



THE MAN OF STEEL AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

An Analysis of Mindsets in the
Superman Films (1970-2000)

Pablo Ramiro Villalva Guzmán

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Superman Films (1970-2000)*

Religación Press
[Ideas desde el Sur Global]

El Hombre de Acero como constructo social. Un análisis de las mentalidades en las películas de Superman (1970-2000)

O Homem de Aço como construto social. Uma análise das mentalidades nos filmes do Superman (1970-2000)

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Abstract

This work analyzes the evolution of Superman in cinema between 1970 and 2000 as a social construct. Through discourse and visual analysis of six films—from *Superman The Movie*(1978) to *Man of Steel*(2013)—, the author identifies the values and mindsets prevalent in each era. While the 1978-1987 films feature vibrant colors, high-key lighting, and clear distinctions between good and evil, later productions display gloomy tones, low-key lighting, and blurred moral boundaries. The study reveals how the hero reflects sociocultural transformations: from the rejection of revolutions and dictatorships to the post-9/11 disillusionment. Superman emerges as a symbol trapped between disseminating Western values and revealing American fears, evidencing hegemonic processes in global popular culture.

Keywords:

Superman, discourse analysis, semiotics, cultural hegemony, cinematic representation.

Resumen

Esta obra analiza la evolución de Superman en el cine entre 1970 y 2000 como constructo social. Mediante análisis del discurso y visual de seis películas —desde *Superman The Movie* (1978) hasta *Man of Steel* (2013)—, el autor identifica los valores y mentalidades predominantes en cada época. Mientras las películas de 1978-1987 presentan colores vibrantes, alta luminosidad y una clara distinción entre bien y mal, las producciones posteriores muestran tonos sombríos, baja luminosidad y fronteras morales difusas. El estudio revela cómo el héroe refleja transformaciones socioculturales: desde el rechazo a revoluciones y dictaduras hasta la desencanto posterior al 11-S. Superman emerge como un símbolo atrapado entre la difusión de valores occidentales y la revelación de miedos estadounidenses, evidenciando procesos hegemónicos en la cultura popular global.

Palabras clave: Superman, análisis del discurso, semiótica, hegemonía cultural, representación cinematográfica.

Resumo

Este trabalho analisa a evolução do Superman no cinema entre 1970 e 2000 como um construto social. Por meio da análise do discurso e da análise visual de seis filmes —desde *Superman: O Filme* (1978) até *O Homem de Aço* (2013)—, o autor identifica os valores e as mentalidades predominantes em cada época. Enquanto os filmes de 1978-1987 apresentam cores vibrantes, iluminação de alto contraste e uma clara distinção entre bem e mal, as produções posteriores exibem tons sombrios, iluminação de baixo contraste e fronteiras morais difusas. O estudo revela como o herói reflete transformações socioculturais: desde a rejeição a revoluções e ditaduras até o desencantamento pós-11 de setembro. Superman emerge como um símbolo aprisionado entre a difusão de valores ocidentais e a revelação de medos estadunidenses, evidenciando processos hegemônicos na cultura popular global.

Palavras-chave:

Superman, análise do discurso, semiótica, hegemonia cultural, representação cinematográfica.

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The Man of Steel as a Social Construct:

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Chapter 1

Popular Culture as a Site of Meaning: Theoretical Foundations

Introduction

Children have been wearing the Superman costume for several generations now and magazines, toys, comics and films about the character have been in circulation since 1938. Growing up in a Latin America that constantly receives cultural influence from the United States, it was not difficult for me as a child to become a fan of the superhero. In this paper I aim to analyse the character from an academic point of view, to unravel the symbolism present in the representations of the comic book character through the 1970s and 2000s in six films. I seek to observe the mind-sets that these popular culture productions may embed.

The Ordinary and the Popular: Cultural Studies Perspectives from Birmingham

Much of the inspiration for this analysis originated from the legacy of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham regarding the importance of ordinary culture and of popular culture and the contribution of scholars

such as Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart. Stuart Hall asserts:

High culture versus popular culture was, for many years, the classic way of framing the debate about culture ... (roughly, high = good; popular = debased). In recent years, and in a more 'social science' context, the word 'culture' is used to refer to whatever is distinctive about the 'way of life' of a people. (Hall, 1997a, p. 2)

Hall (2007, p. 7), claims that the contribution of Raymond Williams 'was a formative moment for Cultural Studies'. In *Culture is Ordinary* (1958) Williams asserts:

Culture is Ordinary. An interest in learning of the arts is simple, pleasant and natural ... A culture is a whole way of life, and the arts are part of a social organization which economic change clearly radically effects ... It was said that it was a class-dominated culture, deliberately restricting a common inheritance to a small class, while leaving the masses ignorant. (Williams, 1958, pp. 7–8)

Williams goes on: 'to say that working people are excluded from English culture is nonsense; they have their own growing institutions, and much of the strictly bourgeois culture they would in any case not want'. He further asserts: 'There are institutions, and common meanings, which are in no sense the sole product of the commercial middle class'. Raymond Williams also disagrees with the 'normal description of the masses' as 'low and trivial in taste and habit', as he claims that 'there are in fact no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses'. Williams attributes this tendency to the, by then, 'new forms of multiple transmission of news and entertainment' which 'created unbridgeable divisions

between transmitter and audience' and in which the audience was 'being interpreted as an unknown mass'.

This conception is further analysed by Hall (1997a, p. 2), when he observes that 'what has come to be called the "cultural turn" in the social and human sciences, especially in cultural studies and the sociology of culture, has tended to emphasize the importance of meaning to the definition of culture'. Hall (2007, p. 39), underlines that *The Uses of Literacy* (1958) by Richard Hoggart played a 'formative role' in our understanding of what culture is, claiming that 'it simply registers an inescapable fact' regarding the importance of culture through the 'astonishing global expansion and sophistication of the cultural industries', also stating that culture 'creeps into every nook of contemporary life' and 'mediates everything'. Hall (2007, p. 40), highlights that in *The Uses of Literacy*, Hoggart evaluated the relationship between the working classes and popular magazines and newspapers. What had initially been thought of as a negative relationship, appeared in a different light, since 'a sufficiently close relationship had come to exist between publications and their readers'. The values of the working classes often appeared reaffirmed in magazines. Hoggart (1958, p. 339), asserts: 'Every tendency I have analysed in popular publications is to be found in some form of broadcasting ... There is the appeal to old decencies.'

Regarding this phenomenon Hall claims:

The effects of cultural products cannot be 'read off' or inferred from the contents of what is produced for them to consume because, to have 'effects' of any depth, they must enter into and be in active negotiation with an already fully elaborated cultural world. (Hall, 2007, p. 42)

He approaches the production of common meanings as follows:

Representation is the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, a signifying system) to produce meaning ... objects, people, events in the world do not have in themselves any fixed, final or true meaning. It is us – in society, within human cultures – who make things mean, who signify. (Hall, 1997b, p. 61)

Hall (2007), stresses that a ‘constructionist view of language and representation ... owes a great deal to the work ... of the Swiss linguist Saussure’, ‘the father of modern linguistics’. Hall refers to the description of Saussure’s production of meaning provided by Jonathan Culler:

Language is a system of signs. Noises count as language only when they serve to express or communicate ideas ... The sign is the union of a form which signifies, which Saussure calls the significant or signifier, and an idea signified, the *signifié* or signified. (Culler, 1976, p.19)

From Semiotics to Hegemony: Analytical Frameworks for Understanding Representation

Hall (1997b, p. 36), points out that the study of signs in linguistics can be applied to a ‘wide range of cultural objects and practices’. Hall asserts that Saussure ‘foresaw this possibility’ as the study of signs in society, what ‘is now known by the term

semiotics', and accentuates the contribution of Roland Barthes to the study of semiotics focusing on his analysis of professional wrestling, which aims to find the meaning of the event rather than who wins in every fight.

Barthes (1972, p. 16), wrote: 'We are therefore dealing with a real Human Comedy, where the most socially inspired nuances of passion (conceit, rightfulness, refined cruelty, a sense of "paying one's debts") appear'.

As a result, Barthes points out:

In wrestling, unlike judo, Defeat is not a conventional sign, abandoned as soon as it is understood; it is not an outcome, but quite the contrary, it is a duration, a display, it takes up the ancient myths of public Suffering and Humiliation. (Barthes, 1972, p. 19)

Hall (2007, p. 43), also points to the contribution made by Michel Foucault, which was 'much more historically grounded'. Foucault focused on 'relations of power, not relations of meaning'. Hall underlines the contribution of Foucault through the introduction of such ideas as his approach to 'discourse; the issue of power and knowledge; and the issue of the subject', as he took distance from Saussure and Barthes engaging an approach analysing relations of 'force, strategic developments and tactics'.

I would like to highlight that Williams' approach to the concept of culture and the study of society through semiotics, linguistics and discourse appear relevant to the understanding of social life. Richard Hoggart, in *The Uses of Literacy*, also underlined the role of popular media as an area for research.

Raymond Williams approaches this matter from a different perspective in *Culture*:

At one level, 'popular culture', in these later periods, is a very complex combination of residual, self-made and externally produced elements, with important internal conflicts between these. At another level ... is the major area of bourgeois and ruling-class cultural production, moving towards and offered 'universality' in the modern communications institutions. (Williams, 1981, p. 228)

Gramsci (1971, p. 45), referred to this phenomenon when he introduced the concept of hegemony, claiming, 'the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as "domination" and as "intellectual and moral leadership"'.

Gramsci also states:

The 'normal' exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 80)

Regarding the role of cultural exports Williams (1981, p. 230), sees them as 'a function of relative political or commercial dominance, with especially clear cases in the political empires and many related cases in general international competition'. He continues adding:

In certain areas, notably cinema and television production, conditions of relative monopoly, not only internally but internationally, have led beyond simple processes of export to more general processes of cultural dominance and then of cultural dependence. (Williams, 1981, p. 230)

Popular culture is involved then, as Hall (2007), puts it, in an 'active negotiation with an already fully elaborated cultural world' and in the context of what Williams (1981), calls 'international competition'. I would argue then that by analysing popular culture products it may be possible to detect both of these aspects. The two questions I would like to address are:

1. What values are promoted in popular cultural products such as the Superman films?
2. What does representation in these films say about the mind-sets of their day?

Chapter 2

Two Lenses to Unlock Superman

The book employed a combination of two qualitative methods, which were explained in detail below. Each method contributed uniquely to the analysis and interpretation of the gathered data. Together, they allowed for a richer, more nuanced understanding of the subject matter. These approaches were carefully selected to ensure the book's findings were both credible and deeply grounded in real-world observations.

Discourse Analysis

Hall (1997b, p. 44), underlines the shift of attention in Foucault from language to discourse. 'He studied not language, but discourse as a system of representation.' Hall adds that 'it is important to note that the concept of discourse in this usage is not purely a "linguistic" concept. It is about language and practice'.

Regarding the study of discourse in media, Cotter (2001, p. 417), asserts that 'the first dimension, that of text, has been the

primary focus in most media researchers to date, particularly as the text encodes values and ideologies that impact on the larger world’.

Norman Fairclough (2003, pp. 215–216), a Professor of Language in Social life Lancaster University, UK, underlines that discourse ‘is used in a general sense for language (as well as, for instance, visual images) as an element of social life which is dialectically related to other elements’. He adds that discourse ‘is also used more specifically: different discourses are different ways of representing aspects of the world’.

Fairclough (2003, p. 10), argues that ‘part of what is implied in approaching texts as elements of social events is that we are not only concerned with texts as such, but also with interactive processes of meaning-making.’

For Fairclough, events are not simply effects of social structures since their relationship is mediated by social practices. Social practices are ‘the articulations of different types of social element ... associated with particular areas of social life’ and ‘classroom teaching in contemporary British education’ is an example of it. Social practices involve the articulation of action and interaction, persons, the material world and discourse.

Fairclough (2003, p. 2), asserts that his approach to discourse analysis ‘is based upon the assumption that language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life’. Fairclough (2003, p. 5) emphasises that ‘the relationship between language and other elements and aspects of social life, and its approach to the linguistic analysis of texts is always oriented to the social character of texts’.

Regarding the model of social life present in texts, Fairclough (2013, p. 58), asserts that ‘the ideological work of texts is connected to ... hegemony and universalization’. In relation to hegemony Gramsci (1971, p. 193), claims that ‘the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as “domination” and as “intellectual and moral leadership”’.

Basing his comments on the concept of hegemony introduced by the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, Fairclough (2013, p. 58) also underlines that ‘seeking hegemony is a matter of seeking to universalize particular meanings in the service of achieving and maintaining dominance, and this is ideological work’.

The process of identifying hegemony in texts is explained as follows:

What Laclau and Mouffe (1985) identify, with respect to political hegemony, is the simultaneous operation of a ‘logic of difference’ and a ‘logic of equivalence’. These are respectively tendencies towards creating and proliferating differences between objects, entities, groups of people, etc. and collapsing or ‘subverting’ differences by representing objects, entities, groups of people, etc. (Fairclough, 2003, p. 10).

Fairclough (2003), underlines that ‘this can be applied specifically to the textual moment of social events’ and in this light there appears to be a relevant connection between representation, as a process of meaning-making, and hegemony.

Fairclough (2003, pp. 87–104), asserts that hegemonic tendencies can be found through analysing the semantic relations

of clauses and sentences. These can be of several kinds: relations of cause (a reason, a consequence or a purpose), of condition, of time, of addition, of elaboration (providing examples or rewording) or of contrast/concession. The relations are realized 'in a range of grammatical and lexical (vocabulary) features of texts', for instance parataxis (clauses that are grammatically equal), hypotaxis (when a clause is subordinate to another) and embedding (when one clause 'functions as an element of another clause').

Fairclough (2003, p. 142), asserts that a clause 'is a simple sentence, as opposed to a complex sentence which combines a number of clauses' and further asserts that 'clauses have three main types of element: processes (usually realized as verbs), participants (subjects, objects, etc.) and circumstances (commonly realized as adverbs)'.

The focus of the discourse analysis in this dissertation will be to highlight the tendencies of meaning-making, through relations of equivalence and difference between people, entities, objects and activities found in every scene of the films. Breaver (2009, p. 223), defines a scene as 'a unit of a motion picture usually composed of a number of interrelated shots that are unified by location or a dramatic incident'.

According to Fairclough (2003), relations of equivalence and difference can be realised through the grammatical feature of parataxis. Additionally, Fairclough (2013, p. 102) emphasises that these relations can also be established 'from a process point of view, in terms of the relational "work" that is being done ... that relations of meaning inclusion (the term used in semantics is "hyponymy")' adding that the meaning of one phrase 'includes the meanings of the former, which are thereby made equivalent to one another'.

As Fairclough (2003, p. 101), emphasises ‘this textual process of meaning-making is an important element ... seeking to achieve hegemony’ but its effectiveness ‘is not guaranteed’ as it depends on ‘how pervasively’ they appear and ‘how successfully alternatives are excluded’.

Due to the word limit of this dissertation it was necessary to prioritize two Superman films, the first one and the most recent one: *Superman The Movie*, released in 1978 and *Man of Steel*, released in 2013. It was necessary to transcribe the script from *Man of Steel*, while the script from *Superman The Movie* was obtained from the fan Web Site www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk.

Visual Analysis

In their book *Visual Culture* Howells and Negreiros (2012, p. 1), write that ‘during our lives, we are usually taught how to read the printed word’ but they also write that ‘meaning is both made and transmitted in the visual world’. Howells and Negreiros argue that by tackling ‘any visual text – whether it is a drawing, a painting, a photograph, a film, an advertisement, a television programme or a news media text’ it is possible to discover ‘what it means and how that meaning is communicated’. They add: ‘We will discover, even, how some images give away more meaning than their authors consciously intended’.

Several strategies for visual analysis are set out by Howells and Negreiros: iconology, form, history of art, ideology and semiotics. For this research I shall focus on two strategies: iconology and semiotics.

Iconology

According to Panofsky (1972, p. 3), 'iconography is that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art as opposed to their form'. Panofsky points to 'the distinction between subject matter or meaning on the one hand, and form on the other'.

Panofsky (1972, pp. 5–15), claimed that works of art have three levels or 'strata' of meaning. These levels are summarized as follows:

Primary or Natural Subject Matter

This is subdivided into:

Factual ('certain configurations of line and colour or certain peculiarly shaped lumps ... as representations of natural objects ... [such as] ... animals, plants, houses, tools, and so forth'.)

Expressional (objects are seen as events, for instance the 'the mournful character of a pose or gesture, or the homelike and peaceful atmosphere of an interior'.)

This 'world of pure forms' is called 'the world of artistic motifs', a 'pre-iconographical description' of the work of art.

Secondary or Conventional Subject Matter

This refers to the connection between artistic motifs and compositions (the combination of artistic motifs), for example 'a

group of figures seated at the dinner table in a certain arrangement represents the Last Supper’.

Motifs recognized as ‘carriers of secondary or conventional meaning’ are called images, and the combinations of images are called stories and allegories.

Intrinsic Meaning of Content

This refers to the conception of ‘pure forms, motifs, images, stories and allegories as manifestations of underlying principles’. These underlying principles ‘reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work’.

For instance, in the famous fresco of Leonardo da Vinci thirteen men around the dinner table represent the Last Supper and this means that ‘we deal with the work of art as such’. On the other hand, trying to understand the same painting as a ‘document of Leonardo’s personality, or of the civilization of the Italian High Renaissance, or of a peculiar religious attitude, we deal with the work as a symptom’. Discovering and interpreting the symbolical values present in an artistic work, which is ‘generally unknown to the artist himself’, is the object of iconography. These symbolical values can be found through ‘compositional methods’ and ‘iconographical significance’. Panofsky recommends we focus on the ‘basic principles which underline the choice and representation of motifs’ including the ‘production and interpretation of images’ and the ‘formal arrangements and technical procedures employed’. An important filter for the application of this theory

is what Panofsky calls the ‘controlling principle of interpretation’, which means taking into account the manner in which objects and events were expressed by forms, the history in which concepts were expressed by objects and events, and the way in which tendencies of the human mind were expressed by objects and events.

For Panofsky (1972, p. 16), in order to find out the intrinsic meaning of a work it is necessary to refer to ‘many other documents of civilization’ in terms of the ‘political, poetical, religious, philosophical and social tendencies of the personality, period or country under investigation’.

Semiotics

Howells and Negreiros (2012, pp. 112–13), state about the origin of semiotics that ‘it begins with the early linguistic work of Ferdinand de Saussure and an explanation of the basic terms and concept of semiotics’. ‘Saussure showed that language was a system of signs or signals’ and ‘he used the “lexicon of signification”: a group of terms that comprised the “sign”, the “signifier” and the “signified”.

In his book *Mythologies* Barthes claims:

We are dealing in any semiological system, not with two, but with three different terms. For what we grasp is not at all one term after the other, but the correlation which unites them: there are, therefore, the signifier, the signified and the sign, which is the associative total of the first two terms. (Barthes, 1972, p. 111)

Howells and Negreiros (2012, p. 113), illustrate this when they say,

in English-speaking countries, the signifier “D-O-G” is taken to mean a certain kind of fluffy quadruped with a cold, wet nose that can clear a coffee table with one sweep of his tail. ... the signifier, in this case, is that combination of those three letters on a printed page ... the signified is the idea we get in our head as a result of reading the signifier.

According to Howells and Negreiros (2012, p. 119), ‘although Barthes is based on Saussure, he takes semiotics well beyond the Saussurian model’. Barthes introduces his approach to myth as follows:

In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional pattern which I have just described: the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. (Barthes, 1972, p. 113)

Howells and Negreiros (2012, p. 119), provide a practical example of what Barthes means by a myth when they say that, according to Saussurian semiotics, letters are used to represent a dog, but the contribution of Barthes is useful in order to understand then that ‘the resulting sign’ can be used to mean something else ‘such as fidelity’.

Howells and Negreiros (2012), provide further examples. In the case of the fast food chain McDonald's, in the 1980s the company 'took the policy decision to no longer focus on food in its advertising, but to stress the experience of eating at the McDonald's outlet. These were portrayed as happy'. Mercedes Benz is also 'instantly recognizable' for sophistication.

Another example of myth found in Barthes, this time political rather than commercial, is as follows:

I am at the barber's, and a copy of *Paris Match* is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the meaning of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. (Barthes, 1972, p. 115)

Barthes (1972, pp. 115–16), asserts that in this case there is a 'greater semiological system', in which a new terminology applies. For instance, the signifier is seen in myth 'from two points of view: as the final term of the linguistic system, or as the first term of the mythical system', and therefore on the plane of language the signifier becomes a 'meaning', whereas on the plane of myth Barthes calls it 'form'. The signified is called 'concept' while the result of the process gains the name of 'signification'.

Barthes claims that 'the signifier of myth presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning and form, full

on one side and empty on the other' and that 'when it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself. ... the form has put all this richness at a distance: its newly acquired penury calls for a signification to fill it'. In other words, the black soldier is stripped of his individuality in order to become part of a bigger composition. Additionally Howells and Negreiros (2012, p. 123), assert that in this case, this picture 'presents French imperialism as a fact that does not need explaining, when imperialism is, in reality, a deeply political issue'.

Barthes (1972) defines myth as a 'type of speech' and emphasises that mythology 'is a part both of semiology inasmuch as it is a formal science, and of ideology inasmuch as it is an historical science: it studies ideas-in-form'.

Barthes (1972), realises this when he confesses to feeling 'impatience at the sight of the "naturalness" with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality' complaining about the 'decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse which ... is hidden there'. Howells and Negreiros (1972, p. 131), comment on this issue that the notion of what-goes-without-saying is indeed Barthes's 'most useful contribution to the analysis of visual culture' as it provides a tool to 'question ... things that we had previously taken for granted'.

As seen in this section, iconography and semiotics are useful strategies for visual analysis. These strategies for analysis will be applied to a set of frames taken from the films *Superman The Movie*, *Superman II*, *Superman III*, *Superman IV*, *Superman Returns* and *Man of Steel*.

I would argue that discourse analysis and visual analysis can indeed complement each other and together help to achieve

a comprehensive understanding of the sociology of culture in the Superman film franchise. Discourse analysis can facilitate the understanding of what has been said in the Superman films, while visual analysis can provide clues as to what has been shown, voluntarily or involuntarily, in them.

Before engaging in the analysis I would like to explore the creation of the character and the impact it has had on film.

Chapter 3

Superman: From Paper to Film

Origins of the character

Rocketed to Earth from the dying planet Krypton, baby Kal-El was found by a farming couple who named the boy Clark Kent and raised him as their own. Discovering his enormous powers, they instilled in him strong moral values — and inspired him to become a hero. (DC Comics, 2015)

Andrae (1980, p. 84), underlines that Superman was created by the writer Jerry Siegel and the illustrator Joe Shuster in the United States of America during the 1930s, a time preceded by ‘the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933’. According to Andrae the idea of a Superman was present ‘in the Nazis’ distorted use of the Nietzschean concept of the *Übermensch*’.

Soares (2015, p. 748), claims that ‘debuting in *Action Comics* 1 in 1938, the character borrowed from other cultures from its inception’. Soares adds that both creators of Superman were sons of Jewish refugees, and that ‘Superman’s back story invokes the almost four-thousand-year-old story of Moses’ as he is sent to earth from Krypton, a planet doomed to extinction, and that his strength is ‘reminiscent of Samson’.

In the novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Nietzsche (1844-1900), the character Zarathustra claims: ‘The Superman ... is my paramount and sole concern – and not man: not the nearest, not the poorest, not the most suffering, not the best.’

Jerry Siegel stated interview for the 1981 BBC documentary *Arena, The Comic Strip Hero* (1981): ‘Back in those days Nazism was rising up and innocent people were being killed ... and I felt that the world desperately needed a crusader’.

Darowski (2012, pp. 1–3), states: ‘Superman has had one of the most profound impacts on American popular culture and to this day he remains a profit-generator’. Scvivally (2008, pp. 16–61), further emphasises that the 1940s radio show had an ‘instantaneous popularity’ and ‘became an immediate hit’ also indicating that as early as 1941 a cartoon TV series emerged. In 1948 Superman was brought to the cinema with Kirk Alyn starring in ‘15 exciting chapters of the Columbia Pictures serial, *Superman*’, and the franchise continued to flourish on television throughout the 1950s with new films and a new TV series starring George Reeves, until the actor died in 1959.

I will now refer to the context in which the main Superman films, those from the 1970s to the 2000s, were produced.

Superman The Movie (1978)

According to Scivally (2008), at the beginning of the 1970s American film and TV producers saw Superman as ‘kid stuff’ and ‘it took a young film producer in Europe to understand the character’s magical appeal’. That producer was Ilya Salkind. Rossen (2008, p. 56), claims that when he presented the idea of a Superman film to his Russian-born father, Alexander Salkind, a financier, Ilya said: ‘He has powers ... he flies; he’s like Jesus’.

Scivally (2008), asserts that the producers announced a budget of 20 million dollars, ‘an astronomic figure at the time’, and hired Mario Puzo, writer of the mafia novel *The Godfather*, to write the script for *Superman The Movie*. The Internet Movie Database states about the storyline:

Unable to convince the ruling council of Krypton that their world will destroy itself soon, scientist Jor-El takes drastic measures to preserve the Kryptonian race: He sends his infant son Kal-El to Earth. There, gaining great powers under Earth’s yellow sun, he will become a champion of truth and justice. (The Internet Movie Data Base, 1990-2015)

Scivally (2008), highlights that the Salkinds cast an unknown actor, Christopher Reeve, as Superman/Clark Kent, Gene Hackman as Lex Luthor and Marlon Brando as Superman’s Krypton father Jor-El. Richard Donner was chosen to direct the new Superman saga. Scivally asserts that ‘Donner ... realized that at its core, the Superman myth that had developed over the years was fundamentally a retelling of the story of Jesus Christ’. Hutchison

(1987, p. 129), highlights that the film won an 'Academy Award for Special Achievement in visual effects'

Events that preceded the production of *Superman The Movie* and *Superman II* are documented in BBC ON THIS DAY (2008). These included the rise of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the invasion of Cuba in 1961, the Cuban missile crisis, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1962, the Vietnam invasion in 1965, the Watergate Scandal in 1973, the resignation of President Richard Nixon in 1974, and the Cold War.

Superman II (1980)

Scivally (2008), emphasizes that, as frictions emerged between Donner and the Salkinds they hired Richard Lester to direct *Superman II*.

The Internet Movie Database describes the storyline of *Superman II* as follows: 'Superman agrees to sacrifice his powers to start a relationship with Lois Lane, unaware that three Kryptonian criminals he inadvertently released are conquering Earth.'

Scivally (2008, pp. 94–95), indicates that, 'by the time of *Superman II*'s release, the Licensing Corporation of America ... had awarded two hundred licences for more than 1,200 products tied to the two films'.

Superman III (1983)

Scivally (2008), indicates that Lester was hired again to direct *Superman III*. In this film, according to The Internet Movie Data

Base (1990-2015), 'synthetic kryptonite laced with tobacco tar splits Superman in two: good Clark Kent and bad Man of Steel'. Lester told the press that 'instead of having more villains ... this time Superman's battle was against himself'.

Events that preceded the production of *Superman III* are documented in BBC ON THIS DAY (2008): the election of Ronald Reagan as U.S. President in 1980, the Falklands War in 1982 and the continuation of the Cold War.

Superman IV: The Quest For Peace (1987)

According to Scivally (2008), the Salkinds had no intention of producing another Superman film after the failure of a spin-off titled *Supergirl*, and Cannon films approached them to 'buy the Superman license'. Christopher Reeve was reluctant to appear in another film but accepted the offer from Cannon films 'on condition that he would be given greater artistic control of *Superman IV* – he wanted to direct the film'. As Scivally puts it 'a 12-year-old boy writes to Superman urging him to fight for world peace' and Superman 'takes it upon himself to physically confiscate all the world's nuclear weapons, which he hurls into the sun'. Scivally adds that Reeve 'wanted to show that Superman was an interplanetary citizen'. Soares (2015, p. 751) asserts: 'The movie was a cinematic mess and a box-office bomb, side-lining the Superman movies for the next two decades'.

Events that preceded the production of *Superman IV* are documented in BBC ON THIS DAY (2008). These included the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev as leader of the Soviet Union in 1985, the liberation of 39 American hostages at the Lebanon Embassy in 1985, and the continuation of the Cold War.

***Superman Returns* (2006)**

Scivally (2008), asserts that Brian Singer, 'director of the phenomenally successful *X-Men* (2000)' was chosen by Warner Brothers to revive the Superman franchise, after a long struggle and continued failed projects. As Scivally notes, 'instead of reinventing Superman for the new millennium, Singer wanted to make a film that would be a continuation of the Christopher Reeve films'. Scivally adds that the 'screenwriters struggled with a problem: how to make a hero created during the Depression relevant to modern audiences'.

Scivally indicates that Singer cast an unknown actor, Brandon Routh, for the role of Superman. The Internet Movie Database (1990-2015), describes the storyline of *Superman Returns* as follows: 'Superman reappears after a long absence, but is challenged by an old foe who uses Kryptonian technology for world domination'.

Events that preceded the production of *Superman Returns* are documented in the BBC ON THIS DAY (2008). These included the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001. I would argue that the death of Christopher Reeve in 2004 also influenced this film. *USA Today* (2004) reported that the actor died of heart failure 'after being paralyzed in a horse riding accident' since 1995.

***Man of Steel* (2013)**

The *Hollywood Reporter* (2013), states that following the success of Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy in 2012 'the quick return of the other great DC comic hero was inevitable'. The

Hollywood Reporter (2013), highlights that Nolan participated in the new Superman film as a producer and co-story writer with David Goyer while Zack Snyder directed. The film casted Russell Crowe as Jor-El, Michael Shannon as the ‘rebellious General Zod’ and Henry Cavill as the new Superman/Clark Kent/Kal-El and was a full reboot, retelling the genesis of the hero.

In a review, *The Guardian* stated:

‘Snyder has created a colossal, grandiose genesis for the Man of Steel, a titanic Moses-out-of-Nietzsche tale, a planet-clashing spectacle that is seen perpetually through a glowing, lens-flaring light: the opposite of the twilight of the gods. (The Guardian, 2015)

Soares (2015, p. 755), affirms that the film ‘respects the last seventy-five years of Superman mythology and simultaneously breaks with them to “reboot” the character for a twenty-first century, post-9/11 audience’.

Events that preceded the release of *Man of Steel*, which are listed by the BBC News Archive (2015), were the London terrorist attacks in 2005 and the Credit Crunch of 2007 and 2008.

The Franchise

According to *The Numbers* (2015), the Superman franchise, that is, all the films produced from 1978 to 2013, is worth \$1,514,810,659. *Superman The Movie* (1978), achieved worldwide box office sales of \$300,200,000. *Superman II* (1980), made \$101,347,629. *Superman III* made \$59,950,623. *Superman IV: The Quest For Peace* (1987), reaching

\$11,227,824 with a budget of \$17,000,000, this was the only Superman film that actually lost money).

In the 2000s the box office figures peaked. *Superman Returns* (2006) made \$374,085,065 at the worldwide box office, of which \$200,120,000 was made at the domestic box office. The budget for the film was \$232,000,000. *Man of Steel* (2013), which had a similar budget of \$225,000,000, made \$667,999,518 at the global box office of which \$291,045,518 was achieved at the domestic box office. *The Numbers* (2015) lists the Superman franchise within the top 30 earners of the western cinema industry.

Chapter 4

Why Revolution Was Condemned and Choice Became Valued

As mentioned in the Introduction, Fairclough (2013), explains that the semantic relations between clauses and sentences in equivalences and differences reveal meanings, which are aiming to be universalised. The main findings from the analysis of discourse of the six Superman films are as follows:

Superman The Movie (1978)

Activities

When Jor-El advocates against three individuals – General Zod, Ursa and Non – the word ‘revolution’ appears as a synonym of sedition, a mindless aberration, etc.

Table 1. Equivalences of specific charges

Relations of Elaboration and Addition 'Specific charges'
'Acts of treason'
'Ultimate aim of sedition'
'Mindless aberration'
'Are matters of undeniable fact'
'Means of expression are wanton violence and destruction'
'Perversions and unreasoning hatred of all mankind'
'Have threatened even the children of the Planet Krypton'
'Intended revolution'
'Insidious plot to establish a new order amongst us'

Note: Own elaboration.

As the Council of Government declares the accused guilty, the punishment –isolation, not imprisonment – appears as follows:

Table 2. Isolation in the phantom zone

Relations of Contrast
Relations of Elaboration 'Isolation in Phantom Zone'
'An unpleasant duty'
'An eternal living death'
'Masterly performed'
'The fate they deserved'
'A chance for life'

Note: Own elaboration.

While Jor-El warns the Council of an eventual destruction of Krypton, the councillors decide to stay on the planet and ask Jor-El to respect their decision.

Table 3. Respect the Council's decision

Relations of Contrast	
Relations of Addition and Elaboration: 'Abide by the Council's decision'	Relations of Elaboration 'Deemed as an act of insurrection'
'Remain silent' 'Neither I nor my wife will leave Krypton.'	'Any attempt to create a climate of fear and panic'

Note: Own elaboration.

As Jonathan Kent finds his demonstrating abilities, he establishes the principles cited below.

Table 4. Lecture from Jonathan Kent

Relations of Contrast	
Relations of Elaboration 'Showing off'	Relations of Elaboration 'You are here for a reason'
'Do all these amazing things' 'Tell people about it' 'Every time I get the football I can make a touchdown'	'Not to score touchdowns.'

Note: Own elaboration.

As Superman discovers a magical crystal that brings back a hologram of Jor-El, who presents the instructions detailed in table 5:

Table 5. Re-joining earth

Relations of Contrast	
Relations of Addition	
'Re-join your new world'	
'Serve its collective humanity'	'But always hold in your heart the
'Live as one of them, Kal-El'.	pride of your special heritage'.
'Discover where your strength and your power are	
needed'.	

Note: Own elaboration.

Clark Kent suggests Lois Lane should let up (lower stress) with work. Lane appears as a young professional who rejects being a housewife.

Table 6. Lois Lane on letting up

Relations of Elaboration 'Let up'
'Other half lives'
'My sister, for instance'
'Three kids, two cats, one mortgage'
'I would go bananas in a week'

Note: Own elaboration.

When Superman appears in public and the *Daily Planet's* editor, Perry White, calls it the 'story of the century', the relations of elaboration are as follows:

Table 7. The story of the century

Relations of Elaboration 'Sitting on top of the story of the century'
'I want the name of this flying whatchamacallit to go with the Daily Planet'
'Like bacon and eggs'
'Franks and beans, death and taxes'
'Politics and corruption'
'The single, most important interview since God talked to Moses'

Note: Own elaboration.

A contrast of two activities is established after Superman appears to the public for the first time. Superman flies to the 'fortress of solitude' a replica of the planet Krypton on earth, where Jor-El lectures his son about keeping his secret identity, as a rejection of vanity.

Table 8. Vanity and the secret identity

Relations of Contrast	
Relations of Elaboration: 'Revealed to the world'	Relations of Elaboration 'Keep your secret identity'
	'You cannot serve humanity 28 hours a day'
'Enjoyed it'	'Your help will be called for endlessly'
'Got carried away'	'Your enemies will discover their only way to hurt you by hurting the people you care for'
'How good it felt'	
'Very well'	'Do not punish yourself with your feelings of vanity'

Note: Own elaboration.

People

General Zod and Jor-El appear to be opposites; one remains silent while the other initiates a revolution.

Table 9. Zod and Jor-El

Relations of Contrast	
Relations of Addition General Zod	Relations of Elaboration Jor-El
'Chief architect of this intended revolution'	'Is one of Krypton's greatest scientists'
'Author of this insidious plot'	'Not given to wild unsupported statements'
'Establish a new order'	'I will remain silent'
'Himself as absolute ruler'	'Neither I, nor my wife, will leave Krypton'

Note: Own elaboration.

In the process of leaving his parents, Jor-El and Lara, to mention two key things, Kal-El/Superman becomes the father and the baby receives his inheritance as detailed in Table 10. Arguably there is a clear reference to the Bible (John, 1:18, King James Version), 'No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father'.

Table 10. Inheritance and the father

Relations of Contrast	
Relations of Addition Jor-El and Lara	Relations of Elaboration Superman
'Never leave you' 'Even in the face of our death' 'The richness of our lives shall be yours'. 'All that I have, all that I've learned, everything I feel...all this and more, I bequeath you, my son'. 'This is all I can send you'	'Carry me inside you' 'Make my strength your own' 'See my life through your eyes' 'Your life will be seen through mine' 'Son becomes the father' 'The Father the son' 'Forbidden for you to interfere with human history'.

Note: Own elaboration.

Another example of the inherited goods that Superman receives from his ancestry is the advantage over human beings, as shown in Table 11.

Table 11. Superman and humans

Relations of Contrast	
Relations of Addition Superman	Relations of Addition People of Earth
'The only survivor of the Planet Krypton'. 'Even though you were raised as a human you are not one of them' 'You have great powers' 'Only some of which you have as yet discovered'. 'Your powers will far exceed those of mortal men'. 'It is forbidden for you to interfere with human history' 'My only son'.	'They can be a great people' 'They wish to be' 'They only lack the light to show the way' 'Capacity for good' 'They're happy to abuse the resources of the world'. 'I have sent them you'

Note: Own elaboration.

In terms of the meaning relations of the characters, Kent appears to be judged as a more ethical being than Lois Lane at the workplace, as seen in Table 12.

Table 12. Lois Lane and Clark Kent compared by Perry White

Relations of Contrast	
Relations of Addition Lois Lane	Relations of Elaboration Clark Kent
'Pushing a bunch of rinky-dink tabloid garbage'	'Starting on the paper today'. 'Treats his Chief with the proper respect'. 'Has a snappy punchy prose style' 'The fastest typist ever seen' 'Sends a check every week to his sweet mother'

Note: Own elaboration.

The character Lex Luthor, an eccentric and wealthy criminal, appears as intelligent although diabolical.

Table 13. Lex Luthor

Relations of Addition Lex Luthor
'Sick' 'Executing the crime of the century' 'Greatest criminal mind of our time' 'Twisted' 'The most brilliantly diabolical leader of our time'

Note: Own elaboration.

Entities

The role of the media is highlighted in the film through the role of the *Daily Planet*, as detailed in Table 14.

Table 14. The Daily Planet

Relations of Addition The Daily Planet
'A great metropolitan newspaper' 'Whose reputation for clarity and truth had become a symbol of hope for the city of Metropolis'

Note: Own elaboration.

Objects

Land plays an important role in the film. The motivation behind Lex Luthor's bombing of the Saint Andreas fault resides in the fact that his properties, deserted lands, become new expensive shores.

Table 15. Lex Luthor and Land

Relations of Contrast	
Relations of Addition	Relations of Addition
'Land' 'Is always needed' 'People pay through the nose to get it'	'Stocks may rise and fall' 'Utilities and transportation systems may collapse' 'People are no damn good'

Note: Own elaboration.

The crystals sent to Superman by his parents appear in the film as the received inheritance.

Table 16. Inherited crystals

Relations of Addition Krypton Crystals
'Embed total accumulation of all literature and scientific fact from dozens of other worlds spanning the 28 known galaxies'

Note: Own elaboration.

Man of Steel (2013)

Activities

In *Man of Steel*, Jor-El warns the Council of the imminent destruction of the planet Krypton, but the alternative is a clear reference to colonisation.

Table 17. Jor-El in 2013

Relations of Contrast	
Relations of Addition:	Relations of Addition:
'Krypton core it's collapsing'	'Look to the stars like our ancestors did'
'Harvesting the core was suicide'	'There are habitable worlds within reach'
'Accelerated process of implosion'	'We can begin by using the old outposts'
Energy reserves were exhausted	
'Everybody here is already dead'	

Note: Own elaboration.

In clear opposition to what occurs in 1978, a coup d'état has a deeper justification by Zod who also invites Jor-El to join his forces in order to preserve the planet.

Table 18. Zod's intentions

Relations of Addition
'Join me'
'Help me save our race'
'We'll start a new'
'We'll server the degenerative bloodlines that led us to this state'

Note: Own elaboration.

The destruction of Krypton in *Man of Steel* (2013) is presented with an alternative, the survival of a citizen that carries the whole genetic material of their civilisation as detailed below.

Table 19. Sending Superman to earth

Relations of Addition Sending Superman to earth
'Krypton is doomed'
'It's the only chance now'
'It's our people's only hope'

Note: Own elaboration.

In contrast to what occurs in the 1970s version, it is not Jor-El who suggests a secret identity to Clark Kent, but it is Jonathan Kent who does. People's possible negative reaction is used to justify the emergence of a dual identity.

Table 20. The second identity in 2013

Relations of Contrast	
	Relations of Elaboration 'The world finds out what you can do'
'Keep this side of yourself a secret'	'It will change everything' 'Our beliefs' 'Our notions' 'What it means to be human' 'People are afraid of what they don't understand'

Note: Own elaboration.

I would argue that one of the milestones of *Man of Steel* is the contrast between what the society of Krypton lost as opposed to what they had in the past. A society with citizens without agency appears as something negative and as a symptom of decline.

Table 21. The society of Krypton in 2013

Relations of Contrast	
Relations of Addition	Relations of Elaboration 'Krypton lost something precious'
'Kryptonians were conceived in a chamber such as this' 'Every child was designed to fulfil a pre-determined role in society'	'The element of choice' 'Chance that what a child dreamed of becoming was something other than what society had intended'

Note: Own elaboration.

In this film General Zod is also found guilty of the 'crimes of murder' and 'treason', so he and 'his fellow insurgents' are sent to

prison. When Zod and his acquaintances are liberated they plan to take over the earth in order to recreate Krypton.

People

The contrastive relation between Superman and the people of Earth reveals a reference to divinity but also to the possibility of a threat as humans may ‘try to kill him’.

Table 22. Superman and humans, 2013

Relations of Contrast	
Relations of Addition Superman	People of Earth
‘He will drink the radiation’ ‘It’s our people’s only hope’ ‘His name is Kal son of El’ ‘He’ll be a god to them’	‘They’ll try to kill him’

Note: Own elaboration.

I would also argue that, peculiarly, Kal-El appears to be the ‘first natural born in centuries’, as shown below.

Table 23. Superman's characteristics

Relations of Contrast	
Relations of Addition Jor-El	Relations of Addition Kal-El
	'Came from Krypton'
	'Is the first natural birth in centuries'
	'A child of the Earth'
'I am your father'	'Hope that you can bring them'
'A shadow of him'	'The sun strengthens your muscles, your skin, your senses'
'His consciousness'	'Grow stronger'
	'Will help them accomplish wonders'

Note: Own elaboration.

I would also like to highlight that one of the main differences between *Man of Steel* (2013) and *Superman The Movie* (1978), lies in the blurred boundaries between good and bad in the later film. For instance, after being defeated by Superman, General Zod exposes his motivations for trying to recreate Krypton on earth.

Table 24. General Zod in 2013

Relations of Elaboration General Zod
'I exist only to protect Krypton'
'Is the sole purpose for which I was born'
'Every action I take, no matter how violent or how cruel Is for the greater good of my people'
'Now I have no people'
'My soul is what you have taken from me'

Note: Own elaboration.

Entities

As General Zod attempts a coup d'état there is a clear reference to the role of the Government as responsible for the ruin of the planet.

Table 25. The Krypton Council

Relations of Addition The Council

‘Lawmakers with their endless debates have lead to Krypton in the ruin’

Note: Own elaboration.

Objects

As the planet was about to explode Jor-El stores all the genetic material in Superman’s body so that Krypton’s society can emerge again.

Table 26. The Codex

Relations of Addition The Codex

‘The DNA of a billion people’
‘Bonded it within his son’s individual cells’

Note: Own elaboration.

Summary of Findings

While *Superman The Movie* (1978), condemns revolution, pretentiousness, greed, vanity and violence, approves of isolation for the accused and highlights the importance of heritage and patriarchal authority, the film *Man of Steel* (2013), appears to expose dialectic relations between activities and between characters. Furthermore, although *Man of Steel* (2013), appears to advocate in favour of ‘the element of choice’ and the ‘chance that what a child dreamed of becoming something other than what society had intended’ a disapproval of society persists throughout the film. I would stress that in *Man of Steel* the relations of equivalence and difference reveal a constant attitude of disenchantment – with lawmakers, with humans who would try to kill Superman, with humans’ fear of the unknown, and with Krypton as well.

Chapter 5

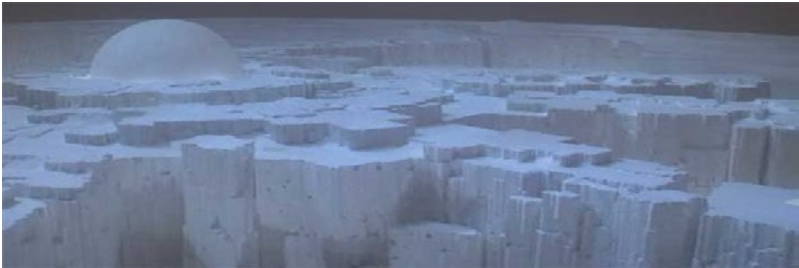
From White Capes to Grey Skies: A Visual Journey Through Decades

Frames from the six films representing key events and characters have been chosen for this analysis. Each frame will be analysed from the perspectives of semiotics and iconology. The principles stated by Barthes (1972), will be used to identify a signifier or form and its concept. Iconology, under the principles stated by Panofsky (1972), will be used to identify the intrinsic meaning of the contents through the choice of motifs.

Superman The Movie (1978)

The Introduction of Planet Krypton

Figure 1. Planet Krypton, 1978



The motif chosen is a set of cubical structures, similar to that found in another blockbuster, *Star Wars* (1977), to represent a technologically advanced civilisation.

Figure 2. Scene from *Star Wars*, 1977



Krypton is all white, Wright (2008–2015), asserts that the psychological effect of white – the colour of Krypton– is ‘hygiene, sterility, clarity, purity, cleanness, simplicity, sophistication, efficiency’. Therefore Krypton appears as a signifier of a technologically advanced, and possibly pure, civilization.

Trial against General Zod

Figure 3. General Zod, Ursa and Non being judged, 1978



The three criminals are military personnel, shown by their black uniforms. The men have beards and look unfriendly, indicating disapproval of authoritarian rule. According to Wright (2008–2015) a negative meaning of black signifies ‘oppression, coldness, menace, heaviness’. The three criminals here are seen as signifiers of evil and misconduct.

The Krypton Government Council

Figure 4. The Krypton Government Council, 1978



The members of the council are middle aged and mostly men, suggesting the importance of the hierarchy of age and gender in government.

Their clothing displays a degree of glow, an attribute that is normally present in the representation of divine figures. The group of leaders appear here therefore as signifiers of divine order and legality.

Superman's Parents Send their Son to Earth

Figure 5. Jor-El and Lara, 1978



The motifs chosen for this frame include the two characters, who are white and wearing glowing costumes in a technologically advanced setting. The frame may suggest the hierarchy of an upper class of divine nature.

Superman's parents Jor-El and Lara, as they prepare to send their son to earth, appear as signifiers of divine and pure ancestry.

The Kents Find Superman

Figure 6. Jonathan and Martha Kent, 1978



The motifs chosen for this frame are the American countryside and a white, mature man and woman dressed formally. This points to a traditional white family. The mature white couple appear here as signifiers of humbleness.

Clark Kent in Smallville

Figure 7. Smallville, 1978



In this frame the building appears to have Victorian influence, as stated by Heritage Open Days (2015), due to the slate roof, brick and decorated roofline. The footballers, the blue sky, the green grass, the American flag and 1940s cars point to a traditional, arguably ideal, American setting. These elements appear as signifiers of cheerfulness.

Jor-El reveals powers to Superman

Figure 8. The Fortress of Solitude, 1978



The Royal Institute of British Architects (2015), asserts that 'High Tech' is modern style characterized by glass and expressed constructions, while 'Brutalism' uses massive forms and unusual shapes. At the Fortress of Solitude, these components are merged with a hologram of Jor-El, suggesting an appreciation for modernism. The white colour used seems to signify holiness.

The *Daily Planet* Newsroom

Figure 9. The Newsroom, 1978



Here a middle-aged white man (Perry White, the boss) roughly pushing a white woman of about 25 years of age (Lois Lane, reporter) and a white man wearing glasses, bending and being hit by a door (Clark Kent, reporter), seem to indicate the pyramidal structure of the workplace and gender inequality. The setting appears as a signifier of agility.

Superman visits Lois Lane

Figure 10. Superman, 1978



Scivally (2008, p. 7), claims that Superman's outfit was 'patterned after the circus strongman' of the 1930s adding that the cape was added 'to help give the drawings a sense of movement'. This appears to reveal an appreciation for power, which is preserved in this film. In terms of colour composition, according to Wright (2008–2015), blue is 'intelligence, communication, trust' and red means 'physical courage, strength, energy, masculinity' while the psychological effect of yellow is 'optimism, confidence, self-esteem, friendliness'. Therefore I would argue that Superman appears as a signifier of strength, reliability, courage and friendship.

Lex Luthor Headquarters

Figure 11. The Lex Luthor Headquarters, 1978



A white, smartly dressed man of about 40 years of age, a white and attractive woman who is exuberantly dressed and another white man are seen inside an underground train station with an eclectic decor. The Washington University Collection (2015), defines 'eclectic' as 'a variety of mixed-styled structures'. This setting seems to suggest the operation of crime below the law and a relationship with aristocracy. This setting materialises as a signifier of the underworld.

Superman II (1980)

The American President Kneels Before General Zod

Figure 12. The President of the U.S. kneels before General Zod, 1980



The choice of motifs: The Kryptonian villains and the President surrendering his authority seem to reveal a fear of defeat at the hands of an authoritarian ruler. The Kryptonian criminals and the U.S. government are seen here as signifiers of humiliation.

Superman Promises the President to Remain on his Side

Figure 13. Superman restores the American flag to the White House, 1980



The President, Superman and the American flag may appear here as the affirmation of faith in a superior being. These elements appear as signifiers of nationalism.

Superman III (1983)

Superman fights Clark Kent

Figure 14. Clark Kent and evil Superman fight, 1983

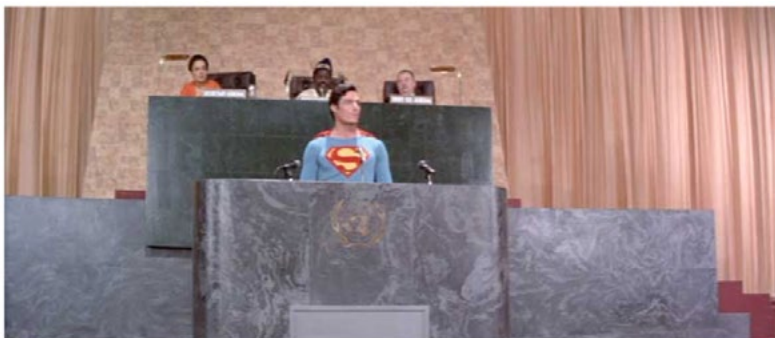


Evil Superman is presented here as aggressive and dark, with darker skin and dirty clothing, while Clark Kent appears clean and scared. The choice of motifs seems to indicate disapproval of evil. Clark Kent and an evil Superman are shown here as signifiers of an inner moral crisis.

Superman IV: The Quest for Peace (1987)

Superman addresses the United Nations

Figure 15. Superman addresses the United Nations, 1987



Superman and the United Nations is a choice of motifs that may be interpreted as the need for global peace. In this frame Superman, the United Nations building and the diplomats appear as signifiers of world citizenship.

Superman Returns (2006)

Lex Luthor Breaks into the Fortress of Solitude

Figure 16. The Fortress of Solitude, 2006



The Fortress of Solitude in this film resembles the version in the original films of the 1970s and 80s but in this case it has been made dark. Wright (2008–2015) emphasizes that ‘grey has a dampening effect on other colours used with it’; so I would argue that this setting might reveal a state of depression. Additionally, these elements appear as signifiers of intrusion and the threat of a sacred place.

Superman Reappears

Figure 17. Superman speaks to plane passengers, 2006



In this frame Superman reappears to the public. His costume resembles that of the Christopher Reeve saga but is in a darker shade. Indeed, as shown in Figure 14, the choice of colours between the evil Superman and the 2006 Superman are similar. Wright (2008–2015) asserts that ‘heavy use of grey usually indicates a lack of confidence and fear of exposure’. Arguably, therefore, the choice of colours for the 2006 suit might have eroded the initial positive qualities of the Superman character, affecting the intrinsic meaning and the concept.

Lois Lane Sees Perry White at his Office

Figure 18. Lois Lane speaks to Perry White, 2006



The decoration of Perry White's office appears old fashioned, perhaps from the 1940s, and White is no longer a white man. This frames suggests nostalgia for the past and a more multicultural society. However, Perry White standing behind his desk while Lois speaks to him, appears as a signifier of hierarchy.

Lex Luthor Walking out of his Headquarters

Figure 19. Lex Luthor walks out of his headquarters, 2006



Lex Luthor is framed here by his aides, a group of men dressed casually. A woman wears clothes from the 1940s. According to the Victoria and Albert Museum (2015) 'saucer shaped' hats and cinched waists represent that decade. English (2007, p. 58) claims that women's clothing in the 1940s and 1950s, like those from designer Balenciaga, 'used stiff materials that would hold their shape' which appears to be the case in this frame.

Luthor also wears vintage clothing. Arguably these elements reveal a feeling of nostalgia.

Additionally, these elements appear as signifiers of the extravagance of the upper classes.

***Man of Steel* (2013)**

Krypton Landscape

Figure 20. Krypton landscape, 2013

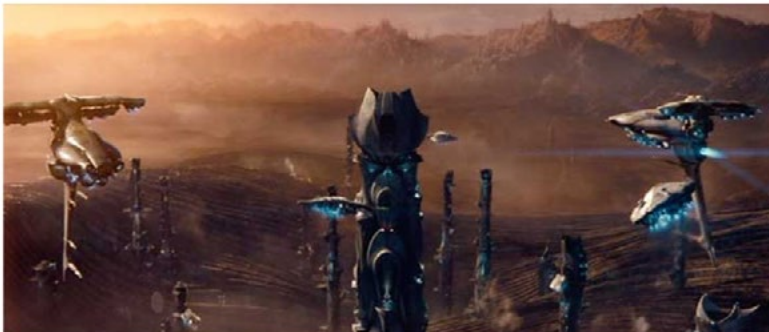


Figure 21. Scene from *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, 2002



The choice of motifs here includes flying saucers with signs of combustion, a sunset, a warm light and a deserted geography similar to the one in *Star Wars* (2005). This can be interpreted as an attempt to represent an advanced civilisation. The elements in Figure 20 signify development.

The Krypton Council

Figure 22. The Krypton Council, 2013



The Royal Institute of British Architects (2015), states that a classical revival style makes ‘references to Classical architecture’ which appears to be the case in this frame. Additionally, Coming-soon.net (2015), reports that Zack Snyder, director of the film, affirmed in an interview for *SFX* magazine that he tried to create a Krypton different from Earth but believable, ancient and ‘torn apart’. Therefore the motifs used in this frame seem to reveal an attitude of respect for wisdom and tradition. The symbols also appear as signifiers of intelligence, democracy and social order.

Jor-El Speaking to the Council

Figure 23. Jor-El, 2013



A white man addresses the Council; the character wears armour, which carries a family crest indicating the importance of genealogy, hierarchy and prestige in social agency. The elements in this frame appear as signifiers of power and strength.

General Zod Attempts a Coup d'Etat

Figure 24. General Zod overthrows the Krypton Council, 2013



A man of about 40 years of age appears before the government council, threatening the governors with guns. A black uniform indicates a military rank and this choice of motifs may be interpreted as a rejection of illegitimate power. General Zod, his acquaintances and the setting appear here as signifiers of a threat.

Clark Kent Walking in Rural United States

Figure 25. Clark Kent walking in rural United States, 2013



According to the Internet Movie Cars Database (2015), the cars appearing in this frame are a 1987 Ford F-150 SuperCab XLT Lariat pick-up truck and a 1992 Ford Econoline school bus. There is also a house with peeling paint and Clark Kent stares at the scene. This could be revealing a time of limited resources and economic recession. The elements in this frame appear as signifiers of deterioration.

Jonathan Kent Consoles his Son

Figure 26. Jonathan Kent and Clark Kent, 2013



Jonathan Kent (Kevin Costner), a white middle aged and working class farmer, a sad white 15-year-old Clark Kent and, according to the Internet Movie Cars Database (2015), a 1968 Dodge D-100 rusty and scratched pick- up truck, in a garden with the grass left uncut appear here as motifs that reveal limited resources. The elements described above appear as signifiers of protection.

Perry White at his Office

Figure 27. Perry White at the Daily Planet, 2013



An African American man wearing a silk tie in an imposing posture in an office with big windows displaying skyscrapers appear as motifs of a multicultural society. The elements described above are presented as signifiers of authority.

Clark Kent Visits his Mother

Figure 28. Martha Kent comforts Clark Kent, 2013



A white woman of about 50 years of age gives reassurance to her son; the paint is peeling on the house. These motifs seem to indicate the importance of the mother-figure for the working classes. The elements described above are presented as signifiers of tenderness.

Clark Kent Seeks Advice from a Catholic Priest

Figure 29. Clark Kent, 2013



Clark Kent looks for advice from a Catholic priest; in the background is an image of Jesus Christ. These motifs seem to highlight the importance of the Christian faith in society. Clark Kent and the image of Jesus Christ appear as synonyms and as signifiers of the goodness of divinity.

Superman Presents Himself to the U.S. Authorities

Figure 30. Superman surrenders to the authorities, 2013



A man floats in the sky, the sun shining behind him, while the police point guns at the man. These appear as motifs that may reveal fear and distrust of the unknown. Again, Superman, the police and human beings appear as signifiers of divinity.

Superman Sees Lois Lane at Military Headquarters

Figure 31. Superman speaks to Lois Lane, 2013



After surrendering to the authorities Superman speaks to reporter Lois Lane. In this frame Lane is giving advice to Superman. Both appear as motifs of the role of women in providing guidance. The two characters appear as signifiers of female strength.

Superman Challenging the Villains

Figure 32. Superman fights the Kryptonians, 2013



The costume in this frame no longer has the red underwear. In an interview for *NPR* (2013), Zack Snyder, director of the film, claimed that the underwear was 'a leftover from Victorian strongmen' and that 'we've moved on a little bit from that era of modesty'. The colour red here is bright. In an interview for *Games Radar* (2013), Deborah Snyder, producer of the film, stated that Zack Snyder wanted the suit to 'feel like a space suit' and to resemble armour. These motifs appear to reveal a lesser degree of innocence.

Consequences of the Superman-Zod Fight

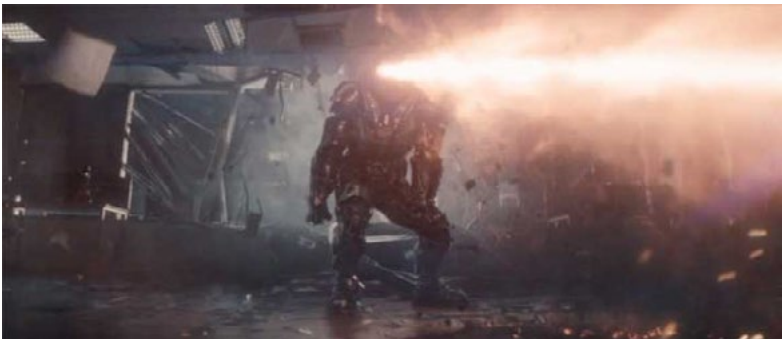
Figure 33. Buildings collapse as Superman and Zod fight, 2013



Perry White and a companion run in terror as a building collapses behind them. The similarity of these motifs to footage from the US terrorists attacks of 2001 seem to reveal a rejection of terrorism. These elements appear as signifiers of terror.

General Zod Destroying Everything

Figure 34. General Zod destroys Metropolis, 2013



Since Superman prevented the recreation of Planet Krypton, General Zod takes revenge on Superman by trying to destroy Earth. This appears as motifs that reveal a fear of terrorism. General Zod and the destruction he causes appear as signifiers of fundamentalism.

Superman Kills General Zod

Figure 35. Superman cries over Zod's corpse, 2013



Superman screams as he stares at the corpse of General Zod whom he has just killed and Lois Lane stares at the scene. These motifs may reveal a moral rejection of killing. The elements described above may appear as signifiers of regret.

Chapter 6

A Superman Trapped Between Values and Fears

I would like to point to the different uses of colour in the Superman films. While in the 1970s and 1980s Superman was presented in bright colours, in the 2000s the tones are more gloomy. The similarity is striking between the costume of evil Superman, seen in Figure 14, and the costume of the character in the 2006 film *Superman Returns*, seen in Figure 17.

I have intentionally left out of my discussion a quite relevant aspect of the film, the use of lighting, which deserves special attention. Hayward (2000, p. 210), highlights the existence of two types of lighting: high key (bright lighting 'with very few (if any) shadows', typical of musicals and comedies) and low key ('predominantly dark and shadowy' lighting, according to Hayward often including the concept of 'high-contrast lighting effects' (also known as *chiaroscuro*), used in horror, psychodramas and thrillers).

Misek (2010, p. 124), asserts that in low-key lighting the intention is to 'eschew color and mimic black and white cinematography's focus on tone'. I would emphasise then that while the 1970s Superman films appear to have been filmed with high key lightning, *Superman Returns* (2006), was filmed using low key. Additionally, *Superman Returns* (2006), displays a slight sepia colouring, which Misek (2010, p. 189), claims is 'regarded as black and white'; he further stresses that this implies 'a revival of the memory of past events'. Finally, in *Man of Steel* colour appears with a slight blue hue and pale. Misek (2010, p. 165), comments on the prevalence at the time of 'color monochrome' which involves a 'process of partial desaturation followed by an emphasis on a single hue'. Relevant here is Goethe's (1840, p. 311), assertion regarding blue, that 'as a hue it is powerful, but it is in the negative side ... as it were, stimulating negation ... a kind of contraction between excitement and response'.

Therefore, I would argue that the colour and lightning in the post-Christopher Reeve films seem to reveal an attitude of nostalgia and sadness.

Conclusion

Hassler-Forest (2011), suggests that Superman's ideological agency was evident since the early days of an 'A-list superhero film franchise' that was extremely lucrative from 1979 to 1987, a tendency that appears to continue. The hero might have been used to universalise hegemonic concepts, but its origin itself arose out of a merge of other symbolic sources, such as Christianity, Nietzschean literature, ancient mythologies. Arjun Apparudai highlights:

As rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized in one or another way: this is true of music and housing styles as much as it is true of science and terrorism, spectacles and constitutions. (Apparudai, 1996, p. 32)

Arguably this mixture facilitated the success of the character, even through fiddling with the constant comparison with a deity. But this paper appears to uncover much more than this.

Howels and Negreiros (2012, p. 234), assert that there are two groups of film theorists, those who see film's strength in 'its transcendence of reality' and others who consider that film is 'intrinsically related to the real world'. I would like to highlight that the analysis of texts and the semiotic analysis in this dissertation have revealed embedded messages in the Superman films; for instance the importance of inheritance and the rejection of dictatorship, uncovering the values the character represents. Cavalier (2014, p. 196), points out that both Superman and Batman inherited wealth from their families, an aspect that I had not considered before, as I had thought of these two heroes as indeed quite different. Bourdieu (1986) defines the existence of different forms of capital. While economic capital refers to monetary accumulation, cultural capital can be embodied: the 'long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body' or 'an objectified state through pictures, books, dictionaries, machines, etc.'. Both the Superman and Batman characters seem to be the inheritors of cultural capital. Additionally, Eco (1972, p. 15), stated that 'Superman's double identity has a function', as Clark Kent personifies the average American 'who is harassed by complexes and despised by his fellow men' feeding the hope that one day 'a superman can spring forth ... redeeming years of mediocre existence'. In other words, personifying an aspiration.

I would like to stress that the combination of the findings from the textual analysis and those from the analysis of the iconography appear quite striking. In *Superman the Movie* (1978), the antagonist is a military leader who plots a 'revolution' and an 'insidious plot' 'to establish a new order', who besides is bearded and is accompanied by a similar subject. During the 1960s and 1970s there were only a few political opponents of American power who would possibly fit this antagonistic role, arguably Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Similar to what happened during the economic blockade in Cuba, the three super villains are not imprisoned but isolated in the Phantom Zone.

The visual analysis appears to have revealed characteristics of the producers' mind-sets. For instance, a Victorian house in the U.S. countryside seems to go in line with what Huntington (2004, p. 59), claims to be the Anglo Protestant culture in the United States, which 'has combined political and social institutions inherited from England, including most notably the English language ... together with values of dissenting Protestantism'. These images though contrast with the Superman films of the 2000s, where the U.S. appears to be a much more ethnically diverse location. Perhaps it is the comparison between the settings displayed in the 1970s and 1980s and those appearing in the 2000s that might deliver a broader contrast. Between the vibrant lights and colours of the 1970s films and the darkness and disenchantment of the films in the 2000s, as stated earlier in section three, much had happened; the fall of the Berlin wall, the September 11 attacks and the Credit Crunch of 2007 and 2008. Chomsky (2011), talks about the 'American Decline' and a 'global society that is dividing into two blocs: the plutonomy and the rest'; he claims too that in the United States 'the workforce is living a precarious existence' since they are subject to 'growing worker insecurity'. The American Dream,

defined by Cullen (2003), as made up of social mobility, equality and home ownership is increasingly under threat. Slavoj Žižek approaches this issue from the perspective of the psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan:

Reality's frame is structured by the left-overs of hallucinatory fantasy: the ultimate guarantee of our "sense of reality" turns on how what we experience as "reality" conforms to the fantasy-frame. (The ultimate proof of it is the experience of the "loss of reality": "our world falls apart" when we encounter something which, due to its traumatic character, cannot be integrated into our symbolic universe). (Žižek, 2003, p.89)

I would like to highlight another difference in the values represented in the films from the 1970s and 1980s and in those from the 2000s. While the 1978 *General Zod* does not offer any reason for his apparent crimes, in 2013 there doesn't appear to be any clear boundary between good and evil. There is no longer a single explanation for the characters' behaviour. Both Jor-El and Zod can be seen as criminals or saviours. While Jor-El plans to reconstruct Krypton through the colonisation of new planets with the support of the Government Council, Zod intends to overthrow the entire establishment in order to save the planet from destruction. Arguably this represents the global world of the twenty first century, where power is no longer centralised.

Recalling what Hall (2007, p 42), asserts – that ‘the effects of cultural products cannot be “read off” or inferred from the contents’ but that ‘they must enter into and be in active negotiation with an already fully elaborated cultural world’ I would also argue that this process may imply a further level. As meanings are trying to be universalised much is given off. Said (1978, p. 3), highlights a similar case when he refers to Orientalism, a tendency that ‘unilaterally determines what can be said about the Orient’ claiming that indeed ‘European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self’. Possibly revealing a lot about the European mind-set, rather than just defining the Orient.

I would conclude then, that what we are dealing with is indeed a Superman trapped between trying to spread western values and revealing American fears. Sometimes running the risk of exposing more than achieving, in a multi polar world where the processes of negotiation may continue endlessly.

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The Man of Steel as a Social Construct:

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