

Superheroes on Screen:

Real Life Lessons for Security Debates

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Abstract

Superhero films and episodic shows have existed since the early days of those media, but since 9/11 they have become one of the most popular and most lucrative forms of popular culture. These fantastic tales are not simple amusements but nuanced explorations of fundamental security questions. Their treatment of social issues of power, security and control are here interrogated using the Film Studies approach of close reading to showcase this relevance to the real-life considerations of the legitimacy of security approaches. By scrutinising three specific pieces—*Daredevil* Season 2, *Captain America: Civil War*, and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*—superhero tales are framed (by the authors) as narratives which significantly influence the general public's understanding of security, often encouraging them to view expansive power critically—to luxuriate within omnipotence while also recognising the possibility as well as the need for limits, be they ethical or legal.

Key words: Superheroes, Organized crime, Terrorism, Law, State Oversight.

Introduction

Human security is a concept that is difficult to define and often misunderstood. In his essay surrounding the very sponginess of the term, Owen (2004) proposes a threshold definition of human security, one focused on the severity of the threat and which recognizes “that various scales of threat require various scales of response”. Taking seriously Owen's promotion of the “interdisciplinary analysis needed to decipher the complex relations that make up our human insecurity”, we have devised a novel interdisciplinary approach to understand severe threats and responses from a transnational security infrastructure. We apply the methods of Film Studies to a genre of movies and episodic shows which present fantastical, often extreme threats to human security and explore individual and social responses to those threats: the motion picture superhero genre.

The threats and security responses presented in these movies provide narrative structures which, consciously or subconsciously, influence or even guide people's understanding of public security approaches. Using two movies and an episodic show,

different scales of threat are presented. These threats are then analysed for their utility in understanding how people are conditioned to react to non-fictional narratives of threat and security response. In particular, the ethical dilemmas presented in stark terms in such fictional narratives provide patterns of thought which are then applied to decisions about security (Adams, 2014). These range from dealing with neighbourhood crime or city-wide organised crime, to the power of law enforcement and the military within a country and between countries, and up to the planetary issues of climate change, pandemics, and weapons of mass destruction.

Security policies are often justified and/or presented in a narrative form. These narratives do not stand alone but within the broader culture, including stories presented as factual (historical and current affairs narratives) and as fictional (books, graphic novels, episodic shows, theatrical films). As Jameson (1995, p. 3) suggested, “We map our fellows in class terms day by day and fantasize our current events in terms of larger mythic narratives.”

Security laws and policies embody attempts to prevent, disrupt, or minimise the impact of threats. The success of those attempts depends as well on the understanding, intent and biases of those implementing them, and also of the reactions (resistance, avoidance, compliance) of those subject to them (Adams & Sasse, 1999). Successful security policies are often analysed through game-theoretic approaches to explore potential outcomes, depending not only on the actions of defenders, but the resulting responses of attackers. The ability of attackers to change their approach in response to defence action is sometimes used as the defining difference between safety (defence against natural forces) and security (defence against human-directed forces).

According to Jennings (2006), Walter Benjamin frames the origins of the detective genre as a response to the fears of the anonymity of life in the city surrounded by unknown others, compared to life in a village surrounded by known others. Discussing the works of Baudelaire, Benjamin identifies the reasoning of the detective as the psychological bulwark of the city dweller against the threats of the asocial person, hidden from their persecutors by the masses. Superhero tales, in part, emerge out of the detective genre which is so focused on negotiating often-invisible threats to society. One of the best-known imprints in modern superhero tales is DC, whose name originally expanded to “Detective Comics”. Batman, of whom more below, is often represented as a “Great Detective” along the lines of Sherlock Holmes. The threats dealt with by detectives are the murderer, the thief, the blackmailer. The Great Detective (Holmes) is sometimes faced with the Great Criminal (Moriarty), an entity who wields a force that can threaten not just on an individual level but on a systemic one. Similarly, Superheroes like Batman face their own Moriarty-like nemeses in the form of Supervillains like the Joker.

What threats do these supervillains (and sometimes superheroes) represent and do these representations provide people with a narrative frame for their own dealings with societal security questions? For decades, superheroes have formed a significant part of modern cultural referents, functioning as modern myths providing their audiences with sense-making narratives about current events and political developments. Since 9/11, the latest movie and episodic show versions of superheroes from Marvel and DC have become some of the best-known stories around the world. The power of superheroes

and the villains they battle can represent the choices presented to politicians, voters, bureaucrats, and law enforcement officials, about how powerful actors in the real world can be understood: their motivations, goals, methods, limits, and the intended and unintended consequences of their actions. It should be stressed that this paper focusses not on the intent of the creators—which may be mainly that of generating revenue through entertainment rather than communicating social or philosophical messages. Instead, it focusses on elucidating the tensions, and impact on viewers, of these powerful metaphors presented by the stories to represent real-world power conferred by technology. The choice of stories chosen for consideration are those which represent different features of real-world security apparatus. Superman’s X-Ray vision resembles the full-body scanners in use in airports; Iron Man’s exoskeleton acts like a fighter plane and/or a UAV (some worn, some remotely controlled, some AI-controlled); Daredevil’s acute hearing serves as an analogue for the NSA’s surveillance. Former US President Obama used the plot from a Batman film as an analogy, equating ISIS to supervillain Joker during discussions about conflicts in the Middle East with some of his senior security advisers (Goldberg, 2016). Whether one personally enjoys the superhero genre or not, security scholars need to engage with a form that is mobilized by and holds such sway over some of the powerful individuals whose actions dictate the security infrastructure.

As a first step in this process, the humanities’ method of close reading of “texts” (which in this context refers to both video and prose), is applied to three recent movie or episodic show renditions of superheroes: *Daredevil* (2016), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016). Key elements of each are the pitting of hero against hero, and the relationship of superhero and law. Key scenes from each text are used to show how superhero films frame questions about security policies, in particular:

- What is the appropriate level of response to security threats?
- Who decides the acceptability of “collateral damage” in dealing with threats?
- How are those empowered to use violence in service of the state held to appropriate standards of conduct?

These considerations show how such texts mediate for a mass audience the question of how to deal with powerful institutional or individual actors, including those acting clearly within the law, those skirting the edges of the law, those breaking the law with “good” intent and those breaking the law for their own ends. Understanding what these fantastical tales contribute to popular understandings of security debates can give greater insight to those within the field into how those outside of it potentially perceive the legitimacy of differing approaches towards real-world institutional and systemic threats.

Methodology

First, this section introduces the primary method: *Close Reading*, defined in Brummett (2009, p. 25) as “the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meaning”. Following that, justification is presented of the utility of

such close readings of fictional texts, and superhero genre fiction in particular, to these questions.

Description of the Method

A reader or viewer can enter the flow of words and “be transported into the narrative world,” as Green, Brock, and Kaufman (2004, p.322) put it. Sometimes a small part of the text comes into sharper focus—the choice of a particular word or the image evoked by a specific description—without disrupting the transportation of the reader. In close reading, a reader seeks to avoid this transportation, and instead focuses on such details and draws out their relevance, which often extends beyond the specific concerns of that particular narrative and can be both *incoming* (using external sources to enrich the current narrative) and *outgoing* (using the current narrative to illuminate other narratives or broader social questions). Such relevance can come from multiple elements.

The detail itself may be compelling and evocative, containing a specific meaning. Brummett (2009, p. 25) explains that a host of “thoughts, feelings and associations [...] are suggested by words, images, objects, actions and messages”. In this paper, such (potentially multiple) responses to a single detail are referred to as *direct interpretations*.

The detail may tie in to other elements elsewhere in the text, such as the repetition of words or phrases, or the use of antonyms, synonyms, and homonyms, in written text, or the repeated appearance of background objects, of character movements or of dialogue in video. This is an *intra-textual reference*.

The detail may tie in to other texts, by quotation, imitation, or reflection. This is an *inter-textual reference*.

The detail may be a common element of a genre (Auken, 2018), perhaps even one of the core defining elements of that genre: the individual with abilities beyond the normal becoming a superhero or supervillain in the use of these abilities, one of the common defining features of the superhero genre. This is a *genre reference*.

Finally, the detail might reference broader political or public discourses, a *social reference*.

Any individual detail may be read in more than one of these ways, creating a web of meanings and connections back and forth, incoming and outgoing, within the text, to other texts, and to society.

The examination of these details allows the reader to create a deeper understanding of the meaning of the text, and to draw from it a conscious understanding of (some of) the unconscious, subliminal messages taken by (some of the) readers from the text.

Close reading is not limited to the written word. Still images, whether photographs or drawn, can equally be analysed for their content. Audio recordings of spoken words and/or other sounds (background noise, music) may also be analysed. Video forms deeply rich and tapestried texts (in the rest of this paper, “text” will usually refer to such a video narrative, using “written text” to distinguish words displayed on computer or printed out). They typically mix spoken words, music, background noises, and of course

multiple visual images, both static and in motion. The body language, facial expressions, and voice performance of actors add further depth. These images may also of course contain written text, either as part of the scene (a bill-board, a menu, a hand-written note, a printed document) or as an overlay (the “text crawl” in each *Star Wars* film giving viewers a textual introduction).

Close reading of visual, thematic, and formal elements helps to draw out the specific tropes and conventions of established storytelling modes or *genres* that texts inhabit. A genre allows a particular narrative to carry more meaning than its bare presentation alone. Following genre conventions, a text conveys multiple levels of meaning. Individual narratives may inhabit multiple genres and larger pieces of work will contain specific elements which are drawn from a genre. A superhero genre piece may include a political speech—indeed, *Batman v Superman* features extended sequences wherein a senator makes a congressional address. A Batman film and a senator’s address exist within separate genres; yet such a political speech, when presented within the confines of a superhero story, may articulate the full stakes of a superhero’s overwhelming power as well as the state’s ability to react to or co-opt that power. This paper deploys examples from the superhero genre, itself a sub-category of the science fiction and fantasy genre, and its commingling with present-day political and legal discourses to interrogate how the public thinks about security.

Visual and sonic elements individually (the compelling detail) and together, in interaction with each other in the same scene (immediate intra-textual reference) or in other scenes (intra-textual reference), to other video texts (inter-textual references), to genre conventions, and to general social and political discourses, all provide the data analysed to develop a thesis about the topic: the impact that superhero films have on the understanding of security by both those subject to it and those creating/implementing it, a method justified below.

Justification of the Method

Narrative presentation and analysis are often used in discussions of ethical issues. The philosopher Arendt’s arguably most famous works are or include narrative tales of the emergence, practices, and aftermath of the totalitarian Nazi regime (Arendt, 1963). In a brief rare foray into methodology, she wrote: “No matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for ourselves, contain as in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say” (Arendt, 1960). Disch (1993, p.669) expanded upon Arendt’s proposition and drew parallels between ethical discussions and Nussbaum’s (2001) conceptions of stories (Disch refers to the original 19686 edition), explaining that much ethical discussion consists of “vertical storytelling,” in which a dilemma is presented and analysed according to existing pre-articulated rules of evaluation. New challenges, such as the totalitarian regimes of the mid-twentieth century, upon which Arendt focussed her critical eye, required development of new categories and concepts which needed “horizontal storytelling” to “lay open to view the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer difficulty of actual human deliberation” (Nussbaum, 1986, p.69). As Mink (1970, p. 547) wrote: “Memory, imagination and conceptualization all serve this function, whatever else they do: they are ways of grasping together in a single mental act things which are not experienced together, or even capable of being so experienced,

because they are separated by time, space or logical kind. And ability to do this is a necessary (although not a sufficient) condition of understanding.” Referencing philosophy and history, but also psychology and sociology, she claims that narratives are a key element in humanity’s struggle “to comprehend the world as a totality”. As with other modes of comprehension (reductionist, categorical, configurational), narratives provide a method of presenting (what the author believes to be) the salient information, discarding the non-pertinent. Fiction allows the author (and reader) of a narrative to separate out a concept from elements of the real world in order to highlight its salience. For subjects as complicated as security, this paper posits that the abstraction offered by fiction, and genre forms of fiction particularly, provides people with a framework in which to understand, without losing sight of their nuances and ambiguities, the social and ethical problems of power.

Superheroes and Security

Magerstädt (2014) explains the utility of the science fiction genre as an instantiation of the concept of narrative as a sense-making tool. She claims that science fiction can distance the audience from the complexities of the real world, allowing the exploration of a small number of factors and their implications without concern for the interplay of too many extraneous variables. In particular, science fiction strongly utilises what Schaper (1978) calls the second-order belief inherent in reading fiction: even though we know the material we are consuming is fiction, the audience believes that it matters, and emotional and intellectual responses to it are valid. Science fiction allows for the introduction of impossible, improbable, or as yet impossible capabilities of people or objects. The power of the billionaire to affect the world around them is undoubted (Bonica, McCarty, Poole & Rosenthal, 2013), but the shady power of political donations in supposedly democratic countries like the US are deliberately obscured by both donor and recipient. The overt physical and technological power of Batman or the technological power of Iron Man provides more easily understood analogies for the immense power wielded by the ultra-rich. Such analogies may even have a lampshade hung on them, as in *The Avengers* (2012), when Tony Stark is asked what he is without his Iron Man suit and replies, “genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist”; while in the *Batman v Superman* follow-up *Justice League* (2017), the alter-ego of Batman, Bruce Wayne, is asked what his superpower is and replies, “I’m rich”.

These tales of empowered billionaires and God-like supermen fit within a long continuum of mythic storytelling that serves as a site for ethical evaluation and contemplation (Coogan & O’Neil, 2006). French (2016) begins her exploration of the moral code of the warrior with an in-depth presentation of *The Iliad*, one of the earliest and most famous texts of warriors, that both survives to this day and is regularly translated anew. In her close reading of a tale of the Trojan War, she explores the reasons why warriors fight and the codes by which they determine which actions are ethical in combat.

Just as French found inspiration for her exploration of modern ethics for military personnel (particularly officers, who bear responsibility for the actions of those under their command, and of the weaponry that they deploy) in an ancient myth of warring gods and men, so can inspiration be found in modern superhero tales for understanding security choices and consequences.

***Daredevil*: Vigilantes, Supervillains and the Law**

Daredevil articulates the triangular and vexed relationship between the law, vigilante superhero and supervillain. It focuses on the eponymous blind superhero, real name Matt Murdock, a seemingly contradictory hero—vigilante by night and lawyer by day. The series hinges upon the heroic vigilante's conflicted relationship with the law: How does the vigilante resemble the criminals against whom both he and the legal apparatus fight?

The series contains multiple resonant figures to *Daredevil*, providing further insight into the triangulation. These include the ex-Marine sniper Frank Castle, who becomes the vigilante Punisher in a quest for vengeance, killing criminals whom he deems unredeemable; and the mob boss Wilson Fisk, otherwise known as the Kingpin. The Punisher, a brutal and vicious torturer and killer, exhibits significant contempt for the rule of law, held back only by his own code of not killing the innocent and harming them as little as he can while pursuing his vengeance. The Kingpin, on the other hand, uses legal means to expand his power hand-in-hand with his criminal activities. When both are in prison, Kingpin easily arranges for the Punisher's escape, demonstrating that he too could walk out any time he wishes. Kingpin chooses to remain in prison, however, seeking to regain his freedom through manipulation of the legal process, rather than becoming a fugitive.

Daredevil Season 2 contains a wealth of relevant material over its approximately ten hours, the most compelling sequences being those of interrogations, often involving violence and torture, through which emerges the tenuous relationship of all three characters towards the law. Within its realm of physical and psychological torture, *Daredevil* brings the viewer to inhabit a space outside the law's borders, accentuating increasingly grotesque detail to highlight the monstrosity of unbounded extra-legal action. Within presentations of bloodless interrogation, the series also suggests monstrosities hidden by the law.

Schneier's (2012) examination of defectors from established social norms to articulate the amorphous distinctions between individuals' and institutions' legitimacy or lack thereof is reflected in these texts. Benjamin's (1986) concept of "the Great Criminal" is a key theme not only of *Daredevil* but the superhero genre generally. Like superheroes and supervillains, the Great Criminal challenges the law by proposing an alternative legal structure, one that undermines the state's monopoly, and the validity of its command, over violence.

Close Readings: Interrogations in *Daredevil*

Daredevil follows a non-lethal form of enhanced interrogation that echoes that of the Bush administration, which stopped only at the line of inducing organ failure. Torture in *Daredevil* is framed as a response to the impotence of the law. After he has broken a gun runner's hand, he promises to send him to jail. With malice, his victim asserts, "We both know I'll be back out by the end of the month". The law is thus framed as a malleable tool for both the heroes and villains of this universe, a theme increasingly apparent.

Daredevil is himself interrogated by the Punisher, his murderous distorted reflection, in a rooftop scene. The Punisher tries to force Daredevil to go beyond the “cowardice” of his non-lethal code, and to adopt the Punisher’s murderous (he would say executionary) approach, using one of the standard justifications offered for capital punishment: prevention of future crime by the criminal. This instead pushes Daredevil, and thus viewers, to confront the ethical pitfalls, even the insanity, of vigilantism.

Their dialogue takes place under a billboard featuring an NYPD public service announcement asking citizens to report suspicious persons. Its worn state suggests an unending post-9/11 state of emergency—warnings of heightened security have become the background in which Americans’ collective consciousness places the world, as within the background of these scenes. These vigilantes are thus framed as products of post-9/11 paranoia, wherein the War on Terror has normalized practices akin to the torture they practice. These superheroes are born of a moment when the law has been suspended. Yet when Punisher threatens to kill a random criminal, the superhero exclaims, “It’s up to the law, not me and not you!” This staging of the law’s defender as a figure of literal impotence, chained to a chimney, suggests that the law’s supposed morality is an idea that holds little sway, the ideals of the meek and the bound.

During Castle’s later trial (defended by Murdock) the challenge and charismatic power of the vigilante ideal is reiterated. The sequence begins with a montage of the interrogation of potential jury members, showing ordinary members of the public offering divergent views on Frank Castle. Some jury members pejoratively compare him to the real-life serial killer Son of Sam, others glowingly to the real-life “Subway Vigilante” Bernhard Goetz. Castle is then shown entering the courtroom, framed apart from the tribunal, from a heroic low angle and finishing with a close-up with an American flag in the background, rendering him a hero and national icon, not a criminal defendant. It seems to suggest that an American hero is someone willing to take the law into their own hands.

The heroic representation of torture as an interrogatory tool is undermined by showing its use by both heroes and mobsters, and by later exposing the horror of extra-legal action when the Punisher lethally tortures a gang member in a diner. The Punisher beats the gang member’s face into a pulp—each blow leading to ever-more-severe disfigurement. Lending the scene a sharply self-critical dimension, it employs a point-of-view shot from the eyes of the beaten criminal, positioning the viewer as the object of the vigilante’s violence. Through these shifts in subject position, expressed via the camerawork, the program highlights the potential monstrosity of unbounded extra-legal action.

While the scene in the diner provides a tacit defence of the rule of law via its representation of the overwhelming violence that can emerge in spaces of legal impunity, the series’ most searing indictment of such legal structures appears within a bloodless sequence of interrogation, in which Murdock meets Wilson Fisk, whom the former successfully prosecuted in Season 1, in prison. This scene reveals the law co-opted by the criminal as a moral gloss, a kind of exonerating smokescreen. Kingpin’s lawyer stands upstage behind Murdock’s seated figure, opposite a Kingpin chained to the table. Kingpin patronizes Murdock with questions about the burden of proof, acting

as though he, the criminal, commands the law and that he has a monopoly on its violence to frame this moment in the terms offered by Benjamin (1986, p. 281). Although an example of Benjamin's "Great Criminal," Kingpin nevertheless shrouds himself within legitimacy. This power dynamic shifts back to Murdock, following his visual and figurative de-centring by the Kingpin. In a display of how legal mastery can be a kind of superpower and potentially more devastating than a physical blow from Daredevil, Murdock threatens to keep Kingpin's foreign lover forever in exile by stating, "I will use every legal loophole and footnote... I can break you without breaking a single law." The threat inspires Fisk to break his shackles, exposing the security theater (Schneier, 2006) of his supposed incarceration. With each threat to Murdock, wherein he admits to systemic-wide corruption within the legal system, Kingpin's smokescreen disappears. Reinforcing the newfound sway that the lawyer holds over the criminal, Murdock pushes away the hand that tries to help him out of the cell. The lawyer has gone from acting like a blind justice to one of malevolent sight.

***Captain America: Civil War*—Power's Subordination to**

Process

If *Daredevil* takes an ambivalent position towards the law as an effective regulatory tool and security mechanism, then *Captain America: Civil War* explores how extra-legal (superheroic) power could be brought into a legal framework. It wrestles with the processes behind this subordination and shows how superheroic acts can be discursively made licit or illicit.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe, of which the film is a part, has emphasized the intertwining of these vigilantes' interests with those of the state. The superhero team, the Avengers, stand as an alliance of disparate vigilantes which ostensibly has the approval of the US state. Dissension within the Avengers' ranks is sparked by the collateral damage of these heroes' past actions, which forces the protagonists to wrestle with the need to control their power through mechanisms of civilian oversight. The heroes on opposite sides of the debate are led by Captain America (a "super soldier" produced by the military in World War II, frozen from the 1940s to 2010s, growing ever more disillusioned with the state and its post-9/11 realist policy) and Iron Man (an Industrialist-turned-vigilante-turned willing arm of the executive branch). The heroes' sometimes callous response to collateral damage as well as moments of debate between the various protagonists are analysed below.

Close Readings of *Captain America: Civil War*

A presentation by the US secretary of state showing a montage of the heroes' collateral damage foregrounds questions about the need for legal controls. Before presenting the footage, he states, "While many people see you as heroes, there are some who prefer the word 'vigilantes'... What would you call a group of US-based, enhanced individuals who routinely ignore sovereign borders and inflict their will wherever they choose, and who, frankly, seem unconcerned with what they leave behind?" As he goes on to name the various sites of devastation—set pieces from various Marvel films—the film cuts to camera phone footage. This grounded point-of-view framing creates distance from the actions taking place above, suggesting that when contemplating legally unbounded

power at a distance, what was seen in the first person as monumental, even exhilarating, becomes horrifying in the third person. The secretary of state concludes, “In the past four years, you’ve operated with unlimited power and no supervision. That’s an arrangement the governments of the world can no longer tolerate.” He introduces a sweeping UN mandate called the Sokovia Accords, designed to bring the group under the control of world powers. An ideological fissure emerges between the two leaders of the super team: Captain America (alter-ego Steve Rogers) for continued legal autonomy; Iron Man (alter-ego Tony Stark) for accepting regulation to temper the team’s potential for collateral damage but also as a pragmatic political move. This shows both the allure of unbounded extra-legal power as well as the danger it poses and the need to place it within limits.

Stark states, “If we don’t accept limitations, we’re boundary-less, we’re no better than the bad guys”. Rogers retorts that the UN is composed of “people with agendas [and] agendas change,” thus suggesting the possibility of their power being harnessed for unethical ends. Crucially, the scene also begins to suggest how the law might be manipulated by those under its charge. An ally of Stark notes “if we have one hand on the wheel, we can still steer. We need to win their trust.” Stark’s side positions proposed legal countermeasures not as effective oversight, but as a kind of moral gloss. Later, Stark tells Rogers that “once we put out the PR fire, documents can be amended”. Until Rogers realizes that the government interned one colleague without due process, he is almost persuaded by Stark’s argument for shifting boundaries. For Stark, like Kingpin, the law is something that serves as an exonerating mechanism, as a security theatre appearing to place limits on their power, while in reality providing legal authority for their unlimited actions.

The malleability of the Accords echoes criticisms of the controversial and sweeping UN Resolution 1373, which created the framework of global security law mirroring many countries in the muddy and amorphous terminology of America’s War on Terror. The resolution commits those countries to fighting in an amorphous conflict whose terms, some critics have asserted, are dictated by the changing whims of the United States (Scheppelle, 2013, p. 253; p. 267).

The film, seemingly initially set on Manichaeian lines, falls increasingly into grey areas. Stark describes his own strange legal position, on the edges of law and state sanction, by labelling himself in contradictory terms as “active duty non-combatant”, just before going into combat. He conflates the technology that gives him his previously legally unsanctioned superpowers with his class status. When asked if he “brought his suit” (meaning his super suit), he cheekily retorts “Yes, I did. And it’s a lovely Tom Ford three-piece two button”. His technologically enhanced power, rooted in wealth, allows him to control the terms by which he fights.

However, the film also highlights the limits of Stark’s powers. Stark’s aforementioned Tom Ford suit conceals an Iron Man gauntlet, which stops a bullet but nevertheless leaves the technology-enhanced Stark exposed, overwhelmed, and unable to engage in combat. His visible anxiety shows his fear of inherent superpower, justified when Captain America rips off Iron Man’s mask to expose Stark’s face in the film’s finale. As Captain America’s shield is driven towards his prone body, the unmasked Iron Man tries desperately to shield his exposed head, only to find the shield destroying his suit’s

power source. Captain America, a poor boy from Brooklyn, is the truly empowered figure, ultimately leaving the wealthy individual who seeks the protections of the law prone and immobile with his technology shutting down—his broken and discarded mask framing the scene as a metaphoric decapitation.

Stark's plight suggests the problem of Benjamin's (1986) divine violence—a revolutionary violence that might have the power to entirely decimate existing legal structures—for those shaped by the law. The secretary of state foreshadows this problem when he mentions that the literal God Thor and the (human equivalent to a) demigod Hulk are both missing, comparing them to weapons of mass destruction. The absence of such figures during the conversation about power subordinating itself to law gestures to how they could render such issues moot. Schneier's (2017, 2018) concept of the Internet of Things as a "world-sized robot" reflects the potential for current technology to create similar threats, carrying the castrating threat of divine levels of power. Such threats and their impact upon the existing legal system and those vigilantes who define themselves by their separation from it, is the central theme of *Batman v Superman*.

Batman v Superman: Excessional Power Levels, Fear, Trust, and Security

Batman v Superman goes beyond the previous texts in presenting the effect of an agent outside of the context defined by the triangle of the law, the vigilante superhero, and supervillain. Through its estranging portrayal of Superman rendering legal and vigilante actors impotent, the film portrays his ability to commit divine violence, reflecting Superman's biological father's description from *Man of Steel* (2013): "He will be a god to them".

Superman acts as a sentient force operating beyond the human, and the film pushes us to realize its impact not merely upon a mortal individual like Batman but upon the state. Through the presentation of and the discourse surrounding Superman, which echoes the Bush administration grappling with Iraq's possible possession of weapons of mass destruction, the following questions arise: How does such an entity expose the frailty of existing reactive structures of power, forcing them to act pre-emptively? How do superheroes, supervillains, and the state contextualize the out-of-context problem for their own ends? How might the out-of-context problem be thus abused?

The sudden emergence of Superman into his world represents a requirement for governments to encompass a paradigm shift in the balances of power. Just as machine guns, tanks, chemical weapons and nuclear weapons changed the world, and required new approaches to national and international security, so do the possibility of small states or non-state actors to gain the power to severely disrupt cities or countries with dirty bombs or cyberattacks, or to ground airplanes at a major airport using nothing more than toy drones (BBC News, 2018).

Close Readings of *Batman v Superman*

Batman v Superman metaphorically foregrounds the question of divine violence in an early scene, replaying part of *Man of Steel*, where Superman and his alien enemy

destroy parts of the city of Metropolis as they fight each other. Accentuating the film's fostering of an estranging perspective on superhero powers, and recalling *Captain America: Civil War*'s montage of collateral damage, this battle of Titans is presented from the viewpoint of grounded humanity caught in the cross fire. As a businessman waits for death in a toppling skyscraper, he recites the Lord's Prayer and calls upon a "Heavenly God" just as Superman and his enemy's laser beams streak through the office space behind him. The tower's fall creates a massive plume of dust, evoking photographs from the 9/11 attacks, where the World Trade Center's dust cloud swept through New York's streets. The film shows Superman as akin to a transnational terrorist threat, capable of disrupting and transforming legal strictures. The problem of such excessive individual power is framed by an African warlord who declares, "Men with power obey neither policy nor principle".

The film wrestles with the impunity of such a force, through the often-impotent responses of the legislative apparatus and the vigilante Batman, a non-superpowered hero who risks being made irrelevant by the threat from above. A Predator drone is destroyed by Superman before the state-employed operator can even see him. Batman builds himself up in a training sequence, but the camera focuses on his dropping of weights—on the limits of his strength. By contrast, the film shows Superman pulling a huge tanker over ice with no pause or visible strain, walking towards the camera in a long, uninterrupted take—the duration of the image suggesting the ease in which he performs the Herculean task.

Such a presence disrupts the triangle of law, superhero, and supervillain. Batman positions himself as an outlaw when he responds to criticism about his ever-more-violent tactics, retorting, "We're criminals, Alfred. We have always been criminals". He relishes his dual position as a Great Criminal and Great Detective, proud of his disruption of the state's monopoly on violence. However, more so than *Daredevil* which often positions its heroes as a threat to the state, the film suggests that the vigilante serves the state's interests. Superman's alter-ego Clark Kent, a newspaper reporter, works to expose the classist and racist strands of Batman's war on crime. He encounters an executive branch that construes the Batman vigilante as a tool in its policing activities allowed to perform extra-legal action without repercussions. At a Gotham police station, he sees a clipping of a political cartoon that shows a police officer using the Bat Signal—the beacon the police traditionally employ to call upon the vigilante—as a Baseball Bat which she's about to swing into the head of a disarmed masked thief. The self-described criminal Batman is seen by Gotham officers as a means to invisibly perform police brutality. Kent uncovers a systemic malignancy within a law enforcement apparatus that hides behind the cloak of an unbounded vigilante.

Although Superman delivers no public pronouncements in the film, both the state and Batman envision nightmarish scenarios of an individual able to intervene unilaterally on a nation-state scale. While the concerns of great power in the hands of a few actors echo those shared about by the Secretary of State in *Captain America: Civil War*, *Batman v Superman* articulates the disruptive change in far more dystopian terms. The film's supervillain, billionaire industrialist and government contractor Lex Luthor, imagines a reality wherein Superman becomes a tyrant, forcing citizens to salute him in parades. Billionaire and Batman's alter-ego Bruce Wayne dreams (or perhaps has a vision) of a near-future where the alien Superman not only threatens the law but becomes the law. In

his nightmare, Batman hangs in chains. Superman flies down into the underground bunker, and soldiers wearing the superhero's S symbol on their sleeves bow down in supplication. We see the image from the trapped vigilante's point of view—the state falls on its knees in the face of its new king, its new god.

The film illustrates how such out-of-context problems can be contextualized by the state and repurposed for its own ends so as to expand its security powers. The rhetoric Superman inspires from both the vigilante and the supervillain resembles that of Bush administration officials regarding al-Qaeda. Responding to criticism of a plan to kill Superman, breaking his vow not to kill, Wayne says, “He has the power to wipe out the entire human race, and if we believe there's even a 1% chance that he is our enemy, we have to take it as an absolute certainty and we have to destroy him”—echoing former vice president Cheney's One Percent Doctrine (Suskind, 2006) justifying pre-emptive action in the name of security. Luthor tells an acquiescing senator that Superman invites a shift in the scale of the United States' security apparatus, from homeland to planetary, just as transnational terrorists inspired a global War on Terror.

Superman inspires multiple transformations within the state and the vigilante Batman, but the superhero is ultimately manipulated by the film's supervillain. Luthor exploits the alien hero's bonds to his lover and to his mother. When Luthor reveals his hand, the film's camera—which often captures Superman from a low angle to accentuate his stature—looks down upon him. This emphasis on his few human bonds obliquely expresses an underlying concern: What if Superman had no connection to humanity?

Again from Batman's vision/nightmare, Superman exclaims, “She was my world” before destroying the Caped Crusader with a glance. If the Superman of nightmare may be uninterested in humanity, the Kent of the film remains deeply invested in questions of excessive power. He reads an article on Batman's activities which includes the question: “If the [Gotham City Police Department] endorses masked vigilantes as our city's watchmen, who watches the watchmen?” This paraphrase of a Juvenal quote, which also serves as an inter-textual reference to the realist and deeply sceptical superhero tale *Watchmen* (1986), points to how superhero fictions are particularly well-suited to exploration of extremes of power, and the ethical blind spots that emerge in the executive actors' and the law's response to such force (Hughes, 2006). As a senator declaims within Superman's congressional hearing, “In a democracy, good is a conversation, not a unilateral decision”. Focusing on figures capable of taking unilateral action, *Batman v Superman* shows how the superhero story invites and provokes conversation of what exactly constitutes “good” within a society threatened by excessional menaces.

Discussion: Power, Control, Security, and the Superhero

Superhero films are about fictional beings, usually with fantastical technologies or abilities. They are modern-day myths, which serve the purpose not only to entertain but to explore issues of power, control, and security in the real world. What issues do the three texts considered here highlight, and what suggestions do they provide for our real-world considerations of security? A summary of our conclusions drawn from each of the above close readings give answers to the questions given in the introduction:

- What is the appropriate level of response to security threats?
- Who decides the acceptability of “collateral damage” in dealing with threats?
- How are those empowered to use violence in service of the state held to appropriate standards of conduct?

These core questions are presented and wrestled with in an entertaining, viscerally appealing and accessible fashion—superhero films thus offer a means of security studies education on a mass scale, for the general public. Films can help us understand the threat and the promise of the whistleblower. Just as Snowden claimed his primary purpose in revealing the breadth and strength of the surveillance wielded by the NSA (and GCHQ) was to stimulate a public democratic debate about the validity of their methods and goals (MacAskill and Hern, 2018), superhero films challenge viewers to consider how power can be controlled, and whether we must rely solely on the probity of the powerful or whether institutional mechanisms of law can be applied to powerful institutions and individuals.

Summary of Readings from *Daredevil*

In *Daredevil*, the threats of self-interested power deriving from money, physical prowess, and corruption are presented alongside the actions of those who believe they are acting in the best interests of society, but that their only resource is to do so outside the framework of the law and the strictures of law enforcement. *Daredevil*'s rooftop interactions with the Punisher explore the issue of capital punishment, with the Punisher presenting the case for summary execution of criminals to prevent their future crimes, compared to *Daredevil*'s code of brutal violence without killing. The impotence of the police and civil lawyers in the face of organized crime is presented as a justification for the actions of the vigilante. The montage of jury selection—some starkly opposed and some in staunch support for a vigilante—reminds viewers of the variety of perspectives held by ordinary people in the real world regarding the employment of extra-legal means in the pursuit of justice. The mobster Kingpin's brazen co-option of the law for his own nefarious ends suggests how it can serve as a tool for those in organized crime who seek to challenge the state's supposed monopoly on violence in the vein of Benjamin's concept of the “Great Criminal”. Murdock's legal abilities as a public defender, on full display in his scene of interrogation with the mobster, Kingpin, frame the law as a force of resistance against both state and state-like actors. Via *Daredevil*,

viewers are given a rich education into the law's oppressive and liberating potential, a mutable and contested site for the operation of power.

Summary of Readings from *Captain America: Civil War*

In a world threatened by mercenaries willing to use military weapons and tactics in pursuit of financial gain, and their paymasters seeking control over biological weapons, the collateral damage of the Avengers' actions in prior films and the opening sequences of *Captain America: Civil War* call into question how military power can be held in check. When the UK government sent the British Army into Northern Ireland in 1969, or when Belgium deployed troops on the streets of Brussels in 2015 (Bartunek, 2017), these were initially expected to be short-term missions, yet the British Army remained deployed for nearly thirty years, while the Belgian deployment already has plans in place until 2020. Military forces trained to kill enemy military personnel and take military control over hostile territory are given the job of defending against insurgent threats on their own territory surrounded by their own civilian citizens. Through its debates on the law's strictures upon superhero action, *Captain America: Civil War* offers a mythic space to ask who should control the rules of engagement in such activities, and who decides on the acceptability of collateral damage.

Summary of Readings from *Batman v Superman*

While *Captain America: Civil War* deals with questions of military force outside the battlefield, *Batman v Superman* looks at what can happen when the power to destroy the world rests not in the hands of superpowers like the USA and the USSR, terrifying as that prospect is, but in the hands of a small group or even an individual with superpowers. The excessional power of Superman leads the vigilante Batman to abandon (in intent, though in the end not in action) his no-killing code in response to the potential for Superman to enslave or destroy the human race.

Superman entirely disrupts the state's monopoly upon violence and acts as an out-of-context problem, an embodiment of Schneier's (2017, 2018) "world sized robot." In a world defined by an interconnected Internet of Things, including small weapons of mass destruction, Schneier sees cataclysmic threats as often invisible, infinitely scalable, and disruptive. With sensors that cull the environment for information and actuators that respond without human input, Schneier warns that the Internet now "senses, thinks, and acts.... We're building a world-sized robot, and we don't even realize it" (Schneier, 2017).

Conclusions

Tales of superpowers, whether biological or technological, embedded in the body or worn/used, inherited, invented or acquired, provide a compelling story which, when done well, can present to viewers the stark choices facing the world today in security. The scope of such stories can encompass multiple scales, from the local neighbourhood hero through the destruction of a city, up to world-threatening or -saving. As Schneier (2000) explained, security threats, and the responses of authorities to those threats, exist in the real world at each of these scales. Society needs mechanisms to deal with threats

such as military invasion, international terrorism, organized crime, white-collar crime, petty crime, and violence against intimate partners. There are different systems—legal, extra-legal, and social—providing mechanisms to deal with those different threats. Superhero stories are no different. Local superheroes such as Daredevil pit themselves against local crime bosses, while Thor, the Hulk, and Superman confront planetary or galactic threats from Thanos (in the *Captain America: Civil War* follow-up *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018)) or Steppenwolf (in the Batman v Superman follow-up *Justice League* (2017)).

Through close readings of these three texts, and their key messages of power, security, control, and collateral damage, these texts are shown to be not just interesting amusements, but explorations of these fundamental questions of security. Presented as fiction, they nevertheless have resonance for the real world. People reason best by analogy to familiar narrative concepts. In the aftermath of the 2012 Aurora shootings at a screening of the Batman film *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), Schneier (2012b) emphasized that feelings of security derive less from facts and statistics than from stories, as they “engage us at a much more visceral level, especially stories that are vivid, exciting or personally involving”. These tales of superheroes provide vivid modern myths that allow voters to consider whether the stories told by politicians, military officers, police officers, and bureaucrats provide legitimate reasons for security policies and actions that are in the best interests of society, or whether they are the self-serving justifications of their actions in pursuit of only their own gain.

Power and its control are intimately tied up with knowledge and understanding as well as the will to act. A final reading from *Batman v Superman* underlines this. Despite his immense power, Superman appears before a Senate committee. One of the people seriously hurt in his city-destroying battle at the beginning of the film is also present, sitting in a wheelchair. Unknown to the occupant the wheelchair contains a bomb. This bomb is also hidden from Superman’s X-ray vision. As the bomb explodes, Superman remains physically untouched by the explosion, yet emotionally numbed by his failure to prevent it. These superhero tales offer the possibility to see expansive power critically—to luxuriate within omnipotence while also gleaning the possibility as well as the need for limits, be they ethical or legal. Thus, they help people to have the conversation about what constitutes “good” that is so vital to the legitimacy of security.

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