

*The United States of Superman: An  
Analysis of Superman and Relevance*

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## Abstract

### *The United States of Superman: An Analysis of Superman and Relevance*

This thesis traces the seventy-five year development of the cultural icon Superman across media, from his initial appearance in *Action Comics* in 1938 through to the 2013 film *Man of Steel*.<sup>1</sup> It unpicks received critical understandings of Superman by comparing secondary interpretations of his history and evolution to primary evidence provided by Superman stories themselves. In so doing, it identifies how Superman's meaning has evolved across the seven decades of his existence and reveals the role played by popular perceptions and critical interpretations in shaping his significance.

In particular, I critique the concept of social and political Relevance which has, in the past four decades, established itself as a prominent model according to which popular narratives, including those featuring Superman, are evaluated. Comparing the claims made by scholars and historians to my own readings, I argue that the Relevance discourse has led critics and commentators to erroneously claim that Superman and the stories featuring him either serve as expressions of America's cultural development or are irrelevant fantasies that bear little relation to Real Life concerns. I evaluate these perceptions in detail through my four main chapters.

Chapter One analyses the assertion that Superman began as an exponent of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, and suggests that this reading has little basis in evidence from the early comics themselves. Consequently, I argue that the New Deal interpretation is likely a retrospective account that only partially engages with Superman's contemporaneous significances. Chapter Two interrogates the perception that, between his initial appearance and the

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<sup>1</sup> *Man of Steel*, directed by Zack Snyder (2013; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2013), DVD.



end of the 1950s, Superman developed into a socially and politically conservative figure, and analyses this interpretation in relation to the concept of ideology. I propose that, while there is some evidence of conservative ideological intent in the character's stories, this accounts for only a small aspect of his broader meaning and appeal.

Chapter Three investigates the commonly presumed contrast between comic book stories from Superman's supposedly fanciful "Silver Age" period of the 1950s and 1960s, and the more relevant narratives of the 1970s and 1980s. Here, I argue that texts from these supposedly distinct periods have more in common than historians and commentators acknowledge, leading me to propose that academic understandings of Relevance should be reworked to accommodate a range of different narrative types. In Chapter Four, I propose that current perceptions of Superman's significance commonly centre upon his status as an idealistic figure who transcends the contingencies, compromises, and imperfections that characterise Real life. I suggest that this perception stems from Richard Donner's attempt to mythologise the character in his 1978 film *Superman: The Movie*, and the re-emphasis that Donner's interpretation has received in subsequent iterations of the character.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, in my Conclusion, I discuss *Man of Steel*, a film that seeks to change audience perceptions of Superman and which has provoked controversy by challenging the idealistic representation of the character popularised by *Superman: The Movie*. Through this analysis, I consider the implications of this controversy for Superman's future, in particular for perceptions of his Relevance, as well as what the debate surrounding the film and Superman more generally reveals to us about the concept of Relevance itself.

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<sup>2</sup> *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner (1978; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

## Literature Review and Methodology

### **Introduction: Why Study Superman?**

In his seventy-sixth year, Superman remains a ubiquitous popular icon. Not only are his stories still being told in *Action Comics* and *Superman*, monthly comic book titles that have been his home since the late 1930s, but, as part of the DC Comics reboot, the New 52, his comic presence has expanded into new titles. In addition to *Action Comics* and *Superman*, he currently appears regularly alongside Batman in *Batman/Superman* and *Superman/Wonder Woman* respectively, as well as other heroes from DC's pantheon in *Justice League*.

More significantly, in 2013, the seventy-fifth anniversary of his first appearance in *Action Comics*, Superman reappeared on the big screen in *Man of Steel*, a film that, despite a mixed critical reception, earned \$668,045,518 and established a new shared cinematic universe for DC's superheroes.<sup>3</sup> He will continue to play a key role in the development of DC's cinematic universe in 2016's *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* and is therefore likely to remain a prominent popular entertainment icon for the foreseeable future.

Superman's continued presence and appeal across successive decades is the most obvious reason why he is worthy of academic investigation. However, there are three other reasons why it is important to analyse the character. Firstly, he is seen by many as a figure who is representative of the American national character, an attribute that might impart him with significance greater than his status as a simple entertainment product and a lucrative

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<sup>3</sup> "Man of Steel," *Rotten Tomatoes*, accessed August 1, 2014, [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/superman\\_man\\_of\\_steel/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/superman_man_of_steel/); "Man of Steel," *Box Office Mojo*, last updated September 5, 2014, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=superman2012.htm>.

trademark.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, if Superman can truly be deemed to represent something more than entertainment, then it is possible that his stories may communicate certain messages and values. This leads me to my third reason for investigating Superman which is that, despite his enduring popularity and his apparent status as a representative of significant American values, he has received comparatively less scholarly attention than the similarly ubiquitous Batman, who has been the subject of two monographs by film and cultural studies Professor Will Brooker as well as several editions of collected essays.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, whilst important and insightful academic investigations into Superman have been conducted in recent years, and are named and discussed in the passages below, there remains no thesis-length scholarly investigation of his history from his inception to the present by a single author and it is this absence that my project addresses. More importantly, as the following sections make clear, the studies of Superman that do exist, be they popular or academic analyses, tend to repeat widely held but problematic assumptions about the character and his development. My thesis challenges these preconceptions in order to provide a more thorough account of Superman and his meaning.

This literature review and methodology clarifies the precise gap in knowledge that my thesis fills and outlines the hypotheses that inform my approach to the subject, the questions I have sought to answer, and the previous interventions in the field by other authors upon and against whose arguments I have modelled my research.

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<sup>4</sup> Larry Tye, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012), xiii; Tom Dehaven, *Our Hero: Superman on Earth* (London: Yale University Press, 2010), 5; Joseph J. Darowski, preface to *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 1-4: 2; Gary Engle, "What Makes Superman so Darned American?," in *Superman at Fifty! The Persistence of a Legend*, ed. Dennis Dooley and Gary Engle (Cleveland, OH: Octavia, 1988), 80; Lincoln Geraghty, introduction to *The Smallville Chronicles: Critical Essays On the Television Series*, ed. Lincoln Geraghty (Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2011), vii-xxx: viii.

<sup>5</sup> Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (London: Continuum, 2000); Will Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012); Roberta Pearson and William Urrichio, eds., *The Many Lives of the Batman* (London: BFI Publishing, 1991); Liam Burke, ed., *Batman: Fan Phenomena* (Glasgow, Bell & Bain, 2013).

Before I move on to discuss previous analyses of Superman and their limitations, it is important for me to be upfront about the scope of my own research. My focus is Superman, and, for the most part, I do not analyse other characters from the Superman Family, such as Superboy, Supergirl, and Lois Lane. One reason for this is to maintain a clear focus and to manage my time and the structure of my project effectively. More importantly, Lois Lane, Supergirl and, in many cases, Superboy are separate characters who have their own comic book titles and are themselves worthy of dedicated scholarly investigation. Another reason is that, whilst, as far as the comics are concerned, these characters and their own narratives often affect Superman's own continuity, I believe that the core titles of the Superman canon, *Action Comics* and *Superman*, tend to be representative of the direction taken by Superman's comic book universe. A possible exception to my focus upon narratives featuring Superman himself is my discussion, in Chapter Four, of the television series *Smallville*, which can be considered a Superboy text. However, my attention to *Smallville* is justified by the fact that it is an original contribution to the Superman mythos, whose innovations are not represented elsewhere and which has significantly influenced Superman narratives in other media.

Here, it is also important to make clear that, given the necessary restrictions on the scope of my project, whilst my research is substantial and my account of Superman's history is representative, I cannot claim to have produced a definitive history of the character, nor has that been my intent. As we have seen, Superman remains popular and is still involved in new narratives; any attempt to write a definitive history of the character whilst he continues to evolve must necessarily be reductive. My own conclusions about Superman are therefore one intervention in an ongoing discourse that is set to further evolve as the character himself continues to change; they are not an attempt to lay claim to a definitive interpretation of his meaning.

## Literature Review

Since the 1990s, and gathering speed throughout the 2000s, there has been a growth in superhero scholarship from both popular and academic sources, which may be a consequence of the increasing prominence of superheroes in successful big budget blockbusters. However, interest in Superman has also gathered momentum during the long running court case throughout which DC Comics' and Warner Bros.' ownership of the character has been contested, with at least two significant histories of Superman published as it ran: Larry Tye's popular analysis, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero*, and academic Brad Ricca's biography of Siegel and Shuster, *Super Boys: The Amazing Adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster—the Creators of Superman*.<sup>6</sup>

Although academic texts are normally treated as distinct from popular or journalistic writing, it would be a mistake for a researcher of superhero stories to place too great an emphasis on texts developed from within the academic arena at the expense of insightful accounts written in a less formal style by authors producing their work from outside of it. Indeed, although we often expect academic texts to display greater analytical rigour than popular analyses, the field of superhero scholarship is not yet fully developed and, as I demonstrate through this literature review, many academic investigations into superheroes share assumptions with their more popular or journalistic

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<sup>666</sup> Brad Ricca, *Super Boys: The Amazing Adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster — the Creators of Superman* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2013). In 1999 it was ruled that material published in *Action Comics* #1 was not produced as work for hire for DC Comics. This gave the Siegel family joint rights to the character with DC Comics. The two parties tried to reach an agreement over control of the character but talks broke down in 2001 and further legal disputes followed. In 2009 the Siegel family were awarded further rights to material from *Action Comics* #4, *Superman* #1 and early newspaper strips. The dispute was finally resolved in 2013 with DC Comics being awarded full rights to the character. Dan Best, ed., *The Trials of Superman*, vol. 1 (Blaq Books, 2012), 7; Dominic Patten, "Warner Bros. Wins Last Piece Of 'Superman' Copyright Case," *Deadline*, November 21, 2013, <http://deadline.com/2013/11/warner-bros-wins-last-piece-of-superman-copyright-case-641029/>; Jeff Trexler, "Siegel Superman Case Ends (Almost)," *Comicsbeat*, March 22, 2013, <http://www.comicsbeat.com/siegel-superman-case-ends-almost/>.

counterparts, with the study of Superman being no exception. The following paragraphs discuss academic and popular writings on Superman in order to provide a broad overview of the different works which constitute the field, beginning with the more popularly styled journalistic investigations into the character.

Perhaps the most significant recent popular history of Superman is journalist Larry Tye's *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero*, which draws heavily upon previously unseen documents released through court proceedings to provide a wealth of new information about the creation and evolution of the character. A work with a similar focus but written in a more polemical style, providing a less detailed account of Superman's history, is Tom Dehaven's *Our Hero: Superman on Earth* which, despite its more casual expression, is useful as an evaluative opinion piece by a notable contributor to the discourse surrounding Superman and his history. In a slightly different vein, Glen Weldon's *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography* is valuable for its documentation of the different narratives and storylines in which the character has been involved.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, if Weldon's work adds little to Tye's insights into the historical and industrial context of Superman's creation and development, it nevertheless serves as a useful primer for facts and trivia concerning the content of Superman's stories, notably important "milestones" such as the year in which villains like the Prankster and Toyman first appeared.<sup>8</sup> Another informative source of facts concerning Superman's history but one that intentionally overlooks the character's comic book adventures to focus on his appearances in other media is Bruce Scivally's *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway*.<sup>9</sup>

Other histories that have been invaluable to my research include Les Daniels' appropriately titled *Superman: The Complete History*, as well as comic book

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<sup>7</sup> Glen Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Scivally, *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008).

writer and historian Gerard Jones' *Men of Tomorrow: The True Story of the Birth of the Superheroes*.<sup>10</sup> The latter has a broader focus than the other texts mentioned so far, covering the creation of several superheroes, whilst also providing significant information and analyses regarding Superman's inception and early narratives. Jones' other significant work, *The Comic Book Heroes: The First History of Modern Comic Books from the Silver Age to the Present*, a collaboration with Will Jacobs, provides a similarly valuable historical account of the superhero genre in comics as a whole, including several discussions of Superman, which it combines with productive, if not impartial, analysis.<sup>11</sup> Another comic book writer, Grant Morrison, has also provided an account of Superman's history in the context of a broader discussion of the superhero genre in his *Supergods: The World in the Age of the Superhero*, which is pursued through his own unique autobiographical perspective.<sup>12</sup>

Also of note are shorter popular pieces featuring analyses of the character and collected editions of short essays on the subject. For instance, Dennis Dooley and Gary Engle's *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend!* is an important collection of articles by journalists and comic book creators which outlines critical perceptions of Superman at the time of his fiftieth anniversary in 1988.<sup>13</sup> Other texts that have helped to shape the critical discourse surrounding Superman and which have consequently informed my research are Roger Sabin's short section on the character in his study *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels*, and editorials for collected editions of historic Superman stories such as *Superman in the Forties*, *Superman in the Fifties*, *Superman in*

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<sup>10</sup> Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1998); Gerard Jones, *The Men of Tomorrow: The True Story of the Birth of the Superheroes* (London: Arrow Books, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes: The First History of Modern Comic Books from the Silver Age to the Present* (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Grant Morrison, *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Dennis Dooley and Gary Engle, eds., *Superman at Fifty! The Persistence of a Legend* (Cleveland, OH: Octavia, 1988).

*the Sixties, Superman in the Seventies and Superman in the Eighties*.<sup>14</sup> As will become apparent in the following more detailed discussion of these popular histories, many of their interpretations of Superman's meaning and history contain significant similarities.

I begin my overview with a discussion of Larry Tye's *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero*. Although Tye's analysis considers a variety of the factors that informed Superman's creation and development, his understanding of the character's popularity and meaning is to a significant degree founded on the idea that the Man of Steel is particularly adept at reflecting the outlook and attitude of the American people at any given point in the nation's history. For instance, in the first chapter, Tye makes a number of claims about Superman's place in the popular culture of the 1930s, which link the character to the socio-political context of that era and he suggests that the Man of Steel's response to the events of that time chimed with the thoughts and desires of the American people experiencing them:

It was April 1938 and the world was holding its breath. The Führer's storm troopers had just occupied Czechoslovakia. Joseph Stalin had shown the West that he was as ruthless as the Nazis by staging a show trial for Nikolai Bukharin, a champion of the revolution, and then liquidating him. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal was in full motion, but one in three Americans remained ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-nourished, and 250,000 teenagers had taken to the road to earn money to send home. Never had America so craved a hero, if not a

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<sup>14</sup> Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996); Robert Greenberger, ed., *Superman in the Forties* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2005); Nick J. Napolitano, ed., *Superman in the Fifties* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2002); Dale Crain, ed., *Superman in the Sixties* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 1999); Michael Wright, ed., *Superman in the Seventies* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2000); Robert Greenberger, ed., *Superman in the Eighties* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2006).



messiah. Never had a publisher so perfectly timed its release of a new title.<sup>15</sup>

Tye reprises this interpretation later in his discussion of the 2001-2011 television series *Smallville*, where he claims that the series' launch "in the wake of 9/11 gave America a hero it could believe in when it needed one, the same way Jerry and Joe had done more than sixty years earlier."<sup>16</sup> According to this view, one essential principle of Superman's appeal can be found in his role as a response to American national anxieties caused by political events and even global troubles. It is not only Tye who takes this approach to contextualisation as Tom Dehaven makes the similar suggestion that Superman's evolution over the years can be, to an extent, seen as a reflection of the developing national mood:

In the 1930s Superman was Tom Joad in aerialist's tights: a gadfly, a caped vigilante, a working-class warrior fighting for better and more equitable social conditions. In the 1940s he became a personification of the American fighting spirit. Although in the comic books he by and large sat out World War II, somehow Superman emerged from it as a totem of national indomitability, enterprise and victory.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, although he has himself been critical of too-strident attempts to link Superman to political events and trends, Glen Weldon describes the Superman of the 1950s as an Eisenhower Republican and later ties his apparent decline in popularity in the late 1980's to a similar drop in the national mood following problems associated with Reaganite economic policy:

where the first two Superman films had helped lift the national mood out of its energy-crunch malaise, by 1989 Reagan's

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<sup>15</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>17</sup> Dehaven, *Our Hero*, 4.

“Morning of America” had aged into a long night haunted by fears of a looming economic recession. There was one hero ideally suited to these dark times, and he didn’t wear an “S.”<sup>18</sup>

Other popular chroniclers of Superman have taken a comparable approach. For instance, Dennis O’Neil, in his article about Superman’s evolution “The Man of Steel and Me” for the collection *Superman at Fifty*, argues of Superman’s post-war evolution that,

as Superman became more and more godlike, he had less to do with the problems of ordinary people — not surprisingly, since readers couldn’t expect the guy who blew out a star to worry much about greedy mine owners. This newer, lighter, almost droll Superman reflected the mood of the country.<sup>19</sup>

O’Neil elaborates, proposing that “the public embraced Superman in 1938 because he was an antidote to the Depression; that same public wanted its post-war entertainment to be escapist, frothy, devoid of reminders of either the poverty of the ‘30s or the bloodletting in Europe and Asia.”<sup>20</sup>

Roger Sabin, writing in a popular style, prior to his academic career, again makes similar reflections upon Superman’s development, proposing that,

in his earliest outings, he had been a kind of super-social worker, in the comic’s words, a “champion of the oppressed,” reflecting the liberal idealism of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Drunks, wife-batterers and gamblers received his attention, while in one famous tale a mine-owner who obliges miners to labour in dangerous conditions is

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<sup>18</sup> Glen Weldon, “Superman’s Real Kryptonite: American Politics,” *Washington Post*, April 5, 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/supermans-real-kryptonite-american-politics/2013/04/05/208706d4-9c7f-11e2-9bda-edd1a7fb557d\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/supermans-real-kryptonite-american-politics/2013/04/05/208706d4-9c7f-11e2-9bda-edd1a7fb557d_story.html); Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 127: 239.

<sup>19</sup> Dennis O’Neil, “The Man of Steel and Me,” in *Superman at Fifty! The Persistence of a Legend*, ed., Dennis Dooley and Gary Engle (Cleveland, OH: Octavia, 1988), 52.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

compelled by Superman to experience those conditions himself. Then, when the Cold War came to America, the character evolved into a fantasy guardian of the world order: an all-powerful, and at times portly looking conservative, fighting for “Truth, Justice and the American Way.” Later still, he would be revamped for more cynical times.<sup>21</sup>

Bruce Scivally also agrees in his introduction to *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway*, where he characterises Superman’s appeal in terms of his apparent connections to significant world events. Quoting the first Superman story that appeared in *Action Comics* #1, he writes:

The story ended in a cliffhanger and a bit of ballyhoo: “A physical marvel, a mental wonder, SUPERMAN is destined to reshape the destiny of a world.”

In the waning years of the Great Depression, on the cusp of events that would soon lead to a second world war, no one could have foreseen how true those words were.<sup>22</sup>

Gerard Jones’ analysis in *Men of Tomorrow* is less strident. However, he still seems inclined to link Superman’s adventures to the prevailing political climate. Indeed, although he states that Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s initial rendering of Superman “wasn’t a coherent political statement,” Jones, like several of the commentators quoted above, argues that “it was a New Deal Hollywood portrayal of a world where innocent people are hurt by greed and callousness and we could all use a primary coloured conscience to zoom in and knock us to our senses.”<sup>23</sup> Writing with collaborator Will Jacobs in *The Comic Book Heroes*, Jones again engages in a similar analysis by considering Superman’s connection to Real Life events alongside a number of other elements that may have informed his “Silver Age” comic book narratives,

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<sup>21</sup> Sabin, *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels*, 61.

<sup>22</sup> Scivally, *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Jones, *The Men of Tomorrow*, 174.

including editor Mort Weisinger and several of his writers' interest in science fiction.<sup>24</sup> Here, the historians again speculate that broader social and historical occurrences, such as the Holocaust, may have influenced the Man of Steel's stories in important ways and draw attention to connections between *Superman: The Movie* and Ronald Reagan's political campaigns.<sup>25</sup>

Les Daniels, like Jones and Jacobs, is relatively cautious in his recognition of links between Superman comics and socio-political events and issues but also claims that "one way Siegel and Shuster reached out to audiences" in their creation of Superman "was by dealing with the social problems of the day."<sup>26</sup> We can also detect an echo of this idea in Morrison's *Supergods*, where the author considers that "the original Superman was a bold humanist response to Depression-era fears of runaway scientific advance and soulless industrialism."<sup>27</sup>

This sentiment is mirrored in some editorial pieces for collected editions of past Superman stories. For example, in his introduction to *Superman in the Forties*, Bob Hughes argues that "to the Depression-weary average American, Superman appeared to be what it took to change the world. If they couldn't win life's battle's for real, at least it helped to know that someone was on their side."<sup>28</sup> He goes on to suggest that "by the end of the war, Superman, like America, was faced with a new world order. The United States was no longer a backward hick country but the world's reigning super-power. Similarly, Metropolis was no longer the sole stage for Superman's adventures. He walked the world and sometimes farther."<sup>29</sup>

Comic book writer Mark Waid concurs in his introduction to *Superman in the Fifties*, proposing that "when Superman first appeared in 1938, he was a

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<sup>24</sup> Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 80.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 16: 232.

<sup>26</sup> Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History*, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Morrison, *Supergods*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Bob Hughes, introduction to *Superman in the Forties*, ed. Robert Greenberger (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2005), 5-7: 6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

diamond in the rough: a quick tempered social activist whose dedication to the ideals of truth and justice apparently put him above the rules and regulations of common society.”<sup>30</sup> Waid, like Sabin, argues that, as time progressed,

particularly in the years following World War II — Superman’s natural patriotism practically forced him to transform his approach to problem solving. As a nation, we had just validated the concept of the American way not only by leading — and helping to win — the greatest battle mankind had ever witnessed, but also by consequently establishing ourselves as the world’s policemen. As a people, we were justifiably proud of ourselves and believed more than ever in the ideals of order and virtue. In reflection, Superman gradually curbed his rebel ways to become more of a super-lawman — a global boy scout, if you will.<sup>31</sup>

As we can see, the tendency of the above texts is to, with varying degrees of emphasis, approach Superman stories with the presumption that they directly reflect national, even global politics, or that they act as barometers for the mood of the American people as it changed throughout history. Indeed, even though they often present a nuanced picture, they all characterise Superman’s development in terms of his expression of politics or national consciousness to some degree.

Nevertheless, the assumption that Superman naturally reflects changes in American society is not the only prominent view of the Man of Steel’s relationship with the nation’s history to be held by popular historians and journalists. As we shall see in my analysis of 1978’s *Superman: The Movie* and subsequent texts in Chapter Four, in the past four decades there has

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<sup>30</sup> Mark Waid, “In the 1950s, Calling Someone a Boy Scout Was a Compliment,” introduction to *Superman in the Fifties*, ed. Nick J. Napolitano (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2002), 5-8: 5.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Waid, “In the 1950s, Calling Someone a Boy Scout Was a Compliment,” 5-7.

developed a prominent school of thought that considers Superman to be ill-suited to social and political narrative topics. This view is articulated more by film journalists, such as *The New York Times*' Dave Itzkoff and Manohla Dargis, than popular historians of Superman but it is nevertheless also espoused by Glen Weldon, the author of *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, who has argued that placing the focus of the character's stories on political or social topics could "kill the idea of Superman."<sup>32</sup>

Interestingly, although the assertion that Superman is naturally ill-suited to social and political concerns appears to contradict the prominent point of view that he inevitably reflects developing historical trends in American society, as it is espoused by Dehaven, Tye and, in some cases, even Weldon, it can actually be seen as an outgrowth of the socio-political reading of the character. Indeed, in judging Superman to be generally incompatible with socio-political themes, exponents of this position in fact accept the terms of the debate forwarded by the opposing view. This includes the proposition that socio-political topics are an important consideration for superhero stories, as well as a criteria against which they should be evaluated and categorised as either pertinent to the contingencies of Real Life or not. Indeed, in his opposition to the socio-political interpretation of Superman, Weldon has arguably accepted its terms but inverted its assumptions regarding the value of Superman's appeal.

As we have seen, for adherents to the socio-political interpretation of Superman, the character's essential appeal is rooted in his ability to evolve with and reflect changes in American politics and society. By contrast, Weldon's understanding that Superman "remains above the political fray, he

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<sup>32</sup>Dave Itzkoff, "Alien Yet Familiar," *New York Times*, May 22, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/26/movies/man-of-steel-aims-to-make-superman-relevant-again.html?pagewanted=1>; Manohla Dargis, "Part Man, Part God, All Hunk," review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *New York Times*, June 13, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/14/movies/man-of-steel-depicts-a-striving-stranger-in-a-strange-land.html?pagewanted=1>; Glen Weldon, "Superman's Real Kryptonite: American Politics."

represents truth, justice, compassion and mercy” and his suggestion that “no matter what decade it is, he reminds us that we can be better than we are” locates the Man of Steel’s value in the universal resonance that stems from his ability to transcend political concerns and even the contingencies of specific historical contexts.<sup>33</sup> Here, we can see that the socio-political interpretation of Superman has established a binary division around which much of the debate concerning the character’s significance is conducted, even by those who do not think that Superman should be understood as having a political agenda. In considering that even Superman historians and journalists who contradict this framework do so according to the terms of the debate that it proposes, we can see that the socio-political interpretation of the Man of Steel represents the most influential approach to understanding his stories.

However, there are problems with the socio-political interpretation of Superman. As I suggested earlier, Larry Tye begins his account of Superman’s history with the claim that the character’s creation was informed by the early aggression of the Nazis in Europe, the poverty experienced by the Americans during the Depression and even the political situation in the Soviet Union. Whilst Tye does recount other influences, such as the films of Douglas Fairbanks, pulp magazines and comics, he never considers the possibility that the fact that Superman has been informed by so many popular genres, and is himself a work of fantasy, complicates his status as a mirror to America’s evolving social and political zeitgeist.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Tye begins his account with the assertion that “each generation got the Superman it needed and deserved. Each change offered a Rorschach test of that time and its dreams.”<sup>35</sup> This position does not evolve a great deal throughout the course of his analysis and, in his concluding thoughts, he states that the reason Superman has never been finally “killed off” over the years is because

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 5: 11: 15.

<sup>35</sup> Tye, *Superman*, xiv.

"America would not have it. Kids want to be like him, and parents like that because they did, too. Many still do. He has proven tougher and more embedded in our DNA than even Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster dared dream."<sup>36</sup>

Here, Tye suggests that Superman has remained popular because he has always resonated with the feelings of the American people and is naturally in tune with their changing attitudes, yet he does not unpack why this is, simply reinforcing the idea by restating that the character resonates because he has always reflected the cultural "DNA" of the nation.

The same logic underpins Tom Dehaven's understanding that Superman has remained popular through changing times because he naturally and inevitably represents certain aspects of the national character.<sup>37</sup> We can see this in his suggestion that Superman embodies such intrinsically American qualities as "American exceptionalism," "self-reliance," and being an "immigrant."<sup>38</sup> A very similar argument is pursued by Gary Engle in his contribution to *Superman at Fifty*, "What Makes Superman so Darned American?" where he argues that,

It is impossible to imagine Superman being as popular as he is and speaking as deeply to the American character were he not an immigrant and an orphan. Immigration, of course, is the overwhelming fact in American history. Except for the Indians, all Americans have an immediate sense of their origins elsewhere. No nation on Earth has so deeply embedded in its social consciousness the imagery of passage of one social identity to another: the Mayflower of the New England Separatists, the slave ships from Africa and the subsequent underground railroads toward freedom in the North, the sailing ships and shuttles across two oceans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>37</sup> Dehaven, *Our Hero*, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



the freedom airlifts in the 20<sup>th</sup>. Somehow the picture just isn't complete without Superman's rocketship.<sup>39</sup>

These accounts, and others discussed in the passages above, indicate that Superman's status as a reflector of the United States' culture, society and politics is predetermined by his essential American-ness. This understanding is an oversimplification and ignores possible tensions between essentialist American identity and immigrant status. It is also a circular argument, as it suggests that Superman's resonance with the American psyche, and his continued appeal, stems from the fact that his intrinsically American essence allows him to resonate with the prevailing ideas and feelings of the population, which, in turn makes him appealing. Furthermore, given that these investigations presume that there exists at any point in time one prevailing national ethos or attitude for Superman to mirror, it can be argued that the logical conclusion of these views is that, in each period of twentieth century American history, we are presented with a simple, singular Superman who represents the defining philosophies or political and social problematics of the time.

However, an analysis based upon such assertions presents both a limited understanding of Superman's significance and an oversimplified view of American history. We can gain a clearer view of why this is the case if we consider academic and historian Martin Halliwell's approach to historical analysis.<sup>40</sup> Halliwell suggests that if we look "beyond memories, myths and nostalgia" when investigating any given decade of American history, we can "unearth historical tensions that cannot easily be slotted into a unified narrative."<sup>41</sup> In other words, as far as Halliwell is concerned, periods in American history may not be as uniform as the above accounts of Superman's past imply or be defined by a single prevailing ethos that is directly reflected

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<sup>39</sup> Engle, "What Makes Superman So Darned American," 80.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

in their popular culture. Indeed, the implication of this is that any decade, year or even month will be the site of any number of competing and contradictory narratives. This in turn suggests that at no point in America's history was the country wholly defined by a singular national narrative or sense of identity and that it would therefore be difficult for any popular figure to unproblematically represent the American national perspective because the United States has never had a wholly homogenous culture. If Halliwell's arguments are accurate, then it is difficult to see how Superman could, at any point, have provided a reflection of the national attitude in such an uncomplicated fashion as has been implied by the histories discussed above.

Given these possibilities, it is important to explain why such direct political readings of Superman have occurred. It can be suggested that popular histories of Superman, which are not required to adhere to the same standards of analytic rigour as academic texts, are often motivated by the desire to tell a good story and that this intent leads them to, quite legitimately given their aims, frame their representation of Superman's relationship with American history and politics in such a way that the story of the character's development seems like a striking and exciting narrative in its own right. Keeping this in mind, we can propose that such claims as Tye's hyperbolic assertion that "our longest-lasting hero [Superman] will endure as long as we need a champion, which should be until the end of time" and the bold suggestion by Dehaven that Superman has "lasted" simply because "you can't beat" the character's "premise" are more akin to decorative rhetorical flourishes than incisive, thoroughly considered observations.<sup>42</sup> Broad and casually employed statements of this kind indicate that the authors of some popular histories at least are not afraid of using exaggeration or hyperbole to serve an entertaining story. In fact, as a consequence of their often casual approach, popular accounts at times feel intentionally uncomplicated in their endeavours to locate Superman's ongoing popularity either in his consistent

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<sup>42</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 300; Dehaven, *Our Hero*, 2.

role as a representative of the national psyche, defined as a singular, coherent entity, or in his fundamentally American essence. Indeed, Weldon's rather dismissive recognition that "Superman's status as a corporate-owned, heavily licensed nugget of intellectual property [. . .] may be the most important reason he's still around, but it's the least interesting" is indicative of the fact that, even when they discuss such issues, many commentators tend to gloss over the significance of the reality that the Superman's longevity has been the product of, amongst other things, a conscious drive by his creators and owners to update and protect him, often instead seeing Superman's appeal as predetermined by his intrinsic connection to the values of the American people.<sup>43</sup>

As my argument throughout this thesis makes clear, much of Superman's history has indeed been defined by a struggle on the part of his creators to associate him with particular narratives or perspectives and to resist or contain ideas that have become attributed to him in contravention of their wishes and which might risk damaging his reputation as well as his profitability. In other words, I contend that Superman does not naturally express the singular will of the American people but is the site of debate and contestation, which DC Comics and its parent company Time Warner often seek to manage and contain.

If we are too keen to gloss over the fact that much of Superman's meaning and significance has been carefully managed by DC Comics for its own commercial interest, we might also fail to see that some of the narratives that have been woven from the character's history may have been constructed largely to serve his corporate owner's own purposes. As Will Brooker has shown in his study of Batman, narratives found in official paratexts do not necessarily provide impartial accounts and it is relatively easy for historians

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<sup>43</sup> Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorised Biography*, 1.

and critics to mistake their seemingly unimpassioned statements as Truth.<sup>44</sup> As Chapter Three notes, officially endorsed accounts of Superman's history may be designed to intentionally downplay a number of the character's past associations and some aspects of his potential significance in favour of a partial view that DC currently wishes to promote. Indeed, as I discuss in Chapter Three, we can see this in the editorial entitled "Relevance" from the collected edition *Superman in the Sixties*.<sup>45</sup> This piece considers the "formula" preferred by Mort Weisinger, the editor of Superman comics in the 1960s, negatively and dismisses those stories that adhere to it with the suggestion that "unfortunately" Superman would have to wait until the "'70s to become relevant."<sup>46</sup> This account evaluates Superman texts of the 1960s according to the ideal criteria of Relevance and their ability to mirror the political mood of the period, against which they are found wanting. The editorial then encourages readers to direct their attention to the stories published in the following decade, which it dubs more significant, at least as far as their engagement with Real Life issues is concerned.

Interestingly, Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs have attributed the introduction of the term Relevance, which the editorial discussed above promotes, to 1970s comic book fans who sought to describe superhero stories which directly engaged with social and political issues.<sup>47</sup> They also suggest that the trend influenced the likes of Frank Miller and others in the decades that followed.<sup>48</sup> Considering the evidence provided by the short editorial from *Superman in the Sixties*, we can speculate that the term may have, as a result of the close relationship between comics fandom and professional producers, become established within official discourse as the yardstick against which all Superman stories are measured; one that, as we see in Chapter Three, is

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<sup>44</sup> Gerard Genette, introduction to *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1-15: 1; Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, 101.

<sup>45</sup> "Relevance," in *Superman in the Sixties*, 179.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 147.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 151.

often cited as a means of validating the Man of Steel's more politically engaged stories, most of which were published in the decades following the 1960s and the tone of which comprises the modern aesthetic.<sup>49</sup>

Just as intriguingly, we can identify citations of Relevance in the discourse surrounding the release of the most recent Superman film, 2013's *Man of Steel*, which, as I show in my conclusion, seeks to reconnect Superman to the current social and political context in the minds of his audience.<sup>50</sup> Considering the connotations of the term as it is used in the editorial from *Superman in the Sixties* and by Jones and Jacobs, we can hypothesise that Tye, Dehaven, and others, in presuming that Superman stories mirror the socio-political context of their publication dates, are evaluating the narratives according to the criteria of Relevance as it has been applied to superhero texts by both fans and major corporations like DC since the 1970s. If this is true, it is possible to argue that these popular historians may be unintentionally reinforcing DC's own interests by emphasising a value that the corporation has adopted for its own purposes and is itself seeking to associate with Superman in official paratexts.<sup>51</sup>

Given that Relevance continues to be espoused by popular histories that tend to embellish their accounts of Superman's evolution with generalisations and rhetorical posturing, we might expect academic texts, which have a reputation for greater analytical rigour, to present a different picture. However, as we see below, this is not always the case. Currently, although there are a growing number of valuable scholarly interventions in the field, most current academic investigations of Superman are limited in their scope. Many restrict their analysis of the character to a single chapter, as is the case with Alex Evans' "Superman is the Faultline: Fissures in the Monomythic Man of Steel" and Robert M. McManus and Grace R. Waitman's "*Smallville* as a Rhetorical Means of Moral Value Education," as well as Thomas Andrae's

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<sup>49</sup> Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, 266.

<sup>50</sup> Dave Itzkoff, "Alien, Yet Familiar".

<sup>51</sup> Gerard Genette, introduction to *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, 1.

"From Menace to Messiah: The History and Historicity of Superman," Umberto Eco's "The Myth of Superman" and Ian Gordon's "Nostalgia, Myth, and Ideology: Superman at the End of the American Century."<sup>52</sup> Additionally, several academic texts that analyse Superman do so only as a small part of a broad examination of the whole superhero genre. For instance, although Ian Gordon's chapter on "The Comic Book" from *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture* provides a thorough and productive contribution to the study of Superman's development, it also spreads its analysis across comics featuring other characters and is limited in its length.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Christopher Murray's *Champions of the Oppressed* contains several detailed passages analysing Superman but his discussion of the character forms only part of a wider investigation of the relationship between superhero comics and World War II propaganda.<sup>54</sup> Greg S. McCue and Clive Bloom's *Dark Knights: The New Comics in Context* also contains some productive analysis of early Superman stories in its first chapter but again the volume's broad focus, which documents the evolution of the entire superhero genre, ultimately restricts the scope and depth of the content dedicated to the Man of Steel.<sup>55</sup>

Here, it is important to note that some full academic volumes on the subject of Superman do exist. However, most of them are collections of separate

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<sup>52</sup> Alex Evans, "Superman is the Faultline: Fissures in the Monomythic Man of Steel," in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror,"* ed. Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell (London: Continuum, 2010), 117-126; Robert M. McManus and Grace R. Waitman, "Smallville as a Rhetorical Means of Moral Value Education," in *The Amazing Transforming Superhero*, ed. Terrence R. Wandtyke (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2007), 174-191; Thomas Andrae, "From Menace to Messiah: The History and Historicity of Superman," in *American Media and Mass Culture*, ed. Donald Lazere (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 124-138; Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman," in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson, 1981 [1962]), 107-124; Ian Gordon, "Nostalgia, Myth, and Ideology: Visions of Superman at the End of the American Century," in *Comics & Ideology (Popular Culture and Everyday Life)*, ed. Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, and Ian Gordon (New York, NY: Peter Laing, 2001), 177-193.

<sup>53</sup> Ian Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 128-151.

<sup>54</sup> Christopher Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed: Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda in America During World War II* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2011).

<sup>55</sup> Greg S. McCue and Clive Bloom, *Dark Knights: The New Comics in Context* (London: Pluto Press, 1993), 3-8.

essays rather than a single analysis. For instance, the Joseph J. Darwoski edited volume, *The Ages of Superman*, is a collection of essays by a number of authors which collectively trace Superman's development from inception to recent years, and *The Smallville Chronicles: Critical Essays On the Television Series*, edited by Lincoln Geraghty, provides a similar variety of perspectives in its specific consideration of the 2001-2011 television series.<sup>56</sup> Although invaluable, neither of these texts provides a single, internally consistent academic study of Superman from his origin to his present. One text that arguably comes closer to filling this gap is Brad Ricca's *Super Boys*, a full-length monograph that, to some extent, details the history of Superman through the lives of his creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. However, because Ricca's work is primarily a biography of Siegel and Shuster themselves, it reasonably places more focus on the two comic book creators than it does on Superman.

Its limited size and scope is not the only concerning feature of current Superman scholarship. A further limitation of extant academic debate on the subject presents itself when we consider the overlaps between the arguments featured in scholarly accounts and those found in popular histories of the character. That there is overlap between academic and popular studies of Superman is unsurprising, especially when we consider that, prior to the increased academic interest in superheroes, comic book fans and popular historians were the primary researchers of superhero narratives.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, several scholars investigating superheroes appear to have developed their academic commitment to the subject through or alongside their own continuing popular interest in it. One example is Thomas Andrae, who has made significant contributions to the academic study of the superhero genre through his essay "From Menace to Messiah" and who has produced several works concerning superheroes which straddle the divide between popular

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<sup>56</sup> Lincoln Geraghty, ed., *The Smallville Chronicles: Critical Essays On the Television Series* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2011).

<sup>57</sup> Bill Schelly, *The Golden Age of Comic Fandom* (Seattle, WA: Hamster Press, 1999).

and academic writing.<sup>58</sup> Another is Roger Sabin, who, as mentioned earlier, wrote *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels* prior to completing his PhD.

However, perhaps the clearest illustration of the risks associated with the overlap between academic and popular studies of superheroes can be found in Ricca's *Super Boys*. Ricca's biography of Superman's creators is an invaluable intervention in the field and contains a wealth of helpful information regarding Superman's invention. However, its popular, almost novelistic style is sometimes in danger of confusing the distinction between evidence based conclusions and unsupported assertions made for the sake of increasing the book's entertainment value. For instance, in his chapter "How to Kill a Superman," Ricca narrates Siegel's thoughts as the writer returns from the 1940 New York World's Fair:

As the train drew back from Cleveland, Jerry sat there and watched the hills and vineyards blur by. A thought unfurled in his mind that seemed so alien, he couldn't help considering it more carefully. Jerry pressed his finger against the glass. He remembered his early trip to New York about syndication and how they [Harry Donenfeld and Jack Leibowitz] had humiliated him. He imagined Superman running past the train. Then he couldn't see anything.

The truth of it was that Jerry had reached his limit. Watching Donenfeld ride around on that elephant with an ear-to-ear grin was just too much. The World's Fair was great, but he could see the writing on the wall. Jerry knew they [Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster] were being squeezed out. Or even if they weren't, it wasn't fair that they were doing all the work while Harry was raking in the money. Jerry had created the character, but he

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas Andrae, *Creators of the Superheroes* (Neshannock, PA: Hermes Press, 2011); Thomas Andrae, *Carl Barks and the Disney Comic Book* (Mississippi, MA: University Press of Mississippi, 2006); Thomas Andrae and Mel Gordon, *Siegel and Shuster's Funnyman* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2010).



was not his master. By the time they got home, Jerry had a plan more nefarious than any Luthor had ever come up with: Jerry was going to kill Superman.<sup>59</sup>

My concern here is that Ricca does not support this narrative with the clear citation of sources. It is therefore difficult to discern whether his representation of Siegel's thoughts on the train journey, and his suggestion that whilst travelling the writer decided to kill off Superman, is based on evidence that he has encountered or is largely speculation designed to add colour and richness to his story.

In this instance, Ricca's approach is akin to Tye and Dehaven's tendency to embellish and hyperbolise Superman's history, and demonstrates that academics who follow the style and approach of popular historians risk muddying the distinction between evidence-based conclusions and unsupported assertions. This, in turn, makes it more difficult for scholars who draw upon their arguments to separate points rooted in primary evidence from unsupported assertions, potentially leading them to contribute to the propagation of particular myths or narratives which present a limited, partial or simplified picture of Superman and his history. In fact, it is possible to speculate that the Relevance discourse and the idea that Superman uncomplicatedly mirrors the prevailing cultural and political trends of his times may have been propagated through a similar process.

The first expression of the Relevance discourse in a secondary account of Superman's history may, in fact, have appeared in the 1987 essay "From Menace to Messiah," where Thomas Andrae, writing in his scholarly mode, argues that "the social changes prescribed by the early Superman stories are easily assimilated into the New Deal philosophy of expanded governmental power to regulate the abuses of the economic system and discipline industry,

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<sup>59</sup> Ricca, *Super Boys*, 190.

provide social security and public relief, and protect the rights of workers and minorities.”<sup>60</sup>

Whilst Andrae is careful with his sources and grounds his reading of Superman in his interpretations of specific stories and Siegel’s own influences, other academics are less so. For instance, in his introduction to *The Smallville Chronicles*, Lincoln Geraghty again reprises the familiar proposition that Superman’s development provides a direct mirror for broad social and political trends in America in his suggestion that “Siegel and Shuster founded Superman in an era that needed heroes,” as well as in the way that he links the Superman of the 1950s television series to “the nation’s Communist containment strategy” through the character’s role as a vehicle for the idea “that the honest American male could still make a difference.”<sup>61</sup> He continues this line of thought in his discussions of *Superman: The Movie* and the television series *Smallville*, suggesting that “whereas *Smallville* spoke to a nation looking for reassurance in the myth of the superhero post the trauma of 9/11 [. . .] *Superman* tuned the nation into a celebration of American values and ideals the year after the Bicentennial.”<sup>62</sup>

Geraghty relies heavily on secondary material to substantiate his claims, which poses a problem: even if those texts Geraghty references are thoroughly researched, they may still be coloured by the problematic preconceptions of their authors. As my earlier discussion of Ricca’s *Super Boys* illustrates, there are risks involved in relying on the analyses of others for support, because even a carefully researched work such as his may contain unsupported assertions which a new author can risk repeating and perpetuating. Furthermore, a study of one author cited by Geraghty can be used to demonstrate that he might have risked falling into this trap himself, as a result of his overdependence on secondary analysis.

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<sup>60</sup> Andrae, “From Menace to Messiah,” 131.

<sup>61</sup> Lincoln Geraghty, introduction to *The Smallville Chronicles*, x: xi: xii.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

Geraghty draws significantly upon Ian Gordon's "Nostalgia, Myth and Ideology: Superman at the End of the American Century," which itself repeats arguments from Gordon's *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture* in its suggestion that the early Superman of 1938 and 1939 "was tied to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal politics" and "America's 1930s isolationism," and that "beginning in the latter half of the 1940, Superman was transformed into a symbol of more general American cultural values in that his individualism was tied to consumerist values."<sup>63</sup> Here we can see that Gordon's argument can easily be incorporated into the Relevance discourse. Indeed, Gordon develops his interpretation further in *Comic Books and Consumer Culture*, where he argues that Superman reflected Rooseveltian politics in the 1930s and developed alongside America's evolving socio-political climate, thus mirroring, or even contributing to, the nation's transition from Depression-era poverty to a "richly commodified postwar" state.<sup>64</sup> Although Gordon's opinions are thoroughly researched and substantiated, they are not necessarily free from personal presumptions. For instance, if many scholars and critics who follow the Relevance discourse sometimes place too little emphasis on the influence that Superman's status as a commercial product has on his broader meaning, Gordon's analysis marks a departure from this trend in that it emphasises the point too strongly. Indeed, his account of Superman's transition from an advocate of the New Deal to a commercial product seems predicated upon a presumed division between "art" and "consumerism" that not all scholars, including myself, would agree with, as is indicated by his suggestion that eventually "Siegel and Shuster set aside any claims to Superman's integrity as a literary character in favour of his commercial worth."<sup>65</sup> Gordon's reliance upon this contestable distinction between "art" and "consumerism" raises the possibility that his understanding of Superman's evolution and his own version of the Relevance discourse are themselves problematic.

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<sup>63</sup> Gordon, "Nostalgia, Myth, and Ideology: Superman at the End of the American Century," 181.

<sup>64</sup> Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture*, 151.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

Considering this, we can see that, in citing Gordon's work uncritically to support his own analysis, Geraghty leaves the impression that a partial reading of Superman's history and development is an unproblematic and Truthful account. This example also serves to illustrate the broader point that those who, like Geraghty, rely on secondary sources to substantiate their own interpretations without a considerable degree of caution and further scrutiny risk reinforcing unfounded opinions as if they are uncontested Truths, with the result that partial understandings become established as Common Sense. Indeed, as I explain in Chapter One, Andrae's account of the early Superman's connections to the political context of the late 1930s is problematic in several respects and it is concerning that many of his presumptions have found their way into subsequent analyses of the character.<sup>66</sup>

The risk of propagating problematic narratives has arguably become greater with the increase in the number of well researched and valuable popular analyses, such as Tye's *Superman*, that nevertheless tend to assert their opinions and their own versions of the Relevance discourse confidently and casually, an approach which further entrenches the idea that Superman's role as a mirror of American society and politics can be taken for granted. Indeed, the assumption that the Relevance discourse is a Common Sense principle that can be treated casually and without caution might already be influencing scholarly accounts of Superman's significance, as is evidenced in Joseph J. Darowski's preface to *The Ages of Superman*.<sup>67</sup> Here, Darowski grounds his approach in the Relevance discourse, with his preface leaving the impression

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<sup>66</sup> A version of the Relevance discourse is also evident in Christopher Murray's *Champions of the Oppressed*. Murray argues that "superheroes appeared in the wake of the Great Depression and on the eve of war, a time when many Americans were quite willing to be distracted by fantasy, but also were asking questions about their national identity and political obligations. Superhero comics answered these questions in no uncertain terms, offering a hopeful vision of America that was powerful, mythic, and patriotic, personifying the American Dream in the iconic form of the superhero, a champion for democracy and freedom who would stand against the forces of lawlessness and oppression." Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 7.

<sup>67</sup> Joseph J. Darowski, preface to *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 1-5.

that the other analyses featured within the book are also rooted in its presumptions.<sup>68</sup>

Even though he does not cite the term explicitly, his comments indicate that the underlying presumptions of the Relevance discourse significantly shape his book's approach to Superman. Furthermore, it appears that he employs these assumptions without considering their contextual origins and without citing primary or secondary material to support his stance:

by exploring how this popular icon [Superman] has changed through the years we can track how our entertainment mirrors changes in our society. Superman began as a crusading social avenger at the end of the Great Depression, became a patriotic hero during World War II, saw his powers increase in the early years of the Cold War, and has looked for his place in the superhero world since the turn of the century.<sup>69</sup>

The fact that Darowski does not cite the texts that have informed his interpretation of Superman as a reflector of American politics and society gives the impression that he may be treating this understanding of Superman as a widely accepted Common Sense that does not need to be further substantiated through citation. This has implications for the work as a whole. Indeed, one potential consequence of Darowski's approach to *The Ages of Superman* is that the authors of the volume's essays have been encouraged to analyse Superman texts in line with the precepts of the Relevance discourse, which, as a result of the book's focus and editorial line, they may feel little impetus to interrogate. Consequently, their analyses may be too keen to twist the primary material to fit the concerns favoured by the Relevance model. Indeed, we see this tendency in Jason M. LaTouche's "Red, White and Bruised: The Vietnam War and the Weakening of Superman" where the scholar rather stridently identifies Dennis O'Neil and Curt Swan's 1970 comic

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 2.

book storyline *Kryptonite Nevermore*, which sought to recast Superman as a more troubled character than he had previously been depicted, as a reflection of the American public's feelings regarding the role of their country in the Vietnam War, the national anxieties that the conflict occasioned and the concerns that it raised regarding the United States' status as a "pre-eminent force for good."<sup>70</sup>

LaTouche's essay is well-researched and he cites several statistics to indicate that the national mood of the time chimes with the story's message.<sup>71</sup> However, in this instance, there are also other equally or more plausible ways of accounting for DC's decision to transform Superman into a physically weaker, more troubled character. One explanation can be found in DC's rivalry with Marvel. If Jones and Jacobs' account of the development of the comic book industry since the "Silver Age" is correct, Marvel Comics had been refining a unique brand identity from their portrayal of troubled superheroes since the debuts of the Fantastic Four's Ben Grimm and Spider-Man in the early 1960s and had begun to overtake DC's market share of the comics publishing industry by the 1970s.<sup>72</sup> In this context, and given the fact that O'Neil's *Kryptonite Nevermore* storyline does not mention the Vietnam War or explicitly touch upon related themes, the possibility that Superman's 1970 revamp was occasioned as an attempt by DC to match the tone, content and commercial appeal of their competitor's comics begins to seem at least as plausible as the idea that it was constructed as an intentional engagement with the popular concerns surrounding Vietnam. This case demonstrates the limits of the Relevance discourse by illustrating its difficulty in accounting for

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<sup>70</sup> Jason M. LaTouche, "Red, White and Bruised: The Vietnam War and the Weakening of Superman," in *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 91-102: 95; Dennis O'Neil and Curt Swan, *Kryptonite Nevermore* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2009 [1971]).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>72</sup> "Silver Age" is a term often used by fans and historians of the comic book industry to describe the period between the late 1950s and late 1960s which was marked by a resurgence in the popularity of superheroes following their post-war decline. Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 1-144; Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 51: 53: 60: 169.

influences on Superman stories that have little to do with the wider social and political concerns of Real Life. Indeed, in its application here, the Relevance discourse fails to paint an adequately comprehensive picture of the possible meaning and intent of O'Neil's *Kryptonite Nevermore* storyline.

Considering its limitations and given that the Relevance discourse continues to affect scholars' and historians' perceptions of Superman's meaning, it is necessary to challenge or at least re-evaluate the concept if we are to gain a truly comprehensive understanding of the character. This is the task that my thesis undertakes and my approach is outlined in my methodology below. However, before I proceed to my methodology, it is important to acknowledge that not all academic accounts of Superman adhere to the Relevance discourse.

One particularly significant analysis that takes a different approach to the Relevance discourse but which still characterises Superman as an expression of a broader national consciousness is Umberto Eco's oft cited "The Myth of Superman."<sup>73</sup> Eco argues that Superman stories, in the comics at least, are characterised by their "redundancy."<sup>74</sup> He proposes that Superman is a character caught between two different narrative forms: the "romance" and the "myth." "Myth", he says, is defined by stasis:

In other words, a Greek statue could represent Hercules or a scene of Hercules' labours; in both cases, but more so in the latter, Hercules would be seen as someone who has a story and this story would characterise his divine features. The story has taken place and can no longer be denied. Hercules has been made real through the development of temporal events. But once the development ended his image symbolized, along with the character, the story of his development, and it

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<sup>73</sup> Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman," 107-124.

<sup>74</sup> Eco, "The Myth of Superman," 120.

became the substance of the definitive record and judgements about him.<sup>75</sup>

As we see here, Eco believes that, in a myth, a symbolic character, like Hercules, is inseparable from his own story, which serves to convey a single immutable message, meaning or lesson to its audience through the actions of the central protagonist. He also proposes that, in contrast to the symbolic figure found in myth, who “embodies a law, or a universal demand, and therefore must be in part *predictable* and cannot hold surprises for us,” is the character of a “romance” plot, the kind found in a novel, who “wants, rather, to be a man like anyone else.”<sup>76</sup> According to Eco, “what could befall him is as unforeseeable as what may happen to us” and this type of character therefore seems alive and vital because of the realistic variability, unpredictability and the unexpectedness of the events he experiences.<sup>77</sup> The romance style plot therefore does not necessarily seek to impart its central character with a symbolic resonance as is the case in myth. Rather, new events and scenarios are introduced simply to keep the narrative moving forward in interesting ways or, as Eco describes it, multiplying “like a tapeworm.”<sup>78</sup> Once the narrative is exhausted of possible new situations, it draws to a close and the central character’s life and adventures end. In Eco’s terms, the protagonist “consumes” himself and effectively dies.<sup>79</sup>

Eco proposes that Superman faces the dilemma of being a mythic character seeking to appeal to currently popular novelistic tastes. This dilemma, he explains, is resolved through a sleight of hand involving a clever narrative device that allows Superman’s writers to present his life as an ongoing story which, like the plot of a novel, seemingly evolves and changes over the course of a series of unpredictable and surprising events even though each of his narratives actually conveys the same symbolic, ultimately fixed meaning.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 108-109.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 111.



Eco describes this device as the “oneiric climate,” which refers to the sense of timelessness that pervades Superman’s adventures.<sup>80</sup> He states that, although Superman stories indicate to their audience that past narratives impact upon the character’s present, they are remarkably unclear about which previous adventures inform his current story and how they have influenced the present conditions of his “life.” This vagueness is further compounded by the confusion introduced by “imaginary tales” featuring developments which did not really happen and “untold tales” that introduce previously unrevealed events into Superman’s history, all of which serve to further muddle the character’s timeline.<sup>81</sup> The obfuscation performed by these tricks allows Superman stories to have the appearance of a varied, romance style narrative development, whilst the same conventions are in fact repeated in each narrative and the plots thus continue “hammering away at the same meaning which we have peacefully acquired upon reading the first work of the series” without the character’s audience noticing.<sup>82</sup> The meaning of Superman stories thus becomes “redundant” because each of the character’s adventures simply serves as a reiteration of what has gone before and adds nothing new to his significance or his development.<sup>83</sup>

The fixed, immutable “meaning” that Eco attributes to Superman can be found in the character’s function as “a pedagogic instrument of this society” and as a tool used to persuade his readers to accept their place within the established social system.<sup>84</sup> According to Eco, it is through obscuring the relationship between cause and effect that Superman stories repetitively convey the singular message that “the subject is not responsible for his past, nor master of his future.”<sup>85</sup> Through this notion, the character encourages his readers to defer decisions to others, precluding the possibility that they might

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

seek to change the status quo or even see such social action as possible. In this respect, as far as Eco is concerned, Superman stories, in the comics at least, reflect dominant, social ideology and can perhaps be deemed political in their endeavours to propagate and uphold its principles.

Eco's understanding of Superman comics as agents of ideological reinforcement seems rooted in his structuralist perspective, which presupposes that a narrative's meaning is formed solely by the interrelationship between a text's formal properties and content, two parts that, when combined, form a complete signifying whole that effectively dictates the correct interpretation to its readers. Consequently, it is a theoretical model that leaves little room for the influence of audience interpretation. In fact, Eco proposes that Superman's readers are, "for precise psychological reasons," incapable of applying their attention beyond the content of "a few pages."<sup>86</sup> This renders them particularly susceptible to the ideological project of Superman stories as they are unable to detect that the character's narratives are structured to reinforce their own already established lack of temporal awareness and, as a consequence of their short-term perceptions, they fail to notice that each new story carries the same "pedagogic" message as the one before it.<sup>87</sup>

As we see in Chapter Three, evidence from the comics of the 1960s — the decade in which Eco's essay was first published — indicates that their readers were in no way as uncritical and passive as he suggests. In fact, many had a clear and critical knowledge of the narrative conventions governing Superman's universe, as demonstrated by their ability to recall precedents from past comics when writing to the editor to challenge him for breaking the established "rules" of the strip.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, although he is making a genuine attempt to get to grips with the concept of continuity as it existed in

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>88</sup> A. L. Jr., letter to the editor, "Metropolis Mailbag," *Action Comics* #245, October 1958, 25; Jimmy Jones, letter to the editor, "Metropolis Mailbag," *Action Comics* #299, April 1963, 17.

Superman texts of the 1960s, Eco's analysis seems to twist the evidence to suit his pre-established assumptions. Indeed, he goes as far as to suggest that Superman texts are similar to any number of other "closed" or ideological narratives, notably detective stories featuring Sherlock Holmes and Nero Wolfe.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, it can be argued that Eco is primarily interested in investigating Superman stories in comics as examples of "closed" narratives and searching for incidents which lend further credence to his already affirmed distinction between "closed" and "open" texts.<sup>90</sup> His discussion of Superman therefore serves as much as a reaffirmation of the broader structuralist narrative of ideology and its functions, and Eco's own understanding of its strategies of indoctrination, as it does an engagement with Superman and the characteristics of his stories.

In addition to Eco, Alex Evans' short essay "Superman is the Faultline" also differs from the Relevance approach. In fact, Evans complicates suggestions that Superman can be seen to directly reflect particular political points of view or any unified national consensus by arguing that his stories often contain irresolvable internal contradictions.<sup>91</sup> This intervention has influenced my own approach and I therefore subject it to more detailed discussion in the following methodology section. Simon Locke's discussion of Superman and other superhero texts in his chapter from *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, "To Be Continued: The Magical Power of Super-Science," has been even more influential and is also discussed at greater length in the methodology.<sup>92</sup>

The tendency of many of the texts discussed above to root themselves, often unquestioningly, in secondary, received assertions and accepted narratives as much as in the primary evidence from Superman stories confirms that there is a gap in knowledge in the study of the Man of Steel. Indeed, as of yet, there

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<sup>89</sup> Umberto Eco, introduction to *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 3-46: 8; Eco, "The Myth of Superman," 118.

<sup>90</sup> Umberto Eco, introduction to *The Role of the Reader*, 8-9.

<sup>91</sup> Evans, "Superman is the Faultline," 121.

<sup>92</sup> Simon Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalisation: Enchanted Science and Mundane Mysteries* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 99-124.

exists no thesis-length academic investigation into the character by a single author that draws its insights largely from the primary evidence of Superman stories themselves and which thoroughly questions and examines the principles of this clearly-established Relevance discourse and other problematic approaches. In fact, the continuing prevalence of dominant yet critically-unexamined discourses in discussions of Superman's meaning and significance suggests that, although several popular and academic accounts of the character's history have been published in recent years, the question of what Superman has meant and continues to mean to his creators and members of his audience as well as how his significance has changed over time has not yet been comprehensively examined.

My thesis addresses this gap by presenting an analysis that does not assume that Superman naturally serves as a barometer for the mood of the American nation nor that he is easily identifiable as a pedagogic tool of ideological indoctrination nor that he, as a commercial product, is at any point necessarily precluded from making interventions in debates concerning serious political and social issues. Rather, I will seek to subject existing approaches to new levels of scrutiny by drawing them into my discussions of the primary material of Superman stories themselves and by testing the accounts forwarded by other scholars against the evidence I find.

Due to the fact that the most prominent discourse expounded by scholars and popular historians, which is the Relevance discourse, often affirms that Superman stories reflect the prevailing political and social perspectives of their time, my analysis focuses primarily on the Man of Steel's political Relevance. However, I engage with the term critically and examine its appropriateness as a theoretical model used for analysing Superman stories, which enables me to evaluate their politics without rooting my analysis in common, established, but under-scrutinised assertions.

## Methodology

In order to achieve the aims of my thesis and to approximate what Superman's meaning might have been in past historical contexts, this thesis considers how he was understood by both his audience and his creators throughout his 76 year history.

In order to form an appropriate investigative framework for understanding how Superman's readers, viewers, and listeners may have engaged with the character, I have considered a number of nuanced audience response studies, most of which approach their subject matter from a social science perspective. These include Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*, Jeffery Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*, Martin Barker's *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* and his collaboration with Kate Brooks, *Knowing Audiences — Judge Dredd, its Friends, Fans and Foes*.<sup>93</sup>

These works productively illustrate that the points of view of different audience members viewing or reading a single text are likely to be influenced by a variety of social factors. For instance, Radway understands that readers of romance texts see the act of reading as,

combative and compensatory. It is combative in the sense that it enables them [female romance readers] to refuse the other-directed social role prescribed for them by their position within the institution of marriage. In picking up a book, as they have so eloquently told us, they refuse temporarily their family's otherwise constant demand that they attend to the wants of

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<sup>93</sup> Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991 [1984]); Jeffery Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson, MA: University Press of Mississippi, 2001); Martin Barker, *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989); Martin Barker and Kate Brooks, *Knowing Audiences — Judge Dredd, its Friends, Fans and Foes* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1998).

others even as they act deliberately to do something for their own private pleasure.<sup>94</sup>

In other words, readers of romance fiction have their understanding of these novels conditioned by their specific placement and subjugated position within the social structure.

Jeffrey Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*, whose focus is more closely related to my project here, again demonstrates how the cultural position of an audience influences their perception of the texts that they read. Brown's work illustrates that comic books provide the marginalised fan community that engages with them an alternative measure of prestige, or "cultural capital," to the normative standards of mainstream culture, one that credits those who have both collected large numbers of comics and have high levels of knowledge concerning their content.<sup>95</sup> According to Brown, through this marginalised measure of cultural value, comic book fans may accrue personal status without having to aspire to the normative standards of cultural and social success from which they have been excluded.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, such measures of value operate in contrast to those adopted by more mainstream groups who might dismiss comics as inconsequential, "worthless" trash.<sup>97</sup> Another of Brown's significant insights is that audiences' interpretations of texts are influenced by their previous encounters with similar materials and their existing knowledge of the medium's generic and formal conventions.<sup>98</sup> Thus, readers familiar with a certain genre of comic book are likely to interpret and interact with newly encountered texts differently to those whose perceptions and expectations have not been informed by similar prior knowledge.

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<sup>94</sup> Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 211.

<sup>95</sup> Brown, *Black Superheroes*, 70: 73.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

What we see in Brown and Radway's studies is perhaps a more tangible illustration of Stanley Fish's theoretical concept of interpretive communities, the implication of which is that different audience groups with contrasting social placements are likely to present us with correspondingly diverse ranges of tastes and textual understandings.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, these arguments help us to avoid the assumption, which Eco seems to perpetuate, that there exists a direct and uncomplicated relationship between a text's intended meaning and audience interpretations of it. The reminder that audience perceptions are often diverse is also valuable if we are to avoid repeating received narratives about Superman, including interpretations which uncritically presume, as Tye, Dehaven and others do, that at any point in time Superman can reflect a singular prevailing attitude of American society.

However, I have not engaged with these texts simply so that they may help me to avoid the pitfalls that have hampered other attempts to understand Superman and his history. Martin Barker's work has, in particular, provided a significant positive influence on my own approach. Barker's argument is a response to the "identification" model which predominated within mass media scholarship at the time of his writing.<sup>100</sup> He outlines his case through an analysis of film techniques, illustrating that fictional stories appearing in the mass media position the audience so that "our relation with the character is always mediated by the point of view from which s/he is presented."<sup>101</sup>

He further argues that audience members are less susceptible to a text's messages than "identification" or "effects" models might presume. This is because, rather than situating themselves within a narrative or the perspective of a particular character featured within a text, audiences form their interpretations through their active engagement with the artistic conventions that the text cites. In other words, like Brown, Barker argues that

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<sup>99</sup> Stanley Fish, "Is There a Text in This Class?," in *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003 [1980]), 317.

<sup>100</sup> Martin Barker: *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*, 94-95.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

audiences bring assumptions to texts that have been formed by their awareness of the broader trends in which they are situated. Such contextualising factors might include genre or the traditional thematic concerns and style associated with an author.

Barker explores this idea further with Kate Brooks in *Knowing Audiences — Judge Dredd, its Friends, Fans and Foes*, in which the two scholars posit their “SPACES (Site for the Production of Active Cinematic Experiences)” model as a means of understanding how audiences engage with films.<sup>102</sup> This is an approach that has informed my own study to a significant degree. The SPACES model further develops the concept of interpretive communities into a more complex and tangible picture of what such groups might actually look like. Barker and Brooks’ model has particular appeal because it expands on the idea that individuals’ prior encounters with similar or related texts, and the assumptions and expectations that these engagements have formed, influence their understanding of the popular narratives that they interact with in more detail than either Brown or Barker have previously provided. The implication of these theories for Superman texts is that, depending on the types of interpretive communities inhabited by his audience, the character’s stories may mean very different things to different people. Indeed, given that the cultural circumstances in which readers live and the practices through which they engage with texts change and develop over time, it should surely follow that the meanings that have become associated with Superman over the course of his seventy-six year history are very diverse.

As my thesis is informed by the hypothesis that American culture is never homogenous, even at a single point in history, I am careful not to assume that any of the “interpretive community” theories discussed above necessarily apply to all contexts and I supplement my application of these ideas with supporting evidence from the time. For instance, Chapter One grounds my speculations regarding the interpretive practices of late 1930s and 1940s

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<sup>102</sup> Barker and Brooks, *Knowing Audiences*, 154.



audiences in the evidence provided by studies close to the time, most notably Robert K. Merton's *Mass Persuasion: The Social Psychology of a War Bond Drive*.<sup>103</sup>

It is important to note here that -- the influence of the above social science studies notwithstanding -- my investigation into Superman's meaning will not take the form of an audience study. The primary reasons for this are twofold: firstly, my approach is grounded in textual analysis. Secondly, and more significantly, the audience studies discussed are, as the term implies, largely focussed on what the reactions of individuals and groups to certain texts reveal about the people themselves. Whilst this is a very worthwhile endeavour, it is to a large extent incompatible with the aim of this project, which is to analyse the political and cultural history of Superman as a character. Indeed, if this project were to take an approach similar to the one pursued by Barker, Brooks and the other social scientists mentioned above in conducting interviews and questionnaires with Superman readers and film viewers, it would likely lead to a focus on the audiences themselves, their reading strategies, and the appropriateness of the methodology used in seeking to learn their opinions at the expense of attention given to the Man of Steel himself, his stories and his history.

Such an analysis would also jar with the scope of this project and the period of time it seeks to cover. Indeed, Superman's initial adventures debuted in the late 1930s and if people who can remember reading these comics at the time of their original publication could even be found, they may not be able to accurately remember their original impressions and what Superman meant to them at the time. Furthermore, as Barker and Brooks' thorough investigation into reactions to the film *Judge Dredd* indicates, it is possible for a study of audience responses to a single text to fill a whole monograph.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Robert K. Merton, *Mass Persuasion: The Social Psychology of a War Bond Drive* (New York, NY: Howard Fertig, 2004 [1943]).

<sup>104</sup> *Judge Dredd*, directed by Danny Cannon (1995; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Pictures, 1999), DVD.

For these reasons, an attempt to cover the scope of Superman's full history with a similar audience-focussed approach would run into significant difficulties.

With these considerations in mind, my project takes its lead from Will Brooker's monograph *Batman Unmasked*, which provides a lucid academic analysis of Batman's history from his inception in 1939 to his more recent narratives of the late 1990s. Brooker's analysis places Batman in the cultural context of each decade of his history and discusses his origins, wartime role, the changes to his adventures brought about by Fredric Wertham's anti-comics crusade, the fad that accompanied the "camp" 1966 television series and the controversies surrounding the films of the late 1980s and 1990s. Whilst Brooker accounts for audience interpretations of Batman and how they have contributed to the character's meaning, his approach is not preoccupied with them. Rather, he often uses "examples of 'real' audiences" to substantiate his own theoretical interpretations of Batman narratives and the discourses surrounding them.<sup>105</sup> The fact that Brooker's approach is more explicitly theoretical than that of the audience studies discussed above allows him to widen the scope of his analysis. The result is that, whilst Brooker's analysis provides a clear insight into why it is difficult to gain a comprehensive understanding of Batman's ever-changing significance without considering how popular understandings of his meaning have developed over time, he does not get side-tracked by this aspect of his approach or lose sight of his primary focus: Batman himself. Rather, he balances a number of different sources including the primary material of Batman stories in comics, television and films with editorial dictates, critics' interpretations and available audience understandings in order to provide the most comprehensive account of Batman's history to date and the closest possible evaluation of Batman's significance as it has evolved over time.

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<sup>105</sup> Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, 30-31: 62.

*Batman Unmasked* also presents interesting possibilities for the consideration of politics and Relevance in relation to superhero texts, particularly in its discussion of the reactions to Joel Schumacher's 1995 and 1997 Batman films by fans and critics.<sup>106</sup> As Brooker notes, Schumacher's films

were identified in the press primarily by what they were not; that is, by their difference from the previous Batman [in film]. They were not Tim Burton films, they were not "dark," they were not a world away from the TV show; they were not played "straight." These distinctions, especially the last, became most explicit with *Batman and Robin*. By this point the oppositions were clearly being drawn between the two films under Burton's helm and those directed by Schumacher.<sup>107</sup>

According to Brooker, this discourse of opposition provides the means through which fans and critics policed Batman films on the grounds of their legitimacy. As Brooker again notes, "Schumacher's Batman" became "associated with all the qualities many comic fans had learned to abhor — camp, gayness, the aesthetic of the TV show."<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, the debate was "fuelled by homophobia in the quite literal sense — a fear of homosexuality, and a determination to "protect" Batman from such associations."<sup>109</sup>

Here, Brooker's analysis raises the possibility that the discussion surrounding "correct" portrayals of Batman are tied up with wider social discourses, in this case concerning sexuality and homophobia, which indicates that more may be at stake in the controversies and debates surrounding the Caped Crusader and his true significance than the meaning of a fictional character. Indeed, if, as Brooker's work seems to imply, the contestations surrounding a

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<sup>106</sup> *Batman Forever*, directed by Joel Schumacher (1995; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 1999), DVD; *Batman & Robin*, directed by Joel Schumacher (1997; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 1999), DVD.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

superhero's meaning are implicated in broader social debates, then it raises the possibility that such discussions might tell us something about the societies in which their adventures are produced and published, although perhaps in a more nuanced and less straightforward fashion than the Relevance discourse, which simply assumes a given character's inevitable correspondence to the dominant socio-political climate. Indeed, through Brooker's work, it is possible to conceive of an alternative understanding of superhero politics. Brooker's analysis indicates that superheroes may not simply reflect the politics of the societies in which their adventures are produced and published, but rather have their significance shaped by the discourses, arguments, and contestations surrounding the formation of their own meaning, debates that we might term political. According to this view, at any time multiple and contrasting significances might be attributed to Batman and, whilst the character himself may or may not provide insights into our society, the debates surrounding him and through which his various meanings are produced have the potential to be equally or more revealing.

If Batman, a character of similar longevity and cultural significance to Superman, is surrounded by a discourse of contestation and contention regarding his true meaning, it is possible to speculate that the same might be true of the Man of Steel. In fact, as a result of *Batman Unmasked's* status as the first book-length analysis of its target superhero as well as its innovative and productive approach to the politics surrounding the character it analyses, I see it as the closest available approximation to a template for my own thesis. Therefore, I follow Brooker's example in producing a balanced account of Superman's history which takes its lead from the primary material of Superman stories themselves but positions them within the industrial context in which they were produced and the broader context of American history.

However, my focus is, of course, Superman, the nature of whose character and narratives differ significantly from those of Batman. For instance, while they have not abandoned all of their fantastical elements, at least since the

1986 reboot of DC's continuity, Batman's adventures have often placed a greater emphasis on "grittier," "serious" and "more plausible" crime-fighting.<sup>110</sup> To this end, director Christopher Nolan has stressed the "realism" of his *Dark Knight* trilogy and Scott Snyder's well-received Batman comics can broadly be described as detective stories that emphasise the Caped Crusader's powers of deduction in his pursuit of a murderous psychopath, a hidden but influential secret society and a particularly "dark" incarnation of the Joker.<sup>111</sup> By contrast -- although, as we shall see in chapters Three and Four, as well as my Conclusion, similar trends can be identified in a number of Superman stories from the same period -- the Man of Steel continues to engage more prominently in science fiction narratives, with his most recent filmic incarnation, *Man of Steel*, in many respects playing out as an alien invasion story, despite its engagement with a number of contemporary current affairs connotations. Whilst these contrasts are not absolute, they are nevertheless significant enough to require that a thesis analysing Superman should take a differing approach and emphasis to one focusing on Batman. Indeed, considering that science fiction, for instance, plays a more significant role in Superman stories than in Batman narratives, the subject should feature more prominently in a study of the Man of Steel than in an analysis of the Dark Knight. Furthermore, we might expect science fiction and its associated connotations to have a more significant bearing on Superman's meaning, as well as audiences' understandings of the character. Therefore, as a means of accounting for this prominent aspect of Superman's significance, I draw upon Simon Locke's *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, which brings the perspective of a social scientist to bear against popular conceptions of science and their impact on texts from the science fiction or science fantasy genres, including superhero comics.

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<sup>110</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 116.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 93; Scott Snyder, Jock, and Francesco Francavilla, *Batman: The Black Mirror* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2011); Scott Snyder and Greg Capullo, *Batman: The Court of Owls*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2012); Scott Snyder and Greg Capullo, *Batman: Death of the Family* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2013).

Locke draws upon Richard Reynolds' structuralist study of Superhero continuity in *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* but develops his analysis to address broader issues.<sup>112</sup> He illustrates how superhero continuity is informed by the same underlying logic of rationalised coherence that underpins popular understandings of science and argues that individuals use to make sense of the world around them. He argues that, for the most part, post-Enlightenment societies no longer accept the intervention of God as an adequate explanation for strange or troubling incidents. Indeed, Locke's account, which draws upon the work of Max Weber and Howard Garfinkel, proposes that the growth of Protestant Christianity in western societies has paradoxically led, in the long term, to the disavowal of enchanted religious perspectives and to the development of the philosophy of scientific rationalism.<sup>113</sup> This rationalistic view has sought to expose the falsity of so-called enchanted visions of the world through its objective pursuit of empirically verifiable Facts.<sup>114</sup> However, Locke's argument implies that, in common with the enchanted religious perspective, scientific rationalism portrays itself "as a total cosmological vision, a definition of reality within which humanity is defined and located."<sup>115</sup> For Locke, then, scientific rationalism is not an objective perspective from which to view the world that is uncoloured by its own prejudices and assumptions. Rather, scientific rationalism is itself an enchanted vision, which fails to escape the problematic subjectivity that characterises religious superstition, and it is therefore only a rival point of view but one which has come to supplant religion as the dominant "cosmological" narrative of rationalised societies.<sup>116</sup>

Additionally, as scientific rationalism's claim to be the single means of discovering universal Truth is not necessarily an objective or self-evident

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<sup>112</sup> Richard Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992).

<sup>113</sup> Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, 42.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

certainty, this means that it must seek to protect its prevalence against the threat posed by rival opinions. As Locke points out,

to maintain the assumption of a single, common, external reality in the face of contrasting visions of that reality, scientists have generated an internal discourse consisting of a variety of standardized verbal formulations for discounting alternative views to their own. Given that scientists in controversy associate their views with the “facts,” these rhetorics of error provide means of justifying the designation of alternative views as “non-factual.”<sup>117</sup>

According to Locke, through referring to the logic of Fact versus non-Fact in its endeavour to emphasise its own objectivity and truthfulness, the discourse of scientific rationalism also provides the vocabulary through which those seeking to have their own dissenting point of view accepted by the prevailing worldview can express themselves. Locke argues that superhero stories, as science fiction or science fantasy texts which draw upon the logical underpinning of rationalistic discourse, albeit through playful and imaginative storytelling, reproduce the Fact versus non-Fact division that characterises scientific rhetoric in their constant maintenance of continuity.<sup>118</sup> Through the processes involved in maintaining a coherent superhero continuity, what is “true” or “false” in a given fictional superhero universe or character’s history is continually being revised and elaborated upon, just as scientific understandings of what is factual and non-factual constantly change as new discoveries are made, previously accepted theories are discounted and the narrative concerning what Facts are validated as Truth is continually revised.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>119</sup> Locke’s argument, as it is applied to superhero stories, is in some respects similar to Geoff Klock’s concept of the “revisionary superhero narrative.” Discussing Frank Miller’s Batman stories, Klock argues that “Miller’s revisionary realism” represents “a literal revising of the

Considering these links between superheroes and the logic of scientific rationalisation, we can hypothesise that Superman stories, which engage more prominently in discourses of science and science fiction than many heroic characters, provide insights into the currently dominant rhetoric of scientific rationalism and its uses. We can also speculate that they are particularly illustrative of the manner in which scientific rationalism is used to associate certain ideas and concepts with a sense of plausibility and objectivity, as well as the means through which such judgements, once established, are then contested following the same principles initially employed to legitimise them. Therefore, as is the case with Will Brooker's analysis of Batman, the implication of Locke's arguments is that, through their commitment to scientific principles and logic, Superman texts will shed light on the way in which cultural narratives are shaped through arguments and debates.

The works of Will Brooker and Simon Locke may be the most significant influences on my approach to Superman, but they are not the only academic texts that have informed my interest in cultural narratives and the debates through which they are both formed and challenged. Alex Evans has been similarly influential in his discussion of arguments put forward by cultural materialist Alan Sinfield in his essay "Superman is the Faultline," where he argues that even Superman narratives that might, at first glance, appear to convey a singularly dominant, hegemonic view of society are often fractured by self-contradictions and internal divisions.<sup>120</sup> Evans' analysis has increased my confidence in the possibility that Brooker and Locke's understanding of

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facts of a comic book character's history on the basis of recent interpretation. Take, for example, the design of Superman's home planet, Krypton. The rendering of a 'futuristic' world looks very different today than the rendering done in 1938. Today, however, Krypton is portrayed anew and is expected to be understood as the true rendition of how Krypton *has always* looked." In other words, just as in Locke's argument, Klock is suggesting that, in superhero continuity, Truth is perceived to be an absolute and fixed concept, even as the details from which it is constituted are revised by different creators as time progresses. However, Klock and Locke's analyses are not entirely compatible; Klock is writing in the tradition of literary theory and Locke from the perspective of a social scientist. Geoff Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (London: Continuum, 2002), 25: 31.

<sup>120</sup> Evans, "Superman is the Faultline," 123.



cultural narratives as discourses, which are defined and shaped through political contest and debate, can be successfully applied to Superman in a manner that challenges the dominant Relevance approach to the character's politics. It has also encouraged me to consider theories advocated by Alan Sinfield whose "faultlines" concept, outlined in his monograph *Cultural Politics - - Queer Reading*, introduces further possibilities regarding the issue of how cultural power is wielded through debates and has thus informed the theoretical underpinnings of my work, most obviously my discussion of the politics of the wartime and 1950s variants of Superman in Chapter Two.<sup>121</sup> Also of importance is Michael Billig's *Arguing and Thinking*.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, Billig's proposition that cultural perspectives are informed by or even formed through argument and are often constructed in relation to real or imagined opposing points of view is largely compatible with the approaches taken by Brooker, Locke, Evans, and Sinfield in its supposition that culture is always heterogeneous and that cultural narratives tend to exist in permanent conflict with differing points of view.<sup>123</sup>

Following the theoretical position presented by Brooker, Locke and others, it is possible to hypothesise that, in contrast to the prominent Relevance discourse, Superman stories do not necessarily have to be seen to directly and uncomplicatedly reflect America's supposedly homogenous but continuously evolving national character and political consciousness to be recognised as political or pertinent to reality. Indeed, through this literature review, we have encountered the possibility that, even if we do not focus our attention on their political aspects, Superman stories, as well as the debates surrounding them, might help to explain the process through which the many and varying cultural narratives that shape our understanding of the society in which we live are themselves formed and contested. The logical consequence of this hypothesis, and my discussions of various texts throughout this

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<sup>121</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics - - Queer Reading* (London: Routledge, 2005 [1994]), 4.

<sup>122</sup> Michael Billig, *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology*, new edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1987]).

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-79: 274.

literature review and methodology, is that there exists a diverse range of meanings that can be attributed to Superman and a number of political significances to his narratives which the Relevance discourse is unable to accommodate within its narrow conception of politics. It is the potential for this alternative view of Superman's politics, which places more emphasis on the ongoing dialogue through which his meaning is shaped than on his role as an uncomplicated reflection of politics and society, as well as my own conclusion that currently accepted discourses concerning the Man of Steel's meaning and history need to be interrogated, that informs this thesis and its research questions. Each of these questions will be answered in the four chapters that follow.

My first two chapters consider the first question: whether or not it is truly appropriate to evaluate Superman in political terms, to the point of identifying him with a specific party political agenda, as many adherents to the Relevance discourse have done through the suggestion that Superman was an advocate of Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s and an Eisenhower Republican in the 1950s. More specifically, Chapter One focuses on Superman's initial two years of comic book publication in 1938 and 1939 while Chapter Two analyses his development through the 1940s and early 1950s across the media of comic books, radio, film and television. The discussions pursued in these two chapters also encompass my second research question, which considers the broader concern as to whether it is adequate to examine Superman and his stories primarily through the terms of the Relevance discourse, which assumes that he serves as an uncomplicated reflection of the continuously evolving socio-political consensus of the American nation itself, even if it does not presuppose that he has any particular party political allegiance. To this end, Chapter Two, in addition to its analysis of Superman's party political allegiances of the 1940s and 1950s, discusses the concept of ideology and its function within Superman texts.

Chapter Three considers my third research question, which asks whether there is an alternative way of conceiving of Superman's politics, meaning and even Relevance, and how this might relate to the most common traditions of evaluating Superman narratives. This chapter once again focuses primarily on the comics, this time the stories from the 1950s and 1960s.

Chapter Four considers the question of how critics and historians currently perceive Superman's Relevance, what criteria they are using in their evaluations, and what might have influenced their perceptions. It examines Superman texts across different media since the 1970s but places greatest emphasis on *Superman: The Movie* and its sequels, as well as the television series *Lois & Clark* and *Smallville*.

Finally, my conclusion presents what I, following my investigations, perceive to be the most accurate portrait of Superman's political significance. Here, I also consider the question of what the implications of my findings are for both the use of the term Relevance as it is applied to Superman and prospects for the character's possible future significance, discussing this in relation to his most recent filmic incarnation, *Man of Steel*.

Before I begin my analysis proper, it is important to reiterate that, although my goal is to produce a more thorough and rigorously academic investigation into Superman's cultural and political history than has previously been provided, I cannot claim that my work on the subject is intended to be definitive. Given that my approach acknowledges that understandings of Superman may have been formed as a result of certain creators, fans, critics or historians seeking to forward a partial perspective or a particular set of priorities and presumptions, I must acknowledge that I may also be unintentionally asserting the dominance of my own subjective point of view.

One point in particular where this might be risked is in my endeavours to carve out a space for my own research against the approaches taken by others. However, as I hope that I have already demonstrated throughout the

course of this literature review and methodology, I have sought to mitigate this danger by treating the work of others with the appropriate respect and fair mindedness throughout my argument. To this end, it has been important for me to remain self-critical and to be aware that my account is, despite its endeavour to shed new light on the subject of the Man of Steel and his history, itself one intervention in an ongoing debate, albeit one that, I believe, points in an interesting new direction for the study of Superman and superheroes in general. I therefore continue to position my own opinions in relation to those of others throughout my analysis, an approach that allows readers to see my own arguments in the context of the broader discussion in which they are involved and to evaluate them in relation to other points of view. I also endeavour to honestly examine the nature of my own conclusions and ensure that any educated guesses on my part are framed as such, rather than being presented as objective, uncontested Facts.

## Chapter One: Origins, Early Politics, and the New Deal Interpretation

This first chapter addresses the initial two years of Superman's publication in comics with a view to discovering what the character may have originally meant to his target audience. In order to accomplish this, I will take my lead from previous attempts to grapple with this subject from popular historians and academics, comparing their understandings with the content of early Superman stories in the comics from 1938 and 1939 before presenting my own interpretation. As the main concern of this thesis is the political Relevance of Superman, it is significant for my purposes that one of the most prevalent strains of critical interpretation stresses the difference between the "original" Superman, who was supposedly an exponent of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, and the character as he has become known since.

This political interpretation suggests that, after initially supporting Roosevelt's New Deal, Superman subsequently transferred his allegiance to the Republican Party, or at least to conformity with the status quo, and became a protector and defender of established institutions. This view has been articulated by Larry Tye, who suggests that Superman changed from "Democratic idealist to Republican realist," Tom Dehaven, who similarly believes that by the 1950s "Superman had switched allegiance and was now, quietly but indisputably, an Eisenhower super-Republican," and academic Roger Sabin who writes of Superman that, "in his earliest outings, he had been a kind of super-social worker [. . .] reflecting the liberal idealism of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal" but then "evolved into a fantasy guardian of the world order: an all-powerful and at times slightly portly-looking conservative."<sup>124</sup> Similar ideas are held by Bob Hughes who believes that "it was clear from the start that Superman voted for Roosevelt" but as time progressed "he became a solid citizen, working with the police, not in spite of

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<sup>124</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 46; Dehaven, *Our Hero*, 89; Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels*, 61.

them,” comic book writer and editor Dennis O’Neil, who proposes “as Superman had grown more powerful physically, he had become less flamboyant personally, *safer* somehow — a Scoutmaster in cape and boots,” as well as academic Ian Gordon who argues that Superman was initially a “simple-minded liberal reformer” whose “social activism dissipated as his owners and creators grew aware of his potential as a commodity.”<sup>125</sup>

Many of these perspectives, particularly the views of Hughes, O’Neil and Tye, present a Superman whose evolution was directly in step with political and social changes within American society. Indeed, Hughes appears to see this as a key reason for Superman’s early popularity. He writes that “to the Depression-weary average American, Superman appeared to be what it took to change the world. If they couldn’t win life’s battles for real, at least it helped to know that someone was on their side.”<sup>126</sup> Even Jerry Siegel himself appears to endorse the New Deal reading in a 1975 press release:

Listening to President Roosevelt's "fireside chats" . . . being unemployed and worried during the Depression and knowing hopelessness and fear. Hearing and reading of the oppression and slaughter of helpless, oppressed Jews in Nazi Germany . . . seeing movies depicting the horrors of privation suffered by the downtrodden . . . reading of gallant, crusading heroes in the pulps, and seeing equally crusading heroes on the screen in feature films and movie serials (often pitted against malevolent, grasping, ruthless madmen)  
I had the great urge to help . . . help the despairing masses, somehow.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Hughes, introduction to *Superman in the Forties*, 6; O’Neil, “The Man of Steel and Me,” 46–58: 52; Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture*, 134.

<sup>126</sup> Hughes, introduction, 6.

<sup>127</sup> Jerry Siegel, “Superman’s Originator Puts Curse on Superman Movie,” (press release, 1975), 8.

This understanding of Superman, forwarded by many historians as well as Siegel himself, suggests that the Man of Steel appealed to people of the late 1930s because he directly addressed and engaged with the political zeitgeist of the times and the problems and injustices suffered by the ordinary public.

It is the goal of my first chapter to examine this narrative and to explore whether it is accurate to attribute such direct political significance to a commercial fantasy such as Superman. To this end, I consider whether or not the consensus that Superman was an exponent of the New Deal is a reasonable interpretation of his early stories and if the hero can be considered to be involved with political topics at all.

One of the most developed engagements with the idea that 1930s Superman stories directly reproduce the political and social mood of the historical context of their publication can be found in Thomas Andrae's "From Menace to Messiah," which construes Superman's behaviour in early stories as a more or less direct manifestation of the national psyche of the time. Andrae argues of precursors to Superman in film and literature,

they echoed Roosevelt's assumption that a just society could be secured by grafting a welfare state onto what remained a capitalist foundation; existing institutions need not be abandoned if excessive individualism and mass selfishness could be curtailed. The Superman stories thus helped to ease the transition from a collapsed laissez-faire ethic of individual success to a belief in a strong central authority under the New Deal.<sup>128</sup>

This critique seemingly applies to Siegel's original villainous conception of the "Super-Man," Dunn, who appears in the 1933 prose story "Reign of the Super-Man," and is initially a downtrodden, jobless man living on the

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<sup>128</sup> Andrae, "From Menace to Messiah," 129.

breadline until he is fed a formula by scientist Smalley.<sup>129</sup> Upon gaining powers from this serum, Dunn seeks to satiate his own greed and lust for power by fermenting international conflict.<sup>130</sup> For Andrae, this "Super-Man" "exposes the Horatio Alger ethic as a sham."<sup>131</sup> This is because, in accordance with the prevailing trend of pre-comic book "superman" stories, Dunn's self-serving and ultimately socially destructive acts of greed, present a critique of the laissez-faire model by suggesting that the untrammelled personal excess which results from unchecked individualism leads to tyranny and the collapse of social order.<sup>132</sup> Andrae also extends this critique to the Superman appearing in *Action Comics* #1 who, with his interventions in social justice, his prevention of a wrongful execution, and his halting of the actions of a wife-beater, seemingly continues this anti-individualist trend and mirrors the growing power of the state to intervene in the lives of American citizens, whilst continuing to evoke the idea that the "superman" represents an unrestrained and somewhat threatening force.<sup>133</sup> Andrae elaborates,

No longer portrayed as a neutral arbiter, the federal government came to be viewed as an infallible protector of society's welfare.

Siegel and Shuster's adaptation of the Superman for comic books reveals a transitional phase in this development. In the earliest episodes, Superman is still not incorporated into the establishment and retains his predecessor's [the villain from Siegel and Shuster's earlier text story, "Reign of the Super-Man"] demonic qualities. At first he is a lawless individual who is wanted by the police, who freely resorts to violence or

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<sup>129</sup> Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, "Reign of the Super-Man," *Science Fiction* #3 (short story, 1933), 1-2.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>131</sup> Andrae, "From Menace to Messiah," 127.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>133</sup> Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, "Superman, Champion of the Oppressed!," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Anton Kawasaki, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2006 [1938]), 3-16.



threats of violence to extort information or confessions from suspects, and who kills his adversaries when the situation demands it. Unlike his predecessors, however, Superman is selflessly dedicated to the public good. His most deeply held conviction, that he should never use his superpowers for profit and personal ambition, reflects the collectivist ethos of the nascent welfare state. This conviction is manifested in his struggle for social justice and his "dedication to assisting the helpless and the oppressed."<sup>134</sup>

As the above quotation suggests, for Andrae, the Superman of the late 1930s is simultaneously an exponent of Roosevelt's New Deal and an untamed force of individualism. Andrae tries to reconcile these tensions by suggesting that the underlying logic of the early stories was, despite Superman's seeming unruliness, entirely compatible with the principles of the New Deal. Indeed, he argues that "the social changes prescribed by the early Superman stories are easily assimilated into the New Deal philosophy of expanded governmental power to regulate the abuses of the economic system and discipline industry, provide social security and public relief, and protect the rights of workers and minorities."<sup>135</sup> According to this argument, although Superman is engaged in extra-legal activities, those actions are undertaken in the spirit of corporate "regulation," thus rendering the character compatible with the principle of "collectivism" that underpinned many aspects of the New Deal programme.<sup>136</sup> If we continue to follow the logic of this argument, we can also see an interesting correlation between the issues concerning "national housing" briefly mentioned in Roosevelt's fifth "Fireside Chat" and the content of *Action Comics* #8, which has Superman tackle the problem of

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<sup>134</sup> Andrae, "From Menace to Messiah," 130.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>136</sup> David Eldridge, *American Culture in the 1930s* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2008), 17.

slums, an example which provides some evidential support for Andrae's theory.<sup>137</sup>

However, despite the alignment of some aspects of the Superman story from *Action Comics* #8 and Roosevelt's rhetoric, there are flaws within Andrae's argument, particularly in his suggestion that the figure appearing in early *Action Comics* marks a "transitional phase" in the development of the "superman" concept. Andrae's belief that Superman's outlaw status is descended from Dunn is not entirely compatible with his previous assertion that the earlier character is a manifestation of fears concerning individualist excess. Indeed, in contrast to Dunn from "Reign of the Super-Man," it can be argued that the comic book Superman of 1938 and 1939 is neither a terrifying nor truly subversive character. As the opening incident in *Action Comics* #1, in which Superman rescues a woman named Evelyn Curry from wrongful execution, the story from *Action Comics* #8, in which Superman endeavours to redirect the energies of boys from the slums away from crime and towards "constructive channels," the story from *Action Comics* #10, in which he takes on a corrupt and vicious prison superintendent, and his tackling of reckless driving in *Action Comics* #12 all illustrate, Superman's breaking of the letter of the law is often undertaken in order to uphold its underlying principle.<sup>138</sup> Therefore, unlike Dunn from "Reign of the Super-Man," the comic book character's unlawful actions can be seen as not a consequence of his personal excess but rather of his dedication to his civic duty.

At first glance, this would appear to suggest that Andrae is at least correct in his assertion that the underlying logic of these early stories is compatible with

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<sup>137</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Fireside Chat 5: On Addressing the Critics," *Millercenter*, accessed October 6, 2014, <http://millercenter.org/president/fdroosevelt/speeches/speech-3302>; Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, "Superman in the Slums," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Anton Kawasaki, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2006 [1939]), 97-110.

<sup>138</sup> Siegel and Shuster, "Superman, Champion of the Oppressed!," 4-7; Siegel and Shuster, "Superman in the Slums," 108; Siegel and Shuster, "Superman Goes to Prison," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Anton Kawasaki, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2006 [1939]), 125-138; Siegel and Shuster, "Superman Declares War on Reckless Drivers," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Anton Kawasaki, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2006 [1939]), 153-166.

the New Deal's reformist ethic of safeguarding society through regulation. However, "reformist politics" may not be the most accurate description of Superman's agenda in the above stories. For example, although Superman does break into the Governor's house in *Action Comics* #1, it is done as a means of preventing a miscarriage of justice which could, theoretically speaking, damage the reputation of the police force if it were to come to light.<sup>139</sup> Thus, it could be suggested that Superman's actions protect the integrity of the system of law enforcement as it already exists. Similarly, in *Action Comics* #10, there are indications that Wyman, the corrupt prison superintendent that Superman tackles, is acting in violation of existing legal frameworks. He hides his maltreatment of prisoners when the Governor arrives to inspect the site and he coerces those in his charge to pretend that they are "contented" with his regime.<sup>140</sup> Superman resolves the problem by punishing Wyman, who is later convicted, and exposing the truth about him to the Governor, the established authority on such matters.<sup>141</sup> The politics of the Superman story in *Action Comics* #12 are also along the same lines: despite the fact that Superman initially tackles reckless driving by destroying a used car salesman's stock of "accidents waiting to happen," by frightening individual motorists, and tearing apart a factory whose owner uses "inferior metals and parts at the cost of human lives," he finally resolves the issue by confronting the town mayor and convincing him to "see to it that traffic laws are strictly obeyed and that driving permits are only issued to responsible drivers."<sup>142</sup>

Considering the above, we can see that if there is a problem with the established political, social, and legal systems in these stories, it results from individuals' unwillingness to act upon the responsibility that the extant laws, which underpin those frameworks, have conferred upon them. Once the responsible people have either been convicted of crimes or persuaded to

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<sup>139</sup> Siegel and Shuster, "Superman, Champion of the Oppressed!," 5-7.

<sup>140</sup> Siegel and Shuster, "Superman Goes to Prison," 128.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>142</sup> Siegel and Shuster, "Superman Declares War on Reckless Drivers," 158-160: 161:166.

change their ways, the social, political, and legal frameworks as they already exist function correctly and are not in need of reform. Even the storyline in *Action Comics* #3, where Superman confronts a mine owner with concerns about the safety of his operation, which Andrae cites as specific evidence of Superman's New Deal tintured political agenda and "class awareness," suggests that the solution to the problem should come from the mine owner himself and is therefore primarily an issue of private, personal responsibility.<sup>143</sup>

The emphasis that Superman places on the responsibility of the individual is not entirely incompatible with Roosevelt's rhetoric. Indeed, Roosevelt suggested that culpability for the Great Depression did not rest with society as a whole but rather lay at the doors of a few individuals, or, as he put it, "a selfish minority."<sup>144</sup> However, as discussed earlier, many of the solutions posed by the New Deal were informed by ideas concerning "collectivism" which can be seen to contrast with Superman's actions in the stories described above. This is because, as the above discussion is intended to demonstrate, Superman can be seen to press for individualist solutions to social problems. Through following this interpretive thread, and having read all issues of *Action Comics* and *Superman* from 1938 and 1939, it has become clear to me that the single significant exception to this seeming individualist trend is the Superman story from *Action Comics* #8, in which Superman tries to prevent boys from the slums from becoming locked into a life of crime and eventually jailed. In much of this narrative, Superman's agenda is similar to that of other stories. When young Frankie Marello is sent to a reformatory for "assault and battery," Superman is critical of the sentence, recognising the truth of the boy's mother's assertion that "he might have been a good boy except for his environment."<sup>145</sup> However, he tries to save the other children in

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<sup>143</sup> Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, "The Blakely Mine Disaster," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Anton Kawasaki, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2006 [1938]), 31-44; Andrae, "From Menace to Messiah," 130.

<sup>144</sup> Roosevelt, "Fireside Chat 5: On Addressing the Critics."

<sup>145</sup> Siegel and Shuster, "Superman in the Slums," 98: 99.

Marello's gang from both "the police and themselves" not through changing the law but by convincing them that stolen money is not "easy dough" and that, essentially, crime does not pay.<sup>146</sup> Thus, rather than trying to reform the established practices of law enforcement so that the penal system will take greater account of the difficult circumstances in which many people live when issuing punitive sanctions against them, Superman is, for most of the story, engaged in an endeavour to remould the boys with the aim of making them better conform to the expectations of society.

However, a possible break from this logic comes towards the story's end when Superman, having managed to reform the boys, decides to improve the "living conditions" that encouraged them to become involved in crime in the first place.<sup>147</sup> He proceeds to destroy the slum area of the city whilst being attacked by the army and police.<sup>148</sup> With that area of the city ruined, the authorities have no choice but to rebuild and construct modern "apartment projects," replacing the slums with "splendid housing conditions."<sup>149</sup> The conclusion to this tale does mark a departure from the general trend of early Superman narratives because here the character institutes a genuine reform of the city's infrastructure and social conditions. However, the fact that it is an exception is significant and suggests that "reformist politics" are unusual territory for Superman. Indeed, the possibility that "individualism" can, if we wish, be seen to mark most of the stories cautions against sharp assertions that Superman reflects the "collectivist" philosophy of the New Deal.

It is in fact possible to suggest that, rather than a supporter of the "collectivist" ethic of the New Deal, Superman is himself the embodiment of individualism. As of *Action Comics* #1, he has no parents or family. He also has special powers that mark him apart from the rest of society and he has a tendency to take matters into his own hands. Considering this evidence, it can

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<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

be argued that Superman's politics are actually more in line with the philosophy of Franklin D. Roosevelt's predecessor, Republican Herbert Hoover.<sup>150</sup> Hoover was a social Conservative who praised "individualism" and who believed that the "collectivist" sentiment epitomised by the "government in business" model of "socialism," which he believed characterised Roosevelt's policies, was antithetical to the principles of "self-government" that underpinned the "freedom" of the "American system."<sup>151</sup> According to this Conservative reading, it could be said that Superman's interventions articulate an understanding that further encroachment into personal freedoms by the state is unnecessary when effective individuals are allowed to take charge of difficult situations and given the freedom to solve problems unilaterally. Superman can therefore be seen to represent the supreme manifestation of this idea by taking it upon himself to correct social wrongs without any prompt from federal authorities or the proper institutions. Further evidence for such a reading can be found in the fact that Superman's socially responsible actions, particularly in *Action Comics* #9, but also elsewhere in these early stories, are undertaken in direct opposition to the representatives of state power.<sup>152</sup> Therefore, rather than acting within the spirit of the New Deal's expansion of the state, Superman can be seen to be contravening its principles by acting without the consent of the authorities, which seems to attract their ire, even when they are secretly in favour of much of what he is doing.<sup>153</sup>

The Conservative reading of Superman seems even more plausible when we consider that Siegel's press release, which appears to draw such a specific

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<sup>150</sup> Herbert Hoover, "Principles and Ideals of the United States Government," *Millercenter*, accessed October 6, 2014, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/6000>.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, "Wanted: Superman," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Anton Kawasaki, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2006 [1939]), 111-125.

<sup>153</sup> Siegel and Shuster, "Superman in the Slums," 110. That the individualist interpretation of Superman is a possible and legitimate reading of the Man of Steel's early stories is tentatively supported by Christopher Murray's analysis, which proposes that Siegel and Shuster's Superman reflected the American myth of the "self made man." Murray, *Champions of the Oppressed*, 11.

connection between the writer's authorial influences and Roosevelt's politics, is seemingly unreliable. As Gerard Jones has noted, Siegel has a history of unreliability as a narrator of the creation of Superman. The writer altered his chronology of Superman's creation several times, indicating that the invention of the character was largely his own work and that the ideas occurred to him in a single night.<sup>154</sup> By contrast, as we shall see, it is more accurate to suggest that the development Superman, as he appears in *Action Comics* #1, occurred over a number of years and that the character was still being refined even following his initial appearances in the comics.

As far as Siegel's press release is concerned, in what is perhaps an attempt to emphasise his authorial influence on Superman's early stories, Siegel has introduced into his account a fairly significant historical inaccuracy. He suggests that Superman was created to "help" the "despairing masses" and address social and political problems, including the "slaughter" of the Jews in Nazi Germany. However, whilst they had already deprived German Jewish citizens of their rights through the Nuremburg Laws in 1935, in 1938, the year of Superman's initial publication, and two years after the character was conceived in his costumed form, the Nazis, despite increasing their "discrimination" against the Jews, were still largely planning their genocidal policy.<sup>155</sup> Thus, although it is possible to suggest that part of Superman's development could have been influenced by Siegel and Shuster's distaste for the anti-Semitic rhetoric and policies of the Nazi regime, it is unlikely that the character was influenced by the Holocaust, to which Siegel's mention of "slaughter" in his press release seemingly refers, before it began. This may be an honest mistake on Siegel's part but, that said, it is surprising that he would have so easily muddled Superman's main formative influences. Rather, because Siegel has a previous history of embellishment in his covering of a fictional trip to the 1933 Chicago World's Fair and writing a review for the film

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<sup>154</sup> Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 109-110.

<sup>155</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler* (London: Penguin, 2009 [2008]), 346: 455: 454.

*King Kong*, which he had “yet to see,” in *Science Fiction* #4, and considering the fact that there are no explicit references to the Nazis in any Superman stories from 1938 and 1939, it is possible to suggest that he may be intentionally distorting the history his press release recounts.<sup>156</sup> If his reference to the influence of the actions of the Nazis on his Superman work is an embellishment, then it is logical to presume that it is possible for his account of the part played by Roosevelt’s “Fireside Chats” in forming his Superman concept to be equally misleading. Indeed, as is the case with the Nazis, Superman stories of the 1930s make no overt reference to the New Deal.

I have not undertaken this exercise to simply propose that Superman is a social Conservative rather than a reformist New Dealer. In fact, such a clear cut reading would also be problematic, as it would run against the grain of the evidence from *Action Comics* #8, which does see Superman engaged in a manner of reform, as well as Jerry Siegel’s own assertions, as articulated in his 1975 press release. Rather, my aim is to suggest that we should be cautious about making assertive statements regarding Superman’s political allegiance in this period.

A further illustration of why it may be overly presumptuous to assume that Superman stories of this era offer commentary on Real Life events, which paves the way for an alternative approach to understanding the character, can be rendered through a discussion of Brad Ricca’s analysis of the Superman story from *Action Comics* #9. In this narrative, a continuation of the plot featured in *Action Comics* #8, the chief of police hires Captain Reilly, a famous policeman with a “100% record,” to catch Superman after his destruction of “public property.”<sup>157</sup> According to Ricca, “Reilly, the celebrity detective in question, is a stand-in for Eliot Ness, who led the infamous

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<sup>156</sup> Ricca, *Super Boys*, 78.

<sup>157</sup> Siegel and Shuster, “Wanted: Superman,” 113: 112.



Untouchables in Chicago and finally brought down Al Capone.”<sup>158</sup> Ricca goes on to suggest that the appearance of Reilly in *Action Comics* #9 is intended as a reasonably serious commentary on the capabilities of Ness and law enforcement in general:

Ness, the honest-to-goodness crime fighter, was also the basis for Chester Gould’s Dick Tracy. Following his success in Chicago, Ness came to Cleveland [where Siegel and Shuster lived] as safety director in 1935. After posing for pictures, Ness formed a new group of lawmen and began sweeping reforms of a highly corrupt police department. Ness also helped form the local Boystown and won awards for dramatically lowering the fatality rate. He went after liquor and gambling. He was Superman with a badge.

But Ness would eventually leave Cleveland after a scandal-ridden divorce, only to return for a failed run for mayor in 1947. His greatest failure in Cleveland still haunted voters; they could not forget that he had failed to solve the “Torso Murders” that clutched the city around the throat from 1934 to 1938. Having claimed twelve official victims over the city’s landscape in various horrible states, the killer seemingly taunted Ness through the mail and took Cleveland to the very edge of panic. Ness as “Reilly” in *Action* is an ironic figure: not only does he not get Superman or the killer but he is symbolic of the police department’s failure to save Jerry’s father years before. Clark even refers to Reilly as a “conceited windbag.” Superman is the law in this town, complete with his own badge

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<sup>158</sup> Ricca, *Super Boys*, 159.

and uniform. Superman exposes all of the holes in the armour of law enforcement — and all of the people it failed.<sup>159</sup>

Here, as per the critical tradition of imparting Superman with Real Life significance, Ricca suggests that through the satirizing of Ness via his fictional proxy Reilly, *Action Comics* #9 is to some extent engaged in a serious critique of the failings associated with the police. However, whilst it certainly seems reasonable, and perhaps even likely, that the depiction of Reilly in *Action Comics* #9 was influenced by the persona of his real life counterpart, it is much harder to detect a serious message about law enforcement. A good deal of the narrative in *Action Comics* #9 is taken up by Reilly's competition with his amateur rival Snoop for the police's \$5000 dollar reward for Superman's capture. In fact, far from presenting a negative image of Reilly's detective skills, the story actually implies that he would have been successful in his endeavour to unmask Superman had he not "infuriated" Snoop to the point that he sabotages the investigation by turning off the lights when Reilly is about to force Clark to disclose the Superman "uniform" he is wearing underneath his clothes.<sup>160</sup> The case is finally ended in comedic fashion when Superman knocks the two rivals' heads together.<sup>161</sup>

In light of this evidence, we can see that Ricca's reading of the story as a masked critique of a specific individual is perhaps a little too assertive. If the story is intended as a satire of Ness, it is surprising that, despite the seeming inclusion of a caricature of the man himself, it does not broach any of the specifics Ricca has mentioned, even via metaphor. Indeed, it is something of a stretch to imagine his plot to unmask Superman as a stand-in for his failed attempt to apprehend Cleveland's "torso killer" because the superhero and the murderer are hardly similar. Furthermore, the story's supposed critique of Ness' ability through the implication that he, like Reilly, is a "conceited windbag" and an ultimate failure hardly qualifies as sharp satire. Even this

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 159-160.

<sup>160</sup> Siegel and Shuster, "Wanted: Superman," 123.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 124.

reading is doubtful because, as we have seen, it is not Reilly's detective skills that are responsible for his eventual defeat but his unfortunate association with the quarrelsome Snoop.<sup>162</sup> Considering these aspects of the narrative from *Action Comics* #9, it seems that this story is characterised more by a sense of fun, humour, and adventure than sincere commentary. Following these thoughts, it can be argued that a more plausible account of the Real Life content of this and other Superman stories is that, rather than using the narratives as a means to critique specific individuals, Siegel was very loosely drawing upon real life figures to gather ideas for the mostly fictionalised characters and concepts appearing in the imaginary universe that he and Shuster created. This point is supported by an early proposal to publishers written by Siegel, which makes reference to Superman's tentative ties to reality in its declaration that he "operates against a background of America's most well-known cities," but stresses the character's "astounding" qualities, focus on comedy, "adventure," and does not give any mention of his involvement in political topics and Real Life issues.<sup>163</sup>

My point is not that Ricca is necessarily "wrong" but that parallels between Superman stories and Real Life events are at best ambiguous and that we should therefore be cautious about presuming that the story in *Action Comics* #9 was designed with a serious message in mind, a reading which places too little emphasis on the comic absurdity that characterises the strip. Indeed, whilst it may be true that Siegel drew upon real people and events as inspiration for his Superman stories and it may consequently be tempting to infer that he and Shuster had serious messages to convey, it is worth noting that prior to their work on Superman, the pair were inclined towards parodies, collaborating as it seems they did on "Goober the Mighty," a Tarzan

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>163</sup> *Joanne Siegel and Laura Siegel Larson v. Warner Bros. Entertainment inc.; Time Warner inc.; and DC Comics*, no. CV-04-8400-SGL (RZx) (C.D. CA. August 8, 2009), 7, <http://court.cacd.uscourts.gov/CACD/RecentPubOp.nsf/ecc65f191f28f59b8825728f005ddf4e/d4d24ca39cb2bf3d8825741e00632755>.

spoof for their school newspaper, *The Torch*.<sup>164</sup> In fact, at an early stage in Superman's pre-publication development, Siegel peddled him to artist and potential collaborator Russell Keaton as a "humour and adventure" character.<sup>165</sup> Many humorous touches have been retained in the version of Superman that went into print in 1938 and are particularly evident in his witty quips, such as his response to a villain's exclamation of "good heavens! He won't die!" with "glad I can't say the same for you!" in *Action Comics* #2.<sup>166</sup> If Siegel and Shuster do reference Real Life events and issues in these stories, it is certainly possible to argue that they are, at the very least, filtered through a cartoonish sense of humour.

As Siegel and Shuster's engagement with Tarzan in their invention of "Goobar the Mighty" implies, it is possible to suggest that popular cultural texts had a significant influence on their work, including Superman. Indeed, as I demonstrate in the following analysis, gaining an understanding of Superman's connections to other popular texts has significant implications for how we view the character's politics.

Brad Ricca, Gerard Jones, as well as Siegel and Shuster themselves in an interview with Thomas Andrae, have provided an extensive list of inspirations for Superman.<sup>167</sup> These include the films of Harold Lloyd, the work of artists Alex Raymond, Burne Hogarth, Milt Caniff and Roy Crane (Figures 1 and 2), as well as the cinematic Popeye cartoons.<sup>168</sup> Other possible influences include Edgar Rice Burrough's *John Carter from Mars*, from which Superman's ability to "hurdle a twenty-story [*sic*] building" may have been lifted, and Clark Gable in his role as reporter Peter Warne in the screwball comedy film *It Happened One Night*, who apparently provided at least partial inspiration for Clark

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<sup>164</sup> Ricca, *Super Boys*, 156-157: 45-46.

<sup>165</sup> Jerry Siegel, letter to Russel Keaton, June 12, 1934, quoted in Ricca, *Super Boys*, 101.

<sup>166</sup> Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, "Revolution in San Monte, pt. 2," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Anton Kawasaki, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2006 [1938]), 17-40: 19.

<sup>167</sup> Ricca, *Super Boys*, 23-24; Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 111-113: 116: 150; Thomas Andrae, "Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster: Of Superman and Kids With Dreams," in *Creators of the Superheroes* (Neshannock, PA: Hermes Press, 2011), 13-55.

<sup>168</sup> Andrae, "Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster: Of Superman and Kids With Dreams," 33: 29: 28.

Kent.<sup>169</sup> In addition to all of these, Les Daniels has suggested that Lois Lane was inspired by the film series *Torchy Blane*, Tom Dehaven has argued that aspects of *Action Comics* #1 resemble the detective stories by Dashiell Hammett and Gerard Jones has also emphasised the connections between the adventure comedy elements of Superman and the tone of the 1920s films starring Douglas Fairbanks.<sup>170</sup> In fact, Superman's supposedly political status as a "champion of the oppressed" was likely lifted directly from Fairbanks' comedic adventure film *The Mark of Zorro*.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Siegel and Shuster, "Superman, Champion of the Oppressed!" 4; Ricca, *Super Boys*, 44; Andrae, "Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster: Of Supermen and Kids with Dreams," 34; *It Happened One Night*, directed by Frank Capra (1934; Los Angeles: Columbia Classics, 2006), DVD.

<sup>170</sup> Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History*, 20; Dehaven, *Our Hero*, 51; Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 27: 124.

<sup>171</sup> Siegel and Shuster, "Superman, Champion of the Oppressed!" 4; *The Mark of Zorro*, directed by Fred Niblo (1920; Beverly Hills, CA: United Artists, 2008), DVD. Significantly, in the interview where Superman's indebtedness to Fairbanks' film portrayal of Zorro is mentioned — perhaps the most detailed published interview that Siegel and Shuster ever conducted — there is no mention of Superman's early political intent or any suggestion that the character was created in response to the rise of the Nazi party in Germany. Given the emphasis that Siegel places upon the subject in his 1975 press release, we might have expected to find some reference to it. This omission provides a further indication of Siegel's inconsistency as a chronicler of Superman's creation. Andrae, "Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster: Of Superman and Kids With Dreams," 11-55.

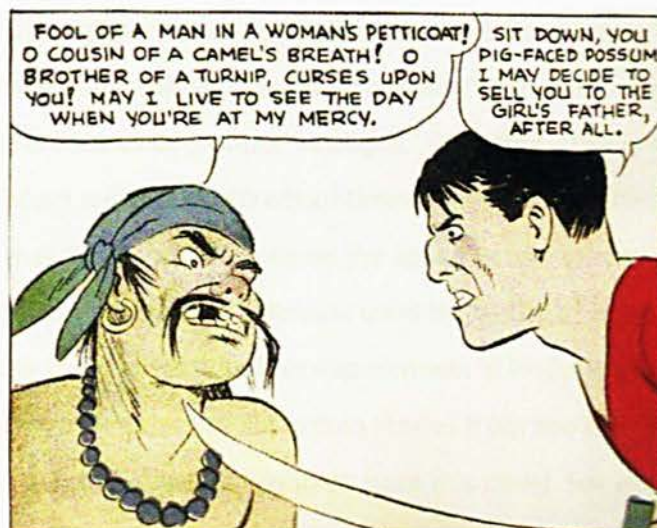


Figure 1. If we compare this image of Captain Easy with Shuster's rendering of Superman (see Figure 2, below), it is clear how much Superman's co-creator mimicked the style of Roy Crane, which helps to explain the tone of comedic adventure evident in the early Superman stories. This was just one of the many influences on the early Superman. Roy Crane, *Roy Crane's Captain Easy: The Complete Sunday Newspaper Strips*, ed. Rick Norwood, vol. 1 (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2010), 40.



Figure 2. An early Superman pose, very similar to Roy Crane's rendering of Captain Easy (see Figure 1 above). Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, "Superman Joins the Circus" in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Anton Kawasaki, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2006 [1938]), 83-96: 95.

Furthermore, the explanation of Superman's powers from *Action Comics* #1, which suggests that his abilities are not "incredible" because "even today on our world exist creatures with super-strength," including "the lowly ant" which "can support weights hundreds of times its own" and "the grasshopper" that "leaps what would be the space of several city blocks," is also very similar to the scientific rationale used by Professor Abednego Danner to justify the plausibility of his experiments in Philip Wylie's *Gladiator*.<sup>172</sup> Other elements of Superman stories from the late 1930s may have been similarly influenced by content from this novel. For example, the book's hero, Hugo Danner, tackles war profiteering by roughly threatening a steel magnate in a manner that is recognisable in Superman's actions at the end of *Action Comics* #1.<sup>173</sup> Similarly, Danner's brief attempt near *Gladiator*'s conclusion "to make the world a better place" by lending his "strength" to the "good" and his "antipathy" to the corrupt can be seen, in some respects, as a precursor to Superman's own mission.<sup>174</sup> Moving on from the influence of *Gladiator* but remaining with *Action Comics* #1, Superman's explanation of why he and the weapons magnate are not electrocuted when running along telephone lines, "birds sit on the telephone wires and they aren't electrocuted — not unless they touch a telephone-pole and are grounded," is reminiscent of the type of Fact based "scientific" justification favoured by Hugo Gernsback, editor of the science fiction pulp magazine *Amazing Stories*, in his promotion of "instructive" "scientifiction."<sup>175</sup> Similarly, Doc Savage, the Man of Bronze, a pulp magazine character, who, like Superman in later comics, has a "fortress of solitude," also shares the early Man of Steel's physical strength, super-speed, and seeming lack of interest in women.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Siegel and Shuster, "Superman, Champion of the Oppressed!", 4; Philip Wylie, *Gladiator* (Blackmask.com: 2004, 1930), 3.

<sup>173</sup> Wylie, *Gladiator*, 124-126; Siegel and Shuster, "Superman, Champion of the Oppressed!", 15.

<sup>174</sup> Wylie, *Gladiator*, 123.

<sup>175</sup> Hugo Gernsback, "A New Sort of Magazine," *Amazing Stories* #1, April 1926, 3.

<sup>176</sup> Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 85; Kenneth Robeson, "The Man of Bronze," in *Doc Savage: The Incredible Origin of the First Superhero*, ed. Anthony Tollin (Encinitas, CA: Nostalgia Ventures, Inc., 2008 [1933]), 5-67:11: 50: 56.

More tentatively, the character “Gimpy” from *Action Comics* #8 and his relationship with Frankie’s gang resembles Putty Nose and his exploitation of Tom Powers (James Cagney) and friend Matt Doyle (Edward Woods) in the film *The Public Enemy*, a movie that depicted social “privation” and which Siegel could plausibly have been referring to in his press release.<sup>177</sup>

The variety of popular cultural influences informing Superman’s development lends some diversity to the character’s early stories. Indeed, Gerard Jones has identified the inconsistent nature of the character’s early exploits. His useful analysis is worth quoting at length:

The cut and paste quality of his [Superman’s] adventures continued after his first appearance. *Action* number 2 featured a story strangely similar to one used in *Detective Comics* the year before; some panels seem to have been pasted in from another source, and in some of them Superman’s cape has obviously been drawn onto a different character. The next month brought a story about a crooked mine owner, starring not Superman but Clark Kent in disguise, as if a strip about a crusading newspaper reporter had been cobbled together with another effort in order to buy time for Superman. The fourth story was more polished, but it also contained few glimpses of Superman in costume; its centrepiece was a football sequence that echoed a chapter from Philip Wylie’s *Gladiator* and may have been a survivor of some earlier version of “the Superman.”<sup>178</sup>

Jones may be indulging in some speculation but his comments are seemingly incisive and it has indeed been revealed during the recent court case regarding the ownership rights to Superman that the script of the Superman

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<sup>177</sup> Jerry Siegel, “Superman’s Originator Puts Curse on Superman Movie,” 8; *The Public Enemy*, directed by William A. Wellman (1931; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 2013), DVD.

<sup>178</sup> Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 142.



story in *Action Comics* #4 at least had been developed from an earlier version of the character, which was formed by Siegel in conjunction with artist Russel Keaton.<sup>179</sup> Jones' analysis implies that, during the early stages of his publication, the character was still being pieced together in an ad-hoc manner from ideas and influences Siegel and Shuster had to hand in order to fill tight deadlines. This would certainly correspond with what we know of the character's development and his several variations, such as the bald-headed antihero of "Reign of the Super-Man," as well as the "he-man in a sleeveless undershirt" who featured in an unpublished strip that preceded the costumed and caped figure of *Action Comics* #1.<sup>180</sup> There is also evidence that the Superman strip was being thrown together from some of Siegel and Shuster's own earlier work involving different characters and genres in the artwork of the comic itself. As Gerard Jones has noted,

the cut-and-paste quality of his [Superman's] adventures continued after his first appearance. *Action* number 2 features a story strangely similar to one used in *Detective* the year before; some panels seem to have been pasted in from another source, and in some of them Superman's cape has obviously been drawn onto a different character. The next month brought a story about a crooked mine owner, starring not Superman but Clark Kent in disguise, as if a strip about a crusading newspaper reporter had been cobbled together with another effort in order to buy time for Superman.<sup>181</sup>

In this respect, the scruffily drawn and rather roughly hewn Superman of Siegel and Shuster's early comics, whose image has been formed through the amalgamation of elements from a variety of sources, is the visual

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<sup>179</sup> Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, "Superman Plays Football," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Anton Kawasaki, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2006 [1938]), 45-58; Joanne Siegel and Laura Siegel Larson v. Warner Bros. Entertainment inc.; Time Warner inc.; and DC Comics, at \*9.

<sup>180</sup> Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 110; Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History*, 32.

<sup>181</sup> Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 142.

embodiment of the collage of influences and genres that comprised the Superman strip itself (Figure 3).



Figure 3. One of many early images of Superman in which the character's cape appears to have been drawn on as an afterthought. Siegel and Shuster, "Revolution in San Monte, Part 2," 22.

The consequence of the piecemeal establishment of Superman's narrative formula is that, although rather rough around the edges, the early Superman's adventures are characterised by a large degree of variety in terms of the different genres they cite.

Indeed, *Action Comics* #1, aside from its science fiction opening and Superman's Flash Gordon style costume, can be generally described as an action adventure story or possibly — given its focus on Superman's attempts to save an innocent woman from execution — also a crime narrative.<sup>182</sup> The story in *Action Comics* #2 can be considered a war story and the one featured in *Action Comics* #4 a sports story in the tradition of the publication's other regular strip, " 'Pep' Morgan."<sup>183</sup> Furthermore, the narrative in *Action Comics* #5 can be identified as a heroic romance and the story in *Action Comics* #9 is for the most part a comedy.<sup>184</sup> Shot through many of these narratives is also a screwball-style relationship between Clark Kent and Lois Lane.<sup>185</sup> Considering

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<sup>182</sup> Other interesting commonalities between early Superman stories and pulp crime fiction of the 1920s and 1930s can be seen in their plot structure and pacing. Academic Erin A. Smith has discussed the "complexity and speed" of pulp crime narratives: "the sense of speed in hard-boiled fiction is intensified by its terse, almost telegraphic language, its heavy reliance on taciturn dialogue and its short, action-packed chapters." Significantly, these features can be identified in early Superman stories. For instance, *Action Comics* #1 features a convoluted plot in which Superman moves speedily from preventing the wrongful execution of an innocent woman, to giving a wife-beater a taste of his own medicine, to a date with Lois that ends in a kidnapping and finally concludes in a cliff-hanger which sees Superman apprehend an immoral war profiteer. Throughout this meandering narrative, Superman barks such short sharp threats at his opponents as "tough is putting mildly the treatment you're going to get!" This type of narrative flow and Superman's behaviour makes it easy to read Superman, at least in the instance of *Action Comics* #1, as some manner of hard-boiled detective hero. Erin A. Smith, *Hard-Boiled: Working Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000), 84; Siegel and Shuster, "Superman, Champion of the Oppressed!," 3-18: 8.

<sup>183</sup> Alex Ross, "The Flash Gordon Legacy," in *Flash Gordon: On the Planet Mongo* (London: Titan Books, 2012), 6-9: 8.

<sup>184</sup> Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, "Superman and the Dam," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Anton Kawasaki, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2006 [1938]), 59-68.

<sup>185</sup> A game of one-upmanship familiar to screwball comedy is particularly evident in the Superman story from *Action Comics* #9, where Clark Kent confronts Lois about her feelings for "someone else." Lois crushes him by announcing her preference for Superman and an apparently dejected Clark "turns into an empty office" only burst into laughter at Lois' expense and the realisation that she has so completely fallen for his disguise. This is a playful reworking of the familiar screwball convention whereby the male hero undergoes "ritualistic humiliation at the hands of the zany heroine." Siegel and Shuster, "Wanted: Superman," 114;

this, it is possible to argue that, because the early Superman bears the imprint of many popular genres, the character does not convey a strong sense of tonal unity, let alone a coherent political agenda following the principles of the New Deal or any other policy of either the left or right. Therefore, of all the critics, Gerard Jones comes closest to grasping Superman's politics when he asserts that the character's stories do not represent a "coherent political statement." I would perhaps go further to suggest that they do not have to be seen to be making any kind of political statement, nor necessarily expressing a coherent worldview.<sup>186</sup> If the political content of these stories is far from obvious, to the point that early Superman stories may not have been political at all, it is worth asking from where the New Deal interpretation has emanated. The next section of the chapter answers this question.

A clue to how and why the New Deal analysis of Superman may have been formed can be found in Erin A. Smith's examination of pulp detective stories, *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*.<sup>187</sup> Given the "working-class" identity that Smith attributes to the readership of pulp crime magazines, we might be surprised by her conclusion that "the hard-boiled detective seems an unlikely proletarian hero."<sup>188</sup> Smith points to the fact that the central characters of pulp narratives do not unproblematically adhere to the political ideologies traditionally associated with the working classes. In her words, the hard-boiled hero is not "a worker in the traditional sense, or even labor's ally."<sup>189</sup> However, despite this assertion, and drawing upon Raymond Williams' concept, she detects the "'mechanic accents' of this fiction" and recognises "its resonance with structures of feeling prominent in the early-twentieth-century worker's life."<sup>190</sup> According to Smith, the archetypal

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Wes D. Gehring, *Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy* (Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2002), 2.

<sup>186</sup> Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 174.

<sup>187</sup> Erin A. Smith, *Hard-Boiled: Working Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 16: 79.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>190</sup> Erin A. Smith, *Hard-Boiled*, 79; Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), 48.

detective hero of hard-boiled fictions “worked in a seedy neighbourhood, took flak and interference from his employers, struggled to make ends meet, spoke a tough, colloquial slang, and showed a great deal of concern with his working conditions and his autonomy on the job,” which allowed him to adequately intersect with the life experiences of working-class people.<sup>191</sup>

As we can see, Smith’s model suggests that popular fiction sometimes does draw influence from social discourses present in Real Life. However, as her analysis illustrates, it does not necessarily follow that these texts convey coherent ideological messages. They are, in fact, ambivalent.<sup>192</sup> According to Smith, what pulp crime narratives can be seen to engage with on an implicit level are broader concerns regarding the changing culture surrounding work within the United States during the early twentieth century. Smith writes,

the workaholic private eyes who filled *Black Mask*’s pages between the wars had everything to do with changes in the structure of work in the early decades of the twentieth century. Scientific management pioneered by Frederick Winslow Taylor challenged workers’ notions about the links between manhood, skill, and autonomy at work. These challenges were most acutely felt by the skilled workers, who were disproportionately native-born or earlier immigrants from northern and Western Europe. Pulp detective fiction was involved in a renegotiation of these men’s gender and class identities.

In other words, one of the ways working men appropriated these tales was as allegories about workers’ control and autonomy. Although scientific management dates from the 1910s, major conflicts between labor and management over its implementation on a significant scale came in the late ‘20s and

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<sup>191</sup> Smith, *Hard-Boiled*, 79.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

early '30s. This places hard-boiled pulp fiction squarely in a time characterized by intense struggles over who would control the pace and method of production. These struggles informed both the form and subject matter of hard-boiled fiction in complex and politically contradictory ways. Although the narrative structures of hard-boiled fiction were continuous with the logic of scientifically managed work, the plots were used by readers to voice opposition to the deskilling of work and to evoke a powerful nostalgia for the culture of artisans.<sup>193</sup>

Following this account, pulp narratives were informed by changes within the social fabric and in the day-to-day lives of the working-class, which eroded workers' sense of masculine autonomy. In this context, pulp detective stories provided a new outlet through which men could identify themselves with traits associated with manliness:

Pulp ads hailed [. . .] a working-class man, concerned with getting autonomous, well paid-work, practical education and products to enhance his embattled manliness. Moreover, pulp detective fiction paid a great deal of attention to the skills needed to navigate commodity culture and the ability to read gender, class, and power relationships from the self-presentations of others. These magazines were engaged in making workers feel at home with commodities, in shaping them into consumers. At the same time, the needs and desires of working-class readers determined the kinds of appeals advertisers could make and the kinds of product they could promote.<sup>194</sup>

According to this logic, a story in which, for example, Sam Spade tackles a murder may not explicitly acknowledge that it is "about" manliness but,

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 80-81.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 11.

through the actions of its rough, masculine hero, it may nonetheless be heavily inflected with widely held cultural understandings of what it means to be a working-class man in early twentieth century American society. Given the fictional nature of these stories, which we may expect to complicate attempts to draw direct parallels between their content and Real Life, Smith may be leaning a little too heavily on the correlation between the story material of these magazines and the social conditions experienced by their readers. However, her analysis raises provocative implications. If pulp fictions reproduce elements of working-class perspectives and experiences, it is possible to speculate that some concepts and ideas which inform political ideologies and arguments may be present in these narratives, not because they are intentionally included to forward an ideological agenda, but because they tend to be informed by the same shared cultural understandings and commonplaces of everyday life. Thus, although readers may identify with such elements as the “seedy neighbourhood” that the detective inhabits or the overbearing, interfering tendencies of his employers, and these motifs may have elsewhere been utilised by left-wing political propaganda narratives directed towards the working-classes, they do not in and of themselves denote that a story which features them adheres to that political agenda. Similarly, following this thread, it can be suggested that pulp stories’ evocations of the desirability of autonomy and individualism as aspirational goals do not always denote a right-wing stance. Rather, it is perhaps the case that concepts which are pertinent to the way a working-class audience may view the world are included within the pulp narratives Smith describes at least partially to make a commercial text, written “by men of more wealth and education than the readers targeted,” appeal to their intended audience and appear to engage with the concerns that inform their everyday lives.<sup>195</sup>

Smith’s discussion of pulp fiction narratives is relevant to the origins of the New Deal reading of Superman because, as I suggested earlier, in the process

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 11.

of constructing the Man of Steel's early stories, Siegel and Shuster drew upon many and varied popular cultural texts, a good deal, if not all, of which may have sought to engage with their readers by articulating cultural understandings familiar to them. It may therefore be the case that some fragmentary elements of the "collectivist" ideas which underpinned the New Deal filtered through contemporary culture into Superman in an ad-hoc and accidental fashion. If this is true, and the example of *Action Comics* #8 suggests that it is, it is possible to argue that the dispersed and diluted nature of these influences would render the New Deal interpretation possible but far from self-evident.

However, we can begin to see how the reading may have come to light and then become prevalent if we pursue a broader investigation of how readers construct logical, internally coherent narratives from dispersed and fragmentary textual cues, which do not, on their own, denote an obvious and readily available textual meaning. To this end, in the following paragraph, I study the manner in which elements of the Nietzschean ideal of "the superman" filtered into Siegel and Shuster's character through Wylie's *Gladiator* and were subsequently woven by some cultural commentators into a coherent narrative which cast Superman as a fascist.<sup>196</sup> I then demonstrate how such partial readings can become broadly accepted through an engagement with Will Brooker's study of the "Dark Knight" interpretation of Batman, with a view to applying my findings to the New Deal understanding of Superman.

As mentioned previously, the comic book Superman was influenced by Wylie's character in several ways. However, despite similarities in both characters' special powers and experiences, Hugo Danner and Superman differ significantly in their attitudes towards "normal" humans. Indeed, after having spent most of *Gladiator* enjoying the affections of women and the

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<sup>196</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1974 [1961]), 42.



prestige occasioned by his own athletic prowess before failing in a brief and rather belated attempt to use his special abilities to aid mankind, Danner effectively concludes that his limitations are the fault of ordinary men:

his tragedy lay in the lie he had told to his father: great deeds were always imminent and none of them could be accomplished because they involved humanity, humanity protecting its diseases, its pettiness, its miserable convictions and conventions, with the essence of itself — life. Life not misty and fecund for the future, but life clawing at the dollar in the hour, the security in platitudes, the relief of visible facts, the hope in rationalization, the needs of skin, belly, and womb.<sup>197</sup>

Here, helping ordinary people seems purposeless because, by their very nature as humans, they are inhibited by their natural inequities and cannot hope to aspire to the manner of brilliance that Danner seeks to accomplish. Therefore, every attempt by him to lift them to greatness inevitably results in failure and Danner's own disillusionment. Underpinning this attitude is logic familiar to Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy regarding "the superman" from "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" and Zarathustra's assertion that "man is something to be overcome."<sup>198</sup> In line with Nietzsche's philosophy, it is certainly possible to suggest that at this point in the novel's narrative, Danner, who is the manifestation of the superior next level of human physical and mental development, sees mankind as "a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment."<sup>199</sup>

As I have indicated above, despite the imprint that Wylie's work appears to have left on Siegel and Shuster's Superman, the Nietzschean ideal that Danner's characterisation articulates is in many ways dissimilar to the attitude

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<sup>197</sup> Wylie, *Gladiator*, 132.

<sup>198</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 41.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

of the early comic book character. This is because the latter's goodness in the somewhat muddled, inconsistent world that he inhabits is not defined by abstract and coherent philosophies of greatness but primarily through his specific interventions in the lives of human beings through which, in contrast to Danner's detached attitude towards them, he demonstrates his commitment either to aiding them or encouraging them to help themselves.

The numerous correspondences and dissimilarities that exist between the conceptions of "the superman" found in *Gladiator* and *Action Comics* suggest that the Nietzschean ideal has been transferred from the former to the latter but in, at most, a partial and fragmentary form. Considering this, it is, at first glance, surprising that such an incomplete concept can still be used as the basis for a coherent political interpretation of Superman. However, although they may present only a partial image of the Nietzschean ideal, the imprints left on Superman by Wylie's novel and retained in subsequent comics in later years have provided enough evidence to support a critical trend that interprets Superman as an articulation of "the Nietzsche-Nazi myth of the exceptional man who is beyond good and evil."<sup>200</sup> This strain of interpretation had several advocates, including — as is reported by Jones — Sterling North, literary editor of the *Chicago Daily News*, and — according to Tye — the periodical *Catholic World*.<sup>201</sup> However, perhaps the most prominent exponent of this type of view was psychologist Fredric Wertham. In his work, much maligned by comic book fans, *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham writes of Superman:

[. . .] Superman (with the big S on his uniform — we should, I suppose, be thankful that it is not an S.S.) needs an endless stream of ever new submen, criminals and "foreign-looking" people not only to justify his existence but to even make it possible. It is this feature that engenders in children either one

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<sup>200</sup> Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York, NY: Reinhart & Company, 1954), 97.

<sup>201</sup> Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 170; Tye, *Superman*, 128.

or the other of two attitudes: either they fantasy themselves as supermen, with the attendant prejudices against the submen, or it makes them submissive and receptive to the blandishments of strong men who will solve all their social problems for them — by force.<sup>202</sup>

Even though Wertham was writing in the 1940s and 1950s, subsequent to the appearance of Superman's original adventures, and he was probably not specifically discussing the early comic books written by Siegel and Shuster, he does not specify the particular iteration of Superman to which he is referring.<sup>203</sup> Thus, he appears to make reference to the character in general and his comments can be legitimately brought to bear against the Superman stories of the late 1930s. Indeed, the differentiation made by Wertham between the "Nietzsche-Nazi" Superman and the "submen" is, in fact, a reasonably fair summary of the relationship between the Superman of the late 1930s comics and those he fights. His toying with, for example, Norvell in *Action Comics* #1 by picking him up and taking him on a frightening airborne excursion, as well as his response to the munition magnate's terrified plea of "take me down! Take me down!" with a nonchalant quip about the "view" can certainly be interpreted as an indifferent response by the hero to the sufferings of a lesser being.<sup>204</sup> Thus, even though his threatening behaviour is undertaken with the aim of helping honest humans, Superman can be seen to act as though he is set apart from ordinary people, especially criminals, to the extent that he finds their suffering amusing. Therefore, just as Nietzsche's ideas were reworked by Hitler to justify the dictator's own ideals regarding the racial supremacy of the Aryan people, so following Wertham's logic, we could make a similar case for Siegel and Shuster's character.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 34.

<sup>203</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 128-130; Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, 101.

<sup>204</sup> Siegel and Shuster, "Superman, Champion of the Oppressed!," 16.

<sup>205</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, 145: 180-181.

In light of these thoughts, Siegel and Shuster's Superman now appears to utilise the differentiation between "the superman" and the ordinary individual posed by Nietzsche and then Danner in Wylie's *Gladiator* as the foundational theme for stories that follow a similar logic to that which enabled Nazism. Consequently, Superman stories can, if the reader wishes, be seen to imply that it is only just and proper for the strong to triumph over the weak and racially inferior, even though such an interpretation places an unjudicial level of emphasis on Superman's tendency to overpower his enemies as opposed to his inclination to help other humans.

There are many flaws to Wertham's engagement with comic book texts, which seem conditioned from the outset by conclusions he has already made, such as his opinion that most comics, superhero books included, are "crime" comics, which "lead" children into "temptation to commit delinquencies."<sup>206</sup> Indeed, an interpretation that applies Wertham's thoughts concerning Superman to the stories of the 1930s would, like the psychiatrist's own arguments, be selective and possibly too keen to emphasise the Man of Steel's tendency to "dominate" the people he interacts with over and above his inclination to aid them. An interpretation like this, which places emphasis upon particular textual cues and connotations, in this case the link between Superman, the philosophies of Nietzsche, and the appropriation of the latter by Nazism, to the neglect of others, would therefore present an unfairly selective and limited understanding of the character's early stories. However, the elucidation of this possible, if rather narrow, interpretation of Siegel and Shuster's Superman can be used to forward a significant point. It is feasible for readers to construct coherent political interpretations of an entertainment character from popular fiction based on a selective engagement with textual content. Such an approach emphasises the importance of textual elements which support the point the reader is forwarding and which play down aspects that serve to contradict their view. Wertham's comments regarding

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<sup>206</sup> Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, 114; Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 33: 80.

Superman may have, in fact, been too selective to be convincing. Indeed, it seems that, in contrast to the effect that *Seduction of the Innocent* had on Batman's diegesis, there is little evidence to suggest that it had a similar influence upon Superman comics.<sup>207</sup> Certainly, the links Wertham draws between Superman and the pseudo Nietzschean philosophy expounded by the Nazis conflicts to a large degree with evidence from wartime comics, some of which see Superman fight the fascists.<sup>208</sup> However, by examining Will Brooker's work on Batman, we can see that it is possible for partial and selective readings like Wertham's to become mainstream and even dominant.

According to Brooker, the currently dominant, supposedly "realist" "Dark Knight" interpretation of Batman, which has influenced the tone of the most recent film trilogy from director Christopher Nolan, has no foundation in "a terminal point of 'truth' or absolute origin."<sup>209</sup> Indeed, Brooker argues,

the earliest Bob Kane creations, often held up as a definitive ur-text and source of the "authentic" Batman, are cartoonish and crude in their artwork, dialogue and storytelling. The 1970s O'Neil and Adams stories [ . . . ] can equally be read as campy, overblown melodrama. The 1960s TV series is arguably more "realistic" than any comic book, simply through its use of filmed live action rather than drawn interpretations. Frank Miller's *All-Star Batman and Robin* goes to such an extreme of dark, gritty machismo that it arguably becomes camp parody.<sup>210</sup>

Here we can see that, like Wertham's suggestion that Superman is a Nazi, the "realist," "dark," and "gritty" interpretation of Batman that currently holds

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<sup>207</sup> Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, 146; Dehaven, *Our Hero*, 86.

<sup>208</sup> Jerry Siegel and Ed Dobrotka, "Destroyers From the Depths," *Superman* #20, January-February 1943, 18-30; Jerry Siegel and Sam Citron, "Meet the Squiffles," *Superman* #22, May-June 1943, 2-13; Don Cameron and Ed Dobrotka, "There'll Always Be a Superman," *Action Comics* #62, July 1943, 2-14.

<sup>209</sup> Will Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, 182.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

precedence has been constructed via a selective reading of the character's historic adventures, especially those early tales by Bob Kane, which have been reclaimed as "realistic," a viewpoint that exists in tension with their often fantastical elements.<sup>211</sup> Through Brooker's analysis, it appears that the interpretation that identifies an authentically "realistic" Batman amongst the plethora of inconsistently toned narratives featuring the character has been formed subsequent to his original appearance in order to serve a particular "agenda."<sup>212</sup> Brooker considers that the "agenda" behind this often represents an attempt to delegitimise homosexual interpretations of Batman in favour of a more mainstream heterosexual view projected by the "darker" version of the character. Consequently, because Batman's "dark" and "gritty" variation is rhetorically framed as the authentic, natural incarnation and the camp, homosexual interpretation the aberration, the promotion of "Dark Knight" Batman can be seen as an intervention in wider debates regarding sexuality and one that is designed to endorse normative heterosexuality at the expense of its aberrant "other."<sup>213</sup>

Looking back to my earlier comments regarding how the prevailing political readings of 1930s Superman, or those interpretations which cast him as a figure who engages with Real Life problems, place too little emphasis on the comedic and entertainment values of the character, it can be suggested that there are some tentative parallels between the dominant but partial "Dark Knight" readings of Batman and the prominence of the New Deal interpretation of Superman. Just as we can see that the interpretation of Bob Kane's Batman as "realistic," "dark," and "gritty" is an overly narrow retrospective reclamation of the character designed to forward a specific heterosexual, or indeed homophobic, agenda, so it is possible to suggest that the interpretation that constructs Superman as a political figure is a similarly

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

retroactive reconstruction of the character intended to forward a principle that has import beyond the comic book stories themselves.

It can, in fact, be suggested that the New Deal interpretation of Superman has been partially constructed by Siegel himself in order to forward the intended purpose of his 1975 intervention. Siegel's press release is indeed a retrospective account of Superman's creation and was produced at a time when *Superman: The Movie* was in production and, as Gerard Jones has reported, was expected to make Warner Bros. millions of dollars.<sup>214</sup> Siegel was trying to give voice to the injustice that he felt had been inflicted upon him in the hope of drawing attention to his plight of having lost the rights to his creation. He may therefore have forwarded the New Deal interpretation of Superman in order to achieve the goal of receiving some financial recompense for the creation that he believed had been stolen from him. We can infer that, to this end, Siegel may be overemphasising the purposefulness with which he invented Superman in his suggestion that the character's apparently specific, political agenda is a consequence of his authorial presence and direction.

The press release can thus be regarded as an attempt to weave a coherent political message and an impression of the writer's robust authorial perspective from a selective interpretation of specific fragments found within a relatively diverse and inconsistent group of texts. In other words, rather than a truly factual account of Superman's creation, Siegel's 1975 press release can be seen as an attempt to construct a consistent, politically motivated authorial intention where there wasn't one before or where, perhaps, a different one had previously existed. Consequently, it is perhaps more accurate to view Siegel's account of Superman's creation as an interpretation that is just as partial and limited as Wertham's linkage of fragments of Nietzschean philosophy to form the Nazi reading of the

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<sup>214</sup> *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner (1978; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 2006), DVD; Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, xi.

character. However, it is more convincing because of its association with Siegel, a possibility that seems especially plausible if we consider Gerard Jones' claim that, "Jerry Siegel was the first to bring the history of the [comic book] business to public awareness."<sup>215</sup> If Jones is correct, it seems possible that Siegel's intervention is the origin of, and trendsetter for, subsequent engagements with the history of the industry. Jones' analysis certainly seems to suggest this:

the history of the comic book has been told by those who sympathize with those who got rooked. The men who got rich from them kept their mouths shut. The men who founded the companies, bought the characters, and created the multimedia marketing empires kept their stories to themselves and let the writers and cartoonists write the history.<sup>216</sup>

Although no history that I have encountered explicitly cites Siegel's press release as the source for their New Deal interpretation of Superman, evidence for the continuing currency of his account is provided by the fact that, despite the emergence of alternative interpretations of the seeming injustice surrounding the sale of Superman to DC Comics, the notion persists that it was a "swindle."<sup>217</sup> These indicators notwithstanding, it is interesting that, despite the paucity of explicitly pro-New Deal content in the 1930s stories themselves, Siegel's press release is not often recognised as the origin of the political interpretation of Superman. This oversight on the part of historians may not be intentional. Indeed, a consideration of Harold Garfinkel's theories concerning the "documentary method of interpretation" may lead us to an understanding of how Siegel's 1975 account could have influenced subsequent engagements with Superman's history, to the extent that the

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<sup>215</sup> Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, xiv.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Morrison, *Supergods*, 12; Tye, *Superman*, 29.



writer's retrospective politicisation of the character has been reproduced in later histories as an apparently self-evident Truth without attribution.<sup>218</sup>

The documentary method of interpretation is, as defined by Garfinkel, derived from and "recognizable for everyday necessities of recognising what a person is 'talking about' given that he does not say exactly what he means, or in recognizing such common occurrences as mailmen, friendly gestures, and promises."<sup>219</sup> It is therefore an illustration of how Common Sense knowledge can be drawn upon by individuals as a "resource" to aid their navigation through "everyday life."<sup>220</sup> According to this mode of interpretation, "a society's members encounter and know the moral order as perceivedly normal courses of action-familiar scenes of everyday affairs, the world of daily life is known in common with others and with others taken for granted. They refer to this world as the 'natural facts of life' which, for members, are through and through moral facts of life."<sup>221</sup>

Garfinkel continues,

familiar scenes of everyday activities, treated by members as the "natural facts of life," are massive facts of the members' daily existence both as a real world and as the product of activities in the real world. They furnish the "fix," the "this is it" to which the waking state returns one, and are points of departure and return for every modification of the world of daily life that is achieved in play, dreaming, trance, scientific theorizing, or high ceremony.<sup>222</sup>

Here, the social scientist is suggesting that individuals' sense of the world and their own place within it are conditioned by what they already know.

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<sup>218</sup> Howard Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008 [1967]), 78.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 75: 35.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

Furthermore, due to the fact that such understandings are often “held in common with others,” they are perceived to indicate the existence of a single, coherent world comprised of mutually comprehensible Truths. According to Garfinkel, the documentary method of interpretation

consists of treating an actual appearance as “the document of,” as “pointing to,” as “standing on behalf of” a presupposed underlying pattern. Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of “what is known” about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other.<sup>223</sup>

Thus, for Garfinkel, the documentary method of interpretation, as it is practiced by ordinary people, is characterised by a tendency to interpret isolated phenomena as evidence of a larger, commonly accessible “pattern” or narrative. It is a self-reinforcing means of investigation because individuals’ present perspectives are shaped by the ordering of past experiences into coherent, seemingly concrete and logical narratives according to which all new experiences are evaluated. As we can see here, an individual’s engagement with new phenomena is undertaken via the conceptual frameworks and attendant assumptions that have been developed from their ordering of past experiences and knowledge into a coherent narrative that demarcates, and anchors them to, their place within society and the “real world.” As a result of this process, they are more likely to gravitate towards interpretations of new information that render it consistent with their existing worldview.

Considering the implications of Garfinkel’s theory, we can suggest that critics who revisit Superman’s early stories do so with a preconceived interpretative framework or “pattern” in mind, an approach that has been conditioned by

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 78.

prior engagements with the subject and according to which newly encountered textual evidence is perceived. Thus, we can see that these historians, like those critics who favour Batman's darker incarnations, or Wertham in his reworking of Superman in accordance with his own established perceptions of comics, may be performing a form of "bricolage" that is consistent with the practice of Garfinkel's documentary method of interpretation.<sup>224</sup> They are engaging with this practice by constructing readings of Superman stories, which conform to established understandings of the character's early politics and which reaffirm their author's existing assumptions, from only dispersed fragments of textual evidence. Upon seeing a few textual signifiers that tentatively appear to give weight to the expected pattern, Superman historians perhaps do not feel the need to challenge the established New Deal interpretation of the character's early stories. This is because they are working from the assumption that such isolated, fragmentary significances as Superman's status as a "champion of the oppressed" and his reforming behaviour in *Action Comics* #8 are evidence enough to reaffirm the already established preconception that a broader political framework underpins the narratives.

In light of the above theory, we can suggest that Siegel's political interpretation of Superman, as well as his story of the character's invention, have become established as an accepted wisdom. We can also speculate that the general acceptance of his view may be further entrenched by the fact that many critics have been writing since the 1970s and 1980s, a period during which overt political Relevance and Realism became accepted as legitimate discursive terrain for superhero stories.<sup>225</sup> This now common understanding may further encourage commentators and historians to anachronistically seek coherent political frameworks in texts that were published before Relevance became popular. Indeed, the prominent Relevance discourse may entice authors into leaning on such seemingly powerful evidence as Siegel's 1975

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<sup>224</sup> Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, 131.

<sup>225</sup> Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 151.

account, which is conducive to an interpretation that privileges the political potential of Superman's early stories.

The result of my educated speculation is that it is plausible that the New Deal Superman is a retrospective revision of the 1930s character that may have initially developed from a narrow account of the character's history forwarded by a man with a vested interest in how Superman's significance, and his own role in shaping that meaning, is perceived. If we follow this logic to its conclusion, we can see that the political New Deal interpretation of early Superman is thus an understandable but limited conception, and that the connected idea, which suggests that the character's popularity stems from his correspondence to the political zeitgeist of the times and his direct engagement with the struggles of Real Life individuals, does not provide a truly adequate account of his original appeal.

This possibility raises the question of how we should evaluate the original meaning and appeal of 1930s Superman. An answer to this is indexed by my previous mention of the generic variety of early Superman stories, which tapped into a number of popular cultural trends. Again, as discussed above, despite the politically focussed account of the creation of Superman offered in Siegel's press release, the character, as he initially appeared, seems to have been constructed from a rough alignment of diverse influences, which does not present a clear authorial voice but rather a jumble of different genres and concepts that have been incorporated and recycled from earlier texts. In this respect, we may see Siegel and Shuster as Will Brooker sees Christopher Nolan, the director of the *Dark Knight Trilogy*: as Barthian "scriptors."<sup>226</sup>

We can draw this connection because Brooker's description of Christopher Nolan's "role in selecting and stitching together elements from existing Batman texts into a new tapestry" resembles the creative process that

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<sup>226</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, 9; Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image — Music — Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142-148: 146.

spawned Superman.<sup>227</sup> According to this formulation of authorship, the “act of creation lies in assemblage, an awareness of intertextual contexts, and a contribution to a broader, cultural conversation, rather than a claim to pure intention.”<sup>228</sup> My intent here is not to diminish Siegel and Shuster’s role as the creators of Superman or their talent. Rather, I mean to suggest that in the piecemeal development of their Superman concept over a number of years, Siegel and Shuster drew upon and then recycled a number of elements and significances from existing cultural products to create an original and successful amalgamation of established ideas and concepts. It is the association of such numerous influences that, in fact, provides a more plausible explanation of Superman’s appeal than his expression of a political message that resonates with American society. This idea can be further elaborated if we consider the theories outlined by Martin Barker and Kate Brooks in *Knowing Audiences — Judge Dredd, its Friends, Fans and Foes* in conjunction with earlier audience studies from closer to the time of Superman’s initial publication.

Studying audience responses to the 1998 film *Judge Dredd*, Barker and Brooks propose a new model for evaluating the public’s engagement with cinema, “SPACES (Site for the Production of Active Cinematic Experiences)”, which takes greater account of audiences’ active involvement in both their reasons for choosing to watch particular films and their viewing experiences.<sup>229</sup> In a manner that can be seen as similar to the mode of textual engagement offered by Garfinkel’s documentary method of interpretation, Barker and Brooks suggest that people’s reactions to films are conditioned by their established preconceptions:

We propose SPACE as a semi-technical term, whose acronymic properties nicely sum up our meaning! A SPACE is a model of possible orientation to a film, covering at least the following

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Barker and Brooks, *Knowing Audiences*, 154.

aspects: reasons for going; expectations of a film; preparations; choice of cinema (or video) and company; way of participating in the film; pleasures and dislikes, surprises and disappointments; judgements; and wind-down and aftermath.<sup>230</sup>

Barker and Brooks then continue to outline how the different SPACES, or orientations, inhabited by audiences are characterised by variant expectations.<sup>231</sup> For example, the expectations of those who inhabit the “Action-Adventure SPACE” are defined by

pleasure (thrills, excitement) in experiencing the dramas of the “macho” charismatic hero (who is huge, awesome), whose strength and prowess is being tested. These films are “just watched,” “just enjoyed” — you don’t analyse them, you don’t think about them: they begin, they do something (preferably physical) to you, they end — end of experience! There is in fact an overwhelming sense of experiencing such films in the present tense, with little sense of past or future to the process.<sup>232</sup>

By contrast, viewers inhabiting the “Film-Follower SPACE” experience the cinema as

a rather special place, with “magical” properties and with its own traditions and languages which must be learnt and updated. So there are languages of expertise (involving directors, direction styles and techniques, actors and acting), and histories (both general and specific to a film’s progress), and a sense of apprenticeship towards these. A new film contributes to the tradition and to the magic. This is about

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 154-175.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 155.

being “in the know”; a language of both formal critique (film studies) and anecdote (stories of, in and around the industry). Finally there is an overarching language of appreciation.<sup>233</sup>

Here we can see that Barker and Brooks’ model of viewership proposes that the appeal of a film, the way in which it is engaged with, and how its overall meaning is construed and evaluated vary depending upon the orientation of the viewer. Although Barker and Brooks’ theories were outlined in 1998 and, in the 1940s, a time much closer to Superman’s initial publication, some theories relating to audiences’ responses to popular culture were directed towards emphasising “a passive audience in thrall to a soulless, degrading mass culture,” there are other studies from the decade whose findings are not too much at variance with those of Barker and Brooks.<sup>234</sup>

Indeed, despite being written about political propaganda and not entertainment material like comic books, Paul F. Lazarsfield, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet’s study “The People’s Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign” demonstrates that 1940s audiences responded differently to mass media texts depending on their prior orientation towards political discourses.<sup>235</sup>

The study suggests that, for example, those who were generally engaged in politics and who had “strong partisan views” were more likely to pay close attention to election propaganda in the mass media than less politically interested audience members but were unlikely to be swayed by it.<sup>236</sup> At variance to those of strong partisan views were “the less interested people who relied more on conversations and less on formal media as sources of

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>234</sup> Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn, “Moral Panic and Censorship: The Vulnerable Audience,” in *The Audience Studies Reader*, ed. Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn (London: Routledge, 2003), 51-53: 52.

<sup>235</sup> Paul F. Lazarsfield, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, “The People’s Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign,” in *The Audience Studies Reader*, ed. Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn (London: Routledge, 2003 [1944]), 13-18.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 14.

information.”<sup>237</sup> Although in some respects this study still appears to be underpinned by the logic of the “passive audience” in its suggestion that “person-to-person influence reaches the ones who are more susceptible to change, and serves as a bridge over which formal media of communications extend their influence,” it does begin to hint that how and why an audience member may have responded to a text was, even in the 1940s, predicated upon the perspective that they brought to it.<sup>238</sup> Robert K. Merton’s *Mass Persuasion* goes further in emphasising the critical faculties of audiences, outlining categories of respondents to singer Kate Smith’s War Bond marathon radio promotion. The different groups include the “Predisposed Bond Buyer,” the “Susceptible Bond Buyer,” “Detachment and Decision,” and “Divided Loyalties.” Here, Merton’s categorisation of the contrasting audience types helps to illustrate how different listeners’ existing perspectives affected the way they engaged with and interpreted Smith’s appeals, in a manner that is not too dissimilar to the approach emphasised by Barker and Brooks’ coinage of the term “SPACES.”<sup>239</sup>

Even though Barker and Brooks were writing about film audiences and, by contrast, the 1940s studies were discussing propaganda, their compatible shifting of the focus from authorial intent to audience perspective in the study of meaning has significant consequences for my approach to early Superman texts. Although it would perhaps be rather futile to speculate which specific categories may have best described audience orientations towards comic books over seventy years ago, we can at least infer from the studies cited above that people of the time responded to mass media texts in different ways. In fact, as Barker has reported, some studies from the time, notably Wolfe and Fiske’s study of a “sample of 104 American children” did, to some extent, indicate that comic book readers perceived the texts in a variety of ways, although, as Barker also points out, the conclusions of these

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Merton, *Mass Persuasion*, 115: 121: 130: 135.



investigations are limited in their tendency to be prejudiced by the preconceptions of the academics conducting them.<sup>240</sup>

Following the terminology of Barker and Brooks, it is feasible that readers inhabiting different SPACES may have brought diverse expectations to Superman's early narratives, many of whom could have found their individual preferences satisfied by any one the range of popular cultural influences and attendant sub-genres, from screwball comedy and crime to science fiction, contained within the character's stories. Indeed, given that *Action Comics* was itself originally an anthology of different features — from crime to comedy — it is perhaps unsurprising that "Superman," which contains elements from many of the genres present in the early issues of the book, soon became the most popular strip. It perhaps provided material that could cater for numerous different readers who may have been initially drawn to the comic by the presence of a particular story from their favourite genre amongst the mélange of different types of narrative offered by the publication. Significantly, this theory explains Superman's appeal without recourse to any suggestion that he was engaged in Real Life issues or politics.

Before I proceed further, it is important to consider a possible challenge to my interpretation. It is feasible that a flexible and multiple figure like Superman risks being so diverse and dispersed in his narrative repertoire that his identity dissolves and he ceases to be convincing as a distinct character. According to this theory, diversity would lead not to commercial success but to indistinctness, brand dissolution, and ultimately failure. Why this did not happen to Superman needs to be addressed and can be understood if we return once more to Will Brooker's analysis of Batman. Brooker offers an explanation of how the threat of dispersal and dissolution may be mitigated in his "Batman genre" concept, which suggests that

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<sup>240</sup> Katherine M. Wolfe & Marjorie Fiske, "The Children Talk About the Comics," *Communication Research* (New York, NY: Harper & Bros., 1949), 3-50, quoted in Barker, *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*, 245.

within a “Batman genre story,” variation would be allowed, indeed expected, within a set of familiar rules, just as was the case in the classical Hollywood genres. Some of the codes would always remain — a Bat-costume, gadgets, crime-fighting, Gotham — but some would be missing or altered. Batman might not be Bruce Wayne; he might be Bruce Wayne and Terry McGinnis, or Barbara Gordon, or Ziggy and Ronnie. Just as the boundaries of the Western genre have stretched to include the comedy-Western, musical Western and science fiction Western without losing the basic identifying characteristics of the theme, if not iconography, so we could see — as indeed we have already seen — the science fiction Batman story, the comedy Batman story, the romantic Batman story.<sup>241</sup>

It is important to note here that Brooker was, like Barker and Brooks, writing in the 1990s. He was also making predictions about the possible corporate strategy for diversifying Batman in future narratives. We should therefore apply his theory to the roughly hewn and rather ad-hoc Superman comics of the late 1930s cautiously. However, where his thoughts are pertinent to my subject is in the idea that a single fictional figure can simultaneously support different and often incompatible interpretations without losing their brand identity, so long as their narratives always feature some recognisable and familiar elements from previous iterations.

Thus, according to Brooker’s understanding, Batman’s ability to sustain a number of contrasting narrative permutations is enabled simply by the fact that his stories always recycle some of the familiar thematic “codes” associated with the character.<sup>242</sup> If we apply this logic to the Superman of the 1930s, we can see that the genre diversity and multiple appeal of the

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<sup>241</sup> Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, 328.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

character's early stories is given the plausible appearance of consistency simply by the recurrent presence of a strongman named Superman who often masquerades as weakling reporter Clark Kent and, when not in disguise, wears a colourful uniform and performs fantastic feats.

Considering my earlier discussion of how historians may have utilised techniques equivalent to Garfinkel's documentary method of interpretation to infer the existence of broad political patterns within Superman stories from 1938 and 1939 from dispersed textual cues, it is feasible that relatively small points of continuity, such as the characteristics of Superman mentioned above, may have provided enough material for his readers to piece together a more coherent and consistent thematic identity for the character than was explicitly denoted by the texts. Following my new theory, it is possible to suggest that readers of Superman comics of the 1930s would have approached the Man of Steel's early stories according to their differing expectations, which were informed by the orientations they held that were, in turn, ultimately derived from their specific placement within interpretive communities. Therefore, just as historians may have confirmed their expectations regarding Superman's political values via a practice similar to Garfinkel's documentary method of interpretation, so readers may have interpreted the character in line with their own preferences and preconceptions.

In approaching the character's narratives through the varied perspectives that would have been imparted to them through their places within diverse interpretive communities, Superman's early readers may have thus constructed a broad range of interpretations of the character's identity. Such creative interpretations could each be made internally consistent by individual readers weaving dispersed genre identifiers and textual cues into coherent readings that catered for the specific popular tastes of their particular interpretive community. Consequently, we can see that, in at least the first two years of his publication, the totality of Superman's identity may

have been comprised of a number of different interpretive “states” derived from the differing orientations of his readers, many of whom would have inhabited contrasting interpretive communities. For instance, readers of tales featuring Sam Spade may have seen Superman as a crime character.

Similarly, readers familiar with the magazines published by Hugo Gernsback or the comic strip adventures of colourfully costumed Flash Gordon could have interpreted Superman as a science fiction hero. Furthermore, fans of sports adventures like the “ ‘Pep’ Morgan” strip that was featured in early issues of *Action Comics* may have been attracted to Superman through *Action Comics* #4’s football story, and an appreciator of romantic or screwball comedies, such as *It Happened One Night*, might have placed emphasis on the banter between Clark and Lois as evidence of underlying romantic feeling. Some readers may have enjoyed “Superman” mainly, perhaps only, for his comedic aspects and a politically minded audience member could indeed have been able to formulate the character as a reform-oriented New Dealer. It is even possible to suggest that readers may have been able to construct a reading of the early Superman character that combined several of the above possibilities in a way which seemed coherent according to their specific orientation and pre-established tastes.

Indeed, all of these differing interpretive threads could feasibly have been woven around Superman’s recurring thematic components, with the consequence that the character could mean different things to many people and yet remain a recognisable point of reference for his diverse readership. Additionally, we can speculate that one possible result of this textual framing is that Superman’s diversity may have been an aspect of particular appeal to many of his readers, who might have seen the hero as the internally consistent centre of a comic book series that was enjoyable for its variety. If my argument is correct, Superman was originally successful because he appealed to a broad audience comprised of different people with varied tastes. If we follow this view further, and consider that audiences close to the

period of Superman's early publication were often sceptical of perceived "propagandas," not to mention the fact that the New Deal itself was seen negatively by some as both potentially undemocratic as well as financially risky, we can see that if Superman had been configured specifically and overtly as a New Deal supporter in order to keep him in step with the times, he may have been less popular.<sup>243</sup>

Having now investigated and problematised the political New Deal reading of Superman's 1930s adventures and formulated a new approach through which to engage with the character's early narratives, my aims for this chapter are complete. My new understanding of Superman's early appeal, which locates it more within the character's ability to cater for a diverse range of popular cultural tastes whilst remaining a coherent entity in the minds of his readers than in his direct engagement with politics and Real Life issues, has significant implications for the established narrative that Superman was initially an exponent of the New Deal who later morphed into a Conservative. This is because, if critics' assertions concerning the New Dealist nature of Superman's early stories can now be seen as problematic, it raises the possibility that other widely held beliefs concerning the character's politics may be equally limited. It is the project of my second chapter to investigate how these implications play out.

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<sup>243</sup> Merton, *Mass Persuasion*, 142; "Dr. Frank Declares New Deal Fascist," *New York Times*, January 30, 1938, <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F00810F6355A157A93C2AA178AD85F4C8385F9>; "Barton Predicts New Deal Ouster," *New York Times*, January 28, 1939, <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F7071FFE3A5B177A93CAAB178AD85F4D8385F9>.

## Chapter Two: Conservatism, World War Two, and the 1950s

In Chapter One, I argue that the received understanding of the 1930s Superman as a reformist exponent of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal is not greatly supported by primary evidence from the comics of the time. This finding has led me to believe that the perception that Superman served political agendas in subsequent decades requires more investigation. To this end, this chapter examines whether or not it is legitimate to engage with the meanings of Superman narratives from the 1940s and 1950s in such political terms as historians have employed and investigates if these readings are as selective as those which attribute a Democrat party-inspired New Deal agenda to the Man of Steel's 1930s tales. My analysis examines examples from texts across media, including comic books, radio, animation, and television.

As I have shown in Chapter One, Several historians have suggested that by the 1950s Superman had transitioned from his initial New Deal agenda to promoting the goals of Republican "Conservatism." This view has been articulated most clearly by Tom Dehaven who has proposed that by the middle decade of the twentieth century, the character had "indisputably" become "an Eisenhower super-Republican" as well as by Larry Tye who understands that the Man of Steel "switched" from being a "Democratic idealist to Republican Realist."<sup>244</sup> Several other scholars, including Roger Sabin and Thomas Andrae, have also remarked upon Superman's move from a reformist agenda in the 1930s to a generalised, small "c" conservative stance by the 1950s.<sup>245</sup> Given that these opinions place Superman's political transition in the years between the 1930s and 1950s, it is likely that the shift

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<sup>244</sup> Dehaven, *Our Hero*, 89; Tye, *Superman*, 46.

<sup>245</sup> Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels*, 61; Thomas Andrae, "From Menace to Messiah," 131.

occurred during the 1940s. This view is lent further support by academic Ian Gordon's investigations into the history of comic books.

In his monograph *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture*, Gordon follows the established trend of reading early Superman stories according to a political slant. He suggests that the character's 1930s comic book stories initially promoted "a version of New Deal politics for juveniles" and that the character's agenda changed following a "campaign against comic books launched by Sterling North, literary editor of the *Chicago Daily News*" which prompted DC to take "steps to protect their business."<sup>246</sup> These steps involved ensuring that the character adhered to new moral "standards," the "hiring" of an "advisory editorial board of child psychologists, educators, and welfare workers" as well as the introduction of the "Supermen of America" page, which "offered readers advice from Superman on the conduct of their lives."<sup>247</sup> According to Gordon,

The advisory board and the "Supermen of America" column positioned DC as a trustworthy publisher that sought to inculcate a sense of morality among youth. The company probably created the two features more to convince parents of the wholesome nature of Superman / DC Comics than for the stated purpose of ensuring their moral quality. DC even commercialised the morality page. The first "Supermen of America" page contained an advertisement for the new Superman club. Over 250,000 children joined the club at a cost of ten cents, for which each received a pin and a Superman decoder, which suggests that the column succeeded in teaching children to be self-reliant consumers, or at least convinced parents of the harmlessness of DC's products. At the same time DC, and Siegel and Shuster, adjusted Superman's

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<sup>246</sup> Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture*, 134: 136.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

storylines in a way that, if it did not make them moral, probably made them more acceptable to parents.<sup>248</sup>

According to this view, Superman sacrificed his initial reformist agenda for the commercial and financial security that comes with a reluctance to engage in potentially controversial criticisms of the established order and an increased readiness to both align himself with and defend the status quo.

As my comments above suggest, Gordon's assertions regarding Superman's political shift lean heavily on the character's early status as a sincere exponent of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. I have made clear in Chapter One, in which I gave the New Deal interpretation detailed consideration, that the comics of the 1930s provide little evidence to support this reading and that it is at least as accurate to consider the Superman of the 1930s as more a commercial, entertainment-focussed character than a political polemicist. However, even though I do not fully agree with Gordon's political understanding of the Superman stories from 1938 and 1939, his analysis of the content of *Action Comics* and *Superman* published during the 1940s is given significant support not only by evidence from the periodicals themselves but also important paratextual documents, such as letters from editor Whitney Ellsworth to Siegel and Shuster. For instance, a letter from Ellsworth to Jerry Siegel, dated January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1940, appears to validate Gordon's understanding that Superman comics were being increasingly regulated in order to ensure that they appeared "wholesome" to parents and that they would consequently be resilient to criticism from the likes of Sterling North.<sup>249</sup> The editor's suggestion that "we're trying to get away a little from the excessive use of firearms and knives on the covers, at least" is indicative of an increasing level of caution on the part of Superman's handlers.<sup>250</sup> Furthermore, Ellsworth's rather ill-tempered comments regarding

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Whitney Ellsworth, letter to Jerry Siegel, January 2, 1940.



Shuster's artwork, detailed in a letter dated November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1940, which criticises its "quality," particularly with regard to the rendering of Superman's "ape-like" forearms and Lois' perceived sexiness, are suggestive of heightening editorial oversight and intervention in the production of the Man of Steel's comic book stories.<sup>251</sup>

Although the above evidence clearly indicates a tightening of the editorial reins, the most powerful illustration of this trend can be found in Ellsworth's editorial policy for DC Comics titles. Of particular interest are the editor's comments regarding Superman's relationship with the agencies of law enforcement. Ellsworth's suggestion that crime "should be depicted in all cases as sordid and unpleasant" implies, as Gordon's analysis suggests, that DC was acting in order to protect Superman from accusations that he encouraged socially irresponsible behaviour, might be a bad influence on children or was anything besides a purveyor of "virtuousness."<sup>252</sup> Ellsworth's directive that "all stories should be written and depicted from the angle of the law" also illustrates that not only was Superman's potential offensiveness being toned down but, in contrast to 1930s stories in which his battles with police and the army rendered his allegiance ambiguous, the character was also being reworked so as to actively support and promote the established authority of the state.<sup>253</sup>

Even if we do not accept Gordon's suggestion that Superman was initially a supporter of the New Deal, the above evidence indicates that he is correct in his theory that, during the 1940s, the character's creators and editors made a conscious effort to rework his politics. Indeed, it is possible that they endeavoured to clarify Superman's moral philosophy in order to prevent potentially controversial "misinterpretations" by readers, which may have risked damaging the character's reputation if they provoked critical

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<sup>251</sup> Whitney Ellsworth, letter to Jerry Siegel, November 4, 1940.

<sup>252</sup> Whitney Ellsworth, "Editorial Policy for Superman-D.C. Publications" (Editorial Directive, DC Comics, New York, 1940); Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture*, 136.

<sup>253</sup> Siegel and Shuster, "Superman in the Slums," 109.

interventions similar to those made by Sterling North. Perhaps the best illustrations of DC's attempts to clarify Superman's ethics can be identified in the "Supermen of America" column which began in 1939.

Although the principles espoused by the "Supermen of America" column are initially vague, with Superman's values of "Goodness," "Justice," and "Righteousness" given little concrete contextualisation, the character later begins to clarify his morality.<sup>254</sup> In *Action Comics* #17, for example, he evokes a somewhat paternal tone when recommending healthy eating for his readers, an emphasis that continues into the next issue, which features a message condemning gangs and stealing.<sup>255</sup> Superman further develops his moral persona in *Action Comics* #19, in which he references the "Revolutionary War" in his discussion of "Courage" and therefore aligns his own values with those who fought for the establishment of the United States as a country, consequently associating himself with the nation state for the first time.<sup>256</sup> Superman's philosophy continues to evolve in *Action Comics* #22, when he suggests that his principles of "Strength, Courage, Justice" are tied to the concept of "freedom" and are antithetical to the ideas that led to the destructive conflict raging outside of America's borders at the time of its publication:

Now, more than ever before, we should endeavour to strengthen these ideals in our hearts. For in other less fortunate parts of the world we have read and seen the horrible results of men forgetting and casting their ideals out of their minds and hearts. War, destruction, famine and untold suffering descend on mankind once the principles of STRENGTH, COURAGE, and JUSTICE disappear.

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<sup>254</sup> "Supermen of America," *Action Comics* #15, August 1939, 16.

<sup>255</sup> "Supermen of America," *Action Comics* #17, October 1939, 16.

<sup>256</sup> "Supermen of America," *Action Comics* #19, December 1939, 16.

The pioneers and founders of America fought, bled and died to protect and cherish these principles; and with such a priceless heritage this country of ours grew from infancy into the strong, thriving nation that it is today.<sup>257</sup>

These comments, through which Superman criticises all sides involved in the Second World War, appear to mark the first time in which Superman, having previously tied his perspective to the US state, aligns himself with America's stance of neutrality regarding the conflict. This sentiment is revisited and further clarified on the "Supermen of America" page in *Action Comics* #41, dated October 1941:

The Leaders of this great nation of ours are shouldering the responsibility of safe-guarding the nation from aggression, and guarding our Freedom and Liberty. In much the same way, your father must shoulder the responsibility of protecting the home in which you live, and your mother cheerfully accepts the responsibility of preserving the family life and all the homely institutions which we hold so dear.

Similarly, it is your duty to yourself, your God, your country and your parents to care for yourself in body and mind. You must accept your share of responsibility, thereby lessening the weight of responsibility from the shoulders of others.<sup>258</sup>

In a piece designed to enhance Superman's respectability in the eyes of parents, we might expect the character to court the approval of established institutions of significant authority. However, the attempts by "Supermen of America" to link Superman to religion, the state, and the family are nevertheless significant for the development of the character's meaning in the pre-war and wartime period. Perhaps the most important aspect of

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<sup>257</sup> "Supermen of America," *Action Comics* #22, March 1940, 22.

<sup>258</sup> "Supermen of America," *Action Comics* #41, October 1941, 15.

Superman's association with these institutions is that he seemingly links the roles of individuals in the family to the foreign policy of the nation and, in turn, connects the efforts of the United States government in "safeguarding the nation from aggression" through its stance of neutrality to the will of God. Indeed, in his linking the government's role in "safeguarding the nation" to the American father's responsibility in "protecting the home" and the mother's purpose in "preserving the family life," Superman also appears to be attributing parental authority to the nation state. Furthermore, it is possible to suggest that both institutions are imbued with the sanctity of the church through Superman's linkage of a citizen's "duty" to "family" and "country" with the same responsibility to "God," a connection which appears to impart them with the inherent "goodness" associated with the deity and which therefore implies that the "responsibilities" and authority that they hold are God-given and thus natural.

It can be argued that these associations have been linked to the Man of Steel by the "Supermen of America" columns with the intent that he might benefit from appearing to be the manifestation of the singular purpose of the church, state, and family, uniting the aims and agendas of all three institutions. Arguably, the intended effect of the rhetoric employed by Superman in the "Supermen of America" editorials is that his perspective would appear to be so aligned with the institutions and authorities he refers to that he seems to speak on their behalf. Furthermore, it is feasible that, whether it was successful in its persuasive endeavour or not, this association was aimed at enhancing Superman's credibility with the established authorities he mentions in his rhetoric. We can hypothesise that, if Superman's overt endorsement of the state, the church, and the family risked losing the interest of more progressive or radically minded readers, the character and DC themselves sought to gain by courting the respect of the established social powers and institutions who might be the most difficult to fight should Superman become involved in controversies that affronted them. This was

indeed the case later in the 1950s, when a Senate subcommittee investigation into comics forced the industry to adopt a policy of strict self-censorship following a campaign by Fredric Wertham and religious groups.<sup>259</sup> Thus, in their aligning Superman with the institutions of the family, the state, and the church via the “Supermen of America” editorials, it is possible to argue that DC Comics sought to make powerful friends and establish a reputation amongst influential pillars of the establishment that would help to cement Superman’s ongoing sustainability as a secure commercial prospect.

Given the emerging alignment between Superman and the policies of the US state in the early 1940s, as indexed by the “Supermen of America” pages, it is not surprising that the column from *Action Comics* #48 has the character explicitly endorse both the country’s military effort as it entered the Second World War and the principle of democracy for which it claimed to be fighting through his promotion of war bonds:

One of the greatest virtues that a person can possess is that of Loyalty —which means, simply, being true to persons and ideals that are worthy of themselves and our respect.

All of us feel Loyalty to our families, to those who are nearest and dearest to us — and that is one of the basic ideals of Democracy, for in a Democracy the family and the individuals within it constitute the very life-blood of the State.

We feel, also, a deep sense of Loyalty to the God who will guide our Democracy and the Allied Democracies through the dark days to the ultimate victory of Right over Evil.

And we feel that same deep sense of Loyalty to our great nation, and to our President, and to those who are labouring

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<sup>259</sup> Amy Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: History of the Comics Code* (Mississippi, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), x: 24.

side by side with him, and to the leaders and peoples and ideals of other great nations which stand shoulder to shoulder with our own in a common cause.

Our Loyalty to family, God and country is now being put to severe tests, and we are all ready and willing — yes, and anxious — to show that our Loyalty is more than mere word. Most of us have relatives in the armed forces. All of us are helping to share the financial burden of our righteous battle by investing in Defense Bonds and Stamps, and the purchase of these Bonds and Stamps is a very simple way of proving our loyalty to all the things in life that are most worth-while. Let our slogan be “KEEP ‘EM BUYING!”<sup>260</sup>

Here, Superman develops the position that he articulated in *Action Comics* #41, where, as I describe above, he appears to conflate the concepts of family, the state, and God in support of the United States’ stance of neutrality. Now, Superman uses the term “Loyalty” to link the concepts of nation state, the family, and God to the idea of “Democracy,” which is, if this rhetoric is to be believed, a cause that connects the values of America to its allies and justifies war. Once again, we see these concepts imparted with a sense of natural goodness through Superman’s linking them to the deity, a manoeuvre which implies that the US and its allies, “the other great nations,” are not simply fighting to protect their own interests but are enacting the will of God himself. From the examples provided by the “Supermen of America” pages we can now see that one possible consequence of DC’s attempts to surround Superman with an air of respectability, at least as far as established authorities were concerned, by emphasising and elaborating upon his moral code is that the character becomes increasingly politicised and more prone to

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<sup>260</sup> “Supermen of America,” *Action Comics* #48, May 1942, 15; John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1986), 29: 37.

espousing the agenda and worldview of the pre-war and wartime American state.

However, it would perhaps be unfair to attribute this project to Superman as a character and brand as a whole if it were confined only to the pages of the “Supermen of America” editorials. These texts do not in themselves provide a comprehensive illustration of the politics of the Superman brand in its entirety, portrayed as it was in a variety of media and through the input of diverse creative talents. In order to provide a more thorough investigation of Superman’s politics during the 1940s, I use the passages below to analyse all three major strands of the contemporaneous Superman franchise as they appear in comics, radio, and animation. To this end, I examine the correspondences and dissimilarities between these iterations in order to discern if it is truly accurate to attribute to them the same political agenda that is present in the pages of “Supermen of America,” which did seemingly mirror American foreign policy in its initial pre-war neutrality and subsequent wartime belligerency. Following this, I consider the significance of my findings in terms of the perception that Superman’s political agenda had shifted towards Republican Conservatism by the 1950s. My discussion begins with an analysis of stories from the comics. I follow this with an examination of the radio serial and, finally, the animated cartoons.

As Gordon has identified, in pre-war comics of the very early years of the 1940s “Siegel and Shuster [. . .] created a series of stories in which Superman confronted fifth columnists and saboteurs working for an unnamed European power bent on destroying America’s munitions plants.”<sup>261</sup> However, these narratives are not only interesting because they feature fifth columnists and saboteurs but also because those enemies were not initially identified explicitly as servants of the Axis Powers.

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<sup>261</sup> Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture*, 137.

A story from December 1940's *Action Comics* #31, for example, features a villain with the German sounding name of Baron Munsdorf who is identified as "the head of a spy ring" but is not linked directly to the Nazi regime and is instead described in slightly more vague terms as working for a "racketeer nation."<sup>262</sup> In a similar vein, in the "Superman" narrative from *Action Comics* #36, Superman takes on more "fifth columnists," who are this time attempting sabotage for "Nation X"; *Superman* #10 depicts a sporting contest between America and the fictional nation of Dukalia whose consul resembles Hitler in his military dress and salute but is named Karl Wolff.<sup>263</sup>

A later pre-World War Two story, this time from *Superman* #12, features a plot in which members of the "Grotak bund" make several attempts to destroy American armament factories.<sup>264</sup> Prefiguring the sentiment of the "Supermen of America" column from *Action Comics* #41, the story begins with an emphasis on the need for America to defend its own peace from threats that may drag it into the war.<sup>265</sup> Elsewhere in the same issue and in a similar vein is a story involving a man named Carl Bogart, the foreman of a plantation situated on an isolated island, who is scaring off visitors in order to hide the fact that he is using his workplace as a "secret refuelling base for submarines belonging to a foreign nation which prey on merchant marine in these neutral waters!"<sup>266</sup> *Action Comics* #41 contains another story featuring sabotage, this time not directly organised by agents of an aggressive power but rather by Ralph Cowan, an irresponsible individual who is undertaking the destruction on the behalf of a "foreign country."<sup>267</sup> In addition to these examples,

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<sup>262</sup> Jerry Siegel and Jack Burnley, "In the Grip of Morpheus," *Action Comics* #31, December 1940, 2-13: 11.

<sup>263</sup> Jerry Siegel, Wayne Boring, and Joe Shuster, "Fifth Columnists," *Action Comics* #36, May 1941, 2-14: 3-7; Jerry Siegel and Wayne Boring, "The Dukalia Spy Ring," *Superman* #10, May-June 1941, 51-63: 52.

<sup>264</sup> Jerry Siegel and Leo Nowak, "The Grotak Bund," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Bob Joy, vol. 7 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2009 [1941]), 32-44.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>266</sup> Jerry Siegel and Leo Nowak, "Peril on Pogo Island," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Bob Joy, vol. 7 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2009 [1941]), 6-18: 16.

<sup>267</sup> Jerry Siegel and John Sikela, "The Saboteur," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Bob Joy, vol. 7 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2009 [1941]), 59-71: 71.



*Superman* #15 from March-April 1942, which was published following America's entry into the war, features two stories apparently related to the conflict. However, given that their production probably predated the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and the United States' direct involvement in the war, their ties to it are still relatively cautious. The first is yet another tale of sabotage, this time perpetrated by agents of the fictional nation of "Napkan," a close analogue of Japan.<sup>268</sup> The second features Superman's battle against "Razkal," the leader of another fictitious nation, Oxnalia, who, like Karl Wolff, bears a very strong resemblance to Hitler but is marginally distanced from the dictator by his name and association with a fictitious country.<sup>269</sup>

These stories illustrate that, although by 1941 Superman narratives that featured plots that tentatively addressed issues surrounding the war became frequent enough to render the subject of espionage a prominent narrative concern for the character, his engagement with the conflict was initially cautious and his writers and editors were reluctant to have him battle the Germans and Japanese explicitly. Considering my earlier discussion of attempts to increase Superman's respectability by aligning him with the American state in the pages of "Supermen of America," we can speculate that, because DC Comics was engaged in an endeavour to secure Superman's good reputation, they were reluctant to risk any controversy which may have resulted from him straying from the United States' official foreign policy position by insulting nations and peoples who were not, at this time, America's enemies. To this end, we can see that instead of having Superman directly confront Nazi Germany or imperial Japan, DC Comics pitted him against opponents from fictionalised foreign countries.

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<sup>268</sup> Jerry Siegel and Leo Nowak, "Saboteurs from Napkan," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Bob Joy, vol. 8 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2010 [1942]), 115-126.

<sup>269</sup> Jerry Siegel and John Sikela, "Superman in Oxnalia," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Bob Joy, vol. 8 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2010 [1942]), 127-139.

Furthermore, Superman's tentative and coded initial engagement with enemies who, despite their resemblance, are significantly not identified with any Axis nation appears to mimic the United States' pre-war foreign policy, which was officially neutral but slanted in Great Britain's favour through the lend lease programme.<sup>270</sup> The alignment of Superman's comic book adventures with the foreign policy of the nation is further indicated by the fact that, their initial reluctance notwithstanding, once America had been involved in the Second World War long enough for DC's production deadlines to catch up to its new status as a belligerent, Superman comics began to endorse America's campaign wholeheartedly. This change is evident in stories from *Superman* #18, *Superman* #20, *Superman* #22, *Superman* #24, *Superman* #25, *Action Comics* #76, *Superman* #34, and *Superman* #36, which all pitted Superman against villains that were explicitly identified as either Japanese or Nazi enemies.<sup>271</sup>

As I indicated earlier, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of Superman's contemporaneous politics, it is necessary for me to extend my analysis to examples of the character's stories in other media. Interestingly, Superman's radio narratives, like stories from the comics, also appear to have mirrored developments in the foreign policy of the United States. However, before I begin to analyse this strand of the Superman franchise, it is important to note that the different texts which comprised the character's overarching brand contained significant divergences. Indeed, in order for me to consider the full significance of the similarities between the comic books' engagement

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<sup>270</sup> Gaddis Smith, *American Diplomacy During the Second World War* (London: John Wiley and Sons, 1965), 2.

<sup>271</sup> Jerry Siegel and John Sikela, "The Conquest of a City," *Superman* #18, September-October 1942, 2-15; Siegel and Dobrotka, "Destroyers from the Depths," 18-30; Siegel and Citron, "Meet the Squiffles," 2-13; Don Cameron and Ed Dobrotka, "Suicide Voyage," *Action Comics* #24, September-October 1943, 46-56; Jerry Siegel and Ira Yarbrough, "The Man Superman Refused to Help," *Superman* #25, November-December 1943, 2-23; Ed Dobrotka, "All Ashore That's Going Ashore," *Action Comics* #76, September 1944, 2-13; Don Cameron and Pete Riss, "The United States Navy," *Superman* #34, May-June 1945, 1-15; Alvin Schwartz and Ira Yarbrough, "Glory for Gloria," *Superman* #36, September-October 1945, 16-27.

with the war and the handling of the conflict by the radio and cartoon iterations of Superman, it is first necessary to understand their differences.

In fact, the radio series was, before the war, significantly different to the comic in terms of both its narrative style and characterisation. In contrast to the varied and ad-hoc generic repertoire that permeated early Superman stories in comics, the pre-war radio show quickly settled upon a fairly consistent adventure mystery format, which had Superman solve a number of puzzles featuring gangsters and super-villains, beginning with his attempts to uncover “a vague and sinister plot against the railways of the west.”<sup>272</sup>

Further differences between the two can also be recognised in the show’s alteration of certain aspects of Superman’s character and diegetic personal history. Indeed, whilst Superman’s comic book stories depict him growing up in an orphanage, the radio show has him arrive on Earth “full grown” and, from episode 28 onwards, his most constant companion is not Lois Lane, as in the comics, but Jimmy Olsen, who was invented for the radio serial and initially had no counterpart in Superman’s monthly four-colour narratives.<sup>273</sup> More emphasis is also placed on reporter Clark Kent, who, considering the format of the programme — which was inevitably tailored to the audio medium through which it was performed — is perhaps more logically positioned to investigate the particulars of any given mystery and to provide narrative exposition through dialogue when discussing plot developments with his colleagues at the Daily Planet than Superman. In many cases, only the dramatic denouements of the serial’s episodes are left to Superman.<sup>274</sup> Due to the fact that it is Kent who drives forward many of the plots, he also

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<sup>272</sup> Robert Maxwell, “Keno’s Landslide,” *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 3, February 16, 1940, mp3, 11:39, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page01](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page01).

<sup>273</sup> Siegel and Shuster, “Superman, Champion of the Oppressed!,” 2; Robert Maxwell, “Clark Kent, MildMannered Reporter,” *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 2, February 14, 1940, mp3, 11:35, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page01](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page01); Robert Maxwell, “Donelli’s Protection Racket, Part 1,” *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 28, April 15, 1940, mp3, 11:41, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page01](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page01).

<sup>274</sup> Robert Maxwell, “The Silver Clipper,” *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 6, February 23, 1940, mp3, 11:21, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page01](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page01).

displays more assertiveness than his comic book counterpart, to the extent that in the storyline "The Last of the Clipper Ships," his heroic saving of the life of a ship's captain prompts Jimmy to remark, "You're just like Superman in a lot of ways."<sup>275</sup>

Returning to my analysis of Superman's engagement with the war, it is perhaps significant that these considerable points of divergence notwithstanding, the radio show's handling of the conflict is remarkably similar to the approach to the subject taken by Superman's comic book narratives. Just as the comic books initially made only implicit reference to America's soon to be military adversaries through the employment of fifth columnists and super-villains, whose activities were sponsored by tentatively identified foreign powers, the radio show introduced its audience to the subject of "espionage" via the figure of Dr Deutch, the head of a "band of foreign agents," in the story of "The Grayson Submarine."<sup>276</sup> Deutch's origins are strongly implied through his German sounding name, which, although intentionally spelt wrong to add a layer of abstraction from reality, also literally means "German," as well as that of his henchman, Hans, who refers to his boss as "Herr Doctor," and his dictatorial tendencies, which are demonstrated by his penchant for statements such as "I give orders, you obey."<sup>277</sup> However the story never openly identifies him as a Nazi.

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<sup>275</sup> Robert Maxwell, "The Last of the Clipper Ships, Part 8," *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 174, March 21, 1941, mp3, 11:36, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page03](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page03); Robert Maxwell, "The Last of the Clipper Ships, Part 12," *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 178, March 31, 1941, mp3, 11:33, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page03](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page03).

<sup>276</sup> Robert Maxwell, "The Grayson Submarine, Part 5," *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 200, May 21, 1941, mp3, 11:43, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page03](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page03); Robert Maxwell, "The Grayson Submarine, Part 4," *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 199, May 19, 1941, mp3, 11:43, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page03](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page03).

<sup>277</sup> Robert Maxwell, "The Grayson Submarine, Part 6," *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 201, May 23, 1941, mp3, 11:36, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page03](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page03).

Once America had entered the conflict in 1942, the radio show explicitly endorsed the war effort by patriotically associating Superman with the “American way” in its opening titles and using the same segment of the programme to promote “war savings stamps.”<sup>278</sup> It also introduced its listeners to villains who were openly identified as the United States’ Real Life opponents. For instance, the “Leopard Woman,” who features in “The Midnight Intruder,” attempts to steal a “new and revolutionary explosive” that her Japanese employers intend to deploy against America’s war industries.<sup>279</sup> Further narratives featuring the United States’ wartime enemies include the 1942 storyline “The Mystery Ship,” which concludes with the revelation of a plot by a “German agent” to carry out “a war of nerves” that would “terrorise” the American “merchant marine,” as well as the 1943 tale “The New German Weapon,” in which Clark Kent and Jimmy Olsen infiltrate a spy ring to “gain access to Nazi plans for the destruction of a huge squad of American bombers.”<sup>280</sup> In a similar vein, “The Mystery of the Sleeping Beauty” features a battle against the Japanese.<sup>281</sup>

Turning attention to the Fleischer and Famous Studios cartoons, it seems that, like the radio serial before them, they also reworked the Superman formula implemented by previous texts to suit their featured medium and the preferred style of their creators. For instance, the plots of the cartoons were pared down to suit the largely visual medium of animation and to emphasise

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<sup>278</sup> Robert Maxwell, “The Lost Continent of Atlantis, Part 2,” *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 400, December 11, 1942, mp3, 14:44, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page05](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page05).

<sup>279</sup> Robert Maxwell, “The Midnight Intruder, Part 10,” *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 394, December 2, 1942, mp3, 14:48, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page05](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page05); Robert Maxwell “The Midnight Intruder, Part 8,” *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 392, December 1, 1942, mp3, 14:26, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page05](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page05).

<sup>280</sup> Robert Maxwell, “The Mystery Ship, Part 7,” *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 414, December 31, 1942, mp3, 14:24, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page05](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page05); Robert Maxwell, “The New German Weapon Part 4,” *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 621, October 19, 1943, mp3, 14:47, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page06](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page06).

<sup>281</sup> Robert Maxwell, “The Mystery of the Sleeping Beauty, Part 19,” *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 962, February 8, 1945, mp3, 14:10, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page06](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page06).

the animated action, with the result that they cannot easily engage in the relatively complex mystery adventure format employed by the radio show. The cartoons also feature even less dialogue than stories from the comics and do not make a single reference to Jimmy Olsen, who is present for most of Superman's radio adventures. They also feature little of the humorous parody that had characterised Siegel's writing in the comics up until his draft into the army during 1943.<sup>282</sup>

Although the limited dialogue and visual focus of the animations means that the complex mysteries found in the radio show and much of the off-beat humour that can be identified in the comics is missing from the cartoons, where they do converge with prior interpretations of Superman is once more in their engagement with the Second World War. Several Superman historians have identified that the Superman cartoons "shifted tone" after Fleischer Studios stopped producing them and that they moved away from traditional themes and instead turned their focus to wartime propaganda messages featuring stereotyped portrayals of Japanese spies and saboteurs when released under the banner of Famous Studios.<sup>283</sup> They claim that this began with the 1942 feature *Japoteurs*.<sup>284</sup> However, Marek Wasielewski has provided a slightly different interpretation.<sup>285</sup> Wasielewski suggests that a shift towards an engagement with wartime concerns can be felt earlier and more subtly in the Fleischer Superman short, *Terror on the Midway*.<sup>286</sup> In his essay, titled " 'This Amazing Stranger From the Planet Krypton': Industrial

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<sup>282</sup> Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 219.

<sup>283</sup> Scivally, *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway*, 28; Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History*, 61; Philip Skerry and Chris Lambert, "From Panel to Panavision," in *Superman at Fifty! The Persistence of a Legend*, 65; Todd S. Monson, " 'Superman Says You Can Slap a Jap!': The Man of Steel and Race Hatred in World War II," in *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 5-15: 12.

<sup>284</sup> *Japoteurs*, directed by Seymour Kneitel (1942; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2004), DVD.

<sup>285</sup> Marek Wasielewski, " 'This Amazing Stranger From the Planet Krypton': Industrial Design and the Machine Paradigm in the Fleischer Animated Superman Shorts 1941-1943," *Film International* 5, no. 2 (2007): 6-15: 12.

<sup>286</sup> *Terror on the Midway*, directed by Dave Fleischer (1942; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2004), DVD.

Design and the Machine Paradigm in the Fleischer Animated Superman Shorts 1941-1943," Wasielewski indicates that the monstrous "killer ape" depicted by the cartoon may actually be a representation of the Japanese.<sup>287</sup>

Contemporaneous tendencies to compare the Japanese to "apes" and the cartoon's title, which can be interpreted as a reference to Midway Island in the Pacific Ocean, appear to support the idea that the animation reflects fears regarding America's military vulnerabilities in that region.<sup>288</sup> If we consider Todd S. Munson's suggestion that *Japoteurs*, which "premiered on September 18, 1942," "was likely conceived soon after the attack on Pearl Harbour," it becomes possible to argue that the Superman cartoon series also corresponds to the trend, established by both the comics and the radio show, of mirroring the shifts in the foreign policy of the US state with the nation's potential enemies handled only tentatively at first and, later, more explicitly.<sup>289</sup>

There are some limitations to the suggestion that *Terror on the Midway* reflects the same transition in American foreign policy from neutrality to military engagement that is also mirrored in the depiction of fifth columnists and saboteurs with German sounding names in the comic book Superman stories that were published as pre-war tensions between America and Hitler's Third Reich increased. This is largely because, if *Terror on the Midway* does represent a similar intervention, it is not as explicit as the trend found in comic books and the general theme of the cartoon, which sees the giant ape rampage through a circus is not so easy to align with America's pre-war foreign policy concerns, to the extent that its political intent is certainly questionable. However, even if *Terror on the Midway* does not represent a fictionalised reflection of the transitional period in American foreign policy between genuine neutrality and active engagement, it is nevertheless true that, in their shift from a focus upon pre-war crime and fantasy stories to

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<sup>287</sup> Marek Wasielewski, " 'This Amazing Stranger From the Planet Krypton': Industrial Design and the Machine Paradigm in the Fleischer Animated Superman Shorts 1941-1943."

<sup>288</sup> Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 116.

<sup>289</sup> Munson, " 'Superman Says You Can Slap a Jap!,' " 12.

wartime anti-Japanese and German propaganda, like Superman tales in comic books and on radio, the Superman cartoons of the 1940s broadly reflect changes in America's international role. In that sense, their mirroring of American foreign policy is, to a significant degree, comparable to similar trends seen in other contemporaneous Superman texts in different media.

The similarities in the methods through which stories from the three strands of the Superman franchise discussed above engaged with America's position of neutrality and, subsequently, belligerence is significant because it marks a point of convergence in what are, in many respects, diverse texts. It is possible that this may be accidental because the slotting of America's wartime enemies into established popular cultural formulas was not unique to Superman texts and the trend was also prevalent in contemporaneous Hollywood films.<sup>290</sup>

However, there are indications that the similarities between different strands of the Superman franchise are evidence of a specific corporate strategy on the part of DC Comics which aimed to secure and consolidate the Superman brand. Indeed, the possibility that a certain amount of synergy was being actively encouraged by the corporation is indexed by the fact that, despite clear divergences between the comic book, radio, and cartoon portrayals of Superman, some cross-coordination between the different texts did take place in several instances unrelated to the war. Such a strategy is implied by the rechristening of Clark Kent's editor, initially named George Taylor, as Perry White in *Superman* #7, a nod to his equivalent in the radio serial.<sup>291</sup> It is also suggested by the attempts to draw Jimmy Olsen into the cast of the comics in *Superman* #13, *Superman* #15, *Action Comics* #71, *Superman* #28, and *Superman* #30, as well as the increasing tendency of the comic book

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<sup>290</sup> Anthony Rhodes, *Propaganda, the Art of Persuasion: World War II* (London: Angus and Robertson Publishers, 1984), 151.

<sup>291</sup> Jerry Siegel, Wayne Boring, and Joe Shuster, "The Three Kingpins of Crime," *Superman* #7, November-December 1940, 3-15: 3; Scivally, *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway*, 19.



Superman to recite the familiar radio phrase “up, up and away!”<sup>292</sup> The Fleischer cartoons were also linked to the radio show through their employment of the voices of Bud Collier and Joan Alexander, who portrayed Superman and Lois Lane in the wireless programme, and were tied to the comics through the story “Superman, Matinee Idol,” published in the pages of *Superman* #19, which involves Clark attempting to prevent Lois from seeing his on-screen counterpart reveal his secret identity as Superman whilst they visit the cinema for a date.<sup>293</sup> The animations are also referenced in *Superman* #25 and advertised in the comics.<sup>294</sup>

In light of the above evidence, it is reasonable to consider that Superman’s engagement with wartime themes in his comic book, radio, and cartoon incarnations is not simply casually reflective of broad trends in American popular culture during the Second World War but part of DC comics’ ongoing attempt to consolidate the Superman franchise. Indeed, given that there remained many discrepancies between Superman’s depiction across the three media but significant similarities in their engagement with the war, it is feasible that the similar representations of the conflict in all three major strands of the Superman franchise marks the most coherent and sustained attempt to consolidate the brand during the character’s early years.

Furthermore, if it is true that DC used the “Supermen of America” pages to preclude potential criticism of their protagonist by powerful institutions through associating his moral position with the agenda of the American state,

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<sup>292</sup> Jerry Siegel and Leo Nowak, “Superman Versus the Archer,” *Superman* #13, November-December 1941, 17-29: 23; Jerry Siegel and Leo Nowak, “The Cop who was Ruined,” *Superman* #15, March-April 1942, 2-14: 12; Don Cameron and Ira Yarbrough, “Valentine Villainy,” *Action Comics* #71, April 1944, 2-13: 3; Don Cameron and Ed Dobrotka, “The Suicidal Swain,” *Superman* #28, May-June 1944, 32-35: 32; Don Cameron and Ira Yarbrough, “Superman Alias Superman,” *Superman* #30, September-October 1944, 2-13: 4; Scivally, *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway*, 19.

<sup>293</sup> Jerry Siegel and Ed Dobrotka, “Superman, Matinee Idol,” *Superman* #19, November-December 1942, 53-64.

<sup>294</sup> Jerry Siegel and Ira Yarbrough, “Hi-Jack--Jackal of Crime,” *Superman* #25, November-December 1943, 45-56: 48; Jerry Siegel and John Sikela, “The Man Who Put Out the Sun,” *Action Comics* #53, October 1942, 2-14: 14.

we can also see that Superman's close shadowing of United States foreign policy shortly before and during the war in stories from comics, radio, and animation indicates that this project was not limited to those editorials. In fact, the columns may have been one part of a broad-ranging attempt to foster the growth of a uniform commercial identity and moral and political philosophy across different threads of the franchise. It can also be argued that this movement was also intended to ensure that the radio and cinematic portrayals of the character, which probably had a larger audience and broader reach than the comics, were compatible with the content of the periodicals so that, if readers were drawn to them through their interest in the other media texts, they were not surprised or alienated by what they found.

An interesting consequence of the closeness of Superman's agenda to the policies of the American state in the three major strands of his franchise is that, despite their differences, it may be possible to view the values of all three incarnations as compatible with the philosophy expressed in the "Supermen of America" pages. Considering the correspondences between the wartime politics of the comic book, radio, and cartoon iterations of Superman, it can be argued that DC's attempt to cultivate these similarities was part of the company's endeavour to encourage Superman's audience to emphasise the commonalities between the variations of the character, which also diverged in many ways, in their readings. Indeed, they may have sought to persuade Superman's readers, viewers and listeners to identify the differing variations of the character as the same figure, or at least as distinct characters who were nevertheless uniformly committed to the values articulated in the pages of "Supermen of America" and who were also aligned with the column's support for the United States, its foreign policy, its apparatuses and institutions. This project may have sought to aid the commercial success of the character by both encouraging readers to expand their enjoyment of Superman into different media and aligning him with

powerful institutions, a move which arguably provided a more stable commercial future for him by making it less likely that those organisations that the Man of Steel endorsed would bring their influence to bear against him.

In light of these thoughts, we can consider that Superman's creators may not have simply used the war to enhance Superman's reputation as a legitimate and trustworthy children's character. Rather, they may also have utilised it as a means of exerting greater control over the politics and moral tone of the brand as a whole, weaving together all of its strands in the promotion of a single cause that was widely and enthusiastically accepted by most Americans.<sup>295</sup> Furthermore, this was undertaken through a process that helped to foster the perception that a single ethical framework could be attributed to all of Superman's variations, one that was in accordance with the aims and objectives of the pre-war and wartime American state.

The significance of the crystallisation of Superman's political philosophy during the early to mid 1940s in relation to the possibility that, in this period, he began to develop a Conservative perspective that would come to full fruition by the 1950s can be grasped through an engagement with theories concerning ideology. The model of power relations proposed by Louis Althusser in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" casts an interesting light on Superman's alignment with the politics and policies of the pre-war and wartime American state. In his essay, Althusser theorises how the dominant and oppressive structures of power that are present in capitalist societies such as America encourage their subjects to "spontaneously" consent to their authority.<sup>296</sup> According to Althusser, the tendency of subjects to willingly accept their place within society and their

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<sup>295</sup> John Bush Jones, *All Out For Victory! Magazine Advertising and the World War II Home Front* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2009), 1.

<sup>296</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004 [1968]), 693-702: 698.

repression by the authority of the state is essentially facilitated by the circulation of “ideology.”<sup>297</sup> Althusser also suggests that ideology is made up of political and contextually contingent ideas that associate, and eventually amalgamate, themselves with the cultural assumptions which underpin ordinary individuals’ understandings of Common Sense or, as Althusser terms it, “obviousnesses” with the aim that they become assimilated into the public store of widely held, generally recognised, seemingly self-evident Truths.<sup>298</sup>

One such Truth discussed by Althusser is the notion of “freedom.”<sup>299</sup> He suggests that, in capitalist societies, a “subject” who believes themselves to be “a centre of initiatives” and “the author of and responsible for” their own “actions” inevitably attributes these qualities to their perception of themselves as a “free individual.”<sup>300</sup> However, he argues that the very notion of “freedom” is an artificial, ideological construct, designed to persuade individuals that the limited agency that has been afforded to them by the dominant social powers is an outcome of their personal “free” choice. It is produced when a nation’s dominant power structures seek to convince members of the society that they dominate to accept the restrictions placed upon them. They achieve this by informing their subjects that they are “free” and that it is the laws and regulations written into the established framework of governance and oppression that enable their ability to exercise this privileged “freedom.” Through these means the dominant ideology hopes to encourage its subjects to “freely accept” their own subjugation and to be content with the limitations that the state places upon their lives.<sup>301</sup>

According to Althusser, then, because such Common Sense notions as “freedom” are accepted as “self-evident” Truths, individuals born into cultures defined by them internalise these ideological principles from the

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 694.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 698.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 701.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

moment of their birth and thus embrace them as the natural characteristics of the universe. As a consequence, “subjects” are not minded to criticise the worldview that is fed to them through ideology because it forms the assumptions that underpin their very sense of being and which condition their understanding, acceptance or dismissal of all new ideas and information to the extent that they are unlikely to even consider questioning its dictates. In fact, if they were to do so, it may result in the unmooring of the very concepts that underpin their sense of selfhood. Thus, for Althusser, ideology’s established and dominant presence within Common Sense, and its subjects’ consequent tendency to accept its principles as unassailable Truth, enable its ability to self-perpetuate, with each new generation accepting its terms as natural and contributing to its recirculation in the next. The outcome of this is that nobody in the thrall of ideology can ever have even come close to knowing a world that was not saturated by its prevailing influence or to thinking outside of its structures.

Althusser further elaborates upon this idea with his suggestion that the belief that ideological concepts are “real” is supported by their seeming material presence. This presence takes the form of the ideological state apparatuses designed to emphasise the worldview endorsed by ideology in concrete terms. To this end, such physically manifested practices as the maintenance of “law and order” by the police and the judicial system function to issue punitive sanctions against those “bad subjects” who reject or stray from the range of behavioural norms that ideology has demarcated as legitimate.<sup>302</sup> The presence of these apparatuses and the social strictures that they enforce thus encourage “subjects” to live their lives within the frameworks and restrictions provided for them. This results in repetitive ritual patterns of behaviour on the part of individuals as they continuously endeavour to demonstrate their status as “(good) subjects” and therefore avoid punishment for transgression by repeatedly emphasising an adherence and

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

commitment to “legitimate” behavioural norms, whilst all the time believing that their conformity is an acceptable trade-off for the privilege of living in a society that affords them “freedom.”<sup>303</sup> These repetitive practices which, aside from obeying the principles of the law, also include praying at church or adhering to one’s place in a family patriarchy, help “subjects” to convince themselves that the existence of the abstract and artificial notions proffered by ideology is a Fact through their experience of them as a seemingly tangibly lived-in physical reality.<sup>304</sup>

Following the Althusserian model, one consequence of the fact that the dominant ideological worldview is dependent upon the state apparatuses for its continued propagation and survival is that it must seek to convince its subjects of the legitimacy of these institutions and their functions. Consequently, it inevitably endorses the relations of power that are continuously being reinforced by their social roles. Thus, ideology seeks to resist changes that could alter those frameworks of dominance and can therefore be regarded as an innately conservative force. However, because its role is to legitimise such institutions and structures as the police, the judicial system, the church, and the family, upon which the very functioning of the nation state as a concrete, tangible entity is predicated, ideology does not serve the interests of a single faction but rather supports the systems of power that enable and support the established party political system of “free choice” and “democracy” itself. According to this perspective, ideology exerts its conservative influence through all mainstream culture and politics and is as evident in Democrat Roosevelt’s reformist New Deal programmes of the 1930s, which were arguably instituted to “prop up” America’s faltering capitalist infrastructure and to protect the integrity of the nation state that

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 696: 700.

was dependent upon it, as it is in the more overtly corporatist agenda that can be attributed to Eisenhower's Republican administration of the 1950s.<sup>305</sup>

A consequence of this is that, at least for the analytical purposes of this chapter, it is possible, as well as necessary, to identify two contrasting definitions of "conservatism" that can be applied to Superman. The first is the traditional, politically partisan, capital "C" variation associated with the traditionalist views and agendas of organisations such as the Republican party. The second is the ideological, small 'c' sense of the term discussed here, which may refer to any attempt to promote, support or endorse the relations of power that underpin the capitalist, consumerist nation state, as well as the social structures, institutions, and apparatuses which support them.

My analysis of pre-war and wartime Superman texts across media has encountered little suggestion that the Superman stories appearing in the period are following any specific party political agenda. However, I have found significant evidence of their protagonist's increasing alignment with the apparatuses of law enforcement, as indicated by Ellsworth's editorial policy, as well as an emerging correspondence between their politics and the foreign policy of the American state. It is therefore possible to argue that, during this period, Superman was beginning to be engaged with a conservatively ideological agenda, although he was not, at this time, a supporter of the Republican party or its policies.

If we were to follow Althusser's logic wholeheartedly, we could suggest that supporting state ideology was Superman's main goal during the early to mid-1940s. Indeed, Superman's endorsement of the policies of the United States government and the function of such institutions as the system of law enforcement and the family as united in their expression of God's will implies

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<sup>305</sup> Eldridge, *American Culture in the 1930s*, 13; William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 139.

that, together, their perspective represents the single correct and natural way of looking at the world that is also the only legitimate guide for living. Certainly, the articulation of this perspective in the “Supermen of America” columns, which I have shown to be politically compatible with other contemporaneous Superman texts both prior to and during the war, appears to be intended as a means of reaffirming the ideological notion that Superman’s readers are privileged in their subjugation to the American state, its democratic system, and its apparatuses.

However, although many aspects of this interpretation seem persuasive, it does not entirely account for the meaning of all Superman texts that appeared in the period leading up to and during the war. In fact, there is a problem with the Althusserian model of ideology that I have used as the basis for this interpretation, which can be unpacked when we consider Alan Sinfield’s differing formulation of the concept. Sinfield elaborates upon and criticises the Althusserian understanding of the role played by ritualised practices in reinforcing ideological concepts in his prominent work *Cultural Politics - - Queer Reading*. This work challenges the “entrapment” model of ideological power offered by Althusser through its recognition of the interpretive agency that is imparted to “subjects” who live in “subcultural communities.”<sup>306</sup> In his discussion of the repression of homosexuals in the 1950s, Sinfield implies that subcultural identities are often initially created by dominant ideology to effectively serve as the Althusserian aberrant “bad subjects” through whose persecution it seeks to both justify and express its intimidating power, and who are coded as “unnatural,” “degenerate” and “wrong” for this purpose.<sup>307</sup>

At first glance, this formulation of ideological self-perpetuation seems compatible with Althusser’s understanding. However, unlike Althusser, who believes that ideology represents a monolithic and all-pervasive force that

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<sup>306</sup> Sinfield, *Cultural Politics - - Queer Reading*, 25: 66.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-59.



enables resistance only to legitimise the state apparatuses it supports and to provide those institutions with an excuse to demonstrate their intimidating, coercive power, Sinfield's model suggests that it is possible for individuals to genuinely fight back in ways that do not ultimately serve the interests of the prevailing hegemonic structure. For Sinfield, the potential for a challenge to the dominant ideological worldview originates in the marginalised peoples or, indeed, the "bad subjects" that ideology seeks to delegitimise and depower. He proposes that it is possible for the individuals who inhabit these marginalised perspectives to gain a certain amount of strength, which may, in turn, enable them to contest the dominant's power if they can reclaim their cultural and social identities for their own purposes. Thus, subjectivities that had initially been created by the dominant ideology for the purpose of demonstrating the necessity of its oppressive power can become rallying points for the people that inhabit them and foci for collective action, reinforcement, and strength. Sinfield explains: "In that bit of the world where the subculture runs you may feel confident, as we used to say, that Black is beautiful, gay is good. There, those stories work, they build their own kinds of interactive plausibility."<sup>308</sup>

Accordingly, if members of a gay subculture, for example, wished to embrace the idea that homosexuality is as natural as heterosexuality, thereby complicating one justification for the privilege associated with the latter by dominant ideology, they would challenge the binaries that underpin the established narrative by presenting an alternative that problematises the dominant's claims to represent the objective Truth.<sup>309</sup> When it is presented with such challenges, Sinfield believes that, in many instances, the dominant ideology reacts by seeking to accommodate the contending perspective within its own narrative. Accommodation works through the dominant's acceptance of some aspects of a marginalised subculture as legitimate if only

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 41.

so that it may appropriate it for its own purposes and agendas. To this end, the dominant ideology only accepts aspects of the previously resistant view that it can reformulate in the service of its own ends, by suggesting that those elements had always been compatible with its basic, underlying values, whilst disregarding and castigating those it finds too difficult to assimilate, casting them back into cultural marginalisation. As far as the accommodated aspects of the subculture are concerned, the catch to its acceptance is that the dominant does not allow it full representation. Instead, as Sinfield understands, “mainstream recognition is by mainstream criteria,” meaning that the dominant inevitably seeks to rework the subcultures it “plunders” in order for them to better serve its prevailing narrative about the world and justifications for its privileged position within it.<sup>310</sup>

Nevertheless, despite these contingencies, this process also demands a trade-off on the part of the dominant ideology because, once it has recognised the legitimacy of certain aspects of identities that it previously sought to delegitimise and oppress, it must present itself as representative of them. This poses a potential problem for the coherence of its worldview because other, more established subjectivities contained within the dominant ideology’s coalition of interests may conflict with its recent acquisitions, resulting in internal tensions and contradictions or, in Sinfield’s terms, “faultlines.”<sup>311</sup> These faultlines can only be smoothed over, if they can ever be at all, via a long and creative process of revision through which the dominant must seek to discover a new means of ordering its overarching narrative and worldview, so as to reconcile its internal tensions and resolve its inconsistencies.

This is inevitably a fluid and unending process as, for every potentially dangerous competing narrative and subject position the dominant accommodates, it must ultimately designate another “degenerate” or

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 81: 82.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 4.

“aberrant” worldview to take its place as the excuse it needs to justify the prevalence of its own oppressive power. The newly maligned subjectivity may then, in time, present a plausible enough alternative worldview to challenge the narrative espoused by the established order, necessitating its accommodation into the dominant, causing the prevailing ideology further internal stress and tension, and resulting in the latter’s existence in an endless state of revision and flux.

Considering Sinfield’s theory, we can therefore see that “despite their power, dominant ideological formations are always, in practice, under pressure from diverse disturbances.”<sup>312</sup> Indeed it is a result of these “diverse disturbances” that it is now possible to suggest that the dominant’s supposedly coherent narrative requires the ritualised reinforcement that Althusser initially identified in such social practices as adherence to the principles of the law and praying in church. However, differing again from Althusser, Sinfield believes that these ideological strategies of repetition are not only present in tangible, lived in social practices but in creative outlets like literature.<sup>313</sup> Sinfield also contends that, in contrast to Althusser’s position, such repetitions do not simply, confidently, and unproblematically reassert the authority of the dominant worldview in the minds of its “subjects” but often take the form of “faultline stories,” which “address contested aspects of our ideological formation.”<sup>314</sup> According to Sinfield, faultline stories do not simply reinforce what the ideological subject already knows. Rather, the ritualised recurrence of faultline narratives is illustrative of the method through which the dominant worldview seeks to avoid the potential destabilisation of its authority that is risked when one of its own strands of philosophy “threatens disruption by manifestly failing to cohere with the rest.”<sup>315</sup> Sinfield believes that dominant ideology responds to problematic aspects of its own

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

perspective by “reorganizing” and “retelling” the problem narrative again and again, “trying to get it into shape.”<sup>316</sup>

Sinfield’s theories indicate that, as a consequence of the continuous repetitive disruptions and ideological reformulations to which the dominant ideology is subject, its position of prevalence is not a foregone conclusion and that its plausibility as the singular, natural and truthful worldview is hamstrung by points of internal weakness and constantly threatened by the competing perspectives of the very subject positions of which it is comprised and that it pretends to represent. Indeed, the dominant’s constant need to rework its own narrative in order to better account for the diverse subjectivities it claims to speak for implies that its prevalence is not an inevitability, and that it is in fact engaged in continuous projects of persuasion and active argumentation that are intended to convince its “subjects” of its own legitimacy. It must constantly seek to persuade those differing subjectivities that constitute the broad coalition from which it is constructed that it “really” is reflective of the singular truthful means of perceiving the world.

To this end, as Sinfield recognises, the troublesome and oft repeated faultline narratives are manifestations of the dominant ideology’s continued and continuous struggle to impose order on its own unruly and often self-contradictory worldview. Faultline stories can therefore be seen as indicators of the process in which dominant ideology must engage itself if it is to retain its prevalence. They also help us to see that, in order to hold on to its hegemony, dominant ideology has to repetitiously endeavour to reaffirm or regain the assent and consent of those upon whom its power depends, by entreating them to accept its representation of reality. In effect, the

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

dominant is constantly directed by the need to persuade its subjects that, in Sinfield's words, "the world is like *this*, isn't it?"<sup>317</sup>

If we adhere to Sinfield's logic, it follows that, given their persuasive intent, the entreaties put forward by dominant ideology are intended to be recognised and therefore manifest themselves in relatively overt rhetorically deployed signifiers that are designed to engage their target audience with the key propositions of the argument they are seeking to convey. However, because such persuasive narratives are constructed in order to resolve a particular ideological complication, they inevitably rearticulate the difficult issue, therefore highlighting the faultline that they are seeking to smooth over. Thus, arguments intended to resolve the internal contradictions inherent within dominant ideology draw further emphasis to the problem when the text's audience does not feel that the resolution that it provides is adequate, coherent, conclusive, comprehensive or, consequently, persuasive enough, with the result that it must be tackled again in a later narrative.

It is already possible to see how the corporate strategy of DC Comics, which seemingly sought to align the three main strands of the Superman franchise in an endeavour to present the US state, its institutions, and policies as manifestations of a singular, correct, divinely sanctioned and naturally dominant worldview, might correspond to this theory of persuasively exercised ideological power. Indeed, the explicitness of the politics conveyed through the "Supermen of America" pages, the prominent position of the war bond advertisements at the beginning of episodes of the radio show, and the openly anti-Japanese racism articulated by the later animations all indicate that attempts by Superman texts to forward political messages conform more to the Sinfieldian model of relatively overt ideological persuasion than the Althusserian conception of surreptitious indoctrination. However, the application of Sinfield's theory alone does not provide a full account of how

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid., xviii.

pre-war and wartime Superman texts might seek to exercise ideological power through persuasion or the difficulties facing these strategies of domination.

As my discussion of Sinfield has shown, when engaged in strategies of ideological persuasion, the dominant point of view uses overt and noticeable argumentative techniques in its endeavours to convince those it wishes to subjugate that its subjective perspective represents the natural Truth. However, as a discussion of theories proposed in Billig et al's *Ideological Dilemmas* illustrates, it is not always possible, even for a dominant ideology, to pursue such persuasive projects in a straightforward or uncomplicated manner unhindered by restrictions of context.<sup>318</sup> Billig et al argue that the complications introduced by practical circumstances often mean that even individuals who wholeheartedly believe in a singular, seemingly internally consistent ideology are not always able to behave directly in accordance with its ideals.<sup>319</sup> This leads them to act in ways that, if not entirely coherent with the ideology that they hold, are, out of all the possibilities available to them, the most compatible with their beliefs.<sup>320</sup> For Billig et al, a consequence of this problematic is the existence of a division between "intellectual" ideology, which they identify as the abstract frameworks of belief held by individuals, and "lived" ideology, which is composed of the compromised manifestations of ideological ideals in the everyday practices or culture of individuals in society.<sup>321</sup> They write,

The very distinction between lived and intellectual ideology suggests one obvious source of an ideological dilemma. Ideologues and social theorists may face particular dilemmas because they simultaneously possess both sorts of ideology.

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<sup>318</sup> Michael Billig et al, *Ideological Dilemmas: A Social Psychology of Everyday Thinking* (London: SAGE, 1988), 32.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*

Their thinking embraces both the great theory, constructed in the calm of the study and realized in systematic completeness on paper, and the everyday beliefs which enable the theorists to go about the normal business of society. For instance, a revolutionary idealist may hold grand notions about how society should operate. These idealistic visions of the future will also be criticisms of the present state of society. Yet this idealist may have to conduct everyday activities and, in fact, may be quite well adjusted to many of the society's practices. Sometimes the head of the lived ideology and the heart of the utopian ideology may pull in different directions.<sup>322</sup>

According to Billig et al, and in contrast to the Althusserian model of ideology, which proposes a direct correspondence between ideology in abstract and the everyday practices of individuals in capitalist society, "intellectual" ideology rarely manifests itself unmediated in practical day-to-day life. Rather, "pure" ideals are often compromised by the particular and often complicating practical situations in which individuals find themselves. As far as dominant ideology is concerned, it follows that it is unlikely that any one individual will be able to abide by all of its abstract principles in their everyday behaviour. In fact, it can be argued that it is this troubled relationship between abstract, "pure" "intellectual ideology" and the realities of everyday life which, at least in part, explains the existence of Sinfield's subcultural groups, which are comprised of individuals who, for a number of diverse reasons, are either unable or unwilling to fully assimilate themselves into the values espoused by the dominant perspective. Indeed, these individuals' problematic position in relation to the ideal societal norms espoused by the dominant ideology makes it easier for it to demarcate their behaviour as "wrong" and the individuals themselves as "bad subjects."

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

If the “pure” vision of intellectual ideology is complicated and obstructed by the practical everyday circumstances of Real Life, it may also be compromised when it is placed in the specific context of popular fictional texts, whose conventions are not always able to easily accommodate the sincere expressions of intellectual philosophies. For instance, although, as Ian Gordon’s argument suggests in *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture*, we would perhaps expect the commercial aspects of Superman texts to be directly in line with the aims of the American consumer state, this is not necessarily the case.<sup>323</sup> As I suggested in Chapter One, Superman comics were initially more commercial than political texts, whose success may have stemmed from their generic diversity. Superman might have been enjoyed for his credentials as a romantic hero, a pulp action hero, a science fiction hero, or, indeed, an outlandish or comedic character. Thus, even if Superman was, in part, created to forward the intellectual politics of the New Deal, then this message is perhaps obfuscated by the various other interpretive possibilities available to his readers, to the extent that the character’s supposed political meaning would probably not be immediately obvious to an audience member not already inclined to see it, if it can be identified as being present at all.

Furthermore, it is also possible to suggest that, if Superman’s success did come from his diversity, then attempts to focus too strongly on a single, coherent political message at the expense of other aspects of his character might have alienated some members of his audience to the detriment of the comic’s sales. In this scenario, in Superman comics, just as Billig et al propose, two aspects of the seemingly singular, dominant ideology of the American capitalist state are at odds with one another’s interests. Indeed, in this context, any desire on the part of DC to have their character’s stories articulate an internally consistent argument designed to lucidly convey a “pure” intellectual political ideal would be compromised by the practical need of the comics to sustain their commercial appeal. This compromise seems

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<sup>323</sup> Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture*, 128-151.



likely to result in a message whose coherence is diluted and obscured by other components of Superman's generic repertoire and remains evident in only dispersed, fragmentary signifiers that many audience members might not notice. In other words, whilst it is likely that, as is discussed at length in Chapter Three, fantasy narratives of the kind present in Superman stories reflect aspects of the dominant ideology's underlying logic, it is perhaps less probable that they will often articulate coherent, ideological arguments. Furthermore, if this is true of Superman's comic book narratives, it may also be a characteristic of his appearances in other media, whose significance similarly cannot easily be reduced to any political content they may contain.

A combination of Sinfield and Billig et al's theories therefore tells us that, whilst ideology may exist as lived in cultural Common Senses which are broadly accepted by most people in society as being True, these Truths are not uncontested. Furthermore, the dominant ideology must continually seek to reaffirm the singular naturalness of its own stance not through covert indoctrination but explicitly expressed arguments, which nevertheless present themselves as simple reflections of nature and purport to represent the world as it "really is." These arguments cannot express themselves independently from the context in which they are uttered and their meaning will thus always be to some extent mediated by their circumstances. Such circumstances may not be amenable to the clarity of the message and may result in it being altered or obscured when it is adapted to suit the context of its expression. Indeed, as we shall see, an argument seeking to articulate a sincere proposition through a comic book series such as "Superman," which is often characterised by humour, may have to struggle against the grain of the tone indicated by other textual signifiers to underscore the seriousness of its point. In fact, we can suppose that the more a message is tailored to fit an inhospitable textual context, the more its clarity might be disrupted, with the result that the ideas that it presents are evident in only distorted refractions of the original, "pure" ideological principle.

Despite these potential difficulties, the risks posed by altering a text to make it a more appropriate vehicle for coherent ideological propositions, changes which might result in alienating audience members and losing the attention of the very individuals that the arguments seek to address, mean that attempts at ideological persuasion are often constrained in their freedom of expression. Indeed, they are caught in a bind between drawing attention to the point they are trying to make and ensuring that their expressions of persuasive intent do not appear incongruous with or detract from other signifiers present in the text through which they seek to convey their message.

This theory provides a new perspective through which I can examine the seemingly political, ideological nature of pre-war and wartime Superman stories, enabling me to undertake a more complex and comprehensive analysis of these popular texts than Althusser's "entrapment" model allows. Following my mode of analysis, and particularly my discussion of Sinfield's arguments, it appears that, if Superman truly was co-opted into the principles and aims of the dominant ideology of the American consumerist state and the institutions and apparatuses that underwrote its power shortly before and during the Second World War, the process would not have manifested as an Althusserian covert, all-pervasive and unidentifiable force. Rather, it would be visible in individual stories, in the form of specific and identifiable signs of a persuasive endeavour to utilise the signifiers found in Superman's fictional universe as framing devices through which the ideological agenda of the US state and its institutions might be promoted to the character's readership. Furthermore, it would manifest itself in a manner that was consistent with the established style of Superman's narratives and in terms that his audience would be likely to both understand and accept. As I mentioned earlier, if we consider the prominence of the attempts made in the "Supermen of America" column to conflate the values of the family and the American state with the will of God, as well as the fact that Superman's stories across media are

seemingly compatible with their arguments, it seems that Superman narratives during and shortly prior to the war were engaged in acts of ideological persuasion. However, it is also possible to present a more complicated picture: one which suggests that even though such an ideological agenda can be identified, acquiescence to Superman's propositions on the part of his readers may have been far from inevitable.

As I mention briefly above and in Chapter One, Superman's initial success might have been a result of his diverse appeal. In Chapter One, utilising Martin Barker and Kate Brooks' SPACES model, as well as audience studies from the 1940s, I suggest that the varied array of genres cited by Superman stories from 1938 and 1939 likely provided material that catered for a broad range of popular cultural tastes and reader orientations. Further to this, I proposed that, as a result of Superman's generic diversity and lack of a clearly defined narrative tone, his audience may have been able to construe his adventures as any one of a number of different types of feature, be it science fiction, crime, screwball comedy, war or sports. Interestingly, it is still possible to identify a similar variety in the pre-war and wartime Superman narratives of the 1940s. Indeed, despite seemingly genuine attempts to impart the Superman franchise with a coherent moral and ideological framework beginning shortly before and continuing during the conflict, many aspects of Superman's original, multifarious entertainment appeal remained intact throughout this period. Furthermore, if we return to the stories themselves, we can see that they retain elements which, if they do not "resist" the conservatively ideological agenda that began to inflect the character's moral philosophy in this period, are not directly geared towards furthering its aims.

One interesting, and in many ways representative, example of a comic book story that addresses wartime themes but cannot easily be identified as a text that is intended to convey a clear and coherent ideological message is the *Superman* #20 story, "Destroyers from the Depths." It provides a good illustration of the multiple interpretive slants that can still be gleaned from

even those Superman stories that explicitly addressed the war. Hitler appears in the story and is represented in a comic fashion resonant with contemporaneous propagandistic depictions of him, a characteristic which locates the narrative within the discursive context of wartime political texts. However, the dictator can be considered a largely marginalised presence in a story that places a much greater emphasis on Superman's battle with Nazi agent Herr Fange, whose creation of a "super diving bell" and a method for controlling gigantic sea creatures mark him as an inventor of some skill.<sup>324</sup> In fact, rather than presenting the straightforward image of a World War Two themed villain, Fange, in his manipulation of technology and strange animals, could be understood as a villain of the Luthor tradition, as Luthor also used unusual creatures to forward his evil schemes in a story from the earlier *Superman* #12.<sup>325</sup> Fange's physical appearance which is, as his name suggests, marked by two prominent fangs, also supports this reading, as Luthor was represented with similarly protruding teeth in the earlier *Action Comics* #47, a shared feature that makes them seem equally demonic (Figures 4 and 5).<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Siegel and Dobrotka, "Destroyers from the Depths," 19: 20; Rhodes, *Propaganda, the Art of Persuasion: World War II*, 96.

<sup>325</sup> Jerry Siegel and John Sikela, "The Beasts of Luthor," *Superman* #12, September-October 1941, 51-63.

<sup>326</sup> Jerry Siegel and John Sikela, "Powerstone," *Action Comics* #47, April 1942, 2-14.



Figure 4. Luthor as he appears with fangs in the story "Powerstone." Siegel and Sikela, "Powerstone," 4.

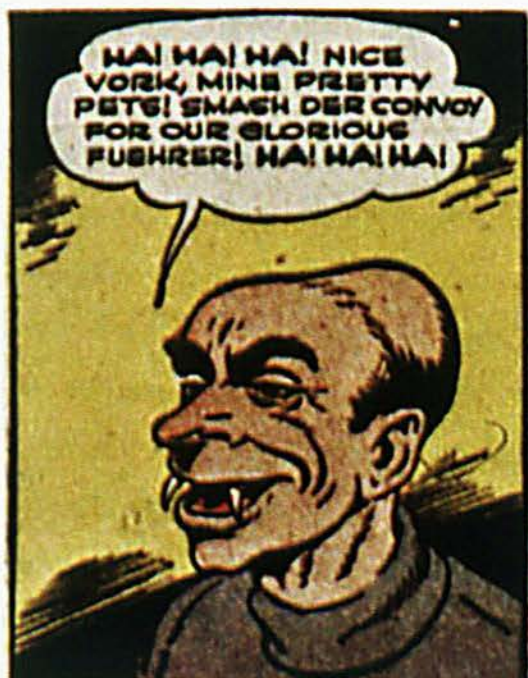


Figure 5. Herr Fange as he is drawn in "Destroyers from the Depths" is similar in his appearance to Superman's established opponent Luthor (see Figure 4 above)." Siegel and Dobrotka, "Destroyers from the Depts," 27.

A consequence of this correspondence is that, despite its wartime content and context, the story can be seen to touch upon the ambiguous status of scientific invention as a tool that has the potential for both good and evil applications, a longstanding concern of Superman stories that extends through to the comic book character's dealings with his first regular supervillain opponent, the Ultra-Humanite.<sup>327</sup> According to this interpretation, Superman, who was sent from his home world in a futuristic spaceship by his scientist father and who uses his special powers to aid mankind, functions as the representative of benevolent applications of technology, in contradistinction to the various mad scientists, from the Ultra-Humanite through Luthor to Herr Fange, whose evil designs illustrate the threatening potential of science.<sup>328</sup> Here, the comedic and science fiction conventions of the story conflict with the aims of any sincere and realistic political message that it might also be seeking to articulate, with the result that it can be placed at least as easily within the typical narrative tradition of Superman stories dating back to his first comic book appearance as in the context of wartime propaganda narratives.

"Destroyers from the Depths" is not an isolated example: comic book stories that articulate a similar diversity of focus include *Superman* #22's "Meet the Squiffles," which once again features both Hitler and fantastical creatures, *Action Comics* #62's "There'll Always Be a Superman," which contains a science fiction framing device for a central narrative about Nazis, and *Superman* #25's "The King of Comic Books" which largely involves a plot about Nazi spies but places significant emphasis on the type of self-referential humour that had been one of Jerry Siegel's trademarks since "Goober the Mighty."<sup>329</sup> It is also worth noting that, in addition to those stories which

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<sup>327</sup> Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, "Superman Meets the Ultra-Humanite," in *The Superman Chronicles*, ed. Bob Joy, vol. 2 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2007), 3-16.

<sup>328</sup> Siegel and Shuster, "Superman, Champion of the Oppressed!," 4.

<sup>329</sup> Jerry Siegel and Sam Citron, "Meet the Squiffles," 3; Don Cameron and Ed Dobrotka, "There'll Always Be a Superman," 3-4; Jerry Siegel and Ira Yarbrough, "The King of Comic Books," 29-40: 31.

engaged with the subject matter of the Second World War shortly prior to and during the conflict, many Superman stories from the comics of the time paid little heed to the war effort. Instead, they focussed solely upon traditional Superman enemies such as Luthor, as in the fourth story contained within *Superman* #12, "When Titans Clash" from *Superman* #17, the first story from *Action Comics* #42, as well as the comedy gangster, "The Prankster," as seen in the Superman narrative from *Action Comics* #51, *Action Comics* #57, and "The Great ABC Panic" from *Superman* #22.<sup>330</sup>

This is also to some extent true of episodes from the radio show which, despite their fondness for narratives featuring spies and saboteurs, present a number of wartime storylines which have little connection to the conflict. Indeed, the 1942 plot "The Headless Indian" has Clark investigate a seeming haunting, only to discover that it is, in reality, a hoax perpetrated by a group of crooks trying to disguise their counterfeiting "racket."<sup>331</sup> A similar mystery haunting is featured in the "Ghost Car," in which the villain establishes the myth as part of an attempt to steal an "abandoned gold mine," which, it later transpires, contains bauxite, "the stuff they use to make aluminium," that is in turn used by the government to make "fighting planes" and is, in the context of the war, "more valuable than gold."<sup>332</sup> Despite this reference to the conflict in its conclusion, this plot is again more closely related to the conventions of the mystery format that was established in pre-war Superman radio narratives than the themes and concerns of war-related stories. Indeed, Blane, the villain of the piece, resembles a traditional crook and, unlike the

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<sup>330</sup> Jerry Siegel and John Sikela, "The Beasts of Luthor," 51-63; Jerry Siegel and John Sikela, "When Titans Clash," *Superman* #17, July-August 1942, 40-52; Jerry Siegel and Leo Nowak, "The Empire in the Sky," *Action Comics* #42, November 1941, 2-4; Jerry Siegel and John Sikela, "The Case of the Crimeless Crimes," *Action Comics* #51, August 1942, 2-14; Jerry Siegel and John Sikela, "Crime's Comedy King," *Action Comics* #57, February 1943, 2-14; Jerry Siegel and Ed Dobrotka, "The Great ABC Panic," *Superman* #22, May-June 1943, 33-44.

<sup>331</sup> Robert Maxwell, "The Headless Indian, Part 18," *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 383, November 18, 1942, mp3, 14:16, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page05](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page05).

<sup>332</sup> Robert Maxwell, "The Ghost Car, Part 8," *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 320, February 35, 1942, mp3, 12:16, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page04](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page04).

spies and saboteurs featured in many war-themed stories, is not trying to hamper the American war effort but simply intends to make himself rich by supplying its material demands. He can thus be likened to Superman's traditional gangster adversaries.

The plot of another narrative, "The Tin Men," revolves around "master criminal" the Vulture and his efforts to steal a prototype "mechanical man" that he intends to use "to do his evil bidding."<sup>333</sup> Although the Nazi leader is alluded to once in passing via the Vulture's description of his plan to use "mental torture" against Clark, Lois, and Perry, as "the principle Hitler uses to force people to do his bidding," the story is easy to locate in the tradition of the type of pre-war tale involving the Yellow Mask and other similar narratives where Superman is tasked with uncovering and stopping the nefarious schemes of super-villains.<sup>334</sup>

As I mention above, many radio episodes do feature Nazi and Japanese agents and, at the beginning of each story, the announcer makes Superman's connections to the war hard to avoid through his entreating the audience to buy war bonds. However, the above stories perhaps contain enough divergent material for listeners to have formed understandings of the radio Superman that expanded their sense of his significance beyond the wartime concerns of the American state and which may have placed little or no importance in the character's politics.

A similar diversity of focus can also be found in the cinematic cartoons, although perhaps to a lesser degree. Indeed, despite the fact that five of the final eight animated shorts, *Japoteurs*, *Eleventh Hour*, *Destruction, Inc.*, *Jungle Drums*, and *Secret Agent*, feature Superman combating Japanese or Nazi

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<sup>333</sup> Robert Maxwell, "The Tin Men, Part 14," *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 428, January 21, 1943, mp3, 14:34, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page06](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page06).

<sup>334</sup> Maxwell, "The Tin Men, Part 14; Robert Maxwell, "The Silver Clipper," *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 6, February 23, 1940, mp3, 11:21, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page01](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page01).



enemies, three of the later features, *Showdown*, *The Mummy Strikes*, and *The Underground World*, pursue plots that are unrelated to wartime topics and which involve Superman tackling some of his more traditional opponents in the form of gangsters and monsters.<sup>335</sup>

As the above examples demonstrate, across the three media I discuss, the traditional subject matter of Superman's stories continued to exist alongside their wartime themes. Even during the period of conflict, when his corporate owners were trying to refine and streamline his ideological worldview, Superman retained many of the characteristics that originally constituted his diverse appeal and popularity. Thus, the character may still have encouraged a number of different readings from his audience, which might, in turn, have prompted them to attribute an equal variety of meanings and significances to him. This is pertinent to Superman's role as an agent of ideology because, as I have argued above, any acts of persuasion, including those seeking to reaffirm a dominant ideological proposition in the minds of their audience, must make the points they are seeking to convey clear, even as they tailor their message to suit the cultural tastes of its recipients. Otherwise, those they seek to persuade may "misinterpret" or "misconstrue" the text's "proper" meaning or message or simply not notice it. For instance, one would perhaps expect an argument that is seeking to convince its audience that a particular worldview is correct or which, in Sinfield's language, proposes that "the world is like *this*," to be most persuasive if it were to frame its suggestions in a form that implies that the perspective it presents is reflective of the Common Sense understandings of reality that its audience hold. Indeed, couching the argument in these terms may encourage its recipients to

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<sup>335</sup> *Eleventh Hour*, directed by Dan Gordon (1942; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2004), DVD; *Destruction, Inc.*, directed by Izzy Sparber (1942; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2004), DVD; *Jungle Drums*, directed by Dan Gordon (1943; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2004), DVD; *Secret Agent*, directed by Seymour Kneitel (1943; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2004), DVD; *Showdown*, directed by Izzy Sparber (1942; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2004), DVD; *The Mummy Strikes*, directed by Izzy Sparber (1943; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2004), DVD; *The Underground World*, directed by Seymour Kneitel (1943; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2004), DVD.

view its representations as realistic or at least applicable to Real Life situations in some way. However the Superman stories I discuss in the above passages do not contain many signifiers that index such intent and they often appear to undermine the seriousness of the wartime themes they do feature by expressing them through the comedic entertainment conventions familiar to Superman. Therefore, it is possible that “readers” engaged with stories which dealt with both wartime topics and Superman’s traditional entertainment concerns according to interpretive frameworks which placed more emphasis on unrealistic story elements than those aspects which contextualised the narratives and their protagonist within contemporaneous Real Life events.

Even those readers predisposed to interpreting a story through the filter of its connections to reality might, upon noticing the degree of artistic licence exploited in introducing such fantastical elements as giant monsters, master criminals, and “squiffles,” have been encouraged to change their orientation towards it. Instead of taking the tale seriously, they may subsequently have been more inclined towards engaging with it according to a perspective of suspended disbelief, an approach which may encourage them to view such politically relevant aspects as the appearance of Real Life figures like Hitler as equally tinted with imaginative fantasy.

If we consider this analysis reasonable, we can accept that even the Superman stories which did feature wartime content were, like “Destroyers from the Depths,” far from uniformly ideological in their focus or in the types of reading they encouraged. Furthermore, it can be suggested that those stories from the early to mid-1940s, which did not place significant emphasis on the war but which continued to engage with the genre forms and conventions of entertainment and fantasy that had previously characterised Superman’s adventures, would not necessarily have been viewed by their audience as pertinent to the Real Life context of their publication. Following this, it is feasible that their potential to provoke readings which cast their

content as more ephemeral, comical fantasies than relevant reflections upon Real Life events implies that Superman stories of the 1940s can be described as unreliable vehicles for ideological arguments that seek to persuade their audience to accept a political standpoint or representation of the world. Thus, even though an attempt to convey an internally coherent argument can be identified across pre-war and then wartime Superman texts, it does not necessarily follow that this agenda was always articulated without its clarity being disrupted by other competing signifiers present in the tales through which it was expressed.

In light of these thoughts, we can see that, despite attempts by Superman's owners to refine his meaning and personal philosophy shortly prior to and during the war, the character appears to have remained the complex and diverse figure that he had been since Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster introduced him to comics in the late 1930s. Therefore, even during the 1940s, a period of relatively strong political focus for Superman, his significance could never be reduced to that of a simple purveyor of conservatively ideological messages, even if that function did comprise one aspect of his meaning and purpose. This is not to suggest that this ambiguity necessarily allows Superman stories to be easily hijacked by "resistant" anti-war interpretations, as explicit and frequently expressed affirmations of Superman's patriotism in several narratives, such as the tale from *Action Comics* #67 and editorials like the "Supermen of America" page from *Action Comics* #77, would caution against this possibility.<sup>336</sup> However, I would argue that, in adapting the war to the concerns traditionally addressed by Superman, editors and writers, intentionally or otherwise, provided their readers with the space and the means to choose whether to privilege the more political wartime flavouring that was given to familiar tropes and themes in some instances or to largely

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<sup>336</sup> Don Cameron and Sam Citron, "Make Way for Fate," *Action Comics* #67, December 1942, 2-13; 5; "Supermen of America," *Action Comics* #77, October 1944, 31.

overlook such infusions in favour of readings that placed more emphasis on Superman's status as a figure of fun and fantasy.

The possibility that, even shortly prior to and during the Second World War, a period in which he does appear to have been involved in promoting ideological messages, Superman's meaning cannot easily be explained in full simply through reference to his political agenda is significant because it has implications for the theory that he had become a conservative, even specifically a Republican, defender of established institutions and ideas by the 1950s. Indeed, given my above thoughts, it is possible to suggest that if Superman was, as Tye and Dehaven have asserted, a Republican in the 1950s, we should expect to find evidence of rhetorical techniques designed to forward this politically partisan agenda in a persuasive endeavour that is just as, if not more, focussed and coherent as the attempts made by Superman's owners to provide their protagonist with a unified political outlook in his pre-war and wartime texts.

The most obvious political rhetoric to be found in the 1950s Superman comics is arguably contained within public service advertisements commissioned by Jack Schiff, an editor who was reportedly interested in using his comics to educate his audience.<sup>337</sup> For instance, *Action Comics* #179's "People are People" betrays a political agenda that stops short of endorsing civil rights but which can nevertheless be identified as tentatively correspondent to Schiff's "liberal" outlook in its message that "people are people, and should be judged as such, regardless of colour or beliefs!"<sup>338</sup> Similarly, the public service advertisement from *Action Comics* #143, "Superman's Code for Buddies," which features Superman reprimanding a group of boys for excluding a peer, Sam Levy, from their clubhouse because of his name, argues that, "it never should matter what a person is — Protestant, Jew or Catholic" or "what the

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<sup>337</sup> Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 26.

<sup>338</sup> Jack Schiff and Win Mortimer, "People are People," *Action Comics* #179, April 1953, 15; Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, 82.

colour of a person's skin is, or where his parents were born."<sup>339</sup> Both of these texts can be identified as broadly representative of the more progressive social arguments pursued by some of Schiff's public service advertisements. Indeed, the seemingly "liberal" sentiments they articulate may, contrary to expectations, caution against interpreting Superman's overall worldview during the 1950s as being in line with the partisan political "Conservatism" associated with the Republican party.

However, they do not necessarily disprove a conservative interpretation of Superman completely. That Superman's promotion of tolerance should not necessarily be interpreted as suggestive of his strident support for civil rights is tentatively indicated in the fact that the advertisements were produced in conjunction with the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ). Kevin M. Schultz has argued that, although this organisation was associated with the early campaign for civil rights to some degree, it was often "tepid and hesitant" in its support, fearing that "pushing too strongly for racial equality might jeopardise their primary objective of religious goodwill."<sup>340</sup>

Interestingly, whilst we should be cautious about judging historical texts for not engaging with political or historical developments that they could not predict, the description "tepid and hesitant" might also be applied to the content of both "Superman's Code for Buddies" and "People are People." Indeed, for texts that are apparently advocating an explicit anti-racist point of view, they are surprisingly tentative in the subject they are dealing with. For instance, in neither is the specific race of the people being discriminated against actually mentioned. Although one would perhaps expect the audience to infer that Sam Levy in "Superman's Code for Buddies" is Jewish from his name, as well as indications provided by the advertisement's references to World War Two and the depiction of a gravestone shaped as

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<sup>339</sup> Jack Schiff and Al Plastino, "Superman's Code for Buddies," *Action Comics* #143, April 1950, 42.

<sup>340</sup> Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Post-War America to its Protestant Promise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 105: 8.

the Star of David that features prominently in the background of one of the panels, it is notable that the narrative does not emphasise its point by stating it explicitly (Figure 6). Similarly, although the boy who is discriminated against in "People are People" is clearly not white, his particular race is never identified, which is suggestive of the possibility that DC were wary of intervening too directly in issues concerning relations between white and specific non-white racial groups like African Americans (Figure 7). Furthermore, it is important to note that that the seemingly "liberal," comparatively progressive content of the public service advertisements is not representative of the politics of Superman stories themselves, nor are progressive challenges to entrenched cultural assumptions the norm in these texts. Indeed, the public service advertisements also advocate what can be considered conservatively ideological principles in their support for established institutions and suggestions regarding the importance of finding work before high school graduation and the value of school itself.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Jack Schiff and Win Mortimer, "Job Counselor," *Action Comics* #147, August 1950, 48; Jack Schiff and Win Mortimer, "School Children 'Round the World," *Action Comics* #149, October 1950, 40.

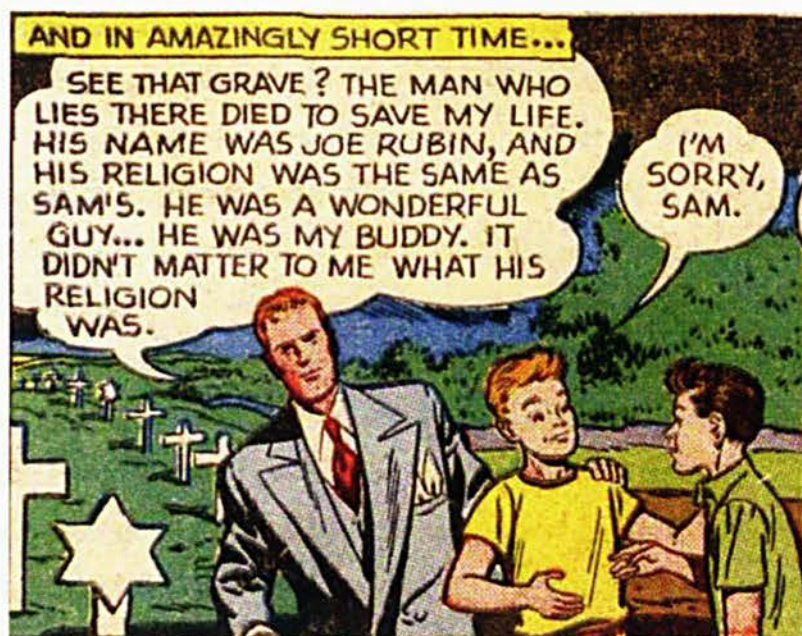


Figure 6. In "Superman's Code for Buddies," this panel, which features the Star of David prominently in the background, and Sam's surname "Levy" are the advertisement's only indications that it is criticising anti-Semitism. Jack Schiff and Al Plastino, "Superman's Code for Buddies," 42.

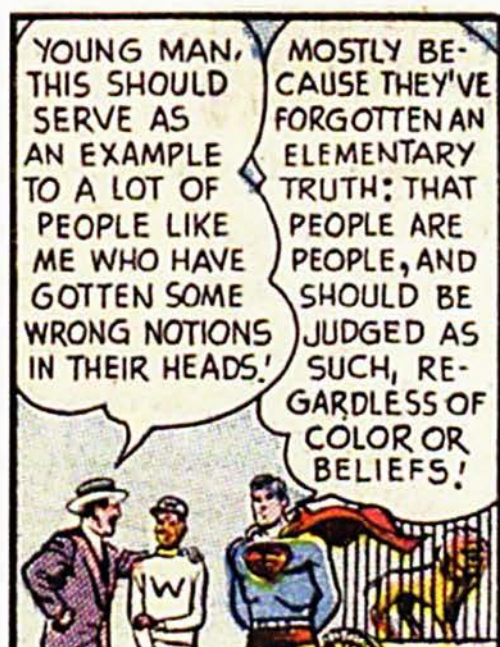


Figure 7. Here, Superman appears in the public service advertisement "people are people." The boy depicted in the panel is clearly not white but his ethnic background is not identified in the strip. Jack Schiff and Win Mortimer, "People are People," 82.

I am not arguing here that Jack Schiff, or even DC Comics themselves, were insincere in their endeavours to promote racial tolerance. Rather, as was the case with the wartime messages espoused by a number of Superman stories, which were often compromised or obscured by the narratives' commitment to other concerns, the commercial interests of DC perhaps made them cautious about endorsing one position too stridently at the expense of another and alienating readers as a result. Furthermore, during the 1950s, when these advertisements were published, comics were under attack from an "alliance" of both liberal and Conservative critics and, whilst they may have been genuinely inclined to promote integration and racial equality and minded to appease the likes of Fredric Wertham and Gerson Legman who criticised comics for their supposedly "racist," even pro-Nazi content during the late 1940s and 1950s, it is possible that DC may have equally been afraid of further affronting Conservative critics, and that they consequently approached social issues cautiously.<sup>342</sup> This theory seems even more plausible when we consider that, during the 1950s, even those who expressed moderate left-wing sympathies risked being dubbed "pink" and being condemned for their supposed association with the Communist cause.<sup>343</sup>

Here, we are once again witnessing intellectual ideology becoming compromised by circumstance, a complication which leads progressive ideals to be tempered in their expression through publication in the, at the time, critically scrutinised medium of comic books. As a result, even the most explicitly political public service advertisements that involve Superman in potentially controversial subjects are characterised by a significant air of caution and are less clear in their message than they might be. However, if these advertisements are not strident in their "liberal" argumentative intent,

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<sup>342</sup> Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 24; Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 97; Gerson Legman, "The Comic Books and the Public," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 2, no. 1 (1948): 473-477: 475.

<sup>343</sup> Ellen Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 185.



they nevertheless provide a more explicit perspective than the comic book stories, which are even more reluctant to engage with such agendas.

Given that the prospect of a possible third world war remained throughout the 1950s, and considering the prominence of McCarthyism in the early and middle periods of the decade which, of both political parties, was most enthusiastically embraced by the Republicans, we might expect this era's Conservative Superman to be involved in a similar type of story to those published shortly before World War Two, which mirrored the United States' foreign policy in their emphasis on the nation's need to defend its own peace from spies and saboteurs.<sup>344</sup> In this context, we might also think it likely for 1950s stories to engage with topics such as espionage, which are, as pre-war and wartime stories have illustrated, well suited to emulating tense foreign policy politics. Therefore, the 1950s would have provided an ideal context for Superman to emphasise his Republican credentials by embodying the tough anti-Communist stance associated with the party through promoting vigilance, tackling villainous and degenerate agents from left-wing dictatorships and, in the process, delegitimising those perspectives that he did not endorse.<sup>345</sup>

It is thus surprising that from all of the 1950s issues of *Action Comics* and *Superman* publications, I can only identify six examples of comic book stories which reference the subject of espionage. The first of these, "The Bride of Superman" from *Action Comics* #143, dated April 1950, contains only an incidental reference to foreign spies, which is used to justify a plot that largely consists of a romantic drama.<sup>346</sup> In the second, "Lois Lane Joins the WACs" from *Superman* #82, dated May-June 1953, the female reporter enlists in the military organisation in the hunt for a story and encounters another recruit

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<sup>344</sup> Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes*, 163.

<sup>345</sup> Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 138.

<sup>346</sup> William Woolfolk and Al Plastino, "The Bride of Superman," *Action Comics* #143, April 1950, 1-12: 12.

whom she suspects to be a foreign agent.<sup>347</sup> Instead of laying the foundations for a serious message, Lois' suspicions serve as a framing device for a narrative centred upon a comic misunderstanding. The conclusion reveals that Lois's suspect, Judy Masters, is another reporter who has managed to beat the heroine to her scoop.<sup>348</sup> Whilst this story does appear to actively endorse the United States' military apparatuses in its promotion of the WACS as well as hinting at the threat posed by foreign spies, it does not link the two themes to form a coherent argumentative position or worldview for the reader to accept. In fact, where it can be identified, its ideological argument appears fragmentary, unfocussed and underdeveloped.

The third example is another story with a military setting, "The Boy Napoleon."<sup>349</sup> This narrative, featured in January 1958's *Superman* #118, has Superman fool a group of "foreign spies" in order to help rescue Jimmy Olsen from a humorous misunderstanding that has led the military to believe the cub reporter to be a General of genius. The fourth spy story, "The Super-Sergeant" from *Superman* #122, is a rather fantastical narrative that largely focusses upon Superman's attempts to ameliorate problems caused by a member of the armed forces who accidentally acquires some of his powers.<sup>350</sup> The reference to foreign spies in the fifth example, the 1959 story "The Girl in Superman's Past" from *Superman* #129, is even more incidental than that in "The Bride of Superman."<sup>351</sup> The topic is only addressed when Superman speculates about the strange behaviour of his college sweetheart, which is eventually explained by the fact that she is a mermaid.<sup>352</sup> The final reference to espionage occurs in a 1959 story from *Action Comics* #256, in which the Man of Steel pretends to be a "Superman of the Future" in order to foil a plot

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<sup>347</sup> William Woolfolk and Wayne Boring, "Lois Lane Joins the WACS," *Superman* #82, May-June 1953, 1-10.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>349</sup> Curt Swan, "The Boy Napoleon," *Superman* #118, January 1958, 12-21.

<sup>350</sup> Otto Binder and Wayne Boring, "The Super-Sergeant," *Superman* #122, July 1958, 18-25.

<sup>351</sup> Bill Finger and Wayne Boring, "The Girl in Superman's Past," *Superman* #129, May 1959, 22-31.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 27: 29.

to assassinate the President. However, the main thrust of the narrative is focussed upon the strange powers apparently manifested within the future protagonist.<sup>353</sup>

The small number of these narratives and their often casual references to Cold War politics suggest that such concerns were most often utilised to serve as the pretext for stories of a largely fantastical or comical nature, which do not necessarily appear to be significantly engaged in sincere and coherent rhetorical arguments designed to persuade their audience to accept the claim to legitimacy and universality made by a dominant ideology and its values. Furthermore, aside from this significantly small number of foreign spy stories, I have found little evidence of a Republican political agenda in Superman comics of the 1950s. In fact, Superman stories from the decade place an increasing focus upon both elaborate science fiction narratives featuring Kryptonians, as in *Superman* #65's "The Three Supermen from Krypton" and *Superman* #77's "The Man Who Went to Krypton" as well as other aliens, as in *Superman* #84's "A Dog House for Superman" and *Superman* #102's "The Midget Menace."<sup>354</sup> Although it could be argued that these narratives utilise aliens as metaphors for Communist enemies, an interpretation that has been applied to similar monsters from films of the 1950s, the presence of these space men can also quite plausibly be explained by the long standing interest in science fiction held by Superman writers such as Otto Binder, Edmond Hamilton and editor Mort Weisinger, which dates back to their involvement with the genre in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>355</sup> Thus, the heavy emphasis placed

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<sup>353</sup> Otto Binder and Curt Swan, "The Superman of the Future," *Action Comics* #256, September 1959, 2-13: 11.

<sup>354</sup> William Woolfolk and Al Plastino, "The Three Supermen from Krypton," *Superman* #65, July-August 1950, 33-46; Bill Finger and Wayne Boring, "The Man Who Went to Krypton," *Superman* #77, July-August 1952, 1-12; William Woolfolk and Al Plastino, "A Dog House for Superman," *Superman* #84, September-October 1953, 16-25; Edmond Hamilton and Wayne Boring, "The Midget Menace," *Superman* #102, January 1956, 13-20.

<sup>355</sup> David Seed, *American Science Fiction and the Cold War: Literature and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 2; Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s*, 10; Will Murray, "Superman's Editor Mort Weisinger," in *The Krypton Companion*, ed. Michael Eury (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2007), 8-14: 10-11: 13.

upon science fiction by 1950s Superman stories in comics can be seen as more a consequence of their links to 1920s pulp fiction than the result of their connection to the cultural or political context of the Cold War. This possibility can be used to problematise those readings which seek to locate the subject matter of these stories primarily within the context of 1950s' political discourses. Indeed, it implies that readers might have construed the narratives according to the terms of their status as entertainment texts, which dealt more with fantastical concepts than realistic, Real Life issues.

It can be argued that the politics of, what is perhaps the other most significant Superman text of the 1950s, *The Adventures of Superman* television series, are as ambiguous and incidental as those found in the comics.<sup>356</sup> As is the case for the comic books of the period, a few episodes do contain plots concerning foreign spies. For instance, season one's "The Monkey Mystery" features a story involving a woman who is being pursued by enemy agents following her escape from an unidentified Eastern European country and in season two's "Jet Ace," foreign agents kidnap a pilot in order to coerce him into divulging state secrets.<sup>357</sup> Similarly, in season six's "The Atomic Captive," spies seek to blackmail a defected atomic scientist into disclosing his classified knowledge.<sup>358</sup> In a characteristic that echoes stories from the comic books, these narratives are vague in their politics and either refrain from explicitly identifying the country of the villains' origin or assign a fictional national identity to the antagonists. They are also small in their number, a scarcity which implies that, in contrast to the prominence of pre-war tales dealing with the subject, the topic of foreign spies does not constitute a significant element of Superman's narrative repertoire of the

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<sup>356</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 160.

<sup>357</sup> Robert Maxwell, "The Monkey Mystery," *The Adventures of Superman*, season 1, episode 5, directed by Thomas Carr, aired October 17, 1952 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD; Whitney Ellsworth, "Jet Ace," *The Adventures of Superman*, season 2, episode 4, directed by Thomas Carr, aired October 10, 1953 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

<sup>358</sup> Whitney Ellsworth, "The Atomic Captive," *The Adventures of Superman*, season 6, episode 5, directed by George Blair, aired March 3, 1958 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

time. As is the case with comic book narratives of the 1950s, aside from a few spy stories, episodes from *The Adventures of Superman* contain little evidence that the show is pursuing a specifically Republican anti-Communist agenda. However, there is some indication of ideological “conservatism” which I discuss in the paragraphs below.

In addition to the foreign agent stories, other unusually political episodes from *The Adventures of Superman* include “Stamp Day for Superman” and the two-part tale “The Unknown People.”<sup>359</sup> “Stamp Day for Superman” is a public service broadcast commissioned to promote “treasury savings bonds and stamps” and features a similar endorsement of patriotic consumerism found in wartime comic book advertisements of war bonds. Like the “Supermen of America” pages from the wartime comics, the broadcast aligns the values of being a “Super-citizen” and a good family member in its suggestion that saving money to buy the stamps will make children’s parents “plenty proud of you”; this sentiment renders its message a conservatively ideological endorsement of the US state and its institutions.<sup>360</sup> However, this story is once more significant in its status as an exception, as it is the only episode from the series to feature such an agenda.

“The Unknown People” is slightly more complicated in its politics. In the plot of this story, strange creatures from the centre of the Earth are inadvertently discovered in the town of Silsby when an oil well drills too deep. Whilst it may be accurate to characterise the story as a fantasy alien invasion adventure, like the comic book public service advertisements it initially seems to hint at a “liberal” political agenda. For instance, when the harmless alien creatures are

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<sup>359</sup> Whitney Ellsworth, “Stamp Day for Superman,” *The Adventures of Superman*, directed by Thomas Carr (1954; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD; Robert Maxwell, “The Unknown People, Part 1,” *The Adventures of Superman*, season 1, episode 25, directed by Lee Sholem, aired November 23, 1951 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD; Robert Maxwell, “The Unknown People, Part 2,” *The Adventures of Superman*, season 2, episode 26, directed by Lee Sholem, aired November 23, 1951 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

<sup>360</sup> Whitney Ellsworth, “Stamp Day for Superman.”

hounded by townspeople Luke Benson and a number of Silsby's other inhabitants who believe them to be dangerous, Superman criticises the local worthy and his gang by describing them as a "lynch mob," an act that seemingly hints at the same type of message of mutual respect offered by Schiff's "People are People."<sup>361</sup> Further evidence of this "liberal" sentiment can be found in part two of the narrative when, after one of the victimised aliens is shot, the plot makes what appears to be a barely disguised reference to segregation when Superman tries to have the creature treated for his injuries at the local (human) hospital. He faces resistance from many of the townspeople, as well as the establishment's manager who is reluctant to accommodate the "monstrosity."<sup>362</sup> The narrative unsurprisingly aligns itself with Superman's perspective when, following the operation to remove the bullet from the creature's wound, the "alien" is revealed to be almost identical to ordinary humans on a physiological level, thus indicating that those who oppose the treatment of "the little creature" are "wrong" in relation to factual evidence. This further contributes to the sense that the story is intended as a social allegory, potentially regarding race relations. This agenda is seemingly emphasised again when Superman draws attention to the correspondences between the attitude of the townspeople and racist beliefs by comparing them to "Nazi Storm Troopers," as he tries to prevent them from barging into the hospital and assaulting his charge.<sup>363</sup>

However, the seemingly "liberal" politics of the narrative are undercut by the conclusion of the story, in which the "little creatures" decide to leave the surface world forever. Lois interprets the decision as them sending the message "you live your lives and we'll live ours" and if we follow the understanding of the story that casts it as a political allegory, its ending appears to suggest that not only can different peoples not coexist but that segregation and separation is an adequate, even desired, solution to racial

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<sup>361</sup> Maxwell, "The Unknown People, Part 2."

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

tensions. In fact, Lois' line arguably indicates that the text's apparently liberal argument has been all along operating according to the logic of ideological conservatism in its apparent endorsement of the existing social structure and divisions of power. Indeed, if we accept that the story serves as a metaphor for racial tensions within the United States, once we have considered its conclusion, it can be suggested that it is intended to promote equality and criticise racism but only within a rhetorical framework that is ultimately uncritical of the established and prevailing relations of power and the social norms that they endorse. It is even possible to argue that the narrative's focus on the shared humanity of different peoples is used as an alibi and an excuse that allows it to overlook the socially instituted relations of power that facilitate intolerant and racist practices and discourses. Certainly, the story appears to provide as much a tacit endorsement of segregation as it offers an implicit critique of racism. As Tom Dehaven has noted, the internal tensions within the story, which indicate both an acceptance of the structures and practices that legitimise racist beliefs and an approval of discourses promoting equality, render its political argument rather ill-defined.<sup>364</sup> As was the case with wartime Superman comics and the 1950s public service advertisements, we may be witnessing a disjuncture between the desire on the part of the episode's creative staff to articulate a socially progressive agenda and the need to protect Superman from controversy, resulting in an unclear message. As a result of the narrative's vague politics, we can speculate that it might be relatively easy for its audience to overlook its social arguments and to place greater emphasis on its science fiction elements, which are more clearly articulated.

If those *The Adventures of Superman* episodes that do address political topics are vague in their arguments to the point that their central propositions are often rendered unclear, the show is more consistent in its handling of the issues of crime and criminality. In fact, from the second season onwards, it

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<sup>364</sup> Dehaven, *Our Hero*, 104.

was produced by Whitney Ellsworth who appears to have applied to the television series the same principles regarding law and order that he imposed on the comics during his editorship. Indeed, perhaps the most common type of plot associated with *The Adventures of Superman* is the crime narrative, as is epitomised by such episodes as “My Friend Superman,” “The Dog Who Knew Superman,” “The Man in the Lead Mask,” and “The Machine That Could Plot Crimes.”<sup>365</sup> As I have suggested, the depiction of gangsters in these crime stories corresponds with the sentiment of Ellsworth’s comic book editorial policy and his edict that “crime should be depicted in all cases as sordid and unpleasant” and that criminals “should never be glamorised.” This trend is particularly evident in the representation of gangsters Hank and Louie, who are depicted as buffoons, in “The Dog Who Knew Superman” and many crooks in a number of later episodes.

Furthermore, in a diegetic context where Superman is mostly preoccupied with apprehending petty crooks and gangsters, the character’s endorsement of the “American way” in the show’s opening titles can be viewed as largely applying to the principles of law and order.<sup>366</sup> In respect of its disregard for criminals and its repetitive reinforcement of the notion that crime is futile through Superman’s weekly victories over his enemies, the television series can be regarded as ideological in its support for law, order, and the state apparatus of the police. It is therefore tempting to suggest that, whilst its ideological focus is not as broad ranging as pre-war and wartime comics, which endorsed both America’s legal frameworks and foreign policy, *The Adventures of Superman*’s repetitive reinforcement of the legitimacy of the

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<sup>365</sup> Whitney Ellsworth, “My Friend Superman,” *The Adventures of Superman*, season 2, episode 15, directed by Thomas Carr, aired December 26, 1953 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD; Whitney Ellsworth, “The Dog Who Knew Superman,” *The Adventures of Superman*, season 2, episode 9, directed by Thomas Carr, aired November 15, 1953 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD; Whitney Ellsworth, “The Man in the Lead Mask,” *The Adventures of Superman*, season 2, episode 11, directed by Thomas Carr, aired November 28, 1953 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD; Whitney Ellsworth, “The Machine That Could Plot Crimes,” *The Adventures of Superman*, season 2, episode 13, directed by Thomas Carr, aired December 12, 1953 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

<sup>366</sup> Whitney Ellsworth, “The Dog Who Knew Superman.”



existing structures and practices of law and order indicates that it is another small “c” conservative text rather than an explicitly partisan Conservative, Republican interpretation of Superman.

However, we should even be cautious about this interpretation because, if *The Adventures of Superman* argues against crime and criminality, it does not always present it as an issue to be taken seriously. Indeed, the plot of “The Dog Who Knew Superman,” in which Hank and Louie seek to uncover Superman’s secret identity by using a friendly canine to track him down, is an unlikely example of a serious and didactic anti-crime narrative. This is also true of “The Machine That Could Plot Crimes” which, as its title suggests, depicts a crook who uses a state of the art computer to help him formulate the perfect caper. Considering the comical and sometimes fantastical nature of these adventures, which are at least characteristic of Ellsworth’s tenure as producer between seasons two and six, it can be argued that, if *The Adventures of Superman* is designed to communicate a conservatively ideological anti-crime worldview to its audience, then this intent may face the same complication as pre-war and wartime comics’ attempts to promote political arguments through texts that are also characterised by entertainment conceits.

As is the case with such comic book stories as “Destroyers from the Depths,” it can be argued that *The Adventures of Superman*’s more fantastical and comical aspects might distract from or obscure signifiers of the more serious anti-crime ideological argument that the series may also be seeking to convey. This may result in audience members approaching episodes from orientations that privilege the series’ entertainment concerns and forming interpretations that do not construe the show’s meanings according to political or ideological terms. Consequently, as is the case with other texts discussed in this chapter, particularly those Superman narratives printed and broadcast in the 1950s, it is difficult to identify any clearly defined political purpose within most episodes of *The Adventures of Superman*; whilst there

are identifiable signifiers of ideological intent, other signs from within the text are likely to conflict with and obscure such an agenda. We can see, therefore, that *The Adventures of Superman*, like other Superman texts from the same period, displays no evidence of a politically partisan agenda, Republican or otherwise, and only relatively dispersed, often tentative signifiers of a conservatively ideological argumentative intent.

In light of my discussion of their politics, we can see that there is little to no evidence of party political Republicanism in 1950s Superman stories from either comics or television and some fragmentary indications of a vaguely expressed conservatively ideological agenda in a few narratives from the decade. Given the limited nature of the politics of these texts, and the sometimes ambiguous perspectives they present, we can suggest that they are less engaged in the furtherance of a coherent ideological project than Superman narratives in comic books, radio, and animation from the 1940s. Indeed, although the stories of the pre-war and wartime 1940s remained diverse in their appeal, they did foreground a political or ideological standpoint comparatively frequently. As we have seen, this is notably not the case with the 1950s stories I have encountered, in which ideological agendas appear to have been pursued only fitfully. In light of these thoughts, we can suggest that readings of 1950s Superman, which cast him as a politically partisan Republican, or even those interpretations that identify him as primarily a purveyor of ideology and a protector of the status quo, are as limited as those understandings of the 1930s version of the character which construe him as a New Dealer.

Considering the effort that appears to have been made by DC to align Superman with the nation state and its apparatuses, as well as the principles of contemporaneous American foreign policy during the pre-war and wartime periods, it is perhaps surprising that the company continued to allow Superman texts from the early to mid-1940s the level of diversity that we have seen. This is especially striking given that Superman's ongoing versatility

seems to have resulted in his not being so clearly defined by his endorsement of the US government and its apparatuses as we might expect. Even more remarkable is that DC's tolerance for Superman's narrative flexibility continued into the 1950s, when they appear to have allowed his stories to drift further away from their wartime high point of ideological coherence. The remainder of this chapter seeks an explanation for these phenomena.

We can find a suggestion of why these developments might have occurred in Robert K. Merton's assertion that 1940s audiences were often critically aware of the "propagandas" directed at them and viewed attempts to address them with political arguments sceptically.<sup>367</sup> This may have posed a problem for DC if they did wish to improve Superman's reputation by providing him with a respectable and, at times, didactic moral philosophy and rhetorical purpose. Keeping such scepticism in mind, it is possible to suggest that, although they were wary of controversy and willing to place increasing emphasis on Superman's moral philosophy in order to avoid it, DC Comics was equally concerned about the possibility of alienating those readers who appreciated his stories largely as entertainment. Such individuals would perhaps not have looked kindly upon, or been receptive to, political messages that were directed to them through a text that they read for pleasure. If this is true, it is possible that correspondences between the foreign enemies that featured in Superman's pre-war and wartime stories and representations of Superman's "racketeer" and super-villain opponents were not simply a means of rhetorical framing designed to accommodate his audience to the policies and agendas of the US government, but rather an attempt to safeguard the character's popularity as a figure of entertainment at a time when certain aspects of his identity were becoming politicised. Indeed, the process of accommodating Superman to the ideology of the pre-war US consumerist state and the foreign policy agenda of its government may have put his popularity and financial success at risk if political themes had been

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<sup>367</sup> Merton, *Mass Persuasion*, 142.

emphasised too stridently. Following this logic, it can be suggested that because DC adapted the war to fit the established tropes of Superman's narrative universe but refrained from reducing his repertoire to wartime concerns, the character's followers were allowed the interpretive freedom to form understandings of him that were not preoccupied with politics or the ideological agenda of the US state.

I have argued that, by the end of the war, Superman's politics had, for those who were minded to engage with them, become clearly established as consistently aligned with the policies and perspectives of the nation. Once Superman's reputation securing, patriotic philosophy had been consolidated, it may have been unnecessary, and even potentially harmful to the character's popularity, if he were to continue emphasising ideological or political arguments. Considering the small number and exceptional nature of political Superman stories in the 1950s and later declarations by Mort Weisinger, who edited the stories for Superman's comic books as well as the television show during the decade, that "we never go in for stories of a political nature," it seems that, if there was a concerted effort to provide a coherent direction to Superman's development after the war, it was towards re-emphasising his status as a figure of entertainment.<sup>368</sup> To this end, Superman's focus was shifted further away from either partisan political concerns or even ideological agendas. Once the ideological project that emphasised Superman's increasing alignment with the American state and its institutions was relaxed, it was, to an extent, sidelined in favour of a focus on less political aspects of his appeal. Therefore, in the instances when ideologically motivated content did appear, it seems likely that editorial efforts were directed towards ensuring that it was not emphasised at the expense of Superman's now privileged focus on entertainment.

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<sup>368</sup> Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History*, 95; Mort Weisinger, reply to Dennis Fox, "Metropolis Mailbag," *Action Comics* #287, April 1962, 17; Mort Weisinger, reply to Victoria Phillips, "Metropolis Mailbag," *Action Comics* #339, July 1966, 13.

Here, it is important to recall Sinfield's suggestion that, even once it has been successful in persuading its target audience of its status as Common Sense, an ideological proposition does not become established as Truth forever, but must continuously seek to persuade the diverse subjectivities it claims to represent that it remains the only perspective to perceive the world as it "really is" in order to safeguard against its own fracturing at the hands of its internal contradictions. Keeping this theory in mind, we can see how the lessening emphasis placed on Superman's political philosophy may have enabled the partial disintegration of the character's relatively coherent wartime ideological perspective, resulting in a lessening of its clarity and rhetorical power. Indeed, as far as 1950s Superman texts are concerned, when Superman's relatively coherent 1940s political agenda was given less emphasis and reinforcement, the Man of Steel's other concerns were given greater space to develop. As a result, it may be that DC sought to facilitate the growth of readings of the character which did not privilege his pre-war and wartime conservatively ideological worldview, and which judged him according to his status as a science fiction, fantasy, comedy, and entertainment figure. As we can see in the examples I have discussed, this process appears to have resulted in a character whose ideological agenda is, where it can be perceived at all, indexed more through a small number of texts and through fragmentary and sometimes conflicting signifiers than through a coherent political argument.

Although it is possible to identify a trend towards reemphasising Superman's status as a figure of entertainment at the expense of his political philosophy in the period between the end of the war and the dawn of the 1950s, the decreasing emphasis placed upon and fragmentation of Superman's political focus does not tell the whole story of the Man of Steel's development in these years. Indeed, before I proceed to my conclusion, it is important to acknowledge one notable exception to this trend: "The Clan of the Fiery Cross," a radio storyline which, in its reprisal of a topic that had previously

been addressed in more vague terms by the earlier plot “The Hate Mongers Organization,” apparently seeks to maintain the tendency towards political intervention that Superman established shortly prior to and during World War Two.<sup>369</sup> However, this story shifts Superman’s focus away from his wartime endorsement of the United States’ foreign policy and towards an anti-“intolerance” argumentative agenda.<sup>370</sup> Despite this agenda, it seems that “The Clan of the Fiery Cross” endeavours to pre-empt any controversy that might be provoked by its broaching the topic of race relations between white and black American citizens, between whom there existed particular tension, through a focus on the prejudice experienced by a Chinese family.<sup>371</sup> Nevertheless, the storyline’s targeting of the Ku Klux Klan via the notably transparent fictionalised stand-in “the Fiery Cross Clan” and criticism of racist practices mark it apart from some of Superman’s later forays into the topic. It is, for instance, much clearer in its intent than television’s “The Unknown People,” which obscures its pro-tolerance sentiment behind the veil of its own science fiction trappings and undercuts the progressive arguments that can be identified in its narrative with a conclusion that restores and seemingly endorses the status quo.

It is perhaps the 1946 radio storyline’s comparatively specific and explicit approach to political issues that has prompted some historians to emphasise its significance. For instance, in his essay “‘His Greatest Enemy? Intolerance!’” Michael Goodrum has argued that through “The Clan of the Fiery Cross,” *The Adventures of Superman* deliberately foregrounded “socially progressive ideas and sought to present itself as a constitutive participant in discourses

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<sup>369</sup> Michael Goodrum, “ ‘His Greatest Enemy? Intolerance!’ The Superman Radio Show in 1946,” *Scan: Journal of Media Arts Culture* 5, no. 2 (2008): [http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal\\_id=118](http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=118); Robert Maxwell, “The Clan of the Fiery Cross, Part 3,” *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 1310, June 16, 1946, mp3, 14:30, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page09](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page09); Robert Maxwell, “The Hate Mongers’ Organization, Part 1,” *The Adventures of Superman*, episode 1269, April 16, 1946, mp3, 17:59, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Superman\\_page09](https://archive.org/details/Superman_page09).

<sup>370</sup> Robert Maxwell, “The Clan of the Fiery Cross, Part 3.”

<sup>371</sup> Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 21; Tye, *Superman*, 82.

promoting tolerance.”<sup>372</sup> Additionally, Glen Weldon, in an article written in opposition to DC’s decision in 2013 to hire science fiction writer and anti-gay marriage activist Orson Scott Card to write an online Superman comic, cites “Operation Intolerance,” the banner under which “The Clan of the Fiery Cross” was produced, to support his point of view that “Superman represents compassion” as well as his suggestion that “the fact that a guy who has dedicated himself to hate and discrimination would be handed the keys to the character just shows that DC Comics doesn’t understand who the character is for.”<sup>373</sup>

Whilst Goodrum is perhaps accurate in his summary of the storyline’s message and intent, Weldon’s use of “The Clan of the Fiery Cross” to make a broader point about the Man of Steel’s general character is perhaps a little too strident because the politics of the arc do not establish an ongoing trend for the superhero. Indeed, in the year of its broadcast, excepting *Action Comics* #93’s relatively unusual “Christmas ‘Round the World,” which tentatively touched upon issues concerning tolerance and unusually had Superman refer to himself as a “comrade,” Superman’s comic book stories are largely dedicated to plots involving comedy crooks like Wilbur Wolfingham and the Prankster, as well as mischief caused by Lois’ niece Susie and the magical imp Mr Mxyzptlk.<sup>374</sup> Similarly, the two Superman film serials starring Kirk Alyn, 1948’s *Superman* and 1950’s *Atom Man vs Superman*, avoided political themes and focussed upon the protagonist’s battle with traditionally outlandish villains, the Spider-Lady and Atom Man, who was, in

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<sup>372</sup> Michael Goodrum, “‘His Greatest Enemy? Intolerance!’ The Superman Radio Show in 1946.”

<sup>373</sup> Glen Weldon, “Orson Scott Card Isn’t the Guy to Tell Me a Superman Story,” *Salon.com*, March 7, 2013, [http://www.salon.com/2013/03/07/superman\\_biographer\\_on\\_the\\_orson\\_scott\\_card\\_fallout\\_supe\\_represents\\_compassion/](http://www.salon.com/2013/03/07/superman_biographer_on_the_orson_scott_card_fallout_supe_represents_compassion/); Tye, *Superman*, 82.

<sup>374</sup> Don Cameron and Ira Yarbrough, “Christmas ‘Round the World,” in *Superman in the Forties*, ed. Robert Greenberger (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2005 [1946]), 174-189: 182; Don Cameron and Ira Yarbrough, “Swindle in Sweethearts,” *Superman* #39, March-April 1946, 37-48; John Small, “The Laughing Stock of Metropolis,” *Action Comics* #95, April 1946, 2-13; Don Cameron and Ira Yarbrough, “The Mxyzptlk-Susie Alliance,” *Superman in the Forties*, ed. Robert Greenberger (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2005 [1946]), 132-143.

fact, the evil scientist Luthor in disguise.<sup>375</sup> Consequently, it is possible to argue that the status of “The Clan of the Fiery Cross,” as an unusual exception to the general character of Superman stories published between the conclusion of the Second World War and the early 1950s, provides further support to the idea that the Superman brand as a whole was shifting away from political arguments in this period.

If we take into account the above arguments and consider the lack of supporting textual evidence for the Republican reading of 1950s Superman, we can speculate that this understanding may have been produced through a similar investigative approach to that which informed the New Deal interpretation of the Man of Steel. Indeed, as is the case with the New Deal understandings of the character, historians investigating 1950s Superman stories may have constructed their readings of him according to the perceptions, established by the Realism and Relevance trend that grew out of the Marvel comics of the 1960s and the work of Dennis O’Neil and Neal Adams for DC in the 1970s, that superhero comics should and do reflect the prevailing social and political zeitgeist of their time. Such readings may have organised those relatively dispersed and fragmentary elements of 1950s Superman narratives that can be identified as conservative, in the more generalised bi-partisan, small “c,” and ideological sense of the term, according to a framework of understanding underpinned by perceptions that the decade was “presided over politically” by the “moderate Republicanism” and politically partisan capital “C” Conservatism of President Eisenhower.<sup>376</sup>

This method of interpretive engagement may have conflated the fragmentary evidence of an ideologically conservative agenda, which can be seen in a few Superman stories of the 1950s, with the politically partisan brand of Conservatism advocated by the Republican Party, resulting in readings that

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<sup>375</sup> *Superman*, Film Serial, directed by Spencer Gordon Bennett and Thomas Carr (1948; Los Angeles, CA: Columbia Pictures, 2006), DVD; *Atom Man vs Superman*, directed by Spencer Gordon Bennett (1950; Los Angeles, CA: Columbia, 2006), DVD.

<sup>376</sup> Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 136: 138.



perceive the Superman narratives of the decade to be a reflection of the dominance of Eisenhower's administration and its agenda. As I argue in Chapter One, such political readings tend to result in narrow and significantly limited interpretations of Superman, whose significance for his audience is, as my analysis shows, likely to have extended beyond his political and even ideological agenda. Consequently, I believe that, as far as the examination of historical Superman texts is concerned, it is necessary for academics and historians to explore new interpretive frameworks that do not evaluate narratives featuring the Man of Steel primarily according to the terms of their perceived political content. My next chapter seeks to uncover such a new approach through an analysis of how the science fiction tropes that had considerable presence in Superman comic book stories of the 1950s and 1960s can be seen to be socially relevant, even if we do not assume that they are attempting to convey a specific, coherent political agenda, be it a promotion of liberal, conservative, Democratic, Republican or even ideological values.

### Chapter Three: Comparing “Silver Age” “Fantasy” to the Realism of Relevance

In Chapter Two, I suggest that the Realism and Relevance trend in comic books, which has been prevalent in the superhero genre since the rise of Marvel in the 1960s and the work of O’Neil and Adams for DC in the early 1970s, has influenced the way in which fans, critics and academics evaluate Superman stories from earlier periods, specifically the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.<sup>377</sup> I also propose that such political interpretations provide only a limited means of accounting for Superman stories from across media in these periods.

In the present chapter, I argue that, although those who follow the Relevance discourse have often shown a tendency to read explicit political significance into Superman texts which do not necessarily lend themselves to such analyses, this inclination is not the only approach that it encourages. Indeed, I argue that the Relevance discourse also provides the logic according to which some Superman stories may simply be dismissed as ephemeral entertainment. Following these thoughts, I suggest that a third way of understanding these stories is, in fact, possible and that the term Relevance and its attendant associations should be re-evaluated, particularly as they are applied to Superman comics of the “Silver Age,” in order to accommodate it. Furthermore, although I propose in Chapter Two that Superman comics are unreliable vehicles for coherent argumentative expressions of pure ideological concepts, in this present section of my thesis, I contend that they do reflect the more casual conceits of “lived” ideology, or Common Sense, in which they are rooted. In other words, whilst they do not often forward coherent ideological arguments, Superman stories nevertheless reproduce commonly held cultural beliefs and assumptions.

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<sup>377</sup> Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 151.

In pursuit of this argument, I first outline the different traits of the Mort Weisinger edited comics of Superman's 1950s and 1960s "Silver Age" as well as the characteristics of the social Relevance stories of the 1970s and beyond, against whose traits the former have come to be evaluated. Then, I demonstrate how the Relevance aesthetic of comic book stories from the 1970s and later decades has influenced critical perceptions of the narratives of the "Silver Age" and why this has led to the latter being dismissed by some, most notably official paratexts, as not relevant. Finally, I demonstrate the problems with such evaluations and seek to reconstruct the term Relevance so that it becomes better suited to accounting for the nuances of "Silver Age" Superman stories.

Weisinger's influence upon Superman's world is often seen by commentators to take hold from 1957, when he returned from California following the finish of *The Adventures of Superman* television show, until his retirement in 1970.<sup>378</sup> Indeed, until 1953, Weisinger had shared his editorial role with Jack Schiff and had been working under Whitney Ellsworth's oversight until 1957.<sup>379</sup> However, because, in 1945, the year Weisinger returned to work at DC after his service during the Second World War, the style and content of Superman stories began to change to an aesthetic that remained remarkably consistent until the late sixties, it is possible to suggest that the period of his influence covers the 1950s and 1960s in their entirety.<sup>380</sup> Although it is difficult to ascertain exactly who was responsible for this evolution, the style and tone that had already characterised Superman comics for at least fifteen years was retained, and arguably perfected, when Weisinger's responsibilities increased in 1957. This indicates that Weisinger may have been a significant motivating force behind the development of Superman comic book stories accross the whole period.<sup>381</sup> I therefore consider any Superman story

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 14: 138.

<sup>379</sup> Murray, "Superman's Editor Mort Weisinger," 12.

<sup>380</sup> Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 227.

<sup>381</sup> Murray, "Superman's Editor Mort Weisinger," 12.

published between 1949, the year of the first comic book appearance of kryptonite, which marked the beginning of an increasing influence of science fiction upon the Man of Steel's adventures that became a hallmark of Weisinger's time as editor, and 1970 to be part of the Weisinger "Silver Age" era.<sup>382</sup> As I mentioned in my literature review, the social Relevance trend grew out of the success of early 1960s Marvel comics, which featured more down-to-earth, troubled, and seemingly realistic characters who, as reported by Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs, experienced "the real emotional stresses of living."<sup>383</sup> However, it perhaps found its fullest expression in the early 1970s work of Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams, whose aesthetic continued to influence the 1986 reboot of Superman and is felt in the political topicality of more recent texts, such as *Superman: Grounded*.<sup>384</sup> Indeed, Relevance, and its accompanying discourse of Realism, has been one of the defining aesthetics of Superman comics in the four decades since the O'Neil and Adams style became prominent, and it remains prevalent to this day.

Although my argument specifically evaluates the implications of social and political Relevance for stories featuring the Man of Steel, it is important to note that Superman comics were influenced by shifting trends within, as well as audience expectations of, the superhero genre as a whole. It will therefore be necessary to discuss texts which do not feature Superman but which have contributed to the shaping of the critical discourse through which the Man of Steel's stories are received and interpreted, in order to present a full picture of the effect that Relevance has had on Superman stories themselves, as well as perceptions of them within fandom and the comic book industry. I devote particular attention to O'Neil and Adams' *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series, an explicitly socially relevant text which, more than most superhero comics of

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<sup>382</sup> Bill Finger and Al Plastino, "Superman Returns to Krypton," in *Superman in the Forties*, ed. Robert Greenberger (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2005 [1949]), 56-67.

<sup>383</sup> Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 53.

<sup>384</sup> J. Michael Straczynski, Eddy Barrows, and G. Willow Wilson, *Superman: Grounded*, Vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2011).

the early 1970s, sought to engage directly with prominent contemporaneous political debates.<sup>385</sup>

Whilst, as Chapter Two illustrates, there has been a tendency amongst some critics who follow the Relevance discourse to read stories published under Mort Weisinger's tenure as editor during the 1950s politically, the Relevance perspective is not necessarily a monolithic evaluative trend and has encouraged different understandings of "Silver Age" Superman narratives. In contrast to Tye, Dehaven, and Sabin, who all describe the Superman of Weisinger's comics, at least those stories from the 1950s, as a "Republican," some official narratives do not attribute any notable political meaning to "Silver Age" narratives. Indeed, officially sanctioned paratexts appearing in *Superman in the Sixties* are less inclined to emphasise "Silver Age" Superman stories' connections to America's prevailing social and political zeitgeist. Rather, they regard them as simply ephemeral entertainment of little wider significance and draw a binary division between them and more overtly political or relevant texts. For instance, Mark Waid's introduction to the volume, in which he presents a contrasting interpretive approach to the one displayed in his equivalent piece for *Superman in the Fifties*, characterises this period of Superman's publication history as "pointedly" existing "outside its era" and as "making only infrequent reference to the changing times, giving youngsters a safe and simple retreat from an outside world fast growing darker as Vietnam raged and the youth movement shook the nation."<sup>386</sup>

A later editorial from the same volume, entitled "Relevance," acknowledges that "by the end of the decade, and as current events turned grimmer, the issues of the outside world simply could not be ignored by Superman."<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams, *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2012 [1970-1972]); Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 148.

<sup>386</sup> Mark Waid, introduction to *Superman in the Sixties*, ed. Dale Crain (New York, NY: DC Comics, 1999), 6-9.

<sup>387</sup> "Relevance," *Superman in the Sixties*, 179.

Nevertheless, it concludes that these developments were “barely a ripple compared to what was happening elsewhere in comics, most notably the *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series by Dennis O’Neil and Neal Adams which took on topics such as drug use, racism, Native American affairs, overpopulation, and other environmental, political and religious concerns.”<sup>388</sup> The editorial appears to suggest that, if readers are interested in more socially and politically significant or, indeed, relevant content, they ought to engage with stories from the succeeding decade, the 1970s, when the creators associated with the Relevance aesthetic began to provide a greater contribution to Superman’s adventures. In an apparent attempt to draw a binary division between relevant and irrelevant Superman texts, the editorial states:

Adams began illustrating many of the Superman Family covers in the late ‘60s with dynamic and powerful flair. Unfortunately, with some welcome exceptions, the stories beneath these covers were more of the same patented Weisinger formula. Superman would have to wait until the ‘70s to become relevant, most notably after O’Neil took over the series in 1970.<sup>389</sup>

Due to the fact that the Relevance discourse only initially developed through Marvel’s 1960s comics and then the work of O’Neil and Adams for DC in the 1970s, it can be argued that its application to earlier texts, such as the Weisinger era Superman stories from the 1950s and 1960s discussed here, is a retrospective imposition of an interpretive point of view that is rooted in assumptions that the stories’ creators are unlikely to have themselves considered when originally producing their work. Nevertheless, at a glance, the stories from the Weisinger period do appear to support the rather

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

dismissive interpretation offered by *Superman in the Sixties*, as they are often apparently magical tales in which Superman is the subject of strange transformations. For instance, the metamorphoses that he undergoes in "The Lady and the Lion" from *Action Comics* #243 and in "The Monster From Krypton" from *Action Comics* #303 seem like flights of fancy which have little bearing on life as it is experienced by real people.<sup>390</sup> The seemingly fantastical, imaginative nature of Superman stories published under Weisinger's editorship is given added emphasis by the artwork, which was produced according to an aesthetic established by Wayne Boring, whose solid, thick-chested, and slightly stiff Superman — often depicted hovering in the foreground of a miniature Metropolis — appears to exist more in a world of toys, carefully posed in imaginative play, than in a realistic city (Figure 8).<sup>391</sup>

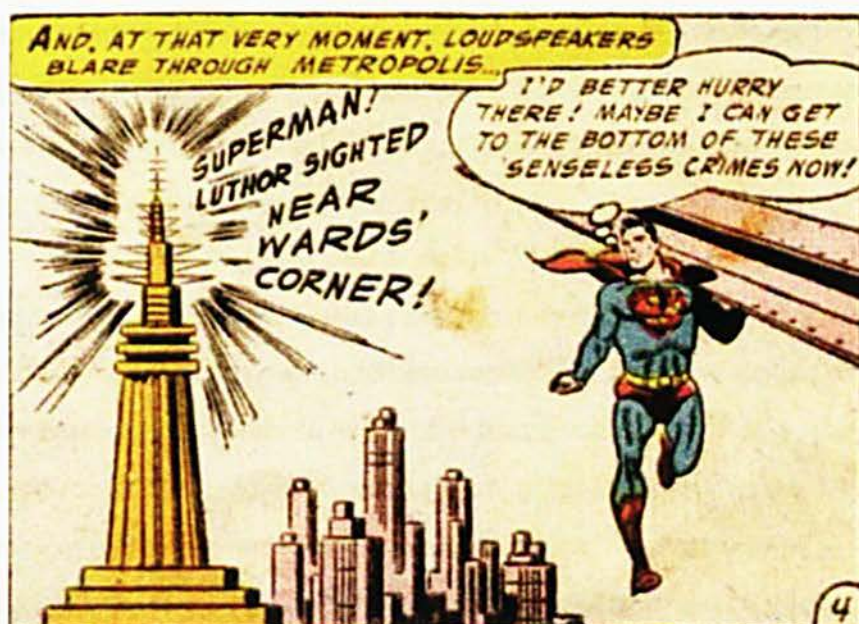


Figure 8. Here, as in much of Boring's artwork for "Silver Age" Superman comics, the Man of Steel is depicted jogging through the air, with a diminutive Metropolis in the background. However, the image indicates more the static pose of a figurine than fluid movement. Wayne Boring, "Luthor's Amazing Rebus," *Superman* #101, November 1955, 2-9: 5.

<sup>390</sup> Otto Binder and Wayne Boring, "The Lady and the Lion," in *Showcase Presents: Superman*, ed. Robert Greenberger, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2010 [1958]), 86-97; Edmund Hamilton and Curt Swan, "The Monster From Krypton," *Action Comics* #303, August 1963, 1-12.

<sup>391</sup> Morrison, *Supergods*, 62.

The possibility that Superman texts of the “Silver Age” are simply ephemeral fantasies that have little connection to Real Life is seemingly supported by Mort Weisinger himself who, as we saw in Chapter Two, explicitly stated in the 1960s that “we don’t go in for stories of a political nature.”<sup>392</sup> His comments appear to indicate that his stories were never designed to feature the same kind of political engagement that can be found in the more obviously realistic and relevant comics of the 1970s. It is from this apparently frivolous style of narrative that, perhaps prompted by competitor Marvel Comics’ success at selling stories featuring protagonists with social problems, DC’s 1970s Relevance narratives tried to distance themselves. As Jones and Jacobs suggest in *The Comic Book Heroes*, DC’s Relevance narratives of the 1970s were defined by a tendency to tackle explicitly political themes and, at least on the surface, they seem markedly different from the “fairy-tale” quality of Superman stories from the preceding two decades.<sup>393</sup> Jones and Jacobs also recognise that this trend is epitomised by Dennis O’Neil and Neal Adams’ *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series.<sup>394</sup>

*Green Lantern/Green Arrow* makes it clear that its subject matter is different to the binary good versus evil, superhero versus mad scientist formula that had dominated DC’s superhero line for the past few decades.<sup>395</sup> In an early issue, the comic’s protagonist, Green Lantern, pointedly disavows the existence of moral binaries with his acceptance that “it’s a gray world — nothing but gray . . .”<sup>396</sup> As Jones and Jacobs have noted, the series’ focus upon contemporaneous social ills and moral vagaries was conducted with an aspiration towards Realism that conditioned everything from the thematic content of the stories to the art, which was characterised by expressive,

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<sup>392</sup> Mort Weisinger, reply to Dennis Fox, “Metropolis Mailbag,” *Action Comics* #287, April 1962, 17; Mort Weisinger, reply to Victoria Phillips, “Metropolis Mailbag,” *Action Comics* #339, July 1966, 13.

<sup>393</sup> Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 79: 120-121.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 147: 79.

<sup>395</sup> O’Neil and Adams, *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, 14; Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 147.

<sup>396</sup> O’Neil and Adams, *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, 88.



illustrative, and anatomically detailed renderings of its central characters (Figure 9).<sup>397</sup>



Figure 9. Green Lantern as he is rendered by Neal Adams. O'Neil and Adams, *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, 92.

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<sup>397</sup> Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 122.

The O'Neil and Adams approach was apparently successful with fandom and, as Jones and Jacobs have again suggested, DC Comics was looking for a new aesthetic that would boost its sales in a flagging market.<sup>398</sup> The acclaim garnered by the series therefore encouraged the company to apply the social Relevance approach to other characters and O'Neil reputedly became "revamp man at DC."<sup>399</sup>

O'Neil took over the *Superman* line of comics in 1971 and introduced themes which did not connect directly with specific social issues but did reposition Superman more towards the grey middle of the moral spectrum. O'Neil and Curt Swan's story, *Kryptonite Nevermore*, sees Superman realise that it is wrong to judge people by "the way they look," become "bitter" towards humanity for their ingratitude, and almost destroy planet Earth in a mighty battle with a doppelganger.<sup>400</sup> The last event causes him to re-evaluate his place in the world and renounce some of his power, realising that too much in the hands of one man can be dangerous. Significantly, the artwork of *Superman* also changed following the critical success of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*. Curt Swan who, under Weisinger's editorial direction, had drawn Superman in a manner that was consistent with the style established by Wayne Boring in the 1940s and 1950s began to add more detailed facial expressions and musculature to his figures, bringing them more into line with Adams' aesthetic and resulting in a further indication that the Man of Steel was being reoriented towards Realism and Relevance by his creators (Figures 10 and 11).

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<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 148: 150.

<sup>400</sup> Dennis O'Neil and Curt Swan, *Kryptonite Nevermore* (New York, NY: DC Comics 2009 [1971]), 80: 127: 182.

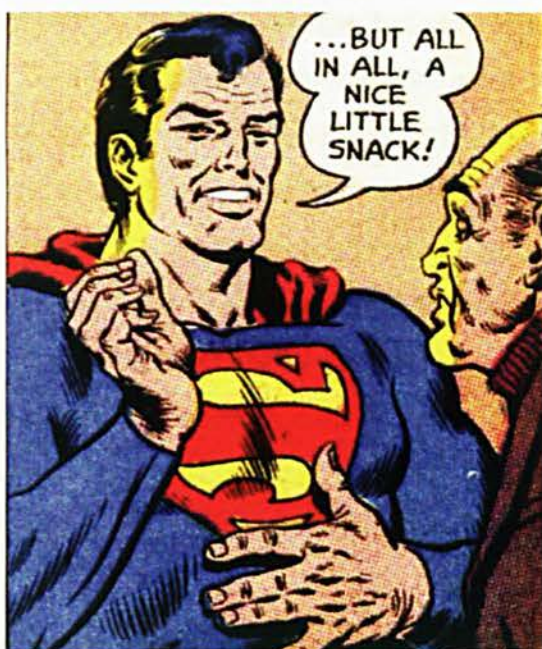


Figure 10. Superman, as drawn by Curt Swan in 1970 following the critical success of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, is more detailed than the artist's earlier renderings of the superhero (see Figure 11 below). O'Neil and Swan, *Kryptonite Nevermore*, 17.



Figure 11. An earlier, less detailed depiction of Superman by Curt Swan, illustrating the differences in style between Weisinger's tenure as editor in Superman's "Silver Age" and the post O'Neil and Adams aesthetic of the 1970s (see Figure 10 above). Binder and Swan, "The Superman of the Future," 2-13.

Despite the fact that not all of O'Neil's changes to Superman's character and universe lasted, his work in both the *Kryptonite Nevermore* storyline and in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* likely provided some of the inspiration for the influential 1986 Byrne and Wolfman Superman revamp.<sup>401</sup> Indeed, whilst it is important to recognise significant differences between the style and tone of Byrne's stories, which often place a greater emphasis on science fiction, and Wolfman's contributions, which tend to favour a comparatively "gritty" street-level aesthetic, both writers produced stories with identifiably socially relevant content with Relevance appearing to be a significant motivation for the changes introduced through the 1986 revamp.<sup>402</sup>

In Byrne and Wolfman's retelling, Superman was again depowered and Lex Luthor is, interestingly, cast in a role similar to that of Jubal Slade, the villain of O'Neil and Adams' first issue of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, an unscrupulous businessman with criminal interests who targets the socially vulnerable.<sup>403</sup> In fact, the 1986 reimagining, particularly Marv Wolfman and Jerry Ordway's contributions to the Man of Steel's revised universe, is more committed to dealing with socially relevant issues than O'Neil's earlier *Kryptonite Nevermore*. In an introduction to a collected edition of stories from 1987, in which he effectively claims to be the architect of the revamp, Wolfman makes it clear that the impetus behind his stories was an aspiration towards the aesthetic of Realism, which, as we have seen, is an important component of social Relevance, by stating that he intended to create "smaller stories, more personal tales somewhat more realistic in nature".<sup>404</sup>

These post-1986 stories tackle such realistic and socially relevant themes as the rights and wrongs of vigilante justice, rogue state sponsored international

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<sup>401</sup> Dennis O'Neil, afterword to *Kryptonite Nevermore* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2009 [2008]), 186-189: 189.

<sup>402</sup> Marv Wolfman, "Reinventing the Wheel," in *Superman: The Man of Steel*, ed. Robert Greenberger, vol. 2 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2003), 7.

<sup>403</sup> O'Neil and Adams, *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, 15.

<sup>404</sup> Marv Wolfman, "Reinventing the Wheel," 7.



terrorism, gangs, child custody, and the legacy of America's war in Vietnam. They also place a general focus on intimate personal relationships throughout, with Clark Kent rendered as Superman's "real" personality in order to humanise him.<sup>405</sup> The endeavours to humanise Superman are given visual expression through his cape which — in contrast to its pre-*Crisis* incarnation — is no longer indestructible. In the Byrne and Wolfman revamp, the amount of damage inflicted upon Superman's cape seems indicative of the level of pain experienced by the Man of Steel and serves as an effective visual expression of his newfound human vulnerability (Figure 12).

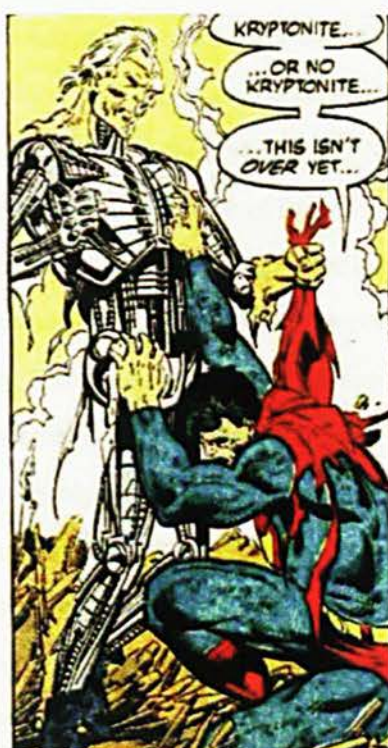


Figure 12. Here Superman is depicted in a struggle against Metallo. His cape has been torn to shreds, expressive of the amount of suffering that has been inflicted upon the Man of Steel. John Byrne, "Heart of Stone," *Superman* #1, January 1987, 21.

<sup>405</sup> John Byrne, "One Night in Gotham City," in *Superman: The Man of Steel*, ed. Robert Greenberger, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2003 [1986]), 65-86; Marv Wolfman and Jerry Ordway, "Man O' War!," in *Superman: The Man of Steel*, ed. Robert Greenberger, vol. 2 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2003 [1987]), 75-97; Marv Wolfman and Jerry Ordway, "Personal Best," in *Superman: The Man of Steel*, ed. Robert Greenberger, vol. 3 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2004 [1987]), 51-72; Marv Wolfman and Jerry Ordway, "Old Ties," in *Superman: The Man of Steel*, ed. Robert Greenberger, vol. 3 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2004 [1987]), 139-160; John Byrne, "Bloodsport," in *Superman: The Man of Steel*, ed. Robert Greenberger, vol. 3 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2004 [1987]), 7-28.

The gesture towards Realism even extends to rationalising Superman's everyday civilian habits, as best illustrated by his shaving routine:

Using a piece of curved, reflective *metal* from the *rocket* Ma and Pa found me in . . . I direct a slender beam of my "*heat vision* . . ." . . . so that it bounces back with pinpoint accuracy . . . and carefully shears off the exposed whiskers!<sup>406</sup>

This revised version of Superman also contains plenty of moral grey areas reminiscent of O'Neil and Adams' *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series, which is evidenced in Byrne's retelling of Superman's first meeting with Batman.<sup>407</sup>

Superman begins this story with a fairly black and white view of justice, apprehending the Caped Crusader because of his status as a "*recognised outlaw*," whereas Batman presents a more nuanced perspective.<sup>408</sup> However, the Dark Knight's close knowledge of the criminal world, as well as Superman's own realisation that Metropolis is "*different*" to Gotham, which, according to Batman, contains a "*garbage pile of crime*" that "*reaches from the lowest sewers . . . to the highest offices of city hall*," finally convinces the Man of Steel that the Dark Knight needs to "*act outside the law*" because the law in Gotham is itself corrupt.<sup>409</sup> The interaction between the two characters in this story therefore recalls the relationship between the titular protagonists of O'Neil and Adams' *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, which, in its first issue, sees the more super-powered hero chastened when his simplistic view of morality is challenged by the street-eye view of his more down-to-earth friend.<sup>410</sup>

Although the 1986 revamp did not introduce the discourse of social Relevance to Superman which, as stated above, was first tentatively attempted by

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<sup>406</sup> John Byrne, "Enemy Mine . . .," in *Superman: The Man of Steel*, ed. Robert Greenberger, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2003 [1986]), 87-108: 90.

<sup>407</sup> John Byrne, "One Night in Gotham City," in *Superman: The Man of Steel*, ed. Robert Greenberger, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2003 [1986]), 65-86.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>410</sup> O'Neil and Adams, *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, 12.

Dennis O'Neil and Curt Swan in 1971, the significance of its socially relevant content is imparted by its place within a "reboot" of Superman's continuity, after his diegetic past had been erased by *Crisis on Infinite Earths*.<sup>411</sup>

Writing about the effect that *Crisis on Infinite Earths* had on Batman comics, Will Brooker argues that the storyline "rebooted continuity and erased the sillier science fiction Batman adventures of the 1950s and 1960s – along with a host of the more frivolous supporting characters – not just out of existence, but out of official memory."<sup>412</sup> He then discusses how the *Crisis* cleared the way for *Batman: Year One* which, according to Brooker, "literally took the character back to square one and defined a new, hardboiled beginning."<sup>413</sup> Even though neither Byrne nor Wolfman's Superman work quite aspires to the level of grim Realism present in Miller's *Batman: Year One*, it is possible to see parallels between the changes imposed upon Batman following the *Crisis* and those applied to Superman. Not only did Wolfman and Byrne's revamp reframe Superman within the discourse of Realism through the introduction of the socially relevant storylines concerning vigilante justice, gangland crime, child custody and the legacy of the Vietnam War, it also canonised this socially relevant iteration of the character as the single correct version by erasing previous interpretations which did not fit the model established by the "reboot."

Brooker's discussion of canonical continuity can be used to further elaborate upon the consequences of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* for Superman. According to Brooker, canonical continuity is "the strict sense of what counts and what happened, what is true and what isn't in the mainstream Batman comic book universe".<sup>414</sup> If we consider that the same is true for Superman, the Superman

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<sup>411</sup> Marv Wolfman and George Pérez, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2000 [1985]).

<sup>412</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, 2.

<sup>413</sup> Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli, *Batman: Year One* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2005 [1986-1987]); Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, 114.

<sup>414</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, 154.

of the rebooted canonical continuity of *The Man of Steel* and its associated series were framed as the one true version of the character, making him the standard according to which all other comic book interpretations were judged. Consequently, those texts of the “Silver Age” that were perceived to conflict with the broad thematic direction and tone of the contemporary brand, and which were no longer part of continuity, were erased from Superman’s history as it was depicted in the ongoing monthly comic book series and confined to dedicated collected editions like *Superman in the Sixties* with their meanings carefully managed by the editorial framing narratives provided, which, as we have seen, tend to highlight the differences between them and texts from the more valued Relevance tradition.

However, as I have indicated in Chapter Two and above, it is overly reductive to evaluate the quality of texts according to the aesthetic of explicit, topical or political social Relevance or Realism if they never aspired to it. We should therefore be cautious about accepting the comic book industry’s definition of Relevance as it is outlined in official editorials too readily, because it might be employed by narratives that are forwarded as much to satisfy and legitimise the current interests of DC Comics as to present illuminating or unbiased criteria against which the success or significance of past Superman stories may be judged. As I have already indicated and further demonstrate below, there are other, more productive ways of conceiving of Relevance than the prominent industry understanding of the term.

In fact, a new model for analysing Superman texts can help us to achieve a more comprehensive and broad-ranging understanding of those narratives which the Relevance discourse cannot easily account for. In order to formulate a new, more appropriate framework through which these stories might be analysed, it is first necessary to understand them according to the terms and context of their original creation. Interestingly, through the following discussion we come to see that even those stories that do not



explicitly engage with political and social topics can be seen as pertinent to the concerns of Real Life. This is because they reflect the underlying logics or Common Sense that inform the rationalised conceptions of the world favoured by western societies, which, in turn, inform ordinary individuals' perceptions of reality.

We have already seen how "Silver Age" Superman comics of the 1960s are viewed to have "pointedly" existed "outside" their social and political context and, as Tom Dehaven has noticed, there in fact appears to be an element of truth in this.<sup>415</sup> Commenting upon Superman and former science fiction pulp editor Mort Weisinger's dependence upon the genre for story material, Dehaven suggests that "all of the resplendent cityscapes — whether in Kandor, on Krypton, or on Earth in the thirtieth century — were obviously inspired by the architecturally dioramic visions of "tomorrow" on display two decades earlier at the 1939 World's Fair, and the rocketry, gadgetry, and haberdashery, not to mention the never ending parade of Bug-Eyed Monsters, seemed recycled from the illustrations young Mort Weisinger had thrilled to in magazines like *Astounding* and *Super Science* and then later purchased himself for *Thrilling Wonder Stories*."<sup>416</sup> If Dehaven is correct, in order to fully get to grips with 1950s and 1960s Superman stories, it is necessary to form an understanding of the early twentieth century pulp science fiction that Weisinger read in his youth and to discern how the Superman stories that the editor later presided over engage with themes that were also present in the early science fiction genre.

According to science fiction historian Roger Luckhurst, "the term 'science fiction' emerged from a mass of competing labels only in the late 1920s."<sup>417</sup> He states:

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<sup>415</sup> Dehaven, *Our Hero*, 121-122.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>417</sup> Roger Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 15.

[. . .] the common origin story is that the radio entrepreneur, journalist and magazine proprietor Hugo Gernsback used the term “scientific fiction” in 1923, proposed the contraction “scientifiction” in 1924, which appeared extensively in his editorials of *Amazing Stories* from 1926, but then coined “science fiction” in his magazine *Science Wonder Stories* in 1929. When the rival magazine *Astounding Stories* changed its name to *Astounding Science-Fiction* in 1938, the subculture more or less consolidated around the term.<sup>418</sup>

Luckhurst argues that

within SF, technology is often an unproblematic positive force, serving as the principle (or only) determining force of progress, even resulting in the ultimate transcendence of human limits — whether that means the physical limits of planet Earth or human biology, or the temporal limits of mundane time and mortality. In this version, SF can be a literature that celebrates the liberation promised by technology, a genre of sublime, superhuman, faster-than-light feats.<sup>419</sup>

As my further consideration of Luckhurst’s thoughts below demonstrates, the idea that science fiction, at least in its early form, presents a mostly positive representation of technology is only a partial account of its more ambivalent representation of scientific “progress.” However, it does offer a good description of the beliefs of Gernsback himself.<sup>420</sup> In his introduction to *Amazing Stories* #1, Gernsback writes:

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>420</sup> Hugo Gernsback, “A New Sort of Magazine,” *Amazing Stories* #1, April 1926, 3.

It must be remembered that we live in an entirely new world. Two hundred years ago, stories of this kind were not possible. Science, through its various branches of mechanics, electricity, astronomy, etc., enters so intimately into all our lives today, and we are so much immersed in this science, that we have become rather prone to take new inventions and discoveries for granted. Our entire mode of living has changed with the present progress, and it is little wonder, therefore, that many fantastic situations — impossible 100 years ago — are brought about today. It is in these situations that the new romancers find their great inspiration.<sup>421</sup>

The “fantastic situations” that Gernsback believes are made possible by scientific development certainly do, according to his own view, have “unambiguously” positive consequences, as is illustrated by his claims that “posterity will point” to his stories “as having blazed a new trail, not only in literature and fiction, but in progress as well.”<sup>422</sup> Thus, Gernsback believes, science and the possibilities it occasions, as well the “scientifiction” that explores them, will contribute to the forging of a wondrous new world.

In order to further our understanding of this view of the relationship between science and science fiction stories, as well as how it has influenced Superman comics, it is necessary to come to terms with the discourse of rationalisation and the apparent disenchantment that informs it. In *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, Simon Locke draws upon theories first espoused by Max Weber to outline the characteristics of disenchantment and track its development from its origins in Protestant thought.<sup>423</sup> According to Locke, “fundamental to the Protestant rationalisation of Catholicism was the denial

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<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

<sup>422</sup> Gernsback, “A New Sort of Magazine,” 3.

<sup>423</sup> Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, trans. H. H. Gerth and D. Martindale (New York, NY: Free Press), 343-355, quoted in Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, 42.

of the capacity of priests to intervene for the ordinary person and magically induce salvation. This forced individuals to rely on their own practical action in treating their life as a God given 'calling,' thereby demonstrating their position amongst the 'Elect.'"<sup>424</sup> Locke also argues that the "impact" of this ideological shift upon "practical conduct" was to produce a disenchanted "world where not only was magic denied, but the capacity to judge the significance of life lost its hold on the human spirit."<sup>425</sup> Locke suggests that "for the Puritan," the "knowledge" of "his place in this life and the worth of what he did came only through the capacity to work without stint in his or her calling — activity that had a most unanticipated and paradoxical consequence, producing a world in which work became all and God was pronounced dead."<sup>426</sup> For Locke, this explains

[. . .] how the formal rationalization of the spirit resonates with that of economic and political action. In these spheres, formal rationality is focused on maximizing respectively the returns on investment and control over a given territory. Both, therefore, are impelled ideal-typically by a purely calculative, instrumental logic directed at efficiency and effectiveness of technical means over and above morally dictated ends. Such ends come from the intellectual sphere. But in this sphere, modern science is also purely instrumental in its pursuit of knowledge of the world, having no interest of its own in moral considerations; so it has no moral boundaries to impose. Economic and political action is then freed from any such restraints, just as the pursuit of knowledge is freed, ideal-typically, from any economic and political interference.<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, 42.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*

According to this logic, the rational scientist, unhindered by moral judgements, is free to seek autonomous, objective Truth and to uncover the secrets of the universe. It is this manner of objective, efficient Truth seeking that Gernsback embraces in the name of “progress.” For Gernsback, then, the more scientific the fiction, the closer it is to morally objective, factual Truth. It is through an appeal to “facts,” as is evidenced in Gernsback’s introduction to Jules Verne’s *Off On a Comet*, that he is able to claim that the fiction he publishes has a functional use-value: that of educating his readers in the particulars of science, thus contributing to the technological advancement of society.<sup>428</sup> His work publishing science fiction can therefore be defined as “beneficial” by the rationalised logic of disenchantment.

However, according to Luckhurst’s account, the popular response to scientific progress in the late Victorian era and early twentieth century was not wholly defined by the views of people like Gernsback and was, in fact, rather more ambivalent.<sup>429</sup> He argues that “electricity held barely imaginable promise for the late Victorians, yet despite the celebrated phalanx of electrical engineers, there was also a dense threat or disturbance in a visibly altered urban terrain. The rhetoric of the ‘electric future’ was shadowed by a substantive discourse that was discomfited, even traumatised by the arrival of these technologies.”<sup>430</sup> Thus, Gernsback’s opinions represent one element of public feeling but the “traumatised” response of some to the changes brought by technological “progress” defines its other. The perceptions that characterise this latter view are illustrated in a story published within Gernsback’s own magazine.

In G. Peyton Wertenbaker’s “The Man from the Atom,” the friend of a scientist agrees to be the subject of an experiment with an atomic machine

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<sup>428</sup> Hugo Gernsback, “Introduction to the Story,” *Amazing Stories* #1, April 1926, 4-5; Jules Verne, “Off On a Comet,” *Amazing Stories* #1, April 1926 [1877], 4-56.

<sup>429</sup> Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, 26.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*

that allows him to grow to such heights that he can expand beyond the known universe to explore other worlds.<sup>431</sup> The experiment is justified by the rationalised logic of pure discovery for its own sake, as it will result in there being “nothing, hardly, that will be unknown.”<sup>432</sup> Initially unbeknownst to the scientist’s friend, the changes to his atomic structure alter his perception of time so that “because I had grown large, centuries had become but moments to me.”<sup>433</sup> When he finally realises the implications of his growth, it is too late to alter his fate: “before I had lived ten minutes of my strange existence, Professor Martyn had vainly hoped away a lifetime and died in bitter despair. Man had come and died away from a world stripped of air and water. In ten minutes of my life. . . .”<sup>434</sup> In this story, the dangers of experimentation and discovery for their own sake are made clear. The protagonist’s dabbling with scientific invention has propelled him into a frightening, alien, empty future where “nothing [. . .] means anything” and from which there is a possibility that he might not return.<sup>435</sup> Here we can see that despite Gernsback’s best efforts to promote scientific advancement as an unambiguously positive force, a more inclusive observation of perspectives suggests that attitudes towards it were more varied. Consequently, Gernsback’s positive rationalised view of technological development can be read as a framing narrative through which the editor sought to arrange certain aspects of the disordered, competing formulations of science into a selectively constructed, coherent ideological position. In other words, Gernsback’s view pertains to Truth in its reference to the Facts and its positive rhetoric concerning scientific progress but actually presents just one side of the broader, less cohesive discourse produced in the upheavals caused by the technological revolution.

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<sup>431</sup> G. Peyton Wertenbaker, “The Man From the Atom,” *Amazing Stories* #1, April 1926, 62-66.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*

My discussion of early twentieth century science fiction is pertinent to later Superman stories of the “Silver Age” because the earlier period’s popular understandings of science — as they were reflected in examples of the science fiction genre of the time — are identifiable in the Superman comics published in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, during his editorship of the science fiction pulp magazine *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, Mort Weisinger printed stories by Otto Binder, a future Superman writer, which combined the early twentieth century sense of ambivalence towards technological development with the Gernsbackian penchant for framing fantastical concepts in a discourse of rationalism, as is evident in Binders 1937 short stories “The Chessboard of Mars” and “Via Etherline.”<sup>436</sup> We can therefore speculate that it is as a consequence of Weisinger’s lingering editorial preferences, initially developed through his boyhood interest in 1920s science fiction, as well as the habits of the writers he employed, that the conceits of the early genre found their way into the Superman comics of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>437</sup> Indeed, the editor and his writers combined earlier Gernsbackian tropes with more contemporaneous concepts like nuclear power to produce a narrative formula which, in stories such as “The World of the Bizarros” where the origin of Superman’s imperfect duplicate is grounded in nuclear technology, is framed by scientific rhetoric and seemingly plausible Fact.”<sup>438</sup>

This resulted in stories that had a level of contemporary gloss but retained the Gernsbackian emphasis on the need to ground fictional ideas in known “facts,” as well as a great deal of the aesthetic of the science fiction genre in its earlier forms. The relationship between earlier twentieth century science fiction and 1950s and 1960s Superman stories is also explicitly evidenced in covers of the characters’ “Silver Age” comics, several of which were copied

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<sup>436</sup> Eando Binder [Otto Binder], “The Chessboard of Mars,” *Thrilling Wonder Stories* #9, no. 2, June 1937, 72-86; Gordon A. Giles [Otto Binder], “Via Etherline,” *Thrilling Wonder Stories* #10, no. 2, October 1937, 79-86.

<sup>437</sup> Murray, “Superman’s Editor Mort Weisinger,” 11.

<sup>438</sup> Otto Binder and Wayne Boring, “The World of the Bizarros,” *Action Comics* #263, April 1960, 2-14.

from pulp science fiction magazines of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>439</sup> In fact, in 1950s and 1960s stories, Superman often behaves like a Gernsbackian scientist-hero himself, conducting experiments to solve scientific problems, as in “The Kid from Krypton” from *Action Comics* #158, where he attempts to “devise a weapon against kryptonite,” and in “A Dog House for Superman” from *Superman* #84, in which he adopts the principles of vaccination in an attempt to immunise himself against the radioactive alien rock.<sup>440</sup> However, what is more relevant to my current purposes is not the fact that these comics cite science fiction conceits familiar to editorials and stories from Gernsback’s magazines but that they extend and incorporate the logic that underpins them into the broader workings of the Superman universe, from the interactions between characters to the construction of the fictional world itself.

In my discussion of Hugo Gernsback and 1920s science fiction, we glimpsed a blueprint for a society governed entirely by the disenchanting principles of scientific rationalism in the pursuit of objectively determined Truths. In the following section I outline how Superman comics of the 1950s and 1960s present a fictional prototype for such a society, albeit in a stylised and often humorous form. I also suggest that they demonstrate a dialogue between the positive and negative popular conceptions of science that we have seen articulated in early twentieth century science fiction and present scientific rationalism as both an efficient and objective means of discovery and advancement and a producer of change and the unknown. I finish this section of the chapter by illustrating how the dialogue that Superman comics articulate can be seen to be underpinned by a similar manipulation of rhetorical techniques as Real Life debates.

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<sup>439</sup> Murray, “Superman’s Editor Mort Weisinger,” 11.

<sup>440</sup> Wayne Boring, “The Kid from Krypton,” *Action Comics* #158, July 1951, 1-12; William Woolfolk and Al Plastino, “A Doghouse For Superman,” *Superman* #84, September-October 1953, 16-25.



The possibility that Superman stories from comics of the 1950s and 1960s are speculative renderings of a society governed entirely by the precepts of rationalism can be further explored and elaborated when we consider the internal rules that govern the character's fictional universe, or, to use the terminology employed by social scientist Martin Barker, whose work is particularly helpful for this discussion, the "situational logics."<sup>441</sup> In his consideration of British comic strip *Scream Inn*, Barker has elaborated upon his understanding that fictional story-worlds found in comic strips are governed by internal rules, or "situational logics," that are related to, but different from, those that inform Real Life: "*Scream Inn* simultaneously is, and inhabits, a parallel world to ours. Anything from our world can enter it; but it immediately becomes subject to the absurd logic that rules there."<sup>442</sup> Following Barker's argument, readers are aware of these "rules" or conventions and make sense of the stories according to the expectations derived from their experience of previous instances of their iteration.<sup>443</sup> Therefore, in order to continue making sense to their audience, fictions must repeatedly honour the implied "contract" that exists between them by adhering to their established and recognised "rules" or, indeed, "situational logics" in a coherent and consistent manner.<sup>444</sup>

Significantly, as we see in the passages below, Superman comics of the 1950s and 1960s are no different. We can consider the two most prominent rules governing these texts to be the rationalist understanding that all of life's incidences should have a logical explanation that is rooted in empirical observation and the idea that nothing ever occurs that fundamentally changes the nature of Superman's universe in a way that might violate the audience's expectations of his stories and alienate readers as a result. In fact, Superman stories are structured in such a way as to make these two rules

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<sup>441</sup> Martin Barker, *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*, 71.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, 256-257.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, 256-257: 82.

mutually complimentary. Indeed, threats to the status quo of Superman's narrative world are dealt with according to the logic of scientific rationalism.

The interestingly close relationship between these rules is evident in the tale "The Lady and the Lion," briefly mentioned above, in which Superman's career as a respected superhero is threatened by the seemingly mystical powers displayed by a descendent of the sorceress Circe, who transforms him into a lion with an apparently magical potion after he spurns her affections.<sup>445</sup> Here, the threat is resolved when Superman discovers that Circe's potion was not really magical at all but in fact "contained a small dose of kryptonite," a mineral which, since the 1949 storyline "Superman Returns to Krypton," has been an established component of the Man of Steel's story-world and known to affect his biology.<sup>446</sup>

With knowledge of the potion's familiar origins, Superman is able to draw upon his scientific expertise to concoct an antidote.<sup>447</sup> Here, both the threat posed to the dominance of rationalistic discourse within Superman's universe, and to Superman himself, by the unaccounted for mysticism of the sorceress are dispelled by a rationalised explanation that exposes Circe's curse to be knowable and rationally explainable according to the established "rules," or situational logics, governing the character's story-world. Considering this representative example, it can be suggested that the fictionalised logic of Superman stories presents a coherent, internally consistent fantasy universe in which scientific rationalism and the empiricist principles of observation and deduction are always able to expose the Truth of even the most seemingly bizarre and enchanted phenomena.

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<sup>445</sup> Otto Binder and Wayne Boring, "The Lady and the Lion," 85-97: 89.

<sup>446</sup> Binder and Boring, "The Lady and The Lion," 96; Bill Finger and Al Plastino, "Superman Returns to Krypton," in *Superman in the Forties*, ed. Robert Greenberger (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2005 [1949]), 56-68.

<sup>447</sup> Binder and Boring, "The Lady and the Lion," 97.

However, this is not all that “Silver Age” Superman comics have to say about the logic of scientific rationalism in which they are grounded; a more complex picture presents itself when we consider Lois Lane’s ongoing quest to unmask Superman’s secret identity. Although, as stories like “The Man Who Married Lois Lane” demonstrate, Lois’ behaviour in romance oriented tales is sometimes influenced by her love for Superman, in most cases her attempts to uncover his secret identity are seemingly motivated by her journalistic desire to discover truth in the form of a “scoop” or, in other words, her compulsion to discover Facts from the previously unknown.<sup>448</sup> Therefore, her Truth seeking actions are largely governed by, and are wholly in keeping with, the scientific, rationalistic logic that underpins Superman’s fictional world. This is evidenced in a great many stories but a good example is “The Great Superman Hoax” from *Superman* #143.<sup>449</sup> In this story, Lois is acting on the orders of her editor Perry White and, although his reasons are not explicitly justified, the reader can perhaps logically assume that as an editor of a newspaper and a journalist himself, like Lois, Perry naturally wants to discover Facts to disclose to the public. Receiving an anonymous letter, which identifies scientist Otto Juris as the secret identity of Superman, Perry sends Lois and Clark to investigate.<sup>450</sup> Once they arrive at Juris’ residence, Lois’ attempt to expose him takes the form of a series of empirical observations and tests. One test, the effect of kryptonite, is barred from her for fear that the disguised Superman might be harmed, so Lois has to rely on other empirical observations. She observes that Juris, like Superman, is something of a scientist, or at least an “electronics expert” and a builder of robots. She also notices Juris’ apparent super strength as he “accidentally” rips off a door handle and spies that his dusting rags are the colour of Superman’s costume.<sup>451</sup> Finally, Lois sees Superman leaving the scientist’s office which,

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<sup>448</sup> Robert Bernstein and Wayne Boring, “The Man Who Married Lois Lane,” *Superman* #136, April 1960, 2-10.

<sup>449</sup> Robert Bernstein and Wayne Boring, “The Great Superman Hoax,” *Superman* #143, February 1961, 1-10.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

she believes, proves that she has “finally discovered the Man of Steel’s secret identity.”<sup>452</sup> However, Clark Kent, the true Superman, who, as we have seen, is a scientist-hero himself and more expert in scientific knowledge than Lois, is able to discern the incorrectness of many of her deductions. The robots are “fake,” the door handle had only been “lightly glued” to the door, and the Superman she saw leaving the office was just a “helium balloon-figure” of him.<sup>453</sup> Arguably, Lois’ miscalculations present us with the appearance of Fact rather than Fact itself, which can be debunked by the true scientist, an outcome that reaffirms the hierarchy encouraged by the prestige that scientific rationalism assigns to the professional as a figure whose level of expertise renders him or her more adept at discovering the Truth than the ordinary layperson. However, this story, which so carefully follows the principles of scientific rationalism, can also be seen to reproduce a complication in its logic, one which, intriguingly, has implications for our understanding of its application in Real Life situations.

As Locke illustrates, scientific understanding is often constructed from theories based upon potential Truths that are themselves extensions of the likely possibilities implied by existing knowledge: “Thus, scientists all come up with possible realities, some of which — perhaps over the course of time *all* of which — will come to be designated ‘not factual’.”<sup>454</sup> Lois is engaging in the same process here: constructing a theory to explain the unknown out of a logical extension of the known. The reporter’s factfinding is certainly enough to convince Perry to hand over the kryptonite he keeps in his safe to Juris, who is really a criminal hoping to defeat Superman, for safekeeping.<sup>455</sup> What Lois has uncovered may be untrue but, in its coherence with the rules of empirical observation, it is consistent with the logic of scientific rationalism and it thus remains plausible enough to be accepted until a similarly rational

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<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 3: 4: 5.

<sup>454</sup> Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, 103.

<sup>455</sup> Bernstein and Boring, “The Great Superman Hoax,” 8.

and empirical, but more authoritative and convincingly superior, opposing argument can be made to counteract her evidence.

As a result of this discussion, we can see that the rules governing the fictional world of Superman comics and the actions of the characters “living” within it do not, in fact, entirely alienate them from Real Life but reflect the rationalistic concepts that inform everyday perceptions of reality in western post-Enlightenment societies. In fact, it can be argued that the correlation between the rules of Superman’s 1950s and 1960s story-world and the principles of scientific rationalism allows his “Silver Age” narratives to not only reflect the logical underpinnings of post-Enlightenment understandings of the world in an abstract sense but also to resonate with and provide something of a model for rationalism’s practical application in Real Life situations. In order to illustrate this, it is first necessary to consider one particular Real Life situation in which the principles of scientific rationalism have been practically applied. Thankfully, Locke has again provided a lead in his discussion of conspiracy theory.<sup>456</sup>

According to Locke, conspiracy discourse is not necessarily engaged with strict matters of science. However, he suggests that it nevertheless utilises the logic of empiricism and evidence based deductions to challenge official, and sometimes even scientific, explanations of strange or unusual phenomena. For Locke, as an extension of the rationalist principle that “the world is determinate and coherent,” “mundane reasoning” of the kind found in conspiracy discourse “treats objects as self-consistent both in themselves and in relation to their context, but this includes a potentially infinite number of features — anything that happened or appeared in the situation.”<sup>457</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, 151

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

Locke clarifies this with the example of conspiracy theories surrounding presidential assassination. He proposes that “to satisfy mundane idealizations, the object-in-context, ‘assassinated-president-with-an-assassin’ has to be coherent and non-contradictory, so the assassin has to display qualities consistent with an opponent of the President, such as an opposing political stance. If, however, this is disputable, then the reality disjuncture created would open up the potential for questioning not only the object-in-context, but also the account of it given.”<sup>458</sup> For Locke, in order to be plausible according to the rationalised principle that informs conspiracy discourse, the evidence presented needs to cohere with the perceived characteristics of the situation or the truthfulness of the account, or even the reality of the circumstances described, might be called into question. Locke’s arguments are seemingly borne out by the more specific example provided by the practices that comprised McCarthyism in 1950s America, an historical phenomenon that is particularly useful for my argument because it is approximately contemporaneous with several of the Superman comics I discuss here.

McCarthyism dominated mainstream American politics in the early to mid 1950s and was given oxygen by the two main parties, as well as trade unions and many others across the political spectrum.<sup>459</sup> According to historian Ellen Schrecker, the “consensus” that McCarthyism managed to propagate “was persuasive because it was plausible” and “many of its underlying assumptions were grounded in what real Communists said and did.”<sup>460</sup> Indeed, according to Schrecker, much of the material gathered when outing Communists at trials and loyalty review hearings in several American industries centred on identifying patterns of behaviour, the so-called “duck test.”<sup>461</sup> Questioning focussed upon outward, evidential traits such as “reading habits” and record

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<sup>458</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>459</sup> Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes*, xiv.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 363: 26.

collections, as well as voiced opinions and political views.<sup>462</sup> Thus, the assumption was that those who exhibited the outward signs associated with Communist behaviour must logically be party members, or at least have underlying personalities that were susceptible to radical left-wing ideologies.

It is possible to suggest that the Real Life, rationalistic conspiracy discourse of McCarthyism and the conception of selfhood that it employed, which supposed the existence of coherent and internally consistent personalities whose outward behavioural traits functioned as direct manifestations of their internal character, were rooted in a similar logic to that which underlies Lois' attempts to uncover Superman's secret identity in the fictional world of Metropolis. In fact, we can see a parallel in the reporter's endeavours to align her observations regarding Superman's possible secret identity with his known characteristics in "The Great Superman Hoax." However, as we shall see in the following discussion of the utilisation of the documentary method of interpretation by characters inhabiting the Man of Steel's diegesis, Superman comics also demonstrate how concepts of selfhood similar to those found in McCarthyism can become farcical when taken to their logical conclusion.

Although, as in "The Great Superman Hoax," Lois has often suspected others of being Superman, the man who most frequently attracts her attention is Clark Kent, the real Man of Steel. However, despite her recurring suspicions and the evidence she gathers, Lois has never been able to expose him. For instance, in "Lois Lane's X-Ray Vision" from *Action Comics* #202, Lois finds a pair of discarded experimental glasses which allow the wearer to see through anything.<sup>463</sup> Her sight is projected through Clark's suit to the "S" insignia of his Superman uniform, which prompts her to once again devise a series of empirical tests to discover, once and for all, if Clark is Superman. After

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<sup>462</sup> Ibid., 366: 283.

<sup>463</sup> Wayne Boring, "Lois Lane's X-Ray Vision," *Action Comics* #202, March 1955, 2-13.

planting a fake bomb in the office, she pretends to hear a ticking sound and Clark, spying the device with his x-ray vision, exclaims “Lois! Get out! A bomb — in the desk drawer!”<sup>464</sup> Lois knows that, without using his powers, Clark would have no way of seeing the device. This would be case closed, except for the fact that Superman has purloined Lois’ x-ray specs and is wearing them as Clark, therefore providing a rational explanation as to how he can see the bomb without powers. The reporter is also already certain from her own experiences that the glasses do work and is not sure that Clark really is the Man of Steel, meaning that the version of events that is easiest to reconcile with Lois’ established knowledge is therefore Clark’s account of mistakenly putting on her glasses.

A similar situation occurs in “Superman’s New Super-Power” from *Action Comics* #221.<sup>465</sup> Here, drawing upon the scientific law that forces can only be transferred, not destroyed, Superman begins to attract metals after breaking apart a magnetic comet. Again, Lois’ suspicions are raised when Clark’s typewriter is magnetically attracted to his hands.<sup>466</sup> Once more, Clark offers an explanation: that the base of his typewriter is “bent” causing it to slide off his desk towards him.<sup>467</sup> Clark’s account fails to fully convince his colleague and Lois, whose lingering suspicions regarding his identity prompt her to see the incident in the context of Superman’s new magnetism, continues to investigate, using a compass to track Superman down whilst he is disguised as Clark in order to prove that they are both magnetic and thus one and the same.<sup>468</sup> However, Clark does manage to convince Lois that he is not Superman by pretending that he has been tricking her all along through the concealment of a magnet in his pocket. Lois concludes: “Clark Kent, you carried that magnet just so that I *would* think you are *Superman* and make

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>465</sup> Wayne Boring, “Superman’s New Super-Power,” *Action Comics* #221, October 1956, 2-11.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid., 11.



myself foolish!”<sup>469</sup> In this story, it is presumably Lois’ established negative perceptions of Clark’s personality which convince her that it is more likely for him to be playing a dirty trick on her than for him to be the real Superman, whom she admires. Here, in conformity with the rationalised logic that the world is “determinate and coherent,” Clark is able to throw Lois off track by constructing an account of himself that is more in line with his colleague’s established understanding of him than her suspicions that he might be Superman.<sup>470</sup> What is interesting here is that, even when pursued through empirical observations of the seemingly factual, the reality, or Truth, of Superman’s secret identity is not self-evident but, rather, a matter of contest and competition between two contrasting interpretations of the available evidence.

In fact, these comics are illustrative of Locke’s suggestions that the truth is not necessarily a fixed principle and that “traffic across the boundary” between Fact and “fiction” is “by no means [. . .] one way,” as well as his understanding that established “fact” can become “non-fact” if it is challenged in a convincing enough manner.<sup>471</sup> Indeed, following scientific rationalism’s principle that the world is “determinate” and “coherent,” Lois’ suspicion that Clark is really Superman threatens to become Fact if she can make the case that the two identities are the same person seem more consistent with established knowledge than the commonly accepted belief that they are separate individuals.<sup>472</sup> If she were to accomplish this, and make it public knowledge, both Lois’ sense of history or “continuity” and that held by the wider populace of Metropolis would be altered and the discourse surrounding Superman’s life and past would be revised to incorporate the new Fact that Clark is, and has always been, Superman. Consequently, the new understanding of Superman’s relationship to Clark Kent would not be

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

<sup>470</sup> Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, 151.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid., 151.

perceived as a recent construction but as having previously existed as a hidden Truth waiting to be uncovered. What Lois is engaging in here is therefore consistent with Garfinkel's documentary method of interpretation as I describe it in Chapter One and as it is understood by Locke as "a feature of ordinary, commonsense reasoning in which particular phenomena and events are treated as 'documents' – signs or indices of an underlying pattern and interpreted accordingly."<sup>473</sup> However, in order to grasp how the utilisation of the documentary method of interpretation by characters existing within Superman's story-world reflects the practice's Real Life applications, as well as its function as a complicating influence, which risks undermining endeavours to achieve absolute, factual certainty, it is necessary to further develop our understanding of the term.

As Locke reports, knowledge held by groups and individuals is neither fixed nor immutable and the documentary method of interpretation functions in such a way that, when new events or previously unencountered phenomena present themselves, they are incorporated into the established pattern of understanding, inevitably altering it.<sup>474</sup> However, despite the changes that the introduction of new knowledge inevitably occasions, as the new information is incorporated into the previous pattern, it is framed in such a way that makes it appear as though it is consistent with the old. In this manner, whilst, through the documentary method of interpretation, "new events may lead to revisions in the assumed pattern," the "revised pattern is taken to have been the actual pattern all along."<sup>475</sup> If we apply Locke's understanding of the documentary method of interpretation to the diegetic context of "Silver Age" Superman stories, it can be argued that Lois' attempts to uncover Superman's true identity risk, if they are finally proven, altering the accepted pattern of knowledge. The consequence of this would be that a new understanding of reality or, as far as comics are concerned, "continuity," which is contrary to

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<sup>473</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid.

the interests of the Man of Steel himself and the preservation of his secret, becomes widely accepted as being and having always been the absolute, factual Truth.

Interestingly, however, we can also see that Clark utilises the same tactics that characterise Lois' attempts to unmask him to counter her threat and prove that he is not Superman. More significantly, he uses the documentary method of interpretation to establish a falsehood — that Clark Kent and Superman are not one and the same — as commonly accepted Fact. This lends further support to Locke's suggestion that Truth and Fact are, to some extent, flexible constructs which have the potential to be altered as circumstances change and debates shift. This idea can be developed further still when we consider that this flexibility is a double-edged sword for Superman.

The difficulties posed for Superman by the malleability of Fact are well presented in "Superman's New Uniform," a 1958 story from *Action Comics* #236.<sup>476</sup> In this story, Luthor, disguised as a friendly scientist, tricks Superman into wearing a false duplicate of his "uniform."<sup>477</sup> Unlike Superman's real suit, the duplicate is subject to damage. After several heroic actions, Superman realises that his uniform is looking tattered and he returns to the still disguised Luthor for a solution to his problem.<sup>478</sup> Luthor promises to make him a new uniform and incorporates a slew of new gadgets into the design, including an "anti-kryptonite belt" which, in a cruelly ironic twist, actually contains the poisonous meteorite, set to have its radiations released at the moment of Luthor's choosing via a timer.<sup>479</sup> This ruse is all part of a cunning plan by Luthor to steal Superman's identity and the villainous scientist uses

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<sup>476</sup> Otto Binder and Wayne Boring, "Superman's New Uniform," *Action Comics* #236, January 1958, 2-13.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

the Man of Steel's real suit and a rubber mask to "pass for" the superhero.<sup>480</sup>

When Superman is being awarded for his services in the town square in front of a large group of townspeople, Luthor approaches in his disguise, claiming to be the genuine article and using Superman's original, indestructible costume as "indices" to support his argument.<sup>481</sup> As per tradition, the two are subject to empirical tests to prove who the true Man of Steel is.<sup>482</sup> A bullet is fired at Luthor but it naturally bounces off his indestructible costume.<sup>483</sup>

Superman volunteers to lift a car with his super-strength, thus demonstrating the consistency of his abilities with the known powers of the real Man of Steel. However, just as he is lifting the vehicle, the "deadly rays" are released from his belt and he becomes too weak to accomplish the feat.<sup>484</sup> Obviously, such feebleness is not consistent with the traits associated with the real Superman and that, coupled with the unfamiliar costume, convinces the audience that the real Superman is, in fact, a fake, as he lies dying from the kryptonite poisoning. Luthor has, in effect, proven that he is the true Superman, at least until the genuine Man of Steel manages to turn the tide of the debate by flying away to safety. Thus, in this story we once again see that the logic of rationalism and the documentary method of interpretation can be used to verify a lie but, more importantly, the story further emphasises how the "signs and indices" required for evidential proof can be used as rhetorical tools in the construction of a false Truth that becomes accepted by many.<sup>485</sup>

As "Superman's New Uniform" demonstrates, just as Superman is able to manipulate which interpretations of his identity are accepted into the store of established common knowledge by presenting evidence to suggest that he and Clark Kent are different people, so can others utilise the same technique to wrestle away control of his identity as Superman. Due to its flexibility, then,

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<sup>480</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>481</sup> Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, 108.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid.

the Truth concerning Superman's identity requires constant management by the character. Indeed, in Superman's world, the Truth is a matter for debate and the Man of Steel faces a continuous argumentative battle between Fact and "counter-fact" to retain control of his own identity. In these stories, evidence is presented then problematised by contradictory evidence, which, in turn, is challenged with the somewhat ironic outcome that empirical investigative practices result in the establishment of the falsehood, that Clark Kent is not Superman, as an apparent Fact until it is again questioned in a subsequent narrative. Here, we see a repetitious convention of Superman's comics, which provides the key problematic around which numerous Superman stories may be constructed. However, aside from providing a useful "story-enabler" that aids DC's writers in their endeavours to formulate new ideas for Superman's ongoing adventures, the argumentative contest surrounding the character's secret identity is also indicative of the perpetual uncertainty risked by continued attempts to seek objective, concrete facts.<sup>486</sup> Indeed, these stories illustrate how, rather than leading to the establishment of a single objectively determined and fixed explanation of all of life's phenomena, the practices of scientific rationalism and empirical investigation may result in perpetual uncertainty, as what is considered to be true is continuously altered and revised.

However, Superman stories also simultaneously present the opposite case, one that is familiar with Gernsback's utilisation of rationalist logic as a means of making sense of a seemingly ambiguous reality through an apparently coherent framing narrative. As we have seen in his successful endeavours to confuse and outfox Lois, Superman's manipulation of rationalised logic allows him to construct elaborate arguments that have an apparent basis in Truth, even when they are falsehoods, enabling him to continue shaping public knowledge of his identity in the face of forces that threaten to wrest such agency away from him. This playfulness with the Truth demonstrates how the

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<sup>486</sup> Barker, *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*, 190.

principles of rationalisation can be utilised as a means of managing the unknown to create order out of the seemingly uncontrollable. Superman's continuous rhetorical manipulation of Fact therefore allows us to see that, although the rationalised discourses of scientific advancement and discovery produce uncertainty and present the possibility of a slide into total relativism and ultimate meaninglessness, they also appear to be the only means of maintaining any kind of order. Superman's ability to constantly and successfully manage his secret identity by presenting counter-evidence to thwart the attempts of either Lois or his enemies to unmask him, or steal his face and name, illustrates how, in his world, uncertainty has been moderated via the application of the rhetoric of rationalisation to confusing or ambiguous situations.

Nevertheless, the above examples do demonstrate that it is possible to construct any Truth in Superman's universe via a rhetorical manipulation of the available evidence. In order to be convincing, the presentation of that evidence simply has to adhere to the rhetorical conventions of rationalisation and appear to be consistent with the pattern of existing facts which constitutes established knowledge. It follows that anything goes, so long as it can be rhetorically reconciled with what has already been established in a manner that presents the new information as an extension or continuation of a previously existing state of affairs. Thus, the slide into a state of wholesale relativism and reigning confusion where nothing is or can be certain is prevented. The disjunctures caused by changes to established knowledge are mitigated by framing techniques which present those alterations to Fact as having always been true and only awaiting their eventual but inevitable discovery by scientific, rationalised, empirical methods.<sup>487</sup> Ever changing reality is thus given the appearance of stability and coherence and the rationalised logical discourse of evidential proof, through which the world is investigated and understood, is validated as the means according to which

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<sup>487</sup> Billig, *Arguing and Thinking*, 173.

the new and apparently now absolute factual Truth is discovered.

Rationalism, at least as it appears in Superman stories of the 1950s and 1960s, is thus always seen to be correct, even when the Facts in which it is grounded and which supposedly justify its means are constantly being altered.

The discourse of rationalism as it is featured in these comics thus provides a strategy for the rhetorical construction and manipulation of Fact that creates uncertainty but, at the same time, prevents the complete dissolution of meaning. The catch is that, because Superman's control over his own identity and place in the world is rhetorical, the potential always exists for it to be destabilised by a new argumentative proposition drawing upon newly presented evidence. He must therefore be forever vigilant and constantly ready to counteract these challenges with his own rhetorical strategies. This may be why, although Lois never proves, once and for all, that Superman and Clark are one and the same, she is able to destabilise his world month after month with new presentations of arguments and evidence.

The function of the rhetoric of rationalisation, as a means of preserving the existing order of knowledge when the facts upon which it has been established shift, can be identified in contexts outside Superman's fictional world. Significantly, for my purposes here, they are present in the anti-Communist crusade of the 1950s. As stated earlier, the search for subversives that characterised McCarthyism was predicated upon the notion of a stable, knowable world inhabited by coherent and consistent individual identities. Suspected Communists could be rooted out because people with radical left-wing sympathies had clearly identifiable traits. However, as Ellen Schrecker's account indicates, these concepts actually existed in tension with the practices of the loyalty review boards that were designed to discover Communists. Schrecker writes of those who were investigated, "though cleared, they remained under a cloud, never knowing when they might again

be subject to investigation.”<sup>488</sup> Her explanation demonstrates that because, in some cases, the questions and tests undertaken by loyalty review boards failed to identify targets for dismissal first time, observational investigations were not able to clearly and unproblematically profile the selfhood of the suspected individuals once and for all.

Furthermore, those identified as Communists were not necessarily marked as such forever. Indeed, as Schrecker has noted, the direction of travel was not only one way and there was the possibility of appeal, so that even if an individual were identified as a Communist or fellow traveller by a loyalty review board and dismissed from their job, the verdict could be challenged and, theoretically, reversed, even though the process was largely difficult, biased, and unfair.<sup>489</sup> In the context of McCarthyism, it can therefore be argued that, despite attempts by loyalty review boards and courts to anchor judgements concerning people’s political lives in explicit evidence, identity was a fluid concept which could always be altered with the presentation of new information. Indeed, rather than leading to a stable and undisputable knowledge of who was a Communist security threat and who was not, anti-Communists appear to have created a situation of uncertainty and constant review in which continuous checks were needed in order to mitigate the possibility of error.

As we have seen, this is very similar to the concept of identity as it is understood in the fictional comic book world inhabited by Superman. Just as workplace loyalty review boards in 1950s America identified Communists and left-wing sympathisers by drawing comparisons between the behavioural traits commonly associated with such individuals and those of the people under investigation, Lois tries to discover Superman’s secret identity by reconciling her observations about Clark and other objects of her suspicions

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<sup>488</sup> Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes*, 365.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.



with the known characteristics of Superman. Furthermore, and as the above discussion illustrates, in Superman's world, as in McCarthyist discourse, a Truth, once it has been established through reconciling a hypothesis with the already known, is always potentially subject to challenge and change if new evidence emerges which problematises its coherence and consistency. Therefore, just as the discourse surrounding Clark Kent would have to be altered if Lois proved that he really was Superman, so would the established knowledge of an individual, as well as their private motivations and past behaviour, have to be re-evaluated if they were either identified as a Communist or they managed to establish their "innocence" after having been dismissed for being involved in subversive activities or having radical left-wing political views, for a newly consistent factual account of their history to be formed. As a result of this comparison, we can see that the fictional world of "Silver Age" Superman stories reflects some of the "real world" methods through which Real Life people maintain their perceptions of reality and their faith in the frameworks of understanding around which their social actions are organised, when the Facts upon which such beliefs are built prove unreliable and subject to change.

In my suggestion that the rationalised logic that underpins Superman stories of the 1950s and 1960s is similar to that which informed McCarthyism, we are beginning to see the means through which the stories that Weisinger edited, dismissed as inconsequential and irrelevant fantasies by official paratexts, can be seen as relevant to Real Life. My point here is not to argue that the identity politics found in Superman comics of the 1950s and 1960s are explicitly political or even intended by their creators to be about McCarthyism, as they would be if they were featured in an intentionally socially relevant text such as *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, even though there are some interesting parallels. As is the case with the supposedly New Deal oriented stories of the late 1930s or the 1950s tales discussed in Chapter Two, it seems that, contrary to the opinions articulated in the editorials from *Superman in the*

*Sixties*, political readings of “Silver Age” Superman stories are possible, even if they do not unproblematically accommodate them. Indeed, it is important to note that there is little or no explicit textual evidence to indicate they were intended to be read in this way. As we have seen, the narrative concerns featured in Superman comics of the “Silver Age” period have as much in common with the tropes of early twentieth century science fiction as the concerns of their own era. Furthermore, editor Weisinger’s statement that “we never go in for stories of a political nature” cautions against interpretations that align his narratives with specific events or topical concerns.<sup>490</sup>

Instead, I am suggesting that, even though they contain unrealistic scenarios, “Silver Age” Superman comics adhere to an underlying set of rationalised logical principles, or Common Sense ideas, which inform both the way Real Life is understood and the manner in which some overtly political narratives, such as those present in McCarthyist discourse, operate. In fact, it is arguably Superman comics’ continued indebtedness to the scenarios prevalent in early twentieth century science fiction that makes them relevant to the Real Life discourses of the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond, because the same logics which underpinned the stories published by Gernsback and others continued and, arguably continue, to influence the way “real” people construct the coherent narratives that allow them to understand the world in which they live. McCarthyism simply provides a helpful example of how the logics of “Silver Age” Superman stories can resonate with the similarly rationalised conceptual understandings of reality that underlie Real Life debates.

Following these thoughts, we can see that “Silver Age” Superman stories casually explore a specific logical framework for making sense of the world that has conditioned many areas of popular discourse since the principles of

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<sup>490</sup> Weisinger, reply to Dennis Fox, “Metropolis Mailbag,” 17; Weisinger, reply to Victoria Phillips, “Metropolis Mailbag,” 13.

rationalisation became widely accepted as Common Sense in western Protestant societies.<sup>491</sup> In addition to this, “Silver Age” Superman stories’ depiction of individuals, such as Clark Kent/Superman himself, who are seeking to establish the dominance of their own representation of reality by linking it to established, widely accepted Truths, also resembles the manner in which political or ideological perspectives secure their own prevalence by associating themselves with broadly believed in Common Senses. In this respect, although it would probably be a stretch to argue that “Silver Age” Superman stories are predominantly political, or even ideological, in the messages that they convey, they at least articulate something about the way in which certain narratives, worldviews or conceptions of reality are constructed, validated, and legitimised. Therefore, whilst they can be considered akin to “fairy-tales,” or “folk tales,” at least according to the logic that appears to have encouraged Barker to draw links between such narratives and the comic strip *Scream Inn*, this likeness should not be used to dismiss them as only “lighthearted fun.”<sup>492</sup>

Indeed, although the plots of “Silver Age” stories are often overtly fantastical in nature, the manner in which characters like Lois and Superman reflect common Real Life techniques of sense-making in their handling of information is likely realistic and relevant to the lives of the comics’ readers. According to my new understanding, then, popular texts, and superhero comics in particular, need not directly involve themselves in political concerns or be seen to explicitly engage with social changes in the country of their production to be relevant. Rather, Relevance may apply to any story, whether explicitly political or otherwise, that reflects the underlying logics or Common Sense principles that underpin social understandings, as well as the way in which ideological or political narratives seek to establish their dominance and status as Truth.

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<sup>491</sup> Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, 42.

<sup>492</sup> Barker, *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*, 67; “Lighthearted Fun,” in *Superman in the Sixties*, ed. Dale Crain (New York, NY: DC Comics, 1999), 191.

Having established a new, contrasting definition of Realism and social Relevance to that associated with post-1970s comic book superhero stories, I am now going to illustrate how an extension of my argument can lead to the dissolution of the binary opposition that, as we have seen, some official narratives have constructed between the Relevance aesthetic and the style of Weisinger's "Silver Age" stories, particularly those from the 1960s. As I have discussed in detail in relation to Lois' attempts to uncover Superman's secret identity, the vast majority of the plots from the Weisinger "Silver Age" period unfold in a world governed by rules that have been heavily influenced by the logic of scientific rationalism. Accordingly, every new event must be reconciled with the previously established rules and "scientific" laws of Superman's universe. As my argument, outlined below, shows, the heavy focus placed on the need to account for events and situations via the documentary method of interpretation was such a prominent feature of Superman's "Silver Age" narratives that it, in fact, became recognised by the comics' readers for what I have already suggested it was: a key component or "situational logic" of Superman's story-world.<sup>493</sup>

As we have seen, Martin Barker argues that it is the "situational logics" of any given text that comprise the "rules" that govern its story-world as well as the actions of characters within it.<sup>494</sup> According to Barker, they also form one half of a "contract" between text and readers which comprises of, on the one hand, a promise on the part of the text that its story-world and characters will behave in a way that is in accordance with their established conventions, and, on the other, the readers' expectations, which are occasioned by their prior experience of similar narratives.<sup>495</sup> Barker has expanded upon this, arguing that

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<sup>493</sup> Barker, *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*, 71.

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

a narrative form is a living form, embodying the rules of a “contract” between itself and an audience with a determinate social location. The form is not an “essence” with a life of its own. It lives in the unconscious assumptions of producers within the production system. A form does not mechanically take its audience through its predetermined sequence of elements. It positions them in typified social relations to itself – lays down invitations on how they should relate to itself – such that the meaning of the text is not simply in the form, its elements and their ordering but is a function of the kind of relationship into which the reader is invited.<sup>496</sup>

Thus, if a “contract” provides the means through which a text may seek to manage the expectations of its audience, the relationship also works two ways. If a text does not live up to the expectations generated by its “invitations,” audiences may see that it has violated the terms of the contract and walk away. According to this theory, a text’s producers must go to considerable lengths to prove that any innovations that they introduce to a character’s story-world are consistent with the established parameters of the fictional universe; and “Silver Age” Superman is no exception. Indeed, evidence that the documentary method of interpretation was a key tool used by Weisinger in his endeavours to legitimise his changes to Superman’s world, as well as the fact that his utilisation of it enabled him to frame his innovations as being consistent with the established characteristics of the character’s universe and the terms of the implied “contract” that existed between his stories and their readership, is provided by the debates found in the “Metropolis Mailbag” letters page.

In the “Metropolis Mailbag” of *Action Comics* #245, one reader asks, “If Superman is so afraid of kryptonite, why doesn’t he fly all around the world to

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<sup>496</sup> Ibid., 133.

find all of it, then use super-long tongs or a lead-suit to gather it and throw it all away into space?"<sup>497</sup> Weisinger argues that it is "hopeless" for Superman to do such a thing because Krypton "burst into millions of pieces of kryptonite that scattered all through space" and that "they will keep falling down on Earth far into the future."<sup>498</sup> However, he appears to have felt the need to address this concern in a later story, in a scenario that almost exactly mirrors the one proposed in the letter column discussion. In a flashback sequence from *Superman* #130's, "The Curse of Kryptonite," Superman remembers how, dressed in a lead suit, he tried "hunting down *all* kryptonite meteors in space."<sup>499</sup> Just as Weisinger's prior explanation suggested, it proves to be an "impossible job."<sup>500</sup>

In the debate outlined above, the received wisdom that Superman's vulnerability to kryptonite is insurmountable is challenged by a reader who outlines a theory of how Superman could overcome it, a proposition that is consistent with the previously established knowledge that kryptonite rays cannot penetrate lead. Weisinger therefore feels the need to provide a counter-argument that will justify his continued use of the mineral as a "useful story-enabler" but which does not present a logical, or to use Locke's terms, "fantasy-reality," disjuncture from what has gone before, perhaps for fear of violating the "contract" with his readers by veering away from the rationalistic logic that traditionally underpins his stories.<sup>501</sup> Thus, he accepts the letter writer's explanation that Superman could use a lead suit to gather the dangerous substance but suggests that there is so much kryptonite that any attempt to contain it would prove futile. In doing so, Weisinger has introduced a change to Superman's universe: that the supply of kryptonite is

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<sup>497</sup> A. L. Jr., letter to the editor, "Metropolis Mailbag," *Action Comics* #245, October 1958, 25.

<sup>498</sup> Mort Weisinger, reply to A.L. Jr., "Metropolis Mailbag," *Action Comics* #245, October 1958, 25.

<sup>499</sup> Otto Binder and Al Plastino, "The Curse of Kryptonite," *Superman* #130, July 1959, 2-8: 6.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>501</sup> Barker: *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*, 190; Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, 111.

effectively infinite. The debate also adds the lead suit to Superman's collection of gadgets and it is subsequently dusted off for use in future narratives.<sup>502</sup>

There are many discussions like this in the pages of the "Metropolis Mailbag," ranging from queries regarding why the writers had red kryptonite affecting Superman in the same way twice, when it should only be once, to questions concerning his powers and age.<sup>503</sup> In fact, the debates surrounding aspects of Superman and his world are so extensive, and the need to account for inconsistencies identified by readers using the documentary method of interpretation so great, that they result in the continued reworking and evolution of Superman's whole universe and also provide extensive resources out of which new stories can be constructed.

This practice of logically accounting for and rationalising all phenomena according to the established parameters of Superman's world extends even to the seemingly silliest of the stories, such as "The Lady and the Lion" and "The Monster from Krypton" mentioned earlier in this chapter. As we have seen, in "The Lady and the Lion," Superman's transformation into a lion at the hands of Circe's descendent is eventually explained by the familiar conceit of kryptonite, rather than magic powers.<sup>504</sup> Similarly, as with many of the strange transformations that Superman undergoes, his metamorphosis into a Kryptonian creature in "The Monster from Krypton" is rationalised as resulting from red kryptonite radiation, a traditional cause of such disturbances to Superman's physiology since 1959's "Superman Versus the

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<sup>502</sup> Otto Binder and Wayne Boring, "Titano the Super-Ape," *Superman* #138, July 1960, 2-11: 7.

<sup>503</sup> Jimmy Jones, letter to the editor, "Metropolis Mailbag," *Action Comics* #299, April 1963, 17; Dennis Hersh, letter to the editor, "Metropolis Mailbag," *Action Comics* #261, February 1960, 15; Irene Vartahoff, letter to the editor, "Metropolis Mailbag," *Action Comics* #322, March 1965, 33.

<sup>504</sup> Binder and Boring, "The Lady and the Lion," 96.

Futuremen.”<sup>505</sup> In these stories, the seemingly magical is made “plausible” via a rhetorical sleight of hand, which frames the fantastical in terms of what is acceptably scientific in Superman’s story-world. Along with revisions to Superman’s backstory provided by narratives like “The Last Days of Ma and Pa Kent,” which expanded upon the Man of Steel’s boyhood past and motivations for becoming a hero, these attempts to create a coherent and consistent world also present us with the beginnings of superhero continuity.<sup>506</sup> Writing specifically about superhero continuity and building upon Reynolds’ distinction between “structural” and “hierarchical” continuity, Locke states that

the pursuit of structural continuity has led to efforts to establish some form of transcendent coherence on a grander scale and it is here that the “rationalization of the irrational” fully emerges. There has been a broadly three part development: first, the emergence of “cosmic” level characters, powers and storylines taken to define a basic set of constituent elements of a given superhero universe; second, the attempt to systematize a given universe by establishing an order between the cosmic powers and their relationship to the “ordinary” superheroes; third, the treatment of a superhero universe as reality itself, thereby reversing the move from science “fact” to science “fiction” and doing so on the grounds that the “magical” constitution of the fantasy world is the underpinning of reality, that in other words reality is magic explicitly understood as symbolization.<sup>507</sup>

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<sup>505</sup> Hamilton and Swan, “The Monster From Krypton,” 12; Bill Finger and Wayne Boring, “Superman Versus the Futuremen,” *Superman* #128, April 1959, 2-21: 7.

<sup>506</sup> Leo Dorfman and Al Plastino, “The Last Days of Ma and Pa Kent,” in *Superman in the Sixties*, ed. Dale Crain (New York, NY: DC Comics, 1999 [1963]), 25-37.

<sup>507</sup> Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, 40-41; Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, 114.



Here, Locke illustrates that, in order to accommodate and account for their more fantastical elements, such as the “cosmic level” characters, in a rationalised manner, superhero comics have produced coherent and systematised magical worlds that are dependent upon the rules established by structuring and hierarchising their more fanciful elements. We have seen something similar in attempts to reconcile the story of Circe’s magic and the monstrous transformations that Superman underwent in the “Silver Age” to the established rationalised, scientific principles of the character’s universe. These have the effect of making the scientific elements of his story-world seem more magical by suggesting that the application of rational explanations can account for any manner of fantastical phenomena, as well as making its more enchanted elements appear relatively rational through proposing that they can be understood “scientifically.” Interestingly, Locke’s theory applies to all superhero comics that have some level of continuity and, as superhero stories began to place increasing emphasis on continuity from the 1960s onwards, and as the Relevance aesthetic developed, it is even more pertinent to the socially relevant stories of the 1970s and beyond than “Silver Age” texts. This is especially true because of their rationalistic emphasis on Realism.<sup>508</sup>

We can now begin to see the means by which the supposed binary division between the realistic, socially relevant stories of the 1970s and 1980s and the “fairy-tales” of the 1950s and 1960s can be dismantled. In order to appear realistic, stories of the social Relevance trend in fact rely upon the same logic of coherence and consistency that underpin the Superman stories of the Weisinger period. Jones and Jacobs touch upon this when, writing about the socially relevant *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, they argue that, “these stories could never really be reality-based. If a man had a power ring and wanted to right social wrongs, think what he’d really do, how quickly his world would become different from ours (and how little he’d need the clown with the

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<sup>508</sup> Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 62.

arrows).”<sup>509</sup> They have here identified a key point: socially relevant stories must fulfil the audience expectations of what a superhero comic is and should be, or risk breaking the terms of the contract that facilitates mutual understanding between the producers of a text and its audience, with the possible further consequence of the story’s creators alienating readers and writing themselves out of business. Although Dennis O’Neil, for example, had previously aspired to be a journalist, in the early 1970s he was writing superhero comics, and no matter which current affairs topics he introduced to his narratives, they still needed to remain true to the underlying principles of the superhero genre.<sup>510</sup> Even a comic book series like *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, which attempts to deal with socially relevant issues, does so in a world of enchanted science populated by aliens and robots via a fantastical character with a power ring.

As has been established through my discussion of Weisinger’s letters pages, 1960s readers of Superman comics evaluated them according to the principles of scientific rationalism. Every addition to a character’s universe, as well as all plot developments, needed to make sense according to the comic’s already established “situational logics.” If the relationship between the new elements and existing Facts were not explained in the story itself, then readers were free to point out inconsistencies in letters to the editor and it was then up to Weisinger to reconcile them to Superman’s world in his playful published responses. As I have hinted, the rules established in the “Silver Age” comics still apply to the comparatively more recent socially relevant stories, which use similar framing techniques to reconcile the aesthetic of political topicality with the established scientifically enchanted superhero universe, altering it in the process. Indeed, the old man’s rebuke to *Green Arrow* in the first issue of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* is a good example of this:

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<sup>509</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid., 114.

I been readin' about you . . . how you work for the *blue skins* . . . and how on a planet someplace you helped out the *orange skins* . . . and you done considerable for the *purple skins*! Only there's *skins* you never bothered with . . . the *black skins*! I want to know . . . *How Come?! Answer me that, Mr. Green Lantern!*<sup>511</sup>

Here, in order to prevent a fictional equivalent of a "reality disjuncture" when readers, accustomed to DC's universally white world in which the issue of race had never been mentioned, encountered a narrative that foregrounded it, O'Neil rationalised the introduction of the subject according to the story-world's known parameters.<sup>512</sup> In O'Neil's revision of the DC universe in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, the fact that the issue of race had never been mentioned previously, as well as Green Lantern's ignorance of it, was re-contextualised as evidence that a prejudice had always existed, at least on Green Lantern's part. The changes that O'Neil also brought to Superman had to be written in to the story-world with similar explicitness, with Superman openly giving up half of his powers and announcing that "I am human, I can make mistakes."<sup>513</sup>

Although, despite his writing several later stories featuring Superman, O'Neil's revision of the character went little further than *Kryptonite Nevermore*, the closure of the story seems to be intended to pave the way for a more "human," down-to-earth Man of Steel, with more obvious personal frailties and character flaws and who may have been ready to be subjected to similar concerns as Green Lantern.<sup>514</sup> The rationalisation of the down-to-earth and

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<sup>511</sup> O'Neil and Adams, *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, 12.

<sup>512</sup> Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, 111.

<sup>513</sup> O'Neil and Swan, *Kryptonite Nevermore*, 22.

<sup>514</sup> Dennis O'Neil and Curt Swan, "The Electronic Ghost of Metropolis," *Superman* #244, November 1971, 1-24; Dennis O'Neil and Curt Swan, "The Kid Who Saved Superman," *Superman* #253, June 1973, 2-18.

the everyday into the more fantastical context of the Superman universe can also be seen in the Man of Steel's explanation of his shaving routine during Byrne's revamp, *The Man of Steel*, an action which, as discussed, introduced the mundane into the extraordinary in order to make the character and his universe seem more realistic and relevant to the real world in which his audience lives. In fact, as this whole discussion has sought to suggest, such forms of rationalisation are very similar to the process through which 1950s and 1960s "Silver Age" comics incorporate new, often outlandish, story ideas into Superman's existing story-world through careful framing techniques that present them as consistent with elements previously introduced to the character's universe.

Just as the above example demonstrates how Realism was written into the post-*Crisis* continuity, so another can illustrate how it could have been written out in a manner that was in keeping with the established rules of the new universe. How, despite its goal of maintaining a single, more realistic version of Superman, the post-*Crisis* continuity actually makes this possible can be demonstrated through an analysis of the 1987 storyline "A Twist in Time."<sup>515</sup> In this tale, the Legion of Superheroes, a group of future heroes inspired by the young Man of Steel's example, seemingly travel back in time to a past in which Superboy existed.<sup>516</sup> However, Superman's past as Superboy was eliminated during *Crisis on Infinite Earths* in 1986, so the story introduces an apparent paradox.<sup>517</sup> In a follow up, "Past Imperfect," it transpires that the past they have journeyed to is, in fact, a pocket universe created by the villainous Time Trapper as part of his broader plot to "rule eternity," not the previous DC universe destroyed by the *Crisis*.<sup>518</sup> Nevertheless, the Superboy from this universe very closely resembles the unrealistic pre-*Crisis* character,

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<sup>515</sup> Paul Levitz, Greg LaRocque, and Mike Decarlo, "A Twist in Time," in *Superman: The Man of Steel*, ed. Robert Greenberger, vol. 4 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2005 [1987]), 72-92.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>518</sup> John Byrne, "Past Imperfect," in *Superman: The Man of Steel*, ed. Robert Greenberger, vol. 4 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2005 [1987]), 114-135: 122.

to the extent that he shares elements of his continuity. For example, one sequence from another story from the same arc, “Future Shock,” even directly references the events of a 1958 comic, with an editorial gloss that describes the new rendering as an “adaptation.”<sup>519</sup> What we can see here, then, is the Superman of the fanciful, “fairy-tale-like” pre-*Crisis* multiverse, or a close approximation of him, supposedly wiped from memory but being reconstructed from materials still available within the new universe. As it was possible to reconstruct the pre-*Crisis* Superman in post-*Crisis* continuity, it would not have been inconceivable for him to one day have replaced the version introduced by Byrne and Ordway in 1986 and to thus bring back the previous, less relevant and more unrealistic state of affairs. In fact, something like this occurred once Byrne had stopped writing Superman stories and pre-*Crisis* elements of Superman’s universe began to return in such narratives as “Lex Luthor Triumphant,” which re-introduced red kryptonite.<sup>520</sup>

If we compare the above examples with my prior discussion of the “Silver Age” Superman stories, the malleability of post-*Crisis* continuity resembles the flexibility imparted to the story-world of the 1950s and 1960s stories by Weisinger’s use of his letters pages to alter and update its parameters. In fact, attempts by framing narratives such as *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and Byrne’s *The Man of Steel* to pin down a single, canonical Superman are also comparable to the “Silver Age” Superman’s continuous struggle to manage his identity as both a separate individual to Clark Kent, according to public perception, and the one true Man of Steel. Indeed, in the post-*Crisis* continuity, as in that of stories from the “Silver Age,” rather than any one single true canonical Superman, there is always the potential for different interpretations and multiple possibilities to be created from the story-world’s current ingredients. These potentialities are limited only by a contributor’s

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<sup>519</sup> John Byrne, “Future Shock,” in *Superman: The Man of Steel*, ed. Robert Greenberger, vol. 4 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2005 [1987]), 93-113: 104.

<sup>520</sup> Jerry Ordway and Dennis Janke, “Lex Luthor Triumphant,” *Superman* #49, November 1990, 1-22.

imagination and their ability to persuade the editors and their readership that any proposed changes are consistent with established rules. To retain the order and consistency of the DC universe continuity in such circumstances thus requires not a single act on the part of the editors and management of DC Comics, like *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, but continuously recurring arguments and counter-arguments which try to validate or restrict changes to Superman by attempting to justify why alterations are permissible or not based upon established precedents and understandings of the character. This state of affairs indicates that, as was the case in Superman's "Silver Age," the post-*Crisis* Man of Steel's story-world does not represent a singular, coherent, fixed, and concrete fictional reality. Rather, it exists in a perpetual state of managed uncertainty, where new possibilities are constantly being raised and where Superman's story, as well as the world in which he exists, is continuously being re-written in order to accommodate them.

Both the "Silver Age" and the more relevant post-1970s stories therefore resemble what Alan Sinfield has dubbed "faultline" texts.<sup>521</sup> As I note in Chapter Two, Sinfield has argued that

when part of our worldview threatens disruption by manifestly failing to cohere with the rest, then we reorganise and retell its story, trying to get it back into shape — back into the old shape if we are conservative-minded, or into a new shape if we are more adventurous. These I call "faultline" stories. They address the awkward unresolved issues; they require the most assiduous and continuous reworking; they hinge upon a fundamental, unresolved ideological complication that finds its way, willy-nilly, into texts.<sup>522</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> Sinfield, *Cultural Politics - - Queer Reading*, 4.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

The “ideological complication” that we can identify in Superman comics from both the “Silver Age” period and the social Relevance trend of the 1970s and beyond is that attempts to rationalise and account for the unknown and unexpected, which are undertaken with the goal of producing a single, coherent Fact and Truth based reality, provide the terminology that is utilised in rhetorical justifications for the constant investigation and re-evaluation of that reality. These reevaluations in turn produce uncertainty and change. This problematic is evident in the 1920s magazines of Hugo Gernsback but can also be found in the discourses surrounding McCarthyism in the 1950s and continues to be present in superhero comics in later decades. Thus, we can see that, although the Superman stories of the “Silver Age” are arguably more indebted to the science fiction of the early part of the twentieth century than the overt contemporary politics of the 1960s, and are not realistic or political according to the traditional sense of Relevance as it is commonly understood by critics, fans, and historians, this does not necessarily present an adequate justification for them being dismissed as “lighthearted fun” that is not relevant. Indeed, these texts reflect and, intentionally or otherwise, often interrogate the prominent discourse of rationalism and its attempts to uncover the mysteries of the world through observation and evidence based theories, as well as its limits and unintended consequences.

Furthermore, whilst “Silver Age” texts do not openly engage with political discourses like McCarthyism, they nevertheless illustrate and examine the types of rationalistic cultural logics upon which the contributors to such debates may justify their arguments, as well as how those individuals use them in their attempts to construct coherent, internally consistent, realistic, narratives. Consequently, if these texts are not politically or socially relevant in an explicit sense, they can nevertheless certainly be deemed to be so in other ways. They are relevant in the sense that they adhere to, bring attention to, and intentionally or unintentionally interrogate commonly held cultural understandings. It is for this reason that dismissing the Relevance of

such texts because they do not explicitly engage with topical political debate is largely unhelpful, particularly as they tend to be underpinned by the same rationalist problematic as stories that do. Therefore, it is my contention that, rather than simply repeating the understandings that editors and fans have previously adhered to, it is worthwhile, for academic debate at least, to re-evaluate the concept of Relevance as it applies to Superman comics specifically and superhero narratives more broadly. A new definition of the term Relevance may include those stories which appear inconsequential but have much to say about the cultural logics that underpin our society and which are utilised in the rhetoric employed by those who may wish to change it. This new definition, which could be used to interrogate explicitly political and socially relevant texts, as well as the previously overlooked or misconstrued “Silver Age” stories, should help us to achieve a more expansive understanding of the superhero genre in comic books and elsewhere, as well as how different texts within it relate to each other and the real world.



#### Chapter Four: Transcendence — The Mythic Post-1978 Superman

In Chapter Three, I argue that even the most fantastical and far-fetched Superman stories of the 1950s and 1960s draw upon rationalised logics or Common Sense principles that also inform the way individuals respond to Real Life situations and make sense of their place in the world. Developing this discussion further, I suggest that because these stories articulate a particular way of interpreting the world, they can, just like more overtly political texts, be considered relevant. In light of this, I propose that it would be productive for academics to rethink the term Relevance as it applies to superhero comics and to reform it into a broader concept that can incorporate different types of narrative. Relevance, as I propose that it should be conceptualised, can refer to any text that reflects the way we understand the world around us and which provides an insight into the logical underpinnings of our cultural beliefs, whether that resembles its author's specific intent or not. According to this new definition, socially relevant texts need not necessarily address a political event, problem or discourse directly, although it may be the case that they do. Rather, they should simply reflect the underlying Common Sense assumptions through which we organise and make sense of our reality. Resulting from this is the possibility that, because texts no longer need to be shown to intentionally pertain to specific social or political issues to be deemed relevant, the concept of Relevance becomes a little looser and more inclusive, encompassing both texts that are covered by the traditional definition and those that are not. However, as stated above, the proposed redefinition of the term Relevance is a suggestion of how the term might be reconfigured, not an outline of how it is currently used.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how Relevance, as it is currently understood by critics, is applied to Superman and how this influences the meanings and significances that are attached to him. I pose five research

questions and answer them in turn as the chapter progresses. In order to formulate questions that are fit for purpose, it is first necessary to get to grips with the topic under investigation. To this end, the following section of this chapter examines the critical discourse surrounding the recent Superman film, *Man of Steel*, in order to glean from it the current perceptions of what it means for Superman to be relevant.<sup>523</sup> This is followed by an analysis of several incarnations of Superman, from 1978's *Superman: The Movie* through to the television series *Smallville*, which identifies how and why certain perceptions surrounding Superman's Relevance may have formed and what this might mean for the character's future.<sup>524</sup>

In a *New York Times* article about *Man of Steel*, published just under a month before its release, Dave Izkoff suggests that the film is "being built on the back of a character who, for as often as writers and filmmakers have lately tried to reinvent him, has proved particularly unsusceptible to attempts to make him more relatable. Audiences seem to want him to be grounded, at the same time that they want to believe he can fly."<sup>525</sup> Izkoff continues, "The qualities that have made Superman timeless have not necessarily made him relevant to this particular time."<sup>526</sup> According to Izkoff, not only is Superman not "relevant" to the present cultural context, but there is an intrinsic aspect of the character's timelessness which makes him a particularly difficult character to adapt "for the paranoid post-Sept. 11 era," a period in which, he perceives, the heroes of big budget blockbusters largely respond to the political climate in an "ironic and loudly violent" fashion.<sup>527</sup> This seems to be a widely held view and is echoed by other critics. In her review of the film for the same newspaper, Manohla Dargis recognises that Superman has been reworked in numerous and varied iterations but locates a central aspect of

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<sup>523</sup> *Man of Steel*, directed by Zack Snyder (2013; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2013), DVD.

<sup>524</sup> *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner (1978; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

<sup>525</sup> Dave Izkoff, "Alien Yet Familiar."

<sup>526</sup> Ibid.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

“idealism” in his character that is ill suited to relevant themes.<sup>528</sup> She argues that

the Superman story had been told in so many ways and in so many moods in the comics — he has married and mourned, died and been reborn — but shaping these transformative cycles into a new film, much less a viable series, remained elusive. Christopher Nolan went dark and then darker with another DC Comics legend in the Dark Knight films, but this was Superman, idealism embodied. What was there left to say about the man in the primary-color suit, especially after Sept. 11?<sup>529</sup>

In these articles we can see that, just as in the *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* comic book series of the 1970s, the concept of Relevance is, at least by some commentators, still being connected to explicit political commentary. Just as interesting, however, is the related idea that Superman is somehow not relevant. Indeed, the two authors of these articles are drawing a similar binary division to the distinction between socio-political Relevance and fanciful “lighthearted fun” that we saw applied to “Silver Age” Superman stories in my previous chapter. This time, however, rather than classifying a specific set of stories featuring Superman as not relevant, the critics quoted here seem to be proposing that there is one “timeless,” authentic, “idealistic” version of the character who, as a figure who transcends the flaws and failings of Real Life society, is essentially and necessarily incompatible with relevant socio-political topics. According to this view, Superman is naturally resistant to reinventions which seek to emphasise such themes.

Itzkoff and Dargis are not isolated in this opinion as their thoughts are echoed in a *Man of Steel* feature piece for *Empire*, in which Ian Nathan’s observations imply that Superman has a concrete essence that is characterised by a strong

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<sup>528</sup> Manohla Dargis, “Part Man, Part God, All Hunk.”

<sup>529</sup> Ibid.

element of rigidity: "Everything about Superman feels preordained. Characters, locations, the very look and sensibility of the mythology come encased in aspic as hard to shatter as Batman's world is pliable."<sup>530</sup> The difficulty of updating Superman is also emphasised in a previous *Empire* feature on the film in which Nathan stresses that producer Deborah Snyder initially "couldn't see how to make him relevant."<sup>531</sup> As these examples illustrate, in 2013 there was a belief among some critics at least that Superman was either resistant to contemporary post-9/11 adaptations or an anathema to them. This is a proposition which, when we consider Ian Nathan's thoughts in particular, also indicates that there is a singular, fixed and correct version of the character which is, in his essence, best suited to adaptations that avoid Relevance.

In Chapter Three's discussion of the editorial paratexts that are used to frame "Silver Age" Superman stories in the collected edition *Superman in the Sixties*, we saw that the Relevance discourse does not only encourage historians to produce partial or flawed political readings of Superman stories that do not unproblematically accommodate them.<sup>532</sup> Rather, it may also have led some to dismiss certain texts or periods of Superman's development as inconsequential "lighthearted fun" that tells us little about the "real" world in which we live.<sup>533</sup> The views of the critics quoted above, who believe Superman to be naturally unsuited to topical concerns, again demonstrate that just as the Relevance discourse prompts a number of historians, such as Tye and Dehaven, to interpret Superman as a figure who is intrinsically tied to America's social development and who is therefore always relevant, so it has led others to perceive him to be an irrelevant character. This view is not limited to film critics and it is shared by some experts on Superman.

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<sup>530</sup> Ian Nathan, "Kingdom Come," *Empire* #288, June 2013, 62-73: 69.

<sup>531</sup> Ian Nathan, "Superman Rises," *Empire* #285, March 2013, 65-71: 67.

<sup>532</sup> "Relevance," in *Superman in the Sixties*, 179.

<sup>533</sup> "Lighthearted Fun," in *Superman in the Sixties*, 191.

For instance, Glen Weldon, a Superman historian and the author of *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, and Mark Waid, a comic book writer and Superman enthusiast perceive either that the character is intrinsically — or has at least come to be seen as — not relevant. In an article for the *Washington Post*, Weldon writes,

When writers push him [Superman] into politicians' squabbles or social debates, they do him a disservice. Such efforts cannot bridge the distance between his tidy two-dimensional world and our own. They can only make it wider. This is why his writers' desire to keep Superman relevant often backfires, resulting in well-meaning but ham-fisted tales that cement his reputation as the ultimate square.

We don't look to Superman because he responded meaningfully to World War II or was saddened by Sept. 11. We look to him because, no matter what decade it is, he reminds us that we can be better than we are.<sup>534</sup>

Waid offers a slightly different view in his postscript to the collected edition of his 2004 reworking of Superman's origin, *Superman: Birthright*, entitled "Reimagining the Man of Tomorrow":

There are entire generations to whom Superman is about as meaningful and significant as Woody Woodpecker or Marmaduke . . . and to be honest, I don't think it has nearly as much to do with comics' availability as it does with the undeniable fact that the Gen-X and Gen-next audience perceive the world around them as far more dangerous, far more unfair and far more screwed up than we ever did. To them, and probably more than we'd like to believe, their world is one where capitalism always wins, where politicians always

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<sup>534</sup> Weldon, "Superman's Real Kryptonite: American Politics."

lie, where sports idols take drugs and beat their wives, where white picket fences are suspect because they hide dark things — and to them, that's the world Superman REPRESENTS and the status quo he DEFENDS.

For some time now — and even more so in the post- 9/11 world, I'd argue — our audience gifts its excitement and loyalty to heroes that AREN'T agents of the status quo.<sup>535</sup>

What we see here are two individuals who each have an awareness of the political readings that have been drawn from Superman texts — as is evidenced by the fact that both have viewed Superman as a reflection of American politics — but who are inclined to suggest that the Man of Steel is either naturally unsuited to Relevance or has at least become perceived to be so.<sup>536</sup> This evidence that some experts on the Man of Steel have begun to share the view that Superman is not relevant or, at least in Waid's case, started to acknowledge its growing presence in the minds of others, indicates that perceptions of Superman's lack of Relevance are not wholly confined to the interpretive community of film critics. Rather, it is a more widely held perception, which indicates that Superman texts have themselves provided enough specific evidence of the Man of Steel's irrelevance, or demonstrated characteristics associated with the idea, to convince even those who have a thorough knowledge of the character's history — as well as an awareness of the political discourses in which he can be placed — that disconnect from politics and social issues is one of his defining traits.

According to this hypothesis, even if we accept the presence of certain elements in Superman stories that can be read politically, a number of his narratives must also contain enough noticeable evidence of his distance and alienation from socially relevant concerns for some of his audience to

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<sup>535</sup> Mark Waid, "Reimagining the Man of Tomorrow," in *Superman: Birthright*, ed. Robert Greenberger (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2004), 292-303: 294.

<sup>536</sup> Mark Waid, "In the 1950s, Calling Someone a Boy Scout Was a Compliment," 5-6; Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorised Biography*, 127: 239.

construe irrelevance as an overriding aspect of his character, to the extent that, to them, it renders other interpretive possibilities insignificant by comparison. As we shall see in the following analysis, it is not only the preoccupations of “Silver Age” texts that helped to foster the idea that Superman is an intrinsically irrelevant character.

Recently, big budget movies, perhaps most notably Christopher Nolan’s Batman trilogy, have encouraged the financial success of and critical interest in the superhero genre, at least as it has been portrayed in lucrative films, through their engagement with post-9/11 political themes.<sup>537</sup> The apparent consensus among film critics in particular and, if Mark Waid is correct, the growing perception among others that Superman is unsuited to socially relevant political topics is therefore a worrying development for the character and arguably raises concerns over the future of his appeal. However, as we shall see, even before we take into account my own repositioning of the term Relevance, it is possible to argue that, just as some historians’ political readings of Superman offer limited understandings of the character, other critics’ assertions that the Man of the Steel is rigid and resistant to change, especially to those reinventions that try to make him relevant, are equally selective.

Indeed, the idea that the character is essentially inflexible in nature and defined by certain intrinsic qualities that are best suited to a particular type of adaptation, particularly those which do not engage with the overt political themes associated with the Relevance aesthetic, begins to seem like an unjudiciously limited view when we reconsider the arguments already presented in Chapter One. As I have argued, initially it was likely Superman’s flexibility and ability to comfortably inhabit a variety of genres and contexts that allowed him to appeal to diverse audiences in a number of ways, facilitating his early success. Given the malleability of the character in his earlier incarnations, the perception that Superman is a figure constrained by

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<sup>537</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, 199-204.

his own inflexibility seems likely to be a relatively recent construction rather than an absolute, unassailable and objective Fact. Furthermore, when we recall my own proposed reworking of the term Relevance and my suggestion that even Superman texts which do not feature explicitly political content may be relevant in other ways, it becomes clear that a thorough re-examination of the idea that there exists one “essential” Superman who is intrinsically resistant to Relevance is necessary.

In light of this concern, questions arise regarding 1) what qualities are perceived to form the natural “essence” of Superman by those that see him as a figure who is intrinsically unsuited to Relevance, 2) where these perceptions come from, 3) for what purpose might the idea of a true, “essential” Superman have been encouraged by some Superman texts, 4) why the understanding that there exists such a definitive version of the character has become a powerful presence in the discourse surrounding him and, seemingly, a consensus amongst film critics and, finally, 5) why this conception of the “essential” Superman has led to the character being viewed by a number of commentators as resistant to change, particularly in relation to attempts to make him relevant. These are the five questions that this chapter seeks to answer.

Possible answers to the first two of these questions can be brought into view through study of the critical reaction to *Man of Steel*. In her review of the *Man of Steel* for *Wired*, Rachel Edidin gives some consideration to the potential malleability of a longstanding fictional character who has survived through many and varying incarnations.<sup>538</sup> Nevertheless, despite her explicitly “not saying” that “superheroes — however iconic — are inviolate,” and her acknowledgement that “the biggest problem with tackling such an iconic character — especially when he’s been around for almost a century in countless iterations — is that you will never ever be able to capture

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<sup>538</sup> Rachel Edidin, “Grim, Violent *Man of Steel* Sells Superman’s Soul for Spectacle,” review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *Wired*, June 13, 2013, <http://www.wired.com/underwire/2013/06/man-of-steel-movie-review/>.



everything that makes him resonate with your audience,” Edidin proceeds to outline the parameters of what Superman “is” and what his stories should be about.

Superman is about hope. In the wrong hands, that casts him as bland; in the right hands, it’s a powerful and poignant statement about what heroism can and should mean. Superman’s all about finding — or, in its absence, being — the light in the darkness. He’s the hero the other heroes look up to, not for his superior power set but for his unflagging decency and compassion. And — no matter how quotable David Carradine was in *Kill Bill* — the best, most persistently definitive Superman stories are about his humanity.<sup>539</sup>

Here, the sharp assertion that Superman “is about hope” and the implication that he has intrinsic characteristics that those producing a story about him should reproduce correctly, begins to appear similar to suggesting that the character has an “inviolable” “essence.”<sup>540</sup> For Edidin, the film interpretation that best realises these essential characteristics to the point of being “timelessly definitive” is not *Man of Steel* but Richard Donner’s *Superman: The Movie*. This is seemingly confirmed by her concluding comments:

*Man of Steel* hasn’t killed Superman or ruined Superman. It doesn’t erase the iconic versions of the character, nor change what he can represent. It hasn’t retroactively destroyed your childhood or mine. All that good stuff is still there: the first two Christopher Reeve movies, the three-part premiere of the 1996 animated series, the adaptation of *All-Star Superman*, any

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<sup>539</sup> Ibid.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid.

episode of *Justice League*, or even the old Fleischer cartoons.<sup>541</sup>

Thus, for Edidin, it seems a film that “wrongly” fails to embody the “essential,” “timeless” aspects of the Superman myth can be justly and easily overlooked in favour of those which do. In fact, given that Edidin appears to believe that *Man of Steel* eschews most of the essential Superman qualities that made Donner’s film “timelessly definitive,” it can be inferred that, at least according to her logic, it is unlikely to remain so fixed in the minds of audiences.

Other critics are less forthright but still regard *Man of Steel* as inferior to and more ephemeral than Donner’s incarnation of Superman. Although Eric Walkuski of *JoBlo* praises the film, suggesting that “it’s sure to please fans of summer blockbuster entertainment, and purists of the character will not be able to complain too harshly, since the character is respected accordingly,” he remarks that “it’s also not likely to make anyone forget Richard Donner’s *Superman* or Christopher Reeve’s unforgettable portrayal of the character.”<sup>542</sup> Here again, the recent film is regarded as more transitory than the 1978 original, with Walkuski implying that it is “hard to imagine” Henry Cavill’s interpretation will “surpass Reeve as the quintessential Superman.”<sup>543</sup> *Flavorwire*’s Jason Bailey compares the “9/11 imagery” of *Man of Steel* unfavorably with the “admirably patient” Donner and Lester films and, although he does not mention *Superman: The Movie* explicitly, *Variety*’s Scott Foundas again draws the comparison.<sup>544</sup> Recapping events from the 1978 film, he writes “Gone [. . .] are any of those lighter moments, fondly

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<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

<sup>542</sup> Eric Walkuski, review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *JoBlo*, June 13, 2013, <http://www.joblo.com/movie-news/review-man-of-steel>.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid.

<sup>544</sup> Jason Bailey, “*Man of Steel* Is the Superman of This Moment — Unfortunately,” review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *Flavorwire*, June 14, 2013, <http://flavorwire.com/397785/man-of-steel-is-the-superman-of-this-moment-unfortunately>; Scott Foundas, review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *Variety*, June 11, 2013, <http://variety.com/2013/film/reviews/film-review-man-of-steel-1200493929/>.

remembered from Superman past, in which our hero — in or out of disguise — used his powers for decidedly non-super feats and, by doing so, grew closer to his fellow man. One longs to see this Superman change a flat or rescue a kitten from a tree or take Lois for a flight around the block.”<sup>545</sup>

Although he does not evaluate *Man of Steel* negatively in his preview piece “Kingdom Come,” *Empire*’s Ian Nathan also invites a comparison between the 2013 film and *Superman: The Movie*, contrasting Snyder’s approach to the emphasis placed upon “romance and comedy” by Donner.<sup>546</sup> Other reviewers compare the two versions of Superman but in less detail. For instance, Richard Corliss’ review of *Man of Steel* for *Time*, Claudia Puig’s review for *USA Today*, and David Denby’s for *The New Yorker* all cite Donner’s film or Christopher Reeve’s interpretation of Superman.<sup>547</sup>

These articles indicate possible answers to the first two questions that I posed above, or at least point in the direction of where they might be found. Firstly, we can identify which natural qualities are currently associated with Superman from Edidin’s evocations of the values of “lightness,” “unflagging decency and compassion,” and “hope,” and Foundas’ further reference to “lighter moments,” characteristics which chime with Ian Nathan’s recognition that elements of “romance and comedy” are associated with the Man of Steel as a result of Donner’s 1978 film. Secondly, given the presence of comparisons between *Man of Steel* and *Superman: The Movie* in reviews, it is apparent that the 1978 film may be the source of critics’ understanding that there exists a singular “timeless,” “quintessential” Superman. The fact that *Superman: The Movie* prominently features romance in Superman’s interview

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<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

<sup>546</sup> Ian Nathan, “Kingdom Come,” 64.

<sup>547</sup> Richard Corliss, “*Man of Steel*: Super Man . . . or Human God?,” review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *Time*, June 12, 2013, <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/06/12/man-of-steel-super-man-or-human-god/#ixzz2pS85L53j>; Claudia Puig, “*Man of Steel* Leaves Destruction in Superhero Quest,” review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *USA Today*, June 13, 2013, [http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2013/06/12/man-of-steel-review/2367021/?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+UsatodaycomMovies-TopStories+%28Life+-+Movies+-+Top+Stories%29](http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2013/06/12/man-of-steel-review/2367021/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+UsatodaycomMovies-TopStories+%28Life+-+Movies+-+Top+Stories%29); David Denby, review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *New Yorker*, June 14-July 30, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town/movies/man-of-steel-2>.

and flight with Lois around Metropolis, as well as lightness and humour in its comedic portrayal of Lex Luthor and his henchman Otis, further supports this supposition.

If the sheer variety of prior permutations of the character suggests that the notion of an essential, true, or “quintessential” Superman is not, as some believe, an objective Fact, but may have been constructed around *Superman: The Movie*, then it is possible to suggest that this air of naturalness and “timelessness” may have been intentionally associated with the superhero as a means of forwarding a specific agenda, with repercussions for his subsequent evolution. If we wish to gain a better understanding of Superman’s present and possible futures, answer my third question, and consequently discover for what purpose the concept of the natural, true, “timeless” and “quintessential” Superman was encouraged by *Superman: The Movie*, it is necessary to subject it to deeper analysis.

At first glance, *Superman: The Movie* conveys more of a sense of nostalgia for the past than “timelessness.” It opens with a prologue recalling the 1930s, then transports its audience to the futuristic world of Krypton which is both technologically advanced and dying, its obsolescence conveyed by the fact that, excepting three women, it is almost entirely inhabited by men over fifty. The stern demeanour of these characters against the cold glacial backdrop only adds to the sense of sterility of a planet that seems to be lacking in life even before it is dead. As a child, Superman is then sent from this stale future back to America’s past, landing in a field “circa” the 1940s.<sup>548</sup> The film then cuts to his teenage years. Judging from the tune playing on the car radio, Bill Haley and His Comets’ single “(We’re Gonna) Rock Around the Clock,” it is likely the 1950s.<sup>549</sup> Following the death of his adopted father Jonathan Kent and his discovery of the green crystal, eighteen-year-old Clark is drawn on a

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<sup>548</sup> David Michael Petrou, *The Making of Superman: The Movie* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1978), 141.

<sup>549</sup> Petrou, *The Making of Superman: The Movie*, 135; *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner.

journey to the Arctic where he establishes the Fortress of Solitude and meets the holographic ghost of Jor-El who compels Clark to stay there to learn his trade as a superhero for the next twelve years.

When he first arrives in Metropolis after this hiatus, Clark's discomfort with modernity is a running theme. He is chastised by Lois for using the now archaic term "swell," gets stuck in a modern revolving door, and then, when looking for a phone booth to mask his change to Superman, is disconcerted by the new open-air equivalent.<sup>550</sup> The first two incidents can easily be explained by the suggestion that Superman is attempting to associate his Clark Kent disguise with the appearance of awkwardness and buffoonery in order protect his true identity. However, the third is perhaps a clearer indication that the character is not easily accommodated by the contemporary context. His search for a place to change into Superman is seemingly not, like the Clark Kent persona in general, a performance designed to distract others from his true identity. Rather, as well as an act of transformation commonly associated with Superman, it is a demonstration of a natural instinct and a suggestion that those instincts emanate from a past era of enclosed phone booths, not the decade in which he has just awoken. Indeed, if we remember that Superman has been in the Fortress of Solitude for twelve years or, in the film's skewed chronology, since the 1950s, both Clark and Superman seem like throwbacks to an earlier era.

What might lend further significance to Superman's period of absence, as far as his audience at the time would have been concerned, is the fact that his most recent live-action screen portrayal had been in the television series that finished production in 1957.<sup>551</sup> Given Les Daniels' assertion that George Reeves "still has fans who believe that the affable dignity and earnest conviction of his interpretation have yet to be surpassed," we can tentatively suggest that, in its status as the then most recent live-action screen portrayal

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<sup>550</sup> *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner.

<sup>551</sup> Gary Grossman, *Superman: Serial to Cereal* (New York, NY: Popular Library, 1976), 99.

of Superman, and one that would still have been familiar to audiences through repeats, the show may have continued to be a significant point of reference for at least some audience members in the 1970s, as well as the creators of *Superman: The Movie*.<sup>552</sup> Thus, if the Superman of the 1978 film appears to have leapt straight from the 1950s, it may be the consequence of recognition on the part of its creators that, to general audiences who did not read comics, Superman was still associated with, and seen as a product of, that decade. Indeed, those who encountered George Reeves' rendering of Superman during their formative childhood years would, by the time of the 1970s, still not have experienced another live-action portrayal of the character that might have contested the prevalence of Reeves' performance in their minds. Therefore, it can be argued that some aspects of *Superman: The Movie*'s diegesis are designed as homage to the previous portrayal, even if the Man of Steel of the film's story-world is unaware of the significance of his behaviour.

It is now possible to suggest that Clark Kent's separation from society in the first Christopher Reeve film is an intentional engagement with Superman's on-screen hiatus. If Reeve and Donner's version of Superman appears to have undergone a period of arrested development, it can be seen as a logical interpretation of the character's status in the 1970s as a relic of a past decade. Only with the new film is Superman finally moving forward and being brought up-to-date, but he is spring-boarding straight from the culture of the 1950s.

If we follow this reading, it becomes evident that Superman must have missed out on many of the societal developments and political movements that had changed people's attitudes in the intervening decades. If the 1950s is sometimes viewed by Conservatives as "a decade of consensus," or, through the eyes of liberals, as "a low point for oppositional politics," then the 1960s

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<sup>552</sup> Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History*, 92; Scivally, *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway*, 57-58.

can perhaps be seen as one of conflict, in which the assumptions that underpinned this apparent cohesion were torn apart.<sup>553</sup>

As this reading suggests, if the Superman of Donner's 1978 film has travelled to the then present directly from what seems to be the 1950s, he has experienced none of the fractious anti-war "confrontation" of 1966-1967 between the government and students, a conflict that led to increasing political polarisation, nor had he been party to the women's liberation movement, through which "by 1967, women activists had already achieved an independence and autonomy that challenged some of the basic assumptions in the dominant culture."<sup>554</sup> He had also missed out on much of the civil rights campaign.<sup>555</sup> Considering that the film's Metropolis scenes were set in then contemporary America and Nixon's resignation occurred in 1974, the year before even the first draft of *Superman: The Movie's* script was completed, it can be suggested that the Watergate scandal, which helped to foster popular attitudes of "skepticism" towards politics, also bypassed Donner's incarnation of Superman.<sup>556</sup>

In this context, the filmic Superman's belief in "truth, justice and the American way," the phrase introduced to the opening titles of the Man of Steel's radio show during the Second World War, and, indeed featured in the credits of the 1950s television show, seems like a romantic recollection of either "the longest period of sustained national unity in the American twentieth century" occasioned by the war or, in the very least, a throwback to the apparent consensus of the 1950s from an era of fragmentation and polarisation.<sup>557</sup> If this backward-looking sensibility is coupled with the film's Christian symbolism, it becomes tempting to read it according to the

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<sup>553</sup> Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s*, 3; Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 343.

<sup>554</sup> Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 325: 326: 335.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, 425-426; Petrou, *The Making of Superman: The Movie*, 28; Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 467.

<sup>557</sup> Scivally, *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway*, 19; Bush Jones, *All-Out for Victory*, 1.

Relevance approach favoured by historians like Tye and Dehaven and to suggest that it is a reflection and an articulation of the “resurgence of post-sixties [C]onservatism,” which was itself conditioned by a “revival of Christian Evangelism that tinged so much of American culture, infecting not only political and social debate but also the airwaves.”<sup>558</sup>

Documenting the rise of the New Right, William H. Chafe writes,

first identified as the “middle American Revolt” of the late 1960s, the rebellion accelerated and deepened in the midst of the political malaise of the 1970s. Although it had roots in traditional [C]onservatism — notably through its strong anticommunism — the “New Right” drew its primary strength from anger against policies that had only recently been introduced to the national agenda: busing, affirmative action, feminism, the Supreme Court’s 1973 decision sanctioning abortion (*Roe v. Wade*), abolition of prayer in schools, and new attitudes of “permissiveness” towards pornography and sexual freedom.<sup>559</sup>

If Chafe is correct, the New Right, in a sense, wanted to reverse the changes that had occurred throughout the 1960s and it can be argued that *Superman: The Movie*’s Christian connotations, as well as the Man of Steel’s seeming unease with 1970s “modernity,” chime with this perspective. It is therefore tempting to read Donner’s Superman, who missed the conflicts and social changes that marked the 1960s, as an emblem of the New Right, evoking as he does the promise of national unity and a heroism that is underpinned by a set of values rooted in the 1950s, the supposed time of “consensus,” before the fractious and “permissive” 1960s brought about the developments that the New Right movement broadly despised. This is a possibility hinted at by

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<sup>558</sup> Will Kaufman, *American Culture in the 1970s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 174.

<sup>559</sup> Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 461.



Jones and Jacobs in their suggestion that *Superman: The Movie* gave Republican presidential candidate “Ronald Reagan the visual template for the most artful presidential campaign in history.”<sup>560</sup> However, if we look more closely, we can see that, as was the case regarding 1930s and 1950s Superman stories, this interpretation does not quite get to grips with the film’s goals. In the analysis below I argue that *Superman: The Movie*’s aims are less politically partisan than initially appears and more successful and influential as a result.

Although the politically Conservative reading of the movie may be tempting, the film itself cautions against it. Lois’ response to Superman’s declaration of values, “you’re going to end up fighting every elected official in this country,” indicates that Superman’s belief in “truth, justice and the American way” actually exists in tension with the values and behaviour of all contemporaneous politicians, Democrat or Republican.<sup>561</sup> What Lois’ line perhaps articulates is an attempt by the film to distance Superman’s values from all specific political ideologies.

Similarly, the film’s ties to religion are not necessarily evidence that it serves a political agenda correspondent to that of the American religious right. Indeed, as Larry Tye notes in his work, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America’s Most Enduring Hero*, “the movie was meant to have religious resonance [. . .] although the religion could as easily have been Muslim, Jewish or Christian.”<sup>562</sup> Thus, to align the religious imagery of the film with neoconservative ideological intent isolates one set of religious connotations from other significant associations. Superman was created by two Jewish men

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<sup>560</sup> Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 232.

<sup>561</sup> *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner. In a 1979 interview with *Cinefantastique* magazine, Richard Donner interprets Lois’ comments as reflective of his own growing cynicism towards politics. In this context, Superman’s version of “truth, justice, and the American Way” perhaps presents an idealistic alternative to the compromises, contingencies and perceived untrustworthiness associated with contemporaneous politicians and traditional political discourse. Don Shay, “Richard Donner on Superman: The Director of Steel Bends Producers in his Bare Hands,” *Cinefantastique*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1979, 12-17: 15.

<sup>562</sup> Tye, *Superman*, 204.

and the film appears to recognise this by presenting as many parallels between Superman and Moses as there are between him and Christ.<sup>563</sup> Such wide-ranging resonances confer upon Superman a higher purpose and a potentially broad appeal because, like Jesus, Moses, and other religious or mythic figures, his example can be framed as more profoundly idealistic and pertinent for all mankind than an attempt to forward a narrowly specific, politically or ideologically partisan agenda.<sup>564</sup>

If specifically Conservative or Christian readings cannot entirely account for the meaning of *Superman: The Movie*, the less narrow concept of myth, which has been specifically cited by the film's director, may.<sup>565</sup> Indeed, it is through an analysis of the term myth and an examination of how and why *Superman: The Movie*'s creators' understanding of the concept may have conditioned their approach to the film that the purpose for which the motion picture fostered the perception that it represents the true, "timeless," and "quintessential" interpretation of Superman can be further illuminated. In Michael David Petrou's *The Making of Superman: The Movie*, Richard Donner articulates his intention "to uphold and enhance" a "great American myth" or "legend."<sup>566</sup> He claims that "Both [creative consultant] Mankiewicz and I decided that we would treat the picture as reality . . . 'larger than life' but still reality."<sup>567</sup> He also points out that "the key to the whole concept of the film is verisimilitude" and that "we've treated it as truth. And the minute you are unfaithful to the truth . . . to the dignity of the legend . . . the minute you

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<sup>563</sup> Danny Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2007), 28; Petrou, *The Making of Superman: The Movie*, 144.

<sup>564</sup> This theory is supported by comments from creative consultant Tom Mankiewicz, who describes the representation of Krypton in *Superman: The Movie* as "almost semi-biblical." This indicates that the scenes on Superman's home world were intended to have religious and even Christian connotations and to be reminiscent of "God sending Christ to save humanity" but do not quite present a fully Christian, biblical allegory. "Taking Flight: The Development of Superman," *Superman: The Movie*, featurette, directed by Michael Thau (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

<sup>565</sup> Petrou, *The Making of Superman: The Movie*, 25.

<sup>566</sup> Petrou, *The Making of Superman: The Movie*, 53:25.

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

screw around with it or parody it and make it into a spoof, you destroy its innocence and honesty.”<sup>568</sup>

The notion of Superman as myth is reinforced several times in the discourse surrounding the release of the first three Superman films. In an interview with *Fantastic Films* magazine, Christopher Reeve makes reference to the differences between Richard Donner, director of *Superman: The Movie*, and Richard Lester, who directed its sequel, suggesting that “Richard Donner was more in love with the myth.”<sup>569</sup> However, the concept of Superman as a myth or legend is again raised by Richard Lester in an interview with *Starburst* magazine about *Superman III* where, in contradiction to Reeve’s comments, he stresses his intention to “remain faithful to the legend.”<sup>570</sup> It is also re-emphasised in the appropriately titled “Making Superman: Filming the Legend” by *Superman: The Movie*’s creative consultant Tom Mankiewicz who echoes Donner in his emphasis on “myth” and “truth” and in his description of Superman’s journey in the film in mythic terms — as an “odyssey.”<sup>571</sup>

Interestingly, the concept of myth, as it is articulated by the creative forces behind *Superman: The Movie* and its first two sequels, particularly Richard Donner, recalls Umberto Eco’s analysis in “The Myth of Superman.”

In his essay, Eco provides a useful definition of a myth, which I have outlined in my literature review but which bears repeating in the context of my current argument:

The traditional figure in religion was a character of human of divine origin, whose image had immutable characteristics and an irreversible destiny. It was possible that a story, as well as a

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<sup>568</sup> Ibid.

<sup>569</sup> Douglas Bakshian, “Superman Talks to America: An Interview with Christopher Reeve,” *Fantastic Films*, vol. 4, no. 2, November 1981, 48-53: 50.

<sup>570</sup> John Brosnan, “Directing Superman,” *Starburst: The Magazine of Television and Fantasy* #60, August 1983, 12-17: 17.

<sup>571</sup> “Making Superman: Filming the Legend,” *Superman: The Movie*, featurette, directed by Michael Thau (Burbank: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

number of traits backed up the character; but the story followed a line of development already established, and it filled in the character's features in a gradual but definitive manner.

In other words, a Greek statue could represent Hercules or a scene from Hercules' labors; in both cases, but more so in the latter, Hercules would be seen as someone who has a story, and this story would characterize his divine features. The story has taken place and can no longer be denied. Hercules has been made real through the development of temporal events. But once the development ended his image symbolized, along with the character, the story of his development, and it became the substance of the definitive record and judgments about him. Even the account greatly favored by antiquity was almost always the story of something which had already happened and of which the public was aware.<sup>572</sup>

As we have already seen in my literature review, for Eco, a myth is a particular, finite story, all the elements of which contribute to defining its central character's traits whilst, at the same time, outlining their "divine" symbolic significance, which seemingly has resonance beyond the individual character and story.

In the passage quoted above, where Donner claims to be "faithful" to the "truth" of a singular Superman "legend," which he sees as "a great American myth," the director appears to be trying to apply a similar conception of the mythical character to that espoused by Eco: as a hero who has one definitive story, which conveys upon him and his actions specific and limited meanings. If his claims that Superman and his story present a singular myth were true, however, the character would have one single story and not be such a versatile figure who even in his relatively early days was depicted in a number

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<sup>572</sup> Eco, "The Myth of Superman," 108-109.

of different representations which, in some cases, were only loosely related. Eco himself recognises that the term myth cannot be applied to Superman without some complication because of the ongoing nature of the character's narrative in the monthly comics.<sup>573</sup> In fact, if we take into account his diverse appearances in texts from media other than comics, the Superman brand as a whole resembles more a loosely interconnected intertextual matrix, of the kind identified by Brooker in his discussion of the connections between various Batman texts, than a specific, singular tale.<sup>574</sup> Consequently, we can see that Superman is quite different to the immutable figure found in the traditional myths Eco describes in his essay.

Donner's suggestion that he is trying to stay true to a single myth can thus be seen as more a rhetorical framing narrative, perhaps designed to protect the film against accusations of inauthenticity, than a sincere representation of the Truth. This is especially the case when we remember that the film's producers, the Salkinds, had, from the beginning, intended to produce numerous Superman stories in the form of sequels, and more so when we consider that despite apparent attempts to be true to the singular myth, the filmmakers were quite prepared to "go beyond the framework of the comics."<sup>575</sup> Indeed, the film makes many alterations to the comic book Superman, not least in changing Krypton from an exotic science fiction utopia reminiscent of Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon*, to a sterile, somewhat austere, crystalline wasteland, and in transforming Lex Luthor from a criminal scientist to what is essentially a property swindler.<sup>576</sup>

Following Eco's analysis, it could be said that the cinematic incarnation of Superman may, like successive comic book narratives, retain the same essential Superman story in structure and fundamental meaning, whilst presenting the illusion of change through cosmetic alterations to the

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<sup>573</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>574</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, 74.

<sup>575</sup> Petrou, *The Making of Superman: The Movie*, 63.

<sup>576</sup> Alex Ross, "The Flash Gordon Legacy," 8.

decorative elements that adorn the essential underlying narrative, such as the names of characters that nevertheless perform the same function as their predecessors from earlier stories. According to this theory, every new Superman story continues “hammering away” at the meanings that had already been conveyed by narratives of the past, whilst presenting the illusion of change.<sup>577</sup> Each new iteration of Superman is ultimately being faithful to the essential myth because, despite the illusion of variety, every successive narrative ultimately expresses the same story with only shallow, cosmetic variations to differentiate it from the last.

However, in this respect, Eco’s analysis has some limitations. His theory is a structuralist account and whilst he is adept at identifying the repetitious tropes present within supposedly “redundant” narratives like Superman comics, as well as how the expected appearance of these “topoi” at specific points in such texts condition how the reader understands and enjoys them, his focus on these elements leads him to overlook the significance of the unique features of individual stories.<sup>578</sup> Eco was, of course, only referring to the comics in his analysis, but if we are to apply his theory to *Superman: The Movie*, as Donner’s claims indicate we can, it is logical to assume that it should also be pertinent to every Superman story across all media. However, given the numerous, different, and varied interpretations of Superman, which range from romance to espionage, through comics, radio, and animation to television and cinema, it is actually possible to suggest that the reverse of this aspect of Eco’s analysis is true.<sup>579</sup> Rather than conveying a sense of false difference between narratives which all ultimately convey the same meaning, it is equally or perhaps more plausible that the repetition of “stock” characters and events lends a misleading sense of cohesion to a loosely interlinked group of stories, many of which have very different meanings. Consequently, it can be argued that the existence of these different

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<sup>577</sup> Eco, “The Myth of Superman,” 120.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid., 120: 119.

<sup>579</sup> Jerry Siegel and Al Plastino, “The Sweetheart Superman Forgot,” in *Superman in the Sixties*, ed. Dale Crain (New York, NY: DC Comics 1999 [1963]), 167-179; Tye, *Superman*, 89.

permutations could result in many contrasting understandings of Superman and a number of different interpretations of his “essence” which, depending on the perspective from which they are expressed, locate the centre of Superman’s meaning in different aspects of his character. Following these thoughts, it is possible to propose that no singular conception of Superman’s “essential” nature can account for the varied totality of his full significance.

As a result of my argument, we can see that if Donner’s film represents a single myth, it is perhaps not one that he has directly adopted from previous stories but one which he has himself constructed, because Superman had, even by the 1970s, featured in many stories across media and would not have presented the director with a single ready-made myth that he could simply adapt. The proposition that Donner’s claims to authenticity are more of a rhetorical device than a reflection of a sincere attempt to adapt a single, unified Superman myth is further supported by the possibility that the rendering of Superman as myth may have had much to do with the commercial prospects of a planned future film franchise.

A further clue to the film’s true intention may therefore be Alexander Salkind’s reported goal of establishing his Superman film series as the successor to the Bond franchise in terms of its longevity and commercial success, with the aim of possibly producing ten films.<sup>580</sup> A brief examination of the qualities of the Bond series may therefore help us to better understand Salkind and Donner’s intentions regarding Superman.

James Chapman has suggested that, despite some nods to the political climate of the Cold War, Bond’s universe was, at least in the early films, a fantasy world which featured “far-fetched plots, exotic foreign locations and colorful visual style,” as well as “science fiction trappings.”<sup>581</sup> Furthermore, as a result of supplanting the Soviet espionage agency SMERSH with the more

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<sup>580</sup> Scivally, *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway*, 78; Petrou, *The Making of Superman: The Movie*, 42.

<sup>581</sup> James Chapman, *Licence to Thrill: A Cultural History of the James Bond Films* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 59: 74: 52.

apolitical and traditionally criminal SPECTRE organisation as Bond's main antagonist, "the films were deliberately de-politicised and detached from the Cold War background of the novels."<sup>582</sup> It is possible that this intentional detachment from the specific socio-political context is an element of what has allowed Bond to be successful in film for decades because, if the cinematic incarnation of the fictional spy is never overbearingly topical, so long as set dressing keeps up-to-date with changing fashions, he will never become outdated as a result of his being too closely tied to the political realities or fashionable trends of any specific decade. Thus, whilst specific political and social topics will cease to be pertinent to audiences in later decades, Bond, whose filmic incarnation first appeared in the 1960s, continues to entertain audiences much later, because, at least up until the mid-to late 1970s, when *Superman: The Movie* was in production, his stories were not dependent upon any specific political climate for their currency.

If the Salkinds were looking to secure future Superman sequels with the success of their first film, to the extent that their series would come to rival the Bond franchise, it therefore makes sense for them to also distance their character from specific, topical social and political concerns so as to mitigate the risk of him being overtaken and made redundant by events. This interpretation of their ambition for Superman is supported by comments from Donner himself in an interview with *Fantastic Films* magazine.<sup>583</sup> Here, in response to James Delson and Patricia Morrisroe's questioning why he did not approach *Superman: The Movie* as a period piece, the director clearly affirms that "although we're not really dealing with contemporary issues, I didn't want to have anything that politically or sociologically significant in the film."<sup>584</sup>

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<sup>582</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>583</sup> James Delson and Patricia Morrisroe, "Interview with Richard Donner," *Fantastic Films*, vol. 2, no.2, June 1979, 8-17.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid., 12.



Rather than making Superman's story a clear allegory for that of Christ or Moses, the religious resonances of *Superman: The Movie* are thus a means of contextualising his choices and sacrifices in a manner that confers upon him similarly mythic and profound associations. It is perhaps to this end that the film implies Superman's positive role on Earth, and by implication his good moral character, are preordained by a manner of divine will. This is further emphasised by Jor-El's intention for his son to become a moral exemplar for the people of Earth to aspire towards, as illustrated by his words: "They can be a great people, Kal-El. They wish to be. They only lack the light to show them the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you, my only son."<sup>585</sup>

These associations imply that Superman is, as a result of his special status, objectively and inherently good and that his morality is divinely imparted and transcendent of the contingencies of normal cultural life. Interestingly, this notion exists in tension with the conceptions of his character offered by previous narratives. As we saw in Chapter Two, during the Second World War Superman's good reputation was depicted as an outgrowth of his particular patriotic devotion to the US state, its institutions and its wartime policies. Even though it is fair to say that some of the "Supermen of America" editorials mythologised America and its actions as manifestations of God's will and sought to associate Superman with the nation's mythic mission, the Man of Steel still needed to positively demonstrate his participation in the providential cause through specific patriotic acts and statements. Here, unlike in *Superman: The Movie*, Superman's moral stature stems not from his divinely imparted essence but from a reputation formed through his undertaking specific "good works." This is also the case in "Silver Age" comic book portrayals, such as "Superman's Hall of Trophies," in which the great explorer Stefan Andriessen donates a museum filled with "mementos" of "Superman's past deeds" to Metropolis in honour of the superhero and his

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<sup>585</sup> *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner.

adventures.<sup>586</sup> As indicated by the artefacts collected by Andriessen, the Man of Steel's social standing is here again imparted through particular, tangible acts of civic responsibility, not his innate divinity.

The reframing of the nature of Superman's moral character and underlying motivations in *Superman: The Movie* accords with the sentiment conveyed by Lois' earlier discussed comments regarding the behaviour of modern politicians being incompatible with the values associated with "the American way." As I have stated, her words disregard any ties between the film and partisan political agendas, which are themselves specific to their eras. By contrast to politicians, the film thus suggests that Superman's beliefs and morality are not contingent upon specific ideologies or forged by circumstance but are a manifestation of the guiding force of a "divine" influence. Similarly, rather than promoting political Conservatism, it is possible to suggest that the film's "nostalgia" and association of its lead with America's past also contribute to the expansion of Superman's apolitical mythic significance. As we shall see in my following discussion of *Superman: The Movie*'s endeavours to mythologise both its protagonist and America, the film's mythologising references to the United States' history are not, in fact, confined to the apparent 1950s setting of its Smallville scenes, even though they do play a significant role in the project.

Indeed, as mentioned at the beginning of my discussion of *Superman: The Movie*, the film's early sequences lead its audience through the 1930s, with a black and white opening shot of the Daily Planet, the 1940s with the discovery of baby Clark Kent, and the 1950s through his teenage years. The period dressing of these sequences — the 1940s wardrobe of Jonathan and Martha Kent when they discover Clark and the 1950s cars in the background of Clark's teenage years in Smallville — work together to convey the sense of time progressing as Clark ages, linking the future Superman's development to the

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<sup>586</sup> William Woolfolk and Wayne Boring, "Superman's Hall of Trophies," *Action Comics* #164, January 1952, 2-13: 2.

progress of American history.<sup>587</sup> However, the fact that the evocation of this past is conveyed through brief scenes that are contextualised largely through period dressing and not through any reference to the social and political climate of the times is significant. In fact, the closest the film comes to reproducing the socio-political context of the decades it depicts is through Lois' single disparaging line about contemporaneous politicians, which obliquely hints at the political "skepticism" of the 1970s, but only does so to distance the film's protagonist from the politics of that decade. Rather than being illustrative of Superman's political leanings, the sequences that recall America's past are thus designed to depoliticise that history by emptying it of its political specificity in order to replace such contextualising detail with a more general abstract idea of those periods based on paraphernalia such as cars and clothing. Consequently, we can see that what is more important to the film than the alignment of Superman to a specific era of America's past and an associated political ideology is the connection of the character to the "divine," mythic narrative of American history itself by showing him grow and age with his nation.

So, given the broad and somewhat vague mythic connotations of the film and its hero, it is worth considering what values Superman's claim to stand for "truth, justice, and the American way" actually refers to. In doing this, we answer my third question and discover for what purpose *Superman: The Movie* established its interpretation of Superman as the "timeless," essential version of the character. Considering what I have already discussed regarding *Superman: The Movie's* attempt to mythologise itself as a mythic narrative about the United States' history, it is possible to suggest that the meaning of Superman's belief in "truth, justice and the American way" is actually self-reflexive. Given that the film attempts to represent its narrative as both a story about Superman and the United States, mythologising the Man of Steel and the country simultaneously, it seems that Superman and his actions are

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<sup>587</sup> Petrou, *The Making of Superman: The Movie*, 137.

synonymous with the “American way” and all of his good deeds and religious associations are a reflection of that national ideal, conferring upon the nation his own mythically divine status. Concurrently, associating Superman’s story with the national narrative contributes to the perception that the character has a symbolic significance that extends beyond the specific, literal events of the film’s plot and which communicates something about America’s national identity. As a result, to paraphrase Jor-El himself in *Superman: The Movie*, Superman becomes America, and America, Superman.<sup>588</sup>

The political significance of this is likely less than it seems. As stated, Superman’s political and religious values are not specified and his actions within the film are largely confined to rescuing people and stopping Luthor’s intent to sink areas of the United States into the sea. If we consider my earlier argument that the Salkinds may not have wanted to impart *Superman: The Movie* with details that could risk locking the character into too specific a political context, then it is possible to suggest that the significance of the film’s converging of Superman’s story with the national narrative lies not in the particular message that it conveys about America but in the fact that it appears to convey such a message. The film leaves itself open for its audience to interpret its meaning by inflecting its generalities with their own ideological preconceptions and political leanings. Thus, for *Superman: The Movie*, it is perhaps not the meaning of the myth that is important but the prestige obtained by conferring a sense of mythic status upon its central character and in turn, itself, as the story of the Man of Steel’s development and the means through which his transcendent features and broader symbolic resonance are illustrated.

With these thoughts in mind, we can now answer my third question regarding for what purpose *Superman: The Movie*’s reputation, as the definitive portrayal of the Superman myth which captures the character’s true essence, was cultivated and encouraged. All of the film’s mythic aspects, religious and

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<sup>588</sup> *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner.

historic, can be seen as the result of an intentional drive by *Superman: The Movie*'s creators to surround the film and its protagonist with an aura of transcendence, suggestive of their significance beyond specific contexts and ideologies. Just as Superman's innate goodness does not seem to age with the passage of time, as ideological worldviews and concepts of social justice fall from fashion, a story about an innately good hero that is also a story about the United States itself will have resonance with all its citizens in any decade and even populations across the globe, so long as the nation retains its power and influence. As far Alexander Salkind's intentions are concerned, this could have led to Superman having a sustained and sustainable long term commercial appeal, which, at least in theory, may have resulted in a film franchise that spanned decades.

The following section of this chapter answers my fourth question by suggesting that it is as a consequence of the 1978 film's mythologising of both Superman as a transcendent being, and itself as the singular definitive, essential portrayal of his story, that it has become and remained prominent in critical discussions of the character, particularly in discourses surrounding his cinematic incarnations. However, in order to do this, it is first necessary to gain a greater understanding of myth and its characteristics. To this end, it is worth considering Roland Barthes' writings on myth, which can, in some respects, be seen as compatible with Eco's conception of the term.<sup>589</sup> Barthes argues that "the very principle of myth" is to transform "history into nature."<sup>590</sup> He utilises the semiological theory that the relationship between the two elements of a sign, the "signifier," a sound or specific utterance, and the "signified," the "conceptual component" evoked by the signifier, is arbitrary, taking the relationship a step further.<sup>591</sup> Barthes defines myth as "*a second-order semiological system* [emphasis in the original]" in which "that which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the

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<sup>589</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage Classics, 2000 [1972]).

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>591</sup> John Sturrock, introduction to *Structuralism and Since: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida*, ed. John Sturrock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 1-18: 6.

first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second.”<sup>592</sup> As John Sturrock notes, Barthes’ understanding of myth, in effect, rests on a distinction between denotation, the “literal meaning” of a text, and its connotation or its “mythical meaning,” the further associations that the text’s literal meaning provokes.<sup>593</sup> Myth is, for Barthes, what happens when the connotation of a text displaces its literal meaning. He believes that this happens when a sign is contextualised in such a way as to make its connotative meaning more immediately obvious than its literal counterpart and that this is a consequence of ideological intent.

According to Barthes, “Myth has an imperative, buttonholing character: stemming from an historical concept, directly springing from contingency (a Latin Class, a threatened Empire), it is / whom it has come to seek.”<sup>594</sup> He further explains that “this interpellent speech is at the same time a frozen speech: at the moment of reaching out to me, it suspends itself, it stiffens, it makes itself look neutral and innocent. The appropriation of the concept is once more driven away by the literalness of the meaning.”<sup>595</sup> As Barthes’ analysis implies, the meaning of a myth is conditioned by its purpose, its intended audience, and the context of its utterance. For the “correct” recipient in the “appropriate” context, a myth will have the appearance of being a “frozen,” self-evident and natural statement of the facts rather than the persuasive rhetorical construct it truly is. This is simply because it orients itself so successfully towards the presumptions and ideological preconceptions of those it is trying to reach that the connotations it prompts seem obvious to the point of appearing literal. Thus, for Barthes, myth-making amounts to rhetorically framing signs in contexts in which their literal meaning appears to articulate what is in fact a connotative, mythological insinuation on the part of the reader. If Eco’s analysis illustrates that a myth is

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<sup>592</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 114.

<sup>593</sup> John Sturrock, “Roland Barthes,” in *Structuralism and Since: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida*, ed. John Sturrock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 52-80: 62-63.

<sup>594</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 124.

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

a narrative which imparts its story and its characters with greater symbolic significance than a simply literal reading would allow, Barthes' argument indicates that, in a myth, symbolic meaning is given privilege over the literal story, to the extent that it masquerades as and displaces the literal. This is what has happened to *Superman: The Movie*.

In framing *Superman: The Movie* as "a great American myth" within a discursive context of "truthfulness," Donner and Salkind are seemingly intending to mythologise their film in a Barthesian sense by depoliticising and naturalising it. The film distances itself from the historical moment of its production in order to maximise its future franchise appeal and to present itself as a truthful embodiment of the "essence" of a "great American myth," whose significance transcends any specific political or social context. Thus, depoliticised and masking its artificiality, it seems that *Superman: The Movie* appears, even to critics in 2013, as the epitome of the "timeless" superhero film. As a consequence, the seemingly apolitical nature of its protagonist, who appears to represent fundamentally idealistic moral principles, is crystallised as the "definitive" and "quintessential" portrait of Superman, in a manner that makes the truthfulness of the representation seem self-evident. Given that the film, produced on a budget of \$55,000,000, earned \$134,218,000 at the US box office, \$50,000,000 elsewhere, and was therefore popular enough to secure itself a legacy of four sequels and a reputation for "timelessness," the Salkinds and Donner appear to have had at least some success in their persuasive endeavour to mythologise their film and its incarnation of Superman.<sup>596</sup>

*Superman: The Movie's* success in establishing itself as the true depiction of the "definitive" Superman myth provides a partial answer to my fourth question concerning why the idea that there is an essential version of the character has become and remained dominant in some critical discourses

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<sup>596</sup> "Superman," *Box Office Mojo*, last updated August 29, 2014, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=superman.htm>; Scivally, *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway*, 90.

surrounding the Man of Steel's films. Indeed, one consequence of the Sakinds' and Donner's success at popularising the notion that their version of the character represents the Truth of the Superman myth is that the idea that there is an essential version of the Man of Steel who is objectively, innately, divinely and transcendently good has dominated discussions of the superhero, at least throughout the strand of critical interpretation that sees him as naturally incompatible with socio-political topics, since the release of the 1978 film. As a consequence, *Superman: The Movie* has provided the many critics who accept the truthfulness of the film's portrayal of Superman with a useful yardstick against which they might measure and evaluate subsequent incarnations of the character.

If *Superman: The Movie* does not represent the true, "quintessential" or "definitive" rendering of the character but only the manufactured appearance of it, then Michael Billig's theories concerning the precariousness of dominant ideological positions can help us to see how the 1978 film's rendering of the Man of Steel can be called into question. According to Billig, in an argumentative discourse, when the veracity of an account is brought into question, there can be "no absolute refutation" of the point of view that challenges its position "because every 'anti-logos' can become a 'logos' to be opposed by a further 'anti-logos.'" <sup>597</sup> Therefore, even a position that at one point enjoys "the privileged status of being unquestioned common sense" can be forced to "take its place in the rhetorical battles of different philosophical perspectives" if an opposing point of view questions its legitimacy and forces it to justify its own status as Truth. <sup>598</sup> In other words, no dominant interpretation of a situation or state of affairs can ever conclusively defeat an argumentative challenge to its primacy because, in the very act of challenging it, the opposing worldview has brought its status as natural into question, causing a shift in understanding that cannot be revoked.

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<sup>597</sup> Billig, *Arguing and Thinking*, 76: 250.

<sup>598</sup> Ibid.



Considering this, the primacy of Donner's Superman within the prominent strains of critical thought outlined above as well as the associated idea that there exists a "definitive" interpretation of the character did not have to remain intact throughout the past three and a half decades to the present day. In fact, the 2013 reboot, *Man of Steel*, seems designed as a challenge to *Superman: The Movie*'s status among many critics as the dominant cinematic version of the character, which is suggestive of the fact that such interventions are indeed possible. Given that *Superman: The Movie* has retained its privileged position within critical discourses for so long when it could, in theory, have been supplanted, we must consider whether subsequent Superman texts have sought and managed to propagate rather than contest this state of affairs. To this end, the following passages track the development of the "mythic Superman" concept through *Superman: The Movie*'s sequels and examine its relationship with the Superman comics and television series of the past few decades. In discussing the latter, we discover an answer to my fourth question.

The Superman texts that the 1978 film most obviously influenced are its three sequels, all of which recirculated the interpretation of the character introduced by the first of the series in some way. In fact, *Superman II* arguably reaffirms the character's mythic status, continuing the project of the first film.

As has already been suggested, according Christopher Reeve, Richard Lester, who is credited as the second film's director, brought a different approach to the material. In contrast to Donner, "Lester's approach [. . .] was more quickly paced, more cynical in some respects, wittier and more into the action and adventure of the legend."<sup>599</sup> Lester concurs in his interview with *Starburst* magazine promoting *Superman III*, admitting to differences between the 1978

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<sup>599</sup> Bakshian, "Superman Talks to America: An Interview with Christopher Reeve," 50.

film and *Superman II*: “The *tempo* of the editing and the removal of excess was as much the reason for the difference as the writing.”<sup>600</sup>

However, despite a number of changes introduced to Donner’s original intent by Lester, including added scenes, the second film in the Salkind’s Superman series arguably remains true to the project established by the original.<sup>601</sup> This point was stressed by Lester in his interview with *Starburst*. Here, in reference to the restrictions that were placed upon him by *Superman II*’s status as the second part of the original 1978 film, Lester affirms the continuity between Superman movies emphasizing his role in forwarding the legend: “there’s no point in making a unique and personalised film as part of the Superman series, you have to remain faithful to the legend, to its generic roots.”<sup>602</sup> Therefore, whilst Lester’s style differs to Donner’s approach, he seems similarly committed to continuing the original theme of Superman as a myth or legend, at least as far as the second film in the Superman series is concerned. Furthermore, given that, as Lester himself acknowledged, elements of the second film had been “forced upon” him by its previous director — who had shot much of its footage during the making of the first — “there were things” he “just couldn’t change” and he may have struggled to alter the overall intent of the project even if he had wanted to.<sup>603</sup>

In *Superman II*, Superman’s struggle with Zod, whose motivation seems simply to accumulate power to satisfy his own despotic urges, is also a battle between the abstract ideals of freedom and despotism.<sup>604</sup> Indeed, the Zod of *Superman II* is the personification of naturalised tyranny. Although he swears vengeance against Jor-El and his “heirs” at the beginning of the first film, he conquers Earth as soon as he arrives on the planet in the second movie, before he has any idea that Superman resides there. Zod provides no

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<sup>600</sup> Brosnan, “Directing Superman,” 16.

<sup>601</sup> Ibid.

<sup>602</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>603</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>604</sup> *Superman II*, directed by Richard Lester (1980; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

philosophical or rational underpinning for his own actions and is, it seems, naturally and inherently tyrannical.

As the primary opponent of Zod's takeover, Superman slips comfortably into the other side of the binary opposition and inhabits the role of defender of freedom. Just as Zod does not voice his reasons for attacking Earth, Superman, as per the tradition established by *Superman: The Movie*, never clearly articulates an opposing ideological worldview. It seems that his stand against Zod emanates from an agenda that the audience is meant to assume is "self-evident," and which stems from Superman's essential, natural characteristics and the somewhat vague ideals of which he is himself symbolic. Once again, just as in the 1978 original, the film's events, as well as Superman's own character, are entwined with the national narrative. If it is Zod who attacks the White House, causing the American flag to fall from its roof, it is Superman who restores it. The film thus explicitly associates its hero with the symbol of the nation, implying that Superman's values of freedom are also those of the United States and vice versa. However, because the concept of "freedom," as the film associates it with Superman and the United States, emanates seemingly naturally from the forces of objective good in opposition to the self-evidently objectively and naturally bad qualities of Zod's totalitarianism, it is never rationalised or justified and therefore appears as an undefined abstract value. *Superman II*, therefore, again naturalises and depoliticises its ideological concepts by divesting them of specifics and cultural contingency, so that they appear as seemingly universal values, pertinent to no specific party, group or faction. The second film thus continues to perpetuate the notion that Superman's values are natural, self-evident, and apolitical.

As mentioned above, Lester appears committed to the idea of Superman as myth when discussing his involment with the second and third instalments of the film franchise. However, in his interview with *Starburst*, he appears to

make a greater commitment to a kind of Relevance and to turning away from some of the fanciful levities of the previous films:

I mean, nobody cared about how Lois Lane, a working reporter, paid for her penthouse apartment in Part 1 whereas 3 starts in this mid-town American unemployment office situated in an obviously depressed state. I wanted to start small and go back to Middle America — to Smallville itself, Superman's hometown. So I think 3 has a bigger element of reality than the others.<sup>605</sup>

Despite his affirmation that he is continuing and is, to an extent restrained by the Superman "legend," Lester's aspiration for *Superman III* — a film to contextualise Superman and to bring him back down to earth — appears to contrast with Donner's approach which, as we have seen, distanced Superman from social topics and political themes.

*Superman III* does indeed open in an unemployment office and at times presents a more down-to-earth, even domestic, narrative that focusses on Clark Kent's courtship of his high school love interest Lana Lang.<sup>606</sup> It's seeming preoccupation with computers may even, at first glance, appear to communicate something about the role of technology in society. However, whilst the focus on Clark Kent's home town and his relationship with Lana Lang is illustrative of Lester's intention to "start small," the film is less successful at introducing social problem narratives into the Superman film series. When — at the beginning of the film — Gus Gorman enters the unemployment office after struggling to find a job and is informed that he is "no longer eligible" for state welfare, it is clear that Gorman's employment problems stem from his own ineptitude and laziness, and the film makes no mention of the possibility that his unemployability may be a consequence of

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<sup>605</sup> Brosnan, "Directing Superman," 17.

<sup>606</sup> *Superman III*, directed by Richard Lester (1983; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

flaws within the social system itself.<sup>607</sup> It is equally unclear that Gorman is situated in a “depressed state” and the film makes no references to this possibility. Rather, Gorman’s situation is characterised humorously and adds to the comic irony that he turns out to be a computer genius once he is in Webster’s employ.<sup>608</sup> Similarly, Webster and Gorman’s manipulation of computer technology to forward their schemes — resulting in a satellite designed to monitor the weather being used to control it — is more in the tradition of comic science fantasy than social commentary. Why the tone of *Superman III* appears to differ so markedly from its director’s stated intent is unclear. However, Ilya Salkind’s assertion that “we’re not really being more realistic” and Pierre Spengler’s affirmation that *Superman III* is “not a computer movie” in an article for *Starlog* magazine, suggest that the film’s producers did not share Lester’s desire to introduce “reality” into Superman’s cinematic world.<sup>609</sup> It may be as a result of a compromise between the visions of Lester and the Superman film series’ producers that, if *Superman III* does not feel quite as grandly mythic as its predecessors, neither does it present itself as a wholesale challenge to the concept of Superman as a mythic character whose symbolic adventures are detached from everyday social and political realities. In fact, given its continued emphasis on humour and science fantasy, it is probably more accurate to view *Superman III* as more a continuation of the detached, mythic aesthetic of the previous films than a departure from it.

However, despite the slight shift in focus and the fact that it does little to extend the myth established by *Superman: The Movie*, it does not seek to mount a significant challenge to it as it refrains from connecting Superman to any specific political or social concern. The fourth film in the series is more problematic. In some respects, *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* can be seen

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<sup>607</sup> *Superman III*, Directed by Richard Lester.

<sup>608</sup> *Superman III*, directed by Richard Lester.

<sup>609</sup> Robert Greenberger, “*Superman III*,” *Starlog* #67, February 1983, 36-39: 65: 36.

as a betrayal of the principles of the first film.<sup>610</sup> Whereas *Superman: The Movie* and its immediate sequel try to perpetuate an air of mythic abstraction, intentionally distancing Superman from relevant social and political concerns in favour of a vaguer idealistic focus, *Superman IV* can be read as an attempt to “throw away the handbook” concerning past portrayals of Superman and an argument for making Superman more relevant in the specifically political sense.<sup>611</sup>

Christopher Reeve, who reportedly had more control over the fourth film’s subject matter than he did over its predecessors’, developed its theme of nuclear disarmament.<sup>612</sup> The new seriousness of tone appears to have been an attempt by Reeve to “take responsibility” for the character and perhaps provide him with a more specific moral purpose than the rather vague levities of previous films.<sup>613</sup>

However, whilst it presents a challenge to the abstraction of the first two films of the series, *Superman IV* does not do so particularly overtly. Rather, it clothes its attempt to shift the character’s focus in the tone established by the original, repeating as it does several key moments from earlier films, like Superman’s flight with Lois from *Superman: The Movie* and his erasing of her memory with a kiss, as first depicted in *Superman II*.

Here we can see a rhetorical strategy familiar to the way in which, as I discuss in Chapter Three, inhabitants of post-Enlightenment societies frame disruptions to the established framework of knowledge as consistent with the old as a means of protecting and maintaining the rationalised principles of the existing social order, whilst the framework of the “known” is in fact being altered to incorporate the new information. According to this theory, if the

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<sup>610</sup> *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*, directed by Sidney J. Furie (1987; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2001), DVD.

<sup>611</sup> “*Superman IV*,” *Starburst*, vol. 9, no. 12, June 1987, 8-16: 8.

<sup>612</sup> Scivally, *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway*, 103; “*Superman IV*,” *Starburst*, vol. 9, no. 12, June 1987, 10.

<sup>613</sup> Lawrence Van Gelder, “At the Movies,” *New York Times*, July 4, 1986, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/07/04/movies/at-the-movies.html>.

new information appears inconsistent or irreconcilable with what is already “known,” a “reality disjuncture” takes place, which either leads to the questioning of the existing principles or the throwing out of the new knowledge as incorrect.<sup>614</sup> Thus, *Superman IV* tries to protect itself from rejection by paying homage to the original film, making clear to its audience that it is the same interpretation of Superman that they are familiar with, whilst reorienting the character towards more specifically relevant political and social issues.

Nevertheless, by studying some critical reactions from the time, it is possible to suggest that *Superman IV* was not successful in its persuasive endeavour. The *Washington Post*’s Desson Howe noticed the “unabashed nuclear disarmament message” but heavily criticised the film, suggesting that “nuclear winter seems more appealing than the prospect of *Superman V*.”<sup>615</sup> *Variety* also identified the new political Relevance, remarking that the “opening sequence shows Superman has picked up the spirit of glasnost as he flies into space to rescue an imperiled cosmonaut and utters his first lines of the picture in Russian,” and subsequently criticised the film for its lack of “agreeable humor.”<sup>616</sup> Despite the attempts of its creators to frame *Superman IV* in the tradition and aesthetic of the original film, to audiences familiar with the more abstract idealism associated with *Superman: The Movie*, the overtly and specifically political nature of the fourth instalment of the series may nevertheless have been viewed as a significant break from the past. Indeed, *Superman IV* is certainly didactic in its approach, with the theme of nuclear disarmament at the centre of the plot. Here, Superman is less a mythic signifier of universal ideals than the proponent of a specific political ideology and agenda, which may have alienated those who enjoyed the

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<sup>614</sup> Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, 111.

<sup>615</sup> Desson Howe, review of *Superman IV*, Warner Bros., *Washington Post*, July 31, 1987, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/supermanivthequestforpeacepghowe\\_a0c8a7.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/supermanivthequestforpeacepghowe_a0c8a7.htm).

<sup>616</sup> *Variety* Staff, review of *Superman IV*, Warner Bros., *Variety*, December 31, 1986, <http://variety.com/1986/film/reviews/superman-iv-the-quest-for-peace-1200427105/>.

“escapist” abstraction of the previous three films as well as those who simply did not agree with Superman’s stance on nuclear disarmament.

Whether or not *Superman IV* would have been a greater success if it had avoided political themes cannot be said with absolute certainty. Critics identified other flaws in the film, specifically its poor special effects, which would likely have harmed its reception anyway.<sup>617</sup> Indeed, if we remember Martin Barker and Kate Brooks’ finding in *Knowing Audiences — Judge Dredd*, that some viewers attend a film simply to see the special effects, we can speculate that the consequences of *Superman IV*’s comparatively low budget of \$17,000,000 may have alienated a significant section of the blockbuster audience.<sup>618</sup>

That said, after *Superman IV* did poorly at the box office, Reeve himself concluded that it was a “big mistake” to have Superman engage in overt social Relevance.<sup>619</sup> Poor special effects notwithstanding, it seems likely that the critical and commercial failure of Superman’s first relevant film since, arguably, *Superman and the Mole Men* would have persuaded more people that Superman was antithetical to films featuring explicit political themes than otherwise.<sup>620</sup> The fact that *Superman: The Movie*’s “timeless” reputation endured the critical and commercial failure of the fourth instalment of the series that it established means that it is possible to speculate that *Superman IV* may have damaged Superman’s credentials as a socially relevant character more than it did his status as a myth.

The Superman film franchise was not the only series of texts which perpetuated the myth established by *Superman: The Movie* and which contributed to perceptions concerning the character’s lack of Relevance, as

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<sup>617</sup> Janet Maslin, review of *Superman IV*, Warner Bros., *New York Times*, July 25, 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/07/25/movies/movie-superman-iv-quest-for-peace.html>.

<sup>618</sup> Barker and Brooks, *Knowing Audiences*, 140; “*Superman IV*,” *Box Office Mojo*, last updated August 29, 2014, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=superman4.htm>.

<sup>619</sup> Christopher Reeve, *Still Me* (London: Arrow Books, 1999), 225.

<sup>620</sup> *Superman and the Mole Men*, directed by Lee Sholem (Los Angeles, CA: Lippert Pictures, Inc., 1951).



well as the notion that he should avoid any association with social and political concerns. The television series also contributed to the idea and, because the part played by them in recirculating the Superman myth is linked to the artistic direction of the comics of the 1970s and 1980s, I discuss these different media texts in turn, starting with a brief overview of trends in the comics.

Some aspects of the comics of the late 1970s and early 1980s featured tangential connections to the films. For example, Lois' hairstyle was redrawn to make her look more like Margot Kidder (Figures 13 and 14) and the romantic emphasis of the stories shifted from Lois to Lana close to the release of *Superman III*, which featured the latter more prominently than the former.<sup>621</sup> However, under Schwartz's tenure, from 1970 to 1986, there were no efforts to rework Krypton to conform to its representation in the films and, in another significant deviation, Clark Kent continued to work for Morgan Edge at the WGBS television station. In fact, despite the heavy emphasis placed on the romance between Superman and Lois in *Superman II*, even the increased focus that the comics placed on relationships from the mid-1970s has potentially more to do with comic book trends than the influence of the films.

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<sup>621</sup> Marv Wolfman and Curt Swan, "Endings," *Action Comics* #556, June 1984, 2-23: 6.



Figure 13. In the early to mid 1980s, Lois' hair was redrawn to give her a fringe similar to the style worn by Margot Kidder in *Superman: The Movie* (see Figure 14 below). Marv Wolfman and Curt Swan, "Endings," *Action Comics* #556, June 1984, 2-23: 6.



Figure 14. Margot Kidder as Lois Lane in *Superman: The Movie*. Her appearance in the film had some influence on comic book depictions of the character (see Figure 13 above). *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner.

Given the disparity between Superman stories in comics of the 1970s and 1980s and their counterparts in film, it is likely that the comics' increasing focus on romantic subplots, which often developed over several issues, as well as Superman's growing supporting cast, were as much a response to the success of Marvel Comics as they were to the Man of Steel's cinematic portrayals. Indeed throughout the 1960s, Marvel Comics focussed heavily upon superhero characters' relationships and their troubled interactions with wider society, as epitomised by the early Spider-Man's misunderstandings with the journalistic establishment, and their aesthetic was successful enough to enable them to overtake DC Comics' share of the market by the early 1970s.<sup>622</sup> Of course, interpersonal relationships had been a feature of the *Lois Lane* and *Jimmy Olsen* comic book lines during the 1950s but the increasing prominence of such topics in Superman's main titles, *Action Comics* and *Superman*, during the 1970s and 1980s marks a noticeable shift in the emphasis of the Man of Steel's core narratives.

The new approach appears to have been popular with Superman readers at the time, with letters to the editor suggesting that they were enthused by the direction, often featuring speculation about the possibilities for characters' future relationships. In *Superman* #314, for example, Mike White comments at the end of his letter,

I saved my favourite subject for last: Clark and Lois' relationship. You're probably going to get a lot of angry letters protesting sending Lois to Central City. Well, this isn't one of them. I think this break-up may be the best thing for both. It may make Clark realize how much he needs Lois, even to the extent that he would consider revealing his dual identity to

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<sup>622</sup> Stan Lee, Steve Ditko, and Johnny Dee, "Spider-Man: Freak! Public Menace!," in *Marvel Masterworks: The Amazing Spider-Man*, ed. Cory Sedlmeier (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2009 [1963]), 13-27: 18; Stan Lee, Steve Ditko, and John Duffi, "Spider-Man Versus the Chameleon," in *Marvel Masterworks: The Amazing Spider-Man*, ed. Cory Sedlmeier (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2009 [1963]), 28-38, 34; Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 169.

her. And Lois might begin to know how much Superman there is in Clark and vice versa.

Some friends think I'm crazy when I talk about comic characters as if they're real. In a sense they are! There's a little bit of Clark, Lois, and even Steve Lombard in each of us.<sup>623</sup>

There are many letters in successive issues in the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s, which illustrate the audience's interest in Superman's romantic life.<sup>624</sup> However, the above cited letter is particularly useful as an illustration of the way in which, following the relative failure of the social Relevance trend of the early 1970s, which arguably petered out in 1973 at the latest, Superman's creators tried to engage the character in a different kind of Relevance.<sup>625</sup> As I discuss in Chapter Three, the meaning of Relevance need not necessarily be confined to explicit social and political topics and the term can be seen as pertinent to texts which engage with the underlying logics or Common Sense according to which we rationalise our understanding of the world. What Mike White understands in his evaluation of the comics' handling of Lois and Clark's relationship is that the events taking place within Superman's fictional world are influenced by the logics that underpin Real Life. We can gain a better understanding of this proposition through a discussion of ideas concerning soap opera.

Writing about British soaps in particular, Dorothy Hobson suggests that the core of the soap opera genre is in the presentation of its characters as realistic individuals. She states that soap opera characters

have a verisimilitude which defines them as being "true to life" for the audience. Like Forster's "round" characters, they create

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<sup>623</sup> Mike White, letter to the editor, "Metropolis Mailbag," *Superman* #314, August 1977, 18.

<sup>624</sup> William Nut, letter to the editor, "Metropolis Mailbag," *Superman* #323, May 1978, 18; Philip M. Botwinick, letter to the editor, "Superman in Action," *Action Comics* #486, August 1978, 19; Jay Dickson, letter to the editor, "Metropolis Mailbag," *Superman* #337, July 1979, 18-19: 18.

<sup>625</sup> Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 151.

the impression that they could live and breathe and operate outside their fictional form and could be transferred to other situations and still retain their credibility.<sup>626</sup>

Although Hobson's comments mainly refer to British television texts, they also chime with Ien Ang's discussion of "emotional realism" in her study of the American television series *Dallas*.<sup>627</sup> Here, Ang considers that, at the "denotative level," the programme can be deemed "unrealistic" because the events of the show do not correspond to the occurrences people generally encounter in reality. However, she argues that at the "connotative level" the responses of the series' characters to the events they experience are open to readings that construe them as akin to the emotions of "real people" coping with the ups and downs of life.<sup>628</sup>

Considering Ang's theory, we can see that "emotional realism" is not only found in the relatively naturalistic story-worlds present in British soap operas but is also noticeable in the arguably more farfetched diegesis of *Dallas*, where characters behave "realistically" in the face of "unrealistic" events and, we can speculate, other types of texts featuring fanciful plots. In fact, given that, as my discussion of Ang has shown, characters that audiences perceive to be realistic can exist in apparently far-fetched fictional scenarios, I would argue that the protagonists of Superman comics from the mid- to late-1970s and 1980s can also be identified as "true to life," at least if their behaviour is evaluated according to the criteria of "emotional realism." As Mike White has identified, despite operating within a science fiction scenario, characters in 1970s Superman comics are designed to give the impression of having "well rounded personalities," to the extent that that their reactions to events seem natural enough to be illustrative of the type of actions and decisions undertaken by people in Real Life. Indeed, what White is doing with his analysis is applying knowledge of people's behaviour from the world outside

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<sup>626</sup> Dorothy Hobson, *Soap Opera* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2003), xiii.

<sup>627</sup> Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas*, trans. Della Couling (London: Routledge, 1982), 41.

<sup>628</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-46.

the comic book diegesis in a manner that allows him to make predictions about the likely future developments of Lois and Superman's relationship, and which seems to be relevant to the narrative because its characters behave like "real" people. Indeed, his assertion that "there's a little bit of Clark, Lois, and even Steve Lombard in each of us" implies that the behaviour of the comic book characters, naturalistic as it seems to be, is sufficiently "real" to convey lessons for Real Life relationships, even if it occurs in a fictional context that we would perhaps consider to be far from realistic in the traditional sense.

Given the shift in focus of the Superman comics in the 1970s and 1980s towards stories featuring ongoing relationships, it is unsurprising that John Byrne, the former penciller and co-plotter of Claremont's *X-Men* stories and writer of *Fantastic Four* for Marvel Comics, a company which specialised in such topics, was chosen to remodel Superman in 1986 alongside Marv Wolfman and Jerry Ordway.<sup>629</sup> As I discuss in Chapter Three, the new creative team produced stories that teased the possibility of a renewed drive towards Relevance, with Byrne introducing a dynamic between Superman and Batman which resembled the tensions that Dennis O'Neil had written into the relationship between the central characters of his *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series. However, although the relationship between Superman and Batman remained tense in Byrne's comics, whilst present, socially relevant issues as traditionally defined, and as they were featured in O'Neil and Adams' *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* stories, were not generally the central focus of the disputes between the Man of Steel and the Dark Knight, nor were they necessarily the most prominent aspect of Byrne's stories more broadly, which also tended to place a heavy emphasis on relationships and science fiction. Again, as mentioned in Chapter Three, Wolfman and Ordway made a more concerted effort to reintroduce traditional Relevance but this, as in Byrne's tales, was coupled with an increasing emphasis on the relationship subplots

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<sup>629</sup> Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 302: 250.

involving Cat and Lois.<sup>630</sup> Byrne, Wolfman, and Ordway also aided this focus by shifting the protagonist's true personality from Superman to Clark Kent and moving the latter's characterisation away from the "outrageous wimp" of earlier versions, towards a more assertive demeanor, which seemingly made it easier for them and, we can speculate, the reader, to focus on the interactions between the Man of Steel and his supporting cast at *The Daily Planet*.<sup>631</sup>

Interestingly, Byrne likened the approach to the revamp to the television series *Moonlighting* in an interview for the *New York Times*, in which the role of television in influencing people's taste was mentioned.<sup>632</sup> We can speculate, then, that the 1986 revamp had been produced with a possible television adaptation in mind, with the commercial appeal of the new take on Superman being tested in the comics first. Indeed, when *Lois & Clark* followed in 1993, the producers of the show were open about the influence of the comics. Bruce Scivally writes of series producer, Deborah Levine:

Her focus wasn't on doing a show about Superman, but about two people who worked at the *Daily Planet* who had a love/hate relationship and, oh yes, one of them came from Krypton. Following from that, instead of Superman creating the Clark Kent persona to disguise himself as a mild mannered reporter, Levine saw Kent as someone who really wanted more than anything else to be human, to have a family, to be a good writer. Co-producer Bryce Zabel said it was pretty clear they were influenced by the John Byrne revamp, although they tried to put their stamp on it.<sup>633</sup>

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<sup>630</sup> Wolfman, "Reinventing the Wheel," 6-7.

<sup>631</sup> Larry Rohter, "Reinventing Superman: He'll be Upwardly Mobile," *New York Times*, June 10, 1986, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/06/10/style/reinventing-superman-he-ll-be-upwardly-mobile.html>.

<sup>632</sup> Ibid.

<sup>633</sup> Scivally, *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway*, 121.

Here we can see the same “verisimilitude” of characterisation that Hobson has identified in British soap operas, as well as the “emotional realism” that Ang has associated with *Dallas*, which is also present in Schwartz’s comics. Arguably then, *Lois & Clark* positioned itself within the same framework of Relevance that had been developing in the comics for some time. However, the comics of the 1980s are not the show’s only influence. Despite Deborah Levine’s insistence that she was more interested in producing a show about relationships than “a new Superman series,” evidence from the episodes themselves suggest that *Lois & Clark* does draw inspiration from the Christopher Reeve films.<sup>634</sup> For example, episode #16, “Foundling,” features a holographic projection of a silver-haired Jor-El, clothed in a robe against the backdrop of a white crystalline planet, an image clearly intended to reference Marlon Brando’s portrayal in *Superman: The Movie*.<sup>635</sup> Similarly, in the episode “Strange Visitor (From Another Planet),” Lois’ lines regarding Superman, “what he can’t do, it doesn’t matter. It’s the idea of Superman. Someone to believe in. Someone to build a few hopes around,” evoke the abstract non-politics of the 1978 film by couching the character’s actions and motivations in terms of vague mythic idealism.<sup>636</sup> It appears that in *Lois & Clark*, as in the three Salkind produced films, Superman’s actions are motivated purely by his intrinsic, divine moral goodness, not by a specific political or social perspective.

The influence of the John Byrne comics on *Lois & Clark* means that there are differences between the thematic emphasis of the television show and the films, which Deborah Levine was keen to emphasise in her suggestion that the show “was about Clark and Clark was the character and he created this other person — Superman — so he could go and fight for good and truth and justice

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<sup>634</sup> “From Rivals to Romance: The Making of *Lois & Clark*,” *Lois & Clark*, season 1, featurette (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

<sup>635</sup> Deborah Levine, “Foundling,” *Lois & Clark*, season 1, episode 16, directed by Bill D’Elia, aired February 20, 1994 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

<sup>636</sup> Deborah Levine, “Strange Visitor (From Another Planet),” *Lois & Clark*, season 1, episode 2, directed by Randall Zisk, aired September 26, 1993 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD, quoted in Scivally, *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway*, 127-128.



and the American way.”<sup>637</sup> For instance, although *Superman II* focuses heavily on the romance between Lois and Clark, it arguably does so to illustrate the characteristics of the “Superman” identity. At the end of the film, Lois and Clark do not end up together and Superman realises that he has to sacrifice personal happiness in order fulfil his “divine,” transcendent calling as the Earth’s protector. Indeed, the film’s conclusion restores the previous status quo, with Superman dedicating his life to saving the world whilst trying to allay Lois’ suspicions about his secret identity. By contrast, in the first season at least, *Lois & Clark* sidelined the “Superman” persona, often relegating him to the final fifteen minutes of its episodes. In addition to this, the emphasis the series placed on Clark’s identity at the expense of screen-time dedicated to the Superman persona meant that, arguably, “Superman’s” abstract, alien distance and the sense of otherworldliness associated with him was enhanced by his very absence.

In *Lois & Clark*’s evocation — but side-lining of — the mythically idealistic Superman of the film series, we can begin to see a complete answer to the question of why the concept of a “definitive,” true Superman has become and remained dominant in prominent critical discourses since 1978. The answer is that because *Superman: The Movie* was successfully mythologised, in the Barthesian sense of being depoliticised and dehistoricised, with the result that its portrayal of Superman appeared to be the self-evidently true screen incarnation of the Man of Steel, it became seen as the natural foundational source for all subsequent adaptations. Consequently, even those texts which, like *Superman IV*, and, indeed, *Lois & Clark*, try to make changes to Donner’s interpretation of the character must legitimise themselves as faithful adaptations of the true Superman myth by citing the 1978 film as their progenitor. Thus, in its attempt to seek legitimacy, *Lois & Clark* also recirculated the mythic Superman of *Superman: The Movie* in a new way, demonstrating its continuing currency in new contexts and therefore

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<sup>637</sup> “From Rivals to Romance: The Making of *Lois & Clark*,” *Lois & Clark*, season 1.

furthering the impression that the filmic interpretation is the essential, foundational version of the character, even though the series also diverged from the movie in a number of important ways. This trend is continued by the show that can be seen as *Lois & Clark*'s successor, *Smallville*.

*Lois & Clark* and *Smallville* are television series from different genres. In "From Rivals to Romance: The Making of *Lois & Clark*," Deborah Levine has stated clearly that she considers the show she produced to be a "romantic comedy."<sup>638</sup> By contrast, *Smallville* takes itself more seriously and is probably most accurately located in the teen science fantasy drama genre, occupying a space on a generic spectrum between the naturalistic *Dawson's Creek* and the more fantastical, comedic, and self-aware *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. However, despite their generic differences, the fact that both *Smallville* and *Lois & Clark* focus on relationships means that their characterisation of Clark — particularly their emphasis on his human side — and their appeal to the "emotional realism" familiar to the soap opera genre is surprisingly similar.

This reading is in fact supported by Alfred Gough in a 2001 interview with *Kryptonsite*'s Craig Byrne, where *Smallville*'s co-producer sought to differentiate his show from *Lois & Clark*:

while *Lois & Clark* has a lot of fans and was a very popular show, we wanted to re-interpret Superman for today and make him more relatable. We've humanized him in a way you haven't seen before. We really wanted to get inside Clark's head and show that he's just as vulnerable as any ordinary teenager. This is a kid who's not only going through puberty but is also struggling with his emerging superpowers.<sup>639</sup>

However, Gough's suggestion that he "wanted to get inside Clark's head and show that he's just as vulnerable as any ordinary teenager" echoes Levine's

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<sup>638</sup> "From Rivals to Romance: The Making of *Lois & Clark*," *Lois & Clark*, season 1.

<sup>639</sup> Alfred Gough, interview by Craig Byrne, *Kryptonsite*, April 6, 2001, <http://www.kryptonsite.com/gough.htm>.

vision of Clark as a normal man, “someone who really wanted more than anything else to be human, to have a family, to be a good writer.” Where Gough’s approach differs from Levine’s is only in the degree of emphasis placed on Clark’s human side. If *Lois & Clark* placed heavy emphasis on the Clark Kent persona at the expense of Superman, *Smallville* goes further, getting rid of the “tights and flights” and explicitly making Clark the only persona.<sup>640</sup>

Indeed, in their commentary on *Smallville*’s pilot episode, producers Alfred Gough, Miles Millar, and director David Nutter explicitly emphasise their intention “not to do a show about a superhero but to do a young man who’s heroic and becomes that.”<sup>641</sup> It is an aspiration that is in tune with show’s status as a teen drama and it is clear that its producers see the “flights and tights” as a potentially alienating factor for their audience, suggesting that there is a “stigma” associated with the Superman identity, particularly the connotations evoked by the costume.<sup>642</sup> By contrast, the show’s creators sought to emphasise that “Clark is a teenager” who “has the teenager rebellion side of him” alongside unusual “powers.”<sup>643</sup> They also stress that “every now and then he’s going to use them for not so noble means” and that this aspect of the character makes him more “real,” “accessible,” and “relatable” to his intended teenage audience in a way that the traditional Superman in full tights and flights could never be.<sup>644</sup> Following this intent, the show has a strong focus upon relationships, with the on/off friendships and romances between Clark, Lex, Lana, Lois, and others forming its main “hook” for the audience. In fact, the various relationships and interactions between

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<sup>640</sup> Ian Gordon, “*Smallville*: Superhero Mythos and Intellectual Property Regimes,” in *The Smallville Chronicles: Critical Essays On the Television Series*, ed. Lincoln Geraghty (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2011), 89-108: 90.

<sup>641</sup> “Pilot Commentary by Executive Producers Alfred Gough & Miles Millar and David Nutter,” *Smallville*, season 1 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

<sup>642</sup> Ibid.

<sup>643</sup> Ibid.

<sup>644</sup> Ibid.

the central characters in *Smallville* are seemingly intentionally underdefined with the aim of increasing the show's appeal to its target audience.

In her essay "Televisual Transformations: Myth and Social Issues in *Smallville*," Karin Beeler notes how Clark's "self-sacrifice" in holding back his true feelings for Lana, who appears to love him by the end of season two, often resembles selfishness as much as heroism:

One of the key elements of a savior [*sic*] is that he is willing to sacrifice his own needs and even himself to help others. Clark appears to play the role of this kind of hero convincing himself that he does not reciprocate Lana's feelings for him in part because of his concern for her welfare. He tells Chloe that he worries about Lana's safety if he were to tell her about his true identity. Yet it is important to note that this "sacrifice" of Clark's is not painted without ambiguity. Depending on the perspective, his silence or secrecy surrounding his identity may be viewed as an ultimate form of selfishness or fear of commitment and not as a sign of concern for Lana's welfare.<sup>645</sup>

Lex, who starts the series as a close friend of Clark's, certainly comes to see the protagonist's motivations as selfish by season seven. In the episode "Fierce," in which Lex confronts Clark's newly arrived Kryptonian cousin about her powers, he hints that he knows Clark's secret, would have kept it, and would have protected him if he had only trusted him with the truth.<sup>646</sup> By his account, it was Clark's untrusting selfishness which caused their relationship to break down. At times, Lex certainly appears more willing to share his feelings with Clark, openly telling him in the season four episode "Devoted," "There's a darkness in me that I can't always control . . . I can feel creeping

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<sup>645</sup> Karin Beeler, "Televisual Transformations: Myth and Social Issues in *Smallville*," in *The Smallville Chronicles: Critical Essays On the Television Series*, ed. Lincoln Geraghty (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, Ltd., 2011), 25-44: 31-32.

<sup>646</sup> Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, "Fierce," *Smallville*, season 7, episode 3, directed by Whitney Ransick, aired October 11, 2007 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011), DVD.

over the corners. Your friendship keeps it at bay.”<sup>647</sup> According to Lex’s understanding, his good moral character is dependent upon Clark’s friendship. Therefore, as far as Lex is concerned, he is “devoted” to Clark and would never do anything to jeopardise their relationship because his own sanity is at stake. Lex’s interpretation allows us to consider the possibility that the decline of his friendship with Clark and his subsequent descent into evil is a direct consequence of Clark’s rejection of him, thus making Clark as much the villain as Lex, if not more so.

However, it is important to note that Lex’s apparent openness about his feelings towards Clark can also be seen as a cover for his own selfish hidden agendas. In *Smallville*’s early seasons, Lex has a secret room in his mansion which he uses to store artefacts from his friend’s adventures and to investigate the mysteries surrounding him. These underhand practices undermine Lex’s claim to honesty and trustworthiness, unsurprisingly damaging his friendship with Clark when he finds out what Lex has been doing in the season three episode “Covenant.”<sup>648</sup> In light of this evidence, it seems that Lex’s friendship with Clark has not prevented him from treading the dark path but simply provided an outlet for his Machiavellian inclinations, or, as Jes Battis has suggested, a means through which he can “mold [sic] Clark into a utilizable tool” for the furthering of his own designs.<sup>649</sup>

These competing narratives regarding the responsibility for Lex’s eventual downfall make a clear assignation of blame remarkably difficult. However, even this fog of moral subjectivity does not represent the limit of the ambiguity surrounding Clark and Lex’s relationship. Their sexuality is also

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<sup>647</sup> Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, “Devoted,” *Smallville*, season 4, episode 4, directed by David Carson, aired October 13, 2004 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011), DVD, quoted in Jes Battis, “The Kryptonite Closet: Silence and Queer Secrecy in *Smallville*,” *The Smallville Chronicles: Critical Essays On the Television Series*, ed. Lincoln Geraghty (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, Ltd., 2011), 45-61: 50.

<sup>648</sup> Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, “Covenant,” *Smallville*, season 3, episode 22, directed by Greg Beeman, aired May 19, 2004 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011), DVD.

<sup>649</sup> Jes Battis, “The Kryptonite Closet: Silence and Queer Secrecy in *Smallville*,” in *The Smallville Chronicles: Critical Essays On the Television Series*, ed. Lincoln Geraghty (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, Ltd., 2011), 53.

characterised by uncertainty. Indeed, as Battis has noted, the series seems keen to court speculation about the true nature of Clark and Lex's friendship.<sup>650</sup> This tendency is as prominent as it ever is in the season six episode "Crimson," in which Clark, under the influence of the inhibition unleashing powers of red kryptonite, disrupts Lex and Lana's engagement party and kidnaps the bride-to-be.<sup>651</sup> When Lex goes to rescue his fiancée, Clark tries to humiliate him by exposing some of the fallacies underpinning their relationship. Clark tells Lana she is a "competition" to Lex and that Lex has "always wanted everything I've ever had," thus suggesting that Lex is simply using Lana to draw himself closer to Clark.<sup>652</sup> However the fact that Clark is also using his and Lana's previous relationship to get at Lex is suggestive of the possibility that the two males' romantic attachments to Lana, as well as their battles for her affections, are simply proxies through which their own troubled relationship is played out. Of course, the narrative never explicitly endorses this reading but, as Battis understands, "The question, *are they or aren't they?* is ultimately not important. What is important is *Smallville's* willingness to render these two male characters as vulnerable, as well as its willingness to celebrate their close friendship without shutting down its erotic potential through masculine stereotyping."<sup>653</sup> Battis also points towards slash fanfiction featuring the two characters as an illustration of how the show's ambiguity has been seized upon by fans wishing to further explore their interpretations of the central characters' relationships.<sup>654</sup>

As Julie Stone Pitzer has also recognised, Warner Bros. has encouraged its audience to extend their interaction with the series beyond the act of viewing itself and to subject its plots and characters to speculation and discussion in

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<sup>650</sup> Jes Battis, "The Kryptonite Closet: Silence and Queer Secrecy in *Smallville*," 59.

<sup>651</sup> Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, "Crimson," *Smallville*, season 6, episode 13, directed by Glen Winter, aired February 1, 2007 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011), DVD.

<sup>652</sup> Ibid.

<sup>653</sup> Battis, "The Kryptonite Closet: Silence and Queer Secrecy in *Smallville*," 59.

<sup>654</sup> Ibid., 57.

online chatrooms hosted by the WB and CW television networks.<sup>655</sup>

Furthermore, fans have taken to creating online videos which pay homage to the relationships in the series.<sup>656</sup> The network also constructed a simulation of the *Smallville Torch* newspaper as well as an online tour of the town, further framing the show within a sense of verisimilitude and encouraging the perception that its characters and storylines exist in a universe that is not too distant from the “real world” inhabited by its audience.<sup>657</sup> All of this seems designed to take *Smallville* to new heights of Relevance for its intended audience of teenagers and young adults as they are encouraged to interact with the show “parasocially” and to see it not just as a fictional text but as part of their everyday lives.<sup>658</sup>

As we have seen, the very personal type of Relevance that *Smallville* cultivates through its focus upon the interconnected lives of its protagonists and the “emotional realism” that characterises their interactions is more indebted to the relationship oriented focus of the comics since the 1970s and *Lois & Clark* than the grandly mythic, abstract ideals of inherent goodness associated with Christopher Reeve’s Superman. The incarnation of Superman who appears in the first two Christopher Reeve films nevertheless provided considerable inspiration for *Smallville*. Indeed, whilst the show draws upon several Superman variations, from the John Byrne comics to *Lois & Clark* — through guest appearances by Dean Cain and Teri Hatcher in the episodes “Cure” and “Abandoned” respectively — its most significant influence, next to Byrne’s emphasis on Clark as the focus of Superman’s personality, is in fact

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<sup>655</sup> Julie Stone Pitzer, “Vids, Vlogs, and Blogs: The Participatory Culture of *Smallville*’s Digital Fan,” in *The Smallville Chronicles: Critical Essays On the Television Series*, ed. Lincoln Geraghty (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, Ltd, 2011), 109-128: 114.

<sup>656</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>657</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>658</sup> Stan Beeler, “From Comic Book to Bildungsroman: *Smallville*, Narrative, and the Education of a Young Hero,” in *The Smallville Chronicles: Critical Essays On the Television Series*, ed. Lincoln Geraghty (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, Ltd, 2011), 3-24: 9; Barker, *Comics: Power, Ideology and the Critics*, 60-61.

the Reeve film series.<sup>659</sup> The logo and colours of Smallville High are taken from Clark's high school reunion in *Superman III*, Annette O'Toole, who portrayed Lana Lang in the same film returns as Martha Kent, and *Superman II*'s Zod, Terence Stamp, is the voice of Jor-El in the Fortress of Solitude, the design of which is lifted straight from the 1978 movie.<sup>660</sup> In season two, Christopher Reeve makes a significant guest appearance in the episode "Rosetta," as does Margot Kidder in season four's "Crusade" and former Supergirl Helen Slater in the season seven episode "Blue."<sup>661</sup> In evoking the movies so clearly, these elements seem designed to recall the mythically abstract Superman of the Salkind films. Furthermore, it is possible that the presence of former participants in the Superman myth in the life of *Smallville*'s Clark Kent is designed to give the impression that the "current" generation's interpretation of the character is being schooled by the old until he is at last ready to assume his role as the true Superman in season ten's final episode, an event which is signalled by the presence of John Williams' Superman march from Donner's 1978 film.<sup>662</sup> These relationships seem intended to place Tom Welling's Clark Kent within the same tradition as Reeve's, imparting him with an air of legitimacy, as well as authenticity. This theory is supported by the thoughts expressed by *Smallville*'s creative talents in the documentary featurette "Christopher Reeve: The Man of Steel,"

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<sup>659</sup> Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, "Cure," *Smallville*, season 7, episode 4, directed by Rick Rosenthal, aired October 18, 2007 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011), DVD; Todd Slavkin, Darren Swimmer, Kelly Souders, and Brian Peterson, "Abandoned," *Smallville*, season 10, episode 8, directed by Kevin G. Fair, aired November 12, 2010 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011), DVD.

<sup>660</sup> Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, "Exodus," *Smallville*, season 2, episode 23, directed by Greg Beeman, aired May 20, 2003 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011), DVD.

<sup>661</sup> Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, "Crusade," *Smallville*, season 4, episode 1, directed by Greg Beeman, aired September 22, 2004 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011), DVD; Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, "Rosetta," *Smallville*, season 2, episode 17, directed by James Marshall, aired February 25, 2003 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011), DVD; Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, "Blue," *Smallville*, season 7, episode 8, directed by Glen Winter, aired November 15, 2007 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011), DVD.

<sup>662</sup> Todd Slavkin, Darren Swimmer, Kelly Souders, and Brian Peterson, "Finale," *Smallville*, season 10, episodes 21 and 22, directed by Kevin G. Fair and Greg Beeman, aired May 13, 2011 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011), DVD.



included in the DVD release the of show's second season.<sup>663</sup> Here, when discussing the episode "Rosetta," in which Reeve makes his appearance, Welling claims that Reeve is "the most knowledgeable guy on Superman in the world," and therefore stresses his predecessor's role as in imparter of knowledge, which interestingly mirrors his part as professor Swan in the show itself, a man who seeks to teach Clark about his heritage.<sup>664</sup> The fact that Reeve's presence and his sharing of his knowledge of Superman with *Smallville's* Clark Kent is intended to emphasise the connections between the televised portrayal of the character and Donner's 1978 cinematic rendering is made explicit by Alfred Gough, who states that "We always wanted Christopher Reeve to guest star in the show but we wanted him to be in the right part and we wanted a passing of the torch from one generation of Superman to the next."<sup>665</sup>

With all the references to the filmic Superman, it is perhaps surprising that the superhero does not make a single full appearance. Instead, the heroic persona's presence in *Smallville* is reduced to ancient prophecies of the future from the Kawatche Cave walls and cryptic flash-forwards which are coloured by references that evoke his past incarnations, particularly Christopher Reeve's portrayal.<sup>666</sup> The effect of this is that Reeve's Superman is once again evoked and associated with mythical ideals but further abstracted by the show's tendency to isolate Clark's superhero persona from the series' timeline.

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<sup>663</sup> "Christopher Reeve: The Man of Steel," *Smallville*, season 2, featurette (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010), DVD.

<sup>664</sup> Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, "Rosetta," *Smallville*, season 2; "Christopher Reeve: The Man of Steel," *Smallville*, season 2.

<sup>665</sup> "Christopher Reeve: The Man of Steel," *Smallville*, season 2.

<sup>666</sup> Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, "Skinwalker," *Smallville*, season 2, episode 10, directed by Marita Grabiak, aired November 26, 2002 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011), DVD; Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, "Reaper," *Smallville*, season 1, episode 17, directed by Terrence O'Hara, aired April 23, 2002 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011), DVD; Todd Slavkin, Darren Swimmer, Kelly Souders, and Brian Peterson, "Salvation," *Smallville*, season 9, episode 21, directed by Greg Beeman, aired May 14, 2010 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2011), DVD.

This feature of *Smallville*'s narrative is explained by Reeve himself in "Christopher Reeve: The Man of Steel," where he argues that "there are two Clark Kents. The character that Tom plays is more modelled on the character that Jeff East played in *Superman One* [ . . . ] but then when he comes to the city, that's when another persona takes place: where he puts on the goofy glasses and acts shy, it's because he's trying to distract suspicion that he might actually be Superman. So, in fact the Clark Kent as an adult, which I played in my late twenties, is actually another persona, another character."<sup>667</sup> Welling concurs, admitting "it's an odd dilemma that we find ourselves in because we both play the same character in different stages of the character's life. So a lot of information he [Reeve] had was about a character who I don't know."<sup>668</sup> The comments by Reeve and Welling indicate that the versions of Clark Kent that they play are the same and yet different and impress upon us that, when Welling's character finally grows up to become the Superman previously embodied by Reeve, he will have ceased to be the character that *Smallville* is about, bringing about the end of the show.

The fact that Reeve's mythic Superman informs *Smallville* but hovers outside of the show's diegetic continuity further emphasises the timelessly mythic, "frozen" quality of Reeve's Superman. Indeed, the image of Reeve's Superman is already formed, waiting to be embraced by Welling's Clark Kent but, at the same time, it is always out of reach to a character who seems to be forever developing towards it. The consequence of this problematic is that *Smallville* does not develop the concept of "Superman," all that the "tights and flights" represent, much beyond what Reeve had established. It also emphasises the sense of "Superman's" isolation from the more relatable, human, "emotionally realistic" and relevant qualities epitomised by *Smallville*'s rendering of Clark. Via this strategy, *Smallville*'s diegesis, like *Lois & Clark*'s before it, locates itself within the established tradition of Truth associated with the Reeve film series in a manner that allows the producers to

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<sup>667</sup> "Christopher Reeve: The Man of Steel," *Smallville*, season 2.

<sup>668</sup> Ibid.

frame it as a legitimate entry into a grand tradition whilst they take the character in a different direction, further emphasising the human and often seemingly flawed Clark persona and sidelining “Superman.”

Indeed, Clark’s status in the show as a largely good-natured but often troubled teenager and then young adult means that he, for the most part, falls short of the ideal represented by his mythic destiny as Superman. Simply put, because he is not yet the mythic embodiment of innate goodness, he does not have to be perfect, can experience growing pains, behave selfishly at times, and involve himself in often complicated, troubled relationships. All of this increases the sense of believability conveyed by the character by making him seem more “well rounded” and apparently realistic, at least according to the tenets of “emotional realism.” It also allows the audience to see him and his world as similar and relevant to their own, and consequently makes it easier for them to interact with Clark in particular and *Smallville* in general “parasocially.” This portrayal is undertaken to give the young Clark “angst and edge” but it also means that “Superman” is a role that Clark has to grow into, a scenario that differentiates the fallible teenager from the superhero.<sup>669</sup> This differentiation between Clark and Superman is compounded by the fact that the future Superman indexed most clearly by the show is Reeve’s past portrayal, which exists outside the series’ own narrative continuity.

Through *Smallville* we can begin to answer my fifth and final question and to discover why it is that the prominence of Donner’s Superman and the abstracted values associated with what many critics consider to be his “definitive” rendering of the character has led them to view the Man of Steel as resistant to change, and particularly to attempts to make him relevant. Whilst Reeve’s Superman has retained his mythic status and abstract resonance through *Lois & Clark* and *Smallville*’s citation of him, the television shows’ further development of the 1970s and 1980s comics’ tendency to

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<sup>669</sup> Alfred Gough, interview by Craig Byrne, *Kryptonsite*, April 6, 2001, <http://www.kryptonsite.com/gough.htm>.

emphasise Clark Kent and his personal relationships has resulted in Superman being reduced from a character in his own right to a “fancy pair of long johns” and a set of mythic ideals, which have little direct relevance to the complex moral situations found within contextually specific circumstances, such as fraught romantic relationships or socio-political concerns.<sup>670</sup> Consequently, we can see that in successfully mythologising *Superman: The Movie* and its protagonist as transcendent of specific contexts, Donner and the Salkinds helped to start a tradition which, as it developed, increasingly abstracted the values attributed to Superman to the extent that it has fostered the perception that he is not relevant to the complexities of current, contextually contingent political debates and discourses. Moreover, the fact that the Donner interpretation of Superman has become established as the true, “quintessential” Man of Steel in the minds of the critics who believe him to be naturally resistant to narratives focussing upon specific political or social concerns means that any deviations from his perceived irrelevant abstraction are often viewed as violations of his true “nature,” as well as what he is and “should be” about.

That said, if the 1986 comic book revamp, *Lois & Clark*, and, finally, *Smallville* can be viewed as attempts to make Superman relevant, or at least “emotionally realistic,” by shifting the emphasis away from the moral abstractions associated with the “Superman” persona onto the more personal relationship oriented trials and tribulations facing Clark Kent, then this approach also carries a risk as far as Relevance is concerned. It may be that it is not just the themes and aesthetic of the Christopher Reeve film series that has fostered the perception that Superman is not relevant. As demonstrated at the beginning of this chapter, several critics have recently suggested that Superman is not relevant, not necessarily because Clark Kent fails to connect on a personal level but because Superman, as a character, is difficult to relate to post-9/11 politics. With critics continuing to frame Relevance along

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<sup>670</sup> John Byrne, “The Haunting,” in *Superman: The Man of Steel*, ed. Robert Greenberger, vol. 1 (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2003), 132-153: 135.

traditional, directly political lines, the contrastingly more personal, relationship oriented conception of Relevance pursued by series such as *Smallville* and *Lois & Clark*, which often eschew political and ideological dilemmas in favour of more intimate concerns, may seem like a confirmation that the character is ill-suited to engagements with the post-9/11 political context.

Conclusion: Contest and Contradiction — The Unpredictable Future of  
Superman

In the first three chapters of this thesis, I analyse Superman's past and propose that readings which evaluate the character's appeal according to his political Relevance tend to place his stories in one of two opposing categories. I suggest that those stories which can be construed by historians as expressions of a particular political philosophy or argument are often deemed relevant and those which are perceived not to lend themselves to such interpretations are sometimes categorised as ephemeral, throwaway fantasies. Furthermore, I propose that there is currently a tendency on the part of many historians and critics to follow these trends in their interpretations of Superman. Indeed, commentators' perceptions of Superman often fall either side of a binary division between the idea that the character's stories always transparently reflect developments in American politics and society, making him an intrinsically relevant character, and the understanding that he naturally, and inflexibly, transcends such topicality. From Chapter Three onwards, I consider that, because Superman is the subject of a multitude of different understandings, political and otherwise, it is, at least for my own purposes as an academic seeking a more thorough account of the character's meaning, restrictive to characterise his significance according to two such narrowly defined oppositions. Consequently, I have widened the scope of the term Relevance so that it may better account for the broad span of significances attributed to Superman.

In my fourth chapter, I have brought my analysis of Superman narratives and their surrounding discourses into the present. I have illustrated that most critics continue to conceive of Relevance in overtly political terms. I also contend that, following the establishment of Richard Donner's rendering of Superman, which sought to mythologise the character and to distance him

from political issues and historical and contextual specificity, as the “definitive” incarnation of the character, the Man of Steel has become increasingly established in significant parts of the critical mindset as a figure who is not relevant. In this, my conclusion, I retain my focus on Superman’s recent history with a discussion of what is perhaps the most significant attempt to alter perceptions of the character: the film *Man of Steel*. I also discuss the relationship between Henry Cavill’s portrayal of Superman in *Man of Steel* and Christopher Reeve’s rendering of the protagonist in *Superman: The Movie*, as well as what it reveals to us about the Relevance of each and of Superman more generally. Following this, I consider how perceptions of Superman may change in the future and how such shifts might affect his portrayal in forthcoming texts.

Before I move forward with my analysis, it is necessary to contextualise *Man of Steel* and to clarify why, given the numerous recent Superman texts available for study, I intend to place my focus on this oeuvre. Although there have been a number of significant Superman stories released in recent years, notably through the New 52 comic book reboot, which has once again rewritten Superman’s diegetic history and altered the character’s appearance and personality, the most influential texts, those which determine the true nature of the character for the majority of audience members have, for some decades, been the films.

As I discuss in Chapter Four, many of the characteristics associated with what is often perceived to be the true, “quintessential” interpretation of Superman currently stem from the character’s portrayal by Christopher Reeve in Richard Donner’s film, *Superman: The Movie*. As I have argued, this cinematic rendering of the character has influenced successive interpretations, including *Lois & Clark, Smallville*, John Byrne’s 1986 comic book revamp, *The Man of Steel*, and notably *Superman Returns*, a film which re-emphasised many of the

characteristics associated with Reeve's Superman.<sup>671</sup> Indeed, the 2006 movie places itself in continuity with Christopher Reeve's first two films and reprises many of the elements associated with Richard Donner's 1978 original, including the crystalline Krypton, Marlon Brando as Jor-El, the John Williams theme tune, a portrayal of Luthor by Kevin Spacey that harkens back to Gene Hackman's earlier performance, and Brandon Routh in the lead role who, as *Empire* notes, bears a resemblance to Christopher Reeve.<sup>672</sup> Interestingly, this film and its connections to *Superman: The Movie* also appear to have prompted the re-emphasis of traits associated with Christopher Reeve's incarnation of Superman in comic book stories published circa 2006, particularly *Up, Up and Away!*, *Superman: Brainiac*, *Superman and the Legion of Superheroes*, *Superman: Last Son*, and *Escape from Bizarro World*.<sup>673</sup> These stories harken back to Donner's Superman by depicting Krypton as a world constructed from crystalline technology, featuring a Superman who is, particularly in *Superman: Brainiac* and *Superman and the Legion of Superheroes*, drawn to resemble Reeve, as well as, in the case of *Superman: Escape from Bizarro World* and *Superman: Last Son*, having Richard Donner himself contribute to the writing (Figures 15 and 16).

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<sup>671</sup> *Superman Returns*, directed by Bryan Singer (2006; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros, 2006), DVD.

<sup>672</sup> Ian Nathan, "Superman Returns: The Big Blue Boy Scout is Back," review of *Superman Returns*, Warner Bros., *Empire*, accessed September 6, 2014, <http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/ReviewComplete.asp?FID=9751>.

<sup>673</sup> Kurt Busiek, Geoff Johns, Pete Woods, and Renato Guedes, *Superman: Up, Up and Away!* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2006); Geoff Johns, Gary Frank, and Jon Sibal, *Superman: Brainiac* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2009 [2008]); Geoff Johns, Gary Frank, and Jon Sibal, *Superman and the Legion of Superheroes* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2008 [2007]); Geoff Johns, Richard Donner, and Adam Kubert, *Superman: Last Son* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2008 [2006-2007]); Geoff Johns, Richard Donner, and Eric Powell, *Superman: Escape from Bizarro World* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2009 [2007]).



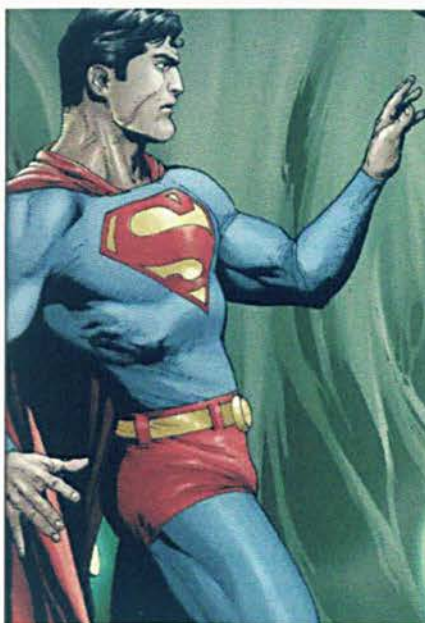


Figure 15. Superman drawn to resemble Christopher Reeve (see Figure 16 below) in the comic book storyline, *Superman: Brainiac*. Geoff Johns, Gary Frank, and Jon Sibal, *Superman: Brainiac*.

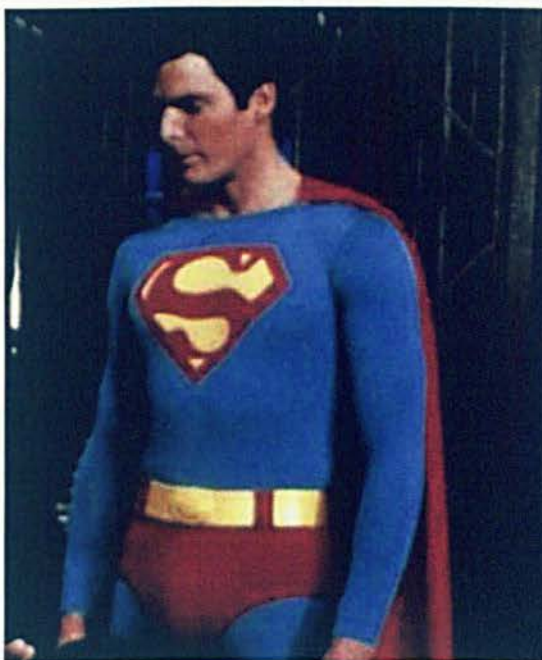


Figure 16. Christopher Reeve as he appears in *Superman: The Movie*. His portrayal of Superman inspired the artwork of comic books published around 2006 (see Figure 15 above). *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner.

Further indications of the primacy of filmic interpretations of the character are present in DC's New 52 reboot of Superman's diegesis, which has coincided with a renewed attempt by Warner Bros. to consolidate their superhero properties under the single banner of DC Entertainment.<sup>674</sup> This consolidation has been marked by the appointment of Diane Nelson as president of DC Comics, whom the company has tasked with "leading the efforts to fully realize the power and value of DC Entertainment's rich portfolio of stories and characters, including such cultural icons as Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman, across all media and platforms."<sup>675</sup>

The fact that the increasing synergy between different cross-media strands of the Superman franchise places primacy in the filmic representations of the character can be seen in Superman's costume redesign for the New 52 as well as a number of other changes. The new suit, Kryptonian armour lacking in external underwear, appears as though it may have been partially remodelled after the design featured in *Man of Steel*, which entered production before the advent of the comic book relaunch and it is interesting that, when interviewed by *Total Film* magazine, Henry Cavill asserts the legitimacy of Superman's appearance in Snyder's film, arguing "even Superman in the new comics doesn't have the briefs."<sup>676</sup> Considering the timing of the New 52 relaunch, Cavill's emphasis on the connections between his portrayal of Superman and the character's representation in the recent comic books raises the possibility that the New 52 redesign of the *Man of Steel*'s costume was partially undertaken in order to add legitimacy to his representation in Snyder's film (Figures 17 and 18).

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<sup>674</sup> "About DC Entertainment," *DC Entertainment*, accessed August 1, 2014, <http://www.dcentertainment.com/>.

<sup>675</sup> "Diane Nelson," *DC Entertainment*, accessed August 1, 2014, <http://www.dcentertainment.com/management/diane-nelson>.

<sup>676</sup> Matthew Leyland, "Reel Steel," *Total Film* #205, May 2003, 72-77: 76.



Figure 17. Superman in his New 52 Kryptonian armour, similar to Henry Cavill's outfit in the film *Man of Steel* (see Figure 18 below). Scott Lobdell and Kenneth Rocafort, "They Will Join You in the Sun," *Superman* #13, December 2012, 22.



Figure 18. Henry Cavill as Superman in Kryptonian armour for the film *Man of Steel*, which is similar to Superman's remodelled costume in DC's New 52 (see Figure 17 above). *Man of Steel*, directed by Zack Snyder.

The New 52 Superman also manifests signs of being a more troubled, less idealistic figure than some of his predecessors. This is indicated through Superman's exchanges with Lex Luthor in *Superman* #15, where Luthor, displaying disfiguring scars from their previous encounters, suggests that, deep down, the Man of Steel feels the desire to kill him, his comments appearing to hit a raw nerve with the superhero. Here, Luthor's injuries and his apparent insights into Superman's character support the idea that the New 52 version of the Man of Steel has a greater propensity to act rashly and might be more tempted to kill his opponents than previous variations. As we see in the following analysis, many of these less than idealistic traits can be associated with Henry Cavill's portrayal of Superman in *Man of Steel*. Furthermore, in addition to Superman himself, the Kryptonian character Faora has also been redrawn in the image of her cinematic counterpart (Figures 19 and 20) and the comic book representation of Krypton itself has begun to be reworked to resemble its rendering in *Man of Steel*.<sup>677</sup>

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<sup>677</sup> Scott Lobdell and Kenneth Rocafort, "Because I'm a Scorpion," *Superman* #15, February 2013, 2-28: 23; Scott Lobdell and Kenneth Rocafort, "Krypton Returns, Part 1," *Action Comics Annual* #2, December 2013, 2-39: 20: 31.





Figure 19. Faora as she has been redesigned for DC’s New 52, in an outfit that recalls her appearance in *Man of Steel* (see Figure 20 below). Scott Lobdell and Kenneth Rocafort, “Krypton Returns, Part 1,” *Action Comics Annual* #2, December 2013, 2-39: 20: 31.



Figure 20. Faora, played by Antje Traue, wearing Kryptonian battle armour in *Man of Steel*. Her appearance here is extremely similar to her portrayal in DC’s New 52 (see Figure 19 above). *Man of Steel*, directed by Zack Snyder.

Whilst the correspondences outlined above do not suggest that the comics and films are always fully aligned in their portrayals of the Man of Steel, which is in fact rarely the case, they do indicate that the filmic Superman continues to set the broad tone of his adventures across different strands of the brand. Such influence is perhaps not surprising, especially as the films are considerably more lucrative than Superman comics, whose popularity has been in decline for some years, with regular monthly sales of only around 40,000. By contrast, *Man of Steel* earned \$668,045,518 at the box office, a figure which suggests that millions of people have seen it at the cinema.<sup>678</sup> It is because of the continued prominence of the cinematic incarnations of Superman and their ongoing propensity to impact on other renderings of the character that I am focusing primarily on *Man of Steel* in this, my conclusion. As attempts by Michael Shannon and David Goyer to distance *Man of Steel* characters Jor-El and Zod from their equivalents in Donner and Lester's movies illustrate, Snyder's film represents an endeavour to alter popular perceptions of the Superman universe and is the most significant challenge to the primacy of Donner's 1978 film interpretation of Superman to date.<sup>679</sup> As such, it is most likely to be the primary vehicle through which the character's future meanings and significances are developed.

We can gain a greater understanding of how *Man of Steel* might influence Superman's future meaning if we consider the innovations it has brought to the character and why some of these have caused controversy. Insight into this can be gained if we consider critic Darren Franich's article, "What *Man of*

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<sup>678</sup> Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, 56; Jones and Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, 365; "Sales Report for July, 2013: *Superman Unchained*, *Superior Spider-Man* Stay Strong," *Comic Book Resources*, August 13, 2013, <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=47289>; "Man of Steel," *Box Office Mojo*.

<sup>679</sup> In an article for *Total Film*, Michael Shannon emphasises the differences between his representation of Zod and Terence Stamp's earlier portrayal, suggesting that Stamp channelled "pure hatred, rage" and that his interpretation of the character is "more ambiguous." Interestingly, and emphasising the contrast between *Man of Steel* and *Superman: The Movie*, Shannon also refers to the representation of Krypton in Donner's 1978 film disparagingly as "an ethereal, crystal floating mirror thing." In the same article, David Goyer states of Russell Crowe that "I think people felt he's playing the Marlon Brando role, which isn't necessarily the case." Matthew Leyland, "Reel Steel," 72-77: 75: 76: 77.

*Steel* Gets Wrong About Superman (Hint: that Ending),” which links the film’s plot to post-9/11 political discourse.<sup>680</sup> Despite his suggestion that the film “doesn’t talk very much about the main character’s code of ethics,” Franich argues that, “*Man of Steel* nevertheless feels topical in one respect. Not to get heavy, but there’s been a lot of talk lately about the use and abuse of government power, and of how drone strikes radically reshape the rules of warfare in terrifying ways.”<sup>681</sup>

In his article, Franich refers to another piece by *Esquire* writer Tom Junod entitled “The Lethal Presidency of Barack Obama,” which criticises the Obama administration’s use of drone attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>682</sup> In this second piece, Junod argues that the President uses his own moral consternation over the necessity of using “lethal force” to enhance his reputation as a thoughtful leader who is saddened by the actions he is compelled to undertake in the name of security:

Your admission that you struggle in the exercise of lethal power is meant as an assurance that your struggle compels you to use lethal power responsibly. But neither you nor anyone in your administration has allowed the impression that that struggle is anything but an obstacle to be surmounted and that you are anything but resolute in surmounting it. You struggle with your moral qualms about the Lethal Presidency only to gain the moral distinction of triumphing over them — and to claim, as the Lethal President, the higher morality of killing.<sup>683</sup>

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<sup>680</sup> Darren Franich, “What *Man of Steel* Gets Wrong About Superman (Hint: That Ending),” *Entertainment Weekly*, June 15, 2013, <http://popwatch.ew.com/2013/06/15/man-of-steel-superman-zod-death/>.

<sup>681</sup> Ibid.

<sup>682</sup> Tom Junod, “The Lethal Presidency of Barack Obama,” *Esquire*, May 23, 2013, <http://www.esquire.com/features/obama-lethal-presidency-0812-3>.

<sup>683</sup> Franich, “What *Man of Steel* Gets Wrong About Superman (Hint: That Ending).”

Placing his argument within an established trend of comparing Obama to Superman, which includes an Alex Ross painting depicting the President as the superhero and Grant Morrison and Gene Ha's *Action Comics* #9, which features a black Superman as the leader of the free world, Franich transposes Junod's argument onto the narrative of *Man of Steel*, suggesting that if the "Lethal President" of Junod's article is replaced with "Lethal Superhero,"

you have *Man of Steel*, a movie that allows Superman to kill because it shrugs and says, well, there was nothing else to do, and Superman is a better man for triumphing over the adversity of having to kill someone. Of course, everything about the end of *Man of Steel* is ludicrous: This is yet another movie, like *Star Trek Into Darkness*, where, like, half a city is destroyed, and nobody seems to notice. But ultimately, the movie comes down to one question: "Zod is about to kill a human being. What can Superman do? Nothing! Murder is justified!"<sup>684</sup>

In the same vein as Junod's criticism of Obama, Franich is essentially arguing that *Man of Steel*'s creators are seeking to justify Superman's killing of Zod as legitimate in the absence of better alternatives. Furthermore, his comments indicate that, as far as the film is concerned, Superman's willingness to use lethal force reflects well on his moral character and suggests that he is a man who has the strength of conviction to shoulder the burden of responsibility for such difficult decisions. Franich's interpretation seems to gain further traction when we follow his line of analysis and compare one speech used by

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<sup>684</sup> "Obama Sports Alex Ross T-Shirt," *Alexrossart*, October 31, 2008, <http://www.alexrossart.com/rossreport.asp?id=466>; Grant Morrison and Gene Ha, "The Curse of Superman," *Action Comics* #9, July 2013, 2-27; Franich, "What *Man of Steel* Gets Wrong About Superman (Hint: That Ending)."



Obama to justify his drone policy with the logic underpinning *Man of Steel's* plot.<sup>685</sup>

In his speech addressing his administration's drone policy, Obama admits that he is not entirely comfortable with the United States' use of "remotely piloted aircraft."<sup>686</sup> He recognises that they have caused "civilian casualties" and also acknowledges that "to say a military tactic is legal, or even effective, is not to say it is wise or moral in every instance" and that "for the families of those" who have been incorrectly targeted, "no words or legal construct can justify their loss."<sup>687</sup> However, he also presents his audience with a number of unpalatable replacement options, ranging from "boots on the ground" to doing "nothing" but settles upon drone attacks as the least destructive of the available alternatives:

as Commander-in-Chief, I must weigh these heartbreaking tragedies against the alternatives. To do nothing in the face of terrorist networks would invite far more civilian casualties — not just in our cities at home and our facilities abroad, but also in the very places like Sana'a and Kabul and Mogadishu where terrorists seek a foothold. Remember that the terrorists we are after target civilians, and the death toll from their acts of terrorism against Muslims dwarfs any estimate of civilian casualties from drone strikes. So doing nothing is not an option.<sup>688</sup>

According to Obama's own account, then, his actions are coherent with traditional moral objections to lethal violence because they are motivated by his distaste for killing. In this context, the President's use of drones against

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<sup>685</sup> "Obama's Speech on Drone Policy," *New York Times*, May 23, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/24/us/politics/transcript-of-obamas-speech-on-drone-policy.html?pagewanted=10&r=1&pagewanted=print>.

<sup>686</sup> Ibid.

<sup>687</sup> Ibid.

<sup>688</sup> Ibid.

terrorists is the lesser of several possible evils and his framing of the issue in these terms allows him to represent himself as a thoughtful and serious-minded leader who, in his ability to make nuanced distinctions between different types of lethal force, is an individual particularly capable of shouldering the burden of responsibility that accompanies his role.

Here, Junod's argument that Obama's rhetoric is intended to enhance his own status and moral credibility seems plausible. This is because the President's categorisation of violent policies into a number of different alternatives, each of which inhabit a separate place on a spectrum between legitimate and unjust or terroristic uses of lethal force, allows him to affirm that his actions really are consistent with his moral aversion to death and murder. The rhetorical framing utilised by Obama in seeking to justify his drone policy can also, as Franich supposes, be deemed significant with regards to the "politics" of *Man of Steel* because the President's arguments do indeed seem to correspond with some aspects of the film's narrative and appear particularly relevant to Superman's battle with General Zod, whose very name connotes the use of military force.

At first glance, *Man of Steel* appears to present a clear binary division between Superman and Zod. Whilst Superman seeks to make Jor-El's liberal dream that the populations of Earth and Krypton might "coexist" a reality by serving as a "bridge" between the two peoples, Zod and his fellow Kryptonians favour an incompatible form of Kryptonian supremacism.<sup>689</sup> Zod is, in fact, so reactionary in his worldview that, upon his first meeting with Superman, he implies that the extinction of the human race is a necessary "foundation" for a revived Kryptonian society.<sup>690</sup> When his plan to rebuild Krypton is foiled and his people ejected to their apparent doom in the Phantom Zone, Zod's determination is undimmed and he declares his

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<sup>689</sup> *Man of Steel*, directed by Zack Snyder.

<sup>690</sup> *Man of Steel*, directed by Zack Snyder.

intention to annihilate the people of Earth “one by one.”<sup>691</sup> This leaves Superman with a further dilemma, as sending Zod to join his people in the Phantom Zone is, at this point in the narrative, no longer an option and, in the words of the film’s screenwriter David Goyer, “no prison on the planet could hold” the General.<sup>692</sup> Thus, it seems that Superman is left to choose between the life of one genocidal Kryptonian and the lives of several billion humans. Faced with Zod’s murderous intent and an enemy that he cannot contain, Superman is forced to select what, if we accept Franich’s arguments, the film and its creators would like us to see as the lesser of two evils by killing Zod. This reading of the film suggests that, at least in the situation in which it places Superman, where the Man of Steel’s actions are constrained by his circumstances, his use of lethal force against Zod is legitimate because it will lead to a greater preservation of life. Here we can detect an echo of Obama’s argument that, in some circumstances, it is necessary to take lives so that more may be saved.

However, another interpretation of the film is available; it is also possible to suggest that, rather than simply offering an endorsement of Obama’s argument regarding lethal force, *Man of Steel* can be viewed as a critique of the logic utilised by the President. This new reading can be elaborated upon if we review both Obama’s speech and *Man of Steel*’s plot through the prism of Michael Billig’s discussion of the rhetorical technique of “particularization and categorization,” as well as the conceits of rationalism as they are discussed in Chapter Three.<sup>693</sup> According to Billig, “in rhetorical situations each party will attempt to apply the label which suits their purposes best. The defence’s ‘unfortunate victim of circumstances’ will be the prosecution’s ‘scheming criminal.’”<sup>694</sup> He goes on to suggest that since, in arguments, “the rhetorical

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<sup>691</sup> Ibid.

<sup>692</sup> Simon Reynolds, “*Man of Steel*’s David S. Goyer on General Zod Controversy – Spoilers,” *Digital Spy*, September 24, 2013, <http://www.digitalspy.co.uk/movies/news/a518041/man-of-steels-david-s-goyer-on-general-zod-controversy-spoilers.html#~p2n7cUP1bcRC5j>.

<sup>693</sup> Michael Billig, *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1987]), 172.

<sup>694</sup> Ibid.

context is one of justification and criticism, the controversial label has to be justified and criticisms repelled.”<sup>695</sup> He elaborates upon this theory with the example of the American invasion of Granada in the 1980s, suggesting that, according to President Reagan’s rhetoric, “the ‘rescue mission’ was very different from the typical invasion: not every form of vicious warfare was deployed against the tiny, and ill-defended island, besides which the US forces were not involved in the murder of an American ambassador. *Ipsa facto* the invasion was no invasion.”<sup>696</sup>

Such rhetorical manoeuvrings were perhaps necessary for Reagan in his endeavour to persuade the American public of the legitimacy of his administration’s actions because, as I mention in Chapter Three, post-Enlightenment societies view the world as “determinate” and “coherent.”<sup>697</sup> According to such principles, any narrative that is to be deemed “rational” or plausible must be both internally consistent and appear to cohere to the established store of accepted Truth and Common Sense understandings concerning the workings of the universe. This poses a difficulty for an American President trying to justify an invasion because, as Billig’s arguments indicate, the term has negative connotations. Indeed, if the President were to describe a military deployment as an “invasion,” it may be categorised as an unjust act by a large number of people for whom the term has the established negative implications of being contrary to the principles of liberty. To solve this dilemma, a politician seeking, like Reagan, to legitimise such an operation must try to recategorise it by suggesting that the particular circumstances in which it is being undertaken justify its description under a different label. In this way, Billig asserts that an “invasion” may become a “rescue mission” and, according to this logic, an action normally considered “bad” can, paradoxically, be seen as good because it occurs in special circumstances that

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<sup>695</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>696</sup> Ibid.

<sup>697</sup> Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, 151.

allow it to become excepted from previously established standards of action and behaviour.<sup>698</sup>

We can see a similar strategy in Obama's attempt to justify his administration's use of lethal force in the speech quoted at the beginning of this analysis. As we have seen, Obama's suggestion that his use of drones to target specific individuals is undertaken as a means of averting the "far more civilian casualties" that would be caused by the unhindered actions of "terrorists" can be understood as an endeavour to recast the terms of debate surrounding the use of "lethal force."<sup>699</sup> Given that his speech endeavours to demarcate Obama's limited and considered use of "lethal force" from the more indiscriminate acts of killing that he believes to occur "where terrorists seek a foothold," it can be argued that the President is seeking to construct a new binary opposition between the "good" form of thoughtful and considered violence utilised by his administration and the "bad" actions of his more prolifically murderous enemies.<sup>700</sup> However, it is possible to uncover a flaw in the logic of Obama's rhetoric if we return to the plot of *Man of Steel*, which can also be seen to critique this kind of argumentative strategy.

Michael Shannon, who plays General Zod in *Man of Steel*, provides an indication of how the film can be used to critique the logic underpinning Obama's foreign policy in his description of the motivations driving his character:

The key for me is his name's not Villain Zod, or Monster Zod. It's General Zod. In the same way in the States we have General Petraeus. That's what he is. He's the best warrior on Krypton and it's his job to protect the Kryptonians and he takes it seriously. I'm not saying he's a nice guy, Mr. Green Jeans, but

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<sup>698</sup> Billig, *Arguing and Thinking*, 173.

<sup>699</sup> "Obama's Speech on Drone Policy."

<sup>700</sup> Ibid.

he doesn't exist just to be mean and give Superman a hard time.<sup>701</sup>

Considering Shannon's comments, we can see Zod as a more nuanced character than the previous reading suggests. His coup attempt against the Kryptonian council is motivated by his knowledge that the councillors have failed to heed Jor-El's predictions of their home world's destruction and to protect Krypton's people from their doom. Consequently, it can be suggested that Zod's despotism is founded on a desire to protect his people. He articulates this motivation explicitly before his final confrontation with Superman: "I exist only to protect Krypton. That is the sole purpose for which I was born and every action I take, no matter how violent or how cruel, is for the greater good of my people."<sup>702</sup> Indeed, although Zod's inclination to annihilate species he deems unworthy rather than seek to live alongside them seems designed to signpost him as an unsympathetic character, he is not without nuance and it is not difficult to imagine a perspective from which his mission to preserve both Krypton's people and its culture might be deemed heroic. In fact, rather than identifying Zod as an uncomplicated villain, it is also possible to view him as a man out of time. On his native Krypton, his efforts to preserve the planet's civilisation and culture might have made him a hero. However, in outlasting his home-world and migrating to an unsympathetic context, Zod, to paraphrase Harvey Dent's portrait of Caesar in *The Dark Knight*, another superhero film with connections to post-9/11 discourse, can be viewed as a potential hero who lives "long enough" to see himself become a villain.<sup>703</sup>

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<sup>701</sup> Ian Nathan, "Kingdom Come," 67.

<sup>702</sup> *Man of Steel*, directed by Zack Snyder.

<sup>703</sup> Harvey Dent's suggestion in *The Dark Knight* that "you either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain" refers to one dilemma of liberalism that is explored by the film. In Nolan's second Batman film, the Dark Knight is forced to implement authoritarian methods of law enforcement to counter the arguably greater threat of tyranny posed by the Joker. Dent's comments are meant as an expression of support to Batman's actions but they can also be read as a foreshadowing of his own tragic fate, which sees him become the physical embodiment of the internal contradiction that characterises the

If Zod's uncompromising supremacism undercuts the more sympathetic aspects of his mission to preserve his own people, this element of his character provides another means through which *Man of Steel* poses and elaborates interesting dilemmas. In fact, his unrelenting determination to uphold what he believes to be the superior culture of Krypton and its people, as well as his disdain for the "squalour" of human civilisation, fundamentally problematises Jor-El's intention to foster the peaceful coexistence of Kryptonians and humans by having his son serve as a "bridge" between them.<sup>704</sup> As a result of Zod's intransigence, Superman has to make a choice between protecting mankind, whose moral qualities he is unsure of, or siding with the General, who he knows "can't be trusted," in his campaign to annihilate the human race.<sup>705</sup> Either option places him in opposition to one civilisation but he eventually chooses to aid mankind. Towards its conclusion, *Man of Steel* presents us with a narrative in which one desperate individual, seeking to preserve his people at the cost of another species' existence, forces his opponent into commensurate behaviour during a vicious battle for survival.

As we have seen, Zod is open about his own uncompromising stance. He announces that he will annihilate humanity "one by one" and refuses to countenance any exit from his battle against Superman aside from death.<sup>706</sup> In this context, the types of behaviour which we might expect to demarcate distinctions between "good" and "bad," "hero" and "villain," such as showing mercy to one's enemy and limiting one's use of force to non-lethal methods, do not necessarily apply. This is because, in this situation, the consequences of the hero showing too much reticence would prove dire for his own side if his enemy were to exploit his hesitancy. Therefore, in order to protect the people that he has chosen, Superman must demonstrate the same ferocity as

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dilemma explored by the film. *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2008; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 2008), DVD.

<sup>704</sup> *Man of Steel*, directed by Zack Snyder.

<sup>705</sup> Ibid.

<sup>706</sup> *Man of Steel*, directed by Zack Snyder.

Zod. Indeed, he declares, after a brief hesitation, that “Krypton had its chance” before destroying the General’s ship and the last remaining “genesis chamber” from which the dead planet’s future populace might be grown.

As these examples indicate, the refusal by Zod and his followers to alter their opinion that humans are inferior to themselves and are deserving of extinction renders the endeavours of Jor-El and Superman to unite the two peoples in a mutually tolerant society untenable, because distinct cultures cannot feasibly coexist if one is determined to destroy the other. As a result, Superman is forced to choose between his native race and his adopted people, and his eventual siding with humanity requires him to eliminate not just the reactionary Zod but what is left of the similarly uncompromising Kryptonian populace in a turn of events that has been described by one critic, *Wired*’s Rachel Edidin, as equivalent to an act of “genocide.”<sup>707</sup> Thus, we can see that whilst it is Zod who appears to be forcing events, as the movie’s final battles develop, Superman’s own actions begin to mirror those of his enemy. It is here that we reach the logical conclusion of the strategies of rhetorical “categorization and particularization,” which seek to preserve moral binaries in ethically complex and difficult situations by reframing the terms of what is considered to be acceptable moral behaviour, and it is now possible to grasp the problems associated with them.<sup>708</sup>

As my initial reading of *Man of Steel* sought to demonstrate, Superman’s increasingly brutal actions in opposing Zod and his followers can be rationalised as legitimate according to the special and unfortunate circumstances in which he is placed by the film’s narrative. However, if we bring my second reading of the film into view, we can see that the fact that the terms of what can be acceptably defined as good can be reframed to such an extent that it becomes possible to justify the film’s “hero” undertaking what is nearly, if not equivalent to, the “genocide” intended by its “villain”

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<sup>707</sup> Rachel Edidin, “Grim, Violent *Man of Steel* Sells Superman’s Soul for Spectacle.”

<sup>708</sup> Billig, *Arguing and Thinking*, 148.



suggests that practices of “categorization” can lead to the destabilisation and dissolution of the moral boundaries they seek to preserve. Indeed, Superman’s increasing similarity to Zod as *Man of Steel*’s narrative progresses demonstrates how efforts to preserve the demarcation between “good” and “evil” — in circumstances where two opposing sides are both perpetrating acts of violence — by differentiating one evil from another, can result in the self-contradictory suggestion that evil may actually, at times, be good. Following this inconsistency, Zod could also be described as “good” because, if his actions are largely indistinguishable from those of the “hero” Superman, he should logically be deemed commensurate in his morality. Consequently, there eventually becomes little difference between the film’s hero and villain or the philosophies they represent.

If Superman and Jor-El’s liberal dream can only be brought about by the annihilation of those who disagree with it, then in practice it seems as intolerant as Zod’s Kryptonian supremacism. As a result of these similarities, the division separating the seemingly good from the supposedly bad dissolves, finally leading to a collapse in the binary logic of conventional morality. This is an outcome that the film signposts with the anguished scream released by Superman as he breaks Zod’s neck, apparently as he realises what the General has forced him to become. In this respect, and in contrast to Franich’s view, *Man of Steel* can be read as a critique of both Superman’s actions and the type of rhetoric used by Obama to justify his foreign policy. In effect, the film can be seen to suggest that it is potentially destabilising for an individual to justify particular acts of “evil” as necessary in the defence against a greater one, and that using special exceptions to justify ethically problematic actions is the means through which their own moral integrity can become compromised, to the extent that they eventually come to resemble that which they oppose. Following this reading, it can be said that, even if it does not engage with contemporary politics in an overt or direct manner, *Man of Steel* interrogates the fundamental dilemma contained

within the logical principles of liberalism, which place considerable value on the mutual toleration and coexistence between people of different cultures and beliefs but which cannot easily accommodate “intolerant” perspectives.

Indeed, “intolerant” views, such as terroristic Islamic extremism and, it seems, Zod’s own brand of Kryptonian fascism, pose a threat to liberal values by refusing to accept the principle of mutual equality and actively seeking to enforce contrary views on society, possibly resulting in the destruction of liberalism itself. Consequently, to protect the values of freedom and tolerance in which they place faith, liberals may be forced to defeat and maybe even destroy those whom the values of “tolerance” cannot “tolerate.” This is very similar to the logical contradiction that President Obama is also grappling with in his attempt to reconcile the use of lethal force against terrorists in foreign nations with his own apparent aversion to violence in his speech about drones. Indeed, we can speculate that, as far as the President is concerned, it is impossible to protect the United States and the liberal principles for which it is perceived to stand without attacking and defeating those who wish to annihilate it.

As the above analysis illustrates, *Man of Steel* can support at least two distinct political readings: one which, as Franich’s arguments illustrate, endorses the actions of the Obama administration, and another that is critical of them. It can support these different interpretations because the film, like the majority of Superman texts before it, does not, in fact, directly engage with political debates. Rather, as we have seen, its plot and story-world are underpinned by “situational logics” which reflect the rationale that informs arguments made by contemporary politicians seeking to legitimise their policies and actions.<sup>709</sup> Interestingly, however, despite the fantastical nature of much of its content, *Man of Steel* does contain some explicit signifiers, such as scenes of urban destruction and an encounter with a drone, that appear to have been included with the intent of locating the film in the post-9/11 discursive

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<sup>709</sup> Barker, *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*, 71.

context. Indeed, considering the presence of these admittedly minor elements, it can be suggested that, whilst *Man of Steel* can accurately be considered — like many Superman narratives — as a text from the science fiction genre that to a large degree concerns itself with spaceships and alien planets, its creators may have also wished to signpost the film's connections to post-9/11 debates. Indeed, considering the small numbers of citations of post-9/11 imagery appearing at the margins of the film's narrative, it can be argued that *Man of Steel's* producers are tentatively seeking to encourage their audience to connect its plot to contemporary political discourses, whilst still allowing them the imaginative space to draw their own conclusions regarding the movie's specific message and meaning as well as which aspects of the film, whether political, generic or otherwise, to emphasise in their readings.

As I have sought to demonstrate, the fact that *Man of Steel* engages with the underlying logics of post-9/11 political rhetoric but refrains from explicitly endorsing a specific partisan position makes it an ambiguous text that can support more than one politically charged reading. This ambiguity means that *Man of Steel*, like the 1950s and 1960s Superman stories discussed in Chapter Three, can be considered as a Sinfieldian “faultline” narrative, which is significant for the possibilities it raises for Superman's future.<sup>710</sup> However, as I have hinted, in contrast to Superman's “Silver Age” comic book narratives, which may only accidentally reflect cultural faultlines, there are indications that *Man of Steel* was intentionally designed as a problematic faultline text in order that it might alter perceptions of the character. Indeed, tentative identifiers of this intent can be found in comments by David S. Goyer, who, in an interview with *Empire*, has suggested that Superman was “ceasing” to be “relevant” and that *Man of Steel* was, in part, designed to address this.<sup>711</sup>

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<sup>710</sup> Sinfield, *Cultural Politics* - - *Queer Reading*, 4.

<sup>711</sup> Cree Hugh, Dan Jolin, Allie Plum, David Goyer, and Zack Snyder, *Man Of Steel Spoiler Special* — Zack Snyder, David S. Goyer, SoundCloud, 1:21:05, accessed August 1, 2014, <https://soundcloud.com/empiremagazine/man-of-steel-spoiler-special>.

Here, he also suggests that in order to revitalise the character it was necessary to “slay some sacred cows.”<sup>712</sup>

As I discuss in Chapter Four, one of the biggest “sacred cows” concerning Superman, which arguably stems from his 1978 film incarnation, is his association with transcendent conceptions of objectively determined goodness.<sup>713</sup> As I propose in Chapter Four, *Superman: The Movie* does not entirely clarify the exact principles which constitute Superman’s innate goodness. I also suggest that this omission was perhaps intentional and that further clarification was not provided in the hope that, if Superman’s moral code did not contain any contextually specific ideas that might connect his perspective to the prevailing cultural philosophies of any particular period, he might seem more universal in his appeal. As we have seen, *Man of Steel*’s status as a contentious and ambiguous faultline text, which resists attempts to impose a singular, objectively correct reading onto its narrative and has prompted a debate concerning the morality of Superman’s actions as it depicts them, challenges the idea that the character necessarily represents universal moral principles. In fact, Goyer himself has emphasised the importance of the film’s “ambiguities” and the next stage of my analysis considers how *Man of Steel*’s creators may hope that their provocation of controversy through challenging established understandings of Superman will change the nature of the debate surrounding the character in the future.<sup>714</sup>

In my previous chapter and the passages above, I have remarked that a number of critics criticised the less idealistic tone of *Man of Steel* in comparison to Donner’s version of Superman. However, the film was not met with an entirely negative reaction. Although *Wired*’s Rachel Edidin, *Forbes*’ Scott Mendelson, and *Entertainment Weekly*’s Darren Franich all reviewed the film negatively, *Empire*’s Dan Jolin, *Total Film*’s Matthew Leyland, *IGN*’s

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<sup>712</sup> Ibid.

<sup>713</sup> Ibid.

<sup>714</sup> Ian Nathan, “Superman Rises,” review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *Empire*, March 2013, 70.

Jim Vejvoda, *Firstshowing's* Jeremy Kirk, and "Joe Comicbook" of *comicbook.com* were more positive.<sup>715</sup>

This lack of consensus is mirrored in comments posted on review sites, which indicate that there may be some conflict over whether or not *Man of Steel* damages Superman's reputation. For instance, in response to Edidin's critical appraisal of the film and her assertion that " 'a story where Superman kills people' isn't an edgy Superman story; it's a lazy one, taking the shortest, most obvious path to define this Superman as different from that one," Shannon S. considers *Man of Steel* superior to prior incarnations.<sup>716</sup> Significantly, Shannon S. reflects positively on Superman's killing of Zod, implying that the act is justified:

Great acting, great story, great special effects and action scenes, and really great villains. He killed Zod to save five people who were a heartbeat away from being incinerated by an unrepentant maniac hellbent on exterminating the human race. But somehow that is unforgiveable and unjustifiable in this critic's view. I disagreed with nearly every point and perspective he [*sic*] had on the movie. My recommendation is that people watch the movie and enjoy it for what it is, not try

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<sup>715</sup> Scott Mendelson, "Review: *Man Of Steel* Fails To Take Flight," review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *Forbes*, June 11, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2013/06/11/review-man-of-steel-never-takes-flight/>; Dan Jolin, "Man of Steel: The Clark Knight," review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *Empire*, accessed August 1, 2014, <http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?FID=137126>; Matthew Leyland, "Superman Begins," review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *Total Film*, June 17, 2014, <http://www.totalfilm.com/reviews/cinema/man-of-steel/>; Jim Vejvoda, "Superman's Reborn in Grand Fashion," review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *IGN*, June 10, 2013, <http://uk.ign.com/articles/2013/06/11/man-of-steel-review>; Jeremy Kirk, "Review: Despite Flaws, *Man of Steel* is Still the Best Superman Yet," review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *Firstshowing*, June 14, 2013, <http://www.firstshowing.net/2013/review-despite-flaws-man-of-steel-is-still-the-best-superman-yet/>; Joe Comicbook, "Man of Steel Review: The Best Comic Book Movie Ever Made," review of *Man of Steel*, Warner Bros., *Comicbook.com*, June 10, 2013, <http://comicbook.com/blog/2013/06/10/man-of-steel-review-the-best-comic-book-movie-ever-made/>.

<sup>716</sup> Shannon S., April 2014, comment on Edidin, "Grim, Violent *Man of Steel* Sells Superman's Soul for Spectacle."

to hold its faithfulness to previous movies or comic books or personal interpretations of the Superman character. That's a silly standard that serves no useful purpose. And this was a really, really great film that deserves better.<sup>717</sup>

The sentiment articulated here is also echoed in a response to Franich's discussion of the film by Noahwayne0, who remarks:

Seriously, the writer [Franich] did not understand that the ending was meant to be traumatic — Superman was pleading with Zod, and Zod was going to kill those people so he was forced to sever his only connection left to his heritage leaving him alone in the world, he was clearly traumatized, he reached out to Lois like a son to his mother looking for comfort. It was an incredible [sic] powerful scene. This was the greatest Superman movie of all time. No its [sic] not Christopher Reeve, its [sic] a hell of a lot better. Its [sic] the one true fans have been waiting for.<sup>718</sup>

Agreeing with Noahwayne0's comments, Molten writes:

You are so right. It's not like he went on a killing spree or something. He HAD to save that family and for all you know that's how he's going to come up with the no killing rule because this is an origin story? [sic] Just going on this rant is just ridiculous to me.<sup>719</sup>

From the snapshot provided by these comments, we can see that the “ambiguity” Goyer may have intentionally written into the script of *Man of Steel* has prompted critics and other viewers to make sense of the narrative in

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<sup>717</sup> Ibid.

<sup>718</sup> Noahwayne0, 2013, comment on Franich, “What *Man of Steel* Gets Wrong About Superman (Hint: That Ending).”

<sup>719</sup> Molten, 2013, comment on Franich, “What *Man of Steel* Gets Wrong About Superman (Hint: That Ending).”

contrasting ways. Some have accepted the rationale that Superman's ability to choose the correct action in difficult circumstances makes him a hero, whilst others, like Franich and Edidin, have suggested that the film's events taint Superman's moral character. Indeed, it is differences like these that appear to have prompted the interest, discussion, and debate that surround the film. This should not surprise us, given that, as I have argued, *Man of Steel* can be seen as a faultline text and, as Sinfield notes, "people write about faultlines, in order to address aspects of their life that they find hard to handle" and that they therefore find them to be "interesting."<sup>720</sup>

In fact, it can be argued that it is *Man of Steel's* status as a problematic text that makes it seem worthy of discussion; this theory explains why Snyder and Goyer may have wished to provoke the controversy in which *Man of Steel* has become embroiled. As Chapter Four indicates, Goyer is not the only commentator who believes that there has been a growing perception amongst critics and fans that Superman is no longer relevant. Significantly, others, including Superman historian Glen Weldon and comic book writer Mark Waid, have either made a similar claim themselves or acknowledged the existence of the perception in the discourse surrounding the character.<sup>721</sup> Furthermore, if we again consider Sinfield's argument that morally ambiguous and potentially divisive faultline texts are particularly interesting, an explanation for Superman's apparent decline in popularity can be located in the widely shared consensus, at least amongst film critics, that Donner's interpretation of the superhero, subsequent versions of him influenced by the director's portrayal, and the characteristics associated with him represent the Man of Steel as he is "meant" to be. In fact, it is perhaps the concretisation of the 1978 portrayal of Superman as the "authentic" version of the character in the minds of many critics and commentators that led *Empire* journalist Ian Nathan to suggest that "everything about Superman feels preordained.

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<sup>720</sup> Sinfield, *Cultural Politics - - Queer Reading*, 4.

<sup>721</sup> Weldon, "Superman's Real Kryptonite: American Politics"; Waid, "Reimagining the Man of Tomorrow," 292-303.

Characters, locations, the very look and sensibility of the mythology come encased in aspic as hard to shatter as Batman's world is pliable."<sup>722</sup>

If, as Nathan suggests, Superman's personality, identity, and meaning are perceived to be settled issues and unchangeable, uncontested facts that are not up for discussion, then, in contrast to faultline issues and stories, he can be seen as uncontroversial and perhaps uninteresting. By contrast, the fact that *Man of Steel* has provoked controversy suggests that it has revived Superman as a focus of interest and debate by challenging the prevalence of the Donner incarnation. As I suggested in Chapters Two and Four, even dominant perspectives can be contested if they are successfully challenged by an opposing narrative. Furthermore, this relationship of ideological competition can be used to argue that not only does *Man of Steel*, as a reboot of Superman, represent a threat to the primacy of Donner's film but also that the willingness of some to defend Reeve's incarnation of the character illustrates that his idealistic variation of Superman is not as irrelevant as many have implied.

If we accept Chapter Four's suggestion that the perception that Superman is, in his "essence," an idealistic character largely stems from *Superman: The Movie*, it can be argued that *Man of Steel* has been deemed a "lesser" interpretation by Edidin and others at least partially because it differs from the consensus established by the 1978 film within prominent critical discourses. According to this logic, and if we choose to follow the principles of rationalist coherence in this analysis, the morally ambiguous actions of *Man of Steel*'s Superman can be seen to present a "reality disjuncture" for those who believe in his essential goodness, because of their inconsistency with those viewers' understanding of his fundamental qualities.<sup>723</sup> Consequently, it can be argued that critics like Edidin may have dismissed the film because it threatens to disrupt their perceptions of what is perhaps, for them, a firmly

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<sup>722</sup> Nathan, "Kingdom Come," 69.

<sup>723</sup> Locke, *Re-crafting Rationalization*, 152.



held Truth. Furthermore, if we consider that *Superman: The Movie* has constructed its portrayal of Superman around principles of transcendent idealism and objective goodness, we can speculate that those who accept this representation as an articulation of an underlying Truth concerning Superman also believe that certain ideas and principles can be deemed to be objectively good. For these individuals, Superman might be considered worthwhile because he reminds others of what it means to be good, and his benevolent interventions and their effects provide illustrations of why it remains important for Real Life individuals to aspire to the moral idealism he represents. However, it is possible to suggest that the appeal of Superman to people who believe him to represent a sense of universal goodness is not simply that he endorses the existence of a singular, universal moral Truth but also that he may be utilised as a rhetorical means of convincing others that a particular point of view is objectively good or correct.

In fact, the debate that surrounded DC's appointment of Orson Scott Card, a prominent science fiction author and anti-gay marriage campaigner, as the writer of the online first comic series *The Adventures of Superman*, tentatively suggests that there is precedent for critics and audiences using Superman and his associated significance to put forward and legitimise personal points of view. For instance, considering the subject of Scott Card's appointment in an article for the *Guardian*, journalist Andrew Wheeler writes:

Superman is a good guy. More than that, Superman is the best guy. Created by writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster in 1932 [*sic*], he's the archetypal superhero, a man of enormous power who places himself in service to the powerless. To borrow a famous phrase from the 1940s Superman radio serial, he stands for "truth, justice and the American way."

It's hard to reconcile Superman's principles with the values of science fiction author Orson Scott Card.<sup>724</sup>

Wheeler's argument is nuanced but he goes on to state quite firmly that Scott Card's "principles do not align with Superman's"; Brett White, writing on *Comic Book Resources*, seemingly agrees:

Orson Scott Card can write all the science fiction he wants, creating the worlds from scratch and molding new characters to fit his outlook on life. That's his prerogative. He should not, however, be allowed to come anywhere near pre-established superheroes like Superman, who possess a single, unifying trait: an overwhelming compassion for all human beings and the desire to fight for their survival and rights. This is not a political statement. This truth goes beyond political leanings.<sup>725</sup>

Superman historian Glen Weldon also concurs in an article for *npr*, in which he suggests that Scott Card's politics do not correspond to Superman's nature as an "ideal" and a representative of "our best self."<sup>726</sup> However, writing on *Breitbart*, Nostradamus X disagrees with these sentiments:

Suddenly the liberal/gay community is trying to make Superman a symbol of their cause. But is he? Since the beginning, Superman has been the most [C]onservative of superheroes, even to the point that Frank Miller lambasted the character as a Reagan crony in his classic *The Dark Knight Returns*.

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<sup>724</sup> Andrew Wheeler, "Orson Scott Card Isn't the Right Man to Write Superman," *Guardian*, February 14, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/feb/14/orson-scott-card-superman-boycott>.

<sup>725</sup> Brett White, "Opinion: Orson Scott Card Hiring Sends Mixed Signals to DC's LGBT Fans," *Comic Book Resources*, February 12, 2013, <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=43714>.

<sup>726</sup> Glen Weldon, "The Man of Tomorrow: Superman, Orson Scott Card and Me," *npr*, February 17, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2013/02/17/172229592/man-of-tomorrow-superman-orson-scott-card-and-me>.

The most significant Superman comics have always focused on his old-fashioned views of morality, thinking of himself at heart as a farm boy who refuses to kill or interfere in the course of human events (the opposite of big government).

Whenever there's been a story where Superman adopts liberal principles, he's inevitably repented of his decision. Such as the story of the graphic novel *Kindgom Come*, where Superman went around punishing every superhero who disagreed with him, a bit like this current situation with liberals and Card. The only difference is Superman eventually realized he was wrong.<sup>727</sup>

All four of the contributors to the Orson Scott Card controversy support their arguments with reference to what they believe to be Superman's basic qualities. As we can see in the passages above, for Wheeler it is Superman's status as "the best guy" that makes Scott Card, whose views he considers negatively, an ill-fit as a Superman writer.<sup>728</sup> For White, it is the fact that Superman's "desire" to "fight" for "the survival and rights of all human beings" is a "truth that goes beyond political leanings" which renders Scott Card, as a "political commentator and outspoken opponent of homosexual behaviour," unfit to write stories for the character.<sup>729</sup> Similarly, Weldon considers Superman's essentially idealistic nature antithetical to, what he perceives to be, Scott Card's intolerant politics.<sup>730</sup> By contrast, Nostradamus X's paraphrasing of Jor-El's edict from *Superman: The Movie* indicates that he believes that Superman's morality and innate "Conservatism" effectively

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<sup>727</sup> Nostradamus X, "Can Superman Triumph Over Modern Thought Police?," *Breitbart*, February 20, 2013, <http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Hollywood/2013/02/19/liberals-superman-comics-writer>.

<sup>728</sup> Wheeler, "Orson Scott Card isn't the Right Man to Write Superman."

<sup>729</sup> White, "Opinion: Orson Scott Card Hiring Sends Mixed Signals to DC's LGBT Fans."

<sup>730</sup> Weldon, "The Man of Tomorrow: Superman, Orson Scott Card and Me."

originate from his natural reluctance to “interfere in the course of human events.”<sup>731</sup>

All four commentators refer to numerous Superman texts and Nostradamus X is the only contributor to cite Donner’s 1978 film explicitly. However, the fact that Wheeler, Weldon, and White all make reference to Superman’s status as a representative of fundamental, universal goodness suggests that their sense of the Man of Steel’s moral significance may be influenced by *Superman: The Movie*, or at least by subsequent texts that have drawn upon its portrayal of the character. If we accept this, it is possible to argue that, as is the case with historians who read Superman’s 1930s adventures politically, Weldon, Wheeler, White, and Nostradamus X are using the documentary method of interpretation to piece together selective readings of Superman that seek to reconcile his many incarnations with the tone of the dominant, supposedly true portrayal found in the 1978 film as well as their own understandings of what this version of the character represents.<sup>732</sup>

Indeed, it can be argued that these contributors are attempting to legitimise their personal worldviews by connecting them to the objectively good values that have been widely attributed to Superman since the release of Donner’s film at the same time as they are trying to delegitimise interpretations of the Man of Steel with which they disagree. If the post-Donner Superman, who represents essential goodness, can also be associated with liberal ideas concerning the equality of people with different sexual orientations then, if we again apply the rationalised logic of coherence, it follows that such principles must also be essentially good. Similarly, if Superman’s natural transcendence of partisan human disputes renders him a Conservative then, by association, Conservatism itself seems like a transcendent, universal principle. Here we can see that the universalisms associated with post-Donner understandings of Superman can be, and seemingly have been, co-opted by

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<sup>731</sup> Nostradamus X, “Can Superman Triumph Over Modern Thought Police?”; *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner.

<sup>732</sup> Locke, *Re-Crafting Rationalization*, 5.

readers and critics for the purposes of politically motivated rhetoric designed to frame their own personal, partisan viewpoints as consistent with accepted Common Sense understandings regarding Superman's idealised moral status and transcendent goodness.

This discussion lends support to my theory that those who defend Reeve's 1978 portrayal of Superman may not be motivated solely by the desire to conserve the status of a beloved film whose primacy is being challenged by another. Rather, as I have indicated, they may also be defending the legitimacy of certain values that they have attached to Reeve's Superman, such as the existence of a universally applicable concept of goodness, in response to *Man of Steel*, a film that can be seen to question both Superman's status as a moral exemplar and the viability of universalised understandings of morality through its provocation of divisive debates concerning the protagonist's actions. This use of the idealistic post-Donner Superman, as a tool through which individual political and moral philosophies may be validated, thus provides another example of the strategies through which people in western post-Enlightenment societies seek to establish subjective positions as universalisms by framing them as extensions of established, accepted Facts or objective Truths.

It is unclear yet whether Cavill's Superman in *Man of Steel* will dislodge Reeve's interpretation from its position of dominance. However, in common with Billig's assertion, outlined earlier, that even a position that enjoys acceptance as Common Sense can be challenged if another view questions its status as Truth and forces it to "take its place in the rhetorical battles of different philosophical perspectives," it can be suggested that *Man of Steel's* morally ambiguous rendering of Superman has at least a chance of replacing Reeve's as the "definitive" interpretation.<sup>733</sup> More to the point, it brings to the fore the possibility that the idea that Donner's rendering represents the "essential," universally moral Superman is, in fact, a rhetorical construction

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<sup>733</sup> Billig, *Arguing and Thinking*, 250.

that has been utilised as a means of legitimising specific, partial agendas and points of view, and that it is therefore a perspective that is subject to challenge. Indeed, it appears that *Man of Steel* has forced those critics who believe in *Superman: The Movie*'s status as the depiction of the "quintessential" version of the character to defend it, thus recategorising it and shifting it out of its privileged position in the minds of many commentators as an unquestioned, objective Truth and into the domain of contestable opinions. In fact, whilst reviews of *Man of Steel* were mixed overall, some critics have asserted that it surpasses *Superman: The Movie*.<sup>734</sup>

We have seen that Noahwayne0 rates *Man of Steel* as "the greatest Superman movie of all time" and "a hell of a lot better" than Reeve's incarnation and he is not the only individual to hold this view.<sup>735</sup> In a similar vein but perhaps more significantly, Jeremy Kirk of *Firstshowing* asserts that "even for those who grew up loving Richard Donner's direction and Christopher Reeve's portrayal of Superman, it's hard denying *Man of Steel* as the best film version the last son of Krypton has had," and Joe Comicbook of *comicbook.com* concurs, arguing that "*Man Of Steel* may be the best overall comic book movie ever made."<sup>736</sup> These reflections indicate that, whilst it may not yet have reached a position of prevalence, Cavill's interpretation of Superman might yet supplant Reeve's as the dominant portrayal if its reputation grows and more come to share these views.

However, this future is not inevitable and, following the arguments outlined in Chapter Two, it can be suggested that just as competing worldviews in broader discourse are locked in an ongoing struggle to either defend or establish their primacy, so *Man of Steel* must continuously reaffirm its claim to dominance if it is to attain and then maintain a hegemonic position as the perceived true representation of Superman. This probably means that its

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<sup>734</sup> "Man of Steel," Rotten Tomatoes.

<sup>735</sup> Noahwayne0, 2013, comment on Franich, "What *Man of Steel* Gets Wrong About Superman (Hint: That Ending)."

<sup>736</sup> Kirk, "Review: Despite Flaws, *Man of Steel* is Still the Best Superman Yet"; Comicbook, "*Man Of Steel* Review: The Best Comic Book Movie Ever Made."

success in this endeavour is dependent upon how its sequels are received and whether or not it comes to be regarded as the origin of a set of texts that once again reveal Superman's true character.

As my analysis throughout this thesis has implied, the discourse of reception is as transitive as Superman's own significance. Indeed, given that the perception that superhero texts should and do engage with the politics of their eras only began to emerge in earnest during the 1970s, it is possible to suggest that popular understandings of what makes a superhero text appealing change as time progresses and may alter again in the future. Consequently, if Superman is to retain his currency over time, he must adapt to alterations in perceptions and, if he is to remain popular in a period when superhero texts are at least partially evaluated according to their political Relevance in the traditional sense of the term, his creators should allow him to be open to such readings if they wish his narratives to be critically and commercially well-received, even if they do not represent the full extent of his meaning or appeal.

As far as Superman's future is concerned, it follows from this argument that it is difficult to predict. If Superman has no intrinsic "essence" that defines which interpretations are good or "legitimate," the question of his continued currency depends not on his innate characteristics but his ability to adapt to changing cultural climates in ways that audiences will accept. There is nothing automatic about this and, as the above analysis of the relationship between *Superman: The Movie* and *Man of Steel* illustrates, changes to Superman's character and reputation must be facilitated via a power struggle between different forces, each seeking to establish their vision of the character as the one acceptable incarnation.

As we have witnessed through the way in which Donner's film has been brought to bear against Snyder's, a portrayal that has been established as the dominant variation of Superman can be utilised by cultural commentators as

a device through which new interpretations of the character are policed and, as the debate surrounding *Man of Steel* illustrates, existing perceptions of his “essential” traits are sometimes difficult to shift. It follows that the most recent filmic incarnation of Superman faces an uphill struggle in establishing its primacy. However, if *Man of Steel* and future films featuring Henry Cavill’s Superman are successful enough to establish his rendering of the character as the dominant variation, it is possible that the Man of Steel may become reclaimed as a character who is at least open to political significance or Relevance as it has been traditionally defined by many critics. Conversely, if Reeve’s incarnation of Superman continues to be perceived as the definitive interpretation, then the superhero’s reputation for abstraction and, what is seen by many people as his irrelevance, may continue.

My research has led me to believe that it is this relationship of competition and continuous struggle between different understandings of Superman, rather than limited readings of the character along partisan party lines or as a direct expression of broad changes in American society, that constitutes the most important aspect of his political significance and Relevance. This understanding is reflected in the title of this thesis because, as the previous chapters have sought to demonstrate, there is not one, essentially true version of Superman: the character exists in numerous different interpretive “states.” In fact, at any one time, there exist different understandings of Superman held by people in distinct interpretive communities. One point of view may achieve dominance for some time and have a measure of success in convincing those who had previously held different interpretations to accommodate themselves to its seeming Truth. However, so long as Superman remains a popular cultural figure and his audience continues to recall his diverse history and form personal understandings of it, there will always be another conception of the character ready to challenge, supplant or redefine accepted perceptions of him. In this sense, the title of my thesis, *The United States of Superman*, refers to all the various renderings of the



character — from Jerry Siegel's Clark Gable influenced "romantic hero," to Weisinger's anxious science fiction rationalist, to Christopher Reeve's transcendent ideal, to Henry Cavill's morally ambiguous protagonist — all diverse in many respects but united in their struggle to imprint themselves upon the popular imagination.<sup>737</sup>

If the argument pursued throughout this thesis implies that Superman means different things to different people, it does not necessarily follow that he is ultimately empty of real, concrete meaning. Rather, we can see him as a mosaic or a collage whose overall meaning has been pieced together by different narratives by individual artists, writers, readers, and interpretive communities over time, each with a particular understanding of what he represents and with some wishing to persuade others of the correctness of their view. Any interpretation of Superman is informed by many others who have left their mark on the character; each reading can therefore be seen as a selective collaging of the different perspectives and ideas that have informed his various transformations over the years. He has, therefore, many potential meanings and is a versatile character who is capable of being, and indeed has been, co-opted to serve numerous functions and to articulate a diverse array of ideas. It is thus not surprising that some of his stories prompt controversy and discussion, as no one text can ever capture every reader or interpretive community's understanding of his significance. Indeed, any new reading of Superman is likely to alienate some fans or critics whose understanding of his meaning and values rests on an earlier incarnation that they believe to be true and correct. I would also suggest that it is his continuing ability to provoke debates that keeps Superman, as well as the meanings and significances associated with him, circulating in the popular consciousness.

However, the idea that Superman is a flexible figure, who is perceived in different ways by different people does not account for his unique significance. As Will Brooker has noted, Batman can also be considered a

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<sup>737</sup> Andrae, "Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster: Of Superman and Kids With Dreams," 31.

flexible character whose meaning is continuously subject to change and debate, and this is likely to be true of other superheroes.<sup>738</sup> What is interesting about Superman in particular is that, as a character that has been deemed to be not relevant by many, he tells us much about the nature of the Relevance discourse and how it is used rhetorically as a means of forwarding particular points of view.

Indeed, the conception of Superman as a figure whose universal principles naturally distance him from specific political or social concerns does not represent an objective Truth concerning the character. Rather, this representation of Superman can be seen as a rhetorical device that provides the means through which subjective, partial points of view might be framed as uncontested Fact by their becoming associated with the character's supposedly universal moral values. This possibility suggests that the very notion of irrelevance, can itself be political and, indeed relevant. Indeed, this example, taken in conjunction with my earlier discussion of how Superman comic book stories of the 1950s and 1960s reflect the principles of scientific rationalism and how Superman comics of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the television series *Lois & Clark* and *Smallville* from the 1990s and 2000s, articulate a contrasting form of Relevance in their "emotional realism," tells us that Relevance is not an objective concept that can and must only refer to the most explicitly political of texts. In fact, the possibility that the traditional Relevance discourse has itself been politicised in order to police the meanings associated with Superman suggests that scholars and critics should no longer draw upon it without caution. Instead, we should consider that just as, and perhaps because, different individuals and interpretive communities understand Superman in contrasting ways, there also exist various states of Relevance to which different Superman texts might appeal.

Indeed, as I have shown in my discussions throughout this thesis, even texts that do not engage with political Relevance as it is traditionally defined may

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<sup>738</sup> Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, 218.

tell us something profound about the nature of the societies in which we live in their reflection of the Common Senses that we hold. For instance, whilst Superman comics of the 1950s and 1960s can inform us about the contradictions inherent within the logic of scientific rationalism, the focus of *Smallville* on romantic relationships can tell us something about the cultural logics underpinning the practices of courtship in twenty-first century America. Similarly, when it is viewed from a certain angle, *Man of Steel* has potent insights to offer concerning the dilemmas faced by liberal, western societies, even if it is largely a science fiction narrative that has little direct connection to the specific political debates of Real Life. Even the supposedly transcendent, seemingly irrelevant Superman popularised by Richard Donner's 1978 film can be seen as a rhetorical construct initially designed to aid the fortunes of the film series in which he starred, and subsequently a device that is utilised by some to promote the Truth of their own points of view, a usage that can inform us a great deal about how arguments are pursued, as well as how subjective ideas become accepted as Common Sense. In this respect, then, just as the differing interpretations that can be made of the character constitute the "United States of Superman," so the Man of Steel whose adventures connect with the logical underpinnings of American culture in a diverse number of ways, can be said to embody the United States of Relevance. This is, for me, what makes him such a unique and fascinating cultural icon.

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