

Comics Across Media

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More Than Just Good Guys: The Superhero Film in Post-9/11 U.S. Discourse

The presence of comics material across multiple media has arguably been nowhere more visible than on multiplex screens (and, I should acknowledge, home theaters and portable technology) over the past decade, as superhero narratives with their basis in comic book adventures have proved to be the dominant millennial form of the action-spectacle blockbuster. Surely, this is an overdetermined phenomenon, coinciding as it does with the growth of internet fan communities and of their relationship with motion picture producers, as well as with advancements in special effects technology, and with a precipitous decline in theater-going, which some argue has led to Hollywood's more thorough embrace of spectacle as a film's main draw. Here, I would like to focus on another explanation for the superhero's popularity and preponderance, however, one that helps guide a politically informed reading of the texts as well. I would argue that the comic-book superhero is a figure uniquely constructed to meet the needs of the politically dominant in the context of a post-9/11 United States, and to offer a pleasurable inflection of nationalism to its movie audiences.

If the attacks of 9/11 were conceived of in the popular consciousness as an emasculating penetration, a threat to a masculine national body, and a collapse of national borders (the attacks, after all, came from both "inside" and "out": domestic airliners flown by foreign militants), the comic book superhero was an emollient for these perceived crises. A powerful, hypermasculine white man, always aligned with one objective or another of the secure nation-state—protecting the populace from criminals, eliminating the extra-national Other, seeming even to single-handedly fight entire wars (i.e., *Iron Man*)—the superhero serves as a personification of potent state power, thus relating state objectives to the level of the individual. Beyond his objectives and actions, the superhero is also often closely aligned with institutions (e.g., police forces [*Batman Begins*], military/industry [*Iron Man*], the "fourth estate" [*Superman Returns*, *Spider-Man*]) and symbols (e.g., the American flag and its colors [*Spider-Man*, the forthcoming *Captain America*]), making him a metonym for the nation itself. If the superhero is a personalized incarnation of the nation, then the agents of the state as represented in the superhero narrative are often well-meaning but weak, corrupt, in need of a reconstituted and impenetrable masculine strength. Here, we can think of the government in *Iron Man* who needs the hero to defeat Afghani terrorists, of the police force who needs the extra-legal Batman extradite a Chinese national (*The Dark Knight*), of police officers who can be penetrated by bullets as a foil to the Superman who cannot (*Superman Returns*). In this sense the agents of the state in superhero films can be said to represent "pre-9/11" bodies, unprotected against threats frequently conceived of as foreign Others, whereas the hero represents a "post-9/11" remasculinized body.

If the superhero's built and metonymically codified body posits the nation as strong, impenetrable, clearly defined, American and masculine—the latter two being somewhat redundant in this context, as I've suggested—the superhero costume, even if it is used in part for

stealth, like Batman's, is made to emphasize the body's (masculine) lines and clearly mark where the body begins and ends. That is, in the films Batman's costume may be utilized for stealth in relation to his adversaries, but for the audience it is designed, as presented in poses and in action, to show the movements and shape of the body. This is evident especially for those numerous heroes whose muscular physiques remain hidden or disguised in normal clothes, finding true and full expression only in costume, in action. The focus on a body lined and re-lined articulates clear boundaries, between body and environment, between inside and outside—between Self (personified state) and Other.

Thus outfitted and characterized, the superhero is deployed in missions which would have been carried out by the state anyway, or which the state is inhibited from accomplishing by its own emasculated inability or bureaucratic and “unmanly” rules. The superhero is often able to traverse the globe, remaining recognizable and clearly differentiated from national and ethnic Others. In terms of post-9/11 discourse, the penetration represented by the superhero's violent excursion into other countries emphasizes the secure boundaries of the white American body-nation while establishing the penetrability of (O)thers, articulating the reified strength of the United States' borders and the justness of its objectives, offering audiences a way to deal with anxieties about U.S. hegemony provoked by the attacks and their aftermath, and implicitly and metaphorically offering a neocolonial rationale for war. In our discussion, I hope to especially focus on some of the superhero films whose genesis and production took place entirely after the attacks and the start of the wars, as several of these films directly address and narrativize issues such as terrorism, torture, and domestic spying in relation to the superhero.