missile that is capable of bombing several enemy combatants simultaneously. His latest demonstration takes place in front of the American Army in Afghanistan, and after the demonstration and sale of the technology, Stark is captured by a terrorist organization known as the Ten Rings; in the process Stark is wounded by his own weaponry, which the terrorists have acquired for personal gain from Stark’s business partner, Obadiah Stane (a thinly veiled Dick Cheney reference, since Stark Industries also represents a Halliburton-esque business). Stark escapes from captivity by constructing a suit of armor, which he uses to defeat Stane and the terrorists, while publicly denouncing his company’s weaponry business and announcing that he is a costumed vigilante responsible for illegal political actions in an unstable region. The results of his admission have yet to be determined, though a sequel is underway at this time.

Throughout *Iron Man* the following ideas can be seen through the actions of the story and its characters: terrorist attacks in other countries; corrupt business partners signing dirty deals with these terrorists to further their own political goals in the U.S.; newer technology making the war easier on America’s front; the question of whether war or peace is the correct answer; and taking personal, illegal actions to ensure that America’s safety is paramount. These are only a few of the themes present that show how divergent Iron Man’s origin is from his comic roots, where his suit is made as a way
of sustaining his life after he is captured and wounded in the jungles of Korea; along the way, the comic version of Iron Man showed his struggle against his villains. This conflict reflected industry’s role in the struggle against Communism during the 1960’s.

Ultimately, Iron Man strives for modernity and change in his story, at the same time maintaining a balance with the character’s malleable origins in the Sixties. The plot of the film reflects that difference, and strives to show how characters reflect post-9/11 sensibilities. By recreating the outside world, comic book movies strive to make sense of a world turned upside down by the fateful day’s events. The unreal destruction of September 11 is answered by a string of costumed heroes, fantastic characters who answer the call to reflect uncertain times and help us deal with the struggle for identity in a post-9/11 world.

_V for Vendetta_

The character of _V_ is a terrorist in the graphic novel, set in a potential prediction of the 1990s to comment on the Thatcher regime of Britain in the 1980’s. For the film adaptation, the character has now been transplanted to a future in 2020, with the shift to a commentary on the Bush administration. One example of this commentary is the classification of “aviary flu” under the banner of propaganda, as ordered by the film’s representation of the British leader, Chancellor Adam Sutler (renamed from his comic version, Adam Susan). This report of the flu never appeared in the original text, but is included as one example of propaganda spread to quell the revolution that the actions of Codename V threaten to spark throughout the nation. Though not the large success that the film _Iron Man_ would become, _V for Vendetta_ drew a large audience in both domestic and foreign markets, earning a larger box office take than other R-rated action films. More importantly, it became the first comic book movie to reflect an anti-Bush agenda within its content, using the adapted material to speak about the views in reaction to the American public against the Bush administration.

_The Dark Knight_

_The Dark Knight_’s domestic box office take of over $525 million has made it the second-highest grossing movie of all time. Though box office numbers are not necessarily the best way to confirm the cultural significance and lasting legacy of this
film, there can be no denying that this work found ways to touch a chord in the audience in a manner that was surpassed only by 1997’s Titanic, another film whose real-life tragedy was able to draw in people who otherwise would have set the film aside as a piece of fluff and fiction. The ideology behind the recent hit film The Dark Knight is a complex and ambiguous one, open to interpretation from the audience. The movie offers glimpses of political corruption, criminal control of a territory a la al-Qaeda, terrorism, disintegration of morality within the legal system, torture as a means of gathering information, sadism, anarchy, ideological differences, and wiretapping as a means of catching criminals. It does not go unnoticed when Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) tells Bruce Wayne/Batman (Christian Bale) that his sonar system – which illegally uses cell phone signals to recreate movement and location – is “too much power for one man” ("The Dark Knight"). The film is a direct reflection of the environment of fear that has been created in the wake of 9/11; the narrative of the plot would not exist without the state of the world today.

Yet it is a defiantly entertaining film, and its themes easily can be overlooked for popcorn blockbuster entertainment. The moral ambiguity the film presents does not require its audience to extend its brain beyond surface, visceral experiences; rather, the subtext of the film allows for its larger messages to be revealed through the actions of the characters, without coming off as heavy-handed. Even when the characters move away from reality, there is a plethora of action and excitement on display for viewers to enjoy without needing a copy of the day’s newspaper for extra meaning.

It seems the closer to American politics the movie is (without sacrificing the narrative thrust of the work), the greater the earnings for the film. This author would like to look at the mirror of our world using the “capes and cowl” genre as a guide to our world in the wake of September 11. The unreal events of that day have caused our films to become couched in fantasy, with heroes hiding behind masks and powers in order to help raise consciousness and awareness of themes and ideas in the real world. We deal with the fantastic by paying to watch men and women put on masks and become something else; whether that mask is Bruce Wayne or Batman is irrelevant, since the mask itself becomes the answer to a void given life by us.
**Research Method**

I have located no studies that attempt a critical analysis of superhero films post-September 11. The often-metaphorical nature of such comics and their subsequent film adaptations will involve changes to the characters in a way that is indicative of greater societal changes within the 21st Century, and will easily reflect the events of September 11 and its aftermath. There has been work done focusing on the differences between thematic and structural adaptations of comic book movie adaptations, such as that done by Matthew Jones. Thematic adaptations share in common particular characters and conflicts with their comic art source material, but do not employ the same set of “distributional functions” for the central plot or story arc of the film, meaning that they do not copy the comic work outright in its structure. Structural adaptations, for the most part, use the same set of distributional functions as the comic art source material upon which they are based (Jones 109). Since *V for Vendetta*, *Iron Man*, and *The Dark Knight* change many aspects of the comic art source material outright in their creations, they stand as thematic adaptations under Jones’ definition.

One of the justifications for this work may be to test a textual methodology for film criticism and analysis. Though it will look at the evolution of the superhero film in brief parts, it will focus on three films that critically update their original source material to reflect the times: *V for Vendetta* (2006), *Iron Man* (2008), and *The Dark Knight* (2008).

This analysis was concerned with the relationship between film messages and the environment because the research indicated an interest in images and dialogue that resonated with, and influenced, viewers. The ultimate focus was on a detailed analysis of the films.

Two sources for the texts under analysis were used to achieve the purpose of this study: a copy of the film on DVD, and a copy of the original comic source text and artwork, which can be used to reference shots and iconography.

The first test in analyzing the film was to compare the film with the comic itself to determine how closely the film adhered to the character within the pages of the comic. Given the fact that comics are created as a visual medium much like film, it is not surprising to find entire pages of the comic replicated within the frames of a film.
The second step in the process was to locate and identify portions of the film that portray events related to terrorism and/or events and iconography related to September 11 and its aftermath. These did not need to be present within the original comic; many adaptations of previously created works alter the content for creative license.

The third step of the analysis involved a detailed description and evaluation of the film’s visual content. The basic storyline of the complete work is briefly synopsized in later chapters, and the key segments are identified in later chapters. The key segments are then viewed via a DVD player, and the visual and narrative elements of each shot are analyzed with a critical view towards the portrayal of elements of post-9/11 characterization.

This study will focus on key scenes within these three films and use content analysis to identify the frequency of, or references to, events of September 11th in the narrative of each film. Using Baudrillard as a theoretical perspective, this thesis will focus on the dialogue, imagery, and setting of the film, contrasting it with the work of comics as they relate to the films listed. Most movie patrons never have had contact with the original source material, and thus the comics may seem irrelevant to, or in service of, the plot of the film. They are, after all, adaptations of a work, and the composition of a comic book/graphic novel may not easily translate to the celluloid version of the story.

Points of Discussion in Narrative

The trouble with *V for Vendetta*, *Iron Man*, and *The Dark Knight* is that their main simulacra are characters who wear masks. The audience members can use this symbolism to place themselves behind the Guy Fawkes mask/armored suit/cape and have adventures in which they take on the problems of the world. However, if the films mask and pervert a basic reality, then they also stand as a depressing reminder that there is nobody out there willing to heed the call of society and mete out justice. Everyone can be represented, but at the end of the day the audience walks out into the real world, leaving the hero behind. The simulacrum is true, since it conceals nothing, and stands for nothing. It bears no resemblance to reality at the end of its final stage.

As stated earlier, *V for Vendetta* brought specific changes to the narrative in order to make the film modern and politically charged, which was the explicit intent of the
filmmakers and screenwriters. *Iron Man*, having arrived after the adaptation of *V*, is a reflection of the new political sensibilities of the 21st century, and may take a larger chance by incorporating a political element into the story of a billionaire industrialist who has an altar ego of a technologically enhanced hero.

*The Dark Knight* stands out as a film that towers above all the others that came before it (the lauded and politically charged *Iron Man* included) for certain specific reasons, beyond its financial recuperations. The film is considered a “revisionist” superhero film, one that takes many of the trappings that “pollute,” according to critics, the other genre films that came before it, and effectively eliminates them, thus making it a more transcendent work of art. It represents an evolution towards reality in superhero films, and the film accomplishes this by changing characters and stories to fit a new mold of superhero and time. In effect, one could say that all the films released since *X-Men* in 2000 have been leading up to this point in the narrative of the superhero.

Secondly, it contains the closest interpretation of the “real world” within a superhero setting, mainly because it focuses on characters that don’t exhibit superhuman powers or strength, but rather a technologically driven protagonist and minimalist antagonist, both of whom exist in terms that reveal themselves to be very much focused on the more human aspects of their archetypes. Thus, the *Dark Knight* is the map of reality for the comic films, a simulacrum of what the real world is when the film is over.

*Chapter Organization*

This chapter has provided a defined research question, along with a reinforcement of the central method and timeline. The second chapter will provide a workable history of the comic book and the film adaptation, as far as they pertain to my topic. Special focus will begin with the film adaptation of Superman, whose 1978 film success provided impetus for continued cinematic representation of comic characters. The third chapter will reflect the work of Baudrillard, whose theories provide an important reflective principle in this work. The chapter will state how the various strands of research complement each other, thus showing how the representations of characters are simulations/simulacra, and what that ultimately means in terms of the post-9/11 narrative.
The fourth and final chapter will focus on a conclusive summary of these potential findings, and whether the cultural artifacts answer the larger question of “Where are we now?”
CHAPTER TWO: THE HISTORY OF THE COMIC BOOK FILM

Chapter one provided an overview of the purpose and background for the comic book heroes as they are adapted to film. This second chapter provides a historical examination of the comic book to film adaptation within American cinema. The comic book film in America has almost solely focused on the superhero, which remains the largest market force in comic books in the nation. Though there have been successful films created from non-superhero comics, such as *Ghost World, American Splendor,* and *A History of Violence,* this thesis will focus on the development of comic superheroes into their film adaptations. This chapter is dedicated to the (by no means comprehensive) history of the comic book superhero film, showing how historical events – and often war or conflict in American history – have affected the movies themselves, along with audience interest in the works.

The comic book film has undergone a radical change since the Max Fleischer *Superman* cartoons of the early 1940’s, which were more notable for their innovative use of rotoscoping (creating animated cartoons by tracing live-action footage) and design than their political content (Flagg 1625). The first true movie serial was based off a property now at Warner Brothers, one that was originally created as a clone of Superman to imitate the enormous success of the future icon. *The Adventures of Captain Marvel* arrived in 1941 as the first movie serial to use a superhero character as its protagonist, and the success of this strategy ensured that future movie serials would involve the superhero characters in some form (Jones); Captain Marvel’s popularity rivaled even that of Superman in the early 1940’s (Wright 18-19). *Spy Smasher* and *The Batman* followed in 1942 and 1943, respectively (Jones).

There has been a clear sign of American propagandizing and proliferation in their wake. The *Batman* movie serials of the 1940’s used jingoistic characters and traits to become more palatable for the average American, who was going through World War II and exposed to intense hatred of Nazi Germany and Japan during this media-heavy conflict. Even Captain America was the subject of movie serials. He debuted in 1940 punching Adolf Hitler in the jaw on the cover of his premiere issue, and his serials arrived at the height of the conflict in 1944 (Wright 32; Jones).
By the end of the Second World War, superheroes were no longer tied together in unity against the great enemies of America, and their comic books were soon being phased out in favor of more realistic stories in crime and romance comics. Yet their adventures were being recorded on television cameras and sent to homes across the country. *The Adventures of Superman* was the first recorded instance of a superhero being beamed into television sets, and kept interest in Superman high among the public, making the character immune to the recession in the rest of the industry (Wright 182).

If it appears that there was a distinct lack of superhero comics being adapted into film and/or television works, that lack can be attributed to the muted response given to comic book superheroes after their use as propaganda tools in World War II. Following the war, many superheroes began to fade out, with only the most jingoistic remaining in place to fight the Cold War against the Communists. Many had become outmoded, especially in the wake of the ongoing rise of juvenile delinquency that accompanied the end of the Second Great War. Moreover, the work of Dr. Frederic Wertham in 1954’s *Seduction of the Innocent* proved to be the death knell for many newsprint capers, since it linked comic books to the rising tide of juvenile delinquency with questionable psychological studies. Regardless of the dubious nature of the academics, the damage was done: comic books began to be regarded not just as children’s literature, but *dangerous* as well, and the resulting frenzy ensured that comic books were sanitized by a self-regulating body called the Comics Code Authority. Similarly, the adaptations of these works also became almost extinct, with only Superman and Batman receiving televised adaptations on networks.

Beyond reflecting the crisis the original source medium went through, these works begin to reevaluate the position of the comic book superhero in American culture. It was through the television program that Superman became a figure for American values. Moving further away from the alien heritage that was his origin, the character of Superman was changed to reflect strong American values, something that could not be done with other superheroes that began, or enjoyed their greatest popularity, during World War II. Perhaps it was his status as an icon, or his origins as the first popular superhero; regardless, Superman enjoyed a level of success on television that was denied to other superheroes.
Since most Americans didn’t take superheroes seriously anymore, particularly after the crucifixion of the comics industry by Dr. Wertham, the revival of the superhero came from an unlikely place: Hugh Hefner and the Playboy mansion. It was rumored that Hefner and the Playboy bunnies would watch the 1942 Batman serials, screeching at the now-humorous anachronisms within the program (Daniels 138). The potential to exploit this level of humor in iconic characters like Batman prompted the creation of a new type of television program. Sporting a catchy theme song, along with a high level of camp, and featuring Adam West as the Caped Crusader, Batman began in 1966. After the success of the series, it was only a matter of time before a feature film would follow. That same year, Batman and Robin made their feature film debut in Batman: The Movie. Taking its cues from the series, the film included many campy and overwrought fight scenes, using phrases such as “Zap! Bam! Pow!” to emphasize fighting, and unknowingly creating a pop culture stigma that would be associated with the medium of comics to this day. Though successful, the film would prove detrimental to comics’ being taken seriously as an art form, forcing many creators to work within the campy limitations and lack of credibility that the show and feature inspired among viewers (Wright 225).

These two television programs represented the reappropriated nature of the superhero. While Superman became an invaluable tool for the public, particularly with his moral compass, Batman became a joke. Remaining invaluable to pop culture, these two icons exemplified the dichotomy represented by superheroes in their adaptation to moving pictures. Twelve years passed with the superhero as a joke to the general public. The campy nature of the Batman film and television program had created a diminished view of the social importance of the superhero concept, whose ideals had not been updated for a public that had endured Vietnam, Woodstock, and the Watergate scandal. More than a decade would pass before the creation of the first modern superhero film, and it would involve a character whose ideals were largely unchanged from his comic book roots.

By 1978, the American public was ready to believe that a man could fly, and Richard Donner’s adaptation of Superman promised exactly that in its tagline. Moreover, it found a perfect Clark Kent in Christopher Reeve, who also took on Kent’s alter ego in Superman: The Movie. Unlike the 1966 Batman feature, Superman placed its Kryptonian
hero in the real world, with Metropolis and its denizens as a replacement for New York City. The plot itself focused on Superman’s actions in the real world, and the reaction of the world’s citizens to having an alien with the power of a god as protector on the same planet. During its theatrical run it earned $134,218,018 (“Box Office/Business for Superman”), a large amount for a film that cast an unknown in the role of the iconic title character; the success of this film began an era in which this practice was common for the subgenre. The film was successful enough to warrant a sequel, and in 1980, Superman II arrived to acclaim among critics, though it earned slightly less money than the first film [$101,347,629] (“Box Office/Business for Superman II”). More importantly, the film presented the distinctive fiduciary rewards for creating an atmosphere of verisimilitude within the subgenre of superhero comic book film adaptations, utilizing special effects to suspend the disbelief of watching actors in a movie about a man that could fly.

With the release of the sequel, viewers were rewarded with an eighteen minute fight scene between Superman and escaped convicts from the Phantom Zone that took place throughout Metropolis, as well as in Superman’s Fortress of Solitude in the Arctic Circle. This long battle sequence presented a plausible glimpse of what would happen if superpowered beings joined in battle, and it set a precedent that most superhero films are still following (Daniels 176).

The Superman film franchise spawned many other cultural artifacts: a pair of poorly performing sequels in Superman III (1983) and Superman IV: The Quest for Peace (1987), coupled with Supergirl (1984), a film focusing on actress Helen Slater in the title role of Superman’s cousin as a fellow costumed survivor of Krypton; it also furthered the larger superhero trend in Hollywood films. In 1982, Warner Brothers transformed the Swamp Thing horror comic into its next venture into Hollywood. Written and directed by Wes Craven (then an exploitation and low-budget horror auteur), the film inspired a low-budget sequel called The Return of Swamp Thing (Daniels 184-185). In 1989, The Punisher was brought out of its origins in Marvel Comics to the big screen with Dolph Lundgren in the title role of Frank Castle; though not a superhero, the Punisher was a mercenary with an arsenal the size of a small nation and a mentality to eradicate crime. The film bypassed cinemas and was released on video in the United States due to New World Pictures’ bankruptcy (“Trivia for The Punisher”). After the

In 1989, another film would capture the public attention in a fashion similar to the Superman revision presented a decade earlier. Celebrated filmmaker Tim Burton was offered the chance to reinvigorate the Batman franchise to reflect the newfound popularity of Frank Miller’s twin works, The Dark Knight Returns and Batman: Year One. Using the graphic novels as aesthetic and thematic blueprints, Burton created a stylized, gothic version of Gotham City that stood apart from reality, deconstructing the superhero and revitalizing him in the process (Wright 267). While much less campy than the 1966 film, the movie nonetheless eschewed reality in favor of a more stylized, overwrought Gotham whose Joker became a tacit social commentary on the end of the Reagan Era; Jack Nicholson’s character emerged as a likeable villain who was much less frightening than his comic predecessor, yet still filled with the malevolent and magnetic energy of Nicholson’s earlier character acting. Essentially filling the role of politician, the Joker planned to gain control of Gotham City by distributing deadly cosmetics and throwing a grand parade that metaphorically celebrates and condemns the decade that has ended with lethal means.

In many ways, the film used Batman as social commentary, which was a departure from previous movies. Whereas Superman was a franchise based around a simple and joyous concept [“You’ll believe a man can fly!” (Superman 1978)], Batman, falling on the cusp of the 1990s, announced the audience’s departure from the innocence of previous filmgoing generations to a new age of cynicism and bitterness. There was no tagline to the film, not even a title on the poster, but rather a solitary bat symbol with yellow shielding on black background. Unlike West’s depiction in the sixties series, Michael Keaton’s Bruce Wayne is a tortured individual who witnessed his parents’ murders at the hands of Jack Napier, the criminal who would become the Joker after an industrial acid accident. The film also represented a stylistic departure from the real world that Superman existed in; set designer Anton Furst designed a setting that was a gothic urban wasteland where night rarely broke for its citizens. Itself fashioned after the science fiction mainstays Blade Runner and Metropolis, Gotham City became a commentary on the frightening quality of the American megalopolis in the wake of
Reagan’s war on drugs, taking its visual cues from Frank Miller’s dystopian future of *The Dark Knight Returns*, an anti-Reagan work that inspired the film’s creation (Wright 267). Though the film wasn’t branded as child-friendly, the film went on to become the highest-grossing film of the year, earning $100 million in the first ten days of release. By the end of its run, it had grossed $251,185,407 (“Box Office/Business for *Batman*”) and assured that a sequel would be following soon after.

The same could not be said of Marvel’s 1991 film *Captain America*. Quickly shot and produced in the United States and Yugoslavia, the movie represented a poorly constructed version of America’s patriot son. The film was so maligned by critics and test audiences it never made it to American theaters, and at this time is out of print on DVD (“Trivia for *Captain America*”).

By 1992, audiences were ready for another Tim Burton *Batman* production, which he delivered to the public with *Batman Returns*, featuring Keaton’s return to the title role and a new slew of villains in the Penguin (Danny DeVito) and Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer). This pair of villains was given a more lavish stage for their crimes, since the success of the previous film had guaranteed greater resources for the sequel [*Returns* more than doubled its predecessor’s production budget of $35 million, with $80 million at its disposal] (“Box Office/Business for *Batman Returns*”). The film represented a more personalized vision for Burton, whose misfit sensibilities could be seen in his choice of actors for both films (Morgenstern F48). This represented a divergence from the first film, which featured a Joker who was scarred by science as opposed to personal experiences and demons. Oswald Cobblepot is a deformed son of society who was cast into the sewers by his parents, and is raised by penguins to adulthood, where he emerged as a new favorite son of Gotham City. Cobblepot teamed with wealthy businessman Max Schreck (Christopher Walken) to achieve these heights of popularity, eventually planning to become mayor so he could turn the city into a gothic cesspool of crime. Selina Kyle (Michelle Pfeiffer) entered this main plot as a secretary for Schreck, and she was summarily cast out a window when she learns of the less-than-savory occurrences at her company. Rather than perishing from the fall, her mental state frayed when she was rescued by a pack of cats, and she soon became involved in the crime organizations of Penguin and Schreck as Catwoman. The film’s success at the box
office showed that there was an audience eager to consume all things Bat-related: Batman merchandise was again selling due to the success of the film, along with the emergence of a critically acclaimed animated children’s television program, *Batman: The Animated Series* (Daniels 216). The success of the second film ($162,744,850 at the box office) (“Box Office/Business for *Batman Returns*”) ensured a sequel, yet the changes in characters and tone of the second film were met with some critical disdain that Warner Brothers would later use to change the style of the third and fourth films in the franchise.

In 1994, Alex Proyas chose to create a film based on the Crow, a character from Image Comics, which was an independent comic book company that was started and operated by artists who had “defected” from larger comic book companies like Marvel and DC Comics. *The Crow* was a much more violent film based on the story of a rock musician, Eric Draven (Brandon Lee), who watches as his girlfriend is raped and murdered by thugs, then he himself is murdered by the same criminals. He is brought back to life via mystical forces led by a crow, and pursues a quest to seek vengeance for both deaths. Lauded for its level of violence and artistic qualities, the film is also notable for Lee’s premature death on-set before the film was completed (“Blank Pistol Kills Actor, the Son of Bruce Lee” A14).

Warner Brothers believed that *Batman Returns* should have made more money than its predecessor, since more resources had been given to its production. Therefore, the decision was made to take the third film, titled *Batman Forever* (1995), in a more mainstream direction, away from the violence of *Returns* and *The Crow*, which prompted Michael Keaton to refuse reprising his Batman role. Val Kilmer was cast as Batman days after the refusal. In an effort to bring a more light-hearted approach to the film series, Burton was replaced as director by Joel Schumacher. Robin (Chris O’Donnell) was introduced in the film as well, along with Two-Face (Tommy Lee Jones) and an expensive casting coup of Jim Carrey as the Riddler. The film featured brighter colors for its palette, which dismissed much of the black and forbidding atmosphere of Burton’s films and seemed blatantly commercial. The violence of the first two films was tempered by the comedic stylings of Carrey as Riddler, a red-haired and lime-green villain given to using riddles to distract his foes, along with Jones’s Two-Face, who blatantly imitated Nicholson’s portrayal of the Joker from the first film. However, neither fazed the
audience for the film; *Batman Forever* grossed $184,031,112, with a $52.78 million opening weekend (“Box Office/Business for *Batman Forever*”).

Based on the success of *Forever*, Warner Brothers immediately decided to commission a sequel, simply titled *Batman & Robin*. Rehiring much of the cast and crew, the studio thought it was best to fast track production for a June 1997 release date. Schumacher’s desire for his second Batman film was to pay homage to the camp style of the 1960’s television series that the film series originally antagonized. The production designer for the film, Barbara Ling, admitted that her influence in moving the world away from the dark gothic spires of Burton’s setting came from “neon-ridden Tokyo and the Machine Age. Gotham is like a World’s Fair on ecstasy ("Batman & Robin").” Val Kilmer was not brought back for the production, and the studio chose George Clooney for the role of Batman. Alicia Silverstone was brought in as the young niece of Alfred, Bruce Wayne’s butler, who adopts her own secret identity, Batgirl.

The film’s villains presented the greatest break from the verisimilitude of the rogues’ gallery that had been established in the Burton era. Poison Ivy (Uma Thurman) was a chemist who was poisoned by the Venom drug on which she was working, and learned to control plants through an acquired set of powers. Her accomplice in crime was Bane, a monosyllabic thug who became extremely strong and imposing as a result of the Venom drug that he ingested on a regular basis. The final, and perhaps most damning, example of the break in the rogue’s gallery was Mr. Freeze, a former scientist who became an insane criminal after trying to cryogenically preserve his dying wife, and who must live in a sub-zero suit powered by diamonds. Future California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger was chosen for the role, and was paid a salary of $25 million, expanding the production budget to $125 million (“Box Office/Business for *Batman & Robin*”).

The film was released to modest financial success, grossing $107,285,004 in North America (“Box Office/Business for *Batman & Robin*”); it earned $42,872,606 in its opening weekend, but rapidly declined due to the critical panning and poor word of mouth that the movie received. Most critics chose to blame the film’s emphasis on camp and hyperbole as its most debilitating aspect. Warner Brothers declared *Batman & Robin* a financial success, but not on the scale for which they were hoping. The critics also savaged the film for its seeming emphasis on homoerotic innuendos within the storyline.
and production. Schumacher, an openly gay filmmaker throughout most of his career, chose to expand on the suits of the protagonists from *Batman Forever* by placing nipples on the costumes of Batman and Robin, as well as enlarging the codpieces of the armor for both characters. In the DVD release of the film, Schumacher claimed, “The bodies of the suits come from ancient Greek statues, which display perfect bodies. They were anatomically erotic” (“Batman & Robin”). The sexual innuendo of Batman and Robin, who live together in Wayne Manor with Alfred, referenced the controversy surrounding Dr. Frederic Wertham’s research on the deviant influence of Batman and Robin. In the 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham famously claimed that there was a homoerotic relationship between Batman and Robin, since the duo lived and worked together, and Wayne specifically took in young Dick Grayson after the child’s family was murdered. Regardless of the “controversy,” Warner Brothers would not release another live action Batman film for eight years.

Another Image comic was turned into a hit film in the wake of the success of *The Crow*; this time it was the company’s hottest property. Based on the immensely successful Todd McFarlane creation, *Spawn* centered on the fallen soldier Al Simmons (Michael Jai White), who made a deal with Malebolgia (voice of Frank Walker) to come back to protect his family and gain revenge against Jason Wynn, Al’s former government employer who was complicit in his murder. The powerful hellspawn becomes a costumed avenger, his power made physical via chains and a deadly cape. The film, with a production budget of $40 million, was considered a modest success, earning $54,967,359 during the summer of 1997 in North America (“Box Office/Business for *Spawn*”).

This trend towards darkness was palpable in the next adaptation of a comic book hero. The first film from Marvel Comics’ stable of characters was rated R and focused on vampires, thus moving away from the family-friendly trends of the Batman franchise in DC Comics. *Blade*, written by comics author David S. Goyer, starred Wesley Snipes in the title role of a vampire hunter who was himself half-vampire as a result of his mother having been bitten while he was in the womb, but was raised as a human when he was taken in by vampire hunter Whistler (Kris Kristofferson). The film focuses on Blade’s attempts to eradicate a vampire clan while maintaining his humanity as a “daywalker,” or
one who walks with humans. The character combines supernatural abilities with a large assortment of specialized weaponry, thus appealing to the sensibilities of the target audience of young males, and in fact setting the tone for the success of *The Matrix* one year later, itself a film that drew much inspiration from the comic book medium in terms of action.

The year 2000 brought with it the much-anticipated *X-Men* film adaptation, which propelled then-unknown actor Hugh Jackman to stardom due to his portrayal of popular anti-hero mutant Wolverine. Though there had been prior attempts to bring the mutant heroes to film, writer David Hayter and director Bryan Singer were the first people to bring a personal vision of the team from the comic pages to the screen. Revolving around a set of mutants who were persecuted for their difference from the humanity that they strive to protect, *X-Men* became a surprise success during the summer, earning $157,299,717 on a production budget of $75 million (“Box Office/Business for *X-Men*”). The success of the film ensured that a sequel would be quick to follow.

*Sixth Sense* filmmaker M. Night Shyamalan turned his attentions to creating an original superhero film in 2000 with *Unbreakable*. Due to the success of his previous work, Shyamalan’s next collaboration with *Sixth Sense* lead Bruce Willis was highly anticipated, and was marketed as a thriller much like its predecessor. However, it differed from *The Sixth Sense* by centering its plot on a superhero in the confines of the real world. The story focused on David Dunn (Willis), who is the sole survivor of a train wreck. The catastrophe forces him to reexamine his life, and he comes to the conclusion that he is somebody extraordinary. In the film he meets Elijah Price (Samuel L. Jackson), a comic book aficionado who suffers from osteogenesis imperfecta, a rare disease in which bones are brittle and break easily. Price inspires Dunn to use his invincibility and extra-sensory perception for the good of man, and David freed a family held hostage by a sadist, becoming a mythic figure in the city. At the end of the film, it was revealed that Price is a madman who, driven by the comics he collects in his art gallery, believes himself to be a comic book villain, named after the taunts he received as a young boy in his neighborhood, “Mr. Glass.” Price believes Dunn is his counterpart, and has orchestrated a series of terror attacks and disasters that have taken hundreds of lives in order to find David, whom he believes to be the superhero ("Unbreakable").
The film was intended to follow the traditional three-part structure of comics: a character’s origin, his/her battles with common villainy, and the confrontation between the protagonist and his or her “archenemy.” However, Shyamalan found the origin aspect to be a more interesting focus for his picture, and was given a production budget of $75 million to create a more expansive experience compared to his work on *The Sixth Sense*. Grossing $95,011,339 domestically, the film sold even more in the overseas market, earning $153,106,782 for a total of $248,118,121 (“Box Office/Business for *Unbreakable*”).

In summer 2001, a trailer appeared touting the release of the *Spider-Man* film, showing a bank robbery in which the criminals escaped via helicopter to the skies of New York City. However, the helicopter stopped in the air, and the criminals looked to see what happened. A giant web spun between the two towers of the World Trade Center that kept the evildoers in place so that the authorities can arrest them. The movie earned recognition for this ad during a busy summer season. However, due to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the preview was pulled from theaters, and a new one was created. A preview poster featuring the World Trade Center was also pulled so not to traumatize the audience after the attacks (Fitzpatrick).

In summer 2002, *Spider-Man* was released to huge audience anticipation. The success of *X-Men* had made filmgoers believe that movie studios would be able to deliver credible stories featuring the mythic heroes. Given a production budget of $139 million, cult film director Sam Raimi (the *Evil Dead* series) was hired by Sony Pictures to bring the character to life on screen. The film continued the tradition of placing relative unknowns in the protagonist role. Tobey Maguire was hired to play the role of Peter Parker, who, bitten by a radioactive spider, gained the strength and agility of a spider. Deciding to use his powers for personal gain, Peter entered the world of professional wrestling, where he gained the name “Spider-Man.” After a match, he failed to stop a burglar escape, and this burglar would murder Peter’s uncle Ben Parker (Cliff Robertson), with whom Peter was living along with his Aunt May. Recognizing that he could have stopped the burglar and saved Uncle Ben, Peter vowed to take up a life of responsibility with his newfound power.
The film was released to an eager audience after the events of September 11; *Spider-Man* became an unexpected blockbuster, earning $403,706,375 ("Box Office/Business for *Spider-Man*") in North America alone, with an opening weekend of $115 million. Sony decided to immediately begin production on another installment. The superhero movie had arrived, and the success of *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* assured that more superhero films would fill out the Hollywood summer season. The development of franchises marked a turning point for the subgenre of comic book films, and other films soon followed.

The second superhero film of 2002 was Wesley Snipes’ return to the role that revived his career in *Blade II*. Directed by Mexican auteur Guillermo Del Toro, the film moved away from the cyberpunk influences of the first movie into a darker, more supernatural vein. The greater success of the second film over its predecessor suggested that even R-rated superheroes were capturing mainstream audience attention, and Del Toro’s success from the picture moved him to the upper echelon of directors.

The first superhero film of 2003 was *Daredevil*, starring Ben Affleck as Matt Murdock, altar ego of the title character. The film was a somewhat faithful adaptation of Marvel’s Batman analogue, a character whose extra senses were enhanced by exposure to radiation that summarily blinded him. The film was released to mixed critical acclaim, including low marks for poor character development and scattered characterization. Nevertheless, the film went on to earn $102,543,518 in North America, which was a handsome return on its production budget of $78 million ("Box Office Business of *Daredevil*"). Years later, a DVD re-release of the film subtitled *Director’s Cut* revealed a subplot about gangsters that had been entirely excised from the picture, which satiated some critics’ complaints about the film (Papamichael).

In May 2003, Fox released a sequel to the first *X-Men* feature, titled *X2: X-Men United*. Director Bryan Singer wanted to study, “the human perspective, the kind of blind rage that feeds into warmongering and terrorism ([Worley](#)),” and wanted to use a “human villain.” The film began in the White House with a mutant attack on the President, which was a shocking take on the superhero since the terrorist attacks of September 11. However, the action later moved to Alaska. The film was highly praised for its execution, and many critics claimed that it overcame the slump known to affect
film franchises in their later iterations. Many felt that it was the rare achievement of a sequel outdoing its predecessor in terms of visceral and emotional fulfillment.

Mainstream audiences agreed, providing the film with an opening weekend worth $85,558,731, and the film recouped its production budget of $110 million with North American earnings of $214,948,780 (“Box Office/Business for X2: X-Men United”). The superhero franchise not only had been successful, but now it had grown in earnings, setting the stage for another installment.

Marvel and Universal Pictures attempted to create another franchise with their next property, the Hulk, using Ang Lee on the basis of his hit film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Eric Bana, an unknown Australian actor, was cast to be the misunderstood scientist turned hulking monster. Where this film differed from previous ones was its treatment of the story. Whereas other films had either placed characters in the real world (*X-Men, Spider-Man*), or within heavily campy versions of the mythological settings (*Batman & Robin*), Lee wanted *Hulk* to be a “Greek tragedy.” Lee explained his feelings about the Hulk in a revealing interview:

I don’t think the Hulk is a superhero. He’s the first Marvel character who is a tragic monster. Really an anti-hero. I feel that everyone has a Hulk inside, and each of our Hulks is both scary and, potentially, pleasurable. That’s the scariest thing about them. (“An Interview with Ang Lee”)

The approach to the film was different from what other directors had done with the subgenre. Lee’s visual style also involved framing that placed transitional effects within a comic book style, using specific panels to create a feeling of watching a comic book unfold on the screen. Even if Lee intended the film to be a modification of a Greek tragedy, mainstream audiences were unreceptive to his final product. The film earned $62,128,420 during its opening weekend, but plunged 70% in its next weekend (Box Office/Business for *Hulk*). The film grossed $132,177,234, below the $137 million production budget given to the feature (“Box Office/Business for *Hulk*”).

In 2004, Dark Horse Comics property *Hellboy* was turned into a feature film, directed by *Blade II*’s Guillermo del Toro. The film focused on the adventures of a demon who was brought into our world by Nazis, only to be “rescued” by an American doctor, Trevor Bruttenholm, and raised to be a secret protector of society as the title character. With his compatriots Abe Sapien and Liz Sherman, they form the Bureau of
Paranormal Research & Defense (B.P.R.D.), which informs the government of paranormal activity and keeps the rest of the human population unaware of the world outside their eyes. The film was a personal project of del Toro, who was attracted to Mike Mignola’s original creation, and after the success of Blade II, del Toro was given the opportunity to cast actor Ron Perlman in the title role. This brought a sort of independent credibility to the project since Perlman was far from a leading man for a Hollywood A-picture. The film was modestly budgeted at $66 million, and earned $59,623,958 in North America. Its international take was $39,695,029, which represented a success for Sony and Revolution Studios, thus leading to another installment in 2008 titled Hellboy II: The Golden Army. The sequel veered away from the narrative of the comic book itself, presenting a look at a world where Hellboy and the B.P.R.D. were known to the world at large. However, rather than being loved, they are turned away from the people whom they are trying to protect. The sequel utilized del Toro as both writer and director for a fantastic world that sharply broke with the rest of the comic book films that appeared that year, and grossed $75,986,503 in North America on a production budget of $85 million (“Box Office/Business for Hellboy II”). However, it earned its production budget back in foreign grosses of $84,401,560 (“Box Office/Business for Hellboy II”).

The year’s biggest and most anticipated blockbuster superhero film was Spider-Man 2. Retaining the same cast and crew, the film examined the personal impact of being a superhero, and the devastating toll it required of an everyday human being. The film was the first superhero feature filmed in New York City after the events of September 11, and it was another large success for Sony, earning a domestic total gross of $373,585,825 on a production budget of $200 million (“Box Office/Business for Spider-Man 2”). However, unlike its predecessor, the film differed in its critical reception; it was a sensation among reviewers. Recognized critic Roger Ebert gave the film four stars, the highest in his rating system, citing the film as “the best superhero movie since the modern genre was launched with Superman (1978),” and said that viewers could “identify more completely with heroes like themselves than with remote godlike paragons” on the screen (2004). He even called the movie the first one that was “a superhero movie for people who don't go to superhero movies (2004),” citing the
change from faithful adaptations of works to more film-oriented works where the source material is altered to create a more pleasurable experience for an audience not closely associated with the films. 

*Catwoman* was decidedly a step backwards for the subgenre. Starring Halle Berry in the title role, the film was adapted from the DC Comics character, and made some dramatic changes to the source material. The divergences were jarring and poorly received by audiences and critics; in fact, the production woes on this film were so great that Berry went on to publicly disparage the film at the 2005 Golden Raspberry awards, which are the antithesis of the Academy Awards. After accepting the “Razzie” award for Worst Actress, Berry went on to call the film “godawful” (Bushby).

The first superhero film to be based on original material arrived in the form of Disney/Pixar Studios’ animated feature *The Incredibles*. Though writer/director Brad Bird created the characters himself, they were based upon Marvel Comics’ Fantastic Four, a quartet of adventurers that were tied together by family. The quintet in the film displayed superpowers, and provided a commentary on the role of government in stepping in to stop superheroes from accomplishing their goals (Scott). Ultimately, the film became a large hit, with the possibility of a franchise for Disney.

The final superhero film release of 2004 was the third installment of the series that began the modern era of superhero filmmaking. *Blade: Trinity* was the first film to be both written and directed by franchise writer David S. Goyer, and boasted the addition of two stars to the cast in Jessica Biel (playing Whistler’s daughter) and Ryan Reynolds (former vampire Hannibal King). Though the film was expected to return as much as the second installment of the franchise, it earned $52,411,906 domestically, making for a poor return on its $65 million production budget. The film was not well received critically, and audiences moved away from a film that was not directed by del Toro, and that also bore the misfortune of moving away from the tight storylines of the previous installments in the franchise.

Marvel Comics released another property as a film in the beginning of 2005, this time an extension of the *Daredevil* film through the female anti-hero Elektra. With Jennifer Garner reprising the title role, the film again diverged from much of the source
material within the original stories of the comic book assassin. *Elektra* was released with much critical disdain and a lack of interest at the box office.

DC Comics again tried to create a hot property in superhero films with the feature *Constantine*. Based upon a character created from the mature *Hellblazer* series, John Constantine is a man who grapples with demons in an attempt to prevent the apocalypse. Starring popular actor Keanu Reeves (himself a star of the comics-inspired *Matrix* trilogy), the film drew heavily from previous arcs of the *Hellblazer* series, most notably the “Dangerous Habits” story involving Constantine’s protracted death by smoking. The film took an action-horror style much like Marvel’s adaptations of *Blade*, and earned $230 million worldwide (“Box Office/Business for *Constantine*”).

The next film to be made in the superhero subgenre was Disney’s *Sky High*, a more family-friendly update of *X-Men’s* Xavier School for Gifted Youngsters. Using the backdrop of a high school as the setting for a gathering of teenagers with superpowers, the film continued the tradition of targeting family audiences. Another film that focused on the family aspect of its original source material was Marvel’s *Fantastic Four*. The first Marvel comic book success created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in the 1960’s, the film was a surprise hit for Fox, grossing $154,696,080 domestically (“Box Office/Business for *Fantastic Four*”). While fans berated the film’s divergence from the original story of the quartet, it struck a chord with audiences, and warranted the creation of a sequel in 2007. Titled *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*, the film focused on the arrival of a metallic alien, whose presence signaled the end of the world. Though made by the same cast and crew, the film suffered from raised expectations, and returned just $131,921,738 on a production budget of $130 million (“Box Office/Business for *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*”).

It had been eight years since *Batman & Robin* had effectively killed the Batman franchise for films. In 2005, Warner Brothers chose to renew the film series, rebooting the entire project under a new director and cast, away from the previous films of the Burton/Schumacher era, and even titled the film *Batman Begins* to signal this creative shift. Creative duties were given to Christopher Nolan, known for his work on the cult sensation *Memento*, who injected verisimilitude back into his new property with co-writer David S. Goyer. The film was meant to focus more on Batman, which was a departure
from the previous films that gave most screen time and attention to his rogues’ gallery. A considerably darker picture than its predecessors, the film also featured an ensemble cast that was assembled after Nolan had the Bruce Wayne/Batman actor that he preferred—character actor Christian Bale. Budgeted at $150 million, and consisting of fewer computerized special effects than other superhero films, the film was a success for Warner Brothers, earning $205,343,774 domestically (“Box Office/Business for Batman Begins”). A sequel was planned following the news (Schuker B1).

In the spring of 2006, Andy and Larry Wachowski, who created the influential Matrix trilogy, worked with fellow producer Joel Silver to bring Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s influential graphic novel V for Vendetta to the silver screen. The film maintained the core anti-totalitarian stances of the book, but moved the story forward to reflect American politics. The Norsefire Party was used to represent the governments of President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, both in power at the time, and was presented as a terrifying parable of what could happen if government gained complete power over its citizenry. A problem with the book and film adaptation was the heroism of the character V, who was a revolutionary terrorist fighting against the government. The theme of a corrupt government was the driving force behind the success of the film, which grossed $70,511,035. However, due to the changes in the film, writer Moore requested that his name be taken off the finished product, noting that previous films based on his work, such as From Hell (2001) and The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen (2003), were deprived of the complex meanings and stories of his original material. Nevertheless, the film was well received by audiences, and easily recouped its production budget of $54 million (“Box Office/Business for V for Vendetta”).

Summer 2006 saw the return of the X-Men series that helped revitalize the superhero subgenre. However, director Bryan Singer left in preproduction to complete work on the Warner Brothers revival of the Superman series. Singer’s friend Brett Ratner was brought in to direct the film. Though there had been many different directors attached to the project at different times, Ratner was cited as an unpopular candidate due to his previous films in the Rush Hour series. X-Men: The Last Stand was intended to work as the last act of a trilogy, bringing many different storylines to a close, and as a result of including a wide assortment of the various mutants from the Marvel Comics
property, the production budget swelled to $210 million. However, the Fox release enjoyed a healthy opening weekend of $122,861,157, and went on to gross $234,360,014 domestically ("Box Office/Business for X-Men: The Last Stand"). The film enjoyed similar success overseas, making it the most profitable X-Men film to date. A spin-off film was released in May 2009, titled X-Men Origins: Wolverine, and focused on the most popular character within the franchise (Scott).

Warner Brothers attempted to revive their most iconic character that same year, using the X-Men franchise starter’s Bryan Singer as the director for Superman Returns. An ambitious project that had undergone several development and production impasses, the film was planned as a continuation of the film series that had brought Christopher Reeve to fame. The reboot of the series took a peculiar direction in terms of film continuity. An avowed fan of the Richard Donner Superman mythos, Singer and his co-writers Michael Dougherty and Dan Harris set the time of the film after the first and second films, making it an effective cancellation of the third and fourth films in the series. An expensive production, Superman Returns was determined to have a total cost of $270 million by Warner Brothers ("Box Office/Business for Superman Returns").

The film itself was released during a particularly busy summer season that saw the blockbuster continuation of the X-Men and Pirates of the Caribbean series, and went on to gross $200.08 million in North America. Though the film recouped its production and marketing costs with international grosses of $191 million, Warner Brothers and Legendary Pictures admitted that they believed the film should have had a stronger box office return (Schuker B1). Fans themselves were mostly pleased with the recreation of the Superman mythos for the film. However, some were incensed by the inclusion of a child for Lois Lane (Kate Bosworth), which was a continuation of a subplot in Superman II in which Superman/Clark Kent and Lane consummate their relationship. The presence of a superpowered child as a result of the coupling raised the ire of many fans, and perhaps forced too many inexperienced viewers out of the film since it heavily referenced events from the first two Donner adaptations. Warner Brothers is currently examining the possibility of again restarting the franchise, this time scrapping the continuity of previous films altogether (Schuker B1).
Another original property was developed by 20th Century Fox for release in the summer, titled *My Super Ex-Girlfriend*. Starring Uma Thurman and Luke Wilson, and directed by Ivan Reitman, the picture revolved around a man and his date, who turns out to be a superheroeine. Marketed as a “romantic comedy with a superhero twist,” the film incorporated elements of superhero lore into the narrative, such as an origin story and a villain with personal connections to the hero. It did not strike a large chord with audiences, and earned only $22,530,295 domestically (“Box Office/Business for *My Super Ex-Girlfriend*”).

Marvel gave another character an early 2007 action picture. *Ghost Rider* featured longtime superhero fan Nicholas Cage (so enamored with Superman that he named his child “Kal-El,” after the character’s Kryptonian name) in the role of Johnny Blaze, a motorcycle stuntman who sells his soul to the devil Mephistopheles (Peter Fonda) in exchange for curing his father’s lung cancer, and inadvertently becomes an agent in the service of Hell. Filmed during 2005 and 2006, the film opened to poor critical reception. Nonetheless, the film earned $115,802,596 domestically, and $228,738,393 worldwide (“Box Office/Business for *Ghost Rider*”).

Marvel’s largest film to date was *Spider-Man 3*. Filmed as the concluding chapter of a trilogy, much like *X-Men: The Last Stand*, the film retained the same cast and crew from the previous two films. The story focused on Peter Parker’s relationship with Mary Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst), and villains Sandman and Venom (Topher Grace), along with Peter’s best friend Harry Osborn (James Franco), whose turn to villainy is established by his belief in Peter/Spider-Man’s complicity in the death of his father Norman (Willem Dafoe), the original Green Goblin. The film’s estimated production budget of $260 million made it the most expensive comic book film of all time, and director Sam Raimi often complained of studio interference with the project, particularly the need to include Venom in the narrative. Though the film opened to a large box office weekend gross of $151,116,516, it did so with little critical fanfare; reviewers and fans pointed to the lack of character development due to an overabundance of players. The film grossed $336,530,303 domestically (“Box Office/Business for *Spider-Man 3*”), proving that the franchise was still a viable commodity, but the filmmakers were
displeased with the final result, and Raimi vowed to retain creative control of *Spider-Man* for the next projected installment (Miller).

In 2008, Marvel Studios began producing motion pictures that were made independently of larger studios, freeing the filmmakers to create movies that could be more faithful to their visions of the classic characters (DC Comics is owned by Warner Brothers). The first production from this studio was *Iron Man*, directed by Jon Favreau and featuring Robert Downey Jr. as Tony Stark, whose abduction and imprisonment in a foreign country leads him to become the title character. The film was a large success, a surprise for the fledgling studio and director Favreau. The next production from Marvel Studios was the revival of the Hulk character, titled *The Incredible Hulk*, after his comic book iteration. The film, directed by Louis Leterrier, was cleverly structured in a way that, while it began (or could be interpreted in such a manner) in the place where Ang Lee’s version ended, the focus was placed more on the action elements of the picture. Starring Edward Norton as Bruce Banner, whose rage turns him into the title character, the picture also featured a cameo by Downey as Tony Stark, implying the creation of an Avengers unit that would consist of characters under production under Marvel Studios. The $150 million film did not receive a much larger box office take than its predecessor, earning only $134,518,390 (“Box Office/Business for *The Incredible Hulk*”).

The largest superhero film of 2008 also became the second highest-grossing domestic picture of all time. *The Dark Knight* was released to unprecedented critical acclaim and box office receipts, with audiences largely agreeing that it represented a shift in the comic book film subgenre towards art. In February 2009, the late Heath Ledger won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his inspired portrayal of the Joker, Batman’s ultimate arch-nemesis (Ayres).

The increased cultural significance of the superhero film becomes clear: while superhero films were being made before the events of September 11th, the films themselves became greater successes in the wake of the terrorist attacks on that day. Cinematic history shows that *Spider-Man* was a large blockbuster film, earning more than its studio estimated, and thus paving the way for more movies to be made. More importantly, the inclusion of the character in the city impacted most by the events of that
horrific Tuesday can be seen as a way of coping with the situation, a sort of metaphysical conflict taking place in the skies.

In Spider-Man 2, the title character fights against Dr. Otto Octavius on an out-of-control subway train, which he must struggle to save from careening off the tracks. Though there is no danger to the viewer during this conflict, and there is no mention made to the events of September 11th, the tension is palpable since the bystanders are innocents in a conflict that they cannot understand. Even when Octavius escapes, Spider-Man comes to the rescue, stopping the subway train at the cost of great personal harm and exhaustion. When he collapses, the rescued commuters lift him on their hands, pushing him to the sky like a messiah figure. Unmasked before the people he was trying to protect, Spider-Man/Peter Parker is told by a small child that none of the passengers will tell anybody who he really is, and hands the mask back to the hero. The image is a powerful reminder of how people laud true heroes that perform unselfish acts. It also reflects the type of worship given to heroes after the tragic events of September 11th, and showed the kind of selfless courage needed to perform extraordinary acts. This is symbolic of the changing role of the superhero at the beginning of the 21st century, which is an allegory for our times. The audience needs a hero to believe in, someone that will come and protect them from harm caused by evil that nobody understands. This has been true of the superhero for many times, especially in film, when there are tumultuous times in America. However, given the concentrated nature of the war on terror, coupled with its existential dilemmas, the success of the modern superhero film becomes morally clear. The next chapter will identify some of the theoretical underpinnings of the modern film superhero, as well as critically analyze the superhero film adaptation through common themes of each film.
CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSIS OF THEORY AND THE SUPERHERO FILM ADAPTATION

As displayed in the second chapter, the superhero has changed throughout history in both comic and visual forms, in response to the outside world that he/she inhabits. The reality of the time in which these works were created is reflected in either the pages of the comic book, or, in this case, the frame of the film. In this chapter, the author will discuss the many parts of *V for Vendetta, Iron Man*, and *The Dark Knight*, examining the films and stating that these films are reflections of the times in which they are created, at the same time using the Baudrillardian theory of simulation/simulacra, which states that simulation can mask and pervert reality. Baudrillard’s argument is difficult to encapsulate within objective reality, as much of what he posits is largely theoretical and postmodern, standing outside of mainstream consciousness. Thus, it is necessary to provide a primer for how all the films add to a discussion of the various debates raised by Baudrillard, along with the content and its relationship to the September 11th attacks and their aftermath.

The various strands of Baudrillardian research reflect a smart understanding of the work done on reality and the power of imagery in film. Moreover, these films represent the inability to gain one’s bearings in the realm of postmodernity, a common thread in the studies of powerful media. The subjective functions of realizing one’s space, comprehending one’s territory, or even recognizing what is the common thread of truth in these films fulfill the need of an audience for simulation: they are the outside world, underneath a microscope and changed for the viewer. According to Baudrillard, we are now in a new era of simulation in which computerization, information processing, media, and the organization of society according to simulation codes and models replace production as the organizing principle of society; effectively, information and signs are governed by models, codes, and cybernetics (Best and Kellner 118). Given the appropriate tenets of Baudrillard, which are 1) simulation/simulacra, 2) hyperreality, and 3) the implosion of society via media, it is important to know that models and codes become the primary determinants of the social experience in the age of technology. Furthermore, within these movies there is literal potential for the postmodern theorist to
discover greater resemblance between simulation and simulacra. In the postmodern world, the boundary between image and reality implodes, and the very ground of the “real” disappears beneath façade (Baudrillard 11-13; Best and Kellner 119).

This can be seen in the utilization of the “real world” in the three films. All utilize simulations of the real world to various degrees of success in an attempt to bring emotional gravitas to their work. In terms of adaptations, this often means casting aside more esoteric and idiosyncratic elements of the comic book/graphic novel in an attempt to reach, or to placate, a broader audience that may not be willing to accept the various strands of unreality in the work. This results in the elimination of plotlines, as well as condensation of lengthy parables and morals into sound bites that can be easily digested and visually replicated for the masses. Finally, there are many instances where the “real” world is simulated via models and codes for mass audiences, and symbols and signs are used to recreate vistas in the modern world for filmgoers. This can be seen as a process of incorporating iconographic visual arts into the frame to blur the distinctions between the real and the unreal. Sometimes the unreal becomes a simulation for the real, since it can be popularly recreated for mass consumption and/or practical application.

Regardless, there is a blurring of distinctions between the real and the unreal that takes place within these three films, given credence by the precession of simulacra, as well as the utilization of codes and models of the real world within the films. For Baudrillard, the models of America in Disneyland are more real than the parking lot outside the amusement land that is “objectively real.” The United States thus becomes more like Disneyland, as the models replace reality due to the ideal nature of their portrayals in physicality and media. This is an example of the hyperreal, which also becomes evident in the films examined (Baudrillard 24-26).

Best and Kellner describe how television figures that played roles of important societal figures on their respective programs were often considered “Real” instead of simulations (119). Robert Young, who played Dr. Welby on the show Marcus Welby, M.D., was often solicited for medical advice, even going so far as to appear in advertisements where he would vouch for the effectiveness of decaffeinated coffee. Likewise, Raymond Burr, who played the attorney on Perry Mason, would receive thousands of letters asking for legal advice during the 1950’s. This is an extension of
Baudrillard’s concept of “hyperreality,” where the prefix “hyper” signifies more real than real, whereas the real is created via a model or template (2). The real is no longer simply given anymore, but is artificially produced and reproduced as “real.” This makes it, like Debord’s concept of the spectacle, more real than objective reality, retouched and refurbished in a sort of conflicting resemblance of itself.

Within the map of Borges’ empire, it is clear that, once the edges have frayed away, the territory itself no longer exists in the physical realm. This is a case of the simulacrum/simulacra overtaking reality, as the symbol itself becomes more distinctly real than the very objective reality upon which it is based. The media today play the part in stating exactly what that map would be, since Baudrillard believed that the power of the media is close to being absolute, possibly even irresistible. “All media and the official news service only exist to maintain the illusion of actuality – of the reality of the stakes, of the objectivity of the facts” (Baudrillard 71). Moreover, if this is true, the discerning consumer will not be able to provide a form of physical proof to counteract the media override. Now it is required to provide a glimpse of media for mass identification, since the “politics by simulacrum” (Bukatman 253) have emerged into the popular consciousness.

Film adaptations have the tricky agenda of taking a fictional universe and committing it to the celluloid screen in an attempt to replicate the outside world, or at least to make the vision of the printed page into the verisimilitude of the live action motion picture. For that reason, Baudrillard claims that films can replicate the real world to the point of an audience’s being drawn into the images that are being shown. When the postmodernist describes an academic at his computer, in a manner similar to a film aficionado in front of the large screen, he simply states that the academic “has at last found the equivalent of what the teenager gets from his stereo and his walkman; a spectacular desublimation of thought, his concepts as images on a screen” (Bukatman 395).

In light of Baudrillard’s work, one can now break down these three films according to themes that appear throughout these works. Though these are not all of the themes that appear in the films themselves (the films have other themes at work, particularly The Dark Knight), those that illustrate the influence of the real world on these
adaptations include the following: technology, privacy/freedom, hyperreality, security/terrorism/innocence, patriotism, politics, and torture/violence.

Technology

V for Vendetta

Baudrillard’s precession of simulacra are what makes the story of V become so involving, even creating a sort of reality that exists in the pages of symbolism in V for Vendetta. In his writing, Baudrillard describes a mediated and imploded society in which all power to act has been transformed into the power to appear; in other words, the physical act of existing is not enough unless your image can be seen by the masses of people in order to commit full power to the work. This is apparent to the protagonist V in both the graphic novel and the film, since a particular scene becomes the pivot point of both works. In both works, V takes over a broadcast station controlled by the government and uses the frequency to broadcast an ultimatum to the British citizens to become more independent, or to lose their destiny in the ensuing war that he is enacting against the Norsefire party. The government has used the broadcast media to trap its citizens via the use of cameras to pacify their rebellious actions, and the spectacle of the Voice of Fate (via radio) and Storm Saxon (via television) provide the masses with enough entertainment to reinforce Baudrillard’s belief that the media prevent response from their audience, much like a panopticon that is no longer necessary. Thanks to technology, now the television is no longer the source of an absolute gaze; “You no longer watch TV, TV watches you (live)” (Baudrillard 53).

Baudrillard also argues that power has been subsumed by technological forces to such a degree that it is no longer the province of the state; rather, power has itself become a simulation (37), a concept denied to most humans who believe themselves to be in charge. The media have invaded the lives of their audience to the point where, rather than serving as entertainment, the audience is held in thrall to the media. This is where Alan Moore creates the Voice of Fate in Lewis Prothero, a man whose vocal timbre serves as the soothing ideological outsource of the government. There can be no
argument with the Voice of Fate that the Norsefire Party has created in these media. Rather, much as Baudrillard believes, power has shifted to the media, which merely maintain an illusion of truth (71).

The use of visuals becomes appropriately prominent in the film adaptation of V. The first images of our main characters Evey and V feature their various reactions to the face of Prothero during his broadcast as Fate, a Bill O’Reilly-esque spokesperson for the Norsefire Party whose vitriolic broadcasts are the backbone of the televised presence of government. Applauded by an unseen audience, Prothero (Roger Allam) denigrates every other major nation as being run by degenerates and slaves, as though anybody who does not conform to the party beliefs of the British Government is doomed to remain in society’s dregs. Yet this is not an extension of the man himself; Prothero, spouting rhetoric with the bile rising against other nations, skin tones, and religious beliefs, is a man whose life had become ensconced in pharmaceutical drugs. Departing from his comic source collection of dolls, Prothero’s addiction has given himself away to infection, much like the media in the eyes of Baudrillard, who claims that media “controls the mutation of the real into the hyperreal” (55).

The dissolution of individual power comes from the simulation of total power through the media in Baudrillard’s work. V takes this principle and uses it to captivate the audience in both comic and film stories. Through his broadcast, he claims that the British people have allowed themselves to be compliant in the death of their society by electing a madman in Susan (Sutler in the film). The government’s broadcasting site becomes its own denigration of power in both versions, showing the artificial and fragile grip it holds over its citizens. V’s polemic becomes the extension of his mission statement, a desire to place the individual back into power and mind in his work. V represents the human overcoming the government pull of defeatist logic that the Norsefire Party uses to hold power over its citizens. In one of the more famous quotes from the film, V tells Evey, “People should not be afraid of their government. Governments should be afraid of their people” (“V for Vendetta”). The work of V is set out to show the simulacra of power that the Norsefire Party has achieved through the work of the Voice/Image of Fate.
V in the comic goes one step further in showing the very precarious nature of power of the government. The Leader Adam Susan is a cold figure who has rejected every form of compassion that has ever been shown to him by human compatriots. Instead, in his altered mental state, Susan has transferred his image of love onto the computer system known as Fate, the center of control for every government action and broadcast medium. This love becomes perverted by V, who has hacked into the system and altered it to his benefit for terrorism. V programs Fate to show Susan a simple message, “I love you.” Susan becomes warped by the image, unable to shake himself from the simulation of love shown by the unfeeling computer. Fate holds its Leader in its sway while the government becomes slowly destroyed, and yet the simulacra of love cannot sway the Party from its leader’s volatile mental state.

According to Baudrillard:

The medium itself is no longer identifiable as such and the merging of the medium and the message (McLuhan) is the first great formula of this new age. There is no longer any medium in the literal sense: it is now intangible, diffuse and diffracted in the real, and it can no longer be said that the latter is distorted by it (54).

This revelation serves as the problematic truth; Fate is no longer the message of reason or cold, hard, and objective reality. The simulation of control provided by Fate and its various functions now is deprived of the Norsefire Party. Society becomes the double of television as television becomes the new reality (Baudrillard 55), and Fate becomes an extension of V’s newfound image consciousness via his televised broadcast. He is now the one whose power emanates from the government, and no physical entity can replicate or overthrow the visual power of V’s image in the dissolution of the government.

The only way to break the very hold of technology is to enter into anarchy, which is the solution that the comic V brings to fruition through his actions against the totalitarian government. The government leaders, Susan included, claim that he believes wholly and fully in fascism as a reason to continue with the policies of the Norsefire Party, yet it is his technology that ultimately (and metaphorically) betrays him and the government as an entity. V’s insurrection and control over the computer of Fate stands as another example of media implosion, where every eventuality can be curtailed via
computer networks. Yet this technology existed before V became a terrorist force, and in fact remains the principal reason for the negative depiction of the Norsefire government. To be fair, the government is depicted as being paranoid and willing to eradicate various members of its governed populace in order to keep the majority in line. However, V’s actions cause a chain reaction that ends up sending the entire nation into the anarchy that Susan was attempting to curtail after the unnamed attack happened at the outset of the movie/graphic novel. Therefore, it can be surmised that V’s actions have brought about the end of technology.

_The Dark Knight_

In *The Dark Knight Returns*, an aged Batman comes out of retirement to save his city and nation from the dual aspects of rigidity and anarchy, which have unwittingly combined to make the life of the Everyman oppressive and terrifying (Fingeroth 131). Baudrillard’s media implosion is made much more real in this sense, since the televised screen literally becomes its own character, a rotating roster of newscasters and critics that report the chaos, simultaneously reassuring us that everything will be alright. When one pundit claims that Batman is actually assuaging the fears of the beleaguered populace of Gotham City, another attacks her for believing that Batman is the cure to the problem, and claims that Batman’s very presence exacerbates the problems of the city.

Further use of the media implosion is seen in the sequel to *Dark Knight Returns*, simply titled *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*. When Batman and his new partner Carrie/Robin/Catgirl break various heroes out of their government-created prisons, the media have already infiltrated the deepest recesses of the culture, to the point where there’s a channel for every potential viewer, but each one focuses on the exact same thing. Since this is a specialized form of control over the populace, the people cannot leave freely while the broadcasts are occurring. Thus, the media have exploded over society, becoming larger than any entity discussed within their realm.

Yet the question remains: Why is the closest depiction of the trauma of the real world a man wearing pointy ears and stalking criminals using various gadgets and tools to destroy society’s underbelly? Miller’s vision of the criminal dystopia, stylishly recreated for Burton’s 1989 feature film, connected with audiences because, according to Fingeroth:
It is a world both familiar and foreign to us, a bleak foretelling of what could be our urban future. In such a world, anger would be the most rational reaction to the insanity implied in the spire of every building, in the corruption in every corner of society. So would confusion. Who is there to be angry at when the entire world seems set on its head? Who to blame – who to rage against? When all is dark, what does unleashing the darkness within accomplish? Unless that rage is channeled through a Dark Knight? Like any great character of fiction, Batman has a grand appeal. In his case, it is that he takes the anger we feel at the world and puts it to constructive use (132).

Though there is no concrete evidence that Miller’s vision (and subsequently, Nolan’s films) place Batman in the position of answering existential evil that is encountered in the real world, it stands to reason that Batman’s propensity towards constructive violence makes him diametrically opposed to the belief that vigilante justice will be a societal downfall should it ever become implemented. In fact, many depictions of Batman portray a world where his presence is a benefit to the populace.

In The Dark Knight, one sees that the Joker’s promise to stop murdering others once Batman is unmasked is a simulation of the use of videotaping by terrorists to declare their endgame in modern times. This is not the first time that the audience sees terrorist demands being made via a captivating media screen. In The Dark Knight Returns, a “rehabilitated” Harvey Dent/Two-Face holds a news channel hostage while threatening to destroy analogues of the World Trade Center, a frightening premonition of what would happen in reality (it doesn’t help Miller’s case that, by the book’s conclusion, an electromagnetic pulse causes a plane in flight to fall from the sky, crashing into one of those towers and creating pandemonium in the streets). Perhaps the use of media to declare insane, existential evil deeds is only fitting since these characters exist as a result of media; they would not exist without a Batman, who himself would not exist were it not for the efforts of creators Bill Finger and Bob Kane.

However, this is used not as a statement of reality in The Dark Knight, but rather as a simulation of reality. Presenting the execution onscreen of a supposed vigilante [one who Batman turns into the police, saying that he could never be the Caped Crusader because he is “wearing hockey pants” (“The Dark Knight”)] presupposes the relevance of such a videotaped mechanism as prominent media statements in the modern era.

Iron Man

54
This use of videotape as the way of captivating media audiences is also reflected on a smaller scale in *Iron Man*. Once captured, Tony Stark is hooded and unmasked before a camera crew while terrorists (seemingly) read demands into the line of the camera. Unbeknownst to Stark, his captors are really proclaiming that they did not receive instructions on what to do once Stark was brought in alive, sending a personal message to Obadiah Stane, Stark’s second-in-command who wishes to indulge a corporate takeover. However, the audience in 2008 would understand that what was happening to Stark would be a threat of execution to anybody watching the scene, since it reflects the modern era of videotaping prisoners of war.

Moreover, *Iron Man* is the perfect example of the Baudrillardian ideal of simulation overtaking reality. Stark is able to conceptualize the suit that will save his life and become the backbone of the film, thereby able to take the simulation of the suit and make it reality. It is the literal sign that overtakes reality, becoming more real than what was seen before the suit. With the advent of the virtual reality simulator within the film, such as the one that provides specifications and technological manifests of the suit before and during flight, Stark makes his Iron Man armor reality.

Technology literally becomes what drives Stark at the film’s outset. When his military envoy is attacked by the terrorist group Ten Rings, Stark is mortally wounded, when shrapnel from his own weapons penetrates his chest and moves towards his heart. The only way to stop his eventual death is to hook his heart up to an artificial core of renewable energy, known as an arc reactor. This reactor is able to power not only his heart, but also the suit that Stark uses to escape from the Ten Rings. Thus, technology not only becomes the champion reason for his victory over his enemies, it is the very reason for his survival. What are we to make of Iron Man’s latest suit, fighting it out with another perversion of his vision for the industry at the outset of the film? In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, Baudrillard discusses how the body has become a device fully assimilated to the telematic interface, where we can be controlled from afar via technology. The body is no longer metaphor or symbol, because there is nothing below the flesh anymore (Bukatman 246).

According to Baudrillard, the body is now an infinite set of surfaces, or an object among objects (40). This is actually envisioned in the first arc written in the *Iron Man*
comic book written by Warren Ellis, who believed that he would be capable of achieving a sort of biotechnological connection with his suit if he were to place nanotechnology inside his body, thereby able to operate his suit from a remote location with the assistance of his nanomachines. While it is uncertain what the next Iron Man film will contain, Ellis’s story does provide the impetus for moving Tony Stark’s story into the 21st century, with the conflict in Afghanistan acting as the beginning of the billionaire’s move into superhumanity. If the body “is a metastatic body, a fractal body which can no longer hope for resurrection” (Baudrillard 44), then what does the future hold for Stark? His body is already at the point of death, and at this point may be more technology than humanity; even Pepper Potts, assistant to the billionaire industrialist, uses the first arc reactor that powered his cardiovascular system as visual proof “that Tony Stark has a heart” (“Iron Man”).

Another point for discussion is the inclusion of technology in Stark’s body as a vehicle for character development. Stark would not survive without the inclusion of technology into his body at the outset of the film, much less be able to find a reusable source of energy to power his suit. In the wake of September 11, such technology has become personalized to the point of near invisibility, a point that is made clear in the version of Iron Man.

There is also the presence of remote control for the suit, since there is the artificial computer program Jarvis to help pilot the suit and provide Stark with technical readouts for the flight. Jarvis represents the literal overtaking of humanity by technology; in his original comic source form, Jarvis was the human butler for Stark and the Avengers. Though Jarvis’s electronic form represents a more useful counterpart in the film version of Iron Man, it also represents a movement towards distancing the characters from their human traits and source origins.

How does technology and, to a certain extent, the media, play a part in the creation of Iron Man/Iron Man? The character becomes a living replication of the technological man, whose encounters with technology lead him to literally infuse himself with his own product in order to become a more powerful technocrat. Stark’s infusion will undoubtedly cause him to move into the medical industry in the real world, where the powerful energy core for his armored suit will be the reason for many amazing
yet, instead showing the ultimate military achievement in the Iron Man suit that Stark wears to become a greater force for peace. While there is no direct correlation between the possibilities of renewable energy sources and the extraordinary abilities exhibited by Stark in his film and comic, it is nevertheless a coup for Stark Industries’ potential future in non-lethal weaponry, which is challenged at every turn by the Cheney-esque Obadiah Stane.

More importantly, “In the postmodern landscape, boundaries between information and entertainment, images and politics, implode” (Best and Kellner 120). This can be seen in the way that news is often recreated in our entertainment, since many TV news programs and documentaries assume the aesthetic form of entertainment, using dramatic and melodramatic codes to frame their stories for the masses. In V for Vendetta, Prothero becomes a cipher of Bill O’Reilly and his polarizing program on Fox News channel; Iron Man features the use of a montage incorporating Stark into all different facets of the media industry, as seen on magazine templates of Rolling Stone, Wired, and Time. The Dark Knight features a newscaster who follows, and comments on, the ongoing story of Batman as he encounters the Joker, growing more frantic and unstable as the villain’s plan comes together in a disquieting fashion. The result blurs together entertainment and information; the audience perceives that what they are watching is a story onscreen, yet the presence of these media outlets (which have already been tempered by the entertainment industry) in the film(s) arguably will make audience members believe the simulation is taking place.

Privacy/Freedom

Perhaps this is the greatest lesson that one can take from the post-9/11 films of V for Vendetta, Iron Man, and The Dark Knight: Technology will cause one to overcome his/her predecessors, even if it becomes too much power for one man to have, and thus stripping one of his/her privacy for a “greater good.” Again, Batman’s use of the sonar device in the cellular technology is a way of ripping the privacy away from Gotham City citizens, in spite of the fact that his intentions are good. In many ways, this reflects V’s use of Fate to monitor over all of London via the CCTV network (in the comic), as well
as Iron Man’s technologically hermetic home in California (in the film). However, Batman’s use of cellular technology oversees everyone in Gotham City, thereby becoming almost an extension of the pre-crime technologies espoused by Phillip K. Dick’s “The Minority Report.” Though he is not able to stop crimes before they happen, the audience sees that Batman can intrude into the lives of the people he protects in an attempt to save them from further harm; this is like the federal government’s intrusion into the private lives of its citizens via wiretapping, which was done in order to protect the nation from domestic terrorists. This raises the question of whether the ends (capturing the Joker before he can engage in his ultimate endgame) justify the means (eavesdropping on the millions of citizens in Gotham City, thereby depriving them of privacy).

This is also a simulation of what happened in the United States when then-President George W. Bush introduced the bill that would allow him to eavesdrop on American citizens in order to prevent terrorist attacks from occurring in the United States. While his intentions may have been honest, there was a direct backlash from citizens who demanded their privacy, sparking a heated debate between protection from terrorist attacks and the repeal of civil liberties (Lichtblau). This becomes a case where the simulation overtakes reality, since President Bush signed the bill into law before exiting office. Thus, Batman’s use of the technology makes everyone who lives in Gotham City implicit in almost every way, regardless of his good intentions. Furthermore, it means that he becomes something of a terrorist himself, preying on people who may have intentions to commit crimes, but never do actually enact those plans. This is a more moralistic debate that is advanced by Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), who claims, “This is too much power for one man to have” (“The Dark Knight”). Fortunately for U.S. residents (and the citizens of Gotham City), Batman allows Fox to destroy the technology, making sure that his goal is achieved without allowing his power to corrupt absolutely. However, this is a pat answer, revealing a troubling concept: one will relinquish his/her privacy for a limited period, with the belief that not only will the invader complete his/her task, but he/she/they will return things to a state of normalcy afterwards. This is an impossible leap in an age where information is more readily available than ever, and privacy becomes a prized commodity.
Another point to make about the concept of privacy invasion is the use of cellular phone technology as the connection in the sonar that is used to examine all the citizens of Gotham City. Here, much as Baudrillard has posited, the media have become the implosive force that imprisons its users in its thrall. Rather than being free to contact whomever they wish, the populace is held captive by the forces that surround it. The most damning principle behind this concept is that Batman does this while his people continue to act without the knowledge of a Big Brother-style entity “safeguarding” them. In this respect, we see the implosion of any and all possibilities by the self-declared protector of the city, whose prison around the city is one created by media products, and Batman keeps his people in line via the technology they once trusted.

Hyperreality

In truth, the Afghanistan desert in the beginning of Iron Man is nothing more than an American landscape that has been altered and appropriated for reasons of saving money on air transportation. Yet the audience believes that the hyperreal Afghanistan desert looks exactly like the filmmaker’s vision, and likely would construct the simulation of the desert exactly like director Jon Favreau did in his film, using it as a basis for the reality upon which Iron Man was commenting. More real, and perhaps more problematic, is the depiction of Chicago and Hong Kong in The Dark Knight. Chicago serves itself as a model of what Gotham City would be like, at least according to the vision of director Christopher Nolan. By using distinct Chicago landmarks, even going so far as to place recognizable Illinois license plates on cars for representation of Gotham City, the metropolis comes alive and is made real via the hyperreality of the Chicago set locations for the film.

The use of videotaping in both Batman films featuring the Joker shows the power of imagery, since the Joker’s very presence, though malevolent, is offset by his demagogical nature. By pandering to their prejudices and ignorance, the Joker is truly giving the people of Gotham City what they want, currying favor with the masses via the media that control them. Moreover, they become hyperreal since many denizens of the city never have contact with Batman, unless they are committing a crime or being victimized as a result of one. The implosion of meaning gives way to simulacra that
overtake reality. The citizens of Gotham City believe that Batman does not exist until he arrives on the television, but his lack of physical presence in the community deprives him of meaning, and deprives the citizens of Gotham of being able to truly conceptualize what it is that the character does for the city. Thus, the demagogical nature of Joker’s plan is to carve out an image of himself, even though it is meaningless in the hyperreal.

Reality, according to Baudrillard, is, within an image, believed to be the equivalent of a symbol/sign of its own existence. Reality does not exist within the realm of signs; rather, reality is an ideology to conceal the fact that it does not objectively exist. The signs that the Joker uses to prey on Gothamites throughout both films indicate a heavy use of iconography and symbolism. The symbols become masks of reality, and then are perverted until they are stripped of all realism, becoming thus more real than the objects they simulate (Baudrillard 11).

Ultimately, The Dark Knight exists as the closest representation of reality under the moniker of a superhero film, since it simultaneously revels in, and replaces, the world outside of the theater. Gotham City is presented as imaginary to reveal that there is no real once the audience leaves the screening hall. It is simultaneously a celebration of American life, power, and identity, yet it masks the fact that we have no clear identity outside of the proscenium arch of the silver screen. If one believes in the simulation of reality via the depiction of Gotham City, the presentation of the Chicago skyline and the Hong Kong metropolis (both of which were locations for filming the picture) makes it much more real to an uncritical eye. The viewer understands that these images are real, yet they would not exist and be defined unless society (and thus the viewer) claims they are real.

**Security/Terrorism/Innocence**

*V for Vendetta*

The issue of security versus innocence becomes a question in all three films. In *V for Vendetta*, an alteration in the film from the original source material comes late into the film, when V notifies Inspector Eric Finch of the Norsefire Party that he will provide information regarding Larkhill. Here the audience sees V tell a story to Finch regarding
the actual rise to power of Sutler and the Norsefire Party. In a sequence of events that vaguely alludes to the Bush administration, Sutler gains power via an experiment devoted to national security where bioweapons are tested under the pretense of protecting England. In the scene, there are dead prisoners [whose crimes are never reported; Prothero labels them “degenerates”] (“V for Vendetta”) being carted out while members wear hazmat suits similar to those during the infamous anthrax scare post-9/11. The prisoners are also shown in glass cases, naked and hooded, presumably so they cannot be heard by the guards that walk the halls outside wearing jackboots similar to fascist style. A prisoner is kicked repeatedly by a boot, and the next cut moves the shot to prisoners whose cells include blood on the glass walls. It seems that they have been infected with a virus whose side effects and physical ailments bear striking resemblances to the AIDS virus (Keller 203).

During this monologue, V tells Finch that fear was the true weapon of the government, which allowed Sutler to gain power in an unprecedented manner. This can be referred to as a denotation of the power of Bush’s administration, in which the executive branch of government gained new levels of power. It also never occurs in the book, which shows how the narrative has been changed to reflect new experiences within the publication of the book and the filming of the movie.

The first truly outspoken indication of the war experienced by Evey, V, and Valerie is midway though the movie, when Valerie claims that “America’s war grew worse and worse, and eventually came to London,” accompanied by a flurry of images of soldiers carting wounded, babies that had been burned and wearing bandages, and (presumably) insurgents firing bullets into the air. Earlier, when Valerie had met her lover Ruth during the filming of The Salt Flats, the actress claimed that the filming took place during 2005, which would have begun Bush’s second administration. Later, an image of an anti-war protest, as shown by the scrolling poster marked “NO WAR,” is shown as a way of promoting an anti-military stance. One particular sign during the protest reads “Bush” explicitly, with an insult that has been filmed out due to the limitations of the screen ratio. Nevertheless, once paused, it is possible to read the accompanying words “You’re a fucking…” with the final words out of the frame, showing how President Bush is represented within the confines of the film. Again,
according to director McTeigue, this may be subjective baggage that is chosen on the part of the audience, but nevertheless it represents a conscious choice of the filmmakers to include imagery that was reminiscent of conflicts both past and present.

Creedy, head of the Finger and its obviously twisted henchmen, is shown to be the true manipulative villain behind all the kidnappings, experimentation, and bioweaponry in the film, since it is his suggestion to use the virus in populated areas (here there is footage shown from the London Tube bombings, what often has been referred to as “London’s 9/11”) to make the population rely on the Norsefire Party in order to maintain stability within the government. Creedy thus coerces the population into full obedience by providing the disease and subsequent cure for the worst biological attack in the United Kingdom, one that leaves 80,000 dead (“V for Vendetta”). Here in Creedy is the extension of the paranoia and fear of government gone awry. Inspector Finch also complains that his job is compromised by the terror tactics of Creedy. According to James R. Keller, “The inspector cannot ‘conduct his investigation’ into the activities of the terrorist V if his witnesses ‘disappear…into…Creedy’s black bags.’ The ‘bags’ allude to the international outcry against the U.S. practice of hooding detainees at the Guantanamo Bay military base in Cuba, hooding having been identified as torture in international treaty” (50). The black bagging of suspects by Creedy is also reminiscent of the process of capturing terrorists, or sensitive subjects whose existence could become problematic. The Norsefire Party is renowned for its Fingermen, whose purpose is to make subjects disappear under presumption of death. The quiet imprisonment of Evey is seen as a representation of what Creedy’s men will do to those deemed malicious enough to be sent to the camps.

**Terrorism**

All three films examine the use of terrorism in their narrative context, capitalizing wildly on the different aspects of the concept. The previously mentioned filmic instances serve as evidence for a claim that terrorism has changed the characters; in a way, all three are terrorists. V is a revolutionary terrorist, attempting to change the political makeup of his country by using dynamite and propagandizing rhetoric that will plunge his populace into anarchy. In an unusual turn of events in post-9/11 culture, V becomes the hero of the film via his death at its end. According to Keller, “*V for Vendetta* does seem to condone
terrorism or at least make some terrorism seem a justifiable expression of outrage from the powerless against the tyranny of the majority and/or the establishment” (22). The author points out that terrorism, often thought to be the refuge of villains whose anarchic ideologies contradict the state, may be the only way to defeat the establishment in a totalitarian state.

Iron Man is a different sort of terrorist, willing to take illegal action on enemy soil, but not wanting to upset the status quo of the government that he willingly serves (and that also provides a steady form of recompense). Finally, Batman is at the opposite end of terrorism, since his actions further bolster and maintain the status quo. He is attempting to wipe out all criminals to maintain law and order in the community that he has served peerlessly for so long, and he will not cross the line of killing that V and Iron Man have walked. Perhaps it comes from his background; Batman watched his family die by a criminal’s gun, while V and Iron Man have caused death because of their frustration with their captivity.

More importantly, these characters are catalysts for change in their world. All three of the protagonists in the films are placed in danger for their causes, and they come back changed. V’s death sparks the revolution that his vendetta was planned to achieve, and thus he culminates his ideological change from terrorist to hero by burning on a funeral pyre of dynamite that explodes underneath the Parliament building in London. Iron Man takes the world by storm, becoming a sort of celebrity phenomenon by the film’s end; this is fitting, considering his beginnings as the billionaire Tony Stark. The character’s first sighting is in Afghanistan, when Stark uses the armor to take out members of the Ten Rings who held him captive. In this fashion, Stark is a terrorist, since his actions on the ground are illegal and cause an uprising of the citizens. Yet that upsetting of the established status quo is his point, even though it is very briefly shown, and it never seems that Iron Man truly solves all of the problems in Afghanistan. Instead, he merely puts many bad people into the ground. Though he is considered a terrorist in Afghanistan, he is ultimately a hero who defends American soil and is presented as such at the end, even being allowed to enter the Avengers initiative by Nick Fury, director of S.H.I.E.L.D., the movie’s equivalent of a top-secret military force.
The Joker and Terrorism

Maybe the greatest representation of Baudrillard’s simulation and simulacra is Heath Ledger’s depiction The Dark Knight’s Joker, who becomes the horrific symbol of terror in the real world. Shuffling through the world like a specter of doom, he not only believes that Batman has altered the reality of Gotham City and its criminal underworld, the Joker is a justification for destroying all of reality. The Joker is the perfect example of a simulacrum in that he has become the living embodiment of the nothingness of chaos and anarchy. He has no name, no matching fingerprints, and the audience knows even less about him when they leave the theater than they ever did before the film started. He is mystery and enigma made real, since nobody can define him or his methods save for himself, and he may not even be cognizant of what drives him to such territory in the frightening mental landscape.

There is no reality to any of the statements that he makes, since reality does not exist for him. All he sees are societal rules and regulations, which are masking the primordial chaos. To paraphrase one of the iconic lines of the film, he’s not just aware that the signs point to nothing; he believes that he’s ahead of the curve (“The Dark Knight”). The Joker is a simulacrum come to life via his personality, which is malleable and primitive, unwilling to use technology beyond its thrall over the audience, in whom he yearns to inspire mass terror. Thus, Joker no longer needs to simulate the terror within his mysterious identity; he is anarchy made real, having reflected, masked, perverted, and borne no relation to any discernible reality, much less sanity.

The Joker even begins to destroy various aspects of the society that created him. Money means nothing to the villain, who, after escaping from prison (symbolic of his anarchic freedom from the regulations of normal, free society), incinerates a pile of money to reflect his perverted sense of the world. Money, given value via the symbolic exchange that society embraces, is caught up in neither use values nor exchange values by the Joker, and as such he escapes domination by the logic of political economy. This is another reflection of Baudrillard, who writes how capitalism is partly responsible for the encroachment of the artifice of the simulacra, since one can buy and sell images in place of reality easily (36). An example of this is the Joker’s iconic portrayal in media both in and out of the film. The Joker’s journey towards chaos is metaphoric of the
destruction of the World Trade Center, where the loss of lives and money was emblematic of the fragile nature of society. The confusion and societal underpinnings of the film make it a believable simulation of not only events of the day (scaled down from their catastrophic real counterparts to effectively and tastefully portray reactions to terrorism), but also how real people react to the horror of modern villainy.

Finally, there is the fact that Batman effectively becomes the villain in the eyes of the public at the end of the film, choosing to let a scarred Harvey Dent remain Gotham City’s white knight while he becomes the self-declared evil that has destroyed the man. Giving strict instructions to Commissioner Jim Gordon at the end of the film, he runs away with the knowledge that he has kept hope alive in the city by becoming the symbol needed to represent fear and crime, which is the antithesis of his true nature. Baudrillard claims that “facts no longer have any trajectory of their own, they arise at the intersection of the models” (32). Thus, the boundaries and distinctions of philosophy and society are imploded into a flux where simulacra do not differentiate between truth and unreality (Baudrillard 11-13). Due to the need for a villain to answer for the insanity forced upon the city, Batman chooses to make himself a scapegoat for the city, his simulated, hyperreal image of negative consequence becoming the truth in the eyes of the masses, who are informed by the media. Ultimately, Batman understands that the Joker, and thus chaos, cannot win in an ordered society, and that in order to simulate order, he must become the simulation of the villain, or the believed villain, so that the model of organization can be maintained. Batman must become a terrorist in order to stop true terror.

Batman stands as the catalyst for change. While petty crime has been substantially lowered at the beginning of the film, the Joker is the immediate result of Batman’s presence in the city. Indeed, the very first scene of the film takes place inside a bank as the masked robbers steal money from the vault. Even this is a transitional period, since the vault money belongs to the mafia that Batman is trying to wipe out. When the manager informs the Joker of this, the villain reveals his scarred face to him, thus showing how strange and unique characters are replacing the older Mafioso leaders. Batman, focused on the task of eradicating crime, does not pay the Joker any attention
after the bank robbery. It is here that the audience begins to see how the overlooking of potential criminals can have horrific consequences.

After the Joker’s initial strike and Batman’s takedown of various other gangsters, the crime families decide to meet underground to hide away from Batman. The Joker arrives, wearing a jacket filled with grenades that will explode with the pull of a trigger. The criminal strikes out at the gangsters, claiming that their fear of Batman is ultimately unfounded and childish. He calls their meetings “group therapy sessions,” and violently murders henchmen using simple tools such as pencils. The greater threat that he makes is that the mob is powerless against the Dark Knight without him, and thus he posits that he will be able to kill him. While making his point, he disparages the mob to the point that one of the lieutenants stands up against him; at this point his coat opens, revealing the grenades that are tied together by a string he controls. This is imagery much like a suicide bomber, a marked move to contemporary life, yet it can easily be explained by his appearance and apparent insanity. This is the first long exposure the audience and mob have to the character in the film, and his personality is one that will take the greatest toll on those close to him.

During a meeting with Harvey Dent and Rachel Dawes, Wayne argues that nobody had appointed the Batman as a champion for the people, to which Dent replies, “We did. All those people that let scum take over our city” (“The Dark Knight”). The idolization of a masked vigilante even by popular elected officials is indicative of the changed times in Gotham City, acting as a simulation of reality. It is a wish fulfillment of the superhero as described by Fingeroth (17); one knowing what the right thing is, and standing up to existential evil in a tangible way and stopping it before it can worsen, is emblematic of the superhero concept at its core. This concept of a larger evil will fulfill Batman’s crusade; while he is able to defeat those that would strike out in petty crimes for a more humanistic purpose (self-fulfillment), he will soon encounter an enemy that does not hunger for the greater spoils of war. Instead, it is his first contact with the Joker that begins to reveal greater reliance on the imagery and ideology of September 11th and its aftermath.

After a massive number of mob associates are arrested because of Batman’s extradition of a criminal accountant, Ryan Douglas, a former vigilante that Batman
captured for trying to take up his mantle is hung in front of the mayor’s office, dead and wearing Joker makeup. A video is delivered to GCN (the equivalent of CNN in the fictional world) featuring his death on camera. The image of Douglas tied up to a chair as the Joker shakes the camera is used to create a sort of terror within the audience. In the video, Douglas claims that Batman is a symbol that “we don’t have to be afraid of scum like you (the Joker)” (“The Dark Knight”). The Joker then reveals his face on camera, claiming that, “This is how crazy Batman has made Gotham” (“The Dark Knight”), promising that more people will die if Batman does not unmask. His threats are those of a terrorist, since he has no cause beyond wanting to see Batman reveal himself to the people he claims to protect.

The Joker appears again at a fundraiser for Harvey Dent in Bruce Wayne’s penthouse, and takes Rachel Dawes hostage. He tells her a story that he gave himself the knife scars that are his horrifying makeup, which contradicts a prior story that he gave to the criminal Gamble: his father cut his face after murdering his mother in a drunken rage. It is telling that the Joker uses different stories to explain his creation, since both are potentially true; in the seminal Joker story The Killing Joke, there is a plausible origin given for his character, where his horrific facial expression was created due to exposure to a powerful chemical vat, similar to his film origin in Tim Burton’s 1989 Batman. Towards the end of the tale, Joker says that he has a past that is multiple choice (Moore and Bolland), claiming that his beginning is fluid, and he has been through many different incarnations in his creation. This is repeated in subtle form in the film, and there is a distinct reason for this. Rather than becoming a simple villain, the Joker now stands for a complex, intangible force that cannot be named. His promotion of chaos and anarchy is matched by the simple fact that he has no definable origin, nor any personal wish beyond the encouragement of disorder.

After the attack on Dawes, Wayne’s butler Alfred claims that perhaps Batman doesn’t understand the Joker. He claims that some men aren’t looking for money; “some men just want to watch the world burn” (“The Dark Knight”). This is an apt description of the Joker, since his purpose is not money; quite simply, it is pure terror. Later, there is support for this when the Joker stands next to one of his mob partners and burns a pile of cash, claiming that it’s not about money, but rather about giving Gotham a better class of
criminal. In this case, there comes a point of extremism, of being a radical for a cause greater than oneself. In many ways, this is also what Batman does to win the hearts of Gotham City’s citizens, since he is pursuing justice through whatever means possible. The radicalism that the Joker brings shows a clear sense of purpose, which is the dissolution of purpose and society.

Dent recognizes that Batman cannot provide his true identity, and that he is a symbol for a greater good. At the press conference where Batman claims that he will unmask, Dent engages in rhetoric that is not unfamiliar to those who have watched the news since September 11th. In an attempt to appease the angered populace, he tells the people that everything that can be done about the Joker killings is being done. Though he calls the Batman an outlaw, he says that the people have been happy to have Batman clean the streets for them. He then says that, though things are worse than they were before, “the night is darkest just before the dawn” (“The Dark Knight”), and then claims that things will get better. The district attorney then says that the citizens of Gotham City should not give in to the terrorist demands of the Joker, a reminder of the United States’ “no-negotiation” policy with terrorists in reality; Batman will have to answer to the people for his outlaw actions, not to the Joker. He then turns himself in as Batman while Bruce Wayne stands by in shock.

Alfred offers an explanation to Rachel for Dent’s actions, and claims that this is an ideological victory for both Wayne and Dent. “Perhaps both Bruce and Mr. Dent believe that Batman stands for something more important than the whims of a terrorist, Ms. Dawes. Even if everyone hates him for it, that’s the sacrifice he’s making. He’s not being a hero, he’s being something more” (“The Dark Knight”). This shows how people view the ideological stances of Batman and Harvey Dent, two opposite sides of the same coin. This is also a chilling possible description of the Bush Administration, which dropped in approval ratings as the Iraq War continued during the filming and exhibition of The Dark Knight. President Bush declined in popularity as the war dragged on, and claimed that it was his ideological imperative to continue the war. In this sense, though he did what was unpopular, President Bush believed that his view of the war was ultimately right, and acting as a sort of sacrificial lamb for his own subjective viewpoint on terrorism.
When Batman and the Joker finally meet for a prolonged confrontation/discussion, it is telling that the Joker is kept wholly in the dark, his white makeup the only visible indication of the villain. Yet Batman is bathed in darkness as well, a symbol that his methods are also similar to those of the Joker. It is here that Joker lays out his belief that Batman has changed things, and there is no going back to the previous status quo. This is reminiscent of the attacks of September 11th, which can be argued as one of the moments in American society that most altered the psychological and sociological makeup of the nation. The Joker then states that Batman is the other side of his personality, somebody whose very presence completes him. It is Batman’s rules that separate the Joker from the Caped Crusader, along with the fact that the Joker is classified as a “freak who just enjoys it” by a police captain. There is no identification on his person, no fingerprints that match in the police system, and only knives that are weapons of terror. Afterwards, he explains that he uses knives to pull emotional reactions from his victims, a horrific explanation of his personal bias in murder. Finally, there is the surgical insertion of a pipe bomb inside one of his henchmen, which explodes after his escape from the holding cell in the Gotham City Police Department Major Crimes Unit.

The ominous music and escape of the terrorist Joker at the end of the second act of the film gives way to an image that is strikingly similar to that of the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. The explosions in both warehouses are followed with flames among the debris that is littered across the background, and firefighters are trying to console one another after the attack. This subtle but fascinating image is then repeated with Batman standing atop the rubble that housed his dead love Rachel, who was consumed by the fires from the blast; the hero stands alone and silent, a reminder of what he has lost in his crusade. This pose on rubble is a reminder to viewers of the tragedy that killed so many American citizens via visual cues and mise-en-scene. Later on, when Alfred brings the beleagured hero his breakfast, Bruce asks his butler if his presence brought about Rachel’s death. He claims he was supposed to inspire good, not madness and death. This is a question that could be asked about the greater United States and its declaration to provide life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Not unlike the United States’ villains, Batman’s enemies are now ideologically motivated beyond what has
come before, wanting to create chaos that will tear down all the good that he has wrought. Instead of standing for personal gain, there is an ideological, existential conflict that becomes apparent through the film that is a simulation of the greater war on terror happening outside the audience’s doors. There is a popular belief held that the United States’ very existence as a democratic and just nation was impetus enough for the al-Qaeda terrorists to fly planes into the World Trade Center and other targets. Given the opinions of the majority of American citizens towards this conceit, there is a parallel metaphor running in the film with Bruce Wayne, who believes that Batman does good, yet simultaneously inspires evil.

The conflict facing Wayne is now this: while he may have wanted to unmask in an attempt to prevent any further bloodshed, he now sees what he has done is create an enemy he cannot defeat in the traditional sense. This is the same thing as the changing face of war, and the myriad shades of grey that appear when one breaks down the conceptual nature of terrorism in the 21st century. No longer do heroes simply stand for good, and others for evil, which is representative of the moral ambiguity facing nations of the world. Rather than easily delineated ideologies, the difference between the subjective concepts of right and wrong is argued amongst the protagonists and antagonists of these films. This is indicative of the changing nature of conflict caused by terrorism; since terrorists do not operate under national or state control, they cannot be defeated in the same manner as previous antagonists. Rather, their very power is the threat of their existence, which strikes fear of an attack into victims.

Anarchy in the Movies, and the Ethical Response

The Joker’s reason for burning money is that his preference for the cheap nature of gasoline, knives, and dynamite make money obsolete. According to the Joker, “It’s not about money, it’s about sending a message. Everything burns” (“The Dark Knight”). After burning the cash pile, he then calls the GCN, which is broadcasting a live interview with the accountant from Wayne Enterprises who has stumbled onto the secret identity of his employer and has promised to reveal his true name. The Joker calls the network and claims that he will start blowing up hospitals unless an ordinary Gotham City resident kills the accountant. The priority for this call comes from the very same reasoning behind terrorist demands; rather than wanting to protect Batman’s identity, the Joker is
attempting to make an ideological argument that the government cannot protect its people from devolving beyond society. The Joker’s belief in the fragility of society makes him less interested in taking out specific targets, and more concerned with watching anarchy take hold among the people, as society begins to tear itself apart.

In fact, the concept of anarchy is a connecting factor in both *The Dark Knight* and *V for Vendetta*, yet the very purpose of these works in using anarchy is different. While *The Dark Knight* wraps its darkest character underneath the possibility of anarchy and its societal construction, V sees the potential for good in the anarchic destruction of the Norsefire Party. Though the graphic novel is the one that explicitly states that what he’s intending is anarchy, his intentions in both novel and film are to create a better world than what has come before. What was done to him in the Larkhill Detention Camp made him a monster, though it also created an extremely prescient person. In the graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, Alan Moore and David Lloyd gave their terrorist protagonist a reason for his belief in the positive potential of anarchy:

> Anarchy wears two faces, both creator and destroyer. Thus destroyers topple empires, make a canvas of clean rubble where creators can build a better world. Rubble once achieved makes further ruins’ means irrelevant. Away with our explosives, then! Away with our destroyers! They have no place within our better world. But let us raise a toast to all of our bombers, all our bastards, most unlovely and most unforgivable (222).

The Joker’s view of people with plans is made apparent to Dent when he breaks into the scarred district attorney’s hospital room. His mantra of “introduce a little anarchy” into the world is reflected in the fact that some of the citizens he speaks to actually attempt to kill the accountant outside of the television studio. He believes that he’s the equivalent of a dog chasing cars, since he doesn’t think he knows what he would do with one if he caught it. He tries to show the people he calls “schemers” that their attempts to control events and situations are “pathetic” (“The Dark Knight”). He also claims that having plans was the reason why Dent is tied down to a hospital bed, and that when things go according to plan everything is aligned correctly in the world. His self-description as an agent of chaos is indicative of his anarchic resolution.

V and the Joker are simulations of anarchy in practice, yet they represent two different simulacra. The revolutionary terrorist V is chaos via violent upheaval and coup, simulating a takeover and rebuilding for perceived good, whereas the Joker is a
simulacrum of chaos incarnate. He doesn’t want to rebuild the world in his image or ideology. As butler and loyal confidante Alfred states, he merely wishes to watch the world burn.

Batman’s answer to Joker’s intentions is a surprising choice: he wires all the cell phones in Gotham to become sonar, and can easily tap into the privacy of the citizens. Lucius Fox talks about the concept as being dangerous, unethical, and wrong; he asks Batman what cost he’s willing to pay to capture the Joker. This is a question relating back to the wiretapping done by President Bush, who spied on American citizens in an attempt to locate terrorists who would attempt to attack national soil. The scene features a protagonist who is breaking some of his own rules to stop a madman, and an advisor who believes that the ends may not justify the means.

This question of ethics and results will become a defining point of the film, particularly in the scene that follows. The Joker calls it a social experiment when he wires two ferries that are carrying different cargo (one holds ordinary citizens, and the other is a prison ferry featuring dangerous criminals) with explosives, and tells both boats that he has given the boats the detonator that will blow the other out of the water. He recommends that each boat destroy the other, since the uncertainty of the situation will be unbearable for others to take. The prisoners do not get a say in this situation, and what happens with the citizens is an ethical dilemma: Do they blow up the prisoners before the criminals have the chance to do the same to them? The argument becomes a voting process in which the citizens literally take the lives of the criminals into their own hands via a process not dissimilar to our own elections, despite the protests of a vocal few who are willing to eradicate the prisoners without any second thought. The vote turns out to be overwhelmingly in favor of blowing up the prisoners, yet there is no ultimate explosion that will eradicate the other boat. The Joker even tricks a SWAT team attempting to take him out when he switches the hostages he took from a hospital into the clothing of his henchmen, simultaneously placing the criminals in doctors’ scrubs. Without understanding the tricky mindset of the Joker, the SWAT team nearly kills many hostages while thinking that they are really criminals. This constant moral questioning sets *The Dark Knight* apart from other films within the superhero comic book adaptation.
subgenre that once easily defined its characters as moral and immoral in movies such as *Spider-Man* and *Superman Returns*.

Even Batman’s victory over the Joker in a fistfight is clouded by the fact that what the villain did was merely a diversion, stopping the Caped Crusader from intervening in Harvey Dent’s attempted murder of Commissioner Gordon’s son. The Joker recognizes that Dent’s soul has been blackened by these events, and that Dent’s prosecution will be destroyed with his image as the world sees what he’s truly become—a two-faced killer. The death of Dent at Batman’s hands before he can become a child murderer nevertheless presents the chilling dilemma of what to do about the beleaguered district attorney, and whether to come forward with the truth about the crimes he has committed. Even though Dent has broken the law several times in his attempt to shut down the mob in Gotham City, he has done so by keeping a strong public face that has restored the citizens’ faith in government, not unlike the public feats of President Bush and New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani during the attacks of September 11th. Batman and Commissioner Gordon know that the Joker cannot win, and Dent cannot be turned away from his position as Gotham’s true hero. Thus, Batman decides that he will accept blame for the five people that have died, making himself a true criminal outlaw in the eyes of the people he will continue to protect, and tells Commissioner Gordon, “Sometimes, the truth isn’t good enough. Sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded” (“The Dark Knight”). The film ends with Batman becoming the true counterpart to Harvey Dent, who was the White Knight that Gotham needed in order to maintain order and serenity; Batman truly becomes the hero that Gotham City deserves, its Dark Knight.

This is a simulation of good versus evil. Baudrillard spoke about religion and deities in a revealing chapter, claiming that even ardent followers of a God could believe in the idea of a distorted truth. However, his claim of God as a simulacrum meant that His followers would be following a lie, and the highest in the church knew that a divine image of Him for worship would be necessary to conceal the lie (8). The same is true for Batman and Commissioner Gordon at the end of *The Dark Knight*. Even though Dent became a confused criminal, the symbols of authority must maintain the façade of decency and humanity the media has cultivated for the district attorney. Thus, the
simulation of a good man becomes his true being, even in the face of death, masking all the terror that he has wrought through his violent campaign that ended with his horrible death. Batman, stating that he will simulate a criminal, thus becomes a criminal in the eyes of the law. By creating a simulacrum of the reality he wants to achieve, Batman is now hunted by the police for his actions.

Batman goes from being a hero to becoming a terrorist. Both Dent and Alfred believe that Batman must endure in order to make the right choice for Gotham City, and thus must fight on. Even though people are dying, Alfred wants his master to endure the hatred of the citizens in order to make the choice that nobody else can make. Andrew Klavan of the Wall Street Journal argues that The Dark Knight is an allegory praising the beleaguered President and his moral courage at the time of filming and release:

Like W (nickname of President George W. Bush), Batman is vilified and despised for confronting terrorists in the only terms they understand. Like W, Batman sometimes has to push the boundaries of civil rights to deal with an emergency, certain that he will re-establish those boundaries when the emergency is past. And like W, Batman understands that there is no moral equivalence between a free society -- in which people sometimes make the wrong choices -- and a criminal sect bent on destruction. The former must be cherished even in its moments of folly; the latter must be hounded to the gates of Hell.

Nolan’s overt, spoken references to the Joker’s being a terrorist are few throughout the movie, yet they show the character to be a terrorist in his purest form. Every attack that is perpetrated in the film is considered one of terrorism, regardless of its revolutionary intent or seditious nature. The concept of the Joker in The Dark Knight is the one that exists in the western world, where the connotation does not have to do with someone who simply uses terror and fear to attack their enemies, but rather has a historical meaning derived by the attacks of September 11th.

Patriotism

Iron Man

During the montage that introduces the character of Tony Stark and his brief history in the presentation of the Apogee Award, his image is brought up as the voice claims that Stark has changed the face of the weapons industry. While appearing on the cover of Rolling Stone, Stark has ensured freedom and protected America’s interests
around the world (“Iron Man”). He is then called “a real patriot” by Air Force Colonel Jim Rhoades (Terrence Howard), which is a contrast from what Christine Everhart from *Vanity Fair* claims. She gives him another nickname, “the Merchant of Death” (“Iron Man”). Stark responds that, “The day weapons are no longer needed to keep the peace, I’ll start making bricks and beams to open baby hospitals,” and that “peace means having a bigger stick than the other guy” (“Iron Man”). The audience is revealed to be focusing on a character whose charisma is accompanied by a belief in war profiteering, and his weapons manufacturing makes him more of a polarizing figure in the present anti-war climate.

Stark’s presentation of the Jericho missile in Afghanistan begins with his asking, “Is it better to be feared or respected? And I say, is it too much to ask for both?” (“Iron Man”). At this point, Stark says that he prefers the weapon one only needs to fire once. “That’s the way Dad did it, that’s the way America does it, and it’s worked pretty well so far” (“Iron Man”). This reveals his personal stance towards militarism, since his “bigger stick” is an advanced piece of aircraft weaponry that will annihilate a large portion of the land. In the beginning of his comic book origins, Stan Lee conceived him as a hero for the pro-military set. Lee took the kind of character that, according to the DVD special feature “The Invincible Iron Man: The History of the Hero,” nobody liked, and placed him in the spotlight of the burgeoning Marvel comics heroes. The irony of creating a pro-war character during the Sixties, when the Vietnam War was beginning, was not lost on Lee, and yet Iron Man became a very popular character. In a twist, Marvel Comics and Lee received more fan mail from females for *Iron Man* than any other title. According to his creators, Tony Stark aroused the maternal instinct in women (“Iron Man”).

It was the intention of director Jon Favreau to make Iron Man as real as possible, and that included the suit (“Iron Man”). This striving for verisimilitude is akin to the need to make audiences believe that it could happen. One thing that Favreau and his writing team believed is that, unlike other popular Marvel characters, there is no set Iron Man story within the comics. Not only does this mean that there is no set mythology behind the character to which one must adhere, but it also meant that anybody could set out to create the definitive Iron Man story. According to Favreau, there were specific
characters that must be included, but there was also a story that could be placed behind the film not attached to the comics. This meant that Iron Man could be filmed in the modern day, free from his Vietnam War origins, and could still represent the military establishment during a controversial period in American history.

The style of verisimilitude employed by Favreau marks the scenes where Stark and Rhodes interact after Stark’s return from captivity in Afghanistan. Not only did it make the proceedings more authentic, but it also provided actors Downey and Howard with a sense of inspiration and awe for the actual work done by the military men. This infusion of pro-military support from the main actors is interesting, since the narrative of the film involves its main character moving from a pro-military stance to creating weapons of peace. The authenticity of the situation also leads to his torture scene. After being hooded and led outside by his captors, Stark sees that they have his weaponry. Stark’s translator and fellow hostage asks him for a list of materials; the captors say that he will be set free after he creates a Jericho missile for them. The Afghan caves and terrorists and the prison of Tony Stark are used to create the reason behind Stark’s mindset and character for this piece, as opposed to his comic book origins of capture in Vietnam.

As time goes on and the war continues, the adaptation of Iron Man is held up because this is a character that represents the worst aspects of the industrial military complex; what’s more, in a sort of meta-commentary, Stark realizes that he is a person who is intensely flawed, and sets about to correct this flaw (Crantz). Stark’s place in the world is unique because of his history; at the beginning, it appears that he was born to create weapons, or at least immerse himself in his father’s work in the Manhattan Project (“Iron Man”). This is an extension of patriotism, since he becomes a great American citizen by doing the only thing he knows how to do – build weapons. Indeed, even his enemies in his comic origins are derived from a Cold War ideology: rogues such as the Crimson Dynamo, Black Widow, and the Mandarin were all based in nations that were labeled Communist sympathizers during the Sixties. Yet it is telling that the greatest enemy of Iron Man in his film is Obadiah Stane, who argues with Stark that “We’re Iron Mongers. What we do keeps the world from falling into chaos” (“Iron Man”). Stane is an American; more importantly, he becomes the antagonistic face of the corrupt
industrial military complex who, when faced with the possibility of replacement, causes his own unconscionably evil end.

The very cinematic elements of Stane make him completely different from the terrorists in the film. An early encounter with the head of the Ten Rings reveals him to be a master manipulator of people, something of the puppet master Vice President Cheney always popularly was described as when compared to President Bush. He makes things happen by exchanging parts for people, and answers to an unseen cadre of directors who threaten to shut Stark out after his press conference (another of Stane’s manipulations) (“Iron Man”). However, there is a difference in tone of the villainy here as opposed to the other films. Whereas V’s Sutler, Creedy and the Norsefire Party are driven by a desire to remain in control of the government, Stane ostensibly is a villain who bankrolls terrorists to remain a powerful businessman. He even provides weapons that drive villagers from their homes in Afghanistan. The word “insurgents” is used to describe these people, a term often used in the news post-9/11, along with “collateral damage” during the climactic battle with Stark in their respective War Monger and Iron Man suits.

The character of Obadiah Stane himself is one who has undergone several changes. His involvement with Tony Stark’s father and company was present in both comic and film, but the film makes him a peaceful vice president of the company until the end, when he makes his literal hostile takeover bid. Stane does don the Iron Monger suit after finding Stark’s model, much as he does when he creates the Iron Monger suit in the comics after finding Tony Stark’s notes. What is interesting is that his representation is a simulation of the perception of the American businessman in the modern era. In an attempt to make the film accessible to audiences nationwide, and possibly across the globe, Stane arguably becomes a replica of Vice President Cheney in his second-in-command status, shadowy puppet operations, and co-opting of the technology used by his predecessor to take over the company, thereby shutting out those who had power prior to his coup. This reflection of the modern businessman, simulated as ruthless and greedy to the core, is a perception that turns all who exhibit similar behavior into Stane’s contemporaries. Since the contemporary businessman has been represented as tied to politicians, the representation is charged with political agendas. His argument for being
involved with war is simple: he’s supposed to be tied to conflict because of his job. This is not far removed from Stark’s concept of patriotism, but it represents an extremist point of view that reveals a selfish agenda in the creation of the character.

**Politics**

In fact, Iron Man always has been Marvel’s most political superhero, since he was literally forged on the battlefield in Vietnam (Wright 222). His very first action as a superhero was to demolish a Viet Cong military base and overthrow a sadistic Communist warlord. Iron Man’s very nature is to fight against the Communists during the Cold War via symbolic contests of power and will (Wright 222). His very antithesis in terms of character is the Soviet hero the Titanium Man, and when he receives a challenge from him he must accept it as “a matter of national pride…of prestige” (Wright 222), while the Communists in Russia believe that his defeat will be a powerful one used as a propaganda victory for the nation. Naturally, American-created (and published) Iron Man/Tony Stark emerges triumphant, exclaiming, “You picked the wrong enemy this time, mister! You made the worst mistake any Red can make…you challenged a foe who isn’t afraid of you!” (Wright 222) This victory underscored the American determination to confront Communist aggression through any means possible, as well as symbolically providing a victory for its readership.

Even more notable was that the Marvel Comics readership was deeply involved in political debate, with “bundles of mail” coming into the offices of the publisher every day from more than 225 colleges (Wright 223). Nevertheless, *Iron Man* became the title that endorsed Cold War assumptions by Marvel, and there was little room for dissent within his ideology. Letters to the editor suggested that the Cold War consensus was split among Marvel’s readers. One reader warned that Iron Man’s assault on a Red Chinese air base would likely provoke World War III (Wright 223), implying that the very nature of the comics was changing from the bygone days of Captain America punching Adolf Hitler in the face.

Even Stan Lee, creator of Iron Man and editor of Marvel’s publishing line, admitted that the hawkish political tone regarding the Vietnam War became a source of embarrassment to him. As the Vietnam War escalated and antiwar protests increased,
Lee reduced the Cold War references in Marvel comics. The increasing politicization of young people – often those most likely to purchase comic books – along with the deepening political divide in the nation led the embattled writer to conclude that Marvel’s best policy was to hold the center and avoid political commentary of any kind (Wright 222-223). This kind of political escape made characters such as Iron Man and Captain America lose some of their potent propaganda chemistry; some readers wanted Captain America to go to Vietnam like he did Germany during World War II, while others were emphatic in their objections to his entry into the conflict (Wright 222).

Indeed, the Democratic Convention of 1968 caused many changes in the Marvel editorial board, not the least of which was the conversion of Iron Man from symbolic Cold Warrior to American diplomat. Soviet foes such as the Crimson Dynamo returned, but this time without an overt political agenda (Wright 241). Racism, poverty, and pollution became his problems of choice to solve; indeed, in *Iron Man* number 78, Stark muses on how “Stark Industries, one of the world’s foremost munitions manufacturers, has given way to Stark International – whose business is peace, pure and simple, and betterment of man through technology!”¹ (Mantlo 2; Wright 242)

The final straw for Stark in changing to his mission of peace was the September 1975 issue of *Iron Man*, titled “Long Time Gone.” In the issue, Stark flashes back to an incident in Vietnam, where he witnessed Stark Industries technology lay waste to an entire village, killing enemy and ally alike. This bears striking similarity to his narrative arc in the film, when Stark witnessed American soldiers killed in action after the demonstration of the Jericho missile. Worse yet, the Ten Rings have his weaponry in

¹ Author’s Note: This change was far from easy to achieve. Bowing to the liberal consensus of its reader base, Iron Man spoke out more strongly against the right-wing establishment; arguing with a conservative senator that demonstrators were, rather than a new breed of people wanting to destroy the government, the people that made the country of America great, as opposed to the government (Wright 241). It takes rock-throwing student demonstration picketing Iron Man’s munitions factory to make Tony Stark realize that his view on the Vietnam War may be incorrect. After panicked security guards fire, the demonstrators cry out that this bears a striking resemblance to the Kent State shootings.
massive quantities, preparing for a larger operation; while this is later shown to be the work of Stark’s business partner Obadiah Stane, the young weapons manufacturer is unaware of this when he first encounters the terrorist organization. Both cases have the same end result: Stark abandons his weapons manufacturing division for the creation of a more peaceful mission statement for Stark International.

Stark says that he saw young Americans killed by the weapons that he had created to protect them, and that the system was flawed. He then claims that he realizes that he has more to offer than making things blow up, and he claims that he will effectively shut down the weapons manufacturing division. The belief that the weapons delivery system has gone unchecked and resulted in this unhealthy system makes the very principle of what he is doing palpable. The evidence for his claim is the unique amount of weaponry available to the cave terrorists of the Ten Rings, who are the result of Stane’s greed for power, along with Stark’s propensity for making better and deadlier weapons. Ultimately, what this film is suggesting is the same thing as Stark’s contention: the weapons that have been created by Stark are emblematic of the many problems facing the world, particularly those of the weapons manufacturers. The people the weapons should be used against are the ones in control of them, and their destruction of lives and land is the direct result of an unchecked weapons system made possible by greed and hubris.

Tony Stark and Fallibility/Accountability

Perhaps Ian Crantz says it best in his assessment of the human fallibilities of Stark as his own sort of personal saving grace:

It is Stark’s all too human fallibilities that make him a hero. That Tony Stark doesn’t always know whether he’s making the right decision is something readers can relate to all too well. And more than most heroes, he understands that the worst messes we ever have to deal with are the ones we made ourselves, and that they are many. And some of them can’t be solved with a laser blast.

In many ways, Stark’s fallibilities seem to come from his helping others, even though it may come at physical, personal, or economic cost. This also places the character in the realm of reality, since it is his own foibles that push him to failure in certain aspects of life rather than others, much as occurs in subjective reality. However, a more telling feature of the story is that Stark realizes that his efforts to create better weapons may be hurting others, though not until he is almost mortally wounded in a
combat situation. The opposite is true in Stane. The simulation of good and evil in businessmen and weapons manufacturers makes the man more evil than his supposed employer. Stark is personally motivated, while Stane remains economically and politically driven.

According to the film narrative, there must be personal accountability for the actions of those who are using your works for evil. Stark, seeing for the first time the true consequences of his weapons in enemy hands, decides that he is going to actually commit to making lives better in his own proactive way. This is akin to V who, seeing the St. Mary’s Virus was cured by his own blood, creates an insurgency to rise against the corrupt government of the Norsefire Party. Not knowing his own past, he assumes that he can take responsibility for the actions of the government he could not stop before. The question becomes this: How does one’s personal responsibility become more important when it bears impact on a national stage?

**The Dark Knight**

It is this semblance of personal responsibility that is inherently vital to the story behind *The Dark Knight*, providing an insight into some of the greater political ramifications in the film. Bruce Wayne’s personal, zealous crusade against crime in his first movie has given way to the rise of other vigilantes, some good and some evil. Many are deciding to further his fight against crime, while others such as the Joker see his personal cause as being a reason to create anarchy. This represents a great change from the comic origins of Batman. The very presence of Batman during his early years was enough to frighten criminals, and there were no citizens that spoke out against him during his crusading period. The modern Batman becomes a polarizing figure in both of Nolan’s films, as well as in Miller’s *Dark Knight Returns*. Television pundits in all three works debate the presence of Batman as a symbol for both good and evil, walking a dubious middle ground of the moderate. However, the end also exemplifies the determination of the Dark Knight, maybe even more so than in Miller’s *the Dark Knight Returns*. In an effort to keep the peace in his city, he is willing to sacrifice himself to the police and those who would look up to him so he can remain the villain, thereby winning an ideological victory by appearing to lose, as was the case with Miller and *The Dark Knight Returns*. 
Others are inspired by the justice Batman is doing, and become heroic public figures all their own (Harvey Dent). This extension of personal responsibility into the lives of these characters is an eerie prediction of President Barack Obama’s campaigning into the White House, and represents a newer direction for its characters. However, there also are elements of post-9/11 America that display some of the more controversial topics of the decade: xenophobia, insurgency, radicalism, anarchy, terrorism, suicide bombing, and torture. These elements combine to make the film a statement on the way the world is now, and wonder if the very things that have been created to protect us are actually causing the world to worsen due to their presence and limitations.

*V for Vendetta*

*V for Vendetta* is the most politically charged film in this study, weaving a tale around the possible downfall of America and England in the end of the war on terror. James Keller’s treatise on *V for Vendetta* is explicit in its view of the Bush Administration and its “mandate on that priority” of repealing civil rights via the fight against terrorism, “introducing torture (the secret CIA prisons and Abu Ghraib), spying (FBI phone tapping), internment camps (Gitmo), unwarranted search and seizure, and lengthy incarceration without due process, all explicitly retrograde to our Bill of Rights and, in some cases, our international treaties” (22). If one were to use this statement as a blueprint, it would suggest that the film introduces elements of September 11th and its aftermath into its narrative. At the very least, it states exactly what is being manipulated for political posturing within the film.

Beyond using Prothero as a spokesperson for the Norsefire Party, the movie also creates an imposing persona for Chancellor Adam Sutler (John Hurt) in the media. His spectacle is transferred to the meetings he has with other party members, going so far as to create a Big Brother-esque gigantic façade through a large video screen (this is done in a fashion that is reminiscent of the film version of George Orwell’s *1984*, a movie that also featured Hurt in a prominent role).

V himself is a media creation, using revolutionary figures and theatrical underpinnings to complete his manifest image of terror. Relying on a Guy Fawkes mask with long flowing hair and black trench coat, aping the swashbuckling style of Errol Flynn, V also espouses lyrics from William Shakespeare and Lou Reed (in the comic
version), becoming a literal amalgamation of popular culture. Though this may appear to be normal to the untrained audience, many artifacts of popular culture were outlawed by the Norsefire Party for their rebellious musical and lyrical nature. His hideaway is a collection of paintings and movie posters, supplied with a jukebox to reflect his cultural inheritance of the zeitgeist of the 20th century. V’s cultural appropriation means that he will take the vast amalgamation of popular culture and use it to create an image that is terrifying, yet universally recognizable in the Britain that has been perverted by the onset of war. This reflects the process of social entropy that Baudrillard equates with media implosion, where the meaning of the media and the social are deprived in the public due to this dissemination. The dissemination of media messages saturates the social field, and meaning and messages flatten each other out in a neutralized flow of information, which can be processed through the lens of entertainment (Best and Kellner 121). For V, it almost becomes a McLuhan-style vendetta against the Norsefire Party that created him, since the media of popular culture is the message that he provides for Evey. Though deprived of its original jocular meaning, the popular culture that he uses is already being delivered to the apathetic masses of the film. According to Baudrillard, constant bombardment of information and propaganda has made audiences a sullen silent majority, and the media have created an environment in which all meaning and messages implode as though entropy has ensued (56-57). V actually uses this media implosion against the Norsefire Party, causing the populace to rise from its imposed trance and stand up against the government after he creates new forms of propaganda that go against the Party line.

Perhaps it was a smart idea on the part of the filmmakers to not include V’s persistent examination of the populace via CCTV from the graphic novel. After all, a hero can only be one if he s/he does not intrude on the privacy and rights of the people who are being protected. Yet V, while a hero of this work, is not quite as heroic as Batman and Iron Man, never standing up and intervening in criminal activities except rescuing Evey from rape and murder, which he does for his own personal agenda. The simulation of V’s invasive nature would be too dramatic for the audience, since, unlike Batman, V does not offer a respite from this constant monitoring by offering to end his surveillance at a designated junction; instead, Evey (replacing a perished V by taking up
his mantle) continues to monitor the populace, watching to see if and how the vision of her fallen colleague will be achieved. This robbery of power and freedom from the citizens via constant monitoring is still carried out by V/Evey, only it is done without the knowledge of the monitored. This is a direct contrast to the fact that President Bush’s phone-tapping measure was made public knowledge of a sort, as no one knew who was being tapped, or how much phone-tapping had already occurred.

Politically, V for Vendetta is heavy with description of the changes in the real world, which is appropriate given the source material. However, in this case, rather than remain a treatise on the dangers of Margaret Thatcher’s England, the movie adaptation is focused on the threats presented to the world by the Bush Administration of the new millennium. One indication of the changes in society that were not in the graphic novel source was the specific use of “collateral” and “rendition” during Valerie’s monologue. Her reference to the changes in the world are not shown in the graphic novel, and thus indicate an incorporation of real words that appeared in various news segments across networks in reality following the events at Guantanamo Bay and the Abu Ghraib prison. Both words themselves became titles for films after the events of September 11th and its aftermath.

The change in the character of Gordon Deitrich from graphic novel to film is one of the most extensive in the adaptation. He is originally a bootlegger who takes Evey in, eventually becoming a romantic partner whose death prompts Evey to take action that will place her in the prison of V. The film version Gordon is a work associate of Evey’s at the television network, and his seemingly romantic advances are actually calls for attention from Evey. He is a gay man and, under the Sutler regime of the Norsefire Party, “being different is dangerous” (“V for Vendetta”). The Koran is among his possessions, which indicates his break from traditional party culture, though no strict religion is supported (In fact, there is a Catholic priest in the novel and film, whose deviant sexuality is shown when he takes advantage of young girls inside the church. However, this may not be an attack on the church so much as a summation that all the members of the Norsefire Party who held significant power were also corrupt). He seems to support a form of “pop anarchy,” which is indicated by his possession of a pastiche of the Sex Pistols “God Save the Queen” poster, altered to include Sutler’s face over the Queen’s
visage. Here, the criminality is maintained, yet it is done so more as sedition than bootlegging; all crimes in the film are focused on the protest against the Norsefire Party, as opposed to the inclusion of racketeers, gamblers, and murderers in the book.

What these changes represent is an alteration of almost every element in the film to connect with the overriding theme of political protest. Whereas in the graphic novel characters existed with lives that took them far outside government ideologies, eventually every character was brought back to his/her place as a government mouthpiece. The character of Rosemary was excised from the movie, whereas her arc plays a pivotal role in the novel: she becomes the executioner of Chancellor Susan during a parade to promote party unity. Instead, Sutler is black-bagged, or hooded in the manner of terror suspects, and dragged to the tube tunnel where V physically provides him a rose, a symbol of the impending doom of the subject. Creedy proceeds to fire point blank into Sutler’s head, thereby keeping the spirit of Rosemary’s assassination of Susan in its adaptation. This exclusion of characters whose narrative arc takes them in directions parallel to the rest of the party is indicative of how the story has been changed to make the focus on political content its more overt agenda, with the salacious nature of Dascombe at the television network altered so that his character can instead become a cipher for the works of Sutler.

The more subtle changes are what make the content so interesting to examine, and also represent the greater immersion in post-9/11 culture. In the graphic novel, the fictional television program Storm Saxon is shown off-panel, with its protagonist leveling scores of harshly stereotypical African caricatures in an attempt to “save” a faceless damsel-in-distress from miscegenation. In the film, Storm Saxon presents its villain of the week as a grinning Arab terrorist with full headband and turban, loaded with dynamite, and having a Caucasian woman tied to a chair early in the actual motion picture. Though a subtle change, it represents a large shift from the fears of interracial marriage that Moore was lampooning to the real media creation of Arab villains.

The end of the film focuses on the dissolution of the Norsefire Party, much as the book does. However, this dissolution occurs in the span of one day, 5th November (Guy Fawkes’ Day in the United Kingdom), when Creedy executes Sutler, and then has his neck broken by V. The lack of information regarding Sutler and Creedy means that the
government is unable to stop the cavalcade of protestors wearing Guy Fawkes masks from assuming power when they begin to march on the Parliament building. While the end of the graphic novel shows the populace falling into a state of anarchy, it is not shown in the film; it is merely implied that a new day has come. More famously, Evey does not become the new incarnation of V; instead, a plethora of Guy Fawkes masks have been mailed to the agitated populace, who appear on the night of 5\textsuperscript{th} November with every intention of revolution. This is an interesting point of departure, since it appears that, rather than existing in only one specific person, V is seen as having the potential to be inside of everybody. Therefore, it stands to reason that, since V was a terrorist in the purest form of the word, all seem to contain an aspect of V inside them, making them potential terrorists.

**Torture/Violence**

Perhaps the real place where the events and aftermath of September 11\textsuperscript{th} collide with the films most is the prisons at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. *V for Vendetta* contains elements that support the idea of a film inspired by the events of 9/11, and, given how its script differs from the comic book source material, is perhaps more overt about the prisons than its predecessors in the comic book film adaptation subgenre. The idea of Abu Ghraib as a central theme for superhero film adaptations may be a polarizing concept at first, yet it is through this stark imagery that the audience begins to solidify its belief that the superhero may indeed represent a movement towards the storytelling and change that our 21\textsuperscript{st} century history has wrought.

In 2004, Specialist Sabrina Harman and Corporal Charles Graner took photographs in the Abu Ghraib prison outside of Baghdad. These photos included prisoners stripped naked, placed in painful stress positions, held captive by barking dogs, and their heads hooded by sandbags. The photographs shocked the world’s conscience (Gourevitch WK10), and revealed that the Bush administration was using terror tactics with prisoners in an attempt to get information. Since the material was released in 2004, one can infer that the inclusion of imagery in the film similar to these photos was intentional so that audience members would be able to make the connection. Several prisoners in the film are nude and hooded, perhaps alluding to the prison scandal that

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occurred before filming began (Keller 203). Moreover, the images of the Larkhill prisoners include bright orange prison garb, occasionally accompanied by black hoods. They are bound and abused physically; in one instance, Prothero repeatedly kicks an inmate on the ground (Keller, 203; “V for Vendetta”).

The shaving of Evey’s head and her purification shower in cold water are images that are recognizable to anybody who has watched the media and recognizes how prisoners are processed. The barren, austere surroundings of Evey’s prison are directly taken from V’s experience in the Larkhill prison when Sutler rose to power. The rats inside the prison are indicative of the disgusting nature of these real atrocities, along with the communication that dead prisoner Valerie provides for Evey during her “incarceration.” Valerie’s experiences as a lesbian whose parents abandoned her reflect the experiences of Evey and V in the prison, since they too are abandoned by the country that protected them. The impetus for this argument comes from the belief that the United States has turned on certain citizens in the wake of the twenty-first century as a result of the attacks perpetrated on the people and institutions of the nation, and the prisoners are held in atrocious surroundings that blocks hope out from the world. The helpless prisoners of Abu Ghraib have now been given a visual voice through Portman’s recreation of Evey from the original graphic novel.

The image of the Larkhill prison camp that housed Valerie and V is shown in segments midway through the picture, where the scarred face of Valerie is blankly shown with those of other prisoners wearing orange prison regalia. Moreover, there are images of mass graves in the Larkhill prison camps, indicative of the images of naked prisoners stacked atop each other in Abu Ghraib that sparked the controversy surrounding the military establishment. However, this is probably done less to remind viewers of contemporary political controversies than it is to draw parallels between the practices of the fascist Norsefire Party and the Nazis, whose practices in concentration camps often included the digging of mass graves for incarcerated Jews. Since the Norsefire Party is assumed to be based on a combination of attributes from the graphic novel and actual events in both English and American governments, it can be assumed further that these graves are the results of what would happen were the government to gain too much power.
The Larkhill Detention Center was the focal point of anger for V, since it was there that his vendetta was determined. It is therefore no surprise that Larkhill becomes the biggest cover-up in the film, because all the administrators in the camp become high-ranking Party members. Larkhill is where a virus is manipulated to create the panic that envelops the nation, and provided the means by which Sutler gained power over the government. The people who had been taken because of their sexual preferences, ethnicities, and religious beliefs become the test subjects for this horrific virus, and they seem to be processed like prisoners in Guantanamo Bay with their orange shirts, shaved heads, and military surroundings. In both texts, Dr. Stanton/Surridge becomes cold to their plight as she administers the virus to them, claiming that they are not even human to her anymore. Whether this is a symptom of her true nature or the malleable nature of a prison doctor over his/her prisoners is debatable; nevertheless, the end result is the same: Dr. Surridge becomes unfeeling towards the predicament of her subjects.

Arkham Asylum, though it existed in the comics before the events at Guantanamo Bay and the Abu Ghraib prison, stands as an allegory for what occurs in *The Dark Knight*. The prisoners of Arkham Asylum are considered the most dangerous criminals in Gotham City, and are treated as possible targets of the Joker after his final declaration on GCN. This reflects the status of some of these characters as true threats during their incarceration at Arkham. Arkham represents a SuperMax prison, the highest security level for any prison. There has never been any successful escape attempt from a SuperMax prison, nor has any Muslim terrorist escaped from an American prison. Yet Gothamites are still afraid of these prisoners, even to the point of wanting to eradicate them when the Joker conducts his “social experiment” on the ferries out of Gotham City.

**Torture**

Torture is experienced by Evey during the second act of the film. She is dunked underwater as an unnamed, faceless prison guard (whom we later learn is V) asks for the identity of Codename V. The experience of Evey in V’s torture simulation becomes more real than the images that she conjures of Larkhill, which was an urban legend within the realm of the film. After her experiences in the simulated prison, Evey leaves V’s hideout. She suddenly encounters the poster of Valerie Page for the fictional film *The Salt Flats*, which makes her realize that the parchment containing her story was real.
Moreover, it means that the torture experienced by Valerie and V was real, validating the existence of Larkhill and the St. Mary’s virus that was created by the government.

The use of torture is also seen in both *Iron Man* and the *Dark Knight*; in the former, Tony Stark is dunked underwater by the Ten Rings in an attempt to solicit information on how to craft a Jericho missile for the terrorist group. Before this, he is hooded and held at gunpoint while the Ten Rings reads a letter of intent into the camera (“Iron Man”). In the latter, there is a scene where Harvey Dent kidnap a henchman of the Joker and puts a black bag over his head. Once removing it, Dent threatens to kill the man unless he tells him where his partner, Rachel Dawes, is located. The process includes Dent’s firing of a gun over the head of the terrorist, pointing the gun at his head, and flipping a coin to make the man believe that his life will be decided by a turn of the coin, as opposed to his own actions. All three occasions involve the interrogation, torture, and solicitation of information from characters.

Torture emerges in two different forms, and both come from the self-defined protectors of the city. Batman captures Sal Maroni, the head of organized crime since Carmine Falcone was placed in Arkham Asylum in the first film *Batman Begins*. Maroni supposedly has information on the Joker’s whereabouts, and Batman drops him from three stories, breaking his legs in the process. Batman’s extreme interrogation methods don’t work on Maroni, since the Joker hasn’t provided enough information to the gangster for the Caped Crusader. Maroni claims that the Joker has no rules, and that nobody will cross him for Batman, whose principles prevent him from killing criminals. Though Batman walks a certain line, he won’t cross the line for murder, which would make him no better than a common criminal. Dent captures Thomas Schiff, a paranoid schizophrenic who tried to kill the mayor with the Joker, and threatens his life by flipping a coin for it. If he doesn’t provide information, Dent says that he’ll kill Schiff with a handgun.

It is at this point that one sees the ideological stand against organized crime that Batman and Dent both represent. Both are idealists who work against crime, and yet they take differing paths against villany. While Batman fights crime in the underworld via vigilante methods, Dent uses his power within the system to fight a public battle against the mobsters who have squelched the life from the town. Here they are both using
methods of torture to grab information from criminals, with different consequences for each were they to be discovered. While Batman is a vigilante whose methods are permitted within his tenuous status inside the police force, Dent is a public servant whose image provides the very hope that Batman wants to bring to Gotham City. Therefore, were he to be discovered torturing criminals for information, it would tear away the very image that brought him to power in Gotham City, which would have catastrophic morale results for the citizens who depend on his “White Knight” status. Batman, realizing this dilemma, sees that he must unmask in order to allow Harvey’s crusade to continue, and doesn’t want his presence to exacerbate the Joker’s killing spree.

Summary

Perhaps Baudrillard could not conceive of a world where men would convincingly fight as though gods on a silver screen, yet his simulations and simulacra do somehow anticipate the media and political aspirations of these films. In “The Precession of Simulacra,” Baudrillard writes, “It is always a question of proving the real by the imaginary” (36). Thus, because imagination has been changed by reality, it confirms that our reality has changed. The change in imagination is reflected by film adaptations that alter their original content (already created as a response to a fixed reality) to reflect current reality. *V for Vendetta, Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* become simulations of reality in their running times, epic films that examine the human condition and find that the boundaries between the real and the superhuman are torn apart by the screen. The precession of simulacra, the implosion of media, and the ultimate consumption of reality by the simulacra/hyperreality are indicated by the films’ close adherence to principles and events of the world in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001. The identities of the protagonists of the movies can be seen as constantly in flux, much like the audience’s questioning what is happening in the wake of the terror attacks. In fact, such a solid reality doesn’t seem to exist, since the anarchy of V and the Joker, combined with the revolutionary acumen of Tony Stark/Iron Man, represent sea changes that will be felt in their respective films, much as the planes flying into the buildings altered the very worldview of U.S. citizens. Moreover, the political bent of Harvey Dent, Stark’s media image, and V’s choice to become a terrorist against what he
believes to be a corrupt government were all in direct contrast to the previous vision of a hero, one who dons an alternate identity in order to indulge the benefits of a reality that may have been a façade once the mask was worn.

This breakdown of films by privacy/freedom, technology, hyperreality, security/terrorism/innocence, patriotism, politics, and torture/violence indicates what is true about the changing nature of superheroes in film: they are reflecting more often the changes in society brought about by September 11 and its aftermath. By incorporating these themes into the research done by Jean Baudrillard, one is able to get a sense of how the simulations of reality become allegorical signs of our times in these movies.

Having analyzed the works of Baudrillard, along with utilizing themes from his work in critical study, this chapter has provided a textual analysis of three films that suggests the comic book superhero motion picture adaptation contains elements of real events, such as September 11th and its aftermath. The final chapter will explore what these findings suggest about film adaptations, comic book superheroes, and modern America.
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS

The previous chapter provided a theoretical and critical overview of the elements of September 11th and/or terrorism integrated into superhero film adaptations, and this final chapter will explore the potential ramifications of these changes. This thesis was intended to analyze works in a medium that have transitioned from another medium. Any motion picture adapted from comic books that feature terrorists and charismatic billionaires turned peacekeepers becomes worthy of studying, since it reflects a new resolve in the heroes of popular culture. Given the recent rise in the popularity of the superhero film in Hollywood, this work has focused on a subgenre that becomes more entangled with the mainstream, and thus its films have messages that are assimilated back into a population that gave $1 billion to comic book films in the summer of 2008. The rise of the comic book film adaptation subgenre allows for a critical examination of the function of these films for audiences in a United States that seems ideologically divided, and how it creates discussion of issues via the actions shown onscreen. The maturation of the subgenre from simple depictions of action sequences and good vs. evil has given rise to films that question morality, terrorism, governments, and what it means to be a hero in a world that is changing. The audience also has matured as well, which means that the content of the films is digested by growing masses.

This work has found political elements suggesting that V for Vendetta, Iron Man, and The Dark Knight have updated their source material to include elements of American issues after the events of September 11th by including themes of privacy/freedom, technology, hyperreality, security/terrorism/innocence, patriotism, politics, and torture/violence. The themes are used to illustrate the changing nature of the superhero in the modern world, which is an allusion to changes in conflict and the American culture of the 21st century. Though V and Iron Man had politics in their origins, the inclusion of political events in Batman’s latest film indicates a movement within the superhero/comic book film adaptation to address issues facing society and government, one which has been met with popularity and profitability. What this means is that these films have shifted their focus from providing escapist entertainment to including the new values of American life. In the wake of September 11th, the tone of superhero comics has changed,
and so have their film adaptations. Gone are the villains whose tyranny was meted out via hyperbolic actions and statements; there is no need for a tyrannical ruler of a fictional country such as Dr. Doom in comic book films when Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong Il present a dangerous reality that goes above and beyond comical threats. Instead, Doom is recast in *Fantastic Four* as an industrialist and scientist whose ego is derived from his greed in the corporate world. The adaptations of these comic book films replace the fiction and bluster of their source material (or at least their earlier origins) for simulations of reality, placing their heroes in dangers that are not outside our daily lives.

**Allegory and Impact**

The true meaning of comic film adaptations as newly allegorical works is unknown at this time, but it is likely that this is the evolution of the superhero from page to screen. During this transition, the superhero will become immersed in American culture to appeal to as many Americans as possible, at the same time being used to address fears and concerns of the audience in tumultuous times. Members of the audience will include screenwriters and directors, who must make their films accessible to a wide berth of people. This is an extension of the work of comics and popular culture in general, which has simultaneously existed as commentary on reality in addition to providing entertainment that was digestible for mass audiences.

Keller’s treatise on *V for Vendetta* and its impact on popular culture shows a mature work in both comic and film adaptation that absorbs daily life and reflects a twisted version in its setting. The most important thing that can be drawn from both original work and discussion is that the atrocities that are depicted come from the news, which makes their impact even more poignant and powerful. What was more interesting was how the world that Moore and Lloyd made in their work soon resembled reality. Legislation that would have isolated homosexuals as undesirables was under serious consideration during the process of creating the work, and CCTV had become a crucial aspect of British culture. In the introduction to the trade paperback of *V for Vendetta*, Moore mentions that he’s considering moving his family out of England in order to protect them from the cold world he inadvertently described, claiming, “(T)he tabloid press are circulating the idea of concentration camps for persons with AIDS. The new riot
police wear black visors, as do their horses, and their vans have rotating video cameras mounted on top. The government has expressed a desire to eradicate homosexuality, even as an abstract concept, and one can only speculate as to which minority will be the next legislated against” (Moore and Lloyd 6).

Frank Miller couldn’t have known that his vision of a plane crashing into a skyscraper in the 1986 graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*, nor its scarily prescient successor image in 2001’s *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, would become reality on September 11, 2001; yet, that was exactly what happened. Though this was not the first time that the United States had seen itself under attack, it has had perhaps the greatest impact of any one attack on our nation. Miller’s *Dark Knight Strikes Again* changed its tone as a result of this action: Batman becomes much less a criminal and much more of a patriotic freedom fighter, one who deposes the tyrannical Lex Luthor from his position as puppet master of the planet. From these two points, one can see that the two most influential comic writers of the 1980s were not only good at predicting, or even depicting, certain political events, they were also motivated to promote their views via the printed medium.

Bradford Wright notes the prescience that Miller displayed in his work, and claims that he is not alone in this discovery.

They [comic book writers] long ago anticipated the multi-billion dollar fantasy industry now dominated by video games, motion pictures and television. And, unfortunately, that is not all that they predicted. Countless buildings have been bombed and destroyed in comic books, especially in New York. Villains from Lex Luthor to Dr. Doom have attacked America’s commercial and political centers to foment chaos and fear. International terrorist organizations like Hydra, A.I.M, and the Sons of the Serpents have conspired to destroy democratic governments and paralyze free societies (Moss).

Charles Moss also discusses the dangers that face readers of comic books, as well as moviegoers of all ages. “Though there have been threats of catastrophe before, they seem to pale in comparison to the danger the entire planet is facing currently, notably worldwide terrorism, nuclear armament and global warming.” His claim that film audiences need flawed heroes is illustrative of the malleable nature of comic book heroes, who are unique in that it is possible to update them for new times while maintaining their pertinent background information.
Though Miller became a sort of apologist with his pledge to patriotism and upcoming propaganda work *Holy Terror, Batman!*, his work was under consideration for *Batman Begins*, which was an adaptation of the origins of Batman. The origins of the modern incarnation of the character had been detailed in Miller and David Mazzucchelli’s popular trade *Batman: Year One*, which focused on both the title character and James Gordon, the man who would become the human foil for the adventurous hero. Through the changes in Miller’s philosophy, combined with what has transpired in the real world, writer/director Christopher Nolan created a Gotham City whose denizens lived inside the reality of September 11th, making mention of the Americanized version of “terrorist” and, according to Andrew Klavan, celebrating the accomplishments of President Bush through Batman.

Klavan’s observation is the most important point of these films. Despite the fact that politically motivated films, such as the liberal Paul Haggis (writer and director of *Crash*) movie *In the Valley of Elah* and conservative *An American Carol* (featuring Kevin Farley as Michael Malone, a spoof of controversial documentary filmmaker Michael Moore), do not perform as well at the box office ($6,777,741 and $7,001,720, respectively) (“Box Office/Business for *In the Valley of Elah*”; “Box Office/Business for *An American Carol*”), he points out that films revolving around political morality can be financially successful as comic book adaptations. This means that consumers would prefer to see men and women fight existential battles with physical enemies rather than revisit conflict that is ongoing. Superheroes have often existed in popular culture as escapist fare, yet this research also draws from works that prove the superhero comic book was a cultural touchstone that could also attract audiences with their allegorical tales. Thus, Klavan’s point is reinforced by the history of popular comic books, and this history has set the tone for film adaptations of comic book superheroes.

What is surprising is that a film that promoted a terrorist served as the stepping stone for political content in superhero films. Due to the success of *V for Vendetta* and its initial attack on the Bush Administration, *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* draw a parallel relationship in terms of content and tone, becoming more successful in the process. To be fair, this success can be attributed to the larger name recognition of Batman and Iron Man as opposed to V, who began as a counterculture British comic book character; it
may also be attributed to the ratings of the films. While *V* received a rating of “R,” *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* were both “PG-13,” making them more accessible to younger audiences.

This also raises the issue of hyperreality in terms of the simulation/simulacra of wartime conflict onscreen. Since such overtly critical films as *Redacted* and *Stop/Loss* may present too real of an experience since they are based on actual events following 9/11 and its aftermath in Iraq, filmgoers prefer the simulation of these events in superhero films. This may provide catharsis for some people, while also raising questions about morality and government intrusiveness, such as the wiretapping practices of Batman in *The Dark Knight*. Baudrillardian logic would state that the simulacra would replace the real, and though superheroes are a logistical and physical impossibility, *The Dark Knight* presents characters that exist within a plausible reality, operating under the set of changes brought by the American response to September 11. Thus, the existential conflicts are easier to resolve, or at least digest, within the realm of the superhero comic book film adaptation. Though not furthering the Baudrillardian concept of simulation/simulacra, the idea is used to explore the hyperreality that has emerged within the subgenre.

Finally, *Iron Man* is a movie looking at the “next great superhero,” which is a nebulous claim at best. It appears to be a greater examination of personal responsibility. Tony Stark is a man whose entire life’s work seems to be corrupted when he is nearly killed by his own weaponry. Cowed by the fact that he has not taken a hands-on approach to his business in lieu of his pursuit of frivolous pleasures, Stark becomes an obsessive activist, pursuing peace even if it means breaking international peace treaties and national military no-fly zones. What’s more, he’s the hero of the film, given a marketing campaign that places toy replicas of the character directly with children. This makes him not only relatable to children, it also makes him a sort of role model. Batman also has had a similar path in the world of merchandising tie-in products, though *V* never has crossed over to the children’s toy market (perhaps thankfully).

In fact, these three movies seem to represent different settings for personal responsibility within the realm of the superhero on film. If Tony Stark believes that he must consolidate his power, and Batman must keep the peace and momentum of Harvey Dent alive, *V* believes that it is his personal responsibility to bring anarchy and his
vendetta to fruition, thus providing liberation for the people of the United Kingdom. He truly wants England to prevail, since his belief in a free society is tarnished by the rise of the fascist Norsefire Party to power. The eradication of civil liberties thus becomes a point of evil among the audience, who see that V is fighting an ideological, revolutionary war against the enemy Brits who once captured and tried to kill him. V’s vendetta becomes his personal responsibility, a sign to everybody that, if one is unhappy with the current power situation, there are means of altering it for the good of society.

However, where this film differs, and what makes it a fascinating study, is the character of V. Though he is a superhero, possessing enhanced skills and technology in both comic and film, the adaptation never takes away from the fact that he is, above all, a terrorist to the fascist government that has taken hold in England. Regardless of the Norsefire Party and its corruption, V still represents the revolutionary mindset that also drives many extremists in their pursuit of what they believe to be radicalized justice. Tony Stark and Bruce Wayne do not live in a world of absolutes in terms of their heroism. They do what they believe to be right, but their justification for doing so is that they are superheroes, having access to technology that makes them able to do the impossible. V does not have the audience that Iron Man and Batman do, and, given the “Mature Audiences” label on the graphic novel and “R” rating in the American version of the film, may never be able to cross over to a larger youth audience that is undoubtedly drawn to the heroics of the characters from Marvel and DC Comics.

It takes a catastrophic event to drive an omnipotent party into power, and for it to gain approval ratings such as President Bush had after the invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of the September 11th attacks. In a similar fashion, Sutler and the Norsefire Party fabricate a crisis in the St. Mary’s Virus (an analogue for the AIDS epidemic in the 1980’s and 1990’s) that, upon promising to eradicate the plague, puts them in positions of unprecedented power. Conspiracies whirled across sects in the United States after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, some focusing on the possibility of the government’s involvement in the attacks to consolidate power and gain strength in the eyes of the populace. More broadly, this supports an idea that viruses and insurgencies within the population are both seen as contagious. Ideas such as these are disguised behind the veil of the comic book hero in films like V for Vendetta, where the protagonist
wears a mask to conceal his true identity, and thus the audience can also hide behind the tropes of the genre in order to safely deal with the themes.

It is not impossible to classify the actions of Tony Stark as being politically motivated, even though there is a healthy disconnect between the world of the film and the realm of objective reality in American and global society. What makes Stark interesting is that he is a person whose very interests are in the paramilitary industrial complex that had become vilified in the years following the initiation of the Iraq War, and the later declines in popularity of Bush and Cheney in its ongoing struggle.

Where Are We Now?

These changes reflect the new political face of the modern world, since they would not exist in their current iterations without an acknowledgement of the events in the audience’s reality. Be it V’s exposure to deadly chemicals at Larkhill/Guantanamo Bay, Tony Stark’s incarceration in a terrorist camp in Afghanistan, or Batman’s crisis of identity while society is under siege from the terrorist faction of the Joker, these adaptations of material incorporate elements from the news in the aftermath of the events of September 11th. The advent of occurrences in our nation is reflected in the narratives of these characters, and it makes for fascinating viewing. Beyond the costumed heroics, there emerges a sense of feeling as though resolution to the conflict is possible: existential evil is placed within the real world and given face, along with a protagonist whose capability for good is boundless.

More importantly, these three films introduce a murky gray area of logic to their narrative. The actions of V, Iron Man, and Batman certainly are not those of a traditional comic book hero. Rather than exemplifying the Superman mantra of “Truth, justice, and the American way,” their actions are clouded in moral questions without easy answers. Witness V’s murder of security guards and his vengeance against Party officials, Stark’s illegal terrorist actions followed by the killing of the “actual” terrorists, and Batman (and Harvey Dent) using physical torture for information. These are not events that are created in a vacuum; instead, they serve as carefully created reminders that the world outside is under siege and there is no easy answer to the conflict at home. The writing crucially shows how the updated purpose of the superhero in film is to address concerns
of the real world while still remaining within their own universe. The exploration of this
dichotomy has provided an insightful look at the creation of a comic book film adaptation
in an evolving society.

The film version of *Iron Man* is a perfect example of this canonization of the
stories in the comic book. While it is possible to derive more enjoyment from the film
with an understanding of previous stories, characters, and themes, one could easily make
the argument that these are unimportant to experiencing the motion picture. The same
argument could be made that one needs to have an understanding of the contemporary
international political situation in order to properly enjoy the film. By rating the film PG-
13, the Motion Picture Association of America opened the film up to general audiences
across the nation, making it accessible to people across age brackets and demographics.
Though there is no way to gauge subjective artistic success apart from critical reaction,
and that is a dubious claim at best in certain cases, it is both possible and likely that it is
was the filmmakers’ (in a cynical view, one would also include the studios) intentions to
make the movie as accessible to as many audiences as possible.

The more important discovery for this work is that elements of reality exist within
these works of fiction, yet are buried underneath the action and story so that one can
overlook them as extraneous. When Andrew Klavan claims that *The Dark Knight* is a
work that masks its conservative agenda under capes and tights, he also claims that the
liberal media are directly promoting their agenda via films such as *Rendition, In the
Valley of Elah*, and the Brian De Palma controversy *Redacted*, which depicted American
soldiers raping Iraqi civilians. What he also argues is that these films, “which preach
moral equivalence and advocate surrender, that disrespect the military and their mission,
that seem unable to distinguish the difference between America and Islamo-fascism, have
bombed more spectacularly than Operation Shock and Awe” (Klavan). This is a
staggering generalization, but does represent a truth: while films that are set during the
Iraq War and focus on the conflict that audiences are living through do not impact the
box office, films such as *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* become some of the highest-
grossing films of all time in the United States. Though a seemingly minor signifier of
cultural meaning, it nevertheless provides an interesting query for research, perhaps as
dreams and wishes (as embodied by the superhero, according to Fingeroth) are said to exist as a way for people to process events and issues facing them in reality.

According to Moss, the reason for the recent success of the superhero film as blockbuster event is simple: “Hollywood, along with the rest of mainstream popular culture, has finally discovered what comic book fans have known all along: superheroes serve as brightly-colored, two-dimensional extensions of ourselves.” Specifically, these films act as our own personal wish fulfillment fantasies, showing complex conflicts as easily solved with the correct combination of intelligence, strength, and ability. Rene Rodriguez also writes that “most Iraq war-themed films… may simply be too on-the-nose for [their] own good, dealing with a polarizing subject with which moviegoers are already living.” If this is true, and filmgoers are unable to take direct messages regarding the world in which they are living, it becomes impossible to create mass market films with direct references to the conflict in Iraq, much less the events of September 11th.

According to Chad Hartigan, an analyst at Exhibitor Relations Company, “Moviegoers today are not adverse to serious-minded escapism…(t)hey just prefer it not be too seriously close to home. They’re looking for a middle between holding up a mirror to our reality and completely stupid escapism” (Rodriguez).

If what Hartigan says is true, then these films offer these escapes into fantasy worlds that closely mirror our own, covering up any commentary with tights, armor, and weapons in order to create allegorical works for the modern era. If so, it would not be the first time that superheroes have acted out politically; Wright claims that the social upheavals of the 1960’s prompted superheroes (and more importantly, their writers) to question their own authority and purpose. Now that questioning has been brought to the silver screen for a new generation to observe. Perhaps the superhero as allegory for our time is an uncomfortable subject for some to deal with; after all, part of the appeal that Hartigan claims in escapism is the separation of what occurs onscreen from the news and tumult of the outside world.

What makes The Dark Knight far from an escapist film is its tendency towards reality. It is not impossible to imagine a person taking justice into his/her own hands via his/her own means; however, it is not a kind portrayal of even this sort, since the end result of the film has Bruce Wayne losing love, allies, and his alter ego’s status as hero
because he chooses the road not taken by others. The moral questions it poses regarding interrogation, terrorism, and wiretapping also draw critical acclaim. When it became the second highest-grossing film of all time in the United States (not accounting for inflation of ticket prices), the movie showed that it had tapped into greater popular culture. Thus the question becomes how a film that has emerged to be perhaps the largest film of the decade also has been anointed as a milestone for audience maturity and morality questions about subjects in the real world.

Concluding Remarks

This work argues that terrorism, questionable morality, and personal responsibility have become important, even commercially viable, themes within the comic book film subgenre, a representation of America following the events of September 11th. V’s question of his purposeful vendetta, Iron Man’s emergence in a post-9/11 world, and Batman’s wiretapping in order to capture a dangerous terrorist are all forms of justification for the emerging gray area of morality in the new group of cinematic superheroes. Gone are the days when Superman fought for America, waving a flag over the populace after defeating evil Kryptonian prisoners for control of the heart of America, as well as Batman’s self-consciously campy crime cases against inconspicuous conspirators. In its place has emerged a film subgenre that is unafraid to question authority, even going so far in V as to advocate terrorism for the greater good. The superheroes, though still adhering to prescribed conflicts from filmmakers and the source material, have instead been converted to meet the needs of 21st century audiences.

To state that comic books are not politically motivated, or at least recognizable, is to ignore a medium that has been maturing ever since its humble origins in newsprint. The election of President Obama has recently spurred a number of companies, such as Marvel and Image, to use his image in comic books, even featuring his likeness on top-selling comic book covers (such as Amazing Spider-Man #583 and Youngblood #8). Some publishers, such as Erik Larsen (creator and artist for Image’s Savage Dragon comic), have exhumed the first appearance of Captain America, and featured the president punching out Osama bin Laden while holding an American flag on issue #145 of his comic, with Savage Dragon and a shrunken, animated Statue of Liberty as
witnesses. Below the image, the caption reads, “Obama vs. Osama” (Johnson). This not only recognizes the real world, but also acknowledges a change in the status quo. Though hardly the first time that comics have done so, it nevertheless is an important point to make. Likewise, it appears that comic book movies are now beginning to recognize the politics and events that have shaped our reality. One need only witness Iron Man’s sale of weapons in Afghanistan and the alteration of V’s story to the near future with images of anti-war and anti-Bush protests in the visuals to see this is true.

The comic book film has entered into a new era of commercial and critical success, which may be attributable to the efforts of comic creators to place their protagonists in the modern world. In the book Extremis by Warren Ellis and Adi Granov, Tony Stark is captured in the Middle East and creates the Iron Man suit there instead of in Vietnam; Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch depict a man whose weapons manufacturing company is turned towards the development of the Iron Man suit and the funding of peacekeeping task force in their Avengers update The Ultimates. Later issues of the series featured the team, including Captain America, quelling terrorist insurgences in the Middle East. The themes of these works model themselves after the superhero’s classic formula, in which they defeat a villain after facing conflict. However, their updated settings allows for a reflection of modern-day values.

This is only the latest entertainment form to couch commerce and present-day concerns into a visually appealing and less literal form. Given the history of the printed word, one can trace the usage of fictional work as allegory for cultural concerns back to Shakespeare; whether on the stage (Arthur Miller’s The Crucible was written for the stage during the Red Scare) or for television (the television serial adaptation of M*A*S*H* was set in Korea as a commentary on American involvement in Vietnam), entertainment has been shown as a way of commenting on the state of the world. Even in previous superhero films, politics crept into the narrative in some form. Superman’s travails often carried him to fight for America in spite of his alien origins, and lead actor Christopher Reeve co-authored the fourth Superman film, subtitled The Quest for Peace. In the film, Superman takes on villain Nuclear Man, an idealization of nuclear power gone awry.
However, given the crossover success of the comic book film subgenre into the mainstream, along with the original perception of the source medium as wasteful children’s literature, some would be surprised to see that the film adaptations of the comic book heroes millions grew up reading have adopted aspects of reality. The once-vacuous nature of the original source material, combined with the great success enjoyed by superhero films as summer blockbuster releases, make the films’ use of allegorical elements as comment on society the new form of framing conflict the world is facing.

Thus, the real world has encroached upon comic book movies, and, though they are fantasy films, these bits of reality make them more palatable to the consumer. Moreover, these works help moviegoers define their place in the world by making their issues, existential though they may be, real via the heroics of costumed crime fighters. Further examination of future comic book film adaptations will provide greater critical research into the growing political agenda of superheroes and their creators/filmmakers.
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