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# The Death of Superman: Superheroes in Contemporary Hollywood

Corey Shaw  
Corey.Shaw@Colorado.EDU

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## *Chapter One*

### *The Nativity of the Superhero*

Superheroes have a unique place in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Since Superman swept into Action comics in 1938, superheroes have taken the country by storm in a plethora of different incarnations. Comic books were just the beginning: radio, television, and film catapulted superheroes into the modern age, turning the ultimate defenders, like Batman and Superman, into household names and iconic figures. Over the last half of the century, superheroes and comic books have developed a powerful mythology that has seeped into every realm of American culture. American mythologist, Joseph Campbell, defines myths as stories about humanity's search throughout the ages for truth, meaning, and significance. In myths, Campbell says, "we're seeking...an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive" (Power of Myth Interview, Campbell).

All of humanity needs superheroes and their mythology, on a personal and cultural level. The myth is a depersonalized dream, an objective collection of subjective thoughts. In turn, the mythos of Superman and Batman are both a reflection and a refraction of us as people, and as a culture. We can't exist without the mythos of heroes, and heroes can't exist without us. Born out of the ashes of the Great Depression in the 1930's, Superheroes became the embodiment of all the sons and father figures that went off to Europe to stop the spread of fascism in World War II. Superman is an all powerful paternal figure, the son of a God, a martyr, an alien, sent from the heavens to protect the family mentality that became the core of what America as a nation represented in the

1940's and 1950's - in Superman we trust, in Dad we trust, in America we trust, in God we trust.

The end of World War II ushered in a new era in America – the era of Postmodernity. A new communist fearing capitalist mentality entrenched the nation. The modern age had been defined by an intellectual drive for the high arts, culture, individuality, and the mentality that reality drives truth – history shaping reality and culture in a linear fashion. In modernism, culture and reality have a stark divide. Postmodernity in America (beginning in the mid 1960's) is associated with a loss of cultural connection to history. Frederic Jameson posits that postmodernity has funneled the historical past into nothing but over-stylized products that can be sold and consumed for profit. He says, “ Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process” (Jameson, 10). In postmodernity popular culture is reality.

By the 1960's The American Dream collapsed after a second wave of feminism, a controversial draft of American boys for a war in a place many of them had never heard of, the assassination of a beloved President, and the impeachment of another. By the 1980's, divorce rates had reached an all time high. More and more broken families struggled to find a place in Reagan's postmodern America, and gang violence was on the rise (Rossen, 174-177). Single mothers raised fatherless children everywhere. The notion of God and a theological America was still present, but it was fading. Superman, and the American Dream he embodied, were dying. God was dead, a vision of America gone. The death of Superman was the death of the American dream – the end of the nuclear family and the collapse of idealized paternity.

Superman and Batman have come to represent two very different periods in American culture. Superman is a God-like figure sent from the heavens to protect the nuclear family from annihilation, a symbol of religious patriotism and escapism, the poster-boy for the American Dream, while Batman is a much darker figure, a mortal detective and vigilante, seeking out corruption in the streets, an existential everyman, the embodiment of a Postmodern America. Superman and Batman have become a way for Americans to learn more about themselves as people, and as Americans. Much like the gods of Greek and Roman mythology, comic books and their superheroes have become a way for humanity to escape, project, and manage the real world. They are us, and we them.

The advent of superheroes came hand-in-hand with the onset of World War II. Americans flocked to more movies and bought more comic books than ever before. Escaping the hardships of reality through a lighthearted musical with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, a Western with John Wayne, or a comic book with Superman or Batman (among many others) became the most common forms of entertainment. Movies and comic books, at their core, are very similar art forms. Comic books and film are primarily visual mediums that tell stories. Storyboards for movies are almost identical to comic books in structure and aesthetic.

Two companies, DC<sup>i</sup> and Marvel, dominated the comic book market for thirty years. DC brought the world Batman and Superman, while Marvel created Spiderman and the X-Men. Both companies have two of the largest fictional universes in American history. Despite the similarities historically and formally between comic books and movies, the actual comic book movie did not emerge as a genre until 1978 with Richard

Donner's *Superman*. America's first superhero was destined to get the first Hollywood treatment. Batman would be next in 1989, and would dominate the comic book genre on screen for more than 20 years.

Superman and Batman are easily America's most identifiable superheroes. Comic books, and the word superhero, are synonymous with Batman and Superman. Superman was the first superhero ever. In fact, the word superhero didn't even exist until Jerry Siegel coined it after co-creating Superman in 1938 (Daniels, *Superman*, 12-14). Siegel wrote the original Superman stories, while Joel Shuster penned the comic's artwork. Superman first appeared in *Action Comics* Issue 1 (and on the cover) in 1938. He was an instant success. Superman's costume consisted of colors of the American flag, and introduced the tights, trunks, and cape attire that have characterized superheroes up through the present day. The Technicolor red, white, and blue costume gives Superman a very patriotic look, a look which no doubt helped his popularity during the Second World War when the American military needed all the civilian support it could get. A large red "S" encompassed in a yellow triangle shone brightly off the center of Superman's chest. The simple "S" in the triangle, Superman's symbol, has become one of the most recognizable images on Earth. It has come to represent freedom, justice, and the American way.

Superman inspired an array of other superheroes in the next few years, however none bigger than Batman. Batman was introduced in 1939 in an issue of *Detective* comics. Drawn by Bob Kane and written by Bill Finger, Batman shows the influence of Superman, yet credits 1920's *Mask of Zorro* and 1930's *The Bat Whispers* as aiding him in coming up with the final character (Daniels, *Batman*, 18). Bob Kane actually traced

over an exact picture of Superman, then started playing with different variations of color and masks before dialing in what the exact Batman would look like. Black and grey, with the black done in blue per comic tradition was the final choice (yellow added to the logo later), along with the mask of course. Kane opted for pointy ears as opposed to a more traditional mask like the one worn by Zorro because it made Batman look more devilish and more menacing to criminals (Daniels, Batman, 18-23).

Although he is an alien, Superman looks human. What makes him special are his superhuman powers - flying, super-strength, x-ray vision, super breath, and super speed, just to name a few. Superman takes place in the science fiction world. He is an alien acclimating to the human world. Superheroes must have a disguise, or a mask, to conceal their super identity. Superman's mask is mild mannered reporter Clark Kent. Action Comics featured five or six different stories at a time, however, it was Superman that people wanted most of all, and the superhero began appearing on all the covers of Action Comics within the comic book's first year because of high demand. In the summer of 1939, Superman became the first character to receive his own comic book. It was an all-color, sixty-four-page comic, devoted entirely to the Man of Steel (Daniels, Superman, 35-36).

Batman is completely human, as opposed to the alien Superman. Batman is really Bruce Wayne, heir to Wayne Enterprises. In order to fight crime and restore order, Bruce must become Batman. Batman had a far more sinister look than the sparkly-looking Superman. Unlike Superman, Batman has no superpowers at all. Batman's abilities derive mostly from his intelligence, special gadgets, and training as a fighter. Bruce is tormented by the fact that his parents were murdered in front of him, and spends the rest

of his life trying to avenge their death. Superman protects humanity because it is his duty. Batman is like the devil punishing the wicked in the dark alleys of Gotham, while Superman is like a Christ figure, sent from above to save us all.

Comic book popularity grew over the next decade. 1940 was a monumental year for comics because of the massive success the new art form had in popular culture, and ushered in what would be known to historians as the Golden Age of comics. 1940 was also the year World War II escalated in Europe. By December of 1941, the United States was involved in the War. Comic book and movie sales skyrocketed. Superman and Batman were both appearing in three separate comics by then, including comics of their own. Despite the plethora of new comic book characters popping up all over the place, in both the DC and Marvel universes, none have ever achieved the stature and iconic status of Superman and Batman. . Supermania in the 1940's spawned an array of new Superman toys for kids<sup>ii</sup>. After selling the rights to Superman for \$130 in 1938, Siegel and Shuster no longer had control of the character they had created (Benton, 35). This meant the creators of Superman had no rights to the character, and despite all of the commercial and popular success their beloved character was enjoying (and going to attain in the future), Siegel and Shuster never saw any financial restitution or creative control. Superman as a brand was being established. Batman would take a little bit more time to develop as a brand (not being fully realized until the 1960's), but the Dark Knight was selling a lot of comic books in 1940 and had developed considerable mass appeal. The mythos of both superheroes had begun to evolve (Benton, 35-45).

1940 was also the year that Superman and Batman became big radio stars. Television was over a decade away from being the dominant source of home

entertainment, and it was through radio that the two superheroes became household names for everyone, not just children and comic book readers. Superman was the first to conquer the airwaves. Premiering on February 12, 1940, *The Adventures of Superman* featured one of the most memorable introductions in the history of storytelling, one that thenceforth became synonymous with Superman. “Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound! Look, up in the sky! It’s a bird! It’s a plane! It’s Superman” (Rossen, 1).

By 1942 the Mutual Network, a major broadcasting station at the time, was running *The Adventures of Superman* on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for fifteen-minute segments. The show aired just before dinner, prime time in the age of the nuclear family. Without ever picking up a comic, millions of people were introduced to Superman. Clayton “Bud” Collyer was the first actor ever to play Superman in any medium. He became the voice of Superman on the radio show and in Max Fleisher’s *Superman* cartoons. Collyer was not acknowledged as the actor who played Superman until later. The producers of the show took a lot of care in keeping the actor who played Superman a secret from the public, a brilliant marketing technique that only added to the mythology of the Man of Steel (Rossen, 1-4).<sup>iii</sup>

The 1950’s ushered in new era in America. World War II was over, but a new war had just begun, The Cold War. The threat of communism and nuclear war was the name of the game. The U.S government was on red alert for Russian spies. Americans became extremely xenophobic. The Red Scare, as it was called, was headed by Senator Joseph McCarthy, and seeped deep into the foundation of American culture, ultimately dividing the country. America became a culture of “friendly” citizens, people who turned over the



names of possible communists to the government, and “unfriendly” citizens, Americans who would not name names and were thus a communist threat as well. Science fiction became the genre of the decade. Films like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Directed by Robert Wise, 1951), *The Thing From Another World* (Directed by Christian Nyby, 1951), and *Tarantula* (Directed by Jack Arnold, 1955) became popular fare. These films mirrored the general fears of the time. *Tarantula* and *The Thing From Another World* address the fear of radioactivity from nuclear fallout, turning our own worst fears into physical monsters, while *The Day the Earth Stood Still* offers a more introspective conclusion to the problem of the times.

Superman found an easy home in the 1950’s. Since his narrative always dealt with science fiction themes, Superman’s transition into the new decade was a natural evolution for the Man of Steel. Radiation in Superman’s stories is generally associated with Kryptonite, the one thing that can kill the Son of Krypton. Paradoxically Kryptonite comes from Krypton, Superman’s home planet, the same place where his superpowers come from. The parallel to American society was very clear. By having control of nuclear warheads, the U.S was endowed with a superpower. However, that atomic power could potentially destroy all of humanity, America included. Although Kryptonite had initially been introduced on the radio show, it was in 1949, only months after the USSR blew up their first atomic bomb that Superman’s poison appeared in the comic books. Lex Luthor, one of the most iconic villains in the Superman universe, has always been associated with Kryptonite. From creating synthetic Kryptonite to kill Superman (*Action Comics #141, 1950*), to eating Kryptonite himself and becoming Kryptonite Man to kill Superman

(*Action Comics* #249, 1959), Lex Luthor has been linked with Kryptonite for a long time (Darowski, 21).

The threat of things coming from outer space was also a big theme during the 1950's. *Superman* #65 introduced audiences to three survivors of Krypton that had equivalent powers to Superman on Earth (Darowski, 20). Krypton had come under rule of a dictatorship, and the three Kryptonians vowed to live free or die (a definitive mantra of communism). Paradoxically, the Kryptonians seek a dictator-like command over Earth. Lex Luthor, Kryptonite, and the Kryptonians (Later known as General Zod and his compatriots) were born out of the Cold War, but would battle Superman well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Superman's Cold War Villains would follow him through the ages. The 1950's Superman is ultimately the one that American audiences remember the mythology of the most. Clark Kent dressed in a conservative suit and hat, with glasses, reporting for the newspaper *The Daily Planet*, while Superman's red, white, and blue colors became all the more present.

Batman's popularity also grew during the 1950's. Batman's original dark, demonic aesthetic by Bob Kane, had evolved into something much fluffier. By the fifties Batman had been joined by his sidekick Robin, the Boy Wonder. Robin's colors were much brighter than Batman's. He wore a vest, over a bright green shirt, with green trunks, and a yellow cape: A yellow "R" over the heart signifying his superhero persona Robin. Robin was the alter ego of Dick Grayson, the son of a team of acrobats. Grayson's parents were brutally murdered, much like Bruce Wayne's. Bruce adopts Grayson and trains him as his junior sidekick. Robin's introduction into the comics ushered in a buddy detective era in the Batman mythology. Robin, a child superhero, ended up doubling the

sales of Batman comics, and became synonymous with the character until the 1970's. Batman and Robin were known as the "Dynamic Duo" and "The Caped Crusaders". Batman and Robin became a new generations Sherlock Holmes and Watson. The two solved all kinds of crimes together on streets of Gotham. The comics had a much lighter feel than Bob Kane's initial incarnation of the Bat-Man. Batman started appearing with a smiling face, and his demonic horns scaled back to make him less foreboding and scary. Batman and Robin's fight against crime started in the streets of Gotham City, however, with the arrival of The Cold War in the 1950's, even the dynamic duo's stories took a turn toward the realm of science fiction.

The dynamic duo encountered everything from radioactive giant bees, to time machines, to alien creatures from beyond, and everything in between. Batman's writers were really reaching for stories to attach the Dark Knight and the Boy Wonder to the popular fare of the time. The science fiction genre was not one that Batman and Robin coupled well to. By the late 1950's, Batman was overwhelmed by visitors from other worlds. The stories began sounding more and more ridiculous. Despite being able to destroy every malicious villain they encountered in their adventures, Batman and Robin had a real foe in the real world in the 1950's that nearly ran them off the printing press. In 1954, Fredric Wertham, an elderly psychiatrist, made all kinds of aggressive claims about the negative influence of comic books in American children's lives in a book called *Seduction of the Innocent*. Wertham asserted that comic's glorified criminals, and that comic readers would mimic the crimes they read about in the real world. Batman and Robin were addressed specifically in the book. Wertham charged Batman and Robin with being homosexual. He also claimed the stories would turn children into homosexuals

themselves. Wertham wrote, “the Batman type of story may stimulate children to homosexual fantasies” (Daniels, *Batman*, 84).

As ridiculous as the allegations may have been, Wertham’s book seeped into the minds of 1950’s America and the comic book industry was almost destroyed. Many comic publishing companies went out of business. DC and Marvel survived, mainly by adopting a Comics Code that would help self-regulate the industry. Batman as a franchise, however, was in trouble. In a desperate effort to save Batman’s name in the public domain, a crew of new characters were added to bring Batman back to a level of respectability.<sup>iv</sup>

Superman’s television show went into production in 1951, when his radio show was still on the air. The show marked Superman’s official entry into the popular market of the modern world. It aired 104 episodes and has been syndicated for more than forty years (Rossen, 14). It is the earliest image of Superman that became familiar to general audiences. The show, *The Adventures of Superman*, has become an early television classic. The actor who played the Man of Steel came to represent his face in popular culture for almost thirty years, George Reeves. Reeves remained anonymous to maintain the mythos of the character that had been established by the radio show. Phyllis Collins played Lois Lane, Superman’s love interest and Clark Kent’s counterpart, while Jack White played Jimmy Olson, the Daily Planet’s photographer, and John Hamilton played Daily Planet editor Perry White. The show first aired in 1953 and was a huge success. The producers maintained a ruthless production schedule, which took a major toll on all of the actors, especially George Reeves (Rossen, 14-15).

George Reeves lived the role of Superman. He made all kinds of public appearances as the Man of Steel and constantly played up the mythology of the character. It was a twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week job. Superman was not just a role the actor played; he had to actually live the part of Superman. On June 16, 1959, Reeves was found dead from a gunshot wound. The death was officially ruled a suicide, but many friends and associates assumed there was some kind of foul play. Superman was dead in pop culture, however, his mythos would continue to evolve between the pages of the comic, and in the minds of his fans everywhere.

The new face of Batman was a successful evolution for the superhero and comic books started flying off the shelves again. Batman's resurgence on newsstands gave the hero a whole new life in American culture. By 1965, a Batman television show was in the works, and within a year Batman, Robin, and a host of villains would burst into the living rooms of families across the country. The 1960's had birthed a Pop Art movement and museums around the country were displaying works of Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein that featured imagery from comic books, including works from DC, which probably helped spark interest for a Batman show. *Batman* first aired on January 12, 1966 and was an instant success (Daniels, *Batman*, 103). Adam West played Batman in the television series, a role that would define the actor's career. The most important characters on the show were Batman's villains. Cesar Romero was a big hit as the Joker, legendary actor Burgess Meredith played the Penguin, and was featured on the show more than any of the other villains, and Julie Newmar as Catwoman<sup>v</sup>. The show also introduced the iconic image of the Batmobile into the minds of Americans everywhere. A

combination of a hotrod and spaceship, the Batmobile became just as recognizable as Batman himself (Daniels, *Batman*, 111-112).

*Batman* the television show was completely over the top, relishing in the fact that it was corny and ridiculous. The corny and ridiculousness were key components of Pop Art, which had many foundations in camp. Camp is a cultural, social, and aesthetic style, and sensibility, that deliberately draws attention to itself in a reflexive sort of way. The campy sensibility of the *Batman* television show latched itself onto the *Batman* mythos for many years to come. *Batman* merchandise flooded the market. *Batman* and *Robin* dolls, puppet theaters, bobble heads, and *Batman* cola had a place in the homes of 1960's Americans. *Batman* was back. A 1966 feature film was made, directed by Leslie H. Martinson, featuring all of the villains, but *Batman*'s television adventures did not span out as well over the course of a full length feature film. However, just as quickly as the show had risen to success, ratings plummeted. The show has been in syndication ever since and has always had a large fan base. *Batman*'s short run on television immortalized him in the minds of people everywhere. The *Batman* television show set up a naïve concept of comic books that has been sutured to Americans minds ever since. The pop/camp craze brought millions of new fans to *Batman*'s world, however, it simultaneously destroyed all of the efforts that had been made in the recent decade to restore the Dark Knight back to his former self.

Superman was failing at the newsstand as a comic book. The era of World War II that Superman was born out of had long since passed, and the Cold War of the fifties had given way to a more socially aware America. The sixties would bring a civil rights movement, a women's rights movement, the beginning of a controversial war in

Vietnam, and the assassination of a beloved American President, John F. Kennedy. American politics became even more uprooted when the 37<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Richard M. Nixon, resigned from office after the Watergate Scandal of 1974.

It had been almost twenty years since *The Adventures of Superman* and the harrowing death of George Reeves. Big blockbuster movies had become the calling card of popular American entertainment by the mid-to-late seventies. Big budget science fiction movies had become en vogue due to films like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977) and *Star Wars: A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977) grossing well over \$100 million at the box office (huge returns in the 1970's) (<http://www.filmsite.org/series>). The silver screen had become a new vessel for the spread of iconography in American culture. Superman was dying, but he wasn't dead yet. In the next chapter I will discuss the resurrection of Superman's mythos at the movies through a close-analysis of the film *Superman*.

## *Chapter Two*

### *The Resurrection: The Man of Steel*

By the mid-1970's, America had been transformed. U.S. citizens had been through multiple civil rights movements, a draft to Vietnam, and saw a president resign from office after the Watergate scandal. People had lost a lot of faith in the government as a form of protection. Superman's sales at the newsstands were at an all-time low. During World War II people couldn't get enough of the Man of Steel, however, the character had some trouble evolving after the death of George Reeves. Kids were still reading the comics, and watching the cartoons, but adults had fallen by the wayside. Superman's mythos had existed around the edge of American culture for twenty years, marinating behind the scenes, just waiting to save humanity once again.

Superman's trip to the silver screen became the inevitable next step in the evolution of the character. A Superman movie would revive the character for old fans, and introduce a whole new generation to the Man of Steel. *Superman*, directed by Richard Donner and released in 1978, would ultimately create the comic book genre as a film. It was the first big budget, big screen transformation for any big comic book character. Every comic book movie since has directly, or indirectly, been influenced by the film. The format has been used countless times since. There is an origin story, where Superman's background and childhood are shown. There is a female character that generally needs saving, Lois Lane. There is a supervillain, Lex Luthor, who tries to kill the superhero. In the end the superhero always gets the bad guys, saves the world, gets the girl, and a happy ending ensues. It was a return to classic principles of escapism and the nostalgia of the American Dream. The movie was marketed brilliantly to audiences



with the line “You’ll believe a man can fly!” The idea of flying, even through the eyes of another person on screen, taps into a deep desire that most humans have had since childhood. Many kids that grew up reading about Superman flying, or hearing about it on the radio, could only dream about the superhero’s gravity defying feat. *Superman* would make that dream a reality.

The title sequence in *Superman* sets the tone for the entire story to come. The viewer is immediately shot through space in a sequence reminiscent of the introduction to *Star Wars*, released only a year earlier. The first person perspective of the camera immediately gives the illusion of flying through space. In one long take, title credits begin to whoosh in electric splendor, hurling the viewer through the cosmos. John Williams score creeps in. The horn section builds. After the two biggest stars names are shot like laser beams, Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman, and the director’s name, Richard Donner, the iconic Superman logo blasts out of space and engulfs the entire screen. The red, white, and blue colors radiate off the screen in a mass of heroic glory. The score builds to a crescendo. The flight through space continues. Within the first three minutes of the film the audience is bonded to the perspective of Superman. Superman’s eyes are the eyes we see the world through, and it will be through his eyes that the narrative of the movie will unfold.

The decision to put Marlon Brando’s name first and Gene Hackman’s name second in the billing for the movie was a decision made to sell tickets. Brando played Superman’s father, Jor-El, and is only in the movie for about ten minutes total. He was the highest paid actor at the time receiving 3.5 million dollars for what was basically a cameo. Gene Hackman, who played Lex Luthor, was also a big star fresh off of his roles

in the French Connection films. Having big name stars was important for the studio at the time since the film was so expensive to produce. Having Hackman and Brando on the bill offered some kind of safety net. It is also important to note that Christopher Reeve, the then unknown theatre actor who played Superman, gets billed third, right after the Superman logo appears. This is the first time in the history that the name of the actor-playing Superman is given right out of the gates. Although Reeve was unknown at the time, and his name was not front-billed, it appears initially that there was some effort to keep with the tradition of not billing the actor playing Superman. The end credit sequence also did something interesting with the placement of the cast. Rather than front-loading the cast, which would have immediately given away the identity of the Man of Steel to audiences, in particular children who may still believe in the fantasy, the cast is put almost at the very end of the sequence. By putting Superman's identity at the very end, it ensures that most children will not see the name. It is rare for children to stay through entire credit sequences (although not impossible, as I did it as a child), so Superman's identity could still hypothetically be concealed from children. Nonetheless, it is a first in the history of Superman's forty-year history that the actor playing him has been revealed so quickly.

Our first view of Superman in physical form is as a small baby on his home planet Krypton. The sequences in Krypton are all oversaturated in white. The planet is a white crystal vortex. Jor-El and the rest of the Kryptonians wear all white. The camera tracks right to reveal a long shot of a woman carrying a child wrapped in a red, white, and blue blanket (the colors of Superman, the colors of America). The film cuts to a medium close-up of Jor-El. The woman walks into medium close-up with the baby. The film cuts

to a long shot exposing a crystal space ship, Jor- El holding a crystal from the ship in his hand. Jor-El wears the same symbol as Superman on his chest. The symbol is also on baby Superman's blanket – Krypton's symbol. It is revealed that Krypton is dying. The only way to save the baby is to send him off to live on another planet. "But why Earth," asks Superman's mother.

This is an important scene in the film. It establishes what Superman's dharma on Earth is as a baby before he is even conscious of his path. He is blessed with being "super" directly by his parents. When mom asks, "But why Earth Jor-El? They're primitive, thousands of years behind us," Jor-El replies, "he will need that advantage to survive". Mom goes onto to describe all of the reasons it will be hard on him. He will defy their gravity, a stranger in a strange land, isolated. Jor-El says all of those things she sees as disadvantages, will actually help him. He will be stronger, faster, and virtually resistant to harm. Since he looks like a human, he will be able to blend in on Earth. Kal-El (Superman) will be like a God to humanity. It is rare in comic books for a superhero to be super right out of the womb. Generally there is some kind of scenario that blesses a character with superpowers, or the powers are discovered later. Superman has superpowers from the moment he becomes conscious. His parents send him to Earth specifically to be super. Jor- El can also be viewed as a God like figure imparting Kal-El (Superman), his son, as a Christ like figure. Superman's interplanetary cradle, baring a striking resemblance to popular representations of the Star of Bethlehem, is packed with a special green crystal, a homing beacon back to the spirit of his father. Jor-El assures his wife that their son will never be alone.

A character's parents typically have a big influence over the decision to become a superhero, whether consciously or subconsciously according to Joseph Campbell's structure of the monomyth, and what he calls the hero's journey (Campbell, *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, *Monomyth*). Superman begins more subconsciously, and then becomes very literal and conscious when Clark discovers that he can access his father through the Palace of Solitude (Superman's official home on Earth, and a vessel to his father Jor-El). By the time Superman's ship lands on Earth in Smallville, Kansas, he has grown from a baby into a small boy. When Ma and Pa Kent find him, he is naked in a giant chasm left by his ship's landing, wrapped in his baby blanket from home. Superman's vibrant blanket shines brightly against the stark, grey backdrop of the Kansas landscape. The older couple decide to take the boy home, but not before Pa changes a busted tire. The jack slips out, Ma screams, and before Pa can even realize the car is about to fall on his head, something stops it. Pa looks like he has seen God. The film turns to reveal little Superman caught the car. Little Superman stands on his tippy toes, effortlessly holding the massive automobile over Pa. Superman is not only born with the power to be a superhero, he is also graced with the will to do so, even as a child.

After Pa dies, Clark (the name Superman's Earth parents give him, and his alter-ego) finds a green crystal stored in his parents' shed (the same crystal Jor-El packed on baby Superman's ship before sending him to Earth) and decides to leave the farm on a journey to discover himself and his uncanny powers. Clark had already felt isolated as a child from his other peers, and his journey to the fortress of solitude (isolation is even in the name) would fulfill the prophecy his mother had laid down the day he left Krypton. Yet, it is in isolation that Clark rediscovers who he actually is. Clark Kent is a costume

that he had been wearing subconsciously to blend in with human civilization. Clark's real persona, Superman, had to be pushed into his subconscious mind, along with all memories of his biological parents. When Clark realizes that he is really Superman, an alien from another planet, sent to protect humanity from themselves (his true self), rather than just a freak with weird powers, his entire universe changes. He walks into the Fortress of Solitude unconsciously wearing the costume of Clark Kent. After speaking to his father, Jor-El (God/Marlon Brando), Kal-El (Superman/Jesus), can truly begin to live out his destiny on Earth, and be the savior of mankind, a symbol for America.

It is in the Arctic that the green crystal leads Clark. The crystal starts to light up and Clark smirks as he heaves it into what look like an infinite abyss of ice. The crystal comes flying directly at the camera, whooshing past the lens. The film turns to follow the crystal, as it soars deep into the bowels of the Arctic out of the frame. When it plops down in the snow (center of the frame, in medium close-up), it begins to sink. The entire area looks like it's going through some kind of chemical reaction mixed with an Earthquake on ice. Glaciers break apart and move like tectonic plates; the whole sequence looks a giant whirlpool in the middle of the North Pole. Then miraculously out of the chaos rises the Fortress of Solitude, a crystal castle resembling the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz*. As the crystals rise out of the water, thoughts of Superman's ship and Krypton immediately come to mind (as they should). The growth of the crystals looks like a combination of organic life and nuclear fusion. The image juxtaposes something very natural, with something very alien. Clark's unconscious (The Fortress of Solitude) comes rising out of the sea to reveal itself entirely to Clark's conscious mind. Clark steps into his unconscious consciously. By doing this, the unconscious becomes his conscious,

and conscious the unconscious. Superman, who Clark really is, becomes his conscious personality, his real personality, while Clark becomes the mask.

After Jor-El tells Kal-El about his heritage and purpose, twelve years have passed and Superman is in his full red, white, and blue garb ready to go save America. Cut to the Daily Planet, and the introduction of Lois Lane (played dramatically by Margot Kidder), and Superman's alter ego news reporter Clark Kent (although Clark Kent is who Superman started as, the new Clark is a costume to conceal his real persona). Superman and Clark are polar opposites of each other. While Superman is the embodiment of power and confidence, Clark is mild-mannered and a wet-noodle. Superman represents who we (Americans/humanity) all want to be, and Clark represents what we actually are. Lois is introduced as a hardworking journalist initially. She is one of the only female reporters on the team (there is one other woman in the office that gets screen time, but she always seems to be batting her eyes at Perry White, the Daily Planet's editor and chief, played by Jackie Cooper). Lois represents the modern woman in the workplace (at least initially). Work is the only thing on her mind. When Clark is introduced, she barely glances at him.

Clark sidles his way into conversation with Lois as she's leaving work, and just as they walk onto the main street, a gun pops out in their face down an alley. Clark tells Lois, "I think we better do what he says," and leads them into closed quarters with the thief. Clark blocks Lois, as the thief demands her purse. She drops the purse on the ground as she hands it to him, and when he bends down to pick it up, Lois kicks him in the chest. The crook falls back, but fires a shot off right at Lois. In slow motion, Clark catches the bullet so it does not hit her, falling to the ground immediately to conceal his identity, playing dumb to the super act he has just performed. "What happened," she asks.

Clark says, "I think I must have fainted". Throughout the film Clark makes attempts to court Lois, bumbling around every chance he gets to ask her on a date. Lois, on the other hand, has no real interest in the modest Clark. As soon as Superman arrives in Metropolis all eyes are on the demi-God, especially the eyes of Lois Lane.

Right after Clark and Lois have their first encounter, Lex Luthor (played by Gene Hackman), Superman's arch nemesis is introduced. Lex Luthor and his two cronies, Miss Teschmacher and Otis, have a secret lair underneath the Metropolis subway. The underground lair (now a cliché for supervillains) looks a like gorgeous bank that is being used for radioactive fallout. The ceilings are impossibly high, especially for being underground. Something about it is reminiscent of the Federal Reserve, or some big government building in Washington D.C. The mise-en-scene is a direct homage to Lex Luthor's roots in the radioactive age of the Superman comics. Luthor controls society from beneath, working all the gears, greasing all the right spots. He is directly correlated to money, power, and world domination. The first time Luthor speaks, he is ranting on about how incredible he is in the third person. The scene is a satirical look at the wealthy American business mogul. Luthor represents corporate America, and the megalomaniacs that actually run the country - behind closed doors, underground. Miss Teschmacher, although Luthor's girlfriend and a villain, is also his voice-of-reason. She calls him twisted, and rolls her eyes at his narcissistic claims. Luthor has a God complex, believing he is the most powerful man on Earth. Superman is a real God, so when Superman comes out of the closet, Luthor becomes obsessed with capturing the Man of Steel.

Superman's relationship with Lois develops quickly after he saves her from a near helicopter accident on the roof of the daily planet. Lois becomes infatuated with

Superman immediately. She is like a groupie at a Van Halen show, a cheerleader, but more than anything she becomes a cliché female character who constantly needs to be rescued (by a man) for the rest of the movie. She longs to meet with him. Lucky for her Superman has become the biggest story in Metropolis and Perry wants all attention on the hero: who is, where he is from, what he is like. Superman has been busy around town. He has become the neighborhood firefighter on steroids. Superman attends to everything from rescuing a little girl's cat out of a tree, to stopping burglars while their scaling giant skyscrapers for their next score, and even saving Air Force One, the President of the United States private jet, from crashing because one of its engines blew out. Superman rescuing the President from imminent death is particularly important. It metaphorically shows that America is still here to protect us, that Superman and the American Dream are alive and well. Superman makes his presence known in Metropolis quickly. Clark passes a note to Lois (in an effort to give her the scoop first, and to setup a Superman Lois date), during Perry's Superman spiel, telling her a friend will meet her at her place at eight.

Lois drinks wine, looking all dolled up on her rooftop, waiting for Clark's "friend" to arrive. Superman's POV comes gliding in from up above, gently landing on the edge of Lois's apartment building. Lois is flustered (in a good way). Lois is taken aback. She flounders around her words, just gooning up at the sight of Metropolis's newest celebrity. After the whole cheerleader throwing herself at the captain of the football team routine, Superman makes a huge mistake. Lois asks him if he has any weaknesses and Superman openly announces that Kryptonite is the only thing can hurt him, and even kill him. The interview wraps up with a romantic flight in Superman's arms through the night sky. It is this sequence that the film really lives up to its tagline. The audience gets



positioned with Lois, so everyone watching has the illusion of flying with Superman; a dream come true for many Superman fans. The two are accompanied by John Williams "Lois variation" of Superman's theme, a much softer, sweeter accompaniment than the more intense score. Superman's flight sequences with Lois use the same variation of the score as a motif through all the Superman movies. The romantic interview is a huge success the next day in the news. Everybody reads about the Man of Steel, including Lex Luthor, who immediately latches on to Superman's weakness, Kryptonite, and begins plotting to use it against him.

Luthor has a maniacal real estate plan to buy up lots of barren desert around California, divert a test nuclear warhead to San Andreas, and make a fortune off the land when California is destroyed. He knows the omnipresent, omnipotent Superman will no doubt try and stop him, so Luthor lures Superman to his underground lair, and uses kryptonite to debilitate him. The threat of nuclear warfare and radioactivity, the same threat Superman protected America from in the 1950's is still very present in the Man of Steel's world at the end of the 1970's. Lex Luthor's plan to start a war so he could get rich, however, would become a major cultural theme for contemporary America. Luthor is the archetype of the mega-powerful, Donald Trump-like businessman, a foreshadowing of Ronald Reagan's America in the 1980's, an era run by business moguls and corporate villains. By making Luthor the threat of nuclear warfare, the film is actually saying fear the capitalist mentality in America - fear the modern-day businessmen, not Communism and the Soviet Union. Capitalism in America is where the real threat of nuclear war lay, not on the other side of the world. The film both tips its hat to the Cold War and Superman's historical mythos, while trying to suture the Man of Steel a more

contemporary America. America no longer needed to be protected from the outside world - America needed to be protected from itself.

*Superman* made a killing at the box office grossing more than 300 million worldwide (<http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Superman>). It still ranks as the number seventh highest grossing superhero movie of all time. A sequel had already been planned for *Superman* before the film had even gone into the pipeline. Director Richard Donner filmed roughly 75% of *Superman 2* during production of the first Superman film (Rossen, 119). The really expensive actors like Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman, had all of their scenes for both movies done simultaneously in an effort to save money. Despite filming the vast majority of the sequel, Warner Brothers replaced Donner with director Richard Lester after a disagreement between Donner and the studio. To receive directing credit Lester had to shoot at least 51% of the film, so he was forced to re-film a lot of what Donner had already done, without the use of Brando and Hackman (Rossen 119-121). *Superman II* opened in 1980 to critical praise, and saw good box office returns, however, the sequel only brought in a third of the box office revenue as the first film (a little more than 100 million, which was still huge at the time) (<http://www.filmsite.org/series-superman2.html>).

The first two Superman films are regarded as the only two financially and critically, successful entries in the Superman canon (until the new millennia). Two more sequels would follow, but both movies, *Superman III* and *Superman IV: Quest for Peace*, were not received well by audiences and critics, and are considered box-office bombs. Superman disappeared from pop culture almost as quickly as he had been resurrected. Despite a new theme song, and the revitalization of the Man of Steel's logo as a symbol

of American patriotism and idealized masculinity, it was clear by the dwindling box office numbers that his time had passed as America's premier superhero. Superman embodied an America that no longer existed, that in many ways, was the enemy.

Superman could no longer protect us from the enemy because he had, ironically, become the enemy. Superman was dead. The death of Superman would usher in a new era of Superhero in contemporary America. Frank Miller was about to transform Batman into America's postmodern superhero for the 21<sup>st</sup> century – The Dark Knight.

### *Chapter Three*

#### *The Fallen Angel: The Dark Knight*

Starting the in 1970's but really reaching its crux in the 1980's, comic books, and the media in general, began to reflect a society and a government that were deteriorating from the inside out. Captain America, a Marvel superhero who had always been a beacon for American patriotism, was featured in a series of comics in 1974 and 1975 where he was completely disgusted with the Watergate Affair, and resigned from active duty for the United States government. Captain America, a composite of the American flag who unconditionally swore allegiance to the U.S, changed his name to the Nomad, a character with no identity and no home. Captain America, AKA Steve Rogers, would be the catalyst for the entire comic book genre to examine superheroes blind allegiance to the American political agenda, however, it would be Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986 that would not only redefine the comic book genre, but also create an entirely new genre unto itself: The comic book grown up - the graphic novel. The aura of the campy Batman of the 1960's television show that was still so prevalent in pop-culture was about to be annihilated by Miller's dark vision of Batman's role as a superhero in contemporary America. Comic book artist Alan Moore, most famous for his highly political comic book depictions of superheroes during Reagan era America, said, "heroes are starting to become rather a problem" (Reynolds. 100).

Miller, who famously wrote and penciled the vast majority of his work, became a household name after *The Dark Knight Returns* was released in 1986. The story is all about the breakdown of the social consensus that allows heroes to operate within our

society. Batman is in his mid-fifties and has been retired from action for ten years. He comes back to fight for Gotham after the city has spiraled out of dismay because of his long-term absence. Batman's return is met with mixed feelings. Some consider him a criminal, while others believe he is in fact the heroic Batman of legend. The media plays a huge role throughout the story. The media is the one with the power to create superheroes and super-villains in Miller's story, yet the power of Batman's mythology, the spirit of his legend, reside in the hearts of all of humanity (Miller, *Dark Knight Returns*). In an interview, Miller described life in New York in the 1980's as "a place that's silly and frightening. I hope people find *The Dark Knight* both silly and frightening" (Reynolds, 101). Miller's story is about how deviance has become the norm – how the consensus has been attacked beyond any point of culturally normative values. *The Dark Knight Returns* evolves the superhero myth out of the era hegemonic allegiance to America, while simultaneously reiterating the core foundations the Batman myth itself is founded on – a marginal figure that is loved by some, and chastised by others. Miller's vision of Batman would be refracted throughout the superheroes mythos from that point forward.<sup>vi</sup>

Batman experienced a renaissance in popularity in his new mature form. The new, more adult Batman stories brought the Caped Crusader back to his noir, detective roots. In the mid-1980's, Warner Brothers put a feature length Batman film into the pipeline. The studio hired up and coming visionary director Tim Burton, fresh off the blockbuster success of *Pee Wee's Big Adventure* (1985) and *Beetle Juice* (1988), to create a darker, more serious depiction of Batman. Burton chose Michael Keaton to play Batman in the new incarnation, a controversial choice for the new serious version of the Caped Crusader

considering Keaton was known for more comedic roles. Jack Nicholson was cast as a new maniacal, sadistic version of the Joker. The new Batman was about to take the world by storm.

The production design in Tim Burton's *Batman* was the polar opposite of the campy television show of the 1960's. Burton's vision features expressionistic lighting and massive sets to create a dystopian, Gothic environment for the Caped Crusader's exploits, a world that would be believable for Batman on film in contemporary America in 1989. Batman's costume would get modernized as well. The costume is made of vinyl and serves as body armor, rather than fabric, so Batman doesn't have to constantly dodge bullets throughout the film – a more logical explanation for Batman's use of an eccentric costume in modern times.

The title sequence in *Batman* thematically sets the viewer up for the entire movie. Danny Elfman's score is dark and foreboding, and the opening shot has the viewer peering out into a cloudy Gotham City sky – a sky that is reminiscent of a Gothic horror movie. In long-take, the film tracks down underground into a black chasm. Elfman's score starts to pick up pace, as the film creeps through the darkness, slowly twisting and turning, as if letting the viewers eyes adjust to the light underground. Batman shines across the screen in gold. As soon as the superhero's name appears, the film begins to move quicker through the darkness. The camera lurks around corners, as the drums from Elfman's theme song blast off. There is an animalistic sense of fury in the movement, like an owl on the hunt, or a bat creeping towards its prey – completely focused, completely comfortable in the dark, completely aware. It feels like floating through the

crypt of a haunted house, through the bowels of society. As the film tracks out, the iconic Batman logo is revealed.

Batman was not endowed with superpowers from birth. Bruce Wayne, Batman's alter ego, witnessed the brutal murder of his parents as a child. Revenge is the driving force behind Batman's heroics. Batman becomes a criminal before he becomes a superhero. It is in the catacombs of urban life that Batman finds his true mission – his true calling as a superhero. He uses darkness as his ally, the same darkness that the criminals of Gotham City use to ravage the innocent. It is only appropriate that Batman manifests underground, both symbolically and literally.

Gotham city looks like a combination of different time periods all rolled into one in the film. One of the main themes of postmodernism is smashing together various styles from different historical periods, creating an eclectic fusion of culture that is indefinable. Gotham looks very similar to New York City in the 1940's, with a Gothic, ethereal twist. The cars, and some of the outfits are very retro looking, yet there is a strange sense of something very modern about the cinematic world. The soundtrack on the streets for instance, sounds very synth heavy and poppy (thanks to Prince), and despite the majority of people in suits, ties, and fancy dresses, there are others dressed in specifically 1980's garb. The meshing of time periods creates an eerie sense of nostalgia, with lots of familiar elements, that is creating something both new and old – a mixture of noir, pop culture, and Gothic sensibilities that is purely postmodern

Rather than following in the tradition of *Superman*, *Batman* bypasses a drawn out origin story for the titular character. Batman already exists within the narrative world on

screen. Society does not know what to make of Batman for the vast majority of the film. He is considered a vigilante by police officers, city officials, and the media. Criminals, however, have a very different perspective of the Dark Knight. He is like a devil sent to punish them for their sins. After leaving a show, an upper-class family (mother, father, and son; the three could be mistaken for the Wayne family trio, faking out a Batman origin story) tries to hail a cab to no avail. Prostitutes, beggars, and junkies litter the street. From a canted, high-angle atop a building, the family, in long shot, wanders down an alley. The film sweeps around a building to a medium-shot behind the family as they walk past a cracked out junkie begging for money. "Can you spare a dollar Mister," he says, but the father just ignores him. As dad turns the corner, he gets cracked over the head. The attacker, in medium close-up, shoves a gun down the terrified wife's face. Lurking in the shadows is the junkie who just asked for a dollar a moment before, his silhouette pacing in the background, while the man with the gun snags mom's purse. The man in the background quickly grabs dad's wallet, and the two run off into the night, leaving the screaming mother in medium close-up. The film swings back to a birds-eye-view long shot to show the now broken family.

The opening sequence takes into account that most people know Batman's origin story. Bruce Wayne's parents were murdered after a play, in the back alley of Gotham City. The film tricks the viewer (if one knows anything about Batman's mythos) into initially thinking they are watching Bruce's parents get murdered. The scene suggests that contemporary America is impoverished and desperate for money, so desperate that a man would murder a boy's father right in front of him. The two thugs are acting very manic, with faces that are pale and emaciated. The implication is that they are on drugs



and desperate for another fix (probably crack cocaine given the decade). This was definitely a major fear in Reagan's America. That crack, a drug that Reagan's administration linked to inner-city neighborhoods would spread out into white America, contaminating white children with addiction. It also makes a major statement about the economy, the rich living prosperously, the poor struggling to make ends meet. The scene shows a stark social divide between upper and lower class – between Reagan's idealized America, and the reality that America had become.

The film looms over the street where the crime was just committed, three stories up in the air. Down below, a demonic shadow appears, and disappears - the shadow of a bat. As the criminals gloat about their score, looking more and more drugged out all the time in a series of medium-shots, one of them looks around nervously, as if he's being watched. His buddy asks if he is scared of heights or something. In close-up, the nervous thug goes into a story about a fellow criminal, Johnny. "I heard the Bat got him," he says. Batman has only appeared as a symbol and a shadow thus far, yet he is already instilling fear in criminals. The thug goes on to say they found Johnny five stories down with no blood. The implication is that Batman is some supernatural force, not a human. He is described more like a legend, a monster, more than a superhero. The thug's partner laughs off his buddy's superstitious notion of a giant Bat Man, who lurks on building tops of Gotham, waiting to feed on criminals.

As the thugs chat, the film pulls out into a long shot. In the background, Batman gently drops in behind criminals. The camera tilts up as Batman jumps off a ledge, showing off his full bat-suit for the first time - the yellow utility belt, and yellow Batman logo radiating off an all black, vinyl suit, the cut of the cape resembling the wings of a bat

(the canted angle for Batman's entrance is a motif used throughout the film to show the characters dominance over criminals). The film shifts over Batman's shoulder as he approaches the criminals, the ears on his mask resembling devil horns (paying direct homage to Bob Kane's original vision of the character). They shoot him and Batman drops to the ground, however, the Caped Crusader ethereally rises back to his feet and continues after the two men. Batman pulls out his first gadget in the film, a type of boomerang, shaped like a bat, with a line attached. He launches it, catching a criminal on the other end of the line. Batman holds the drugged out thug over the edge of the building. "Don't kill me...who are you," he pleads. Batman says, "I'm not gonna kill you. I just want you to tell all your friends about me. I am Batman!" Batman already exists in the narrative world of the film - while his physical presence is more of a legend at this point. Batman physically appearing, while the criminals are discussing the legend of Batman, literally brings the mythos of Batman to life on screen for viewers, and for criminals in the cinematic world.

Batman has an entire city overrun with crime to deal with. The city oozes with corruption from the inside out. Mob boss Carl Grissom, played by Jack Palance, has Gotham city in his pocket - Politicians, city officials, and police officers are all pawns for him to play with. Jack Napier, played by Jack Nicholson (pre-Joker transformation), is one of Grissom's guns for hire. Jack is having an affair with Grissom's girlfriend Alicia. Grissom finds out and sets Jack up to get busted by the cops during a robbery. Jack immediately knows he has been setup and a shoot out with the police ensues in the middle of a chemical factory.

Police Commissioner Gordon, played by Pat Hingle, is one of the only forces of government in the film that is not shown as openly corrupt. He shows up at the crime scene and immediately tells the officers not to kill Jack, only to arrest him. Gordon tells Lieutenant Eckhart, "I'm in charge here, not Carl Grissom!" Jack, meanwhile, is turning the chemical factory into the laboratory of a mad scientist. In a sequence reminiscent of the creation scene in James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1932), the film cuts overhead an open control panel where Jack furiously throws levers and switches – smoke and electricity explode everywhere, while kettles of neon green acid pour out all over the facility. Jack, in a long shot, stands in the middle of blazing hot pipes, steam spewing out all around him. After the control panel short circuits, Jack sidles out unharmed. The film cuts to a foggy corridor shot where Jack's goons are in a shoot-out with the cops. Bullets pierce the boiling hot pipes, burning liquid spraying all over the police officers. Just as the crooks are about to escape, Batman drops down in front of the frame. The film quickly cuts to a medium close-up of the Caped Crusader - a canted angle makes him look even more brooding. The crooks viciously fire rounds off at Batman – to no avail. A medium close-up of Batman reveals him pulling out his Batarang. He fires it quickly at the foe, winding the criminal up in the process, then attaches the line to the railing, and leaves the crook hanging over the edge (possibly to fall to his death, possibly for the police to arrest- whichever happens first). Commissioner Gordon hears the man screaming, and from a high-angle in a wide long shot overhead, Gordon approaches the commotion from below. He looks up, in close-up, sees Batman, and looks as though he has seen the devil. Commissioner Gordon and Batman, historically, worked together to capture the baddies, even though it was always Batman doing most of the work on the streets, however,

Gordon, like the rest of Gotham, does not know what to make of Batman yet - friend, or foe, enemy, or ally.

Jack races up the stairs to the top of the factory. The cops are closing in on him. He lurks in the shadows high above the law, darkness covers Jack's face as he notices the back exit creeping in the corner. Jack has a maniacal smirk across his face as he holds his revolver close. It is the first time in the film that Jack looks happy. His character thus far has had a serious look plastered on his face, but now there is a sense of madness in his eyes, a psychotic madness. Jack aims his gun at Commissioner Gordon, when suddenly Batman drops in from the smoky darkness up above in a wide long shot. The film cuts to a close-up of the bright yellow utility belt, Batman's hand clicking a button on top. A close-up of Jack's gun reveals it being ripped out of his hands (by Batman's device), and in an instant Batman has Jack in his grip. Batman lifts Jack up in the air like some devil from another world. Jack screams out, "Jesus", as if trying to atone for his sins at the last moment before death - like Batman is the Grim Reaper.

Jack is saved for a moment when his goon Bob holds a gun up to Commissioner Gordon's head. Batman puts Jack down. They look deeply into each other's eyes, like they are destined to be together, soul mates. Jack quickly grabs his gun, but Batman is gone. Jack shoots Lieutenant Eckhart, the bullet killing the dirty cop as his overweight body crashes into streaming hot pipe. Batman reemerges from the shadows. Jack fires a shot at the Caped Crusader's head. Batman deflects it with his forearm shield - the bullet ricochets across Jack's face, as he stumbles backwards and falls over the railing, managing to grab on to the ledge with one hand. In close-up, Batman quickly gives Jack another hand and starts to pull him up, however, Jack slips - falling to his apparent death

in a giant green vat of chemicals. A canted-angle up at Batman in close-up makes the hero look disheartened, as if he has failed himself. Jack Napier is about to become Batman's iconic super villain the Joker. The Joker's backstory in the chemical factory was adapted from Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*, and is one of many additions Batman's foray in graphic novels added to the iconography, and the mythology of Batman's universe<sup>vii</sup>. The Joker holds Batman responsible for his disfigurement.

*Batman* makes an interesting decision. Unlike *Superman*, in which the titular character receives almost all of the screen time, in *Batman* the Joker dominates the frame just as much, if not more, than the Caped Crusader himself. In fact the Joker, Batman's arch nemesis and evil doppelgänger, ends up getting even more screen time than the Dark Knight in the film. Part of this has to do with capitalizing on Jack Nicholson's expensive price tag,<sup>viii</sup> but more so, in *Batman*'s postmodern world, the villain is given far more weight in the story. Batman himself is even a villain in the film. In a world where the law has become corrupt, the criminal paradoxically becomes the hero. Super-villains are Gods of their own world. They can do whatever they want, which makes criminals incredibly attractive for audiences to project themselves into. Jack Nicholson's Joker becomes the anchor of the film. He is the embodiment of a postmodern era of artwork, capitalism, and corruption all rolled into one<sup>ix</sup>

After Jack falls in the chemicals, he is rushed into emergency plastic surgery. The operating room looks like a basement in the middle of the projects. A (presumably) German, back alley surgeon unwraps bloody bandages from around Jack's head, a look of terror in his eye. The front of Jack head is never shown – only a silhouette from behind, blackness, a monstrous figure. Most of the scene is in a long shot with extremely

exaggerated lighting. Jack is a shadowy figure, a faceless madman- while the doctor is oversaturated in light – every one of his facial movements reads like an open book. He is horrified by his creation. Jack senses the fear radiating off the doctor. “ Mirror,” demands Jack. The doctor reluctantly hands Jack a decoupage hand mirror to inspect his new face. Jack grunts at first, then the grunt turns in to laughter. In a close-up, Jack smashes the mirror into the doctor’s tray of barbaric tools. Jack’s laughter grows more and more intense. It sounds maniacal – psychotic. He breaks the one light overhead, and laughs his way right out the door, the high-pitched cackle encompassing the entire frame. The Joker is born.

Vicki Vale, played by Kim Basinger, ends up being Batman’s love interest in the film. Vicki Vale, sort of the same character as Lois Lane in Superman, is a photographer for the Gotham paper, who falls in love with Bruce Wayne (Batman). Vale starts out as independent working woman, but soon falls prey to the overly familiar role of superhero cheerleader (much like Lois Lane). The Vicki Vale character is mostly there as a love interest for Bruce Wayne. She discovers that Bruce Wayne is actually Batman in the film, a secret that Vicki Vale eventually discovered in the comics, but it took years to develop. In an effort to fuse many different eras of Batman, and America, into the film the strong female character got lost somewhere in the shuffle. Vale represents Batman’s way out. She is symbolic of the companionship Bruce yearns for, but can ultimately never have because of his souls relationship with Gotham City.

Both Vicki Vale and Lois Lane are a refraction of how women were portrayed by the media in the 1980’s. The 1980’s were a rough decade for Hollywood. A massive corporate takeover of all the major studios, dwindling ticket sales, and the birth of home

video and cable television all fostered Hollywood's conformity to America's cultural programming of the 1980's. The second wave of feminism of the sixties and seventies had to be silenced in the name of commerce, in the name of family. The backlash shaped the female image in Hollywood in the 1980's. Women were either pitted against one another in films, or women's lives are framed as morality tales in which the "good mother" wins and the independent woman punished. Meanwhile, the 1980's were an era of big, machismo action flicks. Films like *First Blood* (1982), *The Terminator* (1984), and *Die Hard* (1988) were at multiplexes everywhere. Muscles, guns, explosions, and of course women who need to be saved<sup>x</sup>. Vicki Vale starts out as a strong, independent woman. She is an up-and-coming photographer at an almost all male newspaper. As soon as Vale meets Bruce Wayne/Batman, her love interest and patriarchal savior, her career gradually falls by the wayside along with her independence. By the end of the film she gives up her career completely to be with Bruce Wayne – so the couple can foster a healthy marriage (Faludi, *Fetal Visions*)

The Joker quickly rises to power in Gotham City. First he takes over Grissom's chair in the organized crime ring, but that is just the beginning. The Joker is a chemical expert and creates all kinds of deadly toys for his own sadistic fun. He has everything from a hand buzzer that electrocutes the person on the other end to death - to a flower the Joker wears as a corsage that sprays acid in the unsuspecting victims faces. The Joker concocts a brilliant plan to randomly poison different cosmetic products in Gotham. People start to die all over the city. A mass panic breaks out over which products are causing the plague. People stop using all cosmetic products and before long everyone looks just as demented and chaotic as the Joker himself.

The Joker considers himself an artist, “I’m the worlds first fully functional homicidal artist,” he says when talking to Vicki Vale. He creates living artwork out of people by chemically deforming their faces like his own. The Joker’s claim to be a “homicidal artist” evolves even murder to the status of art in the postmodern world of *Batman*. In postmodernity where there is no separation between the real, popular culture, and the media, where everything is just an amalgamation of everything else, murder could easily be interpreted as art. People have no way of perceiving the difference. Bruce Wayne, at his manifest level, embodies the capitalist, entrepreneur playboy of the 1980’s. Wayne is automatically grouped into a select echelon of society – a class that has the privilege to determine what art is real, and what is inferior. Many of Wayne’s peers, particularly during this time period, may have claimed that the Joker homicidal art was the next generation of postmodernism –the new art. The Joker gathers a lot of support quickly, despite the disturbing nature of his artwork (violence). The Joker tries to make murder beautiful, artistic, and theatrical – and succeeds to great extent.

Batman recognizes a line that the Joker says, “have you ever danced with the devil in the cold moonlight?” He cannot pinpoint it immediately, but the line taps into something deeply repressed in his subconscious. Batman realizes it was the Joker (Jack Napier) who murdered his parents in cold blood when he was a child. During a flashback, a young Jack stares the Wayne family down through the barrel of a gun. Jack says the line just before he kills Bruce’s parents right in front of the young boy. The film sutures the Joker and the Wayne family killer together. In the comics, the two criminals are completely different people that have nothing to do with each other. The film combines the two character arcs for narrative efficiency, while also adding an extra layer of



emotional attachment for the Batman's stake in his battle with the Joker. Batman must save Gotham City from the Joker, but even more importantly he must free his subconscious mind from the death of his beloved parents.

In the climax of the film, the Joker crashes Gotham City's annual gala. He has promised the citizens of Gotham that he will dump \$20 million dollars over the crowd during the party, and the city is in chaos. The Joker directly invites Batman to the soiree, challenging the Caped Crusader to try and stop him. A massive parade, baring a striking resemblance to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, marches downtown. The centerpiece of the float is a cake with 200 plastered on the front (a symbol for Gotham's 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city), and is lead by the carnival conductor of madness, the Joker. A massive clown balloon squeezes into the frame, as party music by Prince blares off the concrete jungle.

Citizens of Gotham flood the streets, ready for their chance to get rich quick. Behind the massive balloon, in the background, a float in the shape of a birthday cake carries the Joker and his cronies to the party. The Joker looks like the Mayor of Gotham City. Dressed in a more eccentric version of his purple suit, the Joker dons a bright purple overcoat, checkered pants, and a matching hat – his poisonous posy radiating off his belligerent garb. The Joker erratically pumps his fist in the air, blowing kisses to the crowd – the caricature of any politician who just won an election. Canted long - shots of Gotham's citizens begging the Joker for the millions he has promised. The Joker and his men start dumping trash bags of cash out of the float - the citizens of Gotham flock like a pack of rats. Gotham City doesn't care who is in charge as long as everybody is rich, a refraction of Ronald Reagan's politics in the 1980's<sup>xi</sup>. "Gotham's Greed," as reporter

Alexander Knox puts it so poetically – America’s Greed. Paradoxically Bruce Wayne is the wealthiest person in Gotham, and he is the city’s superhero. Capitalism gives rise to a city overrun with villains, but it also gave birth to the superhero that would save Gotham from itself – Batman.

After sending the bat-mobile in to destroy the Joker’s chemical factory (Batman’s car is remote controlled and voice activated), Batman pulls out his biggest gadget in the film - the Batwing. The Batwing is shaped like the bat symbol on Batman’s chest and glides across the sky like a winged creature of the night. The skyline of Gotham looks like New York City bathed in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* - ominous and Gothic, expressionistic and terrifying. Just as the Joker asks where Batman is, he looks high up in the sky, in a long corridor shot through giant skyscrapers, and sees the batwing, looking very similar to a stealth bomber, zooming through the clouds overhead<sup>xiii</sup>. The Joker pulls out a giant remote control, flips a switch, and the massive clown balloon starts blowing poisonous green gas out of its neck. The Joker is about to create his biggest homicidal art project yet – a postmodern masterpiece that all of Gotham will be a part of. The crowd starts dropping like dominos - people flee the scene in terror.

Batman flies the Batwing straight up in the air. In an expanded long shot, the batwing flies up towards the moon, it sits in the glow of the moonlight for just a moment, perfectly embodied in the satellites ethereal luminescence. The film is foreshadowing the bat signal, a spotlight designed by Batman with his logo on the ballast that when projected by Commissioner Gordon, displays Batman’s emblem in the sky – an immediate indicator that Batman’s help is needed by Gotham City. The bat symbol is a big part of the superhero’s iconography - embodying the mythology, the legend of

Batman. The bat-symbol conjures up the Dark Knight. The symbol strikes fear in criminals and gives hope to the innocent.

Batman's final encounter in the cathedral with the Joker cyclically brings the story back to where it began for the Caped Crusader and his arch-nemesis. After Batman rises from the fire and brimstone of the crash, he follows the Joker and Vale into the massive Gothic cathedral. The setting is the perfect place for the final confrontation. For Batman the church symbolizes the death of his parents, and the fallen angel he had to become as a result. Batman's relationship with the church is a bit of a dichotomy. He is emblematic of the Christianity, warding off evil, protecting Gotham city from damnation – yet he is the antithesis of the church both in his demonic appearance, and in taking the law into his own hands. The Joker has an interesting relationship with the church as well. At first glance he is the polar opposite of everything Christianity represents. He is a criminal who kills for fun – an anarchist denying all order. The Killer Clown is also the embodiment of capitalist America in the 1980's. America is by definition “a nation under God”. If the Joker embodies a particular era of America, he in turn embodies Christianity on some level.

The film posits the church as both superhero and super-villain. It is in the church that the Joker tells Batman that it is Batman who made him, Batman's responsibility for what he has become. Batman confronts the Joker about killing his parents, and in turn blames the Joker for what he has become. Batman would not exist without the Joker, and vice-versa (in the film). The two are destined for each other. The Killer Clown pulls Batman and Vicki Vale off the roof. The two hang in the air, dwindling high above Gotham City - This time it is the Joker who is on top, with Batman on the cusp of Death

(a reversal of the Joker's transformation scene in the beginning). Just as the Joker is about to get away on a ladder hanging from a helicopter, Batman shoots his bat-line at the Joker's legs, wrapping him up with a gargoyle statue. The gargoyle breaks off the roof, plummeting the Killer Clown to his death.

*Batman* was the highest grossing film of 1989 bringing in over \$250 million at the box office (<http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Batman>). It was released the very same year the Berlin Wall would get knocked down, signaling the end of the Cold War with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. *Batman* exploded in popular culture like hot napalm. Burton's film completely reshaped what people thought a comic book movie could be. A sequel was the obvious next step and Tim Burton was brought back to write and direct, with Michael Keaton reprising his role as the Caped Crusader. *Batman Returns* was released three years later in 1992 and was also a big hit grossing over \$162 million (<http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Batman>). *Batman* had officially become the superhero of Post Cold War America in the 1990's. Although *Batman Returns* was the last time Tim Burton and Michael Keaton would be attached to the franchise, *Batman*'s mythos in contemporary America was just getting started. Despite only playing *Batman* in two films Michael Keaton would be sutured to the iconic role for the rest of his career.

Unlike the Superman films, where Superman/Clark Kent was always played by the same person (Christopher Reeve), the actor playing *Batman*/Bruce Wayne changes every couple of years. The many faces of *Batman* over the years have managed to always keep the character fresh in the ever-changing air of popular culture. *Batman* always looks like *Batman* in his costume. Bruce Wayne is the only thing that changes face. *Batman*

could technically be anybody. The idea is very much in line with what Bob Kane envisioned for his creation over fifty years earlier. Batman is emblematic of a hero that any person could potentially be. Val Kilmer would play Batman next in *Batman Forever* (1995), and George Clooney donned the suit in *Batman and Robin* (1997). Since the 1990's the Batman franchise has been a cash cow. The films made more than \$700 million dollars domestically (Over \$1 billion dollars worldwide) (<http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Batman>). The movies have become guaranteed money makers. Batman's mythos catapulted into contemporary America after his trip to the silver screen in 1989, immortalizing the new vision of Batman, while cementing the comic book movie as a profitable genre in Hollywood. 1989 would be known as "the Year of the Bat" (Boichel, 18).

## *Chapter Four*

### *The Purge: The Death of Superman*

Tim Burton's *Batman* was the beginning of new era in popular culture – the age of the comic book movie. Batmania took the world by storm. Batman quickly rose in popularity to America's premier superhero. Only a decade earlier, on the heels of the success of the Superman movies, Superman and his iconography had once again come to represent America as a superpower. Superman's foray back in pop-culture was short-lived, and after the success of *Batman* on the silver screen, Superman was dealt a heavy blow at newsstands in the 1990's. Americans seemed to almost forget about the superhero that had protected them for more than fifty years. Meanwhile *Batman's* popularity skyrocketed. *Batman* comics were selling faster than ever, *Batman* merchandise boomed off the shelves, an animated show was born (*Batman: The Animated Series* from 1992-1995), and the 1990's saw three more major motion pictures. *Batman* had become a massive cultural icon, and a huge commodity.

By the early 1990's, DC publishers began using gimmicks to try and milk readers back to the Superman mythos. One of the biggest was the marriage of Superman to Lois Lane. Marrying the two characters was an interesting move, considering how many conflicts Superman and Lois fostered over the years. Fans began to fear the worst, particularly since Superman proposed to Lois as Clark, not as Superman. Publishers made it appear that Superman was about to retire into a life as his alter-ego Clark Kent. Simultaneously, a show had been optioned at the ABC network called *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*. The show's primary focus was the relationship of Lois and

Clark, not Superman and Lois. The show began heavily influencing the stories in the comic books. Superman and Lois Lane's marriage was put on hold in an effort to mirror the comic book and the television show. Superman's image as a superhero was being deconstructed right in front of America's face. The demi-God was becoming nothing more than a guise for melodrama, his superpowers and secret identity became almost nonexistent. Just like the 1960's *Batman* television series had influenced the Batman comics on the newsstand (a nearly fatal move for Batman's mythos at the time), Superman's entire mythology was now being deconstructed – condemned.

Superman was starting to look like a joke. DC's next big idea (which turned out to be a brilliant marketing tactic) was the literal Death of Superman. *Superman #75* was released in 1992 and featured the climactic battle between Superman and his monstrous foe Doomsday. The cover of the issue pictured Superman's torn red cape blowing from a stake in the ground, "THE DEATH OF SUPERMAN" shooting off the bottom of the page – an iconic image in its own right. *The Death of Superman* flew off the shelves. Fans from everywhere came out of the woodwork for what seemed like Superman's last adventure. "When the smoke cleared it had sold a staggering 6 million copies" (Daniels, *Superman*, 170)<sup>xiii</sup>. Superman had worked his way back onto newsstands, but he had become a nonexistent force at the movies. The world would receive shocking news on June 1, 1995. Christopher Reeve, the actor the world knew better as Superman, had been in a horse riding accident and was paralyzed from the neck down. He would never walk again and a machine was required just for him to breath. Superman was no longer Superman, no longer a god – he was a broken man, one that couldn't even breath by

himself, walk by himself. When Christopher Reeve became crippled, Superman was simultaneously issued a fatal blow in popular culture<sup>xiv</sup>.

The death of Christopher Reeve and *The Death of Superman* both literalized what happened to the superhero (Superman) in the memory of mass culture. Batman spawned a series of much darker antiheroes in comics during the 1990's (Todd McFarlane's *Spawn*, Sam Keith's *The Maxx*, and Dale Keown's *Pitt* to name a few). Even characters, previously known as villains, like Spiderman's arch-nemesis Venom, would receive their own series of stories as the protagonist. Newer, more grown up heroes received their own movies and television shows, while older characters, like Superman, started disappearing all together<sup>xv</sup>. None of the new heroes, though, could raise a flag to the popularity of Batman - Men, women, and children all had Bat-fever. Batman became a modern day James Bond. Each film introduced a new villain, or set of villains, a new set of Bat-gadgets, and a new, beautiful leading lady. Every couple of year's fans had a new fearsome foe to look forward to. The new actors playing Batman varied in popularity, but none reached the iconic status of the original Caped Crusader Michael Keaton (which was also the case with Sean Connery's James Bond).

By the end of the nineties, the Batman films had become a joke. *Batman and Robin* (1997) marks the end of the initial Batman franchise in Hollywood. The movies, like the comics in the 1950's, began fusing Batman to a Bat-Family. Robin and Batgirl were both introduced in desperation. The movie even tried to fuse elements of the campy 1960's television show too, but the amalgamation of different elements, and one too many villains, left the movie feeling over-congested and cheesy. *Batman and Robin* was a huge disappointment at the box office. It only grossed a meager \$107 million dollars on



a massive production budget of \$125 million (<http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Batman>). After four films, Warner Brothers decided Batman had worn out his welcome. The Dark Knight would go on an eight year hiatus at the movies.

Comic book sales would decline after the new millennium. Comic book movies on the other hand, would explode into Hollywood with a vengeance. America would spend the vast majority of the decade at war with the Middle East. Many young Americans would once again sacrifice their lives for a war in a far off place. Comic book movies became a huge money maker during the new war (just as comic books at newsstands had helped American's get through the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War for over more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a century). Comic book publishers began heavily focusing on big production, theatrical versions of their beloved characters. The end of the initial Batman franchise signaled the rise of the comic book movie as a genre. Everything from Spiderman to the X-Men, Blade to Iron Man, and everything in between received a big-screen adaptation. Comic book movies drew in gigantic audiences, came with lots of merchandising, and had the potentiality for an infinite number of sequels – the genre was a match made in heaven for big Hollywood studios.

Batman and Superman were bound to try and stake their claim on the new era of comic book movies. The horrible taste of *Batman and Robin* was just fading from people's mouths, and Superman had been absent from the big screen for more than thirteen years (1987's *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* was the Man of Steel's last foray). In 2005, Christopher Nolan, a director known for psychological realism, released the contemporary vision of the Caped Crusader in *Batman Begins*. The new Batman was

like no other version of the superhero that came before him. Nolan's Batman was the beginning of a new era of superhero on film – the realistic comic book movie. For the first time in popular culture, Batman was given a major backstory to explain the origin of the superhero's mythology (*Superman* did the same thing twenty-five years earlier, but in a science fiction setting). All of Batman's abilities were tied to years of intensive training with Ra's al Ghul's League of Shadows, a secret organization of ninjas that has different ties to international governments. The film also investigates the psychology of what made Bruce Wayne become Batman, including the brutal murder of his parents, and what led him to choose bats as a symbol of protection for Gotham City – a phobia of bats. Batman's costume was completely redesigned to make it more believable in the real world. All of Batman's gadgets were given a technological update, in particular the batmobile<sup>xvi</sup>. *Batman Begins* took the world by storm. The Dark Knight posited incredibly well to reality. Batman was given more weight than ever in Nolan's new rendition. *Batman Begins* put Batman back in the center of his world. For the first time ever at the movies, the dynamic of Batman's psychology was beginning to unravel. Audiences around the world fell in love with the more human rendition of the superhero. Although villains still played a huge role in Batman's new universe, it was Bruce Wayne and Batman that dominated the screen.

Superman tried to make a comeback in 2006, hot on the success of *Batman Begins*. *Superman Returns* was not received well. The film was a continuation of the original Superman series and just seemed out of place. The film was considered a failure after only making \$200 million at the box office on an over \$200 million dollar budget (<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=superman06.htm>). Superman was really

struggling to find a place in popular culture in America. In the era of comic book movies, where Superman was undoubtedly the grandfather of the genre, the Man of Steel seemed like a stranger to most American audiences. Batman, on the other-hand, continued his renaissance throughout the new millennium, and Christopher Nolan's films continued to attract the masses. Nolan's films became so popular that Batman's mythology was once again reinvented.

After finishing the Batman series, Nolan was asked to do to Batman what he did to Superman – bring the Man of Steel into the contemporary real world, to make the superhero more psychologically tormented. The only problem with that idea is that Superman is not a psychological tormented character, Batman is. The characters, despite both being superheroes, have very little in common, and Superman did not fare well with Nolan's darker treatment. The movie, *The Man of Steel* (directed by Zack Snyder, 2013), ended up being a financial box office success with Nolan's name attached (even as producer), despite lukewarm critical and fan responses. *Man of Steel* brought back a classic Cold War villain, General Zod (also the villain in Superman II), and sutured him to the role of a modern American criminal, an intergalactic terrorist. The film posits Superman with all kinds of psychological dilemmas of consciousness. He is incredibly unsure of who he is throughout the film, which is against the core of Superman's entire mythos. Superman even kills Zod at the end of the film, a move that goes against everything that Superman has always stood for.

*Man of Steel* was supposed to officially reboot Superman on the silver screen. A sequel was put into the pipeline immediately. However, Warner Brothers amended their announcement only a few months later. The Superman sequel would feature Batman and

would be called *Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice*. The addition of Batman to the newly rebooted Superman franchise appears to be a desperate move on the part of DC and Warner Brothers. Superman barely has had a presence in the new millennium. The Man of Steel has no identity to grasp onto in the contemporary world. Superman has become a symbol without a face. His emblematic “S” means more to the world than his face at this point. Superman and Batman had adventures together almost since the very beginning, so a major motion picture should only make sense, and it does in some ways. On the contrary, Superman has recently just become his own superhero in popular culture again. By throwing Batman into the new Superman film, the studio looks as if they are trying to use the Dark Knight’s weight as a commodity, as a crutch, for the Man of Steel – for Superman.

Batman has unquestionably become the more prevalent superhero in contemporary Hollywood. Despite being born out of the same era, Superman and Batman have evolved to embody very different historical periods. Superman has never been able to outgrow his Great Depression, World War II, Cold War era mentality that the superhero came to reflect. His mythology in modern times can still be threaded right back to the first twenty years of the Superman comics. Superman, despite countless stories and adventures, has always represented the same things - Patriarchy, the American Dream, and patriotism. Batman’s mythos on the other-hand has a lot more plasticity. The Caped Crusader redefined himself every ten years, while managing to keep the core elements that make him an identifiable superhero intact. Superman ultimately just became too super for contemporary audiences - his quest to save the nuclear family just has not worked in modern times. Batman’s ever-evolving mythology is a refraction of mankind’s

relationship with the world, a way for us to better understand the human condition – to better understand ourselves.

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<sup>i</sup> The publishing name DC originates from *Detective Comics*. *Detective Comics* was the publisher's flagship series and issue #1 came out in 1937. Batman's first appearance was in issue #27 and hit newsstands the summer of 1939.

<sup>ii</sup> Action figures, trading cards, and even a ray gun that projected a Superman serial on any wall a child chose to shoot it at

<sup>iii</sup> In 1945 Batman was introduced on Superman's radio show. This marked the beginning of a long relationship between Batman and Superman. The main reason for the initial pairing was because Collyer's need for some time off. Batman and his sidekick Robin (a popular addition to the comics by that point) would fill in for Superman. The first adventure where Batman is featured on the show, however, involves a plot with Batman, Robin, and Superman working together, and Superman ultimately saving Batman. The plots often times made Batman the minor character in the adventure. Generally Batman was on the show it was when Superman had been detained (typically by kryptonite, his legendary Achilles heel, also popularized by the radio show), at which point Batman and Robin carried out their own adventures. The appearances were supposed to help jumpstart Batman's own radio show, which nonetheless never actually got off the ground, and Batman's life on the radio would be sutured to Superman. There were a few different actors who played Batman on the show, but Matt Crowley was most famous for the role. Not until television was in full effect by the mid 1960's, did Batman have a show of his own.

<sup>iv</sup> Batdog was first in 1955, followed by Batwoman, Bat-Girl, and Bat-Mite. This became known as the Batman family. These attempts ultimately just drove Batman further and further away from what made him Batman in the first place.

<sup>v</sup> Meredith said, "It was kind of the trendy thing to do at the time." However, it was the villains that really made the show a hit. Julie Newmar played Catwoman with a sarcastic eroticism, and became an icon in her own right, her image being attached to Catwoman for many years. Despite being a criminal, Catwoman represented the strong embodiment of a woman. The second wave of feminism was on the rise and Newmar's Catwoman represented a woman that was just as powerful, if not more powerful, than her male counterparts

<sup>vi</sup> Miller also penned *Batman: Year One* in 1987, which offers the perspective of Jim Gordon, future Commissioner of Gotham City, as a rookie detective on the force. *The Dark Knight Returns* spawned an array of more serious Batman graphic novels including Alan Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988) and Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* (1989).

<sup>vii</sup> Tim Burton loosely based his rendition of the Joker of Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*. For instance, the Joker's transformation in *Batman* is more or less the same (he falls in vat of chemicals and his face becomes died white, lips red and plastered in a smile, and his hair died green), however, the rest of the film takes a lot of liberty with the character.

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<sup>viii</sup> Jack Nicholson took a pay-cut in salary from \$10 million a film to \$6 million for *Batman*. In exchange Nicholson was given a cut of the profits from the movie on the backend including merchandise, video, and DVD sales. After the film became an international success, Nicholson ended up pocketing closer to \$60 million, making him the highest paid actor ever for one movie.

<sup>ix</sup> The late 1980's through the 1990's is a period that Dr. Paul Gordon defines as the "Rise of the Criminal Superhero". Until the late 1980's, criminals rarely defeated the protagonist. Traditionally good guys saved the day, and the bad guy/guys had to pay for their crimes. Good guys conventionally had something to do with law and order, and were often times government officials, soldiers, or police officers. Humanity sublimated into these characters to gain a sense of omnipotence over the world. The American public's faith in law and order suffered a series of fatal blows after the War in Vietnam, the controversial assassination of 35<sup>th</sup> President John F. Kennedy, and the impeachment of 37<sup>th</sup> President Richard M. Nixon, just to name a few. The American public could no longer suture themselves to such law-abiding heroes because the law had failed to protect them. Criminals, on the other-hand, are above the law .

<sup>x</sup> The rising divorce rates of the decade had given rise to a very different view of the independent woman. The second wave of feminism in the 1960's and 70's had created backlash in the media against the workingwoman. The increase in divorce rates was spun to be a result of the independent woman destroying the nuclear family. According to Susan Faludi, "efforts to hush the female in American films have been a perennial feature of cinema in backlash periods." In other words, when the feminine voice threatens patriarchal power in society, Hollywood movies tend to heavily reinforce passive gender programming for women. This has been the pattern throughout the history of Hollywood cinema. Faludi is tracking the history of woman throughout American culture through the guise of cinema. Historically, when feminist movements gain strength the media tends to suture woman to a much more passive role. Cinema has a privileged place in the media to dictate what the majority of culture sees as normal. Faludi uses the film 1987 *Fatal Attraction* to demonstrate a trend in the 1980's to criminalize the working, independent woman. All three top grossing films in 1987 (*Three Men and a Cradle*, *Fatal Attraction*, and *Beverly Hills Cop 2*) featured women divided into two groups – for reward or punishment. The good women are all subservient housewives, while the female villains are all independent women that do not want to give up their career. Faludi also points out that Paramount Picture is the studio responsible for all three films. The mentality towards women in these films becomes programmed into the lives of real people. The more aggression towards empowered women that there is in the media, at the movies, the more that mentality will seep deeper and deeper into America as a culture. It is a cyclical pattern (Faludi, *Fatal Visions*).

<sup>xi</sup> Like Gordon Gekko says in Oliver Stone's 1987 film *Wall Street*, "Greed is Good," the 1980's were a decade defined by capitalism, mass consumption, and lavish spending. The stock market exploded, making people tons of money, and President Ronald Reagan encouraged mass consumer spending. Americans during the 1980's are generally viewed as self-absorbed, binge consumers. ([http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1992-01-23/news/1992023038\\_1\\_greed-1955-and-1980-charitable-giving](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1992-01-23/news/1992023038_1_greed-1955-and-1980-charitable-giving)).

<sup>xii</sup> After the War in Vietnam was over in 1975, America was in dire need of a President who could reestablish the nation as a superpower during the Cold War. The election of 40<sup>th</sup> American President Ronald Reagan signaled the start of a new era in the country. Reagan assigned Casper Weinberger as defense secretary, and sought to rejuvenate America's stronghold on the Soviet Union by building up an enormous military program. The program included the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), also known as "Star Wars", and reviving the Air Force's B-1 Bomber Program with the new B-2 Stealth Bomber Program. Star Wars was supposed to make the U.S invulnerable nuclear attack by shooting down missiles from space, while stealth bombers could fly into enemy territory undetected by radar. In fact Reagan's Stealth technology was one of the main components that forced Saddam Hussein's

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troops out of Kuwait in 1991. The military initiative was a big part of Reagan's America in the 1980's (<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bal-te.pentagon08jun08-story.html#page=1>).

<sup>xiii</sup> *The Death of Superman* turned out to be a hoax. After his death four alternative Supermen were devised as possible replacements for the Man of Steel. Each variation was given their chance to prove who the real Superman actually was. The story was called *The Reign of the Supermen*. The real Superman was eventually resurrected and went on to continue his adventures as if nothing had ever happened. Killing off titular superheroes in comics only to resurrect them months later was nothing new. Comic book publishers had a history of pulling stunts like *The Death of Superman* in an effort to reboot their characters, and make lots of revenue.

<sup>xiv</sup> It is uncanny that both actors who are attached to the role of Superman historically in the media both suffered early, complicated demises, not to mention share the same last name. It is like there is a curse surrounding the mythos of Superman in the media (not to mention surrounding the last name Reeves). Carrying the weight of Superman on ones shoulders is no easy task. Both actors became incredibly typecast prior to their deaths, having become so sutured to the iconography (and the legend) of Superman himself.

<sup>xv</sup> Even a villain in Batman's universe gave him a serious run for his money. In 1993 Bane, "a super steroid enhanced genius," (*Knightfall*, 1) breaks Batman's back disabling the crime-fighter for six months. Jean-Paul Valley, Batman's apprentice, replaces the crime-fighter in Gotham under the name Azrael. Azrael becomes increasingly violent, borderline psychotic, and end up destroying Batman's reputation with law enforcement and the public became tarnished for many years because of Azrael. It takes many years for Batman to earn the trust back of Gotham City in the comics. The idea of Batman being a villain was not new, but since *Knightfall* the idea of a criminal Caped Crusader has become a permanent addition to the superhero's mythos, and has been echoed throughout Batman's various incarnations over the next twenty years. Bane was briefly featured in *Batman and Robin*, but the character was nothing like his comic book counterpart and was big disappointment. Bane finally got his moment in the limelight of the silver screen in Christopher Nolan's 2012 *The Dark Knight Rises*. The spine-breaking supervillain was played Tom Hardy in the film.

<sup>xvi</sup> The batmobile had always looked like supped-up sports car. It had lots of cool abilities, but was completely unrealistic. The new batmobile looked like a futuristic tank. It was something that a soldier would drive into the battle of the apocalypse.