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Abstract

For my undergraduate honors thesis, I propose a study on the evolution of Superman and Batman as superheroes in America over the course of the past century, ultimately leading to the creation of the comic book movie genre in contemporary cinema. The study will be done using the close analysis of two films, with each film viewed through the historical (social, political, religious) lens of the period it was made. The two films are as Superman (1978, Dir. Richard Donner) and Batman (1989, Dir. Tim Burton).

Comic books, per the decade they are made, can offer a fantastic metaphor for what is happening socially in American culture. Although they are packaged as fantastic products for children, comic books are constantly fused with very adult, very sociopolitical themes. Movies tend to function in a similar way. Comics and movies aesthetically tell their stories in a homologous way as well. The blueprint for a movie is a storyboard, and a storyboard is basically a giant comic book. It is no surprise that the two art forms sutured themselves together. The marriage of comics and movies has unquestionably reached its peak in the new millennium.

My study will catalog the history of the evolution of comic book movies, starting in the 1970’s with the first big comic book movie in Hollywood Superman, which really laid the blueprints for what a comic book movie should be like, and what a superhero should look like - uplifting and heroic. Superman was the cinematic comic book hero for over a decade (He was America’s preferred comic book hero for almost fifty years). Ten years later (on the tail end of the Reagan administration), Burton’s Batman looks like the polar opposite of Superman - a vinyl clad, gothic comic book world. Since then, Batman has dominated Hollywood. Although Batman and Superman were both born out of the Great Depression, there is a reason that Superman carries more popularity in the 1930’s through the 1970’s, but darker characters like Batman literally take over the movie, and comic, world by the end of the 1980’s and all the way through the new millennium. The study will compare and contrast the two films, while considering the social, political, and religious climates of the era each film was made in.

The main focus of the compare and contrast will be on the superheroes in the two films, the environments in which they function, and the visual representation of the comic book on screen. Each superhero represents a certain set of ideals held by American culture, while the environments of these stories are often a direct reflection of the world we live in. In Superman, which takes place during the Jimmy Carter administration (usually viewed as a lighter period in U.S politics, particularly after the Watergate Scandal and Richard Nixon/Gerald Ford years). The film is light-hearted and funny. Superman is a hero that can do no wrong. He wears an incredibly bright costume that represents the colors of the American flag (red, white, and blue). When Superman flies overhead fighting injustice and protecting the American way, he literally becomes the physical embodiment of the American Dream. The country can rest easy because Superman is here to protect us, protect the “American way”. Superman is an alien, but more like a God.
Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989) is almost the exact opposite. The film is very dark in tone and color scheme. Gotham City looks like an inversion of different time periods in American culture. Batman, who traditionally wore blue and grey in the comics, is given an all black, vinyl suit. Batman’s costume looks like something out of the BDSM culture (bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism). The world that Batman protects is a postmodern world of capitalism – Hell on Earth. Criminals run Gotham City - dirty cops, corrupt politicians, and leagues of brilliant psychopaths, just to name a few. Batman is considered a vigilante in the film world, not a superhero. He is human, but is incredibly skilled and has lots of wealth.

This study will primarily treat films and comic books as texts, with the thematic and aesthetic analysis as a means to further understand the cinematic and social relevance of comic book movies, and superheroes, in American society. Research materials will include various books on the social, political, and philosophical function of comic books (both in print and on screen).
Timeline

- **November**
  - Serious work begins. Begin compiling research materials and notes. Watch and take notes on the seven films. Begin choosing scenes for close analysis. Start writing outlines.

- **December and Winter Break**
  - Finalizing research and outlines. Begin writing actual thesis.

- **By January 25**
  - Have somewhere between a 1/3 and 1/2 of my thesis written. I’m planning on having 3-4 of the eight chapters completed by this date, with the introduction.

- **Late January/Early February**
  - Working with advisor on existing drafts and outlines. Getting initial feedback, making revisions before continuing work.

- **February**
  - Revising existing material, finishing unwritten chapters/conclusion/forward.

- **By March 1st**
  - First Draft of entire thesis is complete.

- **Early March**
  - Working with advisor on revising, polishing, and improving the draft.

- **By March 17th**
  - Final text of thesis locked, with no more changes to come, so that the committee will have time to review the work before the scheduled defense date. Additional time spent formatting and making finished copies.

- **March 31st**
  - Defense copy turned into Committee Members

- **April 7th**
  - Thesis defended in front of the committee.
Acknowledgments

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Most importantly, to my mom and my sister– it would be an understatement to say that, as a family, we have experienced some ups and downs in the past three years. Every time I was ready to quit, you did not let me and I am forever grateful. This honors thesis stands as a testament to your unconditional love and encouragement. You are my everything.