

Saying No to Hetero-Masculinity

The Villain in the Superhero Film

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The central fascination in the superhero film is the transforming body, whether of hero or villain. Much attention is given to the body's discovery of its own transformation, which explains why superhero films are even more obsessed with origin stories than the comics themselves.

-Scott Bukatman, "Why I Hate Superhero Movies" (121)

While Scott Bukatman argues that both the hero and the villain's transforming bodies entrance the film audience, a curious dichotomy has arisen between popular culture and critical discourse.

In popular culture, the villain seems to prevail more than the hero. As Heath Ledger's performance as the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) underscores, the villain can quickly become the focus of popular attention. Indeed, Ledger's is still the only performance in the superhero film genre to have garnered an Academy Award. In critical analyses, however, the hero, replete with many neuroses and conflicted desires, has tended to draw more attention. This focus seems related to two factors. First, notwithstanding the genre's invasions from masses of uniform, faceless adversaries which might speak to a range of trauma and fears of 'others' which permeate post-9/11 American culture, the superhero film has tended to favor strong interpersonal conflicts between the hero and villain. Second, superheroes and their transformative bodies, especially those of male heroes, have provided critics with a more congenial subject to analyze "how contemporary America (through its most effective ambassador, Hollywood) projects social sexual models as well as ideological postures concerning masculinity" (Roblou 78). Supervillains perhaps are less amenable to that ideological project.

This paper proposes, however, that the male supervillain plays a central role in conveying and challenging the models of masculinity on offer in the superhero film. Partly this centrality comes from the relative scarcity of female supervillains so far represented in the superhero film. With the exception of Jean Grey (Famke Janssen) in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (Brett Ratner, 2006) and Talia Al Ghul (Marion Cotillard) in *The Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan, 2012), the superhero genre has been far more fascinated with the conflict between the hero and his male nemeses. Some suggest this focus on the male villain might stem from a desire to explore the hero's darker side. However, this approach elides the way the male supervillain, with his Machiavellian plans and powers, perpetually threatens to overwhelm the hero and the aligned structures of hetero-masculinity

which produce and sustain him. If the superhero provides his spectators with a handy checklist of "what makes a man a man" (Roblou 77), then the villain presents the audience with an offsetting guide to "what makes a man unmanly." In fact, linked to excessive greed, irrationality, and characteristics stereotypically associated with homosexuality and/or femininity, the villain primarily serves as a potent representation of a failed masculine subject. No matter how brilliant, powerful or cunning he may be, the villain seems doomed to succeed only in his perpetual failure to achieve his stated ambition, a paradoxical outcome that serves to improve the appeal of the hero and his version of white hetero-masculinity.¹ But, what if the villain's propensity to fail points beyond the hero and his normalizing social structures and to more disturbing possibilities?

Given its interests in destabilizing normative identities and practices, queer theory offers a productive answer to this question. Already positioned as beyond acceptable boundaries of behaviour and morals, the villain easily fits into queer explorations of transgression, disruption, and, more recently, failure. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, for example, Judith Halberstam contends that some apparent failures are actually rejections of hetero-normative notions of success and encourages critics to explore more fully what such failures might also be advocating (2). Following Halberstam, the villain's apparent failures might best be viewed as rejections of heteronormativity, its structures of family, home and nation, and, most importantly, the masculinity the hero embodies. Lee Edelman's work in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* is also useful. Edelman argues the constitutive anti-sociality inherent in queerness offers a rebuttal to the very idea of the social itself. Accordingly the villain's leadership of criminal gangs or global crime syndicates can be read as a rejection of structures based on Oedipal stories of patriarchal succession and advocating subversive forms of organization based on affiliation. More provocatively, Edelman points out that some queers actively reject "the futurch," a form of heteronormative, reproductive futurity embodied by the figure of the Child ("Negativity" 821). The villain too might be seen as resisting the futurch and its totalizing heteronormative vision. After all, no one in the audience thinks the villain is fighting for the children.

1. For the purposes of this paper, I exclude *Hancock* (Peter Berg, 2008) since my focus is the large number of white heterosexual male superheroes in the superhero film genre. Of course, several African American actors play notable supporting characters in the superhero films including Morgan Freeman (Lucius Fox), Samuel L. Jackson (Nick Fury), Don Cheadle (James Rhodes), and Idris Elba (Heimdell).



A Villain's Guide to (Failed) Masculinity

The superhero film pivots on the transformative moment where the hero passes from nerdish geek to muscular, masculine hero. Low angle shots emphasizing the actors' transformed, sculpted male torsos affirm their white masculine bodies as ones capable of containing and controlling their newfound power. Chris Evans' transformation of Steve Rogers in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011) best underscores this passage. Using CGI effects to reshape Evans' buff body into a stunted scrawny boy, the film underscores Rogers' inability to fend off larger boys who bully him relentlessly, and from whose abuse he is rescued by his all-American masculine friend, Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan). Only his heroic fortitude and resilience – "I can do this all day" – mark Rogers as possessing sufficient moral character to withstand the transformation into Captain America.

Few such glorious moments attend the unveiling of the villain's body – in fact, his entire body is rarely revealed. Unlike the approbation that attends the hero's new muscularity, when villainous male bodies are transformed, they often become grotesque and abjected. Norman Osborn (Willem Dafoe)'s transformation into the Green Goblin in *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002) underscores this point: his bared chest is emaciated, the exact opposite of Rogers' or Thor (Chris Hemsworth)'s buffed bodies. And, although Loki from *Thor* and *The Avengers* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011; Joss Whedon, 2012) is played by the handsome Tom Hiddleston,² we soon learn that his attractive human (Asgardian) body cleverly conceals his 'true' monstrous identity as a scion of the despised, adversarial Frost Giants. Similarly, in *Captain*

2. Hiddleston has a well-documented sex appeal including being nominated as one of the sexiest men alive. Critical reviews of his role in *Thor: The Dark World* often cite Loki's darker tormented character's appeal in contrast to Thor (Chris Hemsworth)'s muscular, macho masculinity. Apropos the argument I am making here, Time critic Richard Corliss observes, "Loki's demeanor bears a hint of the gay outsider, an antidote to the solemn testosterone of most of the Avengers crew" (Fox).

America, Herr Schmidt (Hugo Weaving) dons a masculine mask to hide the hideous red skull his head has become in the aftermath of the failure of his own ingested precursor to Captain America's Super Soldier serum. In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker's green hair, garish lipstick smile and uncontrollable body tics stand in stark contrast to the grim, controlled body of Batman (Christian Bale). Notably, unlike Thor or Captain America's white muscled bodies, neither Loki nor the Red Skull possesses such idealized hard bodies. As if ashamed of this failure, they remain enwrapped within their chosen garb, their smaller lithe bodies hidden from view. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bane (Tom Hardy) offers an interesting variation on the villain's failed masculine body if only because his excessive physique seems to suggest that the villain too can attain the hero's masculine musculature. And yet, like the other villains, Bane's harnessed body remains frequently enwrapped in his encompassing coat, as if his grotesque muscularity is not to be seen, and, thereby, coded as obscene. While this attachment to costume suggestively links the villain to masculine drag performance, the villain's bodies more often seem to align with a soft feminine Other.

Interestingly, the etymology of "villain" suggests this link is not entirely accidental, *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes that "villain," a term derived from Old French, originally denoted "a low-born base-minded rustic." However, even as the word eventually came to signify an innate criminality, the term could also describe a woman, although without necessarily imputing negative qualities. Still, connotatively, the male "villain" already seems aligned with what Barbara Creed identifies as the monstrous, a feminine figure that is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not (10-11). Here the monstrous is a feminized male who threatens the clear lines of the hero's white hetero-masculinity. Antony Easthope notably identifies this border-threatening figure in *What A Man's Gotta Do*, where he observed the Joker is "a crudely exaggerated caricature of the feminized male" (30). As Mark Simpson observes, the feminized male – the fem boy who is unable to master the male skills of sport and combat – is "from a straight-arrow, utilitarian point of view [...] worse than useless in the manly scheme of things" (ix). The film *Thor* illustrates how Loki's attributes become associated with the figure of the feminized man. Loki derives his power not from physical bodily strength but rather from trickery – his ability to cast illusions. As a result, other warriors such as Thor's friends Fandral, Hogun, Volstagg, and Sif (Josh Dallas, Tadanobu Asano, Ray Stevenson, Jamie Alexander), dismiss his value in warfare. Interestingly, Sif (the group's sole female warrior)'s treatment of Loki also positions him as less than masculine. For Sif, Loki's actions result

from his personal jealousy of Thor, not from the needs of the (patriarchal) State. Later, she challenges Loki's assumption of patriarchal power, standing defiantly in the throne room when he refuses to return Thor to Asgard. More important, Loki's secret Frost Giant ancestry also links him with the feminine. True, the diamond-hard Frost Giants seem unlikely candidates to be aligned with Creed's monstrous feminine, which focuses on the role of the maternal and abjection. However, the Ice Giants' fluid shape-shifting prowess that quickly turns their frozen limbs into penetrating phallic objects places them in a lineage with other shape shifting figures including *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991)'s fluid murderous T1000 (Robert Patrick), whom critics such as Mark Dery link to cultural fears about feminism, feminization and abjection (Byers 14).

If one posits a spectrum of masculinities, the Red Skull provides another illustration of how the villain queers heteronormative masculinity. Striking an imperial pose in the shadows of his private office, Schmidt theatrically stands for his portrait, controlling the lighting and listening to opera. On one hand, dressed in his military attire, he is a paragon of masculinity. The picture is contradictory however since the opera – Wagner, of course – is not only a high cultural art form, but also, as Wayne Koestenbaum has shown, has had strong connections to gay men and homosexuality. Not so much a picture of androgyny, the Red Skull listening in the privacy of his chambers presents a counterbalancing picture of a butch opera queen, via Tom of Finland.

Paradoxically, a villain's sole success lies in the inevitable failure of his quest. Whether the villain's goal is anarchy (Joker), world domination (Red Skull), or simply "to ruin [his sibling's] big day" (Loki), the hero inevitably foils the villain's plan. While the villain's rout ostensibly provides an approving nod to "the good of social order and control" (Buscaljon 52), his defeat might more properly be positioned within the politics of masculinity. Unquestionably, the villain's loss serves primarily to reinforce a form of desirable heroic masculinity, and, simultaneously, to enshrine the attributes of white heterosexual masculinity as the dominant fiction to which others must bow. As the final scenes of Odin (Anthony

Hopkins)'s restoration in *Thor* illustrate, the hero's victory, no matter the cost, assures the positive values of masculine success, family, and love that reinforce hetero-patriarchy. But what if the constitutive element of the villain – his failures – represents something other than markers of the hero's precarious success – a 'victory' that, like the masculinity it sustains, is tentative, incomplete, exacting? Perhaps the villain is less a failure of hetero-patriarchal masculinity than a rejection of that masculinity tout court. Halberstam notes in the *The Queer Art of Failure* that "success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation" (2). Certainly the hero confirms this definition of success. Even Steve Rogers, who lacks the financial reserves of Bruce Wayne, achieves success when he overcomes his boyish inexperience with women and (finally) kisses Peggy Carter (Haley Atwell). Likewise, Thor's successful maturation is at least partially linked to establishing an ennobling relationship with astrophysicist Jane Foster (Natalie Portman). Recent film supervillains, by contrast, eschew such success, which for them appears defined through acquisition of greater power over others. Remarkably, unlike the heterosexual hero, these villains are depicted as devoid of sexual desires, with priorities oriented to different goals than heteronormative success. Equally, unlike earlier incarnations, recent supervillains do not seem much motivated by wealth accumulation.³ Neither the Red Skull nor Loki's goals are linked to monetary gain, while the Joker provocatively burns piles of money: "It's not about the money...it's about...sending a message. Everything burns." Indeed, he dismisses those criminals who only seek financial reward, opining, "This town deserves a better class of criminal."

These examples suggest a glimmer of the villain's rejection of several social paradigms, not just those of heteronormative culture. Lee Edelman contends, "[a]s the figure of non-productivity, then, the queer both threatens and consolidates" structures of capitalist hetero-patriarchy ("Antagonism" 821). Certainly the villains in Nolan's *Batman* trilogy seem to have, at best, an ambivalent relationship to late capitalism, especially with Bane's villainous takeover of the Gotham Stock Exchange. As a figure of non-productivity – the villains neither add to the Gross Domestic Product, nor plan to have children⁴ – the villain occupies the queer position that



3. Lex Luthor (Kevin Spacey)'s Kryptonian real estate play in *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006) appears to be an outlier in this regard. Space does not allow me to fully explore the complex relationships between capital, villains and Bruce Wayne/Batman in the *Dark Knight* trilogy.

4. As if to underscore my point, in *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bane's villainy becomes nuanced when it is revealed that even he is capable of nurturing a child – even if that child becomes the femme fatale Talia al Ghul.



Edelman identifies. Moreover, Halberstam suggests “the queer subject stands between heterosexual optimism and its realization” (*Failure* 108). In the superhero film, the villain interposes himself in the hero’s narrative of finding true love and happiness. All that stands in Thor’s path to become Asgard’s king are Loki’s machinations, the Red Skull’s plans for world domination ultimately intervene in Steve Roger’s blossoming love affair with Peggy Carter, and the Joker brings to an end Bruce Wayne’s potential for happiness with Rachel (Maggie Gyllenhaall) by killing her.

Further pursuing Halberstam’s assertions, the villain’s pre-destined failures might be viewed productively, as a screen to “more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (*Failure* 3). In this sense the villain and his minions speak to ways of organizing social life beyond that of the family and the nation formation it supports. The Red Skull’s Nazi-derivative sect Hydra and its genderless, black uniformed soldiers illustrate the point. While positioned as the product of the Skull’s fascist inclinations, Hydra is an organization that is based on affiliation, on individual choice as opposed to oedipal bonds of filiation, which bind the hero to family, home, and nation. Likewise, the Joker’s organization of criminals is maintained by affiliated bonds – even if only for the moment of their crimes. Such transitory connections run counter to homo and hetero normative perspectives which see such non-familial organizations as threats to the nuclear family, the metropolis and ultimately the nation.

We are not ‘fighting for the children’

Simply positioning the villain as a mirror of the hero’s darkest impulses (Roblou 84) underplays him as a figure of anti-sociality, one whose central goal is to promote “a path that leads to no good and has no other end than an end to the good as such” (Edelman “Antagonism” 822). Certainly the Red Skull seems to follow this pattern. Although his ultimate goal is never made entirely clear, the Skull does plan to destroy both the Allies and the Axis for no other than reason than they presumably stand between him and world domination. Moreover, Daniel Buscaljon contends that since the Joker manifests all of three of Kant’s levels of evil – frailty, impurity and depravity – he provides a strong representation of Kant’s notion of absolute evil (54). Following Edelman’s arguments that reproductive futurity, at its heart, has a constitutive negativity (“Antagonism” 823), we might say more precisely what Buscaljon calls the Joker’s “preference for its [the moral life’s] negation, living a life of almost impossibly perfect depravity” (55) is more about the challenge that anti-sociality offers to reproductive futurity and its totalizing logics. This Joker ‘queerly’ resists attempts to recuperate him into any logic.

Loki also takes up a position of structural negativity. Upon realizing his ‘true’ identity as the son of Laufey (Colm Feore), king of the Frost Giants, rather than Odin of Asgard, Loki rejects Odin’s plan for a peaceful co-



existence between the Frost Giants and Asgard, therein rejecting the futurity that the All-Father saw in him as an abandoned child whom Odin and Frigga (Renne Russo) adopted and raised as their own. Admittedly, it is difficult to imagine an audience condemning Odin's moment of kindness, compassion and good intentions, especially since it is child Loki who is rescued from Laufey, who has left his defective son to die in the cold. Still, it is exactly this moment that Loki denounces from a position of negativity. Reflecting on his past, Loki re-reads it as a series of slights, which Frigga denies, asserting she and Odin tried hard to love him. Ultimately, Odin's strategy of assimilation is not coded by the film as wrong; rather it is Loki's innate (read: villainous) Frost Giant nature that leads him down his destructive path. Again, I prefer to re-read Loki's rejection of Odin and subsequent usurpation of Asgard's throne not as a sign of Oedipal rebellion or sibling rivalry but as a wish to commit the original Sin itself – patricide. Far from being the actions of a bitter, queer son, Loki repudiates Oedipus and sets out to impose his own anarchistic view of the world onto Asgard and the Nine Realms.⁵ It is thus unsurprising that Loki chooses to fall rather than be rescued by Odin or Thor in the film's final moments. Echoing Lucifer from *Paradise Lost*, Loki also chooses to reign in hell than serve in heaven. In a gesture of final rejection, Loki takes his chances on the

5. Although Loki's role in *The Avengers* is not addressed here, it is worth noting that Loki happily extends his anarchistic vision to Earth.

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void between the worlds rather than return to Asgard's hetero-patriarchy where he has no place.

The Im/Possibility of True Villainy

Given the conservative nature of the superhero film, at least in its blockbuster form, it is difficult to imagine that the kind of villainy the Joker enacts could ever ultimately triumph. That would move us far away from the optimism that infuses both the superhero comic and its filmic counterpart and might authorize more open-ended forms of hetero-masculinity than the genre currently posits. Certainly espousing contrarian, potentially violent resistance is not without its dangers.⁶ Halberstam recalls the feminist artist Solana who shot

6. Similarly, the 2012 movie theatre shooting at the premiere of *The Dark Knight Rises* in Aurora, Colorado provides a vivid cautionary example of how (even purportedly) embracing the Joker's ethos leads to deadly consequences for many others. Linking copycat violence to representations in films (or videogames) is a dubious business, but it is worth wondering how much of this violence may be linked to frustrations created by the narrow strictures of (white) heteronormative masculinity.

Andy Warhol, and cautions that we must recognize that “this kind of violence is precisely what we call upon and imply when we theorize and conjure negativity” (“Anti-Social” 150). Similarly, while reading Hydra and other queer villainous organization as offering alternative modes of sociality is a useful corrective to otherwise conventional readings, Halberstam usefully cautions readers that the relationship of homosexuality to politics has not always been progressive (“Anti-Social” 150). As a villain explicitly aligned with Nazism, the Red Skull underscores Halberstam’s observation that

the politics of masculinity, as opposed to the politics of gay social movements or the politics of gender variance, names a political strand that can easily incorporate forms of female and male masculinism while casting all feminine identification as a source of inferiority and as contrary to the nation state. (“Anti-Social” 147)

In reading the villain as rejecting hetero-masculinity, we must not simply dismiss the misogynistic and effeminacy-hating patterns that are might play in such rejections. Indeed, the ongoing antipathy to effeminate men still attests to the need to interrogate such rejections carefully.

For these reasons, Edelman’s formulation of the queer negativity remains a productive way to conceptualize the super villain other than just as a masculine failure who ultimately burnishes the hero’s masculine aura further. As Edelman argues in *No Future*, “[q]ueerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it [...] accept[s] its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure” (3). Accordingly, the villain is more than just the hero’s complement, but rather becomes a sign of queer resistance endemic to the social structures the hero embodies and protects. The supervillain’s persistence in the face of indubitable failure reminds us of the structural negativity at the heart of the superhero film. Edelman proposes a form of queer oppositionality which would even “oppose itself to the logic of opposition” (*No Future* 4). Reading the villain as a fundamental negativity positions him as inescapably queer and a troubling paradox: just as the superhero must optimistically say “yes” to the future for which he fights, the villain intones, “never.” Or, better yet: Loki, in his comic book incarnation, has now been rewritten as a gender-shifting bisexual, more in accordance with classical Norse mythology (Burlingame). Trickster that he is, Loki may yet be the villain we have always wanted and needed.

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