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Superhero Ecologies: An Environmental Reading of Contemporary Superhero Cinema

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Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis took the better portion of an entire year. It involved reading well over a thousand pages of research, watching nearly a hundred films, and immersing myself in some unfamiliar areas of both pop-culture and academia. Piecing it all together was oftentimes humbling, exhausting, and challenging, but in the grand scheme of things, I am incredibly grateful for the chance to have done this project. I have learned far more than I ever anticipated, and I am very proud of what it has become. Of course, none of it would be possible without the help of many.

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Introduction
Welcome to Silsby: Home of the World's Deepest Oil Well
and the Birth of Superhero Cinema

Most comic book scholars mark the beginning of the superhero genre as June 1938, when Superman made his first appearance in *Action Comics #1*. Superheroes became immensely popular following Superman's successful debut, heralding in what is known as the Golden Age of comics, introducing a slew of famous characters such as Batman, Aquaman, Captain America, and the Flash. Comics being a highly visual medium, it was only a matter of time before these stories were adjusted for the early screen.

That being said, the beginning of superhero cinema is a bit less absolute in comparison to the beginning of superhero comics. Even before Superman became an icon on the page, films were developing superheroes-of-sorts on screen, adapting mythological and pulp fiction characters like Zorro, Robin Hood, and Tarzan for the movies. In 1943, Columbia Pictures released a fifteen-chapter serial titled *The Batman* (Lambert Hillyer, 1943), bringing the caped crusader to the screen for the first time. However, it was not until 1951 that the first Superman feature film hit screens. Lippert Pictures released *Superman and the Mole Men* (Lee Sholem), an independent B-movie that introduced George Reeves as the man of steel, kicking off his role in the acclaimed television series *Adventures of Superman* (1952-1958). Reeves' Superman became the first live-action superhero on screen to reach the level of icon, so perhaps his November 23rd, 1951 debut can be considered superhero cinema's most precise birthdate.

After a brief voice-over narration providing some exposition at the film's very beginning, *Superman and the Mole Men* starts with a wide shot of a small town and then fades into a sign reading "Welcome to Silsby: Home of the World's Deepest Oil Well." In a subsequent shot, the camera pans down an enormous derrick from top to bottom. As made clear from these first few

images, the film will focus heavily on the small town's oil industry, and the enormous well will be a key feature of the plot.

As the story continues, reporters Clark Kent—Superman's alter-ego—and Lois Lane arrive in Silsby to write a story on the famous well. Upon getting there, though, they find that the well has been shut down for some mysterious reason. After one of the oil workers is found dead, the reporters as well as the audience find out that the well was decommissioned because its drill, reaching unprecedented depths, came back with traces of radium, rendering it highly dangerous. The mystery does not end there, however. At the same time as Clark and Lois start to suspect something stranger is at hand, little gremlin-like creatures—the Mole Men—start to climb out of the well. With misshapen undersized bodies and enormous heads, these Mole Men start to frighten people around Silsby. The Mole Men are also radioactive. Everything they touch lights up with life-threatening levels of nuclear contamination. In actuality, the Mole Men are really just scared and confused creatures, strangers in a strange land who curiously climbed to the surface when Silsby drilled a hole into their underground habitat. Unfortunately, their uncanny appearance still terrifies the townsfolk, so some of Silsby's more brutish men rally together to hunt down and kill these subterranean outsiders.

Superman is the only one who stands between the Mole Men and the townspeople. Only he understands the creatures' radioactive dangers, but at the same time, only he knows that they intend no harm. With great leadership and democratic consideration, Superman successfully keeps the two parties from hurting each other by the end of the movie, and the mole men submissively return to their underground environment. After they have gone back beneath the surface, though, radioactive bolts start to shoot up from beneath the oilrig. In a subsequent long shot of the derrick, the entire structure blows up in a massive explosion and then proceeds to

burn away in a fiery blaze. The camera cuts back to Superman, Lois, and two locals watching the inferno from the sidelines. One of the locals exclaims, "They're destroying the well and the casing so no one can ever get to them again." Following one more shot of the oilrig in flames, the camera cuts to Lois standing beside Superman. Pensively, she states the final line, "It's almost as if they're saying 'you live your lives, and we'll live ours.'" Superman nods in agreement as the scene fades to black.

While one can easily read *Superman and the Mole Men* as an upfront story about 1950s nuclear anxieties and Cold War paranoia, the story also begs a long overdue environmental reading. The Mole Men, after all, come from beneath the Earth's very surface, and they rise up only because humanity chose to drill into their subterranean home in search for oil. The film's central conflict could then symbolize the consequences of humans' over-extraction of natural resources. Through this lens, Lois' final line leaves viewers with the sense that nature demands respect, and if humanity abuses it, they will suffer severe ecological backlash.

Little to no eco-criticism has been written about *Superman and the Mole Men*. In fact, very little eco-criticism has been written about the cinematic superhero genre in general. This is surprising, especially considering that the genre has evidently harbored environmental subtexts since its earliest pictures. Nevertheless, even as comic and cinema studies have gained recent legitimacy in academia, and superhero films have dominated the box-office in popularity, few scholars have attempted to study this growing genre through an environmental lens. Perhaps this is due to the fact that many superhero movies are often taken at a face value that seems to resist any further philosophical—let alone eco-sophical—investigation. The clear-cut morality and sometimes-childish conventions portrayed in superhero cinema may have rendered scholars unwilling to dig into these films as texts worthy of higher meaning. Even in the genre's

contemporary success, viewers may simply write off the booming superhero franchises as superficial blockbusters, good for entertainment, but not much else.

After watching a vast anthology of superhero cinema, though, starting with *Superman and the Mole Men* and ending with the most recent Marvel adaptations, one begins to see that the genre has always held an environmental subtext. Evolving over time, the American superhero film genre's ecological depictions and subtle discourses reflect humanity's versatile and adaptive relationship with nature. This thesis will explore how superhero cinema has told and continues to tell environmental stories, especially in recent years, as the genre reaches new heights and transforms to tell new, perhaps even more-obvious ecological narratives.

Before delving into specifics, one must understand a few key terms that will be pertinent to this thesis. First of all, the term "superhero cinema" is rather vague on its own. As aforementioned, superheroes do not have a definite starting point on the screen, and the genre lacks an absolute iconography. In the most liberal of terms, one could claim that contemporary protagonists such as Harry Potter or Indiana Jones are superheroes due to their high mimetic statuses and altruistic morals. On the other hand, under the strictest definition, one could exclude the Incredible Hulk or Doctor Strange from the superhero category simply for not sporting masks or occasionally breaching clear-cut morality. This paper will do its best to drawn a line and stay true to it, focusing primarily on movies that were adapted from comic books and have been specifically marketed as superhero stories. This takes Harry Potter and Indiana Jones out of the running, but it lets Hulk, Strange, and some of their other friends back in.

Likewise, the emphasis on cinema alone also carries much weight when talking about superheroes. In today's world, the superhero genre has become highly multi-media, appearing not only in movies and comics, but also in television shows, mini-series, novels, video games,

cartoons and even Broadway plays. The list could go on, especially in the current digital age when global fan-bases provide seemingly endless additional content online. While all of these genres deserve to be studied at some point, this paper will try to retain a specific attention and focus more-or-less exclusively on live-action cinema. Admittedly, some of the other mediums—especially comics—will come up in contextual conversation with film, but the foremost emphasis will always remain on the movies.

However, even given these stipulations, superhero movies are still a vast category. Thus, this paper will also cater its readings to *contemporary* superhero cinema, namely, the movies that have come out within the twenty-first century. After all, superhero movies have only really taken American cinema by storm in recent years. In order to thoroughly understand the genre and its larger connotations, one must consider it at its current height in popularity. Again, examples of superhero cinema appearing before the year 2000 will also come up, but they will largely serve as retroactive pieces for historical understanding.

The twenty-first century is also a very important time for eco-criticism, specifically in the field of cinema studies. *Ecocinema* is thus a very new term in academia, but it is nonetheless crucial. In Salma Monani and Stephen Rust's introduction to their anthology, *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, they state:

> While film and media scholars have always explored cinema's
> cultural negotiations, until recently ecocritical perspectives have
> been largely absent in the scholarship. A somewhat remiss tack,
> since from production to consumption and recirculation, the
> cinematic experience is inescapably embedded in ecological webs.
> Cinematic texts, with their audio-visual presentations of

> individuals and their habitats, affect our imaginations of the world
>
> around us, and thus, potentially, our actions towards this world.
>
> (Monani 2)

Writing in 2013, these scholars stress eco-criticism's contemporary importance and its inextricable relationship with film. Tellingly, ecocinema's growth in twenty-first century academia seems to parallel the superhero genre's rising popularity since the turn of the millennium. Perhaps the two can inform one another ways that are more than mere coincidence.

That being said, this thesis will not try to claim that Hollywood executives are ever gathering around a table to discuss environmental theory when planning their next superhero blockbuster. It is also well aware that superhero cinema as an industry is not the best thing for the environment. Making big-budget movies takes an immense number of resources. Then, the following fanaticism for these movies, taking place in multiplex movie theaters and at larger events such as San Diego's Comic-Con, does an equal amount of ecological damage. This project will knowingly remove itself from that sector and focus instead on the stories, reading superhero movies as narrative art forms that speak for themselves. Only through this lens can one start to see the eco-critical value riddled within superhero cinema. Although the superhero genre may not be the most obvious type of movies to choose for ecocinematic research, Monani and Rust claim that "ecocinema is not simply limited to films with explicit messages of environmental consciousness, but investigates the breadth of cinema from Hollywood corporate productions and independent avant-gard films to the expanding media sites in which producers, consumers, and texts interact" (Manani 2). Such is the nature of all theoretical research and readings in the end. It is not enough to study what is explicit or intended in a text. The surface is

just the beginning; one must dig deep into unexpected and unprecedented territories to find new, provocative meanings.

Thus, this thesis will use a combination of scholarship from the fields of comics, cinema, and environmental studies to investigate how contemporary superhero cinema communicates environmental messages. Chapter One will look at the genre's conventional depiction of landscapes, particularly the city, and what roles these places serve in the stories. Chapter Two will then turn to these film's visual effects, investigating how the genre's pertinent use of CGI creates places and characters that allude to a posthuman condition in the contemporary Anthropocene. Lastly, Chapter Three will look at superheroes' purposes and ethical implications in the context of global environmental crises such as climate change, studying how the genre has transformed to reevaluate heroism in a world on the brink of inevitable disaster.

As a more-recent Superman actor, Christopher Reeve, wrote in a memoir, "To say that I believed in Superman is quite an understatement. Of course I knew it was only a movie, but it seemed to me that the values embodied by Superman on the screen should be the values that prevail in the real world" (Reeve 159). Superman is obviously not real, but his stories are, and popular cinema is a very effective way to share these stories. In a world that changes and requires more environmental consideration than ever before, perhaps superhero movies can be a tool, and rethinking them to look for their eco-critical connotations might prove crucial. Filmmakers, of course, hold great power in creating these films, but once they get projected on a screen, the power falls to the viewers, wielding criticism, revision, and interpretation as their greatest strengths. May this paper be but one humble use of this power. May it prevail in the real world.

Chapter 1
Superheroes, Cities, and Subordinate Landscapes

In 1978, moviegoers watched an unsuspecting Jonathan and Martha Kent drive across a lonely prairie road in Richard Donner's *Superman*. Because Superman's origins were already a part of American pop-cultural folklore at this time, the audience could likely anticipate in this early scene that the Kents' innocent rural lives were about to change dramatically. Before the couple's very eyes, a meteor-like object speeds out of the atmosphere and crashes into the open plains beside the road. The Kents pull over to investigate the crash and find the object to be an alien spacecraft carrying a young humanoid child. The child quickly reveals himself as supernatural when he is able to lift Martha and Jonathan's car with his own two hands. As the iconic story goes, the Kents take the child in, name him Clark, and raise him on their farm in Smallville, Kansas. The film's subsequent early scenes show Clark growing up in the pastoral town, learning about his abilities, and eventually leaving for the arctic to discover his true purpose on Earth. The story spends fewer than ten minutes on Clark's wilderness excursion before audiences find him in the far more familiar setting of Metropolis, the fictional pseudo-New York City that Clark Kent and Superman call home in the majority of stories.

In this urban landscape, Superman can finally use his powers to their fullest potential, protecting people from ubiquitous crime and offering a beacon of hope amongst the city's dangers. This transformation from the pastoral farm to the action-packed city is a conventional aspect of American mythological character arcs. Like F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby or L. Frank Baum's Dorothy Gale, Clark Kent grew up in the barren Great Plains, somewhere in between the wondrous Western frontier and the established Eastern seaboard. Only after a brief

stint in the character-building wild does Clark realize his identity as Superman and then arrive in Metropolis to, as he so eloquently puts it, "fight for truth, justice, and the American way."

The urban landscape is unquestionably the most common setting for American superhero narratives, and the representation of cities in these stories has traditionally followed their established place in national mythology over time. As seen in *Superman*, cities are places where crime needs fighting and a hero can serve a purpose. The city requires a hero more than anywhere else, and it conventionally serves as a perfect setting for thrilling, episodic narratives. This image of the city, however, is not constant. As the genre develops throughout the years, its representations of cities and their surrounding landscapes are perpetually transformed, challenged, and subverted. This chapter will study the way that superhero movies have depicted different environments, focusing on the city's evolutionary significance as the genre's primary setting, but also examining the roles of subordinate landscapes such as the wilderness, the suburbs, and the pastoral. Starting off this thesis by looking at the way superhero cinema represents different spaces will show that the environment and its depiction over time hold crucial significance in the genre. Much like those in the real world, the environments shown in superhero movies are constantly changing, and with each represented shift, the genre feeds a larger eco-critical commentary that slowly becomes part of its iconography.

An Evolution of the Hero's Urban Home

Ever since the dawn of mainstream superheroes in comic books' Golden Age, the city has served as the supernatural protagonists' most common abode. In many ways, cities have always made obvious sense as these stories' settings. Urban environments have more crime, and thus more action and more people to be saved. From a production standpoint, a city also offers an

endless supply of problems and stories to address, making it plausible for a character to come back in comic issue after comic issue to repeatedly save the day in slightly new ways each time. Likewise, early superhero comics draw influences from preexisting mediums and archetypes that already established the city as a go-to place for enthralling adventure. As comics scholar Peter Coogan states, "the best popular culture, whether Homer's epics, Shakespeare's plays, or the televised adventures of Xena of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, combine preexisting elements in new and exciting ways. They follow the dictates for success in formula, balancing convention and invention to create successful, popular, and archetypal stories and characters" (Coogan 13). Western literature as old and iconic as Homer's *The Iliad*, Henry Field's *Tom Jones*, and Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* have always placed the climax of the hero's journey in an urban environment, establishing it as a conventional landscape for excitement. The city environment is just one of the many pre-established narrative functions that the superhero genre adopted and incorporated for itself early on.

Furthermore, around the same time that superhero comics were popularized, American movies also fostered strong urban representations through film noir, a dreary cinematic mode that began after World War II. Noir films typically offer audiences pessimistic stories with stylized darkness. In "Notes on Film Noir," Paul Schrader explains that "noir heroes dread to look ahead, but instead try to survive by the day, and if unsuccessful at that, they retreat to the past. Thus, film noir's techniques emphasize loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, and insecurity, then submerge these self-doubts in mannerism and style" (Schrader 273).[1] Usually, these movies take place in cities, drawing influence from German Expressionist and American gangster films. Cities serve as quintessential plot devices in noir films, for the sprawling,

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[1] Some of film noir's most notable titles include John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* (1953), and Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958).

overpopulated, and shady environment can reflect the tangled labyrinth that its heroes helplessly try navigating through. Anthony R. Mills makes the connection between noir and superhero comics in *American Theology*, *Superhero Comics*, *and Cinema*. According to Mills, the eastern American cities needed a parallel literary response to Western stories, for "as the growing industrialized cities of the east became the cultural center of the United States once again in the twentieth century, the literature expressing American mythology needed to accommodate those who knew nothing of the frontier" (Mills 23). Thus, as immediate post-World War II images of American exceptionalism brought the Western genre to peak popularity in cinema, noir followed suit, and its influence quickly bled down to comics.

Mills further explains, "Superman is an urban version of the western hero, an adaptation who resolves the unique tensions of life in the city. Even more than Superman, Batman reflects the gritty noir underworld of urban crime; his explicit intent is to drive fear into the hearts of criminals" (Mills 24). Noir heroes typically put justice over law and uphold strong moral codes even when authorities advise against them. Unlike the Western cowboy who acts in a frontier environment devoid of established rules, urban noir heroes are surrounded by systems of regulation, but they refuse to let a commitment to the establishment undermine their utilitarian goals. In plainer words, noir heroes are vigilantes, just like Batman, Daredevil, the Punisher, or just about any other iconic superhero one can think of. As Andrew R. Bahlman explains in *The Mythology of the Superhero*, "whenever a superhero sees a conflict between the rules of the legal system and his rules of justice, he will promote said justice over the legal system that holds sway in the society of the hero" (Bahlman 56). Audiences can still find this trope in contemporary superhero movies like Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005), Jon Favreau's *Iron Man* (2008), and Joe and Anthony Russo's *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) amongst so

many others. Corrupt urban bureaucracy engulfs modern superheroes in their environments. Like film noir heroes, they are the only ones willing to go against the grain and liberate the city from its domineering constraints.

As American society and culture progressed into the 1960s, though, the superhero genre and its urban representations also changed. The Vietnam War slowly ended the public image of an all-good American nation, and thus the frontier-based Western lost its cinematic popularity. Conventional film noir as a perpetually reproduced genre also met an end as the Hollywood studio system fell apart. For the first time, independent filmmakers could find success in the movie industry and challenge the traditional rules established in the Hays Production Code. Consequently, film noir transformed into neo-noir during this Hollywood Renaissance, with more on-screen violence and daringness than ever before. Neo-noir titles like Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) still take place in urban environments and deal with domineering authorities, but they do so with heightened, austere realism. Superheroes followed some of these liberal transformations as American comics entered their Silver Age. Mills defines this Silver Age as the era starting in 1961 when Marvel Comics' writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby created new heroes and stories that "represent a genuine revolution in the notions of what it means to be human" (Mills 96). Just as the destruction of the Hays Production Code opened up more freedom for cinema in the 1960s, the similarly overbearing Comic Code disappeared during this same decade, allowing Lee and Kirby to introduce more original heroes such as the Fantastic Four, X-Men, Iron Man, The Incredible Hulk, and of course, your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man. These heroes captured America's hearts, but offered very different images of urban superheroes, with more moral ambiguity and inner conflicts than ever before.

No longer was the superhero a divine sight to behold in the 60s and 70s, and non-coincidentally, neither was the American city. In Scott Bukatman's "A Song of the Urban Superhero," he proposes that at one point "American superheroes encapsulated and embodied the same utopian aspirations of modernity as the cities themselves. Superhero narratives thus comprise a genre that joins World's Fairs, urban musicals, and slapstick comedies in presenting urban modernity as a utopia of sublime grace. These comics dream impossible figures in ideal cities" (Bukatman 171). However, with nuclear anxieties regarding humankind's newfound ability to instantly destroy its metropolises and an advanced sense of environmental awareness overtaking the public conscience in the second half of the twentieth century, the city's technological sublime could not hold the same weight in American society.[2] As the city grew more vulnerable, so did its heroic inhabitants.

Not until the 1980s did superheroes truly catch up with neo-noir's urban grit, though. As far as mainstream culture went, superheroes' most recognizable presentation throughout the 1960s and early 70s was the sardonic *Batman* (Lorenzo Semple Jr. and William Dozier, 1966-1968) television series starring Adam West and Burt Ward. While Stan Lee and Jack Kirby transformed comics to reveal superheroes as complex and human, *Batman* offered an early, influential filmic representation of superheroes that emphasized camp and humor. In the 1980s, however, comics underwent another renaissance, entering the Bronze Age with the rise of graphic novels, which helped establish the medium as a more respected narrative art form. By the 80s, urban America had lost its glory and the American people often saw places like New

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[2] Mid-twentieth century scholar Perry Miller coined the term "technological sublime" in *The Life in the Mind of America*, writing retroactively about nineteenth century America's fascination with technological achievements such as steamboats, locomotives, and industrialized cities. He claims that such man-made inventions were evoking the same kind of spiritual awesomeness as some of nature's most compelling wonders.

York City and Chicago as dangerously over-packed assortments of violent neighborhoods. In reference to this new urban image's effect on the post-Silver Age superhero genre, Mills states:

> This concern with the self continued into the 1980s, but was now augmented by an intensified distrust of government and a loss of national identity, which became manifested in two significant ways. For one, the rise of violent crime in urban areas instigated a glorification of vigilantism, both real and fictional. For another, America was still reeling from its loss in Vietnam, and a variety of media in the 1980s tried to compensate by presenting rescue and revenge fantasies. All of this was facilitated by the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who brought with him conservative patriotic views, an attitude of American superiority, and an ethic of cowboy justice. (Mills 99)

Thus, while Hollywood brought *Superman* to the big screen at this time, adapting perhaps the most patriotic of superheroes to clean up the city with his Reagan-like sense of American pride, comics took a more critical angle through masterful graphic novels such as Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* and Frank Millers' *The Dark Knight Returns*. Both of these groundbreaking pieces depict cities as places of wretched filth, where superheroes can hardly do any good without being ostracized. Miller's story portrays Batman as an aged and infamous icon who has been in retirement ever since realizing that Gotham City is beyond saving. Unlike the happy, innocent Gotham depicted in earlier comics or the 1966 TV series, the setting that Miller establishes is desolate, dark, and unwelcoming. Similarly, in the opening pages of Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen*, an unseen narrator (who ends up being revealed as the vigilante hero Rorschach) shares his October 12th, 1985 journal entry with the reader. Across the panels, his scrawl states, "This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face. The streets are extended gutters

and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown.

The accumulated filth of all their sex and murder will foam up about their waists and all the

whores and politicians will look up and shout 'save us'… and I will look down and whisper

'no'" (Moore 9).[3] From this initial text alone, readers can tell that *Watchmen* is not a story about

heroes preserving the urban environment's purity, but one about heroes who will fight to clean

up the muddy streets even if those streets resist cleaning, and they will happily let the dirty and

corrupted perish in the process. As Mills puts it, for comics in the 1980s, "this meant the creation

and presentation of grim and gritty heroes who were barely discernable from villains. By this

time [Stan] Lee's concerns and values were considered obsolete and irrelevant. Something had to

be done *now*, whatever it takes" (Mills 99).

　　While the loveable Superman held the cinematic stage for most of the 1980s, it was not

until the decade's final year that superhero film caught up with its graphic novel predecessors'

culturally relevant grit. In 1989, Warner Brothers Studios and director Tim Burton released

Batman, the year's most highly anticipated summer blockbuster. Starring Michael Keaton as the

caped crusader and Jack Nicholson as the evil Joker, *Batman*'s impressive casting already

promised a new, more mature take on the superhero genre. Upon its release, *Batman* delivered

the dark urbanity that comic fans yearned to see come alive. In the very first scene, Gotham City

looks like the one that Miller presents in *The Dark Knight Returns*. The opening shot shows the

city skyline at night, dimly lit through excessive fog. Closer subsequent shots show the

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[3] Interestingly, Rorschach's opening entry in *Watchmen* has stark parallels to the opening voice-over monologue in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. In Scorsese's film, the disgruntled cab-driving protagonist, Travis Bickle, reads from his journal entry about New York City, stating, "All the animals come out at night—whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies. Sick, venal. Someday a real rain'll come and wash all this scum off the streets. I go all over. I take people to the Bronx, Brooklyn, I take 'em to Harlem. I don't care. Don't make no difference to me. It does to some. Some won't even take spooks. Don't make no difference to me." His disgust about the city and his indifference for the fate of its residents establishes Bickle as the same kind of anti-hero as Rorschach. Evidently, comics were still drawing influence from neo-noir films in the Bronze Age, and they were attacking similar socio-political phenomena through their representations of urbanity.

downtown streets crowded with eerie Gothic architecture and destitute-looking people. The

camera soon focuses on a family trying to hail a cab, but they cannot get any attention. As the

family elbows their way down the busy sidewalk, they pass by bums and prostitutes. No one is

smiling and everything looks dirty. The family eventually escapes the crowds to take a short cut

down an alley where they are heckled for money and then mugged by two pistol-wielding men.

Subsequently, as the muggers count their money on a rooftop, they start to fearfully muse

about the elusive "bat" that has been attacking criminals at night. In a moment of dramatic irony,

Batman floats down into the frame's background. The muggers do not see him and they continue

talking about his mysterious ways. Meanwhile, the bat-like figure creeps closer through the

omnipresent smoke. Eventually, a high-angle point of view (POV) shot of the muggers lets the

audience know that Batman is right on top of them. As they look up, the camera cuts to a low-

angle, full-body reverse shot of Batman menacingly spreading his black wings to the criminals'

terror. The robbers immediately run in fear and Batman follows at a measured pace. They soon

turn around and shoot Batman in the chest, making him fall and offering a moment of relief

before he slowly rises again to spread his wings once more. In quick-cutting shots, Batman kicks

one of the robbers through a door and then ties up the other one by the ankle before dangling him

over the edge of the building. Looking down at the several story drop below him, the robber

hysterically begs, "Don't kill me," and Batman evenly responds "I'm not going to kill you. I

want you to do me a favor. I want you to tell all your friends about me." Still panicked, the

robber cries "What are you?" to which Batman pulls him close and utters, "I'm Batman," before

throwing him aside and flying off the rooftop. From this opening sequence, one can already see

that Tim Burton's *Batman* offers a new kind of protagonist and urban environment to the

superhero film genre. As an extension of Gotham City's bleak depiction in the opening shots, the

hero himself appears as a terrifying figure. Throughout Batman's entire attack on the robbers, dark musical queues seem to highlight his frightening qualities. The scene almost appears like something out of a horror movie, with Batman as the masked slasher and the robbers as the terrified victims.

Compare this scene with Superman's introduction to the screen in 1978. Superman's love interest, Lois Lane, hangs for dear life from a broken-down helicopter atop Metropolis' Daily Planet skyscraper. When Clark Kent sees this, he breaks open his buttoned shirt, revealing the famous Superman "S" before going into a revolving door and coming out the other side in the complete Superman outfit— red cape, bright tights, hair curl and all. Lois loses her grip and begins falling only for Superman to swoop in and catch her on the way down, coolly reassuring her with a charming grin, "Don't worry miss, I've got you." Moments later, the helicopter falls and while the hoards of citizens and reporters below shriek in fear, Superman simply reaches out an arm to effortlessly snag it out of midair. The booming John Williams score begins playing as the bystanders below clap, cheer, and look up in awe at Superman ascending back to the tower's roof with the helicopter and an unharmed Lois. Once landed, he charismatically tells Lois, "Well, I certainly hope this little incident hasn't put you off flying, miss; statistically speaking, of course, it's still the safest way to travel." He then introduces himself as a friend before flying off with a smile and a wave. In this heroic debut, the protagonist is a colorful spectacle that the entire city witnesses with wonder and applause. Superman's first public appearance in the film makes it clear that he is there to protect Metropolis' people from harm. In *Batman*, however, nobody cheers for the hero; even the family that falls victim to the muggers does not see him evoke justice. Like Rorschach in Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen*, Burton's Batman is not in the

hero business for the city's approval. The city is a cesspool of slime and villainy that refuses to clean itself up, so the hero does not ask for its permission to do so on his own terms.

Throughout the 1990s, the superhero genre went through somewhat of a relapse. After Tim Burton expanded his dreary depiction of Gotham City with *Batman Returns* in 1992, director Joel Schumacher took the franchise's reins, creating *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman and Robin* (1997). Schumacher digressed from Burton's mysterious depiction of the character and instead decided to try recapturing the campy energy from the 1960s television show. Filled with poor casting and egregious puns, Schumacher's two Batman films met critical scrutiny.[4] While lighthearted superhero narratives may have been accepted with open arms in the 1960s, the genre had developed dramatically since then, and audiences now craved something more critical out of their urban vigilantes. The closest that fans could come to their ideal representations throughout the 1990s was on television. Particularly, Fox Kids' *Batman: The Animated Series* (Bob Kane, 1992-1995) draws directly from Tim Burton's representation of the character and environment. Visually, it captures the same somber imagery of Batman and Gotham City, as animators actually drew the show's artwork on black paper to evoke a constant shadowy aesthetic.[5]

Nevertheless, these shows still catered primarily to children, airing on kids' networks often during the daytime. The genre became stuck in somewhat of a patronizing cycle that deviated from its 1980s experimental success. Likewise, America's cities no longer carried the

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[4] *Batman Forever* included Val Kilmer as Batman, Jim Carrey as the Riddler, and Tommy Lee Jones as Two-Face. While all commendable actors, they seemed more-than-slightly out of place as these comic book characters, especially when depicted with such outdated camp. *Batman & Robin* replaced Val Kilmer with George Clooney as the protagonist, and casted Arnold Schwarzenegger as antagonist Mr. Freeze. While Mr. Freeze has been known to be an intensely dangerous villain in the Batman comics, the movie mostly used his character to create a long line of bad puns about ice and cold weather.

[5] *Batman: The Animated Series* inspired other 1990s superhero cartoon series such as *Batman Beyond* (Bob Kane and Bill Finger, 1999-2001) and *Superman: The Animated Series* (Joe Shuster, 1996-2000), which all took place in the same universe and eventually converged in the 2000s on Cartoon Network's *Justice League* (Bob Kane and Joe Shuster, 2001-2004) series.

same grim connotations that they did in previous decades either, and the nation's new leaders hardly fostered the same heroic presentation as Ronald Reagan did before them. Therefore, it may have seemed as if the superhero genre would burn out upon entering the new millennium. With the comic book industry dying, dramas like *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), and *Forest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1995) dominating the box office, and American city's losing their prevalence on the screen, perhaps superheroes would fade into no more than relics of film history. Little did moviegoers know, however, that the genre was on the cusp of an unparalleled cinematic revitalization and America's urban environments would never be the same again.

In July of 2000, 20th Century Fox and director Bryan Singer released *X-Men* (2000), a strikingly modern, live-action film adaptation of the beloved Marvel comic series. With stunning visual effects for the time, a well-constructed story, and a stellar cast including Patrick Stewart, Ian McKellen, Halle Berry and introducing Hugh Jackman as the main protagonist, Wolverine, *X-Men* soared critically and commercially, emphatically putting superhero movies back on the map. Meanwhile, Marvel also revamped their comics in 2000 with the *Ultimate* series. The *Ultimate* series restarted Marvel's vast and extensive timeline, reintroducing all of their characters with updated origin stories and contemporary urban settings. All of the sudden, iconic superheroes were ingrained back into pop-culture for a whole new generation.

On the heels of 20th Century Fox's success with *X-Men*, Columbia Pictures was quick to adapt Marvel's most iconic hero for the big screen with *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002). Spider-Man is perhaps the prototypical urban hero, coming from Queens and hardly ever moving beyond New York City's borders. *Spider-Man* thus takes place entirely in New York City and the studio shot much of the film on location there. Many of the film's most visually memorable

scenes depict the hero swinging through Manhattan's skyscrapers, making the urban environment part of the film's narrative and aesthetic fabric. Moreover, Spider-Man is one of the heroes most known for keeping a secret alter-ego, and throughout the film, he must work to keep his identity as lowly high-school student Peter Parker separate from his identity as Spider-Man. Only in the city, however, can Peter divide his identities so acutely. As Bukatman states, "whether in their true identity… or incarnated in their more spectacular forms, superheroes play a continuous game of deception and duplicity that could only be played out in the city," for "the city is a haven for imposters" (Bukatman 189). If there were not crowds of citizens to hide amongst or narrow alleyways to change into costume in, a mask would only do so much good and a hero would hardly survive without revealing who he or she really is. Without the urban environment iconographically ingrained into the genre, many of superheroes' most recognizable traits such as secret identities, masks, and costumes would become futile.

The New York City setting has always been a staple of Spider-Man's lore and Columbia Pictures intended to capitalize on that in their film's marketing. Its first trailer came out near the end of the summer of 2001, with a sequence that was not created for the final film, but simply meant to give audiences a glimpse into the kind of movie they had to look forward to the following spring. In the trailer, a group of armed robbers infiltrate and steal from a New York City bank before ascending to the building's rooftop to escape in a helicopter. The criminals happily soar over Manhattan, celebrating their heist until something jolts the helicopter back in midair. The money goes flying out the window and the helicopter is pulled to a sudden halt. Over a series of increasingly wide shots, the camera reveals that the vehicle is caught in an enormous web, suspended a thousand feet in the air between the World Trade Center's Twin Towers. The

image promised hope and even a touch of camp at the time of the trailer's release, but audiences

could have never imagined what it would soon evolve into.

Broken Cities and Box-Office Superheroes in Post-9/11 America

Hardly a month after the first *Spider-Man* trailer's release, this iconic image of the web-

tangled helicopter changed entirely. What was initially intended to let viewers know that the

New York City setting would be a quintessential aspect to the hopeful and fun superhero story no

longer appeared appropriate. On September 11th, 2001, as hijacked planes struck the World

Trade center and the skyscrapers fell to the ground, covering Manhattan in incinerated dust,

Hollywood and the American city's image transformed. No longer could filmmakers create

urban disaster films as innocently fictional representations. Also, no longer could audiences

unapologetically indulge in voyeuristically watching national monuments crumble to the ground

on screen.[6]

In a single day, the city became an anxiety-ridden place in the American consciousness.

Nobody wanted to relive the terrible events that occurred in New York, but at the same time, it

seemed impossible and perhaps even disrespectful to repress them. Terrence McSweeney

explores this effect on American cinema in *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11*

Frames Per Second. He explains in his introduction how "9/11 was both erased from the cinema

screens and returned to in film after film," creating cinematic allegory that in some ways

consumerised trauma, but in other ways paid homage to the nation's fragile state (McSweeney

2). The producers of *Spider-Man*, for example, swiftly pulled their original trailer from theaters

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[6] Examples of these kinds of urban disaster films from before 9/11 include *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996), *Godzilla* (Roland Emmerich, 1998), and *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998). Each of these films shows ruined American cityscapes and iconic structures such as the White House, the Chrysler Building and even the Twin Towers themselves under destruction. Following the attacks, such images could not be shown on screen as inoffensively.

and edited any shots in the movie that showed the Towers so that the late landmarks would not appear in the final cut. The film covered up the evidence of what once was, for the horrific memory was too ripe to share. At the same time, however, the film's narrative now carried new weight. Just as anxieties around nuclear weapons transformed superhero comics after the second World War, the vulnerabilities following 9/11 made superhero stories all the more relevant in the twenty-first century.[7] The American city once again felt exposed and capable of being destroyed, so in a way, audiences could find solace in fictional supernatural beings saving their urban centers from destruction.

It thus seems like no coincidence that Warner Brothers brought back its original *Superman* franchise in the early 2000s. Although the series' previous movie was released nearly two decades earlier, America once again needed someone to fight for its way and protect its cities. Brandon Roth replaced Christopher Reeve as Superman in the new film, and Warner Brothers put *X-Men*'s Bryan Singer behind the camera to direct the highly anticipated *Superman Returns* (2006). Throughout the finished film, the post-9/11 allegory is quite strong and it transparently creates a commentary on heroism in the post-traumatic American city. When the movie initially reintroduces Superman to Metropolis for the first time in five years—and to moviegoers for the first time in nineteen years— he is saving a plane about to crash land into a packed baseball stadium. Lois Lane is aboard the plane, putting her in the same kind of flight-related danger that she underwent when Superman first saved her in 1978, only this time, it is not centered around a malfunctioning helicopter with only her life at stake, but a commercial airliner filled with innocent citizens. Just before the plane is about to nose-dive into the ballpark, Superman places himself between the aircraft and the ground, cradling it to a safe landing as the

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[7] As aforementioned, nuclear anxieties were a major reason that superhero comics introduced more vulnerable protagonists in the medium's Silver Age. Headlining Marvel heroes like Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, and Daredevil all got their powers through some sort of radiation in the 1960s.

stadium cheers and everyone gets out alive. It is a fantastical, but nonetheless satisfying reimagining of how the city may have reacted if the man of steel could have stopped the planes from crashing into the World Trade Center.

Moreover, *Superman Returns* came out in 2006 and, in its diegesis, Superman has been gone for exactly five years. When Superman reconnects with Lois Lane on a rooftop in a later scene, she asks him "How could you leave us like that?" implying that the city had undergone something distressing after he left and no one was there to save them. Of course, the movie never explicitly references the events of September 11th, for such a blunt statement would seem too unsettling for the audience and ultimately unbefitting for the film's hopeful fantasy. McSweeney hypothesizes that, "in the years that followed, superhero films were only able to allude to the war on terror without ever confronting it directly. Despite this, the war on terror and 9/11 influenced the genre profoundly in its themes and even in the construction of its mise-en-scene" (McSweeney 113). Taking McSweeney's interpretation into consideration, even if *Superman Returns* does not reference the actual event, Lois' line about abandonment or the shot of Superman stopping the plane at the last second clearly illustrate 9/11's influence on the movie and its urban setting.

This post-9/11 image of the vulnerable American city is seen in a plethora of early 2000s superhero movies beyond *Superman Returns*. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, several major studios threw millions of dollars into creating big-budget blockbuster adaptations of comic book narratives, many of them taking place in New York City. *Fantastic Four* (Tim Story, 2005), *Daredevil* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2003), *Hellboy* (Guillermo del Toro, 2004), and Sam Raimi's two *Spider-Man* sequels (2004; 2007) all happen in the Big Apple. Almost all of them also have action sequences that take place with crowds of innocent New Yorkers watching.

Spider-Man 3 even places its climactic fight in a skyscraper, with frequent shots of the citizens looking up at the battle with all too familiar mixtures of terror and wonder on their faces. The city had become a central location for national sentiments; the country was a macrocosm of New York. The wounds it endured permeated the nation and its emotional response yearning for hope and justice redefined the American identity.

The post-9/11 political discourse in America further tightened this relationship between cities, cinema, and the nation at large throughout the 21st century's first decade. Similar to how Ronald Reagan inspired action heroes and Christopher Reeve's Superman with his patriotism in the 1980s, President George W. Bush became somewhat of a superheroic icon after the terrorist attacks. Although previously mocked for his blundering speech patterns, President Bush arrived in New York City after the Towers fell and standing before the debris with firefighters and survivors at his side, he addressed the American people with strength and passion, promising recovery and retribution. As history will have it, the aftermath of 9/11 was far more complicated than a single immediate speech could ever encapsulate, but McSweeney explains that "in the weeks after (9/11), George W. Bush's popularity ratings rose to stratospheric levels and when he called out to America and the rest of the world from the rubble of Ground Zero, many began to see him in a distinctly heroic light," as his "rhetoric itself seemed overtly mythological or at least reminiscent of a comic book" (McSweeney 112). Bush's good versus evil absolutisms against terrorists were heard loud and clear across the nation, and they persisted as his term went on. Beginning this steadfast rhetoric at Ground Zero further established the city as the home front hub for post-9/11 national sentiment and conflict to come. For these reasons, perhaps the simplicity of altruistic protagonists fighting off indisputably evil villains in the cityscape became a very appealing plotline for American moviegoers at the time. In conventional superhero

narratives, there is little question as to who is in the right or wrong, and like Bush, audiences can usually point clear and quick fingers at the good guys and the bad guys.

As the Bush presidency went forward, however, the post-9/11 national sentiment became morally and legally less absolute. Most significantly, the realization that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, thus putting the entire post-9/11 U.S. military activity into question, occurred under President Bush's administration. The American identity became more divisive and the President's clear-cut rhetoric lost much of its validity. Because the city still stood as a national microcosm, the depiction of urban environments went from places of emotive recovery to pensive reflection during Bush's second term and into the Obama presidency.

Director Christopher Nolan alludes to this transformation in his Batman franchise, which started in 2005 with *Batman Begins* and continued through the Obama administration. Despite being a darker and more realistic take on the genre than what audiences typically expect, *Batman Begins* tells a relatively straightforward post-9/11 superhero narrative, where Batman bends the rules to evoke justice in Gotham. At its climax, Batman stops an explosive monorail from blowing up the central Wayne Tower skyscraper, which would have in turn decimated Gotham City. In Nolan's 2008 sequel, *The Dark Knight*, the tone becomes even darker, yet the city's situation is far more complex. The movie's new villain, the Joker, brings Gotham an unprecedented kind of terror and injustice—one that begs for regular people to turn against each other and crumble into disorder. While *Batman Begins* focuses on Batman fighting the organized chaos and crime in the city, the Joker tests Batman's moral limits in *The Dark Knight*. The psychotic clown does not want to infiltrate society's fabric and corrupt the city. He is simply a madman who relishes in chaos for chaos' sake, pressing the boundaries of a fearful society.

Batman cannot stop the Joker by bending the rules, for as the movie's script states, "The Joker, he's got no rules" and "Some men just want to watch the world burn." The socio-ethical dilemma explored in *The Dark Knight* reflects America's unfolding political situation in 2008 and concludes with the philosophical proposition that perhaps peace can only stand upon a foundation of lies and deceits. Essentially, George W. Bush, like Batman, cannot create authentic peace and mollify the broken urban spirit by constantly amending the rules, for playing by no rules can be more dangerous than playing by imperfect ones. To borrow another quote from the film, "You either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain." Audiences can easily interpret this statement as a direct allegory to how the conflicted American city saw its place in the world towards the end of Bush's presidency.

This allegorical shift towards humility and reflection appears in many superhero films following the Bush administration, as the protagonists deal with the limits of altruism in a morally complicated world. John Favreau's *Iron Man* directly addresses wartime deception and national arms dealing in the Middle East; *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* alludes to the Patriot Act's invasive effects on people's privacy; even Marc Webb's Spider-Man reboot, *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), has the web-slinger deal with a New York City police force that wants him arrested for taking the law into his own hands. Maybe superheroes have thus evolved beyond the cityscape and out towards a wider universe. They no longer stand as extensions of urban sublimity, and perhaps the threat of vigilante terror has become too high a price for vigilante justice. In order to make a real difference, heroes must broaden their horizons both philosophically and physically.

After all, in more recent superhero movies, particularly those that came out after 2008, the city still stands as the foremost setting, but other landscapes have been explored more

extensively. McSweeney actually suggests that Marvel's 2012 film *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon) "functions as a compelling conclusion to the post-9/11 decade of superhero cinema in the way it symbolically recreates and rewrites 9/11 and the war on terror in an attempt to perform some sort of closure by reconciling America with the divisive events of its recent past" (McSweeney 129). This climactic crossover film that the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) built up for four years and across five movies, ends with a very straightforward battle between good and evil, taking place in the familiar New York City environment. All of the franchise's established and beloved heroes (Iron Man, Thor, Captain America, Hulk, Hawkeye, and Black Widow) finally come together to fight off the antagonist's army and save the planet. As audiences could easily predict, the heroes win in the end; New York City (and by literal extension, the entire world) is saved for good.

After the film's credits, however, an additional foreboding scene taking place upon an asteroid in outer space reveals the franchise's arch-villain, Thanos. The scene opens as one of Thanos' mercenaries describes how humanity managed to stand in the way of Earth's destruction. After the mercenary states that to challenge humanity "is to court death," an over-the-shoulder shot of Thanos shows him turning around, revealing his alien head as he breaks into a grin.[8] Thanos' excitement over this sinister threat implies that the heroes' fight is far from over, and his place in outer space shows that their next challenges will take on a more cosmic scale, far beyond the city's concrete boundaries. Next time, saving the universe will mean more than just saving Manhattan. Because the MCU franchise unequivocally leads the superhero genre in popularity and capital, audiences can interpret this ending as a foreshadowing not only for future Marvel movies, but for all superhero movies that follow in its footsteps.

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[8] Intentionally vague, Thanos is not named in this sequence. He is not identified until later MCU films. Only knowledgeable comic book readers would be able to immediately recognize the character's full potential at the end of *The Avengers*.

Heroes in the Wild

One year after Marvel's *The Avengers*, Warner Brothers kicked off their cinematic DC Extended Universe (DCEU) with a rebooted Superman film, *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013). This modern take on the character focuses primarily on Superman's origins. While Richard Donner's 1978 *Superman* spends hardly a fraction of the narrative on the time between Clark Kent's departure from Smallville and Superman's arrival in Metropolis, *Man of Steel* expands that time to last nearly the entire movie. Not until the final scene does the audience see the hero living in the city as his recognizable tie, blazer, and glasses-wearing Clark Kent alter ego. Instead, the story mostly fluctuates between flashbacks of Clark growing up on the Kansas farm and his quest to learn about his powers after departing to the wilderness. Over fifty minutes go by in the film before Superman dons his famous suit and first takes flight. He gets his suit and learns about who he is from the Fortress of Solitude, an Earthly home that his late alien parents left him from their home planet of Krypton. As it is in the original *Superman* movie as well as the comics, the Fortress of Solitude in *Man of Steel* is hidden away in the arctic, deep within nature's harsh confines and distant from any human contact. In contrast to the city's ubiquitous human threats, this icy habitat offers Superman a place for reflection and learning, where he can meditate on who he is and independently decide what he should do.

Superman briefly retreats to the wilderness once again in *Man of Steel*'s sequel, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016). Feeling conflicted after failing to save people from an explosion, Superman removes himself from Metropolis and in the next scene, he wanders through the Himalayan Mountains by himself. Atop a snowy peak, he has a conversation with the ghost of his adoptive father. His tells him a story from his days growing up on the prairie, about a time that he accidently flooded his neighbor's farm and had to learn to

forgive himself after their horses died. With this dose of levelheaded pastoral wisdom about self-forgiveness, Superman finds the strength to come back to Metropolis and save the city once more in the movie's climax. Evidently, the wilderness is not just a place of reflection and education; it can also serve as a space of jaded removal when the city's burdens become too much for the heroes. In relation to the city as an environment of densely congested action, the wilderness acts not only as a formative landscape, but also as a direct foil—a place of utter absence.

In the same year that *Man of Steel* hit theaters, the *X-Men* franchise also came out with a stand-alone Wolverine movie, simply titled *The Wolverine* (James Mangold, 2013). At the film's beginning, audiences find Wolverine living deep in the Yukon wilderness, his hair overgrown and scraggly as he sleeps on the bare earth. Viewers who have kept up with the franchise know that Wolverine has seen his fair share of tragedy in life. He has lived for centuries, fought in every war in American history, and most recently in the timeline, had to kill the woman he loved in order to save others from her erratically volatile powers. The last detail in this list is why he lives as a heartbroken hermit in the Canadian woods at the start of this film. The city has become too harsh, so he moves into the wild.

Nature is not a promise of peace for Wolverine, though. As it is in conventional American eco-critical thought, the untamed wilderness puts one in a defenseless and risky state. Roderick Nash studies America's relationship with natural landscapes in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, explaining how from the dawn of colonization, American settlers desired a distance from the corruptive and treacherous wild. After Jamestown, the New World's wilderness "constituted a formidable threat to (settlers') very survival" with unknown diseases, animals, and geography; meanwhile, "civilized man faced the danger of succumbing to the wildness of his surroundings and reverting to savagery" (Nash 24). An ongoing theme

throughout Wolverine's character, as highlighted in his name, is that he holds inner turmoil between his human and animalistic natures. By running away to the woods and becoming a recluse, he gives into his animalistic side. He separates himself from the world so that nobody will ask him to save it, because every time he plays the hero, he ends up hurting somebody in the process. Thus, he resides in the woods, knowingly entering what Nash describes as "a dark and sinister symbol" in the American environmental conscience (Nash 24). The wilderness does not offer tranquility to Wolverine (or to Superman for that matter). It only offers numbness to the pain—an emptiness in direct contrast to the urban sphere's constant fullness.

Superhero Suburbia: Reflecting and Refracting the Ideal

If the urban sphere is overwhelmingly demanding and the wilderness is devoid of any heroic trajectory, then one must wonder where the American monomyth and superheroes draw their happy medium. In contemporary American society, one would likely point to the suburbs as the ideal compromise between the two environments. The suburbs lie on the city's outskirts, comfortably close to its resources, but safely distanced from its threats. They are also a car ride away from the wilderness without being submerged in its desolation. Despite the suburbs getting some pop-cultural attention in sitcoms, horror films, and family dramas, the landscape has gone largely overlooked in the superhero genre. Only a couple distinct examples stand out, and they differ based on their respective depictions of supernatural abilities.

The most notable representation of suburbia in the superhero genre comes from the *X-Men* franchise. Although the franchise's eleven movies over the past eighteen years have explored all kinds of environments, one of the most recurring settings throughout the entire series is the X-Mansion, the site of Xavier's Academy for Gifted Youngsters. This fictional place

is located in Westchester, New York, a real suburb of New York City. In the *X-Men* universe, the mansion is the home that telepathic mutant Charles Xavier (Professor X) grew up in. Upon inheriting it, he converted it into a boarding school and safe-haven for mutants like himself. In this franchise's extensive universe, mutants have complicated political and social relationships with the rest of humanity. They are often ostracized or unwelcome in everyday society. The supernatural protagonists desire normality, or at least want inclusion into average America without having to hide their differences. David R. Coon investigates suburbia's role in pop-culture in *Closer Look: Suburban Narratives and American Values in Film and Television*, touching on its perception as an ideal American environment. He explains in the book's introduction, "given their ubiquity in the American landscape coupled with their frequent use over the years as a rather nondescript and benign backdrop, suburbs, as well as those who populate them, are often seen as typical… average… normal" (Coon 10-11). When the mutants board at the X-Mansion, they can embrace such normality and safety that suburbia stands for in America.

As far as its visuals go in the *X-Men* films, the X-Mansion is furnished with homey decor such as houseplants, lamps, and furniture delicately placed around warmly lit rooms. Its grounds appear well kept and covered with magnificent green trees. The mise-en-scene makes it truly seem like an ideal environment. As Professor X explains to Wolverine during the franchise's first film, "Anonymity is a mutant's first attempt against the world's hostility. To the public, we are merely a school for gifted youngsters… the students are mostly runaways, frightened, alone, some with gifts so extreme that they have become a danger to themselves and those around them… and yet here [they] are with others [their] own age, learning, being accepted, not feared." From this monologue layered over shots of the school's active campus, the audience sees how

the X-Mansion embodies so much of the suburban American monomyth. Not only can the students feel safe and accepted, but they can also appear as just another brick in the wall, remaining anonymous and neutral despite their powers.

At the same time, however, the X-Mansion also unveils the suburban ideal as no more than a fictional cover-up. Professor X continues his speech to Wolverine, "The school is merely our public face. The lower levels, however, are an entirely different matter." The camera then does the rest of the talking by panning down below the school's surface, revealing a metallic lined basement with a futuristic jet hanger. The imagery is a clear contrast to the school's unassuming surface-level aesthetic and foregrounds the fact that the picturesque environment depicted in the suburban imaginary is no more than just that— an imaginary. On this topic, Coon states:

> Suburbia is a concrete spatial arrangement that shapes the everyday lives of the majority of Americans and expresses many of the hopes and fears embedded within American society. Although it may be a far cry from reality, the idea of a perfect suburban life still exists in the collective imagination of millions of Americans. This myth of suburban perfection is built around a variety of social values and identities, including the importance of tradition, the centrality of the nuclear family, the desire for a community of like-minded neighbors, the need for clearly defined gender roles, and the belief that with hard work and determination anyone can be successful. (Coon 3-4)

By calling suburbia "a far cry from reality," Coon suggests that the suburban ideal of safety is a lie that the American mind has convinced itself of. Professor X hiding weapons and advanced infrastructure in a bunker under the X-Mansion demonstrates this point. While the students feel

safe at the school and the surface appears strikingly normal, the environment can only ensure this safety if its leaders know they have the proper protection at hand. Throughout the *X-Men* franchise, the X-Mansion confirms many more of these suburban attributes that Coon lists, but it also subverts some of them.

Perhaps the most interesting of Coon's suburban attributes that *X-Men* encapsulates are the landscape's promising connotations of family and community. Although drastically heterogeneous, the X-Men are a family of sorts. In the series' third film, *X-Men: The Last Stand* (Brett Ratner, 2006), the often stoic Wolverine uncharacteristically addresses the fellow mutants at the school, saying, "We stand together, X-Men, all of us," strongly implying that all of the heroes are simultaneously supportive and reliant on one another as a cohesive unit. However, if the X-Men are a family, then they are far from the nuclear one that fits suburbia's privileged American mold. Ever since their comic book origins, the X-Men have been a transparent allegory of minority groups in the United States and abroad, facing scrutiny and limited civil rights because of their differences. The first *X-Men* film actually opens with a scene in Auschwitz, making a clear parallel between what the Jews endured during Nazi Germany and what mutants go through in the film's "not too distant future" American setting. In "X-Men as J-Men: The Jewish Subtext of a Comic Book Movie," Lawrence Baron studies this parallel, stating, "unlike those who insist on the uniqueness of the Holocaust, (Bryan) Singer employs the Holocaust as a metaphor for the vulnerability of any minority group," stressing that the "underlying philosophy of *X-Men* is that 'the notions of prejudice and fear' are universal" and therefore can spread to any environment, even the unassuming confines of peaceful suburbia (Baron 51).

Therefore, the mutants residing in Westchester very much deconstruct Coon's idea that "the historical exclusion of certain groups based on race, class, and sexual orientation has led to a suburban landscape that is dominated by those who are white, middle class, and heterosexual" (Coon 26). Although the X-Men may not literally represent different races, classes, or sexualities, they do altogether make up a motley group of atypical and socially marginalized people. They are members of a demographic that would archetypally not belong in the suburbs at all. However, the struggles the students sometimes face at the school simultaneously affirm Coon's statements in a way. The franchise's second film, *X2* (Bryan Singer, 2003), actually touches on this paradox rather directly by putting the haven-like X-Mansion under attack. In the first film, the mansion faces no direct threats and the heroes go into the nearby New York City to fight the villains, yet the second film brings the action to the mansion itself with military personnel infiltrating the school, tranquilizing its students, and attempting to shut it down for the supposed safety of non-mutants. The sequence makes one reflect on redlining policies that once aimed to remove unwanted demographics from quiet neighborhoods, showing that the suburban American dream is often exclusive to those who fit the schematic perception of stereotypical Americans: white, heteronormative, and not mutated. Coon further explains, "although people of all races and ethnic backgrounds did move to the suburbs… the rapid growth of suburbia was driven primarily by white families, while black families faced many obstacles that limited their access to suburbia" (Coon 8). *X2* highlights these obstacles. While the X-Mansion served as a representation of the suburban monomythical environment with slight variations in *X-Men*, *X2* explores and expands those destabilizing variations.

As Coon puts it, though, "media narratives that challenge the myth of suburban perfection call into question the values embedded in that myth," so the *X-Men* franchise toes a

delicate line between upholding suburbia as embodiment of the American dream and critiquing it (Coon 4). Sometimes the X-Mansion serves as a quintessential suburban refuge for those who are different, but sometimes those differences make it even harder to exist in this supposedly perfect environment. Nonetheless, it is a common theme throughout the franchise that mutants want respect and acceptance into the very ideal that suburbia provides the American imagination. After all, the suburban myth symbolizes the American dream for a reason, and that reason's roots stretch back long before superheroes, cinema, or comic books held any national or eco-critical influence.

Coon elaborates that, "the pastoral view of the suburbs stressed a return to nature and tapped into the Jeffersonian ideal of property ownership as a marker of citizenship" (Coon 8-9). Ever since America's birth, foundational images of a pastoral ideal have heavily influenced the nation's environmental mindset. A small pocket of land that one can own and self-sustain upon manifests much of the independence and personal freedom that America prides itself in. Like the suburbs, the pastoral landscape is not quite in the wilderness, but it is close enough to take in the view of the mountains and the scent of the trees. It is not in the city either, but it is connected with society enough that one can remain civil and secure. In his description of early Americans' ecological perceptions, Nash states, "the pastoral condition seemed closest to paradise and the life of ease and contentment. Americans hardly needed reminding that Eden had been a garden" (Nash 31). As far back as early settlement, the American mind relished in the idea of pastoralism, a landscape where one could be simultaneously safe and adventurous, where one could reclaim some quasi-divine condition that the New World seemed to promise. This model of environmental perfection resonates to this day in many contemporary arts and mediums, superhero cinema just being one of them.

The Pastoral: An American Hero's Fantastical Dream

In the modern industrial worlds that superhero narratives often take place in, the suburbs may have largely taken over the pastoral as the ideal American landscape. Nonetheless, the pastoral landscape does make some key appearances in the genre, and its purpose has changed over time. As stated at this chapter's opening, the pastoral Smallville serves as an ideal community for Superman's all-American upbringing in comics and films. In most of these stories, though (especially the 1978 film), Superman still has to go to the city to realize his potential, following the action to make good use of his powers. According to this early generic superhero narrative, Smallville is simply a beginning for the hero; staying there would never satisfy his quest for justice. In more contemporary post-Bush, twenty-first century superhero movies, however, the pastoral's function has changed. No longer is it a humble starting point for the heroes, but rather a fantastical endpoint, one that they long for and muse over, striving for its peaceful, yet allusive promises of escape.

The final X-Men movie featuring Wolverine came out in 2017 and it offers a compelling depiction of American pastoralism. Titled *Logan* (James Mangold, 2017), the unconventionally R-rated, ultra-violent, superhero neo-Western tells a story filled with heartbreak, pain, and constant movement. The protagonists, Wolverine and Professor X, are on the run, trying to transport a young mutant named Laura from the Mexican border to Canada. All the while, an army of men chases them, trying to capture Laura for torturous experimental purposes. One of the few calm and joyful scenes in the film, however, happens when a farm family hospitably takes in Wolverine, Professor X, and Laura for the night, feeding them dinner and letting them sleep over in their house. Although nervous about staying put for so long, the characters manage to have a pleasant conversation over dinner. For the sake of anonymity, the three heroes pretend

that they are a grandfather-father-daughter trio traveling the country. Although the front is just a precaution, they seem to enjoy behaving like average people in this peaceful environment.

Before going to bed, Professor X even tells Wolverine, "this is what life looks like: a home with people who love each other, a safe place—you should take a moment and feel it." Professor X ends up dying that night, making this his last didactic message for Wolverine. He emphasizes the importance of love, family, and tranquility that has appeared so rarely in their lives, but can be found quite profoundly in this pastoral setting. While most of the movie takes place in the wilderness, emphasizing Wolverine's angst and pain, this one scene in the pastoral lets the characters breathe and Professor X's heartfelt speech underscores how crucial that can be for superheroes who are constantly burdened with tremendous tasks. At the same time, however, the audience also realizes how unconventional and rare this sequence is for the genre. Superhero cinema does not allow its characters many chances to enjoy the pleasures of calm, household routines. Contrary to Superman, though, for Wolverine, the pastoral landscape is sadly something he can only dream of. Actually having the privilege to call this environment home seems like an unattainable fantasy.

An even more profound scene including the pastoral appears in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015). At a point in this direct sequel to Marvel's first *Avengers* film, the reunited team of heroes must seek refuge from its enemies. Responsively, the team's reserved archer side-hero, Hawkeye, invites them to hide out in his house. Unbeknownst to many of the Avengers, Hawkeye has a home and family at some non-disclosed location in North America. The scene opens up with a wide shot of a pinkish sky as the Avengers' jet zooms into frame and lands on a grassy field. The camera then pans down to reveal a green hilltop next to a quaint farmhouse. The team is relatively confused about where they are and assume it is some sort of secret hideout

for Hawkeye. They appear even more confused when they enter the house and Hawkeye greets his wife and two children with fatherly spirit. Iron Man even makes doubtful jokes about the situation, saying that Hawkeye's wife must be "some sort of agent" and that his kids must be "smaller agents." This is the first time that any of the Avengers see one of their fellow heroes having aspects of family life and they respond with perplexity, as if they have never imagined such possibilities for themselves.

Staying in the pastoral landscape with Hawkeye's family makes the Avengers reflect on their lives as superheroes and to what extent they must remain in their episodic, city-saving, routines. The restful environment gives Bruce Banner (the Incredible Hulk) and Black Widow time to reflect on their relationship, which has been a budding, yet strained romance throughout the film. Inspired by Hawkeye's situation, Black Widow suggests that she and Bruce could commit to each other. Bruce, however, cannot see how such a situation could work. Disheartened, he responds, "Are you out of your mind?" and then asks "Where could I go? Where in the world am I not a threat?... You have no future with me." Looking around the house, he adds, "I can't have this [or] kids. Do the math. I physically can't." Black Widow then replies, "Neither can I," before explaining how her former KGB superiors sterilized her during her training so that she would never have a family to distract her from her deadly missions. In the end, she asks Bruce, "You still think you're the only monster on the team?" This heart-wrenching dialogue between the two morally wounded protagonists could hardly take place in any other setting. Only in the pastoral does the action-packed film take time to let the characters contemplate and verbalize these personal thoughts regarding family and love, for only here do these thoughts appear as potentials in the heroes' minds.

Like *Logan*, *Age of Ultron* uses the idyllic pastoral landscape as a transparent symbol for family and the heroes' fantastical dream of someday hanging up their capes. Obviously, the genre and its environmental iconography has shifted since 1978. No longer do audiences cheer on Superman for moving from Smallville to Metropolis to fulfill his heroic duty. Instead, audiences sympathize with far more vulnerable heroes who see the pastoral as a place they wish they could retreat to and question whether or not that wish will ever come to fruition. During a subsequent scene at Hawkeye's house, Iron Man tells Captain America about his desire "to end the team," and asks, "isn't that the mission? Isn't that the 'why we fight?' So we can end the fight? So we can go home?" The pastoral strikes a nerve with Iron Man; seeing it, he wants to go back to just being Tony Stark and return home. Unfortunately, though, home is far from a quaint farmhouse for Iron Man and the rest of the Avengers, and just being average people may be a thing of the past for all superheroes.

For most of these heroes, home remains the city. No matter what kind of stints these characters have in the sheltered suburbs or the quiet pastoral, the urban environment constantly beckons for a savior, and in the heroes' selfless nature, they cannot help but answer the call. For this reason, the Avengers do not stay at Hawkeye's house for long, and they soon find themselves in the fictional European city of Sokovia, teaming up to fight off the film's main antagonist. Similarly, Wolverine cannot remain statically safe at the family farm forever, for his villains eventually meet him there. Even when Superman returns to visit Smallville in *Man of Steel* or *Dawn of Justice*, Metropolis always pulls him back with haste. If these characters stopped fighting, too many people would suffer for them to relax in good conscience. Although its role has shifted, the city still remains a domineering part of superhero iconography, and if the protagonists deviate too far from their iconographic molds, perhaps they cease to be protagonists

altogether. As Peter Parker's sagacious Uncle Ben says in *Spider-Man*, "With great power comes great responsibility." For Spider-Man as well as any other supernatural heroic character in film, leaving the city knowing that danger is still afoot and that no one else can stop it would be a severe breech of responsibility, and a gross misuse of power.

The world is changing though, both in narrative and in essence. The lines between different landscapes and environments are blurring and traces of humanity appear everywhere. Populations grow, cities expand, and perhaps the world's contrasting spheres will soon bleed into one. Eco-theorist William Cronon writes adamantly about this environmental fluidity in "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." In order to preserve nature's sublime aesthetic, Cronon suggests that Americans must reconsider what one deems natural, stating, "if wilderness can stop being [just] out there and start being [also] in here, if it can start being as humane as it is natural, then perhaps we can get on with the unending task of struggling to live rightly in the world—not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses both" (Cronon 90). This means that humanity should not only be environmentally conscious, but also inspired and awestruck by nature's humble threads that weave their way from mountaintops or forests and into more developed spaces. Superhero movies may take some time to reflect this in their iconography, as their narratives often rely on the audience's mythological preconceptions of what certain settings should stand for. Nevertheless, the audiences are shifting with the world, making it possible and plausible for new, daring landscapes to make their way onto the screen. Like superheroes making a permanent move to the pastoral, this may seem like a far off, distant illusion, but it is closer than one might think. In fact, it has already begun.

Converging Landscapes and Cinema's Fleeting Environment

Marvel's *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018) is a sensational and groundbreaking movie for a long list of reasons. One of the film's most fascinating aspects is its setting. *Black Panther* takes place in a fictional African nation called Wakanda. On the surface, the country appears as no more than a third world tribal nation and the rest of the world treats it accordingly. However, the rest of the world does not see that Wakanda is secretly one of the wealthiest and most technologically advanced places on the planet. Abundant in a fictional rare metal called Vibranium, Wakanda is rich beyond measure even though more developed nations deem it impoverished. On top of being a strong symbol for Africa's pre-colonial hunter-gatherer sustainability, Wakanda also functions as an amalgamation of the urban, wilderness, and pastoral landscapes. The film's protagonist, King T'Challa (Black Panther), can proudly call Wakanda home, a place where each individual can live ideally, upholding tradition while simultaneously advancing into an industrially utopic future. Visually, the film switches off between remarkable pastoral imagery of the African plains and sweeping shots of the nation's ultramodern city. Wakanda does not merely subvert the American imagination's idea of different landscapes. It blends their best attributes together for an unprecedentedly efficient and satisfying environment within the superhero genre.

Obviously, the city remains the dominant iconographic landscape for superhero stories. Ever since American comic book writers started publishing their narrative art in the urban sphere nearly a century ago, superheroes have called cities their homes. While superheroes may visit the wilderness, the pastoral, or the suburbs every once in a while, these other environments all seem to serve subordinate roles to the stories' central metropolises. Perhaps without intention, though, these settings and their narrative representations have been shaping a subtle eco-critical

commentary within the genre. Although it may not always be transparent, the environments depicted within superhero movies are essential to their narrative essence and audience reception. The representations of different landscapes in pop-cultural artifacts such as superhero movies often reflect larger, real-world perceptions of those landscapes. *Batman*'s gritty Gotham in the 1980s, *Superman Returns'* vulnerable Metropolis of the post-9/11 years, and Wakanda's contemporary hybridity between technological advancement and environmental consciousness are all more than just narrative details. They each allude to something deeply engrained in their respective time periods' American imaginary.

      Black Panther's Wakanda certainly offers a bright future for this imaginary. Unfortunately, Wakanda is not real. Then again, neither is Metropolis, Gotham, Sokovia, or even Smallville. Westchester may be a real place, but the X-Mansion is fictional. In fact, even the New York City in *Spider-Man* or *The Avengers* is a made-up setting. It is meant to represent the real place, but in actuality, it is no more real than any of the other films' fictional places. Even if shot on location, a film's setting remains a mere stage, sitting before a void to serve some narrative function. Then, as digital effects become increasingly ubiquitous in superhero movies, perhaps the settings will grow larger and more extravagant on-screen, but the physical environment will consequentially shrink on set. As this paper's subsequent chapters will attest to, the essence of place may fade away in superhero cinema, and soon enough, perhaps so will its inhabitants, taking the human out of the superhuman characters altogether and garnering an even starker environmental subtext in the process.

Chapter 2
Posthuman Superhumans in the Anthropocene

When *X-Men* first hit the theaters in 2000, audiences could finally witness superheroes performing spectacular stunts and exhibiting incredible powers in a live-action movie. With literally no strings attached, Magneto could float up into the sky; Cyclops could shoot lasers from his pupils; Mystique could change her figure right before the viewer's eyes. At long last, iconic superheroes could come alive, and the graphic medium of comics could be brought to the screen in visually compelling and accurate manners. While cultural and political phenomena played no small part in the superhero genre's rising popularity in the twenty-first century, one cannot ignore the technical developments in film production over the past few decades that finally allowed comic books to be effectively adapted into movies. Most critically, the recent mastery of digital effects and prevalence of computer generated images (CGI) have given filmmakers the ability to manipulate images on screen, combine live-action and animation as one, and give birth to an entire new rolodex of filmic spectacles that are crucial to superhero cinema's current popularity. While these digital functions are apparent in most superhero movies on an aesthetic level, they also feed into the genre's larger eco-critical connotations, further establishing sub-texts about humankind's evolution within and impact on contemporary environments.

As a medium, film has always reflected the real world onto a screen in some way or another.[9] Although foundational critics such as Andre Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Rudolf Arnheim may have argued the extent to which cinema should aim for realism in as early as the

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[9] The obvious exception to this rule is animation, which could perhaps be considered an entirely different medium from live-action film. While raw film has a strong indexical relationship with the real world, animation is entirely the artist's creation. This chapter will predominantly refer to live-action movies, but animation will come up as a precursor to CGI and something that now converges with live-action footage through modern visual effects.

1930s, the mere technical processes of using a movie camera to record the world in twenty-four frames per second and then projecting that recording onto a screen always retains some sort of indexical relationship between the tangible environment and the finished art piece.[10] This indexical relationship between film and reality does not mean that cinema *is* reality, though. In fact, the camera and the screen are the very means by which movie-going audiences become separated from reality. This filmic phenomenon illustrates an inherent eco-critical process that goes into filmmaking. The camera is an industrial tool, made and operated by the human hand. Its photographic ability to capture or reflect "nature" stands as and always has stood as a testimony to anthropocentric conceptions, illustrations, and manipulations of the environment, especially over the past century or so, as film and photography have becomes popular arts, and the Anthropocene has entered the public consciousness more starkly.

The Anthropocene is a scientific term denoting the world's current geological age. Coming after the Holocene, which has been naturally sustaining the Earth's climate since the last ice age, the Anthropocene places humanity as the planet's new foremost ecological force. Although the era's starting date is ambiguous, and its validity is still being debated to this day, the Anthropocene as a concept gained much attention in the twentieth century, especially since the 1980s when scientists Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer began popularizing the term in academia. In 2000, the same two scientists openly defined the Anthropocene in a newsletter as "the still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere" that have become so eminent "in geology and ecology" that they establish "the current geological epoch" (Crutzen 17). Today, with increasing global temperatures, melting polar ice caps, and large-scale

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[10] French film theorist Andre Bazin (1918-1958) and German theorist Siegfried Kracauer (1886-1966) both agreed that cinema should be in the service of reality, as articulated in their respective essays, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" and "Basic Concepts." Meanwhile, German theorist Rudolf Arnheim (1904-2007) disagreed with Bazin and Kracauer in his essay "The Complete Film," where he defends artistic manipulation and creative human freedom within the cinematic medium.

extraction of natural resources across the globe instigating clear ecological responses, this notion of humanity living in a time where it is the greatest influence on its own environment is—or at least should be—undeniable.

Indexical art forms like cinema and photography that capture nature and rose to prevalence across the industrious twentieth century thus stand as reflections and meta-commentaries on the Anthropocene. Jennifer Fay explores this in her book *Inhospitable Worlds*, arguing that "cinema's dominant mode of aesthetic world-making is often at odds with the very real human world it is meant to simulate" (Fay 4). Artificial sets, deceptive stages, and of course, digital images, all emphasize the clear fission between the real world and the one synthetically constructed for film. Even the most untouched piece of footage still fails to be fully natural. To look at a still video of a mountain, for example, even if shot in real time with no cuts, edits, or adjustments, is still not the same as looking at the actual thing. The camera is an inescapably anthropogenic tool, and film, even in its most primitive form, always reveals some essence of human intrusion upon nature.

The current intervention of CGI in cinema has only made movies all the more anthropogenic and further from anything natural. As film theorist Lev Manovich writes in *The Language of New Media*, with digital effects, film "loses its privileged indexical relationship to prefilmic reality," and thus, "if live-action footage were left intact in traditional filmmaking, now it functions as raw material for further compositing, animating, and morphing" (Manovich 732). In an eco-critical theoretical sense, the prefilmic content can be seen as nature, and the filming, editing, projecting, and animating over it represents human exploitation. Photographic and movie cameras alike have thus evolved from mere recording devices into partial tools contributing towards the construction of a product increasingly manipulated by the human hand. At the turn

of the twentieth century, foundational filmmakers like George Méliès and Sergei Eistenstein adjusted live-action film's recording abilities with montage and editing. Today, as Manovich would argue, the modern adjustments of animation and CGI have overtaken the recording abilities all together, rendering the least natural aspects the premier content within each shot.

Digital effects started to become popular tools for filmmakers towards the end of the twentieth century, around the same time Crutzen and Stoermer began denoting the Anthropocene. In the early 1980s, films like *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982), *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), and those in the original *Star Wars* trilogy (George Lucas, 1977; Irvin Kershner, 1980; Richard Marquand, 1983) all displayed groundbreaking special effects for their time and established CGI as something that could enhance films both visually and narratively, especially in the science-fiction and adventure genres.[11] It is then no surprise that Superman hit the big screen in the first, big-budget, blockbuster superhero franchise during this same time. Coming out in 1978, *Superman* received the Academy Award for Best Visual Effects, using CGI to stay true to its tagline promotional claim that "You'll Believe A Man Can Fly."

If the 1980s laid the groundwork for CGI, then the 1990s proved its potential and solidified it as a standard cinematic tool. In the first half of the decade, James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) offered audiences truly unprecedented visuals. With a cybernetic antagonist made of liquid metal, *Terminator 2* demonstrated how CGI could bend bodies and aesthetically modify human abilities. Meanwhile, *Jurassic Park* showed how digital effects could bring enormous and

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[11] It should be noted that CGI was also used in more primitive forms long before the 1980s, famously appearing in the opening title and dream sequences in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) and the skeleton battle in *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963). The 1980s are pointed to as the groundbreaking decade for digital effects because computer technology became far more advanced and accessible during the period. With the rise of personal computers and computing becoming a more common skill, filmmakers were able to use CGI effects more lavishly and liberally while remaining efficient in budget and time.

incredible entities such as prehistoric dinosaurs back to life in believable fashions. Not only did these two films raise the bar for digital visuals, but they also established CGI as a common tool for (re)creating the fantastical. While a few outstanding occasions demonstrate CGI being used for strictly dramatic purposes, such as Robert Zemmekis' adjustment of historical footage in *Forrest Gump*, James Cameron's recreation of past relics in *Titanic*, or David Fincher's heightened state of characters' facial features in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), the tool has largely been adopted by films aiming to exhibit the amazing and render the unbelievable believable, a remarkably pertinent aspect of almost all superhero movies.

Then, just before the turn of the millennium, while *X-Men* was still in production, the year 1999 offered a final twentieth-century breakthrough in visual effects. Still using CGI to create otherworldly beings and expand the human body's capabilities, the Wachowski siblings' *The Matrix* (Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, 1999) and George Lucas' *Star Wars: Episode I- The Phantom Menace* (1999) took the tool a step further by creating entire worlds with computer imagery. Now, not only were actors performing alongside digital characters, but they were doing it without backgrounds, sets, or physical environments. With CGI, all of this could be filled in after the shoot. Although the camera could never offer audiences a one-hundred percent natural environment, *The Matrix* and *The Phantom Menace* proved it can go as far as creating a movie without any authentic landscape at all. The actors only needed a green screen and a camera on set. A complete sense of place could be built around them on a computer during post-production.

As established in Chapter One, different landscapes—the city in particular—play enormous roles in superhero films. To bring superheroes to life and exhibit their powers, not only do filmmakers need the modern visual technology to make it appear realistic, but they also

need a surrounding environment that can work with and react to the heroes' supernatural abilities. Thus, in the twenty-first century, digital effects have become utterly ubiquitous in superhero cinema, for the films could hardly function on a narrative level without CGI places and beings in the frame. This chapter will explore the impact of these digitally composed settings and characters in superhero films from an eco-critical perspective. The CGI settings and their development over the genre's recent history offer growing commentaries on humankind's omnipresent influence on and presence in the world as well as the ongoing disappearance of raw nature in the Anthropocene. Relatedly, the digital characters within these changing settings also reflect the human subject's own transformation. As humanity overtakes nature in these films on both a narrative and production level, the human subject becomes less essential and embraces instead a posthuman hybrid existence with technology.

The City's Disappearance

Although *Superman* certainly used early digital effects to make the title protagonist fly in 1978, it still used primarily real locations for all of the sets. A rural Alberta town stood in for Smallville; Arizona and Nevada aptly served as deserts for the film's climax; and the majority of the movie was shot in New York City, appropriately representing the fictional city of Metropolis. Come Tim Burton's *Batman* films in 1989 and 1992, though, the depiction of places had already shifted to a somewhat less authentic representation in film. Instead of using an actual city to stand in for Gotham, *Batman* and *Batman Returns* relied primarily on sound stages with elaborate sets. As discussed in chapter one, Burton's Batman was a darker reimagining of the character, stemming from the gritty 1980s comics. The films aesthetically evoked this by borrowing cinematic techniques from German Expressionism and film noir, using tightly knit

shots and compact sets to reflect the labyrinthine urban sprawl that the hero must traverse. With few exceptions, most of the outdoor scenes in these two films were actually shot inside, disguised in frequent nighttime settings that accented their austere tones.

This difference between *Superman* filming in real cities and *Batman* using artificial sets ends up fitting the films' respective protagonists, establishing a link between the production and narrative aspects of superhero cinema. In "Fantastic Views," an essay studying the use of digital effects in superhero cinema, Lisa Gotto states that "Superman is a panoramic authority," and, "thus, Superman conveys spatial negotiation through the principle of the visual sovereign. Being positioned at a considerable distance. Superman's elevated eyes gaze down to oversee the totality of events" (Gotto 48). As a film about an admirable hero with divine capabilities, it seems appropriate that *Superman* should be shot outside with limitless space for the man of steel's awesome and infinite abilities. After all, Superman derives his powers from Earth's yellow sun. It would be inappropriate (perhaps even cruel) to shield the beloved character from such vital natural light. Likewise, Superman is a natural-born superhero. Unlike many other heroes, Superman has always been Superman, and Clark Kent is the made-up alter ego. He is strikingly authentic, and the film's real sets reflect this with actual towers, streets, and skies filling the mise-en-scene.

Batman, on the other hand, is somewhat of a foil to Superman, and thus requires a contrasting setting. Bruce Wayne has no innate superpowers of his own. In essence, he is no more than a man, and he created the Batman persona through ingenious craftsmanship and rigorous physical training. According to Gotto, because Batman is a human being at his core, he "is obliged to approach the city… Diving into irregular forms, he explores space by experiencing it" (Gotto 48). While Superman holds omnipotent oversight over Metropolis, Batman has a more

grounded relationship with Gotham, one that relies on dwelling beneath the surface for heroic justice. Therefore, it makes sense that Tim Burton shot his two Batman movies on indoor studio lots, capturing Gotham's trapped desperation as well as its hero's human limitations. Although Superman may be able to fly above his city, Batman cannot go beyond the manmade ceiling.

This eleven-year development from *Superman* to *Batman* reflects two crucial aspects in early superhero blockbusters that would eventually grow into iconographic conventions for the genre. First, it shows how the filmmakers' production choices often serve narrative purposes as well, usually revealing something about the protagonist through the environment. Secondly, it demonstrates that in as early as 1989, superhero movies were already moving away from natural sets and onto something more fabricated. It almost foreshadows the fact that CGI would soon take over. Eerily, it also demonstrates the eventual diminishment of real places in film, foreshadowing the Anthropocene's rising presence in the indexical art. Whether this was purposefully prophetic or not, come the early twenty-first century, CGI had become mainstream and the superhero genre boomed with success as myriads of old comic characters found new homes in the movies. *X-Men* may have initially exhibited what digital effects could do for the genre, but Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* solidified the genre and its use of CGI in the movie's strictly New York City setting.

Chapter One already established New York City as an essential aspect of Spider-Man's character and lore across comics and movies. Part of this is due to the nature of his powers. While Superman can fly anywhere he wants and Batman can crawl through any landscape's underbelly, Spider-Man swings on webs and scales walls, a supernatural ability that is most useful in the presence of tall skyscrapers and compact structures. His ability to save the day

depends upon physical touch, creating limits and vulnerabilities, as well as a strict, literally

pendulum-like relationship with gravity. Considering this, Gotto states:

> In *Spider-Man* this manner of being in the world is presented as a
>
> movement through a world whose space itself is rendered movable.
>
> When Spider-Man crawls alongside the buildings of the city,
>
> classical principles of orientation are turned upside down: walls
>
> become floors, vertical lines turn into horizontal routes. Hence,
>
> Spider-Man's ability to stick to surfaces transforms the outside of
>
> constructed environments into a terrain of altered accessibility.
>
> (Gotto 49)

Obviously, getting shots that frequently manipulate gravity and space in such dramatic fashions

could only be done on a large scale with the help of digital effects. Therefore, although *Spider-Man* was partially filmed in New York City, many of the iconic shots of the hero swinging

through buildings were made up of CGI skyscrapers and a hodgepodge of images from different

places—some of them truly being New York, others being Los Angeles, and plenty being

entirely digital.

Spider-Man's 2004 Deluxe DVD includes a commentary from the film's special effects

designer, John Dykstra, who breaks down the creation of the hero and his environment. One of

the film's first action sequences is a fight in Times Square between Spider-Man and his

antagonist, the Green Goblin. The full scene, however, was not actually filmed in the heart of

Manhattan. Rather than spending the time and money to clear out one of the busiest commercial

centers in America, the *Spider-Man* production crew mixed and matched buildings and artifacts

from different places—both real and digital— to create their own virtual version of Time Square.

Dykstra explains, "portions of [this scene] were shot in New York; portions of it were shot on a stage at Columbia Pictures; portions of it were shot in Downey [California], and portions of it were generated in the computer." This filmic process environmentally reflects not only an increasingly anthropogenic world, but also an increasingly convergent one. The Anthropocene is a global phenomenon, so as humankind's ability to manipulate the supposedly natural reality grows, the world seems a bit smaller, and the sense of change between cities shrinks.

This same scene in *Spider-Man* also features large parade-like balloons floating above the Square. In actuality, these grandiose props were not even there; they were digitally added in to give viewers a sense of scale and altitude in Spidey's aerial combat with the Goblin. Dykstra's commentary makes it clear that "the balloons were actually helpful tools to tie some of these environments together because they gave good foreground objects and sort of bridged the gap between the different photography." The balloons also turn out to be helpful tools for Spider-Man to bounce off of, letting him efficiently cross over Time Square and save his distressed love-interest, Mary Jane. Although the hovering digitized balloons are present in several shots throughout the scene, Spider-Man is actually standing on top of one of them in mid-action when he hears a scream. A reverse shot then shows Mary Jane dangling from a crumbling balcony that the Goblin just bombed. The camera cuts to a high-angle wide shot of the square as the hero leaps, revealing him hopping from balloon to balloon like trampolines to quickly traverse the setting. After a brief disruption from the Goblin, Spider-Man is able to catch Mary Jane at the very last second before she crashes into the concrete ground. This sequence stands as a testament to the hero's reliance on touch in urban architecture as well as CGI's necessity in both the film's aesthetic and story. Without digital manipulation, the filmmakers would not be able to have these

balloons fill the scene. Without the balloons, Spider-Man would not have been able to cross the virtual Time Square and save Mary Jane.

Inserting digital buildings and artifacts as well as stitching together places became a common practice in creating cities in the superhero genre after *Spider-Man*'s success. Even Christopher Nolan, a director who is notorious for using practical effects and locations in his films, used digital effects to make Gotham appear larger and more complex while filming *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* in Chicago. As the years went on and the genre evolved, however, so did its use of technology. The MCU's genesis in 2008 led to the cinematic adaptation of more fantastical superhero comics such as *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), which focuses on Norse gods and takes place in both modern-day rural New Mexico, and the mythological divine city of Asgard. While filming on location in New Mexico proved easy enough, no real city could capture Asgard's godliness, so filmmakers had to build it from scratch using CGI and studio stages in Los Angeles. In order to bridge this gap between the mythological and the real worlds, though, there had to be some sort of consistency between Asgard and the earthly cities in other MCU movies. After all, although Asgard is meant to appear extravagant in *Thor*, it is still meant to look believable and thus, must retain some similarities to places as familiar as New York City—or rather, the representation of New York City displayed in MCU films such as *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011) and *The Avengers*.

Luckily for the filmmakers, CGI had developed enough throughout the 2000s for the bridge between Asgard and New York City to become a reality. Just as *The Matrix* and *The Phantom Menace* used digitally constructed cities in 1999, the MCU could do the same in 2011 and 2012, effectively connecting the fantastical with the real across their franchise by making

nearly everything a digital representation, distancing live-action film from nature on an entirely

new level. The climax of Marvel's *The Avengers* takes place in New York City, depicting

unmistakable images of an alien army invading downtown Manhattan. Director Joss Whedon's

commentary on the film's DVD, however, reveals that much of this iconic New York City

sequence was actually shot on a studio in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Even the iconic three

hundred and sixty degree dolly shot of the film's six heroes assembling for action upon an

aqueduct in Manhattan was created predominantly in the computer. Despite how integral this

climactic shot was to the film's marketing campaign and how crucial the entire aqueduct

sequence is to the story, the famous aqueduct was really no more than a fraction of a set created

before a green screen over a thousand miles away from the city that never sleeps.

The most shocking aspect of this, however, may be that the digital set actually appears

entirely believable. While earlier CGI environments like those from *The Matrix* or *The Phantom

Menace* were impressive, one could still tell that they were fake due to their overly pristine and

geometric shapes. Watching these movies today, audiences can easily imagine the actors

performing before vacant green screens only to be filled in later. However, thanks to

technological advancements, *The Avengers*' characters actually appear to be fighting in the real

New York City. The effects even look more natural than *Spider-Man*'s hybrid setting or

Batman's extravagant physical sets. In actuality, though, *The Avengers*' Big Apple is even

further removed from a natural image, creating a new standard for live-action cinematic places

not existing in the first place. Superhero cinema's setting is almost wholly constructed in post-

production now, paralleling the Anthropocene's current inescapability.

According to Crutzen and Stoermer in the same 2000 newsletter where they defined the

Anthropocene, "urbanization has even increased tenfold since the past century," making the

growing city one of the premier causes and signifiers of the new epoch (Crutzen 17). The cityscape keeps getting larger and larger, munching away at the peripheral landscape with concrete and industrial expansion. As explored in this paper's first chapter, the city in superhero films among other American mythologies has conventionally stood in contrast to the untouched wilderness as a social and oftentimes treacherous landscape defined by humanity. The city's growth across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries thus creates a third intertwined string, running alongside the rising Anthropocene and cinematic art. Today, it is hard to deny the Anthropocene's presence in the real world as major cities keep expanding, and movies have gotten to a point where filmic urban landscapes can appear alive without the camera ever leaving a studio, creating an ubiquity of manmade urbanity taking the place of nature.

Nowhere is this ecocinematic reflection more prevalent than in the contemporary superhero genre, where characters are dependent on urban settings as well as powers that could hardly be cinematically produced without CGI. As Chapter One explained, superhero movies are currently changing and their environments are becoming more vast and diverse. Not only are filmmakers using CGI to recreate New York City for a battle sequence, but they are crafting entirely fictional locations such as Asgard and Wakanda to appear just as real. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the heroes not only fight in the fictional city of Sokovia, but digital effects allow them to lift the entire city up into the sky, defying the city-setting's conventional laws of possibility. Later, the MCU's two *Guardians of the Galaxy* films (James Gunn, 2015; James Gunn, 2017) and *Thor: Ragnorok* (Taika Waititi, 2016) used CGI to create not just cities, but entire worlds mixed with wilderness and novel landscapes previously unseen anywhere except the comics. Evidently, it is not just the cities that are being affected by humankind, but all environments, brilliantly displayed across the superhero genre's vast filmography in the twenty-first century.

The importance of CGI in superhero films from an eco-critical perspective does not end with the creation of landscapes. As aforementioned, modern digital effects are crucial to the genre not just for constructing places in which heroes can execute their powers, but also for the creation of the heroes themselves. Superheroes often embody some sort of hybridity between the human and the non-human, whether that non-human is the technological, the animal, the alien, or the divine. Largely, they epitomize different forms of posthuman entities. To depict this in a compelling manner, filmmakers must use CGI to adjust bodies and bend the physical subject in ways that constantly defy reality. The Anthropocene, after all, not only requires one to look at the world from a new perspective, but it also requires one to rethink the very notion of what it means to be human.

Dual Selves and Morphed Monsters

Posthuman theory is a growing field of philosophical thought tightly linked to contemporary eco-criticism. In her book *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti defines posthuman thinking as "a generative tool to help us re-think the basic unit of reference for the human in the bio-genetic age known as 'anthropocene,' the historical moment when Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet," making posthumanism's connection to environmentalism and humankind's current place within the ecosystem quite transparent (Braidotti 5). Under this definition, most superhero stories have always dealt with posthumanism in some way or another. After all, superheroes are usually some sort of altered or advanced being, suggesting potential evolutions or transformations beyond what one would typically consider human. The stories are all somehow about duality. A single person can occupy two selves: a human one and a superhuman one. Bruce Wayne is also Batman; Clark Kent is also

Superman; Peter Parker is also Spider-Man, and so on. One self is the simple being and the other one is the superhero, and some sort of transformation usually changes the former into the latter. For this reason, CGI is an incredibly important tool for the cinematic genre. It is pertinent not only on a technical level, but a narrative one as well, further suggesting that superhero movies are making environmental statements on posthuman identity and evolution in the current Anthropocene.

In her essay, "The Digital Multitude," film theorist Kristen Whissel suggests that CGI serves four main purposes in film. The digital tool can slow images down into "bullet time," it can "morph" bodies, create "gravity defying bodies" and bring "digital creatures" to life, often in "simulated crowds" (Whissel 757). Because superheroes come in all shapes and sizes and deal with all sorts of conflicts, their filmic genre consistently uses all four of Whissel's digital techniques to make characters and stories come alive. Given the technology in the early 2000s, studios often did this by creating literal doubles for their supernatural characters. Because Toby McGuire could not actually swing from webs in his role as Spider-Man, and Christ Evans could not really fly around in a ball of fire as the Human Torch, filmmakers used CGI to give these characters the incredible capabilities that their actors could never truly perform.[12] Thus, when the human becomes the superhero on screen, the human actor actually disappears, and the limitless CGI being takes over to perform the spectacular stunts that make the character cinematically possible.[13]

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[12] While the former example of Toby McGuire is an obviously reference to Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man*, the latter example refers to Tim Story's *Fantastic Four*, which starred Chris Evans as Johnny Storm, the hot-headed jock character who can ignite himself into the fiery superhero known as the Human Torch

[13] This doubling technique, replacing a credited actor with a virtual being, was first used to create the infamous character Jar-Jar Binks in *The Phantom Menace*. While voiced by Ahmed Best, Jar-Jar was a completely digitized creature in the final film, fluidly performing alongside human co-stars Liam Neeson and Ewan McGreggor.

Raimi's *Spider-Man* is one of the most notorious superhero movies for using this technique. As this chapter's previous section already established, *Spider-Man* had no shortage of digital effects and the film's virtual New York City environment was an unexpendable part of making the movie possible. One of the first digital effects shown in the film occurs in an early scene when a pre-supernatural Peter Parker visits a lab and gets bitten by a genetically enhanced super-spider, thus attaining his powers. When the spider crawls across Peter's hand, an extreme close up captures the colorful arachnid biting down into Peter's flesh. The spider is entirely CGI in this shot, and its digital fangs piercing Peter's unassuming and organic hand makes a metanarrative point about the movie's digital effects. Just like his character, Peter Parker actor Toby McGuire is no more than human, but once bitten by this digital creature, he can become something superior. The hero's power stems from this CGI spider; just as its bite gives Peter Parker his ability to become Spider-Man in the story, it also allows the actor to share his role with a digital figure that can execute stunts beyond human capability.

The digital formula for bringing Spider-Man to life is therefore to replace the human actor whenever he dons the mask and starts using his powers. Many of the film's action sequences are essentially animated all the way down to the characters. At the same time though, these sequences are still meant to appear realistic, fluidly mixed in with the rest of the film's live-action aesthetic. Thus, the visual effects team intentionally degraded many of these sequences, making the scenery and characters appear dirtier or less prosthetic, cutting away at animation's overly sharp appearance so the image would fit in with the messiness of reality. In Manovich's words, digital images are "hyperreal," and "the result of a different more perfect than human, vision" (Manovich 725). This makes perfect sense for superheroes such as Spider-Man because at the end of the day, such characters are meant to embody something more perfect

than mere human. The film also aims to humanize the hero while retaining this spectacularity, so it becomes a balancing practice between the digital's hyperreal image and a sense of imperfect actuality.

One way in which *Spider-Man* creates this balance while using CGI is through a process called "physiquing." According to Drykstra on the *Spider-Man* DVD commentary, "physiquing" denotes creating a model of a character for CGI and then adding in little features that match the actor's physique—such as posture, breathing patterns, and muscle movements—so that the audience will not suspect any discontinuity or inauthenticity. Dykstra calls this "illusion in the service of the story," and while it serves a valid purpose in making Spider-Man a believable and spectacular character in the movie, erasing the human actor and adding in a digital substitute certainly raises some critical questions from an ecocinematic perspective.

As fans will remember, in the original 1960s Spider-Man comics, Peter Parker gets his powers from a radioactive spider, embodying the period's fascination and fear over nuclear power's potential effects on humanity. Spider-Man thus stems directly from anxieties over the human species' self-destruction. Sam Raimi changed the spider to a genetically engineered one for the 2002 film to add more scientific credibility and contemporary relevance. Concurrently, the filmmakers did some "genetic" engineering themselves by animating a CGI Spider-Man to replace Toby McGuire, capturing not only the protagonist's dual identity, but also the audience's anxiety over a postmodern world where intelligent entities superior to humans might exist— perhaps even within the humans themselves. Instead of nuclear bombs being the audience's subject of environmental nervousness in *Spider-Man*, it is the possibility of humanity disappearing altogether and being replaced by something more technologically sophisticated or physically powerful, embodying posthumanism and subverting longstanding affirmations about

what Braidotti would call "the basic unit of common reference to our species, our policies, and our relationship to other inhabitants on this planet" (Braidotti 2).

Another superhero—or perhaps one would call him an anti-hero—who embodies this anthropocentric anxiety and received a live-action film in the early 2000s is the Incredible Hulk. A year after *Spider-Man* came out, director Ang Lee released *Hulk* (2003), with the intention of putting a more dramatic and emotional twist on the character and genre. As previously established, CGI, with few exceptions, was adopted largely by the action and science-fiction film genres for creating spectacles, forming a brand new cinema of attractions.[14] Thus, when Ang Lee created *Hulk* as more of a drama than an outright action flick, the film received unflattering responses from fans and critics alike. Unsurprisingly though, one of the film's most iconic draws was its completely digital rendition of the title character. While previous live-action depictions of the Hulk consisted of large men—most famously Lou Ferrigno— painted green, Lee's film finally had the technology to bring the monster into frame in its full non-human enormity. Marvel Comics first created the Hulk during the 1960s as a scientist named Bruce Banner who acquires a frightful condition after being overexposed to gamma radiation in the lab. This condition makes Banner turn into an enormous green monster whenever his temper increases. Lee's film generally follows this same origin story, but like those in Raimi's *Spider-Man*, *Hulk*'s

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[14] Tom Gunning coined the term "cinema of attractions" in his late twentieth century essay "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde." Referring predominantly to films from the silent era, Gunning defines cinema of attractions as film that "directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself," where narrative comes second to image (Gunning 384). Although far removed from silent films of the early 1900s, contemporary superhero films may use this same logic when creating visually stunning beings and spectacles with CGI.

digital effects and CGI superpowers offers audiences an additional contemporary theoretical layer regarding environmental concerns.

In *Hulk*, Eric Bana plays Bruce Banner, but whenever he transforms into his rage-filled alter ego, Bana leaves the scene entirely and only the digital Hulk remains. Bonus features from the film's DVD show how Hulk's special effects team created the Hulk in the same way one creates a cartoon character—with animation. However, unlike Elmer Fudd chasing Bugs Bunny through an illustrated forest, this cartoonish character is placed into an otherwise live set, often interacting with other actors in the same frame.[15] In the film's first transformation scene, for example, Banner turns into the Hulk at a lab and then proceeds to break through walls and tear down equipment. Behind the scenes footage reveals that most of this destruction was actually done practically, with crews knocking over sets and recording it. The difference, however, is that in the raw footage, no one is actually present before the camera. Materials fall apart, queued by preset triggers, and then the subject is inserted later on to create an illusion of impact.

A later scene once again demonstrates this digital/human separation to an even greater extent. After becoming enraged, transforming, and attacking some aggressors outside his house, Hulk flees into the woods and ends up outside the house of Betty Ross, Bruce's love interest played by Jennifer Connolly. Hearing noise, Betty exits her house to investigate and finds Hulk coyly hiding behind a willow tree, looking at her with sad eyes. After getting over her initial shock, Betty stands her ground as Hulk steps out from behind the arbor to approach her. As Hulk comes into the light, Betty recognizes him as Bruce. He squats down, protectively picks her up in his giant green hands, and places her on top of a car. Multiple shot-reverse-shots between the two

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[15] At the same time, though, the Hulk is not like Roger Rabbit talking with Eddie Valiant in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (Robert Zemekis, 1988) or the cartoon penguins tap-dancing around Julie Andrews in *Mary Poppins* (Robert Stevenson, 1964). He is not meant to look like an out-of-place cartoon character in a live-action set, but rather a being just as real as the human actors around him. Once again, this is where the degrading of the hyperreal digital image once again comes into play.

characters then reveal looks of wonder, curiosity, and intelligence in their faces. The Hulk is calm for once and Betty witnesses the monster emoting something other than anger in this tender moment. It is a slower scene meant to show Banner's remaining humanity and compassion when in monster form. Ironically, though, behind-the-scenes footage reveals that Connolly is the only person on set for this sequence, and what the audience sees as the Hulk picking up Betty is really just Connolly moving around in a harness that was digitally edited out in post production and replaced with the Hulk's enormous hand. Moreover, in those emotional shots where the two stare longingly into each other's eyes, it is likely that Connolly was just staring into a camera lens or maybe even just off into vacant space.

From a posthuman perspective, this scene seems to hinder the fact that the Hulk directly contrasts with Bruce. Narratively, it suggests that the human can still exist in the monster, but the 2003 production process shows that this is a long way from reality. Matt Yockey explores *Hulk*'s use of CGI in "Secret Origins: Melodrama and the Digital in Ang Lee's *Hulk*," explaining how the film's "exchange of subject and object seems to dissolve the boundary between the two actually requires and sustains awareness of that boundary," and therefore, "the digital image suggests that latent crisis at the heart of representation: what we 'know' to be 'true' about ourselves and the world is purely subjective and, thus, always in a state of transformation" (Yockey 35). Because the title character in *Hulk* does not have control over his powers as do Spider-Man or most other superheroes, and seemingly loses complete human consciousness when he transforms, Bruce's switch from human to supernatural being is riddled with far more conflicts than most within the genre, reflecting the fear that comes with humanity's potentially fading existence. Braidotti states, "subjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behavior, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative and

specular counterpart" (Braidotti 14). By these terms, Hulk is most certainly Bruce's Other. For the most part, the monster transparently lacks conscious rationality and human self-regulation. His actions pose a threat not only to Bruce, but to all other humans around him as well.

James N. Gilmore testifies to this point in his essay "Will You Like Me When I'm Angry?" where he claims to "see Hulk's body as part of a larger *mise-en-scene* about scientific engineering. This destabilizing impossibility of identification… is inevitably *necessary* for the tensions *Hulk* and, to a lesser extent, *The Incredible Hulk* explore between nature and science" (Gilmore 18). Coming out in 2003, *Hulk* uses its digital technology to reflect the time's hesitations regarding technological advancements. Perhaps because of Y2K, the Patriot Act, early national bioengineering debates, or general unfamiliarity with computational devices that were starting to become more popular at the time, *Hulk* draws a clear line between the human and the non-human, rather horrifically depicting what could happen if the non-human gets the upper hand. As Gilmore notes, however, *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008), which was released five years later, does not foster such connotations as straightforwardly. In many ways, its more contemporary narrative and updated CGI use illustrates a far less absolute posthuman discourse that better reflects humanity's dual relationship with technology and its current response to the Anthropocene—a telling shift that extends to the superhero genre as a whole.

Hybrid Heroes

In the same year that *Hulk* came out, Peter Jackson concluded his cinematic *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001; 2002; 2003), which included the character Gollum, a fictional creature that, despite being digitized, was still played by actor Andy Serkis. With this mangy, yet humanoid being, *The Lord of the Rings* introduced an entirely new form of CGI, bringing the actor back

into the frame, but adjusting him with digitized imagery. This new technology is called "motion capture," and while previous films had experimented with it, Serkis' performance stood as its groundbreaking application, cementing it as the new, superlative way for filmmakers to bring fantastical characters to life. The way motion capture works is that the actor playing the digitized character is present in the frame while the cameras shoot the scene. During the shoot, the actor wears a suit covered in sensors so the special effects team can go back and animate right onto his/her body while retaining all human motions and expressions. Rather than creating an entirely animated creature for these roles and trying to match an actor's performance through Dykstra's "physiquing," motion capture characters keep an element of actual performance intact. The posthuman entity in film is thus no longer a starkly dual being that switches off between the human actor and digital character, but rather a hybrid of human flesh and animation. With the commercial success of *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the critical acclaim for Gollum, it was only a matter of time before superhero movies latched onto motion-capture for their own narratives and productions.[16]

While Ang Lee's *Hulk* used basic animation, Louis Leterrier's reboot, *The Incredible Hulk*, used motion capture to create the Hulk. In *The Incredible Hulk*, Edward Norton replaces Eric Bana as Bruce Banner, but unlike Bana, Norton can also be considered playing the role of the Hulk himself. Behind the scenes footage reveals Norton performing the Hulk's actions before a camera, gathering footage to be adjusted for aesthetic and proportion later on. Gilmore comments that, "this notion of 'making him into' the Hulk is interesting, for it essentially mimics the diegetic transformation of Banner into Hulk," because "Norton's physiognomy is digitally

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[16] Gollum appeared most prevalently in the second two installments of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, subsequently subtitled *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*. Released in 2002 and 2003, these two films both won Academy Awards for Best Visual Effects in their respective years. *The Return of the King* took home 11 Oscars total including Best Picture, tying *Titanic* and *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959) for the most Oscar wins of all time.

transformed, 'cloned' into a new performative entity" (Gilmore 15). This is done to an even greater extent in *The Avengers*, where Mark Ruffalo replaces Norton as Banner and the Hulk. Once again Ruffalo acted out both sides of the character using motion capture, which by 2012 was so advanced that viewers can still easily recognize Ruffalo's face after he fully transforms. Behind-the-scenes outtakes actually show Ruffalo wearing enormous green gloves and chest plates with sensors so that he can perform action sequences alongside other actors while embodying some of his character's massive stature— a clear step up from *Hulk* and even *The Incredible Hulk,* further bridging the human actor to the supernatural character.

While movies like *Spider-Man* and *Hulk* made a direct division between the human and the hero, the more contemporary *The Incredible Hulk* and *The Avengers* blur the line with motion capture. Once again, however, this shift in production also reflects itself in the films' narratives. While *Hulk* shows Bruce Banner's origins as the Hulk, *The Incredible Hulk* focuses more on Bruce Banner's quest to control his powers and keep his humanity upon transformation. At the movie's end, Banner is partially able to accomplish this, as he can effectively aim the Hulk towards a specific enemy to save innocent people. In the final scene, Bruce is living as a recluse, following archetypal landscape traditions by learning about himself in the wilderness. For the film's last few shots, Bruce meditates peacefully. The camera first captures a close up of his hands looking relaxed and nimble. It then cuts to a full body shot of him exhaling deeply in a postured seated position. Meanwhile, the camera slowly zooms in on his face as the music softly grows dark and ominous. The camera cuts back to his hands now in trembling fists before cutting to an extreme close up of his eyes shooting open to reveal bright emerald irises, signifying a change into the Hulk before the screen goes black. However, while the transformation has been framed as a distressing process for Bruce throughout the majority of the film, in this final shot,

he looks directly into the camera and smirks, implying that he has found some sort of confident control or happy symbiosis with his inner monster.

This self-referential discovery becomes even clearer in *The Avengers*, which like *The Incredible Hulk,* also takes place in the MCU and thus its Hulk is a direct continuation of the same character. At the end of *The Avengers*, Captain America advises Bruce to "get angry" in preparation for a battle. With a sly smile, Bruce turns around and states the iconic line, "That's my secret, Captain, I'm always angry," before transforming into the Hulk on command to knock out a giant approaching monster in one swift shot.[17] Just like how the Hulk is no longer either actor or animation behind the scenes, in the story, the Hulk is no longer either man or monster, but instead a fluid combination of the two, both co-existing despite some lingering struggles to occupy the same being. For the Hulk, the self is no longer divided, but shared on a biological as well as spiritual level. With the man-versus-monster and actor-versus-animation anxiety somewhat quelled, *The Avengers*' Hulk represents a contemporary acceptance for the way technology and science influences the human subject as well as its environment.

Biotechnology, however, is admittedly rather fantastical when depicted in superhero cinema. Although the field has come very far in its practical applications during recent years, excessive gamma radiation turning a man into a giant green monster whenever he gets angry, or a genetically-modified-spider bite giving a teenager the ability to scale walls is an immense dramatization. Posthuman theory does not limit itself to mere biotechnology, though, and neither do superhero movies. According to Braidotti, "a rather complex symbiotic relationship has emerged in our cyber universe: a sort of mutual dependence between flesh and the machine" (Braidotti 113). The simple technologies that one interacts with nearly everyday have essentially

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[17] The "giant approaching monster" referred to here is known as a Leviathan, which is traditionally a form of sea monster in Hebrew legends. In the MCU, it is a breed of enormous genetically engineered extraterrestrials that invade earth at the end of *The Avengers*.

become quasi-vital parts of the human species. Although they are not ingrained in the human

DNA, seemingly commonplace machines and tech separate people and the world from their

natural states. After all, industrial inventions of the late nineteenth and twentieth century such as

steam engines, automobiles, power plants, and airplanes have been key players in accelerating

the Anthropocene, emitting enough carbon dioxide and requiring enough resources to render the

natural world quite vulnerable. At the same time, however, new technologies also give birth to

novel resources and provide humanity with newfound capabilities. Especially in recent years,

alternative energy sources, advanced scientific tools, and the widespread explosion of

information via the internet and social networks are all technological advancements that have

evidently served humanity for the better. Despite its potential for damage, technology can also

sustain humanity in such a catastrophic ecological time.

It thus seems like no surprise that Jon Favreau kicked off the MCU with *Iron Man* in

2008, one year after Apple Inc. released the first iPhone and essentially put computers into the

world's pockets. *Iron Man* started a trend of superhero movies about people who engineer their

own powers and consciously manage them using science and technology. In the revolutionary

film, weapons designer Tony Stark is near-fatally wounded after being ambushed and kidnapped

by terrorists in Afghanistan. He tricks his kidnappers into thinking he is designing a missile for

them, but instead builds a weaponized metal suit to escape the hostage situation. The suit

functions according to Tony's commands because of an electromagnet embedded in his chest.

The electromagnet powers the suit while also keeping Tony alive by protecting his heart from

shrapnel. He and the suit are in many ways one, but when Tony puts it on in frame, actor Robert

Downey Jr. is often just in a motion capture suit with the advanced super-suit digitally pasted on

in post-production.

Simultaneously, *Iron Man*'s story largely centers around Tony's ability to adapt his character as well as his physical self and suit, building and improving upon his sustainable creation. Whereas Spider-Man and the Hulk gained their powers by accident, and Superman was born divine, Tony crafts his own abilities. After *Iron Man*, more superhero films started adopting this self-engineered origin story, as the genre placed significantly less privilege on a hero's organic abilities. In contrast to 2002's *Spider-Man*, for example, the rebooted *The Amazing Spider-Man* in 2012 changed the hero's web-shooting abilities from something that he could do from his flesh to something he could only do with techy wristbands that produce the webs for him. Later on, the MCU's reboot, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Jon Watts, 2017) took this to an even greater extent, with Spider-Man's suit being designed by Tony Stark himself and possessing many of the Iron Man suit's same technological benefits including scanners, external gadgets, and a conversational operating system. This shift resonates strongly with the discourse surrounding technology's role in the Anthropocene. In Chris Wodskou's essay "Rise of the Anthropocene," he claims, "for human's to live comfortably within the Earth's limits, it seems likely that renewable energy technologies will be a big part of the equation" (Wodskou 25). As heroes become more instrumental in how they use technology to enhance their abilities, they reflect how humanity at large must embrace new innovations to sustain itself in the current environment.

It seems fair to deem superhero films before *Iron Man* as somewhat technophobic due to the fact that many of their villains were technologically dependent, whereas the heroes remained organic. In as early as *Superman III* (Richard Lester, 1983), the man of steel fights a super-computer that (albeit, comically) cocoons an antagonist in wires and turns her into a cyborg during the film's final fight. More recently and more seriously, though, *Spider-Man*'s Green

Goblin is a very machine-based villain. Unlike Spider-Man who comes across his genetic gifts when haphazardly bitten, the Goblin uses tools and technology such as a hover board and a militaristic suit to become a comparable antagonist. The villain does have some biologically embedded superpowers, but in contrast to Spider-Man who was bitten by absolute chance, the Green Goblin actively gives himself powers through self-experimentation in a mad pursuit of scientific breakthrough.

Even this voluntary biological experimentation, however, has turned around in recent superhero movies, being framed less as an arrogant endeavor and instead as a noble action. Heroes such as Captain America, Wolverine, and Deadpool, all of whom received movies focusing on their origin stories since 2008, each volunteer to undergo biological experiments in their respective films to attain advanced abilities.[18] Similarly, the title hero in the MCU's *Doctor Strange* (Scott Derrikson, 2016) underwent a combination of biological and spiritual transformations to get his powers. In each case, the characters have the intention of elevating themselves to an advanced state of being. This narrative shift suggests a greater degree of agency that gives the human subject more choice over how to use technology and embrace the posthuman condition. Unlike the previous decade's supervillains, though, these more contemporary heroes go into body-altering and risky experiments to serve a higher heroic purpose rather than out of sheer avariciousness. Nonetheless, it would be paradoxical to have an antagonist's signature trait being technological dependence or no innate powers, for so many heroes are now equally dependent on their extrinsic tools as they are on their intrinsic abilities.

The DC Comics character Cyborg, cinematically appearing in Zack Snyder's *Justice League* (2017), epitomizes the contemporary techno-human hybrid hero. As his name implies,

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[18] These movies featuring the origin stories for Captain America, Wolverine, and Deadpool are respectively *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (Gavin Hood, 2009), and *Deadpool* (Tim Miller, 2016).

Cyborg is half man and half machine. Born Victor Stone, the human became Cyborg after a near-fatal accident. His scientist father kept him alive by engineering a cybernetic body around his flesh and a computer-powered brain that feeds him an exponentially increasing amount of data from other networks. Cyborg may seem like a severe overstatement of the interconnectedness between humans and machines, but as Braidotti states, "contemporary machines are no metaphors, but they are engines that both process forces and energies, facilitating interrelations, multiple connections, and assemblages," and "the merger of the human with the technological results in a new transversal compound, a new kind of eco-sophical unity, not unlike the symbiotic relationship between the animal and its planetary habitat" (Braidotti 92). Thus, Cyborg's conjoined existence with digital networks and artificial intelligence (AI) stands as a strikingly potent metaphor for humanity's current inseparableness from computers, data, and constant information streams. As Cyborg explains about himself during his first appearance in *Justice League*, "every day I wake up different. Modified," and although he frames this constant computerized evolution with jadedness, he eventually comes to use it for the better as a hero. The signs of human innovation are everywhere, but as Cyborg manifests, such innovations are simultaneously changing humanity and its inner capacities.

Concurring with the modern emphasis on technological superheroes with fluid selves and indivisible identities, the concept of alter egos has also somewhat faded from the genre since *Iron Man*, adding yet another layer to the connection between CGI superheroes and the genre's contemporary posthuman discourse. At the end of *Iron Man*, Tony Stark confidently reveals in a press conference, "I am Iron Man," coolly blowing his secret identity to the world without worry. In subsequent superhero movies, especially those in the MCU, secret identities are not as eminent of factors as they previously were for the genre. Citizens know that in their respective

recent movie appearances Steve Rogers is Captain America, Peter Quill is Starlord, Natasha

Romanova is Black Widow, and so on. Even the traditionally ultra-secretive Batman reveals

himself as Bruce Wayne rather easily in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). Due

to this dramatic shift away from one of the genre's most recognizable tropes, the need for the

mask has consequentially also faded. Surely Spider-Man, Captain America, and Iron Man

amongst others still don their signature disguises in the movies, but the masks no longer suggest

the same sort of transformation away from the human and into the superhuman. In *Iron Man*, for

example, the audience gets frequent shots of Tony Stark's face behind his mask, emotively

processing and working with the suit's inner systems. Likewise, the camera also provides POV

shots, so viewers can see what the superhero sees. On this topic, Gotto suggests that:

> entering into the inside of the mask provides a critical space for
>
> rethinking assumptions around viewing positions. Significantly,
>
> the shots depicting the superhero's view through the mask lack a
>
> defined frame: we see through a screen without noticing the
>
> confines of the screen. This way of redering space is reflexive
>
> because it indicates a specific perception: it duplicates the
>
> cinema's screen and its masking action. (Gotto 45)

Iron Man's use of this unique shot-reverse-shot format, where audiences can both experience

the hero in action while also watching his face behind the mask is a clear barrier breaker between

the human and the superhuman in the time of the Anthropocene. No longer can a mask split the

self in two like it did to Toby McGuire and the digital Spider-Man in in 2002. Now, even when

Iron Man is in the height of action, the camera can still cut to Robert Downey Jr. Clearly, time

has passed. The environment has changed from its core nature. The self has become fluid, simultaneously occupying both human and virtual space.

One must question, however, if the contemporary superhero is then an optimistic or pessimistic symbol of humanity and its future. Do characters like Iron Man, Cyborg, or the modern adaptations of Spider-Man connote that technology liberates or constricts humanity? After all, in *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), Tony Stark discovers that the electromagnet keeping him alive and giving him his powers is also slowly killing him. Nevertheless, by the film's ending, Tony prevails once again, creating a new element that can sustain his heart while also maintaining his supernatural capabilities. This is just one microcosmic example among many in the superhero film genre that illustrates how technology, while dangerous, is perhaps the only way humanity can save itself. Just as Wodskou suggests, "technology seems likely to be the tool of first resort to solve the self-inflicted problems caused by our technology" (Wodskou 25). Much of the Anthropocene's ecological damage is irreversible at this point, and the human species has become so dependent on technology that it cannot solve its ecological problems by simply letting go of the machines it has created, for many of these very same machines now also sustain the human species.

As Braidotti suggests, the posthuman species is an extension of the human, and there is no going back. If treated correctly and respectfully, though, "this affirmative, unprogrammed mutation can help actualize new concepts, affects and planetary subject formations," for "just as we do not know what posthuman bodies can do, we cannot even begin to guess what postanthropocentric embodied brains will actually be able to think up" (Braidotti, 104). Technology may be inescapable at this point, but it does not need to evoke downfall. Just as film theorist Philip Rosen suggests that digitization is "a matter of degree rather than kind [in

movies]," the same can be said for technology in the real world (Rosen 739). Its usefulness and purpose remains in the human user's hand. Just as CGI and motion capture are flexible tools for filmmakers to embed within live action footage, the use of technology is a matter of degree and agency. When used morally, it can evoke a very bright future indeed.

The Future is Now

Much of the scholarship surrounding digital effects, posthumanism, and superhero movies seems to put heavy emphasis on the future. Because CGI foundationally depicted the ability to bring prehistoric dinosaurs back to life in *Jurassic Park*, and robots back from the future in *Terminator 2*, several theorists seem to look at the tool as something that constantly points to achievements that are impossible given modern technology, but plausible in some oncoming era. Concurrently, digital effects are also often linked to anxieties over apocalyptic events. *Jurassic Park*'s dinosaurs obviously endured extinction in the past, and *Terminator 2* is literally subtitled *Judgment Day*, connoting the film's plot about halting a war-torn future between humans and machines. Kristen Whissel points to apocalyptic blockbusters with armies of CGI villains such as *Independence Day* and *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, stating that "these films represent their protagonists' clashes with the multitude as a struggle against the swift approach of a terrible new age in which mankind is first outnumbered and then threatened with destruction or enslavement by the subhuman, the human simulation, the anthropomorphized machine, or the undead" (Whissel 763-764). The contemporary superhero movie is no stranger to massified armies of non-humans bringing on Armageddon. *The Avengers* does it with aliens; *Avengers: Age of Ultron* does it with robots; *Justice League* does it with ancient alien-demon

hybrids.[19] A big difference, however, between superhero movies' and other action genres' use of digital effects and inhuman entities, is that the heroes can also be considered inhuman—and on some accounts even subhuman—but they nonetheless still stand as humanity's final hope in these global crises.

In a crucial scene from *The Avengers*, for example, the team manager, Nick Fury, articulates that the movie's heroes had been assembled to "bring together a group of remarkable people to see if they could become something more. To see if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we never could." Fury's dramatic diction is somewhat ambiguous. He refers to the movie's heroes as people, but at the same time acknowledges that they hold powers that elevate them from all others. The speech signifies that the heroes are not detached from humanity, but rather positively distinguished from within due to their abilities. After all, Hulk, Iron Man, Captain America, and even Thor have all been mere humans at some point in their lives.[20] In the end, though, their deviations from standard humanity have rendered them the only beings that can possibly fight off the enemies beyond Earth's defensive capabilities.

Also unlike several apocalyptic films, *The Avengers*, along with most other superhero movies, takes place in the present, with no claim of the future being responsible for bringing digital enemies against humanity. Although the technology to build Iron Man, Spider-Man, Cyborg, or many other characters may not yet exist in real life, it does in the films' modern-day diegesis and becomes more and more plausible as the genre evolves from year to year. With no direct mention of superheroes or cinema, Digital Humanities scholar Sherry Turkle writes in her

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[19] These "ancient alien, demon hybrids" from *Justice League* are known as Parademons in the DC canon. They are extraterrestrials that, throughout the film, serve the villainous God, Steppenwolf in his desire for domination over Earth.

[20] Thor may have been born a God, but when stripped of his powers and banished to Earth in his debuting MCU movie, he becomes a simple person and endures humanity firsthand until earning his powers back.

book *Alone Together* that humanity currently "approach(es) a new state of the self, itself. For a start, it presumes entitlements. It can experience the physical and virtual in near simultaneity. And it is able to make more time by multitasking, our twenty-first-century alchemy" (Turkle 155). While the superhero genre may be allegorical and metaphoric, it has grown into something far more down to earth in recent years. Personal computers, smart phones, virtual realities, and AI in the current age of digital information have rendered the human species more connected to mechanical devices than ever before. As superhero movies oftentimes suggest in lighthearted manners, these seemingly futuristic achievements and anxieties are no longer happening in the future. They are happening right now.

This newfound emphasis on the present mimics the discourse on the Anthropocene in recent years. Previous decades pointed to high-stakes ecological phenomena such as global warming as far off, distant problems that could be put on the back burner for years to come. For a long time, even those who conceded climate change as a potentially apocalyptic reality could feel comfortable ignoring it, assured that a seemingly endless amount of time stood between current actions and ecological consequences. One of the biggest arguments for climate action was—and often still is—to leave a better world for *future* generations, pulling on people's heartstrings by placing the focus not on themselves, but on their children and grandchildren. While this rhetoric remains used and effective to a similar extent today, the Anthropocene can no longer be written off as something so far removed. As David A. Collings writes in his book on climate theory, *Stolen Future, Broken Present*, "we are *already* living in a ruined future, already enduring changes in the biosphere for which we are not prepared" (Collings 109). The future's events no longer belong to the future. They belong to the present. Climate change's consequences are here, and they demand a response in real time.

Therefore, humans juggle these philosophical questions of degree, agency, and evolution on more than mere theoretical levels. They exist beyond cinema, fiction, or speculation. Dan Hassier-Forest looks directly at contemporary superhero movies from an exclusively posthuman lens in "Of Iron Men and Green Monsters: Superheroes and Posthumanism," stating:

> even though these films offer tantalizing representations of posthuman bodies that are frequently ambiguous, both the narratives and the aesthetic choices tend to create a binary system that places them firmly within a hierarchy that explicitly favors traditional humanist values… this most typically occurs by separating out two different strands of posthumanism, one of which is subsequently coded as "benevolent/natural/empowering" while the other is shown to be "malevolent/artificial/corrupting." (Hassier-Forest 3)

Evidently, superhero cinema not only incorporates posthuman ideas, but it addresses a very real crossroads that the human species presently faces. With so much advanced technology at its fingertips, humanity can either use it in instrumental or deterministic manners. People can either choose to be Iron Man, or they can choose to be the Green Goblin, with a mountain of gray area in between.

For a more clear-cut example of this dichotomy from a single movie, in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Tony Stark creates a cyborg named Ultron to hopefully fight the Avengers' battles for them, so the human heroes will no longer need to risk their own lives. Ultron, however, ends up using his AI to identify the best solution to global suffering as mankind's extinction. Consequently, Ultron turns against the Avengers and starts a quest to decimate all humans on

Earth with an army of robots. Ultron is so powerful, however, that the only way to destroy him is for Tony to create yet another cyborg of greater strength. This second cyborg is named Vision, and his conflicting relationship with Ultron symbolizes how technology can sometimes be a danger and at other times a security. Stated in binary terms, Tony's two creations demonstrate how technology can either save or destroy, and hopefully that complex choice will remain up to a still-human conscience to navigate.

In one of *Age of Ultron*'s final scenes, Vision and Ultron come face to face for a dialogue with no humans in sight. His plan to bring on human extinction foiled, the tattered Ultron tells Vision that "Stark asked for a savior, and settled for a slave." Evidently, he sees himself as the savior, and Vision as the slave, for the former prioritizes an objective mission, while the latter serves the fallible human agenda. The camera cuts to Vision for him to sagaciously respond, "Humans are odd. They think order and chaos are somehow opposites, and they try to control what won't be, but there is grace is their failings, and I think you missed that." He refers, of course, to humanity's endless quest for organization and meaning. In the specific context, he speaks about the superheroes' perhaps fruitless aim for peace in an anthropocentric world hurling towards destruction. However, adopting an optimistic philosophy, he concedes that the failures are a part of positive growth, and for that reason, humans are still worth saving.

In a continuing series of cross cutting mid-shots, Ultron stoically responds, "They're doomed," and Vision cannot help but quietly agree, "Yes," before suggesting that "a thing isn't beautiful because it lasts," and that "it's a privilege to be among [humans]." Ultron stubbornly calls Vision "naïve," and then launches to attack. The camera cuts to a wide shot as Vision swiftly annihilates him without effort, depicting the cyborg's quasi-divine power, but simultaneously framing it as a defense for humanity. In the subsequent scene, Hawkeye returns

to his pastoral home referred to in chapter one. He embraces his wife and for the time being, the ending appears peaceful. It is beautiful, but as Vision and Ultron know, the happy ending cannot last in this anthropocentric world.

If technology can think beyond the human brain at this point, then maybe it can already see the end of the human species and the world it has created. What this means exactly remains clouded in mystery. Will this result in a world run by cyborgs? Will humans fully transform into something posthuman? Or will the human species simply fade away—and if so, will it be its own downfall as Vision and Ultron both anticipate? If the seemingly futuristic achievements of the superhero movies are coming to fruition in the modern world, then perhaps so are the detriments. If the advanced technologies surrounding humanity are already ubiquitous, then so is the Anthropocene, and perhaps Armageddon is truly in sight. Climate change studies and eco-critical theory look deeply into these paradoxes of slow violence and self-destruction, and although it may seem like a stretch for any fiction to grapple with these topics, the superhero genre may have found a way to effectively communicate them. CGI has come a long way in film and the superhero genre has been able to use it not only as a technical tool, but also as a narrative one to reflect the transformations and evolutions between humans and non-humans in the twenty-first century. The next chapter will look at the limits to this posthuman relationship in superhero cinema as well as the genre's cinematic depiction of slow violence and superheroes' true purposes in a world on the brink of human extinction.

Chapter 3
Rethinking Heroism at the End of the World

Thanks yet again in no small part to modern advancements in digital effects, come 2009, Zack Snyder and Warner Brother Pictures were able to adapt arguably the most revered graphic novel of all time into a movie—*Watchmen*. While Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' source material is perhaps too dense and medium-specific for any adaptation to ever do complete justice to, Snyder stayed true to the original work and brought the story to the big screen in a relatively satisfying way for fans and critics alike. Of course, he had to take out a few plotlines from the original comic for efficiency, but he also adds in a few scenes to fill in the gaps. One of the film's more praised additions is its opening credits sequence, where Snyder effectively sets up the story's dystopian 1980s universe and ominous tone. While opening credits sequences are somewhat of an outdated trope in film, Snyder brought the convention back in *Watchmen* to foreshadow some of the key themes it would soon address, most notably those regarding change and the ethics of progress.[21]

The sequence is set to the tune of Bob Dylan's 1964 hit "The Times They Are A Changin,'" a classic folk-rock song about the turn of the tides and the coming of a cultural revolution in America.[22] Appropriately, the sequence's images show a series of events taking place over the past generation in the film's diegesis. It opens with shots of classical-looking heroes donning masks and smiling faces. They seem to pose for news cameras, happily knocking out generic looking villains. A banner in one shot's background shows that this is the 1940s,

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[21] While opening credits sequences were a staple of film for much of its early history, they became retroactive following George Lucas' *Star Wars*, which eliminated the convention to successfully jump right into the story, thus starting a new trend.

[22] Choosing a Bob Dylan song for *Watchmen*'s opening credits is not a coincidence, as Dave Gibbons and Alan Moore took influence from the songwriter in creating *Watchmen*. In the graphic novel's opening pages, large bold text between the panels reads "AT MIDNIGHT, ALL THE AGENTS…" quoting Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row" (Moore 14).

signifying not only the Golden Age of comics and superheroes, but also World War II America, when national morale was high. A subsequent shot then shows a large warlike plane taking off, its metallic body soaring into the sky with a mural of Miss Jupiter—one of the film's heroes—painted on its side. It signifies progress in a positive light and ties the heroes' successes to industrial advancements. As this plane takes off, celebrating Miss Jupiter, it presumably soars towards a brighter future.

As the song carries on, though, the sequence's tone changes. One of the shots reveals a hero sitting dead on the side of the road; another shows a pregnant Miss Jupiter at her retirement party; the next captures a resistant hero being dragged into the back of an ambulance. Evidently, the world is getting darker and the heroes are fading. On a more familiar level, subsequent shots also show the assassination of President Kennedy and a television set reporting on Vietnam, depicting the Cold War hysteria that jeopardized notions of American exceptionalism. More straightforwardly, the camera also zooms in on a newspaper headline reading, "RUSS HAVE A-BOMB" and later reveals a number of Soviet military personnel watching their jets fly over a yard filled with nuclear missiles. These shots show the darker side of industrial progress, depicting an American fear of technology when it falls into the enemy's hands. Snyder also juxtaposes this industrial anxiety with a shot of the moon landing, one of the greatest scientific and engineering achievements of the past century. Evidently, things are more complicated than they seem, and as Chapter Two already explained, technological progress is often a double-edged sword.

Time carries on and Dylan continues to play, as the shots start depicting the rise of a new generation of heroes—the ones whom the movie will primarily focus on. These new heroes will have to deal with the contemporary issues that are evidently more complicated than those in the

previous era. In the scene's final shot, the camera zooms out from a man spray-painting "Who Watches The Watchmen?" on a store window. As the shot grows wider and wider, the viewer sees a crowd of protesters gathering outside the window, holding signs with messages such as "Badges Not Masks" and "Bring Us Our Police Back." Then, as Dylan blows a final note from his harmonica, one member of the crowd lights a Molotov cocktail and throws it through the window, shattering the graffitied glass and erupting the protest in a fiery explosion.

The entire sequence is over five minutes long and is understandably dense. After all, Snyder included the scene to fill in much of the drawn-out backstory that the comic provides across hundreds of panels. However, if one overarching aspect of the opening credits' layered intricacies stands out, it is the unmistakable theme of change both for the industrial world as well as the superhero genre. What was once celebrated is now condemned, and certain "achievements" have also created an entire new breed of national paranoia and conflicts. Similarly, heroes no longer hold the same societal reverence or serve the same purposes, for the villains and the world's threats are of entirely different natures.

When Moore and Gibbons released *Watchmen* in the 1980s, it was a watershed moment for comics and the superhero genre. Likewise, Snyder released the film in 2009 on the heels of *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight,* two films that significantly changed superhero cinema in the twenty-first century. Although the Cold War was long over at the time of Snyder's movie, *Watchmen*'s themes and focuses still resonate with current moviegoers, for it addresses national anxieties that can easily translate to modern feelings about contemporary conflicts such as climate change, posthumanism, and the rising Anthropocene.

In a later scene, Doctor Manhattan—*Watchmen*'s only supernatural and divine hero— goes away from Earth to spend reflective and isolated time on Mars. Meditating on the red

planet, he wills with his mind an enormous mechanical structure to rise from the ground. Although the structure is magnificent, it serves no exact purpose on the barren planet (or any other, for that matter). It is an unnecessary industrial relic of the technological sublime placed where no one will ever see it. Meanwhile, Doctor Manhattan's inner monologue voice-over states, "They claim their labors are to build a heaven, but their heaven is populated with horrors. Perhaps the world is not made. Perhaps nothing is made. A clock without a craftsman. It's too late. It always has been." The hero's musings are ambiguous, but in light of the magnificent yet nonetheless useless structure that he creates on a world without life, two eco-critical interpretations stand out.

Perhaps the most obvious interpretation of this speech assumes that Doctor Manhattan is talking about human beings in general and their endless drive for progress on Earth. Throughout history, revolutionary inventions and technological feats have frequently been understood as accomplishments. However, Doctor Manhattan highlights that these progressive innovations have created immense dangers as well. The most cited example of this paradox is the creation of nuclear weapons, which gives humankind the potential to destroy itself and the world it inhabits. In a post-Cold War context, though, perhaps all industrious creations can be seen as contributing to such terrors, for they all feed gradual processes like climate change, which are now coming to fruition. Doctor Manhattan's final line that it is and always has been "too late" to solve this problem also signifies how industrial progress has been going on from the beginning of time. Merely sustaining human life always requires some sort of intervention upon the natural world. The consequences have always been there. Only now are they being manifested in real time.

In a second interpretation, one can also assume that the "they" Doctor Manhattan refers to are the superheroes back on Earth. In this reading, the "labors" are the heroes' night-by-night

tasks of fighting crime in the pursuit of some undefined justice. The omnipotent Doctor Manhattan sees that this process is nothing more than an endless perpetuation. This is the way it always has been for superheroes, and unless something disrupts the cycle, it is the way it always will be. Despite how much good superheroes do, they cannot conventionally solve problems beyond the immediate. No matter how many crimes they fight, more crimes will always rise to the surface.

These two readings of Doctor Manhattan's monologue are largely intertwined, as superheroes alone cannot save the world from gradual problems like climate change, and contemporary humanity no longer has the privilege of framing such ecological issues as temporally distant. Bahlmann testifies to this, stating, "as amazing as superheroes are within their own realities, the fact still remains that they are relatively ineffective when it comes to dealing with problems outside of the supernatural challenges they face as superheroes" (Bahlmann 51). It is true that superheroes are rarely put to the task of saving the world unless some sort of villain or unexpected apocalyptic event comes in its path. After all, this is what usually makes for compelling narratives in comics and cinema—a clear threat must be stopped within a limited number of pages or minutes. Bahlmann continues to claim that even the smartest superheroes are "all men of stunning intellect who seem incapable of finding a solution to major crises like poverty, starvation, and pollution" (Bahlmann 51). In the modern world, the most compelling major crisis of this nature must be climate change. It is a matter of slow violence that has quietly been going on perhaps since the dawn of humanity. Ever since modern industrialization, though, its effects have grown more severe and tangible, leaving one to wonder what superheroes and superhero stories are to do in a time when slow violence becomes immediate.

This chapter will look at the ways in which superhero movies have evolved in recent years to reflect ecological crises that threaten the human species. Although it may not be evident at first, and those making the movies may not have even considered it, environmental discourses and climate theories have built their way into the superhero genre's very fiber, impacting not only the stories, but the way they are told and released as well. The MCU has subverted the blockbuster model with an arch-narrative that demands its audiences to think in less immediate, slow violence timeframes. Then, the franchise's climactic film *Avengers: Infinity War* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2018) foregrounds the ecological conflict with a narrative that directly grapples with issues of overpopulation and finite resources, leaving audiences and characters alike to wonder what purpose heroes and their stories serve in an environmentally jeopardized universe.

Subverting the Blockbuster Model With Slow Violence

"Slow violence" is a term used to describe events where the violent consequences of one's actions are so far removed and temporally delayed that one can hardly see the relationship between cause and effect. Needless to say, it is a crucial term for contextualizing climate change. Rob Nixon coined the term in his book *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*, which focuses on humanity's relationship with its ecologically transforming world. He defines slow violence as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all," for "violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility" (Nixon 2). Evidently, it is this more conventional kind of visibly impactful violence that has

predominantly shown its face in cinema. Conventionally, it is far easier and more profitable to create a narrative that blows things up with spectacle than it is to get audiences invested in ongoing processes with measured and subtle action.

In fact, narrative in general has nearly always failed to depict slow violence. In most cases, stories have not even attempted to grasp the concept. Even the most epic poem, the longest book, or the most exhaustive play falls short of placing its readers or characters into such ecological timeframes. Perhaps by definition, any bookended narrative cannot capture slow violence. Nixon frames this as one of slow violence awareness' most severe shortcomings, for with no stories that communicate it to the public, it is hard for people to become invested in acting against it. He explains that "we need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence" (Nixon 2). Of course, one may wonder about ongoing serials where the characters keep coming back. In fact, one might even point to comic books in particular and the traditional heroic narratives that have been going on for decades. Couldn't these be examples of slow violence depicted across narrative? Indeed, Spider-Man, Batman, Superman and others may have been around for longer than most fictional characters, but for the most part, the degree of episodic action and the lack of change throughout their vast anthologies deceives readers into ongoing stories that, despite their immensity, actually remain relatively static. For this reason, superheroes rarely grow old, the same villains keep coming back, and each new comic is a new adventure. Slow violence is not a series of serialized adventures, but a single steady process so enormous that one rarely considers it within narrative boundaries.

Thus, one could even argue that superhero movies, as products of the blockbuster cycle, are the antitheses of slow violence stories, and that in their success, they have fatally wounded

the possibility of cinema ever engaging in drawn-out ecological narratives. The blockbuster cycle, according to Gerald Mast and Bruce F. Kawin in *A Short History of the Movies*, started in the late 1970s after George Lucas released *Star Wars* and "the film business adopted a 'blockbuster mentality,' preferring to finance and distribute a few big films with the potential for enormous profits rather than a larger slate of modest films with modest profits" (Mast 585-586). Thus, blockbusters rely on familiar stories that more-or-less insure high ticket sales. Consequentially, they also depend on spectacles, incorporating cutting-edge visual effects to draw in audiences. After all, a blockbuster, by definition, "is a picture that takes in over $100 million at the U.S. box office" (Mast 586).

The cycle's effects on narrative, however, created something that simply made no room for meditative contemplation or slow violence. Aside from bringing in money, *Star Wars* also brought back a new mythology to the cinema. While Hollywood Renaissance films often had ambiguous endings and were message-focused rather than plot-driven, the blockbuster offered familiar stories and straightforward morals. As Kawin and Mast describe it, "many audiences and most producers preferred what were called 'feelgood' movies to 'downers' and 'bummers;' by far the majority of films had heroes to root for, villains to hate, and happy endings. Movies fit once more into recognizable genres and embraced their conventions" (Mast 585). For this reason, *Superman* came out just a year after *Star Wars*, featuring the most recognizable comic book hero to offer an unambiguous, myth-building blockbuster with a happy ending. Whether it is from a falling helicopter, an armed gunman, or a faulty plane engine, Superman saves the day over and over throughout the movie, climaxing when he halts the evil genius Lex Luther from drowning half the country with his transparently diabolical plan. In the movie's final shot, Superman flies over the Earth in outer space. He smiles at the camera and heroically glides away.

According to the blockbuster mythology, which has little to no regard for promoting eco-critical thinking, the world is safe when *Superman*'s credits roll. That is, until the sequel, of course.

Indeed, with so much money going around in the film industry, successful movies hardly ever stood alone in the blockbuster cycle. Although each blockbuster, almost as a rule with few exceptions, had a happy ending, this did not mean that another threat could not rise and thus prompt the hero to return. For this reason, *Superman* was followed by *Superman II* (Richard Lester and Richard Donner, 1981), *Superman III*, *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (Sidney J. Furie, 1987), and eventually *Superman Returns*. Similarly, Burton's *Batman* yielded *Batman Returns*, *Batman Forever*, and *Batman and Robin*. The examples of successful blockbusters from the seventies and eighties that sparked slews of sequels could go on and on.[23] Kawin and Mast describe the period in film history as "the period of the blockbuster, the sequel, the Dolby soundtrack, the videocassette and laserdisc and DVD and Blu-ray, the direct-to-video release, the camcorder, the computer, and the all-powerful talent agent" (Mast 585). Later, they further define the period as "an avalanche of sequels to hits, remakes of classics, and big-budget B pictures in familiar genres" (Mast 588). With so much materialism, money, and demand for fast-paced turnover in Hollywood, cinema could hardly even think to become the first narrative device for creating slow violence.

Writing in the early 2000s, Kawin and Mast consider the blockbuster cycle ongoing and continuing to this day. They also claim that "its end remains unknown" (Mast 585). Truly, the superhero boom at the turn of the millennium only further enforced this episodic mythological structure within popular cinema at first. Of all the popular superhero movies to come out in the

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[23] Other examples of movies that inspired multiple sequels from this period in film history include *Star Wars*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Stephen Spielberg, 1981), *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988), *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984), *Halloween* (John Capenter, 1978), *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980), *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982) and more.

decade's first seven years, nearly each of them received at least one sequel. *X-Men* continues to this day as a franchise with over ten films; Raimi's *Spider-Man* received two sequels before the studio rebooted the character; *Fantastic Four* paved the way for *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (Tim Story, 2007); *Ghost Rider* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2007) lead to *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance* (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, 2011); *Hellboy* created *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (Guillermo del Toro, 2008); and *Batman Begins* sparked both *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises*. With few exceptions, each of these movies also has a happy ending. The villain is defeated and the hero(es) fly, swing, ride, or run off into the distance, leaving open the definite possibility for a sequel, but not really intending audiences to invest in any larger narrative beyond when the credits start rolling. Like their comic book predecessors, superhero movies in the early twenty-first century epitomized the episodic serialization technique, heavily buying into the blockbuster mentality that runs against contemplative slow violence narratives.

As Chapters One and Two both fleshed out, though, superhero movies changed in the late 2000s. Driven by social, political, technical, and cultural shifts, the genre underwent a distinct narrative transformation in the year 2008, bringing different kinds of heroes and different kinds of messages to the screen. However, a corresponding shift also happened on the genre's commercial end. After all, things rarely change in the film industry unless producers or studios give them the green light. In 2007, superhero movies actually seemed to be declining in popularity. Compared to powerhouses like *X-Men* and *Spider-Man*, *Ghost Rider* and *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* were not meeting financial or critical expectations. As Matthias Stork explains in his essay "Assembling the Avengers," in the couple years leading up to 2008, "most [Marvel-adapted] films underperformed financially and the negative critical reception further decreased the overall value of Marvel's brand of character and story content in the market

place" (Stork 88). Perhaps audiences were growing weary of the episodic city saving, and given the changes in culture and society, they valued something deeper than perpetual stories about heroes and villains that were all nicely tied up in the end. In order to make a movie franchise work, it had to be something more than just a serial. It had to address more resonating conflicts. It had to be a universe.

In 2008, that universe began with *Iron Man* kicking off the MCU. While the majority of the film seems like a straightforward, standalone superhero flick, an additional scene appearing after the credits tied the film into something much larger. At the end of the credits, the screen fades back in, showing Tony Stark arriving home to find a man, mysteriously shrouded in low-key lighting, waiting for him. From the shadows, the man says, "You think you're the only superhero in the world? Mr. Stark you've become part of a bigger universe. You just don't know it yet." When Stark asks who he is, the man walks forward and introduces himself as Nick Fury, director of Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division (SHIELD). A close up of Fury stepping into the light then reveals his signature eye-patched face portrayed by Samuel L. Jackson. He tells Stark, "I'm here to talk to you about the Avengers Initiative" before the screen once again goes dark. Long-time comic book fans may have recognized the significance of this scene before others, but it essentially promises the convergence of different Marvel superheroes on screen, something that has become commonplace in the comics, but has never been able to effectively transfer itself to the movies. With Fury alluding to other heroes and mentioning the Avengers, this less-than-a-minute-long hidden scene instigated a dramatic change in the blockbuster model. In the process, it also paved the way for a cinematic narrative that could potentially depict slow violence.

The postcredit scene has become somewhat of a staple of superhero movies since *Iron Man*. In the MCU's subsequent films, Tony Stark appears after *The Incredible Hulk*, Thor's Hammer makes its debut following *Iron Man 2*, and Nick Fury returns yet again at the end of *Thor*.[24] Each of these scenes ties the singular movie into the larger MCU, suggesting that the characters would soon be united in a single film. The postcredit scene in *Captain America: The First Avenger* finally promised a delivery on that suggestion, revealing the first trailer for *The Avengers*, which came out the following year. Of course, one can easily dismiss these after-credit sequences as mere marketing ploys, for they certainly are to an extent. However, they also serve a key narrative function, linking each individual film with the vaster universe and arch-narrative. As Stork puts it, "Marvel Studios indeed constructed the postcredits of its individual films as a marathon toward crossover synergy, creating a build-up to *The Avengers* through theatrically released film segments" that "served a narrative purpose, priming audiences for the series' next installment… while equally offering a promotional advertising model for the overarching notion of the cinematic universe" (Stork 84). While they are there in part to keep audiences coming back, the MCU's postcredit scenes also stand to make sure the fans get invested beyond a single film's story, subverting the tied-up, episodic conventions of the blockbuster cycle and opening up cinema's door for slow violence. The postcredit trope continues to this day, over six years since the heroes first converged in *The Avengers*. Chapter One already analyzed the postcredit scene in *The Avengers*, when MCU arch-villain Thanos first appears, suggesting more movies with larger threats on the horizon. Even after an event as monumental and climactic as *The Avengers*, though, the MCU continued into a second wave of films including *Iron Man 3* (Shane

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[24] Superhero movies outside of the MCU have also started to incorporate postcredit scenes. Films within the X-Men franchise and the DCEU as well as standalone movies like *Venom* (Ruben Fleischer, 2018) and *The Amazing Spider-Man* all include short scenes after their credits, oftentimes offering a glimpse into the franchise's next steps. At this point, one can consider the postcredit scene a piece of the genre's filmic iconography.

Black, 2013), *Thor: The Dark World* (Alan Taylor, 2013), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*,

Guardians of the Galaxy, and then converging once again in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. The

universe has only grown larger and more complex over time, exploring different corners and

characters of its vast canvas while revising the episodic tradition of serial blockbusters. Instead

of progressing linearly, the MCU progresses laterally, changing the notion of a franchise and

making it more conducive to gradual, ecologically minded narratives.

Admittedly, the MCU is not the first franchise that mixed and matched its characters, nor

is it the first film series to go against linear expectations.[25] Critics and academics often point to

Universal Studios' horror mash-ups from the black-and-white era as precursors to Marvel's

universe-building franchise model. With the success of stand-alone serials following individual

hits such as *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931), *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), and *The*

Wolfman (George Waggner, 1941) amongst others, Universal began pairing these monsters up,

eventually having them all meet each other in *The House of Frankenstein* (Erle C. Kenton, 1944)

and *The House of Dracula* (Erle C. Kenton, 1945). Across the Pacific Ocean, the Japanese Toho

Company was doing the same thing with their larger monsters, matching the famous Godzilla up

against other iconic movie creatures such as Mothra, Rodan, Gidorah, and the originally

American King Kong. Clearly, combining main characters from different movies for cross-over

cinematic events was nothing novel to the MCU; however, one could argue that the MCU has

perfected the model, and that these cross-over predecessors failed to share the same potential for

slow violence, because they lacked the premeditative oversight that Marvel has.

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[25] The MCU did not invent the postcredit sequence either. It has been used before, most notably in comedies such as *Airplane!* (David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, and Jerry Zucker, 1980), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (John Hughes, 1986), and *Napoleon Dynamite* (Jared Hess, 2004) to give audiences an unexpected final gag. Thus, it is not the novelty of the MCU postcredit scenes that make them significant, but the way that they tie the movies together and serve a significant purpose in crafting an arch-narrative.

Marvel executives first envisioned the MCU in 2005, when producer Kevin Feige thought up creating a cinematic experience similar to reading comic books. For most of the early 2000s, as the comic industry went though an economic slump, Marvel made money by licensing its characters out to larger studios that wanted to make movies about them. Noticing this, Feige proposed that Marvel take the reins of cinema on its own. Essentially, creating the MCU was a corporate decision, establishing Marvel Comics as a movie studio (Marvel Studios) with the early help of Paramount and Universal as partners to kick off their own franchise. In 2009, following *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk*, Walt Disney Studios purchased Marvel Studios, continuing its plan for a cinematic universe with Feige overseeing production, but now with more financial stability than ever before. Today, the franchise is over ten years old and includes over twenty films that each bleed into one another. It is this fluidity and pre-planning that distinguishes the MCU from previous cross-over franchises. Because Feige has retained corporate oversight for the entire filmography, each film is created with the intention of adding to the overarching story. To stay invested in the MCU's arch-narrative, one must think in larger timeframes, engage in cinematic events lasting over a decade, and consider events—quite literally—beyond the ending credits. Admittedly, the model may not be prefect, but the MCU is perhaps the closest thing one can get to a narrative depiction of slow violence on film, or any other medium for that matter.

Of course, one may argue that the entire MCU is just an enormous piece of commercial entertainment, and to engage in it is far from something contemplative or at all linked to environmental thought. This beckons the question of whether the MCU's structure can really depict slow violence, or whether it is just another cash-grabbing serial amped up to an egregious extent. After all, the MCU is the most successful cinematic franchise of all time, and as

previously mentioned, it is spearheaded less by the filmic artists on set than by the studio

executives upstairs. To this counterpoint, however, one should further consider the way in which

Marvel combines each particular story with the larger narrative. As the blockbuster cycle has

perhaps solidified, producers in the film industry will rarely approve an idea unless it appears

financially promising. Of course, then, to get viewers into the theater, each individual Marvel

movie must be an action-packed and delivering superhero flick, filled with quality character arcs,

heroes, villains, and spectacles galore. This alone is admittedly not conducive to slow violence

narratives, and simply buys further into the episodic blockbuster mentality. As Amitav Ghosh—

an eco-theorist who writes in the same vein as Rob Nixon—argues, one of narrative's

shortcomings in depicting slow violence is that they are often grounded in "individual moral

adventure(s)" and that "what is banished from the territory of the novel [or film in this case] is

precisely the collective," so when a movie is based solely on Iron Man, Spider-Man, Captain

America, or Thor, it cannot grasp the enormity of environmental catastrophe (Ghosh 77-78).

The MCU does not stop at its singular characters or movies, though. Such conventional

approaches are only its starting point. Although the franchise's first wave did ultimately take a

more conservative approach with films centered more or less on individual characters, after *The*

Avengers—a movie that in and of itself stands out for its collective character ensemble—the

MCU switched to focusing more on converging narratives. Rarely is a single hero still saving the

day for Marvel anymore. Another member of the cast often accompanies him or her. Iron Man

appears in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, the Hulk is in *Thor: Ragnarok*, and *The Guardians of the*

Galaxy includes five protagonists that always operate as a team. While each of these films may

be cinematic adventure pieces that are in many ways emblematic of blockbusters, they also stray

from strict singularity or conventional episodic structure. Slowly but surely, the MCU calls on its viewers to follow what is happening to an extended character cast in the long-haul.

On top of its pre-planned structure, it might just be its gradual pace that sets the MCU apart from other franchises that have tried to implement the universe model. Because of the MCU's profound success, many other studios have tried to replicate its narrative style. Most notably, Warner Brothers has been using its rights to DC Comics' characters to try establishing the DCEU. However, despite a handful of successful projects, the DCEU has failed to find the same critical or fanatical praise as the MCU. While a variety of rationales could explain Warner Borthers' shortcomings, one cannot overlook the fact that the DCEU largely rushed its universe-building process. The franchise started in 2013 with *Man of Steel*, which has no blatant references to any other DC Comics character. It then took the DCEU three years and an additional film to show that *Man of Steel* was part of something larger. In 2016, Warner Brothers released *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, which met polarizing reactions and seemed to cram too many important characters into the universe all at once, introducing Batman, Wonder Woman, and Lex Luthor all too hastily for icons of such narrative importance. The same issues plagued the franchise's subsequent film, *Suicide Squad* (David Ayer, 2016), to an even greater extent. *Suicide Squad* attempted to stuff seven DC villains into the franchise at once, including immensely significant ones such as the Joker and Harley Quinn. By the time everyone and everything came together for *Justice League* in 2017, audiences and critics simply felt as if the characters and universe had not had enough thorough exposition. Contrary to the blockbuster

cycle's call for immediacy, the DCEU's fatal flaw, especially when compared to the MCU, may have been its impatience.[26]

From an eco-critical perspective, the MCU defies conventional claims that narrative cannot capture or communicate slow violence to an audience. Although some movies within the franchise may seem more solitary than others, all of them focus on collectivity in some regard and play into a measured master narrative that ties everything together over time. While it buys into many aspects of the blockbuster model, the MCU also changes that model, subverting its expectations of perpetual movies that start at point A, wrap up at point B, and then start again at point A for the sequel. The MCU keeps on going, and the events of one film will often severely impact the next. As Nixon explains, when it comes to violence, "the time frames of damage assessment and potential recovery are wildly out of sync. The deep-time thinking that celebrates natural healing is strategically disastrous if it provides political cover for reckless corporate short-termism" (Nixon 22). Hollywood studios like Marvel and Disney, of course, are not absolved of this short-term, profit-driven thinking, but their products and narratives evidently have the ability to break free from narrow-minded plots and create something larger. In the MCU, an event that occurred years ago in real time can directly impact something that happens in a movie coming out today, emblemizing the kind of scale needed for considering contemporary environmental concerns.

Still, one must wonder where the buck stops with Marvel. Stringing together movie after movie must lead somewhere. While *The Avengers* served as a climactic convergence of the franchise's first few films, the story has carried on since. One has to wonder how long the heroes

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[26] The DCEU is not alone in trying to replicate Marvel's model. Universal Studios has tried to reincarnate its horror universe for a contemporary audience, starting with a reboot of *The Mummy* (Alex Kurtzman, 2017). Like the DCEU though, *The Mummy* was critically ridiculed for rushing through plot points and character introductions. As evidenced through the MCU's measured pace, there is a successful method in taking it slow, which consequentially also makes the franchise more open to eco-critical connotations.

can do this. How many times can the universe fall into peril? How often can the Avengers defend the world and come out unharmed? How long will the heroes have to fight off the city's woes before they can go home? Before they can meet their pastoral ideal? Climate change and slow violence, after all, are not empty signifiers. They should be considered and depicted as global threats because they *are* global threats. Even if people try to ignore their consequences, those consequences will arrive nonetheless. Unless the MCU narratively acknowledges this in some metaphoric or direct manner, it will meet the same end as all the blockbuster franchises before it. It will become yet another long line of popcorn films that, while immensely entertaining, only push cinema further away from any ability to communicate slow violence, which right now, should be a crucial conflict in the audience's mind.

Luckily, the MCU has foregrounded environmental catastrophe in a way that directly makes audiences consider slow violence's consequences as well as the ethics of heroism in a world on the edge of Armageddon. While any disaster-action movie can convey outstanding environmental scenarios such as hurricanes and floods, those films do not really encapsulate the severe human elements of climate change. To effectively illustrate this, it takes not only a universe, but a universe with a bold climax willing to defy expectations and raise novel questions regarding humanity and heroes in the Anthropocene. In short, it takes *Avengers: Infinity War*.

The Infinity War

Coming out ten years after *Iron Man* ignited the MCU, *Avengers: Infinity War* is the nineteenth film in the franchise and finally brings the franchise's arch-villain Thanos into the spotlight. As touched upon in Chapter One, Thanos first appears in *The Avengers*' postcredits scene. He then shows up here and there as a fleeting figure that will presumably bring the heroes

together for another climactic event. For the majority of this time, Thanos' plot remains vague, but at the start of *Infinity War*, his motives become clear. He wants to collect all the Infinity Stones to erase half the universe's population.

Originating in the comics like most of the films' characters and plotlines, the Infinity Stones are a collection of six jewels and each controls an essential element of existence—Time, Space, Reality, Power, Mind, and Soul. Whoever holds a stone controls its respective aspect of the universe. If one holds all six stones at once—thus filling the Infinity Gauntlet—then one attains omnipotence. The stones have appeared throughout the MCU since 2011 as ambiguous, but nonetheless powerful plot devices that, like Thanos himself, help bind the franchise's many storylines together. Only in *Infinity War* do all the stones become crucial for an individual movie, as Thanos spends the entire film trying to collect them and fill the Gauntlet to execute mass-genocide.

On the surface, Thanos may appear as no more than a power-hungry evil mastermind who lusts after the idea of becoming a God. After all, this is what the comics make him out to be. In the 1990s *Infinity Gauntlet* comics that directly inspired *Infinity War*, Thanos wants the stones for the sole sake of wielding power, and he wipes out half the universe's population to impress Death—a tangible, divine being in the comics. For further context, consider Thanos' entry in the *Marvel Encyclopedia*, which refers solely to his comic-book incarnation:

> Born one of the Eternals on Saturn's moon Titan, young Thanos
>
> was ostracized because of his hideous mutant nature. Morose and
>
> withdrawn, he became obsessed with Death. Gathering an army of
>
> mercenaries, he set out to conquer and destroy. He slaughtered
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> thousands on his homeworld with nuclear bombs, including his

mother, and then went on a quest for a Cosmic Cube for the power

to rule the universe and romance Death. Working with the

Avengers, Captain Mar-Vell stopped him, and Death deserted him.

Infamous as the Mad Titan, Thanos committed many more

atrocities in the name of wooing Death, including eradicating half

of the lifeforms in the universe with the Infinity Gauntlet… Thanos

believed the power the Infinity Gauntlet gave him was the key to

winning back Death's affections. (DeFalco 364)

Some of this entry's details may be extraneous for the sake of this thesis, but the takeaway point

is that the Thanos of the comics is evidently after power to entice Death. In the movies, however,

Death is not a living character, or at least she has not been introduced yet, and as far as the

viewers know, she has no intimate relationship with the cinematic Thanos. Like many aspects of

the comics, Thanos had to be revised for the screen and updated to meet the concerns and

interests of contemporary audiences seeking a compelling villain after ten years of waiting.

Thus, the Mad Titan's quest for the Infinity Stones in *Infinity War* is not simply for

power, but for an act of eco-terrorism. Like all forms of terrorism, eco-terrorism has an

ambiguous denotation that can vary from nation to nation and culture to culture. DeMond

Shondell Miller, Jason David Rivera, and Joel C. Yelin provide a quality conceptual definition in

their essay, "Civil Liberties," stating, "eco-terrorism is the violent destruction of property on

behalf of individuals or environmental groups in the name of saving the environment from

further human encroachment and destruction. The aim of eco-terrorism is to stop the human

exploitation of natural resources and bring public attention to environmental issues" (Miller

113). Thanos, however, forgoes the public attention aspect of eco-terrorism and instead goes

straight for the radical action in *Infinity War*. As Gamora—one of the Guardians of the Galaxy and Thanos' adopted daughter—explains, "Thanos… only ever had one goal: to bring balance to the universe by wiping out half of all life. He used to kill people planet by planet, massacre by massacre… if he gets all six Infinity Stones he can do it with the snap of his fingers." As morbid as it may be, it does offer a bit of structure and rationality to Thanos' actions. The ecological crises of the world are in large part due to overpopulation and limited resources, so perhaps environmental extremism is necessary. Still, eco-terrorism does not necessarily give the audience reason to empathize with Thanos just yet.

The first sign of empathy does not come until Thanos explains the aftermath of his plan when he executed it on a global rather than a universal level on Gamora's home planet. He tells her, "your planet was on the brink of collapse. I'm the one who stopped that. You know what's happened since then? The children born have known nothing but full bellies and clear skies. It's a paradise" When Gamora refutes this by calling him a murderer, he responds that it is "a small price to pay for salvation… it's a simple calculus. This universe is finite. Its resources are finite. If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correction." Gamora then passionately shouts at Thanos that he doesn't know that for sure, to which he calmly responds, "I'm the only one who knows that. At least, I'm the only one with the will to act on it."

All the while throughout this scene, Thanos sits humbly on the ground, talking up to Gamora who stands steadfastly. The staging reverses the assumed power dynamic. Likewise, Thanos speaks in a rational tone, sounding mature and sensitive in contrast to Gamora's shouting. Conventionally, the hero would retain the more sensible demeanor while the villain behaves impulsively. *Infinity War* foregrounds these subverted expectations again and again throughout the film, often bringing heroic actions into question on an ethical level. In a time

when resources are scarce and environmental catastrophe is inevitable, certain sacrifices might need to be made, and the boundaries of right and wrong require restructuring.

After all, superheroes typically fight to maintain the way things are and always have been. Even when Batman combats organized corruption in Gotham or Iron Man tries to undermine the flawed weapons manufacturing business, they are still working to restore humanity to some pre-corrupted state. Then, at the climax of each film, when the antagonist poses an immediate threat, the hero always fights to eliminate that villain and put the city back to normal. In reference to this, Bahlmann states, "the hero is reactive and the villain is proactive in the mythological understanding of the superhero" (Bahlmann 76). From an environmental perspective, though, it is the status quo that advances climate change. It is industrialization-as-usual over the past century that has brought about the Anthropocene. When the protagonists combat Thanos in *Infinity War*, they transparently fight for the sake of keeping things as they are. Even though they have each fought time after time to save individual people and stop disrupting events, the heroes are content to keep everyday conventions as they are when nothing is wrong, even if Thanos tells them that the universe's everyday conventions hurl it towards catastrophe.

Infinity War emphasizes this conundrum on multiple occasions, as the heroes could frequently make individual sacrifices to stop Thanos from succeeding but choose not to based on pathos. For example, Gamora tells Starlord—leader of the Guardians of the Galaxy—that he should kill her before Thanos gets the chance to capture her, for she alone knows where the Soul Stone lies and does not want Thanos to get such information out of her. Likewise, the Mind Stone is embedded in Vision's head. It sustains him and gives him his powers. By killing him instantly, the Avengers could destroy the stone and keep it out of Thanos' hands for sure. The Avengers refuse to consider this, though. Vision's lover, Scarlet Witch, dismisses it by stating

"We're not having this conversation… it's too high a price." Ever the pragmatist, Vision

responds, "Only you have the power to pay it," to which Scarlet Witch walks away as he

continues, "Thanos threatens half the universe. One life cannot stand in the way of defeating

him." The virtuous Captain America then responds, "But it should. We don't trade lives,

Vision." It is this very philosophy that makes the superheroes appear as the good guys and

Thanos as the bad guy, but it is also the protagonists' fatal flaw. Economically and ecologically

speaking, sacrificing one life to save many should be the just thing to do, but because the heroes

consider Vision and Gamora important in their personal lives, they cannot bring themselves to

make such decisions.

In fact, Thanos is the only one able to make this sacrifice, for he ends up killing Gamora

to obtain the Soul Stone. After Thanos kidnaps Gamora from the Guardians, he takes her to

Vormir, the planet that hides the Soul Stone. On Vormir, they meet Red Skull, a protector of the

Stone, who tells Thanos that "to ensure that whoever possesses it understands its power, the

Stone demands a sacrifice… In order to take the stone, you must lose that which you love: a soul

for a soul."[27] It soon becomes evident that the one thing Thanos loves is Gamora herself, and that

he will have to sacrifice her to obtain the Stone. He slowly advances on her and dramatically

states, "I ignored my destiny once; I cannot do that again, even for you." Grabbing her by the

arm, Thanos drags the resisting Gamora to a near-by cliff. Slow moving, sad music overtakes the

diegetic sound as he tosses his daughter to her death. A close-up of Gamora's terrified face in

mid-fall fades to a lingering close-up of Thanos distraught with anguish. Nonetheless, just

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[27] Red Skull is never mentioned by name in *Infinity War*, but audiences still recognize him, for he first appeared as the main antagonist in *Captain America: The First Avenger*, which came out seven years earlier and ends with Red Skull being sucked into space. This connection exemplifies the MCU's capacity for creating a slow violence narrative, as audiences would only understand this if they remained invested in the arch-plot over the years.

moments later, the Mad Titan is one sixth closer to his goal of filling the Infinity Gauntlet and bringing ecological balance to the universe.

The sacrificial scene may be distressing and make Thanos appear overwhelmingly cruel, but it also creates some of the most evident sympathy for the character. Killing Gamora fills Thanos with grief, but he does it to fulfill his larger goal that will ideally end up saving the universe in the long run. This is the ultimate ecologically sensitive sacrifice, putting the collective over the individual and considering the big picture over the immediate. Ethically, perhaps one can deem the heroes deontologists who always make sure that the means justify the ends. In direct opposition, Thanos can be considered a consequentialist, where the ends must justify the means. Perhaps consequentialism is the philosophical stance needed for attacking climate change though, for in order to enact positive environmental change, one must consider long-term results of actions. Because of their inability to look beyond duty, conventions, and emotion, the heroes do not think in such ecological terms. Star-Lord does not sacrifice Gamora, and Scarlet Witch does not try taking Vision's life until it is too late. Thanos is too strong by the time the heroes realize their emotional pitfalls. Because of this, the Mad Titan ends up winning.

Contrary to audience expectations, by the end of *Infinity War*, Thanos has all six Infinity Stones in the Gauntlet. Just when it seems that Thor has swooped in at the last moment to save the day, lodging his ax into Thanos' chest, Thanos begins mumbling in his pain, eventually getting out the ominous words, "You should've gone for the head" as the close up on his face pans over to his Gauntleted hand. A subsequent shot of the hand shows his fingers snapping as the screen bursts into white light. The following scene contains some of the most unsettling images in the MCU. Over half of the franchise's main heroes fade to dust. One by one, the Winter Soldier, Black Panther, Groot, Scarlet Witch, Falcon, Mantis, Drax, Star-Lord, Doctor

Strange, and Spider-Man all die by turning to ash in the wind. Half of the universe is gone, and Thanos stands triumphant

As harrowing as it is, this ending makes *Infinity War* all the more impactful from an eco-critical perspective. The absence of a happy ending due to the shortcomings of the status quo are the exact kinds of conflicts one must consider when thinking about climate change. Collings writes in reference to the impending ecological crisis, "if we are honest, we must admit that the events of the past few years undermine the prospectus of a happy ending more than ever. Nearly all of the time for action has slipped by. It is thus time for us to face this crisis in a new way… to contemplate, for the first time, what it means for us if we fail" (Collings 13). For the first time in nineteen films, the Marvel heroes fail and the ending is far from optimistic. Nevertheless, as the film frequently underscores, the heroes' perpetual acts of salvation rarely have any long-term, ecological impacts anyway. Only Thanos with his neo-Malthusian approach considers the overbearing threat of ecocide, which, again according to Collings, "far outweighs genocide, the destruction of a people, for it threatens to ruin the support system for all living things" (Collings 71). If ecocide is worse than genocide, and Thanos' genocide is in an effort to prevent ecocide, then who really has the moral high ground in *Infinity War*?

These questions are perhaps so beyond conventional discourse that they might appall even the most invested MCU fanatic. After all, *Infinity War*'s goal is not to render the Avengers evil and have the audience cheer on Thanos. Up to the film's final scene, the viewer still roots for the heroes to stop Thanos and the ending comes off heartbreakingly. Nevertheless, Thanos is undoubtedly the most complex villain that the franchise has ever offered, for his ethics are the most grounded in contemporary morality. Ecological threats have been ignored for too long, and Thanos is simply the first powerful being willing to take action against them. It is a philosophical

stance reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's in "Critique of Violence," where the theorist calls for less ongoing serving of the status quo, but instead a monumental revolutionary movement to evoke radical change. In Benjamin's terms, what the heroes in *Infinity War* do could be called "mythical violence," whereas Thanos' revolutionary acts could be called "divine violence" (Benjamin 297). He explains, "if mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood" (Benjamin 297). Mythical violence fits the heroes, for they act in the service of law and order, literally upholding the myth that perpetuates slow violence. Meanwhile, Thanos—acting as a divine figure that directly combats the superheroic myth—puts a higher ethical code above the privileged idea of individual life, benefitting the whole to hopefully combat slow violence. As Benjamin continues, "mythical violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake, divine violence pure power over mere life for the sake of the living. The first demands sacrifice, the second accepts it" (Benjamin 297). The philosophy may seem cynical and Thanos' approach may appear as an egregious appropriation of it, but it resonates in the Anthropocene now more than ever. No longer can heroes idle in short-term conflicts, for "a gaze directed only at what is close at hand can at most perceive a dialectical rising and falling in the lawmaking and law-preserving formations of violence" (Benjamin 300). Heroes and audiences alike must consider the possibility of slow violence causing more death and destruction than any average city-threatening villain ever could. This is not to say that Thanos is the true hero, nor is it to say that the Avengers are secretly plotting to destroy the universe. It is just to consider the fact that Thanos' ethical outlook operates on a different temporal scale. While the heroes' mythical

violence peddles alongside slow violence, Thanos' divine violence takes more of an overarching, omnipotent angle, one that logically considers immediate sacrifice worthwhile for a long-term net-benefit.

If heroes fail to acknowledge the value of sacrifice, then they could suffer the same fate as Thanos' home planet, Titan. Titan is framed as the antithesis to Gamora's now prospering planet in *Infinity War*. Unlike Gamora's planet, Titan never had any action taken against its Malthusian crisis. When Thanos arrives back on the planet to fight the heroes near the film's climax, Titan is in ashes, with the ruins of past structures scattered about and a rusty, industrial color polluting the sky. When Doctor Strange asks Thanos if the planet is his home, he evenly responds, "It was," and uses the Reality Stone to reveal what the planet once looked like. The background scenery wipes away from the ruinous landscape to reveal a luscious, yet urban environment, with many people and advanced-looking infrastructure beneath a blue sky. "It was beautiful," Thanos explains, "Titan was like most planets. Too many mouths and not enough to go around, and when we faced extinction I offered a solution." Doctor Strange finishes Thanos' statement, accusingly saying, "Genocide." With his signature composure, Thanos responds, "but random… fair to rich and poor alike. They called me a madman, but what I predicted came to pass." Then, the background wipes back and Titan's landscape returns to its current post-apocalyptic imagery. Again, Thanos' backstory in the film is even further detached from his comic origins. While Thanos attacked his home planet in the comics out of rage for being an outsider, the cinematic Thanos is a survivor. In the movie, Thanos actually wanted to save Titan, but the people neglected his radicalism and went extinct due to a lack of action. Compared to the comics', it is a much more compelling backstory for a contemporary audience, and provides further understanding into Thanos' stoic, Benjamin-like consequentialist approach.

After some characteristically snide responses on Doctor Strange's part and some further explanation from Thanos, Strange asks what Thanos will do after he executes his mass genocide. "I will finally rest," he says, "and watch the sun rise on a grateful universe." This is exactly where *Infinity War* ends. After Thanos collects all six Stones and turns half the universe to dust, the movie's very final image before the credits shows Thanos on some presumably distant planet at dusk. The denouement's opening shot is an extreme long shot of a luscious valley. The camera pans down from the sky to reveal a house upon a hill. The following shot within the house tracks Thanos walking out of its front door from behind. He sits down on the porch as the camera circles around to reveal his tired and weary face. The antagonist takes a deep breath and stares out at the sun as promised. His expression slowly changes from one of deep contemplation to a slight, humble smile. The victorious Thanos has brought the ecological balance that he seeks to the universe, and thus sees all conflicts as resolved, for another ecocide like that on his home planet no longer waits on the horizon. His endpoint is thus the very same ideal that the heroes strive for, but are never able to obtain. Feeling responsible for universal peace, he relaxes in this far removed, tranquil environment. The movie thus closes on an ecological note, heralding back to the traditional representations of different landscapes within conventional superhero mythos, only in the end, it is the villain who ends up successfully retired in the pastoral.

All in all, perhaps the environmentally conscious audience must reconsider the notion of what "infinity" means in *Infinity War* and superhero cinema as a whole. While the obvious rationale for the film's title comes from its having to do with the fictional Infinity Stones, it may also carry a deeper symbolic meaning that extends beyond the film's diegesis and into the real world on a theoretical level, a meaning that derives from Emmanuel Levinas' "Ethics and the Face," as something humanity cannot fully understand, but nonetheless shrouds existence in

opposition to any made up totality. To Levinas, there is an "idea of infinity in us… [that] presents itself as a face in the ethical resistance that paralyses my powers" (Levinas 352). *Infinity War*'s title may not signify the film's climactic battle against Thanos and his army of mercenaries at all. Instead, the real Infinity War could denote the superheroes and everything they have done up to this point. In almost all superhero movies preceding *Infinity War,* the recurring protagonists have time after time again saved the day, but with each ending, there is always a promise of return, the promise of another villain on the horizon, and the looming yet often overlooked presence of some overarching ecological threat that could render everything else meaningless. This endless cycle, this ongoing battle in the cities while the pastoral rots away as a fantastical endpoint—this is the real Infinity War. It has nothing to do with Stones or Gauntlets, but has everything to do with what superheroes have been doing on screens and in comics since before Thanos was even a sketch on a Marvel pitch meeting's drawing board. And as long as the genre stays true to its core conventions, superheroes will keep on fighting this war without an end for all of eternity, infinitely.

The Real Practical Joke

  Watchmen's ending raises some of the same questions that *Infinity War*'s does. At the film's finale, the heroes Doctor Manhattan, Rorschach, Nite Owl, and Sally Jupiter discover that the entire plot involving mysterious murders that lead society into hysteria has been a ruse played by yet another hero, Ozymandias. Ozymandias' super heroic trait is that he is the smartest person in the world. All throughout the film, unbeknownst to the heroes and to the audience, he has been using his superior intellect to create a master plot that makes the entire world question superheroes and their purposes, secretly rendering himself the arch-villain. Paralleling the comic,

at the movie's climax, Ozymandias hides out in an arctic lair, plotting some immense, but ambiguous strike against humanity as a whole when the heroes arrive to try and stop him.

After some brief scuffles with Rorschach and Nite Owl, Ozymandias volunteers the details of his plan to them. Elevated upon a staircase, Ozymandias explains how he plans to set off nuclear weapons in major population hubs around the globe and then blame them all on Doctor Manhattan to create one common world enemy. "Humanity's savage nature will inevitably lead to global annihilation," he says, "so in order to save this planet, I had to trick it, the greatest practical joke in human history." Nite Owl then interjects, "by killing millions," to which Ozymandias immediately responds, "to save billions. A necessary crime." When Rorschach threatens to not let him go through with the plan, Ozymandias nearly laughs it off, ironically stating, "I'm not a comic-book villain. Do you seriously think I'd explain my master-plan to you if there were even the slightest possibility you could affect the outcome?" The camera then cuts to Rorschach and Nite Owl looking both confused and despairing before going back to a slow zoom in on Ozymandias stating, "I triggered it thirty-five minutes ago."

Subsequently, the camera pans over a collection of screens, each labeled with a different major city around the world, and each reading "Detonation Complete" below images of growing nuclear explosions. The sequence then reveals a reactor beneath New York City slowly igniting into bluish light and decimating the city. Ozymandias' plan is complete, and when the scene returns to the arctic, he tells the heroes to "grow up. My new world demands less obvious heroism. Your schoolboy heroics are redundant. What have they achieved?" First appearing in Moore and Gibbons' 1980s comics and then in Snyder's 2009 movie, this question and Ozymandias' overall plan predates, yet parallels the themes brought about in *Infinity War*. The futility of episodic heroism, the sacrifices needed to evoke real change, and one single,

horrendous cataclysmic event warding off an even greater destruction, are all part of *Watchmen* and *Infinity War*'s meta-commentary on both the changing superhero genre and its rising environmental subtexts. Of course, in *Watchmen*, set in a 1980s continued reimagining of the Nixon administration, the conflict revolves around nuclear anxieties and paranoia keeping the world in conflict, yet to a contemporary audience, the same themes could apply to climate change and the slow violence that comes with progress. When Ozymandias says that humanity's savagery will yield annihilation, he could be talking about nuclear war, but he could also be talking about industrialization. After all, industrialization has been a part of human history for far longer than nuclear weapons have, yet only now is it becoming an evident means of annihilation.

When Doctor Manhattan and Sally Jupiter enter the lair, Ozymandias turns on a wall of television sets for everyone to watch. Zooming out from a single screen to the multitude, the camera shows Richard Nixon in a live press conference broadcasted on every channel. He explains "since the attacks [by Doctor Manhattan] I have been in constant contact with the premier of the USSR. Putting aside our past difference, we have both pledged to unite against this common enemy. With the rest of the world, we will prevail." This shows that the single cataclysmic event has indeed been more effective in getting the entire world to unite in a peaceful goal than the superheroes' conventional, ongoing acts of vigilante justice ever could. In eco-critical terms, this demonstrates what it might take to get the entire world on board with an environmental effort to politically prioritize climate action and rethink the merits of industrialization. Like Thanos' plan, Ozymandias' efforts exemplify Walter Benjamin's call-to-action theory of divine violence and manifest its positive outcomes. He ends superheroes' infinite wars in what seems to be the only way possible, with swift and morbid, yet necessary action.

After Nixon ends his televised speech, the screens switch back to their respective news channels and the camera pans across them showing national leaders coming together and bonding over their new common enemy. Ozymandias explicates how his actions have brought about world peace. Rorschach then threatens to reveal Ozymandias' master-deception to the world and open their eyes to the truth, but even Doctor Manhattan realizes that by revealing Ozymandias' trick, they would be foiling the peace brought about by the (now irreversible) plan. When Rorschach refuses to concede or sacrifice his conventional heroic efforts, he leaves, emphatically stating "Never compromise, even in the face of Armageddon." On Rorschach's way out to tell humanity the truth though, Doctor Manhattan blocks him, saying that he cannot let him carry out his virtuous counterplan. Rorschach then removes his mask, exposing his human face in all of its vulnerability and authenticity. He reproachfully tells Doctor Manhattan, "Of course, you must protect Ozymandias' new utopia. What's one more body amongst foundations?" He refuses to back down, and even demands that Doctor Manhattan kill him. Doctor Manhattan then abides, vaporizing Rorschach with a slight hand motion. As the on looking Nite Owl screams in anguish, the camera cuts to a birds-eye-view of an angel-shaped blood stain where Rorschach stood. It is all that remains of him— a spiritual image symbolizing that even in death, the stubbornly hard-boiled protagonist was the most righteous of the story's heroes. Steadfast in his deontological morality, Rorschach would rather die than live in a world built upon lies, regardless of what positive outcome those lies create. In the end, he has the audience's deepest sympathies.

Subsequently, when Nite Owl re-enters Ozymandias' lair, filled with pathos after witnessing Rorschach's death, he charges at Ozymandias, tackles him into the wall of screens and then continuously punches him in the face. With each strike though, the antagonist's head re-

centers with a look of indifference. He does not retaliate. The dynamic between these two in their fight is a microcosm of the larger phenomenon at hand. Ozymadias knows the worthlessness of Nite Owl's emotional retaliation, for the world is finally at peace, so there is no reason to engage in violence anymore. Once the punches stop, Ozymandias evenly states, "A world united at peace. There had to be sacrifice." Still enraged, Nite Owl grabs Ozymandias by the throat and responds, "No! You haven't idealized mankind, but you've deformed it. You've mutilated it. That's your legacy." His breathing then slows and he backs off from Ozymandias. In the next shot, his face is filled with more dejection than anger as he concludes, "That's the real practical joke."

This notion of heroism, progress, salvation, and its outcomes all amounting to no more than a joke or deceit comes up time and time again in superhero comics and film. From Alan Moore's esteemed 1988 graphic novel, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, which ends with the Joker and Batman sharing a sinister chuckle, to Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, in which the updated cinematic Joker states that people's morality is "a bad joke, dropped at the first sign of trouble," the real practical joke appears repeatedly throughout the genre. Then, at the end of *The Dark Knight*, the Joker's prophecy becomes true, as Batman, like *Watchmen*'s heroes, must lie to the people in order to uphold stability.

The joke is thus the conviction that there is a higher purpose or truth going into what superheroes do. While it makes for great stories, all these stories do is fill a void. This void and its connotations are best described by theorist Ernesto Laclau in his book *On Populist Reason*. In it, he explains, "there is nothing in the materiality of the particular parts which predetermines one or the other to function as a whole. Nevertheless, once a certain part has assumed a function, it is its very materiality as a part which becomes a source of enjoyment," and "once a particular

social force becomes hegemonic, it remains so for a whole historical period" (Laclau 115).

Perhaps this is why certain conventions of the superhero genre refuse to die out even after

they've been revealed as obsolete. It is the same reason that humanity keeps on engaging in

progress and looking to the future, even if by that very nature the future has become clouded in

ecological horror. These formalities are simply the functions that humanity has decided to live by

and value, and those functional attributes take an indefinitely long amount of time to revise.

Without them though, people would see the void in its most naked form, barren of all narrative

and rhetoric, rendering the world seemingly valueless without the perpetual fillers.

Perhaps all superhero stories can thus boil down to a great practical joke in the current

Anthropocene. Choosing sides between good and evil and perpetually saving humanity becomes

trite when humanity gradually sends itself towards global disaster. The typical ideas of what is

worth saving have become skewed in the contemporary climate, possibly even rendering the

villains like Thanos or Ozymandias the more moral crowd as the heroes' quests grow obsolete.

This may be why the genre has overarchingly turned towards more comedic tones in recent

years, capitalizing on and bringing the practical joke to the foreground. Starring recognizable

comedic actors Chris Pratt and Paul Rudd as the respective leading heroes, the *Guardians of the

Galaxy* and *Ant-Man* movies (Peyton Reed, 2015; Peyton Reed, 2018) are just as much comedies

as they are action-adventure flicks; *Thor: Ragnorok* revised the title character to capitalize on his

outdated ignorance, and mock his hyper-masculinity; and The MCU's *Spider-Man: Homecoming*

and Sony's *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (Peter Ramsey, Bob Persichetti, and Rodney

Rothman, 2018) can be almost seen as parodies of the character's previous cinematic

incarnations. Then, the most transparent superhero parody in recent years has been Tim Miller's

Deadpool, which constantly breaks fourth-walls and offers unambiguous meta-commentaries on

the genre while still remaining within the diegetic X-Men universe. Maybe given the convoluted ethics of modern ecology, the only kinds of heroes an audience can still cheer on are those like Deadpool, Ant-Man, the Guardians of the Galaxy, or the revised versions of Thor and Spider-Man, for these heroes are self-aware and lighthearted enough that their actions do not immediately prompt questions regarding their consequences.[28] As Collings writes, "if activism cannot ward off the ruins, laughter can convert them into the material of art" (Collings 193). When watching a comedy, the audience feels more comfortable using cinema as an escape, and by hearing characters jest about grave threats, perhaps they become all the more digestible in reality.

Still, the epic heroes keep coming back. Even at the end of *Infinity War*, audiences expect that the surviving heroes will return, revive their lost comrades, and defeat Thanos like any other villain.[29] After all, it is unlikely that the MCU would kill off so many profitable characters all at once and end their franchise on such a pessimistic note. The blockbuster cycle may have been tampered with, but for the most part, audiences still crave happy endings, and they will keep flocking back to the theater expecting to watch the heroes defeat the villains. Indeed, superheroes may just be filling a void by fighting off crime and enacting immediate justice in the Anthropocene, but watching them fill that void remains entertaining, like hearing a bad joke over and over again. People already know the punch line, but they still love to laugh at it.

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[28] Humor, of course, has a deep history in the superhero genre, stemming all the way back to the comics' Golden Age. While the genre has been transparently parodied before in movies such as *Superhero Movie* (Craig Mazin, 2008) and *Kick-Ass* (Matthew Vaughn, 2010), these contemporary examples stand out because they remain within the same franchises and universes as the genre's more serious films, showing that the shift to comedy is more than a mere generic transformation or breech of style. It holds a degree of narrative value.

[29] This is practically confirmed not only by the promise of *Avengers: Endgame* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2019) coming out as a follow-up to *Infinity War*, but also by the trailer that has already been released for *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (Jon Watts, 2019), which shows the MCU's Spider-Man alive and well despite being among Thanos' victims in *Infinity War*.

This is why *Watchmen* ends in a newsroom with sloppy reporter spilling barbeque sauce on his smiley-face shirt, comically paralleling the movie's opening shot when a blood drop stains a smiley-face pin that fell off of a superhero's dead body. As the reporter looks around for a napkin, his boss walks up behind him and says, "we've got nothing to write about anymore. Everyone in the country, every country in the world, they're holding hands now, singing songs about peace and love. It's like living in a goddamn global hippie commune." Evidently, there is nothing going on now that Ozymandias has resolved all of the world's greatest conflicts. The boss' tone of frustration and his desire for something to publish reveals humanity's boredom and dissatisfaction when the void goes unfilled. After a bit of harmless banter, the reporter suggests, "I could look for something in the crank file," to which his boss responds, "Whatever. Take some initiative. Run whatever you'd like. I leave it entirely in your hands."

The reporter then turns towards a pile of papers on his desk topped with Rorschach's journal that he dropped off at the newspaper's office before going to the arctic. The camera dollies towards the book until it is in mid-frame. Rorschach's voice-over recites the beginning of what is presumably the journal's opening entry, which coincides with the movie's first scene. He reads, "Rorschach's journal, October 12th 1985, tonight a comedian died in New York," before the screen goes black to the screeching sound of a guitar chord as the credits role. The song in the closing credits is "Desolation Row", preformed and recorded by My Chemical Romance. Like the opening credits' "The Times They Are A Changin,'" "Desolation Row" was originally written and performed by Bob Dylan, but for the film's ending, the young emo punk band My Chemical Romance updates the tune with a contemporary sound and energy, showing one last time that the times have indeed changed, heroism and progress are not the same void-filler that they were before, and yet, as Rorschach's previously unopened journal signifies, a new story still

remains to be told. If told correctly, such a story can teach, change the way people think, resolve

and revise past issues, and ultimately create an impact that hopefully—with a little superheroic

luck—could leave the world a slightly better place than it arrived in.

Epilogue
Narrative's Superpower

Perhaps even more so than *Infinity War* or *Watchmen*, the DCEU's 2018 *Aquaman* (James Wan) is the superhero movie that foregrounds environmentalism the most. In the film's beginning, Arthur Curry (Aquaman's alter ego) is driving down a coastal road with his father when he turns to look at the ocean. To his surprise, an enormous wave is heading towards shore, capsizing ships and submerging islands in the process. Thanks to Arthur's Antlantean blood, he is able to use his aquatic superpowers to save both himself and his father from the impending wall of water. The movie's next scene is a montage of news reports revealing that huge waves have crashed on shores all over the world, causing horrible destruction in many populated areas.

In the multitude of voices and images, one reporter says "decades of pollution has been thrown back onto land" as footage of trash and plastic piling up on beaches fill the screen. The camera then cuts to a newsroom where three people sit behind a desk. The woman in the center—presumably a reporter or anchor—explains, "many are asking the question, 'was this a natural disaster, or something else?'" The man sitting to her left—identified on screen as Dr. Stephen Shin, author of *Atlanteans Among Us*—refutes the idea that it was a natural occurrence, claiming that the catastrophe "was our first contact with the people of Atlantis." The two other people behind the desk deem him insane, saying that he has no proof that Atlantis even exists. Perhaps this is meant to be a relevant jab at the abundance of climate change deniers in the media who defy facts to go against what is scientifically proven. In *Aquaman*, however, Atlantis is real, and as it turns out, Dr. Shin is correct in blaming the mythological submerged city for the destruction on land.

After Aquaman arrives in Atlantis later in the movie, Orm (the city's king and Aquaman's half-brother) explain that the sea prepares for war against the land. When Aquaman says he plans to stop Orm from destroying the world, Orm asks, "And how do you plan to stop the atrocities that the surface continues to commit?" Similar to how the background of Titan changes during Thanos' story of its destruction in *Infinity War*, Atlantis' background changes here, revealing trash and wounded sea-creatures floating in the ocean's depths. "For a century they have polluted our waters and poisoned our children," Orm continues, "and now their skies burn and our oceans boil." Because of the environmental abuse that humankind has put on the ocean, Atlantis plans to fight back with rising sea levels and phenomena that the human world can only deem natural disasters. Unlike any preceding natural disaster throughout history though, the Atlanteans' revolt aims to seize the world entirely in a holistic, global event.

Therefore, Dr. Shin is right—the Atlanteans did cause the wave. At the same time, however, so did humans through years and years of environmental damage that are finally yielding consequences. Compared to other superhero movies, *Aquaman* is far less symbolic in its contemporary eco-critical context. The Atlanteans obviously represent the ocean, angry at humanity for filling their home with egregious amounts of garbage. The story does not merely beg eco-critical analysis, but demands it, serving it up on a silver platter so that even the most passive audience member cannot help but notice it.

Aquaman thus show how climate change, environmentalism, and the Anthropocene are no longer abstract concepts, but things so real that they can occupy the foreground in a big-budget Hollywood movie. As this paper has articulated time and time again, the superhero movie is the quintessential genre in the twenty-first century so far. It is wonderfully entertaining on the surface, but also reflective of contemporary ideology. At the same time, however, it can also

influence ideology, capturing millions of viewers in theaters across the world with narratives that affect the way people think, feel, and act. It has the power to change the mythologies that people mold the world into. As for *Aquaman*, that mythology involves climate change and the effects of contaminating the natural world, perhaps suggesting that environmentalism has finally become an immanent factor in the world's collective consciousness.

Collings explains that when it comes to something as all-encompassing, unprecedented and monumental as climate change, "we cannot grasp our situation through a bare rendition of the facts; we need stories, figures, parables—in short, myths—to make our reality come fully alive to us, to make it possible for us to do justice to our movement" (Collings 191). Simultaneously however, "the point, of course, would not be to replicate the stories by which we once lived; the myths we need today might well contest, undercut, or even destroy those familiar tales, revealing why they are no longer credible, no longer in some sense true" (Collings 191). While pragmatic discourse, science, and policy have their merits when it comes to environmental action, a true change demands something deeper, something that transcends facts and addresses the human condition on a more soulful level. Right now, superhero movies are perhaps the best vehicles for carrying out this task. With their mass-popularity and iconic characters, these films occupy a rare space that can change the way people interpret life. Judging by the contemporary shifts seen in *Aquaman* and *Infinity War*, superhero movies are well on their way to inspiring and promoting a new mythology where nature demands respect and environmental issues are prioritized.

As Orm tells Aquaman at the beginning of the movie, "A war is coming to the surface whether you like it or not." This inevitability may be true in the real world as well, but with a change of mind and a newfound motive for action, the future can be brighter than it seems on the

current horizon. And even with a new mythology, there will still be laughs and tears, beginnings and ends, heroes and villains, unexpected pains and exuberant joys that come and go along the way. As Aquaman says upon saving the world and becoming king of Atlantis at the end of the movie, "This is gonna be fun."

So how about saving the world for real this time? How about having some fun?

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