



**Universidad**  
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# Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

“Axis America. The Dusk of Democracy”: National  
Identity in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*  
(2016)

Author

Oswaldo André Navarro de Aquino

Supervisor

María del Mar Azcona Montoliú

FACULTY OF ARTS  
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Drawing inspiration from the vignettes of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Dan Jurgens' *The Death of Superman* (1992), the second installment of the superhero or comic book movie saga known as the DCEU (DC Extended Universe) came to fruition under the name of *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016). The movie was directed by Zack Snyder, the same director in charge of conceiving the franchise's inception in its preceding feature film *Man of Steel* (2013). As Liam Burke explains, the movie follows the narrative of "a vigilante or outsider character engaged in a form of revenge narrative and is pitched at a heightened reality with a visual style marked by distinctly comic book imagery" (106). Contrary to popular criticism that tends to accuse superhero films of catering to children, the movie is unafraid of delving into mythological and political issues regarding the constructions of the United States and modern democracies' national identities, and, more specifically, one of its consequential ramifications: nationalism.

*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* revisits one of the scenes from *Man of Steel* in which Superman (Henry Cavill), after having come to terms with his identity as Clark Kent and finding his place on the planet, faces the fascist General Zod (Michael Shannon), who wants to exterminate humans and repopulate the earth with Kryptonians. Yet, this time we see it from the perspective of Bruce Wayne (Ben Affleck), who, unaware of Zod's intentions, reads Superman's actions as a deliberate act of terrorism not only against the U.S. but against humanity as a whole. This

moment lays the ground for the confrontation that emerges throughout the movie between a cynic, hatred, and revenge-driven Bruce Wayne and a naive Clark Kent.

At the time of its release, most reviewers described the film in a negative way. Kim Newman, writing for *Sight and Sound*, described it as “a superhero film which opens and closes with funerals and requires the world’s finest detective and an avatar of truth and justice to batter each other (and everyone else) senseless for two-and-a-half hours.” For A.O. Scott, from *The New York Times*, the movie displays ostentatious “signifiers of importance without having anything much to say” because of its apparent lack of humor.

Among the mainly negative reviews, some critics mentioned some ideological conflicts at the film's heart. This is, for instance, the case of Rick Quinn from *PopMatters*. As he puts it, *Batman v Superman* “utilizes the cultural ubiquitousness of the Greek and Christian narrative mythos, and these understandings of myth as imaginative narratives about ourselves to draw viewers into a sustained critique of American power and hubris in a postmodern world.” For Quinn, as a cultural artifact made in a specific socio-historical moment, the movie engages in a conversation with the socio-political and ideological environment that produced it in relation to issues such as U.S. imperialism and the idea of national identity.

Thus, given the ideological implications of the comic book movie genre as a vehicle for the imperialist advancement and establishment of the sociopolitical and economic hegemony of the United States, this essay will explore how *Batman v. Superman* departs from some of the ideological tenets of the genre to represent the consequences of the decaying transition of western national identities from cultural

and political paradigms based on collective social cooperation into communities ruled by individualism and capitalist urbanization.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As Terence McSweeney (2020) explains, the comic book film genre inherited the ideological legacy of the Western genre, traditionally known for bearing the responsibility of justifying the United States' expansionist agenda in the times of the frontier. In spite of their many differences, westerns and comic book films are said to share a similar ideology: an unabashed and blind-sighted defense of U.S. patriotism (42). Such patriotism –overtly promoted in films like John Wayne's *The Alamo* (1960) or Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978)– manifests in the shape of political slogans that justify its characters' actions by claiming the pursuit of liberty, justice, and truth. In this sense, the historical evolution of the comic book movie genre can be traced on the basis of the ideological paradigms it has reinforced through time.

With the first rise of comic book movies in the 1970s, the superhero of the New Frontier was successfully introduced to the big screen and millions of cinemagoers bought tickets to watch Richard Donner's *Superman* in 1978. The sequels *Superman II* (1980), *Superman III* (1983), and *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (1987) tried to capitalize on the success of the 1978 film. Yet, the more the sequels refused to address the socio-political context surrounding their respective production, the less money they made at the box office. The decade of the 1970s in the United States was a political period of turbulence. The decade can be seen as a response to the systemic injustices that the counterculture that started in the 1960s was fighting against, whether it was racism, misogyny, climate catastrophe, and more important to this essay, U.S. interventionism in Vietnam. It was a time in which there was a need for rebuilding the

U.S. collective imaginary. Reconfiguring the country's patriotism in order to regain the public's trust in the national institutions became the political strategy.

As Terence McSweeney (2020) argues, it is no coincidence to see Christopher Reeves's portrayal of Superman explicitly displaying his embracement of U.S. patriotism by cooperating with the country's president and its military and frequently stopping by the Oval Office. As a quintessential "American hero" and an embodiment of what means to be "American", the character of Superman in *Superman* (1978), *Superman II* (1980), *Superman III* (1983), and *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (1987) is ideologically instrumentalized by being portrayed as a subservient vassal of the U.S. government and its agenda (45, 50). The orchestration of this propagandistic display of trust in the government comes at a time of public general distrust of U.S. institutions after years of racial segregation, discrimination of women and non-white people, and an imperialist war that was destined to be a failure. From *Superman* to *Superman IV*, the character of Superman, portrayed by Christopher Reeves, always remains detached from the tumultuous political reality that surrounded its viewers, which is probably one of the reasons behind the franchise's ultimate failure.

In 1981, Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States. His trickle-down economics vouching for industrial deregulation, general tax cuts, and a decrease in government disbursement plunged the country into its biggest economic deflation since the Great Depression. This resulted in widespread poverty, drug trafficking, social inequality, and general distrust of the institutions among U.S. citizens. If the 1970s U.S. society was defined by social revolutions carried with the purpose of achieving equality among its citizens, the 1980s became the opposite due to

Reagan's economic policies that only exacerbated the difference between classes. On the sociocultural level, Reagan's followers embodied a movement that reclaimed traditional family values as something to be saved from the dangers of cultural anarchy prompted by different social changes pushed by the counterculture, the hippies, and feminism. Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) becomes the conservative dark crusader in charge of safekeeping the traditional values of the U.S. family. For McSweeney (2020), this film and its sequel are construed as a dark melodrama that welcomes the absurdity of this character's mythos, offering a gothic and irrational representation of human drama that can only be described as excessive (54-55). Exuberant displays of flaky goth deluded its viewers into seeing a billionaire, a representative of the major benefactors of Reagan's economic policies, criminally intimidating lower social hierarchies that had been pushed into poverty and crime as the direct solution to the social and political polarization these same policies had managed to perpetuate.

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, speculations and discussions regarding the rebirth of the genre started to take place among academics. As McSweeney (2020: 3) argues, such revival started with the releases of both Bryan Singer's *X-Men* (2000), a mutant tale that served as a Civil Rights allegory that proved to Hollywood that comic book films were profitable, and Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002), an all American coming of age story of a New York mid-class teenager coming to terms with the responsibilities his new abilities brought with them. Both films brought their characters closer to spectators on the basis of topics related to segregation in the former and class in the latter. However, both of them exuded a campy and unserious aura and none dared to venture on issues related to U.S. imperialism and socio-politics

substantially. For Liam Burke, the comic book movie “Renaissance” was not consolidated until it found its “real voice” in 2008 with the release of Jon Favreau’s *Iron Man* (2008) (2015: 111), which shaped its main character as a technocrat concerned with his technology being weaponized by the military-industrial complex while simultaneously keeping the production of weaponry rolling for his economic benefit, eventually profiting from the war machine he allegedly denounces.

In the case of Superman, his traditional “all American” patriotic boy scout persona became difficult to combine with the views of 21st-century spectators who had grown contentious of their nation’s domestic and foreign policies. As Terrence McSweeney explains, in the aftermath of the events of 9/11, the U.S., under the leadership of George W. Bush, reshaped its national and international policies into a series of controversial, xenophobic, and bigoted actions under the oath of fighting a war on terrorism (2020: 50-51). These actions resulted in a series of several unjustified interventions in the Middle East through claims, eventually proven false, of the existence of weapons of mass destruction that threatened the United States and the world as a whole. As a consequence, U.S. legitimacy as the global leading nation was weakened, and so were its representative icons. So when Bryan Singer’s *Superman Returns* was released in 2006, his nostalgic depiction of the character as the embodiment of traditional U.S. values proved to be old-fashioned and unappealing. In a post-9/11 world, the entire globe grew divided amidst the intrusions of the United States in the Middle East (Iraq and Afghanistan) and the global escalation of geopolitical tensions. So while patriotism strongly resurged as an ideological and cultural response to the events of the World Trade Center terrorist attacks, it started

fading down soon after Bush's claims of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq were proven false but had taken hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives. After this U.S. and U.K.-led interventionist affair, the sense of patriotism was jeopardized among citizens who felt abused and betrayed by their countries' national and international imperialist and nationalist policies (NA and Europe).

In the case of Batman, Christopher Nolan's trilogy—*Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)—depicts a U.S. agenda driven by bigoted Red Scare paranoia values that resemble Western nation's real-world policies, encapsulated by the filmmaker's War on Terror inspired motifs and cementing Batman cultural status as the hero protector of the Neoliberal status-quo (McSweeney 2020: 53-54). However, the film romanticizes the world order the character tries to protect when we witness how the billionaire hero allegedly dies a martyr of the country's national and ideological fight against socialism.

Comic book movies had become a terrain for shallow explorations of simple solutions to deeply complicated geopolitical issues that 'coincidentally' always determined the omnipresence of the United States as an answer. As we have explored, comic book movies have been repurposed in many different ways throughout time. But despite having taken on different shapes and forms they have all been ideological instruments created to subserve, as Tanner Mirrlees states, the U.S. agenda responsible for perpetuating their own economic, military, and cultural hegemony (2014). These are products manufactured by U.S. cultural aristocracies (Hollywood) with a budget usually co-financed by their Department of Defence, and that ultimately function as

mechanisms to further the U.S. ambition of reinforcing and preserving their imperialist economic, military, and cultural global dominance (4-11).

Considering the ideological implications of the American superhero movie genre as an instrument for the imperialist promotion and the consolidation of the United States' sociopolitical and economic supremacy, the rest of this essay explores *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* as a movie that recontextualizes the two characters after the events of 9/11 to comment upon present issues related to national identity. As will be argued, the film departs from some of the genre's ideological conventions, deconstructing itself and thus the world that it represents, in order to illustrate the consequences of the transformation of Western national identities amidst the rise of globalized neoliberalism.

### **3. BATMAN V. SUPERMAN: THE DAWN OF JUSTICE (2016)**

#### **3.1 SUPERMAN, A COSMOPOLITAN HERO**

Considering the central conflict of the movie is prompted by the implications of the existence of Superman and his actions, it is detrimental to dissect what aspects of the character differentiate him from past incarnations in relation to the icon's portrayal of the national identity of the country. Contrary to the historical depiction of the hero as the blind patriot subservient and safe keeper of the domestic and international agenda of the United States, Zack Snyder depicts Superman as an alien immigrant troubled by the consequences of his status as a foreigner. Such status is given to the character at a time when, as McSweeney explains (2020), the United States wanted to refortify its global function after a century of interventionist warfare spanning from the Philippine-American war (1899) and the Colombian Thousand Days War (1901) to events such as the bombings of Libya (2011), Syria (2011) and Yemen (2015), among others (48). If Superman is to protect humankind, this film makes sure that humankind does not only mean WASP U.S. citizens.

One of the defining traits of Superman in Snyder's film is the fact his natal planet has vanished in the hands of an ecofascist technocracy whose disdain for the ecological sustainability of Krypton sentenced the entire planet to death. Superman's parents send him as a 'climate refugee' to Earth, where apart from acquiring superhuman abilities he is brought up, nurtured, and raised on the values of modern-day rural Kansas by the Kents, a family of farmers. His identity then becomes a combination of his status as a sort of climate refugee and a farm boy raised on the traditional rural values of community and cooperation. This combination provides him

with a cosmopolitan perspective of the struggles of humankind in a globalized world, shaping him into a cosmopolitan hero. In this sense, he is no longer a hero that blindly serves the political interests of the United States, but one who struggles to find solutions to human problems in a world where the common good is no longer the center of politics.

This view of Superman as a cosmopolitan hero is reinforced, among others, by the scenes that take place in the fictional country of Nairoimi. It is presented as a wild and isolated place (through wide shots of a daunting color palette of washed sandy rouges that accentuates and characterizes this land and its people as a hostile place) and, in a way, could be said to embody any Middle Eastern country ravaged by U.S. geopolitical interventionism represented by the presence of mercenaries arming alleged ‘terrorists’.



*Fig. 1: Village in Nairoimi desert covered in sandstorm.*



*Fig. 2: US mercenaries and military wreak havoc.*



*Fig. 3: Sandy and washed rouges and dark contrast shape this setting as clandestine and hostile.*

When Superman faces and destroys US military weaponry (a drone missile) launched to kill an entire village in Nairobi, he makes a political statement about the current values of his own country. As María del Mar Azcona argues in relation to Jason Bourne in the franchise of the same name (2014), Superman declares himself a stateless person that pledges allegiance to no nation or national agenda, openly expresses his obligation and fidelity to humankind over any national duty, which implicitly invites the spectator to engage on introspective reconsideration in regards to the construction of U.S. patriotic identity (10).



*Fig. 6: U.S. military drone strikes the Nairobi village.*



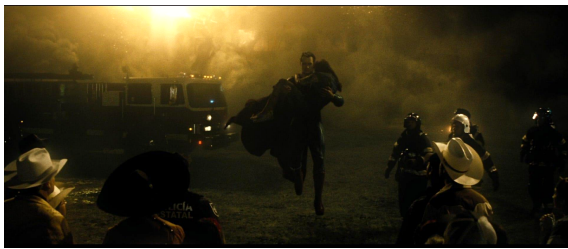
*Fig. 7: Superman faces the U.S. drone missile.*



*Fig. 8: Corporate contracted mercenaries see Superman taking U.S. drone down.*

Superman reinstates his cosmopolitan aspirations when he flies to Mexico to save children from a fire while surrounded by clamoring extended hands and outcries exhaled by Day of the Dead-themed painted faces. There is also a montage sequence

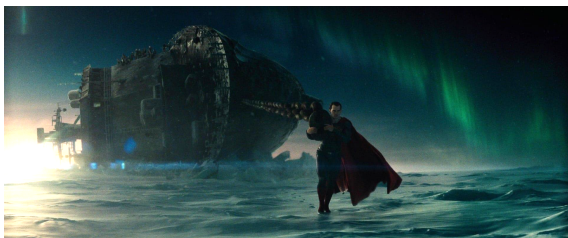
where he is featured in a series of low-angle wide shots, framing him front and center as a larger-than-life virtuous entity, either dragging a wrecked ship (metaphorically the ship of human civilization) to safety through the vastity of an iced Greenland, or saving the crew of a command module from the explosion and debris of a Russian spacecraft that has failed launch in Kazakhstan, or rescuing a group of distraught families sheltered on rooftops sieged by torrential floods somewhere on septentrional Europe. The slow motion in these shots highlights the strength, power, and determination of Superman and his values, which are met with the criticism and scrutiny of voice-overs of the U.S. media debating over the political implications of his acts, and by extension his existence.



*Fig. 9: Superman saves girl from fire in Mexico.*



*Fig. 10: Superman clamored by the Mexican public.*



*Fig. 11: Superman in Greenland.*



*Fig. 11: Superman saving rocket crew at failed launch in Kazakhstan.*



*Fig. 12: Families trapped by floods in Europe.*



*Fig. 13: Superman comes to rescue in floods in Europe.*

However, despite the construction of Superman's identity as a cosmopolitan hero, we need to take into account that even though he is not perceived as a human in the movie, the interpretation of his identity in the political zeitgeist of the United States is one in which he is aligned with whiteness. So while his acts can be perceived as cosmopolitan, it is detrimental to analyze the implication of such being reaffirmed through a character who is male and white. The fact that Superman is granted the privilege of becoming a vehicle to exercise his cosmopolitan morality with a certain freedom is tied to the concept of his social status of invisibility as a white heterosexual male, an entitlement that would be interesting to see not granted to a non-white male superhero. What would be the cultural consequences of upholding a character that does not embody WASP citizenship as responsible for changing geopolitical and social notions of justice?

In parallel with these instances of cosmopolitan acts, we find overt elements conjoining the figure of Superman to a certain nostalgia for the agrarian past of the United States, a time when the nation's values of community and cooperation had not been adulterated by industrialization. Such characterization also contributes to the construction of the otherness of Superman since his a historical moment in which these values are old-fashioned and out of place. Taking from Colin McArthur's (1972) deconstruction of the Western as an introspective dialogue between the United States and its rural past, this representation of Superman becomes the walking embodiment of the clash between what the U.S. used to stand for and what it stands up for now. Superman then becomes, as Will Brooker (2013) argues, a materialization of a series of wish-fulfillment ideological perceptions of what the United States collectively

imagines to be (11). This is a series of values that, as a consequence of the rise of neoliberal corporatism and industrialization, were abandoned, deeming community and collectivism obsolete while embracing the individualist ethos prompted by capitalist materialism (Cassuto 10).

Nevertheless, while trying to make the case for Superman's selflessness being rooted in the rural past of the United States, we need to clarify that agrarian life, historically attached to a sense of political conservatism, is not as much of a direct source of communality but an environment that facilitates it. This promotion of the extension of sympathy to other members of the community did not disappear with capitalist industrialization, it only became scarce to find given the establishment of an economic system that runs on competitiveness and the survival of the greediest. This sociocultural transformation is what seems to alienate Superman in the movie. He is shown finding refuge in the tranquility of the vastness of Kansas crop fields surrounding his parents' farm, the place where he initially learned to selflessly serve the community. Wide long shots of comforting pitch black night skies caressing the cornfields accentuate that it is in this rural world where he learned that human beings are citizens of the same world and, as such, the only way to live through this condition is by helping each other. As Martha Nussbaum (1994) explains, cosmopolitanism is about trying to bridge the gap between the inner and outer concentric circles that constitute one's identity, with the self and closer members of one's family and community occupying the former circle and humanity at a global scale occupying the latter. In this sense, Superman's mission could be read as a way of extending the values

of cooperation and selflessness he was raised on in his closer community sphere all the way to the ones of the furthest.

### **3.2 LEX LUTHOR, A CORPORATE VIRUS**

The figure of Lex Luthor becomes a key element to understand the ideological conflict that takes place between the characters of Superman and Batman in the film. As the plot of *Batman v. Superman* implies, Lex Luthor is responsible for criminalizing the figure of Superman since he manipulates public opinion against him. As this section will argue, Lex Luthor can be read as an embodiment of some capitalist practices that have turned the U.S. into a neoliberal corporate dystopia. For the analysis of Luthor's character, we need to take into account that the destruction of Europe in both WWI and II is one of the detrimental factors that propelled the rise and establishment of U.S. corporations that profited off the need for rebuilding to reassert its position of cultural, political and economic dominance over the world. With most of the world becoming subjected to the U.S. collective imaginary, democracies started being shaped by its values and models of governance, giving birth to the corporate state.

The character of Lex Luthor is defined by two main features: a traumatic childhood and wealth. His trauma, in combination with his power, lays the ground for the consolidation of a corporate state where the government and corporations feed on each other's influence, leaving democracy in the hands of oligarchs who will bend it to their needs. Francisco Collado (2017) has read Gibson's *Gernsback Continuum* as a warning of the materialization of the symptoms of a dystopian proto-fascist, patriarchal, and racist future society dreamed by the U.S. collective imaginary. *Batman v. Superman* reads, not like a warning, but a denouncement of the imperiled situation

of our societies amidst the growing political influence of social figures like Lex Luthor, who seems to be a fictional representation of real-life figures such as Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg or Jeff Bezos, among others.

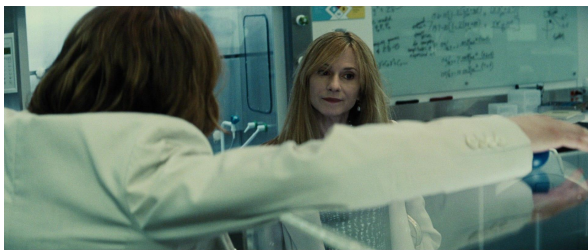
The intricate connections between corporations and democratic political institutions are presented several times in the film. In a scene, for instance, Lex Luthor invites two senators to Lex Corps to get legal permission to weaponize alien kryptonite. The corporation headquarters are depicted as a clean, white, sanitized space through wide shots that emphasize the promise of the magnificence of a future led by this deeply technologically computerized ethos. As the scene develops, Lex Luthor reasserts his dominance over the two senators who, as embodiments of democratic power, are forced to accommodate the technocrat who is dominantly placed in the center while they stand around him (Figs. 14-17).



*Fig. 14.*



*Fig. 15.*



*Fig. 16.*



*Fig. 17.*



*Fig. 18.*



*Fig. 19.*



*Fig. 20.*

Jesse Eisenberg's quirky and awkward performance accentuates the unreliable essence of the character of Lex Luthor. As the movie cuts to the image of Senator Barrows literally eating from Lex's hands (Fig. 18), we later learn that Senator Fincher blocks the import license Lex wanted. And, as punishment for not conceding to his methods, she dies in the explosion of the U.S. Capitol orchestrated by Lex Luthor, whose lobbyist absence is replaced with a jar of his own urine with the intent of expressing and reaffirming his disdain for democratic practice (Fig. 19). Lex's absence is a clear statement about his corrupted nature and his lack of conformity with the democratic scheme of power (Fig. 20).

The fact that Lex's wealth allows him to buy everybody and to bow to one but his own ego, when the epitome of power (Superman) comes to Earth but refuses to serve him, Luthor, with Napoleonic aspirations, wants to destroy him. This is represented in the scene in which Superman confronts Lex on the rooftop of Lex

Corps (Figs. 21-25) under the sky of a stormy night where nothing shines but the flashy lights of corporate buildings as is also the case in other dystopian films such as *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). Framing in the scene changes from low angle point of view long shots that place Superman in a position of superiority in power, morality, and control of the circumstances, into high-angle close-up shots of Superman rendering the character as powerless, defeated, angered, hopeless, impotent and, more importantly, having completely lost the control of the situation to the hands of the technocrat. As Superman humanly bows in despair for his mother, Lex metaphorically bends democracy and humanity into his own will.

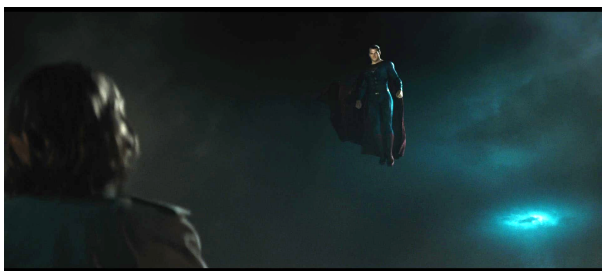


Fig. 21.



Fig. 23.

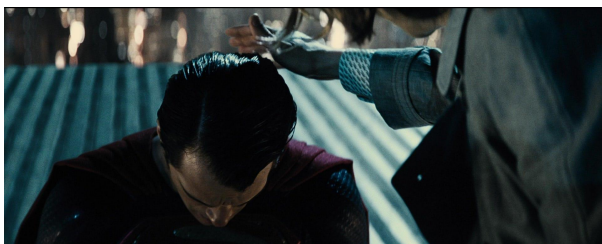


Fig. 25.

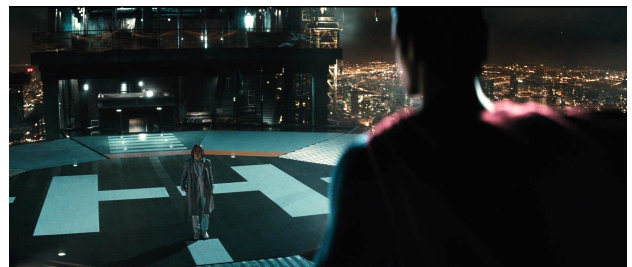


Fig. 22.



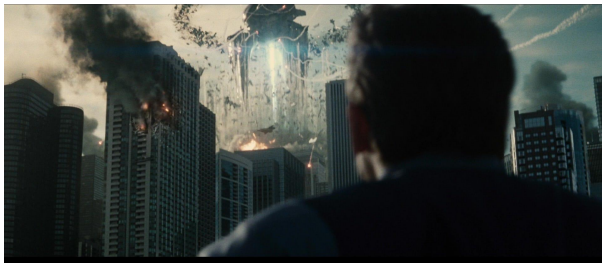
Fig. 24.

### 3.3 BATMAN, THE LEGACY OF CYNICISM

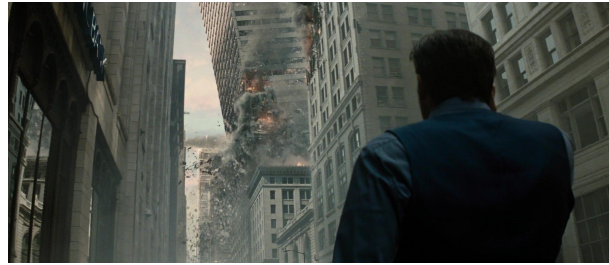
As previously explained, Batman is the other end of the ideological confrontation between the two superheroes orchestrated by Lex Luthor. The anger he felt for the loss of his parents at the hands of street criminality is what has always fueled his desire for revenge. This desire is exacerbated when a “strange being” (Superman) is involved in the death of some of his workers and the destruction of his corporation and his city. If the figure of Lex Luthor is an embodiment of how capital rules over the political, Batman becomes the embodiment of a dysfunctional system that attempts to solve the problems it creates and perpetuates. In line with Cassuto’s reflections on U.S. crime fiction’s hard-boiled sentimentalism, if Superman’s heroism embodies the sentimental view of mutual cooperation in community rooted in the rural, Batman embodies the hard-boiled nihilistic sense of survival and duty also operating in capitalism (2009: 4-7).

This is important to understand the political implications of the embracement, cultural reception, and celebration of Batman’s character across media. As McSweeney (2020) explains, the devotion to the character comes from his status as a billionaire who has the resources to fight crime. So analyzing the character becomes complicated due to its own nature. Wealth inequality is one of the systemic reasons behind the existence of corruption and crime in itself, so it becomes problematic that Batman sets out to fight a problem that he is a part of. In *Batman v. Superman*, Bruce Wayne’s characterization is shaped by the trauma of his loss as a child in conjunction with his wealth, making him almost a mirror image of Luthor. Both are billionaire industrialists who use money to bend the world to their will, which is a defining trait of the political scenario of Western democracies. However, while Lex embodies the

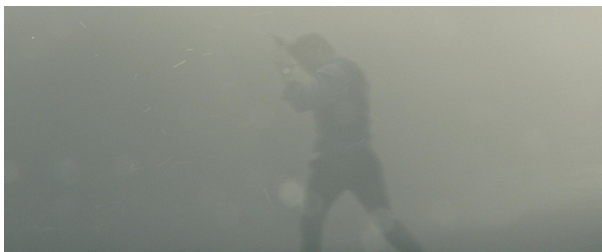
empirical disruptions of late-stage capitalism (the corruption of the gears of democracy through lobbyist manipulation in the hands of technological aristocrats), Batman becomes the walking example of its consequences: a never-ending and self-perpetuating cycle of violence prompted by wealth inequality. In a way, the movie is describing and comments on what happens to the values of democracy when a system that produces inequality controls it. It represents the transition from a society that seemed to act on values like Superman's but that is currently more aligned with the values of hatred, xenophobia, and revenge represented by Batman.



*Fig. 26: Bruce Wayne witnesses the destruction of Metropolis.*



*Fig. 27: Bruce Wayne sees his corporation's building being flooded.*



*Fig. 28: Bruce Wayne witnesses the destruction of Metropolis.*



*Fig. 29: Bruce Wayne, angered, spots the cause of the destruction.*

Bearing this in mind, *Batman v. Superman* constructs this reconfiguration of heroism without romanticizing it. The movie depicts the kind of U.S. heroism that surged as a response to threats and destruction caused by a foreign alien entity in a context as unreliable, corrupted, xenophobic, driven by hatred, and to a point fascistic. Parallel to the events experienced by U.S. citizens on September 11, 2001, the opening

scene from the movie introduces us to the perspective of a Bruce Wayne who, hoping to save his people, is surrounded by destruction and debris. With handheld camera shots that emphasize the chaos, despair, and anxiety experienced by victims trying to escape the devastation, the camera cuts to low-angle point-of-view shots that magnify both the scale and the collapse of the skyscrapers.



*Fig. 30: Superman and Zod destroying everything fighting each other (Bruce Wayne's PoV).*

With no coincidence, the alien figures are presented leveling the spine of U.S. corporatism down to the floor. So when Bruce Wayne ventures into the ashy clouds of gray debris it both enhances his confusion and desolation, while at the same time conveying the clouded gray terrain of ambiguity the character and U.S. policies are going to adopt in the future after finding out who seems responsible.

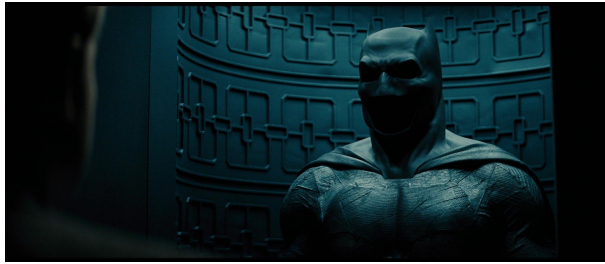
Furthermore, we are shown that Bruce is someone who has lost his moral compass after years of fighting crime. He is trapped in a cycle of despair where he is no longer capable of discerning what is good and what is evil (Figs. 31-32). As Friedrich Nietzsche says, “beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster... for when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes back into you” (69), which is something that represents Bruce’s psychological and moral state in regards to his relationship with crime.



*Fig. 31.*



*Fig. 32.*



*Fig. 33.*

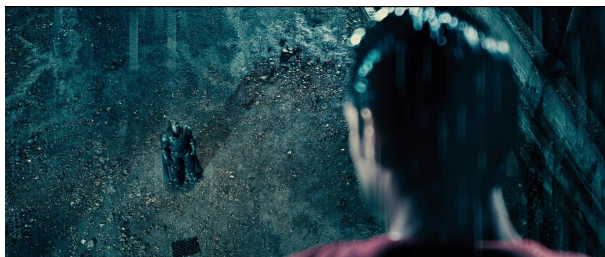


*Fig. 34.*

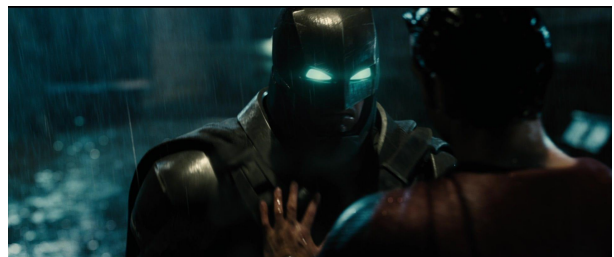
In a scene he stands in front of a Batman suit, looking at its hollow eyes as if by doing so he was able to see the emptiness of his own soul. As the scene alternates from zooming close-up shots of Bruce Wayne and the bat-suit surrounded by nothing but darkness and scarcely dim-lighted patterns of shadows (Figs. 33-34) that highlight the character's violence and moral ambiguity of the character, and how sunk into depression his state of mind is, the soundtrack plays a dreadful melody that is composed by a combination of the chords that constitute Superman and Lex's respective themes. The movie seems to suggest that Bruce is aware of the monster he has become. The cycle of violence and crime prompted by the rise of capitalist industrialization, which is represented through the characterization of Gotham as an inhospitable concrete jungle, has stripped him of his hope in humanity and has led him to perpetuate brutality and mercilessness through his acts, something we see reflected on his branding of criminals who are then killed in jails. He is acting as judge, jury,

and executioner. In a similar way, we can draw parallels between Bruce's morality and the one behind the U.S. political agenda of the War on Terror. After years of self-proclaimed acts of heroism in which they allegedly fought for justice, after they bombed Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria back to the Stone Age they had in a way become the so-called monsters they allegedly were fighting.

Eventually, after Lex Luthor has successfully managed to manufacture the conflict between the two other parties, we are presented with the clash between the two superheroes. This confrontation, then, functions as a metaphorical dispute for the definition and delineation of the modern-day U.S. identity. Or rather as the representation of the transition from the past and more pure values Superman used to embody to the deranged and corrupted one Bruce comes to embody in the present. McSweeney (2020) explains that while the U.S. collective imaginary might perceive itself as the moralistic and utopian Superman, in reality, it mirrors the gritty, troubled, and cynical Batman (57).



*Fig. 34: Camera angle projecting Superman's power over Batman.*

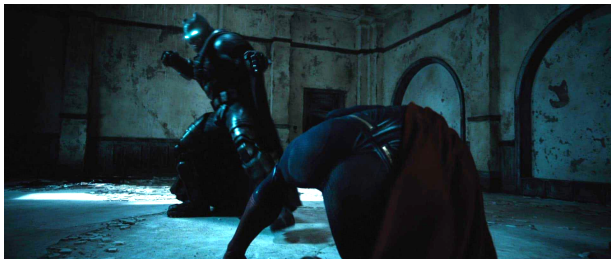


*Fig. 35: Batman's suit is a militaristic armor, resemblant of a tank.*



*Fig. 36.*

In the movie, an alternation of low-angle and high-angle point-of-view shots conveying the conflict is prompted by a difference in morals and power with Superman and his values being depicted as a force that dwarfs Batman. A dominance that is reflected in the way in which Batman is tossed around breaking through piles of different industrial materials resembling capitalist mass-production of commodities (Fig. 36). As it is shown, we pay special attention to the costume of Batman. He is presented wearing an armor-plated costume that mirrors the manufacture of a tank. Batman, just like the U.S. in the present, responds to the foreign alien threat with deployments of his military assets.



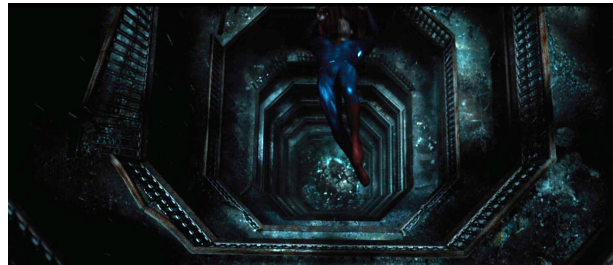
*Fig. 37: Batman overpowers Superman.*



*Fig. 35: Batman's use of commodities as weaponry.*



*Fig. 36: Batman carries a stunned Superman on his shoulders.*



*Fig. 37: Batman throws Superman down a pit of industrial stairs.*

Later in the conflict, when Batman manages to turn the tables, the camera zooms into close-ups that place Superman in a subdued position and accentuate Batman's brutality and hatred. Surrounded by nothing but darkness and lightning strikes of a rainstorm that falls over an eerie dark grotesque industrial landscape, Batman seems to be at an advantage. If in previous scenes we are shown Superman's

legacy was metaphorically bearing the burden of civilization represented by a wrecked ship, we now see Batman carrying Superman's body and throwing it into a metallic and industrial pile of heaters, symbolically illustrating the triumph of individualized and materialistic driven values marked by capitalist modernity over past traditional values of cooperation and community.



*Fig. 35: Superman's body lays on heap of heaters.*

As the movie concludes, we see that a seemingly immortal alien bioengineered by Lex Luthor threatens to destroy everything on its path. In a sense, this entity comes to represent a weapon of mass destruction and one that has been created due to the obsession with playing god of technocrats like Luthor. Metaphorically, this weapon is the materialized consequence of the political enablement and embracement of these kinds of tech billionaires. When Superman gives his life, the movie showcases that there is no reconciliation between these values of the respective national identities that are opposed in the movie. The values of the rural past of communal cooperation of the U.S. in combination with an updated sense of cosmopolitanism, embodied by this Superman, are sacrificed for the individualized capitalist corporate tied to nationalism, embodied by Batman, who eventually grows out of these bigoted feelings after realizing there are threats to all humankind that cannot be solved if blinded by constructed national boundaries.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This essay has explored how *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* departs from what is usually regarded as the traditional ideology of the comic book film genre, that is the overt promotion of the United States' imperialist geopolitical agenda. The essay starts with a brief introduction to the comic book film genre that is used as a generic and ideological contextualization of the analysis that follows. As has been argued, *Batman v Superman* offers a recontextualization of the characters of Superman, Batman, and Lex Luthor in order to address the transformation and demise of the democratic principles on which the nation was founded under the rule of self-contained technocracies and the rise of globalized neoliberalism. The movie depicts Superman as an immigrant climate refugee trying to help a deeply polarized world where his choice of helping humankind is received with scrutiny. Lex Luthor becomes the embodiment of present-day tech oligarchs whose power and influence allow them to breach through the fabrics of democratic practice. Bruce Wayne is construed as an embodiment of some of the possible consequences of letting capitalist goals dictate national politics.

Yet, this ideological reading of the film is not without its shortcomings. Even if Superman is portrayed as a hero with cosmopolitan aspirations and Batman as a capitalist entrepreneur who finds redemption from his bigotry and xenophobia, the fact that the different ideologies these different characters embody are always articulated through white, heterosexual, protestant male characters cannot be ignored. As a result, if the ideological conflict and negotiation that takes place in the film do not include any individuals that deviate from this norm, its ideological resolution can also be considered problematic, or, at least, not completely satisfactory.

In spite of this, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, unlike most films from the comic book film genre, invites a reflection on issues of national identity and the implications behind allowing capitalism to influence it. It also makes a statement regarding the use of cultural artifacts like comic book heroes to perpetuate certain ideological meanings. By depicting its heroes in the way that it does, it asks us to rethink the normalization of the omnipresence of U.S. alleged heroic interventions (and the ones in which European institutions are complicit). It challenges us to think about the sense of moral superiority that brings Western democracies to justify their genocidal interference as necessary heroism, solidifying their position at the top of the hegemony their own system perpetuates. The film warns us about the present and future dangers of letting our democracies in the hands of profit-driven policymakers and technocrats, who lobby their way through our societies making them unequal, unjust, and dispensable.

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