



4-27-2015

It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's...Cultural Anxiety? Using Detective Comics' Three Biggest Heroes to Identify and Explore Cultural Anxieties as Depicted Through Television

Jonathan Vander Lugt
Ursinus College, jovanderlugt@ursinus.edu

Adviser: Tony Nadler

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/media_com_hon

 Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Broadcast and Video Studies Commons](#), and the [Television Commons](#)

Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Vander Lugt, Jonathan, "It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's...Cultural Anxiety? Using Detective Comics' Three Biggest Heroes to Identify and Explore Cultural Anxieties as Depicted Through Television" (2015). *Media and Communication Studies Honors Papers*. 4.
https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/media_com_hon/4

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Media and Communication Studies Honors Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. For more information, please contact aprock@ursinus.edu.

It's a bird! It's a plane! It's...cultural anxiety?

Using Detective Comics' three biggest heroes to identify and explore cultural anxieties as depicted through television

Submitted to the Faculty of Ursinus College in fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the
Media and Communication Studies Department

Jon Vander Lugt

Adviser: Dr. Tony Nadler

April 27, 2015

Abstract

This collection of essays uses the mythic nature of superheroes to examine and discuss specific cultural anxieties as they're navigated and alleviated superhero television texts. First, I examine the way that anxiety over feminism and the women's rights movement manifested itself in *Wonder Woman*, the 70s television series starring Lynda Carter. Next, I use *Smallville* and its depictions of a teenaged Superman to explore its handling of anxieties over the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Finally, I performed a content analysis of six different series of Batman cartoons to examine the way they respond to national concerns over gun violence.

I found that though *Wonder Woman* speaks to concerns about the women's movement in the 70s, it tells us that feminism is something that can be contained by celebrating feminine strength in a way that hyper-feminizes women and depicting that the struggle for women's rights has been completed. *Smallville* navigates American anxiety following 9/11, but it does so in a way that avoids grappling with real-life issues. It allows us to instead engage with myths about America's resilient strength, cultural superiority, and patriarchal subjugation of women. Batman cartoons too handle concerns over gun violence in a superficial way, as the physical depictions of guns become less and less realistic as the series progress.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Not-so-Wonder Woman.....	10
3. <i>Smallville</i> and America's Puberty.....	35
4. Holy Violence in Children's Cartoons, Batman!	50
5. Conclusion.....	91

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

1. Why superheroes?

Superhero narratives pose an acutely useful insight into the inner workings of American culture because of their unique status as one of the most important American myths. When we think about myth, we generally think about gods or demigods, stories of heroism, and an offering of an explanation for beliefs, practices, or natural phenomena. Hougaard Winterbach (2006), in his analysis of the comic *Daredevil: Born Again*, puts it well:

The ultimate purpose of the hero myth is the re-telling of stories that explore and explain the different stages of life on earth. The myth is not simply a story from the pages of old civilizations; it can be perceived as an instruction manual for the rites and meaning of life...the hero has been vital to man's existence. This is evident in the great religions throughout the world, in fairy tales, and in the documentation of vast cultural histories of divergent societies, as well, I would argue, as in the popular contemporary superhero. (p. 132).

Winterbach would agree that superhero stories have all of the things that make up myth: status as a demigod figure, an implicit heroism given the title of the genre, and that their stories, as myth, give particularly meaningful insights into the cultural anxieties of a given time.

Roland Barthes (1972) goes into detail about some of the power that myth can have. After describing how myth works in relation to semiotics, he recalls a personal anecdote in which he sees a French magazine with a black man dressed in French military garb on the cover. On the cover, he observes the man, the uniform, the color of his skin, but that's not what he truly

sees. For Barthes, this batch of images puts on display a mythological sense of French nationalism—and that’s the sort of power he sees myth as having. Through its nationalistic imagery, it projected that all of France was unified under one flag, regardless of race. The image rejected the “detractors of an alleged colonialism” by a member of the oppressed peoples engaging in an extremely nationalistic gesture (p. 115). All of this meaning was imparted simply by showing a man on the cover of a magazine doing a salute. For Barthes, in myth, a constellation of images projects much more powerful meanings than the sum of their parts.

Frederic Jameson’s (1979) work helps articulate the power of myth through fantasy as well. For Jameson, mass culture (in it, tales of myth) serves as a way to broadcast a certain ideology (meaning a way to tackle cultural stress) via the use of fantasy. Jameson takes a critical tone in “Reification and Utopia of Mass Culture.” Throughout, he positions himself as anxious about the way we’re affected by mass culture, but his observations nonetheless provide important insight about why myths resonate with us as much as they do. For him, mass culture has a message, or ideology to impart on its viewers, and:

works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated. (p. 144)

For Jameson, much of what mass culture does is fulfill social and cultural desires by navigating social and cultural problems, through the use of fantasy without providing any substantive changes. In short, as it’s relevant to my explanation of myth, mass culture has something to say about how a culture feels at a given time, and it uses fantasy to say it.

Back to superheroes: how do they fit in to this? Superheroes resonate so acutely as modern myth for several reasons. For one, their superficial resemblance to characters of classic mythology makes the notion function on a visual level. Superman and Heracles both possess super strength, Wonder Woman greatly resembles Athena, and Batman and Hades could be compared as well, given that they both occupy and patrol the underbelly of their respective worlds. By recycling powers and personality traits from classic myth, superheroes slot easily into already-accepted framework for myth, and when combined with how powerfully superheroes can resonate with their readers and viewers, their status as modern myth is particularly apt.

For cultural critic Will Brooker (2013), this resonance has to do with secret identities—they offer an escape into a sort of better self that many readers desire to do as well. He says, “Superhero mythology is about escape, about creating an alternative identity and becoming someone different, someone better. Arguably, superheroes are at their finest when they’re the alter-ego creations of geeks and loners, not handsome hunks” (p. 12). Later, he goes further in explaining how superheroes can make such a mark on their readers, saying, “(The mask of Rorschach, a superhero in *Watchmen*) isn’t just a mask, it’s his face, a face he can bear to look at in the mirror. How many teenagers, male and female, have felt ugly and unlovable and wished they could cover their face with a clean, anonymous, blank?” (p. 12). Simply put, superheroes offer people an escape into something that they wish they could be.

Stan Lee (2013)—a pillar in the comics industry and the creator of most, if not all famous Marvel characters—says superheroes are so powerful because they offer a teenaged and adult version of fairy tales. He says, “...I don’t think we ever outgrow our love for these kinds of stories, stories of people who are bigger and more powerful and more colorful than we are” (p. 117). Danny Fingeroth (2013), another important creator in the comics world, says that

The superhero can represent a snapshot of a moment in time in a culture's development, or a broader sense of cultural identity. As a writer, I find superhero stories useful for metaphorically working out, in both literal and symbolic ways, issues that are important to me—and, hopefully, to a lot of other people. (p. 126)

That's why superheroes are such a potent ground for cultural analysis. Superheroes show us both what we wish we were and what we want our society to be. These days, superheroes reach everybody, and releasing a superhero film has become a legal way for people to print money. We're not talking about an obscure novel on the *New York Times* Book Review; nearly everyone knows the stories of Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, and their superhero contemporaries. These figures function much like the black man on the cover of the magazine that Barthes fell upon, depicting strong images about the sorts of things we value and what we desire. The image Barthes discusses both addressed and assuaged French anxieties about colonialism and race at the time. Superheroes, like Barthes' magazine, alleviate cultural problems by reaffirming fantasies. This sounds similar what Jameson has to say about mass culture, and that's because it is. Much of what follows is directly related to Jameson's "model" of sorts. I will argue that Batman, Wonder Woman, and Superman all have specific stories to tell (via their status as a mythical fantasy), and in the following chapters, I examine this phenomenon, treating them as a form of myth to explore the ways they address and alleviate our culture's anxieties relative to certain moments in its history.

2. Method and how it relates to cultural theory:

Each of the following chapters poses a different inquiry, and so I have drawn on different research methods in order to best find the answers that I was seeking. Chapter Four (Batman) uses a quantitative approach to examine violence in a number of Batman cartoons on television. Chapters Two and Three (Wonder Woman and Superman, respectively) use an interpretive method to explore topics related to feminism and 9/11, respectively—two things less suited to numbers-based research.

In his textbook *Media Convergence*, Klaus Bruhn Jensen (2002) defines critical media research, regardless of method, as addressing “the wider societal, cultural, and historical issues of mediated communication, often in a reception perspective, from which ‘the public interest’ may be assessed” (p. 282). Later, he says, “...media research contributes to (and occasionally initiates) debates in the public sphere, its political as well as cultural components” (p. 285). One of the most important roles of said research, as Jensen also says is that “many textual media studies of...film and television seek to expose either misrepresentations or reified representations of reality” (p. 287). As touched on before, this is what this group of essays does (though in different words), and using different methods in my different chapters was the best way I was able to do so.

Researchers using quantitative and interpretive methods sometimes seem worlds apart from each other. Terri Ann Bailey (2006), however, argues that although interpretive cultural studies and cultivation theory have radically different methods of research, a divide needn't exist because they, according to her, can work to complement each other. The concept of hegemony (“the most adequate account of how dominance is sustained in capitalistic societies”) is important here (p. 5). She says, “Critical cultural theorists strive to analyze the hegemonic practices by which social groups are bound,” and later, she argues that while “hegemony” isn't a

term that's directly used in cultivation theory work¹, the concept of hegemony is reflected in it nonetheless (p. 5). She says that "cultivation examines how media are used in social systems to build consensus (if not agreement) [...] through shared terms of discourse and assumptions about priorities and values" (p. 5). Thus, cultivation analysis is used to find out how the media tell stories about values as a means of stabilizing cultures. These means of stabilization are how hegemony comes into play. They affirm certain beliefs based on what the media are trying to depict. She says later, "both [methods] come to the same conclusion that these media constructed social realities can have negative effects on the public's perception of reality" (p. 9). In short, the two methods are different means to a similar ends.

That last notion is crucial to the following chapters. Using different methods, they all point toward a common end result. I don't directly mention hegemony—only because I stumbled upon the term late in my research, not knowing what it meant before realizing that what I was doing was in fact looking at the messages that hegemonic structures depict. This concept is explored via representations of and in violence in Batman cartoons, through the depiction of an allegedly "strong" woman in *Wonder Woman*, and through examining how *Smallville* is telling stories about how to live in a post-9/11 world. This all explains how certain cultural anxieties are relieved by the maintenance, through fantasy, of societal power structures.

3. Conclusion:

Again, the three essays and research methods work in unison to paint a nuanced picture of how the television industry and its different sectors—*Wonder Woman* appeared on traditional network TV, Batman cartoons were Saturday morning fare, and *Smallville* called upstart

broadcast networks WB and the CW its home—have address and alleviated certain cultural anxieties. The quantitative nature of my Batman research provides a numerical representation of some of the themes uncovered in my qualitative research, which is exactly the type of relationship somebody like Bailey would advocate in scholarly media studies.

In the pages that follow, my chapter about *Wonder Woman* examines the show's post-feminist messages during a time when the feminist movement was created a significant amount of stress for much of the country. The Superman chapter delves into *Smallville*, examining anxieties brought about by 9/11 and how they manifest themselves in a tale featuring the coming-of-age of perhaps the most classically American superhero. Lastly, my Batman research looks at violence and representations of it throughout his cartoon history, with an eye on gun violence through a time when America was in a fervor over violence and guns as they appeared in the media.

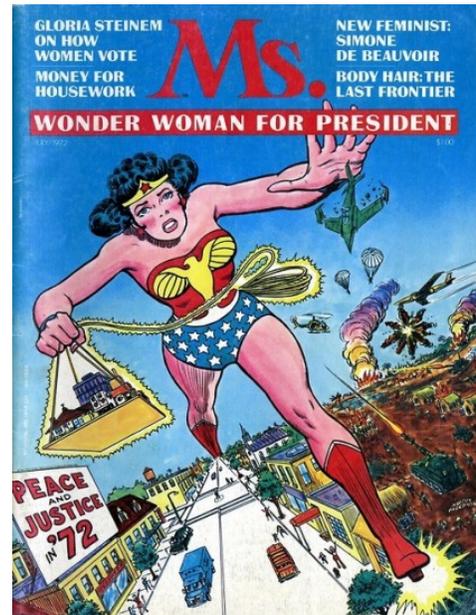
Before moving to the bulk of this work, a phrase that has already and will come up frequently in the coming pages is “cultural anxiety.” The term can be vague, but returning to the work of Barthes helps. His discussion about the man on the magazine and all that it meant—colonialism, concerns about national unity, oppressed peoples—constitutes much of what was at the tip of the French cultural tongue of Barthes' time. Here, these anxieties take the form of certain stresses that American culture had at the time of the analyzed programs' airing, and I argue that the television programs I discuss work to alleviate these anxieties in troubling ways that don't actually grapple with the problems at hand.

¹ Cultivation theory deals with the long-term effects of watching television. In short, it asserts that the world that individuals see on TV is what they will begin to view the real world as. Scholars pursuing claims involving cultivation theory generally use quantitative content analysis supplemented with viewer surveys.

CHAPTER TWO: Not-so-Wonder Woman

1. Introduction

Of all of Detective Comics' modern superheroes, it is Wonder Woman—or Diana Prince when she's not in her distinctive satin red, white, and blue outfit—who offers the most complex and often contradictory narrative history. Superman has been the same since his inception: a good 'ol boy raised on a farm in Kansas. Batman has long been a brooding avenger of the night. Yet, Wonder Woman's history has been much more volatile. Until the release of her well-known television series starring Lynda Carter in the late 1970s, Wonder Woman had transformed from a pro-feminist World War 2 propaganda figure, into a superpower-less female James Bond-esque character, then into a new symbol of feminism in the early 70s, readily adopted as a figurehead by the women's movement. Her Amazon origins appealed to much of the feminist literature of the time. She appeared on the very first cover of *Ms.* magazine, and her image was even used in posters advocating women's control over their healthcare (Levine, 2007, p.136). It stands to reason, then, that Lynda Carter's 1975-1979 portrayal of the superheroine could and should do much the same.



But did she? That's what this research intends to explore. With at least two new blockbuster movies starring Gal Gadot as Wonder Woman scheduled for release in the next three years, it is worth exploring the character's previous on-screen incarnations in depth to provide a

contextual backing for which to compare and interpret future depictions. Lynda Carter's rendition of the Amazon princess is particularly important because it's the first and only one so far to truly stick on television. This version managed to make a mark after a 1974 television pilot, starring Cathy Lee Crosby—not Carter—fell through. Another pilot, from just four years ago in 2011, failed to catch on as well. As the only live-action depiction of Wonder Woman to actually make significant headway into the public's consciousness, a thoughtful analysis of the character could help shed light on some of the influences that will inform Gadot's portrayal of the heroine in coming years.

Tim Hanley (2014), in *Wonder Woman Unbound*, engages in a brief discussion of Carter's portrayal of Wonder Woman, calling her “an unattainable ideal, a role model that no woman could ever hope to match.” Hanley argues that the show “didn't demonstrate the superiority of women but instead focused on the uniqueness of Wonder Woman herself” (p. 222). His statements sparked my investigation. While it's absurd to suggest that Carter's depiction of Wonder Woman is wholly negative, I argue that in response to the anxieties of the time, *Wonder Woman* neutralizes the feminist message that it could imbue by selectively incorporating aspects of feminine empowerment while at the same time disingenuously implying that women no longer had structural impediments to success.

Gender politics in the 70s were changing in ways unfamiliar and undoubtedly uncomfortable to many. Take some of the reactions to the Women's Strike for Equality in 1970: CBS anchor Eric Sevareid “compared the women's movement to an infectious disease.” (Gourley, 2007, p. 11). Though men stood the most to lose by the women's movement, even certain women reacted with obvious anxiety about and even hostility toward the movement. Gourley (2007) mentions that one woman was quoted as being against the march because “the

idea of looking delectable and having men whistle at me” (p. 11). One woman even proposed a “National Celebration of Womanhood Day,” where women hyper-feminize themselves and sing before serving their husband breakfast in bed (Gourley, 2007, p. 11). Midge Kovacs, one of the women that marched in the strike mentioned above, remarked about how news depictions of women in the march were shown as radical and scary—not the “cross section...including establishment types, career women and many older citizens” that actually partook in the march (Gourley, 2007, p. 12). Kovacs said, “Cameras moved in for tight shots of stringy haired, braless women in T-shirts, with angry signs” (Gourley, 2007, p. 12). Male print editors too, worked their hardest to marginalize the movement. At *Newsday*, Marilyn Goldstein was assigned to write a story about the women’s movement with “finding an authority who will say this is all a crock” as her top priority (Faludi, 1991, p. 75-76). Consternation about the women’s movement was building.

Despite this, the women’s movement continued to achieve milestones, and male power structures continued to fall. In 1972, Title IX passed, and with it, big-money resources, scholarships, and overall participation in college sports no longer belonged to just men. A year later, *Roe vs. Wade* kept abortion from being illegal. Laws targeted at ending discrimination in the workplace were passed in the coming years as well. The world that many people knew, men in particular, was breaking down around them. Not only could women participate alongside the boys in their university’s basketball program, but they could also—gasp—control their own bodies, as well as have legal backing to keep companies from paying them less solely because they were women. Susan Faludi (1991) made a great point: “In a nation where class distinctions are weak, or at least submerged, maybe it’s little wonder that gender status is more highly prized and hotly defended” (p. 47). Because America never had lords, serfs or kings, powerful men

turned to their male status to find societal rule. In the late 70s, this was coming to a breaking point.

Throughout history, the male response to this threat has been to persuade “women to collaborate in their own subjugation” (Faludi, 1991, p. 47). This has been going on since the colonial era, when women were shipped as brides to the states not by force, but because they were “sold ‘with their own consent.’” (Faludi, 1991, p. 48). Later in history, as women gained a public voice, they used it campaign against their own rights. “About one-third of the articles and nearly half the books and pamphlets denouncing the campaign for women’s have issued from a female pen,” Faludi (1991) said (p. 48). By the mid-70s, cultural industries were a little sneakier. They used seemingly pro-feminist language to make women feel as though their struggles were validated and their goals were achieved. At the same time, they started pushing women toward self-gratification instead of self-determination (Faludi, 1991, 76). Magazines flaunted strong, independent women “stocking up on designer swimsuits,” “flashing their credit cards at the slightest provocation,” and being excited at the prospect of a new, “liberating” variety of pantyhose (Faludi, 1991, 76). The messages above distinctly resemble some early notions of post-feminism in use as a means of putting bounds on the feminist movement. Post-feminism, a topic I will discuss in more detail later, is a cultural paradigm that arose in the 80s. It boils down to the idea that with women’s struggle for rights “complete,” and culture industries are encouraging women to find worth through commodification and individual self-maintenance. It offers images of women that achieve strength not through working together to break down structural barriers to their success, but through buying things and becoming more conventionally attractive.

I argue that the *Wonder Woman* television series does precisely this, eschewing much of what had made her a feminist icon in the early part of the decade. The character's creator, William Marston, gave us a strong woman who readily used feminine solidarity and represented women collectively breaking free of the shackles of patriarchal bondage. In Lynda Carter's television portrayal, these themes disappear. Instead, we're given a Wonder Woman who readily embodies early makings of a post-feminist ideal: she works largely by herself—hinting that the feminist struggle for rights is complete—and is afforded a good deal of social mobility by simply conforming to dominant standards of attractiveness. All of this certainly questions her status as a feminist icon, and indicates that she may have been just as much of a tool for male as power as she was female strength.

2. William Marston and his original Wonder Woman

Who exactly was William Marston?

I offer here a brief history of the character and some of the ideology that came along with her, as well as how closely the show matches the character that Marston created. Her creator, William Moulton Marston (under the pen name Charles Moulton) published the first books in the Wonder Woman comic series December 1941. He was also a well-known psychologist with three degrees from Harvard—a BA in 1915, law in 1918, and PhD in psychology in 1921—and is credited as the inventor of the modern lie-detector test. His home life was also unorthodox. Marston lived with two lovers, his wife, Elizabeth Holloway Marston, and one of his students from Tufts University, Olive Byrne. This living situation originated out of Holloway's reading of some of the work of Margaret Sanger—who, coincidentally, was

Byrne's aunt—and the work of Havelock Ellis, a British doctor and one of Sanger's lovers. Ellis said that marriage as an institution “resulted in the prohibiting of female sexual pleasure,” something that their living arrangement, in their view, helped fight (Lepore, 2014). Additionally, the situation helped solve the “woman's dilemma” of trying to balance a career with children for Holloway: Byrne played the housewife role to the three's four children (Marston fathered a pair to each woman) while William and Holloway worked (Lepore, 2014).

Marston was also skilled in storytelling in addition to his academic research, evidenced by the fact that he helped fund his way through Harvard by selling screenplays. His film, “Jack Kennard, Coward,” played in a number of theaters throughout the country, even occasionally sharing a billing with Charlie Chaplin (Lepore, 2014). He even wrote a book with his friend Walter Pitkin (a journalism professor at Columbia) detailing exactly what filmmakers could and couldn't get past censors when writing screenplays (Lepore, 2014).

Eventually, he convinced M.C. Gaines (the publisher of Superman) that Action Comics (now DC) needed a female superhero. Marston, with the help of artist H.G. Peter, created Wonder Woman in 1941 as an avenue for spreading his beliefs about women and their role in society to a broader audience. He penned Wonder Woman until his death shortly in 1947, leaving behind a brief but influential run as the creator of one of our modern pillars in superhero content today (Lepore, 2014).

Marston's original vision

At a time in history when women had only just recently gotten the right to vote in the United States, Marston's unique views about women were equal parts progressive and eccentric. Believing that they were by nature more peaceful and loving, and thus better suited for rule of society than war-mongering men, he championed their world leadership (in short, a matriarchy)

as the key to finally achieving a peaceful global society. He even went as far as to say that “women were poised to ‘take over the rule of the country, politically and economically’ within the next hundred years” (Hanley, 2014, p. 12). Wonder Woman was his way to show this belief and to massage his unorthodox views into the minds of the general public, and he claimed to achieve this through a pair of main themes woven throughout his stories: (supposedly) playful bondage, and women working together to achieve an often peaceful means of problem resolution.

Bondage:

Though this may come as a bit of a surprise to casual Wonder Woman fans and broader superhero fans on a whole, elements of bondage were crucial to Marston’s original depictions of the character. To a certain extent, bondage in high numbers might seem intuitive given the occupational hazards of being a superhero, but the extent to which early Wonder Woman was bounded is unparalleled.

Compared to two of her peers, Batman and Captain Marvel,¹ the amount of bondage in Wonder Woman comics stands out drastically. In the first ten issues of each of their respective series,² bondage appeared in each of the comic series in around 3% of the panels. In Batman comics, Batman and Robin appeared tied up around 1% each (adding up to 2% for the main hero subjects), and Captain Marvel was tied up 2% of the time. Wonder Woman, by contrast, was tied up 11% of the time, and bondage was featured in more than a quarter (27%) of her panels. Hanley’s numbers show that there was significantly more bondage in Wonder Woman books than there was throughout the rest of the comics industry (Hanley, 2014, Chapter Three).

For Marston, this bondage wasn’t supposed to be interpreted the way the general public might view the subject today,³ but rather as a way to illustrate the idea of willing submission to

feminine love, both sexual and otherwise. Marston's DISC theory (dominance, inducement, submission, compliance) was at the heart of the way he claimed bondage functioned in *Wonder Woman*. In order to have a "favorable" relationship in a bondage situation, the "active participant" needed to induce the "passive participant" into "pleasant submission." In short, "harsh dominance led to forced compliance, while kind inducement led to willing submission." By showing, as he claimed, women indulging in playful and positive bondage, readers were supposed to interpret submission (to women) as an enjoyable action (Hanley, 2014, p. 15).

Hanley proves decisively that this was Marston's reasoning for bondage throughout his work, but not his actual practice throughout early *Wonder Woman* comics. Using Marston's stated logic, Hanley reasons that because these comics were supposed to teach young boys the benefits of submission to femininity, there should be many men bound by women and enjoying it as well. However, the numbers tell a different story. Men were represented as subjects in just 20% of bondage imagery, compared to 84% for women. This can partially be explained by the fact that the lead character is a woman, but *Wonder Woman* accounts for just 40% of the bondage, leaving 44%—still more than twice as much as men—for other women throughout the series. Additionally, *Wonder Woman* was shown as happy or enjoying the situation in scenes where she is bound in just 14 of 341 panels, showing that when bondage did occur, it generally wasn't pleasant (Hanley, 2014, Chapter Three).

This is problematic when trying to consider bondage in the comics in its supposed role, but it can nonetheless still be interpreted positively. *Wonder Woman* is constantly shown effortlessly breaking the literal shackles placed on her by men, something certainly empowering to women, regardless of whether or not Marston's stated reasoning for bondage holds true in his works. This theme is crucial—it's a literal depiction of women freeing themselves from male

rule. Regardless of the mentioned discrepancies between what Marston actually wrote and what he said, bondage heavily appears in early Wonder Woman comics, intentionally placed there as a means of advancing his views about women and feminine strength. The same cannot be said for the television series, leaving it sorely lacking when it comes to showing women “breaking free” from the oppressive patriarchy created and maintained by males.

While some form of bondage occurred more often than not in the episodes I watched (nine of 14 episodes), the themes of feminine empowerment through bondage were missing. Only five times (in four episodes) did an episode feature a form of bondage that wasn't Wonder Woman briefly tying a villain up with her golden lasso, and rarely did a bondage scene last particularly long. One of the five non-lasso related scenes can even be discarded when considering the breaking of bondage as a depiction of female strength. In “The Man Who Could Not Die,” Diana is tricked in her home by a villain, and forced and locked into the garage, bound to her running car and left to die. This would have been the case, had the main male character of the episode, Bryce (the man that couldn't die), not saved her. This is the exact opposite of what is supposed to happen. Diana/Wonder Woman is the one that should be doing the saving. If creators wanted to depict a powerful woman, the last thing they should have been doing is showing a helpless woman whose life was dependent on the heroic actions of a man.

The lack of meaningful bondage throughout is also a far cry from bondage appearing in more than a quarter of the original comics, something that is particularly striking, given the 45-minute runtime of a television episode. Creators are able to pack much more content and meaningful scenes into 45 minutes of film than in a 24-page (and about 15 minute read) comic book. As a thought exercise, take eight panels as an average amount on a page (a generous assumption). That gives readers close to 200 total panels. If bondage appears in a quarter of these

panels, that's about 50 panels (and probably at least three of the 15 or so minutes of time it takes to read a comic). In the television show, bondage appeared in scant amounts spread through 45 minutes (70, in two episodes) of content, a much lower relative percentage than bondage in comics. While Hanley was able to prove that Wonder Woman comics featured significantly more bondage than her peers, in the show, it's highly unlikely that Carter's Wonder Woman features enough bondage to outpace her superhero compatriots on television at the time.⁴

One reason for this could be that in seasons two and three, a marked shift toward the episode plots being driven by Diana's actions—not Wonder Woman's—occurred. The reason for this in itself is difficult to pin down, but it could have roots in the fact that Diana's character plays a heavier role as the seasons progress. Bondage, intuitively, is most likely to occur during direct crime-fighting. This is the role that Wonder Woman generally took on, regardless of the volume of her appearance, and in later seasons, Diana generally drove the plot while Wonder Woman cleaned up the mess. With Diana steadily playing a heavier role, Wonder Woman had less screen time, and thus less opportunity to bind or be bound.

In general though, the lack of bondage in the series hints that Marston's agenda may not have been particularly high on the list of priorities for the show's creators. Used correctly, bondage could be an excellent metaphor for exactly what Marston was, regardless of his eccentric views or inconsistent practices, trying to depict: strong women capable of limitless things. It's abundantly clear that when it comes to bondage, the television show is not trying to advance Marston's original political and social agendas in a meaningful way. This leaves viewers with a female hero that's content to operate in a world largely constructed by the men around her.

Other women:

Female empowerment through female cooperation and solidarity is another crucial theme Marston wanted to impart on his readers. Throughout the early comics, Wonder Woman had a host of women to work with—the Holliday Girls, led by Etta Candy, as well as her Amazonian sisters when dealing with female villains. In the television show, however, female assistantship is, much like bondage, plainly lacking. Wonder Woman does occasionally see her Amazonian sisters (working together with them once to thwart Nazis), and works with her biological sister as a sidekick in two plot arcs, but the Holliday girls don't exist, and Etta Candy's character is reduced from the strong leader of a group of young girls to a nervous, starry-eyed secretary. Other than the handful appearances of other women mentioned above, Wonder Woman/Diana Prince generally worked without the help of other women when solving crimes—again indicating that *Wonder Woman* is a poor recreation of the character Marston originally created.

While analyzing the role of other women in Marston's original work, Hanley (2014) claimed, "whatever the adventure, the Holliday girls were involved," led by Etta Candy, whose appearance was a "stark contrast to the svelte, wasp-waisted women in most comic books," and was a "brave and heroic leader who was always in the thick of the fight beside her friend Wonder Woman" (p. 21). Etta is also not only brave, but smart as well. In a narrative about showing the future of the world, she manages to create a potion to reverse the aging process, after which she receives a "grand international" award for her scientific work (Robinson, 2004, Chapter 3). Later panels in the same comic show her as a professor, as well as a leading researcher in the field of cryogenics (Robinson, 2004, Chapter 3). Etta's presence in the initial comic books gave readers a female character that was not only brave and smart, but also not conventionally attractive—a woman shown in important relief compared to other female characters in comics. In addition to the significance of Etta to the original narrative, Hanley (2014) goes on to suggest that the

Holliday girls were arguably more important to Wonder Woman than the American military, generally showing up to help her fend off Nazis or Japanese soldiers much earlier than the troops arrived (p. 21).

This was most certainly not the case in the television series. The Holliday girls (or even a group remotely resembling them) were flat-out absent, and Etta was turned into a ditzy, pining foil for Diana in the office of the War Department. She appears infrequently and mostly portrayed as a distinctly less-than-strong woman clearly constructed to make Diana shine in a better light. In “The Feminine Mystique: Part 1,” Diana has a brief discussion with Etta, mostly about how Etta thinks her life would be much better if she had dinner dates. Diana responds by telling Etta that she’d be happy to accompany Etta for dinner, to which Etta says, “It’s not the same, you’re not a man, Diana.” Diana replies by telling her that she’s “always been very happy about that,” positioning Diana as strong woman without the need of male presence in her life to contrast with Etta, who clearly is pining for romantic love. Later in the season, in “Wonder Woman in Hollywood,” Etta’s only appearance is dedicated to her talking about how wonderful and important Hollywood is, positioning herself as someone wrapped up in the vain nature of Hollywood stardom. This is a stark contrast to Diana, who has no knowledge of anything to do with the subject, again positioning Diana as a strong woman in contrast to Etta.

The lack of female solidarity through cooperation and conversation in the television series is striking. In the comics, the Holliday girls appeared in every single issue throughout Marston’s run, indicating exactly how valuable Wonder Woman’s sidekicks were to her (Hanley, 2014, p. 142). Robinson (2004) used the words of important feminist Gloria Steinem when talking about the significance of Wonder Woman’s cooperation with other women. Women working together signals “Wonder Woman’s ability to unleash the power of self-respect in the

women around her, to help them work together and support each other” (Chapter 3). So, while working with other women was a staple of early Wonder Woman comics, the televised incarnation of Wonder Woman/Diana only worked with her sister twice (the only times throughout the series that she had a direct sidekick) and worked with the Amazons to thwart the Nazis just once, indicating exactly how little help she had from other women.⁵ The other important aspect of the comic series that is missing from the show was frequent, empowering conversation about women. At one point in the comic, Diana’s mother, Hippolyta goes so far as to break the fourth wall. She address female viewers by saying [not my emphasis] “You girls can develop strength and courage like our Amazon youngsters if you lead clean, athletic lives and realize the **true power of women**,” (Hanley, 2014, p. 20). Robinson (2004) (through Steinem) talked about the “discovery of sisterhood” as an “exhilarating” experience, in addition to saying that the message women get from the narrative is of strong independence, as Wonder Woman tells her cohorts, “You saved yourselves, I only showed you that you could!” (Chapter 3). In all fourteen episodes and roughly 12 hours of viewing time that I watched, neither Wonder Woman nor Diana had a conversation with a theme remotely resembling the ones discussed above.

In fact, Wonder Woman/Diana never actually spoke with a girl younger than her sister at all, let alone about feminine empowerment. If any woman younger than roughly adult-age existed on Paradise Island, she wasn’t shown, so there wasn’t even a baseline character for young girls to relate to. The youngest, Diana’s sister Drusilla, was depicted (and sexualized, as seen on the left in the photo to the right) as a late teenager and played by the 20-year-old Debra Winger.⁶



Wonder Woman never saves a young girl or teaches young girls lessons about feminine power at all—she just goes about thwarting villains generally in the company of Steve Trevor and a host of other men. What is that supposed to say about feminine empowerment? Very little—instead, it turns Wonder Woman into a “role model” with no one to actually provide an example for.⁷

Capping discussion on Marston

William Marston’s political and social views weren’t perfect. Hanley outlines this in a direct way, saying that a matriarchy remains an unequal society; and that Marston’s views, while progressive for his time, were still reductionist and based on the idea that the sole value that women had to give was maternal and sexual in nature (Hanley 16-17). There’s a lot wrong with some of what Marston believed—but at its heart, *Wonder Woman* was still a comic used to show strong, powerful women through both bondage and solidarity. These themes don’t exist in the show, indicating that it’s at best a flawed replica and modernization of Marston’s original visions for the character.

3. Wonder Woman, post-feminist? What’s the (i)deal?

Quality television and Wonder Woman’s place in the 70s TV environment

There is a distinction I want to make about a pair of terms used by television historians about television in the 70s: quality and relevance. Each term is used in association with discussion of two social movements in the decade: feminism and racial politics, respectively.⁸ Independent TV studio MTM Enterprises—one now known for portraying feminist struggles on screen—was struggling to assert itself as a legitimate means to work within the television medium while struggling to establish television as legitimate medium in itself. MTM (helmed by

Mary Tyler Moore) made a substantial effort to improving the quality of their television shows by making the shows themselves more “‘literate,’ more stylistically complex, and offering more character development than most sitcoms” (Lentz, 2000, p. 3). As Lentz points out, women were going through much the same thing during the second wave of feminism, making the two a natural fit. While television is generally seen as a negative force when it comes to advancing feminist causes, “the construction and reception of MTM shows suggests that 1970s television, far from distancing itself from feminism, adopted a position of proximity to it, using feminist logics to improve its own modes of self-representation” (Lentz, 2000, p. 4).

MTM’s *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was one of the first, and perhaps the best, marriages of quality television and liberal feminism on the small screen. Lentz (2000) discusses Moore’s own liberal feminist battle to “fight for recognition in a man’s world” by attempting to make the switch from TV to film and Broadway. She then compares this to “television’s struggle for legitimation in the world of cinema and theater” (p. 4). Lentz (2000) says, “as a result, the liberal feminist story can be deployed here in the service of television rather than women,” drawing a clear line of comparison between the struggle for television to gain legitimacy in the entertainment world with the struggle of women to gain legitimacy in broader society (p. 4). Lentz’s strong association between television in the 70s and feminist struggles isn’t perfect—Moore largely failed to make a mark on Broadway and the silver screen—but the comparison nonetheless draws a strong parallel between television as a medium and the struggles of feminism.

Lentz argues that feminist issues were making their way onto television in the 70s through the work of MTM Productions. One might think that this momentum should have carried through the fictional character most singularly associated with feminism: Wonder

Woman. Most things about her mid-late 1970s show would indicate “quality television”—high quality sets, costumes, as well as diverse areas for WW to explore among them—so it’s natural to think that the on-screen adaptation of the Amazonian princess starting at that time period would be rife with the other half of “quality television”: feminist thought and issues. However, a closer look at the character and late-70s television series *Wonder Woman* reveals that this wasn’t the case.

Post-feminism and Wonder Woman

This version of WW finds her in a unique place compared to much of the rest of her narrative history: the end of the second wave of feminism and just prior to the rise of post-feminism in U.S. televisual culture. What I’m going to argue is something that a lot of original fans of the series might chafe at: that Carter’s WW can be seen as an acting bridge leading into an era of post-feminism. In this section, I first offer an explanation of post-feminism as a sensibility based on the work of Rosalind Gill (2007), given that the subject is often shrouded in vagueness and inconsistent definitions. I’ll also talk about its broader social significance as highlighted through the work of Angela McRobbie (2007), as well as include some more detailed explanations that discuss the specifics of the “post-feminist sensibility” (Gill, 2007). Second, I argue that two aspects of Carter’s *Wonder Woman* exemplify post-feminism: the scarcity of non-wonder women, implying that female solidarity is no longer necessary and that *Wonder Woman/Diana*’s makeover from season one to season two is an early rendering of the “makeover paradigm.”

Defining post-feminism

Defining post-feminism can be particularly tricky. There is little consensus as to what the term actually means. Gill (2007) approaches post-feminism broadly as a “sensibility made up of

a number of interrelated themes” (p. 1). This sensibility is largely created by commercial entities working their way into a realm of feminist ideas, injecting a focus on commodification and intense introspection and self-maintenance in women as a means of achieving self-worth. These themes emerged in television throughout the 80s and later into the 90s. Gill touches on a number of more specific cultural themes that make up the post-feminist sensibility. One of these, the “makeover paradigm” is foreshadowed by Carter’s Wonder Woman.

Gill (2007) defines the paradigm concisely:

This requires people (predominantly women) to believe first that they or their life is lacking or flawed in some way, and second that it is amenable to reinvention or transformation by following the advice of relationship, design or lifestyle experts, and practising appropriately modified consumption habits. (p. 14)

Much of the makeover paradigm’s ties to post-feminism are rooted in needing to gratify outside social pressures in order to find self-worth. In a post-feminist world, women are allowed to have value and find self-worth—but only if they adhere to certain social norms through self-maintenance and commodification. This is exactly what occurs in these makeovers: women are told that they need new clothes (commodification) and are “punished” if they revert to their old ways (intense self-maintenance). This is a particularly troublesome mindset because it instills a damaging sense of ideals into young women and girls. Women and girls should be able to find self-worth through organic means, not through bizarre social structures constructed in a post-feminist world.

In order to better understand the broader effect that the “makeover paradigm” and sexual difference can have in a culture, the “post-feminist masquerade,” as discussed by Angela McRobbie (2007) helps. Post-feminist makeovers typically aim to make the participating woman

prettier, by using better makeup, a haircut, and wearing more flattering clothing. This is what McRobbie refers to as a masquerade —behavior engaged in by women to re-feminize themselves as a means for avoiding feared retribution for adopting masculine characteristics (working, not raising children, etc.). According to McRobbie (2007), this masquerade is wholly unproductive to society at large—it serves as a “means of emphasizing, as [it] did in classic Hollywood comedies, female vulnerability, fragility, uncertainty and the little girl’s ‘desire to be desired.’” (McRobbie, 2007, p. 725). By entrenching ideas of sexual difference through emphasized femininity, it serves to prop up the patriarchal structure of society, and to continue to separate women and men along lines that shouldn’t exist.

One of the reasons for this retreat in the post-feminist world is due to the media’s depiction that the feminist struggle is over, and because women are now represented as having equal rights, the idea that they’re able to find worth in more “girly” things permeates. That Wonder Woman generally works without other women could be read as trying to tell viewers that she simply doesn’t need their help, indicating that female solidarity is no longer necessary and that the feminine struggle for rights is now over. Now that women have found themselves in the workplace, this facilitates a move back to traditionally feminine behavior (the masquerade). When combined with the other aspects of Carter’s Wonder Woman mentioned above, it’s clear that the television program has distinctly rooted itself in some of the most crucial aspects of post-feminism, creating a type of proto-pf.

Wonder Woman as a solo actor

The first part of the show that establishes its status as proto-post-feminist is Wonder Woman’s status as a solo crime fighter, generally operating without the help of other women. Again, post-feminism assumes that the struggle for equality has been completed (or at least that’s the message that the media send to women), which eliminates the need for women to work

together and fight for their rights. With “equal” status to men, women can now focus inward in order to better themselves. While season one (1976-1977) has Wonder Woman working with other women on a small handful of occasions, cooperation with other women is largely absent, particularly after she’s brought from the 40s to the 70s.

This is troubling. One of the important aspects of William Marston’s original vision for the character is Wonder Woman working together with a band of sorority sisters from the fictional Holliday College, called the Holliday Girls, to fight crime. None of this sort of cooperation is seen in the television series, as Wonder Woman often fights without the aid of other women, telling viewers simultaneously that she doesn’t need help and that she’s the only woman capable of doing the job. Hippolyta even tells her in the pilot, “in a world of ordinary mortals, she’s a wonder woman.” There’s no sense of the need for women to work together to fight for their rights, probably because Diana/Wonder Woman can do it herself. This provides a surface appeal to viewers, who are given a strong woman to identify with. This is a pretty shallow strength, however, because it strips away much of what originally made Wonder Woman so great.

Diana Prince gets a makeover

Throughout the first season (aired on ABC), Diana Prince is the buttoned-up, “dowdy”—a qualifier given to her by her sister—secretary of Steve Trevor. Starting as soon as the pilot, Diana is positioned (at least to Steve) as somebody devoid of sex appeal. In the series pilot, after being tricked by his former secretary (secretly a Nazi spy) due to his sexual relationship with her, Steve loudly declares to those in the War Department in D.C. that from this point forward, he’s “going to have an ordinary-looking secretary,” presumably to avoid any of the troubles

associated with the extracurricular activities he engaged in with his previous one. Enter Diana Prince, dressed in her particularly unrevealing uniform (see below, left), to take the job.

Even when Diana is allowed (however begrudgingly by Steve) to put her looks on display in “Beauty on Parade,” she’s put down in comparison to Wonder Woman. Following the results of the beauty pageant (which Wonder Woman won) Etta Candy said to Steve, “I still don’t understand what happened to Diana, Steve, she was



supposed to be in the beauty pageant.” Steve responded by saying, “Well it’s simple, Etta. When she found out she’d have to share the stage with Wonder Woman, she probably threw in the sponge.” Sure, this conversation was probably meant as a humorous play on the dramatic irony surrounding Wonder Woman’s identity, but it nonetheless positions Diana as somebody who is lacking in the looks department. All conversation of this type halted after the first season, and with that change, came a new outfit for Diana. See the image mentioned previously: left is Diana’s common outfit throughout the first season, and to the right is what Diana typically looked like on the job in seasons two and three, respectively. As can be plainly seen, her outfit is much more modern and trendy—a stark contrast to the muted military uniform in season one.

In addition to a physical makeover, she’s given a promotion—no longer is she “Yeoman Diana Prince.” Instead, she’s a field agent doing a good deal of the heavy lifting; all the while references to her looks are being made constantly. In “Amazon Hot Wax,” a dumbfounded

henchman is reduced to little more than incoherent mumbles in her presence, and when scolded by the woman in charge, offers explanation by saying, “She’s a very attractive woman, Barbie.” In season two, she’s told that she’s “very beautiful” by a crime boss in “Light-Fingered Lady.” I could go on.



Wonder Woman’s costume also changes between seasons one and two, becoming slightly more revealing. Putting aside the fact that she’s already wearing glorified swimwear, Wonder Woman spends the first season in a costume that doesn’t reveal a particularly large amount of cleavage,⁹ as well as a bottom half that covers the entirety of her pelvis. In seasons two and three, the upper half of her costume pushes Carter’s breasts together more, as well as carving out room around her thighs, offering a distinctive “V” shape and revealing much more of her pelvis.

As I briefly mentioned earlier, there is one omission from the show in regards to its similarities with the makeover paradigm: a makeover expert. This is hardly problematic—while the expert is important to the idea as a whole (she or he is, after all, giving the makeover), the implied end result of the makeovers is a sort of social mobility (and thus constructed self-worth) that women would not have been able to obtain in their previous state. Her makeover is one of the central reasons, at least as it’s portrayed to viewers of the show, as why she’s able to step out from behind the desk and into the field and play more of an active role in missions, constructing

female beauty as the sole means to career advancement (again, a substitute for self-worth). The need to be excessively feminine—the “V” shape in her bottom piece could easily be read as a sly reference to the female anatomy—in order to achieve career advancement is what viewers can read here as the post-feminist masquerade. By positioning Diana as needing to be beautiful in order to climb the career ranks or succeed in the man’s world, it reaffirms that women still cannot exist as-is with the men around them.

4. Conclusions:

Feminism was making a lot of waves in the 70s. It was immensely helpful to women and their cause, but it caused an equal amount of concern for those who didn’t see direct benefits for themselves—men especially. That’s where the most significant cultural anxiety comes to play in *Wonder Woman*. We’re given a cultural myth that has been constructed since its creation as strongly feminist, but after looking into how she’s portrayed on television, we can see ways in which these supposedly feminist messages can be used to work stymie feminist goals.

In an aesthetic sense, the show certainly qualifies as a form of myth. *Wonder Woman* is Athena reincarnate, with a strong dose of Artemis¹⁰ thrown in for good measure. In addition, the creators of this show have given us a super-powered, independent woman clearly meant to appeal to the feminist sensibilities of the time. What woman or girl wouldn’t want to be *Wonder Woman*, with her beauty, powers, and the respect of those around her (men included)? That, to refer back to the introductory chapter, is the “fantasy bribe” that Jameson talks about as it appears in this particular myth. Again, these fantasy bribes allow for certain ideologies to be depicted in works of mass culture, and that’s what *Wonder Woman* does.

Here, the ideologies are the proto-post-feminist themes that dull the feminist strengths that a text like this could and should have. Combined with the disregard for Marston's original feminist agenda, this shows that the creators of the program have contained its feminism in much the same way that the magazine ads mentioned in this chapter's introduction do, suggesting that feminine empowerment can be acquired through means constructed by the men around them. The show's creators effectively neutralized feminism in the program, providing an apt blueprint for media to find other ways to contain it. Rather than actually deal with consternation over the way women are treated in the country, *Wonder Woman* has provided a way mitigate the problem without actually addressing it.

This isn't meant to vilify the show's creators. I'm not claiming that the watered-down feminism in the show was a necessarily a conscious choice. It's also worth mentioning that if even one person is inspired by the strength of Lynda Carter's *Wonder Woman*, then in at least one case, she was a powerful way to portray feminine strength in a positive light. But it's nonetheless still worrisome that our culture is willing to gift-wrap this type of message in a text that is so clearly supposed to be empowering to women, but so clearly limits its images of empowerment in ways that preserve certain gender inequities.

This text sends conflicting messages to both men and women alike, altering everyone's notions of what feminism is supposed to be. *Wonder Woman* can be and has been great. She's a strong, powerful woman who exists as an equal to men in a fictional universe dominated by powerful male characters. Lynda Carter's version of the character, on a certain level, does this as well, but given all of the other troublesome aspects of the series, perhaps hers does not deserve the "wonderful" qualifier often attached to Diana Prince's alter ego.

¹ Now known as Shazam.

² Each made their debuts between 1939-42, so there wasn't a particularly gaping time difference to serve as an influential variable.

³ That which includes whips, chains, and other sexual tools.

⁴ Adam West's Batman would likely be the only point of comparison for live-action superhero shows in the 60s and 70s.

⁵ This is throughout the sample I watched.

⁶ It's curious that she's both clearly constructed as a teenager while having a costume showing arguably more cleavage than Wonder Woman's.

⁷ Sure, Wonder Woman is portrayed as occasionally leading the Amazons—but nearly all of her adventures take place outside of Paradise Island.

⁸ While Lentz states that the two are intertwined, "relevance" isn't particularly pertinent here, so allow me to solely focus on "quality" television.

⁹ By today's standards, anyways.

¹⁰ Whose Roman equivalent is named Diana, something of likely to be of little coincidence.

CHAPTER THREE: *Smallville* and America's Puberty

1. Introduction

If you're walking down the street and ask somebody to name a random superhero, there's a better-than-even chance that Superman (alter-ego of Clark Kent) is going to be the name produced. This is with pretty good reason—the man of tomorrow is nearing his eightieth year of publication. He's been through every war dating back to WWII, been privy to numerous social movements in the latter half of the twentieth century and still is still going strong. Pause for a moment to take that fact in. Pretty soon, there won't be anyone alive in the United States who didn't have Superman around as they were growing up as a child or teenager. Sure, there have been different incarnations of him throughout the years: George Reeves' portrayal in the 50s isn't Christopher Reeve's from the 70s, and neither of those is remotely similar to the way Clark Kent is portrayed in *Smallville*, but he's always been around.

This last depiction mentioned above—*Smallville's* (2001-11)—of a teenaged Clark is the focus of this chapter. A unique trait of this specific version of Superman is that puberty and superheroes aren't things we often see paired together.¹ Yes, there's been a trend in the last couple decades of comic book history toward portraying flawed, distinctly humanized heroes, but rarely, if ever, have we seen the formative years—and the problems associated—of Earth's mightiest. We never see Batman between the ages of eight and his mid-twenties,² and Princess Diana of the Amazons has always been a goddess. Most other major superheroes gain their powers as adults, so their teen years probably aren't particularly interesting. For a while, the “big

three”—all characters with feasible teenaged stories to tell—never found their way on screen as adolescents.

That is, until a teenaged Clark Kent was thrust into the spotlight in *Smallville* in late 2001. This show was the first serious attempt at showing a pubescent hero in live action.³ It struck a chord with viewers as they were able to relate to Superman’s growing pains through high school early in the series, and many hung around for later seasons as the show fleshed out and told stories of a previously unanswered part of Clark Kent’s early adulthood. This essay examines parts of the first five seasons, where Clark spends his time within the walls of Smallville High School fighting his own body almost as often as he fights to keep the town safe.⁴ Clark’s young years provide viewers a hero with which they can relate on a surface level (even Superman has to deal with growing up), but I argue that there’s more to Clark’s problems than that.

This chapter looks closely at the way Clark Kent’s personal struggles with his powers, identity and his relationship with Lana Lang are depicted in *Smallville* in relation to the country’s concerns about American security, identity, and pride in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. These themes—American security, identity, and pride—were understandably up in the air following the attacks, and the media played a significant role in shaping peoples’ reactions following the tragedy. Ahern, et al (2002). show that certain television images—ones depicting people falling or jumping from the towers—increased frequency of PTSD in Americans after the attacks. According to Cardeña, Dennis, Winkel, and Skitka (2005), the more television news people watched, the more they felt distressed. TV watching in general, too, had a small link to general levels of distress. Children were affected as well. Kids who watched more television coverage of attacks have been found to “exhibit lower levels of social trust and support

for immigration” (Houston, 2013, p. 183). Houston also suggests that “while psychological distress resulting from an event like 9/11 may fade for children not directly affected by a traumatic social event, the influence of such events on how young people think about the world may remain” (p. 190). As it seems, stress in America was at a high point, and numbers back this up too: according to Schuster, et al. (2001), 90 percent of adults surveyed had one or more stress symptoms, and almost half of that amount reported “substantial” stress. Following the attacks, America was in turmoil, and needed something, or someone, to help pick it back up.

News images did their part in making their attempt to unite America again: Yung Soo Kim (2012) states in a comprehensive content analysis focused on photojournalistic coverage of the event that news images “framed strong pro-American perspectives by showing a challenged America and a nation united through patriotism” (p. 181). On the news in papers and broadcasts, McKinley and Simonet (2003) suggest that a number of key phrases “fueled an idealized scenario in which a victimized nation responded heroically” (p. 1). They argue that phrases such as “attack on America,” “last Taliban stronghold,” and “tattered flag” were raised to a mythical status in the American lexicon, creating the image of America referred to above, and legitimizing “a policy of aggression that is and will continue to be costly not only in money and lives, but also in terms of the United States’ standing in the world” (p. 18). Throughout the news media, America was being depicted as a battered, but strong nation on its way back up.

As for television beyond news, Lynn Spigel (2004) delves into numerous aspects of post-9/11 TV. Her analyses of documentaries, daytime talk shows, and *The West Wing*, among others, provides an important insight into the “textual and narrative logic of television programs that channeled the nation back to commercial TV ‘as usual’” by creating and instilling a sense of comfort in viewers by providing callbacks to things that they’re comfortable with (p. 239). In

short, non-news media worked to make America seem like a strong, resilient country, capable of handling the troubles that are going to come its way.

With the way that 9/11 affected other forms of media in mind, how does the junior man of steel fit into this? Superman has constantly been a part of the American fabric since his creation. Gary Engle (1992), in his article titled “What Makes Superman So Darned American?” waxes poetic about what Superman means to America. Engle says,

He is the male, heroic, match for the Statue of Liberty, like an immigrant from heaven to deliver humankind by sacrificing himself in the service of others. He protects the weak and defends truth and justice and all other moral virtues inherent in the Judeo-Christian tradition, remaining ever-vigilant and ever chaste. (p. 343).

Engle is saying that Superman is an example of a being that is literally perfect. He has no real flaws; instead, his personality and actions are shaped by values that are held dear by many Americans. Ian Gordon (2008) also touches on why Superman resonates so clearly as well. In explaining Umberto Eco’s rendering of the Superman myth Gordon says, “...Superman offers infinite possibilities for storytelling focused on virtue, but Superman’s virtue is limited and the character’s set by the prevailing social order,” meaning that Superman tells us stories about virtue and what it means to be good, but those tales are dictated by the era that that particular story exists in (p.180). He adds, “...Superman then acts as an instructive tool for what passes as virtue in society...in effect, Superman is a product by which we consume virtue” (p. 180).

Superman can be seen as a sort of cultural chameleon, and the things that he has to say depend on when the stories are being told. Given this, there doesn’t seem to be a better figure than the man of tomorrow to help America pick itself back up after 9/11, and that’s what this chapter looks into: the tale of Superman as a reaction to the September 11 terrorist attacks. By giving

America's classic hero a rebirth from the ground up, did the creators of *Smallville* provide a blueprint for Americans to do much the same in a time of such national crisis?

I would argue that the answer is yes. Clark Kent's changing body in *Smallville*—one that instead of sprouting armpit hair or causing his voice to crack gives him x-ray vision, heat vision, and super hearing—is something that he both is able to quickly gain control of, while at the same time causes significant feelings of alienation and difference as he attempts to navigate life in high school. These feelings of confusion—scary things outside of his control are happening to him, to no fault of his own—mirror how Americans felt following 9/11, and his ability to rein his powers in (in effect, solving his problems) capably tells Americans that they too can handle the new, unfamiliar world around them. His powers also place an undue burden of stress on him. His portrayed youth and innocence, combined with the fact that he willfully keeps himself from emotional connection with others as a means of keeping them safe, I argue, both reaffirm a comforting sense of American innocence as well as provide an altruistic figure for Americans to identify with. Finally, in the way that the show handles Lana Lang, I argue *Smallville* reaffirms certain gender norms in response to American anxieties following the terrorist attacks. Her victimization as a justification for violence can be mapped onto the way that America defended its own violence in the Middle East. Viewers' identification with her struggles also offers the “stand-in for actual social justice” that Spigel argues exists elsewhere in television, allowing viewers to feel good by feeling bad (Spigel, 2004, p. 247).

2. Reining in his powers

A recurring theme shows up in a handful of episodes revolving around Clark's acquisition of a new power. Brought on by some sort of trauma, be it emotional or physical, Clark gains a new power that he's completely unable to control. However, by the episode's end, he has not only mastered his new skill, but uses it to save somebody's life. This pattern occurs in "X-Ray," "Heat," and "Whisper" each happening in seasons one, two, and three, respectively.

X-ray vision is the first power that Clark develops and he does so early in season one.⁵ In "X-Ray," after being thrown through a window, he becomes able to see through the skin of the show's shape-shifting antagonist, revealing a greenish-glow around her bones. This obviously confuses and upsets Clark, and he has another bout of unexpected x-ray vision later in the episode. As he's climbing on a rope in gym class, his vision switches on, and he sees his friend Pete Ross's inner musculature and tendons. Clark falls off the rope in shock, and after this outburst he decides that it's time to rein his powers in. With the help of his father, Clark gets his vision under control by the end of the episode. This is crucial because he uses it both to prove the guilt of the antagonist, and uses it to save Lana from being buried alive.

In the next episode in which he develops a power, "Heat," Clark's heat vision is activated by feelings of sexual excitement—something that is, if not traumatic, certainly cause for a great deal of personal embarrassment. He's aroused by his new biology teacher and this feeling is magnified by the video he's watching in class about reproduction. After some training, he's able to control his heat vision so finely that he's able save Lex's life by melting a bullet mid-air at the end of the episode. In the next season, in "Whisper," he gains extremely erratic super hearing as his body compensated for being temporarily blinded. By the episode's end (when his vision has conveniently returned as well), he's able to use his new ability acutely enough to save Pete, who was in a warehouse hundreds of feet away from where Clark heard him. Again, there's definitely

a pattern here: Clark sustains trauma, Clark receives power he can't control, and Clark uses said power by the end of the episode to save the day.

What does this pattern indicate? Other than being a convenient plot device, it also gives viewers a stable track for events in their own lives, including the events following 9/11. Other television programs immediately following the disaster reassured Americans that they were “innocent objects of historical events outside their control” (Spiegel, 2004, p. 245). Spiegel references a pseudo-educational *West Wing* episode, and how its “‘why does everyone want to kill us?’ mantra...becomes...a form of ‘infantile citizenship’ that allows viewers to comfortably confront the horrors of guilt and war...” (p. 245). Here, American citizens are positioned as helpless individuals surrounded by an unfamiliar world of tumult. This aspect of 9/11 becomes America's puberty: there are changes happening that they can't control or predict, making their lives unstable and unfamiliar. Also like puberty, people are forced to grow up at a pace they're not necessarily comfortable with. Plotlines like the ones in *Smallville* above helped map out blueprints for how to move forward. The message behind these episodes is very classically “American,” in that Clark is shown to have solved his problems simply through hard work, and this is a callback to the “pick yourself by your bootstraps” mentality that has permeated American culture for so long. Spiegel (2004) also says that television often used World War 2 documentaries following as a means of inciting nostalgia, to “prepare America for the sacrifice and suffering that lay ahead” (p. 239). That's what Clark's journey through these episodes can mean to viewers: what's ahead is not going to be pleasant, but if you work hard enough and persevere, you'll come out on top.

3. Clark's Burden

What is perhaps the show's most persistent theme throughout Clark's adolescence is the undue burden that his powers place on him. Not only is he tasked with keeping others safe from outside dangers, but also keeping them safe from himself. Shahriar Fouladi (2011) discusses this in his essay about Smallville in reference to Clark's "monstrosity." Monstrosity means, essentially, a perversion of what it means to be a superhero. Original monstrosity, as Fouladi (2011) defines it, is the idea that the presence alone of superpowers leads the humans feeling endangered. This battle with his own nature is where Clark's greatest struggle comes to play—not in his quarrels with villains. This burden—being tasked with the protection of others from outside harm—is not entirely unlike the one that a national "superpower" (such as America) might face.

Clark's powers keep him from leading a normal life—he can't play football, where his powers would give him a surefire lottery ticket to high school superstardom. He also struggles to date, and most problematic of all, he is unable to share his secret with those he's closest to. Even when he does share his powers with others, it's mostly out of necessity. He told Pete in season two because Pete found his spaceship in a cornfield.⁶ Had Pete not kept the ship private after Clark revealed his true nature, the press and town would have been all over the idea of an alien in Smallville. When Chloe Sullivan finds out, it's because Clark had to use his powers in front of her. Lana Lang doesn't find out until season seven, when the use of Lana's ignorance to Clark's powers as a device for narrative tension had simply worn too thin.

The sequence most illustrative of this burden is in season five, in "Reckoning." Earlier in the season, Clark lost his powers, allowing him to start a secret-free relationship with Lana. He eventually gains them back, and with them, the secrets that had been associated with his abilities

for nearly 100 episodes. Tired of the trajectory of their relationship, Clark finally decides to tell Lana everything, an effort that proves very successful. Clark proposes to Lana early in the episode and she accepts, now in full awareness of who Clark is. Later in the episode, his father wins the senatorial race he engaged in (against Lex), adding a cherry to the top of the cake. Midway through the episode, Lex finds out that Lana knows Clark's secret. After Lana leaves his mansion, he drunkenly pursues her in his car, causing her to get into a fatal accident with a bus. Clark, blaming himself, receives a do-over from the start of the day, at the cost of someone else's life. Clark accepts, and in a tragic turn, opted not to tell Lana his secret (causing her to break up with him) and saw his father die instead of Lana. Clark's secret had finally cost the life of somebody that he loved.

This struggle, much like the one with his powers, can easily be mapped onto general cultural anxieties in the United States following 9/11. Spigel (2004) mentions a sequence in the aforementioned episode of *The West Wing* intended to instill a sense of cultural superiority in Americans. This is what *Smallville* does. Clark is shown as a morally correct, self-sacrificing figure, allowing viewers to relate to him to feel better about themselves and feel as though they're doing the right thing.⁷ His status as an adolescent/young adult maintains a certain level of innocence, and these two characteristics are very important to how viewers can map themselves onto Clark. Feeling as though one is "doing the right thing" can easily lead to a sense of superiority—even if it's a benign one—and in this way, *Smallville* functions much the same as *The West Wing* does. Clark's portrayal as a teenager only strengthens this point, as it allows viewers, as discussed earlier, to put themselves in the shoes of a young, naïve person who's simply trying to exist in a scary, unfamiliar world around them.

4. Clark and Lana

Clark's recurring love interest, Lana, appears throughout the first eight seasons, in varying degrees of a relationship with Clark.⁸ Throughout her life, Lana has often been a victim of a good deal of misfortune. It started when she was three when her parents died from a meteor crash in front of her eyes. This continued into her teenage years, mostly due to her proximity to Clark. She often finds herself in peril, only to have Clark swoop in and save the day.⁹ This, I argue, positions her as a classically feminine "damsel in distress." This structure is also seen elsewhere in the media post-9/11—Spigel's (2004) discussion of it in "Entertainment Wars" and Caroline Stabile's (2009) essay about the portrayal of women in *Heroes* are two examples—and the way *Smallville* depicts the relationship between its teenaged lovers serves to further reinforce depictions of gender following the 9/11 attacks.

The plot climax in "X-Ray" is where this is perhaps best on display in *Smallville*. The episode's shape-shifting antagonist, Tina, was obsessed with Lana and determined to take her place. Lana, late in the episode, is approached while she's in a graveyard at her parents' graves by whom she thinks is her first-season boyfriend Whitney. After "Whitney" monologues about how Lana doesn't "deserve her life," Whitney transforms into Tina and a struggle ensues. Tina chokes Lana until she passes out, and in the next scene, Lana is seen trapped in a grave. Clark finds his way to the graveyard, and is approached by Tina-Whitney. The two engage in a struggle, and Tina continues to fight Clark as a Whitney doppelganger, even after Clark reveals that he knows her secret. Clark wins, before rescuing Lana from the grave she was trapped in.

Stabile (2009), in her essay, takes serious issue with this sort of portrayal of women in superhero texts. She argues that despite its surface appearance of being inclusive (featuring

heroes of different ethnicities, genders, etc.), the superhero television show *Heroes* really isn't. Minority and female superheroes do exist, but "whiteness and masculinity occupy positions of power and invulnerability" (p. 89). Clark Kent has all of those things (whiteness, masculinity, power, and invulnerability), while Lana has none, making this difference that much more striking. She goes further, asserting that "our inability to imagine women as anything but vulnerable and in need of protection" provides justification for violence on a national level (p. 89). She says that acts of aggression in the first Gulf War were justified by "the need to protect women and children," and that the Bush Administration "used the Taliban's attacks on women to bolster its case for invading Afghanistan" (p. 89). A distinct parallel to this exists in *Smallville*. Much of the show's action and violence stems from needing to resolve the plot conflict—one that is often climaxed via the peril of Lana Lang—so here too, we see violence justified by the need to save a largely powerless woman. During the episode mentioned above, a lengthy, choreographed fight scene between Clark and Tina-Whitney is clearly constructed as the dramatic centerpiece of the episode, and it's entirely facilitated by Lana's need to be saved. If viewers felt trepidation about the national violence America was participating in, all they needed to do was watch a show like *Smallville* to find out why or how it can be justified.

Spigel (2004), using the words of Jayne Rodgers, also points to the victimization of women in post-9/11 coverage as being used as a tool to "restore gender, as well as social and political order" (246). It did so using "age-old Western fantasies of the East in which 'Oriental' men assault (and even rape) Western women, and more symbolically, the West itself" (p. 246). Here, the "Oriental" other is the Islamic terrorist, but in *Smallville*, the "meteor-freak" serves just as well. That's what Tina was in the episode mentioned above—a person with some type of mutation caused by *Smallville*'s initial meteor shower. Many of the antagonists in early seasons

are said freaks, and their status as a malignant, not well-understood other attacking Smallville's most-loved women easily fills the place of the "Oriental" in the narratives that Spiegel describes.

Lana functions primarily as the woman in distress of the series. One of the key narratives about the victimization of women that Spiegel mentions is the story of pregnant widows and how they were told on *Oprah* following 9/11. About one of the women featured on the show, she says, "The episode presents this woman as having lost not only her husband but also her voice and, with that, her ability to narrate her own story" (p. 247). This is exactly what happens to Lana toward the end of season three. Lana, frustrated with the trajectory of her relationship with Clark, decides to leave *Smallville* and study abroad in France for a semester to find herself. Without the stability of a man in her life, she is lost, in need of a new start. It could be argued that Lana leaving is her way of "narrating her own story," but since the most important result of her trip is her new relationship with another man (Jason Teague), this seems unlikely.

This isn't to say that women across the show are poorly represented—Chloe is a good example of a strong, plot-relevant woman whose best contributions to the show don't have to do with romance. Even Lana, in an all-too-brief instance, takes on the role of the hero for an episode. She learns self-defense and eventually saves Clark at the episode's conclusion, but that episode was most certainly the exception and not the rule.

In all, the way the show depicts Lana is a troubling one. We're given a woman in a superhero narrative who exists mostly to provide romantic tension and be saved, a manifestation of the ways that the country uses women as victims to justify its questionable behavior overseas. As Spiegel (2004) would put it, it also restores traditional gender-based order by using a sense of identification through female suffering as a sort of cultural band-aid, "where the spectator emerges feeling a sense of righteousness even while justice has not been achieved in reality..."

(p. 247). Lana's depiction may be the most worrisome way that 9/11 informs *Smallville*. Clark's puberty as a metaphor for a struggling America is mostly benign, and while the sense of cultural superiority that *Smallville* helps foster isn't really a good thing, the message about women that the show is trying to tell is not positive. It overemphasizes the "man" in this portrayal of the man of steel.

5. Conclusion

I've already made the argument that superhero stories are basically modern myth, and *Smallville* is no different. The show ably takes concerns about a nation-shattering disaster and assuages them using depictions of teenage Superman—an American hero—to do so. Clark's grapples with puberty, by emphasizing his ability to control his powers, help tell Americans that they too can emerge from the tumult around them stronger. The tales of his self-sacrifice as a result of the burden that his powers place on him create an altruistic figure for Americans to further identify with, allowing them to feel better about themselves and their moral position. His relationship with Lana also represents the ways in which consternation over 9/11 manifested itself on screen. Its construction of Lana as a clear victim facilitates on-screen violence, much like female victimization is used to justify real-world political violence. Finally, it also allows viewers to sympathize with her suffering, in order to feel good by feeling sympathy for her in much the same way other television programs accomplished this task.

Smallville represents a social fantasy. Beyond its general appeal as a superhero narrative, this fantasy works so well for viewers because it gives us a chance to feel like we're solving our problems by watching television. We don't actually address the anxieties that the show speaks to.

I touched on this toward the end of my discussion about Lana, and this is where some of Jameson's criticism about mass culture becomes relevant. Again, for Jameson, mass culture exists as a way to spread an ideology via fantasy by speaking to cultural concerns without doing so in a way that facilitates any legitimate cultural change. Here, that ideology would be stories that depict a strong, rebuilding America, America as being culturally superior, and ones that show women as victims. The fantasy is one that many can relate to—everyone, at some point, had to go through the generally awkward time that is adolescence and it's comforting to see that even Superman had the same problems. America's strongest hero went through teenage heartbreak, puberty, and fought with his parents too.¹⁰ It makes the solutions for national concerns I mention in the paragraph above particularly easy to convey.

That's not to say that *Smallville* is a wholly-negative television show, or even that the creators intended to promote the myth of American superiority. Still, it's important to keep in mind what the show is telling us while we watch it. It's easy to get wrapped up in the on-and-off love story between Clark and Lana and lose sight of some of the broader things that the show has to say. If nothing else, this chapter shows that even teenaged superhero soap operas can tell us about what's going on in the world around us—even if we have to use a little bit of x-ray vision to find it.

¹ In the DC Comics continuity, anyway. Stan Lee built an empire off of the teenaged struggles of Spider-Man for Marvel Comics.

² Save for fleeting scenes in *Batman Begins*.

³ There was actually a short-lived television series, *The Adventures of Superboy*, released in the 80s following the conclusion of the line of Superman films starring Christopher Reeve. The show found lukewarm reception (hence just four seasons) as it was basically Superman in costume fighting villains, but a bit younger.

⁴ I ended on an episode featuring the death of Clark's father (as examining father-son relationships was one of the original points of inquiry for this chapter). Jonathan's death could easily be seen as a turning point in the series, both for Clark as a person and for the overall plot of the show. This essay really only looks at the first half of a decade-long series, so companion work looking at the final five or so seasons would suit it nicely.

⁵ Outside of super speed, strength, and general invulnerability; he appears to have been born with those skills.

⁶ How a *spaceship*, of all things, was not found less than a hundred feet off of a highway in the 13 years following the meteor shower is beyond me, but the term "willing suspension of disbelief" exists for a reason, especially in a show about a super-powered hormonal alien.

⁷ The parallels between Jesus Christ and Clark at various points in the show serve to support this.

⁸ The fact that the way she is best introduced as "Clark's recurring love interest" is telling of her role in and of itself.

⁹ This is even referenced during an episode in season three. In an interesting turn on the one of the show's typical episode structures, Lana ends up saving Clark.

¹⁰ I'm sure that the generally very physically attractive cast played a large role in this as well.

CHAPTER FOUR: Holy Violence in Children's Cartoons, Batman!

1. Introduction

Like Wonder Woman and Superman, Batman is one of our modern pop-culture icons. He can be seen anywhere—movies, t-shirts, comic books, video games, and on television. Some of these images come from the mid-60s series starring Adam West and Burt Ward and others in the form of the more recent children's cartoons. There have been six Batman cartoons released since the early 90s, starting with 1992's *Batman: The Animated Series*—a show that was markedly different than previous superhero cartoons, infusing the genre with heavier, more adult themes in contrast to the silly Superfriends-esque cartoons from the 1970s and 1980s. Heavily influenced by Frank Miller's mid-80s reimagining of the character as well as the blockbuster 1989 Tim Burton film, *BAS* was a wild success, running for 85 episodes of the original series and winning four Emmy Awards, as well as having 76 sequel episodes in the two subsequent series, and three more canonically unrelated series starring Batman in the years following.

Leading up to and throughout the run of these cartoons, concerns about violence in the media, especially as it related to children, were building to a crescendo across U.S. Burns and Crawford (1999) discussed the spread over such concerns, saying "...many Americans feel as if violence has invaded their lives" (p. 147). They went further, saying

This fear has extended beyond the poor, inner-city neighborhoods, reaching affluent suburbs, towns, and rural areas. An issue that was once thought of as an urban problem has recently touched historically stable suburban and rural communities. For many,

violence suggests a breakdown in the social order, as no place seems safe anymore. (p. 147)

People that traditionally felt safe were could longer dismiss violence happening in the news as something that “would never happen to them.” It was becoming a problem that people rapidly agreed needed a solution.

Tales of individual concern told the same story. “The antics of “Sesame Street” are being slammed into the military maneuvers of combat. The capriciousness of fantasy has taken a new turn, exchanging its innocence for deadliness,” lamented Terri Hamlin (1987), a southern California teacher in an op-ed published in April 1987 in the *Las Angeles Times*. She continued, saying, “I was sickened as I listened to a little boy excitedly describe for me his tissue-paper collage of ‘blood,’ and I silently cried as another showed me his collage of a gun. Where, for our children, have all the flowers gone?” (Hamlin, 1987). In the eyes of the some of the individuals most influential their lives, our youngest and most impressionable members of society were being sullied by the likes of John Rambo and Jason Voorhees.

Even some teenagers found themselves troubled by what they saw in television and movies. “The media are too violent. Every night you hear about murders. One time I was listening to the radio and the announcer said, ‘Oh, it was quiet in L.A. There were only seven people killed this weekend,’” said Barnaby Go in 1993, then a senior at North Hollywood High School. “If people will pay, violent slasher films will continue to be made. The problem with film and television is that they're visual media. If you don't have a compelling story with visuals, people may not watch,” Go continued. The media follow where the money goes.

He was right. Go’s comments came about a year after *Mortal Kombat*, in its entire violent splendor, was released. Featuring spine-extracting and heart-ripping death blows, the video game

incited a panic across the country. It sparked congressional hearings, pleas for censorship, and even the current system for rating video games (Crossley, 2014). “(Mortal Kombat) was the equivalent of Disney distributing *Reservoir Dogs*, *American Psycho* on *Sesame Street*,” said Rob Crossley, a video games writer. It wasn’t just video games—rap music, movies, and television¹ were subject to public scrutiny in the early-to-mid-90s. As more and more research was conducted to figure out exactly how much violence effected children, the American bubble of anxiety continued to swell. Six more editions of *Mortal Kombat* were released through 1997, along two editions of *Doom*, another heavily-criticized video game. The two *Jurassic Park* movies released in the 90s finished as a pair of the decade’s top 10 grossers. Another two of the top 10 were disaster movies, *Independence Day* and *Armageddon*. *Law and Order*, one of television’s most successful shows, rose to prominence throughout the decade. *ER* too, a series predicated on human injury, caught fire. Gangsta rap, videos of which contained far more references to guns, drugs, alcohol, gambling, and violence than other types of music, became one of the decade’s most popular genres (Jones, 2009, 351). The bubble was at a breaking point.

It popped, like a black widow’s egg sac releasing little terrors everywhere, on April 20th, 1999 in Littleton, Colorado. The Columbine High School massacre ushered in a new era of paranoia over the way violence in media effects kids. No longer was violence the domain of senators and congressmen—it became a realm for the president to address. In the aftermath of the attack, President Bill Clinton clearly identified violent media as one of the factors leading to such tragedies:

We cannot pretend that there is no impact on our culture and our children . . . if there is too much violence coming out of what they see and experience... We have to ask people who produce things to consider the consequences of them--whether it's a violent movie, a

CD, a video game. If they are made, at least they should not be marketed to children.

(Fiore and Healy, 1999)

Clinton went on to ask “the surgeon general to prepare a report on youth violence, including the effects of new media in the computer age,” as well as call for gun control reform (Fiore and Healy, 1999). The exhaustive report condensed much of the existing research about the way violence affects kids, at once making academic research on the subject widely available and also validating the public’s fears (U.S. Office of the Surgeon General, et al, 2001). Its review of studies on the subject showed that media violence did affect children in a statistically significant way, lending credence to the concerns that had spread from living rooms to the oval office (U.S. Office of the Surgeon General, et al, 2001).

The perceived surge in violence sparked not only calls for gun control reform and action on the behalf of the surgeon general, but academic research about the effect of gun violence on children. Princeton University and the Brookings Institution spearheaded a journal of research dedicated solely to the topic of gun violence as it relates to children. Researchers Garbino, Bradshaw, and Vorrasio (2002) found that children exposed to gun violence “commonly experience difficulty concentrating in the classroom, declines in academic performance, and lower educational and career aspirations.” They also state that “Children do not have to witness gun violence directly to develop symptoms of traumatic stress” (2002). Even just hearing about or seeing it on TV can lead to kids feeling threatened. As it gun violence relates to media, it may be seen as “attractive” and lead individuals to “commit ‘copycat’ shootings or try to ‘outdo’ publicized school shootings” (2002). They refer back to Columbine in that the shooters “reported that they planned a ‘better’ school ambush by learning from the ‘mistakes’ of other publicized

school shooters” (2002). It’s clear that guns had become a particular point of anxiety as it related to violence, especially violence directed toward kids.

The research in this chapter analyzes how children’s *Batman* cartoons responded to this cultural milieu. What follows is an analysis of violence throughout all of the Batman cartoons released since *Batman: The Animated Series* debuted in 1992. Released in the heart of national panic over violence in the media, these shows should provide insight into how the entertainment industry’s youth-targeted depictions of violence have evolved in the two-and-a-half decades since. The preeminent Spiderman cartoon of the 90s, *Spider-Man: The Animated Series* appears to have succumbed to censorship—from the beginning of the series, Spider-Man didn’t actually throw punches, and guns didn’t fire real bullets—and I wanted to explore much the same thing throughout the history of Batman cartoons.

Given that superheroes, as myth, function as a way to navigate and alleviate cultural stress, I hypothesized that gun violence throughout the series would decrease. This hypothesis passes the smell test. It’s intuitive that, as our culture becomes more apprehensive about the role that guns and violence play in the lives of our children, that content industries might be pressured to decrease the frequency in which guns are depicted. However, the content analysis of *Batman* cartoon episodes that I conducted did not support this hypothesis. Using the coding and approach I adopted for this study, it appears that gun violence doesn’t change significantly throughout the chronological progression of the series. However, despite these findings, I was able to identify a handful of trends and themes that I will discuss in the following pages. First, the physical appearance of guns does change throughout the series. This indicates that while not proven by the research conducted, my hypothesis is still plausible. Additionally, I explore the notion of technological determinism as it relates to violence in cartoons, the representation of various

demographics involved in cartoon violence, and finally the presence of easily-accessible adult themes in the cartoons observed.

What follows is a selective literature review detailing the media effects/media influences theory debate, and examining the circumstances that preceded *BAS*—the environment in the comics industry in the mid-80s and the release of Tim Burton’s *Batman*—as well as a handful of pertinent studies analyzing children’s cartoons. In addition to a literature review, this research consists of a rigorous content analysis of each episode of a series starring *Batman*, 304 episodes in total, since *BAS*, specifically focused on the pursuit hypothesis mentioned above.

2. Literature Review

Media Influences and Media Effects

Violence in cartoons is best interpreted when viewed through the lenses of a pair of related, but still different media analysis theories: media effects and media influences. The difference between the way each theory describes the effect (or influences) of media on its viewers is subtle, as both scholars supporting the media effects approach and those supporting the influences approach believe that television and other forms of media have effects on their viewers. Where they differ is largely in how they see viewers as receptors of media. Media effects scholars see viewers as passive recipients of media messages, placing more emphasis on the perceived cause-and-effect nature of specific content. Thus, they go about their research by focusing on the content of media and its direct effect on viewers through methods such as content analysis supplemented by laboratory observation or broad surveys. Media influences researchers, on the other hand, see viewers as active decoders of information that media is

sending, placing more emphasis on the personal interpretation of media and the various personal factors leading to it. Their research is based more on qualitative methods to learn about how or why viewers are receiving particular messages from the media. What follows is a brief history of the media effects theory since its inception, and descriptions and criticisms of media effects and media influences theories (Mittell, 2012).

History of the Theory

Early media effects research ascribed a lot of power to the effects of media—something attested by the name of the earliest model, the “hypodermic-needle” model (also known as the magic bullet theory or direct effects model), based on the idea that the media “shoots” their substantial effects into passive victims. An influential study conducted in 1940 about the famous *War of the Worlds* broadcast in 1938 concluded that much of the hysteria was caused by the hysteria itself—not from a “gullible belief” in the media. This research paved the way for the minimal-effects model, one that is based on the idea of selective exposure and selective retention, the idea that people “expose themselves to the media messages that are most familiar to them, and they retain the messages that confirm the values and attitudes they already hold,” (Campbell, R., Martin, C. R., & Fabos, B., 2013, p. 459). As the media studies field progressed through the 1960s and beyond, numerous other theories regarding the media and their effect were developed: the social learning theory, the agenda-setting theory, cultivation effect, and the spiral of silence, theories that attempt to explain different ways that violent content, news media, television in general, and how mass public opinion, respectively, affect our lives (Campbell, R., Martin, C. R., & Fabos, B., 2013)².

Media Effects

While both media effects and media influences researchers agree that television does have an effect on its viewers, the primary difference lies within how these researchers see the viewers as receptors of the messages that television is sending. Media effects scholars measure what they view as the direct effects of media on their passive audiences. They typically use methods of quantitative analysis, such as content analysis, to determine the specific types of messages that the media are sending, and supplement that research with surveys or laboratory experiments to see how subjects react to different types of media.

There are several valid criticisms regarding media effects research. For one, it's difficult for a content analysis study to properly measure context of certain television content in a matter that remains consistent throughout the analysis, particularly regarding violence. The intended meaning of violence in a show such as *The Three Stooges* is certainly very different from the types of violence seen in crime dramas, but it's difficult to make distinctions between the two without heavy subjective influence in coding decisions. Not all violence in television is necessarily bad, and it is difficult to tell the difference between what is potentially harmful and what isn't. Another major critique of media effects, as Mittell says, is that many media effects researchers see violence in television as a negative, destructive force on its audience, and that media effects researchers use their studies to validate their own assumptions, potentially ignoring other societal effects that are proven to have more of an effect on peoples' day-to-day lives.³ There is also heavy criticism surrounding the idea that television viewers are passive receptors of television messages, and media researchers are beginning to take more nuanced approaches to their research that strive to account for how the media that people consume commingle with other social and socioeconomic factors in an individual person's life (Mittell, 2013).

Media Influences

The core of media influences research is about shifting away from the media effects paradigm and adopting a softer stance regarding media and the overall effect it has on the lives of its audience. Media influences scholars see viewers as active recipients of messages, selectively decoding certain messages based on a host of personal factors. They use qualitative research methods, such as ethnographical studies of individuals or longitudinal studies to see how individuals internalize television consumption over a long period of time, in order to study how audiences decode the messages that they are being sent. This makes sense—qualitative studies tend to measure individuals or groups of them, and media influences researchers believe that the individual is much more important when it come to the interpretation of media messages than media effects researchers do (Mittell, 2013).

The primary criticism regarding the media influences approach concerns its scope. The nature of qualitative analysis, such as ethnography, is very individualized, and as a result, is very difficult to draw generalizations to understand a large swath of the population⁴. Rather than using a more scientific, controlled approach, it relies on the subjective nature of interviews and individual perception, thus relying on persuasive appeal of the researcher's writing to make convincing arguments. Media influences research, at its worst, "simply reports the opinions of viewers without sufficient analysis of their significance and contexts," thus making it difficult to make definitive statements about the validity of such studies (Mittell, 2013).

The method of research used on this project is content analysis. That is not to say that I subscribe to the same notions that media effects scholars do—rather, it seems that the best course of action is to use the results found in the study as a baseline to contextualize the ways that viewers could potentially interpret this message. This study will be useful as a springboard for research in either school of thought discussed in the previous paragraphs, as it identifies, very

explicitly, the amount and type of violence shown in children's superhero programming—something that media effects researchers could reference in either laboratory studies of children viewing these cartoons or through surveys used to assess the effects on larger audiences. For media influences research, it will be beneficial in much the same way. An ethnographer could very easily use the results found by this study to provide context to the way their subjects behave. This research is useful for longitudinal studies as well, as *Batman: The Animated Series*, the first cartoon analyzed in this research, began airing 22 years ago, providing a broad spectrum of time to analyze the development of those who have been watching Batman and superhero cartoons since their inception.

Conclusion

Neither media effects nor media influences theory is without its flaws. It is also important for researchers from either school, as well as those interpreting their research, to be able to contextualize each and allow the two to work together to improve our understanding of the way that television and media in general affect their audiences. They both provide a piece of the puzzle when dissecting media's effect—media influence gives an insight to the personal interpretation while media effects will unpack the nature of the messages being sent—and together research from each respective school of thought can work in conjunction to give us a better understanding of the effects that media have on us.

Literature Pertaining to the Cartoon Genre

With an understanding of the broader media effects/media influences debate, it's important to now put this study in perspective with other research of superhero cartoons (and cartoons in general) regarding violence and the relationships between the characters. A handful

of themes arise from reviewing literature on the subject: that “out groups” (minorities and women) have been drastically underrepresented by the animated cartoon genre throughout its history (Klein, H. and Shiffman, K. S., 2009), and that women, when actually shown in superhero cartoons, need to adopt masculine traits while not sacrificing traditionally feminine ones or are portrayed as outright domestic nags (Baker, K., & Raney, A.A., 2007; Roman and McAllister, 2012). Finally, I also discuss that crime (and by extension, violence) is portrayed in superhero cartoons as an individual fault, rather than a result of societal ill⁵ (Kort-Butler, L. A., 2012).

Representation

The result of Klein and Shiffman’s (2009) study should come of little surprise. They selected a substantial cartoon sample spanning most of the twentieth century and found that “females accounted for only 16.4% of all characters with a codable gender” (p. 64) and that “as time has passed, cartoons have contained fewer and fewer African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asians when compared with their population at large” (p. 65). These results are pertinent to this study because it establishes a baseline by which to compare the representation of these groups to the results of my research. Some of the language they use when discussing their results is important to consider as well. “Symbolic annihilation” is a term they frequently use—one that doesn’t have an entirely firm definition, but invokes a sense of a serious level of underrepresentation in these cartoons. Symbolic annihilation is defined broadly in the article as “the way cultural production and media representations ignore, exclude, marginalize, or trivialize a particular group,” (p. 57), and for the operational purposes of the study, was defined as representation of a group in the cartoons being less than one-fourth of the population at-large (pg. 60). Keeping themes like symbolic annihilation in mind is crucial when analyzing media,

both in my study and in general, because, as Klein and Shiffman touch on in their article, the portrayal of certain groups (or lack of portrayal, frankly) sends “implied messages about what it means to be a member or a culturally valued group versus a member of a socially disenfranchised group,” (p. 57). Though the low frequency in which out groups appear in these shows is troubling, one of the more encouraging aspects, though secondary, of Klein and Shiffman’s study is that it found that when they were actually represented in cartoons, out groups were not portrayed particularly differently than their white, male peers (p. 69).

Gender Roles

This subject—the treatment of an out-group (women, in particular) was the focus of Kaysee Baker and Arthur A. Raney’s (2007) work. They centered on blocks of television programming coded for superheroes, and then further coded those programs for themes and character portrayals specific to gender roles. What it found was that while female characters⁶ were making some progress regarding their roles in superhero cartoons, these advancements have not come at the cost of very traditionally feminine aspects of character portrayals in television. There are numerous traits that female characters were found to have that were not significantly (in the statistical sense) different than males, including “lacks bravery,” “needs rescuing,” and “difficulty making decisions,” among others (pg. 34). This shows that, by and large, female heroes were as independent, courageous, and decisive as male heroes—but at the same time, were, significantly, more “concerned about appearance,” and “easily excited by a crisis,” (pg. 34). This is indicative of these cartoons existing in a post-feminist media landscape. Much like Wonder Woman in the 70s, in order to exist among men, female superheroes must also have their traditionally “feminine” aspects on equal display. An interesting point of data, especially when considered in conjunction with Zachary Roman and Matthew P. McAllister’s

(2012) work, concerns the role of mentors in the shows studied. In Baker and Raney's study, 20 of 21 mentor characters were male, something that the Roman and McAllister's research would support.

Roman and McAllister conducted comprehensive study of the first season of *Batman: The Brave and the Bold* (a cartoon included in my research) and the series' surrounding merchandise. Their findings about female characters are somewhat of a hybrid of Klein and Shiffman's and Baker and Raney's work—that female superheroes are portrayed in the show,⁷ but regarding representation in the toy line, are completely nonexistent (pg. 8)—and some of the most important discussion in their work is about Batman (a male character) as a mentor. The study talks at length about Batman's status as a mentor figure to nearly all characters in the show. Though this is mostly an effort to portray supporting characters as more juvenile in order to better relate to the toy-buying audience of the show, it helps define the most important character of the series' role. Again, as with Baker and Raney's study, what this research studies is not exactly congruent with mine, but it provides a good deal of context to the inter-personal workings of the cartoon with the second-most amount of episodes that I coded. The portrayals of gender and its role in these cartoons are important, because, as Baker and Raney say, "they help define what it means to be female or male for children, whose cognitive development, abilities, interests, and motivations can leave them susceptible to the influence of television models," (p. 27). The things that kids see in TV are things that they can take away and apply to real life.

Crime

Moving away from gender roles, another important aspect of superhero cartoons is crime. This is pretty intuitive—heroes like Batman wouldn't be needed if not for crime in Gotham—and with crime comes violence. Kort-Butler (2012) tackles the portrayal of crime in superhero

cartoons directly, and among the three different cartoons studied was *Batman: The Animated Series*, another one of the cartoons in my research. She first laid out the “dominant ideology” about crime in television, basically that the cause of crime comes from inherent individual faults, rather than societal factors (p. 567), and then studied close to fifty individual episodes of superhero cartoons to determine whether or not they adhere to that ideology. In short, they did (p. 578). Through these cartoons, children are being told that criminals are inherently different than the general population.⁸ This is potentially problematic because much of the root of crime in the real-world isn’t because criminals are born “terrible people,” as these cartoons portray, but because they fall into crime as a result of their social environment. Kort-Butler acknowledges that her study doesn’t allow her to actually assess how children are interpreting these messages about crime, but her work is an excellent examination of the relationship between cartoons and the early constructions of crime and criminals in children. Like the previous studies mentioned, this one delves into a topic that isn’t identical to mine, but as stated, crime generally begets violence—providing insight as to why some of the violence coded in my study happened, as well as the way violent criminals are portrayed.

These studies point toward several themes that have emerged in superhero cartoons as well as the genre as a whole: minority and female underrepresentation; the need for females to adopt more masculine traits to succeed as heroes; males, Batman especially, existing as mentors; and the idea that criminals are inherently different and “bad.” Superhero cartoons have much to tell about the worldviews of our youngsters could be shaped, and studies such as the ones mentioned above as well as the one discussed in the following pages that I conducted provide important pieces to the puzzle that we’re laying out for kids.

Paving the Way for Batman: The Animated Series and Subsequent Bat-toons

Batman: The Animated Series was a milestone in the superhero cartoon genre. Pairing detailed artwork and a carefully crafted aesthetic with heavier, mature themes, the program broke new ground for a genre filled with poorly animated and tritely scripted shows. *BAS* is first chronologically in the group of cartoons that my later research details and it provided a solid base for the following cartoons to find success upon.

What follows is an analysis of what circumstances led to the series' creation. Using momentum from the comic industry's shift to a writer and artist-driven "star" system (Brooker, 2000), as well as the immense popularity of the character following the release of Tim Burton's 1989 film *Batman* (Pearson, R. & Uricchio, W., 1991), series creators Bruce Timm and Eric Radomski had a perfect environment to create *BAS* in 1992.

The "Star System"

Will Brooker, writer of *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*, discusses a major shift within the comic book industry. Two significant changes happened: the introduction of direct sales, as well as author royalties (p. 260). Direct sales are essentially what they sound like; they allow for comic companies to sell their comics directly to specialist comic dealers, rather than the usual magazine and news outlets like newsstands or mom-and-pop stores. This created the comic-book store environment, giving fans a place to easily receive their comics in better condition physically as well as a place to congregate and build and share opinions about the content of the comics they were reading. Brooker cites an interview with longtime Batman writer and editor Denny O'Neill, providing a quote that summarizes the situation well:

...The audience became interested and began to demand a certain quality level...the business people here at DC were coming to believe that the direct market was the wave of

the future and that this would create a body of knowledgeable readers...the readers who would care about good material and would notice bylines... (p.261)

What O'Neill touches upon here is what led to the royalty system of paying content creators. Previously, those involved in the creative production of a comic were paid a flat rate per page, with the company retaining all usage rights. Once the buyers of comics became more focused on plot content, it made better business sense to reward the authors that were producing the best work, and that's what Pacific Comics did early in the 80's by giving its writers royalties and shared ownership rights. Soon after, the major companies like DC had to adopt the same practices. This led to a shift in the way fans anticipated comics—instead of simply waiting for the new Batman issue to come out, they could now wait for a particular artist's or writer's "take" on Bats. Fans moved through the 80s waiting to see how the interpretations of Frank Miller, Alan Moore or Grant Morrison would work, or to see what Brian Bolland or Dave McKean could do with their artwork.

All of this discussion seems, at a glance, detached from *BAS*. The comics industry is something entirely different from the toy sales-driven cartoon industry, but the way their content creation functioned was much the same. Look at any superhero cartoon from the 1960s through the mid-1980s. They all look, save for different characters, more or less the same. Some are poorly colored,⁹ others recycle the same stock background, taking little care to hide it, and all were artistically lacking compared to *BAS*. This was the way comics worked prior to the early 80s—each had their own aesthetic that artists had to adhere to, and it didn't matter who was writing, because as O'Neill put it, when he started "the editor was God because it didn't matter who was doing the books, not a bit. Batman sold regardless of who the creative team was..." (p. 261). With the new precedent in the comics industry that allowed writers and artists to make

their own creative interpretations of Batman, Timm and Radomski were able to do much the same in their animated version of the Dark Knight.

Tim Burton's Batman:

In addition to the focal shift to the content creators in the comic industry, the massive success of Tim Burton's *Batman*, released in 1989, was no doubt one of the reasons that *BAS* and the subsequent Bat-toons were able to flourish. Eileen R. Meehan's article in 1991's *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, goes into great detail explaining the exact steps that Warner laid to ensure *Batman's* success.

Before¹⁰ giving audiences that were used to Adam West's campy incarnation of the character from the 60s an entirely different and foreign interpretation, Warner had to be sure that people wouldn't reject¹¹ a darker, brooding, loner Batman (Pearson, R. & Uricchio, W., 1991, p. 53). They did that, as Meehan says, with the release of Frank Miller's 1986 comic book, *The Dark Knight Returns*.¹² *DKR's* success prompted more releases of a darker Batman in comics, culminating in 1988's call-in vote as to whether or not DC would kill off Robin¹³ (Pearson, R. & Uricchio, W., 1991, p. 54). Warner then released an expansive set of merchandise for *Batman*, featuring both images of Batman from the comic books as well as those from the movie, in order to support the film.

In short, what happened in the years preceding *Batman* laid the groundwork for the monetary and commercial success of the animated series three years later. DC already knew that audiences would go for a darker Batman, and with all of the merchandise released, coupled with the release of Burton's sequel film *Batman Returns* three months prior to the debut of the cartoon, Batman stayed fresh in the minds of many. That's not to short the creators of the

show—without their efforts, the cartoon would not have been what it was—but Warner set them up with quite a pitch that Timm and co. went on to hit out of the park.

3. Brief of the Cartoons Studied

To avoid confusion as the analysis weaves through references to six different cartoons all starring the same character, as well as provide background regarding the actual content analyzed, a brief description of the cartoons is necessary. What follows is a short summary of each of the six cartoons studied.

Batman: The Animated Series: (85 episodes, two seasons, 1992-95)

Airing on Fox and the brainchild of Bruce Timm and Eric Radomski, this series, based on Frank Miller's mid-80s reinvention of the character as well as Tim Burton's 1989 feature film, featured a darker, heavier tone than past incarnations of Batman on TV. Set in a nebulous time period with both advanced computers and distinctly 40s-style automobiles and architecture, it featured very detailed art and high-quality animation, and its distinctive art style, equal parts film noir and art deco, has been aptly dubbed "Dark Deco." The first 65 episodes (season one) generally focus on Batman, with a handful of episodes featuring Dick Grayson's Robin, and the second season, called "The Adventures of Batman and Robin," feature the caped crusader's sidekick more heavily. The series won four Emmy Awards, including Outstanding Animated Program and Outstanding Writing in an Animated Program in 1993.

The New Batman Adventures: (24 episodes, one season, 1997-99)

This series, created as a continuation of *BAS* by much of the same team as the original animated series, more heavily featured Batman's sidekicks Nightwing (Dick Grayson), Robin

(Tim Drake), and Batgirl (Barabara Gordon) than *BAS* did. The series also featured a more streamlined, modern art style with brighter colors and many revisions to the character models of both the heroes and the villains. *NBA* was aired on the cable network WB in conjunction with *Superman: The Animated Series*, as part of an hour-long block of television called *The New Batman/Superman Adventures*, and won two Emmy Awards, including 1998's Outstanding Special Class Animated Program.

Batman Beyond: (52 episodes, three seasons, 1999-2001)

Batman Beyond, also made by the same creative team as *BAS* and *NBA*, was set in the same canon as the prior two series, but in 2039, 40 years after the end of events in *NBA*. It features an elderly Bruce Wayne as a mentor to the new Batman, Terry McGinnis, a high school student. This series introduces a wealth of new villains unique to the McGinnis Bat-universe, and its generic roots are distinctly in science-fiction, rather than the film-noir origins of *BAS*. The series also heavily focuses on the interpersonal relations of Terry as he struggles through high school and teen-aged problems while maintaining his responsibilities as Batman. *BB* won a pair of Emmy Awards, including Outstanding Special Class Animated Program in 2001.

The Batman: (65 episodes, five seasons, 2004-08)

The Batman was the first series coded in this research to not be included in the "Timm-verse" of DC animated cartoons and does not belong to the same canon as the prior three cartoons mentioned. Featured is a visibly young Bruce Wayne as he battles crime in Gotham. Airing on the WB and later the CW, the first two seasons of this series were solely focused on Batman, and Batgirl and Robin (Dick Grayson) were introduced in seasons three and four, respectively. Season five focused less on Batman's sidekicks as it did other heroes in the DC universe, featuring team-ups with other characters such as the Flash, Superman, and Martian

Manhunter, among others. The series was nominated for 12 Emmy Awards and won six, largely in categories involving sound editing.

Batman: The Brave and the Bold: (65 episodes, three seasons, 2008-11)

The Brave and the Bold, named after the 60s team-up based comic series that served as the inspiration for the cartoon, deviated greatly from previous Bat-formulas, and featured a much more cartoony, slap-stick tone. The inter-dimensional character Bat-Mite aptly referred to the series as a “love letter to Silver Age of comics,” in the final episode of the series and Batman (Bruce Wayne) and his cohorts (usually another hero or heroes, sometimes popular characters like Aquaman, and other times with lesser-known casts of heroes like the Freedom Fighters), routinely found themselves in absurd situations hatched by both mainstream and obscure villains. The series draws heavily on the pop-art camp aesthetic, and uses humor more frequently than previous cartoons. The series was nominated for one Emmy Award for a first-season musical episode, but did not win any major awards.

Beware the Batman: (26 episodes, one season, 2013-14)

Beware the Batman is the most recent Bat-toon, presently airing on Cartoon Network. It is animated entirely in a CGI style, featuring 3D character models. It stars Bruce Wayne as Batman, a younger, more able-bodied Alfred as well as a new sidekick, Tatsu Yamashiro, a.k.a. Katana, the first minority full-time sidekick throughout Batman’s animated run. After running for eleven episodes in late 2013 on Cartoon Network’s Saturday morning block, the cartoon was pulled from the air with little explanation, and later moved to a weekly, 3 a.m. timeslot scheduled to begin playing the remaining 15 unaired episodes in late July 2014 (Siegel, 2014). The series was nominated for three 2014 Emmy Awards, and the awards are due for announcement on August 25, 2014

4. Method

Choosing the Sample

The sample chosen for this research was a consecutive four-minute sample of every episode in each series starring Batman from *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992-95) forward. This consisted of the aforementioned series, *The New Batman Adventures* (1997-99), *Batman Beyond* (1999-2001), *The Batman* (2004-08), *Batman: The Brave and the Bold* (2008-11), and *Beware the Batman* (2013-14). These specific cartoons were chosen in order to fall in line with the overall Batman-based theme of the research, in addition to providing an excellent twenty-plus year spectrum to be able to analyze the evolution of the cartoons in. After some experimentation, four minutes was chosen as an appropriate sample time because it allowed for the samples to consist of a sizable portion of each episode (roughly 20 percent), while being a short enough time sample to be manageable under the framework and schedule of the research.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was any act of violence defined as actions “done with the legitimate intent to physically harm a character,” as per the coding manual. Upon recognizing an act of violence, the coder categorized it into one of seven types: direct physical violence, projectile violence, gun violence, explosive/bomb violence, disaster violence, magic/supernatural/poison violence, and other violence. Initially, “other violence” was not a part of the coding manual, but was added during the course of the coding by the researcher in order to account for a handful of types of violence that did not fall under the other categories. In addition to coding the type of

each violent act, the scope (the number of characters involved) was coded as well, as was the gender, age, and race of each character involved.

Inter-coder Reliability

To verify inter-coder reliability, three subjects coded the same episode using the coding manual. “Riddler’s Revenge” from *The Batman* was chosen at random to be coded. Results from the first two coders were excellent, as the instances of violence that both the researcher and the coders recorded matched at greater than 95 percent accuracy, meaning that the type of violence, scope, and demographic information of the characters matched 95% of the time.

There were small problems regarding the scope of each violent act, as the researcher intended for each character in a group smaller than five members to have their demographic information coded, but the coders did not realize this and coded all members of the “small group” category for the same demographic information as one unit (given that each character in the “small group” did have the same demographic info). This was a problem easily shored up by edits to the coding manual to make it explicit that each character was to be recorded. The other was that there were a handful (12 between the two) instances that the coders coded and the researchers didn’t, or vice versa.

Four of these instances were solved by editing the coding manual to include intended violence (punches, kicks, gun fire, planted bombs, etc.) that doesn’t connect with its target as violence, three were resolved by clarifying how to handle captives in the coding manual, another two were easily resolved by clarifying explosive/bomb violence, and another was solved by expressly stating that disaster violence had to be carried out by a character or group of characters in order to qualify. There was one instance that a coder simply missed, as well as another that was coded as a result of not reading the manual clearly enough.

The third coder presented much more difficulty, and only coded approximately half of the amount of instances that the researcher (as well as the other coders) did, causing his results to be far off of the researcher's. It was decided to not take these results into consideration as this coder lost his initial set of results and did not respond to requests and inquiries in a timely fashion. He completed a second coding of the episode only an hour before the absolute deadline that he was given by the researcher, and upon discussion between the researcher and his adviser on the issue, it was deemed that this sample was not reliable enough for use. The strength of the match between the results from the first two coders (save for the already described easily-fixed discrepancies) factored into this decision as well.

Coding Process

The sample was coded in a fairly straightforward manner. To randomly distribute the time samples across the 304 episodes from all of the seasons combined, the researcher input an abbreviation representing the series and episode number for each episode into the website random.org in order to obtain a randomized list of each episode. The sample taken from the listed episode depended on where it fell on the random list. For the first episode on the list and every fourth episode from that point forward, the first four minutes were coded. For the second episode and every fourth episode from that point forward, a four-minute segment of roughly the second quarter of the episode was coded. The third quarter of each episode was coded in the same way as the second (using the third episode on the list and every fourth from that point), and the fourth quarter of each episode was done in the same way.

The researcher generally coded each series together after forming lists of which episodes from each series had which sample quadrant recorded, largely for the sake of convenience.

Episodes were viewed from Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, as well as DVDs, and it was impractical time-wise to switch between the three.

5. Results

The total number of instances of violence coded throughout the samples of the six cartoons coded was 2378. The most violent cartoon, in terms of raw instances of violence was *Batman: The Brave and the Bold*. *BAB* also had the highest total instances per sample, with 11.6 instances occurring per four minutes of the cartoon. What follows in the next several paragraphs is a detailed description of the data collected from each cartoon, as well as a final paragraph describing the statistical significance of violence trends from one cartoon to the next. See the attached sheet of tables for complete reference.

Batman: The Animated Series

A total of 460 instances of violence occurred in the 85 samples of *BAS* that were coded. Of those, 320 (69.57%) were direct physical violence, 36 (7.83%) were projectile violence, 42 were from gun violence (9.13%), 16 from explosive/bomb violence (3.48%), four were a result of disaster violence (.87%), 24 were from magic/supernatural/poison violence (5.22%) and 18 (3.91%) were coded as other.

For the scope of actors of violence, 411 acts were committed by individuals (89.35%). Twenty-seven (5.87%) were committed by small groups, three by large groups (.65%) and 19 (4.13%) were not applicable. 382 acts were committed to individuals (83.04%), 52 to small groups (11.30%), seven to large groups (1.52%), nine to crowds (1.96%) and 10 (2.17%) were coded as not applicable.

Male characters were coded as actors 411 times (85.63%), females were coded 52 times (10.83%), and 17 characters were coded as not applicable (3.54%). For the age of the actors, 20 were child/teenagers (4.17%), 434 (90.42%) were adults, nine were elderly (1.88%), and 17 were not applicable (3.54%). For race, 411 characters were coded as white (85.63%), two as Asian (.42%), 14 as Middle Eastern (2.92%), and five as black (1.04%). Nineteen (3.96%) characters were animals, 18 were unknown (3.75%), and 11 were coded as not applicable (2.29%).

Among characters that were the recipients of violence, 435 were male (87.00%), 46 were female (9.20%), one was unknown (.20%) and 18 were not applicable (3.60%). Twenty characters (4.00%) were children/teenagers, 438 (87.60%) were adults, 24 were elderly (4.80%), and 18 were not applicable (3.60%). For race, 426 (85.20%) were white, one was Asian (.20%), 11 were Middle Eastern (2.20%), and six were black (1.20%). Twenty-three (4.60%) animals appeared, as did 18 unknown characters (3.60%) and 15 characters that were not applicable (3.00%).

The New Batman Adventures

There were a total of 170 violent acts observed throughout the sole season *NBA*, resulting in an average of 7.08 per episode. Of those 171 acts, 102 were a result of direct physical violence (60.00%), 17 were due to projectile violence (9.94%), 25 were a result of gun violence (14.71%). Explosive/bomb violence accounted for 10 acts (5.88%), 10 acts of magic/supernatural/poison violence (5.88%) and six were coded as “other” (3.53%).

Pertaining to the scope of the violent actors, 158 acts were committed by individuals (92.94%), 11 were by small groups (6.47%) and there was one act of violence where the actor’s scope was coded as “not applicable” (.59%). For the scope of the recipients of violence, 142

were individuals (83.53%), 23 instances of violence were committed to a small group (13.53%), two to a large group (1.18%), one to a crowd (.59%) and two were not applicable (1.18%).

144 acting characters were coded as male (77.84%), 37 were female (20.00%), and four were not applicable (2.16%). 30 acting characters were child/teens (16.22%), 142 were adults (76.76%), nine were elderly (4.86%), and four were not applicable (2.16%). Only two discernable human races were coded amongst actors, 148 white characters (80.00%), and two black characters (1.08%). Eight characters were coded as animals (4.32%) and 27 were coded as “unknown” (14.59%).

Amongst characters that were recipients of violence, 157 were male (82.63%), 28 (14.74%) were female, and five were not applicable (2.63%). 30 were child/teen (15.79%), 150 were adults (78.95%), five were elderly (2.63%), and five were not applicable (2.63%). Regarding race, again, only white and black characters were coded for discernable human races, with 176 white characters (92.63%), and 5 black characters (2.63%). Seven animals were coded (3.68%) as were two (1.05%) unknown characters.

Batman Beyond

In three seasons and 52 episodes of *BB*, a total of 390 instances of violence were coded in the samples, good for 7.5 per sample. Of these instances, 245 were a result of direct physical violence (62.82%), 53 were a result of projectiles (13.59%), 43 were from guns (11.03%), 14 were from explosive/bomb violence (3.59%), three were a result of disasters (.77%), ten were a result of magic/supernatural/poison violence (2.56%) and 22 were coded as other (5.64%).

For scope of the actors of violence, 362 acts were committed by individuals (92.82%), 15 (3.85%) by small groups, six (1.54%) by large groups, one was committed by a crowd (.26%) and six (1.54%) more were coded as not applicable. For recipients, 348 acts were committed

toward individual characters (89.23%), 25 were committed toward small groups (6.41%), two (.51%) were committed to crowds, and seven (1.79%) were coded as not applicable.

Of the characters that committed violence, 324 (81.20%) were male, 50 (12.53%) were female, one was unknown (.25%), and 24 were not applicable (6.02%). 136 were child/teenage characters (34.09%), 202 were adults (50.63%), 33 (8.27%) were elderly, 17 were unknown (4.26%), and 11 (2.76%) were not applicable. 267 characters were white (66.92%), 13 (3.26%) were Asian, 33 were black (8.27%). Five characters were coded as aliens (1.25%), 17 were animals (4.26%), 57 were unknown (14.29%), and seven (1.75%) were not applicable.

For the recipients of violent acts, 360 (88.02%) were male, 41 were female (10.02%), and eight were not applicable (1.96%). 175 recipients were children/teenagers (42.79%), 185 were adults (45.23%), 37 (9.05%) were elderly, one was unknown (.24%) and 11 were not applicable (2.69%). Regarding race, 312 (76.27%) were white, 7 (1.71%) were Asian, and 25 (6.11%) were black. Twelve animals were coded (2.93%) as well as 49 unknown characters (11.98%), and four not applicable characters (.98%).

The Batman

Five seasons and 65 episodes of *The Batman* aired, with 452 total instances of violence among them among the samples coded, averaging 6.95 per sample. 293 were a result of direct physical violence (64.82%), 55 were from projectile violence (12.17%), 9 were as a result of guns (1.99%), 28 as a result of explosions/bombs (6.19%), 1 as a result of a disaster (.22%), 49 as a result of magic/supernatural/poison violence (10.84%) and 17 were coded as other (3.76%).

Regarding the scope of the actors of violence, 422 acts were committed by individuals (93.36%), 19 were committed by small groups (4.20%), eight (1.77%) by large groups, and three was coded as not applicable (.66%). Among acts of violence committed, 389 were committed to

individuals (86.06%), 38 (8.41%) to small groups, 17 to large groups (3.76%), 7 to crowds (1.55%) and one was not applicable (.22%).

For the gender of those that committed violence, 378 were male (80.60%), 50 (10.66%) were female, 6 were unknown (1.28%), and 35 were not applicable (7.46%). Fifty-five were child/teenagers (11.73%), 364 were adults (77.61%), 12 were elderly (2.56%), 38 were not applicable (8.10%). With regard to race, 373 (79.53%) of characters were white, 7 (1.49%) were Asian (1.49%), two (.43%) were Latino, and eight were black (1.71%). There were eight aliens coded (1.71%), as well as 11 animals (2.35%), 32 unknown characters (6.82%), and 28 that were not applicable (5.97%).

For characters that were recipients of violence, 383 were male (81.14%), 56 (11.86%) were female, six were unknown (1.27%), and 27 were not applicable (5.72%). With respect to age, 60 characters were children/teenagers (12.71%), 367 were adults (77.75%), 13 (2.75%) were elderly, and 32 were not applicable (6.78%). For race, 397 (84.11%) characters were white, six (1.275%) were Asian, two (.42%) were Latino, and eight were black (1.69%). Ten alien characters were coded (2.12%), five characters were animals (1.06%), 18 were unknown (3.81%), and 26 were not applicable (5.51%).

Batman: The Brave and the Bold

In *BAB*, there were 754 total instances of violence. Of those, 440 (58.36%) were from direct physical violence, 86 were from projectile violence (11.41%), 88 were from gun violence (11.67%), 40 were from explosive/bomb violence (5.31%), four were from disaster violence (.53%), 58 were a result of magic/supernatural/poison violence (7.69) and 38 (5.04%) were coded as other.

For scope, 657 of the violent acts were committed by individuals (87.14%), 47 were committed by small groups (6.23%), 24 were committed by large groups (3.18%), four were to crowds (.53%) and 22 (2.92%) were not applicable. For the recipients of violence, 580 were committed to individuals (76.92%), 124 (16.45%) to small groups 26 (3.45%) to large groups, 18 to crowds (2.39%), and six (.80%) were not applicable.

For the codable characters that committed violence, 688 were male (87.21%), 45 (5.87%) were female, seven were unknown (.91%), and 46 were not applicable (6.01%) regarding gender. There were 58 children/teenagers (7.57%), 612 adults (79.90%), 17 elderly characters (2.22%) 28 had unknown age, (3.66%), and 51 were not applicable for age (6.66%). There were 508 white actors (66.32%), three Asian characters (.39%), 12 Latino characters (1.57%), eight Middle Eastern characters (1.04%), 20 black characters (2.61%), 45 aliens (5.87%), 61 animals (7.96%), 61 characters with unknown race (7.96%), and 48 that were not applicable (6.27%).

For the gender of recipients of violence, 743 were male (88.77%), 48 were female (5.73%), five were unknown (.60%), and 90 were not applicable (10.75%). Regarding age, 61 characters were children/teenagers (7.29%), 681 were adults (81.36%), 24 were elderly (2.87%), 16 were unknown (1.91%) and 104 (12.43%) were not applicable. For race, 534 coded characters were white (63.80%), two were Asian (.24%), 12 were Latino (143%), four were Middle Eastern (.48%), 17 were black (2.03%), 31 were aliens (3.70%), 100 animals were coded (11.95%), 116 characters were coded as unknown (13.86%), and 70 (8.36%) were not applicable.

Beware the Batman

As of the conduction of this study, 13 episodes of the first and presumed only season of *Beware the Batman* were available for the public, with the next 13 due for release in late September of 2014. In the first 13 episodes, a total of 125 instances of violence were coded in the

samples, an average of 9.62 per sample. Of those instances, 92 were a result of direct physical violence (73.60%), 13 (10.40%) were from projectile violence, eight (6.40%) were from gun violence, two from explosive/bomb violence (1.60%), five from magic/supernatural/poison violence (4.00%), and five (4.00%) were coded as other.

With regard to scope, 117 violent acts were committed by individuals (93.60%), 7 by small groups (5.60%), and one was not applicable (.80%). One-hundred and eighteen (94.40%) acts were committed to individuals, and 7 (5.60%) to small groups.

For the gender of the violent actors, 98 were male (72.59%), 36 (26.67%) were female, and one was not applicable (.74%). Regarding age, 132 were adults (97.78%), two were elderly (1.48%), and one was not applicable (.74%). For race, 76 characters were white (56.30%), 20 were Asian (14.81%), seven were Middle Eastern (5.19%), five were black (3.70%), five were animals (3.70%), 21 were unknown (15.56%), and one (.74%) was not applicable.

Among the violence recipients, 106 characters were male (79.10%), and 28 (20.90%) were female. For age, 132 were adults (98.51%) and two (1.49%) were elderly. With regard to race, 78 were white (58.21%), 26 (19.40%), five were Middle Eastern (3.73%), six were black (4.48%), six were animals (4.48%), and 13 were unknown (9.70%).

There are two aspects of my results that I wish to clarify. When the term “not applicable” appears in demographics of characters, it’s because characters that were robots or animals without distinct demographic information were coded as “not applicable” for those demographics. Its appearances in scope indicate violence that was committed by off-screen actors or to off-screen targets. In hindsight, it would have been appropriate to further define how to code animals or robots as well as off-screen or implied violence in the coding manual.

As to my hypotheses about gun violence and demographics, neither held particularly well. While there are some significant results between different seasons regarding guns (every series compared to *The Batman* is significant to a $p < .01$ level), there is no discernable trend in a change in the amount that guns are shown in these cartoons. Even total violence in general is inconsistent, with the numbers of violent instances per sample varying in different directions throughout the series. There doesn't appear to be any trend in the representation of minorities or female characters either¹⁴. Though there are some fluctuations in demographics, the superhero cartoon genre is dominated, as one would likely expect, by white males.

6. Discussion

Guns

The first important thing to notice is that my hypothesis about gun violence did not hold particularly well. Violence increased quite a bit between *BAS* (1992-95) and *NBA* (1997-99), up from an average of .49 instances per episode to 1.04 instances per episode, a number that is significant to $p = .025$. Gun violence per episode did decrease from *NBA* to *BB* (1999-2001), but not to a statistically significant degree. However, the decrease in gun violence from *BB* to *TB* (2004-08) was most certainly significant, to $p = .003$.

A potential reason for this—the precipitous decline in gun violence in *TB*—is the fact that it was the first Batman cartoon to air in its entirety post-9/11. One would think would be a prime time for content creators, especially those of children's cartoons, to curb violence, but upon looking elsewhere in the data, it's clear that 9/11 is likely not the cause of the decrease in gun violence. *TB* actually has the highest measured explosive/bomb violence in terms of percentage of total violence (something that it seems creators would be more conscious of post-9/11), and is

second highest to *BAB* in terms of total instances of EBV per sample. The total number of instances of violence per episode is also in line with the numbers from the previous two seasons. My best estimate as to why gun violence fell off of such a cliff in *TB* is that the cartoon may have been more focused on selling toys, based on the episode's plot structures. Main characters sell toys—Batman, Robin, the Joker, Poison Ivy, etc.—and main, identifiable characters were who Batman was generally fighting against. There were few episodes where Batman's primary target was the mob (a group that would rely on guns), in contrast to the many plot points in previous seasons. All of Batman's biggest foes, save for the Penguin and Two-Face, do not have mob or gun-related villain "schticks."¹⁵

Gun violence spiked to highs in both percentage of total instances as well as total instances per episode in *Batman: The Brave and the Bold*. In addition to gun violence spiking, violence in general was at its highest, by far, in *BAB*. Violence in general was also rather high in *BTB*—9.615 instances per sample, a number that is significant to $p < .10$ when compared to *TB* and approaches $p < .10$ significance ($p = .13$) when compared to *Batman Beyond*. It's worth noting that these two cartoons are almost certainly computer animated while the other cartoons, particularly the Bruce Timm-produced ones, appear to be hand-drawn, as evidenced by the less crisp colors and animation lines as well as the absence of any 3-D effects in the show.¹⁶ One would think, given the technological capacity of computers versus human hands, that it would be much easier to portray elaborate fight scenes (leading to more violent acts) on computers than it would be on hand-drawn animation cels. This brings up an interesting discussion about the concept of technological determinism. Technological determinism is the idea that technology has a helping hand in the way we live our lives—be it "hard" determinism, which states that the technology has a direct effect on us, or "soft" determinism, the idea that we use technology to

our own means.¹⁷ The effect of computers on cartoons would likely be soft—which means that they help facilitate our hypothetical tendency to produce violent content, as opposed to directly causing it—which begs an important question: Given the proper tools, will we, as a species, become more violent? That sounds a bit grandiose considering the scope and subject matter of this research, but it’s still an important question to explore. Given the results of this research, the answer may be yes.

Another intriguing trend I observed while viewing these series was a change in the physical portrayal of guns over time. Here’s an image of a gun from each of the series:



As the series progresses, the portrayal of guns in each series becomes less realistic. Initially, they look like actual weapons and evolve into cartoony depictions of guns. They also stop shooting bullets in favor of shooting laser beams. This comes with caveats—they’re only sample images of one instance of gun violence in each series and are not necessarily representative of a larger whole—but it is an interesting trend nonetheless. Though I don’t have hard data in terms of numerical trends, it appears to be of little coincidence that the physical portrayal of guns has changed quite a bit since 1992, a time when things like mass shootings and violence in general were beginning to be of great public concern.

In short, while I am able to make claims about the statistical significance of the amount of gun violence in certain shows compared to others, my research did not really lend insight regarding any trends in the prevalence of gun violence. This means that we can conclude that time is not a factor in the number of times guns are shown, or at the very least, is not one that

doesn't get overshadowed by other factors of the show, such as plot structure. What it did reveal, however, is a potential trend in changes involving the physical depictions of guns, as they have become less realistic-looking over time, something that indicates that my original hypothesis may still be plausible.

Demographics

Outside of gun violence, there are a few results to note regarding the scope and demographic information of the characters involved. A couple of visible spikes appear in scope in *BAB* and *NBA*, but are easily explained given the plot structure of the cartoons. Small groups are recipients of a much higher percentage of violence in *BAB* and *NBA*. At 16.45% and 13.53%, respectively,¹⁸ this is a function of the team-based nature of the plot in each show. As noted by Roman and McAllister, *BAB* specifically sets out to have each episode feature Batman paired with one or more other, more obscure heroes. In *NBA*, the series is very focused on Batman's adventures with his various sidekicks. Observe the promotional image on this page. Here, Batman is seen with Nightwing (left) and Robin (right), making it clear that in this series, Bats is going to be working in a group.¹⁹ There are also spikes in the representation of the elderly and children/teenagers in *BB*, something that is quickly explained because the main Batman of the series, Terry McGinnis is a high-school student being mentored by an elderly Bruce Wayne. There seems to be one race-related spike, the amount of Asian characters present in *BTB*. This doesn't take long to explain; Batman's primary sidekick in the show is an Asian woman.



This image belongs to Warner Brothers

There are also alarmingly few visibly Middle Eastern and Latino characters. Latinos are absent from half of the cartoon series coded, and when they do appear in *BAS*, *TB* and *BAB*, it's

the same character appearing multiple times²⁰, rather than portrayals of multiple Latino characters. Only one character (and his daughter and henchman), Ra's al Ghul, are portrayed as Middle Eastern. There are no visibly Middle Eastern good-guys,²¹ and the only Latino characters are an immature hero, a steroid-filled monster, and a police chief that was quickly abandoned for the more well-known Commissioner Gordon.

Women, as touched on in the literature review, do not appear very often in cartoons in general, let alone superhero cartoons. My research also shows exactly that. Female characters are never involved as a percentage of actors or recipients of violence at higher than a 27% rate,²² and in a show as recent as *BAB*, are featured as actors or recipients of violence only roughly 6% of the time for each. For comparison, animals represented as 8% of violent actors and 12% of violence recipients. That's troubling—the fact that there were more animals than female characters points to a nearly willful exclusion, and coupled with the portrayals of women that Roman and McAllister identify, mainly that when they are shown, they're domestic nags or desperately lovesick, it shows that women are clearly intended to be second-rate in *BAB*.

The Batman, while not containing particularly troubling representation of women in terms of raw data (outside of general underrepresentation), does have at least a couple of instances noted where a female character is tasked with a decidedly less physically difficult job than her male counterparts. For example, episode 56 of *TB*, “White Heat,” Batman, Robin and Batgirl are fighting a villain named Firefly after he transformed into the far more dangerous character Phosphorous²³ and his girlfriend, Blaze, who lacks any defining characteristics (or superpowers) outside of being intelligent and street-smart. Batman decides to send Batgirl to handle Blaze while he and Robin take on Phosphorous. There are possible reasons for this that don't have to do with gender subjugation—given that Batgirl is the police commissioner's

daughter, she is someone that Batman most certainly wants alive in the event of the worst-case scenario happening,²⁴ though the choice to send her on the “easier” task is still puzzling. Batgirl is shown as college-age, whereas Robin is still an early teenager, indicating that she might be more useful to Batman in more dangerous situations due to her natural ability (being older) to process danger better and think more critically than Robin.

In the last episode of the series, “Lost Heroes: Part 2,” Batman decides to send Batgirl to decode a computer rather than fight a hostile alien, which he goes on to do with Robin. Batgirl’s task is much more important than the previous one—she basically saves the entire world—and her status as an older character might have been more well-suited to work with highly technical processes under pressure than Robin’s, but the fact that she is again given a much less physical task is still interesting. This isn’t to say that *The Batman* necessarily portrays women negatively as a whole, but it does merit future investigation.

Adult Themes in BAS

Another less data-driven trend that I noticed was the discussion of much heavier themes in *BAS* than the other cartoons, providing children with accessible discussion of real-world problems. Episode 12 of season one, “It’s Never too Late” is an episode-long discussion on the spider-web effects that drug addiction has on those close to the addict. It’s not a blatant anti-drug PSA, but a depiction of the actual consequences of drug addiction. A mob boss’s frail son (whose hard drug addiction is caused by the mobster’s drug peddling) is seen being tended to in a rehab center. In the sixth episode, “The Underdwellers,” very explicit child slavery is depicted. A good number of children (presumably orphans) are seen to have been kidnapped/collected by a deranged sewer-dweller from an early age. The children have never been exposed to sunlight, evidenced by their adverse reactions the sun, and are illiterate and functionally mute, either a

result of their illiteracy or some sort of trauma inflicted upon them. This is a very disturbing portrayal of the treatment of children, and to be honest, I'm surprised that it made its way onto television. There is also a neat discussion about what the nature of humanity in "His Silicon Soul." In the episode, a perfectly copied robot version of Batman attempts to usurp the real Batman's life and help more robot copies of the population at large take over the world in his desire for lack of crime, illness, and other societal woes. He's eventually unable to, due to an existential crisis caused by the belief that killed the original Batman.²⁵ The real Batman also spells out exactly what human life means to him when the robot explains his plans for a new society: "You mean free of choice, free compassion, free of humanity?" These are all ideas that are generally seen as above children's heads, but *BAS* portrays them in ways that are accessible and meaningful to kids.

Flaws and Limits

In retrospect, one change I would make to my approach is to make a distinction between magic/supernatural violence and poison violence. I initially coded them as the same because they were both different ways to disarm or harm a person without physically maiming them. As I conducted my research, a distinction between the two became clearer. I decided to continue coding the two in the same category in an effort to stay consistent with my method, but I admit that that category does not tell the story that I wanted it to. This oversight doesn't invalidate the category or the rest of the research, but it also doesn't paint as clear a picture of what happened in those instances of violence as it could.

A limit of this research is the nature of the unit of analysis. Because I coded instances of violence, I cannot make firm claims about the portrayals of certain characters (women, minorities, and so on), but instead only the frequency of their appearances. When interpreting my

data, it is necessary to keep in mind the fact that this study should be used to as a supplement other work in the field, rather than a tell-all tale of the nature of superhero cartoons.

Parting thoughts:

Yet another form of cultural myth is depicted in these cartoons. Myths use fantasies to address and assuage cultural concerns of the time, and that's what this set of cartoons does. While characters like Superman and Wonder Woman invoke fantasy by removing human limitations in relentless pursuit of their ideals, Batman offers viewers a chance to identify with a distinctly human character. He has no superpowers. As a result of his human limitations, his actions are carried out with a shred of plausibility. Those watching Superman or Wonder Woman know the feats they accomplish are outside of the realm of human possibility. When kids watch Batman, they instead see a real human being accomplishing incredible feats, not an alien from Krypton or a princess descended from Greek myth.

This research explores the application of these fantasies as a means of responding to the growing national concern over gun violence during the time of the airing of the cartoons examined. Batman offers an excellent superhero to use in research exploring gun violence because he's arguably the most "real" of the heroes discussed in these chapters. His tales are grounded in reality, featuring events that could happen with less suspension of disbelief than other heroes. When trying to find out how very literal depictions of real-world problems (guns) are affecting children, why not use the most "real" of the popular superheroes as he's presented to kids? That's what I've done here. Again, I've used the mythical nature of Batman as a lens to help uncover particular social anxieties relevant to the time of the shows' airing.

My original hypothesis wasn't fully proven, but I still found evidence that changing depictions of firearms throughout the series reflected social anxieties and concerns about gun

violence. Given a different method, the notion that the depiction of guns would change over time could still be true. This isn't unfounded: the physical representation of firearms did appear to change in a clear way throughout the temporal progression of the series. This supports the plausibility of my hypothesis, and perhaps the use of a different method would lead to more clear answers. A more detailed analysis examining guns alone would likely accomplish this. Future research could focus solely on instances where guns were used, providing more context to these situations. Physical portrayals of the guns themselves, demographics of those using them (including things such as occupation or moral alignment within the narrative), as well as the results of the gun violence (did people die?) would all add depth to the broad-strokes picture that my research paints.

My other results also tell stories congruent with my other chapters, particularly about representations and portrayals of women. For instance, the number of women present (as being involved in violence) plummets in *BAB*. Though it aired too late to be considered a response to 9/11 in the way *Smallville* was, it does exist within the post-9/11 media landscape. Further research about the way women are portrayed, both in numerical representation of the series as a whole (not just in violence) and more interpretive research that explores their role within the narratives of these cartoons could lend insight that would pair particularly well with the latter portion of my Superman chapter. In addition, a textual analysis of the ways that female characters were handed less physical plot roles in *TB* would bolster the hypothetical research mentioned above by providing detailed examinations of exactly how women function within the plot of these shows.

What should follow this research pertains to this study's limitations and suggestions discussed in the paragraphs above. First, an amendment to my research that takes into account

the difference between magic/supernatural violence and poison violence would give fuller explanation of trends of the types of violence in these shows. This research would also be well-supplemented by an in-depth, textual analysis of these cartoons. A critical look at some of the portrayals of women, especially the ones from *TB*, would further shine light on how these shows express anxieties about gender. The calls above for research on guns specifically, as I've mentioned, would help fully uncover the nature of gun violence in the cartoons analyzed. More research, focused on violence and characters with speaking lines as the unit of analysis would do a nice job of bridging the gap between the raw numbers of my research and the textual analysis aspect of a more in-depth study because it would answer questions about the relationship between violence and characters more important to the plot of the shows. Hopefully, these suggestions for future research lead to additional close examination of the anxieties I've begun to flesh out here. Batman has a lot to say; maybe we'll eventually be able to discern ways that he can help us and our kids from inside the small screen, rather than Gotham's rooftops.

¹ Even *Beavis and Butthead*, while certainly not high-brow in nature but also certainly not known for its violence, received calls for cancellation.

² See Chapter 14 of *Media and Culture*, Campbell et. al for more detailed descriptions of each of these theories.

³ The negative implications of this attitude are not difficult to discern. With preconceived notions comes bias, and with bias comes poorly done academic work.

⁴ This is why, though I generally agree with what media influences scholars believe, content analysis is my preferred method of media research.

⁵ Please keep in mind that this study does not necessarily make claims concurrent with the literature discussed here. The purpose of this section is to provide broader context to the content of the genre as a whole.

⁶ Interestingly, they also found that roughly one-third of superhero characters were female, something that may have come as a surprise considering the results of Klein and Shiffman's study.

⁷ Despite their existence, however, they are still portrayed as "mysterious objects to be decoded" and as "domesticating pains"—indicating that, despite Baker and Raney's findings, there is still much work to be done regarding the portrayal of women in superhero cartoons.

⁸ And often mentally ill, as many of the Batman villains appear to be.

⁹ Something humorously touched on by Bat-Mite in the second season episode of *Batman: The Brave and the Bold* titled "Bat-Mite Presents: Batman's Strangest Cases!" In a team up with the gang from Scooby Doo, a *Superfriends*-inspired Batman and Robin show up, only for Bat-Mite to pause the program and say, "You see this? Someone mispainted Batman's neck. I hate that!" The Caped Crusader went on to fight for the rest of the episode with a skin-colored patch painted on the neck of his cowl.

¹⁰ Prior to this section, Meehan began her analysis of Warner (WCI)'s efforts to monetize *Batman* by analyzing the corporate structure and history of the company. I did not feel as though this was necessary to include in the review.

¹¹ This is something that was a very real possibility. According to Brooker, Adam West was very intent upon landing the lead role and spoke out vehemently against Warner Brothers upon being rejected. West ended up with a very loyal, very vocal following—something that was surely a pain in the side of Warner Brothers. Had West been cast or had the film taken a comedic tone, it's of my opinion that *BAS* certainly would not have been able to exist the way it did.

¹² A classic and a text any Bat-fan should consume.

¹³ Robin was killed, and this is something that has drawn much criticism. As Meehan says, it was little more than a publicity stunt. Robin was also killed in a very brutal way—beaten to a bloody pulp by the Joker and left in a shack in Iran rigged to explode—only for Batman to arrive seconds too late.

¹⁴ I did not measure the significance of either of these results because the data pools for race were far too low.

¹⁵ The latter of which, curiously, does not appear in the series at all, despite being in the pantheon of Bat-villains.

¹⁶ I was unable to find a source that identified the animation style in *The Batman*.

¹⁷ An example of a hard deterministic effect of technology is the idea that the internet has physically changed the way our brains process information. Using a cell phone to make one's life easier, than say, using a bag phone, in contrast, is an example of soft determinism.

¹⁸ The next highest is *BAS*, at roughly 11%, which has a number of episodes where Batman works directly with Robin on many occasions. No other cartoon is higher than 8%.

¹⁹ Interestingly, Batgirl is absent from this image despite having as much of a role as the other two Bat-protégés. However, in other similar images, Batgirl is featured alongside the rest.

²⁰ Jaime Reyes, a.k.a. the Blue Beetle in *BAB*, police chief Angel Rojas in *TB*, and villain Bane in *BAS* and *TB*.

²¹ Something that, frankly, I'm particularly surprised about due to our country's general Islam-phobia after 9/11.

²² This is the representation as a total percentage of characters that are violent actors in *BTB*, something that comes of little surprise considering Batman's primary sidekick, and thus someone very involved in violence, is a woman. 27% is still low—slightly over half of the female population at large—but that women aren't "symbolically annihilated" here as they are in four other cartoons I coded, and the fact that his sidekick is a woman is encouraging, despite what the rest of the paragraph discusses.

²³ Which, of course, was facilitated by radioactive exposure.

²⁴ Though given Robin's status as a surrogate son to Batman, one would think that he'd want Robin alive just as much, if not more.

²⁵ Remember, in nearly every incarnation of Batman since World War Two, Batman has had a steadfast aversion to killing.

CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion

Not only do these shows acknowledge cultural anxieties, they alleviate them in troubling ways. *Wonder Woman* speaks to concerns about the women's movement in the 70s. Rather than answer harsh questions about how women are treated in our country, it tells us that feminism is something that can be contained by celebrating feminine strength in a way that hyper-feminizes women and by propagating the false idea that the struggle for women's rights has been completed. *Smallville* depicts Superman's struggles with puberty, his burden and his interaction with Lana Lang, as it navigates American anxiety following 9/11. But it does so in a way that again, avoids legitimate grappling with important real-life issues. Rather than dealing with the actual implications that our conflict with the Middle East has, *Smallville* allows us to engage in a nostalgic fantasy world, where myths about America's resilient strength, cultural superiority, and patriarchal subjugation of women reign king. Batman cartoons too handle concerns over gun violence in a literally superficial way. The physical depictions of guns become less and less realistic as the series progress. In real life, we can't solve problems by making guns look like toys, but in cartoons, we can.

This sounds like a very Jamesonian critique of the pop culture that I've researched, and that's because it is. Despite this, I don't wholly subscribe to the views he has. His writing is too cynical for my taste, and leaves little room for agency on the part of the viewers, treating them as little more than a passive recipients in the ideologies that pop culture tries to send. He indicates as much in his discussion about *Jaws*: “[*Jaws*] effectively displaces class antagonisms...by substituting for them a new and spurious kind of fraternity in which the viewer rejoices without understanding that he or she is excluded from it” (144). Here, the watchers of *Jaws* and the

recipients of its ideologies are framed as having little say in the way they interpret them. For me, agency is an important thing to keep in mind when considering these texts because interpretations of television can be heavily influenced by individual perceptions, especially when viewers are informed about these topics. Nonetheless, what Jameson is saying rings true on the level of how popular superhero texts are structured even if we allow for greater room for individual interpretation. These superhero texts, in the way that they deploy myth, alleviate cultural anxieties without doing much to actually address them.

This research also validates the need to resuscitate old texts, particularly ones with ingrained meanings attached to them. It's been almost 40 years since *Wonder Woman* debuted on television, and time and nostalgia do a lot in crystallizing the meanings of certain texts for viewers. It's easy to read *Wonder Woman* as a feminist text, but now we see that it isn't. It's also worthwhile to look into shows not meant for typical adult audiences. What I've found in *Smallville* and all of the Batman cartoons I watched indicates that despite their target audiences of adolescents and children, respectively, meaningful messages can still be found.

Superheroes are here to stay. Marvel's wide-reaching franchise of superhero films isn't about to lose steam any time soon, and DC's impending overhaul and new release of their cinematic universe, as well as the several currently-running successful television shows (*Arrow*, *The Flash*, and the brand-new *Daredevil* on Netflix) promise that we're going to be fed costumed crusaders for a long time. Here, I've given a blueprint of how to flesh out the ways that they depict and address cultural anxieties. As they continue to roll out, it's going to be just as necessary for us to keep a critical, watchful eye on those that, in their stories, are supposed to keep an eye on us.

References

- Ahern, J., Galea, S., Resnick, H., Kilpatrick, D., Bucuvalas, M., Gold, J., & Vlahov, D. (2002). Television Images And Psychological Symptoms After The September 11 Terrorist Attacks. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, 65(4), 289-300.
- Bailey, T. (2006). Cultural Studies and Cultivation Theory: Points of Convergence. *Conference Papers -- International Communication Association*.
- Baker, K., & Raney, A. A. (2007). Equally super?: Gender-role stereotyping of superheroes in children's animated programs. *Mass Communication and Society*, 10(1), 25-41.
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. New York: The Noonday Press.
- Brooker, W. (2000). *Batman unmasked: Analyzing a cultural icon*. (1st ed., pp. 249-294). New York, NY: Continuum Publishing Group Ltd.
- Brooker, W. (2013). We Could Be Heroes. In R. Rosenberg & P. Coogan (Eds.), *What is a Superhero?* (pp. 11-17). Oxford University Press.
- Burns, R., & Crawford, C. (1999). School shootings, the media, and public fear: Ingredients for a moral panic. *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, 32(2), 147-168.
- Campbell, R., Martin, C. R., & Fabos, B. (2013). *Media and culture: An introduction to mass communication*. (8th ed., pp. 451-473). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Cardeña, E., Dennis, J., Winkel, M., & Skitka, L. (2005). A Snapshot of Terror: Acute Posttraumatic Responses to the September 11 Attack. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 6(2), 69-84.
- Crossley, R. (2014, June 2). Mortal Kombat: Violent game that changed video games industry. Retrieved April 26, 2015.

- Engle, G. (1992). What Makes Superman So Darned American? In J. Nachbar & L. Kevin (Eds.), *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text* (pp. 331-343). Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- Faludi, S. (1991). *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1st ed.). New York: Crown.
- Fingerroth, D. (2013). Power and Responsibility...and Other Reflections on Superheroes. In R. Rosenberg & P. Coogan (Eds.), *What is a Superhero?* (pp. 125-127). Oxford University Press.
- Fiore, F., & Healy, M. (1999, May 11). Clinton Urges Hollywood to Cut Violence. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved May 11, 1999, from <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/may/11/news/mn-36050>
- Fouladi, S. (2011). Smallville: Super Puberty and the Monstrous Superhero. In R. Gray & B. Kaklimanadou (Eds.), *The 21st Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre and Globalization in Film* (pp. 161-179). Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland.
- Garbarino, J., Bradshaw, C., & Vorrasi, J. (2002). Mitigating the Effects of Gun Violence on Children and Youth. *Children, Youth, and Gun Violence*, 12(2). Retrieved April 26, 2015, from <http://futureofchildren.org/publications/journals/article/index.xml?journalid=42&articleid=166&ionid=1068&submit>
- Gill, R.. (2007). Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 147-166.

- Go, B. (1993, August 23). Youth: Opinion: Media Violence: 'It Creates Negative Stereotypes.'
- In D. Masterson (Ed.), *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved April 26, 2015, from http://articles.latimes.com/1993-08-23/local/me-27212_1_media-violence
- Gordon, I. (2008). Nostalgia, Myth, and Ideology: Visions of Superman at the End of the "American Century" In A. Ndalians (Ed.), *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero* (pp. 177-193). New York: Routledge.
- Gourley, C. (2007). *Ms. and the Material Girls: Perceptions of Women from the 1970s through the 1990s* (1st ed.). Minneapolis, MN: Twenty-First Century Books.
- Terri, H. (1987, April 5). Commentary: Violence Creeps Into the Classroom. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved April 26, 2015, from http://articles.latimes.com/1987-04-05/local/me-425_1_media-violence
- Hanley, T. (2014). *Wonder Woman Unbound: The Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine*. Chicago Review Press.
- Houston, J. (2013). Long-Term Sociopolitical Effects of 9/11 Television Viewing, Emotions, and Parental Conversation in U.S. Young Adults Who Were Children in 2001. *Communication Research Reports*, 30(3), 183-192.
- Jameson, F. (1979). Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture. *Social Text*, 1, 130-148.
- Jensen, K. (2002). The social origins and uses of media and communication research. In *Handbook of Media & Communication Research* (1st ed., pp. 273-293). London: Routledge.
- Jones, K. (1997). Are rap videos more violent? Style differences and the prevalence of sex and violence in the age of MTV. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 8(4), 343-356.

- Kim, Y. (2012). News Images of the Terrorist Attacks: Framing September 11th and Its Aftermath in the Pictures of the Year International Competition. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 20(3), 158-184.
- Klein, H., & Shiffman, K. S. (2009). Underrepresentation and symbolic annihilation of socially disenfranchised groups ("out groups") in animated cartoons. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 20(1), 55-72.
- Kort-Butler, L. A. (2012). Rotten, vile, and depraved! depictions of criminality in superhero cartoons. *Deviant Behavior*, 33(7), 566-581.
- Lee, S. (2013). More Than Normal, But Believable. In R. Rosenberg & P. Coogan (Eds.), *What is a Superhero?* (pp. 115-117) Oxford University Press.
- Lentz, K. (2000). Quality versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, and the Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television. *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 15(1), 45-93.
- Lepore, J. (2014, September 22). The Last Amazon: Wonder Woman returns. Retrieved April 16, 2015, from <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/22/last-amazon>
- Levine, E. (2007). *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (1st ed., pp. 135-145). Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- McKinley, E. G. and Simonet, T. , (2003). Myth and Hegemony in Post-Sept. 11 News Coverage" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Marriott Hotel, San Diego, CA Online* <.PDF>. 2009-05-26 from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p111576_index.html
- McRobbie, A. (2007). Top Girls? Young women and the post-feminist sexual contract. *Cultural Studies*, 21(4-5), 718-737.

- Meehan, E. R. (1991). *'Holy commodity fetish, Batman!': the political economy of a commercial intertext*. na.
- Mittell, J. (2012, 12 17). *Media violence & debating effects and influences*. Retrieved from <http://justtv.wordpress.com/2012/12/17/media-violence-and-debating-effects-influences/>
- U.S. Office of the Surgeon General, U.S. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, U.S. National Institute of Mental Health & U.S. Center for Mental Health Services (2001). Chapter 4 -- Risk Factors for Youth Violence. *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK44293/>
- Pearson, R. E., & Uricchio, W. (1991). *The many lives of batman: Critical approaches to a superhero and his media*. (1st ed., pp. 47-65). London: Routledge.
- Robinson, L. (2004). *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes*. New York: Routledge.
- Roman Z., & McAllister, M. P. (2012). The brand and the bold: Synergy and sidekicks in children's television. *Global Media Journal*, 12(20), 1-15.
- Siegel, L. (2014, April 23). *Beware the batman returning to cartoon network's schedule - but there's a catch*. Retrieved from <http://www.newsarama.com/20922-beware-the-batman-returning-to-cartoon-network-s-schedule-but-there-s-a-catch.html>
- Schuster, M., Stein, B., Jaycox, L., Collins, R., Marshall, G., Elliott, M., . . . Berry, S. (2001). A National Survey of Stress Reactions after the September 11, 2001, Terrorist Attacks. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 345(20), 1507-1512.
- Spigel, L. (2004). Entertainment Wars: Television Culture After 9/11. *American Quarterly*, 56(2), 235-270.
- Stabile, C. (2009). "Sweetheart, This Ain't Gender Studies": Sexism And Superheroes. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 6(1), 86-92.

Winterbach, H. (2006). Heroes and superheroes: From myth to the American comic book. *South African Journal of Art History*, 21(1), 114-134.