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From Terrorism to Feminism: Live-Action Superhero Films as Reflections of American Social Problems Post 9/11

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From Terrorism to Feminism: Live-Action Superhero Films as Reflections of American Social Problems Post 9/11

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Introduction:

Superheroes have always been used as tools of escapism. From their insurgence into popular culture in the 1930s, to their animation in television programs, and appearance in films in the late 1970s until now, superheroes have allowed audiences an avenue through which they could imagine an alternate, utopian reality. While my thesis focuses on film adaptations of these characters, contextualizing the modern superhero with the inclusion of a brief history of their creation and rise to popularity is necessary. As Freeman contextualizes, comic books, "having evolved throughout the 20th century as an artful mixture of the newspaper comic strip and the pulp magazine . . . emerged as a new popular medium by the mid-1930s" (Freeman). People were transfixed by the stories of superheroes, and they followed their every move through various media. Superheroes were created as a form of wish fulfilment to imagine a world where things weren't so bad and people could still hope for a savior.

In the 1940s, Superman entered the consciousness of American people during World War II. Originally popular among children, Superman slowly became a household name as an icon that fought to protect American citizens: "Superman became synonymous with the American Dream" (Brown). As technology advanced, the character of Superman was adapted for radio. Freeman explains the popularity of Superman's stories via radio saying, "The 1940 Decennial Census conducted by the US Census Bureau had provided a country-by-country record of radio ownership, revealing that, as of 1 April 1940, there were 34,854,532 families in the United States and 28,838,203, or 82.8%, of this Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television 219 number owned a radio receiver" (Freeman). Rather than experiencing the delightful tales of Superman through the comic books, Americans were turning their attention to radio programs. Superman served as not only the image of a benevolent protector, but also as a mirror for the soldiers who

had fought in the war as the stories "can be contextualized as a broader effort to depict war-related themes through the paradigm of such upbeat and escapist typologies" (Freeman). Superman himself was used as a tool of propaganda that ushered in a sense of benign peace in America during one of the most daunting times in our history. As such, Superman grew in popularity, with people eager to escape their own reality for the length of one of his programs. People used Superman as an escape from the harsh reality of World War II and soon his popularity earned him a spot on the silver screen.

The first *Superman* film came out in 1978 and people flocked to the theatres to absorb a message that Americans were safe in the post-World War II world. People could not get enough of the character. Following the Vietnam War, Americans exuded a general lack of morale. Superman presented audiences with an optimistic look and the film did well as a form of escape. He was a moral enforcer of justice and his writers used his image to delude American households into believing that our efforts in the war were beneficial for our country. So, while superhero films have not always been as prevalent in society as they are today, they have always been used as a way to alter American feelings towards politics.

Regarding the morals and motives of superheroes, we see multiple instances in which the characters feel a sense of responsibility, which varies based on their history or their abilities. These caped crusaders have been fighting for the greater good since the dawn of the comic book. As explained in "Superheroes and Philosophy," "In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal [shall be] punished for his misdeeds" (Morris). These characters continually abide by this moral code as if it were engrained into their being. Despite whatever was happening in America throughout the early 20th Century and well into today's current political climate, superheroes represent idealized heroes that Americans can believe in or to whom they

can apply their beliefs. My analysis will focus specifically on the live-action superhero genre in recent examples (since 2004). I'll consider *Spider-Man 2* (2004), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Wonder Woman* (2017), *and Black Panther* (2018) through the lens of social calamity following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and political uprising in the wake of Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and inauguration. Cinema has often been used as a platform through which creators can express their deep-seated fears and respond to current events symbolically. Americans seek therapeutic narratives to curtail their fears. The idealized fantasy of a protected America builds a platform through which complex political and social issues can be analyzed to reveal inherent cultural beliefs. Specifically, live action superhero films can respond to events like 9/11 through connections to tropes of good defeating evil and justice prevailing. As the genre continues to grow, audiences are able to connect to the social messages of the films, contextualizing them with the historical situations of the time.

Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man 2* (2004) became the unexpected film through which American audiences realized a renewed desire for superhero narratives post-9/11. It was one of the first superhero films written and released following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. While *Spider-Man* (2002) came out a few months after the attacks, it was conceptualized in a world before the events of 9/11. As a result, *Spider-Man 2* (2004) can be perceived as a metaphoric response to 9/11, with Peter Parker acting as the nation's savior. *Spider-Man 2* grossed $373.6 million in the United States and was the second highest grossing movie of 2004, proving the desire of Americans to have their beloved city, New York protected from those who would seek to harm it. Spider-man becomes America's utopic imagining of a New York protected from unexpected chaos. Similarly, I view Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) as a response to 9/11; however, this narrative does not suggest an optimistic view of Americans rebuilding following the attacks.

Rather, Batman becomes a grim reminder of the plagued justice system's "War on Terror" as a response. Audiences see the chaos of terror exemplified through the Joker and Nolan's Batman as the embodiment of a government to be critiqued.

While the live action superhero films that we'll consider can be viewed through the lens of a post-9/11 response, these films also react to other political fears. For example, Wonder Woman as a character has always been a political icon. Her creator, William Moulton Marston, intended her to be a step in the direction towards feminism. Wonder Woman is a symbol of women's equality and viewers of the 2017 film also hail her as a feminist icon. Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* (2017) was created prior to Trump's inauguration, but released a few months after. Audiences could (and did) view the film in the wake of his election, noticing feminist messages throughout. *Wonder Woman* thus becomes a battle cry for feminists, with Gal Gadot leading the charge. Similarly, Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) can be viewed through a postcolonial, feminist lens as the film deals with intersectional issues of race and gender and casts women in roles of warrior, queen, and scientist. The women of Wakanda are seen as equals to the men, given positions of power throughout the film. The film, while not a response to the political climate of the time, can be connected to deeper messages of intersectional feminism through the inclusion of empowered women of color.

Overall, through the analyses of modern superhero films, audiences are able to connect how the genre reflects larger social and political fears in the wake of such unexpected realities: fear of annihilation after the 9/11 attacks and existing in a potentially unsafe America following the election of Donald Trump. Americans' desire for a savior was transcribed into film through the original characterizations of the superheroes as all-powerful entities. The superhero film has become an exploratory space through which audiences are emboldened to action by the

reflections of our own sociopolitical climate. Films like *Spider-Man 2* help audiences envision clear concepts of good and evil with the purpose of galvanizing viewers to continue to fight for those ideals. As the genre shifts away from therapeutic intentions, it moves towards criticism of government action, as explained in my interpretation of *The Dark Knight.* Tracking the movements through some of the most popular adaptations in the genre, a connection can be made wherein audiences' projected interpretations of the film's messages implies the predominant sociopolitical fear of the time, despite authorial intent or production timeline of the films. Rather, the national consciousness allows for feminist interpretations of the film in retrospect of sexist rhetoric used liberally throughout Trump's campaign and following his election to office. Analyzing these films in the sociopolitical climate of 2019 reveals a distinct evolution towards representations of marginalized groups. The newest iterations of the live-action superhero genre appeal to the intended audience, namely women, living in the unpredictable post-Trump era. Hershkoff tracks the growing animosity some have towards Trump:

> Many commentators expect President Trump's policy agenda to harm women across multiple dimensions, contributing to a loss of physical autonomy, decreased financial status, and increased social vulnerability. Nevertheless, it is anticipated that the Constitution likely will provide women with neither a sword nor a shield against mounting gendered inequality; to the contrary, the Trump Court more than likely will raise the Constitution as a cudgel against women. (Hershkoff 50)

Without "a sword or shield" for protection from the resurgence of gender inequality, women turn towards powerful, weapon carrying female superheroes as a source of inspiration. More recent superhero films then act as avenues through which audiences connect their own national consciousness onto the films' ideologies.

Just Your Friendly, Neighborhood Christ Figure: *Spider-Man 2* as a Reimagining of New York in a Post-9/11 America

While many superhero films did well during the 20th Century, the live-action films were created and released at a slower rate than seen today. In 1966, 20th Century Fox produced the first full length film adaption of *Batman,* which did relatively well in theatres, making enough in the box office to turn a slight profit. The next largely successful superhero film comes with Warner Bros.' reboot of *Superman* in 1978. To say *Superman* (1978) was successful in theatres would be putting it mildly. The film made over $134 million worldwide and was the second highest grossing film that year, behind *Grease* (1978). *Superman*'s (1978) success encourages a sequel, *Superman II* (1980) and many studios mimic the formula of turning a beloved comic book character into a live action hero, with mild success. However, the next film to compete with *Superman*'s (1978) mass popularity does not come until Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989). Burton's gritty take on Batman resulted in a spike in creation and appreciation of the live action superhero genre. There is a trend of popularity in the live action superhero genre in the 1980s, but their renaissance in the 21st Century is even greater, as there were fifty-seven live-action superhero films released in the twenty-year span between 1980 and 1999, compared to one hundred and twenty-five released in the twenty-year span between 2000 and 2019. Arguably, the re-emergence of these films is thanks, in part, to the box office success of Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002) following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Spider-Man is a beloved hero who was easily adapted from comics and television to his film debut in 2002. Many fans of the character were children as they read the comics or watched the cartoons and they related to him as they grew up with him. Spider-Man, also known as Peter Parker, is unlike other superheroes in the fact that he is a plucky high school student, a loveable

nerd who represents an idealized American idea of an everyman. His audience cannot help but to root for him. Throughout the film we see Peter grow into his spider-esque powers and his "great responsibility" (Raimi 2002). In Raimi's adaptation of the character, we see Spider-Man representing more than a relatable everyman. He projects an altruistic, Christ-like figure[1] when the Green Goblin lords over him and demands to know, "In spite of everything you've done for them, eventually they will hate you. Why bother?" To which Spider-Man replies, "Because it is right" (Raimi 2002). In the first Spider-Man film audiences felt compelled to trust Spider-Man as a protector through his response to the Green Goblin. The villain of the film, the Green Goblin condemns Spider-Man, suggesting that the people of New York are not worthy of being saved as, "they will hate" him "in spite of everything." It is in this scene that Spider-Man is first paralleled to Jesus Christ[2]. Spider-Man is morally bound to his promise to use his abilities for the good of others, not for the praise. This ideology presents an allusion to Christ as he too performed miracles without fear of hatred or persecution. Christ was hated by many during his life on Earth, as evidenced by his eventual crucifixion at the hands of the Romans and Jews. However, Jesus continued to perform miracles up until his death in the hopes of converting or "saving" those who saw them performed. Similarly, Spider-Man acts as a savior of the people of New York through his supernatural abilities which enable him to protect the lives of those would be killed or injured by criminals like the Green Goblin. Spider-Man responds to the Green Goblin's question of "why bother" with the testament that it's what's "right" (Raimi 2002). He

[1] The literary term Christ-Figure referenced here as part of a broader understanding of literary and film analysis terms with "Christ-figure" loosely defined as a "deliberately engineered cinematic transfiguration of Jesus Christ" in Kozlovic's "The Cinematic Christ Figure" (26). However, I will be referring to Spider-Man as Christ-like or a Christ-like figure as the character can be read as having similar traits, though he does not represent a one-to-one comparison to Christ.

[2] Jesus Christ mentioned here presumes a minimal understanding of Western Christian religion based on the New Testament of the Bible wherein Jesus Christ is believed to be the son of God, and believers are saved through his sacrifice as prophesized in the Old Testament.

acts, neither out of selfish desire to be a hero, nor to be well liked by those he saves; rather, Spider-Man's motivations are moored in his moral compass. This scene establishes context in the Spider-Man cannon through which audience members can make connections between Spider-Man and Christ. Spider-Man is a character that audience members feel comfortable trusting as he is not out for his own gain; rather, he protects the people of New York because it is his responsibility.

Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* was intended to do well enough in the box office that it would jump-start a franchise. *Spider-Man* came out in May of 2002, eight months after 9/11. As a result, audience members would have noticed the deeper messages connected to the recent terror attacks. *Spider-Man* was written and produced prior to the attacks. The timing of the release, paired with the scenes added to the film following 9/11 make viewing the film in context with 9/11 unavoidable. *Spider-Man* was not predicted to be released months following the largest terrorist attack in the United States. Keeping authorial intent in mind, *Spider-Man* was intended to be a lighthearted summer blockbuster. However, following 9/11, the film becomes a political response to the attacks, with Spider-Man and the New Yorkers standing for justice. While the production team behind *Spider-Man* did remove the trailers and posters containing the Twin Towers, the towers are visible in the final theatrical release of the film. Sam Raimi is quoted as saying, "I think it's like our memories of a loved one. Probably right after the death of someone we love, it's sometimes hard to look at their pictures. Then later, there's a need to look at them. I didn't want to erase the image of the twin towers. They're seen throughout the course of the movie, because we didn't want the terrorists to win" (Schneider 29). Filmmakers attempted to toe the line of honoring those who were lost during the attacks while also avoiding disrespecting the American audiences by removing the towers altogether. Christina Rickli explains how

Hollywood reacted to 9/11 in film: “Every image that slightly reminded of the attacks was banished from both television and movie screens. In addition, the Twin Towers were digitally erased from movies produced prior to the attacks” (2). No one knew the appropriate way to respond after the attacks. Some film producers and executives reacted in deference to those we lost, and removed images of the Twin Towers they may have captured during filming. Others attempted to pay homage through the inclusion of the images in their films. *Spider-Man* attempted to do both, which was met with mixed results from audience members, as seen in Schneider: “the decision to remove images of the towers from the aforementioned films and several others resulted in a fairly broad, fairly vehement critical backlash” (Schneider 38). The teaser trailer later removed from theaters contains a scene where Spider-Man traps a helicopter between the towers. That particular scene in not present in the final cut of the film. There is speculation that the scene was removed from the film as it prominently showcases the towers; however, these are just rumors as it remains unclear if the scene was ever intended to be included. Sony’s official statement suggests the Twin Tower scene was merely part of the promotional material for the film. While the towers do appear in background shots of the film, seen amid the New York skyline as Spider-Man zips past, there is no instance in the film where they are the focal point of a transition shot or remain on the screen for longer than a blurred second. As a result of the potential editing of the film, audiences were left irritated; however, Raimi found other ways to pay homage to New York and the memory of those lost on 9/11.

Despite the film’s production timeline, Raimi made a few post-9/11 alterations in time for the theatrical release. Raimi wanted to address the audience in his second installment of the franchise and present a message of cohesion and strength in the wake of 9/11. One of the more notable additions to the film was the crowd response to Spider-Man’s fight with the Green

Goblin when a pedestrian New Yorker yells: “You mess with Spidey, you mess with New York! You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us!” (Raimi 2002). Rather obviously, audience members would be able to connect this outburst to a sense of comradery in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Raimi created a space for audiences to connect themselves to the characters in the film. This line emboldens the citizens of New York to help Spider-man in his battle with the Green Goblin, while also reiterating the mentality of Americans following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Following the success of *Spider-Man*, Sony commissioned a sequel. Screenwriters and directors alike were now given a platform through which they could explore the age-old concepts of good and evil while still maintaining a romanticized fictional realm where superheroes like Spider-Man save the day. Weigel gives credence to the notion of good and evil: ‘‘in less than two hours, between the first attack on the World Trade Center and the crash of the fourth highjacked airliner in rural Pennsylvania, Americans discovered, or rediscovered, moral absolutes . . . There was good, and there was evil. We could tell the difference again, and we could use those words again’’ (14). Terrorists became undeniable “bad guys” and there were no grey areas to be found in American desire to have justice served. Filmmakers exploited the need for a savior and created wish-fulfilling movies like *Spider-Man 2* (2004). Post 9/11 the live-action superhero genre developed a certain narrative structure wherein a terroristic threat exists to be disabled by our hero, thus relieving audience members of the burden of fear. These movies are essentially a fictional safety blanket that American audiences can find comfort in following the attacks. Psychologically, people seek out self-comforting aids when faced with traumatic events, Ozcan explains:

A collective trauma occurs when a large group of people experience an unexpected event

> which is accompanied by feelings of fear, powerlessness, and total helplessness. [It] disrupts social life and leads to a loss of sense of coherence and meaning. National traumas threaten or invalidate people's core beliefs and their usual assessments of social reality. With the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, America experienced a massive collective trauma. (206)

Audience members agree on a subconscious level that superhero movies represent the world we want to live in. American viewers are consuming live-action superhero films and perceiving them in such a way that they feel comforted by the potential for heroes. In addition, directors are encouraging the audience to see the parallels of America's post-9/11 reality to the fictional superhero genre post-9/11. The superhero genre utilizes the ideological nature of its subject matter in an attempt to communicate with and placate an audience that was devastated by a horror they were unprepared for. The films create relatable characters who protect a general sense of security as they face off against threats to America. The nation accepts the notion that a super-human would be able to provide America with safety following the unprecedented attacks of 9/11 and this optimism fuels the creation, and subsequent explosion of superhero films.

In the last few years there has been a steady increase in live-action superhero movies, with thirty-one released in the last five years alone. This insurgence of live-action superhero films can be traced back to a somber time when Americans needed to believe in a hero, a larger than life savior. A coordinated attack the magnitude of 9/11 was unprecedented in the United States. The Bush administration was ill prepared for any such terroristic threat as exemplified as Crotty suggests: "Political terrorism was to become the new American war, one to which an open society such as the United States was particularly vulnerable and for which the country was not psychologically or militarily prepared" (Crotty x). On 9/11 the nation was blindsided, and as a

result of the lack of preparedness of the government in the face of national terrorism, Americans felt the need to imagine a hero that could protect us, as we see in *Spider-Man*.

Sam Raimi's Spider-Man in the second installment of the franchise was created and exists in a post-9/11 America. Spider-Man becomes a moral beacon and establishes a sense of right and wrong in his fight against the criminals plaguing New York. In Raimi's second foray into the world of Spider-Man, New York itself commands presence on the screen with pulsating city life viewed through prolonged camera sweeps over the now unavoidably altered skyline. Raimi paints a picture of a prospering city post-9/11. After 9/11, people were clamoring for a hero to root for - someone who, by way of radiation or in this case, a genetically modified spider, was equipped to save American citizens from an unknown danger. While endeavoring to maintain a strong suspension of disbelief, audiences were enthralled by Spider-Man, a kid carefully guarding the streets of New York. Peter Parker simultaneously manages to present himself as an everyman, a simple college student who works at a pizza shop and struggles to pay his rent, while also embodying Christ through his alter ego Spider-Man with his super human abilities and penchant for martyrdom. His character represents the savior the nation was lacking during the 9/11 attacks.

Throughout the expositional, introductory scenes of Sam Raimi's sequel to *Spider-Man* Peter Parker is established as an everyman. He rapidly weaves through traffic on a motorized scooter to get to what audiences read as "Joe's Pizza." Parker's boss, Mr. Aziz, exclaims that Peter is "late . . . always late" to which Peter replies "there was a disturbance" (Raimi 2004). Audience members recognize the expression commonly used throughout all of Spider-Man's iterations which references his superhero acts. As the scene progresses, Mr. Aziz explains his guarantee to deliver pizza in 29 minutes as a "promise" to his customers (Raimi 2004). He

continues saying, “I know to you, Parker, a promise means nothing. But to me, it's serious” and Peter replies, “It's serious to me too, Mr. Aziz” (Raimi 2004). Parker emphatically reassures his boss that he is honor bound to promises, further exemplifying his underlying morals. This scene reminds viewers of the promise Peter made to Uncle Ben in the first film to use his powers responsibly. Additionally, if the viewer is watching without prior knowledge of *Spider-Man*, this scene establishes Peter, and by extension Spider-Man, as an ethical character to which promises are “serious.” This short scene also juxtaposes Peter Parker as a normal college student trying to honor his commitment as a part time employee of Joe’s Pizza with his duties as Spider-Man. Here, audiences see the origin of the idea that he is struggling in his attempt to be successful as both everyman and superhero.

As Peter works to make the pizza delivery on time he realizes he won’t make it on his moped. To attempt to keep his job and avoid New York traffic he changes into his Spider-Man suit and begins flying the pizza. While fulfilling his obligation to Joe’s Pizza, he spots two children running into a street, chasing after a ball. The camera pans up to a van barreling down the road, honking its horn as the children are frozen in the street. Spider-Man puts the delivery on hold and swoops in to save the children from certain death. Following the near miss, Spider-Man also stops to give them some advice, “Hey guys, no playing in the streets” and the wide eyes children respond, “Yes Mr. Spider-Man” (Raimi 2004). It is clear that the children idolize him and as the camera pans to a crowd of on-lookers we see their awe of his heroism. As he finally departs to deliver the pizza, the citizens’ adoration of him is exemplified through one of the bystanders shouting, “Way to go Spidey!” (Raimi 2004). People are happy to have him save the day and are quick to offer praise for his actions.

In opposition to the hero's acclaim received by Spider-Man, Peter Parker continually falls short attempting to balance life while having two part time jobs, being a full-time college student, and acting as and hiding his alter ego, Spider-Man. It becomes apparent through different scenes in the film that Peter Parker is struggling financially. This further cements him as an everyman to audiences as he attempts to navigate life. His timely delivery of pizza was postponed by his rescue mission, so he is let go. Down to only one part time job, freelance photographer of *The Daily Bugle*, Parker implores his boss, James Jameson, to use some of his photos: "Please, isn't there any of these shots you can use? I need the money" (Raimi 2004). Following the untimely loss of one job, Peter cannot afford to have his pictures not printed. Jameson agrees to print a photo of Spider-Man, but his secretary informs Peter that even with his new paycheck there is still money owed on a previous advance. Leaving with no check, Peter heads towards his other life as a college student. On campus he runs into his professor, Mr. Conners. Realizing he missed Conners' class Peter appears crestfallen. Mr. Conners admonishes Peter: "Look at you, Peter. Your grades have been steadily declining. You're late for class. You always appear exhausted" (Raimi 2004). It is obvious to viewers that Peter has been unsuccessful in his attempts to juggle his academics with the other aspects of his life. This plot point serves to present Peter as a relatable character. Audiences would be able to empathize with him. While his enhanced superhuman abilities are less relatable, he is first and foremost an everyman to viewers. This characteristic is reiterated through Peter's interaction with his landlord a few scenes later:

Landlord: Rent.

PP: I have a paycheck due this week and...

Landlord: You're a month late again. Again.

PP: I promise as soon as...

Landlord: If promises were crackers, my daughter would be fat.

PP: I'm really sorry, Mr. Ditkovitch. All I got is this for the rest of the week.

Landlord: “Sorry” doesn't pay the rent. (Raimi 2004)

Through the repetition of the word “again” it is apparent that Parker continues to default payments for his rent. Additionally, he connects to the word “promise” to suggest his adherence to honor; however, like with Mr. Aziz, Parker’s promises are not the same as Spider-Man’s. In removing Peter Parker from Spider-Man we see the ordinary college student: sleepless and overworked while attempting to maintain decent grades. Audiences are able to relate to him as a representation of the balancing act most young adults face.

Inspired by the largely supportive reception of early 21st Century superhero films like *Spider-Man* our cherished modern-day superheroes are given new life on the silver screen. In *Spider-Man 2* the audience experiences the familiar theme of an American cityscape under attack. Rather than allow the horror to play out on screen, audiences suspend their disbelief and escape into a reality where Spider-Man could save the day. For instance, one scene in particular parallels the audience’s desire to have been protected from 9/11. In *Spider-Man 2* Otto Octavius, transformed into the villain “Doc Ock,” grabs a “random” woman to taunt Spider-Man after robbing a bank. This unfortunate victim of Doc Ock’s cruel intentions happens to be Peter’s Aunt May, a kind, elderly mother figure. The audience is able to relate to loved one facing the threat of death and would be able connect themselves to the characters throughout this scene. Doc Ock begins to scale a skyscraper with Aunt May in his clutches, threatening to kill her as he climbs. As Aunt May falls to her presumed death, the audience is reminded of the heartbreaking photo “The Falling Man” taken by Richard Drew on the day of the attacks[3]. In the film, Doc Ock

[3] See figures 1 and 2

is carrying Aunt May up the side of a building. The notes of the background music mimic the sound of Doc Ock climbing the building, increasing in volume as he continues his ascent. The music stops as Spider-Man lands on the side of the building, halting their progress, and demanding Doc Ock "hand her over" (Raimi 2004). Aunt May is dropped and the audience gets a point of view shot from Spider-Man's perspective. She begins to fall and is at first angled with her back to the skyscraper and her head towards a busy, taxi filled, New York street. The scene then cuts back to Spider-Man's, kneeling on the side of the building, with his body angled so that he is looking down at the falling Aunt May, horizontal to the ground. They are now mirroring each other as Spider-Man watches while Aunt May screams mid descent. Aunt May is still falling through Spider-Man's point of view and below her the audience sees police cars and fleeing people following Doc Ock's robbery and careless destruction of the bank. This inclusion of people running away further parallels people's imaginings of 9/11 as New Yorkers attempted to seek safety from the attack and the surrounding presence of first responders. However, rather than have Aunt May perish, the film shows Spider-Man rescuing her as he shoots a web which halts her plummet[4]. Spider-Man is able to ensure her safety, suggesting a possibility that he would similarly have been able to provide such protections to New Yorkers on 9/11.

In comparison to the *Spider-Man 2* scene of Aunt May in peril, we have Richard Drew's "The Falling Man" (Figure 1). Rather than perish in the building, some victims of the attacks chose to take their own lives and jumped from the towers. One of the most famous pictures of these jumpers reflects the trauma experienced, as it depicts a man mid-descent. The image is a close up of the side of one of the Twin Towers and its focal point is a man, his body vertical against the side of the building with his head towards the ground as he falls. His right knee is

[4] See figure 3

bent at an angle, perhaps suggestive of the intentional nature of the jump as his cream-colored shirt billows against the stark contrast of the tower, which forms the entire background of the photo. The image is slightly blurry as it was taken at a distance and zoomed in on the subject. As "The Falling Man" is the most famous of many images taken of victims on that day, solidified in the minds of America as a TIME cover photo, audiences would have made a connection. The angles of the two images differ as Raimi provides a personalized view of Aunt May's fall. The scene in the film is shot through Spider-Man's point of view whereas "The Falling Man" provides a sense of distance from the chaos with viewers as observers rather than potential rescuers. Objectively, the scene and the photograph both showcase the fear of death as a result of attacks outside of our control. That is not to say that every instance of a film character falling from a tall building is a reflection of American fear in response to 9/11; however, the similarities of Aunt May cast in that same role of victim, plummeting to the ground amid a New York attack, her own cream-colored scarf waving around her as she falls, is similar to Drew's photo. Unlike 9/11, this time Spider-Man is there to save the day. He shoots his web, cocoons her in protection, and deposits her safely on the ground. Raimi's *Spider-Man 2* thus provides a fantastical moment of reversing one tragic moment reminiscent of 9/11 wounds, by giving people an escape wherein they can pretend in a New York with Spider-Man where some victims would have been saved. Instead of the total destruction experienced in real life, we are guarded by the superhuman crusaders we've plucked from the pages of well-loved comic books. These men and women served their intended purpose of counteracting our feeling of vulnerability, thus encouraging filmmakers to explore these therapeutic narratives in film.

Figure 1. “The Falling Man” Richard Drew 2001.

Figure 2. Aunt May falling. Raimi 2004.

Figure 3. Spider-Man saves Aunt May Raimi 2004.

As mentioned previously, there are instances in *Spider-Man 2* where Spider-Man can be seen as a parallel to Christ. Peter begins to lose his powers mid-way through the film and questions his commitment to being Spider-Man, which culminates in a dream sequence with deceased Uncle Ben. Peter closes his eyes in his room and reawakes in Uncle Ben's car, surrounded by white light and receives council from him:

> Uncle Ben: All the things you've been thinking about, Peter make me sad.
>
> Peter Parker: Can't you understand? I'm in love with Mary Jane.
>
> Uncle Ben: Peter, all the times we've talked of honesty fairness, justice - Out of those times, I counted on you to have the courage to take those dreams out into the world.
>
> Peter Parker: I can't live your dreams anymore. I want a life of my own.
>
> Uncle Ben: You've been given a gift, Peter. With great power comes great responsibility. Take my hand, son.
>
> Peter Parker: No, Uncle Ben. I'm just Peter Parker. I'm Spider-Man no more. No more. No more. (Raimi 2004)

It is apparent to the audience that this scene is taking place in an afterlife of sorts. The white light surrounding the two is emblematic of an afterlife where Peter can have conversations with Uncle

Ben. There persists a common trope in fiction where lights or white lights in particular reference death and a heavenly afterlife. The scene begins with Ben condemning Peter's thoughts of burying his alter ego, Spider-Man. Ben attempts to hold Peter accountable for his promise to bring "justice" and "fairness . . . into the world," but Peter is unmoved (Raimi 2004). Peter kills the part of himself that is Spider-Man saying, "I'm just Peter Parker" and repeating "no more" until he reawakes in the real world. Peter emphatically distances himself from Spider-Man, refusing to take Ben's hand and instead choosing to give up being Spider-Man. This scene represents a sort of death of Spider-Man so that he can be resurrected later in the film, furthering the metaphor that in some scenes in the film Spider-Man can be viewed as Christ-like. As Christ figures are another common trope in fiction, the inclusion of the symbolic death of a character only to later highlight a resurrection adds to the archetype of a Christ character. Peter's denouncement of Spider-Man becomes the character's symbolic death, hinting a rebirth so Spider-Man can again devote himself to the cause of saving the people of New York.

In addition to having Spider-Man as a symbolic protector of New York, Raimi utilizes *Spider-Man 2* to highlight the unsung heroes of 9/11: the first responders and citizens who volunteered to help. In the film, following Aunt May's narrow brush with death, there's a scene where she describes what a hero is to Peter. Despite the fact that she's illustrating her vision of Spider-Man, May's description portrays the everyday heroes seen in America immediately following the terrorist attacks:

> He knows a hero when he sees one. Too few characters out there, flying around like that saving old girls like me . . . Courageous, self-sacrificing people setting examples for all of us. Everybody loves a hero. People line up for them. Cheer them. Scream their names. And years later, they'll tell how they stood in the rain for hours just to get a glimpse of

> the one who taught them to hold on a second longer. I believe there's a hero in all of us that keeps us honest, gives us strength, makes us noble, and finally allows us to die with pride. (Raimi 2004)

This dialogue from Aunt May to Peter can be interpreted by audiences to be a subtle reference to the men and women who risked their lives as first responders and volunteers during and following the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. While the live-action superhero genre does allow viewers to escape into an Edenic reality of sorts, Raimi intended the film to honor New York. In Aunt May's speech, words like "courageous" and "self-sacrificing" precede the word "people." These attributes are able to be assigned to people without superhuman abilities. The "Responders Remembered" memorial in Nesconset, New York honors fallen first responders of 9/11. The memorial is separated into three distinct sections called "Sacrifice," "Honor," and "Courage." (Responders Remembered). Memorialized first responders of 9/11 embody the qualities Aunt May attributes to heroes, which suggests Aunt May's speech, in part, is a commendation of their heroic actions. Additionally, she claims these heroes taught people to "hold on a second longer." This specific word choice seems odd in association with the character of Spider-Man, but when analyzed in the context of medical professionals, the phrase "hold on a second longer" makes more sense. One could imagine that specific string of words being uttered to many of the victims of the 9/11 attacks as paramedics and firefighters worked to aid and free those trapped under the building's debris and critically injured. The last line of Aunt May's speech to Peter again credits the ordinary people as being remarkable as she suggests the existence of "a hero in all of us" who is "honest" and "noble."

Recalling Spider-Man's previously analyzed "death," the character must subsequently have a resurrection. The film portrays this rebirth after Doc Ock kidnaps Mary Jane Watson,

Peter Parker's love interest, in the hopes of cajoling Spider-Man in to action. Peter, unwilling to see Mary Jane in harm, redons the suit and is thus reborn. The audience even gets a nod to his reappearance as a "Daily Bugle" cover page spins into frame reading "He's back" (Raimi 2004). In an effort to save Mary Jane, Spider-Man follows the trail of destruction Doc Ock leaves in his wake and demands to know: "Where is she?" (Raimi 2004). The fighting begins in earnest following Doc Ock's reply, "Oh, she'll be just fine. Let's talk" (Raimi 2004). During the battle sequence, Spider-Man finds himself atop a speeding subway train in the middle of New York, grappling to stay aloft while Doc Ock slams him around. It is during this altercation that Spider-Man loses his mask. Doc Ock creates a distraction by snapping off the train's break function after first setting it to charge ahead at top speed. Spider-Man makes his way to the front of the train, unmasked. He quickly decides to try to latch the train onto the nearby buildings. He shoots webs to either side of the train, using his body as the block that the webs are tied to. When the weight of maintaining their safety becomes too much for Spider-man to bear, he utilizes the people behind him as if they were a safety net and leans on their supporting hands. As the camera zooms out, the audience sees that he has become the figurative embodiment of Christ as he stands in front of the innocent passengers, arms outstretched, sacrificing himself for their safety[5]. Spider-Man has successfully protected the innocent people on the train while also allowing for audience members to interpret his actions as Christ-like, enabling them to remain in their wish fulfilling fantasy with Spider-Man as a self-sacrificing savior. While buildings collapse in his wake, he stands, arm outstretched, as a hero. As the train grinds to a halt, Spider-Man collapses from the exertion on maintaining the safety of the people onboard the train, reclaiming his promise to Uncle Ben to fight for the continued protection of the innocent. The

[5] See figure 4 and 5.

film compares the would-be victims of terror to the people who were lost as a result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Unfortunately, real world victims had no superhuman hero, so we imagine a more optimistic outcome.

Figure 4. Spider-Man with his arms outstretched in a Christ-like pose. Raimi 2004.

Following that action sequence and Spider-Man's subsequent lapse of consciousness, the passengers of the subway car lift him above their heads to transport him to safety. As he is being held aloft his arms are once again extended to either side of him, a direct allusion to Christ being carried to the tomb after his death. In the scene Spider-Man is seemingly dead, having passed out from the exertion of saving the passengers of the train[6]. After the train stops, gravity begins to pull his body forward, but the men closest to him catch him and raise him above their heads to be passed along and laid out. Similarly, in the Bible two of Jesus' followers come to collect his body after the crucifixion and carry it to be buried. Religious iconography in films is intentional and meant to send an overt message to the audience. Raimi distinctly chose to have Spider-Man's arms outstretched, as we see when one of the passengers straightens Peter's arm out to more closely resemble the crucifixion pose. The bird's eye view of an unmasked Spider-Man

[6] See Figure 5

reveals not only his crucifixion pose, but also a gash in his suit along his ribs, exposing his cut skin[7]. The cut, given to Spider-Man in his previous fight with Doc Ock, offers a further comparison to Christ. In John 19:34 of the Bible a Roman guard cuts Jesus' side to ensure he is dead. In this scene the religious allusions encourage viewers to glean similarities between the characters by recreating specific scenes in the Bible. Raimi allows the audience an escape where New Yorkers are protected from any unforeseen attacks by a real Christ-like figure. This scene offers a hopeful revisioning of history, where Spider-Man seems like he could have been America's savior during 9/11, ensuring the innocent are saved.

Figure 5. Spider-Man being carried with visible abrasion. Raimi 2004.

This scene also includes symbolism reminiscent of 9/11when passengers raise Spider-Man above their heads and carry him to safety. The passengers of the subway act as mirrors to the everyday people who were affected by 9/11, showcasing the idea of American unity following the attacks as they work together to help Spider-Man. He is safeguarded from falling from the train and lifted to safety in their arms. As he is passed over their heads, each passenger contributes to the act of moving him along, raising their hands to maintain his unconscious

[7] See figure 5

weight, he is only able to be carried through their combined effort. The passengers have just experienced a trauma, believing their demise was imminent as the train raced towards the end of the track. These people share a trauma as Americans shared theirs after 9/11. Despite this, they are strong together and help Spider-Man in his time of need and even bravely attempt to defend him and the justice he maintains. The innocent citizens are New Yorkers who clearly come from different backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses as they commute. One passenger clutches a baby to her chest; some passengers wear business professional attire while other are in jeans and ball caps, specifically one man is adorned in a jean jacket with the American flag imprinted on the back. With the American flag as a symbol in the shot, audiences can see that the passengers represent a unified America. They are literally working together for the better good, protecting their safety, represented by Spider-Man. It is apparent this array of characters all come from different backgrounds and lead different lives. Some are even rude, seen when an older man questions Spider-Man's tactics saying, "any more bright ideas?" (Raimi 2004). These people are not perfect; rather, they serve as representations of New Yorkers. Despite their imperfections, the passengers still come together in a time of crisis:

Passenger #1: Is he alive?

Passenger #2: He's just a kid. No older than my son.

Passenger #3: It's all right.

Child #1: We found something.

Child #2: We won't tell nobody. It's good to have you back, Spider-Man.

Doc Ock: He's mine!

Passenger #4: You want to get to him, you got to go through me.

Passenger #5: And me.

Passenger #6: Me too. (Raimi 2004)

The passengers could be a representation of American ideals coming together to serve as one. The passengers, a wide variety of American citizens, have come together, united to say that America will rise again if they stand as one for a singular cause. This scene is a call to action for the American people. It is intended to leave the audience with a feeling of empowerment as a figurative representation of America is seen working together for the greater good. Despite all odds, these passengers will carry on, united to create a stronger America. By allowing the everyday people to be the heroes of this scene, Raimi offers a moment in the film to tell the audience that there is still good in the world and that moving forward Americans can forge a sense of solidarity in the protection of the nation.

In the culmination of Doc Ock's master plan, the final action sequence of the film shows him enabling his uncontrollable fusion reactor, a representation of unstoppable, catastrophic damage to New York. The sheer power of the reactors is referenced throughout the film, but none quiet reflects their destructive capacity as much as when Spider-Man suggests "half of New York" will die if he successfully recreates the machine (Raimi 2004). The fusion reactor represents the kind of fear Americans felt after 9/11 of an unpredictable attack, of being engulfed in an all-consuming explosion of metal and fire. Doc Ock has sequestered himself on the water, outside of the city, to work on his nuclear fusion reactor. The scene is shot with the reactor as the main source of light, casting the building and characters in a flame-like glow. The reactor rapidly gains power and begins magnetically attracting the beams and structural support of the pier building, physically warping them as they bend towards the magnet's pull and are torn away from the walls and floor. *Spider-Man 2*'s female lead, Mary Jane, can be seen tied to one of these support beams with iron chains. As the structure of the building is altered as a result of the

unpredicted, negative effect of the reactor, Mary Jane is at risk of being consumed by the vortex, dangling mere feet away from the scorching power of the sun. As large magnetic pieces of the building fall, Spider-Man and Mary Jane are in danger of being killed by these objects or building collapse and audiences are reminded of presumed images of 9/11 victims following the initial impact of the planes with the Twin Towers. After the collision, survivors were left among the wreckage with similar structural damage and collapsing sections of the towers. While the circumstances presented in the film are different, the thematic choices of this scene encourage audiences to make parallels between the two events. As the film continues, the reaction grows stronger and audiences see the edifice of the building peeled away, causing the roof to collapse on itself. There is no controlling the total, imminent destruction, and Spider-Man attempts to stop the reactor by pulling the plug on the machine. But his effort serves no purpose, as he is helpless to stop the inevitable destruction, despite his powers.

Meanwhile, Raimi cuts to a street scene to show audience members the chaos occurring there. Street signs are being ripped from the ground and cars are sliding out of control, all while people scream and flee in the background. The first shot of the street shows a taxi being pulled towards the magnetic force of the fusion reactor. Next, the scene cuts to a wide angle shot of the entire street and the people of New York attempting to find shelter from the street. One couple enters a nearby building while another is shown moving out of the way of an oncoming taxi. This scene is a small parallel to 9/11, as it reflects what the victims of 9/11 experienced at ground zero. People in the streets following the attacks fled to safety, trying to protect themselves. The scene evokes a similar representation of people fearing for their lives, but not to the magnitude experienced during 9/11. Returning to the pier, Spider-man helplessly asks Dr. Octavius what can be done, to which Dr. Octavius responds, “It can’t be stopped” (Raimi 2004). Dr. Octavius

looks horrified at his own revelation and audience members get a sense of Spider-Man's anxiousness as he scrambles to do anything to stop the uncontrollable terror currently looming over the city.

The terror attacks of 9/11 were unprecedented and America was vastly unprepared for such an event. *Spider-Man 2* gives the audience a visual representation of a fantastical version of a protected America, specifically New York. As the final action scene of the film continues, a wall of the building begins to fall on Mary Jane as she stands helpless to stop it. Unlike real life, Spider-Man swoops in just in time to prevent the wall from landing on her, indulging the audience by providing a hero that can protect the helpless people against collapsing buildings. Holland calls *Spider-Man 2* a "therapeutic narrative" following the attacks, which resulted in its "extraordinary popularity" (300). Americans needed to escape into a reality with a possibility of being saved by a super-human being. Spider-Man is able to neutralize the threat with minimal damage and loss of life as he's become the embodiment of America's protector.

The last scene of the film begins as Peter Parker hears sirens begin to sound outside of his apartment. Despite having just reunited with Mary Jane he knows he is honor bound to protect the city. Peter turns towards the window and the frame cuts to Mary Jane. She walks out of frame, towards the window and the scene cuts again, now to a wide shot of the outside of Peter's apartment building. As she stands behind the window Spider-Man suddenly jumps into frame, following the sounds of the sirens, flying from building to building as the sun sets on New York City[8]. It is apparent that Peter Parker is worried about Mary Jane's reaction to his desire to leave her and go where he is needed; however, at her encouraging, "Go get 'em, tiger" he's off, flying among police helicopters (Raimi 2004). The implication is that, despite Peter's wavering

[8] See figure 6

conviction to his alter-ego through the film, Spider-Man will consistently guard the people of New York and provide superhuman support to the first responders already in transit. In the utopian fantasy of *Spider-Man 2* (2004), New York needs additional support, their first responders are simultaneously heroes and not enough. However, with Spider-Man the city is able to exist under constant protection. The scenic images of Spider-Man flying from skyscraper to skyscraper paint the optimistic picture of a protector watching the citizens of New York and willing to face any foe that might make itself known.

Figure 6. Spider-Man flying to the rescue. Raimi 2004.

Spider-Man, after reclaiming that title, holds true to his promise to Uncle Ben to protect "honesty, justice (and) fairness" in the world (Raimi 2004). After 9/11, superheroes become quasi-gods who can erase the nightmare that remains from the attacks. It's reasonable for audiences to believe that if America had superhuman beings like Spider-Man, 9/11 could have been prevented. In this "therapeutic narrative," all superheroes are elevated to the same status of omnipresent protectors that exist to keep the American people safe (Holland 300). Peter Parker puts his duties as Spider-Man above all else, and by doing so, he creates an unrealistic safe haven where people needn't fear random terroristic threats. *Spider-Man 2* rewrites the narrative, creating a world that audiences are able to envision as an ideal version of America.

Holy Invasion of Privacy, Batman: Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) as a Response to the War on Terrorism

Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) is another film that reflects and incorporates American fears following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The film explores Batman as the vigilant protector of the fictional cityscape of Gotham, which many read as a parallel to New York. The film's depiction of a bleak Gotham cityscape is reflective of a grim post-9/11 world, with criminals running amuck and a city in disrepair. By analyzing scenes showing the Joker's anarchic rhetoric, we can view him as the embodiment of chaos. Gotham's response to the unpredictable destruction the Joker enacts represents American fear of unexpected calamity following 9/11. Batman, provoked by the Joker's nihilist actions, becomes emblematic of a corrupt American government attempting to reestablish security through the declaration of a war on terror. In contrast, District Attorney Harvey Dent is the "White Knight" to Batman's "Dark," as his lawful approach to the justice system mirrors an idealized version of similar practices in the American government (Nolan 2008). *The Dark Knight* (2008) builds these parallels which aid in a viewing the film as an allegory for America's valid fear in response to its own government's tactics in response to 9/11. George W. Bush's implementation of the Patriot Act and the subsequent power of the NSA gave rise to fears of uncontrollable, secret government supervision, which are also major themes of the film. *The Dark Knight* validates American fears of the war on terrorism, as Batman, the supposed superhero, becomes warped in his desire for justice. Additionally, the film scrutinizes American audiences' need for an idealized reality through superhero films as the Joker subverts the typical tropes of the genre, disrupting the expected "therapeutic narrative" provided by previous superhero film adaptations, like *Spider-Man 2.*Through scene and character analysis *The Dark Knight* can be viewed as a form of

political and social criticism of the exploitation of American fear, along with our desire to be soothed by these retellings.

Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* was released in 2008, almost seven years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The successes of Sony's *Spider-Man* franchise inspired competing production companies to attempt similar acclaim in the box office. DC Entertainment, a subsidiary of Warner Bros., endeavored to mimic Sony's achievement in their 2005 Batman reboot, *Batman Begins.* Unlike its predecessors, Nolan's first installment of the three-film franchise exhibits a darker version of a superhero. *Batman Begins* doesn't give the audience a classic superhero; rather, viewers are presented with a vigilante who doesn't follow the letter of the law. In the highly anticipated sequel, audiences are introduced to Heath Ledger's award-winning performance of the iconic DC supervillain, the Joker[9]. Audiences were enamored with his enigmatic portrayal of an often-cartoonish villain, despite his penchant for murder. The Joker is not a protagonist intended to garner audience support, but the distinctly malicious portrayal of the Joker intrigued viewers.

One of the mysteries surrounding the Joker is the origin of his scars. It is apparent to audience members, despite the garish clown makeup, that the Joker has two large scars on either side of his face, extending from his mouth[10]. The story behind his horrific mutilation is presumably the reason behind his devotion to the Joker character, and knowing his motivations would give audiences the opportunity to empathize with him. Instead, the character's backstory remains a mystery. Halfway through the film the Joker tells a high-ranking gangster a version of a story audiences will never know when he says his father disfigured him, giving the backstory

[9] Heath Ledger was awarded a posthumous Oscar for "Best Supporting Actor" for his role as the Joker in *The Dark Knight* following his death on January 22nd, 2008.
[10] See figure 7.

that after killing his mother his father, “turns to (him) and says “why so serious?” Comes at (him) with the knife “why so serious?” Sticks the blade in (his) mouth “Let’s put a smile on that face” (Nolan 2008). This version of his history is seemingly accurate as it portrays the Joker as a villain with a tragic, abusive past who turned to criminal behavior as an escape from his trauma. This version also gives audiences the origin of his catchphrase, “why so serious?” (Nolan 2008). In an initial viewing of the film there is no reason to doubt this glimpse at the Joker’s childhood until he reveals another lie about the origin of his scars later in the film. This time, he suggests he acted out of selfless love and cut himself to mirror his wife, who is scarred as a result of being “in deep with the sharks” (Nolan). He claims, “She can’t stand the sight of (him)” and his supposed declaration of unconditional love forces her to leave him. In both stories audiences understand the Joker wants people to see him as a victim of outside circumstances. In explaining his backstory with these lies he is denying culpability for his actions, citing traumatic events as justification for anarchy. These made up versions of his reality serve to forge a desire in the audience to know his true past and subsequent motivations while allowing him to remain completely mysterious. His character is intriguing, leaving more questions than answers. When the Joker is apprehended in the film Officer James Gordon enhances the enigmatic qualities of the Joker when he reveals they found “Nothing. No matches on prints, DNA, dental. Clothing is custom, no labels. Nothing in his pockets but knives and lint. No name, no other alias... nothing” (Nolan). The Joker has gone to extraordinary measures to make sure he is unidentifiable, thus confounding Gotham police, Batman, and audiences alike. While his character is not extraordinarily likeable, the Joker insights curiosity. The Joker’s unknowable nature makes him a compelling character despite his desire for chaos. Ledger’s performance of the maniac is

compelling and the character remains one of the best superhero villains, as evidenced by Ledger's Oscar win.

Figure 7. Image of the Joker with scars evident. Nolan 2008.

The Dark Knight presents the imperfect characters of the Joker, Batman, and Harvey Dent who can be read as critical responses to a post-9/11 America. John Ip believes, "the parallels between the film's depiction of counterterrorism and the war on terrorism are unmistakable" (209). Filmmakers address their concerns through their creations, as seen repeatedly in the live-action superhero genre. This shift from *Spider-Man* 2's optimistic outlook and *The Dark Knight*'s treatment of post-9/11 themes suggests a trend in the live action superhero genre wherein the films represent larger political responses. In Christopher Nolan's interview with Entertainment Weekly following the release of *The Dark Knight* he suggests his films are at least, in part, political responses:

> Interviewer: You and your co-writers put a lot of what many people take to be political metaphors in your Batman movies. Are these deliberate?
>
> Nolan: Well, the simple answer is yes. That's not to say that we're trying to make political stories. That's not the case. We just write from the perspective of the world we live in, what interests us and frightens us. And one of the things we're very aware of right

> now is the idea of society breaking down. That's what we're doing with the Joker. He's essentially an anarchist. An agent of chaos, we like to call him. (EW Interview)

The fear of the unknown encourages audiences to turn to the alternate realities of film, as evidenced by the overwhelmingly positive response to the *Spider-Man* franchise. Nolan explores that fear, but rather than rewrite history to create a therapeutic narrative, he subverts the superhero film genre and critiques the need for god-like superheroes and the government's reaction to an unprecedented terrorist attack. The film establishes an uncontrollable villain, a terrorist in his own right, and then provides an unconventional hero to corral that threat through nefarious means. The audience can see parallels between The Joker's destruction of life and al Qaeda's terrorist attacks. While Osama Bin Laden has since explained his justification for the attacks of 9/11, the outcome remains the destruction of innocent people and inciting Americans to war.

The Joker can be compared to the 9/11 terrorists as he embodies American fear of the unexplainable. Following the attacks President Bush continued to refer to al Qaeda as "evil" people against "American values" (Crotty 47). The national understanding then became that America was targeted for its mere existence, rather than religious differences or America's military support of Israel. The narrative of al Qaeda terrorists as inherently evil with no motivations for their actions is reflected in a post-9/11 viewing of *The Dark Knight's* Joker. Alfred explains the Joker's mentality to Batman at one point: "some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn" (Nolan). This description characterizes the Joker as having no "logical" motivation; rather, he acts out of the desire to incite anarchy or "watch the world burn" (Nolan 2008). Specifically, Alfred mentions a distaste of these unexplainable

villains to operate out of a desire for monetary gain. This antipathy of financially motivated criminals is expressed by the Joker after he successfully secures the mob's money. He lambasts the mob's motivations after he sets fire to a large pile of bills, "It's not about the money. It's about sending a message" (Nolan). The Joker acts out of malice and a desire to wreak havoc on the people of Gotham rather than any hope of living rich. As the Joker rejects an easily explained motivation, and his lack of reasoned impetus is paired with distinctly terroristic actions throughout the film allow critics are able to make connections to the al Qaeda terrorists. Ip sees parallels between the warped Joker and 9/11 terrorists:

> *The Dark Knight*'s vision of the world is brooding and gritty. In particular, certain motifs—the Joker's grainy homemade videos, cell phone-detonated human bombs, burnt-out remains of buildings swarming with rescue workers—give the film a distinctly post-9/11 aesthetic. The Joker himself presents as a terrorist figure who intimidates, threatens and inflicts violence and mayhem upon a civilian population in furtherance of his anarchic ideological purpose. (213)

The Joker is an exaggeration of Americans' image of a terrorist. He has no motivations beyond inciting chaos and provoking the citizens of Gotham to respond violently to his threats of annihilation. Ip lists a few of the Joker's plots of anarchy to further corroborate a viewing of his character as a caricature of terrorism. In the film the Joker explains his intentions as a villain when he encourages, "Introduce a little anarchy, you upset the established order and everything becomes chaos. I'm an agent of chaos" (Nolan). He aligns himself with chaos, allowing for comparison to the helpless disorder Americans felt following 9/11. Rather than killing indiscriminately, he goes out of his way to target the weakest people of Gotham, innocent residents of the local hospitals. Nolan's character helps us visualize the mania of a person

reveling in chaos.[11] One example of this in the film is scene when the Joker is leaving a Gotham hospital after detonating the bomb he planted, as previously threatened. As he leaves the hospital, he skips down the steps, physically showcasing his joy in the demolition of the building. As the multiple bombs are detonated throughout the building, he holds his arms out to his sides, as if to present his destruction to audiences. The Joker held a similar position after revealing his magic trick to the mob earlier in the film. As audiences will remember, the Joker asked if Gotham's most wanted criminals wanted to see him make a pencil disappear. He slams the pencil into the head of a guard attempting to disarm him, holds his hands to his sides like a magician and says "Ta-da" (Nolan). The hospital's explosion is another one of his tricks, and the reveal of his successfully completed threat elicits another "ta-da" moment (Nolan).

Figure 8. The Joker reveling in his destruction of a Gotham hospital. Nolan 2008.

The Joker serves as a foil to the crime-stopping, order bound Batman as he is depicted as being cruel for the sake of cruelty. His mania is realized when he reveals the logic supporting his acts of terror on the people of Gotham. The audience gets a glimpse of his warped mind when he outlines his methodology:

[11] See Figure 8.

> Nobody panics when things go according to plan. Even if the plan is horrifying! If, tomorrow, I tell the press that, like, a gang banger will get shot, or a truckload of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics, because it's all part of the plan. But when I say that one little old mayor will die, well then everyone loses their minds! (Nolan)

The Joker's explanation resonates with viewers as it critiques humanity's apathetic nature towards death in the name of war, highlighting his own warped views of American ideals and interpretations of human nature. The Joker links the unnecessary destruction of human life to an act that causes the most turmoil amongst witnesses. This dogma is similar to that of terrorist sects as people expect soldiers to die fighting al Qaeda overseas, but no one anticipated an act of war being brought to American soil. The terrorists sought to wreak the most havoc in the name of their god, which was successful in their targeting of innocent Americans. The Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008) symbolizes these groups of people through his desire to initiate turmoil in the city of Gotham. The desire to insight war continues to connect the Joker to Americans' idea of the 9/11 terrorists. The film allows for a viewing where critics are able to recognize the Joker as a terrorist symbol and then see him brought to justice by Batman.

One example of The Joker's parallelism to terrorist groups is the horrific video he releases taunting Batman. According to psychological research studies: "The primary goal of terrorism is to disrupt society by provoking intense fear and shattering all sense of personal and community safety. The target is an entire nation, not only those who are killed, injured, or even directly affected" (Hall). Therefore, the people the Joker kills matter less than the fear he propagates in the minds of the citizens of Gotham. As Batman acts as a representation of post-9/11 United States' government, the Joker becomes the terrorist organization, as seen in the video the Joker sends to news programs, trying to draw the Batman out:

The Joker: Tell them your name.

Brian: Brian Douglas.

Joker: Are you the real Batman?

Brian: No.

Joker: Why do you dress up like him?

Brian: He's a symbol... that we don't have to be afraid of scum like you. . .

Joker: But you do, Brian. You really do. You think the Batman's helped Gotham? Look at me. LOOK AT ME! This is how crazy Batman's made Gotham. You want order in Gotham? Batman has to go. So, Batman must take off his mask, and turn himself in. Every day he doesn't people will die. Starting tonight. I'm a man of my word. (Nolan)

In this scene the Joker enacts similar tactics as the members of the Islamic State.[12] The terrorist group is responsible for the kidnaping and extortions of many Western travelers and reporters in an effort to provoke the American government following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Similarities between the Joker's footage and the threatening Islamic State videos can be made as the Joker broadcasts the execution of an innocent civilian to impact Batman, the American government. Friis explains the reoccurring themes of the taped executions wherein "the victims in the Islamic State's videos are not only killed; they are also forced to actively participate in the performance before their execution . . . by making them perform carefully staged confessions. Through the confessions, the victims are forced to assume, only later to denounce, a particular political identity" (Friis 249). The Joker's performance of terrorism mimics certain real-life terrorist actions when connecting this scene to the Islamic State videos. The grainy video the Joker releases is a reference to the Islamic State kidnappings and killings as he demands Brian

[12] The Islamic State referenced here is a group who "swore fealty" to al-Qaeda following the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Friis). Both groups are Islamic extremists active during the Iraq Insurgency.

denounce his belief in Batman prior to killing him. While Brain claims that Batman represents something greater, a protector of the city of Gotham, the Joker counteracts this argument, suggesting Batman has made Gotham "crazy" (Nolan). The disturbing video reaffirms the Joker as a character who can be read as an agent of terror, verifying the continued American fear of the unpredictability of terrorists.

Batman and the Joker can be viewed as codependent of one another with Batman emblematic of America's sometimes morally corrupt government in a post-9/11 world in response to the Joker's terrorist actions. This idea is exemplified in the film after Batman asks the Joker, "why do you want to kill me?" (Nolan). The Joker laughs at Batman's assumption and is quick to correct the notion: "Kill you? I don't want to kill you. What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off Mob dealers? No you . . . You. Complete. Me" (Nolan). The Joker here suggests an intrinsic connection as Batman continues to respond in unexpected, increasingly morally questionable ways to the Joker's acts of terror. The two characters balance each other as Batman attempts to cling to the moral high ground while slipping further in into darkness as he breaks the superhero moral code, violating the privacy of Gotham citizens, in an attempt to counteract the chaos gleefully enacted by the Joker. The Joker's suggestion that Batman "complete(s)" him reiterates the film's critique of the superhero archetype (Nolan). Batman, a classic vigilante of the DC universe becomes a warped character in Nolan's adaptation. The traditional motives of superhero and supervillain characters are not present in this film, explicitly stated in this interaction. The film sets up Batman as a character whose morals are not as easily defined as characters like Spider-Man, for example. Gotham questions his intentions as his reasoning is shrouded in darkness and their willingness to trust him dwindles as the Joker tests his resolute code of ethics. As the film begins audiences are encouraged to question his

adherence to the law as a news reporter says:

> Like this so-called Batman - a lot of people say he's doing some good, that criminals are running scared, but I say no. What kind of hero needs to wear a mask? You don 't let vigilantes run around breaking the law . . . where does it end? Yet, we hear rumors that instead of trying to arrest him the cops are using him to do their dirty work. (Nolan)

This expositional dialogue in the beginning of the film establishes Batman as a figure who some admire while simultaneously highlighting that others are appalled by the leeway he is being given to operate without fear of ramifications. The interviewer in this scene distances Batman from the title of hero, suggesting real heroes shouldn't need to "wear a mask" or hide the truth. In this scene, parallels can be made between Batman and the nation's fear-fueled imagining of the government's nefarious actions in pursuit of a victory in the war on terrorism. The film presents two responses to justice being served through the suggestion that "people say he's doing some good" with an immediate rebuttal of "no" (Nolan). Similarly to the American response to the government's proposed "war on terror" following the 9/11 attacks, there were parties on either side of the line. Many were grateful for the increased vigor to bring the terrorists to justice while some remained dubious about the government's effectiveness. The President took immediate action, declared a state of emergency, and began planning a response that would satiate the needs of his nation left vulnerable after the attack. In *The Dark Knight* people and police officers are willing to put their faith in someone they do not know if their willingness to overlook the details secures their safety as proven by Crotty who cites a study suggesting "only 40 percent trusted the government in Washington to do the right thing just about always or most of the time" (Crotty 42). This lack of trust works in *The Dark Knight* as Batman supposedly operates solely to keep the people of Gotham safe. However, as he has been left with immunity

of scrutinization by law enforcement, there is no one who can control him if his moral leanings were to change. The interviewer poses a rhetorical question to his audience, asking "where does it end?" (Nolan). The implication of this characterization is, if left unchecked, Batman could abuse his power for his own good, rather than the good of the citizens of Gotham. As the FBI's power is unfettered by the Bush administration following 9/11, American citizens reflectively ask a similar question.

In furthering a connection between Batman in Nolan's *The Dark Knight* to the American response to the unexpected terrorist act of 9/11, critics turn to Batman's interrogation of the Joker. In the film, Rachal Dawes has been kidnapped by the Joker and her life is at risk. Batman, in an effort to extract information about her location, resorts to physical abuse of the Joker.[13] He uses enhanced interrogation techniques, seemingly under the guise of preserving human life, but in the process, he diminishes the value of another life. This scene feels familiar to audiences as reflective of the retroactive awareness of the government's implementation of similar tactics. In *The Modern Superhero in film and Television,* Brown argues, "The film also alludes to the controversial tactics employed by the Bush/Cheney administration in its ongoing War on Terror, most notably the reframing of torture as 'enhanced interrogation techniques'" (Brown 83). The Bush administration approved torture by agents in the CIA and NSA during the Second Gulf War. Through the release of the The Freedom of Information Act, Americans learned that the government used enhanced interrogation techniques on suspected terrorists in Guantanamo Bay following 9/11. In an attempt to gather information about the attacks, inmates were pushed to their physical limits. While the "enhanced interrogation" of inmates was approved in an effort find reasons for the attacks, the film questions the moral justifications of such violent actions

[13] See Figure 9.

(Crotty 129). In the film The Joker gives in rather quickly, and the film seemingly condones Batman's actions while critiquing his moral stability. During Batman's interrogation of the Joker audiences see Gordon, watching through a two-way mirror, stop an officer from entering the room to stop Batman by saying "He's in control" (Nolan). The average Gotham citizen, a police officer, visibly reacts to Batman's violent methods of extracting information, attempting to end the interrogation. The implication of his response becomes a critique of the American government's justification. The Joker is not a character audiences inherently want to shield from violence, but when faced with images of a helpless Joker, Batman's methods become questionable.

Figure 9. Batman's enhanced interrogation of the Joker. Nolan 2008.

Batman serves as a parallel to America's changing and less legally sound National Security through his willingness to violate the privacy of Gotham's citizens in order to capture the Joker. In the film, Nolan criticizes this invasion of privacy through the inclusion of Batman's sonar system. Batman adapts the sonar system built by Fox earlier, allowing him to connect to all of the phones in Gotham City. Similarly to NSA's proposed surveillance of American technology, Batman's sonar system uses Gotham citizens phones to track the Joker. When Fox is shown the sonar surveillance system he is both awed and repulsed:

FOX: Beautiful. Unethical. Dangerous. You've turned every phone in the city into a microphone. Every cell phone in the city.

BATMAN: And high frequency generator/receiver.

FOX: Like the phone I gave you in Hong Kong. You took my sonar concept and applied it to every phone in the city, with half the city feeding you sonar you can image all of Gotham. This is wrong.

BATMAN: I've got to find this man, Lucius.

FOX: But at what cost?

BATMAN: The database is null-key encrypted. It can only be accessed by one person.

FOX: No one should have that kind of power.

WAYNE: That's why I gave it to you. Only you can use it.

FOX: Spying on thirty million people wasn't in my job description. (Nolan)

Bruce Wayne as Batman recognizes how this invasion of privacy breaks the moral code he is usually beholden to; however, he is able to justify he actions as a means through which he will capture the Joker. He explains away the act of spying on the citizens of Gotham, which he knows is wrong, because he believes that using the machine will enable him to "find this man" (Nolan). In the scene, the scope of the invasion of privacy is partially highlighted by the physical magnitude of the device.[14] The sonar machine takes up the entire background of the scene and Fox seems small standing in front of a wall of screens broadcasting their owners' locations and conversations. The moral judgment of Batman is reiterated by Fox following his verification of every phone in the city is a microphone. Fox pushes a button on the device and at once the room is filled with the indistinct conversations of Gotham citizens, unaware they are being monitored.

[14] See Figure 10

Immediately after the confirmation of the scope of the machine Fox tells Batman “this is wrong” (Nolan). Fox’s condemnation of Batman in response to the device is the film’s critique of similar methods taken to ensure American safety following the attacks. In the film, we see Fox grapple with the reality of what Bruce has done and come to the realization that it is not okay, that “no one should have that power” (Nolan). This sonar system is a clear reference to the methods of surveillance used by the NSA, with Fox as a moral objector to the invasion of privacy. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the government was able to use American fear as a tactic to enable mass surveillance of its own citizens as people were willing to give up their privacy if it meant that they would be kept safe in the future. Following the deaths of more than 3,000 innocent people, President Bush signed The Patriot Act (Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act) which, among other things, allowed the NSA to monitor the calls, text messages, and emails of United States citizens. Ip explains the secrecy surrounding the government’s decision to begin monitoring its citizens:

> Revealed by *The New York Times* in December 2005, the “terrorist surveillance program” or “TSP” involved the NSA engaging in electronic surveillance outside of the parameters of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 (FISA), the law governing electronic surveillance for the purpose of acquiring foreign intelligence. The TSP involved the NSA monitoring certain communications between people inside the United States and overseas, where one party was reasonably suspected of having ties to al Qaeda or associated terrorist organizations. It is now also clear that the President authorized the NSA to conduct other intelligence activities-likely including data-mining -together with the TSP, although the full extent of the NSA's activities remains unknown to this

day. (221)

While this Act of congress was initially approved in an effort to track al Qaeda, the mass surveillance continued years after the attacks without reign. Americans did not even learn of a majority of surveillance programs in place until years after the attacks. The "War on Terror" had enabled the government to act on the nation's fears in a supposedly necessary act of counter terrorism. *The Dark Knight* uses the sonar system to reference the Patriot Act and critique its continued usage by the government. Fox responds to Batman's assurance that this machine will enable him to find the Joker asking "at what cost?" (Nolan). The implied cost is the valued privacy of the citizens of Gotham, to which Fox suggests "no one should have that . . . power" (Nolan). The successful capture of the Joker is not enough of a reward to justify spying on the citizens of Gotham. The film, following the critique of heightened surveillance in the name of counterterrorism, destroys the machine after Batman's goal of capturing the Joker is realized. The destruction of the surveillance device suggests the American government's continued "spying" on its own citizens is similarly "unethical" (Nolan).

Figure 10. Fox in front of the sonar device. Nolan 2008.

In opposition to Batman as a symbol of corrupt government practices, District Attorney Harvey Dent represents an idealized version of the American government. This idea is made

explicit to audience members when Officer Gordon describes him as “Gotham's white knight” (Nolan). Batman exists as “the Dark Knight” because he has to operate in the shadows, literally in darkness. He breaks the law to catch criminals and does not risk exposure by donning the mask during the day. Batman notes these distinct differences at the end of the film, commending Dent when he says, “You're the symbol of hope that I could never be. Your stand against organized crime is the first legitimate ray of light in Gotham for decades” (Nolan). Batman’s commendation of Dent exemplifies the need people have to believe in government officials. He is also highlighted as legitimate as opposed to Batman. Additionally, Dent is associated with “light(ness)” or white. The juxtaposition of “white” and “dark” are reiterated throughout the film to further the divide between Dent’s actions as District Attorney and Batman’s actions as Gotham’s vigilante. Unlike Batman, Dent works above board, uses the law to his advantage in the courtroom, and puts away criminals through the appropriate chain of command, as evidenced by the scene where he cross-examines a testifying defendant, Sal Maroni. Maroni questions Dent’s credentials, haughtily saying he “thought the DA just played golf with the Mayor, things like that. Dent responds, “Tee-off's 1:30. More than enough time to put you away for life, Sally” (Nolan). He is confident in the courtroom and his ability to effectively and lawfully punish the criminals of Gotham, which is later proven to be justified as Maroni is taken away in hand-cuffs. While Batman operates in the gray areas, Dent can maintain the image of what Gotham, America, wishes its justice system was and can be analyzed as a representation of an idealized government prior to the attacks.

In a scene following Dent’s successful day in court, Wayne’s date suggests governments willing to break their own laws to maintain order are not the kind of leaders America needs. Instead, she suggests Harvey Dent, a man with only the law to support him, is the actual hero of

Gotham:

> Natascha: I'm talking about the kind of city that idolizes a masked vigilante.
>
> Dent: Gotham's proud of an ordinary man standing up for what's right.
>
> Natascha: Gotham needs heroes like you- elected officials, not a man who thinks he's above the law. (Nolan)

She makes the point that America needs to be able to believe that our government can protect us from evil without breaking the law. While Batman is a dark, corrupted character who has to rely on the cover of darkness to commit crimes in an effort to detain supposedly worse criminals; Dent is able to perform in the light of day, cheerily putting away the scum of Gotham in the courts.

However, even this beacon of hope gets tarnished by the anarchy of the Joker. Following the kidnapping and subsequent murder of Rachel Dawes, Dent loses his moral compass. He is transformed from the hero of the justice system to the corrupted "Two Face." The Joker revels in his ability to warp Gotham's example of a legitimate hero when he says, "I took Gotham's white knight. And I brought him down to our level, it wasn't hard - madness is like gravity. All it takes is a little push" (Nolan). The Joker is sure to use the word "our" implying he and Batman are equal in their "madness" (Nolan). Two Face operates as a villain in Gotham with a double-sided coin. Following Rachel's death, one side of the coin is scratched, now visibly different from the matching side. Furthering the argument that the Joker and Batman are connected, two sides of the same coin, Dent as Two Face is now similarly connected. His character relies on random chance, killing based on the toss of a coin: "heads: you live; tails: you die" (Nolan). Dent is easily corrupted into malevolent actions by one of the Joker's many acts of terror and now, like Batman, does not abide by the rules of law or morality. He serves justice as he sees fit proving

the best aspects of the government cannot go uncorrupted by the horrors of terrorism. In one of the final scenes of the film, Harvey Dent as Two Face corners Gordon and his family, screaming, "You thought we could be decent men in an indecent time...but you were wrong! The world is cruel. And the only morality in a cruel world is chance. Unbiased, unprejudiced, fair" (Nolan). Dent suggests an improbability in the occurrence of "decent men" in "indecent times," attempting to justify the corruption of his moral code. He blames the world for its injustice, attempting to lessen his blame. This outburst directly corelates to the mentality following 9/11. Americans believed that they should hit back harder, explaining how phrases like the "War on Terror" became soothing promises of a better future where America would be protected. In the film, Dent, much like America's government, has become twisted. He is no longer beholden to his morals. Now, he seeks justice through the barrel of a gun.

While Dent may not "die a hero," Batman ensures that he does. Harvey Dent was the American ideal of justice. Wayne believes this, as seen in the film when he says, "Gotham needs a hero with a face. Harvey wasn't the hero we deserved but the hero that we needed" (Nolan). While the film critiques the methods of counter-terrorism used by the United States government following 9/11, Batman condones rule breaking and corruption as the Joker was brought to justice. Additionally, he propagates the lie that if people are able to believe some aspects of the government remain "good" then other, perhaps questionable aspects can be vilified. Through his actions, Batman not only allows Dent to remain Gotham's hope for a utopian city, he also protects Gotham from the truth of Two Face. Harvey, the American ideal of justice, is able to remain Gotham's white knight despite his ultimate slide into villainy. Harvey's image is preserved in the minds of the citizens of Gotham and they can continue on, believing that despite his death, more people like him will continue to stand up for what's right. Batman sacrifices

himself for the people of Gotham, and in doing so, vilifies the corrupt government while a maintaining the optimistic symbol of a lawful government. The film almost condones Batman's version of vigilante justice despite simultaneously critiquing it as he is able to successfully deliver the Joker to law enforcement. The representation of an America that successfully operates with law and order, District Attorney Harvey Dent, is unable to legally bring the Joker down. *The Dark Knight* embodies Americans' fear that our government is not enough to protect us; that we need someone or something that is willing to defy the justice system in order to succeed. The film is a powerful post-9/11 commentary. When the Joker is subsequently brought to justice, not by the symbol of a perfect American justice system, but rather by the warped vigilante, operating in the shadows, it seems acceptable to operate outside of the legal system insofar as it saves American lives.

The Joker, in addition to being an unknowable agent of chaos throughout the film, also resonates with audiences through his condemnation of Americans' need for superhero narratives. The Joker, unlike other superhero villains, does not exist merely to be foiled by the caped crusader. Rather, his actions corrupt the film's hero and he provides meta-commentary on audience understanding of superheroes:

> Don't talk like you're one of them! You're not, even if you'd like to be. To them you're just a freak, like me. They need you right now, but when they don't, they'll cast you out—like a leper. See, their morals, their code it's a bad joke, dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. I'll show you, when the chips are down, these civilized people? They'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster. I'm just ahead of the curve. (Nolan 2008)

While Peter Parker exists as an everyman, Bruce Wayne is othered alongside the Joker. The

Joker describes them as "leper(s)," people historically cast out and removed from polite society. Batman is not "one of them" neither is he a superhero. Instead, he is a "freak" like the Joker. The Joker suggests audience necessity to have a "moral . . . code" reiterated to them through superhero films is fruitless insofar as that code is "dropped at the first sign of trouble" (Nolan). Albeit, superhero films were and are successful, but using them to rewrite traumatic events is critiqued by Nolan through the Joker's monologues. The Joker suggests that Americans need superheroes "right now," but the characters will be cast aside when audiences no longer need them. He ends the monologue with "I'm not a monster" implying a depth of character that exists outside of a simple villain to be defeated by the film's hero. The film ends with Batman as the villain in the eyes of Gotham. He becomes the "freak" the Joker predicted and audiences are left bereft of their usual happy ending.

The superhero genre, while initially successful after 9/11 for the romanticized retelling of a protected nation is now a platform through which producers and audiences alike can project their political and social critiques. Riegler observes, "terrorism and relating fears, paranoia and insecurity, were all but prime ingredients of Hollywood cinema since 2001" which contributes an explanation as to why we hail a masked vigilante as a hero. However, as superhero films move further away from the inception point of 9/11 as the catalyst, the genre becomes an arena through which American filmmakers can explore their fears and audiences can project their realities onto the superheroes. *The Dark Knight* showcases a film that can be analyzed as critically responding to real life fears, while simultaneously not providing any sense of comfort to its audience. Instead, the film almost encourages an analysis wherein audiences must question their opinions of a post 9/11 America as Batman is not inherently the "good guy." Superhero films then become more than simple tales of avenging the innocent; rather, through audience interpretation, the

social and political climate informs underlying messages.

Nevertheless, She Persisted: Feminism in *Wonder Woman* (2017) following Trump's 2016 Presidential Election

Following the thread of fear as an instigator in the creation of post 9-11 superhero films, we arrive at another nation-wide onset of fear: Donald Trump's 2016 election. Barack Obama's polarizing presidency revealed an ugly undercurrent of racism in our nation. Trump's candidacy and subsequent victory in the campaign for president of the United States relied on the votes of white, uneducated, blue-collar Americans.[15] Trump galvanized his voters into what scholars refer to as a Neo-Confederacy, giving a platform to people maintaining sexist and racist ideologies[16]. Millions believed during the 2016 presidential election that we might see a historic win for women. Instead, the election of our 45th president is historic for other reasons. The 2017 *Wonder Woman* film, directed by Patty Jenkins, was released at a time when the United States was politically charged following the election of Donald Trump. While the film was written and filmed prior to the election of our 45th president, audience members would have seen the film through a post-Trump lens. In the film, Diana, princess of Themyscira, represents a female leader who is kind hearted and fierce in nature. In the midst of a sociopolitical climate in which a female's potential rise to power is met with such stark opposition on a national scale, Diana becomes the cinematic representation of opposition to the forces that suppress feminine power and agency, thereby providing inspiration in the form of a female character with the capability and willingness to fight back.

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[15] Ruth Milkman complies analytics of the average Trump voters, concluding "Trump voters were disproportionately middle-aged or older, non-college-educated, white, and male (although the majority of white female voters also supported him). Residents of the "Rust Belt" (the former manufacturing areas that lost untold numbers of high-wage jobs over recent decades) and rural areas were also critical parts of Trump's electoral base."

[16] Neo-Confederacy referenced here defined as a "movement . . . which advocated traditional gender roles, was hostile towards democracy, opposed homosexuality, and favored segregation and white supremacy" (Stein 239)

The iconography and dialogue used throughout *Wonder Woman* coalesce to present an unapologetic feminist[17] message to viewers. For instance, in the first few lines of the film, Diana references a great darkness that exists the closer one looks at the earth. During a prolonged pan-in to the Earth from space Diana presents a brief premise of the film in an expository narration:

> I used to want to save the world. This beautiful place. But I knew so little then. It is a land of magic and wonder. Worth cherishing in every way. But the closer you get the more you see the great darkness shimmering within. And mankind? Mankind is another story altogether. (Jenkins)

Already in this small quotation the audience is aware of the disenchantment Diana feels as a result of her interactions with mankind. She alludes to her deference to humans in association with her naivety; the more educated she becomes, the more disillusioned she is with the entire male population. While the world is "beautiful" and "magic," she no longer has any desire to come to its defense. Diana references a "great darkness" which is a symbol for the corruption bleeding from the hearts of men, without Ares' intervention. The stories Diana has grown up hearing in which the men are created to be "fair and good, strong and passionate" are just that: stories (Jenkins). Humans are not wholly good; rather, they each have their own, sometimes morally questionable, motivations. While this film is told in retrospect and Diana later addresses a different quality found amongst mankind which makes them worthy of salvation, she allows the audience to discover this as the narrative moves forward, rather than coming to that conclusion from the onset of the film. As the opening scene of *Wonder Woman* (2017) ends,

[17] "Feminist" mentioned here presumes a minimal understanding of feminism as the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. Further research is suggested; however, a brief overview of the history of feminism begins in the awareness of the four waves of feminism: the 1850's suffragette "first wave," the 1960s-80s "second wave," the 1990's "third wave," and what scholars are now referring to as the "fourth wave" of feminism, centered around Internet campaigns and public response to sociopolitical culture. (Maclaran)

Diana speaks of the young girl she once was and how naïve that person was in the face of this darkness. Female viewers can relate to that once naïve young girl as we too have all once been blinded to the rampant sexism we are surrounded by. Within the first five minutes of the film there is a precedent established that mankind is imperfect because of its incessant quest for conflict to satiate its "darkness."

In the following scene, we get our first look at the warrior women in Themyscira. Jenkins provides generous sweeping shots of the battle-ready women in their armor as they practice their fighting skills. In the establishing shot of the Amazons sparring[18] the characters are not sexualized gratuitously; instead, their athletic ability is highlighted. In her analysis of female heroines, Purse demonstrates "The contemporary action heroine enacts a sexualized femininity to which display is central; while these women are physically active . . . there is no doubt that their bodies are also being eroticized within the terms of conventionally objectified femininity" (Purse 188). While their outfits do reveal skin, they are not overtly sexualized, their armor performing as a layer of protection instead of a costume designed to enhance their chests. Themyscira is a tropical paradise, an island which is presumably warm, suggesting a necessity for light, while simultaneously protective, clothing. The Amazons are clothed with chest plates covering their vital organs, boots acting as shin guards, and face shields. In previous iterations of warrior women such as Black Widow of *The Avengers* (2012), Lara Croft of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), Catwoman of *Catwoman* (2004), Eleektra of *Elektra* (2005) or even the original Wonder Woman on TV, the outfits leave little to the imagination, obviously intended for the male viewers as they are costumed in overtly sexual outfits. Furthering the notion that Wonder woman as a character has always been presented for the male gaze, Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman is the

[18] See Figure 11

first iteration to not wear earrings[19]. The simple detail of whether or not a character wears jewelry should not seem of vast importance, but the idea that this strong, foreign warrior would be beholden to modern presentations of feminine beauty is laughable. Throughout the scene the Amazons are depicted with full breast plates covering their most vital organs i.e. the heart and lungs,[20] how actual warriors would have been adorned. This armor looks less like corsets and more like bulletproof vests, with the leather shielding them from oppositional attacks. As Fawnia Shoo Hoo explains in an interview with costume designer Lindy Hemming,

> these design choices are intentional and respect the actresses and the characters' intelligence: But the same time, I didn't want them to look *too* fashionable. I wanted [the Amazons] to look like they were sporty and strong and they were able to ride horses. Hopefully, they looked elegant, but elegance was not what they were originally striving for. (Hoo 5)

In addition, the head plates/ face shields seen worn by many of the warriors resemble crowns, as the metallic objects span across their foreheads, framing their faces. This aspect of the warrior costume implies not only their strength in battle, but also their power as women as the feminine looking headpiece symbolizes the reclamation of strength. The traditional feminine, high-class notion of royalty turned on its head and now the connection face shields to crowns can be viewed as a deliberate choice to represent the power of the warrior women of Themyscira. These warriors are grappling against one another while holding swords and shields. Each woman looks fierce in her own unique way and there are no bulging bosoms as there is no intended male gaze.

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[19] Listed under general film trivia on the *Wonder Woman* IMDB page. The full quote saying, "This is the first feature in which Wonder Woman does not wear earrings. She wore red circle earrings throughout the 1970s live action television series and in Hanna-Barbera's long-running animated series *Super Friends* (1973), but wore white star earrings in Cartoon Network's television series *Justice League* (2001)."

[20] See Figure 12

The only bulging we see here are the bulging muscles of these role-defying women. We see women flipping and fighting and one woman dangles herself from a horse and shoots an arrow from a bow mid gallop, epitomizing the strength of the women of Themyscira[21]. These are no shrinking violets. They train rigorously to be ready to defend their paradise and all of us.

Figure 11. Amazonian women practicing combat in sensible armor. Jenkins 2017.

Figure 12. Amazonian face shields which arguably resemble crowns. Jenkins 2017.

[21] See Figure 13

Figure 13. Amazonian warrior shooting arrow while riding horseback. Jenkins 2017.

Additionally, we see a young girl we hear people call "Diana!" (our hero) standing among all of the powerful women mid battle practice. This image harkens back to what the original creator of Wonder Woman had hoped for his heroin. Hanley quotes a 1937 interview with Marston who believes "[women were poised] to take over the rule of the country, politically and economically" (Hanley 13). Marston, an outspoken feminist, hoped that people, mostly young boys, would use his comic as a blueprint for what the future should look like: a matriarchal society. The scene with the adolescent Diana pays homage to Marston as this young girl stands idolizing the strong women role models. Diana becomes the child reader Marston envisioned learning of women's equality in the pages of his Wonder Woman comics. She sees the Amazonian warriors as symbols of strength, she has never known women to be marginalized sex. Rather, Diana's awareness is that of strong female leaders and "rule(rs) of the country" (Hanley 13).

The inclusion of an awe-struck juvenile version of Diana also allows audience members to visualize the impact the strong Amazonian women of Themyscira could have on other young women. Diana aspires to be as strong as the women she is surrounded by, so she works hard to develop her abilities. Through the positive depiction of female warriors and leaders, audience

members are left to conclude Diana is the product of their tutelage. Jenkins' Wonder Woman, the feminist icon, had powerful leaders to mirror herself after as she grew up; she is the result of young girls being encouraged to see themselves as capable and confident. She has never known anything other than the Amazonian women who revel in their skill in combat and intelligence in strategy, thus implying that allowing adolescent girls to see women in power would have a direct, positive impact on their confidence in their own abilities. Despite this, there is a distinct lack of female superheroes in the live-action superhero genre, at least in comparison to the male superhero characters. Carolyn Cocca suggests in her book, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation,* that one solution to this lack of representation is the inclusion of female superheroes in the cannon of pop-culture. She concludes: "We just haven't seen enough female superheroes . . . through whom we could more easily imagine that "anyone can be a hero" (Cocca 53). This reiteration of the idea that there are not enough female action heroes suggests the importance minority representation has on viewers. Adolescent women, when given the opportunity to imagine themselves as the heroes of their own stories, are emboldened at the suggestion of female leadership. The media that is consumed by youth informs them of what is standard and expected in society. *Wonder Woman,* carries on in a continuation of an established cinematic universe, DC's *Justice League* (2017), and was released in a political climate that desperately needed female leaders. Diana resonates with female audience members as a symbol of feminism in a post-Trump era of sexism. Following a presidential campaign where presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was debased for her gender, films that encourage women to rise to a position of leadership are well received by female audiences as they fill a void left by male-dominated superhero films. Additionally, *Wonder Woman* allows audiences viewing in a post-Trump era to rewrite the narrative of gender inequality in the 21st Century.

As the film continues, Diana is taught of the creation of mankind and the purpose of the Amazons in the bedtime story Hippolyta tells her. Ares, the god of war, is jealous and incites violence among the men of Zeus' creation. In response, Zeus creates the Amazons to counteract men's desire for bloodshed, as the film retells: "So, the gods created us, the Amazons to influence men's hearts with love and restore peace to the Earth. And for a brief time, there was peace. But it did not last. Your mother, The Amazon Queen, led a revolt that freed us all from enslavement" (Jenkins). The powerful women revolt against their captors to restore their autonomy. The Amazons were originally made to bring light to the darkness of mankind, brought about through the suggestions of Ares. However, the previously corrupted men even manage to destroy the peace the Amazons intended to foster. In combination with Hippolyta's confirmation in Diana's bedtime story, the images provided in the film show the men capturing and enslaving the Amazonian women[22]. The human men immediately act as though the Amazons were owed to them or were entities that could be considered pieces of property. Joseph English briefly explains the history of women in England and America in the 18th century being viewed as property when he suggests, "The marriage was said to be a "sale to the husband by the same form as if she were a slave," a symbolic sale . . . The notion that the form of the marriage is properly that of a sale prevailed on the continent and in Anglo-Saxon England" (English 77). This reflects a long, Western history of women being worth less than men. Men in the film hold a corrupted version of power as they are shown attempting to dominate the Amazonian women. As Hershkoff posits, the Trump election brought forward "Features of gender relations that for decades have been suppressed or side stepped . . . (and his) coarse and violent language has spotlighted his own misogyny and the persistence of sex-role stereotyping" (Hershkoff 48). This comparison is not to

[22] See Figure 14.

say that filmmakers were operating with knowledge of Trump's sexist comments; rather, viewers would apply the sociopolitical climate of 2017 to their understanding of the messages of the film. The Amazonian women oppose their oppressors and fight for their right to independence; they condemn those that would put them in a subservient role.

Figure 14. Amazonian women captured in Hippolyta's bedtime story to Diana. Jenkins 2017.

In viewing *Wonder Woman* through a feminist lens, we see Steve Trevor as a better man than the average. His continued partnership with Diana serves to juxtapose their genders and mock the stereotypical expectations of her character while simultaneously highlighting her strength. When they first arrive in London, some men hoot and holler at Diana. Steve corrects them saying, "Gentlemen, eyes to yourself" (Jenkins). He feels the need to be a protector and also condemns their overt sexualization of Diana while she seems fine to ignore them completely. A few moments later, Diana marches off in the general direction of the man Steve needs to meet with to hand off Dr. Poison's book. Steve stops her because her cloak blows aside and reveals her warrior outfit:

> STEVE: You can not do that because you're not wearing any clothes. Let's go... Let's go buy some clothes.
>
> DIANA: What do these women wear into battle?

STEVE: They don't . . . (Jenkins)

Steve is aware of the preconceived views of women in England during World War I and endeavors to protect Diana from their projected male gaze. To the average passerby, Diana is reduced to a second-class citizen and her armor only encourages ill-informed men to objectify her while the film has previously normalized the traditional outfit. She is wearing clothes; she's wearing what Amazonians would typically wear into battle. However, because they have traveled to a country predisposed to the objectification of women, they must "fix" her to be ready for public consumption. The traditional Amazonian battle wear is not intentionally revealing in nature, rather it portrays what would have been worn based on historical context as the costume designers drew inspiration from Grecian soldiers, hoping to contextualize the outfits the Amazonians wear. In a study of ancient Greek armor, Jarva suggests the Greeks wore "two-piece bronze cuirasses, composite corslets of linen, leather and scales, and stomach-guard one- piece or composite leather corslets of flexible but fairly thick, tough hide which could provide good enough protection compared to bronze" (Jarva 36-37). Grecian soldiers were only men and their armor described in Jarva's book could also be describing the armor of the Amazons in *Wonder Woman,* further suggesting the costume choice was a reflection of traditionally Greek protective gear rather than intentionally salacious costume choices. Additionally, the costume designers "were trying to tread a line where you didn't over-sexualize people, but you still were proud of their bodies and proud of how fit they were" (Hoo 7). Wonder Woman's infamous red and blue wardrobe, adapted from the original, intentionally sexual depiction in the comics to the modern film is not intended to be viewed through the male gaze. Instead, her costume is designed to highlight her physical strength while also showing battle acumen as it is protective and aerodynamic. Diana reiterates her sole intention is to stop Ares in battle when she questions,

"what do these women wear into battle?" (Jenkins). Diana is a warrior ready to fight, not shop for period-appropriate clothing. While it is accurate that her armor looks different than the average Londoner's dress, there is no need to cover her body other than the male gaze levied at her by the men of England. Diana isn't looking at her outfit as something to be sexualized; rather, she is looking for something that allows her to fight. Steve responds to Diana asking what women "wear into battle" with a tepid "they don't" implying that women do not fight and are not soldiers, in opposition to what she has grown up accustomed to on Themyscira. Despite the fact that Diana is the hero and title character of *Wonder Woman,* she is still reduced to a mere object.

Diana and Ares exist as foils for each other in the film, as Diana is represented as a compassionate victor of the humans, whereas Ares exists as a maniacal other who corrupts the people of Earth as he is not welcome among the gods. As a result of his expulsion, Ares attempts to bring about the annihilation of the human race, to start fresh. He is characterized as "Zeus' son (who) grew envious of mankind and sought to corrupt his father's creation . . . the God of War. Ares poisoned men's hearts with jealousy and suspicion. He turned them against one another and war ravaged the Earth" (Jenkins). In the mythic bedtime story Hippolyta tells Diana, he alone is credited for the downfall of mankind. Ares warps Zeus' intentions with mankind and the men are led astray as a result of his coercion. In this narration, Ares is given a similar story to Christianity's Lucifer. By altering the Greek mythology to mirror the Judeo-Christian origin of sin, the film is suggesting Ares is the devil incarnate. In direct contrast to the character Ares, Diana wants to save mankind. She exists as a righteous protector of man, willing to sacrifice the only life she has known of Themyscira to attempt to save humanity from Ares' wrath. Soon after she is made aware of the horrors of World War I, Diana demands to leave Themyscira to go after the man she believes to be responsible for the carnage: Ares. After learning she will be barred

from returning to Themyscira, Diana responds: “I cannot stand by while innocent lives are lost if no one else will defend the world from Ares, then I must” (Jenkins). She is willing to give up her only home if she can protect the lives of the innocent. She believes the Amazonians are called to action in the wake of World War I and she feels compelled to help.

In a post-Trump era viewing of *Wonder Woman,* we find resonance in Diana’s championing of the marginalized: “I am willing to fight for those who cannot fight for themselves” referring to the women and children who were left victims of the war (Jenkins). This statement isn’t limited to the confines of *Wonder Woman* (2017). The hope that there is a power, be it a group or individual, that looks out for the “little guy” is a comfort to many and is frequently used as a rhetorical strategy in presidential campaigns. For instance, in Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, promises were made to the working class that, if elected, Trump would be their champion in office. He argued that he alone understands their socioeconomic struggles. Some analysts attempt to explain Trump’s election into office by highlighting these promises made on the campaign trail: “The populist variant sees Trump was an anti-establishment rebel, representing the revolt of masses of “forgotten people” against elites of both parties, most especially toppling the detested Republican leadership” (Cochran 445). The irony of this promise is that Trump seems unable to truly sympathize and fight for the working class, as he was born into wealth and has subsequently avoided living in the same or similar poverty in which many of his voters are trapped. The result of this misalignment between understanding and promises made is a dissatisfied portion of the population who are currently realizing Trump may not be operating on their behalf. This dissonance of trust fosters a public lack of faith in leaders coming to the rescue of the helpless. What separates Diana, then, is that she actually fulfills her promise of fighting for those who cannot fight for themselves, creating

both a sense of security for the people in the film and a subliminal optimism that a future, perhaps female, leader can help those whose needs are frequently ignored.

Another one of Donald Trump's promises throughout the campaign was that he was going to bar refugees and immigrants from entering our country. He went as far as to say that he would build a wall along the border between the United States and Mexico to prevent the easy access of Mexican immigrants into our country. Trump maintained a rather polarizing view of Mexican immigrants, Winders explains:

> Republican candidate Donald Trump announced in Summer 2015 that Mexico sent its "worst elements," including rapists, drug-runners, and criminals (CBS News 2015) to the U.S., that "tremendous infectious disease" poured across the U.S.-Mexico border, and that a "beautiful" wall built between Mexico and the U.S. (and paid for by Mexico) was a necessary solution to the "problem" of immigration. (Winders 291)

Trump denigrated an entire race of people to further his xenophobic rhetoric. He is unwilling to see the displaced as helpless and instead sees a group of people with malicious intentions. The film, while not a response to Trump's election, offers easily identified parallels to Trump's presidency, especially considering audiences would have seen the film after the election. The call to action Diana issues after finding out about the need of the women and children affected by the terror of World War I rings true for many of the men and women who staunchly fought the idea of making the United States an unwelcoming nation. Fighting for those who cannot fight for themselves continues to be the foundation on which people who oppose Donald Trump build their arguments. During his candidacy for president and his subsequent time in office, it seems as though Trump does not have the interest of the lower class or disenfranchised people upmost in his concern. Diana then becomes the champion of the helpless, the women and children affected

by the terrors of war, and audiences can cheer her on while viewing her as opposition to Trump's rhetoric.

Another example of a dynamic, empowered woman superhero is seen in the film in the interaction Diana has with Field Marshall Haig following his refusal to allow Steve Trevor back into the field to attempt to stop General Ludendorff. Haig asserts himself from his comfortable position behind his desk only to be on the receiving end of Diana's fury at his inaction:

FIELD MARSHALL HAIG: Captain, you will do nothing. And that's an order.

STEVE: Yes sir. I understand, sir.

DIANA: I don't!

STEVE: Diana, I know this confusing...

DIANA: It is not confusing! It's unthinkable!

HAIG: Who is this woman?

STEVE: She is with me, she is with us.

DIANA: I'm not . . . I am not with you! You would knowingly sacrifice all those lives . . . as if they mean less than yours.

STEVE: Diana, let's talk about it outside.

DIANA: As if they mean nothing? Where I come from, generals don't hide in their offices like cowards.

HAIG: That's enough!

DIANA: They fight alongside their soldiers. They die with them on the battlefield!

HAIG: That's enough!

STEVE: My apologies.

DIANA: You should be ashamed.

STEVE: My apologies.

DIANA: You should be ashamed.

STEVE: Diana . . . Diana!

DIANA: All of you should be ashamed! (Jenkins)

At the start of this scene when Diana responds to Field Marshall Haig, we see her immediately stand for what she believes in. She cannot fathom the idea of powerful leaders casually discussing the continued deaths of their people and is justifiably outraged. Steve's immediate response is to explain Diana's outburst, by saying she must be confused about their foreign policies. Diana refuses to meekly accept Steve's excuses on her behalf and denies her ignorance in the faces of these American generals. The scene is powerful as she staunchly voices her concerns, attempting to change the minds of those who would see a continuation of bloodshed. Diana is not confused about what they're talking about; rather, she is appalled by the notion that they're willing to knowingly sacrifice innocent people. In response to Haig's bemused shock at Diana's outburst, Steve claims Diana as a member of his team, but Diana immediately separates herself from Steve and the other men in the room. Her first "I am not" she addresses to Steve and her clarification, "I am not with you" she addresses to the high-ranking military men plotting their less than peaceful armistice. In these two phrases Diana removes herself from any connection to the men in the room and elevates herself above them, as a true champion of the innocent. She resolutely ignores Steve, the generals and any male attempt to silence her throughout the remainder of the scene, further highlighting her power as a woman who refuses to apologize for what she believes.

In a twist, Steve is the one apologizing for Diana. He understandably has deference for the military leaders as they are of a higher rank, holding positions of power. While Steve, as a

product of his military training, verbally agrees with their decision, Diana, naïve to the hierarchy, perceives the men as her equals as she values no human life over another, which she reiterates in her plea to save men and women in danger at the battlefront. Diana questions if these generals believe their lives to be worth more than the lives of the people fighting the war she is met with silence. Their lack of response spurs her on, as no answer confirms her suspicions. Diana calls the men cowards as they are willing to sacrifice the lives of people they do not know while they remain safe. This idea connects to our own understanding of the way military decisions are made. The men who hold the power will not have to face the physical ramifications of their decisions as they are not the ones who are on the frontlines having their tours of service extended. Diana repeats that the military men in this office should be ashamed, three times. It is apparent that they neither feel the effects of their decisions, nor do they sympathize with men and women they just condemned to death. Diana continues her message despite the general sense of disagreement among the military leaders. She knows her worth and the value of her opinion, as she has not grown up in a society that tells her to defer to men, and so she feels no need silence herself at their behest.

While Diana is considered the main feminist icon in *Wonder Woman,* there are other instances of feminist characters, especially in Etta Candy. Etta is a small, unassuming woman in comparison to Diana. However, her character allows the writers to openly discuss feminism and the disparity between men and women both in the work force and socially. The juxtaposition of men and women in the early 1900s apparent in Etta's introduction:

ETTA: I am introducing myself. It's Etta Candy. I am Steve Trevor's secretary.

DIANA: What is a secretary?

> ETTA: Well, I do everything. I go where he tells me to go and I do what he tells me to do.
>
> DIANA: Well, where I am from, that's called slavery. (Jenkins)

Immediately Etta connects herself to Steve Trevor. She had waited for Steve to make the introductions, but as he was distracted by Diana, Etta asserts herself. Then, in her explanation of her position she defers to Steve. He has the control in their relationship. The writers then use Diana's ignorance to comment on the way women are treated, suggesting Etta's description of a secretary sounds more like forced labor than a highly sought-after job opportunity. To contextualize the strides *Wonder Woman* makes for the feminist movement in the live-action superhero film, Carolynn Cocca asserts the detriments of a lack of representation:

> When an underrepresented group of people is repeatedly reduced to objects, when the narrative's point of view is consistently at that group instead of from that group, the objectified group's story is not being told, empathy for that group is less likely, and the group's power is subverted. If the constantly repeated story is that women and girls are not leaders, are not working in the professional settings are not agents of their own lives but merely adjuncts to others, and are sometimes not even present at all, it can reinforce or foster societal undervaluing of women and girls. (Cocca 5)

Unfortunately, many female live action superhero characters have been presented with their sexuality as their predominant quality (Black Widow *Avengers*, 2012) and Catwoman *Batman: The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)). *Wonder Woman*, like other strong females in science fiction (Princess Leia *Star Wars: A New Hope* 1977) thus opens the door for women to be simultaneously female and strong, without lingering on sex appeal. Women can then see

themselves in positions of power and strength, as we see in Diana and even in positions of solidarity as seen in Etta Candy through her social obligation to the suffragette movement.

While Etta might not have all the battle acumen Diana possesses, she is sure to be included in the suffragette movement. Etta represents the wave of suffragettes who found similar ideals on the pages of Marston's comics. As Jill Lepore contextualizes, "Wonder Woman isn't only an Amazonian princess with badass boots. She's the missing link in a chain of events that begins with the woman suffrage campaigns of the 1910s and ends with the troubled place of feminism fully a century later. Feminism made Wonder Woman. And then Wonder Woman remade feminism" (Lepore xii). Etta pays homage to Marston's original image of Wonder Woman, fighting for equal rights. Wonder Woman is an inherently political character, with her origin tied to Marston's belief of gender equality and her image associated with feminism. In the film, *Wonder Woman* (2017) Diana objects to her wardrobe change, asking Etta: "How can a woman possibly fight in this?" to which Etta responds: Fight? We use our principles. I mean that's how we are gonna get to vote" (Jenkins). Etta has no designs to go to the frontline of World War I, but she also has no intentions to sit silently on the sidelines while men tell her what's best for her gender. Etta embodies a different example of feminism in the film, doing her part to get the right to vote. Andrea Virginás believes Etta is highlighted for her feminist role in the film:, "After all, the world-saving, Ares-defeating mission of Wonder Woman is coordinated by jovial Etta Candy who nearly drops the much-mentioned sword and shield when she first has to look after it, reminding us that feminism is hard work in the field and on the front" (Virginás 486). The film goes out of its way to provide to distinctly different versions of fighting for what you believe in through these two women characters. While Diana marches into the heart of the war, Etta continues to fight locally for change.

Throughout the film we see instances of Diana, Etta, and Steve standing up for what they believe in even if it goes against direct orders. Steve Trevor has a line in the film where he cites his father's saying, "if you see something wrong in the world that you can either do nothing or you can do something" (Jenkins). Following Trump's inauguration into office many Americans opposed what he stood for and felt the need to convey their opinions through protests. While *Wonder Woman* was filmed and produced prior to the election of Trump, audiences would be able to connect this common theme of protesting oppression to their own responses to the political climate of 2016. Steve exists as a person willing to stand up for causes he believes in and this call to action can be viewed as a political message to audience members. Many women and men around the country joined together to protest the results of the 2016 election. In the film, Stephen Trevor uses the line to justify his need to continue fighting in the war and in the current political atmosphere we can view this line with the knowledge of our current political climate and recognize that we have the ability as citizens of the United States to stand up to injustices that we believe are happening. The line suggests that we have a responsibility to, like Diana, stand up for what is right and do something to affect change in the world.

Arguably, one of the most feminist moments in *Wonder Woman* (2017) comes during the "No Man's Land" scene. Diana, having conspired with Steve to disobey the orders of the Haig and go to the battlefront to defeat Ares, creates an iconic cinematic moment in her desire to end the war. Steve, unsuccessfully, attempts to explain to Diana his reasoning to staying in the trenches:

> STEVE: This is No Man's Land! Diana! Means no man can cross it, alright? This battalion has been here for nearly a year.....and they barely gained an inch. Alright?

> Because on the other side, there are a bunch of Germans...pointing machine guns at every square inch of this place. This is not something you can cross. This is not possible.
>
> DIANA: So what? So we do nothing?
>
> STEVE: No, we are doing something. We are, we just. We can't save everyone in this war. This is not what we came here to do.
>
> DIANA: No . . . but it's what I'm going to do. (Jenkins)

In the first line of this interaction we see Steve set up the scene by saying no man is able cross, already hinting at what viewers know is about to happen. Despite the fact that Diana knows this is not the place she will find and defeat Ares, she still feels the need to make her stand in order to defend the people whose lives have been destroyed by the war. Her compassion and strength shine through in this scene as she ignores Steve's warnings and instead fights for what she believes in: standing up for the innocent. The line where Diana acknowledges she is going to brave "No Man's Land" precedes her removing her cloak and hood to reveal her iconic blue and red armor. Her hair loosely frames her face and her form fitting armor reveal her to be a woman strong enough to face what these soldiers cannot. The distinct choice to disrobe Diana and reveal her Amazonian armor allows a feminist reading of the scene wherein Diana is unapologetically depicted as a strong female warrior while she stands alone, above the trenches, facing off against the German soldiers. As she steps out of the trenches and onto the battlefield, we see the first bullet aimed at Diana move in slow motion. It deflects off of her wrist bracelet and she continues to march. This is the first instance in the scene where we see Diana as more powerful than those who would fight her.[23] The imagery of her strength is apparent as she is surrounded by gunfire and dodging explosions, facing her opponents alone. It is only after she begins running across the

[23] See Figure 15

field and taking the fire from the opposing side that allied troops, including Steve Trevor, feels comfortable breaching the trench and engaging the German soldiers. She exists as a fearless leader in this moment, having the courage to do what the men could not. Diana's bravery and compassion for others shifts the balance of the battle as the soldiers are now able to breech the trench as long as she is taking the fire from the Germans. It is through her headstrong nature and natural leadership skills that the men are able succeed after years of immobilizations.

Figure 15. Diana taking on fire from German soldiers as she crosses No Man's Land. Jenkins 2017.

The entire two-minute scene is shot in such a way that while Diana is unmistakably female, she is in no way overtly-sexualized. Instead, she is presented as a symbol of strength, her fearlessness and special power giving her the ability to cross "No Man's Land.[24]" Following her breach of the trench, Diana is the center focus of the frame. In this shot she is shown wearing a protective face shield, previously analyzed as crown/royal iconography that serves to juxtapose the feminine nature of statement jewelry with the protection it provides the warriors. It's not the objects of her gender that allow her to cross; rather, they symbolize her gender as she crosses,

[24] See Figure 16

doing what the soldiers are not. In Pamela Nettleton's review of the film we see the reiteration of the lack of male gaze in Jenkins' shot:

> She faces no single individual but instead weathers a storm of impersonal deadly force (a metaphor not lost on women in the audience who face prejudice, sexism, and harassment), walking and then running toward her target with steely-eyed determination. When the onslaught becomes too much, she drops to one knee, raises her shield, and leans into a hail of bullets. It is a breathtaking shot of a woman in the prime of her power—and that power is athletic rather than sexual. This is new. We are used to seeing women on screen through the prurient eye of the camera that views the female form as does a heterosexual male, lingering on exposed skin and curves. Gal Godot is a stunningly beautiful actress, but rather than exploit her body, here the acting, direction, and camera come together to show something revolutionary: a woman's accomplishment. (Nettleton 39)

Nettleton highlights the feminist aspects of this scene, seeing Diana as simultaneously feminine and strong, which was one of the goals of Lindy Hemming in her costume design. People are willing to see her as an action hero, a defender of the innocent, rather than an incapable woman who needs to be protected. In this moment, she is the protection for the men; they are weak in comparison to Diana. Diana proves herself as a worthy member of Steve's rebel group and is viewed as an asset rather than a liability. It is in this scene that we see Diana transform into Wonder Woman, fearless and strong, forging her own path.[25]

[25] Magoulick, Mary. "Feminism in *Wonder Woman* (2017)." Women & Pop Culture. December, 2018. Georgia College & State University. Lecture.

Figure 16. Diana embodying fearless strength as she crosses No Man's Land. Jenkins 2017.

As the film progresses, Diana comes to the realization that mankind is not quite as just as her mother described. Men are controlled, not by Ares, but by their own desires. While she begins to conclude that mankind is not worthy of the Amazonian protection she attempted to offer, Steve implores Diana to see the duality of man:

> DIANA: They do not deserve our help.
>
> STEVE: Maybe we don't! But it's not about that. It's about what you believe. You don't think I get it, after what I've seen out there? You don't think I wish I could tell you that I was one bad guy to blame? It's not! We are all to blame. I am not. But maybe I am! (Jenkins)

In this scene, Steve aligns himself with the flawed humans who are quick to fight and slow to forgive. Diana must reconfigure her understanding of the world without Ares and the source of all the discontent on Earth. Similarly, we saw many Americans respond to the election of Trump as though he alone was the "bad guy" that needed to be stopped. However, despite how many people reacted negatively to his election, there are obvious supporters who excitedly anticipated his four years in office. Rather than assign all of the blame to Trump, we must also look to the individuals who support leaders for the wrong reasons. Steve reasons that they are all to blame

for the war. This sharing of blame can be extended to America's political climate in the wake of the 2016 election.

Friday January 20th, 2017: Donald Trump is sworn in as the 45th president of the United States. Following a campaign that incited men and women to reveal their bigotry proudly, more than half of the nation was left shell shocked. Many believed the campaign to be a joke and even if it was not, there seemed no chance for Donald Trump to win. Live broadcasts of the election results on MSN and CNN revealed stunned silences and shocked faces as reporters realized there was no mathematical way Hillary Clinton could win. Donald Trump was our president elect and the "Trump-era" altered America's reality, and thus also altered the films created.

On December 5th, 2016 someone anonymously posted an image to the creative platform "Imgur." The image depicts a star-spangled Wonder Woman punching Donald Trump in the face.[26] The image is reminiscent for comic book fans as it mimics the first issue of *Captain America* published March 1st, 1941. The cover of the comic illustrates Captain America in a room surrounded by Nazis. The Nazis are shooting at the hero while he's drawn having just punched Hitler in the face. Published during World War II, the comic was popular with Americans who, appalled by the war, vilified Hitler. Similarly, the image of Wonder Woman punching Trump represents a cultural response to his actions. Trump becomes the villain of an imagined comic book, brought to justice by Wonder Woman, the feminist icon. The connection between the two was made prior to the film's release, with the general understanding that Diana would not be Trump's biggest fan. The image made its rounds on the internet, with many saving it for future use in protests.

[26] See Figure 17

The Women's March, held on January 21st – 23rd , the day after Trump's oath of office, marks the largest single day protest on record with estimations of up to five million people marching nation-wide. Prior to his election, on October 6th, 2016, a tape of Donald Trump making crude remarks about women was leaked to the press. The audio tape contained sexist rhetoric, with Trump saying, "I've got to use some Tic Tacs, just in case I start kissing her. You know I'm automatically attracted to beautiful — I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything ... Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything" (2005). The implication that he would force himself on a reporter because of his so-called celebrity status did not sit well with many in America. Women were scared for their rights as this clearly predatory man now has the prestigious honor of being our nation's leader. Women, emboldened by these statements, took to knitting what are referred to as "pussy hats" for the national Women's March. Millions of hats were made and worn during the protest, allowing women to reclaim the word and send a visual message that there are many dissenters to his presidency. It was around this time that *Wonder Woman* was being filmed for release the next year.

In a post-Trump era viewing of *Wonder Woman,* the great darkness continually referenced serves as an allegory for the inherent misogyny and sexism that became prevalent in the wake of Donald Trump's presidential candidacy and subsequent win. As mentioned previously, this film was written and produced prior to the 2016 presidential election. However, women who attended screenings of the film would have been able to connect this idea to our current political and social timeline. In Bob Woodward's book *Fear: Trump in the White House* Trump is quoted as saying, "You've got to deny, deny, deny and push back on these women. If you admit to anything and any culpability, then you're dead. … You've got to be strong. You've

got to be aggressive. You've got to push back hard. You've got to deny anything that's said about you. Never admit" in regards to women's allegations of sexual assault (Woodward). All of a sudden Americans have the leader of the free world condoning an overtly sexist attitude with hundreds of horrid comments regarding women and their bodies. This blatant disrespect towards women made men feel comfortable showcasing their misogynistic nature. Men and women alike wear custom t-shirts encouraging others to "grab 'em by the pussy" or condoning the behavior with "Trump can grab my pussy" to Trump rallies across the nation. He faces no repercussions for his actions. He is encouraged as he too has encouraged previous closet sexists out of hiding.

Wonder Woman endeavors to leave audience members optimistic about the future and the power they have to influence change, as Diana says in her final fight with Ares:

> It's not about deserving. It's about what you believe. And I believe in love. Then I will destroy you! Goodbye brother . . . I used to want to save the world. To end war and bring peace to mankind. But then I glimpsed the darkness that lives within their mind and learned that inside every one of them there will always be both. A choice each must make for themselves. Something no hero will ever defeat. And now I know that only love can truly save the world. So I stay I fight and I give for the world I know can be. This is my mission now. Forever. (Jenkins)

As Diana suggests she will continue to fight for the world she envisions, so too would audiences feel emboldened to fight for their version of a better world, perhaps one led by powerful women.

Figure 17. Wonder Woman punching Trump. Posted anonymously to Imgur December 5th, 2016.

Black Panther Power: The Fight for Intersectional Feminism in a Post-Trump Era in Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018)

Following Trump's 2016 Presidential election, many Americans turned to film and television as a platform through which sociopolitical fears could be explored. Wakanda exists as an African utopia in direct contrast to America post-Trump. Ryan Coogler's 2018 production, *Black Panther* integrates forward thinking messages regarding gender and race throughout the film. *Black Panther* is historic in the superhero film genre as T'Challa is the first black male lead superhero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The four women closest to T'Challa are some of the strongest people in the film and their portrayals in *Black Panther* appeal to feminist audiences. Shuri, T'Challa's younger sister, is a genius scientist who is praised for her devotion to technological advances and encouraged to pursue her interests. Okoye is the General of the Dora Milajes, a warrior class of women devoted to protecting the Wakandan royalty. Additionally, Nakia is an agent of her own will. Despite being T'Challa's love interest, she serves as his equal and is driven in her desire to help those outside of Wakanda's borders. These strong women help make *Black Panther* a film that can be viewed through a feminist lens as it deals with the intersectional issues of race and gender and casts women in roles of warrior, queen, and scientist. This technologically superior society views women as strong role models. After the possibility of a woman in the White House was rejected by more than half of the voting public, *Black Panther* emerged and allows American viewers to explore female empowerment. The Afrofuturistic film acknowledges the successful nation of the uncolonized African Wakanda when viewed through the lens of postcolonial feminism.[27]

[27] Postcolonial feminist critiques of film take into account the intersectionality of race and gender, focusing on Western feminism and how women of color are continually marginalized. Kahn states postcolonial feminism "focuses on power dynamics embedded in universalizing narratives. Initially directed at second-wave feminism's accommodation of highly diverse gendered experiences under the category of "women," postcolonial scholars

Black Panther's inclusion of a spiritual connection to the panther god is inspired by the comic book cannon; however, Bast plays a large role throughout the film as a prominent deity of the Wakandan people, not just Black Panther's spiritual guide. Bast, inspired by Bastet in Egyptian mythology, "was worshiped in the form of a lioness and later a cat. Bastet was an ancient deity whose ferocious nature was ameliorated after the domestication of the cat" (Deaver 12). In Egyptian mythology, Bast was one of many gods as theirs was a polytheistic religion. She is merely one of many in a long list of animal and human gods the Egyptians worshiped (Deaver 21). Interestingly enough, Bast is also the name of the primary deity worshipped by the tribes of Wakanda. The creators of the film are simultaneously honoring African heritage with the inclusion of an Egyptian goddess, while also erasing the patriarchal notion of a male god. While the intentional choice to name their god Bast may perhaps be as simple as she is a cat goddess and the Black Panther is a cat, connecting Bast's history and the context in which she is used in the film implies a deeper meaning. In the first lines of dialogue in the film a man explains the origins of the Black Panther to his son (presumably T''Chaka and young T'Challa) by saying, "The tribes lived in constant war with each other until a warrior shaman received a vision from the Panther Goddess Bast who led him to the Heart-Shaped Herb, a plant that granted him superhuman strength, speed and instincts" (Coogler 2018). By continuing to assign Bast agency over the powers of the Black Panther the film is signifying no man could ever seek a higher power or purpose without having first been shown the way by a woman's guiding hand. She gives this warrior shaman her heart to end the violence and infighting of what had the potential to be a harmonious society.

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pointed out how the singular definition of women flattened differences and suppressed nuanced understanding of gendered experiences."

Bast is directly referenced seven times throughout the film. Her presence within the tribes of Wakanda is reiterated through casual conversation and exclamations of joy and anger. She is the epicenter of their faith, and having a female god positively correlates to Wakandan inclusiveness of women. Patricia Warren delves into Bast's true nature in Egyptian mythology, "Today, many think of her merely as an archaic cat Goddess, but in reality, she is a Goddess of Light who is often represented in art by the cat symbol. Her full name is Ba-en-auset, which translates "spirit of Isis." In the Egyptian Book of the Dead . . . Bast is one of several light deities who guide the spirit back to the spirit world" (135). In this interpretation of Bast's powers, she holds dominion over the destination of the souls of the dead. In the scene where the trio of women, Nakia, Shuri, and Romanda, and Ross are shown T'Challa's body, the power of women is brought to the forefront. T'Challa's mother evoking Bast's name to save her son then holds much more significance as it becomes a female deity's decision to give man the power of the Black Panther and it is a woman's decision to give T'Challa's spirit back to the Earthly plane. Romanda, god-mother, commands the space with her evocation to heal T'Challa as she begins a ritualistic incantation:

> Nakia, the Herb. I call upon the ancestors. I call upon Bast. I am here with my son, T'Challa. Heal him. We must bury him. Cover him. Cover him! (In Xhosa) Praise the ancestors. Praise the ancestors. Praise the ancestors. Praise the ancestors. Wake up, T'Challa. Wake up. My son for you to come home and be reunited with me. (Coogler 2018)

It is the combined powers of T'Challa's mother, Romanda, and Bast, feline goddess, that bring him back to life. Romanda gathers the herb and combines it with her wisdom to create the potion for T'Challa. She then communicates with the ancestors, namely Bast, to bring T'Challa back to

life. The women in this film are given the power and when T'Challa is left defenseless, it is his mother and Nakia who are able to bring him back. They hold the magic of the ancestors; they have the knowledge and are able to use it. The Wakandan women are elevated to healers and warriors and are god-like in their abilities. Coogler intentionally allows intersectional feminism to be explored in the film as the comics, "initially portrayed (Wakanda) as a country where hypermasculine men dominated, in sharp contrast to the movie and to more recent versions of the comic book which give considerable space to powerful African women" (Newman 3). The Wakandan women are encouraged to be leaders, free-thinkers. Wakandans want everyone to prosper, regardless of gender in their Afrofuturist society. While positions of healer are historically connected to traditionally feminine roles, Romanda's connection to spirituality and the heart shaped herb allows for the Wakandan tribes to prosper through the crowing of a Black Panther. Her knowledge can then be viewed as a source of pride and strength.

Shuri, T'Challa's sister, is the youngest of the primary women characters in *Black Panther*. Despite her youth, she is seen wielding more power and knowledge than any other Wakandan person. She builds the weapons, fashions the armor, and heals the wounded. Shuri has her own lab, where she fosters her abilities. She represents successful females in STEM fields, improving upon the work of the men who came before. Shuri has been allowed to not only explore her passion, but she has been given the opportunity to let it flourish, which can be seen in the improvement of the technology of Wakanda. Audiences see one example of her unabashed superiority in her interaction with T'Challa after she comes to talk with him after his mission. Shuri jokes with Okoye, an effortless example of how a woman can be portrayed a smart while also being goofy and having character. Shuri is immediately associated with the technology:

SHURI: You wish! I'm here for the EMP beads. I've developed an update.

T'CHALLA: Update? No. It worked perfectly.

SHURI: How many times do I have to teach you? Just because something works doesn't mean that it cannot be improved.

T'CHALLA: You are teaching me? What do you know?

SHURI: More than you. (Coogler 2018)

This clever, fun dialogue with her powerful brother is the audience's first introduction to Shuri. The scene elevates her to someone openly smarter than the King of Wakanda. She has built all of their technological weapons and devices while also being a skilled warrior, as seen later in the film. She is unapologetic of her knowledge and she jokingly flaunts it in front of her brother. While T'Challa was on a mission, she was diligently working on her designs at home, improving their lives and goals while not being on the battlefield. She has been allowed to foster her skills and encouraged to pursue them and, as a result, she is arguably the smartest person in Wakanda. Additionally, this message offers a double entendre that women's rights can always be improved upon. The women in this movie are given equal roles and are strong within themselves, but there can always be improvements. The suggestion of need for inclusive feminism tracks an evolution of cinema responding to, in part, societal issues.

In an effort to respond to misogynistic views of women in STEM fields, the film assigns one of the villain characters, M'Baku, the role of being distrustful of female intelligence and then immediately rebukes him in the challenge to T'Challa. M'Baku is the leader of the Jabari tribe. Explained through the exposition at the beginning of the film, the members of the Jabari tribe have removed themselves from the rest of the Wakanda tribes and they are secluded in the mountains. M'Baku's ignorance then is a direct metaphor to uneducated men who shield themselves from realties they do not support. He has hidden away only to disdainfully watch

progress being made. M'Baku stands in the middle of T'Challa's coronation ceremony, in front of every Wakandan tribe and shouts, "We have watched with disgust as your technological advancements have been overseen by a child! Who scoffs at tradition!" (Coogler 2018). He is representing the ignorance of many who believe that women, especially young women, are not able to lead. Despite knowledge that under Shuri's tutelage, the technology has been improved, M'Baku is unwilling to acknowledge her accomplishments. Additionally, the mention of ignoring tradition is a direct reflection of the misogynistic views of the social dogma in the Trump-era: that women are meant to be homemakers, not leading ladies of industry or countries. While M'Baku directly means Shuri is altering, some would say innovating, the technology of Wakanda, the underlying message remains present; ignorant men would rather hide in the mountains than open their world view for the betterment of the people.

Shuri utilizes her voice throughout the film to place judgement on antiquated practices and further the ability for audiences to view the film with a postcolonial feminist lens. Shuri takes pride in, and excels at defying tradition, as evidenced by her conversation with T'Challa following her retrieval of the EMP beads. T'Challa goads Shuri, implying her distaste of tradition when he says, "I can't wait to see what kind of update you make… to your ceremonial outfit" (Coogler). Shuri is walking away and with her back turned towards her brother, she raises her right hand and lifts her middle finger.[28] At first, the scene follows her retreating back and raised arm, but then the angle of the shot rotates to show her smug face and T'Challa's shocked expression in the background. She is willing to openly defy her brother despite his position of power in Wakanda. As she is the youngest and most technologically savvy, she has a foot in both worlds: Wakanda and the 21st Century Western World. In her first scene in the film she flips off

[28] See Figure 18

T’Challa, hinting at her spunk and the informal nature of her and her brother’s interactions. Throughout the film she provides pithy commentary and references that modern audiences would understand, but she does so in a way to subvert the strict traditions of Wakanda. Audiences see this humor in the scene where T’Challa will be crowned the Black Panther. All of the Wakandan tribes have gathered for the ceremony, as it is a very serious transition of power. Zuri “offers a path to the throne” as he asks if anyone wishes to challenge T’Challa in ritual combat (Coogler). After all of the tribes deny the opportunity to “put forth a warrior” Shuri raises her hand, suggesting an intention to fight her brother for the title (Coogler). The tribes react in shock, murmuring amongst themselves until she attempts to bring levity to a serious situation by exclaiming, “this corset is really uncomfortable so could we all just wrap it up and go home?” (Coogler). Her practical joke of pretending to have designs for the throne visibly relaxes those around her as audiences see some Doras attempt to stifle laughter and hear other Wakandans make noises of affirmation. She succeeds in bringing a jovial atmosphere to an otherwise tedious ceremony while also making all Wakanda tribes aware of her discomfort in the traditional outfit she must wear. Wakanda is a country beholden to tradition despite being Afrofuturist, but Shuri continually tries to move from the past to improve the future.

Figure 18. Shuri responds to T'Challa's joke about her ceremonial outfit. Coogler 2018.

Okoye is one of the most powerful women in the entirety of the *Black Panther* (2018) film. She is the general of the warrior class of women called Dora Milaje. Doras are responsible for protecting the elders and royalty of Wakanda. In a juxtaposition of the woman in red, these warriors wear red armor that does not sexualize them. Rather, like the Black Panther suit, the Dora armor is a layer of protection. These arbiters stand a silent majority, with their spears easily accessible and their shaved heads expressing uniformity and power. The strength of the Dora Milaje resonates in the audience every time they stamp their spears in unison following a command by Okoye. Their costume choices are explained, in part, by D.E Wytner's, "Their sensibly shaved heads recognize the beauty of Kenya's Maasai women . . . The Doras, as the Minos, are not sexualized to satiate the male gaze, but are sheathed in the dignity and strength of warriors, offering a positive example for girls today" (Wytner 93). The Dora Milaje shave their heads, at once embracing their natural femininity while also streamlining their abilities in battle. The direct choice to compose the strongest army of the film with only women is an indication of not only the capability, but the effectiveness of women. They honor cultural influences with a direct link to Maasai women of color while emboldening their strength as warriors. The warrior class of Wakandan women can be viewed as similar to the Amazons of *Wonder Woman* insofar as both groups are powerful female soldier. The connection of the two groups suggests an underlying trend of powerful female warriors in the most recent superhero film adaptations. Even critics like Khan come to the conclusion that the Dora Milaje "evoke the legendary Amazons from Greek mythology" (Khan 102). The Doras are trusted to guard the Black Panther and their sovereignty as protectors is never called into question.

Black Panther can be viewed through a postcolonial feminist lens, especially when Okoye and T'Challa visit South Korea, which decidedly differs from their Afrofuturist utopia of

Wakanda. On another mission to track down Klaue and bring him back to Wakanda for questioning, Okoye is shown as an empowered female figure when she responds to Agent Ross after he belittles T'Challa. Okoye is a general of the Dora Milaje warriors. When Ross unintentionally ignores T'Challa's status by patting his chest in comradery, Okoye threatens him in Xhosa, her native tongue. Ross, ever perplexed, addresses T'Challa, ignoring Okoye:

ROSS: Does she speak English?

OKOYE: When she wants to. (Coogler 2018)

This scene provides a bit of comic relief in the film but is it also very powerful and telling of Okoye's intelligence. Okoye is at her core a warrior, a protector of T'Challa as he is the king of Wakanda. So, when Ross touches him as if he is anything less than royalty, Okoye subtly reminds T'Challa that she is there to protect him in their native language. She doesn't openly threaten Ross or cause any embarrassment on his part, initially. She is actually acting out of a kindness to not threaten him directly for his ignorance. Ross then turns away from Okoye to ask T'Challa of her knowledge of a second language. He openly ignores her, instead differing to the man in the room to get information. Okoye chastises his presumption of her inability to speak and understand English face when she answers his query with a sweet "when she wants to" (Coogler). Immediately after this response Ross looks surprised and slightly self-conscious as he quietly responds "huh" (Coogler). Her unexpected response not only implies she understood everything he said, it also reinforces the idea that she can speak for herself. Her rebuttal also suggests that there is a reason she isn't speaking in English in the first place, to communicate privately with T'Challa. Okoye's refutation of Ross' blunder is a victory for women who have previously held their tongues.

Okoye represents a strong female role model throughout the film but exemplifies her devotion to her own morals in the final battle scene. The audience is made aware Okoye and W'Kabi are romantically involved in the way they address one another and interact. Despite their established connection, Okoye remains true to herself and her beliefs despite what W'Kabi thinks. When Killmonger overthrows T'Challa for the right to the throne he splits the loyalty of the tribes. While Okoye remains loyal to T'Challa, W'Kabi is interested in seeing how a new king could impact Wakanda and the rest of the world. The two come face to face during the final battle and finds W'Kabi questioning Okoye's devotion:

W'Kabi: Would you kill me, my love?

Okoye: For Wakanda? Without question! (Coogler)

This scene allows audiences to connect to the powerful, independent women of the film as it subverts the usual trope of women needing to be subservient to their male love interests. Okoye is a strong female warrior before she is a lover or a friend and she makes that obvious to W'Kabi in this scene when she admits that she will kill him if it means protecting Wakanda. Additionally, this scene is powerful because Okoye is not merely disagreeing with W'Kabi's choices, she is very obviously willing to deal the killing blow.[29] In the scene, she responds to W'Kabi, pauses, then raises her spear to him, physically connoting her commitment to Wakanda. She puts hers duty to T'Challa and her beliefs above the desires of a man which contributes to an understanding of Okoye as a nuanced, empowered character. No one would question her strength or her ability to kill W'Kabi. Okoye is unfaltering in her decision and she feels no compulsion to cave under the pressure of a man. *Black Panther* (2018) honors her for her difficult decision and

[29] See Figure 19

further appeals to female audiences members' desire for to see diverse, marginalized groups of people through its portrayal of the female characters of color.

Figure 19. Okoye willing to kill W'Kabi to honor her duty to Wakanda. Coogler 2018.

Nakia, T"Challa's love interest, is also an agent of her own will, much like the previously mentioned powerful women of Wakanda. In the first scene in the film with the Black Panther the audience believes T'Challa is on a rescue mission of sorts, off to save the damsel in distress. However, once everyone is safe it becomes clear that he has selfishly interrupted her mission to have her attend his coronation as king when Nakia claims his arrival "ruined her mission" (Coogler). His explanation for ruining the mission is he, "wish(es) for (her) to be" at his coronation (Coogler). Luckily for the kidnapped women Nakia was attempting to rescue, T'Challa's actions do not result in their deaths. Following his admission, Nakia simply nods and walks past him to check on the recently liberated women. The film subverts the idea that the man must swoop in to save the woman, instead having T'Challa be the one frozen in place and in danger of being shot by one of the militant kidnappers. Despite the implied romantic history between Nakia and T'Challa, Nakia's feelings are not her main focus. She is a powerful savior to the people outside of the protective walls of Wakanda and neither her feelings nor T'Challa's

desire for her to remain in Wakanda force her to abandon her passion. Once T'Challa brings Nakia back to Wakanda for the coronation ceremony an important scene takes place:

T'CHALLA: Come home, Nakia.

NAKIA: I'm right here.

T'CHALLA: Stay.

NAKIA: I came to support you and to honor your father… but I can't stay. I found my calling out there. I've seen too many in need just to turn a blind eye. I can't be happy here… knowing that there's people out there who have nothing. (Coogler)

This is another scene in the film where female characters are shown as having strong moral obligations and a willingness to sacrifice their desires for the betterment of others. The women of Wakanda are allowed their own agency, as evidenced by T'Challa's reaction to Nakia's response. He is disappointed by her answer, as he wants to pursue a romantic relationship, but does not begrudge her "calling" (Coogler). Nakia is more than just T'Challa's love interest in the film, she is her own character with goals and desires outside of their romance. She is an advocate for helping refugees and offering aid to the marginalized and she is vocal about her intention to pursue that passion.

Nakia is just as powerful as the Black Panther, and she doesn't need a suit to fight for what she believes in. Her roots to her beliefs are so strong that when T'Challa wants Nakia to give up her political goals and just be his queen, she refuses. She can't let herself be his queen while she sees her people suffering, she is strong and stands behind her desires without folding under the pressure of T'Challa's. As the scene continues, T'Challa comments on Nakia's ability to lead:

T'CHALLA: If you were not so stubborn, you would make a great queen.

NAKIA: I would make a great queen because I am so stubborn.

T'CHALLA: Ah! See, you admit it.

NAKIA: If that's what I wanted. (Coogler)

At first, T'Challa suggests that Nakia's stubbornness, her commitment to helping the people outside of Wakanda's borders, is a hinderance. However, Nakia is quick to correct that notion, as her "stubbornness" could easily be described as a tenacious perseverance for what she believes to be right. She knows her ambitions are just as important as T'Challa's and her reiteration that she would only be his queen if that was a union she "wanted" equalizes them. Nakia is aware of the burden of her love, but instead of satiating her own desires, she is selflessly giving herself to the aid of those less fortunate. While T'Challa laments her refusal, he respects her choice to say no. *Black Panther* (2018) allows women to have their own unique desires and ambitions and praises them when they act upon them.

Additionally, Nakia is presented as an advisor to the Black Panther as he asks her for her counsel in regard to aiding African countries outside their borders, "what would you have Wakanda do about it?" (Coogler) Nakia happily replies, ready with a response when she says, "Share what we have. We could provide aid… and access to technology and refuge to those who need it. Other countries do it, we could do it better" (Coogler).T'Challa actually listens to Nakia's advice in this scene and begins to inquire about spreading their wealth and knowledge to surrounding countries. T'Challa sees Nakia's ideas as equally worthy of merit and is willing to attempt to bring them to fruition. Despite the fact that T'Challa is the newly crowned king of Wakanda he seeks council with the women he surrounds himself with, namely Nakia. T'Challa values her opinions and sees them as equal to him, as depicted at the end of the film when he explains, under Nakia's advisement, "I bought this building. And that building. And that one

over there. This will be the first Wakandan International Outreach Center. Nakia will oversee the social outreach. And you will spearhead the science and information exchange" (Coogler). He has given Nakia a position of power, overseer of "social outreach" so that she can pursue her passion. Additionally, he is intentionally using Wakandan resources to help those in need, as Nakia suggested.

Finally, there is one scene in particular that depicts the theme of women representing their equality to men while showcasing their talents. In the mission to retrieve the vibranium from Klaue at a casino in South Korea, Nakia and Okoye dress up to disguise themselves as regular party attendees in formal, floor length dresses, makeup, and heels. However, once the fighting begins, their adherence to feminine accessories is forgotten. Okoye rips off her own wig and throws it at an American man's face as a distraction. Her shaved head is revealed, her spear appears, and she is simultaneously fierce and beautiful, still in her evening gown. Similarly, Nakia is seen removing one of her high heeled shoes to wield as a weapon against one of Klaue's men. She brandishes an uncomfortable looking shoe like a sword and proceeds to extol a beatdown. These women are stripping away society's expectations of femininity and remaining powerful in their own expressions of beauty. In an effort to blend in, they present themselves as classically beautiful women. Okoye points out her distaste for the confirmation when she hopes the interaction will be over quickly so she can "get this ridiculous thing off (her) head" (Coogler). Okoye's weave is straightened to mimic the beauty standards present in colonized America, whereas none of the women in Wakanda is depicted as having straightened hair. The change from her usually shaved head to a mimicry of Western beauty standards for women of color is distinct and the rejection of those ideals is represented in the film when she uses the hair as a form of distraction. Similarly, Nakia is shown removing her shoe to use as a blunt object in

the fight with the, as Nakia describes them, “Americans” (Coogler 2018). Both women remove articles of their outfits, strong women without needing to present themselves for objectified consumption.

In a post-credit scene, there is an indirect reference to one of Trump’s campaign promises. One of Trump’s biggest claims during his campaign was that, in an effort to hinder the illegal immigration of Hispanic peoples into the United States, he would “build a wall” between the Mexican and American border. Coogler responds to the desire of making America an impenetrable fortress by having T’Challa explain why division is counteractive to creating allies. As T’Challa speaks with leaders from around the world at the United Nations meeting, he extols the value of inclusion:

> "Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows. We cannot. We must not. We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this earth should treat each other. Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis, the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe." (Coogler)

T’Challa’s addresses calls people who would exclude others in times of crisis “foolish,” which could be interpreted as a dig at America’s commander in chief. Audience members can draw connections between T’Challa’s speech and President Trump’s proposed plan for exclusion. This scene explicitly negates the supposed benefits of strengthening borders. He suggests T’Challa issues a call to action to the world leaders attending the United Nations meeting while simultaneously issuing a call to action to audience members.

Ryan Coogler's 2018 *Black Panther* adaptation exists as a beautifully crafted story that weaves messages of feminism and racial equality throughout. The strong female characters help audiences view the film in the context of the intersectionality of race and gender as critics like Cocca agree that representation in pop culture affects change. Shuri exudes confidence as the smartest person in Wakanda, constantly bettering their technology for battle and medicine. Okoye is the fierce General of the Dora Milaje, commanding an army and maintaining security. Nakia is an impassioned spy who would rather die saving those in need than rest on her laurels as Queen of Wakanda. Additionally, the decision to cast Bast as the deity of the Wakanda tribes encourages a view of a female as the Almighty, thus removing Wakanda from the patriarchal undertones of most Western religions. The women in the film all exude power in their own ways, as they are given equal opportunities to men in our world. They succeed in ways we all expect women could, without the hindrance of a corset, of course.

Conclusion:

Spider-Man 2 (2004) is one of the first intentional live-action super hero films to be released following the 9/11 terrorist attack. *Spider-Man 2* allowed Americans to cling to the illusion of a protected New York. In some scenes, Spider-Man can be juxtaposed with Christ imagery. Overall, in *Spider-Man 2* (2004) we see a message of unity and hope for the future through a society made superior by being guarded by Spider-Man. The purpose of the film was to instill in the audience the idea that together, we can rebuild America, and that we, as a nation, are stronger as a result of the tragedies faced that day.

As the years progress and the nation gets further away from the actions of 9/11, people become more willing to talk about the subject and look critically at the way it was handled. Audiences can clearly understand the symbolism in Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) as a response to government actions following 9/11. In this film, Batman exists as a vigilante. He is a representation of America immediately following the attacks. In order to do what he thinks is right; he performs tasks with questionable legality. For instance, Wayne creates a device that tracks all of the phones in Gotham. This is supposed to be modeled after our government and the NSA. Following the terrorist attacks, the government operated with fear, and they passed the Patriot Act, allowing the surveillance of Americans. They capitalized on a time when Americans would say yes to whatever they believed could bring them safety. Those same tactics are employed by Batman in the film. He is willing to go against the law if that means protecting the people of Gotham, though his methods are hardly justified. In addition, we see the Joker as a representation of utter chaos. His presumed purpose throughout the film is to cause pain and destruction. Finally, Harvey Dent exists as a foil to Batman. He is the regular man who can bring the criminals of Gotham to justice by way of our actual justice system, rather than physically

beating them into submission. The film suggests that while we would all like to pretend that our justice system works, the government we put our faith into is flawed and it cannot be saved by a single man trying to do what's right.

The 2017 *Wonder Woman* film, directed by Patty Jenkins, was hailed as a feminist masterpiece by critics as it was released in the United States during a time when the nation was politically charged following the election of Donald Trump. While the film was written and filmed prior to the election of our 45th president, audience members experienced the film through a post-Trump lens. Diana exists to champion the marginalized women and children victimized by the war which could be interpreted as a reflection of immigrants who were fearful following the 2016 presidential election. She a powerful warrior who is kind-hearted and willing to fight for others.

Finally, *Black Panther* (2018) allows audiences to project strong intersectional feminist messages in their viewing of the film. Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* doesn't respond outright to Trump's rhetoric; rather, it paints a picture of an Afrofuturistic society wherein men and women of color can make technological and scientific advancements without the history of colonization. Women in Wakanda are valued for their minds as well as their abilities in battle. Additionally, a post-credit scene suggests Trump's notion of enclosing America's borders comes from fear rather than understanding. *Black Panther*'s (2018) feminist ideology supports women in the 21st Century without inherently opposing Trump. Audience members are able to appreciate the film without overt references to post-Trump America, but those associations can be made.

Overall, the tragic events of 9/11 and the results of the 2016 presidential election have arguably altered America's consciousness in the interpretation of popular live-action superhero films. The fears of the nation have been interwoven into the entertainment industry, especially

the live-action superhero genre. The idea of a super-strong hero fighting for us or a better society where humans are protected seems to be an important cinematic outlet for many people today. As a result of feeling ill-prepared to protect the nation and fearful of an unknowable future, the desire for a continued stream of superhero films reflects the need for a visual representation of security, even if it's manufactured. Films like *Spider-Man 2* (2004), *Batman: The Dark Knight* (2008), *Wonder Woman* (2017), and *Black Panther* (2018) provide audiences the opportunity to project their desired responses to larger social and political fears. As we move further away from 9/11, the live action superhero film begins to take on evolving ideologies that suggest a progressive change in what audiences want out of a superhero film. The newer interpretations of superheroes in film rely less on responding to 9/11 and focus more on highlighting gender and race issues persisting in America. Ultimately, the films open the discourse for audiences to discuss and apply their ideologies onto a pre-established framework that lends itself to interpretation. The national fear of terroristic threat made audiences and producers aware of a need, jumpstarting a now inundated genre of film. However, the creation of a platform through which audiences can seek comfort or find feminist interpretations and characters, allows the more recent superhero film adaptations to continue resonating today. This trend predicts a continuation of highlighting social issues like gender and race in the genre, encouraging audience reconciliation with their own version of a superhero.

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