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Superheros as Social Practice

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Superheroes as Social Practice

1. Introduction

Culture is typically thought of as resulting from a people's material output such as artistic works like paintings, musical compositions, or sculptures, and also from ritual social practices such as child-rearing, religious rites, or government policies. This representation of culture is, for Theodor Adorno, a key point of misunderstanding of what culture is and how it works. He and others of the Frankfurt School diagnosed mass or popular culture as a process solely meant to produce unnecessary products for consumers. Therefore, rather than culture arising out of the masses, Adorno argues that a select few carefully craft and control the dominant culture (12). Even a cursory investigation of contemporary trends in the United States reveals that six media conglomerates inform 90% of the mass media cultural discourse: General Electric, Time-Warner, Disney, Viacom, News Corp., and Bertlesmann AG (Giroux 4). The question thus arises: what does it mean that a small number of conglomerates owns 90% of the mass media? Today, audiences consume everyday information from a variety of technological programming, including news coverage, entertainment in television and film, print media such as books, and, ever increasingly, the internet.

Consider the holdings of one of these corporations, the Walt Disney Company. Disney, cultural critic Henry Giroux writes, controls:

> six motion picture studios . . . Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, which distributes films for release on video; the ABC television network, with its 226 affiliated stations; two television production studios; cable television networks, . . . 227 radio stations; four music companies . . . five theme park resorts . . . three cruise lines and several smaller resorts; two theatrical production companies that produce Broadway and touring ice shows; several book publishing imprints within Disney Publishing

Worldwide . . . fifteen magazine titles; five videogame development

studios; the ubiquitous Disney Stores; and the Walt Disney Internet

Group. (1-2)

In addition to these holdings, Disney also partners with Apple, Sony, and Netflix for digital distribution of its cultural products (2). The size, variety, and breadth of Disney's holdings are indicative of the current first-world media environment. Giroux concludes that the current cultural environment "represents a danger to social responsibility, public accountability, and democratic citizenship" (15).

The glossy pages of a comic book are not what immediately come to mind when one thinks of the hegemonic practices of conglomerations such as Disney; however, upon closer inspection, those mainstream companies which bring the American superhero into culture represent a part of the media empire of "the Big Six." The Walt Disney Company bought out Marvel Comics and all its subsidiaries in 2009 for 4 billion dollars. Long before Disney acquired Marvel, Kinney National purchased Marvel's rival publisher DC Comics (then National Periodical Publications), all of which is owned today by Time-Warner (Rhoades 93). As a result of these acquisitions, the two largest mass media conglomerates in the world own the companies that have created the modern American superhero.

While the superhero's position within the mass media market is important to consider, the spread of superhero mythology through media and merchandise predates conglomerate involvement. The superhero, after all, is much larger than the comics in which he or she appears. In fact, comics are perhaps the least visible of all superhero media today, and represent a highly specialized market and subculture. According to Bob Schenker, only 25% of comics readers are female (Polo). Both critics and fans have noted that the material environment of the comic book shop has been alienating and even threatening to young girls and women. As a result of the implementation of the direct

sales market, which moved comic books away from supermarket racks and into specialty stores, comics readership became more heavily gendered as a "boy's club" and this perception has moved from the dominant culture into the "geek" subculture.[1]

The stigma of "the funny book," a throwaway novelty intended for children's entertainment, also negatively affects comic book sales, although contemporary statistics show that the perceived ages of comics consumers and their actual ages differ. According to film historian Bruce Scivally, the average comic book reader aged significantly since data collection began: the average reader in 1950 was 12 years old, by the 1990s the average reader was 20 years old, and by 2001 the average age was 25 years old (166). Schenker has also produced statistics which place today's average comics purchaser between the ages of 18 and 45 (Polo). The maturation of the comics allowed for the comics collectibles market to flourish in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During this time, publishers began printing variant covers of their comics and selling through a direct sales market. As a result, young adult readers began buying multiple copies of issues. The perceived collectability of the comics boosted sales to around 48 million issues per month, but the fad ended quickly; in 2001, the average monthly sales were merely 3 million (Scivally 166).

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[1] Although gains have been made in female creatorship and characters, the female comic book reader has been met with hostilities. *Girl-Wonder.org* (a site "created by comic book fans in response to a rising level of frustration at the treatment of female characters, creators and fans inside and outside the comics industry") and *The Mary Sue.com* ("a guide to girl geek culture") are important and useful examples of "geek" sites created by and geared towards female readership. While positive gains have been made—Mike Gold, for instance, praises Disney for developing and encouraging television shows centered around female Marvel superheroines—there remains the group of male fans who feel as though female "geeks" are "ruining" their enjoyment of the works and are not "true" fans because their exposure to the geek culture was not through *The Justice League* or *Call of Duty* but rather young adult fiction or manga (Salkowitz*)*. Despite Gold's argument, current social practices surrounding fandom as a "boy's culture" continue to alienate women, and, as The Beat writes" as much as some individuals within each system would wish to deviate, the mandate to both Marvel and DC from their corporate owners is to be for boys" and we should be cognizant of this industrial, corporate reality.

Overall, comic book sales have been decreasing, and it is possible that the stigmas of gender and age play a significant role in this decline. Superman comics, for instance, sold well since publication first began in 1938, around half a million issues per year. Sales peaked in 1965 with 823,829 issues sold. After the release of the 1978 Superman film, however, only around 200,000 issues sold and after the release of subsequent films, comics sales dropped to under 100,000. Today, selling 100,000 issues represents a "best seller" of the comics industry; typically, sales average around 50,000 issues (Miller). Recently, the comics market has rebounded somewhat; the 2012 calendar year ended with 7 million comics sold in December (Miller). The rebound of comics sales may, however, be due to a revitalizing marketing campaign (DC's "New 52" in 2011 and Marvel's "NOW!" in 2012) which rebooted many titles and provided easier entry into the often confusing and complicated genre, and the recent steady domination of superhero films at the box office.

Today's market sales reflect that, while the comic book remains a significant and important medium in the production and consumption of the American superhero, its reach in—and impact on—the wider social practices of popular culture is overshadowed by those of media such as animation and film. Moreover, radio, television, theater (including the illustrious Broadway), film, prose adaptations, theme park attractions, and a vast array of material consumer objects, including and especially children's toys, have also become part of the massively successful superhero industry. Only certain heroes have made the transition from the marginal world of the comic book to the wider material culture, and even fewer have gone beyond American culture and into global culture. According to Harlan Ellison, Superman, the first and, for some, the greatest superhero, is among the "five fictional creations known to every man, woman, and child on the planet" (qtd in Tye 123). It is one thing to celebrate and enjoy the popularity of these American superheroes; the question remains: what effects on culture, the consumer, and society do

superheroes have? What does their enduring popularity signify?

Umberto Eco takes on the comic book superhero in "The Myth of Superman." He argues that, by reading and accepting the superhero narrative at face value, readers lose their agency, their ability to think, to plan, and to take responsibility for themselves. That is, the superhero narrative eliminates, or interrupts, the ability of readers to question the text, think for themselves, or to even think ahead (156). Jean Baudrilliard has similar criticism for the media. In "Requiem for the Media," he argues that the media "erases the possibility of agency by erasing the possibility for people to perceive that they do not have agency" (Cohen). Through the ideological state apparatuses of media and culture, the media is able to appropriate the superhero into its dissemination of public pedagogy.

The results of the culture industry's public pedagogy, Adorno argues, are not progress or creation, but standardization and stagnation via conformity (14). He argues further that this conformity is not explicitly didactic, but is rather intentionally vague, presented abstractly and on the surface. He writes that "the concoctions of the culture industry are neither guides for a blissful life, nor a new art of moral responsibility, but rather exhortations to toe the line behind which stand the most powerful interests" (17). The importance of these powerful interests lies not in their status as Big Six corporations or the amount of wealth they have behind them, but rather in the resulting arrested development of the audience which consumes superhero narratives. I argue that the superhero narrative has, essentially, become an "opiate of the masses," supplying individuals with an emotional catharsis associated with the tried and true story of good versus evil while also creating a demand for products that recreate the positive feelings associated with the viewer's emotional and psychological experience of the superhero. The superhero as social practice obfuscates the underlying corporate ideologies aimed at creating and maintaining consumers who confuse freedom with consumption. As Giroux points out about Disney, the superhero "offers a fantasy world grounded in a promotional

culture and bought at the expense of citizens' sense of agency and resistance, as the past is purged of its subversive elements and translated into a nostalgic celebration of entrepreneurship and unending technological progress" and furthermore its "trademarked version of fantasy has no language for imagining democratic public life outside consumption" (55).

In the following chapters, I illustrate the history of the corporatized superhero as it began with Superman in 1938 and as it has come to be in the current moment with the Iron Man film franchise. The most important development in the superhero industry, I argue, is film and the advent of comparable media technologies. Although Superman was hugely successful from his first publication, it was not until Richard Donner's 1978 live-action feature film that the superhero reached its full hegemonic potential. In *Film as Social Practice* Graeme Turner argues that film presents its audience "an overriding set of priorities which define what is acceptable and what is not, what is normal and what is not, all through defining what is Australian (or British or American) and what is not" (135). Film, as Adorno claims, continues to occupy the "central sector of the culture industry" (14), and I argue that film occupies a similarly important position within the current superhero industry.

For Turner, film is a type of social practice which aims at transmitting culture through a technological apparatus that operates on levels of production and reception (147). Filmmakers reproduce cultural norms by the very nature of the conventions and codes available to them. He writes, "The filmmaker uses the representational conventions and repertoires available within the culture in order to make something fresh but familiar, new but generic, individual but representative" (131). The filmmaker, then, is a kind of *bricoleur*, using predetermined cultural codes already imbued with connotations and ideologies to assemble a cultural text. In addition to cultural codes, Christian Metz also identifies a second kind of code available to the filmmaker: specialized codes. These

codes have to do with how the film functions as a formal narrative structure including such things as montage, camera angle, and musical score (74). Metz maintains that even the formal features of a film are ideological in nature; filmmakers choose how to use the specialized codes as a way to reach their intended audience, and in this way he relates the specialized codes of film production to the level of ideological dissemination. Specialized codes shape the viewing audience's options for interpretation. As a result of this kind of *bricolage* of both kinds of filmic codes, the superhero discourse is made fresh and new (and therefore has appeal) while remaining tried and true (and therefore a natural part of the cultural system).

The formal elements of film narrative comprise the machinery of the cinematographic apparatus and carry with them an embedded degree of realism even in the most fantastic of stories, as in the superhero film. Turner explains that technology has allowed film to reach the level of human perception, matching the spectator's ability to see and therefore achieve the appearance of natural, real-life events. The film seemingly comes into appearance for the viewer alone, just as ideology appears to come into existence for the subject alone (156). Jean-Lois Baudry argues similarly for the shaping of the viewing audience by the cinematographic apparatus when he writes that film creates the illusion of viewers as "transcendental subjects" who perceive themselves as being the center of perception; in reality, they are framed by the machinery of production and thus constructed by outside forces (537). In both the representation (i.e. cinematographic codes) and specularization (i.e. viewing experience) of the film, "everything happens as if, the subject himself being unable—and for a reason—to account for his own situation, it was necessary to substitute secondary organs, grafted on to replace his own defective ones, instruments or ideological formations capable of filling his function as subject" (540). Baudry's point here is that the ideological state apparatuses that give rise to the film product hail the film's audience and place each

individual into the subject position of "viewer." From this position, the film feeds viewers a set of interpretive possibilities pre-selected by the filmmaker, but really, by the cultural discourse informing—and in many ways determining—the filmmaker's choices in terms of the specialized code of film, especially editing. As a result of the cinematographic apparatus, the viewing audience does not have agency to decide on interpretations, nor can they perceive that they do not have agency for the apparatus provides them with the illusion that they in fact do.

Of contemporary superhero films, Scott Bukatman writes that they "seem to stake out the safest or most familiar version of their eponymous characters" in part because there is a lot of capital at stake in the films; they are, after all, "blockbusters with huge gargantuan budgets" (119). Bukatman's statement implies that the superhero film industry—and the surrounding superhero discourse—is aimed especially at what product will return the most profit. As I will show with the Iron Man franchise, the current superhero moment is marked by a hero who uses technology to supply himself with and/or support his superpowers. Consider the most recent Spider-Man film, *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), directed by Marc Webb. The film's production team decided that Peter Parker—aka Spider-Man—would build an apparatus that would shoot a superstrong web-like thread from his wrists, and that would enable him to artificially reconstruct the spider's ability to spin webs. Webb's film abandons Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* mythology (begun in 2002) that has Peter Parker physically transformed by a spider bite that results in Parker developing the ability to produce biologically-based webbing from his wrists. *The Amazing Spiderman* represents Spider-Man's powers as a realistic by-product of technological ingenuity; in addition, it also aligns the film's story of Spider-Man's origins with the original comic backstory. One by-product of this latest Spider-Man is that Hasbro now markets web-shooters to children, illustrating how the superhero industry interpellates viewing subjects as consumer subjects. Not only do recent

superhero films sell tickets, then, but they are sell consumers of merchandise related in any way to the "brand" associated with the superhero.

A "brand," defined by Peter Coogan as the "forms and connections that governs a cultural entity and all the primary aspects of the entity's 'mythos'" (237), perpetuates the superhero. Branding is a form of production, not a passive act of advertising. Successful corporations produce brand meaning; that is, they are able to disseminate the idea of themselves. This process has been cited as invasive and imperialistic (*The Corporation*). The branding process points to the oppressive nature of the superhero as part of an ideological state apparatus. The fault lies not with the superhero or its authors and artists, but rather, with the appropriation of the superhero by corporate media conglomerates. Over the years, the superhero has served as an image of public pedagogy, instructing individuals not only how to behave (as suggested by Giroux, Coogan and Eco) but how to behave as productive members of the American capitalist system—that is, to surrender their agency without realizing it, and then to conflate this surrender with freedom and so participate in the social practice of consumerism as unwitting dupes of corporate power. For those with access to the superhero brand, the superhero becomes the site at which individual identity forms. When audiences read the superhero, they internalize a specific set of values and way of thinking, and thus the superhero represents a deliberate attempt to control "the range of meanings that circulate within society" (Giroux 10).

Because of the superhero's ability to transmit ideological values and ways of thinking, the superhero can be thought of as what Giroux calls a "teaching machine" (18). In what follows, I investigate two representative examples of the superhero as teaching machine of nationalism and consumerism, Superman and Iron Man. In the Superman chapter, I trace the corporate use of superheroes through Superman's history of appropriation by corporations to sell both abstract ideals and material products. I also consider the rise of the role of media technology and media corporations, beginning with

the radio show in 1941 and ending with the first "serious" superhero film in 1978, to show how the viewing audience internalizes messages of nationalism and consumerism. In the Iron Man chapter, I focus on the superhero industry's shift to focusing on a post-9/11 American hero, discussing the changes to the nationalistic messages resulting from the Iron Man franchise that created a market desire for expensive, innovative technology. I end with a brief look at the future of the superhero film industry and what consequences it may have for the individual.

2. Superman

Louis Althusser maintains that God—the Subject—occupies a central position in the interpellative process by which ideology hails individuals as subjects. In the ideological state apparatuses devoted to religion, God represents the Subject, a fixed and permanent referent differentiated from the subject by the capital letter "S." For Althusser, the Subject represents the Absolute, Unique, and Central Other through and to whom subjects are subjected to a "theory of reality" that is "obvious and true," though thoroughly ideological. The Subject acts as the measure of correct behavior for all other individuals caught up in ideology's web. Since "there is no practice except by and in ideology" the Subject holds an enormous amount of potential ideological power (Althusser). The power of the Subject is only potential because "there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects" (Althusser). That is, ideology is nothing without the material (social) practice of ideology, all of which must be grounded in the Subject and manifested through subjects as social practices that seem to prove the "obviousnesses" of a given culture's way of life. Superman represents a near-perfect expression of the Subject that has from the beginning served to reinforce dominant ideologies in the cultural discourse, particularly those of a Judeo-Christian narrative that

emphasizes sacrifice, salvation, and redemption. He proudly displays a large "S" on his chest as if to show that he represents the "Subject."

As the Subject, Superman functions, as Giroux says about the Disney media empire, as "a teaching machine." In other words, Superman serves as a role model—a point which a number of critics have commented on in the past. According to Ellison, Superman is "the 20th-century archetype of mankind at its finest. He is courage and humanity, steadfastness and decency, responsibility and ethics. He is our universal longing for perfection, for wisdom and power used in the service of the human race" (qtd in Dooley and Engle 12). Tye claims that he is "like us, even though he isn't us. He isn't human but is a shining example for everyone who is. Sometimes it takes an alien to show us what is special about ourselves, or what would be if we really tried" (229). When extended into a more sophisticated ideological analysis of Superman, the statements made by critics like Ellison and Tye illustrate how Superman has come to represent the reified Subject. The danger with Superman's position as "shining example" is that a corporatized market has appropriated the character in order to utilize his popularity to disseminate its own ideological messages. Because of Superman's enduring popularity, this practice does not appear to be ending soon.

In *Superman on Film, Television, Radio and Broadway*, film historian Bruce Scivally has confidence, perhaps on good evidence, that "there has always been and will perhaps always be a Superman for every medium and every generation" (190). A Gallup Poll from 1992 shows that Superman was more popular than all other superheroes combined (Tye 267). Indeed, since *Action Comics* 1 in 1938, there has always been at least one Superman title in print.[2] For seventy-five years, Superman has remained a culturally important figure. Consider that the most recent Superman film, *Superman*

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[2] Only two other comic book superheroes may claim the same success—Batman and Wonder Woman.

Returns (2006), remains the 16th highest grossing superhero film of all time, taking in just over 391 million dollars worldwide (Box Office). With more recent superhero films having grossed over one billion dollars worldwide, producers of the upcoming Superman reboot, *Man of Steel*, should anticipate tripling *Superman Returns* box office receipts. The question is, how did a comic book character from 1938 come to have massive cultural appeal and what consequences does this appeal have for audiences? In this chapter, I explore and analyze Superman's history as an iconic figure within cultural discourse, situating him as a pedagogical figure that acts as an ideal for and legitimizes American social practices. I trace the history of Superman from escapist fantasy to role model to cultural deity. Both the corporatized market and evolving media technology— especially Richard Donner's 1978 feature film—enforced and more deeply entrenched Superman's iconic presence within American cultural discourse and consumer social practice.

1938-1951: The Rise of an American Icon

Superman's origins trace back to Jerry Siegel, a small Jewish boy from Cleveland, Ohio who, during the Great Depression, escaped from his daily life of bullies and anti-Semitism by writing stories about what would become the quintessential and iconic superhero, Superman. Siegel enlisted the help of his cousin, Joe Shuster, to draw the first Superman comic book stories, and together they searched for a publisher. After many failed attempts, Siegel and Shuster found a publisher in National Periodical Publications, and Superman premiered in the June 1938 issue of *Action Comics* 1 (Tye 29).

Since Superman's debut, creative teams have added and edited components of what has become the Superman mythos so imbued in American culture. For example, the names of Superman's adoptive parents, Martha and Jonathan Kent, would not be finalized until the early 1950s. Superman's superpower of flight originated not in the comics, but

in the 1940 radio program[3] and the Fleischer animated short in 1941.[4] The Daily Planet would not become Clark Kent's workplace until *Action Comics* 23 in April 1940, and Clark Kent would not be joined by editor Perry White or photographer pal Jimmy Olsen until the radio show in 1940 and 1951, respectively. Despite these developments, elements from Siegel and Shuster's first issue remain an integral part of the Superman backstory: the infant Kal-El escapes from the dying planet of Krypton in a spaceship built by his father, Jor-El, moments before their planet explodes. The spaceship lands on Earth and, as the boy ages, he discovers he has nearly miraculous superpowers compared to other people. Soon, the boy learns to use his powers to do good as Superman. He develops the disguise of a mild-mannered newspaper reporter, Clark Kent, in order to live and work with ordinary human beings while serving as their guardian and savior.

The role of savior suits Superman well, for he is the first example of the godlike superhero who comes from beyond and uses his superpowers to serve mankind. Siegel incorporated his own Jewish heritage into his character through nomenclature: Superman's birth name, Kal-El, translates from Hebrew to "Voice of God" (Tye 65). Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence have noted the quasi-religious nature of the superhero. They argue that the superhero replaces the function of the redemptive god within society by placing ancient myths and religious beliefs in the hands of popular culture in the form of an Everyman caped hero. Because Superman answers a need for redemption in Western salvation-seeking culture, the authors imply, Superman received almost immediate and sustained popularity.

Billed as the "champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to

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[3] The Superman radio show, *The Adventures of Superman*, premiered on February 12, 1940, and was broadcast by New York City's WOR. Episodes ran from fifteen minutes to a half an hour in length. The series ended in March 1, 1951 due to a decrease in ratings.
[4] The Fleischer brothers, Max and Dave, brought Superman to theaters across the country in the form of ten minute pre-feature short animated films from 1941-2. The shorts were the first time audiences would see Superman fly.

devote his existence to helping those in need" (Siegel 10), Superman was, as he was touted in the comics, "the greatest exponent of Justice the world has ever known" (13). His comic book beginnings under Siegel and Shuster, however, did not immediately symbolize the morally upstanding American Subject. Instead, the original Superman did not take no for an answer; he busted down doors, and man-handled homicidal women. Take, for example, Superman's interrogation technique, "the Superdegree," featured in the Autumn 1939 issue of *Superman* 2. In order to get information out of a criminal, Superman throws him up into the air and catches him, repeatedly, throwing him higher and higher each time. Once Superman feels his torture session has done its job, he returns the criminal to the ground to ascertain the location of his boss. Shortly after the confession, the criminal dies of a heart attack. Superman does not regret his actions. Instead, he moves on, busting down the crime boss's door, barging in, and clamping his hand around the man's throat. When the boss confesses to his crimes, Superman expresses disappointment, remarking, "I'd hoped I'd have to use a little 'persuasion' on you!" (134).

Siegel and Shuster's character was driven, at least at first, by the fantasies of adolescent boys who felt powerless and marginalized. In those early years, Clark Kent's actions represent a character who invites his readers to indulge in fantasies of power and revenge (as they relate to the "nerd" Clark, who is really Superman underneath) while at the same time inviting those same readers to indulge their grandiose narcissism by identifying with Superman who secretly lives and serves others with his godlike superpowers. In *Action Comics* 4, for example, Superman investigates a crooked high school football coach who has hired thugs to rig the game. In order to gain access to the team, Superman poses as football player Tommy Burke. While in the locker room, after opening Ray Martin's locker, Superman-as-Burke finds himself on the receiving end of a couple of punches to the jaw and stomach. Superman-as-Burke simply grins, amused by

the ineffectuality of Martin's blows. He then knocks out the bully with a "light tap" that sends him flying into the opposite wall, exclaiming," Go away! –You bother me!" (61). As a result of this locker room confrontation, Superman-as-Burke gets thrown off the team by the coach, but he ignores the punishment not because he feels sorry the coach kicked Burke off the team, but rather, because he wants to "show coach Stanley a thing or two!" (62). Superman-as-Burke then catches the ball at the goal line and makes a run for the other end zone," getting back" at the player who punched him, jumping over a few others, and dragging four would-be tacklers down the field.

Siegel and Shuster's *Action Comics* Superman (and his alter-ego, Clark Kent) would eventually evolve due to direct intervention of corporate sponsors. In the later years of the Great Depression, however, Superman's strength would be used by others to shape youth culture in texts separate and apart from the comic book narrative. Although America, like Siegel and Shuster, was aware of the situation in Europe at the time of Superman's publication, the early Superman lives in a smaller, parochial world delimited more by adolescent developmental issues than global politics or good and evil morality plays. Eco picks up on this smaller world when he argues that Superman encourages practices only "on the level of the small community" (163). Although writers were fully aware of the rise of Naziism in Europe, Superman could not directly interfere. As Tye relates, "Once he entered the fray, readers would demand real-world results that no make-believe character could deliver. Even having him try would make him look like a paper tiger and could damage morale among American soldiers who were fighting for real" (59). At this point, Superman (and most other superheroes) would not be attached to American ideals of militarism and international defense. The Superman comics turned instead to implicitly drumming up nationalistic support in the target, impressionable audience of young children.

In 1939, early Superman comics included a full-page color advertisement for the

Supermen of America youth club. The image of Superman breaking out of chains was accompanied by text which hailed "all red-blooded young Americans!" and promised "a beautifully colored Certificate of Membership, suitable for framing! . . . A large Membership Button in full color with a patented clasp! . . [and] Superman's Secret Code which you must have to read Superman's Secret Message in every issue of ACTION COMICS!" (40-41). Membership required no fees or dues other than postage. What may have appealed to parents more than the lack of membership dues were the "special instructions" directly from Superman that members would receive in an upcoming issue of *Action Comics*. Once membership was confirmed, Superman instructed his fans on "how to develop strength, courage, and agility, and how to protect yourself in times of danger" (41). Furthermore, the club encouraged its members to develop qualities championed by Superman like strength, courage, and justice, all of which represent the very values Superman embodies and enacts in the comic book narratives.

Comic book writer Grant Morrison's description of the Superman youth club as "some benign *Hitlerjugend* or sci-fi Scout movement" is at first glance humorous (11), yet at the same time his comments represent a sharp critique of nationalistic messages within the Superman narrative, and he is not the first to draw parallels between Superman and the Nazi Party. In his 1954 publication, *Seduction of the Innocent*, child psychologist Fredric Wertham sarcastically remarks that "we should . . . be thankful that it [the S on Superman's chest] is not an S.S," because he views Superman "as a symbol of violent race superiority" (qtd in Weldon 99). "Superman," after all, is oft connected to the English translation (albeit a slightly inaccurate one) of Nietzsche's term, "Übermensch," an ideal appropriated by the Nazis as a justification for a master race. Superman, however, explicitly stands for everything the Nazi Party does not—or so National Comics propaganda presented him.

Morrison draws the *Hitlerjugend* parallel because, in order to reach the ideals set

forth by Superman, a child had to "1. exercise regularly, 2. get sufficient rest and plenty of fresh air, 3. stay outdoors as much as possible, 4. but above all consume vitamin-rich food" (Siegel 92). Hundreds of thousands of children, children as far away as the Philippines, signed up to become Supermen of America (236), and thus a veritable army of Superman fandom was encouraged to wage war on "unhealthy practices" and to achieve "super-health" like Superman. In Superman's words, "there's nothing like cereals, milk, and fruit to give you that Superman Energy!" (92). Other ads for super-health encouraged daily exercise, determination, peer groups, good posture, and diet. In one ad, a young boy tells his mother, "Superman says we should eat what our parents tell us, because *they know best*!" to which Superman says in the next panel, "Mental health is inextricably linked with physical health. Always do the right and just – help others keep our conscience clear . . . that's super-living!" (193). In this case, as the ad implies, "the right thing" means obeying ones elders. For mental health, Superman encouraged children to read good books, including comics (like *Action Comics)*. The provided list of "good books," of course, included other comics from the publisher, as well as more "literary" titles such as *Alice in Wonderland, Robin Hood, Peter Pan,* and *Pinocchio*. He attests in another ad that "it's only through this combination [quick thinking and physical perfection] that the boys and girls of America can grow up into sturdy upstanding American citizens" (253).

These examples, coupled with the youth club's logo emphasizing Superman's strength, his ability to break out of chains, and the large emblem on his chest which attests to the fact that he is a perfect model for Althusser's notion of the "Subject," teach children to obey figures of power, especially the adults in their lives. These figures of power are not limited to parents; they also include Superman, teachers, politicians, and corporate entities. In this way, the Superman youth club represents a site of ideological interpellation because it operates as part of the media ideological state apparatus and the

social practices associated with it, including the expectation that "good" kids mature into socially obedient young subjects. The club was just one of many "hails" for children to reproduce "super" practices. Also available to them were merchandise marketed explicitly to their demographic.

The Superman Brand

Superman became popular around the same time as "public relations and advertising were in their adolescence . . . and both vocations were hell-bent on making every American a consummate consumer" (Tye 124). Through a massive advertising campaign, "the Man of Steel had been welded into the American consciousness" (113). The corporatized Superman "was a commodity that could be branded, packaged, sold, and incorporated" and those entities responsible for this corporatization "took care to associate their all-American hero with all-American products" (125). As a result, the practice of consuming Superman merchandise became associated with good, American practices and the nationalistic messages were inextricably linked with the Man of Steel. On July 3, 1940 in Flushing Meadows, New York, young Americans experienced the conflation of superhero with nationalism firsthand.

The New York World's Fair in 1939-40 took on the moniker of "The World of Tomorrow," and served as a proud site for the display of American innovation and optimism. The setting suited the Man of Steel, and publicist Allen Ducovny had just the product to sell to attendees ("Superman Day"): *New York World's Fair Comics*, a ninety-six page full color souvenir book featuring stories from Superman, Zatana, the Sandman, and other National Periodical favorites (Siegel 93). To better market the comic, Ducovny ensured that Superman, Inc., a National Periodical Publications subsidiary first created in 1939 in order to sell licenses to toy manufacturers (Scivally 159), sponsored an entire day of the Fair devoted to Superman (Bracker 13). Superman Day attracted young participants by reducing admission to prices of a typical issue of *Action Comics* and, after

the end of a series of contests, crowning one participant "Superboy" and another, "Supergirl." The biggest attraction was none other than Superman himself. In his first public appearance ever, Superman greeted young fans and led a parade from atop a tall pedestal through the World's Fair (Bracker 13).

From a marketing standpoint, placing the resources needed to sustain an entire day at the New York World's Fair simply to sell one (albeit large) comic book would not make financial sense, at least not in the short run. In the long run, however, selling Superman to a young audience with many years of purchasing power ahead of them appeared to be a solid wager. Successful shapers of children's culture like Walt Disney understood that children "are tomorrow's adult consumers—so start talking with them now, build that relationship when they're younger, and you've got them as an adult" (*Corporation*). Selling Superman to children at the New York World's Fair in order to create life-long Superman consumers, and even possibly create a market desire in adults attending the event, represented a sophisticated marketing strategy that catapulted Superman into unprecedented success.

Since his first publication, Superman has never been out of print and, even today, he remains a seminal part of superhero mythology. Superman merchandise fills store shelves, with no end in sight. There is no doubt that Superman Inc. succeeded in its early mission to create consumers in every generation since then. Although the superhero industry may have started out primarily as a children's industry—toys and comic books were marketed directly to children 12 and under—since then, wide ranging marketing possibilities emerged. Over the years, a multitude of companies, not simply DC Comics, have used the Man of Steel to sell their products to a broad demographic. Only a few years after his initial publication, Superman would become a brand endorsing both material and immaterial products. Since the 1950s, DC rented Superman out to endorse bubble bath, his own brand of peanut butter, Post cereals, AT&T, Ore-Ida french fries,

and, one of the more "mature" endorsements, the United States Air Force (Scivally 159-60).

Recently, in 2006, Barack Obama posed in front of a Superman statue in Metropolis, Illinois during his run for a Chicago senate seat. The resulting photograph appeared on his website. For Zach Welhouse, "Obama's use of superhero imagery magnified his core campaign messages of strength and hope while humanizing his public persona." Essentially, using Superman's image allowed Obama to brand himself as a desirable American candidate who presumably fought for the same things as white America, the "never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American Way," everything voters would want in their candidate.

Superman has not been limited to selling one political candidate for a government seat, however. Previously, in the 1970s, the American government used Superman in a series of commercials in order to sell the United States Air Force (USAF) to the American public. "Join our super team" (Scivally 160), the USAF asks viewers. In one commercial, basketball player Jerry Sloan announces, "Whether you're a man or woman, whether you qualify to be an officer or an airmen, the air force will train you to be part of their super team, a super job with super skills" ("Jerry Sloan"). The super skills are so super that Superman cannot measure up. When Superman asks to play on Sloan's basketball team, Sloan questions his credentials; if Superman cannot play for the Bulls, then he certainly cannot join the USAF. When coupled with Sloan's earlier promise that the USAF will welcome the American public no matter what their position, the commercial shows that the American citizen's power to join the USAF is more impressive and desirable than Superman's superpowers.

The "brand management" of the United States of American as superior to Superman and his powers would not end in the 1970s. In 2004, Superman encouraged American citizens to spend money they may not have had, appearing in a series of

commercials alongside comedian Jerry Seinfeld for American Express. Longtime

Superman fan Seinfeld first starred alongside an animated version of the Man of Steel in

an American Express Superbowl advertisement that was so successful the company

decided to produce two more, this time in the form of two seven-minute long webisodes.

Like the USAF commercials decades before, American Express attempted to position its

product in relation to what Superman stood for, only to claim that the power of the

American Express brand was superior to Superman's superpowers. One webisode pits the

credit card's "power" against Superman. In it, Superman stops a thief from stealing a

DVD player. As Superman apprehends the criminal, the DVD player breaks. Even with

all of his super powers, he cannot fix the DVD player, but the credit card can; a new one

is purchased thanks to the "power" of using the American Express credit card. According

to Scivally, the advertising campaign had three aims: "branding, getting people to sign up

for American Express cards, and helping those with cards understand what features were

available to them" (164). By associating their company with Superman, American

Express branded itself as a "strong" company that was "part of the American Way." By

the numbers and critical response, the campaign achieved its goals: The American

Express website had over one million visits, and the webisode advertisements aired on

NBC and TBS, and received praise from *Time* in addition to winning a National Silver

ADDY Award (165).[5]

The evolution of media technology has greatly enhanced the reception of the

ideological and pedagogical messages participants of the culture industry have put forth.

The danger is that the new technologies make it harder for the audience to perceive that

outside entities are feeding them these messages. The above examples illustrate the kinds

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[5] The advertisement is not free from the web of corporate culture. It should be noted that NBC is a subsidiary of Big Six conglomeration General Electric, and TBS is one of Time-Warner's.

of "mature" advertising Superman's brand has been used for, but they do not address that, although Superman was a breakout star of *Action Comics*, his popularity waned after the end of World War II. In order to be a successful brand, a cultural figure has to be popular. That Superman endorsed these mature products shows that his popularity rebounded, and the resurgence of his popularity would be due to new media representations of his character, including television.

1951-1978: The Creation of the Flesh and Blood Superman

Media representations outside of the comics and animated shorts shaped much of Superman's image appropriated by the corporations to sell their products. The idea that Superman could appeal to audiences other than children began with the radio show in the 1940s and television program of the 1950s, both media which the entire family could gather round and enjoy. The Supermen of these media were intentionally shaped by corporate sponsors. Consider the second season of the television program, described by Glen Weldon as lighter in tone and content that the first.[6] The first 26 episodes of the series were written with Siegel and Shuster's "fists first, questions later" Superman in mind, in hopes of attracting a more adult audience (Weldon 95). When producers went out in search of a sponsor, however, the violence was met with criticism. Kellogg's, which previously sponsored the radio show, recognized that Siegel and Shuster's adolescent power fantasy would not attract as wide an audience as it hoped for. Thus, in order to step into the role of sponsor for the television program, Kellogg's demanded that the series tone down the violence, and that lead actor George Reeves appear in television ads, in costume, promoting Kellogg's products (Tye 141). Soon after, Reeves appeared in full Clark Kent regalia, talking to his pal Tony the Tiger about Sugar Frosted Flakes. After the show's producers implemented Kellogg's suggestions, "Superman slowly began

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[6] *The Adventures of Superman* was syndicated and ran for seven years, totaling 104 episodes at 30 minutes in length, the last three years of which were produced in color.

to regain something akin to the cultural currency he'd enjoyed during the war" (Weldon 97), proving the market strategy's success in recognizing the need for a televised version of Superman.

Tye identifies the growing vocalization against the depiction of violence in children's entertainment as part of a growing "cultural shift into an era when Americans liked Ike, hated Bolsheviks, and added 'under God' to the Pledge of Allegiance" (143). The cultural shift was supported by an "image-conscious Kellogg's and a public riled up by Wertham and his allies" who were concerned about the comics' "contribution" to juvenile delinquency (143). In Weldon's words, "the outcry over television violence had turned Reeves's Man of Steel into a passive, reactive hero" (102), a hero Tye describes as "kinder, gentler than before" (143). However the result of the sponsor's censorship is described, the fact remains that Superman was edited to become much more palatable to the sensitive American sponsors and audiences. The new medium of television so reached audiences and made such an indelible impression that Reeves's public appearances would have to be carefully monitored, and often curtailed. He even gave up smoking and drinking in public for fear of influencing children (150). Reeves's actions out of costume demonstrate just how much of a role model Superman was for America— and how difficult it was for audiences to separate the fantasy of Superman from the reality of George Reeves. Indeed, Reeves's nickname of "Honest George, the People's Friend" could easily be attributed to Superman (140).

Part of Reeves's popularity may be attributed to the medium of television. The "new" technology produced such a realistic image that the Superman who appeared on those early screens looked like "Superman in real life, and he was sturdier and more steadfast than kids had pictured from the cartoon, imagined on the radio, or seen in the big-screen serials. Here, finally, was a flesh-and-blood Superman worthy of Jerry and Joe's hero" (Tye 137). Kellogg's intervention in *The Adventures of Superman* illustrates

the impact of the media and media technology on the superhero industry. From this point on, the Superman individuals would encounter in their daily lives would be a carefully tailored, sanitized version of the character, informed as it was by the consumer-conscious values of corporate sponsors. Moreover, the Superman of television and film would garner the most consumers, thus disseminating American values to its widest audience yet.

The values perpetuated by the television show reflected the Cold War nationalism that surged after World War II. Superman would be crafted by producers and advertisers as the ultimate patriot. The most significant change to Superman came when television producers edited Superman's mission of fighting "a never-ending battle for truth and justice" to include "and the American Way." The radio program had previously featured the tripartite slogan during the lowest points of World War II. It was removed, however, once the war turned in America's favor (Lundegaard). This war-time emendation branded Superman as an explicitly nationalistic character, unabashedly proclaiming that the quasi-religious figure from beyond had come to earth to help *Americans*. As time passed, some iterations of the character have taken liberties with the phrase "truth, justice, and the American way." For example, the 1966 cartoons substituted "freedom" for "the American way," while other programs like the 1990s live-action television show *The New Adventures of Lois & Clark* left the phrase out entirely, using its absence for comedic value. No matter what the variation, from the moment George Reeves's television Superman began to fight for the American way, Superman became a visible icon of a cultural discourse determined to teach its audience about America's place in the world and their place in America.

Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence's technomythic critical theory maintains that evolving media technologies presented each generation with its very own version of established superheroes in order to "preserve their currency and aura of

credibility" (8). As a result, the figures became inextricably linked with American culture and available for ideological exploitation. The move from comics to animation to live action, full-color television brought Superman into the homes and hearts of American families. The transition of Superman to "serious" film in 1978 would represent the apex of superhero pedagogy (Tye 191), as the high tech medium would lend the superhero his highest degree of realism yet. Indeed, the first film would not only bring the Man of Steel to life for a mass audience, but also cement the audience's conception of who the character was and what he could be—all the while reproducing the ideological messages of a nationalistic corporate America.

1978-present: The Legacy of Donner's *Superman: The Movie*

More than two decades after Superman became "flesh and blood" through television and during Superman's 50th anniversary year, director Richard Donner and script supervisor Tom Makiewicz acknowledged "that, to fans, Superman was not a fantasy character but an embodiment of real hopes and ideals" (Tye 196). In order to create the illusion of a "flesh and blood" embodiment of these ideals, the production crew had to convince its viewing audience that a man could fly. As Tye observes, convincing the audience would take some work. He writes, "moviegoers in the 1970s were not as forgiving as they had been in low tech 1940s and 1950s" (197). The television series had previously attempted to simulate Superman's flight, but the pulley system often resulted in Reeves planted face-first on the ground (137). Donner's production crew attempted similar pulley systems, cranes, and trick camera angles, but nothing succeeded until visual effects artist Zoran Perisic came up with a special lens/projector technique that was so innovative and effective that the film received a Special Achievement Award for Special Effects (197-98). Producers were so confident in their realistic portrayal of the character that they boasted "You'll believe a man can fly."

With the successful accomplishment of a flying Superman, the production team

satisfied tech-savvy audiences and presented a specular experience that anchored the film's success. Of course, the more realistic a film Donner could create, the greater the number of existing Superman fans his movie would please while drawing new fans into the fold. In addition to realistic special effects, Donner also relied on lead actor Christopher Reeve's heartfelt performance. Reeve's Superman is arguably more iconic than George Reeves's portrayal. Critics attribute his success to the level of humanity he imbued in the character. Reeve's Clark Kent was more inept, and thus more sympathetic, than the television Clark from *The Adventures of Superman*. As Superman, Reeve brought a sense of humor that was more human than the super-serious and sober television character (Tye 199), and as a result, his character charmed the audience.

The entertaining escapist fantasy came at a time when America was sorely in need of a resurgence of belief and optimism after such events as Vietnam and Watergate (Scivally 76). Although Superman had previously provided a form of escapism during times of trouble, the film had a much wider reach than any comic book could hope for; Tye estimates that the film brought in one hundred times more consumers than Superman comics at the time (203). Indeed, the film domestically grossed $7,465,343 opening weekend and went on to gross $134,218,018, placing it 30th in the top 100 superhero films of all time (Box Office). The film was the second highest grossing film of 1978 and Warner Brothers' highest grossing film of all time (Tye 191). As a Hollywood feature film, *Superman* received a global release. Foreign box office receipts greatly contributed to the success of the Hollywood blockbuster, accounting for more than half of the 300 million dollars in worldwide sales (Box Office), showing the growing reach of the superhero film.

Superman's box office receipts illustrate, at least in part, the success of the dominant cultural discourse to reproduce subjects of an American consumptive discourse. Consider the results of a Gallup poll from 1991, just four years after the release of

Superman IV: Americans demonstrated that they knew more about the Man of Steel than they did about their country's history (Tye 267). The "teaching machine" of the superhero myth, especially Superman's, was, at least to some degree, more effective in teaching its lessons than K-12 education, and its reach extends to the world. If Harlan Ellison is to be believed, then Superman is one of the five literary characters known to "every man woman and child on the planet" (qtd in Tye 123). The naturalization exam's question of "Who is Superman?" (Tye 197), then, is perhaps a freebie. It signals how favorably the country and its government view Superman. With a nearly invulnerable idealized figure fighting for "the American Way," why should it not? Donner's film would be the first explicit posturing of Superman as an American patriot—at least, it would contain, for the first time in any medium, Superman declaring that he fights for "truth, justice, and the American way" (Lundegaard). As a result, audiences could no longer doubt that Superman was the ideal figure who supported and defended American practices.

The opening sequence sets the serious standard for the film's values. Mimicking the audience's own position, Donner's film opens as if it takes place in an old theater. The entire opening sequence is shot in black and white, evoking an earlier point in cinematic history. Old-fashioned theater curtains open to reveal a movie screen onto which "June 1938" is projected. Superman fans would immediately recognize the date as the first time Superman appeared in comics. Donner's opening attempts to reposition audiences within the time frame of Superman's beginnings, but the illusion breaks as the on-screen movie screen shows a comic book. While viewers are meant to interpret this comic book as Superman's first appearance in *Action Comics* 1, the cover does not feature the superhero lifting a carful of criminals; instead, the film uses a faux cover featuring, not Superman, but a cartoonish rocketship. With this break from history, Donner signals that he aims to create his own vision rather than relying on past iterations, and the next

moment in the opening sequence: A child reaches over and opens the comic book, as many in the audience have done in the past. The comic book's contents, however, are not from any comic book Superman fans have encountered before. Instead, Donner presents new material to the audience, made to look "authentic" in the same style as Shuster's art.

     As the child turns the pages, he reads aloud: "In the decade of the 1930s, even the great city of Metropolis was not spared the ravages of the worldwide depression. In times of fear and confusion, the job of informing the public was the responsibility of the Daily Planet, a great metropolitan newspaper whose reputation for clarity and truth had become the symbol for hope in the city of Metropolis" (*Superman*). The words never appeared in a Superman comic; indeed, the Daily Planet did not appear until the issue 23 in 1940, but the film's audience would immediately recognize the importance of the newspaper. The close up image of the illustrated Daily Planet building transitions into a live-action shot of the same image. The banner which reads "The Daily Planet" now rotates around the globe from right to left as the camera zooms in closer until panning upwards into the stars, transitioning to the opening credits. By opening with the Daily Planet, the film begins with American values and American industry—not with an alien world and culture— foregrounding how clarity, truth, and hope are quintessentially American values. Indeed, Donner's film explicitly positions Superman as an American product rather than a Kryptonian one by making Superman choose between the two cultures.

     As Reynolds writes, "culturally, Superman is completely American" (74). In Donner's first film, Superman believes that "Confession is good for the soul," he salutes Air Force One as he saves the plane from crashing, he does not believe in violence in any form, and he always tells the truth. These are not Kryptonian values—they are the middle-American values he learned from the Kents, the same values attributed to the Daily Planet that opens the film. These American values are worth more to Superman than those of his birth culture, which brings up once more the issue of *Superman* as a

global blockbuster. Superman exemplifies an immigrant who sheds his own culture to completely assimilate and reproduce American cultural values. With the advent of Donner's films, Superman moves from being the ideal Subject for American citizens to being an ideal Subject who may speak to American superiority on a global scale. The film leaves no room to doubt that Superman is American and stands to protect and serve American culture.

Superman's immigration story begins on Krypton. After failing to convince the council of Krypton's imminent danger, scientist Jor-El and his wife Kara decide to send their son, Kal-El, offworld to Earth. The parting scene elucidates Superman's exceptional, other-worldly nature and his Unique Otherness. The ship in which they place their infant son does not resemble the cartoonish rocket ship from the opening sequence; instead, it resembles a heavenly star. The ship's shape emphasizes his mother's concerns that Kal-El will be different from the humans of Earth, that he "won't be one of them" and that "He will be odd, different," but Jor-El recontextualizes his son's abilities in terms of survival: "He will be strong . . . he will be fast, virtually invulnerable" (*Superman*). Furthermore, Kal-El will carry on Jor-El's legacy. He tells his son, "You will carry me inside you, all the days of your life. You will make my strength your own, and see my life through your eyes, as your life will be seen through mine" (*Superman*). The ship ascends into the heavens and begins its journey; soon after, the planet explodes.

When Kal-El's star finally falls to Earth, a young Kal-El—merely a toddler— emerges from the ship with his arms raised towards Martha and Jonathan Kent. The image evokes a child Christ with his arms stretched out toward heaven. The religious connotation further supported by Martha Kent who justifies keeping the child because "all these years how we've prayed and prayed that the good Lord would see fit to give us a child" (*Superman*). Even a secular reading of the scene proves Kal-El's goodness for, happy and smiling with his arms raised as if to receive a hug, he shows that he is full of

love and innocence and has the capacity for good. In the next scene, fifteen years later, high school senior Clark struggles on the sidelines of the football field when he knows full well that he could be the star of the team. The decision to remain sidelined, audiences find out, has come from Jonathan Kent who emphasizes that "you are here for a reason . . . It's not to score touchdowns" (*Superman*). As Weldon reads the scene, "the movie has to establish that Clark, though born an alien, has gone native—that he is now thoroughly a child of the American Midwest, and that his values are those of a human farm boy, not a cold, advanced race" (187). The father's belief in Clark's specialness will be the last "lesson" he imparts on his son; immediately after, Jonathan Kent dies of a heart attack. As a result of his father's sudden death, Clark sets off on a journey to find out just who he is and why he exists.

After Kent's funeral, Clark leaves Smallville and travels north to Antarctica. There, he throws a crystal left over from his crash landing into the ocean; immediately, it grows into the Fortress of Solitude. The Fortress is significant because it separates Superman from the human race. First named in the comics in 1949, the Fortress was finely detailed for readers in 1957. It was mostly played off for relief or humor; it served as the structure where Superman keeps his collections from past adventures and keeps away from "snoopers" (Weldon 108). Donner's film recontextualizes the Fortress of Solitude into something more realistic and much more serious. It is here, in the film, that the boy becomes a man, that Clark Kent becomes Superman, and learns his true identity and his purpose. He spends twelve years under Jor-El's pre-recorded tutelage, and perhaps the most significant lesson he—and audiences—learn is that humans "can be a great people, Kal-El, and they wish to be. They lack only the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you, my only son" (*Superman*). The scene is yet another of Donner's inventions. Prior to the film, in the comics, Jor-El does not return from the dead to communicate to Superman from beyond

the grave. Donner has created the emphasis on father figures for Superman in his use of Jor-El and Jonathan Kent. More than simply reflection the "obey your elders" pedagogy as the youth club did, Donner sets up a quasi-religious paternal power structure.

Superman's education by Jor-El positions the superhero as the Unique and Central Other of the Subject and it also distances him from the human race, but Superman's relationship with coworker Lois Lane, with whom he falls in love, complicates the distance. When Lois dies, he turns back time, defying his father's supreme rule that he never interfere with human history. By flying at a high enough speed around the planet, Superman reverses its axial orbit, which also reverses the events which led to Lois's death. Significantly, Superman forces Earth to turn in the same direction as the Daily Planet's globe from the opening sequence. The detail shows that, although Superman defied his Kryptonian father, he held to the ideals of his American one, thus proving his worth to American audiences that in times of fear and confusion he will set things right.

The film ends with Superman flying off into space. The scene provides the clearest representation of Donner's filmwork. Under Donner, the film iteration of Superman becomes an apotheosis of American values; he is the god that has chosen Earth, specially signaling out America as the right way. Superman's choice of America over Krypton in the first film takes on a more central role in the plot of the sequel, *Superman II* (1980). Once again, Superman is faced with a choice between Lois and the planet and, once again, he chooses Lois. The lure of a "normal" American life is so desirable to Superman that he gives up his superpowers—his heritage as the last son of Krypton—in order to be with her. Superman, the godlike hero from beyond, finds simple human life and human love more desirable than virtual godhood. The decision to quit being Superman comes at the time when the world needs him the most. The Kryptonian criminals featured in the beginning of the first film—General Zod, Ursa, and Non—

escape their imprisonment and come to Earth and use their own superpowers to enslave the Earth. In the end, Superman regains his powers, but it becomes clear that Superman's birth mother's worries have come to fruition: he is isolated, alone, and must remain as humanity's guardian savior and beacon of hope; he cannot be among us, although he will always fight for us.

Donner's films so fully brought to life the idea of who Superman was and what he stood for that, nearly thirty years later, film producers were still reluctant to let go of his vision. Bryan Singer's *Superman Returns* did not reboot the character for the contemporary audience. Instead, it functioned as a sequel to *Superman II*, building off of themes of isolation and godhood and further entrenching Superman in the life of Lois Lane by way of his biological son with her that resulted from their night together in the Fortress of solitude after he had given up his powers. Even the upcoming *Man of Steel*, which does reboot the character, appears to cover similar ground as the Donner films, incorporating the origin story and including General Zod as the antagonist.

Television would also build off of Donner's work, particularly in the presentation of Clark's American life growing up on a small subsistence farm and the values associated with the simple life. Donner spends fifteen minutes, or a tenth of the film's total running time, on Clark with his parents in Smallville, highlighting his education and alienation growing up. Television's *Smallville* (2001) premiered on October 16, 2011 and lasted ten seasons, or 218 hour-long episodes. The series picked up the thread of Clark Kent's adolescence and how he dealt with growing up as an outsider with superpowers. In many ways, the Clark Kent of Smallville is imperfect, clearly not yet the ideal Superman. While, from the second season on, the series flitted between settings in Smallville and Metropolis, Clark would not wear any sort of Kryptonian regalia until Season 9. Informed by a post-9/11 culture, *Smallville* shows how American Superman really is. The alien Kal-El is able to pass as Clark Kent because he was raised on, and

believes in, the middle American values of Martha and Jonathan Kent. Once again, Superman presents as the perfectly assimilated immigrant. The *Smallville* story arc teaches viewers that it is possible to be human, to be accepted in the social world no matter how much of an outsider we are—provided they share the same (American) values.

Despite Clark's assimilation into American culture, *Smallville* continues to reproduce the image of Superman as outsider—this time from an adolescent perspective. Its position as a post-9/11 representation of Superman, however, is key. Instead of the light-hearted celebration of superheroes from America's Golden Age, the ghostly specter of September 11th causes America to take its heroes seriously, to honor the fallen, and to keep its vow to never forget. Therefore, Reeve's likeable human portrayal of Superman in Donner's film had to give way to his more stoic qualities of godlike protector. Donner's vision of Superman—and thus the contemporary vision—is a step away from the idealistic patriot of World War II. Instead of a superpowered man against ne'er-do-wells, Superman is now, for all intents and purposes, a god. America needed a hero like Superman to save them "in times of fear and confusion" and to provide them with the ultimate "symbol for hope" (*Superman*). Consider the endings to Donner's Superman and Singer's *Superman Returns*.

At the end of Donner's film, Superman brings supervillian Lex Luthor to jail. When the warden thanks Superman, the Man of Steel humbly deflects the praise given to him, claiming that "we're all part of the same team." Although the line of dialogue was not delivered in close up, the rise of John Williams's score punctuates its importance. We—Superman, the warden who thanks him, and film audience—are all part of the same *American* team and, as such, we must all play our parts in defending truth and justice. If we are all part of the same team, then Superman is one of us. In *Superman Returns,* however, Superman is clearly not one of us. As he bids his son goodbye, he imparts to

him the same message that Jor-El had before Kal-El's rocket launched. The parting signifies that Superman will not be a part of his son's life; he has a greater purpose. Before he leaves the property, Lois asks if she will ever see him again, he replies, "I'm always around." (*Superman Returns*). He then takes off, beginning the flight over the city—*his* city—that will end the film. The message is clear: Superman is an individual acting in the serving of Metropolis and America.

Contemporary iterations of Superman since Donner's films have come to focus more on Superman's status as an alien immigrant, as an outsider to American or even Earth culture. He is clearly not one of us. Gone are the days when he can disguise himself as Tom Burke and play on the football team. Instead, as shown in Donner's film, Clark Kent is confined to the sidelines because, as Jonathan Kent instills in him, it would not be fair to the other team if Clark were to suit up and play. What once began as a gag for USAF commercials has become a running theme in Superman's narrative: that Superman will never be human—just as we will never be Kryptonian. Such isolation stems from Superman's archetype as a quasi-religious god-like hero. While audiences are willing to buy into the Superman mythos and accept him as a role model, another hero archetype has arisen, perhaps more suited to the contemporary technology-laden culture, with the advent of technology that presents a counterpoint to those heroes like Superman. The secular hero of science and technology is a slightly less far-fetched fantasy. He is not from beyond, he is from right here, and he is one of us, made strong and powerful by his own ingenuity, his massive wealth, and the potential of high technology—the perfect post-9/11 superhero.

3. Iron Man

The realistic fantasy world of Donner's Superman films promotes ideological messages of American nationalism and patriotism through the specular mask of the cinematic experience. As a result, the viewing audience cannot perceive that outside forces hail them into subject positions of good American citizens with good American beliefs and practices. The Iron Man film franchise would continue on in the *Superman* fashion, with a focus on celebrating "entrepreneurship and unending technological progress" (55). Technology is a key part of Iron Man's superpowers. Unlike Superman, Iron Man represents the secular hero, a superhero whose superpowers are either a result of genetics (e.g. The X-men, Spider-Man), laboratory experiments (e.g. Captain America), or science accidents (e.g. The Hulk, The Fantastic Four), or technological augmentation (e.g. Batman, Iron Man). The trend began in 2000 with Bryan Singer's *X-Men*, but truly gained momentum after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As previously stated, 9/11 caused America to redefine its heroes. Now, the "real American hero" was human and used technology to protect and serve; the heroes were police officers, firefighters, and the men and women of the military. As admirable as these ideological nationalistic values may be, they too have been appropriated by the culture industry, commodified, and sold to us through superhero films like *Iron Man*.

Although an important character within Marvel comics, Iron Man has not, historically, enjoyed the type of cultural ubiquity that Superman has. He first appeared in *Tales of Suspense* 39 and would continue to share his title with more established characters such as Captain America; he finally received his own title in 1968. Three years

after publication, Iron Man appeared in the animated series, *The Marvel Super Heroes*, alongside four other superheroes; he later made guest appearances on various other superheroes' cartoons in the 1990s and received his own animated series in 1994 and 2009. A toy line through Toy Biz in the 1990s rounds out his merchandizing. Iron Man's lack of historical and multimedia presence shows that his popularity was far from reaching that of Superman, but that would change after Jon Favreau's *Iron Man* release in 2008 when the character became a household name and one of the most successfully marketed brands and franchises.

The 7th highest grossing superhero film of all time, Iron Man took in over a half a billion dollars worldwide. Two years later, its sequel surpassed the first film in total receipts by 38 million dollars. After only three and a half weeks of worldwide release, *Iron Man 3*'s has passed the one billion dollar mark in worldwide receipts; foreign totals account for over 60% of that total (Box Office). Although Superman was an internationally known figure even before the films, Iron Man was not and yet the franchise's foreign sales remain strong. Giroux argues that the success of the Western cultural product in the globalized market derives from "a performance-driven notion of the self as a brand" that offers "self-actualization and empowerment" which "come packaged as various self-enhancing commodities made available to those who have money to spend and the optimism to believe in them" (9). *Iron Man* and its sequels offer this exact kind of self-enhancing commodity the globalized market desires through the depiction of technology. Although the films supply America with a healthy dose of nationalism and patriotism in the wake of 9/11, more importantly, they demonstrate how technology leads to self-enhancement and empowerment, thus creating in viewers the desire to purchase the commodities.

In this chapter, I will focus on the film iteration of the Iron Man character to show how Favreau has continued Donner's ideological work by providing audiences with a

role model for American social practices. The American practices at work in Favreau's films, however, favor individualism and consumerism, particularly the consumption of technology, over American nationalism. Consequently, the sense of empowerment and a better life subjects receive from their consumption is but an illusion in the service of creating consumers who confuse the corporate desires for profit with their own desires.

Visionary, Genius, Patriot: The Hero's Journey in Favreau's *Iron Man*

Post-9/11 superheroes, A.O. Scott criticizes, have "mostly been angry, anxious and obsessed with the idea of revenge" (Dargis). These characteristics reflect America's vow to make the terrorists responsible pay for their crimes. As a result, the superpowered protagonists enact America's newfound antiterrorism values. The films do not, however, encourage its viewers to join the military and exact their own revenge. In fact, *Iron Man* does not celebrate military action—nor does it explicitly criticize it. Jesse Walker finds that the superheroes in contemporary film "displayed an almost unerring ability to invoke important issues without clearly coming down on one side of the other." He relates that one writer conservative Martin Sieff, describes *Iron Man* "a celebration of what's great about American capitalism" while liberal critic David Edelstein described *Iron Man* as an illustration of how "the military-industrial complex ravages the Third World" (qtd in Walker). Both critics, Walker argues, are correct, for Favreau's film operates as "the film equivalent of a Rorschach test. If you go into *Iron Man* seeking right-wing imagery, you'll find it: Tony Stark is a patriot, pro-military, and likes unilateral intervention. If you go into *Iron Man* looking for left-wing imagery, you'll find that, too: The true villain here is Stane, representing an out-of-control military-industrial complex" (Sonny Bunch qtd in Walker). Both points of view are represented so as to invite audiences of all political persuasions to join in on the fantasy celebration of American patriotism, ingenuity, and greatness.

The audience's role model for these American values lies in the film's

protagonist, Tony Stark. Before becoming Iron Man, he is self-obsessed, reckless,

immature, and careless. He was not raised on the same middle-American moral values as

Clark Kent, but rather on the values of the upper echelons of privileged society. Stark is

incredibly intelligent and massively wealthy, and owns and runs his father's company,

Stark Industries, which made its profits in military funded weapons manufacturing. Stark,

then, represents private industry, individual accomplishment, and military power. At first,

his character is the polar opposite of Reeve's portrayal of Clark Kent, but once he

becomes Iron Man, his character will more positively represent those values.

   Iron Man's origin story begins in Afghanistan. Favreau chose to update his

protagonist's origins from the comics in order to reach contemporary audiences. His

choice also positions Stark as an active player on the antiterrorism circuit, as the

beginning of the film shows him engaged in a weapons demonstration for the United

States military. His convoy is attacked by a terrorist group known as the Ten Rings as it

leaves the demonstration. Stark sustains injuries from the attack and is captured by the

Ten Rings in order to build them the weapon he'd been demonstrating to the United

States. Fellow captive Ho Yinsen stabilizes Stark's injuries, but cannot remove the

shrapnel completely. To keep the metal from piercing his heart, Yinsen installs an

intrusive metal apparatus containing a magnet to keep the shrapnel at bay. Although

Yinsen is credited with saving Stark's life, Stark improves the apparatus by engineering a

new power source, a miniaturized version of the energy generating technology arc reactor

Stark's father designed in the 1970s. The arc reactor frees up Stark's hands to build the

missiles the Ten Rings want, but Stark, like any good American, will not give in to the

terrorists' demands.

   Yinsen, the closest Tony has to a Jonathan Kent figure, is the one who first incites

Tony to fight back. After Stark has been taken on a tour of the facilities and shown the

large cache of Stark Industries weapons the Ten Rings has amassed, Yinsen tells him to

"Look, what you just saw. That is your legacy, Stark. Your life's work, in the hands of those murderers. Is that how you want to go out? Is this the last act of defiance of the great Tony Stark?" (*Iron Man*). As it turns out, the last act of defiance of the great Tony Stark is the first act of Iron Man. With Yinsen's help, Stark builds an armored weaponized suit—the first of many Iron Man armors—out of materials from his weapons and escapes. In the attempt, Yinsen dies and his parting words to Stark, like Jonathan Kent's final message to Clark, is to find purpose in his life: "Don't waste it. Don't waste your life" (*Iron Man*). Although his purpose is not to light the way for humanity, Stark will find that he makes an effective protector.

The comic books strongly imply that Stark turned a blind eye to the under-the-table dealings with terrorist groups. Favreau's decision to make Stark ignorant of the dealings and, furthermore, a victim of them, exonerates him of any wrongdoing. He gains a sense of duty and responsibility from his experiences overseas and proceeds to exact, perhaps to Scott's dismay, revenge against the terrorists. After he first escapes from captivity, he makes sure to destroy the stockpile of the Stark Industries weapons. After he revises his armor design, he tests it for combat in Gulmira, Yinsen's place of origin, destroying the terrorist cell operating there and avenging Yinsen's death. Stark's newfound sense of responsibility comes, he explains, from the fact that "I saw young Americans killed by the very weapons I created to defend them and protect them. And I saw that I had become part of a system that is comfortable with zero accountability. . . . I had my eyes opened. I came to realize that I have more to offer this world than just making things that blow up" (*Iron Man*). As a result of his epiphany, Stark sees that his own company can in fact make lives better, and he shuts down the weapons manufacturing plants responsible for taking innocent lives.

Stark tells his CFO Obadiah Stane that his company is "not doing a good enough job. We can do better. We're gonna do something else," something that, as he tells the

press, will be "consistent with the highest good for this country" (*Iron Man*). Because Stark has distanced himself from the doctrine of zero accountability, because he has taken on and taken out terrorists warring against American practices, Stark becomes an American hero. Indeed, he is the post-9/11 hero, who exacts revenge on terrorist factions, uses technological advancements to defend himself and his country, and upholds the values that make capitalist America great. Thus the film's earlier description of Stark as "visionary, genius, American patriot" charged with "protecting America and her interests around the globe" becomes an accurate and heroic description of Iron Man.

Stark is confident in his cause because, as he tells his assistant Pepper Potts, "I shouldn't be alive unless it was for a reason" (*Iron Man*). Stark's words echo those of Jonathan Kent's from *Superman*. The difference in Stark's utterance is that he has already decided that purpose for himself. As much as Yinsen serves as inspiration, Stark pulls himself up and uses his superior intelligence (and, with later armors, massive wealth) to build himself superpowers. Indeed, he is the only individual capable of being our hero. The Iron Man armors featured in the first two films are calculated to cost a total of 849 million dollars, while the total cost of all of Stark's technology and lifestyle is estimated at $1,612,717,000 ("Cost of"). With his success in the manufacturing industry, these costs do not impede Stark. He builds his suits and other technology without compromising his company's integrity.

Stark is also the only person on the planet intelligent enough to build, operate, and maintain the armored suits. He states in the beginning of the sequel that he has yet to "come across anyone man enough to go toe to toe with me on my best day" (*Iron Man 2*). His remark is a reference to the main conflict in the previous film, in which Obadiah Stane, CFO of Stark Industries-turned-supervillian, replicates and improves Stark's first armored suit to become the Iron Monger. Because he did not have the foresight to test the suit to its limits, as Stark previously had done, his downfall begins after Iron Man leads

him in a chase high into the atmosphere and his suit freezes over and powers down. When applied to the post-9/11 narrative, the failure of Stane to displace Stark speaks to America's resiliency in the face of terrorism and corruption. Moreover, the American hero will not reside in the shadows, but rather take full responsibility for his actions.

At the end of the first film, SHIELD, the government organization handling the aftermath of the Iron Man vs. Iron Monger battle, advises Stark to adhere the cover story that Iron Man serves as his bodyguard. They give Stark an alibi in order to clear him of any responsibility for the armor, battle, or damages. The cover story is a nod to the comics in which, for over forty years, the general public did not know Iron Man's identity. Favreau, however, dispenses with the comics continuity. The cover story does not give Stark credit for his work, which will not do for a film that celebrates American heroism and triumph of the individual. Although Donner's film ended on the sentiment that "We're all on the same team" (*Superman*), *Iron Man* ends with Stark's declaration to the media that "I am Iron Man" (*Iron Man*). The ending illustrates the cultural shift from the Cold War community-raising tactics of the 1970s to an individualized "Generation-I," which furthermore contributes to the hailing of individual consumers.

In the first film, Stane asks Stark, "You really think that just because you have an idea, it belongs to you? Your father, he helped give us the atomic bomb. Now what kind of world would it be today if he was as selfish as you?" (*Iron Man*). Stane only wants the arc reactor technology for his own personal profit, of course, but he raises an important question: Should Stark not also share his technology for the betterment of humanity? *Iron Man 2* (2009) would develop the issue when Stark is brought before a Senate board and questioned about keeping the Iron Man suit for personal use. The government wants Stark to hand over the suit and regulate its usage; Stark will not comply. Just as Superman had earned the right to serve the public through his godlike powers, Iron Man earns the right to serve as our protector because, as he says, "I'm your nuclear deterrent"

(*Iron Man 2*). He argues that his role as Iron Man is "working. We're safe. America is secure. You want my property? You can't have it. But I did you a big favor. I've successfully privatized world peace" (*Iron Man 2*). Iron Man performs the most important function of the armed forces and, furthermore, he protects against the largest perceived threat on the war on terror: nuclear bombs. Just as America conceded to surrender some of its liberties to ensure the country's safety, so too, the film reasons, Stark should be allowed to own and operate the suit without government intervention.

Although Iron Man is presented as an American hero, the above examples show how the focus on his character's greatness lies not in his adherence to middle-American values, like Superman, but rather on his own individuality. In not explicitly coming down on one side or another nationalistically or politically, *Iron Man* illustrates Adorno's point that the culture industry results in standardization and stagnation via conformity that is intentionally vague in order to toe the line (14, 17). Toeing the line between political readings of the film in the post-9/11 politically charged atmosphere allows for the ideological messages of corporatism and consumerism to come through. Recall that powerful interests stand behind this line, and these interests—the Big Six, which include Marvel and DC's parent companies—seek profit. Therefore the controlling ideological messages of the Iron Man franchise are not political, but profitable, and the most profitable aspect of the film is its presentation of technology and its utilization by the individual.

In *Iron Man 2*, the palladium metal in Stark's arc reactor is causing irreversible blood poisoning and Stark faces certain death. Instead of picking himself back up, as in the previous film, Stark has help. As Jor-El taught Clark Kent how to be Superman, so Stark's father educates Stark from beyond the grave. Stark encounters his father in his own version of the Fortress of Solitude, his workshop in the lower level of his Malibu mansion. As he screens an old film reel of outtakes from an opening film for the Stark

Expo 1974, Stark finds a message recorded for him by his father. Regarding the model for the City of the Future exhibition, Howard tells his son, "I built this for you. And some day you'll realize that it represents a whole lot more than people's inventions; it represents my life's work. This is the key to the future. I'm limited by the technology of my time, but one day you'll figure this out. And when you do, you will change the world" (*Iron Man 2*). The model of the city turns out to be a model of an atom, a new element that Howard was not able to manufacture in 1974. The element serves as the new, improved and non-lethal power source for the arc reactor. When Tony realizes what his father has left him, he remarks to Howard that, even though he's been "Dead almost 20 years, you're still taking me to school" (*Iron Man 2*)—just like Jor-El did for his son. Both fathers consider their sons to be carriers of their own legacies. In his closing statement, Howard tells his son, "What is, and always will be, my greatest creation is you" (*Iron Man 2*), as if Tony was "created" solely to carry on his father's legacy of bettering human lives through technology.

Iron Man's development and use of technology suggests the technological superiority of America, but the film franchise's ideological work with American patriotism, the celebration of capitalist wealth and free enterprise, and the evolution of technology does not call Americans to patriotic action. Iron Man does not represent the guiding light to show humanity the way; he is not the figure held at a distance. Rather, as the individualized Generation-I, he is the celebrated individual living among us. As Stark makes it clear in the sequel, the Iron Man armor belongs to him and him alone. Some of Stark's technology, however, can be purchased by individuals in the viewing audience. Through his technology, audiences can emulate Stark's actions and experience some of Iron Man's "superpowers" for themselves.

Make Way for Tomorrow Today: The Consumer and Iron Man

Not only has media technology allowed for more realistic special effects, as seen

in Donner's film, but the ubiquitous nature of high technology in the developed world's daily life has created expectations surrounding its use. The culture industry has appropriated technology's crucial position in everyday practice through producing superhero films centered on the technological hero bolstered by cinematic effects. Attracted by the specular nature of the films, the audience internalizes the ideological messages that technology can improve their lives and thus the films create a market-desire for technological products so that their superhero fantasies may become reality. Moreso than Superman, the secular hero franchise, and Iron Man in particular, "has no language for imagining democratic public life outside consumption" (Giroux 55). The Iron Man film franchise provides both a new ideal Subject for the modern technological era and realistic "superpowers" that fans can reproduce through their own purchasing power.

Marvel figurehead Stan Lee has stated in the past that it was his intent to create characters who were "flesh and blood," with "faults and foibles" in order to make characters to whom he (and readers) could relate (12). The key is that these Marvel characters are, for the most part, "human" characters and not gods which increases their appeal but also their relatability. Because the films adamantly present Stark's superpowers through the technological prosthesis of his armored suit, Stark is undeniably human, unlike Superman who comes from an alien world. Researchers Isabel Pedersen and Luke Simcoe of the Digital Media and Culture Lab at Ryerson University argue that Stark's frail human body makes his character more relatable to audiences, as they, too, grapple with their own desires for immortality, something with which technology can help. The positioning of a humanized central character allows viewers to more easily imagine themselves as Tony Stark. Indeed, the narrative suggests that with enough money, intelligence, and technology one can simulate the superhero experience. Because the Iron Man franchise banks on the simulation of the superhero experience while at the

same time celebrating the individual's right to agency, the film narrative positions individual viewers into falsely believing that they are agents of their own desires.

The Iron Man franchise's audience holds, even more than the 1970s generation, high expectations of technological advancements in cinema. Computer generated imagery (CGI) technology heavily supported the *Iron Man* film, particularly in the rendering of Iron Man's armor. Scott Bukatman criticizes the use of CGI in contemporary superhero films. What once was a physical superhero with real presence, he argues, "Becomes an incarnation of electronic technology—a digital being embodying the fact of being digital," effectively splitting the superhero into "live action and CGI" (122). He also argues that the climax of the films suffer for their dependence on CGI, even "the otherwise sublime *Iron Man*" (122). Bukatman's criticism of the reliance on CGI stripping the hero (and thus also the viewer) from his physicality points to the complications of the cinematographic apparatus and the transcendental subject. As Tony Stark is confined to the Iron Man suit in order to access his "superpowers," so too is the viewing audience confined to the cinema in order to access the fantasy of the narrative. Unlike Stark who receives feedback and data from the outside world, the viewing audience is subjected to the "entertainment" pre-coded fictions of the superhero film. Transcendental viewers internalize the belief that the technology depicted on screen can actually give them Iron Man's superpowers. They can live out their fantasies. The effects of the use of technology in the Iron Man franchise, however, go beyond supplying the consumer with their demands. The franchise is actually responsible for creating the desire for those products in the first place.

The following scene from *Iron Man 2* illustrates how the film creates the desire for Iron Man merchandise, particularly in the ideal consumers, children: As Tony Stark exits the Stark Expo pavilion at the beginning of the film, he wades through a crowd of adoring fans. The camera focuses on one child, a boy wearing a toy Iron Man helmet and

repulsor gloves, who enthusiastically receives Stark's autograph. The same child reappears at the end of the film, as the Expo is under attack by unmanned armored drones created in the style of the Iron Man armor by the main villain, Ivan Vanko. Vanko's drones are programmed to seek out and destroy Iron Man on sight. In his toy helmet and gloves, the child appears to the drone as its target. As the drone aims its weapon at the boy, he bravely raises his arm, and aims his "repulsor ray" at the drone. The child, of course, cannot fire. The drone will kill him. The act of wearing the Iron Man product alone, though, enables the child to believe that he too is like Iron Man, just as human-computer interaction (HCI) technology satisfies adult consumers' need for Stark technology. Children do not die in superhero films, however, and so Iron Man lands behind the child and takes out the drone. Notably, however, Iron Man makes the child believe that the child was the one who destroyed the drone. "Nice job, kid," he tells the boy before the scene ends.

The scene encourages the social practice of the superhero through toys. It creates the chain of logic that the child who purchases the Iron Man merchandise can emulate the child in the film who in turn emulates the hero and is acknowledged and praised by him. A recent Verizon marketing campaign has made use of the child becoming Iron Man. The communications corporation teamed up with *Iron Man 3* for a series of commercials featuring a young child. The child returns home, bursting through the door with excitement to ask his parents, "Did we get it?" When the parents confirm that they have indeed gotten "it," the boy rushes upstairs to complete his science project, thanks to the high speed internet of Fios Quantum. His science fair project is none other than a fully operational, child-sized Iron Man suit—the newest suit featured in *Iron Man 3*. The commercial not only targets children, showing them how the Verizon product can make them like Iron Man, but also illustrates the successful marketing strategy of getting children to nag their parents to buy them something (*Corporation*).

The fantasy of becoming Iron Man carries on into adulthood through the purchasing of HCI technology and other "Iron Man tech" as shown by Pedersen and Simcoe. Pedersen and Simcoe argue that the Iron Man franchise has glorified technology and, through its presentation of advanced technology, created the expectation that such technologies will be available for personal use in the future. They build off of cultural theorist Henry Jenkins's model of media convergence and participatory culture to show how individuals may participate in—i.e. "live and breathe"—Iron Man fandom through the various outlets available to fans. One key example in their article is the mimicry of the heads up display (HUD) which Stark uses as an interface with his Iron Man suit. The frames featuring Stark in the suit are augmented close ups representing what the interior of the suit controls look like. Fans have since taken advantage of the technology available to them through software such as Adobe and the *Iron Man 2* website to post videos of themselves on Youtube as if they were inside of Stark's suit (295). Placing themselves within the world of the film is an example of how viewers position themselves as Tony Stark. The participatory culture of Iron Man fandom is not, however, merely for show. It illustrates how the specular nature of film interpellates an unsuspecting audience. The practice of placing themselves within the Iron Man suit goes beyond participatory culture. It creates the desire to consume HUD technology.

Because "individuals 'orient' themselves to new ideas through everyday practices and engagement with discourses (e.g, playing with Iron Man toys, viewing film trailers while watching other TV shows, exchanging role-playing YouTube videos, etc.)", Pedersen and Simcoe argue that "the public becomes more and more socialized to desire (and expect) highly personal, self-centric computer applications" (296). The HUD is not the only self-centric computer application used by Stark in the films. JARVIS, a digitized artificial intelligence used to control domestic functions and execute commands, operates Tony Stark's HCI system. JARVIS did originate in the comics. Although one Edwin

Jarvis served as Stark's human butler, the Iron Man suit had always been controlled by Stark alone—until being incorporated into the comics post-*Iron Man*. JARVIS was "recreated" by *Iron Man* fan Chad Barraford when he invented a computer program that ran off of speech-recognition. The cost of recreating the *Iron Man* technology was 700 dollars and a Mac mini (295-96). Barraford's reverse engineering of *Iron Man* technology results, Petersen and Simcoe argue, from the fact that "people crave computer components that know them personally and agree to serve them" (295). To satisfy this craving, people do not have to shell out seven hundred dollars or own a Mac mini. They can simply purchase an iPhone equipped with Siri to experience a personal assistant with voice recognition, or any Microsoft Product with Windows 8 which markets itself as the new personalized operating system.

Pedersen and Simcoe call for a push in invention and marketing when they write that "As mainstream culture becomes saturated in the Iron Man vision for AR [augmented reality], inventors need to attend to the phenomenon as a commentary on user expectations and desires" (292). In other words, they incite inventors to create the products that the public demands so that they are available for purchase. The authors recognize, however, that the Iron Man franchise "operates to normalize the seemingly fantastical" and as a result "people become socialized to accept the premise of future technologies" (294). As the cinematographic apparatus presents limited possibilities to transcendental viewers, so the technology of the film presents a limited outcome for viewers. Although they may believe they are purchasing something new, cutting edge, and Stark-like, they are replicating and recycling the same consumptive practices society always has, and they are furthermore unable to perceive that outside forces control their personal agency. Consider some of the brands that sponsor or appear in the Iron Man franchise which stand to make a profit off of the consumers' future consumption of HCI technology: Apple, Audi, Cisco, Dell, Ford, LG, Wired, Segway, and Verizon. These

corporations have a stake in the future of media technology and consumers of media technology. Already "Iron Man" technologies are coming out in the market, with HUD available in upcoming models of Buick SUVs, and these products are arguably products consumers do not really need. But since the culture industry produces the desire for these products, consumers will buy them. The Iron Man franchise not only serves to promote the consumption of expensive technology, but also general corporate practices. This message is further expounded in the *Iron Man* sequel.

Better Living Through Better Technology: The Corporation and Iron Man

Iron Man 2 opens with Stark's appearance at the Stark Expo 2010, a fictionalized World Expo where, as Stark tells audiences, "the best and brightest men and women of nations and corporations the world over . . . pool their resources, share their collective vision, to leave behind a brighter future" (*Iron Man 2*). In a memo accessible through the Stark Expo 2010 website, Stark admits that after the last exposition in 1974, "we lost that glimpse into humankind's amazing future," but it is his hope that the 2012 Expo will continue the good work of the past. In his nostalgia for "the good ol' days," he reveals one of the purposes of the Expo: to task corporations with improving the quality of life for all, for better living is achievable through better technology. While the first film, as Pedersen and Simcoe have argued, created the desire for products, the sequel looks to the originators of the products, the corporations, in order to celebrate the fact that these men and women answer the public's desire for technology and give them better lives. In these scenes, the film glorifies the corporation, not the nation, and it furthermore frames the corporation as serving the country, doing good just as Iron Man, Superman, or the Daily Planet. The glorification of the corporation originates not from Iron Man, but rather a higher authority: his father.

Introduced by Tony to the Expo audience as a "message from the great beyond" (*Iron Man 2*), Howard's prerecorded greeting for the Stark Expo of 1974 is not directed

at Tony, but at his audience, once the attendees of the 1974 Expo, now those of 2010. Howard speaks of the future, and the possibilities the future holds for the advent of technologies that will make everyday living better, easier, and more desirable. He tells audiences that "Everything is achievable through technology: Better living, robust health, and for the first time in human history, the possibility of world peace" (*Iron Man 2*). Audiences already know that the technological advancements related to Iron Man have already brought the latter possibility to fruition, but, as Tony says in his introduction of the clip, "It's not about me. It's not about you, either. It's about legacy, the legacy left behind for future generations. It's not about us!" (*Iron Man 2*).

Despite Stark's words, the work of the Stark Expo and the celebration of the corporation are, in fact, about us. Better technology, Howard Stark argues, will result in "No more tedious work, leaving more time for leisure activities and enjoying the sweet life" (*Iron Man 2*). Essentially, technology will remove the need for individual effort or action; everything will be done for us and decided for us. Although Stark's vision of the utopian future presents as speculative, his sentiment is accurate. Indeed, the evolution of media and technology achieved Stark Industries's aim of creating technology that "will affect the way you live your life every day" (*Iron Man 2*). Technology currently affects nearly every action in the world and occupies a privileged position within society. As a result, the teachings of corporate culture reproduce the ideological effects of the culture industry; that is, the lessons of consumerism the Iron Man franchise imparts serve to uphold passive consumption as a desirable way of life.

The messages of passivity are further complicated by the passive nature of film reception. Recall that the cinematographic apparatus serves in the place of viewers' own perception, drawing them in to the diegetic world through the illusion of mastery over their surroundings. Howard's speech, recorded and projected onto the screen at the Expo, is directed at both the cinematic audience and the audience in the theater. Although the

camera angle changes and cuts away from Howard during the video presentation, those shots which do focus on the screen allow for the viewing audience in the theater to be positioned as the audience at the Stark Expo. The single shot of the crowd looking up at Howard in the darkened room equates to that of the audience in the cinema looking up at the projected film image in the darkened theater. The theater audience's alignment with the Expo's audience allows for Stark's messages about "better living through better technology" to hail them as they would the diegetic audience. It can be said, then, that the scene functions as a meta-demonstration of the ideological power of film. The hail into the subject position of consumer, however, does not begin or end with the film. We have already seen how the film creates the incentive to purchase HCI technology, and how the technology of the Iron Man franchise almost effortlessly translates out of the theater and into individuals' homes.

The Iron Man film franchise uses media technology to endorse its corporate sponsors. To promote *Iron Man 2*, Marvel created an interactive website that immediately invites fan participation. On the site, fans can experience the 2010 Expo through photo galleries, downloadable graphics, video messages from sponsors, a message from Tony Stark, and even the presentation of material from the last Stark Expo in 1974, all through a highly interactive and technological apparatus which masks more covert purposes. Although the site primarily promotes the film, it also promotes the film's sponsors. According to the Stark Expo 2010 website, the following corporations sponsor pavilions at the Expo: Dr. Pepper, LG, Reese's, Sega, Burger King, Gameloft, Norton Antivirus, Semir, Oracle, Royal Purple, Audi, 711, and Turk Telecom. These pavilions can be accessed on the bottom of the screen through a graphic which simulates the HCI technology shown in the previous Iron Man film. The Stark Expo site provides visitors with access to the official pages of the sponsors. For example, clicking on the "preview the pavilion" link for Reese's transports visitors to the company's main website. These

live websites are interspersed with faux sites of fake companies and subsidiaries showing at the Expo, which blurs the lines between superhero fiction and quotidian reality. Having a website that promotes the same ideological message as the film ensures that those ideological messages are accessible outside of the movie theater, indeed in the very homes of potential consumers.

By blurring the lines between fiction and reality, as well as theater and home, corporate ideologies invisibly hail the consumer of the contemporary superhero films. Like the transcendental subjects believe the film exists for them alone, consumers of the contemporary superhero (exemplified by Iron Man) confuse the act of consumption with the fantasy of enacting superhero discourse. As a result, the Iron Man character in the sequel functions less as a protagonist and more as his own brand, showing how the superhero figure has been appropriated by corporate media culture in the contemporary moment. According to Adorno, culture is made up of commodities, and, as an industry, it operates as "public relations . . . so that each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisements" (13). The streamlining of product endorsement, advertisement, and narrative through technological apparatuses in *Iron Man 2* interpellates consumers while teaching said consumers that this act originates from their own selfish desires to be the powerful protagonist.

Although Iron Man operates as an American superhero, the focus of his character is not, as with Superman, on the greatness of the American Way. Rather, the nationalistic celebration of country has been replaced by a celebration of the corporation and the masses now praise and support an industry geared towards exploiting them for profit. As I have shown, the danger in the superhero industry is that the media technology masks the ideological messages hidden in the discourse. As media technology continues to evolve and further entrenches itself in our daily lives, the culture industry surrounding the superhero will grow even more and bring in even larger profits. Disney's acquisition of

Marvel in 2009 only serves to support this claim, especially when considering the

massive box office receipts and merchandizing campaign that have resulted from the

purchase. The future of the superhero industry appears bright for those corporations

poised to profit from it, but the industry's ideological effects must not be ignored.

4. The Future of the Superhero Industry

To claim that the superhero film is a significant part of the film industry is not a

stretch. Walker presents the statistic that, from 2005 to 2012, at least one superhero film

was the top film in America for three years, while for four years superhero films

dominated the box office top 10. Furthermore, since 2008 there has been a flood of

superhero films released: Marvel Studios has released six superhero films, Warner

Brothers (for DC) four, and seven more superhero films have been released by other, smaller studios (Box Office). Of all the film studios, Marvel arguably has the widest-reaching brand. Although Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy—*Batman Begins, The Dark Knight Returns, The Dark Knight Rises*—arguably enjoyed the same type of financial success as the Marvel franchise, its success was limited to the Batman character. Marvel's superhero films are each an advertisement for Marvel's superhero universe. Meanwhile, DC released *Green Lantern* in 2011 and another film version of *Superman* film will be released in June 2013. Even so, DC has yet to achieve the kind of cinematic success as impressive as Marvel.

Take for example Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* (2012). This film is the culmination of what Marvel Studios calls "Phase One," and it set unprecedented records at the box office. After worldwide release of only 154 days, the film grossed $1,511,757,910, 58.8% of which was from foreign totals (Box Office). *The Avengers* stands as the highest grossing film of 2012, and the third-largest grossing film of all time, both domestic and worldwide box office receipts; it also set records for "fastest grossing" film (Box Office). Manohla Dargis sees this success as the product of a deliberate corporate attempt to create and market a "super franchise." In making the solo films— *Iron Man* (2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011)—previous to *The Avengers*, Marvel successfully cultivated a demographic market for each film in succession. Iron Man's position as a franchise launcher mimics the character's role as a founding Avenger, but, as we have seen with Superman, the film medium has a wider reach and thus more of an impact on culture.

Recent box office grosses prove that audiences continue to desire superhero films. Indeed, between 2013 and 2016 Marvel will deploy "Phase Two" of its "super franchise" with the release of *Iron Man 3, Thor 2, Captain American 2, The Guardians of the*

Galaxy, and *Avengers 2*. Marvel is also planning "Phase Three" with *Ant-Man* and *Doctor Strange* as recently confirmed titles. With over five thousand characters in Marvel's storehouse alone there are hundreds if not thousands of superhero film possibilities, and DC Comics will not be left behind. It is important to remember that the contemporary superhero moment is defined by its monetary success and is one of—if not the—the most successful film genres today. The powerful interests behind these films do not seek out solely the entertainment of the masses, but rather they seek to shape the mass culture's daily practices. The bottom line is consumption, capital, and profit, hiding behind the mask of American nationalism and patriotism.

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