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Fantasies of Metal and Wires: Battling Corporate Hegemony and the
Achievement of Posthuman Masculinity in Recent Superhero Cinema

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Joseph J. Cook

ABSTRACT

During the summer of 2008 many movies were released with superhero protagonists. Combining textual readings and theoretical accounts to provide a phenomenological analysis of the representation of the counter-hegemonic struggle against corporate control and the achievement of posthuman masculinity in these recent superhero films, this thesis compares and contrasts specific visual and thematic elements that consistently appear in four of these films: *The Dark Knight*, *Wanted*, *Iron Man*, and *Speed Racer*. Providing intertextual exploration of the cultural status of specific cinematic superheroes, this project explores possible relationships between culture, society, and cinema, treating popular superhero cinema as an industry, while also considering the relationship between cinema and its audiences and potential implications for social and cultural identity.

CHAPTER 1: SUPERHERO CINEMA

Outline and Argument

Using cultural studies movements as a foundation and the phenomenological approach as method, this paper seeks to explicate the counter-hegemonic narrative and posthuman representations of masculinity within four recent superhero films. It is my contention that at least four of the films from 2008's bountiful crop of superhero cinema, *Iron Man*, *Speed Racer*, *The Dark Knight*, and *Wanted* feature a counter-hegemonic struggle against the corporate control of resources and the prioritizing of profit over people. In confronting such tensions, these films also construct a portrayal of masculinity relative to technology and machines. In the narrative conflict at the heart of these films' plots, each hero's masculinity is threatened by dark, controlling corporate forces that alienate and exploit. This threat to masculinity is then defeated as each hero achieves an omnipotent form of masculinity, one that relies on the manipulation of technology and material objects, and is therefore "posthuman." As the narrative of these films tackles these issues within the plot, so too does the visual representation of these heroes address these themes, situating the achievement of posthuman masculinity as the way to battle corporate hegemony, and as a way to reclaim masculinity and reassert oneself in the face of threat.

In my interrogation of these films, I first take a critical approach to these films' treatment of alienation, examining each hero's fight to transcend the

struggle of the powerless individual over powerful exploiters. Each of the four films, *Iron Man*, *Speed Racer*, *The Dark Knight*, and *Wanted*, depict a crisis in which the film's hero wrestles with his identity, struggling to assert an individual self beyond the control of corporate organizations that confine him and exploit society's citizens. Additionally, each hero wrestles with his masculinity as he attempts to come to terms with what it means to be a man in the post-industrial, postmodern world. The threat of domination by corporate goons serves as an additional threat to his masculinity, thereby providing the necessity for the achievement of a masculinity that not only allows for the hero to conquer the selfish villains of our corporations, but also brings confidence and gratification to the individual when he looks into the mirror or goes to sleep at night.

While the first chapter of this exploratory paper provides a critical look at the battle against corporate exploitation in the narrative plotlines the second chapter is an exploration of the resulting posthuman masculinity, which fully comes to life through its visual rendering. Here, I attempt to demonstrate how each of these four films displays a posthuman representation of masculinity. Each hero's identity is visually represented through costuming and mise-en-scene, technical elements that produce a cyborg-like (although not all of these heroes may be defined, in the traditional sense, as cyborgs) posthuman representation of masculinity. These visual representations suggest that power for the heroes (i.e. the ability to assert themselves while simultaneously relieving society of corporate malfeasance and disparaging domination) is obtained in the possession, consumption, creation, and manipulation of technology.

Furthermore, I conclude the thesis by connecting my observations to widely respected theory from Gramsci and Bourdieu. Discussion of these works allows me to link the detailed observations from my exploration of these films to existing theory, thereby offering a hypothesis as to how audiences might interpret these ideas and images. The concluding chapter of this paper suggests potential cultural implications of these films for social life and lived experiences.

Cinematic Stories and Cultural Myth

Given my background, training, and interests, this film criticism is built upon popular concepts within cultural studies movements, and is relatively sociological in nature. As a scholar, my training has been divided between a passion for sociological inquiry and a love of cinema. My research in sociology has largely focused on the sociological implications and social experience of sexual identity, while my study of the history and aesthetics of cinema has tended toward analysis of films that probe social identity and the isolation that results from life experience in the contemporary world. Many of these films are politically engaged and most contain complicated and solemn representations of passion and desire, rejecting mainstream aesthetics while exploring the fluidity of human existence. More specifically, my line of cinematic inquiry has most often delved into films from the New German Cinema and New Queer Cinema movements. With that said, a critical exploration of four superhero films seems a bit unusual for me.

Counter to what I have given as my typical interests, the films chosen for this thesis are a stark contrast in theme and construction; these are examples of films made in the tradition of the Hollywood blockbuster, and yet the topic was nonetheless intriguing to me. Between May and August of 2008, several popular news media outlets released a handful of articles about the summer's selection of superhero movies. Most of these articles emphasized the superhero's human flaws, and suggested that many of these films possessed multi-layered characters. An April *Associated Press* story professed that this summer's heroes had "issues" (but, of course, even since the early comic book days, superheroes always had issues); a May piece in the *New York Times* took a look at superhero costumes on display at the MET and discussed how today's superheroes influence fashion (Horyn 2008); Nick Turse's article for *The Nation* implicated the U.S. Military as having an influence on how arms dealing is portrayed in *Iron Man*; and an August article, again in the *New York Times*, criticized most of the heroes and films that I examine as "failing to walk the walk", accusing the films of often perpetuating the status quo instead of saving the day (Scott). Although there has been much journalistic writing on the popularity of these films and speculation about what they might be saying, there has yet to be any serious scholarly criticism of this recent crop of superhero cinema. My research agenda is significant and worthy of attention because the topic is relevant to both film scholars and to social scientists. Investigating and writing from the vantage point of a community college instructor who is first trained in sociology and then in cultural studies and who teaches courses in introductory sociology as well as

introductory film studies course, I firmly believe that analysis of these films can tell us about the relationship between cinematic myths, cultural artifacts and social identities. Existing research on the cultural status of superheroes examines treatment of superheroes in comic books or as action figures, but does not often (with a few exceptions) address superheroes in film. In my project, I am proposing a creative (and eclectic) framework with which I am engaging in a multidisciplinary conversation by suggesting new avenues for approaching both superheroes and film criticism. Additionally, my research is timely. These cinematic texts were all released within two months of one another last year (in 2008) and each was relatively successful in terms of box office and DVD sales.

This thesis examines the fears, desires, and fantasies addressed in these films and will focus on how specifically related cultural practices are represented on screen. It is my contention that combining cultural studies notions with sociological concepts allows me to explore the relationship between film texts and social identity. In my study, I will treat these four superhero films as cultural artifacts and approach popular superhero cinema as an industry by highlighting these Hollywood films' representation of counter-hegemonic notions of global corporate labor transitions and their representation of masculinity as being enhanced and somewhat dependent on technology. Assuming an interplay exists between identity, community, and consumption, I assert that "consumer" (particularly of technology) and "masculine" both represent subject positions and axes of social identity in these films. In short, I seek to explore how these

cinematic texts refer to cultural mistrust of corporations and to the socio-cultural experience of a posthuman masculinity.

Early-mid twentieth century film criticism rested largely on contrasting the principles of formalism and realism, drawing heavily from the works of Eisenstein and Balazs on the formalist side and Kracauer and Bazin on the realist side. The formalist and realist traditions allow us to see how film, the visual medium, translates concepts and ideas into images. Both realism and formalism were not only aesthetic arguments, but they also represented ideological positions about the function of cinema; formalists argue that films should manipulate images to deliver some version of a truth, while realists argue that film should be used to reveal the natural world (Andrew 1976).

As I examine function in the cinematic medium, the formal technical elements that were the essence of cinema (i.e. montage, mise-en-scene, sound, etc.), and the potential ideas potentially created by these elements, formalism and realism reveal the early basis of film criticism. My project recognizes that contemporary cinema cannot be viewed by seeing formalism and realism as mutually exclusive concepts. Today it is widely acknowledged that the principles of formalism and realism are not only creatively combined by commercial directors, but that, when analyzing modern Hollywood cinema, these two are only pieces of more sophisticated analysis.

The works of Roland Barthes and Clifford Geertz in cultural studies have also had significant impact on scholarly film criticism. Using Barthes work, film scholars address what meanings are “signified” in particular images in hopes of

explaining in more detail what ideas are reflected by visual symbols. Barthes extends structuralist and semiotic notions to popular cultural texts, introducing the concept of “myth” as a relationship between “signifiers” and “signifieds” (Barthes 1972). It is Clifford Geertz (1973) who defined culture itself as “stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.” Although Geertz tended toward ethnographic approaches that differ from my project’s more textual lean, and he was less concerned about ideological positions than was Barthes, his work has undeniable influence here, reminding us that our sense of self is inflected through culture.

Though sometimes contested by other scholars in the field, the writings of sociologist and media critic Stuart Hall (1981) are often considered the unifying principle of modern cultural studies; no matter his influence on cultural studies broadly, his concept of varying “reads” by a culture’s members clearly informs this criticism I am proposing. For Hall, if we are to look at a cultural text’s reception by its members, we have to consider audiences/viewers as active and intelligent producers of meaning. Through his model of “encoding” and “decoding,” viewers construct meaning from the texts they consume with regard to both their social situation and cultural context, as well as to the intended meaning of the text by its producers. According to Hall, there are then three possibilities for audiences/viewers in interpreting texts: “the dominant-hegemonic encoding/decoding,” which accepts producer intended meanings; “a negotiated code,” which appropriates the hegemonic meaning into a more specific meaning dependent upon individual circumstances; and, finally, “an oppositional code,”

where audiences/viewers understand the intended meaning, but creatively decode it in their own subversive ways.

In a more recent work that attempts to examine India's Bollywood cinema in the context of a more specifically sociological brand of cultural studies, Rajinder Kumar Dudrah (2006) explains cinema's on-screen diegetic acknowledgement of individual and cultural selves by asserting that audiences interact with cinema through "a relationship of familiarity and repetition" recognizing that "films translate a sense of our social selfhoods as refracted on the screen" (41). The overarching idea is that meaning in culture, and within film as an artifact of culture, is intertextual, social, and historical, created through a complex interplay between production/producer, text/content, and cultural form/aesthetic interpretation.

Methodology

This exploratory paper turns to cinema to study culture. In the summer of 2008, there were at least twelve films released that could be classified as superhero films (i.e. films whose central characters employ the use of super-human powers or super-sophisticated apparatuses to do battle against sinister groups who have obtained some level of cultural and economic power). This project compares and contrasts the visual and thematic elements of four of these films within the recent trendy surge of superhero cinema, exploring the relationship between cinematic representation and ideology. After first watching all twelve films, I chose my sample of four films on the basis of their similar

themes. I utilized the phenomenological method of intertextual analysis to explore the chosen films. By definition, intertextual analysis “involves comparing several texts that hold some feature in common, perhaps a set of representational techniques, a plot line, or a substantive topic” (Graham 1992:32). As Phillip Sipiora (2008) wrote, utilization of phenomenology as method provides the flexibility for “interpretation” over “translation” (197). As stated earlier in this paper, my choice of method is founded on the belief that through “multiple readings of each text,” I should be able to locate and analyze “the mythologies operating in each text” (Graham 1992: 32).

Through analysis of isolated scenes from each movie, I illustrate the similarities, consistencies, and emergent themes within these films. Analysis of these scenes, then, serves as a formal exploration and a scholarly testament to subtext within these films. Close reading allows for the description of the themes, assumptions, values, and techniques these films share. Furthermore, close reading that explores counter-hegemony and post-human masculinity provides insight into at least one interpretation of the fluid cinema aesthetics between and beyond superhero films.

CHAPTER 2: BATTLING CORPORATE GREED

In the introduction of this paper, I posited my definition of a superhero (at least in the context of the four specific films from 2008) as one who employs the use of super-human powers or super-sophisticated apparatuses to do battle against sinister groups who have obtained some level of cultural and economic power. In the first chapter, I also provided context for the battle that I believe each of these heroes is fighting. Essentially, the battle is one that many cultural theorists might label as counter-hegemonic because it interrogates institutionally-sanctioned authority. More specifically, as this chapter's critical exploration of isolated scenes from these films reveals, these films possess similar plot elements that motivate a central concept. At the center of these films is a thematic focus on the desire for change within America's economic (and often specifically corporate) institution. This focus does not appear as anti-capitalist as much as it seems to encourage smarter capitalism, but is accompanied by the notion that individuals are alienated by corporations and that individuals need not only become aware of this situation, but also rise above such exploitation and put an end to economic suffering by minimizing exploitation.

As this paper explores the relationship between meaning and human experience, specifically the relationship between making meaning out of cinematic superhero texts and the human experience, it is important to consider some of the conceptual tools that ground my interpretation. In my interpretation,

each one of these superhero movies addresses the unfortunate impact of corporate power on individuals and provides a similar provocation as to how society's citizens might combat such alienation and exploitation.

As I explicate the social psychological implications of these specific cultural artifacts and explore how these films suggest that society's collective projects have turned on us, I must acknowledge Marx's concepts of exploitation and alienation, which are at the heart of what these heroes are experiencing. Marx, both alone (1999) and writing with Engels (1970), believes that culture in a capitalist society produces a dominant ideology. Market relations produce a culture whose power dynamics elude both the proletariat, that is the worker, and the bourgeoisie, that is the capitalist. The proletariat is exploited by the bourgeoisie, meaning that proletarians do not perceive, nor receive, the total value of their hard work. Instead, it is the bourgeoisie, as those in control of the means of production, who reap the benefits and profit from the proletariat's efforts. This situation, then, alienates the proletariat as they are isolated, unable to achieve a fulfilling existence because they have lost control over the very institution they create and perpetuate. The experience of alienation separates the individual from the qualities that make us human.

Speed Racer

If one thinks back to the character's origins as a cartoon character, Speed Racer (Emile Hirsch) may not seem like an obvious superhero, but, in this filmic incarnation of the character, he definitely fits my the definition. In fact, as further

analysis here will show, not only is Speed a hero, but so too is his older brother, Rex (Scott Porter). Just eleven minutes into the movie appears a flashback in which a bomb is delivered to the Racer's home. As Pops Racer, (John Goodman) his mechanic, Sparky, (Kick Gurry), and his son Rex work on a vehicle in the garage, young Speed arrives carrying a box. "Hey Pops, a guy told me to give this to you, says he is a big fan" announces Speed, while Rex takes one look at the box and throws it (into young Speed's child-size, drivable car, and with a mop placed on the gas pedal, sends it hurling out in the street just in time to explode. While it is brother Rex who saves the day in this first brush with danger, it becomes fast apparent that young Speed Racer is meant to save the world from the dark, shady, and controlling forces that manipulate society through controlling commerce and competition. As the film continues, audiences are told that the only way for Speed to save the day is to win a "fixed" race, one that someone else is supposed to win, thereby destabilizing the cartel who conspire to rig and profit from races and to monopolize car manufacturing.

While *Speed Racer* is told in a more or less linear fashion, the film also uses extensive flashbacks. In many cases, these flashbacks juxtapose Speed with his older brother, Rex (or, in a plot twist that makes things rather convoluted, with Racer X, who we find at the end of the film is Rex in disguise, after we all thought he had died). Early in the film, during the first race in which we see Speed compete on the tracks, an announcer in a diegetic voiceover talks of Speed's virtuoso moves on the tracks, "Let us hope he doesn't make the same mistakes his brother made." Here, Speed's race is intermingled with a flashback

to the legendary and nostalgic last race of his older brother, Rex Racer. As we watch *Speed* we hear, “No one will ever forget the tragic story of Rex Racer,” says one announcer “He nearly ruined racing,” says another. In the flashbacks to Rex’s final race and the days leading up to it, it becomes clear that Pops and Rex didn’t agree about the future that Rex was pursuing. Rex agreed to race in a huge corporate sponsored race in which many of the racers play dirty, a race in which drivers play whatever tricks it takes to get other racers off the tracks. As the film shows us, Rex’s race was a race that many spectators suspect may be rigged by corporate sponsors.

This dispute between Rex and Pops is not just a father/son disagreement; it has a much heavier weight because it contrasts big-business car manufacturers and corporate-sponsored races which signify corruption, with the mom-and-pop (or here mom-and-Pops) owned family garage and small-town races, the latter signifying freedom, honesty, and responsible capitalism. In fact, much of the production design of the film suggests a modern, 1950s era décor, which may promote a nostalgic feel. Combining these visuals with the plot, it is fair to say that the film is promoting a nostalgic memory of the small business capitalism of a bygone era. As we watch Rex sneak out of the Racer’s home in the middle of the night, he is stopped by Pops, who makes no secret of his position, “So you are quitting...turning your back on everything we ever built...you walk out that door and you better never come back.” As this flashback continues we see Rex at the demonized race and watch as his car crashes into a tunnel.

Television crews arrive at the blazing crash site. “The trial of Rex Racer shook the racing world to its very foundation.... Rex Racer was nothing but a rat....One of the dirtiest drivers in the world” the announcers exclaim as we are brought out of the flashback and back to Speed’s race, contrasting the good son with the one who went wrong. “Folks, I knew Rex Racer, and you can bet if he is up there watching somewhere, you can bet your ass he is damn proud of his little brother” concludes another announcer as Speed wins his race. The camera then pulls away from the race, suggesting that the images we have been shown have been viewed through a television screen. Given all of this talk about sponsorship and fixed races, our emergence from the television screen emphasizes the degree to which many are informed by television, the degree to which we may then be influenced by the sponsors who control the broadcast media. As the camera pulls back from the television screen, we see a woman sipping a martini and remarking “He’s going to be very good” to a man sitting across from her, a man whose face is in silhouette and who replies “No, he’s going to be the best if they don’t destroy him first.”

The next morning, Sparky sits at the Racer’s kitchen table, bathed in the light of a sunny day, reading the newspaper out loud, intensifying the appearance of harmonious family life. “It was a virtuoso display of talent, the likes of which have not been seen at Thunderhead,” he says and then pauses before continuing. “Now as we once again pull our collective jaw up from the floor, we have to ask if it will be different this time.” Sparky reads until he is interrupted by Ms. Racer, who no longer wishes to hear the story. Looking across the table to

Pops, Sparky exhales and complains, “I cannot believe there is not one mention of Racer Motors in here,” to which Pops quickly, in defense of his family-owned business retorts “That’s because the sponsors control the media, Sparky.” Here again, corporate control looms heavily on the narrative.

Since the story has its origins in cartoons, just about anything can happen. Fittingly, then, this breakfast time conversation is disturbed by a jet landing in the street in front of the Racer’s house, breaking up the intimacy of the family scene. Arriving at the Racer’s front door is E.P. Arnold Royalton (Roger Allam), president and chairman of Royalton Industries. Mr. Royalton introduces himself and worms his way into the Racer’s home by commenting on the aroma of Mom’s pancakes. Of course, being the corporate weasel that he is, he thinks he can buy and control anything and everything he desires and, liking his taste of the pancakes, wants to buy the recipe, muttering something about “planning a new home cooking line.” Still, with little time to waste, Royalton moves on, “But we all know the whole reason I am here...” His sales pitch is broken off by Spritle, Speed’s little brother, “Speed doesn’t want to drive for you or any other sponsors.” As this scene and conversation continues, Pops defends his business and the family, “No offense, but Racer Motors has always run as an independent,” to which E.P. Royalton retorts, “You may think of RI as a huge corporate conglomerate, but it remains an independent to me.”

Lured by the appeal of Royalton’s wealth, his charisma, and a curiosity with the man’s operations, Speed agrees to take a tour of Royalton Industries, where he is exposed to drivers and mechanics undergoing intense training,

offices padded with luxury items, and on-site examples of the latest in manufacturing technology. As Royalton talks up his game and hopes to attract Speed to it, he explains, "I wanted you to see that we are committed to winning."

After an introduction to all of this glitz, Speed turns down Royalton's offer. "Racing is in our blood and for Pops it is more than just a sport, it is kinda like a religion and the major sponsors are like the devil," Speed rationalizes to Royalton, who counters "What racing is about has nothing to do with cars or drivers; it's all about power, the unassailable right of money." Continuing on, Royalton explains, as justification, that the most famous race in history, a race in the Grand Prix, was fixed. With the camera in low angle and Royalton in medium frame, Royalton menacingly adds, "Are you ready to put away your toys and grow up? Are you ready to make more money in one year than your father made in his life? Are you ready to become a real racecar driver? Then sign that contract!" But Speed stays steadfast and replies "If that is your idea of racing, then you can keep it! People like you have way too much money and when they get that much money, they start to think that the rules that everyone else plays by do not mean squat to them." Speed's alienation comes from his sense of meaninglessness, as the odds are stacked against him. He is alienated because he cannot win the race fairly when corporate sponsors exact undue influence to squander the possibilities of the regular guy.

Speed doesn't join Royalton. Instead, he makes it his mission to beat him at his own game, aided by the mysterious Racer X (Matthew Fox), a star racer and a seeming do-gooder, who guides Speed in his attempts to win "fixed" races

and undermine the racing cartel that Royalton controls (and who the film later reveals to be the still alive Rex in disguise). Racer X not only guides Speed as a mentor and positive influence, but he also introduces him to other exploited drivers who cooperate with Speed to undermine Royalton and the cartel. One such companion is Rain (Taejo Togokahn), an Asian driver who is introduced to us, the audience, before he has been introduced to Speed, as we witness Racer X rescuing Rain from an evil cartel. In this scene, Rain is shown face-to-face with the cartel, accusing them of wrongdoing. Rain is about to be overtaken by armed thugs when Racer X shows up in his car, equipped with machine guns, and saves Rain. As Rain pants gratitude for Racer X saving his life, X asserts, "I didn't save anything worth saving unless you get smart real fast. You thought you could take on the cartel, but not without help...Maybe you forgot how it feels to stand up and be a man. The only way you'll ever stop these people is to bring them to justice," to which Rain responds, "Justice! That is a commodity I do not waste my money on." Slamming on the brakes of his car, Racer X demands that Rain get out of his car, but, as Rain exits the vehicle, X hands him a business card and says, "You won't win, but if you're still alive, call this number after the race." As subsequent scenes show Rain in cooperation with Speed and X, he must have heeded the advice.

As *Speed Racer* continues to contrast the evil doings of the corporate players with the wholesome nature of the Racer family and their business and the small time racing circuit, the idea of the "good" small business in capitalism prevails. As the film progresses, there are other people involved in the struggle

as well. Racer X introduces Speed to Inspector Detector (Benno Furmann) who works with CIB, a corporate crimes division, and has evidence of Royalton's race fixing. The Inspector wants Speed to race in the "International" races and work with the other racers to uncover the various double crossings that have reduced the power and significance of independent racers and given more power to Royalton as the sponsor of all sponsors, as an all-powerful conglomerate.

Speed Racer wins the races against the odds and, along with Racer X's guidance and the support of the other drivers, undermines the false legitimacy of Royalton's empire. As the film comes to a close, Speed stands proud and echoes the sentiments of his older brother, back when Speed was younger, before Rex was corrupted, "You don't do it because you're a driver, you do it because you're driven."

The Dark Knight

This incredible tale addresses the evils that arise when white-collar crime runs amok, rather than portraying one singular, ominous mogul, like Royalton, the CEO of *Speed Racer*. Yes, there is a concrete and uniform evil that is battled in *The Dark Knight*, but the Joker (Heath Ledger), while maniacal, is, himself, a response to the rampant selfish interests of corporate elites, corrupt cops, and shady bankers. The film opens with a bank robbery in which the Joker robs a bank known to be full of mob money/dirty money, while subsequent scenes inform us Batman (Christian Bale) has been cleansing the streets of the petty criminals who have been selling drugs and guns to one another.

An early scene tells us that Lieutenant Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman) wants search and seizure warrants on five banks, having uncovered corrupt relations between the banks and a variety of criminals. Soon after, we learn that a Chinese business tycoon, named Lao (Chin Han), wants to do business with Bruce Wayne and Wayne Enterprises. In a key scene, Lao makes a presentation to the Board of Directors for Wayne Enterprises, explaining to the Board that a “Joint Chinese venture with Wayne Enterprises will be a powerhouse.” But Mr. Fox (Morgan Freeman), one of Bruce’s most loyal team members, a man privy to Mr. Wayne’s business holdings and to the actions of his alter-ego, Batman, is skeptical. “This joint venture was your idea and the board loves it,” Fox says, “but I’m not convinced. Lao’s company has grown by 8% annually like clockwork. His revenue stream must be off the books. Maybe illegal.” Wayne doesn’t hesitate, “Okay cancel the deal... I just needed a better look at their books.” In this instance, Bruce Wayne positions himself in contrast to the evil-doers.

Another scene reveals Lao in teleconference with the mob: “We know that police have indeed identified our banks by using marked bills...Rest assured your money is safe.” he tells the mob’s members, as well as us, the film audience, referring to the failure of Lieutenant Gordon’s attempted search and seizure. As Lao reassures the men, the Joker enters from the rear of the room and proposes to end the mob’s problems by killing Batman. He wants half of the money in return.

Meanwhile, Batman meets with District Attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart) and Lt. Gordon. The two officials explain to Batman that they are aware

of Lao's connections to the mob and request that Batman bring Lao to them because the Chinese will not extradite internationally. If Batman brings Lao back, they can get him to reveal the criminals he is working for. Bruce Wayne dons the Batman costume and technology, fetches Lao in China and returns him to Dent and Gordon. Soon after, Lao admits to Rachel (Maggie Gyllenhaal), an attorney working with Dent and Gordon, to having pooled all of the investments of the various mobsters in to one big pot. Essentially, then, this is one big criminal conspiracy. Rachel tells Dent and Gordon that Lao was a "glorified accountant," and soon he and a group of mobsters are all on trial.

In court, we learn that five hundred forty-nine criminals were involved in the debacle, with thousands of accounts of fraud, conspiracy, and racketeering as the crime. To a degree, we could say that Gotham's rampant crime and murder rate is at the hands of petty criminals, but, if we go a step further, we can see that it is actually this corruption at the macro-level that produces a collection of smaller crimes. In fact, this is the point that motivates the Joker's terrorist intervention into the workings of the law and the justice system. Disturbed by crooked dealings and yet inspired by individual thirsts for power and control, he intends to create total chaos. The Joker is a malicious vigilante, and probably a schizophrenic, but he too, in some ways is fighting the same corporate corruption and selfishly exacted power (profits over people) that Batman is fighting. As the Joker tells "All you care about is money. This town deserves a better class of criminal and I'm gonna give it to them." "I am not a schemer. I try and show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are." To whatever

degree these characters and events are inspired by terrorist acts in the U.S. and abroad, audiences of the *The Dark Knight* have likely confronted these images in the media and can identify with these struggles through their experiences on (and since) September 11th, 2001.

All of this discussion of the Joker's motives provides an interesting contrast with Bruce Wayne and his luxurious lifestyle. For example, at one point in the film, we see Bruce arriving in his private jet with sexy, fashionably dressed women dripping from his arms. It is this man and his toys that provide the ability to save the city from its plague of crime. Yet, in a way it is consumerism that is the necessary means to fix society's problems. Here, money buys power, the ability to manipulate the system, but that itself, ironically, is another form of the corporate level corruption that is responsible for the whole mess.

Iron Man

Tony Stark (Robert Downey, Jr.) is a millionaire playboy, an arms dealer and the inheritor of Stark Industries, a company his father built. The first third of the film concerns Tony's capture by Middle Eastern terrorists who want to force him to build the ultimate missile. A subtitle notifies us that we are in the Kunar Province, Afghanistan. When Stark and the military convoy accompanying him come under attack in the military jeep, he has to escape the vehicle before it explodes by exiting the jeep and hiding behind a rock. Immediately Tony goes for his cell phone and the look on his face appears to be a one of horror and confusion, as we are witness to his recognition that this often useful piece of

technology is, in this case, useless. Obviously, no matter how dependent one may be on their cell phones, such technology cannot help one get out of a mess like this. With rocket fire and mortar filling the air, the last thing Tony sees before being knocked unconscious in an explosion is an un-detonated grenade, assumingly the subsequent cause of his unconsciousness, a grenade which bears the insignia of Stark Industries. Ironically, Stark has fallen prey to his own military weaponry, which has landed in the wrong hands.

Another subtitle alerts us that we are now going back to thirty-six hours before this event. Here, we are treated to a Stark retrospective in Las Vegas where we are told that Stark is a true “American patriot.” “At age four he built his first circuit board, at age six his first engine, and at age seventeen he graduated sum cum laude from MIT...ushering in a new era for his father’s legacy” as CEO for Stark Industries. We learn that Stark took over the helm of the company from Obadiah Stain (Jeff Bridges), the senior Stark’s closest ally, a man who still resides on the company’s board of directors. Stark Industries creates “superior weapons, advanced robotics, satellite targeting” and Tony Stark has “changed the face of the weapons industry by ensuring freedom for America and her interests around the globe. All of this information is shown to us just as it is shown to the audience of the celebratory dinner designed to pay respect to Stark and his accomplishments. We see blueprint images of weaponry and Maxim-like pictures of Stark in handsome attire, as they play through the multimedia presentation at the dinner.

As the film returns us to Tony's situation in Afghanistan, his captor wants him to build the Jericho missile and brags that he has captured "the most famous mass murderer in the history of America" while another member of the terrorist group adds, "Whoever holds the latest Stark weapons rules these lands." During his time as prisoner, Tony learns that these terrorists have a lot of his weapons. This assisting of international murderers is Tony Stark's legacy. Tony's captors place him in a cave with Yensin (Shaun Toub), a scientist with a Middle-Eastern accent who informs Tony that he lost his family at the hands of these men. Tony and Yensin, locked away in the cave, are expected to build the Jericho missile together. Instead, they build a weapon-laden iron suit which Tony uses to escape.

Tony returns to America and, being the All-American guy he is, the first thing he wants is a cheeseburger. Soon after his return, Tony and his assistant, Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow), are introduced to Agent Phil Colson (Clark Gregg) of the Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division. Agent Colson needs to "debrief Mr. Stark about the circumstances of his escape" and is here to help manage Tony's reputation, as well as his "spin" on the politics of military operations. Fortunately, Tony comes home with a new outlook on the world and his role in it, and he sees that he had formerly been "comfortable in a system that is comfortable with zero accountability," but this is no longer acceptable to him. "I have more to offer this world than just making things that blow up" and he wants to shut down the weapons manufacturing division of Stark Industries until he can decide the best direction for the company

and its relationship with the government. In this case, Tony is positioned as the symbol who represents a turn from unbridled corporate greed to more responsible capitalism.

Tony is now more interested in humanity than the military, which ultimately, isn't very profitable, and complicates his interactions with Obidiah Stain and the military. Tony tells Obidiah Stain they can do better and that life should not be about a "body count." Unfortunately, what Tony doesn't know is that Obi made a deal with the Afghans to have Tony killed and Tony wasn't supposed to come back.. Stain, obviously, takes the side of Stark industries' board of directors and wants to oust Tony, claiming he has post-traumatic stress. It doesn't take a genius to surmise that Stain is far more interested in profit and power than he is people and lives, and Tony is now a threat to Obi's potential for power and profit. Stark, as Iron Man, goes to Afghanistan and saves the innocents from the terrorists who are using his weapons (perhaps this is supposed to be the Taliban, but this is not clear). Tony, disguised in armored weaponry as his new alter ego, Iron Man has revenge on his kidnappers and destroys a weapons compound. His heroism is undertaken as a civilian, not as a weapons designer, but, of course, in a sense, Tony Stark is a vigilante. Tony explains his newly discovered mission to Pepper, who knows about Iron Man, "There is nothing except this... There is the next mission and nothing else... all these years while I reaped the benefits of destruction ... I shouldn't be alive unless it is for a reason. I'm not crazy Pepper, I just finally know what I have to

do.” Yet again, Tony Stark and his alter ego, Iron Man, represent a force that will give responsible capitalism back to the people.

After a series of battles and adventures, whereby Tony defeats Obidiah Stain, who takes on Tony and Iron Man by equipping himself with similar technology, the media gets pictures of Tony in the armor and label him, “Iron Man.” To protect Tony and the government, Agent Colson provides Tony with an alibi; it could be dangerous if the world discovers that their new hero is really Tony Stark. But, as Tony gets up to address the press at the news conference, after fumbling a bit with the ridiculous lies in the note cards he has been given, he shamelessly reveals, in a very untraditional fashion for superhero films, “Truth is, I am Iron Man.”

Wanted

The supposed heroes of *Wanted* emerge from a centuries old clan of weavers, men and women who originally worked on wood frame looms to create clothing out of raw materials. These living descendants of medieval weavers have now formed a secret society of assassins, self named The Fraternity. For over a thousand years it has been the clan’s duty, to perform secret assassinations to protect the world order from chaos. As the narrative unfolds, the clan are not the heroes they pretend to be and their corrupt organization is not functioning to assassinate society’s villains, but rather The Fraternity is killing to further its own profit.

The character to focus on given the context of this thesis is Wesley Gibson (James McAvoy), an account manager trapped in a dull corporate job, who, very soon into the film is aggressively recruited into The Fraternity because they believe he is one of them. We first meet Wesley at work in his corporate job in a high-rise office and are almost immediately aware that he is an outsider, that he does not belong. Wesley suffers from anxiety, doesn't enjoy inner-office socializing and hates his boss, Janice (Lorna Scott), a large woman who achieves satisfaction in her life by making her employees lives hell. Additionally, we are told in voiceover that Wesley's girlfriend is having an affair with his best friend, Barry (Chris Pratt). The disenchantment with corporations appears early in this film as the narrative juxtaposes the dullness of corporate life with the excitement of the Fraternity and their efforts, which, ironically, turn out to have greed at their core.

This cog-in-a- machine message is further underlined by music in the film. On the soundtrack, we hear non-diegetic music over a montage as Wesley makes his trek to work; the vocals are from Nine Inch Nails and the lyrics provide this commentary, "I believe I can see the future as I repeat the same routine. I think I used to have a purpose, but then again, it might have been a dream. I didn't used to think I had a voice. Now I never make a sound."

Once Wesley arrives at work, Janice looms over Wesley's desk and clicks a stapler in Wesley's ear while she torments him about billing reports that he has not finished successfully. Wesley slumps and is eclipsed in the frame by Janice in one instant and by the full frame close-up of the stapler in another. He is

portrayed as weak and his masculinity is threatened; Janice dominates the frame as she dominates Wesley. In a cut to Wesley at the water cooler, we see his face distorted behind the water in the jug, suggesting that his job has a dehumanizing effect on him, and he explains to the audience in non-diegetic voice-over narration, "I have a standing prescription to relieve anxiety attacks; God, I wish I had something else to relieve my stress." As a sexy beautiful young blonde woman whisks by Wesley in the office, he adds "You know there are people, beautiful people, you just wished they could see you in a different setting or a different place instead of where you are and what you have become." By now, even though it is early in the film, we already know that Wesley is experiencing alienation from his job participation, which is exploiting him. "But most of all, you wish you weren't such a pussy for wishing for things that will never change... You know what the best thing is about the end of the day? Tomorrow it starts all over again." Wesley's isolation becomes more palpable through the voiceover.

In the next scene, Wesley goes to an ATM for cash and when he puts in his bank card, we see what he sees on the screen "Insufficient Funds. You're An Asshole," followed by a screen that says, "YOU'RE BROKE. YOUR BEST FRIEND IS FUCKING YOUR GIRLFRIEND, YOU KNOW IT, AND YOU ARE TOO BIG A PUSSY TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT." Here the alienation that results from his workforce participation extends into his personal life, and not only is he unhappy, but his masculinity and pride are also threatened. But never fear, in the next scene Wesley meets Fox (Angelina Jolie), who exudes confidence and sexual prowess as threatening as the gun she carries. She walks up behind

Wesley at a store checkout counter and tells him she knew his father, and that his father died yesterday. She follows this statement with, "He was one of the greatest assassins that ever lived and his killer is standing behind you." With this we are catapulted into a shootout in the store that travels outside and becomes a spectacular car chase in which Fox and Wesley follow the alleged killer. Fox ends up with her torso on the hood of the car taking aim with the gun in her hands, steering the wheel with her legs and feet through the broken windshield and poor Wesley inside the car squealing in fear, much like audiences have seen many females do in similar circumstances where a male is the one wielding the gun. As the calamity of the action ends, the assassin gets away unhurt and Fox and Wesley speed away. This scene emphasizes action that is a stark change from Wesley's life at the office, thereby reinforcing the themes that his job is alienating and dehumanizing.

All of this chaos is followed by a scene in which Wesley is taken by Fox to the textile factory and introduced to the rest of The Fraternity and told that he is a descendant of this secret order and that he must join forces with them to fight evil in the world. Apparently, Wesley has special skills that he can harness, such as the ability to sharp shoot to the degree that he can hit the wings of flies and the ability to "curve" (bend the trajectory of) the bullets that he fires out of a gun so that these bullets travel around objects and people to reach the desired target. Sloan (Morgan Freeman), the leader of The Fraternity tells Wesley, "Insanity is wasting your life as a nothing when you have the blood of a killer flowing through your veins. Insanity is being shit on, beat down, coasting through life with a

miserable existence when you have a caged lion locked inside and the key to release it.” Sloan hands Wesley a gun and tells him that the gun was his father’s. According to Sloan, with this gun Wesley’s father could “conduct a symphony orchestra.” The Fraternity wants Wesley to kill his father’s assassin and join them; in return they will provide him with his father’s substantial wealth and assets, which they control. Rather than mere fame or character mobility, Wesley is goaded into the venture by the allure of material wealth.

With his newfound abilities, group membership, and wealth, Wesley takes control of his life. In the next and final scene of Wesley in the office, Janice is again hounding Wesley and clicking her stapler in his ear, but this time he leaps from his seat and yells at Janet in front of everyone “Shut the fuck up!” Taking a step back he proclaims to all, “She is but one iota of tenuous power; she thinks she can push everyone around.” He takes the stapler from her and throws it against the cubicle wall and explains to Janice that if “you weren’t such a bitch, we would all feel sorry for you. I do feel sorry for you, but as it stands, the way you behave, I feel I can speak for the entire office when I tell you to go fuck yourself.” As Wesley storms away from Janice, Barry approaches him and attempts to give him a high-five, only for Wesley to snatch a keyboard from a nearby desk and crash it across Barry’s face, hurling (via special effects) blood, teeth, and broken off keyboard letters in the formation of “Fuck Yo” toward the audience.

Wesley’s new life and his adventures with The Fraternity provide an escape from the mundane and anxiety ridden existence of a corporate nobody.

His new experiences are acts of resistance against corporate control of everyday life. The audience can relish in Wesley's experiences, riding high on the fantasy of bucking the system at the micro level in their own everyday lives.

Unfortunately, as the film continues, we learn that The Fraternity itself is a nefarious, greed-driven group and Wesley has been tricked. The supposed assassin he is chasing is actually his father and the group has been exploiting their abilities for personal gain, having disobeyed the code (which appears to them as a pattern imbedded in the weave) after two of the group's very own names appeared in the foretelling weave. Could the film be referencing historic conflicts between weaving guilds and commerce? Is the message of the film's resolution that all members of powerful groups are selfish and prone to the misuse of power? Perhaps this is open to interpretation, but the film concludes on a powerful note. The last shot of the film gives us Wesley looking at the camera and talking directly to the audience. He makes a convincing statement and then challenges us with a rhetorical question, "This is me taking back control of my life. What the fuck have you done lately?" At the very least, *Wanted* promotes the necessity of the individual to assert himself above the corporate capitalist machine.

CHAPTER 3: POSTHUMAN MASCULINITY

What is more interesting (though, arguably, for some more insidious) about these films is a concept they more obliquely confront, the promotion of a posthuman masculinity. Elaine L. Graham studies popular culture representations of the digital and technological in films and literature in conjunction with what it means to be human, noting that there has always been a relationship between representations of technology and social change (2002:1). Graham applies Foucault, Haraway, and Hall, among others, to analysis of the representations of aliens, cyborgs and monsters, in popular culture texts, arguing that these representations function “to demonstrate both the fragility of our own assumptions and the promise of alternatives” (55). Citing that “cyborg” is a term that was first used in a 1960 publication by aeronautics experts, Graham contends that “cyborg technologies are diverse” and have the power to “restore” functions, as well as to “reconfigure existing faculties”; for Graham “Machines are essentially extensions of our embodied agency” (2002: 201-204). Here I define the posthuman as the relationship between technology and any concept of what it means to be human, in order to situate the concept of the posthuman (and the synonymous term cyborg) as a gateway to the formation of less stable and more fluid identities. In this chapter, I explore the connection that exists between the concept of the posthuman and the portrayal of masculinity in *Iron Man*, *Speed Racer*, *The Dark Knight*, and *Wanted*.

Kirkham and Thumin (1993) outline four realms of significance within cinematic depictions of masculinity: the body, action, external world, and internal world. For Kirkham and Thumin, the male body is most often represented in terms of a chiseled and slickly oiled physique; it is the symbol of power. The second realm, action, implies masculine skill and prowess as much male on-screen activity consists of sexual seduction and/or violence. The realms of the external world and the internal world refer to a disjunction between socio-cultural norms that ascribe expectations of what a man should be (the external) and the man's own experience (the internal) trying to live up to those expectations. The male heroes of these films are in many ways consistent with Kirkham and Thumin's conception of these realms, but it is the representation of the body, as posthuman, in these films that is most fascinating. If we accept that the depiction of the male body in cinema is a symbol of masculinity, then what might be the interpretation of these films' portrayals when these heroes need technological gadgets and/or prosthetics to amplify and augment their masculine physique?

Iron Man, Speed Racer, The Dark Knight, and Wanted suggest that technology and/or prosthetics give one an edge in the performance and experience of masculinity. As Chris Hables Gray argues, this posthuman "cyborging" supplants natural evolution via "artificial evolution" (2001:11). For Gray, "posthumanism is both a social construction of what it means to be human in the present as well as the technological construction of a new type of techno bio body in the near future" (15). Gray views this as more liberating than limiting and offers, "The cyborg opens a place in politics for disempowering master

narratives,” later adding that “Cyborging ourselves is costuming ourselves... (it is a) technocarnival with permanent consequences” (192-3). In the end, such representations open up a host of more questions: Should we celebrate the potential possibilities for more fluid experiences of gender and masculinity? Might we be happy about the posthuman advantage of moving beyond physical shortcomings? Certainly, it seems that the transgression and/or transformation of boundaries offers more leverage and perhaps greater power. But, perhaps celebration must give way to skepticism as Gray indicates, “Whatever the motivations, whether profit or power or the maximization of the glories of human potential, this process is fundamentally political” (11). Given this, should we also fear what an opposing, contrasting dedication to natural purity might bring?

Speed Racer

Since at least the early nineteen fifties in American society, men’s identities have often been reflected in their vehicles. Identification with motorcycles and muscle cars is a key component of masculinity in modern mythology. Now, early in the new millennium, this may be taken a step further and assert that contemporary mythology evaluates men on the basis of a variety of technologies.

In the opening shot of *Speed Racer*, we are shown young Speed with his backside to the camera, a strong-muscled back in a tight white racing shirt. An early close-up in the film shows us Speed’s shoes. His shoes have penciled illustrations of his car on them. He is preparing for a race, but his mind is locked

in nostalgic reminiscence. Thinking back to his childhood, in a flashback, we see a young Speed at school, ignoring his teacher and drawing cars, “All he is capable of thinking about is automobile racing,” the teacher tells Speed’s mother. Speed is continuously reprimanded for making engine noises with his mouth and imagining himself on the racetrack. When Speed’s brother, Rex, picks him up from school in his racecar, the entire centers on the race track and Speed’s desire to go to the race track in Rex’s car.

Everything in this film is relative to cars, as the cars signify not simply just an extension of masculinity and commerce, but also defines their bodies. Racers’ socks, gloves, and helmet are frequently mentioned, but only in relationship to their existence as a means of extending/connecting the racer and the car; these are devices to assist in proper navigation of the machine. A conversation ensues during this early flashback in which Rex allows Speed to go to the track and drive the car while sitting in Rex’s lap, but only because he has worn the right attire—attire that connects man to machine. “The car is a living breathing thing and you can feel her talking to you... all you need to do is listen,” Rex says to Speed, using the feminine pronoun to establish a sexual connection. When a young Speed takes a ride along with his brother Rex, also a racer, his brother lets him try his own hand at the wheel. Instructing his kid brother on the ways of the car, Rex tells Speed to “stop steering and start driving.” Later in the same scene, when approaching a jump point in the tracks, Rex tells Speed to close his eyes and listen for the right moment to “punch it” for the jump. Everything connecting car to driver is intuitive and visceral.

When the film returns us to the present day Speed at the racetracks, the tracks are wide and serpentine, and they snake in and out with violent hills and curves. The cars on these tracks are rendered as small moving objects and they appear like little cogs in a larger machine, reducing the humans inside the cars as even tinier pieces of a machine. Very soon into *Speed Racer*, we learn to identify characters by their cars, recognizing people by the colors and shape of the steel more than recognizing them by their more human characteristics. Through montage, dissolves, and parallel editing, we are often shown cars giving way to race statistics and other forms of fast changing numbers and mechanical illustrations. Men are consistently shown working in their garages on their vehicles in their spare time. Just thirty-three minutes into the movie, megalomaniacal adversaries known as “the cartel” in an office within a semi truck attempt to kill one of Speed Racer’s cohorts, known as Racer X, by firing on his car with missiles and machine guns. The gang’s leader, firing from inside the truck, controls the missiles via a console with controllers that very much resemble a video game. When we are shown the console’s screen, Racer X appears as a moving target on the game-like display.

Later into the film, we see Royalton, owner of Royalton Industries, in conversation with a car manufacturer from the cartel; the two are talking about “supercharged transponders” and the latest in car technology and contemplating what all could be gained if a single company were to have a monopoly on such technology. The camera pans left to right, back and forth, with the men’s profiles hanging out on the opposite peripheral ends of the frame. In the center of the

frame, our attention focuses on robot arms building cars and the sparks that are made when metal and circuitry collide. In another key scene, we watch as a female technician in a white lab coat explains to Speed Racer the “secret weapons” that have been installed in his car, the Mach 5. The camera pans to the left of the female and the audience enters a visual space in which Speed travels through blueprints of the extras that have been installed on the car before Speed’s international race.

The competitive races are a whirlwind of images. Though, surprisingly, it is not difficult to follow the action, it is necessary to recognize characters by their cars as their faces are often not visible. As cars sling by and drivers dispense with their weaponry, we are constantly reminded that this is not a race against men, but a race amongst men inseparable from their machines, signifying the posthuman connection between man and machine.

Furthermore, as was mentioned in Chapter Two, we later discover that Speed’s brother, Rex, could no longer effectively compete against “the machine” and so fakes his own death with a car accident. The final reel of the film reveals that the mysterious Racer X is indeed, unbeknownst to the family, Speed’s older brother, Rex. After faking his death, Rex has cosmetic surgery to alter his appearance and to recreate himself as a new and better racer, Racer X, a new and better man. In the end, Speed becomes a man because he wins the Grand Prix and defeats Royalton. In contrast, his brother also emerges as a masculine hero, but Rex/Racer X had to rely on cosmetic technology, a posthuman ability,

to regain himself, guide his little brother, and obtain a position of power and acceptance.

The Dark Knight

As the camera caresses a shirtless Bruce Wayne, it provides us a good look at actor Christian Bale's muscled body, but, even with his impressive stature, we see that Bale, or Bruce Wayne, is clearly smaller than the Batman he becomes once suited into the hulking Batsuit. In this scene, Bruce exchanges conversation with his butler, Alfred, who sees that Bruce has been wounded in battle and is tending to his wounds. "Know your limits," Alfred tells him, to which Bruce replies, "Batman has no limits." Quickly, Alfred retorts "But you do, sir," but Bruce/Batman has priorities, and quips back, "Well I can't afford to know them."

Soon after that Bruce tells Mr. Fox that he needs a better suit, one that puts function above fashion. He needs more agility; the suit is too heavy, for starters, and he needs better mobility to turn his head. Fox begins works, but once Bruce recognizes what he will have to do in China to apprehend Lao, he puts a request into Mr. Fox for a suit with oxygen and stabilizers so that he can make the necessary high-altitude jump from an airplane to fetch Mr. Lao. As this daring and exciting scene later unfolds, we see Batman in the new suit, grabbing Lao, and returning to the plane with a sky hook without the plane even landing. We are repeatedly reminded, Bruce/Batman needs the technology; without the technology, he is useless, even in danger of dying. If we just stop for a minute to

ponder Batman's toys—his suit, the stabilizing high-altitude additions to the suit, his motorcycle, the car, the plane, the sonar—all these forms of technology are necessary for Bruce to become the hero, the symbol of masculinity known as the Batman.

The more we explore the film, the more support we have for the reliance on technology as a necessary means (and as a possible catalyst) to posthuman masculinity. The mise-en-scene almost always gives us Batman in the upper portion of the frame, swooping, leaning, looming, and this, combined with the dark and angular features of the Batsuit, along with its padding and armor, create a sense of aggression, a sense of dominance and control traditionally associated with masculinity. *The Dark Knight* emphasizes a connection between man and technology, with the technology serving as a posthuman extension of the man and his claim to a masculine self. This cyborging of sorts is visually revealed in one key scene in which Batman hits the streets to battle the Joker in one of his terrorist attacks. He is in the Batmobile, and when he drives the vehicle, he leans into his steering controls and it appears that his body movements affect the direction of the car. Once the car is hit by a missile launcher and immobilized, we see the Batman inside the vehicle performing a group of scans on the damaged shell as if it were his own body. One of the computer screens tells us, "eject sequence initiated," and we see Batman lean into the console. The camera returns to the outside of the car, where the right front wheel begins to spin. Cutting back to the inside of the car, suddenly, Batman leans forward and pulls on two handles. We cut back to the outside of the car, with the profile of the

vehicle of the car in medium frame, where sheaths of metal retract, and suddenly Batman is expelled from the metal on a small two-wheeled motorcycle-like vehicle. As the scene continues, the lighting and cinematography do not allow us to separate between Batman and the vehicle, in which he can actually crouch and slink into various heights by leaning a certain way. Batman's body, assumingly, acts as a body-controlled hydraulic to the motorcycle. The vehicle consistently looks as if it is hardly composed of much more than Batman himself connecting the front wheel to the back. This, of course, couldn't be the case, but the illusion is created.

Batman later commits an ultimately unethical deed of white collar crime, invading the privacy of all of Gotham by using a computer that taps into citizens' cell phones to track the Joker and his goons. This device allows Batman and Mr. Fox to spy on 30 million people, listening to their conversations, but using their signals to create a grid of locations, whereby they can triangulate the Joker's location. This is, perhaps, the film's strongest example of the visual representation of posthuman masculinity. The eye slits of Batman's cowl glow and flicker like a strobe. In a montage of images, the tracking device is given a palpable connection to Batman. We go back and forth between Batman's ominous stance, eyes flickering, and the image that he sees within the cowl, an image that maps out the physical space of the people of Gotham, a mise-en-scene placing the outline of people into a blueprint of Gotham. Visual pulses emerge from the grid and are choreographed with the strobing flicker behind the

eye slits. He has become part of the machine, or it has become an extension of him.

Iron Man

When Stark picks up a girl after a night on the town, we are shown a medium shot of the girl waking up in Tony's bed alone. A voice begins, "Morning, it is 7 a.m. The weather in Malibu is ... the tide is..." Each of a series of paneled windows becomes unshaded, and the windows themselves display small graphs indicating weather and tide conditions. The camera reverses to the outside of the glass to reveal the girl looking out the windows at the ocean, mouth open in disbelief. The camera quickly retreats to an aerial long shot, portraying her as overwhelmed by the physical space, and to show us the Stark mansion and lab, a stunning piece of architecture sitting on a mountain cliff. The architecture is sleek and angular, visually masculine, and could be the envy/dream image of any playboy wannabe.

We later learn that the voice we heard was the voice of a computer, Jarvis, who runs the house. The Stark mansion is equipped with a laboratory and a variety of technologies. We see Tony in the lab working on the cylindrical engine of a car, he is playing rock music, and he looks at computer imagery of the parts and metal. When he speaks to the computer, it speaks back to him. Jarvis, then, is an intelligent machine, one that somewhat imitates human behavior and this furthers the film's connection between man and machine.

After his capture, when Tony first wakes in Afghanistan, he has a tube running through his nose, down into his lungs, and he removes it. This foreshadows the connection between man and external technology. Tugging on the tubes running to his chest, he hears, "I wouldn't do that if I were you," as Yensin introduces himself to Tony in the cave. When Stark is working, either in the cave at the beginning or later in the film at home in his laboratory, he is often shown in a tight tank top, muscled arms exposed. Stark becomes the ultimate example of posthuman masculinity because, since nearly fatally injured in his capture, the terrorists hired Yensin to keep him alive. When Stark awakes in the terrorists' grasp, he has been equipped with an electromagnet that prevents shrapnel from entering his heart and killing him. This device, located at the center of his muscular upper body, fuses the man, the hero, with machine.

Tony Stark must be innovative in order to free himself from capture. To escape from his terrorist captors, instead of building the missiles they insisted upon, Stark builds body armor, equipped with flame-throwers and hydraulic enhancements for strength. After escaping, Stark in his home laboratory, later modifies his suit and appendages to become a hero fighting the weapons corruption between militaries and corporations. Not only does the technology allow Stark to survive, but it also allows him to succeed over the humans; it gives him an edge.

In one scene, Stark's female assistant, Pepper Potts, must assist Stark with an upgrade to his body technology. She is instructed by Stark to reach into the metal chamber that holds his electromagnetic enhancement and pull out

some wire to replace it with new materials. In medium frame, her hand is literally inside his chest, feeling for the old technology to pull it out and replace it with the new. Stark is leaned back in a chair, Pepper stands above him, and a computer monitor displaying the technology inside his chest is positioned between the two characters, dominating the screen. A robot arm extends from left to right above the two figures. Light, from a source not visible in the shot, shines on the center of his chest, shining on the technology that keeps him alive, on the source of his potency, on the source of his essence and strength.

Working with computers in the lab and talking to Jarvis, we learn that Stark wants the new weapons and robotic projects he is working on to be saved in his private files and not in Stark Industries' main frame. Multiple other shots in this film give us Stark trying out his armored suit and its capabilities in the full of the frame. One significant shot reveals in a medium close-up, a focus on both the hydraulic apparatuses that provide him with superhuman strength and the glowing electromagnet in his chest that keeps him alive, thereby making man and machine inseparable. He encloses his arms with metal and wires, while placing strapping armor over his legs. Robot arms assist him with his suiting up, and Jarvis assists Stark's navigation and operation of the wires and computer programming.

In additional scenes in the lab, when Stark is building, the camera will often enter from the right and move left; robot arms and other metal or computer equipment surround, dwarf, and sometimes hide Stark, the human figure, as he works on his inventions. Mechanical robot arms have the ability to assist Stark in

a variety of situations involving precise movement. Still, as the camera moves around Tony and the equipment in the lab, it will usually become still and fixed, revealing mise-en-scene in which Tony is in a medium shot at the center of the frame and is surrounded by, and ostensibly connected to, the wires and technology.

In one scene before one of his missions, in which we watch Tony trying out the thrust capacity of the suit's built-in rockets, as well as the levitation capacity of the suit, we watch through the computer camera, becoming implicated in part of the equipment ourselves.

Wanted

In the case of Wesley in *Wanted*, there is definitely an emphasis on masculinity and brawn, but only a hint of the posthuman. Wesley doesn't manipulate technology, so to speak, at least not in terms of gadgets and armor, but when he is hurt in action, which is quite often, he has to seek the services of a Russian member of the The Fraternity, a man who provides a chemical bath, a technological solution, that heals all wounds and infections inflicted on the group in a matter of hours. Wesley is beaten to a pulp at regular intervals and nearly killed a couple of times, but it is the power of the Russian's healing bath that allows him to keep his life, his brawn, and then, ultimately, his newly achieved masculinity, augmented by yet another "win" or increase in skill, too. Technology gives him an edge over his enemies and allows him to win the battle.

In some ways it might be said that The Fraternity itself serves as the technology that Wesley depends on to achieve and/or reclaim his masculinity. Before they discover him, he was a wimp, and now he has become a man with independence and prowess. Many times we are shown his toned, muscular body, a few times prancing shirtless and other times sporting tight clothing. These are clothes that the old Wesley would never have worn, clothes which provide a stark contrast to the loose oxford shirt he wore in the film's opening sequence. He even gets to flaunt his new masculine sense of self in front of his old girlfriend. When he returns to their apartment to pick up a gun he had left behind, the girlfriend berates him about what a weakling and a "nothing" he is, only to see Fox strut into the apartment, grab Wesley by the neck, and start to make out with him. Obviously, this is all for show, as a performance of Wesley's virility for an annoying, cheating girlfriend. It could probably go without mention, but any moviegoer who knows anything about contemporary stars or the machinations of the classical paradigm in cinema, knows that making out with Fox, because she is played by the personality star known as Angelina Jolie, is a prize and an achievement with which there are few comparisons. Barry, who is apparently now shacking up with Wesley's ex-girlfriend, confirms all this as he utters, "He's the man!" This confirms Wesley's transformation into a masculine specimen, as he is now the envy of others.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

“Movies make magic. They change things...Movies remain the perfect vehicle for the introduction of certain ritual rites of passage”

--Bell Hooks

Superhero Cinema and Cultural Power

I have not attempted to explain what filmmakers intend in their “encoding,” but rather have tried to provide scholarly interpretation of what I have personally “decoded” in these films. Nor have I endeavored to indulge in a psychoanalytic analysis of representations of the phallus and the symbolic nature of such as a signifier of power. In explaining my interpretations, I have attempted to indicate the potential implications of what I see, suggesting that the signs and meanings in my analysis are not entirely hermeneutical, but rather may influence the worldview of many who see them. What may seem as small details at the periphery of these films actually serve to activate thought and may influence individual and cultural practices. Objects represented in films become commodities which attach to feelings and self-concepts. As we watch films, these relationships call out to us and appellate us; they constitute us as subjects and give us ourselves. As Hall (1973) reminds us, artists encode one set of meanings and audiences decode a set of meanings that may be similar or somewhat different, based on their own interpretive frameworks. Consumption of these

specific superhero film texts influences formation of ideas about the ordinary existence of corporations and the legitimacy of consumer practices (or, conversely, might provide a platform for an oppositional reading that rejects the connections that the movie attempts to make for us). Likewise, consumption of these specific superhero texts influences formation of ideas about what it means to be masculine. Even considering one's individual agency, it is hard to dismiss the notion that some level of appellation is at work when we consume these texts. Given the relationship between consumers and texts, between texts and culture, interpretation of these texts must be situated relative to their social implications, as well as relative to social action.

It is the cultural theory of Antonio Gramsci that provides the best exploration of the relationship between these texts and social power. According to Gramsci, those in power achieve their hegemony, their level of leadership and social power, that works its way into society's institutions and neutralizes dissent, by situating their ideology and practices as natural and expected. In Gramsci's conception of the relationship between cultural ideology and social power, "Hegemonic beliefs are dominant cultural motifs which reinforce inequality and which short-circuit attempts at critical thinking" (Smith and Riley 2009:36). The battle against corporate control in these films is counter-hegemonic because these battles portray "the system," here corporations, as impersonal while mobilizing the idea that resistance to "the system," and the subsequent restoration of honor, safety, and freedom is found in the reification of the self.

Pierre Bourdieu provides a useful exploration of the relationship between these texts and social action. Consumption implies action, a social process involving the creation and use of materials and resources. Culture, then, becomes a resource, as we create and use meaning. One need not reach far to infer that seeing the depiction of a posthuman achievement of masculinity in these movies promotes the idea of accomplishing identity work through the consumption of technology. Bourdieu championed a reflexive sociology that focused on the concept of “habitus,” the idea that an individual’s worldview, level of competence, and overall cultural capital rests within that individual’s class status. Bourdieu believed that habitus reproduces social inequities and power relations, allowing us to “react efficiently in all aspects of our life”; as Smith and Riley (2009:131) habitus “emerges from these inequalities and produces lines of practical action which are always tending to reproduce the objective structures of which they are the product.” Considering structure and practice, Bourdieu treats the body as something that “literally comes through experience and social structure,” as one’s habitus structures one’s body. For example, “The working classes tend toward an instrumental relation to the body, where the body is a tool to be used to attain some external end, and the middle classes view their bodies as ends in themselves to be cultivated for aesthetic and social reasons” (Smith and Riley 2009:265). Going back to the films analyzed in this paper, we are seeing a blurring of lines between worker, consumer, object (as commodity), and spectator—a blurring that conveniently situates films as both second tier mirrors in which to see ourselves and as market displays. My interpretation rests on the

belief that audiences may watch these films and then desire specific technology because of the allure of the promise of masculinity. After all, this is not dissimilar to the fetishizing of cinematic depictions of glamour that many feminists have been criticizing for many years. In these superhero films, heroism is defined in terms of the masculine. The experience/success of these posthuman heroes is attached to a masculine potency that is achieved by the possession, use, and manipulation of technology. The heroes' various material apparatuses exist as an extension to their physical bodies. More specifically, what we have is the attachment of masculinity to consumer items, particularly to technology. In order to meet the masculine heroic ideal and rise up as an individual against the disproportionate concentration of corporate power, we have to have expensive toys to make us potent men. Beyond being fantastical (and maybe whimsical), this is not really far fetched. There also exist deep and complex human and cultural relationships of individuals to computers, cell phones, hearing aids, etc. Some critics, such as Chris Hables Gray (2001) and Elaine Graham (2002), as well as other cyborg scholars, already argue that these things alone qualify as a cyborging of human beings, even without any invasive penetration.

Taking Gramsci and Bourdieu together, we might arrive at the notion that cinematic representations constitute us as subjects bearing the imprint of social class, subjects who develop a blueprint for the acquisition of social habits. Films are containers of socio-cultural tensions; they allow us to make sense of how Americans make sense of the world while reinforcing traditional notions of the status quo and conventional wisdoms about social power and individual mobility.

Cinematic stories deserve recognition as cultural myths because their stories contain truths that are perpetuated as self-evident. Moreover, film viewing constitutes as social action because it is ritual play, a repetitive practice intended as pleasurable that facilitates experience with the non-film world. Of course, at least when considering the four specific analyzed within this paper, the unintended irony is that consumption is the solution to both the dominance of a faceless corporate bureaucracy and a crisis in masculinity, be it consumption of technology to achieve efficacy or the consumption of cinematic texts on which audiences project their own problems and try to work out these tensions.

Suggestions for Future Research

A phenomenological analysis like this is productive and necessary, but may not be sufficient alone. The dynamics of intertextuality and the spirit of empiricism, when taken together, might inspire cultural theorists and researchers to take projects like these a step further. If we are to properly connect these films to the social psychology of American film viewers, much mileage may be gained from the addition of audience-response research to a project such as this one. Investigation and observation of film culture might richly complement phenomenological film analysis. Additionally, comparison of these films to their historical context, comparison to the politics and market trends at the time of their production and release (particularly given the headlines about Wall Street in late 2008 and early 2009, which may make vilification of corporate greed an even more celebrated theme among audiences) may offer another dimension to the

observations that are explored in this paper. Studies of affect and/or audience identification are nearly absent from cultural studies approaches. Similarly, many studies into the opinions and practices of filmgoers, whether they study the average filmgoer or the minions of fandom, do not typically employ phenomenological analysis of the films that motivate their research. When studies of particular films are combined with studies of their respective film cultures, then perhaps cultural studies will have achieved the magnitude of a respectable, sophisticated line of study that truly serves to crumble expectations and transgress disciplinary borders.

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