# A Superman For Our Time
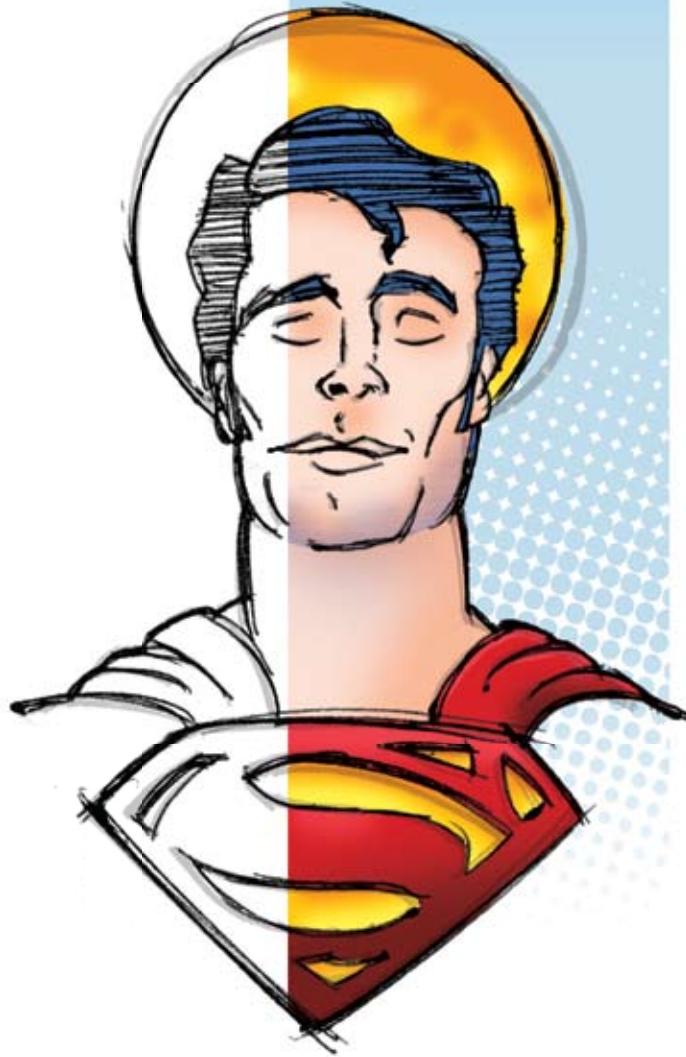
## How the *Man of Steel* Tries to Make Superman Relevant Again – And Why It Succeeds

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TAYLOR.2013

***The world's most recognizable super-hero has also proven to be the most difficult for filmmakers to deal with.***

While the 2000s have been a Golden Age for superhero films, with the blockbuster successes of Marvel's *Spider-Man* (2002-2007), *X-Men* (2000-2011), and *Avengers* (2012) franchises, and Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005-2012), a plethora of screenwriters, directors, and producers have repeatedly been stymied by how to achieve the same level of box office success and appeal to comic book devotees and mainstream audiences in bringing a proper adaptation of Superman to the big screen. One of the key elements of a successful superhero film, similar to all genre films, is its timeliness. A genre film, contained by what Leo Braudy calls its "conventions of connection" (435), limits itself to a certain set of archetypal characters and plots in order to function as a symbolic and relevant discourse on a limited set of philosophical and social problems. However, whereas other superhero franchises have melded their fantastic characters with some degree of social relevance, Superman has, for over a decade now, been impervious to this same kind of topical reinterpretation. Most noteworthy is the critical and commercial failure of director Bryan Singer's 2006 *Superman Returns*.

Arguably, this conundrum has been solved with the release of the David S. Goyer-penned, Zack Snyder-directed *Man of Steel* (2013). Making Superman germane again was accomplished by repurposing the traditional storylines, characters, and themes from the comic books for a new generation of audiences in order to comment on the times and the most significant cultural pressure points of 2013. The film did this through a combination of religious and political subtext addressing the American national mood and self-image, along with a stylized, deconstructive narrative format. The end result was the fifth highest-grossing film of 2013, with a $662 million worldwide box office intake ("Box Office Mojo"), and controversy that, as of this writing, continues to inspire debate in the Superman fan community.

The difficulty of adapting Superman for the past two decades has proven paradoxical. On the one hand, he perfectly fulfills the function of the comic art form, or the generic conventions of connection, to act as what Angela Ndalianis identifies as a "modern day mythology" (3). Comic book superheroes, according to Ndalianis, are the modern world's demigods and heroes, akin to Hercules, Achilles, or Odysseus. Just like these classical heroes, the superhero "is a concrete manifestation of an abstract concept that speaks of the struggle of civilization to survive and maintain order in a world that threatens to be overcome with chaos" (3). Of these larger-than-life heroes in the modern comic book pantheon, Superman has consistently been critically considered to embody the most mythic resonance. As Larry Tye argues, no one "has a more instinctual sense than Superman of right and wrong. […] He is an archetype of mankind at its pinnacle. Like John Wayne, he sweeps in to solve our problems […] Like Jesus Christ, he descended from the heavens to help us discover our humanity" (xiii). "Superman is so indefatigable a product of the human imagination," adds Grant Morrison, as he is "such a perfectly designed emblem of our brightest, kindest, wisest, toughest, selves" (xv). However, this perfection, writes Lawrence Watt-Evans, "is part of what makes him boring sometimes, or at least hard to write good stories about; he's too powerful, too perfect" (qtd. in Yeffeth, 1). He is also not a character audiences can identify with, given his larger than life perfection, and not a character they even want to try and identify with. As Jerald Podair argues, "Superman predates the Cold War, but he really is a Cold War figure, because he fights evil without shadings and without nuance. Once the idea of evil becomes more complicated [...] that's a problem. He's too black and white in a morally gray environment" (qtd. in Leopold). As Zack Snyder explains, a reimagined Superman must to be a character audiences could picture themselves as, "rather than this kind of big blue boy scout up on a throne" (qtd. in Vary).

Since 2005, the angry, obsessive, and pessimistic Batman of Christopher Nolan's trilogy has trumped the optimistic and ever-virtuous Superman in terms of cinematic popularity, speaking to the jaded nature of contemporary audiences. Lisa Purse puts this issue into a larger post-9/11 context, noting that controversial initiatives like the war on terror, the Patriot Act, and the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, have been reflected in increasingly morally complex, cynical action heroes (152). External socio-political concerns still need to be fought and kept at bay but, as far as superhero fans are concerned, the job must be done by a hero who feels accessibly mortal, with appropriate fears, neuroses, failures, and shortcomings.

These inherent problems with Superman, however, are nothing new for comic book writers. National Comics (now DC Comics) editor Carmine Infantino explained in a 1970 *Wall Street Journal* interview that the key to maintaining Superman's relevance was in balancing his heroic perfection and his isolation and outsider status as an alien: "Superman was created in the Depression as an icon, a Nietzsche superman. […] At that time, people needed a perfect being. But now they want someone they can relate to" (qtd. in Berger

146). Moreover, Superman was conceived as a rugged individualist, a self-sufficient man for a time when strength and unyielding willpower were the ideals of masculinity. Such a model of the perfect man has also become outdated and disdained by many contemporary audiences. Essays by cultural commentators Frank Rich and James Wolcott underlined this point when analyzing the DC Comics stunt of killing Superman in 1992, both concurring that the character had to die because he was an emblem of a bygone era. To Wolcott, Superman is a symbol of outdated, pre-feminist machismo (134), while Rich sees the superhero as a relic of Cold War-era conservative militarism (qtd. in Wolcott, 130).

Even the very thematic core of *Superman Returns* is articulated in an article Lois Lane (Kate Bosworth) writes, entitled "Why the World Doesn't Need Superman." Throughout the film, Superman saves countless lives from large-scale destruction, fights and nearly dies to prove that he really is worth having around, mirroring Neal King's analysis of action heroes needing to absorb punishment in order to reaffirm their masculinity (194). As Clare O'Farrell asserts, "[t]his new millennium hero lives in a fortress of solitary and alienated hypermasculinity, bleakly holding on to lost visions of Empire and a lonely sense of his duty to save the world." Nevertheless, even this attempt at timely relevance was not enough to make the film an unqualified hit in 2006. While Warner Bros. executives speculated that the film lacked enough action (Tye 287), critics charged that the film really lacked timeliness. Some, for example, took issue with star Brandon Routh. New Yorker critic Anthony Lane wrote that Routh "offers not so much his personal interpretation of Superman as his best impersonation of Christopher Reeve playing Superman." "Fidelity is one thing," echoed *Las Vegas Weekly* critic Mike D'Angelo, "slavish imitation another." In looking and sounding so much like the Christopher Reeve Superman films, from Routh's uncanny resemblance to a



young Reeve to the use of the same John Williams score, *Superman Returns* was received less as a timely, twenty-first-century updating of the Superman mythology than as a relic from the past.

The disappointing box-office performance of *Superman Returns*, however, signaled that even such a nominal attempt at making a Superman film more introspective as intimating at crises in the modern definition of masculinity was insufficient to reaffirm and sustain the character's appeal. The most logical approach for Warner Bros. studio was to hire a creative team that had already deconstructed and darkened superheroes before. David S. Goyer, who had co-scripted *Batman Begins* (2005) with Christopher Nolan, conceived a new Superman story, helmed by Zack Snyder, the director of *Watchmen* (2009). Snyder's involvement in the project proved poignant, given that *Watchmen* was the adaptation of the 1980s comic book series from writer Alan Moore that endeavored to deconstruct and critique the very concept of the superhero – reinforcing this as the aim of *Man of Steel*.

*Man of Steel*'s committed attempt at a timely reboot begins with its nonlinear storytelling, recalling *Batman Begins* in its dissimilarity from the traditional cause-and-effect superhero origin story. Such an approach offers appeal even to a generation saturated with Tarantino-inspired hip genre deconstructions, as it acknowledges that Superman's origin is perhaps the most well-known superhero story in the world, rather than forcing audiences to wait through yet another film to find out what becomes of the infant who arrives on Earth from the planet Krypton. What happens to him as an adult and why a twenty-first century audience should care about and identify with a nearly omnipotent and invulnerable demigod are the more substantial challenges in determining the film's relevance.

*Man of Steel* approaches the issue by having its main character ask those very same questions of relevance, grappling with his own uncertainties in the world. The very title of the film is notable, in that it does not call

its protagonist (Henry Cavill) "Superman." The prefix "super" would hint at the sort of self-assuredness that has become unpopular in American culture. Throughout the course of the film, the hero is called "Superman" only once (and it functions as a joke), instead being referred to as "Clark," "Kal-El," "Kal," or "the alien" for most of the story. This hero must define his own identity, learn and accept who he is before he can presume to take on the role of the world's saviour. This inarticulate self-doubt already serves to make the most powerful man on Earth approachable.

Much of *Man of Steel*'s storyline becomes this exercise in self-definition. As Clark attempts to determine his role in the world, he wanders across the country, taking various odd jobs and answering an instinctive call to do the right thing, help people, and save lives.[1] Throughout Clark's wanderings, the film highlights the various religious, philosophical, and political interpretations scholars have attempted to graft onto Superman comics. Perhaps more pointedly than any other filmic or television interpretation, *Man of Steel* draws strong religious parallels to its hero; this is appropriate, as the analytical literature on Superman is rife with highlights of Judeo-Christian imagery. From Superman's mission on Earth (Kozloff 78) to his outsider status and dual identity (Cohen 25), the Christ allegory of a supernatural infant growing up to be the savior of the world is, as Anton Karl Kozlovic identifies, "a protracted analogue of the Jesus story" (4). Others still point out that Superman's creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, children of Jewish immigrants and witnesses to anti-Semitic bigotry, likely crafted the character's origin story as an allegory of Moses, the European pogroms and the Jewish diaspora, as well as the immigrant experience (Tye 65-67). In *Man of Steel*, Clark, unlike previous cinematic incarnations of the character, is seen visiting a church. Recalling Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion, Clark seeks advice from a priest about the course of action to take when Kryptonian villain General Zod (Michael Shannon) demands that he sacrifice himself or condemn Earth to annihilation. Notably, this demand for self-sacrifice takes place when Clark is thirty-three-years-old, just like Jesus at the time of his crucifixion. Furthermore, like Jesus, Clark would rather not face Zod's punishment, yet is resigned to do what needs to be done to save the people of the world.

1. Interestingly, this wandering superhero plot device is reminiscent of the 1977-1982 *Incredible Hulk* television series where a superpowered David Banner wanders from town to town, his green alter ego unleashing justice when others are in need of a hero. The Hulk's and Superman's conditions are not only very different – Banner sees the Hulk as an affliction he needs to cure himself of, while Clark's superpowers comprise his innate, unchangeable identity – but Kryptonian powers far surpass those of Banner's, and Clark's purpose on Earth is harder to determine.

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Snyder never shied away from explicitly admitting that they wanted to acknowledge the religious symbolism imbedded in the Superman mythology, stating "I just felt like you could be cute with it and pretend like it doesn't exist, but what that does is hold back the mythology of Superman" (qtd. in Lang). The connection between *Man of Steel*'s Superman and Christianity was thus strongly exploited in the film's marketing campaign. To make sure the film reached as broad an audience as possible, including the burgeoning Christian-entertainment market, Warner Bros. hired the Christian-oriented Grace Hill Media publicity firm to aid in its marketing efforts. Part of the Grace Hill campaign included special advanced screenings for churches and specialized cuts of trailers where the film's religious subtext was emphasized (Lang).

This focus on religion is not to say that *Man of Steel* does not also retain the sort of open-text ambiguity about religion that some analysts have also found in the comic books. If anything, the film recalls mythologist Joseph Campbell's 1988 study of the worldwide monomyth, or how all of the world's major religious figures and mythical heroes essentially resemble each other and their stories are all about the same journey to redeem the world. As Ndalianis writes, "the hero transcends culture, religion, race, gender, age, and speaks without discretion, to all humanity" (2). Furthermore, as Tye argues, the Superman mythology had always allowed for a very broad range of belief-based interpretations (68), and so does *Man of Steel*. Aside from Jewish and Christian interpretations, some Muslims, according to Tye, have seen a representation of God's messenger in Superman, a metaphor for Muhammad. For the Buddhists, explains former Superman comic-book-writer Alvin Schwartz, Superman is the Man of Zen who "live(s) entirely in the now […] He's totally fixed on a single point. His one defining act [is] his rescue mission (69). Superman's appeal is not restricted to religious audiences, however, with the potential, as Tye discusses, for agnostics and atheists to equally recognize the character as a secular messiah (71-72). This is evidenced in the way the film, despite its overt Judeo-Christian symbolism, still allows for a humanistic alternative interpretation. From this point of view, the Superman of *Man of Steel* still does not require anyone to worship him. He does not have a set of commandments and dictates no Gospel of Superman.

The Superhero Film / Articles    **23**

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Although his father, Jor-El (Russell Crowe), symbolically "lives" after death as an artificial intelligence hologram and sets Kal upon a destiny to become a superpowered savior of the Earth, Jor-El is certainly not a deity.

Moreover, the otherworldly realm that is Superman's home planet in *Man of Steel* bears no resemblance to any kind of an afterlife from any religion. In fact, this film's version of Krypton is conspicuously the diametric opposite of the white, ethereal, heaven-like vision that has been the dominant conception of Superman's home world since director Richard Donner's *Superman: The Movie* (1978). The Krypton of *Man of Steel* is a physical, deeply flawed environment, plagued by internal strife unseen in the previous Superman films. Kryptonian society here is torn apart by factional violence, political intrigue, and revolution. Its leadership is depicted as short-sighted and often incompetent. Additionally, in a pivotal change from past depictions, this Krypton functions as a sort of technocratic dictatorship. People are genetically engineered for various roles (scientist, soldier, worker) and allowed no free will to determine the course of their lives. Mirroring contemporary socio-cultural fears of environmental degradation and unsustainable consumption, Kryptonians bring about their destruction through the mismanagement of their resources. Their far-flung galactic empire, more than reminiscent of that of the Romans, eventually collapses because of its sheer spread.

This overextension of empire, as a matter of fact, can equally be interpreted as a parallel to the contemporary United States with its costly foreign commitments to wars in the Middle East. The Kryptonians expand their colonies across the galaxy to ensure the survival of their race, much as the United States claimed to be fighting terrorist enemies threatening its existence, yet this very colonial expansion doomed Krypton to collapse. Once again, this begs comparison to America's involvement in the wars in the Middle East – significant, given *Man of Steel* being the first Superman film where the character has strong ties to the military, which is depicted as largely wrongheaded and misguided, save for the more sympathetic Colonel Hardy (Christopher Meloni). The campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq earned the U.S. immense casualties and inspired animosity among a host of nations (Mason 2). Ultimately, the Krypton of *Man of Steel* functions more as a mirror of all the mistakes modern human societies can make than a heaven-like ideal.

Nevertheless, *Man of Steel*'s aggressively overt – but not unambiguous – religious symbolism failed to inspire support as much as controversy. While the film received some fan backlash for its various alterations of the comic book cannon – the most egregious, some thought, was having Lois Lane (Amy Adams) discover Clark's superhero identity – it was nothing compared to the film's condemnation for mixing religion with violence. The levels of destruction in the film offended many of the target-marketed American clergy. When it came to the climactic killing of General Zod, however, the religious viewers were joined in their outrage by the comic book purists, equally offended by the film's repudiation of the no-killing maxim of the comics. Nonetheless, it can be argued that even this bit of controversy makes *Man of Steel* – although no doubt inadvertently – relevant for its times, particularly for American audiences. In a time of almost unprecedentedly frequent religious debates in American politics and culture, from legislation over abortion to the public funding of contraception, same-sex marriage and the battles over the teaching of evolution and creationism in high schools, that a Superman film should draw heat for its religious subtext is evidence that it speaks to the zeitgeist.

*Man of Steel* ultimately finds its even more pointed and political relevance when it comes to Superman's battles against evil. This Superman is the most conflicted incarnation of the character, repeatedly torn between his instinct for action and his fear of the unforeseen consequences of his actions. In fact, it is ironic that this film ignited controversy over its violence when this is the only cinematic Superman depicted as reluctant to act – or act publicly – because he fears that his well-intended attempts at heroism might dangerously backfire. If one thing has always remained the same about Superman over the character's seventy-five-year career in comic books, TV shows, cartoons, and movies, it has been the way he is the 'ultimate man of action'. As Alvin Schwartz wrote, Superman is always in the moment, he always acts (204). When Superman had been criticized in the past, he had been accused of being an agent of brute, unthinking, violent passion. As Marshall McLuhan argues:

> The attitudes of Superman to current social problems, likewise reflect the strong-arm totalitarian methods of the immature and barbaric mind [...] Any appraisal of the political tendencies of 'Superman' [...] would have to include an

admission that today the dreams of youths and adults alike seem to embody a mounting impatience with the laborious process of civilized life and a restless eagerness to embrace violent solutions. (98)

When psychiatrist Frederick Wertham crusaded against comic books in the 1950s with his book *Seduction of the Innocent*, he singled Superman out as the most pernicious threat to young readers. Wertham even outlined an affliction he called the "Superman Syndrome," a mental state where comic-book-readers are supposedly inspired to derive sadistic pleasure out of doling out violent punishment to others. Wertham's style of condemning media violence for its direct effects – while criticized itself for being little more than a correlational relationship and not an indisputable causal link (Fowles 17) – remains very much a part of the American cultural dialogue, particularly in regards to violence depicted as without consequence (Sternheimer 101-114). Within such an environment, *Man of Steel*'s offering the first Superman who is reluctant to resort to violence feels particularly apt.

Moreover, Superman's self-doubt also carries political poignancy in *Man of Steel*. Making the hero relevant to a 2013 audience would entail reaffirming Superman as an embodiment of American culture and the current American psyche. This is necessary because, as much as the film might be aimed at an international audience as an American one, Superman is still, in the words of Tom deHaven "an avatar of American-ness" – a perception deHaven sees mirrored by global audiences (7). Correspondingly, *Man of Steel* serves as a commentary on the state of American power in 2013. Therefore, Superman's hesitation in instinctively knowing what evil looks like, recognizing enemies, and reluctance to engage in violent confrontation mirrors contemporary political concerns for the United States. Just like Clark wandering the back roads anonymously, trying to find himself, so the United States is attempting to define itself and its mission in the world (Holsti 169).

*Man of Steel* presents not merely a post-9/11 hero, but a post-Afghanistan and post-Iraq Superman. The hero of this film represents a country that had already rushed into battle, and the film, correspondingly, addresses the perceived need for a direct, uncomplicated reaction to a threat. This echoes the fact that, barely a month after the attacks of 9/11, eight out ten Americans supported the Invasion of Afghanistan as punitive action against Al-Qaeda (Moore). Similarly, in 2003, seventy nine percent of Americans were in favor of invading Iraq, their support for the war founded in the fear of Saddam Hussein's

purported weapons of mass destruction (Pew Research Center). The United States, just like in the storyline of a simplistic comic book or action film, defined reality in blacks and whites, epitomized by President George W. Bush's declaration to Congress on September 20th, 2001 that, "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists." Within this cultural environment, the overall superhero genre itself has thrived, both as a theater of compensatory heroics and comfort for a culture that had been attacked. Interrogating the comfort of superheroes in a post-9/11 world, Thomas Pollard asserts heroes "represent stability and order in an increasingly chaotic and dangerous environment" (206). Similarly, Mark DiPaolo argues that post-9/11 superhero narratives function to both reassure audiences and inspire heroics along the lines of the heroism shown by first responders as well as socio-political action and activism. However, according to DiPaolo, these films often carry on a political dialogue about the best way to reach these heroic objectives from left-wing and right-wing perspectives equally, either seeking reconciliation and peace or retribution and violent action (20).

*Man of Steel*'s contribution to this cinema is unique because its hero embodies both impulses. The foremost theme of the film is the impulse to justifiable action, tempered by the fear of unforeseen, self-destructive consequences. This is appropriate given 2013 United States audiences living with the aftermath of action and wars, but this time with an ever-growing majority of the American public convinced that both of those wars had been ill-conceived and poorly executed. Addressing such sentiments, in *Man of Steel*, Superman is quick to recognize evil. He, as always, instinctively knows right from wrong. From his childhood into his wandering adulthood, he repeatedly crosses paths with petty bullies, and, imbued with a seemingly innate moralism, firmly understands such people as needing some measure of punishment. Despite this, his Earth father, Jonathan Kent (Kevin Costner)'s diatribes regarding the negative repercussions



of rushing into battle have firmly impacted Clark. From the moment Clark is conscious of his difference from Earth children, his superhuman powers, he is warned that using those powers could lead to unpredictable problems. Jonathan is even willing to go to his death to make the case for restraint, allowing himself to be swept up by a tornado, his last action being to prevent Clark from using his powers to intervene, and thereby exposing himself. The Clark who wants to act is a remnant of the classic version of Superman, the traditions of the comic books, a pre-9/11 America, or an America in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks and craving the reassurance of one-dimensional comic books and superhero films. The Jonathan-Kent-restrained Clark, however, becomes symbolic of America in 2013, of a Superman truly reimagined and representative of a country grappling with a way to redefine itself.

When faced with the genocidal General Zod, Clark is once again guided by his innate, instinctive moralism. Even before Zod demonstrates his true capacity for violence, Clark explains to the priest in the church that he just feels it in his gut that the Kryptonian cannot be trusted. However, Clark soon comes to realize that Zod – a product of Kryptonian genetic engineering, bred to be an uncompromising soldier and nothing else - does not exist in any sort of a moral grey zone. When he first calls upon Clark to surrender, Zod also warns that if Clark does not, he will "watch this world suffer the consequences." What the consequences will be are made obvious in the virtual-reality/dream sequence of Earth being swamped by an ocean of human skulls immediately after Clark does surrender. Zod has come to Earth to replenish the Kryptonian race by exterminating all humans. He cannot be negotiated or bargained with. The genetic engineering that created him and his crew essentially built them as psychopaths. As Zod's second in command, Faora-Ul (Antje Traue) taunts Clark, "The fact that you possess a sense of morality and we do not gives us an evolutionary advantage. And if history has proven one thing, it is that evolution always wins." When facing superpowered enemies with no sense of morality, a conscience, or empathy, no option but a war seems realistic. But confrontation with these villains ultimately exacts an enormous toll on both Superman and the city of Metropolis.

The cost and aftermath of the confrontation is again crucial to a reimagined Superman's cultural and political relevance, and the issue sparked more of the film's controversy. While the big showdown in the middle of the city is a standard trope of superhero films, the climax of *Man of Steel* heralds the genre's most widespread and cataclysmic destruction yet. Unlike in other superhero/

supervillain fights, here, innocents, including Daily Planet newspaper editor Perry White (Laurence Fishburne) get caught in the middle of the melee, and even Superman is unable to save them all. However, this also yielded the film's most ironic bit of controversy. Just as the religious audience was offended by an overtly Christlike superhero being as violent as this Superman, die-hard comic-book-fans were angered by Superman's sudden shortcomings - his inability to stop all the collateral damage. Superman, the character that had lost his hipness and relevance for these fans, was equally deemed unacceptable for not being super enough. The fan dissatisfaction with a fallible Superman is voiced most pointedly by screenwriter Max Landis in his YouTube diatribe, "Regarding Clark." Landis explains that Superman inherently recognizes his godlike powers must be used for good, rather than needing to suffer tragedies like Batman or Spider-Man to figure out that superpowers should be used to help society. As Landis states, "[Superman's] power absolves him from weakness, fear, and greed and hate and all of the weaknesses that stem from human insecurity." Landis chastises *Man of Steel* because Superman is unable to save innocent people from getting caught in the proverbial crossfire during his battle with Zod, undercutting the character's divine-heroism.

This fan outcry reached its crescendo over Superman's climactic and uncharacteristic killing of Zod. Moments before Zod is able to vaporize four bystanders with his heat-vision, Superman finds no other way of stopping him than snapping his neck, and thereby murdering the only other remaining survivor of Krypton. This, however, also violates Superman's comic tradition of never resorting to the taking of life. For Superman purists, the scene diminished their hero, changing the nature of a character Landis also characterized as a God. Superman's ultimate function, according to this perspective, is not merely to overpower his opponents, since he never has any opponents that are stronger than he is, but instead to embody an ideal for humans to emulate. Zod's killing, however, challenged or eliminated the concept of such an ideal. When a godlike being like Superman kills, it implies that moving beyond violence is something mere humans will certainly never be capable of. Consequently, if Superman's internal conflict throughout the film is emblematic of America's struggle to position itself along the spectrum ranging from restraint to violence, then the killing of Zod – no matter how necessary it may seem at the moment – suggests that restraint and peace will always be unreachable goals. Human beings, or entire nations, Superman's act of murder implies, can never evolve to a point of nonviolence – a highly disconcerting,

if not depressing, subtext for audiences of a superhero blockbuster.

These failures and shortcomings, however, concretize Superman's renewed relevance within the film – as a socio-political cipher. No matter his good intentions, even Superman cannot fight evil and do it in an antiseptic, inconsequential romp. Unlike in 1978's *Superman*, this man of steel cannot turn back the planet and reset time if an adventure does not turn out to his liking. This new Superman has profound limitations, but not because he doubts the relevance of masculinity in the way the hero of *Superman Returns* did. In *Man of Steel*, chaos and disorder are still present, just as always in superhero films, and Superman, like always, steps up to fight the chaos threatening to sweep the world. But just like the war-weary culture that repurposed him, Superman is now much more conscious of the true nature and global impact of a war.

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