THE POLITICAL CORRECTNESS OF SUPERHERO CINEMA

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Abstract

Cinema, since its inchoation, has always been under the scrutiny of how well it emulates life. American cinema, with tour de force, has nurtured its root around the extraordinary narratives of heroes (American Adam), known or unknown, real or fictitious, that have shaped the fate of American civilization. Hollywood, in recent years, has been under severe criticism of being an escapist, which has grown more potent since last decade after the reincarnation of Superhero genre. Since 9/11, Hollywood has turned into a dream factory, transcending people into some dystopian land where someone stands for them to fight for their cause. When such films are criticized and written-off by critics as a gimmick of audiovisual fantasy, they tend to forget the real cause of cinema. Cinema has never been about 'being' but 'becoming'. If people are inclined towards Batman or Ironman or Superman or even to an ordinary Katnis Everdeen, then it is only because they can empathize with those characters who too like them are coping with their losses. Not only, these heroes fight with the enemies of the state but also with the very system they have sworn to protect. These heroes, no matter rich or poor, are ordinary men like us who woke up one day and realized that they were special. Chris Evans, in 86th Annual Academy Awards, sums up the essence of such movies in these words:"Since the dawn of storytelling, we've been joining heroes on journeys, finding entertainment and inspiration in their epic arcs. Their trial to speak to our common struggle; their triumphs inspire a collective hope." Now, the modest attempt of this paper will be to explore the thematic concerns that run within the veins of such films with special mention to The Dark Knight (2008), Iron Man Trilogy (2008-2013), Watchmen (2009), and others: Why have we inclined towards such cinema? What political awareness do these movies bring to us? Do these multicultural superhero movies have an answer to our unrest? Why are these movies so popular all over the world; are we all afraid at the same time?

Keywords: Superhero Cinema, 9/11 attacks, Hollywood, American Adam, Iron Man, Batman, Watchmen

Edward Blake, The Comedian, born 1918. Buried in the rain. Murdered. Is that what happens to us? No time for friends? Only our enemies leave roses. Violent lives ending violently. Blake understood, humans are savage in nature. No matter how much you try to dress it up, to disguise it. Blake saw society's true face. Chose to be a parody of it; a joke. I heard joke once. Man goes to doctor, says he's depressed. Life seems harsh and cruel. Says he feels all alone in threatening world. Doctor says treatment is simple, "the great clown Pagliacci is in town, go see him. That should pick you up." Man bursts into tears. "But doctor," he says, "I am Pagliacci." Good joke. Everybody laugh. Roll on snare drum. Curtain.

- Rorschach (*Watchmen* 2009)

Introduction

The Adam fell again from his Eden on September 9, 2001. But this Adam knew that God is not going to come for his salvation (he never came at the first place, and it would be hoping against the hope that he will come now), so he turned himself towards the religion he knows best, that is, Hollywood. Different versions of 9/11 incident, since it transpired, have been acted and re-enacted time and again on the cinematic screen as if America is trying to console herself of the tragedy she went through. She has done this before in 70s and 80s when experienced assassinations, scandals and more importantly the loss in Vietnam War "by denying them, in fantasies which sought to escape or otherwise transcend present realties altogether" (Sartelle 1996, 516). These reiterations on the cinematic screen are akin to religious rituals that all societies go through to "check the emotions produced by death and controls the stress and anxiety which usually disrupt society" (Mukherjee and Ghosal1999, 234). Cinema, once again, became an experimental ground to evaluate what and how things went wrong and how capable she would be if faced with such threats again.

Since 2000, the stage of American Cinema exploded with the genre of Superheroes advertising the never-die attitude of America before the world. America has always used popular culture to propagate her ethics and when the very foundations of hers were shaken by 9/11 attacks, she went back to the materials that have nurtured American dreams into the veins of generations through comics; that is, the genre of superheroes. Even before the incident the superhero movies were made but the tone and spectacle they achieved this time are unprecedented. On the political stage, where America is targeted for her despotic decisions, she is appreciated for the awe that she brings to the cinema, especially when concentrated to this genre. The significant thing to be noted here is that the movies made with the themes dealing with 9/11 attacks, or America's response to terrorism, or the aftermath effects of the incident on people's lives, though may have fared well (or excelled in few cases) such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *United 93* (2006), *World Trade Center* (2006), *Reign Over Me* (2007), *The Hurt Locker* (2007), or *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), but when compared with the box-office success of Superhero genre, they stand nowhere. American cinema for long has been accused of being an escapist and recently comics based movies have been at the centre of criticism, but if an undercurrent reading of this genre is done, the estimated conclusion will be that a desire to redefine America's existence and purpose and to regain her lost glory is made manifest through this kind of cinema. One of the many reasons behind audience's love affair with these superheroes is that they are able to empathize with them as each of their personality is translated and transformed by some tragic incident to which they cope with their superpowers serving purposes inexhaustible for mortal life. Does it sound familiar? Isn't it something America tries to project herself to do before the world? Not only, this genre ensures a huge cash flow to studios but also gives a potent platform to project an

ideal image of America before the world as a leader striving to make this world a better place for future generations.

The Party of New Hope: Rise of New Adam(s)

"You come from a family of thieves and butchers, and like all guilty men, you try to rewrite your history."

- Ivan Vanko to Tony Stark (*Iron Man 2*)

It does not matter of what gender, section, race or ethnic background a superhero belongs to; whether an immigrant (Superman), or a Canadian (Wolverine), or an Afro-American (Hancock or Storm), or a disabled (Charles Xavier), or a woman (Pepper Potts, or Natasha Romanoff aka Black Widow, or Selina Kyle), or a white (Bruce Wayne or Tony Stark), or an old soul (Captain America), they are fighting for an Eden that needs to be saved (Even God Thor fights for them). "The brutal and horrifying attacks of September 11 further cast a new – if dismal and painful – light on the evolving myth of the American Adam. The collapse of the twin Towers – another version of the urban, capitalistic garden – marks a historical landmark in American consciousness, another fall from innocence. Yet it poses the possibility of a new beginning" (Manzanas 2003, 157). This Adam is adamant to unburden himself of the past, if possible to rewrite history altogether. So what should we understand by reiteration of 9/11 attack on the screen? A French journalist questions J Hoberman ("The Avengers: Why Hollywood is no longer afraid to tackle 9/11" 2012), a film critic from *The Guardian*, 'was it the death of Bin Laden that freed Hollywood "to destroy Manhattan again for fun"'? In response, Hoberman cites Walter Benjamin's clichéd phrase that 'human self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure'. An

apt response, under the hood of Superhero Cinema, can be to French journalist that the audience get libidinal gratification by watching their heroes avenging the wrong done to them, believing that they will rise on the occasion if again, skies loom with death.
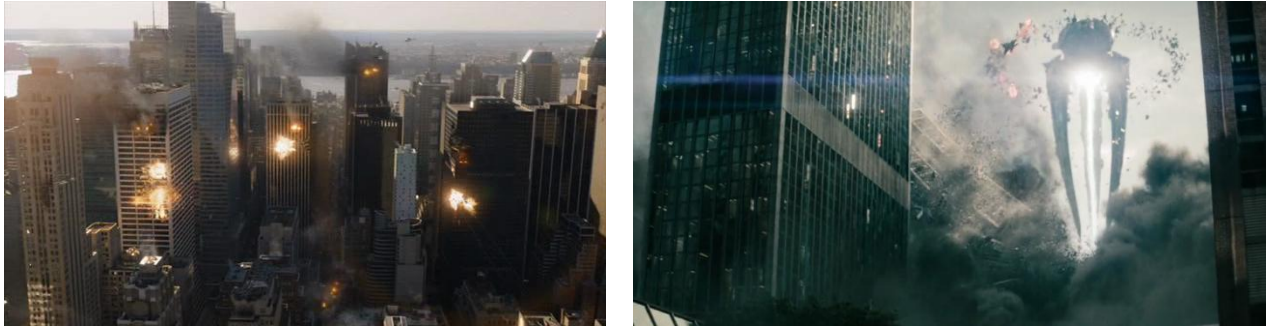

Figure 1: Stills from *The Avengers* (2012) and *Man of Steel* (2013) reproducing cinematic sketch of destruction in New York

These movies are the reformulation of the "disability films" (Sartelle 1996, 522) of Hollywood where a white man being a victim of a tragic incident is not yielding to circumstances but confronting it by turning his disability into inspirations to do higher good. In a way, we can say that these white men are the new 'empowered disabled'. What this white Adam has learned from his past is that he can't protect his Eden alone. The anxiety and fear that has crept into the hearts of this Adam is reverberated through Tony Stark when he discloses his fear to Pepper Potts (Eve) that "threat is imminent, and I have to protect the one thing that I can't live without. That's you" (*Iron Man 3*).

He needs to bring others to the fore to bring the utopian vision of America to be an *El Dorado* for all into culmination. Something that can be likened with the act of correcting the wrongs that were done in Bush's regime with people of colour: "Not a single senator came to the aid of the African-Americans in Congress. One after another, they were told to sit down and shut up" (*Fahrenheit 9/11*). That is why Charles Xavier is putting his efforts to bring Mutants (analogous to marginal sections) into the mainstream of America so that they too can

enjoy the same privileges as any normal citizen. On the other hand, Tony Stark hands over his legacy Stark Industry to his Secretary later girlfriend Pepper Potts so that he can do the job

Figure 2: Sill from *Iron Man* 3 (2013); Pepper wearing Iron Suit protecting Tony Stark (change of roles)

he is needed to do (Pepper, in fact, in *Iron Man 2* implores to Tony to let her do her job of running the company, a job that should have been done by him). With newly entrusted roles to these sections, especially women endowed with masculine role in the Marvel Universe, they are trying to protect the vested interest of their nation so that it can go back to its harmony. In *Iron Man 3* (2013), Tony is shown obsessed with the idea of protecting Pepper. Later we see Pepper protecting and covering Tony Stark, even saving his life at the end. The *Iron Man* trilogy ends with Pepper getting the superpowers (genetically advanced) and is scared that she may harm him. She asks, "Am I gonna be okay?" He answers, "No, you're in a relationship with me, everything will never be okay. But I think I can figure this out, yeah." The conversation certainly connotes the complications of changed roles, orientation and identity of women in the American society which ends with the promise of getting it "fixed" [something reminiscent of Ellen Degeners questioning the Senator Barack Obama's approach to gay and same-sex marriages if he assumes President's office ("Ellen Meets President Obama" 2011)].

Collectively, this group of Adams (whether of Marvel or DC Universe) endeavour to eradicate the evils that persist within the societal structure of America. Unlike God who uncompromisingly believes in destroying cities where evil has touched the brim ("Lot Welcomes the Angels"), they (superheroes) do not give their hope on people so easily and

until even if one remains sane, they will keep on trying to put the state back in its order. In
The Dark Knight (2008), Joker is obsessed to show Batman that nothing is going to happen
with just a hope because "when the chips are down, these civilized people . . . they'll eat each
other." This he does with Harvey Dent (the district attorney) who, later, gains an alter-ego in
the form of Two Face. Now, why does Joker relish on inflicting pains to others? There *is* no
answer for it as people like him thrive on chaos similar to whirlpool that likes to engulf
everything within it. He defines himself as a "dog chasing car. . . . I wouldn't know what to
do with one if I caught it. I just do things."

Gotham needs Bruce Wayne/Batman who corresponds to Jesus/Christ in persona, for
the salvation of the city. Joker desires to see them panicked when stripped off naked without
their knight to protect them. However, citizens of Gotham did not lead Batman down when
Joker conducted his "social experiment" on the two ships (one boarded with convicts and the
other with the normal citizens). The idea very much reflected the concept of the Ship of Fools
("SparkNote on Madness and Civilization"): a group of madmen set adrift from society, not
only as an outcast, but also as pilgrims, in search of their reason and, by extension, the reason
of the world. Batman knew that he marginally escaped defeat this time, but it renewed his
hope that still there is a chance that Gotham (America) can be redeemed.

If the sin was committed by one man and it "visited upon all, it is now taken away by
one man (Christ) for all" (Polak 1973, 54). The grandeur of Superhero Cinema lies in the fact
that it has created a third brand of Adam, who bridges the gap in between the sinner and the
redeemer, and this Adam is *exclusively* American. Albert Schweitzer, one of the most influential figures of this century and Nobel Peace Prize winner, believes that the primary concern in the teachings of Jesus is the "expectation of a coming Kingdom of redemption from evil" (Polak 1973, 206). He further exclaims if He returns

Figure 3: Still from *Man of Steel* (2013); Karl-El as Jesus

in our time, his teachings will concern the same but will be improvised with a modern tone. An attempt that can be witnessed in the making of Superman who envisions saving this world because he did lose one before (Kryptonite), a utopian world that perished into ashes. Karl-El like Jesus 'is no longer the Prophet who announces the renewal of human society on earth, but rather the Redeemer' (Polok 1973, 56). Karl-El's kingdom like Jesus is not of this world (John 18:36). Jesus knows that he is a king, "for this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice" ("Jesus Before Pilate"). In a similar tone, Jor-El (God) tells Karl-El the reason he chose earth for him: "You will give the people of Earth an ideal to strive towards. They will race behind you, they will stumble, they will fall. But in time, they will join you in the sun. In time, you will help them accomplish wonders" (*Man of Steel* 2013).

Now, when we watch these Superheroes on screen putting their lives and happiness second to ours, we are nothing but impressed and aspire to become one of them someday. Ergo, there is this de-eschatologizing process of the teachings of Jesus with more grounded and humanly versions of it because the modern man no longer puts his faith into the "supernatural powers which have chosen the world as their workshop and playground, but rather grasps after these powers for his own use, on the basis of that scientific knowledge in which alone he can now place his faith" (Polak 1973, 209). These Superheroes (most of them being the product of science themselves) are certainly qualifying themselves to be at par with Gods (remember Iron Man fighting with Thor and Hulk beating down Loki in *The Avengers*), writing their own scripture of humanity undertaking the task of accomplishing the utopian vision of America via technology, something that Howard Stark, father of Tony, articulates that, "everything is achievable through technology" (*Iron Man 2*).

Superheroes as Adams: Redeemers or Disguised Freaks?
Ozymandias: You see, the Comedian was right. Humanity's savage nature will inevitably lead to global annihilation. So in order to save this planet I had to trick it with the greatest practical joke in human history.
Nite Owl: Killing millions.
Ozymandias: To save billions. A necessary crime.
- *Watchmen* (2009)

Is it that what Hollywood is doing with us, playing jokes with Disney spectacle bombarding images so that we may never know what else is going on behind the curtains? Film-maker Michael Moore showed in his documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) that weeks before 9/11 attack George W. Bush was informed about the planning of Osama bin Laden to attack America by hijacking airplanes. The report that mentioned this information titled "Bin Laden determined to attack inside the United States," and Bush didn't put his mind to it. He passed it as a vague report or ignored it deliberately is something still debatable yet the way efforts were made for damage control nowhere helps our scepticism as per Bush's involvement. Richard Clarke, the former National Coordinator for Security and Counter-terrorism for the United States, mentions in the documentary the dubious approach of Bush after 9/11 as he

was insistently demanding to find Iraqi hands into the attack, which 'he planned to something about Iraq before he came into office'. Was 9/11 a staged event set up for personal ambitions of United States Government, or was Bush really backstabbed by his business associates? But it does not matter now as noted by Bonnie Mann in her article "How America justifies Its War: A Modern/Postmodern Aesthetics of Masculinity and Sovereignty," that "the series of speeches Bush gave at the end of 2005 to recuperate popular support for the war, his acknowledgement of what he called a "failure" of power intelligence, and his recirculation of the very discursive strategies about the relation between al-Qaeda and the Iraqi state . . . raised his approval ratings to over 40 percent." To summarize it, for U.S. public it does not matter for what reasons wars are taking place until, and unless they are not losing in it.

Here comes the political correctness of superhero cinema where while proposing the blueprint of an ideal society, they legitimize their wrong doings (without offending anyone) that they did on political and social stage, and we, being encouraged by the extravaganza become blindfolded of it. How easily we engage ourselves into the world of Iron Man ignoring the facts that if he were more responsible for his job, terrorists would not have had the access to deadly weapons on the first place. In *Iron Man* (2008), he finds that the weapons that are used by terrorists are funded by his company Stark Industries behind his back. Is *Iron Man* defending Bush? Is Bush being saved by this movie suggesting that he was betrayed by his business partner James R. Bath, the way Stark is manipulated by Obadiah Stane? Bush is no different than Tony Stark, as Moore discloses the fact in his documentary that in the first eight months after he graced President's chair, Bush was on vacation 42 percent of the time. 9/11 incident was a wound to the masculinity of America. As Mann explains while reviewing the book *Shock and Awe* that it was akin to "homosexual rape and simultaneous castration of the United States by a dark, brutal, and overwhelmingly masculine enemy. The immediate response of the U.S. government and the U.S. media, the assertion of the power and invulnerability of the nation, and especially the assertion of the invincible will of the American people to "hunt down the terrorists," and "bring the war to the terrorists," was also a reassertion of the masculinity of the nation" (Mann 2006, 155-156). Likewise, damage is suffered by Tony Stark, who suffers catastrophic damage while being kidnapped in Afghanistan and now has a hole in his chest. The wound on his chest (figure 4) becomes a symbol of a "cracked and bleeding *female* form" (Ramazani 2001, 121) which he never
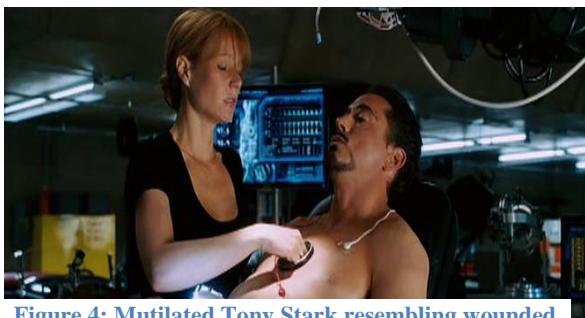

Figure 4: Mutilated Tony Stark resembling wounded America after 9/11

covers because "we remember our wounds to heal our wounds; we keep our wounds open not the better to remember the similar wounds we inflict around the world, but the better to forget, belittle, or ignore them" (Ramazani 2001, 121). He converts himself into a weapon "for a good old-fashioned revenge" (*Iron Man 3*) and launches attack on terrorists who are torturing innocent civilians of Afghanistan and claims to have "privatized

world peace" (*Iron Man 2*). But can his later efforts of doing greater goods, his heroic spectacles hide the fact that the money he generated all these years was blood money?

Now, shifting our focus to another current issue that is going on; how legitimate the mass surveillance conducted by NSA and GCHQ is questionable yet if seen through superhero movies, they instantly concur to this decision though private laws and individual rights might be getting shunned. On the one hand, Charles Xavier fights against the Mutants Registration Act (similar to Patriot Act introduced after 9/11 attack) so that the freedom and rights of mutants as any other normal civilian is not refused. On the other side, he himself keeps track of them through Cerebro (a device via which he can locate the position of any mutant in the world) so that if required he can protect or launch attack on any mutant. A similar procedure is followed by Batman in *The Dark Knight* where he develops a city-wide tracking device to hunt Joker. Lucius Fox knows that this will give Batman ultimate power to enter the private lives of people and hence, he can manipulate them later if he wishes to do so. Thus, his advice goes against this though ignored by Batman. Unconsciously, we as an audience realize that whatever Batman or Charles Xavier is doing is the call of the time, thence, needed to be done. Thinking so we approve of the actions that are conducted by U.S. government and that is the beauty of this kind of cinema.

After *The Avengers* (2013)*,* a demand of the ensemble superhero movies has grown over studios. Since, Marvel has delivered one and sequels are on the line, the heat now has shifted on DC to come up with a Justice League movie soon. Why an ensemble? An obvious answer would be that such movies are an event in themselves and though one may not like movies of any particular hero, he will certainly go to watch for the other one who might be his favourite. However, if dug deep to find the reasons of their popularity, it insinuates that under the pretence of USA USA chant people still are afraid. There is a narrow margin between an outlaw being hailed as a paladin or a criminal, and these superheroes always swing in between these two. There is a demand for ensemble superhero movie because if one superhero turns himself against the world or becomes ineffective (like Bush's administration before 9/11 attacks), there will at least be others to stop him.

Conclusion

So far, we have seen how Hollywood through its dream machinery provides us a vision of a better tomorrow through Superhero genre. These movies legitimize the actions (right or wrong) that America does on the world level, and emphatically it leads them to claim through this genre and others that they certainly are the new Adam(s) who can redeem this world

Figure 5: The Ensemble Cast from *The Avengers*

from its mundane existence by converting into a beatific sphere. These movies do the same

job of nurturing the minds of generations turning them out to be (or telling them) the kind of citizen their nation desires them to be, something that Plato talks about in *The Republic* of telling or censoring the mythical stories that will shape the fate of their empire. The reincarnation of mythical Adam/Jesus on screen simplifies the argument for everyone as they make everything seem so universal. As Roland Barthes explains that, "Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification . . . it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves" (Barthes 1991, 143).

However, every system generates its own contradictions, and Hollywood/America is no exception. One of the best things about the recent superhero movies has been that the heroes this time are fighting not only without the system but also within it. Not only, the hero is saving the world from some alien invasion, but is also standing against the corrupt system that his state has turned out to be. Spiderman teaches us that 'with great power comes great responsibility',' and Hulk advises us to restrain our anger and Hancock tells us that sometimes it is better to let things go because our action may cause irreparable damages (something that America did in Afghanistan and Iraq), and howsoever old-fashioned revenge Tony Stark wants to go, at the end of *Iron Man* trilogy he understands that so far he was disillusioned; to be an Iron Man he needs no suit, as he by himself can protect the world not by being a weapon but a healer. So no matter how much we criticize these movies as escapist yet the schema they propose as how we should train ourselves to be an ideal citizen so that we can contribute in a positive building of our nation and world is certainly commendable. The plea that Howard Stark makes to Tony speaking from an old film asking him to finish the job he started ("I'm limited by the technology of my time, but one day you'll figure this out and when you do, you will change the world"), seems as an appeal to our modern-day cinema which it obviously is doing with its technology bringing the montage of experiences via spectacular visuals inconceivable for a mortal soul.

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