



Pax in Terra: Superman and the Problem of Power in *Superman Returns* and *Man of Steel*

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Abstract

On the May 19, 2017 episode of *Real Time with Bill Maher*, Maher's attacked the exponential rise in the popularity of superhero films and television shows over the past decade, citing 'superhero culture' as the cause of America's current socio-political apathy, disaffection, and complacency. The host's anti-comics monologue is a recent example of the superhero genre's protracted history of persecution and criticism that reached its zenith in the McCarthy Era, due in large part to Frederick Wertham and his sensationalist text *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). Maher's sarcastic but ultimately erroneous remonstrations overlooked the genre's insightful and historically ongoing engagement with the philosophical tension between the onto-existentialism of being human contra Other and power, which comic book superheroes embody. In order to demonstrate this and counter Maher's reductive reading of the genre, this paper will explore the relationship between comic book superbeings, power, and Otherness to excavate and reassess the multifaceted dynamic between the onto-existentialism of being Other and power, using DC Comics character Superman as a case study. By analysing the character's diegetic power and Otherness as they are represented in Bryan Singer's *Superman Returns* (2006) and Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* (2013), this paper will illustrate how Superman, and comic book superbeings more generally, are inherently onto-existentially antithetical to uninvestigated sociopolitical, cultural, and theroetical/philosophical apathy and/or complacency.

Keywords

Superman, power, otherness, ontology, existentialism

On a recent episode of *Real Time with Bill Maher* which aired on May 19th 2017, Maher attacked the exponential rise in the popularity of superhero films and television shows over the past decade. The host cited the genre as the premier cause of America's current socio-political apathy, disaffection, and complacency. In the show's 'New Rule' segment, Maher predicated his critique of the genre on the assumption that comic book films, television shows, and by extension, superhero comics themselves, encourage a cultural psycho-social dependence on contrived *deus ex machina* solutions for complex global issues and debates. During his ostensibly vitriolic monologue, Maher's polemic referred to the preponderance of superhero films and television shows currently in production as a corrosive contemporary phenomenon, a

[Superhero culture that] promotes the mind-set that we are not masters of our own destiny and the best we can do is sit back and wait for Star Lord and a fucking raccoon to sweep in and save our sorry asses. Forget hard work, government institutions, diplomacy, investments – we just need a hero to rise, so we put out the Bat Signal for one man who can step in and solve all of our problems [...] we need to be our own superheroes. (Maher 2017)

Maher's admonition of the genre and rebuke of its characters and concepts was used as a sarcastic way of indirectly criticizing the current U.S Administration and the nature and spectacle of President Trump's ascension to office. However, the host's anti-comics argument is but a recent example in the superhero genre's protracted history of persecution and criticism that gained its height in the McCarthy Era due in large part to anti-comics crusader Frederick Wertham, and his fraudulent text *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954).

Maher's argument, that there is an inextricable causal relationship between contemporary American socio-political ennui and the rampancy of comic book superheroes represented, sold, and consumed in contemporary Western society, is both an equivocal fallacy and an example of a reductive understanding of the nuances and complexes of the genre and its characters. To assume that the impact of these films, television series, and their characters is inherently negative recycles an ossified, erroneous, and ultimately untimely narrative, one that egregiously sequesters superhero comic book literature, its heterogeneous characters, and its pioneering image-text storytelling techniques to the latently pejorative labels 'low-brow' and/or 'children's literature.' Furthermore, such ill-informed remonstrations overlook the genre's insightful and historically ongoing engagement with the relationship

between the onto-existentialism of being human contra Other and power, a philosophical tension comic book superheroes embody.

In order to excavate and demonstrate this relationship, this paper will use the DC Comics character Superman and the tension between its power, Otherness, and the ideological mediation thereof within the context of a diegetic world that reflects the socio-economic, political and cultural reality of the reader/viewer as a case study. Referring to and performing a close reading of Bryan Singer's 2006 *Superman Returns* and Zack Snyder's 2013 *Man of Steel*, this paper will prosecute a defence of the concept of the comic book superbeing. Analysing the character's diegetic power and Otherness, this paper will argue that the existence of a being like Superman in/on any diegetic world that reflects the socio-political and cultural reality of consumers of the character's narratives, represents a philosophical anticatalyst for sociopolitical and cultural complacency and apathy. Instead, Superman, and comic book superbeings more generally, are deeply engaged with *both* concepts of radical onto-existential staticity *and* change. To be clear, the goal of this paper is not to counter or necessarily refute Maher's observation outright. Instead, this paper hopes to highlight to theoretical paucity of Maher's position, expanding upon its central hypothesis, and through a close reading of two dialogic case study examples of contemporary superhero media concerning the character Superman, offer an alternative perspective regarding the tension between contemporary American sociopolitical ennui and the rampancy of comic book superheroes represented, sold, and consumed in contemporary Western society.

Power and the Cultural Rampancy of the Figure of the Comic Book Superbeing

Maher's polemic regarding the preponderance of superhero films and television shows currently in production as a corrosive contemporary phenomenon is a theme taken up by comics scholar Danny Fingeroth in *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* (2004) (hereon *Superman on the Couch*). Fingeroth's text is part of a tradition of comic book scholarship that attempts to address the recurring question of why comic book superbeings, heroes, and costumed crime-fighters more generally are important to contemporary audiences and readerships. Other notable examples in this tradition include, but are not limited to, Richard Reynolds' *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology (Studies in Popular Culture)* (1994); Peter Coogan's *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (2006); Grant Morrison's *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous*

Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human (2012); Terry Ray Clark's *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture: Theories, Themes, Products and Practices* (2012); and Robin S. Rosenberg's *Superhero Origins: What Makes Superheroes Tick and Why We Care* (2013). Not dissimilarly to Maher, Fingeroth interrogates the questions of why is it that human beings feel compelled to create and recreate a range of narratives brimming with such beings. What is clear is that the effect of characters like Superman is not limited to the lines, colours, speech bubbles, and gutters of the comic book page. Fingeroth rightly points out that comic book superbeings are a staple of the Western mass consciousness, gazetted in popular culture constantly, metaphors and adjectives in modern language noted in terms and phrases such as superman, spider-sense, Hulk out, Caped Crusader, Dark Knight and so on. However, Fingeroth draws attention to an important problem with regard to the difference between the characters portrayed in superhero comics and the readers of those narratives in stating that “clearly, Superman and [its] friends did not beat Hitler, as many times as they may have trounced him in the pages of their magazines. Batman doesn't make us any safer when we walk the late night deserted streets of downtown. Or do we *embody* the Batman within us and take that next step in the darkness because that is what the Caped Crusader would do?” (Fingeroth 19)

In *Superman on the Couch*, Fingeroth raises an important question in asking is such a preoccupation with these [comic book superhero] archetypes healthy for an individual of a society? Is our love of these heroic types an abnegation of our responsibility to confront the problems we face individually and collectively? Are we living in some dream world, unwilling or unable to face up to our real adversaries and stumbling blocks? (Fingeroth 20-1)

In view of the marked differences in effective aptitude in any cursory compassion between say a figure like Superman and the average reader/viewer of the character's adventures, it could very well be argued that the concept of the comic book superbeing represents a pervasive and insidious lack, fear, and need for and of power on the part of the latter in terms of her/his ability to emulate the former's panoply of supra-human abilities used in the confrontation and surmounting of various obstacles. Within the hyperdiegesis of DC Comics' Multiverse, the diegetic earths therein represented, with their robust and sometimes revalued histories, internal logic, structures, gods, sects, villains, and heroes all of which display power in fantastical ways, offer the reader/viewer an aesthetic experience of this type of ostensibly transcendent power. The question at this early point is at what cost? The world of the comic

book page/screen is an escape from the very truth the same page shows: power and powerlessness. Power is what simultaneously attracts and repulses the reader/viewer so that that act of opening the comic becomes an attempt to somehow embody, commune, consume or witness levels of comparatively transcendent power. The closing of the book/screening is also a rejection of power, not necessarily of the power of the so-called hero or so-called villain, but the essentially apocalyptic or reality-altering levels of power depicted therein. The power of the comic book superbeing is as much coveted as it is feared but most importantly, it is the essential element in the interaction between modern readers/viewers and comic book superbeings.

Like Maher, Fingeroth highlights inherent philosophical dangers or problems latent within the concept of the comic book superbeing by asking “do superheroes provide an image of 'friendly-fascism'? Is the very idea that they know when and how to do the right thing inherently instilling a misguided sense of dependence on authority in those who partake of these fantasies? Is a society that idealizes a Superman, one that will fall prey to the myth of an Aryan *Übermensch*?” (Fingeroth 21). The preponderance of comic book superhero narratives in contemporary society could lead to an atrophying of the will to change not only one's self but one's world, a process which requires concerted and consistent effort. The experience of transcendent power through the comic book page/screen only requires the reader's attention, an essentially *aesthetic* experience limited to the page/screen. In order to transform the diegetic experience of transcendent power into an extradiegetic affirmation of said power is a desire complicated by the problem of accessibility to it. While the comics page/screen offers a space wherein which the idea of transcendent power can be experienced, it does not make any guarantees of its potential, its use, or its understanding. In view of the essential difference between comic book superbeing characters and the reader/viewers thereof being based on the onto-existential difference in power, the inspirational and aspirational aspect of the comic book superbeing alters. The reader/viewer begins to question not only his/her own adequacy and the adequacy of their power, but whether Superman, for example, is an inspirational, aspirational, or emulatory figure at all. Instead, the reader asks why are “tales of true human valor [not] enough? “ (Fingeroth 31). The comic book superbeing becomes the marker of lack, one that suggests that the existence and worship/celebration of such “beings make us all feel pitifully inadequate” (Fingeroth 32). Is it because of the tensions produced by this power differential that Fingeroth asks whether “it is easier to read of a superior being from beyond the stars outclassing us than of a guy from down the block

who was just luckier or stronger or smarter?” (Fingeroth 32). Or perhaps is it that “superheroes provide us with super-excuses?” or, furthermore, “do superheroes provide us with a respite from having to be perfect ourselves, even while inspiring us to aspire to greater levels of achievement and good works?” (Fingeroth 21). Does the current saturation, and arguably, over-saturation of the aesthetics and narratives of the comic book superbeing be said to represent a cultural phenomenon whereby audiences abdicate their own sense, pursuit, and valuation of heroism, however defined, to fictional examples sequestered to contemporary entertainment?

I argue that it is the uncanny resemblance Superman, and other comic book characters more generally, has to a human man that creates a subtle albeit pervasive onto-existential impasse that the reader/viewer of said character's adventures must inevitably encounter and navigate. In view of the reader/viewer's diegetic experience of the character's marvellous feats and abilities, “maybe we feel uncomfortable with the idea that we're not living up to our potential, or that someone [or something] else has more potential than we do. Or that they're living up to their potential better than we are to ours?” (Fingeroth 32). While Fingeroth suggests that if something or “someone else isn't really playing on the same field or by the same rules we do...then maybe we don't have to feel so bad about ourselves” (Fingeroth 32). That said, the character in question looks like us and yet is able to do things we are not. It is impossible to not compare human being to superbeing in view of the uncanniness of Superman's body and the power and Otherness thereof. Fingeroth counters such a claim by suggesting that “because Superman is from Krypton...we can't be from Krypton” and as such, have “no need to feel any worse about not being him than one would about not being able to stop a hurricane” (Fingeroth 32). In response, I argue that the process of reading/watching the exploits of comic book superbeings like Superman invites the reader/viewer to not only imagine feats of spectacular individual power but to desire such power as well. While Fingeroth suggests that the discrepancy of power between Superman and the reader/viewer is so vast, it creates a tension between a fatalistic acceptance of one's own power and an abnegation of the pursuit of power, and a deferral of the responsibility of power, I argue that it simultaneously also produces a desire for power in the reader/viewer as well.

In view of this perceived lack of power on the part of the reader/viewer, it therefore does not seem surprising that human beings “seem compelled to keep re-creating the [superbeing] generation after generation” (Fingeroth 19). Being that the socio-political and cultural milieu of the reader/viewer is not utopian or dystopian in any total sense, the desire

and fear of power will always persist in the human imagination and will subsequently manifest in its myths, religions, and ever more importantly, its stories and entertainments, in some form or other. The comic book superbeing is one manifestation of a genealogy of power of the anthropic figure of power. These characters are, amongst other things, markers of what we wish we were or fear we will become and are, in this sense, reflective. They reflect humanity's desire for a mode of being that is powerful and effective, while simultaneously reflecting precisely what we do not have, namely transcendent power (supra-moral power). Regardless of the manner in which these characters are changed to satisfy or at least diegetically reflect the extradiegetic fears, hopes, and desires of a specific zeitgeist – such as Green Lantern/Green Arrow's street level war on drugs in the 1960s-70s, Superman and Wonder Woman's respective battle against fascism and the Axis powers, or Batman's crusade against urban decay in the 1980s, for example – “one would call the superheroes never-say-die attitude the idealized vision we have of ourselves and our society. But in reality, it is the idealized vision the entire world has of itself” (Fingeroth 25). While the idealization the superhero represents is often times moral or the victorious outcome of a moral struggle, the underlying leitmotif of the superheroes' struggle within the history of the genre's aesthetic and narratological engagement therewith is typically portrayed as a clash of powers. Therefore, the essence of the ideal envisaged on superhero comics pages/screens, in Wonder Woman's martial prowess, in the Flash's speed, in Superman's flight, or even in Batman's investigative faculties and prodigious deductive abilities is power: the power to effect change first and foremost, regardless of the reason, moral or otherwise. In the last instance, the recurring concern in terms of the relationship between the concept of the comic book superbeing and the reader/audience is

Can we emerge from the fantasy world they provide and go on to do more or better deeds in our own? Can we emerge from that fantasy world and go about our business, feeling that – at least in corner of our consciousness – revenge has been served, hot and bloody, not cold and reasonable? Can we assimilate the better parts of these heroes' moral codes without incorporating the less attractive parts of their behavior and modes of oppression? (Fingeroth 22)

Superman: Power, Otherness, and Disruptivity

When taken within the context of a diegetic world-reality that reflects the socio-political, cultural, and historical reality of the reader/viewer, there is something inexorably disruptive about Superman. The character's type of disruptivity is as old as humanity's first attempts at setting down its dreams and nightmares of radical power in symbols. Superman is part of a long line of disruptive figures; anthropic superbeings that appear as stock characters or archetypes in myth, legend, religion, and folklore. It is my contention that most, if not all of these figures can be traced through a longstanding genealogy based on or reducible to a single concept: disruptivity. Disruptivity, a character's ability, active or passive, to affect, renegotiate, disturb, create, erase, or illuminate the socio-political and cultural reality in which they appear, is therefore intimately linked to what I can describe loosely as power. I should also add at this early stage that my conception of disruptivity develops across a spectrum whereby the more powerful a character in a diegetic reality, the more her/his/its disruptivity. Furthermore, and without getting too pedantic, but casting a necessary albeit cursory glance, it is also important to note that disruptivity can also manifest in many ways depending on the powers said character possesses, wields, or simply has access to. For example, Bruce Wayne a.k.a Batman's level of disruptivity is predicated on a technological constituent. Without the enterprising inventiveness of Lucius Fox and the solicitousness of Alfred Pennyworth, Batman would be a less powerful, and therefore less of a disruptive force or socio-political and cultural actor within the remit of the character's narrative history and tradition. In contrast, a character like Superman, being, within the borne of the character's narrative history and tradition, photosynthetic, Superman requires no technological constituent to substantiate its power and, by extension, its disruptivity.

The terms power and disruptivity, while not interchangeable, are certainly inextricable. The term power refers to both Superman's passive and active ability to rupture any absolutist summation of the conventionally accepted hierarchies of power and identity deployed in the praxes of disciplining and punishing the body, human and Other alike within, on, or reflected by the diegetic and hyperdiegetic earths of the DC Comics Multiverse. In short, within these aforementioned conceptual and aesthetic spaces, Superman has the power to act in a way that transgresses and subverts the limitations of what is thought humanly possible. Historically, this power is localized in the character's uncanny body which superficially resembles that of a human being. By the term 'uncanny', I am referring to the

psychoanalytical concept of the uncanny (*Unheimliche*) which describes phenomena that elicit a simultaneous and peculiar feeling of familiarity and unfamiliarity in the individual experiencing said phenomena as described in Sigmund Freud's "Das Unheimliche" (1919). While depicted as aesthetically indistinguishable from a human man, Superman is not a *superhuman*, but rather an extraterrestrial. In view of this aesthetico-ontological tension, I choose to refer to Superman as uncanny because the character is both an alien being and a being that is also subject to human value systems, and reflects and enforces human ideological ideals in its behaviour. This is exemplified by the fact that Superman acts as a superhero; that is, a reactive superpowered agent pursuing an human and therefore necessarily ideologically determined agenda of dialectical moral probity, namely championing good against evil, in order to discipline and punish 'reprobates' who actively and consciously transgress the ideologically determined norm. The Maheric assumption, in view of the host's attack of non-anthropocentric characters like Rocket Raccoon, is that based on the seemingly high degree of psycho-physical similitude Superman shares with human beings, Superman is, by comparison, more relatable and latently more dependable in acting in favour of the species it so superficially resembles. However, simply because the character looks like a man, does not mean it is one, onto-existentially speaking or, as Marlon Brando's Jor-El states in Richard Donner's 1978 *Superman*: "Although you have been raised as a human, you are not one of them" (Donner 1978).

Even without taking the diegetically phenomenal extremes of Superman's psycho-physical abilities into account, as an alien, the character is *essentially* Other, beyond, or outside the limits of human being. Being born on the planet Krypton means that Superman's power and body have a fundamentally unfamiliar provenance. This is complicated, however, by the fact that the character is, at least superficially, psycho-physically familiar to human perception and understanding because it appears and behaves like a human man. While Superman's familiarity is reinforced by its keen support of what is typically perceived as at least good, at most American, morality, the incongruous aspects of both the character's own being and the human being it imitates are typically precluded in favour of facile, morally dialectic, and ultimately reductive readings of the character's power and Otherness espoused and reproduced by commentary not unlike Maher's quoted earlier. In response, I choose to describe Superman's resemblance to human being as uncanny because the combination of the character's uncanny body and the power it contains and commands is always-already Other than human: it is always-already unfamiliar to the very same sense of familiarity it appears to

project. While ostensibly reflecting human being, Superman's body can express various types of phenomena or behave in unique ways that disrupt humanity's ability to qualify, quantify, or subsequently tame: even within the character's most outré outings on page or screen, or as part of or the cause of the seemingly inexhaustible history of conceptual and aesthetic eccentricity within its mythos.

Superman, and those that came before the character such as Hercules, Gilgamesh, or Christ, are also marked by Otherness. By the term Otherness, I refer to the fact that Superman is not human. This observation, which perhaps might initially seem trite, is meant to draw attention to the paradoxical ontological and existential aspects of the character's being within the diegetic and hyperdiegetic realities in which it appears. The superbeings of myth, religion, and entertainment in the narratives of various cultures around the world, both ancient and modern, often take their being and origin beyond terrestrial limits or human history, be it in some ethereal realm or the depths of intergalactic space. In this way, these figures are *inherently* transgressive and subversive because the Otherness of their existence challenges and questions anthropocentric value systems, world views, and ideologies as reproduced in the diegetic worlds in which they appear in a way that both overtly and subtly necessitates a reevaluation of the categories of being humanity employs in its self-understanding. For example, in the wake of Superman's arrival on a diegetic earth, life in that universe, as its version of humanity understand it, loses its anthropocentric privilege. Furthermore, the being that disrupts said anthropocentric outlooks is able to do things human beings cannot, thus necessitating a renegotiation or dissolution of the pre-existing sociopolitical and ontological hierarchies of power on that earth.

In response to Maher, my intention thus far has been to refer to and reflect upon what I argue are the radical aspects of Superman's power and Otherness in order to discuss and revise their sociopolitical and philosophical consequences and potentials. I propose that such an approach is important for two main reasons. First, it encourages a type of analysis that, through Superman, recognizes the concept of the comic book superbeing as being a resonant and complex engagement with the radical concepts of utopia and dystopia embedded in the concept of an uncanny and powerful being with power enough to either change or destroy a world, in the last instance. In this way, I argue that the Maher's understanding of the ontological consequences characters like Superman explore, represent, and engage with lacks scope. Second, my approach also acknowledges the fact that throughout their history, comic

book superbeings like Superman are morally and ethically problematic because, under the aegis of human ideology, the character uses its extraterrestrial power to intercede and enforce human values. In doing so, Superman has used its abilities to discipline and punish those individuals whose behaviour transgresses the ideologically determined norm set down in human morality and law. However, this corrective use of its abilities is often conducted in a way that effaces democratic rights including due process and the presumption of innocence, precepts of so-called Truth, Justice and The American Way reproduced and reflected in the diegetic worlds in which the character operates. The fact that this type of justice is enacted by an extraterrestrial being whose abilities allow it to totally bypass all human institutions of power creates the problem of whether to read Superman as an agent of redemption/salvation, or as a superpowered autocrat/invader. As such, Maher's reductive reading of the ethical, moral, and philosophical consequences of superpowered intermediation in human affairs lacks even a basic sensitivity to the conceptual complexity of the character and, by extension, characters like it. In this sense, measured philosophical/theoretical speculation and analysis of the character's narrative, history, and tropes is pivotal in providing a holistic and balanced reading of the concept of the comic book superhero and the ontological, existential, and sociopolitical tensions and potentials embodied by its/their power(s) and Otherness(es). Due to my reading of Superman's nature as inherently turbulent and disruptive, my examination of the character's power and Otherness necessarily gestures beyond the confines of dialectical morality, here understood as the conflict between good and evil, common in the conventional appraisal of the character in order to allow the most radical consequences of its being on a diegetic earth and its relationship with human being, beyond *deus ex machina* constructs, to be given their full scope.

Superman and Disruptivity in *Superman Returns* and *Man Of Steel*: A Close Reading

How does Maher's stance compare to my conceptualization of the disruptivity of comic book superbeings? In order to illustrate precisely what I mean by the term disruptivity and how it functions through Superman within the diegetic worlds that reflect the sociopolitical, cultural, and historical reality of the reader/viewer in which the character appears, I will consider two recent examples. As an uncanny being, the cognitive dissonance that Superman, and by extension comic book superbeings, evoke – the experience of the

paradoxical simultaneity of awe and distrust – can be noted in the recent debate surrounding Zack Snyder's film *Man of Steel* (2013). The contemporary audiences' reaction to the film stands as a particularly revealing example of the effect of Superman's disruptivity. Since the film's release, there have been many outspoken criticisms of the amount of destruction and violence in *Man of Steel*. Notable comics writers and 'spokesmen,' including Mark Waid, Max Landis, and Kevin Smith, have all criticized director Zack Snyder and writer David S. Goyer for the apocalyptic levels of destruction depicted in the film. Reactions from those above and countless others suggest that audiences were and still are simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by Superman's power and Otherness. The issue is pervasive and is still a point of controversy in comic book discourse today. As recently as June 26, 2014, noted comics creator Neal Adams expressed his displeasure at the levels of violence and destruction in Snyder's film. In an interview on Kevin Smith's *Fatman On Batman* podcast episode No. 71, Adams refers to one of the film's penultimate scenes in which Superman (Henry Cavill) snaps the neck of its enemy General Zod (Michael Shannon) as Zod threatens to incinerate a man, woman, and child with its heat vision:

And then at the end, what did he do? He killed a guy. Can't he put his hand over his eyes? I'm just saying...put your hand over his eyes. That would stop it pretty much. One arm is around the throat, put the other hand in front of his eyes. That's pretty much it. Take him off to the moon or Saudi Arabia or someplace, and finish the battle there. (Adams 2014)

Commenting on the displays of cataclysmic damage to infrastructure and the devastating loss of life depicted during the climactic battle between Zod and Superman, Adams reiterates his sense of disapproval and discomfort stating,

But why were they fighting in Metropolis? I don't understand...even [...] the robot movies...Transformers movies, they went to Saudi Arabia to fight. They're knocking down the Sphinx and stuff, but there are not so many people. They're in the middle of nowhere. They could have gone on the moon, but as soon as Superman hits a building, it's going to fall down. Didn't we lose 500 people there? It feels weird. (Adams 2014)

This critique of the character's disruptivity is made all the more exigent because all the portrayals of mass destruction shown in the film are *enabled* by Superman itself. I argue that the critiques of the levels of destruction in the film are somewhat naive because *Man of Steel* is, in many ways, a cautionary tale: be careful what you wish for.

Seven years previous, *Superman Returns* (2006) was met with an acerbic, frustrated disappointment. Director Bryan Singer's effort has been famously mocked for its *lack* of the kind of apocalyptic destruction unique to Superman. In *Sold Out: A Threevning with Kevin Smith* (2008), Smith declared that "*Superman Returns* was fucking boring, man", going on to describe *Superman Returns* as "the art house version of Superman, the whiney, emo Superman movie, where Superman doesn't throw a single fucking punch...you won't believe how fucking boring this [Superman] is. It was fucking astounding to me, I couldn't fucking believe it" (Smith 2008). In radical contrast, Snyder's take on the character emerged five years later and delivered what is fair to describe as an apocalyptic spectacle of desolation and destruction for a modern audience demanding that their superhero films be, as a rule, 'real fictions'.

Superman Returns was predicated on a mixture of director Richard Donner's sensibility and aesthetic in his 1978 film *Superman*, intermingled with an air of overt nostalgia. The film worked or did not, depending on one's view, precisely because it took Superman (Brandon Routh) out of modern conditions. By replacing "realism" with nostalgia, Singer effectively neutralized the *problem* of the Superman's power in *Superman Returns*, *limiting* the character and the threats it faced to nostalgic constructions of heroism and villainy that are as allegorical, symbolic, and dialectical as they are conventional; from Lex Luther (Kevin Spacey) as the megalomaniacal real-estate agent (*Fig. I*); to the malignant island of evil, an inversion of the Fortress of Solitude, that metastasizes like Luthor's (and by extension humankind's) own internecine Will through the earth, threatening to destroy civilization (*Fig. II*); to Superman as the spectacularly austere self-sacrificing messiah offering apoptotic redemption and cure (*Fig. IV*). In *Superman Returns*, the disruptivity of the character's power, body, and Otherness are so always-already symbolic that the reality of Superman's power, power enough to lift an island out of the sea and throw it into space (*Fig. III*), is sublimated into the messianic iconography and symbolism that mediate the character's various 'acts of god.'



Fig. I. Taken from *Superman Returns* (2006).



Fig. II. Taken from *Superman Returns* (2006).

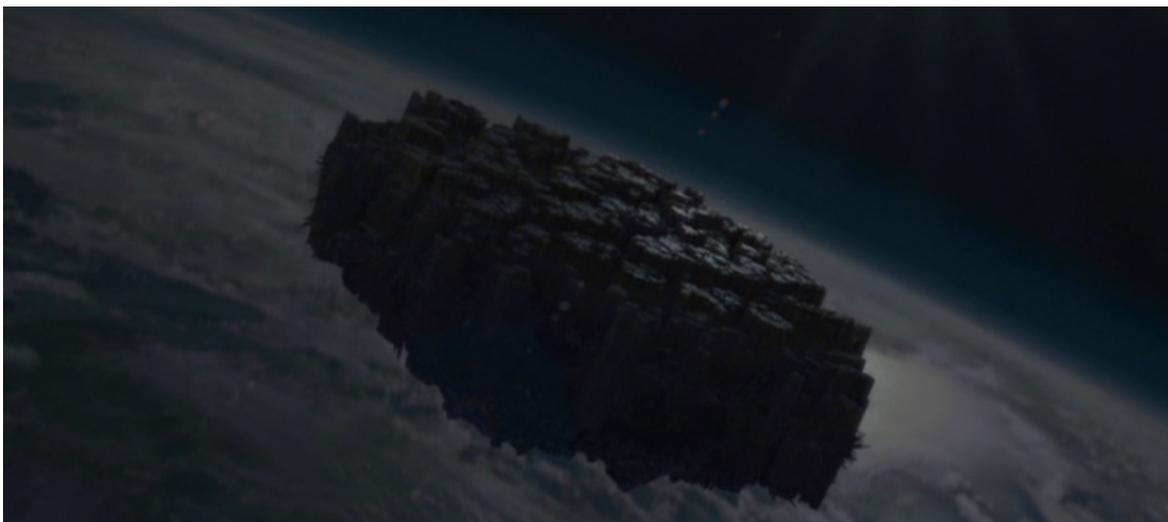


Fig. III. Taken from *Superman Returns* (2006).

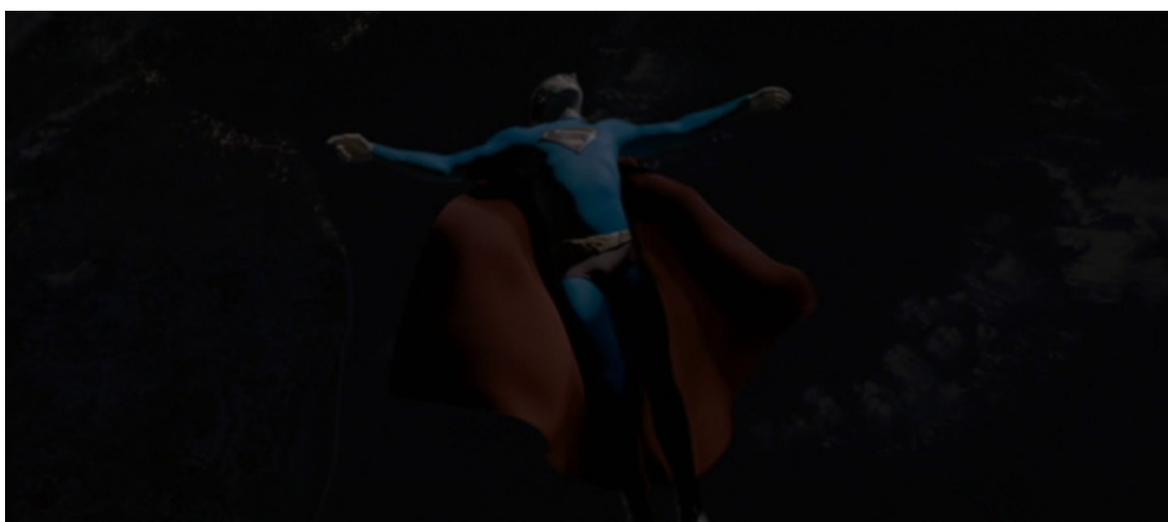


Fig. IV. Taken from *Superman Returns* (2006).

In *Man of Steel*, the audience is shown the opposite. Snyder's take on the character answers that longstanding question of what it would be like if Superman actually existed among us, as it is in its diegetic realities, extradiegetically. The answer, in a word, according to Snyder and Goyer, is *destructive*. While *Superman Returns* offered a nostalgically inflected depiction of the character, Singer's sentimental effort could not anaesthetize the contemporary audiences' interest in the fundamental disruptivity of Superman's ontologicalism. As such, the seemingly jaded and disillusioned audience demanded a realistic depiction of Superman. Though Superman is shown to be deeply conflicted between its human conditioning through the Kents' ethic of denial and suppression contra Jor-El's ethic of striving and overcoming in *Man of Steel*, the reality of the character's power is what

ultimately matters. *This* reality of Superman, one that the audience once eagerly demanded, takes on the horror and monstrosity of realization in *Man of Steel*, whereby the audience is now affronted by a display of the essential disruptivity of the character's power and Otherness that a facile and ameliorative nostalgic frame of reference cannot fully absorb or absolutely annul. As a result, the iconic smile, the salutes and waves, the flag billowing proudly behind the ur-god of the atomic age, left arm akimbo – all the iconography and symbolism that once acted as a protective screen shielding the consumer of the Superman mythos from the truth concerning the disruptivity of the type of being the character represents – is shattered in a spectacle of abiding wrath (*Fig. V, VI, and VII*). I argue that the controversy surrounding the Biblical levels of destruction shown in *Man of Steel* indicates the persistence of a fundamental anxiety about the figure of the comic book superbeing as a god in a cape.



Fig. V. Superman and Zod fight and crash into a Metropolitan skyscraper. Taken from *Man of Steel* (2013).



Fig. VI. Perry White and Jenny Jurwich flee the destruction caused by Superman's battle with Zod. Taken from *Man of Steel* (2013).



Fig. VII. Superman and Lois Lane stand at ground zero of destruction of Metropolis. Taken from *Man of Steel* (2013).

Similarly to Maher's recent upbraiding, Max Landis's Lex Luthor distills the underlying impetus behind this anxiety in the following monologue taken from *Death and Return of Superman Pitch* by Max Landis (2013):

Mark my words, Superman will be the downfall of civilization. He represents the end of human achievement. You wanna know why? Because no human will ever be as good as Superman and that's why he's boring, and that's why he's dangerous. You wanna know why Superman never says anything? Its because he's a 'good guy'? No...its because he's hiding his real motives: to subvert and destroy our society. A messiah figure in the modern era would be the most destructive thing to happen to Metropolis and global culture imaginable. People would stop trying to be better. And I, Lex Luthor, a self-made man, I can't allow that. Our society must reject Superman. (Landis 2013)

Like the dying Sandman of Alex Ross and Mark Waid's masterwork *Kingdom Come* (2005), Landis's Luthor is concerned that "HUMAN INITIATIVE [erodes] the day people [ask] a NEW BREED to face the future FOR them" (Waid 10). Perhaps more directly than the idea of whether or not a superbeing like Superman's disruptivity belittles the idea of human potential and achievement, *Man of Steel* strikingly reminds the viewer what a superbeing, in this case a Kryptonian, is capable of within a diegetic reality that reflects that of the viewer. Snyder's move away from nostalgia toward realism says to the viewer: 'rejoice, or tremble: this being's power remains unavoidable, disruptive, and problematic.' As such, the

viewer is invited to consider the *cost* of reifying a god. More insightfully and penetratingly than Maher's simplistic rejection of superpowered intercession in human affairs, the viewer is made to confront and consider such ideas and their far-reaching philosophical, sociopolitical, and cultural consequences because in Snyder's innings, the succour once provided by Superman – as a concrete symbol of a hopeful and uplifting dream of flying – is shaken to splinters by the fundamentally disruptive effects of its being on an earth. The various reactions to the film and the ongoing debate surrounding it clearly illustrate that many people felt a similar *unease* over the allegedly gratuitous and unnecessary level and portrayal of destruction in *Man of Steel*. It is as if Snyder's film presented a spectacular tract of apocalyptic apostasy against the nostalgic cult of the superhero that contemporary 'high-priests' like Smith and Landis seek to vouchsafe, and deprecators of the superhero industrial complex like Steven Soderbergh, Alejandro Jodorowsky, and Maher seek to tear down. Like Adams, Landis offers a vehement criticism concerning “the way superhero movies have become” in *Regarding Clark* (2013) *Man of Steel* review and discussion, namely, that

at the end of [*Man of Steel*] and allot of these movies, all I'm seeing is fire and death and that confuses the living shit out of me because everybody is going to these movies and they're all making so much money and at the end...a hero stands tall as all of society has crumbles behind him. That isn't a superhero to me, a guy who stands there after everyone else is dead. That's like a rock star. I don't wanna see movies about rock stars. Put the hero back into 'superhero' movies because I think that the 'super' may have taken over. (Landis 2013)

During a presentation at the 2013 Edinburgh Book Festival, Grant Morrison offered a similar, albeit less romantic opinion, stating that the levels of destruction in *Man of Steel*, *the Avengers*, and *Iron Man 3*, to name a few contemporary superhero films, is symptomatic of an Occidental reaction to trauma, specifically, post 9/11 trauma. According to Morrison, the widespread sociopolitical unease propagated in the post 9/11 atmosphere has violently superimposed itself onto the concept of the comic book superbeing and its cinematic expression. As a direct result, superheroes have become tributaries of the military-industrial complexes of the State. Marc DiPaolo's *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film* (2011) and Dan Hassler-Forest's *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age* (2012) note how comic book superbeings have become superpowered apparatuses for homeland security and foreign, and in some cases interplanetary, interstellar, or intergalactic, policy. Morrison suggested that in the midst of the

West's growing fear of itself and its standing in the various spheres of global sociopolitics, its heroes transformed into soldiers. Following Morrison's logic, it can be argued that *Man of Steel* stands as an example of this symptomatic militarization of the comic book superhero, and, in these terms, it is not unreasonable to extrapolate that the post-Nolan "superhero film is to 9/11 what Kaiju films are to Hiroshima" (Morrison 2013). However, I argue that there is a residual idea inherent in all these various criticisms and reviews. What Landis and others are reacting to is an essential truth about the fundamental nature of comic book superbeings: Superman, by its very nature, is insolubly disruptive. While many took exception to the destruction in *Man of Steel*, the destruction itself was, at least theoretically, the most interesting and, I argue, accurate aspect of the film's treatment of the character's power and Otherness. *Man of Steel* suggests that the most realistic outcome of having a being as powerful as Superman on an earth is large-scale disruption that expresses itself in a way that human ideology and its apparatuses cannot ultimately control. The character's disruptivity is exigent whether it is smiling at adoring/fearful masses or breaking buildings in half. Unlike Singer, Snyder and Goyer show that Superman's disruptivity is not nostalgic or quaint, but nuclear or atomic in terms of its affective aptitude.

For writers such as Adams and Landis, it is difficult to entertain the idea that a character whose seemingly inextricable association with humanistic and positivistic ideals such as 'truth', 'hope', and 'justice' is simultaneously a *deus ex perturbationis* – a god of disruption. The vehement response to the destruction depicted in *Man of Steel* interestingly reflects how the various human anxieties concerning omnipotence, divinity, gods, and goddesses, has been reterritorialized, modernized, and reborn in "Superman." In "making it real," Snyder and Goyer offer the audience an explosive insight into a truth about the nature of the comic book superbeings. In the turbulence of a superbeing like Superman's disruptivity, the linkages and apparatuses that afford a species meaning, however flawed and incomplete, are torn open like warm bread. In the inter-diegtics of comic book realities, readers are given an almost farcical buffer for the truth of Superman's disruptivity in the form of a maintained illusion called 'Clark Kent.' In *Man of Steel*, that bespectacled veil is dazzlingly torn asunder: the audience is given the alien, not the "man." The reaction and continuing controversy surrounding *Man of Steel* and its depiction of Superman as an apocalyptically disruptive being illustrates that contemporary audiences are both awed and terrified by this creature: not because of the character's moral excellence or what the character believes, but ultimately because of what the character can do. Snyder's turn reminds the

audience of a simultaneously horrible and exciting truth: Superman's presence on an earth is *never* benign. Said presence always-already carries with it an apocalyptic potential whereby its power leaves diegetic humanity's understanding of ourselves uncertain and not, as Maher implies, securely abdicated to a perfectly altruistic mitigating agent.

Despite Snyder's portrayal of Superman's power and Otherness, generally speaking, the character is, to this day, regarded as a resolute and benevolent defender of the down-trodden and powerless. The character is also seen as an aspirational figure whose heroism, civic-mindedness, and devotion to philosophically contentious concepts like 'truth' and 'justice' are often seen as ideals exemplified in its character and actions worthy of emulation. Whether or not one agrees with this conventional appraisal of Superman, the fact is that many readers/audiences understand the concept of the comic book superbeing in a predominantly dialectical way, that is, as ultimately reducible to categories of either helpful/unhelpful, protective/destructive, or good/evil. While most people would agree with comics scholar Thomas Inge's statement that "comic art is supportive, affirmative, and rejects notions of situational ethics or existential despair," one of the goals of this paper has been to develop a reading of the ways in which the insoluble disruptivity of Superman's power and Otherness *simultaneously* confirm and renege this understanding (Inge 11). I argue that to univocally or uncritically agree is to fall headlong into a conventional understanding of Superman that reduces the disruptivity of the character's power and Otherness to anthropocentrically affirmative apparatuses. The main shortcoming of such a view is that it overlooks a holistic consideration of what Superman's power and Otherness reveal about the various anxieties surrounding human being on earth as it is reflected and reproduced in the diegetic frameworks of the DC Comics Multiverse. These include the question of humanity's perceived privilege of being the only form of intelligent life in the universe and also the preeminent species on the planet they inhabit. Such a consideration reveals that Superman's presence on an earth cannot be viewed through rigid moral abstractions like 'good' and 'evil', but in onto-existential terms that account for the utopian *and* dystopian influence the character's presence exerts on said earth.

In response to Maher, this paper has attempted to illustrate that the onto-existentialism of comic book superbeings is not as simple as being only corrosive to humanity's Will to Power, or only being an anthropic tool of power used or acting on behalf of humanity in order to achieve it. A being of as much disruptivity as Superman on a diegetic earth that reflects

extradiegetic sociopolitical, cultural, and historical reality cannot be understood in purely dialectical terms because the effects of the character's being on said earth have innumerable sociopolitical, scientific, religious, and existential consequences for human beings. For example, whether or not a being like Superman challenges, substitutes, or completely usurps the identities, privileges, and responsibilities of theistic figures of power like Jesus, how the character's presence reframes humanity's understanding of intelligent life and agency in the universe, and the existential limits of human and superbeing on an earth. These consequences all conclude at the same point: Superman's existence is disruptive and invariably forces diegetic humanity to rethink not only its understanding of power and the fact that they are not alone in their universe, but also the systems they use to make each of these aspects of being comprehensible and amenable to them. While controversial and pervasive issues like global financial crises or racism are rarely if ever directly encountered in Superman's adventures, one cannot overlook the fact that the character's mere existence on an earth is as inquisitive as it is disruptive. Superman's existence questions the diegetic aesthetic and narratological reproduction of the human race it encounters, its history, and its potential. Against Maher, I argue that a denizen of one of DC's earths cannot simply sit idle, hope Superman will save them should peril hazard them without asking more fundamental questions concerning what life, value, and human being mean on their earth in the wake of the coming of Superman. In the last instance, the character's power and Otherness affirm that there is a disparity in terms of power between itself and its adoptive race that also questions its systems, laws, ethics, morals, and dogmas, even while seemingly affirming or supporting them. The character's onto-existentialism, its very being, disrupts and therefore problematizes the power and veracity of humanity's most robust intellectual formulations, speculative hypotheses, and scientific laws – from radical ontology, speculative realism, to astrobiology. As such, I conclude that before any critique of Superman, or comic book superbeings like it, be offered to, said critiques must necessarily regard such characters as more than archons of good morality, but also as existential conundrums that disrupts being on diegetic earths that reflect extradiegetic sociopolitical, cultural, and historical realities.

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