GENDER FORUM

An Internet Journal for Gender Studies

Gender and Super Heroes

Edited by
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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. gender forum also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

1 Superhero films are, despite their commercial appeal across the board, often seen as a boys' club. Yet, as the submissions to this issue show, the club is a complex and complicated one filled with ideals so unattainable that not even the titular heroes can fulfil them. This issue of *gender forum* therefore engages not only with superheroes, but primarily with the crises of masculinity negotiated in the superhero films of the past twelve years, starting with *Batman Begins*.

2 Annette Schimmelpfennig's article "Capitalism and Schizophrenia in Gotham City – The Fragile Masculinities of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy*" examines the series' various presentations of masculinity and their dependency on gadgets and 'theatricality'. The success of a man's performance of his masculinity is measured in how convincing he is as either hero or villain and in his exertion of power. Schimmelpfennig thereby argues that the men in the three installments are stereotypes that cater to a heteronormative world view and constantly need to reassure their compulsory heterosexuality and gender affiliation to persist within the society of Gotham. By contrasting the films' protagonist Bruce Wayne and his superhero alter ego Batman with the villains, she concludes that the masculinities are fragile because they strongly depend on money, physical strength and control over other, physically and financially weaker people, otherwise they are not of value for the predominant heterocentric, capitalist community. Furthermore, she observes the subordinate role of femininity in the films which again emphasize the films' focus on the desire for a hypermasculine saviour. Schimmelpfennig consequently stresses that the city (and through it the films themselves) requires an immaculate masculinity that is as good as unattainable and promotes obsolete role models.

3 In "Iron Man as Cyborg: Between Masculinities", Evdokia Stefanopoulou examines the mass proliferation of superhero movies since the turn of the century. The gender issues in superhero movies are often accompanied by the common observation that the vast majority of superheroes are men and the rare presence of women is marked by their placement in a supporting role, thus reproducing a patriarchal ideology. Although this phenomenon can indeed be characterized as an excessive demonstration of masculine power and superheroes can be seen as mythical figures of a technological patriarchy, Stefanopoulou suggests an antithetical reading. Her approach examines the overstated "technological sublime in human form" (Wasielewski 66) as a sort of divergent embodiment of subjectivity containing the notion of the cyborg as described by Donna Harraway. It entails its own blurring of the

ontological boundaries (161), therefore projecting its own existence as a social construction. Deploying this approach, she examines the gender representations in the *Iron Man* trilogy (2008, 2010, 2013) not as demonstration of patriarchal power, but as masculinity in crisis, a masculinity undermined by its excessive technological look and its status as a constructed fabrication. A close analysis of the three texts and a special focus on gender representations will demonstrate how the technological subjectivity of Iron Man and the ironic performance by Robert Downey Jr. actually undermines the surface super-masculinity of the character.

4   Yen-Lian Liu writes about "The Masculine Masquerade of Superheroes in *Watchmen*". He proposes that the image of many American male superheroes is represented as 'phallic' in their costumes. Even though it is a long-term reality that the representation of superheroes often connotes an ideally mythic but essentially un-realizable embodiment of men, such a costuming more often than not involves, as Harry Brod sees it, a process of men's conscious self-masquerade. How well, or how falsely, do male characters accommodate themselves to their masculine costuming as superheroes? How does this costumed heroism affect men's lives, both in public and in private? *Watchmen* examines this relationship with regard to the metaphorical representations of the bodily images of men and their associations with justice and masculinity. If the actualization of superheroes in the reality of *Watchmen* debunks heroism itself, then the graphic representations of those male superheroes' masculine but masked bodies also belie an apotheosizing but simultaneously dehumanizing dimension through such a male masquerade. By juxtaposing the different representations and embodiments of male superheroes in *Watchmen*, the article focuses on how men's negotiations between a performative identity and an unmasked selfhood are relentlessly exposed and problematized. Accordingly, the artificiality of men's masculine images is not only highlighted in the graphic representations of *Watchmen* but also subversive to the conventional notions of super-heroic male embodiments.

5   The issue's final contribution is Nicole M. Rizzuto's review of Kristen Hogan's 2016 book *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability,* published by Duke University Press.

Capitalism and Schizophrenia in Gotham City – The Fragile Masculinities of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy*

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Abstract

My article examines the various presentations of masculinity in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy* and their dependency on gadgets and theatricality. The success of a man's performance of his masculinity is measured in how convincing he is as either hero or villain and in his exertion of power. I argue thereby that the men appearing in the three installments are stereotypes that cater to a heteronormative world view and constantly need to reassure their sexuality and gender affiliation to persist within the society of Gotham. By contrasting the films' protagonist Bruce Wayne and his superhero alter ego Batman with the villains, I conclude that the masculinities are fragile because they strongly depend on money, physical strength and control over other, physically and financially weaker people, otherwise they are not of value for the predominant heterocentric, capitalist community. I thus want to stress that the city (and through it the films themselves) requires an immaculate masculinity that is as good as unattainable and promotes obsolete role models. Furthermore, I will point out the subordinate role of femininity in the films which again emphasize the films' focus on the desire for a hypermasculine saviour.

1   When *Batman Begins* was released in 2005, critics praised Nolan's adaptation for its gritty realism and departure from Joel Schumacher's campy vision of the superhero who was originally created by Bob Kane in 1939[1]. With villains who are more terrorists than troublemakers and a direct connection between capitalism and crusade, it is striking how Nolan's hero may be progressive concerning comic book verisimilitude but languishing with regard to its presentation of masculinity and femininity. This Batman (Christian Bale), it appears, may be post-9/11 but he is far from post-gender. Although *The Dark Knight Trilogy* presents diverse masculine characters (as far as a predominantly white male cast can be considered diverse), all of them end up being stereotypes that cater to a mainly hetero- and phallocentric perspective. This may not come as a surprise, as portrayals of gender roles and gendered bodies in mainstream media, popular culture, and comics especially are often exaggerated[2] but they are nevertheless an important factor as they can shape and influence the continuation of gender stereotypes because people - children and teenagers in particular - look up to these characters as role models (cf. M 37). There might be different ideas to express

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[1] In his *Guardian*-review, Peter Bradshaw calls the work of Nolan-predecessor Schumacher "errors of taste" and *Batman Begins* a "big, bold and […] dark film" (Bradshaw 2005).
[2] One might think here of the way the bodies of superheroes such as Superman, Wonder Woman and likewise Batman are drawn, ususally with a costume that highlights their muscles but also their primary and secondary sexual characteristics.

your masculinity, the trilogy tells us, but the only successful one is that of the "billionaire playboy philanthropist"[3] who has the means and the money to be a part-time superhero.

2 However, even this hardly attainable concept of masculinity is inherently fragile, as it has no value on its own[4]: it only works in contrast with other, seemingly inferior types of men. Without the supervillains, the superhero is just an entrepreneur and they in turn are only criminals. Furthermore, whether they are good or bad, the male characters presented in the three films of the series rely heavily on gadgets to exaggerate their masculinity and thus depend heavily on the capitalist structures of Gotham to avoid losing their meaning[5] in the city's gender regime, as will be discussed in the following. In order to provide a theoretical background for the analysis of masculinity in the *Dark Knight Trilogy*, a short overview of cultural constructs of masculinity will be given and applied to the men of Gotham before the character of Bruce Wayne / Batman will be further examined and compared to the villains he has to defeat. The three main female characters, Rachel Dawes (Katie Holmes, in the second installment replaced by Maggie Gyllenhaal), Selina Kyle / Catwoman (Anne Hathaway) and Miranda Tate / Talia Al Ghul (Marion Cotillard) will be partially included into the analysis, however, as the female characters are flat throughout, the main focus will remain on the various male characters because they are, I argue, still stereotypes yet far more developed than the female ones. The aim of this article is it to show that masculinity in Nolan's *Batman*-films is never a stable entity but it has to be reconstructed and embellished over and over again in order to remain in contention for the male omnipotence the city promotes as its ideal. At the same time, it will be examined how every kind of masculinity, at least in the films, needs an opponent that reveals its flaws and demonstrates where the male performance is insufficient. Without this adversary, the masculinities remain empty and without purpose, they are so fragile that they are always in danger of not being masculine (and thus socially accepted) enough. It will thus be demonstrated how contradictory Gotham's paradigmatic masculinities are.

Manners (and Bodies) Maketh Man

3 Gender as a social construct is perceived through two influencing factors: the way one looks and the way one acts. The outer appearance and the behaviour determine, due to the

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[3] This is how Tony Stark / Iron Man describes himself in the first *Avengers* instalment.

[4] According to Karl Marx's "law of value", value is measured in the amount of human labour necessary to produce a commodity. Gotham, in a metaphorical sense, produces masculinities but they are only of value when they contribute to the economic prosperity of the city and nothing else.

[5] Losing their meaning, i.e. their gendered purpose as controllers of the city would render them obsolete, the city would come dangerously close to losing its favoured heterocentric order.

conventions of society, whether someone is regarded as more or less masculine. Typical masculine behaviour patterns are, for example, "endurance, strength, and competitive spirit" (Wharton 75). Furthermore, Schrock and Schwalbe assert that a decisive factor in establishing masculinity is the ability to exert or resist control (cf. 280). This is an important observation concerning *The Dark Knight Trilogy*, as one of the key conflicts in the series is the question of who is in control of the city, the law or the criminals. The fight for the city appears to be a constant competition between Batman and the villains and strongly depends on physical as well as mental strength. Since both the superhero and the villains in the trilogy are almost all male [6], the films focus strongly on masculine agency. A popular means, especially in superhero films, to express this masculine agency is through the body:

> Men's bodies have long been symbols of masculinity […]. They reveal (or at least they signify), manhood's power, strength, and self-control. […]. Maybe it's no longer through doing hard work but by working out, and maybe now its chemically or surgically enhanced, but still men believe the title of that feminist health classic: Our bodies are ourselves. (Kimmel 224)

The coding of the superhero- and villain-body ergo follows a simple pattern: a ripped body means physical strength, a nonathletic body mental one; but the body is always the preferred instrument to exercise control over others as long as its owner is in control of it himself. Furthermore, the male body in comics and their adaptations is perceived as even more masculine the more it is marked from previous fights and traumatic experiences. Scars and prostheses are visible markers of a turbulent, character-forming past and the men of Gotham present their scars proudly. Scars are not markers of a loss control, quite the opposite; they signify that the man is able to regain control even under life-threatening circumstances.

4 Yet, not only behaviour and appearance are significant aspects regarding the construction of masculinity, but also sexual orientation, most notably heterosexuality, as it is "a key component of hegemonic masculinity" (Wharton 212) and "[h]egemonic versions of masculinity [in turn] are closely tied into capitalist values of rationality, calculation and self-interest […]" (Holmes 58). This observation fits in seamlessly with the portrayal of the men in Gotham City. Securing the city means acting in self-interest because it guarantees acknowledgement from the community and the possible acquisition of a heroic status. Attacking the city is also a deed of self-interest as it means subjugating it to the villain's own moral principles. In this context it is striking that the majority of the men in the city are portrayed as visibly heterosexual, they have families or date partners of the opposite sex.

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[6] Although Miranda Tate / Talia al Ghul can generally be considered a villain because she fakes her own identity to harm Bruce Wayne, Wayne Enterprises and eventually the whole city, I argue that her actions are motivated by the death of her father and he thus remains the mastermind behind the crimes.

Minorities are invisible; the heteronormative community of Gotham is no space for queer characters which becomes – as will be explained later on – obvious when the Joker appears. Gotham's capitalist society favours heteronormativity because, in their opinion, it is only through the subjugation of minorities (women, queer men, men suffering from mental illness) that the hegemonic masculinity can survive. The hegemonic masculinity, in turn, is decisive because, again according to the Gothamites, it guarantees the reproduction of men who can secure the city with their economic potency. Capitalism is therefore the predominat domain of the "modern White Men" (Deleuze and Guattari 182)

5   Just like gender, the roles the men in Nolan's batuniverse[7] assume are socially constructed as well. Scientists, lacking physical strength to control people, resort to their research to do so. The rich heir has to save the city because he can afford to do so and the mercenary is expected to serve as a soldier. All these kinds of different masculinities presented in the films are grounded in power and control and have a strong tendency to theatrical appearances. The better the men perform their assigned role of masculinity, the more they will succeed.

Bruce Wayne, the Capitalist Crusader

6   The Waynes are first introduced as the ultimate picture-book family. Thomas Wayne (Linus Roache) is a self-made billionaire, the owner of Wayne Enterprises and a philanthropist who has financed a cheap transport system to make the city accessible to the poor. His wife Martha (Sara Stewart) is the beautiful loving partner by his side who shares with her husband an exquisite taste in luxury goods and opera. Like most happy families in comics and comic adaptations, they are not meant to last forever. The superhero needs to experience a trauma that changes his / her world view and motivates him / her to fight evil. Young Bruce Wayne (Gus Lewis) suffers two of them: the fall into a well which is inhabited by a pack of bats, the literal bat cave, and the murder of his parents by a thug outside the opera. As "almost all anthropologists and ethnographers agree that masculinity appears transculturally as something to be acquired, achieved, initiated into – a process often involving painful or even mutilating rituals […]" (Solomon-Godeau 71), Bruce's fall and his parents' death can be seen as his first step into manhood. Bruce is no longer the son that is cared for but the sole heir of a corporation and longs for a proper, more heroic male role.

7   With the loss of his parents, the only male guidance in his life is provided by the family's butler Alfred (Michael Cain). Alfred may be a *fatherly* figure due to his age and

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[7] Batverse is the term commonly used to describe the comic universe in which the *Batman* stories take place.

knowing Bruce since birth but he is no *father* figure[8] which might explain why the grown-up Bruce becomes very interested in Ra's al Ghul (Liam Neeson), "a man greatly feared by the criminal underworld" (4:04). Al Ghul appears to fill Bruce's idea of heroic masculinity that his father left empty after his death. He teaches him that "theatricality and deception are powerful agents" (17:23), something his alter ego Batman internalises, and muses "you must become more than just a man in the mind of your opponent" (17:28). As Bruce cannot avenge his parents' death[9], and thus 'man up', he needs to find another way to properly learn how to fight crime. The exclusively male school of the League of Shadows seems to be the perfect place to accomplish this task, as it offers to turn men, and men only, into legends. Justice, the audience is taught, is, of course, a male prerogative. However, this fight for justice follows a dangerous agenda, as Bruce realises that the League of Shadows is nothing but a terrorist organisation that aims to destroy Gotham, the modern day Rome or Constantinople, a cesspool of immorality and criminality, and Bruce's hometown. Gotham becomes a metaphor for his parents and as their son (and a son of the city), Bruce needs to rectify what he could not do for them and he ultimately destroys the school.

8   This raises the question behind Bruce's true motivation: does he become Batman because he really wants to aid others and fight crime or does he only do it to compensate for his own traumas and prove to himself that he can be "man enough" to prevent crimes from happening? His choice of superhero gear points in the direction of the latter. As the epitome of the capitalist consumer, Bruce compensates the loss of his family with expensive investments in military equipment that Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), researcher at Wayne Enterprises and friend of Thomas Wayne, acquires and enhances for him, most notably the Batmobile, a stylised tank. Fox also helps to improve the Batsuit, a uniform which was originally meant to protect soldiers but deemed too expensive to go into mass production. This is an important issue because it emphasises what distinguishes Bruce from other men: money. Bruce can be a superhero because due to his inheritance he can afford to be one. The Batsuit is therefore not simply armour, it is also a display of hypermale financial potency. Its design reflects the theatricality[10] as demanded by al Ghul but it is also modeled after a

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[8] This may be attributed to the fact that Alfred as a butler rates low in the prestige-obsessed ranking of Gotham. The butler is not as financially potent as the industrialist, hence he cannot be a father to the heir.

[9] Chill (Richard Brake), the men who murdered them, is shot by a woman from the cartel of mobster boss Falcone (Tom Wilkinson).

[10] The term "theatricality" is frequently used in all three movies, however, in a derogatory context which has barely anything to do with dramatic performance in a theatre. What they actually mean is hiding one's true identity through the use of special effects and masquerading. It is interesting, still, to see how the notion of "theatricality" changes within the three films. In the beginning, it has a positive connotation as it is described as something desirable by Ra's al Ghul because the members of the League of Shadows use it to distract their

muscular, and thus highly masculine, male body. Furthermore, it can be understood as a "body without organs" (Deleuze and Guattari 4), a symbolic corpus that carries meaning; it is a walking metaphor for the overcoming of trauma and at the same time a visualisation of emotional scars. As the "body without organs" is "desire [,] it is that which one desires and by which one desires" (Deleuze and Guattari 165), it is visually appealing and modeled after the perfect male body, complete with defined abs. The Batsuit may hide Bruce's true identity, yet at the same time it emphasises his masculinity. The choice of gear is therefore extremely self-serving not only for Bruce's protection, but also his ego. He cannot simply fight crime as an everyman, such as Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman), he needs to turn himself into a symbolic überman because, as he puts it, "as a symbol, [he] can be incorruptible, [he] can be everlasting" (40:33). For a man who has everything a man in Gotham can desire, becoming an abstract symbol is the only possible enhancement left.

9   Another way to emphasise his omnipotence is by demonstrating his heterosexuality. Bruce learns early on that his inheritance makes him powerful and grants him control, however it cannot buy him the love of his childhood friend Rachel (Katie Holmes). Rachel's rejection represents a significant loss of control and therefore a loss of masculinity. In order to reestablish it, Bruce asks Alfred what "somebody like [him]" does to which he replies "drive sports cars, date movie stars, buy things that are not for sale" (1:04:39). Following this logic, Bruce has already reached peak masculinity by being an attractive, rich bachelor. There is a special behavioural pattern reserved for this type of man. Consequently, Bruce does his best James Bond-impression, flirts with his own secretary and turns up to an appointment with not one but two ladies in a sports car. When the ladies bathe in the restaurant pool and the waiter threatens to throw them out, Bruce simply buys the whole hotel. "A man often demonstrates his masculinity by wielding power" (Lips 14) and Bruce again does so by demonstrating his superior financial situation. Still, this triumph is only temporary, as Rachel witnesses the scene and although Bruce desperately tells her "Inside I am more" (1:08:01), she leaves in disgust when Bruce's escorts drive up and cheerily proclaim "Bruce, we have some more hotels for you to buy" (1:08:01). In *The Dark Knight*, Bruce continues this strategy and shows up with a prima ballerina from the Moscow Ballet at a fancy restaurant where Rachel has dinner with Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart). When Harvey remarks that it took him three weeks to get reservations there, Bruce smugly mentions that he owns the place (18:57), a remark intended to weaken Dent's masculinity as it reveals his financial inferiority. It appears as if Bruce frequently needs to reassure his own straightness, which is denied by Rachel, the ideal

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enemies. However, the citizens of Gotham use "theatricality" derogatory to emphasise how inauthentic and staged Batman's appearance is.

partner who could establish his masculinity in the heteronormative society. Yet she threatens said straightness when she chooses Dent, by showing up to events with either several or particularly desirable women. Since neither his body nor his money impress her, he needs to prove to himself (and on a larger scale the society of Gotham) that it is not him that is the problem because other women surely are interested. As he cannot control her, and she is the only woman he cannot get, the narrative needs her to die. Similarly, when in the final battle between Batman and Ra's al Ghul the latter says that Bruce is "just an ordinary man in a cape" (1:57:58), this is the biggest possible insult for a man who aims to be a symbol and Batman lets him die in the wreck of his father's train. Bruce's masculinity is fragile because it is highly dependent on vanity and financial means. Although Alfred warns him "you're getting lost in this monster of yours" (1:35:43), Bruce's onset of megalomania becomes even more obvious when he confronts the corrupt cop Flass (Mark Boone Junior) who defends himself with "I swear to God" to which Batman replies "swear to me!" (1:11:59) and he proudly exclaims in *The Dark Knight* that "Batman has no limits!" (13:09), a fatal misjudgement, as both the Joker (Heath Ledger) and Bane (Tom Hardy) will show him. For Bruce Wayne, masculinity comes at a high financial but also physical and societal cost. When he is shown at the end of *The Dark Knight Rises* living anonymously with Selina Kyle, it becomes clear that he cannot be both a symbol and a playboy billionaire philanthropist. The symbol is an abstract entity, much like the signified in a structural sense, whereas the wealthy playboy depends strongly on materialism and is therefore favoured by the capitalist structures of the city. A successful masculinity, at least in Gotham, cannot be an omnipotent, an omnipresent, masculinity, which is why he has to let go of the control over his hometown.

Mad Mind over Body: Dr. Jonathan Crane

10   The first, and only recurring, villain in the trilogy is Dr. Jonathan Crane (Cillian Murphy), head psychiatrist at the Arkham Asylum who also operates under the alter ego "Scarecrow" due to his preferred gadget of imitation. This gadget is necessary because he always runs the risk of not being taken seriously. Crane is no physical threat as opposed to Bane, who breaks both Batman's back and spirit, and he is less creative than the Joker. Still, he is a threat because of his schizophrenic personality, best reflected in the scene when Batman wants to know who he is working for and calls him "Crane" to which Crane replies "Dr. Crane isn't here right now. But if you'd like to make an appointment…" (1:25:17). For Crane, and also for Gotham, mental illness is a tool to support the capitalist structures of the city. Manipulating others into bouts of schizophrenic behaviour creates a climate of anxiety

and violence and violence, in turn, increases production (Deleuze and Guattari 447). Furthermore, unlike Bruce and later on Harvey Dent, he is also completely immune to the charms of childhood-sweetheart-turned-reporter Rachel Dawes, mainly because she implies early on that he is corrupt. Crane's one true love is medicine, even though he has no interest in healing but only in hurting people. His purpose in the structures of Gotham is to be an example of straightforward thinking masculine sobriety that cannot be distracted by feminine allures and instead focuses on increasing the capitalist value of the city by supplying the corrupt and the underworld with mind-altering substances. He researches a psychosis-inducing drug and, like a true academic, needs funding for his project which he receives from Bruce's former mentor Al Ghul. He is only in control of others because of the drug, therefore he is, in comparison to the other villains, less powerful because he strongly depends on Al Ghul's money.

11 Crane's attitude and also his represented idea of masculinity, namely that of a man who exerts control with his brain and not his muscles, are revealed in another encounter with Rachel, when Crane tells her "I respect the mind's power over the body. It's why I do what I do" (1:21:42) and he behaves accordingly. The physical work is done by Falcone's thugs, it is Crane's task to supervise Al Ghul's orders, in this case to poison Gotham's water system with the drug. Yet Crane is, for a villain, unusually self-aware when he tells Falcone "I am more than aware that you are not intimidated by me, Mr. Falcone" (45:20); Falcone is only scared of Crane when he learns that he is working for somebody else, namely Ra's al Ghul, which means that Falcone is not in control of the situation. Falcone assumes that he, as a ruthless mob boss, can intimidate the scientist by blackmailing him but Crane is clever and uses his "Scarecrow"-mask on him which turns Falcone into yet another insane inmate. Still, it is striking how throughout *Batman Begins*, Crane is treated more like a nuisance than a proper villain and he only becomes a threat when it dawns on Batman that he is doing business with his former mentor. Crow thus needs to borrow Al Ghul's money and his muscle power (in the form of various delinquents working for Al Ghul) to oppose Batman. Considering that Ra's Al Ghul teaches Bruce early on how to produce a hallucinatory drug from a dried flower which triggers fear within the unconscious, it takes him a surprisingly long time to see the connection between Al Ghul and Crane. When Crane and Batman finally meet, Crane tells him "you look like a man who takes himself too seriously" (1:15:04), a burning insult for the ego underneath the Batsuit and an allusion to the Joker's catchphrase "why so serious?".

12 However, although both Crane and Bruce appear to embody two completely different ideas of masculinity, they both share an affinity for theatricality. Both men use their masks to

intimidate people and to enhance their performance of a man in control. But Crane cannot keep up with Batman's high level of theatricality and thus suffers the ultimate punishment for a man, he is defeated by a woman, namely Rachel who shoots him off a horse with a taser. Crane has a short moment of masculine redemption when he ultimately assumes the role of a judge at the mock-court in *The Dark Knight Rises*, in true theatrical fashion with scarecrow-like straw sticking out from his suit. He is immediately perceived as more masculine because he is, for the moment, in a powerful position and has control over others again. Nevertheless, his masculinity remains fragile as it again depends on another, more powerful man, namely Bane.

Why So Heteronormative? The Joker

13   The Joker is one of the most interesting villains in the batverse for two reasons: he is anti-capitalist as he has no deeper, economic motivation for his crimes other than the pure joy of causing mayhem and he is the closest *The Dark Knight Trilogy* comes to featuring a queer character. Although the Joker never comments on his sexuality, his appearance and his mannerisms strongly depart from the heterosexual norm the city so strongly favours. He is introduced through the dialogue of two robbers, "Happy" and "Dopey", wearing clown masks who seem to be only partially familiar with him:

> Happy: "So why do they call him the Joker?"
> Dopey: "I heard he wears makeup."
> Happy: "Makeup?"
> Dopey: "Yeah, to scare people. You know, war paint." (2:03)

The makeup cannot simply be makeup in a feminine sense, which is why the other guy corrects this deviation from heteronormativity and adds that it looks like warpaint, a typical masculine gadget used to intimidate the opponent. After robbing the "mob bank", which wrongfully seems to establish the Joker as another character with capitalist motivations, he infiltrates a meeting of exclusively male mobsters. Although in the batverse of the comics the Joker is only one of various dazzling personalities, in Nolan's version he sticks out like a sore thumb due to his extravagant clothes and unkempt appearance. The mobsters may not be friendly with each other but they immediately gang up against the one deriving from the gangster norm. When one of them interrupts the Joker with "enough from the clown" (24:35), the Joker's strategy becomes obvious. He needs to be even more criminal, more dangerous than the others to be taken seriously. The Joker seems to use the slightly androgynous style to be underestimated on purpose. The less masculine he appears, the stronger is his surprise effect and in a world where law and crime are almost exclusively male-represented and only

the watchdogs are female, behaving neither distinctly male or female can, allegedly, only be an advantage.

14   However, the Joker is less complex as he appears because his narrative is extremely constructed or, as Vilja Johnsons describes it, "his identity is empty, as his story of origin constantly shifts" (Johnson 964). He frequently reinvents the cause of his scars[11] but always with the same intention – to arouse pity. In this way, the Joker's narrative is "a fairly pointed mockery of the need for back-stories for villains in the first place, the easy psychoanalysis that reduces every choice to an after-effect of some early trauma" (Tyree 31). It also severely mocks Bruce Wayne, as everything the Batman represents is rooted in trauma. The Joker has no financial desire, as becomes clear when he burns a pile of money, he seeks to disrupt the moral principle of the people, or as Alfred characterises these kinds of villain, "some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money .[…]. some men just wanna watch the world burn" (52:58). In the capitalist world of Gotham, men who are not interested in money attract negative attention, they cannot be controlled and deliberately evade the heteronormative order. The Joker says that he wants to show the mob and the police, both epitomes of masculinity, "how pathetic their attempts to control things really are" (1:44:24) and when masculinity is all about control, the Joker dares to be queer in order to challenge it. Although his appearance is sometimes likened to that of a flamboyant dandy (cf. Barounis 310), a role although ambiguous still commonly associated with masculinity, his queerness becomes most obvious when he invades the hospital where Harvey Dent receives treatment dressed in a nurse outfit. The Joker reaches his goal, gaining access to Dent, by posing in drag. It is in the eyes of the hypermasculine male community the craziest thing a villain can do. Dressed as a woman, the Joker even manages to manipulate Dent into seeking revenge for Rachel's death. In Dent, the Joker has found an easy victim because he is now like him, disfigured, physically imperfect to a point of unattractiveness and therefore less masculine. This exploitation of hurt masculinity becomes also obvious during his crime spree where he surrounds himself with men, and again men only, who suffer from mental illness and are therefore othered just like him because they are not strong, not masculine enough. His henchmen tend to react hysterically when caught, a mode of behaviour which is still commonly recognised as a female malaise, and so fits their portrayal as weak, less manly men. As Deleuze and Guattari define "[m]adness [as] a definite danger" (188), and hysteria has been labeled as a kind of madness, these men are the perfect companions for the Joker.

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[11] Once he says that his father was a drinker who slit the corners of his boy's mouth and asked "why so serious?" (29:11), another time he gave them himself after his gambling wife was disfigured by a mob (49:12).

15   Also contributing to his queerness is the Joker's love story-pastiche. Repeatedly, he plays upon clichéd presentations of heterosexual relationships and turns them into homosexual innuendos, particularly involving Batman. At the beginning of *The Dark Knight Rises*, various Batman imposters, complete with cheap Batsuit-imitations, roam the city and long to be heroes just like their role model. The Joker abducts one of them, records a video message with him and when the police find the dead hostage, he is still wearing his Batman costume but his face is covered in the Joker's make-up. This can be read as a metaphor of homosexual unity, a love-child of both men. The Joker thus tries to queer Batman by pairing him with a man, namely himself, instead of a woman, something the heterocentric order of Gotham strictly denies. When the Joker lets himself get caught on purpose, the Joker's aggressive flirting continues. He tells Batman "you complete me" (1:24:40) and purrs "to them [the police], you're just a freak. Like me" (1:24:52). The Joker threatens Batman's heterosexual masculinity when he says that they are alike which results in Batman grabbing him by the collar and beating him around the cell. As the police men watching want to interfere, Commissioner Gordon prohibits them from doing so and remarks about Batman "he's in control" (1:25:39). Gordon thus confirms Batman's heterosexual power and debilitates possible homosexual connotations. Through his mannerisms, the Joker makes himself appear sexually submissive on purpose. During their final fight on a skyscraper, the Joker almost falls to his death but Batman, again, catches him by his collar. The Joker muses "I think you and I are destined to do this forever" (2:08:40), again hinting at the romantic aspect of the relationship between hero and criminal which is later on turned into reality when Batman and Catwoman become lovers. But Batman as the hero is not enough of a heterosexual man to resist the Joker's advances and he knows that deviating from the order must be punished. The Joker initially challenges the morals of the Gothamites in several aspects. He asks what is socially acceptable, both with regard to conscientious conduct and expression of masculinity. Ultimately, he fails in both areas, he cannot corrupt the people and they do not allow deviation from the prescribed heterosexual, and capitalist, norm which is why he is jailed.

Two-Faced: Harvey Dent

16   Unlike the other male adversaries, Harvey Dent is not initially a villain, just a competitor which may be even worse because Bruce can neither persecute nor punish him. As "[m]asculinity is usually defined in terms of a particular heterosexual aggressiveness" (Holmes 58), by competing for the love of Rachel both Bruce and Dent try to validate their

own masculinity. But Dent has a decisive advantage: as an upright District Attorney, he is called "Gotham's white knight" (17:09) by Jim Gordon and so immediately opposed to Batman as the dark knight. Therefore he does not have to create an alter ego, he can openly assume the role of the savior of the city and free it from the corrupt and criminal. Furthermore, Dent has a clear understanding of what it means to be a man in Gotham City: "You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain" (20:10), a phrase Batman repeats towards the end (2:16:17), only to add that he is "not a hero, not like Dent" (2:16:27). But not even Dent can fulfill the ideal of the white knight, as it becomes clear after his lover Rachel is killed by the Joker and he is left with half of his face burned:

> Dent represents humanity as innocent and good, but this is a false representation. Dent – and humanity – is guilty and evil. Batman's symbolic turning of Dent's head, concealing his true nature and perpetuating the veneer of his goodness and innocence, is simultaneously the suppression of the truth about humanity and the revelation of Batman as an anti-Christ figure. (Bott 245)

Hailing Dent as a hero is an 'alternative fact', as he is not the one who saved the city. However, it seems to be significant that he assumes this role. Dent cannot simply be a moral man, he needs to be more, a hero that can be worshiped. If the public learned that Dent failed, the whole ideal of the white knight, and with it an important concept of masculinity, would be at stake and therefore the truth needs to be bent. Like all men in the trilogy, Dent experiences a significant loss of control and this manifests itself in his habit of throwing a coin to make a decision. To come to a decision himself would mean that he consciously takes responsibility for his actions, throwing the coin means he does not. Dent cannot be a hero who saves his girlfriend so he becomes a villain who avenges her. Before Rachel's death, Dent refrained completely from theatricality because he did not need it. With her by his side, he had everything that his rival Bruce desired while showing him that money cannot buy everything. Once she is dead, Dent parades his scarred face as a reminder of the pain he has suffered. His masculinity has lost its purpose, namely to protect her and the city in general, his eigenwert as the white knight is gone. Additionally, reterritorialisation is impossible, as the city already has enough villains, so there is no role left for him to occupy. Dent is a victim of the city's hegemonic structures and needs to die. He fails as a potential leader and does not manage to take revenge upon the people who caused his misery, he therefore does not live up to Gotham's expectations of masculinity.

Selina Kyle – What's New Pussycat?

17   Female characters are spare in the trilogy and this has a simple reason: women in the batverse cannot be trusted. They do not return love (Rachel), steal (Selina) or are not who they claim to be (Miranda/Talia). At the beginning of *The Dark Knight Rises*, Selina, in the telling role of a maid serving at a dinner party at Wayne Manor, is merely an effective plot device. Her function is it to lure Bruce, who has been living as a recluse after Dent's death, out of hiding, as he catches her when she tries to steal his mother's pearls. When she first appears, a congressman stops her and remarks "sweetheart, not so fast with the chow" (7:34). Selina is visibly annoyed, yet when she flees Wayne Manor with the pearls, she enters the limousine of the same congressman and purrs "can I get a ride?" to which he replies "you read my mind" (12:19). The congressman is later on reported missing. Her use of the sexual pun "ride" reveals that Selina has learned how to manipulate men for her own good because sexualisation is the norm in Gotham City. When she tries to rob Daggett (Ben Mendelsohn), another corrupt businessman, one of his guards catches her in the act and remarks "nice outfit. Those heels make it tough to walk?" (49:54). Selina is constantly sexualized because "[female objectification] serves not only to signify heterosexuality and mark the boundary between gender groups, but it also protects males from homophobic abuse by their peers" (Schrock and Schwabe 285). Men use Selina to assure their own sexuality and therefore avoid becoming victims themselves. It is also striking that while Bruce is only accused of theatricalitywhen he is in the Batsuit, Selina is always sexualized, whether she poses as Catwoman or herself. At the same time, Selina is always in control of the situation because she knows how she is expected to act. Selina has adapted to the city and the gender roles it accepts. In one instant, she changes from skilled fighter to helpless victim as this is how a woman is expected to perform in a dangerous situation.

18   Bruce Wayne is fascinated by her, however it is striking how differently he treats her from Miranda Tate. Miranda is, or rather poses, as a successful independent businesswoman, like him she does not depend on money because she has enough of it and so he can court her. Selina, in contrast, steals to survive, she needs what Bruce has and thus he treats her condescendingly. When she mispronounces "Ibiza", Bruce whispers to her "you wouldn't want these folks realizing you're a crook, not a social climber" (32:50). However, Selina, the femme feline in the catsuit never opposes the man in the batsuit, presumably because she realises that they are much more alike than Bruce suspects. Once they join forces, and Selina saves him by shooting Bane after Miranda/Talia had stabbed him, Bruce has to accept that she is the woman Alfred always wished to be by his side. This pairing also makes more sense

regarding the capitalist structures of the city: the financially independent Miranda/Talia would always threaten Bruce's economically vetted masculinity; she simply does not need him to assure her livelihood.

19   Selina is, due to her poverty, less independent than she appears, and her femininity is just as fragile as the masculinities in the city. As "[g]ender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond" (Butler 231-232), Selina Kyle has no other option than to end up with Bruce Wayne. He is her heteronormative ticket out of poverty and he can grant her, due to his financial power, the new identity she desired. Unlike the other female characters, Bruce can control her and so affirm the heterosexual bond and therefore his masculinity.

Force of Nurture: Bane

20   Batman's final and most potent adversary is Bane, a mercenary, and like Bruce a former student of Ra's al Ghul and the League of Shadows. This shared relationship situates Bane as a mirror to Bruce. Bane emphasises that following the League's confused ideology leads to extremism. Unlike the other villains, Bane refrains from using an alter ego. By using his real name, it appears as if he wants to prove that his masculinity is so solidified that he does not have to hide behind a disguise (even though he wears a mask which covers significant parts of his face). The mask, in turn, has a similar function as the batsuit (which again emphasizes Bane's mirror function) and the Joker's makeup, it both covers and highlights marks of trauma, in Bane's case the injuries he suffered when saving the young Talia al Ghul. Even so, the mask not only supplies him with necessary oxygen, it also serves as a signature feature: "No one cared who I was till I put on the mask" (3:14). When Bane is shown again down in the sewers, he is sitting with his bare back to the audience, revealing a large scar on his back. Bane's whole body is a reminder of the traumas he suffered and unlike Batman, body and armour are one entity as opposed to two separate spheres. Bane is what society nurtured him to be. As Alfred remarks, Bane was "born and raised in hell on earth" (38:24) and so the role of the villain, a villain society created, is the only one he can occupy.

21   It is important to notice in this context that whatever Bane does it has to be bigger and more effective than anything the villains before him did. Bane's crimes are almost phallic in nature, they demonstrate hypermale potency and a deep desire for destruction. His raid on the stock market reveals thereby a significant aspect of his world view. When one of the brokers tells him "this is stock exchange, there's no money you can steal", Bane replies

"really? Then why are you people here?" (41:10). Where the Joker questions the morality of the people, Bane exposes the financial heart of the city as the root of all evil and thus implies that Bruce Wayne as the heir of Wayne Enterprises is a significant part of it. This is also reflected in the way the people treat Bruce after the stock market collapses and he loses his fortune. One man yells at him "how's it feel to be one of the people?" (1:00:48), emphasising that Bruce before has never belonged to the ordinary mortals of the city due to his wealth. When Bane takes the whole football stadium as hostages and kills Dr. Pavel (Alon Aboutboul) in front of them, Gotham quickly deteriorates into. By prompting the audience in the stadium (as representatives of the city) "take control. Take control of your city" (1:27:13), he furthermore positions himself as one of them, something Batman and Bruce Wayne could never be. The people of Gotham, having longed for a chance to strip the rich and the ruling off their power, and thus metaphorically castrate them, are all too eager to see how Bane will make Gotham great again.

22   Similarly, Bane challenges and questions the masculinity of the other men. In one scene between Daggett and Bane, Bane sends away Daggett's assistant to threaten Daggett. Daggett tries to prohibit this by ordering "no, stay here. I'm in charge" to which Bane counters "do you feel in charge?" (1:01:48). Inducing a loss of control, and therefore a loss of masculinity, is Bane's preferred modus of operation. He proclaims himself "Gotham's reckoning" (1:02:10) and a "necessary evil" (1:02:10) which in a way makes him also a symbol. Bane's megalomania is thus no smaller than Bruce's, who openly wished to become a symbol. Although they expelled him, Bane declares "I am the League of Shadows" (1:10:39) and once again demonstrates that he is in control. He combines physical power (in the course of the film he snaps various necks and Bruce's back with his bare hands) with mental one (he manipulates the people of Gotham into anarchic behaviour) and is therefore the epitome of controlling masculinity.

23   Still, the superhero narrative would fail if evil won and so Bane has to be defeated. After Bane breaks Bruce's back and he is thrown into the pit Talia al Ghul escaped from, he undergoes a healing process of biblical proportions[12] and can face Bane in a final battle. Bane's defeat is imaginably easy, Batman simply opens the mask and Bane has to suffocate from the loss of oxygen. Without his mask, a gadget of survival but also theatricality, a man cannot persist, which is also reflected in Bruce's retirement from his superhero alter ego and his anonymous life with Selina. In the end, Bane's masculinity depends on a piece of plastic

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[12] His unusually quick healing process (considering that he must be almost paraplegic) hints again at Gotham's desire for a Christ-like symbol, a saviour who can overcome his own weakness to defeat the foreign threat in the form of the Arabic Ra's al Ghul and the British/Latin American Bane.

which guarantees his survival: without it he is just as fragile and powerless as all the other men. Talia, before she is killed by Catwoman, says that Bane's "only crime was that he loved [her]" (2:13:19) and in a metaphorical sense this is the only crime he committed to himself. Guarding her initially caused him the injuries that now cost him his life, the highly masculine role of the protector therefore ends in disaster for him. Masculinity, the films seem to teach us through Batman, Harvey Dent and Bane, suffers under women, as they damage it and this deters them from becoming and remaining heroes.

Conclusion: Decent Men in Indecent Times?

24   At first glance, the masculinities represented in the *Dark Knight Trilogy* appear manifold. The men are physically strong or intelligent above average, they grew up in poverty or wealth, are here to destroy Gotham or save it. Yet, what they all have in common is that they prefer to hide behind masks. Whether they are masks in the traditional sense, such as Batman's Batsuit, Crane's "Scarecrow" or Bane's stylised respiratory mask, or intangible ones, like the Joker's make-up or Harvey Dent's burn scar, all of them are markers of trauma and humiliation and therefore potential symptoms of weakness. Weakness, in turn, is unaccepted in the society of Gotham. The city demands strong masculinities, however, at the same time it deconstructs them by creating new, seemingly insuperable threats. This leaves the men in a constant state of fear of their own fragile gender, they need to prove it by antagonizing other, supposedly more masculine men.

25   Furthermore, the trilogy depicts its masculinities as a product of their time, a typical approach of post-war comic fiction. But for a series that started in the mid 2000s, the concepts of masculinity presented are surprisingly obsolete and insubstantial. The gender roles the films offer are limited, it all amounts to the men either being heroes or villains, there is nothing in between. The more theatrical they are while performing, the more likely they are to succeed, which is why in the end Batman can be the only man left standing. Yet even the hero repeatedly needs to demonstrate his heterosexuality because a stable heterosexual identity is the most desirable form of masculinity. While the films do acknowledge that other expressions of gender exist, they are also quick to emphasise that they are unsuccessful. Batman, they seem to tell us, is the superhero we deserve because in the end he gets the woman in the catsuit. Rachel, the former love of his life, is easily forgotten. Yet even Batman needs to pay a price: he needs to abandon his superhero identity and make space for a younger generation, as indicated by Blake finding the deserted cave. Gotham is no country for old man

which is why the avenging son of the city disappears into his self-chosen exile and watches from afar like a benevolent but distant father.

26   In conclusion it can be said that the men of Gotham make names for themselves by diminishing others. Even Batman's strong, smart and wealthy persona does not keep him from using violence and the torture of others because the capitalist morals of the city demand that masculinity expresses itself through power and control. What distinguishes him from others is that he has the financial means and conforms effortlessly to the preferred heterosexual norm to perform most effectively. Yet without his armour even the dark knight is only the everyman Bruce Wayne. It thus seems that Nolan argues that not the times themselves are indecent but the demands for an unattainable form of comprehensive, immaculate masculinity.

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Iron Man as Cyborg: Between Masculinities

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Abstract

Since the turn of the millennium there has been a mass proliferation of superhero movies. From the appearance of the fist *Spider-Man* film in 2002 since the latest installment in the Ca*ptain America* series (2016), superhero movies have a tremendous popular and economic success. These popular texts have also a massive cultural impact by articulating their representations and ideologies in a global audience consisting of different national, racial, class and gender identities. The gender issues in superhero movies are often accompanied by the common observation that the great majority of superheroes are men and the rare presence of women is marked by their placement in a supporting role, thus reproducing a patriarchal ideology. Although this phenomenon can indeed be characterized as an excessive demonstration of masculine power and superheroes can be seen as mythical figures of a technological patriarchy, I would also suggest a different approach, an antithetical reading. This approach examines the overstated "technological sublime in human form" (Wasielewski 66) as a sort of divergent embodiment of subjectivity, one that contains the notion of the cyborg as described by Donna Harraway, one containing its own blurring of the ontological boundaries (161), therefore projecting its own existence as a social construction. Deploying this approach, I would examine the gender representations in the *Iron Man* trilogy (2008, 2010, 2013) not as demonstration of patriarchal power, but as masculinity in crisis, a masculinity undermined by its excessive technological look and its status as a constructed fabrication. A close analysis of the three texts and a special focus on gender representations will demonstrate how the technological subjectivity of Iron Man and the ironic performance by Robert Downey Jr. actually undermines the surface super-masculinity of the character. Finally, some general conclusion from the above analysis will be drawn.

1   Since the turn of the century there has been a mass proliferation of superhero movies. From the first installment of the *Spider-Man* franchise in 2002 to the latest *Captain America: Civil War* in 2016, there are 37 superhero movies in the top-100 records of highest grossing films worldwide for each year.[1] Their popularity is also inscribed in the all-time worldwide records, where 16 superhero films appear in the top-100 of highest grossing films. Among these, six films (*Marvel's The Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *The Dark Knight* (2008) and the *Dark Knight Rises* (2012)) have grossed over 1 billion

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[1] The number is based on a corpus I have compiled for my PhD thesis in the American science fiction film for the period 2001-2015.

dollars worldwide.[2] Given these numbers, the superhero film can be regarded as an "event movie" (Elsaesser 321), a highly sophisticated and well-promoted cinematic product that serve as a showcase window for the convergence of various industries, from the comic book and graphic novel market and the latest visual effects and audiovisual technologies, to the videogame industries and to an expanded market of other tie-in products such as toys or t-shirts. Not only is the superhero film an adequate audiovisual product in the conglomerate-driven Hollywood film industry since it can advertise and disseminate products and technologies in a variety of markets, it is also the ultimate audiovisual product condensing the aesthetics and values of the late capitalist, media saturated societies (Jameson 1-5). Hence, the superhero film displays "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all Postmodernisms…" (Jameson 8).

2   Although economic and industrial aspects are major factors in the shaping of these "spectacular narratives" (King), the boom of the superhero film is also a product of its time, ascribing various discourses surrounding the sociopolitical landscape of the first decade of the 21st century. One of the major approaches in this context is the effect of the events of 9/11 in the subsequent filmic production and especially in the superhero films, which accommodate the need of national healing in affirmative myths. The 9/11 context is stressed by Karen Randell (138) who argues that in the superhero cycle, the urban destruction has taken on what she labels as a "9/11 aesthetic" that reworks and resonates the traumatic events. Furthermore, Yann Roblou links the 9/11 trauma with the production of "complex masculinities" in superhero films stressing that we can regard these films as "answers to contemporary issues following the 9/11 trauma, one of which concerns the understanding of the multi-faceted problematic of masculinities" (1). 9/11 destabilized not only the fixed idea of a secure nation, but also the concept of hegemonic masculinity as a fundamental national myth, therefore producing "complex masculinities". Superhero films are also meaning-making systems that produce various subject positions and articulate often-conflicting discourses surrounding identity questions such as race, gender and class.

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[2] All economic data drawn from boxoffice.com.

3 One of the major discourses surrounding the superhero film concerns gender issues, such as the hypermasculinity of superheroes and the patriarchal ideology underlying the texts. Sabine Lebel stresses that superhero films "are positively regressive in terms of their portrayal of male and female bodies, and gender relations" (1). Betty Kaklamanidou supports that "Patriarchy works at carefully calculated ways, and the latest cinematic superhero narratives serve once again as the proof of its hegemony despite the filmic evidence that points to a newfound respect for the powerful female heroine" (61). Adding the race factor to the superhero equation, Jeffrey Brown states: "if comic books represent an acceptable, albeit obviously extreme model of hypermasculinity, and if the black male body is already culturally ascribed as a site of hypermasculinity, then the combination of the two—a black male superhero—runs the risk of being read as an overabundance, a potentially threatening cluster of masculine signifiers" (269).

4 The hegemonic depiction of gender roles can also be located in the origins of the superhero figure in the comic strips of the late 1930's and the emergence of what is commonly known as the era of "Golden Age Comics". In these first images, the connection of the superhero figures with futurism and military technology, as well as with a eugenic hierarchy of bodies suggested a deeply authoritarian ideological core (Wasielewski 68). Although the context of the 21st century superhero has changed significantly, we can still trace the same hierarchy of bodies with the saliency of the white, muscular and hypermasculine superhero body as the ultimate protector of contemporary societies.

5 Although representations of hegemonic masculinities in contemporary production can be traced in past and present conditions, I would nevertheless like to suggest another perspective in examining these excessive masculinities. The superhero figure as a "technological sublime in human form" (Wasielewski 66) can be explored by deploying the notion of the cyborg, as described by Donna Haraway in her 1984 seminal essay. After all, the superhero bodies with their integration in a technological environment and their imminent dependence on various hi-tech gadgets can be regarded as excessive posthumans, as cyborgs with a moral cause.

6 Haraway ("A Manifesto for Cyborgs" 158-161) regards the notion of the cyborg as a political metaphor to overcome the dualities inscribed in the divided Cartesian

subject of contemporary societies. The hybrid body of the cyborg, part-machine, part-flesh, transgresses the polarities shaping our world. Thus, the concepts of nature and culture, public and private, male and female, animal, human and machine are reworked and reconfigured in a radical different perspective. No longer placed in the topos of "original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense" (159), this deviant body challenges and subvert the usual categorizations and taxonomies providing multiple, fractured identities that render the binary oppositions of hierarchical societies irrelevant. The cyborg imagery delineates a path of liberation from dualities, such as gender roles, prescribed in our bodies and our world. As Haraway argues, "the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world" (ibid), meaning a world that disavows gender as "an obligatory distribution of subjects in unequal relationships, where some have property in other" (Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* 328). Thus Haraway's ironic[3] cyborg myth is "about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities, which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work" ("A Manifesto for Cyborgs" 161).

7   It is precisely this notion of the cyborg that I intend to explore in order to approach the issues of gender in superhero movies, and specifically in the *Iron Man* trilogy (2008, 2010, 2013). The persistence of the superhero image even in a more deconstructed, ironic version in mainstream Hollywood establishes it as an icon of contemporary culture. Thus the significance of analyzing the representations and ideologies involved around such icons cannot be overstated. Placing the superhero image in a broader context and using different methods of approach can help us reveal new meanings and ideas. The approach that I will follow diverges from the prevailing reading of superhero films that regards them as expression of patriarchal myths that reproduce images of hegemonic masculinities. The cyborg metaphor I use illuminates the meanings that are ascribed to gender as a social construction of identity in the already highly constructed superhero cyborg body. Superhero movies are after all about fractured identities, split personalities, double lives and retrofitted bodies. It is a submergence of an individual into a technological sublime that brings a transcendence of human possibilities

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[3] According to Haraway, Irony is "about the tension of holding incompatible things together […] about humor and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method" ("A Manifesto for Cyborgs" 158).

and boundaries. As Scott Bukatman suggests: "The central fascination in the superhero movie is the transforming body […] the body's discovery of its own transformation" (121). The superhero body is a cyborg body where the Cartesian ontology is rendered inadequate. Among the superhero pantheon one figure stands out as an ideal cyborg metaphor: Iron Man. Half-man, half-machine as his name eloquently suggests, he is already a divided subject, embodying a negation of the unitary subject of Enlightenment. However, Iron-Man still performs in certain instances hegemonic masculinity, but his altered body causes disruptions in the fixed sense of a gendered self. Therefore, in these momentarily disruptions lay the possibility for a critical rethinking of gender roles. As I will show, the portrayal of Iron-Man in the cinematic trilogy provides a plethora of examples and instances of altered bodies that enclose the potential of altered, multiple identities. Thus, my hypothesis is that by examining the superhero image using Haraway's cyborg metaphor, the superhero can be read as a dichotomous constructed being, enclosing opposing binaries such as masculine/feminine, thus destabilizing hegemonic notions of gender. Furthermore, notions of performance, as I will later explore, can also contribute in this perspective.

Between Masculinities

8   The first cinematic *Iron Man* (2008) is the story of the myth's origins as "the first film always features the hero's origins and subsequent films treat the emergence of each new villain's metamorphologies" (Bukatman 121). The author adds that "the origin story is the real site of plasmatic possibility […] forcing a new awareness of corporeal possibility, as the body is rethought, physically (within the diegesis) and digitally (on the level of production)" (ibid). Thus, in the first *Iron Man* film we witness a technological birth, the gradual metamorphoses of Tony Stark (Robert Downey Junior), an all-masculine all-American entrepreneur, into Iron-Man, an embodiment of fractured subjectivities. His violent birth is placed in Afghanistan, where he has gone to demonstrate Stark Industries' new superweapon "Jericho" to potential buyers. Stark's introduction to the audience finds him sitting in the back of a moving SUV, comfortably drinking his scotch, while listening to hard rock music loudly. He desperately wants to start a conversation, although the military personnel escorting him seem reluctant. When

he finally breaks the silence, they immediately start asking questions about his personal and sexual life and express their admiration. Albeit in a humorous, light-hearted way, the scene presents him as a kind of rock star and as an arrogant playboy. The initial setting is abruptly interrupted when a missile hits the jeep that precedes them. Tony manages to get out of the vehicle and the last thing he sees before falling unconscious is another incoming missile bearing the sign of his own signature "Stark Industries". In the flashback sequence that follows, the viewers get to glimpse Tony's temperament: He is an arrogant, self-centered playboy, who collects women and cars and a true believer in the necessity of weapons in keeping world peace.

9   After this introductory sequence, the scene of his violent rebirth takes place in a dark womb-like cave. Tony Stark's life is at stake as the shrapnel shards from the explosion are reaching his heart, thus he is in need of an altered body, a new birth. This is an all male birth, taking place due to masculine actions and counter-actions, where Iron Man is delivered between two opposing masculinities. On the one side, there is a surrogate doctor, Yinsen (Shaun Toub) an altruistic, scientific figure, who serves as a benevolent father figure and helps him reconstruct a new body and thus a new identity. On the other side, we have the terrorist organization "Ten Rings", an all-male aggressive militaristic group that took him into captivity and commands him to build the new superweapon "Jericho" as a condition of his release. In this all-male scenery, technology with its generative and disrupting possibilities is the only signifier that eludes a signification of masculinity. As Mary Ann Doane notes, in various science fiction narratives "the technological is insistently linked to the maternal" and technology itself is coded as feminine (185). But contrary to Doane (182) who examines "representations of technology that work to fortify – sometimes desperately – conventional understandings of the feminine", I suggest an antithetical approach; that technology can be placed in an intermediate space, between masculine and feminine and its representation may offer destabilizing possibilities in gender identities. It is exactly this destabilizing technological force that underpins Iron Man's birth.

10   Hence the birth scene takes on a double meaning: The reconstruction of Tony's identity as a result of a bodily experience is paralleled with an acknowledgment of the constructedness of his identity. The process of reconstruction, of the technological re-

birth is accompanied by deep acknowledgment as Stark is actually orchestrating his own re-birth. The "being present in my own birth" scenario is enacting a primal scene fantasy, and a rather common fantasy in a genre obsessed with origin myths, cosmogonies, world creations and destructions (Dervin 96, Penley 120). Hence, the witnessing of this primal scene elicits a traumatic acknowledgment of his fabricated identity. The two-fold process of the technological creation of the self oscillates Iron Man in different power positions. On the one hand the orchestration of his own creation gives Iron-Man an empowering position of the male creator who masters the technological skills and enhances his own body. On the other hand the recognition of this process brings forth the constructedness of his identity, the fabrication of his own masculine myth. This realization causes a traumatic awareness that the self is the effect of different experiences in lived social reality as they are inscribed in the body and thus is always in flux. Hence, Iron Man is figured as an ambiguous subject, a cyborg knowing of his own constructed 'nature'. Although the awareness of his constructed self remains embedded in a rather hegemonic masculinity, it nevertheless causes ruptures in the hegemonic notion of the gendered self as an essential, natural and permanent category.

11   The obsessive reenactments of his own construction are replayed in the rest of the "origins" film and are inscribed in his transformed social relations. After his painful birth of iron, fire and blood, he is ejected from the dark of the cave to the blinding white sand, a proper birth metaphor, where he is rescued and brought back home by a literal Deus Ex-Machina, an American army helicopter. The following sequences record the trajectory of the newborn's first clumsy steps into the kinesis of a full-grown subject who has mastered his movements and choreographies. The gradual submersion into the potentialities of his new iron self, the obsessive tests and rehearsals of his powers, bring him to a personality meltdown, a dissolution of the stable identity and a fixation in the constructedness of the self. The metamorphosis is also inscribed in his social relations as they are depicted in the course of the film. From the accompaniment of numerous women prior to his transformation, his current sociability is located in the highly technological environment of his basement where his main interactions are with Jarvis, the male voice of his central operating system and his anthropomorphized (and funny) fire extinguisher. Finally, his relation with his assistant Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) is rebalanced,

although not yet in full equality, by acknowledging her importance in his life.

12   Although the cyborg status is causing dissolution of the boundaries that shape Tony Stark/Iron Man, I am not suggesting a complete transformation but rather an ambiguous placement in various subject positions. His gradual trajectory from a cynical arms manufacturer supporting a militaristic ideology into a more sensitive and considerate individual is not without gaps or contradictions. His identity is not completely altered but shuttered in an incongruous way. After all, this is what the cyborg entails: the coexistence of the opposites, the destabilization of the Manichean logic[4]. Hence, Iron Man may still express arrogance, superiority, or hegemonic masculinity but these instances are not an expression of his solid identity and are in constant conflict with other elements of his fragmented identity.

13   After Iron-Man achieves a complete mastery of his augmented body, his new existence is established in an Oedipal-like confrontation with the father figure of Obadiah Stane (Jeff Bridges), a close friend of his father and co-director of Stark Industries, who obstructs his entrance in the (symbolic) world. Obadiah represents a dominant masculine authority that opposes the 'soft' turn in Tony's positioning (as he ironically asks him "What, you are humanitarian now?"). Iron Man denies the authoritative masculinity of the father-figure, having acquired a new identity that is diverging from the law of the Father[5]. Thus, his own masculinity is figured as deviant. Nevertheless, in the final scene of the duel and in order to confront Iron Man, Obadiah acquires his own giant iron suit, therefore looking like a dark reflection of Iron Man, a meaner, larger, darker version of the self, which is a common feature in superhero films (Tyree 28). Still, although they are similar on the surface, the two augmented bodies have different experiences, different embodied subjectivities and thus different stories to tell.

14   Iron Man and Obadiah embody and project different masculinities. Iron Man is a cyborg; an organism with embodied technological modifications, while Obadiah's nature remains unchanged within his huge, powerful Iron Suit. The difference is a matter of embodiment and is the defining point of their actions. Iron Man's status as a cyborg

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[4] Manichean logic refers to a worldview that describes everything in dualistic opposite terms such as good vs. evil, dark vs. light etc.

[5] Put in simple worlds, the "Law of the Father" in Lacanian psychoanalysis represents the body of social laws, conventions, norms and values of a given society. The adherence to the Law facilitates the child to abandon its desire for the Mother and to assume its 'proper' gendered role.

signifies his embodied difference, a result of a lived experience that has been inscribed into his body. Starting from Stark's ironic injury due to his own weapons to the slow realization that the military industry is actually a threat for the innocents, his inner transformation follows the outer change. Another important incident is his acquaintance with the benevolent father figure of Yinsen, who literally replaces Tony's heart and offers him an alternative model of being. Therefore, Tony's altered body is a production of his own history that marks him with an open wound, a trauma reminding him of the fragility of existence, transforming him both externally and internally. On the contrary, Obadiah's transformation in the final duel is only superficial, external. His transformation is just an Iron Suit that he wears skin-deep and prevents him from any inner changes. Thus, the boundaries of his identity remain unchanged. The suit is just a 'hard' projection of his ego that excludes any lived social experience; it is just a weapon that reflects his solid, unchanged and 'closed' identity.

15   In the second part of the trilogy, *Iron Man 2* (2010) Iron Man's masculinity is again replayed in contrast with other masculinities; those of his enemies but also of his ally, Colonel Rhodes (Don Cheadle). Again Stark's trajectory is delineated between two poles of masculine authority. On the one hand an extravagant excessive masculinity embodied in Russian Ivan (Mickey Rourke) who is marked as a deviant and ethnically Other body. Ivan's masculinity is expressed as an old fashioned masculinity powered by the will to avenge his own father's betrayal by Iron Man's father, Howard Stark. Ivan's body, excessively muscular and covered with tattoos, inscribes not only a negatively deviant masculinity linked primarily to prison life, but also the cold war politics of America. Besides the foreign enemy, there is also the enemy from within, personified in Justin Hammer (Sam Rockwell), as the egomaniac entrepreneur who puts profit and fame above everything, including his country's safety. He sees the perfect opportunity in Ivan's ability to build his own army of iron suits, but his masculinity is being ridiculed as Ivan just uses his resources to meet his own purposes. As it is common in the genre both characters are constructed as hyperboles, portraying an image of excessive masculinities coded in a negative way. Justin's and Ivan's masculinities are inscribed as destructive and negative, serving their own egoistic purposes and failing to contribute to the community.

16   On the other hand, but equally reproducing hegemonic masculinity, is the

protective, law-abiding Colonel Rhodes. Being a close friend of Iron Man and a high-ranking officer in American Air Force, he represents a masculinity that aims toward the protection of the community, engulfing ideals and values such as friendship and honor. When Rhodes witnesses Iron Man in an out-of-control state he decides to stop him and claims one of the iron suits as his own. Although at first he puts his faith in the American Army and hands over the Iron Man's suit to the authorities, the army's collaboration with Justin Hammer and the subsequent catastrophe makes him skeptical about official authority. Thus, he stands as an intermediate figure between Iron Man and the army, between private initiative and national control[6].

17   Iron Man stands between opposing male forces, between mainstream and divergent masculinities and blurs the boundaries between private and collective, egoism and altruism, between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic modes of masculinity. His masculinity is an intermediate and ironically opposes all stable categories. The oscillation is inscribed in his trajectory in the filmic narrative. In one of the first scenes of the film we see him in a Supreme Court hearing, where he is asked to deliver the Iron Suit into the hands of the government due to its status a weapon. Iron Man objects this statement and he refers to the suit as "high-tech" prosthesis and adds, "Iron Man is me. You can't have me". At the end of his triumphant and arrogant speech, he concludes: "I privatized world peace". These statements are inscribing a tendency of mistrust in the government and its handling of military issues – perhaps a comment in the post 9/11 foreign policy. Although in the end of the film his stance is recognized as right – only he can efficiently handle the suit – the need of collectivization, if not nationalization, of security issues is vaguely recognized with the first helpful appearance of the S.H.I.E.L.D. initiative. While he initially declines the job offer as a S.H.I.E.L.D. advisor (he is disqualified for a full membership due to his narcissistic tendencies) with the line "you can't afford me", he does seem to put some consideration into this idea (proven in the subsequent film of the Marvel cinematic universe, *The Avengers* in 2012). Hence, he is placed in a liminal space between collective action and private initiative. However, Tony's choice to oppose the state-control of his powers can be regarded as a part of his hegemonic masculinity,

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[6] Colonel Rhodes' character will be further complicated after his accident in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and his potential assimilation in a cyborg status due to the technological prosthesis that enables him to walk.

simply reproducing the state politics on a private level. Nevertheless, his consideration on using his powers in an alternative collective force and his liminal positioning disrupts hegemonic discourse by suggesting alternative and intermediate possibilities.

18   In the third and final part, the metamorphosis is complete. In this part Stark is presented as vulnerable, sensitive and grounded. He is devoted to two things: His iron suits, which function as a sort of surrogate children, or as Tony puts it "a part of me", and his relationship with Pepper, the most important aspect in his life. These two 'loves' seem to be in conflict at times as the suits are uncannily assuming different domestic roles that undermine his relationship with Pepper, or even worse, threaten her life. However, these instances can also be interpreted as a Freudian return of the repressed, since Tony's repressed hypermasculinity is reflected in the suits' seemingly growing sentience. Another characteristic that delineates his vulnerability and subverts any notion of dominant masculinity is the panic attacks that Tony experiences. Showing a superhero experiencing panic attacks is a total reversal of the common notion of hegemonic masculinity, which usually excludes any signs of 'weaknesses'. Tony's body inscribes the coexistence of the opposite, the elimination of the dualities of a hegemonic masculinity, such as weak and strong, powerful and powerless, superhero and everyday man. Finally, his sensitive and caring side is revealed in his relationship with the child who helps him after he lands unconscious in Tennessee, having escaped in one of his iron suits from the catastrophic attack in his house. Although never resorting to overt sentimentality and preserving his cool, ironic persona, Iron Man seems to take a real interest in this child by giving him a solution on how to deal with bullies and by empathizing with him as he projects his own childhood also marked by an absent father. Yet, this incident can be read as Stark fulfilling the criteria of a heteronormative father and re-writing his own traumatic father-son relationship, yet it also reveals qualities usually coded as feminine that add another dimension in his not-too-solid masculine identity.

19   His transformation is paralleled with the trajectory of Pepper Potts's arc in the film. As Pepper is captured by Aldrich Cillian (Guy Pearce) – a personification of the evil scientific-industrial complex – who uses a biogenetic process to turn dismembered ex-soldiers into weapons, she is subjected by force into this transforming process and thus

acquires a more than human status. In the final battle scene, as she comes out of the flames after a sixty-meter fall and saves Iron Man, she is finally positioned as his equal. Her transformed femininity is matched with Iron Man's altered masculinity. In this scene, the issues of gender roles reallocation and of a latent empowered femininity throughout the trilogy are openly manifested. It is the necessary reversal in gender roles for Iron Man to complete his transformation and re-enter his social milieu as a changed man.

20   In the final scene of *Iron Man* 3 (2013), both Iron Man and Pepper get rid of their prosthesis and thus return to a 'normal' human status. Nevertheless, they remain changed because the inner transformation has altered permanently their fixed, stable sense of self[7]. As Iron Man says in the end, "my armor was a cocoon… and now I am a changed man… I am Iron Man". It is exactly this identity description that can be attributed to the process of becoming a cyborg. The armor is indeed a cocoon for the reworking and negotiation of a traditional understanding of the self as a closed and fixed identity with impermeable limits. The armor, the 'external self', the technological prosthesis subvert this image, thus disrupting any notion of traditional, fixed categories such as masculine/feminine. However, I am not suggesting that Iron-Man is a "creature in a post-gender world" (Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" 159). On the contrary, he still remains a gendered figure. Yet the awareness of his constructed identity and the possibility to change it brings also a disruption in the sense of a gendered self as a solid, fixed and permanent category. The gendered self is just one possibility in a rather fractured identity. It is this acknowledgment that cannot be removed along with the technological modification. Once disrupted, the notion of the self cannot be brought back to neatly, fixed boundaries and thus the importance of the conclusive and sort of existentialist identity manifestation: "I am Iron Man".

Performing Self, Performing Cyborg

21   One of the highly discussed aspects of the Iron Man trilogy was Robert Downey Jr.'s performance. In his review of the film, Roger Ebert ("*Iron Man*") writes:

       Downey's performance is intriguing, and unexpected […] Tony Stark is created

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[7] Pepper Potts's transformation seems to be confined in the *Iron Man* trilogy, since she is downgraded to a marginal and slightly more passive role in the *Avengers* (2012) and disappears from subsequent Marvel films.

from the persona Downey has fashioned through many movies: irreverent, quirky, self-deprecating, wise-cracking [….] "Iron Man" doesn't seem to know how seriously most superhero movies take themselves. If there is wit in the dialog, the superhero is often supposed to be unaware of it. If there is broad humor, it usually belongs to the villain. What happens in "Iron Man," however, is that sometimes we wonder how seriously even Stark takes it. He's flippant in the face of disaster, casual on the brink of ruin […] At the end of the day it's Robert Downey Jr. who powers the lift-off separating this from most other superhero movies. You hire an actor for his strengths, and Downey would not be strong as a one-dimensional mighty-man. He is strong because he is smart, quick and funny, and because we sense his public persona masks deep private wounds.

Other critics have also commented upon the link between Downey's performance and his public persona. A.O. Scott comments: "On paper the character is completely preposterous, but since Tony is played by Robert Downey Jr., he's almost immediately as authentic and familiar — as much fun, as much trouble — as your ex-boyfriend or your old college roommate". Kirk Honeycott states "Downey plays off his own bad-boy image wonderfully" and David Edelstein complements: "Who wouldn't root for Downey as a guy who has to clean up his act? [...] Downey has such terrific instincts." Lastly David Denby remarks: "He [Downey] can make offhandedness mesmerizing, even soulful; he passes through the key moments in this cloddish story as if he were ad-libbing his inner life."

22   The comments on Downey's performance and its connection with the actor's persona highlight issues of performance as a dual focus on the embodiment of character and the body of the actor. This correlation is described by Richard de Cordova, who defines performance, in contradiction with acting, as the moments of the body's activity where the split between actor and character is foregrounded or as he puts it, "those moments in films in which acting comes to the fore and is noticed, there is a split between actor and character as agents of two different actions" (152). This rupture between the two bodies creates a distancing effect and "when the performative dimension comes to the fore […] the body of the actor becomes an issue in the film, and, at those moments, the spectator is involved in a particularly complex play of identification and belief" (de Cordova 155). It is precisely this rupture that is achieved by Downey's ironic performance. The funny, quick and casual style and the projection of Downey's own 'bad boy' persona create a distancing effect and the 'seriousness' of the character with all its

gendered attributes are constantly interrogated by the text. This doubling effect is further enhanced when one considers that several lines of Iron Man's dialogue were actually Downey's improvisation (Eisenberg, "Jeff Bridges says Iron Man was all Improv") resulting in a further projection of the actor's persona within the fabricated character and an accentuation of the disjuncture between the real and fictive body. Thus, a space of self-reflexivity, humor and discontinuity is created that undermines the credibility of Iron-Man as well as his superficial masculine characteristics that at first seem to define the character. Although at first look these masculine characteristics seem to be simply reproduced, Downey Jr. uses humor and ironic distance to oscillate and adapt between different types of masculinity. Thus, a critical distance is created for negotiating the meaning of these hegemonic masculine features.

23   The dichotomy between the character and the actor's body is further complicated when another split is considered; that between the physical body and the technological body as inscribed in the figuration of the cyborg. Christine Cornea (4) comments on what she calls a "cyborg performance" and stresses the interconnectedness between the cyborg, technology, cinematic apparatus and generic context and those issues of performance are entangled with what is considered a "proper" or "natural" style of acting. Specifically, Cornea highlights how the "robotic" performance of many cinematic cyborgs (i.e. in *Terminator* films (1984, 1991), *Robocop* (1987), and *Universal Soldier* (1992)) can be considered as a "generic form of acting" that is common to science fiction film and thus must be interpreted in a proper context and examined in relation with other elements of the cinematic text. In the case at hand, Downey Jr.'s cyborg performance is rather anti-robotic, albeit equally superficial. It is a performance that does not try to reveal a deeper meaning for the character or transfuse him with psychological depth[8] but instead it remains on the surface. Thus it can be understood as a self-referential performance that by avoiding the search of a "depth" and of a "reality effect" stresses its own constuctedness. As Cornea notes the type of performance that stresses materiality and depthlessness can be marked by what Philip Auslander characterizes as "resistant forms of performance that retain a degree of self-reflexivity, remain at the level of the

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[8] Iron Man's character is reworked in a more complex manner in subsequent films (*Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron (*2015), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016).

superficial, the surface, while somehow avoiding a reification of the very surfaces they present" (10). By presenting a self-referential, ironic superhero like Iron-Man, and by playing out loud the common (or latent) aspects of masculinity, as coded in previous cinematic superhero texts, the films under examination provide a "resistant form of performance". Portraying Iron-Man's oscillation between different types of masculinity, the films create multiple layers of referentiality where Downey's performance undermines and parodies superheroes' traditional masculine traits.

24   Several instances in this 'constructed' performance, one that brings attention to its constructed surfaces, can be found throughout the trilogy. For example, in *Iron Man* (2008), we find extended scenes where Tony Stark builds his technological suit, while trying to master the powers and possibilities it offers. Tony delivers his first efforts of a new reconstructed body with humor, while depictions of an all-controlling masculine power are constantly undermined by his failures. Thus, Iron Man is a literally constructed hero shown as the product of constant self-production, of trial and failure. This constructedness is highlighted by his playfulness, as he makes his interaction with his suit seem like a delightful activity than a serious preoccupation. For instance, his fist trial of the suit is actually a child-like ride in the night skyline of Los Angeles, which echoes the thrilling experience of human flight as a common children's dream. Another example is during a fighting sequence in *Iron Man 3* where an adversary asks him: "Is that all you've got? One trick and one cheesy line?" to which he ironically responds: "Sweetheart, that could be the name of my autobiography." Thus, he performs his own 'low' superhero status in contrast with the serious, grand masculine characteristics of other superheroes. By remaining on the surface, and by acknowledging it, he paradoxically avoids the reification of these surface qualities. The text reveals the superhero as a constructed gendered self, a self that according to Judith Butler continually performs its gender by a ritualized repetition of stylized acts. Hence, Downey delivers a performance that draws attentions to its constructed elements by intertwining parts of comic dialogue with an appropriately ironic enunciation, thus laying bare the mechanism of a constructed, gendered superhero image.

Conclusion

25   As we are now approaching the end of the 2010s, the superhero craze seems to expand, entering a more self-referential, ironic phase. Although instances of humor and irony are evident in older examples of the genre, such as *X-Men* (2000) or even *Superman* (1978), nevertheless this tendency is more evident and self-reflexive in recent superhero texts. The superbly preposterous *Deadpool* (2015) became the first superhero film with a Golden Globe nomination in the category of best musical or comedy, following the same path of self-referentiality, parody and humor that deconstruct and parodies the dominant superhero image. This self-referentiality ironically plays with the main genre conventions and offers a fresh perspective in a saturated genre. Besides the generic renewal that seems to be at work, issues of representation and ideology, such as gender roles are also brought into question.

26   By associating the superhero image with another prolific contemporary image, that of the cyborg and by deploying other tools of analysis, such as performance aspects, I hopefully showed that new meanings can be disclosed such as the disruptive possibilities of the technological, constructed body. Hence, notions of hegemonic gender representations that shape the analysis of superhero image are questioned and even in occasions subverted and replaced by notions of the constructed self and the subsequent blurring of its boundaries and dichotomies. Nevertheless, hegemonic gender depictions are far but absent in superhero films; but they are often placed in a liminal space between hegemonic and counter masculinity. Thus, the *Iron Man* cinematic trilogy offers a plethora of subject positioning and "points of entry", creating a heterogeneous and conflicting textuality that offers a multitude of readings. Whether this is a Hollywood strategy in order to renew a genre and to address a larger audience, that often contains radically different subjects, or is the result of conflicting social discourses and movements, the superhero myth has still some revealing stories to tell about the boundaries of ourselves and the multitude of identities that we adopt in our contemporary world. Hence, Iron Man's description in a cyborg metaphor can offer us a new perspective in exploring gender issues in the enduring superhero myth.

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The Masculine Masquerade of Superheroes in *Watchmen*

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Abstract

The image of many American male superheroes is always represented as being 'phallic' in their costumes. Even though it is a long-term reality that the representation of superheroes often connotes an ideally mythic but essentially un-realizable embodiment of men, such a costuming more often than not involves, as Harry Brod sees it, a process of men's conscious self-masquerade.[1] How well, or how falsely, do male characters accommodate themselves to their masculine costuming as superheroes? How does this costumed heroism affect men's lives, both in public and in private? This article is inspired by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's graphic novel, *Watchmen*, with regard to the metaphorical representations of the bodily images of men and their associations with justice and masculinity. If the actualization of superheroes in the reality of *Watchmen* debunks heroism itself, then the graphic representations of those male superheroes' masculine but masked bodies also belie an apotheosizing but simultaneously dehumanizing dimension through such a male masquerade. By juxtaposing the different representations and embodiments of male superheroes in *Watchmen*, the article focuses on how men's negotiations between a performative identity and an unmasked selfhood are relentlessly exposed and problematized. Accordingly, the artificiality of men's masculine images is not only highlighted in the graphic representations of *Watchmen* but also subversive to the conventional notions of super-heroic male embodiments.[2]

> "Who Watches the Watchme…"
> (*Watchmen*, II:18)[3]

> "Vanishing is no big problem when you're a costumed hero ー
> you just take your costume off."
> (*Under the Hood* 12)[4]

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[1] Brod, Harry. "Masculinity as Masquerade." *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, edited by Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner, MIT Press, 1995, pp. 13-19.

[2] An earlier version of this article was orally presented at the 7th Asian Conference on Arts and Humanities, held by the International Academic Forum (IAFOR) in Kobe, Japan, in April 2016.

[3] For the citations of *Watchmen*, the Roman numeral signals the volume while the Arabic numeral signals the page number in that volume.

[4] The excerpts of the fictional *Under the Hood*, written by Hollis Mason (a.k.a. the first Nite Owl), are from the many intercalary chapters scattered between the 12 volumes of *Watchmen*. The citation signals the exact page number of Mason's book printed in *Watchmen*.

1   Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin, in response to the conventional focus on the phallic image of male bodies as the masculine model, proposes an alternative understanding of men through another bodily feature － through testicles. Flannigan-Saint-Aubin associates what he terms the "testicular masculine" (250) with such connotations as "patience, stability, and endurance" (250) and differentiates it from the "testerical" one (250) that emphasizes the "[s]taying power and steadfastness" which "might become stubbornness or intractability…" (250). That is to say, while the "testicular masculine" represents the positive side of manhood derided from the metaphorical meanings of testicles, the "testerical" one represents its negative side, and both are further contrasted with the phallic model of aggression and dominance. These models are not mutually exclusive; instead, the combined images of erection (the penis) and containment (the testicles) serve to enlarge and subvert our perspective of "a fantasied version of the male body" (Flannigan-Saint-Aubin 240) that has long been associated only with the penis and its potent significance. Similarly, Susan Bordo, looking for a wider representation of male bodies, uses the image of an aroused penis － instead of emphasizing a hard and pulsing one － to contend that the biological arousal of the penis needs not be conventionally equated with the domination of the female sex but rather be viewed as the exhibition of human affection － of "someone or something that has aroused another" in an intimate relationship (67). The penile arousal thereby functions to counteract and to implement the dominant discourse of phallic authority as the sole perspective of men.

2   Accordingly, the representations of male bodies have much more dimensions than the conventional focus on the phallic image as the sole model of male masculinity. In this sense, the configurations of male superheroes, especially those that magnify a visibly muscular body and a supra-human capacity, need a second consideration. Flannigan-Saint-Aubin contends that the dichotomy of Superman and Clark Kent can exemplify "the plasticity of masculinity" (254) if we highlight Kal-El's interchangeability between different modes of masculinity. 'Superman' stands as a true identity while 'Kent' functions as its human camouflage, and

'Superman' is attributed with a more masculine authority, especially when Kal freely exerts his power in public, whereas 'Kent' is a humanized containment of such super-heroic prowess. In other words, 'Superman' embodies the phallic stage of masculinity while 'Kent' embodies the testicular/testerical one. These two forms of male presentment seem mutually exclusive on the surface, but their combination in fact corresponds to a man's sexual and social functions: "Superman is episodic; he 'rises' to the occasion 'like a speeding bullet' and then disappears with only a trace of his former self. Clark Kent 'hangs in there' until the Man of Steel, driven by crises, springs into action" (Flannigan-Saint-Aubin 252-53). The two modes are thus configured in one male body and demarcated by the change of context and clothes. More importantly, the humanized undercover of Kent is necessary for Kal to fit into the society: "Although the patriarchal ideal is a phallic one…the phallic…need not be normative" (Flannigan-Saint-Aubin 254). Accordingly, the dichotomy of Superman and Kent exhibits a revised version of conventional manhood: a man only reveals his phallic power when necessary not only because its arousal, as biology tells us, cannot last forever, but also because a proper containment of such a power is the key to a man's adaptation into society.

3   Nevertheless, as the boundary between an alien man of steel and a cover of human flesh is ideally interchangeable and functional for Superman, many Earthen heroes do not share such a privilege of being naturally born a superhuman. Kent knows when he can be his real self, who only needs to take off his camouflage to break out of the mundanity as Kent and to establish himself again at the top of the world ―a free-willed shift of identities that involves no sense of confusion for him and for his watchers. By contrast, the pairing of a normal man with the notions of costumed heroism and supra-human masculinity turns out to be inherently problematic, as Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's graphic novel, *Watchmen*, attempts to expose.[5] Mason, a retired costumed hero, thus notes in *Under the Hood*: "Dressing up in a

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[5] Moore is the novel's story writer; Gibbons is its illustrator and letterer, and John Higgins is the colorist. The front cover and the back cover of *Watchmen* show only Moore's and Gibbons's names, while Higgins's name shows up on the inside front cover. I retain Higgins's name on my Works Cited page.

costume takes a very extreme personality…" (9). As Kal's blue-and-red costume stands for his true identity that demarcates itself from a restrained selfhood, in *Watchmen*, the imaginary identity in masquerade is simultaneously fulfilling and disorienting for the novel's human heroes. As Mason avers: "Vanishing is no big problem when you're a costumed hero ― you just take your costume off" (*Under the Hood* 12). Mason's paradoxical statement ― in which a celebration of one's visible, heroic but extreme façade of masculine exhibition is combined with a degradation of one's human, 'invisible' body stripped of one's costume ― thus reveals how a costumed man's achievement in masculine and heroic embodiments is suspended in-between a dehumanizing negation of a part of his selfhood and an embrace of a self-alienated invention of an apotheosized mask. To borrow Flannigan-Saint-Aubin's terms, as a man accommodates himself to the phallic mode of self-representation in public, he is also attempting to escape the testicular mode of his body ― of the essentially inescapable reality of a contented, inconspicuous, and 'wrapped' substance always commonly 'hanging' underneath his costume.

4　　Such a deliberate and purposeful costumed heroism is not without its risk. Inventing oneself as a superhero not only signifies the inconsistence between a man's vision of the world (in which the world needs the 'I' in costumes) and his original life in the same world (in which I am basically an invisible nobody), but it further indicates how a man can suffer in-between the real and the fictional sense of his selfhood. For Harry Brod, the notion of male masquerade has similarities with Judith Butler's idea of gender as stylized forms of performance;[6] however, whereas performance focuses on the naturalized practices of constructing one's gender, masquerading oneself by costumes focalizes its superficial and fictional dimensions, "for masquerade invokes a distinction between the artificial and the real" (Brod 17). As the acceptable forms of costumed heroism very often visibly magnify this

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[6] For more details on Butler's idea, see her groundbreaking books, *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993).

artificiality of manliness, the whole idea of a man's super-heroic embodiments of justice, power, and masculinity should be thus called into question. Not until recently does the problem of super-heroic embodiments have revealed itself to the audience's eyes, as *The Dark Knight Trilogy* (directed by Christopher Nolan) and the Iron Man series (played by Robert Downey Jr.) have shown us.[7] Yet, before the popularity of superheroes on the big screen begins to reveal its commercial potential, Moore and Gibbons's *Watchmen*, among other superhero fictions that use graphic pictures instead of motion ones, has critically examined the conflict between a masqueraded and an unmasked self as well as between the ideal heroism and the all-too-real humanity. *Watchmen*, by highlighting the visual representations of (super-)heroism, thus reflects on the intricate correlation between male bodies, masculine embodiments, and the conventional notions of justice and power.

5   The fictional dimension of costumed heroism and its problematic outcome are directly alluded to through the novel's title. Jamie A. Hughes cites the famous phrase in *Watchmen* — "Who watches the Watchmen?" (n. pag.)[8] — as the focus of her argument that the answer to the cited question "is simple: we are all subjected to that same power — that of ideology" (556). For Hughes, each of the costumed heroes in *Watchmen* is driven by different motives that have not only "prompted them to become superheroes" (550) but also led to the reflection on how superheroes "are nothing more than individuals caught up in an ideology" (549-50). However, Hughes fails to notice that, in one iconic scene of *Watchmen*, in which Edward Blake (a.k.a. the Comedian) and Daniel Dreiberg (a.k.a. the second Nite Owl)[9] discuss how the American Dream has been realized and embodied in a group of people protesting against costumed vigilantes (II:16-18), the phrase that Hughes emphasizes is in fact deliberately

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[7] Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy* consists of *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). The Iron Man series played by Robert Downey Jr. refer to *Iron Man* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010) (both directed by Jon Favreau), and *Iron Man 3* (2013) (directed by Shane Black).

[8] The complete sentence shows up only after the whole novel is finished, both in its original Latin (taken from *Satires* by Juvenal) and in its English translation. No page number is available.

[9] Henceforth, in this article, 'Nite Owl' refers to Daniel Dreiberg while the first Nite Owl is referred to by his real name, Mason.

interrupted by the Comedian when a woman paints it on a wall, thus rendering it forever incomplete: "Who Watches the Watchme…" (II:18).

6   If the complete sentence indicates how the costumed heroes have to be 'watched' for their existence to be recognized and judged, its incompleteness suggests the partial and un-finish-able nature of costumed heroism and its aspiration. In the words of Peter Y. Paik, "the superheroes constitute a practice of violence legitimated by its essentially reactive and belated character, as a form of always 'striking second'…" (55). Costumed heroes often convince themselves that their masqueraded identities can bring an end to the very social transgressions that motivate their acts; however, these ideal motivations are in fact reactive to the long existence of violence and injustice surrounding them. This is the paradoxical nature of costumed heroism: like how the Joker repetitively shows up before Batman, the existence of costumed heroism can never be the harbinger of peace because, if there is a real peace, then there is no need for costumed or superhuman heroes. Milton Glass's introduction to his book, *Dr. Manhattan: Super-Powers and the Superpowers*, directly points this out: "The suggestion that the presence of a superhuman has inclined the world more towards peace is refudiated by the sharp increase in both Russian and American nuclear stockpiles since the advent of Dr. Manhattan" (III).[10] Accordingly, in the process of what Iain Thomson calls the "hypertrophic deconstruction" (106), the actualization and aggrandizement of heroes in reality can lead to the destruction of heroism itself, making heroism inherently doomed to fail at reaching its ideal destination. As Nite Owl realizes it at the end of *Watchmen*: "We're damned if we stay quiet, Earth's damned if we don't" (XII:20). The choice to involve oneself in costumed

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[10] Dr. Manhattan, an American superhuman created by an experimental accident, is used by the U.S. government as a threatening propaganda against the Soviet Russia, which leaves the Soviet government with no choice but to boost its nuclear power to defend against such a being. Like Mason's *Under the Hood*, Glass's introduction is also one of the intercalary parts in *Watchmen*. The citation signals the exact page number of Glass's book printed in *Watchmen*. Alfred Pennyworth, in Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), also points this out: as Bruce Wayne (a.k.a. Batman) is frustrated by the death of Rachel Dawes and asks: "Did I bring this on her? I was meant to inspire good. Not madness, not death," Alfred responds: "You have inspired good, but you spat in the faces of Gotham's criminals. Didn't you think there might be some casualties? Things were always gonna get worse before they got better." Alfred's statements indirectly suggest that the existence of superheroes is not exempted from the responsibility for making things worse.

heroism is a double-edged sword that can never vanquish its enemies: if one does not perform as a hero, he will be consumed by the mundanity and the corruption of everyday life; if one does, he will be engaged in a never-ending war that potentially consumes the whole world.

7   These concerns affect not only the Watchmen but also their predecessors, the Minutemen, whose notion of costumed heroism is similarly haunted by the collapse of its original aspiration. As Mason puts it in his recollections of the Minutemen: "One of the big problems that faced costumed heroes at the time was the absence of costumed criminals of any real note. I don't think any of us realized how much we needed those goons until they started to thin out" (*Under the Hood* 12). Mason belatedly admits that the function of costumed heroism cannot afford the total disappearance of its villains, but, ironically, he also ignores the fact that it was the Minutemen who were actually outlived by those very 'goons' whose persisting existence substantially supports and subverts the Minutemen's heroic vision.[11] The inheritance of similar concerns for costumed heroism from the Minutemen to the Watchmen points out how the conventional ideals of masculine embodiment and heroism can function as universal aspirations that drive generations of men into similar actions and cause shared problems for them.

8   The Comedian thus sees costumed heroism as nothing but a gathering of "masked adventurers" (II:10) performed by a group of immature adults attempting to fulfill their dreams of world peace and social order. The American Dream does come true — people can freely costume themselves as the embodiments of justice or protest against those embodiments — and the Comedian is its best spokesperson when he actualizes the eternal partiality of 'Watchme…' and expresses: "I seen that written up all over durin' this last two

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[11] The ends of the members of the Minutemen are anything but heroic and glorious: "The first Nite Owl runs an auto-repair shop. The first Silk Spectre is a bloated, aging whore, dying in a Californian rest resort. Captain Metropolis was decapitated in a car crash back in '74. Mothman's in an asylum up in Maine. The Silhouette retired in disgrace, murdered six weeks later by a minor adversary seeking revenge. Dollar Bill got shot. Hooded Justice went missing in '55. The Comedian is dead" (I:19). In Mason's recollection, Hooded Justice allegedly dies a gruesome death: "…a badly decomposed body…was pulled from the sea after being washed up on the coast of Boston…shot through the head" (*Under the Hood* 12). Mason himself is also murdered by a local gang, the Knot Tops (VIII:27-28).

weeks! They don't like us an' they don't trust us….Well, me, I kinda like it when things get weird, y'know? I like it when all the cards are on the table" (II:18). As costumed heroes may regard themselves as the full guardians of freedom and order, it is in fact the already existing freedom that guarantees their choices of vigilantism — a freedom that also justifies any attempt at undoing costumed heroism. Indeed, when all the cards are openly spread on the table, there is no need to discern who has a higher standing or not. For the Comedian, those in costumes should stop pretending that they are standing on a morally higher ground or that they still stand a chance of winning the game of good versus evil.

9　　Accordingly, in the "meeting of the crimebusters" (II:9) that Captain Metropolis convenes for the Watchmen, the Comedian expresses his contempt for the godly vision of the costumed heroes, describing them as the adults who "wanna go on playin' cowboys and Indians!" (II:10), and sneering at their disregard for the substantial meaninglessness that supports their heroic façades. The Comedian then burns the map (on which the topics of heroic achievements are displayed), averring that "inside thirty years the nukes are gonna be flyin' like maybugs…" (II:11). Such a swaggering perception of heroism's ultimate futility explains how come the Comedian is capable of continuing his indulgence in a self-amusing vigilantism first as a member of the Minutemen, then as one of the Watchmen, and finally as an agent for the U.S. government. As shown in the reflective words of Dr. Manhattan: "Blake's different. He understands perfectly…and he doesn't care" (IV:19). The Comedian sees that costumed heroism is to be consumed by itself even as its ideal is practiced in different contexts, and he chooses to enjoy this laughable progression into a total annihilation of men's dreams.[12]

10　　Costumed heroes thus connote an anachronism in their imaginations of an ideal future to

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[12] Ironically, it is this behavior that triggers Ozymandias's plan of fulfilling the destination of costumed heroism, at whatever cost it takes. At the end of *Watchment*, it is revealed that Ozymandias conducts not only multiple murders of the members of the Watchmen but also a massacre in New York City, which kills half the city's citizens and successfully transforms humankind into one unified entity longing for the continuity of humanity. Ozymandias, an Earthen hero, thus succeeds in creating a period of world peace.

come — a future that is forever delayed by their very existence. This self-deconstructive nature is reflected in *Watchmen* by the repetitive and self-conscious references to the costumed heroes as romantic embodiments of childish illusions. In *Under the Hood*, Mason depicts how he identifies himself with costumed heroism and later puts it into action: "I like the idea of adventure, and I feel bad unless I'm doing good….[T]he super-heroes had escaped from their four-color world and invaded the plain, factual black and white of the headlines" (5-6). Mason not only directly associates acts of justice with boyish wish-fulfillments, but he also envisions how a world of bland blackness and whiteness can be enriched and energized by the actualization of costumed heroes from colorful, graphic figures on pages into life-form players in reality. The other heroes in *Watchmen* are less extreme than Mason is, but they also respond to costumed heroism with reservation. Adrian Veidt (a.k.a. Ozymandias) thus disparages the essentially impractical existence of costumed heroism:

> My new world demands less obvious heroism, making your schoolboy heroics redundant. What have they achieved? Failing to prevent Earth's salvation is your only triumph. And yet that failure overshadows every past success! By default, you usher in an age of illumination so dazzling that humanity will reject the darkness in its heart…. (XII:17)

Ozymandias thereby justifies the massacre conducted by him in contrast to the futility of other men's allegedly heroic standing. Nite Owl, in forced retirement, also frustratingly reflects upon his past: "Looking back it all seems so…well, childish, I guess. Just a schoolkid's fantasy that got out of hand. That's, y'know, with hindsight…on reflection" (VII:4).[13] These statements not only strengthen the unrealistic dimension of costumed heroism, but they further suggest the split nature between what these men want to achieve and how their costumed covers really function in a world they deem in grave need of them. These belated statements remind us that heroes are no more than normal humans in a phallic/masculine

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[13] In *Watchmen*, before the story begins, the U.S. government passes the Keene Act, which outlaws any form of vigilantism and forces many heroes into retirement.

masquerade that is imbued with internal contradictions, subjective emotions, and male bigotries.

11   Accordingly, for Kevin Alexander Boon, "the man who is labeled 'hero' is always other" (303) because the sublimation of heroes to larger-than-life figures can seriously disfigure their images and distort their functions in society. This is exactly what *Watchmen* shows us, with its allegedly functioning heroes suffering different forms of masculine anxiety and identity crisis. As Mervi Miettinen observes, *Watchmen* "deconstructs the superhero genre…by exposing the inherent contradictions within these gender-bound tropes from the fascist undercurrents of violent patriotism to the often-hinted sexual dysfunction of the costume-fetish variety" (104).[14] Miettinen does not probe further into this "often-hinted sexual dysfunction" in *Watchmen*, but the conflict between a man's masculine costume and his unmasked selfhood is without doubt a gateway to debunking the artificiality of heroic manhood as the 'real' embodiments of masculinity, justice, and humanity.

12   Ozymandias occupies a peculiar position in this correlation between male self-perception and costumed heroism, who establishes himself as a model dissociated from any humane concern and disconnected from any intimate interpersonal relation: "I recognized the fragility of our world in increasingly hazardous times….My first step was to stand back as far as I could, to view the problem from a fresh perspective, my vista widening with my comprehension….Gradually, I closed upon the heart of the dilemma" (XI:21). In Ozymandias's conception, only through an extremely distanced stance can the core problem be closely examined. With Boon's notion of heroes as otherness (303) in mind, Ozymandias stands as the ultimate 'other' in contrast to the remaining male characters in *Watchmen* — an 'otherness' that is best exhibited in his personifications of "Rameses the Second's Greek name

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[14] It is a great pity that Miettinen only focuses her discussion on "the misogynistic vigilante Rorschach" (104) to support her argument. Besides, Miettinen somehow contradicts her own criticism of Rorschach's vigilantism by concluding that "the way he [Rorschach] embodies these [masculine] ideals even in the most extreme can also act as reaffirming those ideals among readers, as his popularity among readers clearly suggests" (107).

and Alexander's free-booting style" (XI:11) in order "to apply antiquity's teachings to today's world" (XI:11). Nevertheless, the perspective that Ozymandias only "incarnates the costumed hero as a Homeric or Aryan ideal…a star in his own right…" (Paik 37), needs a further deliberation. Ozymandias does not simply want to conventionally impersonate his ideal ancient predecessors; he wants to exceed their halfway achievements and to transform himself from 'another' male model into an 'other' one. This heroic excess not only secures Ozymandias's sense of a manifest masculine selfhood that is distinct from all the other humans,[15] but it further transcends a conventional heroism that is always halfway through its destination. "I was determined to measure my success against his [Alexander's]" (XI:8), Ozymandias thus claims and, concluding that Alexander the Great had "not united all the world, nor built a unity that would survive him" (XI:10), begins his own path to "conquest not of men, but of the evils that beset them" (XI:11). Ozymandias's full embrace of an embodiment that is completely 'other' to his time and to his comrades consequently leads to the novel's outcome: he establishes a sense of alienation from society and humanity (while adopting the camouflage as a humanitarian), shows how that establishment reasonably helps him transcend the futility of costumed heroism conducted by other men, and eventually initiates a massacre that no hero can overpower. In this sense, Ozymandias is the opposite incarnation of Superman: while Superman adopts a humanitarian approach in his never-ending battles against evilness, Ozymandias exposes the humanitarian camouflage of costumed heroism in order to fully vanquish that evilness.

13   Ozymandias does not make himself as he is without any internal conflict, but he disallows himself to be visibly disturbed by any mental discomfort in his pursuit of world peace. For Ozymandias, any doubt in mind can only be faced indirectly (for example, in a dream) or after the massacre is executed.[16] Ozymandias's peculiarity as an unaffected,

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[15] As Ozymandias himself expresses: "A life such as mine offers many things worthy of celebration, my friend. You need only look about you" (XI:7).

[16] Thus, we only see Ozymandias's internal conflicts at the end of *Watchmen*, and he only partially

objective man, extremely devoid of any trace of humanitarian concern or subjective emotion, contributes to his establishment as the one 'true' hero in *Watchmen* — the one who fulfills the 'duty' as a performing hero to prevent a global disaster and to maintain the social order (of which the other Watchmen, apparently because of their 'humanitarian' stance and their failure at stopping Ozymandias, do not acknowledge). Ozymandias's decision to conduct a massacre also shows that it takes an extreme character as he is and an extreme project as he does for the romantic dreams of peace and justice to be practically realized. Ozymandias is thereby the axis by which the story of heroism proceeds: *Watchmen* begins with his murder of the Comedian, the one who sees the essence of costumed heroism, and it ends by his accomplishment that irrevocably obsoletes other heroes.

14   Another dimension of Ozymandias's otherness concerns his style, which is described (by Rorschach) as being "pampered and decadent" (I:19) and associated with homosexuality (I:19). This sexual otherness is not explicitly highlighted in the novel; however, in the film adaptation, Ozymandias is associated with gay men and sexual liberations in the opening sequence, which, combined with the fact that Alexander the Great also had a homosexual liaison with another man, suggests that Ozymandias's measures of realizing the destination of costumed heroism may be an extreme defense against the conventional labels of feminization and immorality upon gay men. In fact, Ozymandias is the only hero that 'comes out' of his façade, reveals his identity in public, and lives on his masculine image.[17] Ozymandias's 'coming out' as an idol of masculine embodiment thereby both subverts and strengthens the conventional coding of heroic manhood as sexually 'normal' and publicly recognizable, while the ultimate vision of world peace as he sees it and the measures he employs to realize it

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acknowledges them: "…I know people think me callous, but I've made myself feel every death. By day I imagine endless faces. By night…well, I dream, about swimming towards a hideous….No. Never mind. It isn't significant" (XII:27, ellipsis original). After the massacre, Ozymandias somewhat redundantly asks: "I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end" (XII:27). This redundant expression shows the gravity of the massacre on Ozymandias's mind, but he still manages to emotionally alienate himself from the execution of such a mass killing.

[17] While many heroes choose to retire into an everyday life because of the Keene Act, Ozymandias decides to reveal his identity, builds a corporation, and becomes extremely rich by merchandising his heroic image.

render him both the most representative and the most inhuman hero.

15   Through Ozymandias's achievement, the destination of costumed heroism is revealed to be an uncanny combination: it makes a man both manly and inhuman when heroism meets its destiny and end. By contrast, Nite Owl demonstrates how the problem of such a combination cannot be easily solved for an ordinary man. As Nite Owl describes it when nakedly standing before his costume: "It's this war, the feeling that it's unavoidable. It makes me feel so powerless. So impotent" (VII:19). Nite Owl here expresses how the unstoppable violence and the perception of his human body make him feel incompetent, but he seems not to notice how his involvement in heroic costuming also precipitates this sense of emasculation. Nite Owl is so attracted by the owl's power of night hunting as to make the animal his prototype of crime-fighting; however, such an obsession, as the story reveals, eventually consumes him. Identifying oneself with a nocturnal animal already suggests one's seclusion from the public gaze, and the more Nite Owl is confident at performing as an owl heroically hunting at night, the more he feels insecure as a retired normal man by day. As Nite Owl expresses in his article: "Is it possible…to study a bird so closely…that it becomes invisible?" (n. pag.).[18] Nite Owl's costumed heroism is thus a performative paradox ─ while the advantageous capability of invisibility when hunting criminals at night is highly regarded, to face this invisibility as an everyday man is unbearable. Accordingly, Nite Owl falls prey to the fictional image that he identifies with and further traps himself within an ideal performance connecting masculinity with invisibility.[19] The descriptions of Nite Owl's lover, Laurie Juspeczyk (a.k.a. the second Silk Spectre), of him as a "self-deprecating" man (VII:9), who is "more sort of receptive" in human relationship (IX:8), exacerbate this masculine crisis, which is unintentionally but

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[18] Nite Owl's article, "Blood from the Shoulder of Pallas" (published in the fictional *Journal of the American Ornithological Society* in Fall 1983), is another intercalary chapter in *Watchmen*. No page number is available.

[19] In his article, Nite Owl describes how he was inspired by an owl that hunts at night: "Not knowing which of us had been selected, I stood frozen along with the rodents of the field, my heart hammering as it waited for the sudden clutch of sharpened steel fingers that would provide my first and only indication that I was the predetermined victim" (n. pag.). Here, Nite Owl unwittingly reveals that it was he who 'predetermined' himself both as the invisible hunter and the vulnerable prey.

relentlessly exposed when she mentions how he is good at keeping personal privacy by building a base underground: "It must be great for you, having a secret identity, a secret place nobody knows about…and there's nobody checking up on you, nobody watching you" (VII:10). In contrast to how Batman invites unpredictability and fear, what Nite Owl creates is a masculine obscurity that hinders others' recognitions of him.

16   Nite Owl has some moments of insight concerning the problems of his costumed heroism and masculine embodiment, but these fleeting moments cannot absolve him from a sense of self-degradation as he leads a retired life, especially in the face of other heroes of recognition and visibility. For example, when Laurie visits his secret base, Nite Owl suddenly laments his "being a crimefighter and everything" (VII:7) as well as his past involvement in "this adolescent, romantic thing" (VII:7). Nevertheless, as Laurie later expresses how Nite Owl's night vision goggles function like the power of her superhuman ex-boyfriend (Dr. Manhattan), thus unwittingly comparing Nite Owl's adolescent equipments with a formidable supernatural man-power, he is visibly unnerved for the next few panels (VII:9-10). Afterwards, as he fails to get hard and sexually perform with Laurie, the television ironically shows Ozymandias's muscular potency and gymnastic capability for a charity group (VII:14-15). Nite Owl's male selfhood is at these moments doubly deprecated: as a man, he fails physically and sexually; as a Nite Owl in retirement, he feels the threat of "this mask killer thing" (VII:20) and his own masculine obscurity.[20] Nakedly standing before his costume, he is thus "worried, confused," feeling "this anxiety, this terror bearing down" (VII:20). In order to dispense with his impotence, Nite Owl turns away from his earlier reference to his costumed heroism as an "adolescent, romantic thing" (VII:7) and accepts Laurie's suggestion of resuming their past

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[20] The "mask killer" here (VII:20) refers to Ozymandias's murders of the Watchmen one by one in case they intervene his plan of massacre. As the killer's identity is still unknown to the Watchmen, they can only surmise that the killer knows well how to deal with the former costumed heroes. As Nite Owl's impotence is paired with other heroes' masculine capacities, his exhibitions of potency is paired with, and thus only stressed by, other heroes' powerlessness. For example, when Dr. Manhattan feels vulnerable in front of the reporters' questioning him in an open interview, Laurie and Nite Owl together defeat a gang of youngsters in a hidden alley (III:11-16).

nighttime adventures. After heroically saving a group of residents from a burning building, Nite Owl regains his masculine potency, makes love to Laurie, and expresses: "Yeah, I guess the costumes had something to do with it. It just feels strange, you know? To come out and admit that to somebody. To come out of the closet….Oh, yes. Jesus, yes. I feel so confident it's like I'm on fire" (VII:28). The building on fire is here directly paired with Nite Owl's heroic achievement and sexual arousal, though he does not see that a building on fire is never a stable structure to rely on for one's existence. Moreover, Nite Owl views his identification with a costumed identity as coming out of the closet, thereby equating his camouflage with a masculine (hetero-)sexuality and treating his hidden human body as being unfit for public attention and only fit for sexual gratification. At this moment, Nite Owl temporarily keeps the causes of his masculine anxiety at bay and is fully consumed by his costumed heroism.[21]

17   As the story proceeds, Nite Owl has to face Ozymandias and to establish himself as a 'true' hero who should stop the massacre, both of which depend on casting the most heroically-driven Ozymandias as the arch-villain. Nite Owl thus expresses his commonality, insignificance, and emasculation when facing the formidable Ozymandias: "Well, my stomach feels weird and my balls are all shrivelled up, so, yeah, I guess 'nervous' will do. Y'know, this must be how ordinary people feel. This must be how ordinary people feel around us" (XI:14). Even though Nite Owl here attempts to differentiate himself from the ordinariness of other people, what he does not expect is that it is actually the failure to stop Ozymandias that exposes the superficiality of his costumed heroism and reveals how ordinariness befits his vulnerability. Accordingly, after the massacre is executed, Nite Owl remorsefully strips himself naked, sexually unites with Laurie again, and tearfully faces his selfhood as an un-heroic man by responding that he now only smells of nostalgia (XII:21-22, 25). Thus facing his fragility and lamenting the irreversible failure at fulfilling "this adolescent,

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[21] Nevertheless, we should also note that Laurie becomes more and more intimate with Nite Owl because she has difficulty living with her ex-boyfriend, Dr. Manhattan. Nite Owl's relationship with women is thus always at the mercy of other men.

romantic thing" (VII:7), Nite Owl embraces what he originally is, leaves his costume forever behind, and potentially transcends his entanglement of an ideal manhood with a real humanity.

18   If Nite Owl's end embodies a man's difficult reconciliation with his costumed selfhood, Walter Joseph Kovacs (a.k.a. Rorschach) demonstrates how a man is so identified with his mask of unswayed justice as to deny his human aspect. In Rorschach's own self-assertive words: "My things were where I'd left them. Waiting for me. Putting them on, I abandoned my disguise and became myself, free from fear or weakness or lust. My coat, my shoes, my spotless gloves. My face" (V:18). Indeed, we do not see any display of human flesh when Rorschach is in his costume, which is the only identity he acknowledges: "All Kovacs ever was: man in a costume" (VI:15). As Nite Owl also describes it: "Over the years, that mask's eaten his [Rorschach's] brains" (VII:9). Rorschach's notions of heroism and justice are thus directly presented on his outward display, especially on the shifting patterns of blackness and whiteness of his masked face, which reveals his perspective of a world continuously changing but without any gray zone: "Black and white. Moving. Changing shape…but not mixing. No gray. Very, very beautiful" (VI:10). As Ozymandias puts it in an interview: "I believe he's a man of great integrity, but he seems to see the world in very black and white, Manichean terms" (10).[22] Consequently, evilness and villainy become not only the basic elements in Rorschach's perception of the world but also the necessary grounds on which he relatively conditions his selfhood, which gradually becomes responsive, abstract, and extreme; as Rorschach thus describes his (un-)masked selfhood in costumes: "Without my face [mask], nobody knows. Nobody knows who I am" (V:11).

19   Whereas Nite Owl is haunted by such an obscurity from visibility, Rorschach feels

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[22] The printed interview is also one of the intercalary chapters in *Watchmen*, "After the Masquerade: Superstyle and the Art of Humanoid Watching," in which Ozymandias is interviewed by Doug Roth from *Nova Express* (a fictional magazine in *Watchmen*). The citation signals the exact page number of the printed interview in *Watchmen*.

protected by it. Indeed, Rorschach seldom uses any subject in his speeches throughout *Watchmen*, which suggests the deliberate disconnection from any substantial being in his costumed identification with an abstract idea of impartiality. Accordingly, the public have difficulty recognizing Rorschach's heroic aspect, especially when he is caught and stripped of his mask: "Who is he? This ugly little zero is the terror of the underworld…" (V:28). The world is revealed to be essentially contradictory to Rorschach's imagination; as Nite Owl describes it: "It's just so hard, reaching him. I mean, all this stuff, this horror and madness, he attracts it. *It's his world*. This is where he lives…in this sordid, violent twilight zone…under this shadow" (VIII:18, emphasis added). Rorschach's mask of shifting patterns is thereby a living paradox, signaling how the society will not stop changing and how the attempt to pinpoint the exact boundary on this shifting reality is of no avail, except for arbitrarily defining one's heroic standing and masculine appearance.

20   Such a bigotry in costumed heroism makes Rorschach the most dangerous character in *Watchmen* to be reckoned with, especially when we look into how his self-evident commitments to justice and vigilantism are anything but impersonal and impartial; as Rorschach describes it: "Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose" (VI:26). Rorschach's conception of the world is originated from his personal experience when investigating a little girl's abduction and murder. After this frustrating event ─ in which Rorschach, after discovering that the missing girl is dismembered and fed to dogs, burns the murderer alive (VI:18-26) ─ Rorschach comes to identify himself only with his costume: "Then I was just Kovacs. Kovacs pretending to be Rorschach. Being Rorschach takes certain kind of insight. Back then, just thought I was Rorschach. Very naïve. Very young. Very soft" (VI:14). Rorschach thus leaves his human aspect behind and invents himself in opposition to his former immaturity and tenderness, and comes to be consumed by the evilness that his vigilantism attempts to dissipate in the first place. Moreover, Rorschach's ideal world order is

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deeply rooted in his fantasies of his missing father and the American nationalism, and the ominous correlation between a self-proclaimed justice, the battles against evilness, and the nationalist patriarchy thus underlies his costumed heroism. As exhibited in his childhood diary: "I think he [the missing father] was the kind of guy who would fight for his country and what was right….I like President Truman, the way Dad would of wanted me to….I think it was a good thing to drop the atomic bomb on Japan" (n. pag.).[23] Rorschach's notion of sexuality －especially when it is associated with women －also constitutes a major part of his personality. When Malcolm Long, a psychiatrist, is assigned to evaluate Rorschach's mental state, he shows Rorschach a black-and-white picture (VI:2), the pattern of which reminds Rorschach not only of the silhouette of two persons having sex but also of the humiliations that traumatize him when he, as a boy, is punished by his mother when intervening her whoring (VI:3-4) and accosted by other teenagers taunting him as a "whoreson" (VI:6). Rorschach thereby shows a direct revulsion towards the female sexuality, whose association with other forms of defilement establishes the division between his masculine self-righteousness and the sinfulness of other men. Accordingly, as Rorschach convinces himself that it is the world of good versus evil that compels his costumed heroism, *Watchmen* relentlessly exposes how such a conviction is molded out of personal bigotries, nationalisitc imaginations, and psychological traumas in childhood.

21   Rorschach's self-perception is eventually disrupted by Ozymandias's plan and risks a serious disintegration. Against the other Watchmen's agreement to remain silent, Rorschach determines to expose Ozymandias's plan, and the pattern on his mask focalized in the panel (XII:23) becomes the same as the former black-and-white picture that reminds him of his childhood humiliations. The re-appearance of this same pattern, with its allusions to male

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[23] As one of the intercalary chapters in *Watchmen*, the diary is written when Rorschach was young, in which he mainly describes his problematic relation with his parents. No page number is available. Rorschach still keeps writing his diary when he grows up (and he names it "Rorschach's journal" in *Watchmen*), the contents of which also compose the major part of his storyline.

potency, human corruptions, and interpersonal frustrations all mingling together, reveals how Rorschach is now haunted for the disintegration of a male selfhood he has constructed in childhood and practiced for life.[24] Ozymandias's success thereby renders Rorschach's manly presentment intolerably meaningless, which leaves him with no option but to bring chaos again by exposing the plan or to face himself as how the world has defined him — an "ugly little zero" (V:28) and a "whoreson" (VI:6). In the end, Rorschach takes his mask off, asks Dr. Manhattan to stop him from exposing Ozymandias's plan, and is killed with a human face full of tears (XII:23-24). Moore thus comments in an interview: "At the end this is not the mask talking, it's not Rorschach, it's the actual human being that is somewhere under there" (n. pag.). As the meaning of being Rorschach is made obsolete, Kovacs returns and faces what has obsessed him all along — a self-invention that has deprived Kovacs of his human aspect — and this deprivation is eventually paralleled by his death.

22   In contrast to Rorschach's being consumed by his costume, the Comedian is his own costume incarnate, and the boundary between a man and a costume thus collapses in the Comedian's personification. If Ozymandias establishes himself as a 'true' hero on a high moral ground, then the Comedian is the 'most real' one down on Earth. The Comedian's costume is thereby directly associated with the American ideologies through its colors and patterns borrowed from the American flag, embodying and subverting a powerful stereotype of modern manliness that, as George L. Mosse describes it, can be "seen, touched, or even talked to, a living reminder of human beauty, of the proper morals, and of a longed-for utopia" (6). The collapse between a costumed self and a real one is also shown in how the Comedian perceives the essential flaws of costumed heroism but, simultaneously and consequently, indulges himself in the corrupt violence that his costumed identity justifies. In the words of

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[24] Nevertheless, in one small scene, Rorschach shows a different attitude towards sexuality. When questioning his landlady about a "serious business" of her sexual "slur on [his] reputation" (X:6), Rorschach, seeing the frightening faces of the landlady's children, refrains from getting even with her. This is the one rare occasion that Rorschach, seeing his own shadow of childhood vulnerability on the faces of the children, responds with silence and remorse. In fact, as Rorschach puts it, the landlady reminds him of his mother (V:11).

Paik, "the Comedian has always reveled and taken immense pride in his readiness to face up to the ugly truths of human existence…" (60). Since the true peace is out of the question, the most practical and satisfying way to maintain a temporary façade of order is to enjoy oneself in the employments of violence against social transgressions. The Comedian thus claims: "…once you figure out what a joke everything is, being the comedian's the only thing makes sense" (II:13), while also expressing that: "Hey…I never said it was a good joke! I'm just playin' along with the gag…" (II:13). Accordingly, the Comedian's seeming transcendence beyond the futility of costumed heroism paradoxically makes him the most obsessive performer, and his seeming superficiality and banality further make him the most worldly costumed hero, which is also demonstrated in how his costume is the least covered-up one among the human heroes in *Watchmen*.[25]

23   Nevertheless, the Comedian's outright acceptance of humanity and its heroic façade does not guarantee him a better association with human beings. In fact, this outright-ness always borders on a sense of masculine self-complacency, which, along with his indulgence in his own amusement, renders it difficult for this worldly hero to build any intimate relation with other people, especially with women. The broken sexual relationship literally and metaphorically leaves marks on the Comedian's smiley and manly face, which is first injured by Hooded Justice's beating him up when he attempts to rape Sally Jupiter (a.k.a. the first Silk Spectre, also the mother to Laurie) (II:5-7). The same face is then severely scarred by his pregnant Vietnamese girlfriend with bottle glass for his shedding responsibility to be the child's father; after the scarring, the Comedian immediately shoots her dead (II:14-15). The scarred face is again focalized and humiliated when Laurie, after the Comedian responds to her accusation of the attempted rape of her mother with the causal answer: "only once" (IX:21), splashes water over his face in public.[26]

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[25] I here emphasize the 'human' heroes because Dr. Manhattan, a man transformed into a superhuman being, is mostly naked in *Watchmen*. Dr. Manhattan's extraordinariness will be discussed later.

[26] As both the Comedian and Sally Jupiter refrain from revealing the truth, Laurie knows quite late in *Watchmen*

24   Accordingly, even though the Comedian unabashedly enjoys in his own masculine embodiment, his cracked face not only implicitly betrays what he embodies, but it further demonstrates how the ceaseless miscommunications with women can render his masculine façade ugly and fragile. In fact, when knowing that the world is about to end in Ozymandias's hand, the Comedian has no one but his arch-enemy, Moloch the Mystic, to turn to and to express his feeling with a tearful and helpless face: "…I thought I knew how it was, how the world was. But then I found out about this gag, this joke…" (II:22). As Ozymandias tears down the very essence of costumed heroism that the Comedian sees through and lives on, the Comedian's self-amusing life, his egotism, and his masculine self-confidence thus become real-life jokes. As Ozymandias describes it: "Blake understood, too. He knew my plan would succeed, though its scale terrified him. That's why he told nobody. It was too big to discuss...but he understood" (XI:25). In the end, it befits the retired and desolate Comedian to show us his sorrowful and scarred face right before Ozymandias murders him by throwing him out from a tall building, breaking both the window and the Comedian's face (I:3) — a disfigured face that triggers the story of *Watchmen* and presages the downfall of the seemingly promising ideals of costumed heroism.

25   Jon Osterman (a.k.a. Dr. Manhattan), a man transformed into a superhuman being due to an incident in a scientific experiment, occupies a similar position as Ozymandias does: a superhero that disables other men and exposes the essential ineffectiveness of their costumed heroism. As Mason describes it: "The arrival of Dr. Manhattan would make the terms 'masked hero' and 'costumed adventurer' as obsolete as the persons they described" (*Under the Hood* 13). However, different from Ozymandias's motivation to bring peace, Dr. Manhattan's superhuman existence (and his alleged alliance with the U.S. government) instead precipitates the violence and chaos in the world; as Ozymandias describes it: "Jon's presence accelerated this….As tensions rose, the elevation of costumed heroes became a descent" (XI:22).

(IX:23-24) that the Comedian is her biological father.

Moreover, similar to the Comedian's self-incarnation, the boundary between Dr. Manhattan's human life and costumed life also collapses ─ not because he fully embodies his costume, but because he does not need one. As shown in the reflections of his now break-up girlfriend, Laurie:

> The way he [Dr. Manhattan] looks at things, like he can't remember what they are and doesn't particularly care. This world, the real world, to him it's like walking through mist, and all the people are like shadows. Just shadows in the fog….And he doesn't care how people dress. (III:9)

Dr. Manhattan's supernatural power thus renders him visibly distinct from all the other men, and, unlike Superman, he does not need any costume to demonstrate that. However, as Laurie's descriptions of him reveal, such a nakedly masculine distinction also hinders him from building proper relationships with other human beings, especially with women. Janey Slater, Dr. Manhattan's first girlfriend, thus says to him with awe: "They say you can do anything, Jon. They say you're like God now" (IV:11). Laurie also expresses her uneasiness with his formidable power: "…but Jon, how did you know? I need to see you, you appear…I mean, it's all so deus ex machina…" (VIII:23).

26   Accordingly, instead of a story of peace on Earth maintained by a super-heroic being, what we have through Dr. Manhattan's story is a superhuman trapped in an all-too-human reality, and the combination of the two extremities embodied in his figure ─ of an almost perfect male body with an almost perfect but inhuman superpower ─ only leads to awry outcomes that even the God-like hands cannot keep hold of; as Dr. Manhattan thus reflects: "It's all getting out of my hands…" (IV:12). Indeed, when Dr. Manhattan tries to please Laurie sexually with a foreplay through his hands, he increases the number of his muscular body and attempts to 'magnify' her pleasure with more than two hands, which ends up frightening her out of bed (III:4). In fact, Dr. Manhattan's nude and masculine but eerily shining blue body is another issue that is emphasized in *Watchmen*. As Laurie expresses: "I

remember staring at you. I just couldn't get used to you. I mean, you had a great body, but, y'know, it was blue" (IX:15). Even though this naked exhibition of Dr. Manhattan is demanded by the U.S. government to be covered up (to which he later opposes), such a costumed covering-up does not stop people from paying attention to his spectacular body, to the potent sexuality it connotes, and to the scandalous gossips its blueness brings. When interviewed by *Nova Express*, Janey slanders Dr. Manhattan by saying: "He couldn't relate to me. Not emotionally. Certainly not sexually" (III:6); when Janey is publicly revealed to be "suffering from lung cancer" (III:14), one reporter asks Dr. Manhattan: "[D]o you think you gave Ms. Slater cancer by sleeping with her?" (III:15). Accordingly, compared to Superman's double identities and his predictable but functioning life, Dr. Manhattan can only lead a dysfunctional life due to the collapse between his human and superhuman aspect. Dr. Manhattan's seeming transcendence beyond human capacities thereby renders him the most vulnerable man when faced with the complexity of humanity. This vulnerability also exposes the conventional fallacy of relating superheroes with sexual potency and public recognition — a fallacy that is highlighted in the uncanny image of Dr. Manhattan's exposed muscular flesh with a blue color.

27   Dr. Manhattan's God-like super-heroic power is further downgraded by the fact that he is neither omnipotent nor omniscient, but only almost so. Dr. Manhattan's alleged clairvoyance turns out to be surmountable; as he describes it: "We're all puppets….I'm just a puppet who can see the strings" (IX:5). The fact that even a man as imaginably powerful as Dr. Manhattan is cannot stop Ozymandias's plan of massacre unrelentingly points to the ultimate incredibility of any conventional heroism, be it costumed or supernatural. Therefore, at the end of *Watchmen*, in response to Ozymandias's doubt of whether the plan really "all worked out in the end" (XII:27) to correct the wrongs in the world, Dr. Manhattan only responds: "Nothing ever ends" (XII:27), thus acknowledging that any form of heroism is not the final answer to how the world should proceed. Dr. Manhattan then decides to leave for another

"less complicated" galaxy (XII:27), leaving the Earth's fate to its non-superhuman beings who attempt to regain their beliefs in humanity after the massacre. After Dr. Manhattan's absence, Laurie and Nite Owl (now using his real name, Daniel) together work through their lives in alias while facing the probability of another chaos caused by the potential exposure of the truth of the massacre by Rorschach's journal.[27] This final uncertainty suggests that the cycle between human transgressions and reactive heroism will repeat itself for eternity, with or without such a superhuman as Dr. Manhattan. This uncertain ending, along with the fact that it is Dr. Manhattan who eventually confronts and kills Rorschach in *Watchmen*, further reveals that the complicated humanity and the justification of practicing justice are the core issues we should emphasize, not a man of bigoted heroism or of supernatural power.

28　Accordingly, the complex stories of costumed heroes in *Watchmen* collectively demonstrate such underlying issues of conventional heroism as a man's masculine embodiment, his justification of heroic behavior, and his responses to sexuality and interpersonal relations. If an ideal combination of manliness, heroism, and humanity is revealed to be a romantic fiction in *Watchmen*, then we may consider adopting a different form of heroism that is life-based and quotidian but actually worth more attentions and celebrations than the conventional stories of superpower are. Indeed, as Rorschach's journal remains undisclosed at the end of *Watchmen*, the novel shows us the peaceful reconciliation between Laurie and her mother (for the involvement with the Comedian) at the time of Christmas — of celebrating a rebirth after the era of heroism. The conflicts originated from men's masculine and heroic embodiments are thus not resolved through more demands on the realizations of justice and manliness, but rather through two women's mutual recognitions of each other's emotion and humanity. Accordingly, the recognition of small-scale but humanly acts conducted by common, anonymous persons in everyday life can show us what to believe

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[27] Before Rorschach (with Nite Owl) confronts Ozymandias, he writes down all he knows about Ozymandias's plan in his journal and sends it to a small publishing company (the Pioneer Publishing Inc.). We never know how the company is going to handle Rorschach's journal because the story simply ends here.

in at a time of post-heroism － a time that signals not the end of heroism, but a return to its potentials. Desmond Doss and Alan Turing were both recognized as wartime heroes, and both did not conform to the figure of conventional superheroes: while the former refused to use weapons, the latter was prosecuted for his homosexual acts. The public recognitions of such contributions can not only debunk the myth of super-heroism but further lead to a future in which face-to-face interactions and empathic concerns, not ideal displays of one's body and power, should last long and be appreciated.

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Kristen Hogan: *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability.* **Duke University Press: Durham, NC. 2016.**

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1   If Kristen Hogan's time at the Toronto Women's Bookstore was "a love story," (Hogan 86) then her book *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability* is the longest 'Dear John' letter ever written. While Hogan fell in love with Feminist Bookstores during the 1990s and the 2000s, this books chronicles the long war and eventual defeat of feminist bookstores by capitalist bookstores. Hogan charted the rise and fall of the feminist bookstore movement through the lifespan of the *Feminist Bookstore News*, beginning in 1976 and ending at the dawn of the 21st century. Through creating the historical narrative of the Feminist Bookstore movement, Kristen Hogan also introduces the ideas of lesbian antiracist accountability, the feminist shelf, and feminist remembering. These three concepts are important additions to feminist thought and should be further analyzed within the discipline.

2   *The Feminist Bookstore Movement* is separated into seven sections, categorized both chronologically and thematically. Hogan first maps how feminist bookstores formed and incorporated feminist, antiracist collectives within the capitalist system in part one, which spanned from 1970 to 1976. She then looks at how feminist bookstores remained accountable to one another, an aspect of feminist bookstore management in which Hogan believes the *Feminist Bookstore News* and its editor Carol Seajay played a pivotal role. Part three covers the early 1980s, which can be seen as the highpoint of Feminist Bookstores. In this section, Hogan shows how conferences, book orders, lobbying efforts, and romantic and platonic relationships allowed feminist bookstore workers to work together to influence the publishing industry on a global level. At the same time, these women

were able to remain accountable to one another in their efforts to create safe spaces for antiracist feminist activism and education. It is not until part four that Hogan introduces the feminist shelf, which is the most important new idea introduced in *The Feminist Bookstore Movement*. Hogan ends the work by looking at how the feminist bookstore movement was destroyed by its war against large publishing houses and mainstream booksellers, such as *Barnes and Noble* and *Amazon.com*. In her epilogue, Hogan reflects on what the feminist bookstore movement provided to the feminist movement as a whole and how the ideas introduced by feminist bookstores can continue to influence lesbian antiracist accountability in the 21st century and the world of digital bookstores.

3   The role of feminist bookstores within feminism is a topic Hogan has studied for over a decade, and her interest and knowledge of the topic is evident throughout *The Feminist Bookstore Movement*. Her most remarkable contribution to feminist thought is the introduction of the feminist shelf. This concept encapsulates the practice, common at many feminist bookstores throughout the late 20th century, of curating bookshelves so as to group books by theme and construct a syllabus of certain areas of feminist studies. Hogan cites shelves which included African-American, African-Canadian, and Asian-American sections at various bookstores. She also discussed grouping books based on subjects such as lesbian motherhood, domestic abuse, and other experiential categories, which would enable women to find models and vocabularies for their experiences. This practice went beyond the perfunctory 'diversity' section of mainstream bookstores. Furthermore, it allowed for visitors to engage more intimately with the books while they found community and activism within their bookshelves. The idea of the feminist shelf, constructed through a dedication to antiracist accountability, is an important idea that requires further explanation in order to be better incorporated into feminist thought.

4   Although the idea of antiracist accountability and the feminist shelf offer new lenses through which scholars can approach feminist writing, Hogan's work primarily documents events and decisions without offering explanation or theoretical frameworks. Although she explored moments in which bookstore workers were held accountable for racist views, she never delves into the conversations that took place and only offers a few actions taken to hold feminists responsible for racist actions. Hogan relies heavily on the *Feminist Bookstore News* as the space for feminist antiracist accountability, but does not offer much in the way of the newsletter's content or examples of its letters and articles rooted in transnational accountability. In her epilogue, Hogan suggests that a major point of *The Feminist Bookstore Movement* was to inspire a sense of feminist remembering. Feminist remembering is a practice through which feminists could reintroduce antiracist accountability, as previously insured by the feminist shelf, into feminist discourse. However, without offering models for the vocabulary and language used to hold one another accountable, Hogan gives her readers little in the way of preparation for feminist remembering.

5   At times *The Feminist Bookstore Movement* reads more like a nostalgic memoir than a historical narrative of the rise and fall of feminist bookstores and their collective activism. This work would benefit from a greater emphasis on spatial theory and borderlands theory, both of which would expand the idea of the feminist shelf. Ideally, Hogan will write a follow-up book to this work, allowing for greater rumination on the role of feminist shelf in the Digital Age. Despite this shortcoming, however, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement* is an essential addition to feminist studies, especially for those in the discipline interested in the influence of print on the movement. So much of feminism has been articulated through books and circulated by feminist bookstores. By documenting the rise and fall of the

feminist bookstore movement, Hogan has done a great service to both the history and the future of feminism.

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