Remas(k)ulating the American Man: Fear and Masculinity in the Post-9/11 American Superhero Film

Carolyn P. Fisher
College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/402

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
Remas(k)ulating the American Man:

Fear and Masculinity in the Post-9/11 American Superhero Film

by

Carolyn Fisher

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy from
The College of William and Mary

Accepted for (Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

Dr. Colleen Kennedy, Director

Dr. Frederick Corney

Dr. Arthur Knight

Williamsburg, VA
April 15, 2011
**Introduction**

Superheroes have served as sites for the reflection and shaping of American ideals and fears since they first appeared in comic book form in the 1930s. As popular icons which are meant to engage the American imagination and fulfill (however unrealistically) real American desires, they are able to inhabit an idealized and fantastical space in which these desires can be achieved and American enemies can be conquered. They are therefore valuable objects of cultural study, as critical examinations of these characters and their villains can reveal much about actual American values and fears. Furthermore, the adaptable nature of these figures leaves them open to periodic reinvention, whereby they can struggle with and overcome specific forces perceived as threats to American ideals, including, historically, Nazis and communists. These reinventions have occurred in the pages of serial comic books and graphic novels, but they can also take place on film. Film as a mass medium possesses a similar (and arguably more powerful) potential to shape and reflect cultural values. Mainstream cinema in particular reaches a far larger audience than comic books do, so when this medium is used to transmit fantasies of popular superheroes, the result is apt to reinforce and perpetuate the American national narrative.

The 1990s provided Americans with roughly twenty superhero films; however, the 2000s have already given rise to over twice that many, with annual counts reaching as high as seven blockbuster superhero films in a single year. Consider that in the period from 1950 to 1999, approximately thirty feature films about superheroes were released,
but that the years since 2000 have already yielded over forty, with even more set to be released through 2012.

In this paper, I explore the way in which recent superhero films reflect and resolve certain cultural anxieties surrounding the trauma of the September 11, 2001 attacks. I structure my argument primarily around the work of feminist journalist Susan Faludi, whose book *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America* examines anxieties about American masculinity in the wake of 9/11, and I consider how these anxieties are represented in two of the most successful superhero trilogies of the past decade: Sam Raimi’s films starring Tobey Maguire as Spider-Man and Christopher Nolan’s films starring Christian Bale as Batman.¹

In my discussion, I draw frequently on a framework proposed by cultural theorist Richard Dyer in his essay “Entertainment and Utopia,” in which he argues that popular entertainment provides viewers with “temporary answers to the inadequacies of society,”² specifically to real needs which are time- and place-specific, not simply eternal needs of mankind. He introduces “categories of the utopian sensibility” as sets of diametrically opposing pairs, which correspond to some societal inadequacy and its utopian solution which is represented on-screen. Though the films I examine do not necessarily represent anything like a utopia, Dyer’s framework is useful in picking out the perceived societal inadequacies which they represent and subsequently resolve on-screen.

Two of the categories he introduces may be usefully applied to the rebirth of the superhero genre as a whole, but I will introduce an additional category that applies

---
¹ I do not discuss *Spider-Man* (2002) in any serious detail, as this film was largely completed at the time of the September 11 attacks. My discussion also excludes Nolan’s *The Dark Knight Rises*, set for release in 2012.
specifically to post-9/11 superhero movies. The two relevant categories he suggests are energy/exhaustion and intensity/dreariness, and undoubtedly the recent superhero films have tended to fuse their tales with tropes of the action film and consequently delight viewers with their exciting and increasingly digitalized action sequences. However, the category I think is most relevant to these films is one I have observed myself: security/fear.

That fear and doubts about American security permeated American society in the wake of 9/11 is a fairly obvious and uninteresting fact. However, this category’s application to recent superhero films illuminates the specific fears these films reflect. Furthermore, the very nature of security requires an immediate threat, for it is only in the presence of threat that security can be reassured. What we find in these films is the constant reimagination of a particular threat which is overcome to achieve a renewed sense of security. Superhero films are a particularly useful sites for reconciling these issues, for, as others have pointed out, “each time [superheroes] don their costume they respond to a defining trauma from their past and, in fighting crime in the present, ritualistically relive and rewrite that original moment of trauma.”3 Though these films do not explicitly address the trauma of September 11, they nevertheless use the traumatic narratives of these popular figures to deal with the societal anxieties that arose following it.

There are, undoubtedly, a variety of fears and threats which may be found in these films. I focus on only one, examining each film in the context of the crisis of masculinity Faludi argues arose following September 11. I connect this fear and its filmic

---

manifestations and resolutions with trends she argues appear in the popular narratives and myths of that traumatic day. In doing so, I hope to illuminate the fears about American masculinity that pervade these increasingly ubiquitous popular culture narratives and shape their representations of men and women.
Fear and the Emasculation of the American Man

Susan Faludi has argued that Americans reacted to 9/11 by appealing to traditional myths of American masculinity, particularly those born of World War II and the Cold War. She writes that “In the aftermath of the attacks, the cultural troika of media, entertainment, and advertising declared the post-9/11 age an era of neofifties nuclear family ‘togetherness,’ redomesticated femininity, and reconstituted Cold Warrior manhood.”¹ She cites Peggy Noonan’s Wall Street Journal article, “Welcome Back, Duke: From the Ashes of September 11, Arise the Manly Virtues,” in which Noonan definitively declares: “men are back . . . . We are experiencing a new respect for their old-fashioned masculinity, a new respect for physical courage, for strength and for the willingness to use both for the good of others.”² Faludi discusses this sentiment in terms of the re-imagining of American men (and especially America’s male leaders) as classic heroes of the American West, but I would argue that this re-imagination of fifties masculinity is reflected in the superhero film genre as well.

It may be useful to here consider Dyer’s categories of perceived societal inadequacy and utopian solution as a way to understand why this masculine backlash arose. Faludi points out that “the post-9/11 commentaries were riddled with apprehensions that America was lacking in masculine fortitude, that the masses of weak-chinned Black-Berry clutches had left the nation open to attack and wouldn’t have the cojones for the confrontations ahead.”³ In fact, even the physical shape of the attacks

---

² Cited in Ibid., 5.
themselves was read as the symbolic castration of the American nation.\textsuperscript{7} Faludi quotes the director of post-9/11 web site mensaction.net: “The phallic symbol of America had been cut off . . . and at its base was a large smoldering vagina, the true symbol of the American culture, for it is the western culture that represents the feminine materialistic principle, and it is at its extreme in America.”\textsuperscript{8} Such a reading of the September 11 attacks suggests that many Americans held the “feminized” American male responsible for leaving the country vulnerable to attack. It also equates vulnerability with femininity and, inversely, security with masculinity.

To frame this discussion in terms of Dyer’s inadequacy/solution pairings, we might consider the gendered nature of the security/threat category I have introduced, both theoretically and (apparently) in reality. As Faludi’s evidence indicates, “vulnerability” is read as feminine, while “security” is read as masculine.

Viewed this way, we might begin to understand how Faludi’s argument about neo-fifties, traditional masculinity might apply equally well to the rebirth of American superheroes in film. If post-9/11 Americans surveyed their society and found it vulnerable, “womanly,” and lacking in masculine fortitude, we can expect to find in mass media the solution to this inadequacy, i.e. security, strength, and “manly virtue.” In the news, such masculinity is manifested in allusions to Cold War manhood and the mythicized heroism of the American Frontier; in entertainment, I would argue, this masculinity is reflected in the superhero film, a genre which both hearkens back to an earlier era characterized by traditional gender roles and which is itself eternally ripe for topical reinvention.

\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Ibid.}, 11.
\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Ibid.}, 11-12.
Furthermore, as I have suggested, the very nature of security requires a threat against which one is secure, so to achieve this feeling of security, threat needs to be constantly reimagined. This can in part account for the sheer volume of superhero films in recent years, but it is also reflected within the films themselves through the constant threat of the hero’s emasculation-as-vulnerability and subsequent remasculation through shifting this vulnerability to its “proper” place (that is, onto women), in line with “quintessential protection scenarios that indulge in fantasies about the heroes’ unlimited ability to protect a silent and largely feminized humanity from that which threatens it.”

This is to say that accompanying the return of the American man to his traditional “masculine” space is, unsurprisingly, the complementary relegation of the American woman to the realm of traditional femininity, a helpless victim in need of manly rescue. Faludi writes:

In the post-9/11 reenactment of the fifties Western, women figured largely as vulnerable maidens. Never mind that the fatalities that day were three-to-one male-to-female and that most of the female office workers at the World Trade Center (like their male counterparts) rescued themselves by walking down the stairs on their own two feet. The most showcased victims bore female faces.

In fact, she suggests that this framing of the events of September 11 was in many ways essential to what I will call the project of the “remasculation” of the American man. No doubt this is partly due to the general evocation of fifties domesticity, but the idea which underlies both is the exclusive gender binary, within which masculinity and femininity must be rigidly divided and assigned to either sex.

---

10 American Studies scholar Jeffrey Melnick describes this rather nicely as “pushing ‘reset’ on American gender roles and relations” (124).
12 Ibid., 16.
In other words, the perceived “problem” is the inversion of traditional gender roles which have resulted in “soft,” “feminine” men, so part of “correcting” this issue involves reversing this process and “righting” the gender roles which have been so upended by 21st century life. Such a process necessitates, more specifically, that American women be stripped of any “masculine” qualities which might make them threatening to the manly power and virility American men are perceived to have lost. For these men to reclaim these traits, American women need to be cast as helpless and in need of saving to the precise extent that American men must embody the opposite of these qualities. In other words, the American man needs to reassert his strength and ability to protect, and by definition this requires that there be someone (or something) in need of protection. This role has been traditionally relegated to women, and it was once again in the wake of September 11.13 As Carol A. Stabile (Director of the Center for the Study of Women in Society) has pointed out, “the central premise of superhero lore is that someone out there needs to be protected and . . . the someone in need of protection is invariably female or feminized (typically women and children, but sometimes the elderly and animals.”14

Stabile argues that “in the post-9/11 landscape, the gendered lines of protection remain inviolable: men are heroes and women are victims, perpetually in need of

13 Faludi also points out that “In the absence of female victims at the site, the media substituted homemakers in the suburbs held hostage by fear and little children traumatized by television footage. The threat, according to this revised script, [was] . . . to our domestic hearth. ‘We face an enemy determined to bring death and suffering into our homes,’ George W. Bush emphasized in his speech on the fifth anniversary of September 11, as if the hijackers had aimed their planes not at office towers and government buildings but at the white picket fences of the American domicile” (7). In reading the events of 9/11 as attacks on domestic (read: feminine) space, Bush and the American media attach vulnerability to the feminine. So, just as the American home must be secured and protected, so too must American women be protected.
Fisher 9

protection” (89), and *Spider-Man 2* (2004) and *Spider-Man 3* (2007)\(^\text{15}\) are no exception. While I think Stabile is right to point out the “singularly disturbing” failure of the American imagination regarding the protection narrative,\(^\text{16}\) she seems to be suggesting that is it merely more of the same old bad, while in the section below I will argue that cultural conformity to this narrative is a reflection of a specific post-9/11 fear: that, as I have said, of the weakening and feminization of the American Man, and that, furthermore, the protection narrative serves a very specific function in his rehabilitation.

\(^{15}\) The first *Spider-Man* (2002) was near completion at the time of the September 11 attacks, so only minimally reflects the fears they elicited.

\(^{16}\) Carol A. Stabile, “‘Sweetheart, This Ain’t Gender Studies’: Sexism and Superheroes,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6.1 (March 2009): 91.
Spider-Man and Remasculination

Spider-Man’s 2004 sequel strongly reflects the perceived feminization of the American man and the on-screen resolution of this “inadequacy” through the requisite victimization of the American woman in the “remasculcation” process.

Spider-Man 2 depicts a Peter Parker troubled by love and struggling with time management, unable to simultaneously succeed in his roles as a masked superhero, student, tenant, freelance photographer, pizza delivery boy, and Mary Jane admirer. Love for his red-headed crush has driven Peter to engage in such “feminine” activities as poetry-reading and flower-purchasing; yet even in these tasks Peter is unsuccessful, for his duties as Spider-Man keep interfering with his everyday activities (including his attempts to woo Mary Jane). In one scene, for example, Peter manages to ruin a load of street clothes at the laundromat by washing them with his red and blue Spidey suit, which literally bleeds all over the rest of his laundry. This emphasizes the incompatibility of his dual lifestyles, while also reflecting his childlike ineptitude at performing ordinary tasks. Though laundry is a classically “domestic” (and therefore “feminine”) activity, it is also one associated with independence and adulthood, and Peter’s inability to carry it out successfully reflects his boyishness in contrast not to womanhood but to manhood.

A subsequent scene contains a shot of Peter’s closet, in which hangs, on one side, a business suit (the symbol of the Black-Berry-wielding, metrosexual17 man Faludi describes), and on the other, the Spider-Man suit. Peter chooses the former, a decision that foreshadows his subsequent decision to “quit” his life as Spider-Man.

17 According to Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary, a metrosexual is “a usually urban, heterosexual male given to enhancing his personal appearance by fastidious grooming, beauty treatments, and fashionable clothes.” (Available online at http://www.merriam-webstercollegiate.com/).
As it turns out, Peter is dressing so sharply to go to the theater; Mary Jane has been cast in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and he is attempting to make good on a promise to attend, which he has thus far failed to keep (another mark of his failings as a man). Tragically, his dinky electric scooter is run over, causing him to arrive moments too late to be allowed into the theater. He waits outside until Mary Jane emerges after the show, but ultimately chooses to follow some shrieking police cars to a crime scene rather than approach her to explain his absence at the show.

Unfortunately, it seems that Peter’s decision to be a hero after all has been made too late; as he attempts to scale a building in his usual, arachnoid fashion, he discovers to his horror that his Spidey-powers have begun to disappear. He can no longer scale the building’s vertical wall using merely his fingertips, his keen eyesight worsens, and, most importantly, the webs he expels from his wrists in order to do what Spider-Man does (catch criminals in webs, save damsels in distress, etc.) physically dry up. It is worth noting that, in the original comics, Spider-Man’s webs come out of web-shooting gadgets Parker builds and affixes to his wrists. The filmmakers actively chose to make Spider-Man’s webs part of his biology instead,\(^1\) allegedly for reasons of plausibility,\(^2\) but given that “as much as anything, Spider-Man is about coming of age,”\(^3\) the “special inner reserve” Peter calls upon \(^4\) to release his webs suggests a double meaning in Peter’s loss of power. Spider-Man becomes, for all intents and purposes, sterile. His attempts to send forth his potent and defining bodily fluids are futile, and Peter is forced to descend from

---


the building’s roof not by his usual, superhuman means, but by riding the elevator with a man in a jacket and tie.

This scene is meant to be humorous, playing off of the office-sitcom trope of the single shot, awkwardly-too-long elevator ride, during which the two men make painful small talk in between the dings of passing floors. “Nice suit,” the man smirks. “Where’d you get it?” Much of this brief scene’s humor is the result of the juxtaposition of such mundane conversation and ordinary activity with the image of Spider-Man in his full get-up. However, the absurdity of Spider-Man riding an elevator serves another purpose as well, subtly reminding the viewer of the exclusive nature of the choice Peter has made: Peter cannot be both an ordinary, office-going man and a superhero. Without the bodily forces that have made him powerful, Spider-Man is reduced to an ordinary, impotent man in a silly outfit. The cost of the elevator-riding lifestyle, this scene seems to suggest, is Spider-Man’s manhood.

Fortunately, there remains for Spider-Man a path back to “proper” masculinity and potent bodily fluids. This path is, as Faludi’s argument predicts, through the victimization of Mary Jane, whose helplessness creates a space for Peter to regain his manhood. This victimization often takes on the form of potential sexual violence, as when Spider-Man saves Mary Jane from a gang of leering men in a dark alley in the first Spider-Man as well as when the Green Goblin threatens to “finish her nice and slow.” These examples suggest that it is the foremost duty of man not to simply protect women but to specifically protect their chastity and sexual purity. It also reinforces the idea of America’s vulnerability as “female” by operating under the misconception that being a victim of sexual violence is a uniquely feminine risk, recalling the blogger Faludi cites
and his declaration that America had been castrated on September 11 and thereby rendered sexually vulnerable. Because “feminine” American men are “to blame” for this, it is crucial that the role of potential sexual victim be emphatically placed back on the woman. Emphasizing the rape threat in Spider-Man, for example, quietly reminds the viewer that women, not men, are the ones who are vulnerable in a way supposedly only women can be, while simultaneously, once again, providing a (narrative) excuse for manly heroism.

One scene in Spider-Man 2 demonstrates the relationship between Mary Jane’s victimization and Peter’s remasculcation particularly well. Peter and Mary Jane meet for coffee to discuss his feelings for her, though she is engaged to another man. She asks him directly if he loves her, but when he says “no” she requests that he kiss her—she needs to know something (presumably, whether or not he is Spider-Man, as she is implied to have suspected since the end of the first film), but before he can do so, his Spidey-senses tingle. (Apparently, this is one power which he has retained, probably for the dramatic slow-motion shot it provided the film’s trailer.) Peter grabs Mary Jane just in time to pull her out of the way of a car crashing through the cafe’s glass windows, followed shortly by Spider-Man 2 villain Doctor Octopus, who enters the shop on his frightening, mechanical tentacles. He grabs Peter (known Spidey photographer) and demands that he bring “his friend Spider-Man” to meet him, or he’ll “peel the flesh off [Mary Jane’s] bones.” “If you lay one finger on her--” Peter begins but is interrupted. “You’ll do what?” Doc Ock replies, easily tossing Peter into a pile of rubble. He grabs the screaming and flailing Mary Jane and disappears into the city.
The shot cuts to Peter, buried under the debris of the cafe, as he suddenly leaps out, fist first, with a cry of rage. He runs into the street, surveying the chaos through his glasses, only to realize he no longer needs them. The point of view shot here reveals his blurred vision through their lenses and the subsequent clear focus as he removes them. He drops them to the ground, and they break. The scene’s final two shots are of Peter’s fist clenching with anger and power, and a close-up of his glasses-free face revealing the same powerful determination.

Newspapers quickly proclaim the glad tidings: “HE’S BACK,” reads the headline of The Daily Bugle. Subsequent shots depict Spider-Man swinging through the city once again, off to battle Octavius and save Mary Jane with his renewed powers and masculine fortitude.

The resultant battle between hero and villain deposits them on the top of a speeding above-ground railcar, and then rapidly into it, much to the horror of the train’s passengers. Doc Ock breaks through the front of the car, knocking the conductor aside to crank up the car’s speed to over 80 mph and destroy its brakes. “You have a train to catch,” Doc Ock smirks as he leaps off the car, leaving Peter to stop the speeding train before it plunges off the unfinished tracks into the East River (the end of which Peter’s super-vision enables him to see from afar). Peter, who has ripped off his mask because it caught on fire, stands on the front of the car as its passengers panic behind its glass.

Peter’s multiple attempts to stop the moving car all involve superhuman, bodily strength. He first jumps onto the tracks to try to brace the car with his legs, wincing from the strain. When this fails, he tries to anchor the speeding train by shooting webs out of both his wrists onto passing buildings. One web on either side is not enough, so, with the
end of the line approaching, he begins shooting webs out furiously, hanging onto the
growing number of threads with all his strength. He bellows from the exertion, as the
windows behind him burst and the strain on his biceps causes his suit to tear. He keeps
yelling and his eyes bulge as the train finally comes to a stop. He becomes faint and
nearly falls off the train, but the train’s passengers reach out to stop him, gently pulling
him into the car. Nearly unconscious, he is passed through the car by and over the
outstretched hands of those whose life he has just saved, his arms extended in what is
surely meant to be a Christ-like manner (his suit is even torn at his side). They lay him in
the middle of the car and peer down at him with faces of concern and awe. “He’s just a
kid,” one man says, “No older than my son.”

Peter’s eyes open, and as he sees the kindly faces looking down at him, he
realizes with alarm that he is not wearing his mask. He sits up, and his eyes well with
tears as two small boys return his mask to him. “We won’t tell nobody,” one of them
says. “It’s good to have you back, Spider-Man.” He remasks and staggers to his feet. At
that moment, a mechanical tentacle bursts through the back of the train as Doc Ock
reappears. “He’s mine!” he yells, but a burly New Yorker steps in his way. “You wanna
get through him, you gotta get through me,” he says. “And me,” another man says, and in
a moment all the passengers step forward, blocking Doc Ock’s path to Spider-Man. Doc
Ock easily pushes them all to the side, but the point is not lost. This scene is reminiscent
of the post-9/11 addition to the first film of random passersby coming to Spider-Man’s

---

22 This is, admittedly, not the most masculine display, but like the narratives of what cultural theorist Scott
Bukatman has referred to as “the sensitive new age mutant syndrome,” it “indicates an awareness of
emotional need but only within a hypermasculine context” (64). For, as Media Studies Professor Katherine
A. Fowkes has also noted, “a sensitive nice guy like Peter can’t possibly be called a wimp because he’s
(really!) a manly superhero” (130).
aid by throwing groceries at his attacker and yelling, “You mess with Spider-Man, you mess with New York!” and “You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us!”

I return to the significance of such “ordinary heroism” in a subsequent section, but I will first examine the previous scene and how we might read it in terms of Faludi’s argument about masculinity. Like the post-9/11 man, whose remasculisation depends on casting females as victims, Spider-Man’s reclamation of his powers (most notably of his web shooters, which, as I have already argued, can be viewed as a sort of metaphor for masculine virility) occurs as the result of Doc Ock’s capture of Mary Jane. Her endangerment carries with it the threat of sexual assault reminiscent of that by the Green Goblin in the first film, as I have argued above. While the threat to “peel the flesh from her bones” is not quite as sexually suggestive as the Green Goblin’s threat to “finish her nice and slow,” it sufficiently connotes stripping and sadistic violence so as to justify being doubly read as a sexual threat. So, once again, we see the reinforcement of the idea that it is through the (especially sexual) vulnerability of women that men can be heroes and reclaim their manhood.

That the powers Peter regains are especially male in nature is emphasized in both scenes as well. I think it is not insignificant that the return of Peter’s powers is indicated through the return of both his physical strength and his keen sense of vision. The gendered significance of the former is perhaps obvious, but that the first superpower he regains is that of sight is, I think, equally gendered, if less obviously so, in two ways.

As Fowkes has argued, glasses play a particular role in superhero mythology. They are, she points out, fragile and easily broken, and “as with Clark Kent . . . Peter’s eyeglasses at the beginning of the movie mark him as an underdog and a nerd. Eyes that
need glasses represent a physical deficiency and therefore advertise weakness. Glasses, furthermore, are themselves fragile. They can be easily be broken.”

His reacquisition of this lost power, therefore, symbolizes his return from weakness and vulnerability (and, by extension, femininity).

The return of Peter’s super-sight might also be read as gendered by invoking feminist psychoanalytic critic Laura Mulvey, who has argued that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” wherein men look and women are looked at. Peter’s repossessing of this particular superpower, then, represents his reclamation of his role as one who looks, i.e., man, but also as one who looks at (or rather, for) woman as he sets out to find Mary Jane.

The prominent role of Peter’s body in these two scenes (especially in conjunction with, again, his particularly masculine powers of sight and web shooting) also emphasizes the corporeal nature of the masculinity he regains, as suggested by the shot of his clenching fist in the first scene, and by his highly bodily approach to stopping the train in the second. With his body the only barrier between the moving train and the death of dozens of innocent passengers, Peter employs his physical strength through both the use of his muscles (legs, biceps) and his super-strong webs to stop the car. In the end, the latter method is successful, though Peter is “drained” physically as a result.

What occurs next in the railcar exemplifies two themes of the *Spider-Man* trilogy as a whole which relate to the appeal of the Spider-Man narrative generally, but they are presented in the films in ways which reflect specifically post-September 11 themes. The

---

first of these relates to Spider-Man’s youth, a point to which the viewers’ attention is brought through the train scene’s inclusion of Spider-Man’s unmasking, which reveals the youthful, “soft-looking”\textsuperscript{25} face of Tobey Maguire.

However, before I turn to these broader themes of the Spider-Man narrative, let me turn to an analysis of the themes of masculinity I have already examined above as they are manifested in \textit{Spider-Man 3}.

The narrative of \textit{Spider-Man 3} also conforms to the remasculcation narrative of the American man, reflecting the post-9/11 fear of his emasculation and the security threat it poses to the nation. This film, unlike its predecessor, makes several explicit references to fifties-era romantic ideals. In fact, one of the film’s first scenes takes place at a theater on Broadway, where Mary Jane is starring in a musical called \textit{Manhattan Memories} and singing Irving Berlin’s “They Say It’s Wonderful.” This theme is also articulated fairly explicitly by Peter’s Aunt May (as with many of the trilogy’s more obvious messages). Peter and Mary Jane are happily in love as the film begins (as you might imagine from the above-mentioned scene), and Peter decides he wants to propose. Excited by this news, Aunt May gives him the ring Uncle Ben gave her when he proposed, but warns him that “a man has to be understanding and put his wife before himself”-- is he sure he is ready? She describes Ben’s proposal to her--a romantic affair which included a walk on the beach, a swim in the ocean, and a dazzling ring: “I thought it was the sun!” she says. “We’d be married fifty years come August,” she tells Peter, choking up.

May’s speech sets forth the fifties ideal of masculinity against which Peter will be judged throughout the rest of the film. It clearly marks the late Ben Parker as the embodiment of this ideal, while also passing on to Peter the physical symbol of the

gendered expectations which he will first fail to live up to then subsequently embody through, unsurprisingly, another dramatic rescue of Mary Jane as endangered woman.

Peter’s emasculation in this film takes the shape of not merely his failure to achieve this ideal, but also through his adoption of “cosmopolitan,” feminine characteristics. This time, however, Peter faces not the physical loss of his superpowers but the loss of control over himself, caused alternately by a desire for revenge and a mysterious extraterrestrial parasite which “amplifies characteristics of its host, especially aggression.” The combination of vanity and this unchecked aggression render Peter a failure of a man by his aunt’s definition. But, as in Spider-Man 2, he ultimately regains control of himself (and therefore his masculinity) through the heroic gap opened for him through the victimization of women. Though his ultimate rehabilitation here involves, as usual, rescuing Mary Jane, this film introduces a second (and even more helpless) love interest for Peter Parker: the bleach-blonde Gwen Stacy, who spends most of the film (when she is not shrieking bloody murder) gazing wide-eyed at Spider-Man/Peter out of either teary gratitude or simpering admiration.

That Peter will fail as a man (in Aunt May’s neo-fifties sense) is suggested from his first lines of the film: “It's me! Peter Parker! Your friendly neighborhood . . . you know. I've come a long way from becoming the boy who was bitten by a spider. Back then, nothing seemed to go right for me, and now . . . people really like me!” he exclaims as a passing kid points in excitement at a huge Spider-Man billboard in Times Square. Both Peter’s rapidly increasing vanity and his obsession with being looked at (by himself and others) will ultimately lead to his masculine failure, which includes his (temporary) loss of Mary Jane.
Consumed by his own fame (and the sight of his own image plastered on every surface of the city), Peter fails to notice what is going on in Mary Jane’s life: namely, that she is fired from the musical and very sad about it. The latter issue is of particular significance, for, as I have suggested, Peter’s obsession marks him as feminine through his interest in being looked at.\textsuperscript{26} Even putting aside Mulvey’s psychoanalytic musings for the time being, the film’s negative framing of Peter’s delight in being watched suggests that such a delight is proper to women and women alone. In one scene, for example, we witness Peter essentially steal attention from Mary Jane; that we view it this way in the first place implies that he has taken something which is rightfully hers.\textsuperscript{27}

This occurs following Mary Jane’s unexpected firing from \textit{Manhattan Memories}. She is replaced due to the many negative reviews of her debut performance in “all the papers,” but she is not made privy to this information until she turns up for rehearsal the next day. Crestfallen, she exits the theater to wild applause and cheering. She smiles happily, only to realize when someone off-screen yells “All right, Spidey!” that their acclamation is not for her, but for her attention-smitten beau, who swings past the crowd down Broadway as she exits. Here, Peter literally attracts attention away from Mary Jane, and we see the unhappiness that results when a(n) (upstaged and, literally, de-staged) woman looks and a (costumed) man is looked at. It is worth pointing out that \textit{Spider-Man 3} is bookended by scenes of Mary Jane performing on stage, reminding viewers that when all is right in the world, women are the ones being watched (and enjoying it), not men.

\textsuperscript{27} Also noteworthy is the fact that it is now Spider-Man’s image plastered all over Times Square and the city generally, as I have pointed out. Recall the posters of Mary Jane covering the city in \textit{Spider-Man 2} publicizing her role in \textit{The Importance of Being Earnest}. In this respect too, Spider-Man has usurped Mary Jane, and in doing so inverted “proper” gender roles.
The real apex of Peter’s “feminine” vanity, however, occurs in the next scene, which makes it abundantly clear that “NY” does indeed “♥ Spidey,” as the city gathers for a celebration of their favorite masked hero, complete with a marching band, banners, balloons, and a speech by the most recent dewy-eyed recipient of Spider-Man’s heroism: Gwen Stacy. The scene of Gwen’s rescue is itself an interesting site of gendered messages, as it involves a wayward crane crashing into the side of a sky-scraper where she and two other women are modeling for a photo shoot to sell photo-copiers. Gwen is left hanging onto a telephone cord for dear life 62 stories above the pavement, but, fortunately, Spider-Man arrives just in time to catch her as she falls, screaming, towards the ground.

This scene is worth considering before returning to the parade celebrating Spider-Man’s heroic rescue of yet another shrieking woman from certain death. The setting alone makes it noteworthy, particularly regarding the argument it tacitly makes about the office and the men who work there. As in *Spider-Man 2*, this scene’s setting reinforces the emasculated nature of the modern, metrosexual man by explicitly turning his workplace into a feminized space. This is achieved not merely by making it the site of female activity (modeling!), by also by marking the office as itself a space to be looked at, both through the lens of the photographer’s camera and later in an advertisement selling copiers.

It is unclear whether the suit-clad men who fill the room are regular office employees or male models, but by marking the room and everyone in it as the object of the gaze, the film tacitly denotes them all as feminine. The only other man in the room is, notably, the photographer, a vaguely European man with an accent whose reaction to the
approach of the crane (“What is that thing doing in my background?”) denotes his possession of the feminized office as well as the unfamiliarity with which he confronts the threatening crane-as-phallus and its imminent penetration of the feminized workspace from its masculine construction site.

Furthermore, Gwen’s helplessness as she dangles above the streets of Manhattan reinforces, once again, the protection narrative wherein “men are heroes and women are victims, perpetually in need of protection.” In line with what I have been arguing, it is in fact her vulnerability that creates the space for Spider-Man’s masculine heroism to shine through, particularly (here) in comparison to the other “effeminate” males present at the photo shoot, European and office-going alike.

However, as I suggested earlier, this film’s fear of the softening of the modern American man is only secondarily expressed through its depiction of white-collar, working men. Rather, Spider-Man 3 primarily articulates this fear through Peter’s descent into metrosexual vanity. While Spider-Man 2 only alluded to the implications of choosing suit over super-suit, Spider-Man 3 explicitly depicts Peter Parker as swaggering, dancing, shopping metrosexual with an ego over-inflated by fame and power. Even before this transformation fully takes place, however, we are given warning of Peter’s impending descent into the feminine through his obsession with his own image, as I mentioned above.

To some extent, narcissism has been a part of Peter’s modis operandi since he realized in Spider-Man that he could make a living taking and selling photographs of himself to the Daily Bugle. However, there was something innocent and clever in this sort

of self-viewing\textsuperscript{29} that is wholly absent in the obnoxiously bold character he adopts here. Watching him prance around “giving finger guns to every attractive woman he sees”\textsuperscript{30} is painful, but it rather obviously points to Peter’s failure to live up to Aunt May’s definition of “real” masculinity: “A man . . . has to put his wife before himself.” By blatantly ignoring this advice in favor of unbridled narcissism, Peter has, in a sense, entered into a romance with himself, playing the dual roles of husband and wife, man and woman, spectator and object of his own gaze.

But he obviously is not the only one looking. The people gathered at the Spider-Man festival are all there to look, as is Mary Jane (and Peter, at first, who shows up to take pictures before slipping off to suit up). She is still crushed from her recent firing, but he is clearly too dazzled by the sight of his own image everywhere (including children in tiny Spidey-suits) to really hear why she is upset. “I’m going to be swinging in from over there . . . so you know where to look!” he says instead, before departing to prepare for his big entrance, leaving Mary Jane standing alone in the unusual position of female spectator.

Gwen gives her speech, and the crowd goes wild. Peter watches, beaming, as he suits up. “They love me!” he says to himself. As he swoops over the crowd, planting high-fives on the outstretched hands of the festival-goers, they cheer and point, and (in a self-referential nod to Spider-Man’s past iterations) the band breaks into the theme song from the 1967 Spider-Man animated series. Spider-Man deposits himself on the main platform in an impressive display of acrobatics and descends in classic spider fashion beside Gwen, and they kiss in the iconic style from the first film, while a very hurt Mary

\textsuperscript{29} See also the scene from Spider-Man when the scrawny Peter delightedly discovers he has sprouted muscles overnight.

Jane looks on in disbelief. Peter’s blatant disregard for the feelings of his would-be fiancée, needless to say, conflicts directly with his aunt’s guidance.

The other aspects of Peter’s emasculation in this film, as I have suggested, are his narcissism and vanity, both of which are components of the cosmopolitan, metrosexual male and his obsession with personal appearance. Peter’s rival photographer Eddie Brock draws attention to this point when he insults Peter’s photography skills to Spider-Man at the festival. “That guy’s kind of an amateur,” he tells him. “Have you noticed his stuff makes you look kind of bloated? Just, you know, a little chunky.” Traditionally “masculine” men, of course, are not to be concerned with “bloating,” a physical woe often associated with premenstrual women. Eddie’s own attention to Spider-Man’s appearance, however, marks him as equally untenable portrait of masculinity.

Indeed, Eddie goes on to become the villain Venom following his contact with the same inky black substance that turns Peter into Dark Spider-Man (complete with black suit), but hints of Eddie’s evil are present long before this. Edward Brock, Jr., with his bleached hair and generational suffix, represents everything that is “wrong” with the modern man, that very thing that Spider-Man threatens to become if the evil, black goo from outer-space continues to have its way with him. He wears cologne, compliments J. Jonah Jameson (hot-tempered editor of the Daily Bugle) on his shirt, and hits unabashedly (and unsuccessfully) on Jameson’s secretary. He is also, it turns out, a liar and a crook who photoshops fake pictures of Spider-Man in an attempt to steal Peter’s job. Ultimately unwilling to give up the power he experiences as Venom, he is destroyed by Spider-Man.
This brings me back to Dark Spider-Man, who sinks to similarly low levels (of both likability and masculine fortitude) but who is, of course, redeemed before he “loses himself” to the goo. Peter’s resultant bad behavior, however, is tied to his loss of control, both to the sticky, black parasite and to an overpowering desire for revenge which arises in Peter when he learns that the man who actually killed his Uncle Ben is on the loose. Apparently forgetting his admission in Spider-Man 2 that his uncle’s murder was in part the result of Peter’s desire for revenge, Peter sets out to find and kill the murderer, Flint Marko (who becomes the villain Sandman when he falls into a particle accelerator).

Mistakenly believing his efforts to kill Flint successful, Peter tells Aunt May that Spider-Man has killed Uncle Ben’s murderer. He is confused when she reacts not with joy but with surprise and disappointment. “I don’t understand,” she says. “Spider-Man doesn’t kill people.” “I thought you’d feel--but he deserved it, didn’t he?” Peter responds. “I don’t think it’s for us to say whether a person deserves to live or die,” Aunt May says, signaling that this is going to be another attempt at An Important Conversation. “Uncle Ben meant the world to us,” she continues, “but he wouldn’t want us living one second with revenge in our hearts. It’s like a poison. It can take you over. Before you know it, turn us into something ugly.”

Aunt May’s words implicitly connect the all-consuming powers of revenge and the black goo, but they also frame the film’s anti-revenge narrative fifties masculinity through her reference to Uncle Ben, who, as I have already argued, is the model of fifties masculinity within the framework of this film. In losing control of himself to both the

31 He confesses to Aunt May: “The thief was running towards me . . . . I could have stopped him but I wanted revenge. He wanted a car. He tried to take Uncle Ben’s. He said no. Uncle Ben was killed that night for being the only one who did the right thing.”
black suit and his obsession with exacting revenge on Ben’s murderer, Peter fails to be a “man,” which, recall, by May’s definition, involves understanding and selflessness (and, lest we forget, a woman). These obsessions both reflect weakness of will, which, like any weakness, renders Peter emasculated and feminine.

So, once again, Peter must venture down the path of remasculcation and rehabilitation through the victimization of Mary Jane. Venom and Sandman both want Spider-Man dead, so they join forces, capturing Mary Jane and holding her hostage in a taxi suspended 90 stories above the ground in what appears to be a giant web. The danger she faces again includes a vaguely articulated sexual threat, this time voiced by Eddie-turned-Venom. “My spider sense is tingling . . . if you know what I’m talking about,” he leers, wagging his finger suggestively.

The anti-revenge narrative reenters here, as Peter attempts to enlist Harry’s help in saving Mary Jane. At last able to forgive Peter for his role in the death of Harry’s father (the Green Goblin in the first Spider-Man), Harry has a change of heart, and he arrives on the battle scene just in time to help Peter defeat the villains and save MJ from the physical (and sexual) threat of they pose. The two friends even share a “give me your hand!” moment before their requisite reconciliation as Harry lies dying from a fatal blow meant for Peter.

---

33 This equation of revenge with selfishness is a theme which will reappear in the Batman films as well. It is, in its own right, a post-9/11 theme, but I will hold off on discussing this until I consider the Batman films.

34 Harry’s trajectory over the course of this film is as convoluted as its plot as a whole. He begins the film as the New Goblin, still blind with murderous rage over the death of his father at, he mistakenly believes, the hand of Spider-Man/Peter. In one of the film’s first fight scenes, he attempts to kill Peter, but instead ends up in the hospital with no recollection of recent events, including his father’s death. His appetite for vengeance forgotten, he and Peter become pals again, and he rekindles his romance with Mary Jane as Peter’s self-centeredness drives the couple apart. Unfortunately, Harry’s memory suddenly returns and he once again wants Spider-Man dead.

35 Incidentally, amnesiac Harry and Mary Jane share a romantic moment earlier in the film over omelets and Chubby Checker’s “The Twist,” in another explicit reference to fifties domesticity and, specifically, fifties masculinity unimpeded by the desire for revenge.
Of course, the remasculuation process requires that our hero be rehabilitated through the release of his vengeful anger towards his uncle’s killer. As Peter hears for the first time Flint Marko’s sob story36 (something the audience has known the whole movie), he realizes that he has “done terrible things too,” and offers Flint his forgiveness before the Sandman blows away into the New York sunset. At last, it seems that Peter possesses the understanding and selflessness to be a real man, and the film concludes in a nightclub where Mary Jane once again sings Irving Berlin’s “They Say It’s Wonderful.” Peter extends his hand to her, and the two hold each other and dance as the screen fades to black. Mary Jane and Peter have returned to their “proper” roles as object and viewer, respectively, and through his attainment of fifties masculinity (by being understanding, putting his woman before himself, and freeing himself from the constraints of vanity and revenge), Peter is made back into a man.

Peter’s remasculcation process in Spider-Man 3, as in Spider-Man 2, reflects the post-9/11 fear of masculine weakness (through the vanity of the metrosexual and the weakness of will an obsession with revenge indicates) that Faludi argues has pervaded the American imagination since the September 11 attacks. The on-screen representation of this fear and its subsequent resolution (through the victimization of women) reflects the gendered anxiety over the threat/security dichotomy I have introduced following Dyer’s inadequacy/utopian solution pairs, here manifested as the threat the emasculated American Man poses to American society and the security regained through his rehabilitation.

36 “My daughter was dying. I needed money. I was scared. I told your uncle all I wanted was the car. He said to me ‘Why don’t you put down the gun and go home.’ I realize now he was just trying to help me. Then I saw my partner running over with the car. And the gun was in my hand . . . . I’m not asking you to forgive me. I just want you to understand.”
Out of this fear arises another post-9/11 theme which relates more broadly to the American Man as an ordinary citizen. It will not do simply to rehabilitate the masculinity of singular heroes if the “wasting disease” infects the common man. Returning now to the cable car scene from *Spider-Man 2*, I will demonstrate the way in which the *Spider-Man* films depict their hero as both ordinary and extraordinary, and argue that this depiction parallels that found in the media regarding the heroes of September 11.
Spider-Man and (Extra)Ordinary Heroism

Danny Fingeroth, former Marvel editor of the Spider-Man comic books, argues that Spider-Man’s unique charm is two-fold: he is both the first teenage superhero and, rather as a result, the first “regular guy superhero.” Both points he makes are relevant to the appeal and success of Sam Raimi’s Spider-Man trilogy and are exemplified in the previously-described scene of Peter Parker on the train through one passenger’s remark that “he’s just a kid . . . no older than my son.”

The importance of Spider-Man’s youth is that it sets him up for, on the one hand, imperfection, and, on the other, hope. Fingeroth argues that these traits are what make him appealing and “human in the truest sense of the word.” He writes:

> The charm of Spider-Man is that he is not jaded. Unlike Batman . . . his faith in humanity is undiminished. The evil and corruption he sees do not make him despair for humanity. He may go through doubt and insecurity and self-hate. He may wonder why he does what he does, who in the world might care about it, or even if he’s causing more harm than good by fighting crime. But, bottom line, what a teenager brings to the table is knowledge and experience without cynicism and bitterness.

Fowkes echoes this sentiment when she points out that Spider-Man “fights not only crime but also cynicism, reinvesting the city with its iconic status as a place of hope.” The post-9/11 appeal of such a figure is perhaps obvious, but it does seem rather serendipitous.

---

38 The explicitness of this statement helps reconcile the age of Raimi’s Spider-Man (who is a young adult but not technically an adolescent) with the iconic youthfulness of the character. In doing so, it gives the filmic Spider-Man the potential both to represent hope through his youth as well as to be a believably masculine hero. Also of note is that the upcoming Spider-Man reboot (directed by Marc Webb) focuses on a younger Peter Parker still in high school. It will be interesting to see how anxieties about masculinity are dealt with in the presence of a solidly adolescent hero.
that this iconic figure of hope was the first superhero to appear in a Hollywood blockbuster following the September 11 attacks.\footnote{Recall that the first film was nearly completed at this time.} Who better to face a nation grasping for hope in the face of trauma than Spider-Man? Fingeroth, though he does not attach to Spider-Man any particular 9/11 significance, describes his unique inspirational potential as follows:

> Every day, Spider-Man gets out of bed and starts all over again—not like Sisyphus, forever rolling the boulder up the hill, not like Superman, throwing the boulder over the hill with a flick of his wrist, but like we all do, or try to do, when we’re teenagers. . . . Hope fills Spider-Man’s world, the hope that only a teenager can have.\footnote{Danny Fingeroth, Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2004), 149.}

Fingeroth’s point about our identification with Spider-Man is equally crucial here. If he is correct in suggesting that Spider-Man is “truly the ‘regular guy superhero,’”\footnote{Ibid., 146.} then we might find here yet another parallel to post-9/11 America in general and post-9/11 American masculinity, in particular. Fingeroth appears to mean “regular guy” in some sort of gender-neutral sense, as indicated by his use of the first-person plural in speculating on the source of Spider-Man’s appeal. He writes that “we know that, if we got superpowers, we would probably act like Peter Parker. How he feels is how we would feel.”\footnote{Ibid.} But in fact there can be no separation of Spider-Man from his gender, and there is, similarly, no denying that “regular guy” refers to men specifically.\footnote{As Stabile notes: “All these stories about superheroes represent a desire for secular saviors, for men whose powers do not come from god, but are nonetheless sufficient to the task of saving the world from some kind of apocalypse” (87) [my emphasis].} I will address this theme shortly with regards to the gendered language used in describing the (masculine) heroes of September 11, 2001.
Putting that issue aside for the present, I would add, furthermore, that it is not merely that we would act like Spider-Man if we had his powers that makes him so appealing to us, but also that Peter Parker is an everyday person who, rather by accident, is endowed with superpowers. His powers are not the result of his birth on some other planet like Superman’s or something that can be bought with a trust fund like Batman’s. He embodies the idea that any (and, indeed, all) of us could be a hero, and that is precisely why his films are so well-suited to reflect post-9/11 desires about the heroism of the ordinary, American man.

This idea is reflected in the previously discussed train scene as well as in a speech Aunt May gives Peter following his “retirement” from life as Spider-Man. Referring to a neighborhood boy helping the elderly woman load boxes into a moving van, she says:

You’ll never guess who he wants to be: Spider-Man. . . . Well, he knows a hero when he sees one. Too few characters out there flying around like that, saving old girls like me. Lord knows, kids like Henry need a hero: 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 told 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, even though sometimes we have to be steady and give up the thing we want the most, even our dreams. Spider-Man did that for Henry and he wonders where he’s gone. He needs him.

Aunt May’s rather long-winded monologue here reflects, first of all, my previous point about Spider-Man and the hope he embodies. Her reference to “the one who told them to

---

47 Obviously both of these characters are appealing for other reasons, I even argue shortly why I think even Batman’s story is well-suited to the milieu of post-9/11 America.
48 Stabile refers to this as the American “desire for secular saviors, for men whose powers do not come from god” (87).
49 Spider-Man saves Aunt May from Doc Ock earlier in the film in an example of superheroic protection of the feminized, as Stabile notes, as both woman and elderly (87).
hold on a second longer” marks him as beacon of hope in addition to protector, reflecting popular notions of post-9/11 heroism.

More importantly, however, this speech mirrors the theme of what I will call “(extra)ordinariness” at work in these films (and the Batman films as well, as I will discuss below). In practically the same breath, Aunt May declares heroes exceptional, and then suddenly insists, quite to the contrary, that we are all heroes. She first laments the rarity of heroes (“too few characters out there . . . like that”), demarcates the hero as something other than (presumably) “regular” people (“he knows a hero when he sees one,” “setting an example for all of us,” and “People line up for them, cheer for them, scream their names”) then, seemingly out of nowhere, shares with Peter her conviction that “there’s a hero in all of us,” by which she either means “everyone is a hero” or at least “anyone can be a hero.”

Either way, this seemingly contradictory message parallels one found in the September 11 narrative, which, like Aunt May’s speech, both glorifies “rare” individuals for their heroism and declares such heroism widespread and, indeed, common (as suggested in a Wall Street Journal editorial Faludi cites, appropriately titled “Common Valor”). 50 This article begins extolling New York’s firefighters as exceptionally brave: “If firefighters possess a gene lacking in the rest of us, it must have something to do with their sense of direction,” it reads, referring quite literally to their trip up into the towers, while everyone else headed down and out.51 However, the very next paragraph begins with the claim that “the firefighters were by no means alone, of course.” The anonymous author continues, “America has witnessed heroism on a Homeric scale. How much more

poignant to realize that the overwhelming majority of these quiet acts of valor will remain unknown but to God and the ordinary men and women who attempted them.”

The theme of ordinary Americans demonstrating valor of epic proportions also appears in the narrative of Flight 93, the hijacked plane which did not reach its target, but instead crashed in Pennsylvania for unknown reasons. As Faludi points out, “One of the day’s darkest incidents offered the brightest hope. Flight 93 was more perfect for mythmaking for being so scant in facts.”52 Indeed, this myth possesses, unsurprisingly, similar traces of the notion of (extra)ordinary heroism found in the September 11 myth at large. It also demonstrates the attribution of the heroism of 9/11 to American men in particular, arguably in response to the crisis of masculinity I have been exploring.

Faludi cites CNN correspondent Miles O’Brien’s conclusion that “If you’re looking for heroes, the passengers on board that plane . . . would be them.”53 The group of random Americans on Flight 93 certainly renders it an ideal site for planting the (extra)ordinary narrative of the “common valor” of ordinary Americans, and it is made all the more so by the limited amount of information we have regarding what really happened there, as Faludi has pointed out.

The reconstruction of what occurred on that flight illuminates the gendered nature of the heroic narrative of September 11. Faludi argues that the media’s romanticization of the heroism of Flight 93 is based not merely on speculation but on, specifically, speculation about the masculine fortitude of those on board. She writes:

Flight 93 heroism rested on a few brief cell phone calls . . . and the last enigmatic words of software salesman Todd Beamer . . . overheard by an Airfone operator: ‘You ready? OK. Let’s roll.’ Beyond that, the media based their case on the

53 Ibid., 72.
assertions of family members that their loved one was ‘a take charge guy’ (Jeremy Glick), ‘a go-to guy’ who ‘didn’t take no for an answer’ (Todd Beamer), and a man who would ‘never go down without a fight’ (Thomas Burnett) -- remarks treated by the network correspondents like hard news leads.  

In the media attempts to “glean macho significance” out of everything from the flight’s early hour to the height and build of these men, speculation about the (just as likely) actions of less manly passengers of Flight 93 are conspicuously absent. Faludi mentions “flight attendant Sandra Bradshaw [who] called home, too, to report her part in the cabin revolt: she and another flight attendant were boiling coffee pots of water to scald the terrorists.” And she was not alone; Faludi continues:

Other phone calls record female flight attendants and female passengers displaying courage. But these stories never garnered the same media adulation. The myth taking shape demanded male rescuers and female captives. In that story, Sandra Bradshaw’s coffeepot could not become a symbol of American gumption. The flight attendants were assigned another role, as frightened damsels whose distress turned them into inadvertent sirens.

This counternarrative demonstrates, once again, that the framing of ordinary heroes of September 11 follows the trajectory predicted by Faludi’s argument and seen in Spider-Man 2 and Spider-Man 3. She writes:

It was as though the medals handed out for Flight 93 were only secondarily about honoring a fight against foreign antagonists. The primary contest was a war against the wasting disease suspected to have overtaken the male professional class. ... By taking on terrorists, the white-collar men of Flight 93 were assuring their brethren that the ‘feminized society’ wasn’t irreversible after all.

---


Faludi even mentions the September 11 comic book volumes *9-11: Artists Respond* and their “portrayal of the uprising as an all-male action show,” writing that “there was no place for live-action superheroines--not even in the superheroic world of the comics” (74). Or, I might add, in the superheroic world of film, given the scarcity of female superheroes in the recent boom.

Implicit in Faludi’s argument is the assumption that these white-collar men are representative of all American men—that they are just “ordinary guys.” The mythicization of their supposed victory over “feminized society” is reflected in Spider-Man, the “ordinary guy” superhero, who overcomes this “wasting disease” in Spider-Man 2.

We see a similar glorification regarding the common valor of those back on the ground. Faludi argues that “mainstream newspapers and network news shows relapsed to vocabulary habits abandoned thirty years earlier,”59 referring to the tacit replacement by the media of gender-neutral terms like “firefighter” with “firemen.” She quotes firefighter Terese Floren, who wrote in Firework: The Newsletter of Women in the Fire Service, “‘Firemen’ is the perfect word to use when you want to say, ‘All (real) firefighters are men.’ It is a deliberate rejection of the gender-neutral in order to define heroes as male. And that’s exactly why these words are all over the news.”60 Even the above-referenced Wall Street Journal article, which does employ the gender-neutral “firefighter,” uses male pronouns to refer to any singular 9/11 firefighter.61

On the ground, in the air, and on the screen, then, we see the glorification of the American “everyman” as simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary, and that even this phrase is meant somewhat literally in its reference to American men in particular, suggesting the ubiquity of the fear that our ordinary men are just ordinary, and that they are, furthermore, ordinarily weak. This anxiety is manifested in the strange tension of (extra)ordinary heroism in both Spider-Man films as well as in the post-9/11 media, as they attempt to respond to the fear that the American everyman lacks masculine fortitude by depicting their (male) heroes as simultaneously common and exceptional.

59 Ibid., 104.
60 Cited in Ibid.
**Batman and (Extra)Ordinary Heroism**

This (extra)ordinariness theme is present in Christopher Nolan’s *Batman* films as well, though it plays out rather differently. As in the *Spider-Man* films, its reach is twofold, applying to both the superhero himself and those he protects.

Batman, of course, is not “ordinary” in the same way as Spider-Man, whose working-class status affords him such everyday troubles as struggling to keep a job, pay rent on time, care for an aging guardian, and attract the attention of women (all topics the films carefully include). Bruce Wayne, armed with his father’s fortune, shares none of these worries. He takes a job at Wayne Enterprises in *Batman Begins* (2005), but only to gain access to its Research and Development division and its large and idle supply of flashy gizmos and discontinued gadgets his father built for the military. The only semblance of a family Bruce has left (following the cold-blooded murder of his parents during his childhood) is his butler Alfred, who also lives comfortably on the Wayne fortune. Bruce’s status as millionaire bachelor could easily afford him any beautiful woman he might desire, and, indeed, he maintains a playboy persona to mask his actual nighttime activities, showing up in public in *Batman Begins*, for example, with no fewer than three models on his arm.

What makes Batman ordinary, then, is not the nature of the struggles he faces, but rather the fact that, for all intents and purposes, he is a superpowerless superhero. He does not hail from some other planet bearing any number of superhuman abilities, and he has not been randomly bitten by a radioactive spider. As Fingeroth points out, he is

---

62 Peter’s landlord appears frequently in both *Spider-Man 2* and *Spider-Man 3*, to yelling “Rent!” every time Peter enters or exits his room.
“allegedly . . . a normal human, trained to the peak of his abilities.” Fingeroth considers this aspect of Batman, in fact, constitutive of what he calls the “‘they could be me’ aspect [of masked adventurers]” which makes them so popular. He writes that “Batman is fueled by a rage against criminals and an unquenchable thirst for vengeance. Is that a wish-fulfillment fantasy? Indeed. And a powerful one. Who doesn’t want payback for injustices committed against oneself?” This remark certainly seems especially poignant in the wake of September 11.

But his “they could be me” point raises an interesting question which I think must be addressed. I have already discussed this appeal regarding Spider-Man; its application to Batman is markedly different than to that of his boyish, middle-class compatriot due to slightly different implications of “could.” “They could be me” begs the question, “If what?” In Spider-Man’s case, the answer is “if I suddenly gained superpowers.” Recall Fingeroth’s comment that “if we got superpowers, we would probably act like Peter Parker. How he feels is how we would feel.” However, Batman’s might is not the result of his having acquired superpowers; it is the result of the Wayne fortune, and the freedom and gadgets such a fortune can buy. Indeed, the possibility of being anything like Batman would require a trust fund measuring in the billions of dollars, a reality available to very few people.

I would argue that part of what makes Batman so appealing to us (both generally and in post-9/11 America) is that wealth and riches are at the root of Batman’s power. On the one hand, Batman’s wealth provides American viewers the pleasure of witnessing on-

---

64 *Ibid.*
screen the abundance and energy (two of Dyer’s utopian categories) absent in their own lives, particularly during an era of economic recession. But it is also Batman’s wealth which renders him such an emblematic embodiment of the American Way. In many ways, Batman is a sort of American, capitalist ideal, whose story and legacy represents a dark manifestation of the American dream. Fingeroth argues that much of Batman’s appeal to us actually lies, rather counter-intuitively, in his tragic status as orphan:67

What people remember is the orphan, left alone but with an employee, rearing himself, and not just rearing himself, but becoming the world’s greatest detective, as well as an extraordinary athlete, scientist, industrialist, and social butterfly. That’s a great fantasy: alone, with no help from anyone, you become tops in a variety of fields... and have a second job as the scourge of criminals everywhere...68

In fact, he suggests that this fantasy, which he calls “the orphan myth,” is a fundamental American idea. He writes that “the idea, so emphasized and mythologized in American popular culture is: we are all alone. We fight our own battles, make our own rules, defy those who would destroy us. We are alone to succeed or fail, to triumph or succumb. We make our own destinies.”69 This is, indeed, The American Way, an ideal also championed by the hero of the Western film (in another parallel to post-9/11 masculinity anxieties) whose burden, like that of orphan superhero, is “to remain alone.”70

Batman’s success, however, is not strictly his own doing; the fortune which allows him the freedom to become such a superlative fellow is the legacy of a series of hard-working, self-made American men. MIT comparative studies professor William Uricchio has argued that the tragedy of the Batman origin story generates “uncritical

67 Spider-Man is an orphan as well, of course, but he is raised by family, one member of which is still very much alive.
69 Ibid., 70-71.
empathy” for the young Bruce Wayne that allows us (as readers, but conceivably also as viewers) to ignore what Uricchio points out is a significant omission from the story-line: the socio-economic conditions of Batman’s Gotham, in which millionaires like the Waynes are complicit, that give rise to the sort of crime Bruce Wayne will dedicate his life to battling. Surely, Uricchio suggests, one would be likely to find some number of “white-collar” criminals in the Wayne boardroom and at parties the Waynes might attend, but none of this sort of crime is ever addressed in the story.71 Furthermore, while we are told that both Bruce and his father Thomas are generous philanthropists, “the narrative effectively trades on trickle-down economics to make a significant difference in the city’s underclass.”72 The emphasis on the philanthropic nature of the Wayne men both justifies their wealth and allows us to uncritically enjoy the abundance and energy it provides us with as readers and viewers.73

This is an important point, for if the Waynes’ generosity is emphasized in the traditional Batman story, it is over-emphasized in Nolan’s films, particularly in *Batman Begins*. During Bruce Wayne’s first exploration of the tunnels underneath Wayne Manor, for example, Alfred off-handedly informs him: “In the Civil War, your great-great-grandfather was involved in the Underground Railroad, secretly transporting freed slaves to the North.” Considering the dubiousness of this non sequitur given the location of the Mason-Dixon Line, its sole purpose seems to be to inform the audience that the Wayne legacy is one of honor in addition to wealth. In the extended flashback which culminates

---

71 We do encounter some corrupt characters in the Wayne boardroom in *Batman Begins*, but I would argue that their presence further justifies Wayne power by contrast.
in the murder of Bruce’s parents, we learn that Thomas Wayne “work[s] at the hospital . . . [and] leave[s] the running of the company to much better men,” by which he apparently means “more interested men,” simultaneously acknowledging his own moral superiority to “normal” businessmen and suggesting that, despite his enormous fortune, money does not interest him at all. We also learn in this same conversation between Bruce and his father that the Waynes are responsible for the construction of the “new, cheap public transportation system” that Thomas and Martha humbly ride on the way to the opera in their tuxedos and evening gown and shiny pearl necklace.

However, while the comic books and graphic novels may draw attention to the attempted theft of this pearl necklace (a flashback in The Dark Knight Returns, for example, includes panels alternating between young Bruce’s screaming face, the murderer’s gun, and the pearl necklace)\(^\text{74}\), it is almost easily overlooked in the 2005 film. The emphasis is instead placed on the ease with which Thomas Wayne hands over his wallet to Joe Chill, the man who subsequently kills him and his wife in cold blood.

Furthermore, the scene manages to be true to Batman’s origin story while leaving it far from clear that the action which resulted in the Waynes’ deaths was Thomas Wayne’s protection of his wife’s property rather than his protection of his wife. In other words, the film has eradicated the last of the Batman narrative’s elements which may result in anything less than the viewer’s “uncritical empathy” with Bruce Wayne. The best people in Gotham, who happen to also be the wealthiest and who, furthermore, have done everything in their power to better those less fortunate than them (including “nearly bankrupt[ing] Wayne Enterprises combating poverty,” according to Alfred), have been murdered, and we are provided with no reason whatever to criticize them for their socio-

economic status. We are in fact rather likely instead to admire them for their honorable and charitable use of their wealth.\footnote{I will later argue that this fact is in part used to justify Batman’s use of force (in what I’m sure Film Quarterly Writer-at-Large and Stanford Professor J.M. Tyree would deem an “oblique but fairly transparent” parallel to post-9/11 America) (32).}

The Batman narrative generally is (like Spider-Man’s) conducive to the filmic exaggeration (and at times the outright reinvention) of its eponymous character as simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary. He achieves his power through ordinary (i.e. economic, legal) means, yet becomes an extraordinary hero by taking advantage of the liberties his economic power affords him. The Batman of Nolan’s films is both “an ordinary man in a cape,” as Batman Begins villain Ra’s al Ghul points out, and a figure of extraordinary power. Evidence of this duality pervades Batman Begins and The Dark Knight, and even Batman sympathizers alternately espouse both views. In The Dark Knight, Gotham’s District Attorney Harvey Dent (future villain Two-Face) defends Batman at a meal with Bruce Wayne (and their shared love interest Rachel Dawes):

“Gotham is proud of an ordinary man standing up for what’s right,” he says, eschewing the notion that Gotham’s support of “a masked vigilante” is unjust or immoral.

Even Alfred defends both positions at different moments in the same film. At one point, he advises Bruce: “Know your limits, Master Wayne.” “Batman has no limits,” Bruce responds. “Well, you do, sir,” Alfred replies, reminding Bruce that behind his mask he is, after all, just an ordinary man. However, Alfred later tells Rachel: “Perhaps both Bruce and Mr. Dent believe that Batman stands for something more important than a terrorist’s whims, Miss Dawes, even if everyone hates him for it. That’s the sacrifice he’s making--to not be a hero. To be something more.” In other words, to be a symbol of extraordinary power.
What exactly is it, then, that makes Batman extraordinary? An exchange between Batman and one of the dozen Batman copycats who appear in the beginning of *The Dark Knight* asks and answers the question of what sets Batman apart. “Don’t let me find you out here again,” Batman growls. “What gives you the right?!” the copycat says, “What’s the difference between you and me?” Batman responds (in what is undoubtedly one of the most memorable displays of Christian Bale’s much-maligned Batman voice): “I’m not wearing hockey pads.”

While it is later explained that Batman’s concern is not personal glory but rather the safety of the copycats, this remark reiterates the point I have attempted to make above: that Batman’s power derives from what his money allows him to buy, wear, and do. However, his remark also alludes to the corporeal difference between Batman and “regular” men: Batman’s muscles are real; the manly line he cuts is not falsely bulked up with padding. At the intersection of these two meanings is the idea that, in a way, Batman has “bought” his hyper-masculine form.

Rather than this being a kind of deflationary explanation delegitimizing Batman’s masculine power, however, the connection actually serves as a justifying mechanism for Bruce Wayne’s status as billionaire playboy (though we know the latter is merely a facade) which renders him more masculine rather than less. The combination of his wealth and bachelorhood (not to mention the character’s legacy of campy homoeroticism) risk marking Bruce Wayne as emasculated, effeminate, and even homosexual. By emphasizing his hyper-masculine physique (as well as his heterosexuality through the invention of filmic love interest Rachel Dawes), the films legitimize Bruce as a masculine hero and “counter-[act] the more feminine aspects of the [bachelor playboy] image . . .
forestalling suspicions that [risk] linking bachelorhood and consumerism (shopping!) with homosexuality.”

As Bukatman puts it, “Our costumed vigilante is perhaps something more of a dandy, a flamboyant, flamboyantly powered, urban male, who, if not for his never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American Way, would probably be ordered to ‘just move it along.’”

Batman’s hyper-masculine body (bought or otherwise) additionally ensures that quite the opposite is the case.

Just as Batman’s wealth and the masculine body it (literally) affords him are what make him an exceptional hero of American capitalism, Batman’s enemies in both films are framed and vilified through their contrasting relationship with money and consumerism. In *Batman Begins*, Batman must save Gotham from The League of Shadows, a group critic J. M. Tyree describes as “a cross between a group of Tibetan (sic) ninjas and an Al Qaeda-like terrorist organization dedicated to destroying a succession of historical empires when they became too ‘decadent,’” (in one of the film’s more heavy-handed allusions to September 11 and counter-terrorism).

R’as al Ghul describes his organization’s plan to destroy Gotham in the following way, in response to Bruce Wayne’s surprise at learning that this is not their first attempt to do so:

> Over the ages our weapons have grown more sophisticated; with Gotham we tried a new one: economics. But, we underestimated certain of Gotham’s citizens, such as your parents. . . . Their deaths galvanized the city into saving itself and Gotham has limped on every since. We are back to finish the job. And this time, no more misguided idealists will get in the way. Like your father, you lack the courage to do all that is necessary. If someone stands in the way of true justice, you simply walk up behind them and stab them in the heart.

---


This speech glorifies the Waynes both in spite of and because of their wealth. It also reinforces the pro-capitalist (and therefore pro-American) narrative of the *Batman* films by vilifying those that would destroy Gotham for its prosperity. In *The Dark Knight*, for example, The Joker (a flamboyant and flamboyantly-dressed character himself) outlines his “favorite things” as he sets an enormous pile of money on fire: “Dynamite, gunpowder, and gasoline,” he says. “You know what they have in common? They’re cheap.”

By reinventing Batman villains as anti-capitalist anarchists (an admittedly odd combination of ideologies given many anarchists’ general proclivity for free-market capitalism), both *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* tacitly (and often explicitly) equate American heroism with American enterprise and economics. The films’ other forces of evil, Falconi and the mob, are corrupt and greedy, but their relationship with money is presented as something equally antithetical (and perhaps even less so) to the honorable capitalism of the Wayne family as the Joker and the League of Shadows. By representing both the “good wealth” of the Waynes and the “bad wealth” of mob boss Falconi, the films seem to suggest that wealth itself is not the problem. The corruption of certain individuals, not the capitalist system itself, is to blame for Gotham’s suffering.

As Uricchio has argued, such justification of the capitalist structure that brought the Waynes their wealth generates the “uncritical empathy” we feel for Bruce Wayne/Batman. However, he is referring to the Batman story in general, and I think the films’ hyper-pro-capitalist message reflects a more topical leaning. Though I think it does render Batman a sort of “ideal,” American dream hero that might simply be expectedly popular during the post-9/11 era of hypernationalism, I would also argue that even this
(hyper-pro-capitalism reflects) the fear that the emasculated, metrosexual, American man has made America weak, feminine, and therefore vulnerable to attack. Just as the hypermasculinizing of Batman’s body reflects the fear that his wealth-derived power marks him as effeminate, so too does the vehement defense of American capitalism in the 

*Batman* films reflect the fear that America’s wealth-derived power marks it as a weak, vulnerable, feminine nation (filled with weak, effeminate, ineffectual men).

Furthermore, I think Tyree is right to point out the “oblique but fairly transparent” parallel between Al Qaeda and R’as al Ghul’s League of Shadows in *Batman Begins*. That such a parallel can be drawn in the first place (and Tyree might brush it off as obvious and “transparent”) reflects an underlying assumption about Al Qaeda’s motivations in the September 11 attacks: namely, that America was singled out for its “decadence.” Recall George Bush’s September 20, 2001 claim that “[Al Qaeda’s] goal is not making money, its goal is remaking the world and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere.”

The defensive implication of this stance is, of course, that America has done nothing wrong and has been unjustly hated for its economic success. The *Batman* films certainly complicate this; Gotham is patently corrupt, yet is ever deserving of salvation. They certainly acknowledge the failings of the city’s bureaucracy, but they handle them by directing blame away from all the expected places: Gotham is not at fault, capitalism and democracy are not at fault, and Batman is certainly not at fault. As Alfred tells Bruce in *The Dark Knight*, “Some men just want to watch the world burn.” Framing the enemies of Gotham (and America) as alternately jealous of the city’s (and country’s)

---

wealth and simply irrational and destructive, quietly directs the issue of such “decadence” away from questions of weakness and effeminacy. “The enemy is irrational,” the films seem to say, “Of course America and Batman can be both rich and masculine. Who can say why this has happened to us?”

Journalist and blogger Rahul Mahajan has pointed to George W. Bush’s response to the “Why do they hate us?” question in his first address to the nation following the September 11 attacks. He writes:

> For weeks after the attack, the question ‘Why do they hate us?’ reverberated through the country . . . . George W. Bush, in this as in all else, got people on the wrong track in his first speech to the nation-- “America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.” . . . It was a nice comfortable idea. Throughout the 1970s and early 80s, when it was clear to Americans that most of the world was “anti-American,” it was generally easier to believe that the reason must be envy of Americans’ wealth, freedom, and overall success than to consider questions of America’s role in the world.  

The refusal to ask these questions meant America found itself utterly shocked by the attacks of September 11, which, Faludi suggests “broke the dead bolt on our protective myth, the illusion that we are masters of our own security, that our might makes our homeland impregnable, that our families are safe in the bower of their communities and our women and children safe in the arms of their men.” I would argue that America has, once again, buried its head in the sand, “decid[ing] to fortify further their ‘sphere,’” rather than “risk[ing] stepping out of it”

strength for fear of finding our myth false, our nation soft and wealthy, and our men weak. So, in their enterprise of projecting the opposite to be true, the *Batman* films, like the *Spider-Man* films, set about glorifying the ordinary man, emphasizing that Gotham’s masculine strength pervades all levels of society.

The first example of ordinary bravery occurs at the party Bruce Wayne holds for Harvey Dent, following the arrival of the Joker and his hooligans. “I only have one question: where is Harvey Dent?” he asks. A distinguished older gentleman steps into his path. “We’re not intimidated by thugs” he says. The Joker grabs the man and holds a knife threateningly to the man’s face before Rachel Dawes steps forward and demands he stop. This display of common bravery by an obviously wealthy man is representative of the particularly classed nature of “goodness” in these films, but it is also further evidence of Uricchio’s and my point that these films mask the Waynes’ complicity in the suffering that Batman combats.

However, by far the most demonstrative example of the goodness and bravery of everyday Gothamites occurs when the Joker takes remote control of two ferries, one full of “innocent civilians” and one filled with hundreds of Gotham’s prisoners. He informs each group that it possesses the detonator to a bomb on the other, but that if neither makes the decision to destroy the other within a set amount of time, he will blow up both. If, however, one decides to blow up the other, the Joker will let that boat’s passengers live.

Panicked debate ensues on both ferries, but in the end neither group pushes the button, demonstrating the falsity of the Joker’s claim to Batman that “their morals, their

---

code . . . it’s all a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. . . . When the chips are down, these civilized people, they’ll eat each other.” These morals are upheld even on the prisoners’ ferry. As the warden stands by, unsure of what to do with the detonator, a lone man approaches him. “Give it to me,” he says, “and I’ll do what you should have done ten minutes ago.” He grabs the remote and tosses it out a window into the river.

The allotted time passes, but by this point Batman has tracked down the Joker and engaged him in a violent struggle over the detonator to both bombs. “This city just showed you it’s full of people ready to believe in good,” Batman tells him after subduing him. Like Spider-Man’s New Yorkers, Gotham’s citizens prove that they are willing to stand up for good, even when their lives are at stake. That even Gotham’s ordinary criminals will do so as well reflects the idea that even the city’s meanest criminals are more honorable and good than the terrorist that threatens them. As Tyree points out, in this scene, “common decency prevails against the odds and fellow feeling overcomes terror.”

However, I think the outcome of this situation (and its accompanying implications about ordinary people in life-threatening circumstances) in fact reflects a deep-seated fear that the opposite would occur: that ordinary citizens would be too weak-willed and too lacking in masculine fortitude to stand up to such terrorism. It is possible, then, that our speculation about and glorification of the men Flight 93 even represents a darker, almost unspeakable fear: that passengers on the other flights failed to overtake their hijackers--or worse, that they didn’t even try. Perhaps that is what makes this scene so disconcerting, despite its relatively happy conclusion; perhaps it reflects that our over-earnest

---

glorification of ordinary men and their heroism is based not on its presence in our society but its absence.
**Batman and the Protection Narrative**

As I mentioned earlier, the theme of justice versus revenge appears in Nolan’s *Batman* films. The tension between the two (a hallmark theme of the Batman narrative generally) and the subsequent victory of justice over revenge are used to justify Batman’s violent actions. As in *Spider-Man 3*, this tension is gendered, but rather than eschewing revenge based on its inconsistency with an explicit portrait of fifties masculinity, the *Batman* films depict their masculine hero’s transformation from revenge-driven to justice-driven, a change necessitated by Gotham’s weak and vulnerable public.

The film must first justify justice as motivation for violent action to viewers. Rachel and Alfred are the mouthpieces of this stance in the films. Rachel is the first to explicitly address the tension between justice and revenge in *Batman Begins* as she and Bruce leave the Gotham courthouse following the murder of Joe Chill (the Waynes’ murderer) by one of mob boss Falcone’s people. Bruce remarks that perhaps he ought to thank Falcone, as his parents deserve justice. “You’re not talking about justice,” she says, “you’re talking about revenge.” “Sometimes,” he replies, “they’re the same.” Rachel disagrees: “Justice is about harmony, revenge is about making yourself feel better. That’s why we have an impartial system. You care about justice? Look beyond your own pain, Bruce.” She goes on to describe to him the living horrors of the depression, turning down an alley filled with proof that this is the case. Falconi has, she declares, “destroyed everything that [the late Waynes] stood for.”

This brief scene reveals to Batman (and the viewer) the weakness of a Gotham City in dire need of protection. It also sets up a binary association between revenge/the personal and justice/community, a theme present in *Spider-Man 3* as well. There is, for
Rachel (and later for Bruce⁸⁷), no question as to whether one has a greater duty to act out of selfishness (via revenge) or out of concern for the greater good (via justice). In creating this association, furthermore, the film introduces a protection narrative in which a masculine hero must protect a vulnerable public. Unlike a revenge narrative, which does not require a public to be protected in the first place, the protection narrative creates a space in which a masculine hero can take on his role as protector. The film justifies this move by condemning Bruce’s desire for revenge as selfish.

Alfred, as I have said, operates as the other voice of this denunciation. In *Batman Begins*, following an incident involving reckless driving during a chase scene in which Bruce is trying to rush a poisoned Rachel to safety as quickly as possible, Alfred says: “[What you’re doing] can’t be personal, or you’re just a vigilante.” This statement reinforces the above-mentioned binary and reflects the larger distinction between justice and revenge present in the Batman story. However, it simultaneously reinforces Batman’s role as protector (of the weak and feminine) by tacitly moving away from the claim that justice is justified but revenge is not (an idea which viewers and characters on-screen accept as correct) to the claim that the acting in the interest of the public is justified but acting in the interest of the personal is not (an idea we might be less willing to accept). Indeed, Bruce seems quite justified in this action; the viewer remains not entirely convinced that he has done something wrong in rushing Rachel to safety.

Yet, as I have suggested, we feel Batman is justified in trying to save Rachel when she is poisoned, despite the “selfish” nature of such an act. We feel especially torn, in fact, when he fails to save her life in *The Dark Knight*, when he is forced to choose

---

⁸⁷ Bruce, as the film concludes, acknowledges the value of this distinction. “I was a coward with a gun. Justice is about more than revenge,” he tells Rachel.
between rescuing her and rescuing Gotham “White Knight” Harvey Dent. The Joker gives him the two addresses where they are being held, tied to bombs, but when Batman arrives at Rachel’s location, he discovers Harvey there instead. Batman is punished by the Joker for his selfish choice, as Rachel is killed and Harvey Dent becomes Two-Face. However, though the narrative seemingly condemns his “selfish” behavior, the viewer does not.

These two scenes exemplify the way the films use the justice/revenge conflict to mask the highly gendered nature of the protection narrative it overlies. In her examination of recent superhero narratives, Stabile describes the popularity of “quintessential protection scenarios that indulge in fantasies about the heroes’ unlimited ability to protect a silent and largely feminized humanity from that which threatens it.” The Batman films conform with this narrative in the above example and in a number of others, including when Batman saves Rachel and a small boy from the Scarecrow and the terror gas he attempts to spread over Gotham in Batman Begins, as well as when he saves her from plunging to her death in The Dark Knight. Coupled with Batman’s hypermasculinity in the films, such examples demonstrate the tacit equation of femininity with vulnerability in the protection narrative and assign to their masculine hero the role of protecting this feminized community in the name of justice. Indeed, “the affective pull of vulnerability” which Stabile has pointed out “is particularly heightened in the [superhero] narratives that have emerged after September 11 [and] is used as the grounds for the protector’s violence and to legitimize their acts of torture and extreme violence.”

---

89 Ibid.
Both sorts of justification (to uphold justice as well as to protect a vulnerable public) are necessary for post-9/11 American viewers for reasons primarily related to the US’s subsequent invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. Both, I would argue, have been used to justify American violence in these countries. For, on the one hand, it would hardly sit well with most Americans to declare revenge war on a country not directly responsible for the initial wrongdoing. Framing such violence as a war on an abstract concept which is for the good of the world rather than motivated by personal (i.e., national) vendetta, however, America and its leaders can sleep peacefully at night, having convinced themselves that such actions are heroic rather than self-interested.90 And, as Stabile notes, “the Bush Administration used the Taliban’s attacks on women to bolster its case for invading Afghanistan.”91

While no one is quick to admit to the latter claim, George W. Bush’s speech on September 20, 2001 clearly reflects the former. In it, he said: “This is not . . . just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.”92 In framing the “war on terror” in this way, he mirrors the message of justification for violent action I have argued is present in Nolan’s Batman films, and in doing so placing America in the role of (hypermasculine) hero who acts violently to protect the greater good. In doing so, he proves that wealth does not weaken, and that economic power need not be equated with emasculation.

90 This is not to say that either American citizens or the American media have ever abandoned the element of personal/national vendetta when responding to September 11, but rather that the primary spin on America’s subsequent actions was the “War on Terror.”
91 Carol A. Stabile, “‘Sweetheart, This Ain’t Gender Studies’: Sexism and Superheroes,” Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies 6.1 (March 2009): 89.
However, as in the *Batman* films, such rhetoric hides the protection narrative that lies beneath it, in which men protect and women are vulnerable. This narrative, born out of a fear about the lack of masculine fervor in American men, pervades all the films I have discussed here, and, as Stabile points out, is “a singularly disturbing and reactionary failure of the imagination.”

---

Looking Forward

The popularity of superheroes is unlikely to ever dissipate completely, and the recent boom of superhero films shows no sign of slowing anytime soon. However, as the events of September 11 recede from popular memory, perhaps we will find that we no longer need to constantly revisit our own trauma through the narratives of strictly masculine superheroes saving women and feminized publics from a never-ending barrage of threats. The films I have examined reflect our nation’s anxieties about a weakened masculine public blamed for leaving the country vulnerable to attack, and they reveal the way in which it has responded through appeals to traditional, fifties-era norms of masculinity and femininity, in which the manly everyman demonstrates extraordinary heroism to protect helpless women and a vulnerable public.

The appeal of classic superheroes from decades past may never fade, but we can hope that in their future, filmic iterations, we might begin to see the retirement of the protection narrative both on film and in society, even in the face of threat, and to look to new, more empowering heroes for both men and women which are not bound to the oppressive stereotypes of an era lost since passed.
Works Consulted


