Spectacular Rhythms

Cultural Conflict in the Contemporary Superhero Film

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Abstract

This thesis proposes a new analytical perspective to the interplay between the entertaining escapism afforded by spectacular action sequences and the expression of cultural themes in the 2000s-present contemporary superhero film cycle. In the introduction I give a review of the spectacle and narrative debate to explain how current studies on popular action film have tended to primarily focus on the way spectacular displays support narrative progression by driving forward the film plot's narrative chain of cause-and-effect over time. However, the review then explains that whenever the cultural themes invested in these action film narratives are concerned, there is often an assumption that thematic values only surface intermittently as symbolic motifs at certain moments, and so do not really benefit from this kind of storytelling momentum to the same extent.

The introduction then sets up my claim that spectacle not only aids the progression of plot by energising narrative causality and temporal progression, but spectacle also contributes other rhythmically kinetic arcs of narration able to developmentally evolve thematic tales of cultural conflict, which I term as *narrativised spectacle*. I explain my method as one combining a genre theory framework to uncover the cultural contradictions invested in action narratives alongside a neoformalist analysis of the rhythmic components of physical motion, editing, framing, composition and digital visual effects that express these thematic tensions. Examples are then given to show why contemporary superhero films depend on such kinetic kinds of spectacular rhythm, and provide a key case study to work with.

Each chapter finds evidence for my claim by analysing how different kinds of kinetic arc are generated by the audio-visual rhythms of spectacle: able to introduce, challenge, destabilise, conflate, reinstate and eventually reconcile a series of conflicting cultural themes akin to an evolving tale. In the first chapter I explore the physical and spatial spectacle of action sequences. In the second chapter I look at the melodramatic theatrics of performance techniques. In the third chapter I critically interrogate the violent action of the superhero film alongside the themes of masculinity invoked therein. In the final chapter I deal with superheroines. Although these heroines employ these same thematic rhythms as male superheroes, the kinetic arcs are noticeably far more interrupted, due to being burdened with themes of androcentrism. The conclusion then summarises exactly what narrativised spectacle contributes to existing debates on spectacle and narrative, and why it is particularly useful for studying the contemporary superhero-action film.

Table of Contents

Thesis Introduction

Literature Review and Methodology

The existing debates on spectacle and narrative in action film, while extensive, nonetheless tend to observe one sole issue: how displays of spectacular imagery move a narrative along. Spectacle helps to push forward the progression of plot events, using rapid-paced physical choreography, camerawork, editing and digital visual effects to achieve a visceral thrill-ride experience that enhances our comprehension of the storytelling process (King 2000: 4, Purse 2011: 31, Bordwell 2006: 104-5). The speeded-up rhythms of this spectacle energise the tempo of the hero's actions as s/he runs across different locations, is forced to make difficult decisions, or contends with an array of challenging scenarios. However, although critical writing has effectively shown how spectacular imagery moves narrative events along, there still remains another unresolved aspect to the debate: whether the structure of spectacle, with all its energetic rhythms, does not necessarily only aid the pacing of plot progression, but can also *contribute other dynamic ways* of moving the storytelling forward?

My thesis explores how the audio-visual rhythms of spectacular action sequences not only bring forward momentum to the plot, but also generate other important dimensions in the narration of a film: specifically more thematic kinds of storytelling. Spectacle is conventionally understood to benefit the unfolding of plot actions and events by giving haste to the passing of time or movement to the narrative chain of cause-and-effect. Nonetheless, this same energetic momentum can do more than support the development of plot activity, also giving a sense of rhythm to far more abstract and intangible sets of thematic values invested in the storytelling process. It is spectacular action sequences in particular, I argue, that can present rhythmic trajectories able to developmentally tell a tale of key thematic concerns, namely an on-going drama of cultural conflict and social anxiety. The thesis shall achieve this by showing exactly how spectacular rhythms in action film, alongside moving plot events or character actions forward, also manage to afford a degree of causal and temporal development to implicit cultural themes invested in the narration.

The debates on spectacle and narrative tend to treat the relationship between spectacular imagery and narrative structure in terms of how action sequences benefit the plot progression of time and causality. While time and causality are important to my thesis, I focus more closely on the storytelling possibilities of *movement* and *stillness*, and how

kinetic rhythms are generated that present an evolving tale of abstract cultural themes, rather than explore how spectacle causally drives forward or temporally develops key details of plot exposition and characterisation. By focusing on the interplay between movement and stillness I argue that this dynamic kind of 'switching' between motion and inertia generates a thematic kind of rhythm: able to tell a cultural narrative that differs in pacing to the overt narrative or primary plotting.

I propose that a close analysis of the audio-visual rhythms of spectacular imagery reveals a 'narrativisation of spectacle'. What this idea means is that spectacle does more than act as a vehicle or tool that presents specific plot details, because, embedded in the very structure of the spectacle are a series of rhythms that generate other useful temporal and causal patterns of storytelling. To clarify then, my approach asks whether a spectacular action sequence not only moves the plot along, but is also narrativised in its own distinct fashion, contributing other dimensions of narrative causality and temporal progression to the storytelling process at its own particular pace. I term this concept *narrativised spectacle*, being an action sequence made up of spectacular audio-visual rhythms that generate a distinct pattern of narration which unfolds alongside, but at a different pacing to, the main plot events. This other dimension in the film narration, the argument will prove, results from the way one visceral thrill is rhythmically played off against another, invoking key cultural associations and thematic tensions invested in this visual activity. For example, consider how this process works in the action film *Iron Man* (2008). The film's narrative arc consists of the entire chronology of story actions and events from beginning to middle to end, and the film's narration is the specific order in which these events unfold (see Bordwell 1985: 49-50). The narrative chronology follows protagonist hero Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.), a billionaire arms dealer, who spends his immense wealth on carnal pursuits and is unaware of the corrupt practices rife in his manufacturing company, until he becomes kidnapped by terrorists after a weapons demonstration in Afghanistan. Stark is soon tortured and forced to make devices of mass-destruction, but resists his captors by building a mechanical suit that allows him to escape the compound. Then, he adapts the suit and uses it to restore peace within the Middle East, and cease the corruption in his company. If the list of these events comprise the entire narrative arc, then the film's narration forms the specific order in which these actions and events are organised and presented to the viewer, e.g. we are actually shown the kidnapping event first, and the reasons behind this sudden confrontation are gradually revealed afterwards, unfolding over other events that follow. At various moments in the film, the audio-visual

spectacle is essential in energising the action of this film plot, such as employing explosive pyrotechnics to punctuate the moment of the hero's kidnapping as he is bombarded with rocket launchers, or rapid-paced editing during the event of his escape as he brutally shoots his way out of the compound and attacks the terrorists.

The spectacle carries the narration forward in *Iron Man*, but there is in turn a particular rhythmic pattern to these action sequences that does more than benefit the progression of plot events alone. Consider for instance how, as the hero wears the newly-built suit and makes his escape striding through the cave firing upon the captors, each of these physical rhythms are quite precise and linear, especially when compared with the more sporadic, imprecise and unruly gestures of the terrorists that fire their guns wildly and flee in desperation. Throughout this action sequence, the hero's physical movements are carefully-considered whenever shooting his captors, resonating with a kind of 'efficiency', whereas the terrorists are decidedly more 'erratic' in their flailing and screaming. This contrast of two differing paces, one presented as professional, the other amateurish, not only brings to mind a set of culturally-significant themes, but also notions akin to evolving 'musical themes', which organise a melody into recurring notes, as 'a strong, regular, repeated pattern of movement or sound' (Oxford American Dictionaries). The on-going play off between these two kinds of precise/imprecise, professional/amateurish rhythms contributes to the storytelling process not only by driving the plot forward, but also by bringing a kinetic trajectory of evolving change, temporal passing and causal development to a pertinent tale of cultural themes in a state of dramatic conflict.

I will continue to analyse such kinds of spectacular rhythms in order to isolate a particular storytelling arc of socio-cultural conflict and thematic stimulation that would otherwise remain implicit if explored solely in the context of the main narrative plotting. This approach will avoid the rhythmic structure of the spectacle becoming subsumed and overshadowed by more tangible specifics of character traits and motivation, lines of dialogue, or dominant scenarios and circumstances. To achieve this task my critical framework consists of two complimentary parts: (i) *neoformalism*, which isolates the key formal elements of the action film text, specifically the audio-visual components of physical movement, cinematography, editing and special effects, working alongside aspects of (ii) *genre theory*, with an emphasis on the socio-cultural themes conventionally invested in storytelling tropes of action-adventure movies. By using an analytical perspective that focuses on the significance of rhythm my approach will pick up on an

essential, yet underappreciated dimension of the spectacle and narrative debate: introducing *a new way that themes are visually negotiated* in the action film text, which to date current writing has alluded to, but not explicitly enough.

More importantly the main focus of my discussion is a specific close analysis of superhero-action films in particular, because these texts work as the most useful case study for isolating audio-visual rhythms, allowing this thesis to build upon predominant views of spectacle (which tend to define the term as a visual device that primarily drives the plotting forward). The kinds of energetic, rapid spectacular rhythms being argued for in this thesis are most evident in, and crucial to, the superhero film because superhuman feats of motion and propulsion combine together to generate an evolving kind of rhythm that audio-visually resonates or 'echoes' with a sense of kineticism that forms a fundamental part of these films' visual language. An analysis of the superhero film will allow me to explore how the visceral momentum of spectacle offers up a significant narrative rhythm of its own making: one that makes explicit a key set of cultural themes pertinent to these hero figures. By applying the idea of rhythm to an analysis of the superhero films this will ultimately allow me to look at spectacle in a different way: uncovering the dynamic role action sequences can play in telling a viscerally and temporally evolving tale of cultural conflict and themes.

Superhero films possess two main traits that are essential to my thesis argument, which focuses on a rhythm-based understanding of theme analysis: (i) *explicit audio-visual elements* (spectacular visual effects) and (ii) *longstanding thematic conventions* (established tropes inherent to the action-adventure genre). Firstly, contemporary superhero films present a particularly energetic kind of mise-en-scene (that is, the staging of actors and performance, setting, costume, props, lighting, colour), with noticeably 'colourful' costumes, 'exuberant' performances, expansive vistas, as well as an intensified design of editing style, employing rapid-paced cutting enhanced by digital visual effects. Secondly, these films depend on formulaic storytelling structures typical to action films (e.g. notions of good versus evil; narrative trajectories that shift from *dis*equilibrium of the peaceful status-quo back towards its *re*-equilibrium through heroic achievement) that are imbued with a variety of differing allegorical, metaphorical and thematic subject matter. Many of these themes for example revolve around conveying representations of a conservative masculinity alongside American Exceptionalism, which both work together to form a myriad of their own implicit cultural associations. The thesis will explore the way these cultural meanings work together, offering up a series of conflicts and tensions in the

process: e.g. in how the values of an individualistic, self-sufficient, pragmatic manhood *resists* the obligations imposed by a larger community, with its sense of social responsibility and collective domestication.

The remainder of this introduction consists of three sections, with each preparing the ground for the four main chapters that follow and comprise the thesis. The first section of the introduction is a review of the spectacle and narrative debate, explaining the current schools of thought, the arguments relevant to my own thesis argument, and then shows how I intend to develop these ideas further. The arguments on spectacular movement and storytelling will also be explained in the first section, as well as the relationship between cultural themes and audio-visual rhythms, and what my analysis adds to the existing debates. The second section then explains my critical framework and methodology in more detail, again pointing out the existing writing, and how I will build on these works.

The third section emphasises the important role that questions of violence play in discussions of rhythm and theme in superhero-action film, and what my approach will add. The third section will also introduce two key rhythms that feature prominently throughout the four chapters in a number of ways: i.e. gestures of *balletic* grace (and the theme of 'purity' this invokes) against mannerisms of *spasmodic* erraticism (and the theme of 'corrupted' impurity this suggests), as well as explaining how I will build on this dichotomy further to develop my proposed definition of narrativised spectacle.

(i) *Seeking Rhythm*: A Review of The Spectacle / Narrative Debate

The spectacle/narrative debate is such a useful foundation to build upon further in this thesis, being essential to my focus on rhythm and movement in relation to theme and narration. This is because the debate explores connections between thrill-ride experiences alongside features of storytelling, which are especially integral to superhero-action films. More importantly, the debate illuminates the relationship between spectacular displays of energetic movement and the passing of time: factors that both contribute to the unfolding of audio-visual rhythm. I will now review the debate to explore current thinking on how distinctive types of rhythm unfold onscreen, and the particular ways in which these rhythms can contribute to the storytelling process. However, whereas the debate has predominantly explored how spectacle explicitly aids the progression of the film plot, I instead intend to shed more light on how the rhythms of spectacle can invoke, and narrativise, far more implicit sets of social and cultural associations. Spectacle, while

acting as a vehicle to drive the film plot forward, can also arguably generate another storytelling dimension that manages to support a viewer's comprehension of the abstract thematic meanings at stake: as a series of rhythms able to developmentally progress our understanding of themes in the same fashion as an evolving narrative arc.

I will briefly reiterate my core argument here, and then the review that follows shall show the foundation upon which these ideas build, as well as the new dimensions of narration that this thesis will to add to the debate. Consider how dramatic conflict is not simply generated by the cause-and-effect of character actions, but there are also wider cultural themes at work. Similarly, the structure of spectacle not only moves along character actions along over time but also arguably grants a similar sense of onscreen movement to these intrinsic thematic values. I claim that spectacular displays of onscreen rhythms (i.e. shifting and changing movements according to a particular sequence of time) are usually applied to plot analysis, but these same rhythms can also contribute temporal and causal dimensions towards aiding a viewer's understanding of the evolving cultural themes invested in the storytelling. Spectacle can play off one thematic meaning against another as an on-going audio-visual pattern, so rhythmically 'narrativising' these thematic oppositions. This contributory rhythm flows parallel to, but is quite distinguishable from, the primary narrative direction and timing of character actions or events: forming a discernable pacing that caters entirely to implicit meanings. The spectacle/narrative debate introduces many of these concepts, the way these ideas are applied to studies on action film and how these aspects work, providing a useful starting point to develop my own approach further.

Originating in the mid-1990s and extending to the late-2000s, the spectacle/narrative debate continues to remain active across critical studies on popular film. At the crux of the debate revolves one singular question: the extent to whether the impact of spectacle (e.g. thrilling special effects and rapid editing) is either a *supportive* tool for storytelling or actually so distracting as to *hinder* and even eclipse the flow of story information. The debate asks if spectacle punctuates character motivations and decisions, or instead draws attention away from the intricacies of specific plot details. In this sense, any moment or sequence of action-packed spectacle, the debate affirms, becomes potentially beneficial or counterproductive to the progression and comprehension of narrative events. There are ultimately two key positions, then, at stake in the debate: (i) that spectacle inevitably *interrupts* the *flow* of narrative structure; or (ii) that spectacle arguably *enhances* the *effect* of narrative structure (Wood 2002: 371). This tension

between the interruption and enhancement of the narration process is a key point of departure for my thesis, and has been explored by a number of scholars, the most seminal of which will now be outlined in this review, whose ideas continue to re-surface in analyses of how high-budget Hollywood blockbuster productions successfully tell stories.

When applied specifically to the question of rhythm, spectacle is similarly argued between two key positions in the debate. Firstly, spectacle is stated to be very much of the moment, so impressive it dominates the onscreen action to such an extent as to bring a sense of *stillness* to the storytelling. Secondly, spectacle is declared to be so energetic it generates a kind of forward propulsion to the onscreen action, which in turn *moves* the storytelling along. The principles of these contradictory positions of 'stillness/movement' will now be explained and then expanded upon in relation to my own understanding of the role spectacle plays in the storytelling process. The spectacle/narrative debate tends to define spectacle as a display that interrupts or enhances a viewer's comprehension of character motivations and activity, either hindering or aiding the presentation of a chain of plot events. Yet throughout this review I define spectacle not only as a force that interrupts and/or enhances plot causality, but also as a series of differing kinds of physical and filmic kinesis. This is because by blending the two ideas of spectacle together at such an early stage of the thesis argument, my focus on spectacle as a 'kinetic display' is a productive means of establishing exactly how action sequences potentially unfold as a set of evolving storytelling rhythms, which is a key idea to the research question.

The first position that deems spectacle to be a form of 'stillness' (that is, in terms of how the narrative's expositional flow is potentially overshadowed in favour of appreciating the thrilling displays of onscreen action) is rather limited in scope but proves useful to work with as a starting point. Spectacle is defined in this case as drawing attention to itself as an immediate happening, designed for purposes of the here-and-now, offering the viewer a form of thrilling impact or escapism. Derived from the Latin *specere* ('to see'), this view designates spectacle as something on display, eye-catching and out of the ordinary (Lavik 2008, 170). The immediacy of spectacle presents a display so striking that, although offers up an exhilaration of impressive entertainment, it often tends to detract from a viewer's comprehension of the way time passes in the narrative. For instance, in *Superman Returns* (2006) there is a drawn-out spectacular moment when the hero floats high up in space, looking down upon the Earth from beyond the stratosphere. This image provides a source of awe, but still briefly overshadows the wider plot context that places the hero in this scenario (i.e. that Superman is surveying the world for criminal activity).

Even when there is a brief moment of quick movement however, such as after Superman unleashes his (digitally-enhanced) superhuman flight to dart downwards to a site of crime on the surface below, this does not necessary further the narrative in an explicit fashion. This is because the hero's teeming across the skyline first and foremost attracts attention to *itself* as an impressive feat, at the expense of the specific plot events and exposition connected to this behaviour (i.e. leaving viewers uninformed as to what the exact nature of the crime that lies ahead could be).

An advocate of spectacle as a feat of 'immediacy' (i.e. as an eye-catching display so impressive and exhilarating that it draws attention only to the 'here and now' of the moment, rather than any wider narrative impetus tied to this brief moment), Andrew Darley states that the purpose of spectacle operates as 'the antithesis of narrative', designed to dazzle and stimulate the viewer to such a great extent that this process compromises plot motivation (Darley 2000: 104). Viva Paci also agrees that narrative is somewhat compromised by the inclusion of a 'high-tech' special effects rollercoaster-thrill-ride experience (Paci 2006: 122), e.g. achieved through advanced digital technology; or by mechanical means, such as pyrotechnics, which 'foreground' visual pleasure above all else, drawing attention away from the intricacies of plotting. In the same vein, Tom Gunning has described this mode of film production as a 'cinema of attractions', as it does not entertain by emphasising narrative action or character psychology, but rather, *opts* to use the film *image itself* as a means of grasping and holding viewer attention (Gunning 1989: 121). Spectacular attractions are an integral part of popular film's commercial viability, Richard Maltby explains, in which a Hollywood movie will advertise its high-budgets and box office receipts as a strategy of appealing to as broad an array of filmgoers as possible, most concerned with 'putting the money up in the screen' (Maltby 2003: 113). The first position, while insightful, nonetheless has its limitations, consistently favouring a definition of spectacle as 'seeing' over 'telling'.

The arguments on 'immediacy' proposed by Darley, Paci and Gunning are quite valid, but also problematic, in that immediate thrills-and-spills cannot entirely 'eclipse' narrative progression outright, rendering it as somehow passive, or of no consequence. This is because any display of spectacle briefly symbolises at least some degree of cultural significance, invoking a thematic notion, even if not explicitly moving narrative time forward. Indeed even the briefest of spectacular moments of the here-and-now hold a cultural quality able to contribute to a viewer's understanding of the story. Spectacular

effects, Geoff King prudently points out in this regard, can potentially provide a set of 'visceral thrills that *stand in* for the qualities celebrated *thematically* in the narrative [emphasis added]' (King 2000: 31), symbolically drawing out implicit social themes deeply-invested in the film content of setting, décor or character traits and costumes. In *Twister* (1996) for instance, King suggests that the destruction wrought by the digitally-animated forces of nature stand for the qualities of 'wind', namely freedom and vitality, which are values that clash with the far calmer, pastoral American Midwest landscapes, or the location of 'earth', which invoke notions of solidarity and settled existence (King 2000: 23). Again, applying this reasoning to *Superman Returns*, the spectacle of superhuman flight can briefly represent themes of individual power, or an autonomous freedom to act, in the same way that the spectacle of a broken piece of toppling skyscraper hurtling downwards ready to crush screaming civilians below may 'stand for' the theme of helpless, vulnerable domesticity. Yet, even in these cases, the movement of the spectacle, and the setting it presents, merely represent cultural themes as a set of brief *motifs* that signal their presence as though 'standing still', akin to Superman gently floating around in space, or darting across the sky in the very shortest of instants, often at the expense of forward moving narrative progression and exposition.

The issue of the brief motif is important to clarify here, because it brings in tensions between themes as being either symbols that remain still, or as part of an on-going rhythm that operates in a state of sustained motion. In literary terms, a motif is best understood as a distinctive feature or dominant idea in the written text. Similarly in film a motif can compromise 'any significant repeated element that contributes to the overall form. It may be an object, a colour, a place, a person, a sound, or even a character trait… A lighting scheme or camera position… [it may] reappear at climaxes or highly emotional moments… [or as] fairly exact repetitions but a film can chart broader similarities between its ingredients… help[ing] to create parallels among characters and situations' (Bordwell and Thompson 2013: 63 and 66). Such recurring motifs appear at different times across a film narrative, such as a moment of characterisation, a line of spoken dialogue, a performance gesture, a specific event, a circumstance or scenario in the plot, a stylistic technique of camerawork, namely a camera angle, a instant of framing or editing, or the symbolic significance of a costume, prop or an aspect of the décor design, a detail of scene design, or a particular prop. The motif, then, suggests that thematic ideas, and the parallels made between them only tend to appear *intermittently* across a film, surfacing at intervals,

such as during certain occasions in the narrative, or represented as specific objects, people or places.

In *Superman Returns* and *Spider-Man 2* (2004) the spectacular immediacy of darting across the screen, flying or swooping in to rescue victims from falling fragments of urban debris or criminal attacks may well form a recurring set of motifs, such as a moment of rapid-paced editing or instant of high-angled camerawork. These visual motifs manage to briefly symbolise a cultural theme of some sort, such as the value of social responsibility being invoked by short narrative moments of rescuing innocents or the spectacle of the hero quickly catching falling victims or fragments of buildings. The immediacy of spectacular motifs work throughout action films in this way, by surfacing only at certain times: often separated by several narrative scenarios. For each of these reasons, the first position of the debate, by defining spectacle as a show-stopping kind of stillness, although it shows how a set of spectacular motifs may contribute to the storytelling process, it is a viewpoint that remains quite limited in scope whenever exploring how spectacular action sequences rhythmically carry and develop cultural themes over a sustained period of time across the film narration.

It is from the shortcomings I have asserted to the first position of the spectacle/narrative debate that my own thesis can begin to refine a definition of narrativised spectacle: as a series of audio-visual rhythms that manage to generate other dimensions in the narration of a film, which do so by employing a specific combination of filmic elements and cultural themes. To this end, the second position of the spectacle/narrative debate proves far more useful. Spectacle, the second view holds, generates a sense of forward momentum able to support the flow of narrative progression, guiding the storytelling process. Spectacular visuals, for instance, are able to enhance an audience's awareness of character goals and story knowledge, e.g. if a car chase unfolds or a gunfight results in and instigates the death of the hero protagonist's closest friend, then this explosive undertaking is undeniably 'a matter of causal import' (Bordwell 2006: 105). David Bordwell points out that spectacle does not necessarily override narrative in action films, as, with any action scene, regardless of its spectacular elements, there is always a narrative event it must answer to. The plot of action films, Murray Smith advocates, 'advances *through* spectacle', with spectacular elements equally 'as "narrativised" as are the less ostentatious spaces of other genres' (Smith 1998: 13). Regardless of its 'attention-grabbing' immediacy, spectacle fulfils some narrative purpose. In describing set pieces, Warren Buckland maintains that visual extravaganzas are always 'narratologically

motivated' to some extent, playing out a role that serves 'to transform the main protagonist' (Buckland 2006: 185) along their journey of self-discovery. Along the same lines, the impact of digital visual effects, Shilo McClean suggests, are innovative technologies that can actually offer new techniques to support storytelling rather than detract from the plot in any way (McClean 2007: 14). The position taken by my thesis is akin to the views of Bordwell, Smith, McClean and Buckland, in declaring a *balancing act* between spectacle and narrative, in which one factor benefits the other for purposes of generating effective storytelling.

The second position successfully explains how spectacle gives a sense of movement to the storytelling process, such as by hastening the passing of time in the film plot. However, although the second position advocates spectacle as a vehicle for forward narrative movement, this line of reasoning nonetheless primarily favours the temporality and causal details of 'plot' activity and events. The second position, for instance, observes how spectacle gives a sense of temporal passing to (and moves along) a viewer's narrative comprehension of the *protagonist's motivation*, such as through the delivery of lines of spoken dialogue, interactions with other characters, or the unfolding of plot scenarios or circumstances. Where mise-en-scene is concerned (i.e. again, to reiterate, the onscreen elements of actors, performances, set design, costume, props, lighting and colours), the second position seeks to understand how these elements benefit the unfolding of time only in relation to the main plot arc. Whenever discussing stylistic techniques (camerawork, framing or editing strategy), the second position again shows how spectacle benefits our understanding of the passing of narrative time, but always in terms of the exposition of character's decision-making or repercussions of these decisions.

Keeping in mind the reasons stated above, the second position tends to analyse spectacle's capacity to generate temporal passing solely at the level of the plot's chain of cause-and-effect, and has yet to more fully explore *the way that abstract, intangible thematic tensions rhythmically evolve across a film's narration*, doing so through each of the audio-visual rhythms that structure the onscreen spectacle. To remedy this underappreciated aspect of the debate, I argue that spectacle presents cultural themes in a way that takes on a temporal quality similar to the passing of time in the main narrative. As part of arguing this claim, I also aim to show that thematic oppositions form an inherent part of the structure of spectacle, organising the arrangement of its rhythms of camerawork, editing and visual effects. Indeed many spectacular moments can be thematically linked together, and do more than only provide bouts of impressive

exhilaration or punctuate dramatic scenarios. These spectacular rhythms work together to tell a tale of thematic tensions that run throughout a superhero-action film, and do not necessarily express themes in exactly the same way as the narrative plotting as such: instead presenting these same tensions in far a more dynamic, explicit fashion.

The second position of the debate, then, advocates movement over stillness in the storytelling process, which is essential for generating a sense of rhythm, yet this line of reasoning has not yet explicitly focused on the way implicit thematic values are temporally carried across a film's narration. Again, using *Superman Returns* as a case in point, the spectacular imagery of superhuman flight can do more than drive forward the passing of time in a plot scenario (the cause-and-effect of the hero's mission to rescue the damsel Louis Lane from villain Lex Luthor, supporting the causal sequence of events this endeavour will entail). Spectacle also does more than assign a symbolic motif to the narrative action, e.g. portraying the theme of justice with the plot event of 'defeating the villain'. Instead, consider how the structure of the spectacle that shows Superman teeming across the sky also arguably resonates with key cultural themes: but in each of the hero's shifting audio-visual rhythms. During the action sequences that depict an earthquake impacting on Metropolis in *Superman Returns*, every forward motion Superman makes when rhythmically rising and descending across the city to catch broken shards of the urban infrastructure is presented with a series of physical gestures and rapid cutting that manages to carry a series of cultural tensions.

As Superman flies through the cityscape these spectacular rhythms form a narrative trajectory but in the most visceral, abstract sense: driven by a kinetic arc of physical power, individualism and freedom that clashes back and forth with the urban confines of vulnerability, domesticity, and the stipulations of social responsibility. In focusing closely on each of these rhythms, it is apparent that Superman consistently darts forward through manhole covers carved in the tarmac, at the open windows of skyscrapers, or lunges at falling steel signs detached from their building rooftops, always moving forward to the next catastrophe. His motion here is linear, neat and straight, whereas the kinesis of the surrounding density of the city concrete unfolds at a different pacing to the hero. Building walls break away with civilians flailing their limbs in terror, and soon after, detached chucks of rock plummet downwards, bouncing along a road surface already in the process of cracking apart and teeming with yet more running and panicked civilians, all the while cars swerve nervously. These rhythms are all random and staccato in relation to one another, yet Superman's kinesis is choreographed as a linear trajectory that struggles to

negotiate against one fluctuating (and literally thumping) hurdle after another. This is a story arc not only based on the movement of plot events, but a clash of cultural contradictions achieved as one rhythmic thrill is played off against the other. Thematic motifs take on a dynamic form of consistent motion in this regard, especially when applied to the context of music as a successive bout of notes that achieve a melodic, rhythmic formula, out of which much longer passages can then potentially be developed and built upon. Cultural ideas in this respect have the potential to continuously surface and evolve through on-going sustained rhythms, achieved by patterns of editing, framing, shot composition and physical motion that unfold over prolonged periods of several minutes.

I argue that the rhythms of the spectacle found in superhero-action film impart a kind of evolving temporality and gradual cause-and-effect to the cultural themes they portray: bringing in a temporal quality to themes that the spectacle/narrative debate has so far overlooked. Spectacle not only drives narrative events forwards, or stands for cultural ideas, but adds another dimension of temporality to the storytelling, generating movement and causal development to abstract and thematic values. It is in this regard that spectacle does more than simply stand for thematic motifs, but also gives these themes a sense of movement and temporal passing similar to the progression of a narrative arc. The rhythms structuring energetic displays of spectacle tell quite a simple chain of causality, with 'Theme A' continually contending against 'Theme B', until eventually one value fully succeeds over the other. As the rhythm increases the pace this will then escalate these thematic oppositions, and as the pacing slows this helps to seek out a firmer sense of reconciliation between these conflicting social values. With this in mind, spectacular physical motion, digital effects and energetic editing do more than represent themes as motifs in the narrative action. This is because these audio-visual components can combine together, generating rhythmic movements that dynamically carry and evolve the cultural themes invested in each of these rhythms: so 'narrativising' the spectacle and contributing another significant storytelling dimension in the film narration.

So far, the core argument to this thesis has been established as one that looks at how themes are not simply represented through spectacular imagery, but instead take on a temporal quality, which unfolds akin to an evolving narrative arc. In order to develop my argument further, Lisa Purse provides an essential definition of spectacle in *Contemporary Action Cinema* (2011), which isolates specific aspects of the term that emphasise its potential as a generator of differing kinds of dynamic audio-visual rhythm:

> A sense of spectacle can often be intensified by specific presentational strategies designed *to produce emphasis through* ***differentiation***: for example a slowing or quickening of editing *pace*, or of *movement* within the frame; a significant change of *scale* or of the *spatial* relation between objects; the explicit display of special effects that register as out of the ordinary… the exhilarating effect of the presence of forces that explicitly put the human body at physical risk: *speed*, *gravity*, *force*ful *impacts*… operating at – and frequently exceeding – the *limits* of what is humanly possible [emphasis added] (Purse 2011: 28).

The definition above offers a series of key rhythmic terms, based on the differentiation between visual elements of pace, movement, scale, space, speed, gravity, force, impact and human limits. When this description is applied to traditional definitions of rhythm, particularly in terms of musical compositions, it similarly provides a means of organising repetitive *beats* (e.g. a number of strikes of some sort) alongside varied *accents* (a particular emphasis, say on a specific note, chord or point) together with a *tempo* (the particular rate or speed of motion) into a pattern. Rhythmic pacing and movement also follow such a timescale (i.e. the duration of a process or sequence of events), through the metre or metricity directing it (i.e. a metric pattern that employs a regular pulse or beat that underpins the structure, both measurable and counted in its pacing) (Goodridge 1999: 41).

The rhythm generated by spectacle moves narrative events along, but also potentially carries the thematic values invested in the storytelling in a distinct fashion. Consider, for instance, how the spectacle of the hero's physical movements carries narrative action forwards, defined as a *narrative of becoming*, in that the 'protagonist's physical and emotional trajectory towards achieving full occupation of the heroic action body… [is] an integral part of the main narrative thrust that moves the film towards its resolution' (Purse 2011: 33). Any action film's narrative arc is firmly associated with the physical exertion of the hero's body, as it faces an ongoing series of increasingly demanding environmental obstacles or hindrances. Spectacle carries the narrative progression forward in exactly this way during the opening scene of *Casino Royale* (2006).

The chain of narrative events that Bond (Daniel Craig) faces requires him to make the first two kills of his career, so as to acquire a '00' status. The first kill occurs during a frantic close-quarters brawl that takes place in a men's restroom, as Bond kicks, punches and smashes his opponent thorough the toilet stalls and against a brick wall (Purse 2011: 49). Strangling the man's windpipe, dragging him to a full sink, Bond drowns the attacker's face in the water, until he becomes unconscious and falls to the floor. Bloodied and bruised from this exchange of brute force, Bond turns his back for a moment to retrieve his gun, but the assailant regains consciousness and scrambles to grab another

discarded pistol, causing the hero to haphazardly turn and shoot, eventually completing the kill. Compare this first event to the second kill Bond must make during the opening scene, in an office of a corrupt official named Dryden. Ready and waiting for Dryden in the dark, Bond approaches his target in a more stealthy and silent fashion compared to the speed and strength of the brawling style previously employed in the men's restroom fight (Purse 2011: 49). After exchanging a few words about his treason, Bond calmly shoots Dryden dead with a silencer on his weapon, so as not to attract attention (Purse 2011: 49). In this sense, action cinema measures the narrative comprehension of Bond achieving the '00' status, including events of progress, failure, and success, primarily *through* the hero's body, in how it is portrayed in a spectacular fashion (Purse 2007: 7). Important narrative information pertaining to this hero character is delivered through the spectacular action, as the plot's chain of cause-and-effect is moved forward by energetic editing and fighting choreography, allowing Bond to gain the experience and knowledge required to complete his mission later, so eventually fulfilling his narrative of becoming trajectory through a process of self-mastery.

However, in addition to aiding the delivery of key pieces of plot information, this analysis of the spectacle also offers useful insights into the kinds of thematic developments at work. The action sequence expresses a central narrative theme explored throughout the film: questioning whether Bond, with his recently acquired '007' status, is capable of achieving professionalism, or being 'up to the job' at such an early stage in his career, or in danger of succumbing to incompetence (Purse 2011: 50). Focusing on narrative causality alone, this theme is expressed through the exposition of spoken dialogue exchanges between Bond and Dryden, as both characters verbally comment on Bond's hard-earned experience gained in the first fight, and after completing the second kill, that the hero will become a licensed killer. As the hero interrogates the corrupt government official at gunpoint for key information, further comments are also exchanged about how it gets easier to kill after the first time, and that Bond will continue to be tested in the tasks that lay ahead. At the level of narrative exposition, the theme is made explicit here through characterisation, spoken dialogue and the delivery of key plot points, but more important is the way this theme evolves through the formal structure of the spectacle itself. In this respect, these thematic values of 'professionalism' and 'incompetence' briefly surface as spoken motifs in the plot, underscored by the physical swiping of fists and arms.

In another respect, working closely with Purse's ideas, I wish to claim that these are 'cultural themes' rather than narrative themes, delivered in a more abstract and visceral

way patterned by graphic shapes and shots rather than the tangible exposition of characterisation or messages tied to specific plot points. Implicit cultural values are made explicit by being continually invoked through Bond's on-going physical rhythms, which also manage to gain a causal and temporal developmental arc similar to that of the progression of the main narrative trajectory. Consider, for example, how the theme of being up to the job is evident in the stark comparison between the two spectacular kills, which makes it seem as though there are two Bonds at this early stage in the narrative: one a civilised, organised and quiet professional, who operates effectively from a distance, and the other an unpredictable, scrappier fighter, who faces an unnecessary, much greater risk of injury by choosing to engage in hand-to-hand combat (Purse 2011: 49). Purse's analysis introduces how, whilst fighting in the toilets, Bond's inept mannerisms bring to mind a value of recklessness incompetency that always strives to achieve far grander gestures of professionalism, stealth and control. As the fast-paced brawl in the toilet stalls is a grueling physical test of endurance, Purse explains, these motions are then contrasted with the far calmer, more composed bout of precision dealt out in Dryden's office. Bond's narrative of becoming consists of the character's trajectory of plot information, always being driven forward by spectacular action sequences. I want to add to this dynamic my own claim that, at a purely thematic level, each of Bond's physical rhythms gain a distinct kind of causal import that develops over time much in the same way as a narrative arc: making explicit an implicit tale of cultural values in which erratic motions of imprecision *seek out* firmer gestures of precision, allowing notions of 'amateurism' to gradually *evolve into* 'professionalism'.

Developing the ideas explained above, the spectacle of Bond fighting not only visually supports the progression of a key plot point in which the hero triumphs over adversity, but also lends forward momentum to a far more implicit tale of cultural contradictions, in which one value gradually seeks to prevail over its opposite. The physical spectacle of Bond fighting acts as a vehicle that supports the intricacies of plot progression. Yet, the spectacle is also narrativised in its own right during this action sequence because it rhythmically carries an implicit set of thematic associations along an on-going trajectory: as a part of the 'thrill ride' experience invoked by the action hero body's exertions. This kinetic trajectory is discernable from the primary pacing of plot exposition, as it contributes to the narrative process by presenting an explicit, visceral arc that favors a thematic struggle above all else.

While the spectacular movements of a hero's body may contribute to the passing of time in the film plot, the spectacle of surrounding spaces also forms a part of this process. Digital visual effects, for instance, can offer a 'temporal component to spaces' that helps to propel narrative events forward (Wood 2002: 373). Throughout the plot of *Titanic* (1997), the spatial spectacle of the digitally enhanced passenger liner as it moves across the Atlantic supports the development of a linear narrative causal chain: i.e. the ship sails to its destination, unexpectedly collides with an iceberg, then tragically sinks. When the deck is safely intact, this is a stable site for the narrative arc to gradually deliver information pertaining to key characters. As the working-class hero Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) and the aristocratic debutant love-interest Rose (Kate Winslet) each try to court one another in romance and friendship, they have to face several class intolerances along the way. This takes a great deal of narrative time to achieve, most of which happens as the characters gradually walk and talk across the vast spaces of the ship's decking, moving along the many levels reserved for upper, middle and lower classes. After colliding with the iceberg – which tears the vessel's deck apart and causes it to sink – both hero and love-interest are now tasked with surviving the ship's descent together. Time now passes with a greater sense of urgency, as the characters move with the rising water level, finding increasingly less space to manoeuvre class prejudices. While the plot's temporal unfolding benefits from spatial spectacle, when focusing more closely on the rhythmic qualities of these movements across space however, then a particularly thematic kind of tale becomes apparent.

While en-route to New York City harbour, the vessel is often portrayed through a series of shots that stay focused on the length, breadth and many contours (funnels, levels) of the structure, achieving a spectacular surplus (King 2000: 48). These digital images, Aylish Wood explains, by lingering on the size and speed of the Titanic's horizontal passing across the ocean, often use extreme long shots of the ship's detailed construction to celebrate an immense human achievement of advanced technological grandeur. Compare these impressive images of teeming across a vast ocean with those that present the ship's collision, and this more vertical kind of movement depicts desperate human figures tumbling through the widening gap after the vessel splits apart, introducing the impact of destruction, being further emphasised by water running from the propeller downwards along the length of the upended-aft (Wood 2004: 232): invoking the 'dangers' associated with new technological innovations. While the horizontal movement across this space tells a story of stability (celebrating the power of technical innovation), the vertical motion is

far more perilous (deploring how just how dangerous technology is whenever used irresponsibly).

In working with ideas on how spectacular displays of space and movement generate temporal passing in the film narrative, or how spectacle can invoke thematic motifs, I argue that the play off between two differing kinds of motion becomes important to my claim for narrativised spectacle. Spectacular displays of movement across spaces supports the passing of time across a plot's chain of cause-and-effect, but these rhythms are also narrativised in such a way that favours a distinct, kinetic trajectory of thematic development. It is the play off between calmer, slower, horizontal kinds of rhythm against more restless, urgent, vertical forms of rhythm that arguably carries along and gives a temporal unfolding to a set of positive and negative values associated with technology of the ship, as though in the manner of a distinct narrative pattern. This narrative pattern, made up of the movement to-and-fro across horizontal and vertical spaces, favours thematic concerns more than the plot's pacing of character goals. The pairing of two differing movements across horizontal and vertical spaces offers associations of 'grandeur' (Theme A) in tension with 'danger' (Theme B), forming a kind of evolving narrative trajectory embedded within the spectacle itself (Theme A in dramatic conflict with Theme B). By focusing more closely on the thematic qualities invested in the spectacle, rather than the narrative events the spectacle supports, and in isolating the rhythms of this movement across the space, this not only uncovers a series of cultural contradictions, but also shows an evolving, abstract tale of technological power and responsibility of grandeur inevitably resulting in disaster. In this way, spectacle is not simply a driver for plot events, character arcs or offers brief symbolic motifs surrounding Jack and Rose's narrative, but also contributes an evolving tale based on cultural conflict.

The play off between fast and slow-paced rhythms is an important aspect of the debate to continue developing further, and the distinction between 'heightened' and 'contemplative' modes of spectacle proposed by Geoff King in *Spectacular Narratives* (2000) provides a useful foundation for the thesis to build upon. Heightened and contemplative modes of spectacle generate differing kinds of temporal energy, but traditionally these rhythms tend to be applied only as drivers of narrative comprehension and plot causality. Spectacular sequences, King advises, impart important information, offering 'a more direct emotional and experiential impact' that the audience can benefit from (King 2000: 36), with 'an impact similar to that of driving linear narrative: it has the potential to reinforce, almost physiologically, whatever the narrative asserts' (King 2000:

34). Yet, while this is a useful point, King still focuses solely on how spectacle asserts plot activity alone. I wish to ascertain how striking displays of spectacle (while may carry the plot forward) also possess rhythms that develop a more thematic kind of story that contributes to the storytelling process at a different kind of pace.

It is useful to briefly outline King's ideas here as a means to building on them to support my own thesis approach. Firstly, King proposes that 'heightened' spectacle is a particular type of fast-paced rhythm that *propels* narrative progression forwards in a rapid fashion. This process unfolds during those action sequences that employ techniques such as rapid-effect editing 'combined with "unstable" camera movements designed to create an impression of subjective immersion in the action, an "impact aesthetic" often increased by the practice of propelling debris and other objects out toward the viewer' (King 2003: 117). Also termed as *impact aesthetic*, heightened spectacle can often elicit excitement, surprise, anxiety and is an intentionally exhausting viewing experience on the part of the filmmaker. The audio-visual rhythm elicited by an impact aesthetic inevitably involves a quick succession of several shots, each following one after another, which each may take a variety of different forms, from the close-up to an extreme long shot, but in a matter of a few seconds, in order to show the perils faced by hero protagonists and their challenging environments. In terms of plotting, this kind of 'forward-moving drive' might be considered to propel narrative momentum forwards (King 2003: 123), pushing events in the 'right' causal direction. Such fast-paced stylistic techniques and editing schemes impart a long sequence of story information over a short duration, akin to an *efficient* narrative pattern. Developing King's framework further, while fast cutting and debris flying through the screen give impetus to the plot arc, and viscerally symbolise cultural ideas, heightened spectacle can also be argued as a series of continually competing rhythms and evolving energetic movements that form a distinct kinetic trajectory of key cultural themes.

In *Fast Five* (2011) thrilling camera shots and rapid car chase sequences undergo a treatment of heightened spectacle to 'drive' forward the narrative action, giving a sense of urgency to events of the heist plot. The team of joyriders are tasked with stealing a large sum of money to start a new life together away from the authorities, harnessing a bank vault onto one of their convoy, ripping the huge box from the wall, dragging it through the street. On the level of narrative temporality, the spectacle hastens character decisions and dialogue exchanges, giving impetus to the 'escape-from-the-law' scenario. King's model of heightened spectacle is useful in exploring how the passing of time is energised, because the narrative trajectory of actions and events is sped up. However, by adapting this model

slightly, and in focusing primarily on the rhythms at stake, this potentially reveals a more abstract and thematic trajectory that draws attention towards the drama of cultural conflict. Propelled along by the joyrider's sports cars, the safe's erratic, juddering rhythms seem atypical when compared to the responsible, linear driving of the other everyday road users that look on in shock, invoking the thrills felt when moving through urban spaces in an unconventional fashion.[1] While King's approach to this kind of heightened spectacle may successfully isolate how the spectacle drives forward plot details, a focus on each of these bumping and skidding rhythms reveals more than a means of supporting narrative causality.

Consider how the erratic rhythms of the safe, when contrasted with the linear rhythms of the ordinary road-user in *Fast Five* manage to present a distinctively kinetic kind of trajectory that brings cultural values right to the forefront of viewer attention: literally carrying wider social anxieties of 'freedom' resisting 'constraint'. Akin to a to-and-fro pattern, these dueling sets of rhythm gradually develop and evolve over time what it 'means' to defy convention of congested spaces, in the fashion of a temporal narrative chain of cause-and-effect. Rather than only aid a viewer's comprehension of plot activity, these rhythms develop thematic meanings over an extended period of time. Such an ongoing rhythm is arguably made up from a particular arrangement of audio-visual components, the combination of which collectively form a storytelling arc that *contributes* to the flow of narrative causality. These rhythms narrativise the structure of the spectacle by continually *pitting one set of thematic values against another* in a fashion quite distinct from the pacing of the plot's main chain of cause-and-effect. By building on King's ideas, a new perspective can be applied to the analysis of action genres: that spectacle generates another dimension in the narration of a film, working in a way that the pacing of narrative plotting cannot fully emulate to the same extent.

The second kind of spectacle King outlines is the 'contemplative' mode, which again contributes towards narrative progression, but in a more *restrained* fashion. Contemplative spectacle causes the viewer to sit back, rather than tense up, to admire large vistas, rather than endure a perilous wide-knuckle ride effect. The camera tends to linger upon the 'expensive sets, stunts, physical effects or footage of exotic locations in a

[1] Lisa Purse gives key insights behind this phenomenon in *Contemporary Action Cinema* (2011), in sections 'The Thrill of Action and the Need for Speed' (60-64) and 'Movement, Mastery and Urban Spaces' (64-66), the ideas of which will be developed in more detail in the first chapter: specifically in relation to the rhythmic dimension of themes pertaining to the superhero body and the cityscape.

relatively leisurely fashion' (King 2000: 96). A slower, more gradual type of audio-visual rhythm is evident here, one that uses extreme long shots that unfold over an extended period of time, carefully panning or tracking the central object being framed (perhaps revealing a sprawling city, a large space station in orbit above the stratosphere, or gradual avalanche along the side of a mountain). In this case, expansive settings can offer viewers the opportunity for ruminating over narrative depth, emphasising complications, ramifications and nuances (King 2003: 123), reiterating key plot points by prompting viewers to carefully ponder over the chain of cause-and-effect unfolding before them. When focusing solely on questions of rhythm however, rather than the narrative action this spectacle moves forward, the contemplative mode provides a useful means of seeing how cultural themes are ruminated upon in a distinct manner. The contemplative mode, then, offers a key counterpoint to the way cultural themes are carried by heightened forms of spectacle: with these two differing kinds of rhythm able to generate a tale of thematic conflict. The way this play off between heightened and contemplative modes of spectacle operates in the superhero film will be demonstrated in detail throughout chapter one.

Up to this stage in the introduction, by reviewing the spectacle and narrative debate I have outlined the way spectacle gives a dimension of temporal passing to an action film narrative, as it pushes plot events from beginning-to-middle-to-end. Yet, this review has also highlighted that the debate does not yet properly explore how spectacle grants a temporal dimension to the causal unfolding of cultural themes. Whenever themes are discussed in the debate, they are considered solely in terms of visual representation, or as part of a film's plot structure, because there are some action film theorists and critics discussed in this review that continue to assume that there is no narrativisation in play. Upon closer inspection an evident causality *does* exist in the audio-visual conflict between cultural contradictions, and it is only through spectacular rhythms that this storytelling process can happen. Spectacle, I shall prove across this thesis, does more than support themes in the main narrative or merely punctuate thematic ideas in a visual manner, but also energetically propels forward a thematic arc of cultural conflict across the superhero-action film, doing so with each and every spectacular rhythm.

(ii) *Rhythm and Ritual*: Combining Genre Theory with Neoformalist Analysis

The previous section has explained how current studies on action film tend to focus on the way spectacle supports the passing of time in the narrative chain of cause-and-effect. Yet,

embedded within the structure of spectacle lies a series of cultural themes, and the debate has not yet fully explored just how spectacle grant a temporal dimension and causal unfolding to these themes, so in effect becoming narrativised in its own distinct way. My approach aims to show how the evolving audio-visual rhythms of spectacle grants a temporal and causal dimension to these cultural themes, unfolding in a fashion akin to an evolving storytelling trajectory. To achieve this, my method consists of two aspects: a *genre study* that isolates the kinds of cultural conflict invested in superhero storytelling conventions, and an analysis of the *formal components* that rhythmically present these themes.

A genre is a particular category of storytelling conventions, and so any genre film belongs to a long-established tradition of cultural tropes. The action film genre, as does the superhero film, turns to the kinds of impressive spectacle typical of popular forms of entertainment, which often cause viewers, during their film-going experience, to collectively stare in awe in a fashion similar to various traditions of religious and secular ritual (King 2000: 4), for the purpose of anticipating the delivery of recurring cultural meanings. For this reason, genre theory is a useful framework for uncovering the kinds of cultural themes expressed in popular Hollywood movies, providing a means of analysing the social rituals that these films provide and that viewers wish to consume. Superhero films in the same vein are currently commercially dominant and so provide a site for thinking through their cultural value as a medium of social ritual: that is, a ceremonial celebration of American national ideals (and concerns). The superhero film currently holds a high level of cultural popularity, and much of the appeal of these films lies in a ritualistic mode of consumption. In fact, between the period 2000 and 2015 a total of fifty-seven productions have been released (these film titles are listed below[2]) and this growth

[2] These films are listed as: *X-Men* (2000), *Unbreakable* (2000), *Blade II* (2002), *Spider-Man* (2002), *Daredevil* (2003), *X2: X-Men United* (2003), *Hulk* (2003), *The Punisher* (2004), *Spider-Man 2* (2004), *Catwoman* (2004), *Blade: Trinity* (2004), *Hellboy* (2005), *Elektra* (2005), *Batman Begins* (2005), *Fantastic Four* (2005), *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), *Superman Returns* (2006), *Special* (2006), *Ghost Rider* (2007), *Spider-Man 3* (2007), *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007), *Superhero Movie* (2008), *Iron Man* (2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Hancock* (2008), *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Punisher: War Zone* (2008), *The Spirit* (2008), *Watchmen* (2009), *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009), *Defendor* (2009), *Kick-Ass* (2010), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Super* (2010), *The Green Hornet* (2011), *Thor* (2011), *X-Men: First Class* (2011), *Green Lantern* (2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *Chronicle* (2012), *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance* (2012), *Avengers Assemble* (2012), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), *Dredd* (2012), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Man of Steel* (2013), *The Wolverine* (2013), *Kick-Ass 2* (2013), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014), *X-Men: Days of Future Past*

continues to escalate, in that studios are promising yet another twenty-five films in the industry pipeline leading up to 2020 (listed below[3]). It should also briefly be pointed out that among the superhero film cycle's most successful burgeoning commercial successes is Paramount/Marvel's *Avengers Initiative* franchise (2008-present). The *Avengers* films are released not simply as products, but as seasonal events for all to participate in, annually consumed as part of an inter-related network of movies that prompts viewers to join together the entirety of these serialised instalments, so as to achieve the 'complete' entertainment experience. The franchise achieves this by designing each film to explicitly make reference to the importance of characters and events featured in other plots belonging to other films across the series, leading from Phase I (2008-2012), to Phase II (2012-2016), to Phase III (2016-2018).

The study of genre films as a form of social ritual, then, argues that box office success equates an index of cultural popularity. Beginning in the mid-to-late 1970s, and still holding contemporary relevance, a group of genre theorists offered a model for exploring film genres as 'a form of collective cultural expression' (Schatz 1981: 13) termed the *ritual approach*.[4] The overarching purpose behind the ritual approach was and continues to define the popularity of popular Hollywood genres as 'vehicles of and for the exploration of ideas, ideals, cultural values and ideological dilemmas central to American society' (Neale 2000: 220). This reasoning is pertinent for my thesis argument, isolating important cultural themes, but the ritual approach is also problematic to some extent.

Steve Neale criticises the ritual approach for its over-reliance on 'the assumption that all those who pay to see films always like or approve of them' (Neale 2000: 225). Neither can theorists assume that audience approval is ideologically based, or that 'audiences are, or were American, that American audiences are representative of the

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(2014), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Ant-Man* (2015), *The Fantastic Four* (2015).

[3] Eight more productions are expected in the pipeline of 2016, with another seven to be featured in 2017, five in 2018, and at least another five emerging during 2019 to 2020: a combined total of eighty-two. These include: *Deadpool* (2016), *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016), *Suicide Squad* (2016), *Doctor Strange* (2016), *Gambit* (2016), *The Wolverine 2* (2017), *Guardians of the Galaxy 2* (2017), *Wonder Woman* (2017), *The Fantastic Four 2* (2017), *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), *Black Panther* (2017), *Justice League Part One* (2017), *The Flash* (2018), *Avengers: Infinity War Part I* (2018), *Captain Marvel* (2018), *Aquaman* (2018), *Inhumans* (2018), *Shazam* (2019), *Avengers: Infinity War Part II* (2019), *Justice League Part Two* (2019), *Cyborg* (2020), *Green Lantern* (2020).

[4] See Rick Altman's article 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre' (1984) for a more detailed historical account of genre study as deemed either a product of 'social ritual' or a means of 'ideological' manipulation.

American population, and that the American population as a whole is always preoccupied in the same way with the same cultural issues and dilemmas' (Neale 2000: 225-226). Neale is justified in his criticism, because the ritual approach depends heavily on an overly deterministic assumption that audiences collectively and/or consistently anticipate a dominant set of cultural themes to appear in popular forms of entertainment, in which filmmakers then seemingly fulfil these expectations to make a profit, so perpetuating the film industry's continuation. However, the ritual approach proves useful in presenting the key kinds of cultural conflict that tend to *consistently* recur across American action-adventure films texts.

Much of the cultural conflict invested in contemporary action cinema, for instance, brings to mind the same social anxieties that originate with the historical development of the American West, as pioneers of European descent began venturing across and settling vast regions of the great plains of North America (circa 1840-1890). In *Avatar* (2009) the narrative draws closely from the historical context of European settlers heading out West across the Great Plains who, driven by a mission to civilise this wilderness, cross paths with the Native American Indians already settled in these regions, under the pretence these are a savage people in need of education, modern utilities and so forth. The human corporation that sends in troops to colonise the alien world Pandora does so with a prejudiced attitude, employing tactics of mandatory education and eventual ethic cleaning. There is a contradictory clash here between the cultural values of savagery endorsed by the human settlers (who purport to be civilised), while the native Na'vi who wish to protect their land and way of life invoke a contrary kind of civilising force (while the humans often refer to these people as savage) (Purse 2011: 123). Yet more cultural tensions of this kind are evident throughout *Avatar*, as the hero protagonist Jake, a human soldier paralysed from the waist down, infiltrates the alien community through a cryo-chamber that channels his consciousness into a cloned Na'vi body, which plays on the tension between 'the freedom and restriction of physical movement' (Purse 2011: 25).

Other similar social anxieties are ritually repeated across the genre conventions of action-adventure films. In *King Kong* (2005) there is a conflict between notions of the 'primitive' versus 'modernity'. The digital construction of the giant ape's 'expressive features, dynamically 'authentic' motions, and vibrant, glossy fur' gives Kong the elevated status of a contemporary feat of spectacular effects technology, which helps to characterise his 'sensitive and heroic characterisation', whereas the indigenous people of Skull Island that Kong must content with, are presented by 'inscrutable expressions, predominantly

grey skin, and spasmodic physical movements' designated as more primitive by comparison (Purse 2013: 100).

To put the some of these American cultural tensions into context, historian Henry Nash Smith (in his work *Virgin Land*, 1950) introduced the binary of *nature* versus *culture* as a means of better understanding this era of American Westward Expansion: unfolding as a conflict between whether the West is cultivatable as a domesticated 'garden', or if this environment will continue to remain as a threatening, inhospitable 'desert'. Continuing to develop these concerns further, the film scholars Jim Kitses and Will Wright applied Nash's binary of *garden/desert* specifically in relation to the Western genre. In *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (1975) for instance, Wright worked to establish relational similarities between mythic associations, messages and social values and the tropes belonging to the Western, i.e. as 'patterns of opposition' of wilderness/civilisation, inside/outside and strong/weak (Stam et al. 1992: 77), with these binaries able to 'reinforce rather than challenge social understanding' (Wright 1975: 23). It was Kitses however, in his work *Horizons West* (1969) that provided a more comprehensive account of the social anxieties most closely associated with Western films, structuring these values into an antinomial grid in which one antinomy can dynamically shift these thematic values from one end of the spectrum to another:

Wilderness	**Civilization**
The Individual	*The Community*
Freedom	Restriction
Honour	Institution
Self-knowledge	Illusion
Integrity	Compromise
Self-interest	Social responsibility
Solipsism	Democracy
Nature	Culture
Purity	Corruption
Experience	Knowledge
Empiricism	Legalism
Pragmatism	Idealism
Brutalization	Refinement
Savagery	Humanity
The West	The East
America	Europe
The Frontier	America

Equality	Class	
Agrarianism	Industrialism	
Tradition	Change	
The Past	The Future	(Kitses 1969: 11)

The American national tensions Kitses suggests are also central to Geoff King's seminal text *Spectacular Narratives* (2000), in that onscreen spectacular effects 'continue to manifest the kinds of underlying thematic oppositions and reconciliations associated with a broadly 'structuralist' analysis of narrative' (King 2000: 2). While the original American westward frontier acted as the 'free', open, empty horizon for a pioneer to potentially always head towards without fail, its official closure in 1890 inevitably led to the creation of other frontiers in its stead, or as King puts it: '… both imaginary and real… [these] kinds of 'new frontier', loosely conceived, can [now] be identified in the narratives of contemporary Hollywood', in that these narratives allow a *resolution of contradictions* that, while impossible to do so in reality, are resolvable in our own imaginations (King 2000: 6).

In this sense, action film narratives, Lisa Purse explains, 'construct situations and locations that return us to the cluster of meanings the frontier generates in the North American imagination: the site for the policing of otherness as well as more tangible boundaries, and the site of physical renewal, progress and possibility' (Purse 2011: 5). Indeed it is the myth of the American frontier that acts as a means of 'reconciling' in some way issues of: ''civilisation' and a version of 'untamed wilderness' or open space deemed to have given America its unique character' with the characters in these films (and of course Western narratives especially) tending to straddle the line, border or 'frontier' between the two oppositions (King 2000: 6). Writing on the representation of gender identities in action film, Yvonne Tasker in *Spectacular Bodies* (1993) also analyses how the heroes of action narratives express cultural concerns through binary structures that revolve around 'a figure who lacks a place in the community for which he fights, a paradox familiar from the Western genre' (Tasker 1993: 77). Using the themes this paradox invokes, Tasker problematizes the distinction between the value of 'passivity' associated with femininity and women, against notions of 'activity' and masculinity tied to men.

Cultural contradictions, especially those found in American frontier mythology, are central to the study of theme in contemporary action film. Kristin Whissel in *Spectacular Digital Effects* (2014) employs a set of binary oppositions to discuss how cinematic emblems gain allegorical and 'dramatic effect by contrasting power with powerlessness,

the individual with the collective, life with death, and freedom with constraint' (Whissel 2014: 13) many of which share similarities with the same thematic concerns of American frontier mythology. The spectacle of digital bodily morphing and physical transformations, for instance, in *The Matrix* (1999), *Terminator 2: Judgement Da*y (1991), *X-Men* (2000) and *Hulk* (2003) each in effect invoke 'the protagonists' desire for radical freedom from settings and situations defined by incarceration and enslavement' (Whissel 2014: 153). Frontier mythology and binary oppositions also arguably have a critical value when applied directly to the cinematic superhero. In making connections between superhero protagonists and the Western genre, Lorrie Palmer argues that vigilantes such as *The Punisher* (2004) move between two worlds: one of civilisation, with his family and its rituals, and the other, one of the wilderness, in the savagery of the city (for an extensive analysis see Palmer 2007: 279-294). In *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002) John Sheldon Lawrence and Robert Jewitt apply aspects of frontier mythology to explore the storytelling model of duels in which 'chivalrous "peace-loving" superheroes' always win under the 'premise of "civilisation" triumphing over "savagery"' (Lawrence and Jewitt 2002: 54). Even outside the remit of frontier mythology, binaries still prove useful, as Dan Hassler-Forest has argued in relation to *Superman Returns*, which deals with a key thematic antinomy based around contradictions of apocalyptic disaster: in that the world is both 'saved' yet 'destroyed', and the hero both 'sacrifices' himself yet 'survives' (Hassler-Forest 2012: 212). Going back to far earlier writing on the superhero figure in comic book literature, Richard Reynolds' *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992) explains how these heroes exist in a world in which sets of mirror images and opposites continually at work against one another (Reynolds 1992: 68).

As current and past literature suggests, the ritual approach to genre studies uncovers cultural themes, but as a means of expressing cultural conflict through binary oppositions. To clarify, binary oppositions always consist of *two contrary values* that confirm the meaning of what one entity 'is' by comparing its differing qualities to what that entity 'is not'. Social structures create meaning and make sense of the world primarily through a series of binary opposites: an idea with roots in the *structuralist method* of studying myth in primitive societies first introduced by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in his work *Le Cru et le Cuit* ('The Raw and The Cooked' 1964, trans. 1969). For instance, Levi-Strauss argued that societies depend on binaries, only able to define notions of 'freshness' by reconciling this value with that of the 'rotten', or 'highness' juxtaposed with 'lowness', as well as 'nakedness' contrasted against the 'clothed'. More importantly, at the

heart of almost all social anxieties, Levi-Strauss declared, resides one central theme in particular: the gradual passing from 'nature' into 'culture', and the difficulties in reconciling these oppositional values, which is also at the heart of the American frontier mythology and features throughout action-adventure genre films.

The ritual approach is essential in isolating social values in terms of semantics or story (i.e. Kitses, Wright), but my approach will build on this further, exploring how a series of cultural contradictions are able to influence the formal properties of a film in a dynamic fashion by audio-visually playing off one binary opposition against another. Rather than contribute new thematic interpretations to the superhero film, my approach will show exactly how these thematic tensions emerge through the structure of the spectacle, by focusing closely on the relationship between cultural conflicts and audio-visual rhythmic movements. To do so requires a second aspect to my methodology: a neoformalist close analysis that ascertains the onscreen rhythmic qualities at work. Neoformalism offers a useful preoccupation with the '*tech*-icism' of a work: that is, the technical elements, 'materials and devices' available to an artist working within a specific craft (Stam et al. 2000: 48). These technical elements may include the excessive display of onscreen motifs (explained by Kristin Thompson), or the impact of cutting strategies of 'intensified continuity' analysed by David Bordwell, 'post-continuity' advocated by Steven Shaviro, and montage patterning (as developed by 1920s soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein). The design of aural effects also affords a thematic punctuation, as explained by theorist Michel Chion. The neoformalist method brings with it a certain set of tools to work with: namely the formal properties of editing, shot composition, framing, special effects, and how these audio-visual components use movement and space to stage elements of spectacular costume and performance strategies, and challenging terrains typical to the superhero film.

A neoformalist method emphasises just how these filmic mechanisms operate, and by combining this evidence with a ritual-based model of genre theory, the two approaches become *complementary* of one another in ascertaining the thematic meaning invested in rhythmic movements. It is because neoformalism 'is concerned with the *devices and rules* that go into the making of cultural artefacts', that structuralism can then deal with 'the *framework of meaning*; how an audience reads and understands signs within a text [emphasis added]' (Etherington-Wright and Doughty 2011: 63). To reiterate then, by reducing my analysis down to the arrangement of filmic components (e.g. similarities and differences between shot compositions, editing strategies, modes of cinematography, the

paring of fragments of mise-en-scene and aesthetics) this approach will successfully uncover the potential 'dynamism' that plays off cultural oppositions against one another in a rhythmic fashion. For instance, Raymond Bellour in *An Analysis of Film* (1979) employs a model of binary oppositions as a key means of analysing the formal level of a film (i.e. the shot sizes, framing and movement), focusing in particular on how variation and repetition between opposing elements appeared to give 'the narrative sequence its central thrust and impetus' (Stam et al. 1992: 78), e.g. defining the point-of-view shot in terms of *seeing/seen*; or framing as *close/distant*, with camera movement inciting a pairing of *still/moving*. In saying this, Bellour still relegates formal binaries to the level of how narrative causality advances along, whereas my own approach aims to instead look to the way thematic oppositions are embedded in the structure of audio-visual rhythms, expressing and 'telling' these cultural concerns at a visceral level.

The rest of this section shall now fully define the terms I am working with in my method, as well as justify why these ideas are essential for my proposed model of narrativised spectacle. Firstly, neoformalism is key in isolating the kinds of rhythmic movements and aural cadences evident in spectacular action sequences of the superhero film. Secondly, the ritual approach to genre theory is useful to then uncover the themes of cultural conflict expressed and developed by each of these rhythms. Nonetheless, while this combination of two differing approaches may initially seem complementary (as previously explored in the section) these two methods are in many ways incompatible with one another, and this is an issue that needs to be addressed and clarified further. Much of this incompatibility between the two methods of neoformalism and the ritual approach to genre theory stems from a simple paradox between: (i) trying to *explain* the way narrativised spectacle operates in superhero films with a collection of evidence (i.e. neoformalism); against attempting to *interpret* superhero films by applying a pre-existing belief system (i.e. the ritual approach) based not on empirical data but instead justified by sets of cultural assumptions. However, I shall now argue why these two methods do in fact benefit one another, as well as show how this analytical and theoretical pairing provides the most pertinent questions to address in my thesis.

Neoformalism is a method that explains the way devices of form, style and technique work together to generate meaning in a film work. By closely observing how audio-visual components form a series of patterns – either within a single film and/or across several films – this analytical method depends upon data-driven hypotheses that are grounded in empirical collections of evidence. The two seminal neoformalist works are considered to

be David Bordwell's *Narration and the Fiction Film* (1985) and Kristin Thompson's *Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis* (1982), but for purposes of clarification this method is primarily concerned with:

> [A] film's narrative and stylistic form, the historical context of a film's form, and the activity of the viewer in making sense of films. Rather than imposing a prior theoretical approach… meanings in any film emerge through its unique deployment and combination of devices (which can embrace anything from plot to camerawork to costume). In any film, *devices derive their meaning through their relation to each other*, and this relationship is historically situated [emphasis added] (Kuhn and Westwell 2015).

Neoformalism then, 'explains' a film by confirming exactly which stylistic choices or storytelling practices are employed during a particular era or within an institution of filmmaking, 'promoting historical specificity over abstract theor[ies]' and assumptive interpretations (Jenkins 1995: 104). For instance, the narrative form and stylistic techniques employed by the contemporary superhero film can be explained as part of Hollywood's overall aim (from the late silent period up to the 1960s and onwards) to produce as commercially viable a film-going experience to as large a demographic as possible: employing a 'goal-governed protagonist [hero] as the organising principle behind a causally structured narrative', insisting on continuity in editing and catering both the visual and aural style to support narrative exposition above all else (Jenkins 1995: 103). Hence, a neoformalist approach is key in explaining why the superhero film employs certain patterns of style and technique, namely to abide by continuity editing schemes that viewers can easily follow. More importantly, a neoformalist analysis draws attention to the emergence of specific devices during an era. For the contemporary superhero film this would point to the proliferation of increasingly advanced and sophisticated digital-visual-effects technology beginning from the early 2000s to the present. Prior to the 2000s, although earlier examples of computer animation were instrumental in bringing characters such as Superman to the screen in *Superman* (1978), *Superman Part II* (1980), *Superman Part III* (1983), *Superman Part IV: The Quest for Peace* (1987), or Batman in *Batman* (1989), *Batman Returns* (1992), *Batman Forever* (1995), *Batman and Robin* (1997), it was not until the enhancement of digital effects with *X-Men* (2000) and *Spider-Man* (2002) that the spectacular potential of these super-human protagonists from comics and graphic novels could be fully realised onscreen, in that 'the proliferation of comic-book movies, including… *Spider-Man 2*, *Blade: Trinity*, *Catwoman*, and *X Men 3*, reflects technology's ability to duplicate onscreen what before could be realised only by comic-book artists on

the page' (Prince 2004: 26). Advanced digital-visual-effects are not the essential drive behind a proliferation in contemporary superhero movies, yet these tools are certainty a factor: unleashing more possibilities of presenting new and innovative kinds of super-human kinesis, physical manoeuvrability and audio-visual rhythms onscreen. Neoformalism is useful in this regard, explaining that the empirical proliferation of 2000s-present superhero film productions is in part tied to the sustained commercial appeal invested in particularly 'digital' kinds of action hero.

However, although neoformalism is useful in explaining the relationship between technical components of 2000s-present superhero films and the kinds of kinetic rhythms these figures can perform (e.g. by focusing on recurring devices such as advancements in digital technology), this method is nonetheless limited in offering potential interpretations for the cultural significance invested in this visual effects work: which is not really available when solely observing technical craft manuals or press-discourses alone. As Henry Jenkins notes, by using neoformalism to analyse the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* (1933) an empirical explanation stresses just 'how these political images are linked to disruptive and flamboyant tendencies in the vaudeville tradition aesthetic with its spontaneous protagonists against repressive antagonists', but this approach does not typically allow for any deeper interpretation of the data as a means of cultural expression, such as dealing with anxieties around the social chaos of the early depression years (Jenkins 1995: 103).

By detaching the formal qualities from more 'detailed textual criticism' or elements of 'social interpretation', neoformalism indeed allows a critic to explain the historical context behind the film's application of stylistic devices, or suggests how viewers engage with these devices (Kuhn and Westwell 2015). Neoformalism avoids textual criticism or social interpretation because by placing faith in hypotheses not based in a historical context would be to give into an assumptive impulse (Stam et al. 2000: 227), abiding by what Bordwell has termed as 'doctrines' that demand no further interrogation of the empirical validity or scientific rigour at stake (Bordwell and Carroll 1996), namely a dominant ideological assumption taken on its own merits (Jenkins 1995: 100-101). Yet, although neoformalism explains *how* devices give meaning to a film, it still manages to (in part at least) avoid the wider potential kinds of interpretations culturally invested in a film text, such as relatively abstract social anxieties including the *nature versus culture* binary (raised earlier in the section), or notions of individualism versus the community, as well as concerns of identity based on representations of gender, class, racial constructions or

sexuality. For instance, the action genre has often been argued to present masculine sexual agency as active or a driver of the narrative, whereas femininity is far more passive by comparison, coded as an eroticised object there for the pleasure of the male narrative agent (an issue that will be explored in greater depth in chapter four), and neoformalism does not offer any interpretive framework to critically tackle some of the cultural themes or myths invested in this dynamic.

Neoformalism can successfully isolate the functional components of the superhero-action film, but in favouring empirical explanation over interpretative guesswork this gives cause to embrace a ritual approach to genre theory, because this method can offer up a useful framework of cultural interpretation: one based primarily on a thematic series of relatively abstract binary oppositions. Building in more depth on the definitions and key theorists of this school of thought provided earlier in the section, the ritual approach argues that genre formulas work as a channel for groups to share the same sets of fantasies together, with these attitudes changing depending on cultural circumstances, developing new themes and symbols as part of a commercial process that evolves 'in response to new audience interests' (Cawelti 1976: 34). Action genre formulas in particular deal with shifting social concerns through what Thomas Schatz has termed as cultural realms or 'symbolic arenas of action' presented within the film text (Schatz 1981: 27). In the Western genre for example, a cultural arena of expression is evident through sites of the Great Plains, or in the detective and gangster genres it is the urbanised city centres that provide such an arena of debate: all of which play out a set of social values 'in a state of sustained conflict' (Schatz 1981: 27). These sites of sustained cultural conflict provide a mythological doctrine of sorts, which is key to better understanding the themes invested in superhero-action film.

One mythological doctrine key to the North American national imagination, for instance, presents the 'Old West' as split between a figurative and literal arena: a frontier of an unexplored desert on the one side, and a settled urban town on the other. The myth of the frontier stands as a threshold of conflicting cultural concerns (i.e. wilderness versus civilisation) to which the protagonist cowboy is forced to cross and negotiate this boundary. Again, as stated earlier on in the section, in the agrarian desert wilderness the cowboy can embrace a more pragmatic kind of individualism, yet, when in the urbanised town, this self-sufficient tendency gets into conflict with a domesticated community, and the obligations of social responsibility this infrastructure and societal order demands of its urban-denizens. As I shall explore in chapter one, the superhero-action film innovates on

this same series of tensions set up by U. S. frontier mythology: presenting the modern city as a now fully settled urban expanse, giving rise to anxieties that a congested, overpopulated space invokes while inciting a problematic freedom afforded to any extraordinary, superhuman kind of kinesis and enhanced abilities. It is the city space that arguably offers an arena to deal with and debate such cultural tensions. The idea of expressing cultural conflict through a symbolic arena has been contested by Steve Neale on the grounds that this kind of genre formula can neither be empirically confirmed across all genres, nor in terms of film industry practices (Neale 2000: 225). Yet, chapter one argues that there is still a benefit in viewing urban spaces as a cultural arena of debate, because much of the thematic impetus at the heart of superhero narratives depends on the cityscape, and what this space socially represents.

At this early stage in the thesis, it is becoming clear that the interpretive free play of the ritual approach is often in danger of 'wilful inflation' of undecided factors that can be neither entirely confirmed nor explained with evidence, while any attempt at an data-driven explanation nonetheless comes across as a 'search and destroy method' that challenges ambiguities of meaning in a film text, inevitably falling into a 'short-sighted reductionism' (Stam, et al 2000: 247). For this reason, by combing the two approaches the thesis will employ the strengths (rather than the limitations) of both methods. This is because there is one key similarity each method shares: *to seek out the reasons and meanings for the relationship between the elements structuring a film text*. As neoformalism establishes the way formal components are empirically organised, then the ritual approach can offer an interpretative cultural framework to apply to how this evidence is structured. A further complication to the explanation/interpretation duality that briefly needs to be addressed is to consider those interpretations that aim to explain a film. An intentionalist approach for instance uses interpretation as a means of confirming the intentions behind a work, balancing the analysis of what the film's textual details seem to suggest with interviews of directors, actors, screenwriters, producers or the citation of industry practices. Paisley Livingston in *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study* (2005) argues that a film can in part take its form because filmmakers intended to make it that way.

On the other hand, not every interpretation is an explanation, and neither does my approach argue for any interpretation that fully explains how film works come into being. What is important to recognise here is that any interpretation is in part tied to a wider cultural conversation, and rather than look to the intentions of filmmakers my approach is

far more pluralist. There is space for both an interpretation and explanation of cultural factors, and how this relates to notions of a more trustworthy state of 'nature' or 'natural capacities'. It is always productive to challenge the supposed division between an empirically grounded argument for 'human nature' and the intelligent guesswork of 'cultural nurture' (Zunshine 2010: 2). Indeed, '[o]ne cannot study the natural without the cultural' (Plantinga 2013, a), in the same way was it is essential not 'to place culture outside the domain of nature when it comes to humans' (Smith 2008: 278). A naturalistic approach 'assumes a relatively stable human nature developed over millions of years of evolutionary history' and then applies this evidence to filmmaking and film viewing, and a cultural study instead looks to how 'reality is a function of ideology or irrational psychological processes that create our worlds' (Plantinga 2013, b). In balancing these tensions between human and culture, or nature and nurture, there is an interesting play off. Human nature can indeed offer us the freedom to create our own culture, in the same way that this creative process is often limited by certain empirical and biological factors, and the psychological processes behind creating cultural traditions can also impose potential stipulations that redirect the natural capacities of our inherent human nature (Plantinga 2013, b). For each of these aforementioned reasons, it is legitimate to employ pertinent interpretations (i.e. that are grounded in longstanding themes of nature versus culture) as a key means of analytically and theoretically examining popular action genres, such as the superhero film.

After fully defining the main analytical and theoretical terms I am working with in my method (that surround neoformalism and genre theory), the next step is to now clarify the primary meaning of culture in this thesis. Building on the ideas raised above, I argue that culture is a concept best understood by combining the explanative aspects of neoformalism with the interpretative qualities of a genre theory framework: resulting in what can be understood as *an arena of debate*, both in a formal and in a cultural sense. I define culture in this thesis as a formal, social and political arena of debate that tries to make sense of conflicting ideas which comprise the cultural fabric of a society, offering the means of escalating and negotiating these tensions, and eventually some kind of reconciliation. More importantly, this cultural and formal arena of debate arguably functions as an evolving set of traditions, or a form of protean ritual.

Culture offers up coping mechanisms to deal with certain social anxieties, and Hollywood genre filmmaking formally presents these doctrines as a site or space in which hero protagonists and villain antagonists can fight one another, battling over the societal

order, laying claim to the city and community, as well as the values its inhabitants stand for and have faith in. Neoformalism confirms how technical devices evolve over different eras, but it is the ritual approach that suggests not only how attitudes to a core set of themes change over the decades, but also what these continuing mythological and thematic doctrines potentially are. For example, the wilderness/civilisation binary is argued as intrinsic to the Western (see the work of Jim Kitses or Will Wright, as explained earlier), and this genre formula has treated Native American Indians as 'savage' in *Stagecoach* (1939) or *Fort Apache* (1948) when compared to the more civilised settlers, but then treats these nomadic tribes as civilised communities when compared to the sadistic U. S. cavalry in *Soldier Blue* (1970) or *Dances With Wolves* (1990). The ritual approach declares that the way cultural dualities are presented in popular genre filmmaking changes over time, due to a shift from classical to more revisionist attitudes, but it is a neoformalist approach that can explore how filmmaking devices repeat or innovate on these tested formulas in different eras.

The 2000s-present contemporary superhero film offers a key case study in how formal devices such as advanced digital technologies have the potential to express longstanding themes that hark back to earlier genres (e.g. individual freedom and social restriction in the Western or Musical), and how these themes are treated in innovative ways: so forming an *evolving ritual of core mythological themes*. Indeed, I argue throughout this thesis that a protean ritual takes place in the superhero film that repeats and innovates on established cultural myths and themes through a consistent and evolving set of formal and stylistic conventions. Both formally and thematically for instance, the superhero city builds, yet innovates, on the same qualities of the Western, in which the Great Plains are conventionally presented with long shots that emphasise the idyllic beauty of an untouched frontier while the hustle and bustle of the city by comparison employs more frenetic cutting and activity in the frame.

The agrarian wilderness of the Great Plains has conventionally been presented as in a calm state of being, with prolonged long shots that frame the green hills stretching across the horizon, e.g. *Shane* (1953), *Open Range* (2003), or as a savage wasteland with rapid editing and frenetic physical choreography of Indian raids in *Stagecoach*, violent storms in *My Darling Clementine* (1946), or a herd of teeming Buffalo in *Dances with Wolves*. The urban town is a space presented on the one hand with a calm domesticated placidity, e.g. after law was implemented in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valacne* (1962), as much as it has been presented as chaotic and dangerous, e.g. before law was imposed in *The Man*

Who Shot Liberty Valance. Thematically in the Western, the city stands for civilisation and security, but also a form of corrupted individualism, in that it is a congested space with several social stipulations, while the frontier is compromised of open plains and desert on which the individual can move and act without the hindrance of law or order.

As I show later in the thesis, and particularly in chapter one, in the superhero film individual freedom is not equated with the possibilities of venturing across the open wilderness, but is instead realised in the spectacular feats the superhero's superhuman physical kinesis can achieve when rising up above the city: literally and figuratively transcending the sets of hurdles imposed by a Metropolis infrastructure, and the barriers that try to direct and contain this freedom with conformity and societal order. When the heroes in *Superman Returns* or *Spider-Man 2* rise high above the roof tops of buildings and skyscrapers, the space is calmer and more open, but whenever they venture back down into the underbelly of the city, right into the streets and grids of roads and concrete blocks, the detritus of lampposts, garage cans and the sprawling mass of the urban inhabitants, then this space becomes decidedly more frantic and claustrophobic. The formal possibilities and themes may shift between the body and city in a variety of different ways, but it is this symbolic arena that offers a means of *formally negotiating* the tensions invested in crossing a frontier between a pure and physical freedom of human nature and the more cumbersome stipulations imposed by cultured spaces.

The superhero city, in a formal sense, offers a dynamism of giving energetic motion to the process of negotiating cultural binaries: generating an arena of debate that invokes a logic of association to these kinetic rhythms in the urban space. In relation to the cityscape, Tom Gunning has declared that at the beginning of the twentieth century the perception of early cinema offered up a new attraction of 'small doses of scopic pleasure [which] adapted to the nervous rhythm of modern urban reality' (Gunning 1990: 134). However, this idea of the hustle and bustle of the city reflecting a 'nervous rhythm' is actually more useful in arguing for a mythological doctrine of interpretation rather than a historically continent explanation. In *The History of Film Style* Bordwell points out that although between 1850 and 1920 European societies did undergo an era of mechanical reproduction and an expansion of industrial capitalism, these factors do not necessarily prove that 'a new way of seeing [was] produced by [the] modernity' of experiences associated with an urban environment (Bordwell 1997: 146). Human beings have evolved both physiological and psychological mechanisms over millions of years through biological selection, and to assume that such extreme short term changes are due to a city

setting is implausible, as is the hypothesis that a single 'mode of perception' rules over an entire epoch (*Ibid.* 142-143). Equally, if one were to rationalise that a frenetic editing style is a reaction to the same kind of fragmentation felt in the fast-paced patterns of mass conformity and mass productivity in the workplace of urban life, then why do several other films adopt these same techniques in regions that are far less urbanised and not as industrialised as Europe or North America (*Ibid.* 143-144)? What is key to my approach is that, in the very least, one may potently argue only 'certain aspects of modernity, through causal mechanisms yet to be specified, produce or favour the development of [these] attractions' (*Ibid.* 302). An interpretation of the superhero city, then, as a densely (and decidedly contemporary) populated hub of activity is useful in explaining how social anxieties are debated at a formal and thematic level in these film texts.

To better understand this above idea of a logic of association, consider the visual music of experimental filmmaker Oskar Fischinger (1900-1967) and his 'graphic patterns that are either hand-drawn or photographically inscribed onto a soundtrack. Both the sound and image emanate from these graphic patterns' (Russet 2004 113). Fischinger illustrated soundtracks with abstract shapes to offer a visual description of the music being played. In his short *Allegreto* (1936) a cel-animation is drawn to match the aural cadence of a jazz track. Throughout the short there is a close matching between shapes and the music. Louder sounds are visualised by larger shapes. The sharper sounding trumpets are emitted along with sharp-pointed triangles that accompany each blast, whereas quieter sounds are represented by smaller shapes, and softer sounds are more circular. Thinner lines match string instruments, and wind sounds with are matched with shapes that flutter across the screen. Trickling piano keys are matched with long shapes that fall downwards, while low, heavy sounds are matched with thickset shapes placed at the bottom of the screen. This logic of association between shapes and music allows the viewer/listener to effectively see the music in action, using the visuals to pick up on the patterns of music at work.

Musical ideas and musical language, as a set of formal components that are organised across a film's duration, provide a lexicon that becomes central to my argument for culture as an arena of debate. When taken in a literal sense, the language of music, especially in terms of 'rhythms', 'beats' and 'accents', offers up a set of formal patterns, and establishes how these formal qualities play out in a given action sequence. A literal application of musical language is useful to get a sense of the rhythm unfolding in the special effects and frenetic cutting of the action, because this *gestures to a specific kind of onscreen movement* (e.g. bouts of linear precision) that then prompts the question: what is

the use of this literal rhythm as a metaphorical, figurative or cultural association of ideas? With this in mind, in building further on the language of music as a kind of metaphor, the terms such as rhythms, beats and accents now offer a set of formal patterns that seek out a *cultural or symbolic logic of association between the movements*, which is open to social interpretations. A linear arc of a superhero physically flying (*Superman Returns*) or swinging (*Spider-Man 2*) across a cityscape for instance abides by a visual rhythm and cadence that soars in tandem with heroic musical leitmotifs. A neoformalist approach to musical language explains exactly what the movements are: Superman or Spiderman's linear flight unfolds as a literal set of evolving beats and accents.

A ritual approach to genre theory however then applies a more metaphorical logic of association to musical language. Formal linear movements do not only invoke a pleasing (and 'positive' code of) graceful beauty that carries the storytelling forward, but this grace brings to mind archetypes of an 'elegant' performance and masculinist code of heroism harking back to tropes belonging to the Western (an issue that will be dealt with in more detail in the next section). This includes cultural values of individualism, pragmatism, stoicism in contending with the city, and a decidedly 'professional' means of channeling violence to deal with urban crime. In chapter three for example, I explore how the literal beats and accents of a villain do not flow with the same kind of linear progression across the city as a hero, but are far more sporadic, causing messy destruction. In *Spider-Man 3* (2007), the villain Venom's physically erratic convulsions lack all of the hero's grace. In a more metaphorical context, these different kinds of beats and accents of channeling violence are culturally coded as being invested with less a disciplined professionalism, instead favouring a more sadistic expression of self-indulgent savagery. In this sense, a musical language is useful to analyse how the form literally plays out these movements, and also metaphorically in how cultural values are invoked by the form.

To clarify what is meant by beats and accents, and how these musical terms formally and thematically function in the superhero film, I focus on this topic in particular in chapters one and two. Yet to define here exactly what I mean by beats and accents, it is now useful to take the fourfold analysis of style presented by Bordwell in *Figures Traced in Light* (2005: 33-5) to explain how style may perform or combine a series of pertinent functions: *denotative*, *expressive*, *symbolic* and *decorative*. Denotation aims to denote a description of fictional settings and characters, or clearly indicate *a concrete set of persons, objects and place*s (33-34). This mode can give an indication of a character's motives through clearly delivered dialogue and explicitly presented movement as well as a coherent

space and time in the storytelling (33). Symbolism takes the images that have been denoted and then offers *abstract and conceptual meanings behind this denotation* 'through colour schemes, lighting design, setting and musical associations' e.g. a denoted tree for instance can suggest the notion of 'fecundity' or the potential for growth (34). Expressive qualities bring into play another dimension of expression, allowing a single shot or several shots to 'exude' emotional states, including sadness, 'majesty, sprightliness or menace… *carried by light, colour, performances, music and certain camera movements*, such as the blurry swirl that can express vertigo (34). Finally, decorative modes of style offer '*broader patterns that engage us for their own sake*... coaxing us to discover order to notice fine differences' in the framing and cutting, similar to a process of ornamentation which suggests 'the pattern-making possibilities of the medium' (34). This decorative pattern making process 'operates alongside or "on top of" [the] other stylistic functions', and can 'work in a more pervasive, systematic way' creating partially abstract or pure patterns that can be appreciated alongside the clear denotation of a world or the conveyance of expressive states (34).

I have claimed at the beginning of this introduction that narrativised spectacle presents a cultural narrative made up of abstract themes. I will now propose that narrativised spectacle achieves this means of expression through presenting a series of beats and accents that run at a different pacing to the overt narrative plot chain of cause and effect, which will prepare the ground for the main chapters that follow. In chapter one I shall show how beats and accents are made up of a consistent pairing between two differing sets of framed and staged graphic images consistently repeated over time, namely a juxtaposition of the shape and movements of the body compared to the shapes and movement of the city. In chapter two, I show how beats and accents come through in the performances of heroes and villains, made up of their combined visages, physical appearance and behaviours. In chapters three and four, I look more closely at beats and accents as sets of competing methods of heroic, 'precise', balletic violent choreography against villainous bouts of imprecise spasmodic physical savage action.

Returning to the fourfold analysis, Bordwell states that the decorative mode is rare in most forms of storytelling, yet my model for beats and accents (argued above) in the superhero film arguably conform to his definition, considered as broader patterns and differences in camerawork, editing and physical choreography appreciated for their own sake, and so are decorative. My approach to beats and accents also gesture to a set of abstract, intangible thematic meanings, and so in turn can be considered symbolic. Thus,

beats and accents are both decorative and symbolic, however it is essential that a beat properly indicates the two sets of conflicting graphic shapes of persons, objects and places thematically at stake. In this regard, a beat must be properly denotative.

In the superhero film, a beat denotes a concrete body juxtaposed with a concrete city setting, doing so through medium close ups that present the details of this body with wide shots that display the sheer expanse of the city through a continuity editing scheme of the 180 degree rule (as explored in chapter one) or presents a hero's costume coherently in relation to a villain's make-up or through shot/reverse shot (discussed in chapter two). A beat denotes the recognisable set of graphic qualities in relation to the differences or similarities of another set of graphic qualities.

An accent, on the other hand, takes what has been denoted in the beat, and then applies varied kinds of movements to the interaction between body and city or hero and villain, and expresses emotional qualities through inflections of lighting, colour, performance, music and certain camera movements. For this reason, an accent must be expressive to properly function. If repetitive beats sustain a paired pattern of framed shapes over time, then accents add variety by giving movements to this paired pattern of shapes. The decorative and symbolic qualities of body and city are clearly denoted by beats, but then given a varied means of expression through accents.

To summarise, a *denotative beat* allows the cityscape to be clearly recognised as a distinct concrete object in relation to a distinct concrete body of the hero. An *expressive accent* gives a sense of positive or negative associations of ideas depending on how the hero's body successfully moves through the city. The *decorative juxtaposition* of body and city is evident throughout many action sequences as a pattern of editing and framing. The *symbolic quality* is in how the city is consistently invested with a theme of constriction, and when compared to the manoeuvrability of the body, the hero figure is invested with a theme of freedom. Most important of all is that Bordwell's fourfold analysis of style is useful because it distinguishes my model for beats and accents as a series of sustained patterns throughout the duration of an action sequence, as opposed to a motif, which, as stated in the previous section, tends to occur intermittently or at intervals through the narrative process (e.g. only as a brief set of isolated, single moments of decoration or symbolism, and so forth).

So far in this method section I have argued that culture functions as an arena of debate. I have also explained how I use neoformalism to ascertain the way devices relate to one another, and then employ genre theory to see how these devices express an evolving

mythological doctrine. It has also been stated that working with musical language is a key part of the process to ascertain these culturally significant rhythms. Yet, a final point on my definition of culture is to clarify the extent to which I address specific cultural and historical trends of the superhero film. Although I work closely with the North American Frontier Mythology and a doctrine of Manifest Destiny (i.e. the 19th-century belief that the expansion of the U.S. throughout the North American continent was both justified and inevitable, *American Oxford Dictionaries*) during the era of westward expansion from 1840-1890 in which predominantly white settlers of an European ethnicity ventured to build towns and claim territories, my approach nevertheless is neither strictly a historically contingent study nor refers to key event(s) with the intention to make a specific allegorical connection back to the superhero film. Superheroes are in the broadest sense contemporary innovations on the cowboy or sheriff protagonist of the Western, in the same way that the action heroes, hardboiled detectives in the police procedural genre, or even entrepreneurial gangsters are each adapted from this same template of self-reinvention that juggles the forces of law and order. Yet, I do not address specific cultural and historical trends invested in these archetypes, but instead focus closely on relatively abstract mythological doctrines that are not historically authentic, but rather vague in historicity. This is because when studying any mythological doctrine it is more productive to view these ideological belief systems in terms of a longstanding cultural narrative that becomes repeated and innovated on over time, rather than driven by specific social circumstances instigated by key figures.

A traditional or localised approach to history focuses on the chain of causality in terms of interlinked events, persons and places, yet my argument for culture as an arena that debates abstract and implicit themes does not suit this narrow definition. Consider for instance how traditional approaches to history focus carefully on specific persons or events as a source of allegory for film narratives, as short occurrences that are 'brief, rapid, nervous fluctuations,' being 'only momentary outbursts [or] surface manifestations of larger movements' (Braudel 1972: 21). Fernand Braudel makes the distinction between this kind of history as the study of important events, or actions by key figures, known as event or locally-focused history (*l'histoire événementielle*), and states that it is different from the study of history as a long duration, not tied to a specific context or era, but unfolds over generations, termed the *longue durée*.

Belonging to the twentieth century French Annales School of Historians, Braudel (1902-1985) was interested in historical patterning over decades or even centuries, which

in principle is the *very* long term. The longue durée approach, Braudel explains, favours the study of history over a long duration in which the 'passage is almost imperceptible, that of a man in relation to his environment, a history in which all change is slow, a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles… [or indeed] with slow but [slightly] perceptible rhythms' (Braudel 1995 [1949]: 20), driven by a 'desire and need to see [history] on a grand scale' (*Ibid.* 22). The rhythms of change exchanged across this wide expanse of historical activity are not immediately apparent, but repeated time and time again over generations. For example, when applying an event history approach to the superhero film, or when looking for localised instants for an allegorical context, it is clear that the War on Terror, 9/11 and Bush administration politics are a series of events and factors during the 2000s-present that have influenced plot scenarios and central themes: e.g. the city-wide destruction in *Spider-Man 2* (2004), or *Man of Steel* (2013), the covert criminality of *The Dark Knight* (2008) or the Middle Eastern terrorist groups in *Iron Man 2* (2010).

Yet, when applying a longue durée approach to the superhero film, each of these factors are indirectly connected to a wider, on going dynamic of economic and national competition between the major world religions of Christianity and Islam. From early Muslim migration into the Mediterranean Sea from 622-750 AD century, the Western European crusades in the 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th and 15th centuries or the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire from 1299-1923, an Islamic vision has always thrived on 'military and commercial conquests… using geography for [its] development' (Amir-Aslani 2013: 6). In the broadest sense then, a thematic tension of 'Christian values' versus 'Islamic values' arguably extends over centuries prior to the key events leading up to or following on from the War on Terror over the past decade. There are longstanding cultural (and thematic) tensions invoked by this drawn out conflict between belief systems, such as familiarity versus unfamiliarity or domestic stability versus foreign invasion, which continue to remain implicit in popular culture and the entertainment industry.

Similarly, the superhero film is often tied to significant allegories of economic depression, such as the financial recession of the late-2008 in *Dark Knight Rises* (2012) and social upheaval from individually privatising resources for the benefit of the people when the welfare state has failed, e.g. see Dan Hassler-Forrest's study *Capitalist Superheroes* (2012) on neoliberal politics and the modern superhero. Yet the evolution of entrepreneurial and mercantile capitalism between the 14th and 18th centuries suggests that most capitalist systems have always been exploitative. As Braudel explains, cultural

tensions of individual financial freedom versus social economic welfare predate the global depressions and recessions of the 20th century:

> [T]he development of pre-industrial Europe… consisted of its gradual progress towards the rational world of the [free] market, the firm and capitalist investment, until the coming of the revolution… so called market economy… the mechanism of production and exchange linked to rural activities, to small shops and workshops, to banks, exchanges, fairs and (of course) markets… [allowed firms to] manipulate exchange to their advantage and disturb the established order… Today as in the past [capitalism] is multinational, a close relation of the capitalism operated by the great Indies Companies, and the monopolies of all sizes, official or unofficial, which exited then and which were exactly analogous in principle to the monopolies of today (Braudel 1992 [1979]: 23-24).

Applying the longue durée approach to a mythological context, observing cultural themes over centuries is useful in justifying why reactively abstract thematic oppositions still hold topical water today. Similarly, the superhero film is yet another text that participates in the same cultural themes revolving around nature and culture that harks back to the Western genre or even further. However, it is should be reiterated that Braudel does not dismiss the importance of observing history at the level of individual events, but simply explores the 'plurality of social time' in which an event 'finds its place, if only a limited one, through its relation to the changing totality of temporalities' (Tomich 2012: 17). Braudel declares that the relationship between localised events eventually extend into broader rhythmic patterns, as 'the conjoining of movements with different origins and rhythms. The time of today is composed simultaneously of the time of yesterday, of the day before yesterday, and of bygone days' (Braudel 2012 [2009]: 254). For this reason, although the binary of civilisation versus wilderness is a useful means of understanding American national identity at the level of key events, the nature versus culture binary offered by social anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (explained earlier in the section) can more broadly be applied across different nations and histories. The nature versus culture binary is arguably an enduring long durational structure which is fundamental to all human cultures, either pre or post-industrial, or a version of 'the very long term (la très longue durée, [again] such as to be found in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss)… In so doing, he thus insists that the longue durée is not eternal and thereby avoids the problem of ahistorical generalisation' (Lee 2012: 3). All cultures are arguably invested with Lévi-Strauss's thematic tension of nature versus culture at some point or at recurring points over the course of their history, and these themes can be considered as eternal in their popular cultural relevance,

'know[ing] no chance occurrences, no cyclical phases, no ruptures' (Braudel 2012 [2009]: 268).

The longue durée itself is neither eternal nor situated strictly within the narrow remit of an allegorical event, but offers a set of storylines that can pick up on historically specific details at the same time as it can suggest far broader longstanding cultural narratives. For example, Eric Lichtenfeld argues that binary oppositions belonging to the context of frontier mythology may be expected to feature in an American film series such as *Rambo* (1982, 1985, 1988, 2008), but can also occur implicitly in the Australian *Mad Max* film series (1979, 1981, 1985):

> It is ritual that brings a sense of order to the wild. And it is the wilderness of desert wastelands, and Southeast Asian jungles… the mountains of the American Midwest… along with the fluidity of past, present, and future that they embody that so *distils the mythology of American action films*. These, of course, are the myths of the frontier hero who rescues and renews, and of the savage enemy who can be found at the business end of the hero's weapons (primal and otherwise) or, at the very least, of his steely reserve… in action movies… [even] the urban setting is a metaphorical wilderness [emphasis added] (Lichtenfeld 2007: 158).

Here, American cultural themes have been appropriated or 'distilled' by another nationality entirely, with *Mad Max* forming an Australian equivalent of an open American frontier invested with tensions of law and anarchy, borrowing from the iconography of cowboys on horse back, but in the form of bikers streaming across the open desert. The wilderness versus civilisation duality staple to the Western of course has its roots in American culture and history, with the doctrine of pioneers taming the open plains believing it is their Manifest Destiny to do so. Also, specificity is important to cultural theorists, and if American themes are applied to an international context of *Mad Max* then the dialectic continues to become even more abstract and relative. This being said, a longue durée approach still allows for a basic cultural thematic architecture to be manifested in different genres, and periods of history, all expressed through similar or evolving formal devices and narrative themes. Hence, the mythical site of the frontier, while may be so essential to understanding American history, is not necessarily essentially American, as Geoff King notes in great detail:

> Thematic oppositions between constructions of individual freedom, 'nature' and 'authenticity' – on one side – and oppressive institutions, 'decadence' and over-reliance on technology on the other, are *established strongly enough as a central part of the dynamics of many films, whether or not it is always necessary or useful to view them in the light of the frontier mythology*…. I am not claiming that the meanings I ascribe to

> frontier discourse in these films are in any way exclusive to the myth or ideology of the American frontier. Oppositions such as 'frontier' authenticity and alienating technology or bureaucracy are also found in many other cultural frameworks and need not always be figured in frontier terms, even in America… *yet these discourse have so much sheer presence in America* – they are constantly available and at hand – and also because they are so greatly varied in most cases [emphasis added]' (King 2000: 13-14).

Be it from an allegorical, localised event history school of thought, or a longue durée and relative approach, these cultural frameworks are relevant in either case: both in the shorter and longer terms. While these are relatively abstract dialectics then, they are longstanding cultural narratives that are realised through a variety of established and developing formal and stylistic narrative practices, predominantly in a classical Hollywood mode. The wilderness civilisation dialectic goes back further than the Western, with Henry Nash Smith's analysis as a historian in the 1950s, or pulp magazines at the turn of the 20th century, but what is important for this discussion is how it has been currently adapted by the formal techniques of the contemporary superhero film.

To close this methodology section, it is necessary to briefly reiterate how each chapter shall in turn deal with the questions raised by my definition of culture as a formal arena of debate, and, as the thesis evolves, the argument will continue to address these key ideas in more detail. Firstly, chapter one shows off my analysis in detail, looking at the interplay between body and city. I argue that the superhero film depends on the city to present its cultural and formal arena of debate, because urban spaces offer a useful set of formal and stylistic possibilities for filming a digitally enhanced mode of kinesis. Secondly, chapter two applies my analysis more specifically to how the formal and cultural arena is generated by performance techniques, as heroes and villains are situated in close proximity in small spaces, engaging in a clash of social anxieties through competing gestures and mannerisms. Thirdly, chapter three looks at the formal qualities of violence (i.e. physical bouts of precision versus imprecision), and how this brawling across horizontal and/or vertical environmental arcs resonate with themes coded as masculinist (i.e. stoic professionalism versus 'effeminate' emotional excess). Lastly, in chapter four, I apply each of these ideas to the way the superheroine operates in these formal and cultural arenas of debate, uncovering an androcentric paradigm at work. It is through these four chapters that I show how narrativised spectacle functions in the superhero film: employing advancements in digitally enhanced effects to form a kinetic arc of narration that blurs the boundaries between established binary oppositions, in turn using these effects to seek out a reconciliation between thematic and cultural tensions in conflict.

Using this methodology of genre theory and neoformalist analysis, my approach aims to reveal another dynamic storytelling arc able to rhythmically carry thematic tensions throughout a film: by playing off *one* arrangement of audio-visual components against another, all the while explicitly developing and reconciling the social anxieties most invested in action-adventure cinema. For the reasons previously explained, a central set of themes in this study include Nature versus Culture and concerns of Savagery versus Civilisation, and to this end, the two key kinds of audio-visual rhythm analysed throughout this thesis are tied to movements considered as *balletic* (with the natural purity this invokes) that contrast with motions presented as *spasmodic* (invoking a sense of oppressive corruption). The pairing and/or juxtaposition between these two conflicting rhythms, and the cultural themes they bring to mind, are heavily invested in the violence enacted by the cinematic superhero, which again, builds on a tradition that has its origins rooted in the American frontier mythology of the Hollywood Western.

(iii) *Balletic and Spasmodic Rhythms*: Interrogating Aesthetics of Violent Masculinity

This final section introduces the two most significant, consistently recurring kinds of audio-visual rhythm integral to my thesis argument for narrativised spectacle: namely, balletic and spasmodic motions, which pervade spectacular displays of onscreen violence. This section will turn to seminal authors on movie violence to outline the types of cultural contradictions invested in the pairing between these two differing rhythms. More importantly, I argue that a particular thematic tale is told whenever one of these rhythms is played off against another. It is this dynamic of conflicting thematic values, my argument will prove, that can narrativise the formal components that structure violent spectacle (e.g. editing strategies, frame rate, physical movement, etc.), doing so in a distinct way that differs from spectacle's primary role as a vehicle for driving forward the film plot. Thematically speaking, violence in the Western benefits the individual who enacts it in either an admirable or shameful sense: as a means of overcoming or giving into a selfish solipsism. Richard Slotkin notes how 'violence that can be purchased by the wealthy is oppressive; violence that proceeds freely (and in a sense disinterestedly) as a response to injustice is redemptive' (Slotkin [1992] 1998: 603). The latter application of savagery is meant to save a community incapable of protecting itself, whereas the former employs brutality to profit from the maltreatment of the weak and vulnerable. This section will

explore how these two thematic (positive and negative) associations of violence are presented through two very different and conflicting kinds of audio-visual rhythm.

Initially, it is first useful to point out that in action film especially, spectacular displays of violence provide a great deal of escapism, often being put to use as an aesthetic device, i.e. a process that presents the image as visually pleasing, or 'beautified' as an art form. For this reason, violence pervades the onscreen action to such an extent it becomes inseparable from the spectacle, inciting shock, awe and exhilaration. The urgency of violent action is also intrinsic to the plot, propelling events forward as a storytelling aid that supports the narrative content, giving urgency to and/or energising mechanisms of characterisation and performance. From the shootouts in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) to stabbing swordplay in *Captain Blood* (1935) to fist-fighting in *North by North West* (1959) to a stream of machine gun fire in *Commando* (1985) to the epic scale of brawling, kicking and wrestling in *A Good Day to Die Hard* (2013), the act of heroes physically harming henchmen is one dependent on feats of violence in one form or another.[5] Yet, most central to any spectacular display of violence are the audio-visual rhythms structuring it, as well as the cultural associations this arrangement of formal elements manage to invoke. Consider for instance the final gun massacre scene at the end of Arthur Penn's gangster-biography *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), which is a text that helped to establish some key cinematic conventions staple to violence in action film: a slow-motion frame rate with exploding blood squibs that cause the plight of these characters to appear more emphatic and engaging.

During the massacre in *Bonnie and Clyde*, techniques of fast-paced editing are intercut with slow motion at multiple points when the outlaws meet their end, mowed down by police machine-gun fire. This kind of spectacle is an undertaking that alternates with accelerated tempos, accentuating the jerky, convulsing and flailing movements of Bonnie and Clyde as they visibly shake from a prolonged hail of bullet fire (Prince 1998: 59). The combination of fast-paced editing and slow motion seemingly emphasises not

[5] There are some instances of films with action modes that do not rely on physical violence to the same extent. Thrillers or murder-mystery films will use the threat of violence to propel the action forward, but in a verbal sense. *The Whistle Blower* (1986) presents a father who investigates the origins of his son's death, using carefully worded threats against suspects to uncover the truth. The conformational debates and conflicting opinions between Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung in *A Dangerous Method* (2011) operate as a series of attacks that last for hours, rendering one other physically ill and tired from the strain. When compared to the hyper-violence of detective narratives such as *Sin City* (2005) or *Blade Runner* (1982), it is clear that violence exists along a spectrum of palpable and intolerable brutality, which will be addressed in more detail through the course of the thesis.

only the 'spastic' but also 'balletic' qualities of the gangster's death agonies (Crowdus and Porton 1993: 9). This is for the reason that Clyde's 'dying arc', as Stephen Prince puts it, by being extended through the fast-paced editing/slow motion presenting the action, also prolongs a *paradox*: drawing attention to 'the mysteries inherent in that twilight zone between *consciousness and autonomic impulse*, that awful moment when a personality ceases to inhabit a body that is still in motion… visualising this loss of human volition in a tangle of rioting flesh and nerve [emphasis added]' (Prince 1998: 60-61). The gangsters' bodies in these moments seemingly sit on a wavering threshold: bringing to mind the fascinating beauty of life, yet also the sheer ugliness of death. The slow-motion death scenes during shootouts in the Westerns of director Sam Peckinpah in particular are also exemplary of this uneasy tension between the horrific brutality of death alongside the 'graceful beauty' implicit in violent spectacle (Prince 1998: 58). Peckinpah aimed to stylise his material in such a way as to fulfil a personal conviction that would 'wake up' viewers to the true horrors of violence (Prince 1998: 49), to show that violence "could be at the same time repulsive and fascinating".[6] It is this tension between consciousness and autonomic kinds of motion that arguably generate a key set of rhythms able to play off important themes. These themes are tied to the social anxieties associated with that uncertain threshold existing between a state of living and a state of death: that is, juxtaposing the ugly *spasmodic* erraticism of death in conflict with the beautified *balletic* grace of life, as well as notions of the *repulsive* against the *fascinating*, the *concrete* against the *abstract*, and so the *horror* against the *beauty* of onscreen savagery.

There are two kinds of rhythm, then, that are essential to the spectacle of movie violence: beautified, balletic forms of grace, which are juxtaposed against far uglier, spasmodic bouts of erraticism. To further develop the cultural significance behind these two kinds of rhythm, this binary is better understood in relation to what Devin McKinney outlines as categories of *weak* and *strong* violence. Weak violence avoids drawing too much attention to the repulsive qualities or sense of horror tied to the brutal imagery, or as McKinney puts it:

> [Weak violence] *reduces bloodshed to its barest components*… ridicul[ing] the powerful empathies that hard, personalised violence can make an audience feel. It's akin to what has been called camp, and it recalls John Fraser's account (in his touchstone work, *Violence in the Arts*) of camp aesthetics "*draining off*" the "*charge of feeling and meaning*" possible in violent artwork… The violence of these pictures simply doesn't last; it gets left on the floor with the candy wrappers… *[weak] violence is only used as a*

[6] See 'Sam Peckinpah Collection', *Le Devoir* interview, interviews, folder no. 96.

> *device*: something a crowd pays for when it goes in, but not when it comes out [emphasis added]' (McKinney 1993: 19).

In reducing brutal imagery down to the stylistic devices presenting it, weaker forms of violence tend to trivialise the wider social contexts invested in this aggression, instead emphasising its entertainment value. Fantasy and adventure genre formats depend on weaker forms of violence to elicit a palpable, entertaining experience, acting as a means of escapism that benefits, rather than detracts from, the enjoyment of these story-worlds.

The majority of superhero-action films conventionally turn to weak violence, abiding by an imperative of entertainment, which to some extent overshadows the critical aspects tied to this violence. For instance, the elaborate fighting choreography of derring-do by a brightly-coloured costumed hero gracefully clashing with a criminal is a kind of physical spectacle that rarely dwells on the social circumstances that lead to such criminality. This is because the spectacular immediacy of violent actions and behaviour manages to eclipse the 'ugliness' behind the attack, so negating the socio-cultural implications underlying depictions of brutality. An emphasis on the stylistic qualities of violence is particularly evident in the digitally-constructed city-wide destruction wrought during the air-borne fight between Superman and villain, Zod, in *Man of Steel* (2013), or the computer generated imagery of portals that allow the hero Thor and the elf-tyrant Malekith to travel between multiple alien worlds and the City of London all the while engaged in hand-to-hand combat in *Thor: The Dark World* (2013). Weaker forms of violence then, tend to aestheticise or beautify the image, in the process downplaying the socio-cultural anxieties underpinning this spectacle. Superhero films especially use this beautification of brutality in the same fashion of a *sweeping-concerns-under-the-carpet* to avoid detracting from the impact of entertainment.

Weaker forms of violence incorporate both beautified and horrific aspects of violence, but do not tend to invoke the moral consequences behind this brutality, in how these issues apply to the real world around us. This is also true of the superhero film, as even in those cases where the age rating is restricted, primarily for 17-18 year olds rather than a family demographic – e.g. when shooting down criminals in cold blood in *Kick Ass* (2010) or *Dredd* (2012) – these kinds of brutality remain highly stylised by the impressive, aggrandised spectacle of digital visual effects and rapid editing. The brutality is also subservient to the narrative context of heroism and does not affront the audience to the same extent, nor does it compromise any kind of escapism into the fictional story-world.

Age restricted superhero films may offer insights into the cultural context surrounding the violence, but not as explicitly as more realist or social problem genres. For this reason, superhero films are more in keeping with the violence employed by Westerns, fantasy, science fiction or adventure-action films, rather than the brutality of hard-core horror (e.g. torture porn) or social realist genres.

Strong violence, by contrast, directly accosts the audience with the 'ugliness' of the violent attack, making explicit the wider social circumstances this fictional brutality represents (McKinney 1993: 17) The kinds of ugliness McKinney attributes to stronger forms of violence draw attention to the very real dangers experienced in the contemporary world around us. For example, strong depictions of violence are evident in the realist depiction of youth crime and its hazardous repercussions on the populace of a London council estate in *Harry Brown* (2009). Near the film's opening, two teenagers ride upon a scooter taunting a mother while pushing her child in a pram. As the teenagers take pot shots with a pistol at the mother and child for a few minutes, they eventually shoot her dead by accident. This brutal assault unfolds though the point-of-view of a hand-held camera held by one of the juvenile delinquents filming this event, emulating the validity of 'found-footage' that states something dire and authentic about the social circumstances producing this violence. Indeed there are several factors invoked by this scenario that unsettle the viewer, namely the child's sudden loss of a mother, the unjust death of an innocent as well as the senseless and arbitrary nature of the death. Much of the shock, however, comes from how sudden and jerky an action this is, affronting the viewer only briefly before the hand-held camera is quickly turned off.

Although violent imagery can be so strong (in terms of sporadic ugliness) it works as call-to-action to properly acknowledge a wider cultural context, or so weak (as a form of balletic grace) it first-and-foremost aims to entertain, Margaret Bruder suggests that there are certain instances when popular action films confuse this distinction, with both forms of violence working as part of a social ritual. Action films, Bruder states, can potentially use weak violence (i.e. superficial components of style) in a fashion that calls-to-attention far stronger forms of violence (i.e. elements of socio-cultural substance) to give insights into the kind of society that produces this escapist entertainment. Violence in action films is indeed weak and superficial when used as a series of intermittent moments that thrill viewers and help to propel narrative causality forward. Brutality often offers a renewed energetic vigour that maintains the viewer's escapism into a fantastical story-world, e.g. with the hero occasionally stacking up a body count of henchmen or navigating an array of

exploding terrain. On the other hand, Bruder explains, when this violence becomes repeated so *excessively* as to dominate the narrative or characterisation, then it may potentially draw attention *to itself* as a means of declaring something about our collective cultural paradigms.

In the Western-action film *Tombstone* (1993), for example, director George Cosmatos' violence consistently calls attention not only to the thrill-ride experience elicited by the style of cinematic apparatus – that is, the workings of slow motion frame rates – but also a pronounced mulling-over of the cultural impact of each 'physical blow' and the 'spurt of blood' (Bruder 1998, paragraph 9). Throughout *Tombstone*, as gunmen shoot down other gunmen with pistols and rifles, extending the frame rate and the number of shots with varying camera angles at multiple points throughout the film, this stylised repetition of men dying compiles 'a stockpile of images which, when assembled, form our cultural identity' (Bruder 1998, paragraph 21). By repeating these violent motifs across the film, this also calls to attention the *inter-textuality* of this brutal imagery across *other films*, reminding viewers of similar motifs of men dying through extended frame rates and varied camera angels seen in several Westerns and/or action movies, e.g. in *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *The Killer* (1989) or *Last Man Standing* (1996).

As viewers consume this huge stockpile of entertaining tropes of violent deaths of men, at the very heart of this imagery of aggressive savagery resides one key, singular source: the predominately *male* hero-protagonist that conventionally enacts this violence. It is this stockpile of weaker forms of male violence in action genres, by being repeated time-and-time-again, from film to film and from television episode to television episode, that in effect directs viewers to gradually dwell further on cultural associations in the same fashion as stronger displays of brutal imagery would achieve. When understood as a set of intertextual conventions across a film(s), the consistent repetition of weak/stylised forms of violence offer up a social ritual for viewers to participate in, not only for the purposes of providing entertaining escapism or expecting certain stylistic devices to reappear, but also as a forum in which implicit cultural themes can be made explicit: namely, issues of masculine heroism.

As viewers consume a large volume of action films, representations of masculinity and displays of violence noticeably go hand-in-hand. It is this recurring dynamic between male heroes and the savagery they enact that provides a useful means of interrogating the kinds of onscreen rhythms and cultural themes invoked by weaker and stronger forms of violent imagery. Consider, for instance, how physical motions of balletic beauty and

spasmodic gruesomeness in Westerns articulate the problematic issue of identifying whether masculine heroism is either professional or unprofessional in composure. Director Sam Peckinpah's Westerns have always invoked the importance of professionalism in controlling (rather than succumbing) to violent brutality. "If we don't recognise that we're violent people," Peckinpah notes in one interview, "we're dead… I would like to understand the nature of violence. Is there a way to *channel it*, to *use it positively*? [emphasis added]" (Yergin 1972: 90). Indeed the anti-hero 'Dirty Harry' Callahan (played by Clint Eastwood) arguably operates within a 'disguised Western' (see Ray 1985) *because* he is the '*primal* man' (Bingham 1994: 186), and is constantly tasked with channeling his violence in an appropriate fashion. Throughout *Dirty Harry* (1971), the detective's male nature is always in competition with the social institutions that attempt to undermine or quell this power. By forming the male hero as the source and justification of authority, compared to which all other influences are incompetent, Pauline Kael advises that *Dirty Harry* at its core has a 'certain fascist potential' (see Kael 1972) that brings to mind troubling questions of how the hero's violence will be put to use. Many of the cultural values invested in movie violence (mentioned above) shall continue to be explored and built upon throughout the thesis, but for the moment it is useful to briefly outline the most essential concepts pertaining to male heroism and violent behavior, many of which hark back to the Western genre.

In his seminal essay 'Violence in the Film Western,' Lee Clark Mitchell explains how the Western's fixation on presenting narratives of violence stems from an infatuation with the *construction of masculinity*[7] (Mitchell 2001: 176). The Western employs violence as a mediating tool to deal with tensions surrounding what it means to be, act, or behave as a man, able to triumph over adversity 'as only men are allowed to do' (Mitchell 2001: 177). Will Wright also points out how, in a mythological sense, values of moral purity and integrity are invested in the type of violence enacted by hero protagonists, whereas

[7] Lee Clark Mitchell's ideas on masculinity and violence will also be useful in exploring how violence unfolds in relation to the spectacle and performance of the super-heroine in action film, which is an issue that will be interrogated further in the final chapter.

For instance, the western genre 'delight[s] in the male physique' Mitchell points out, and 'duplicates its affectionate lingering over a fantastic landscape we have come to recognize as 'the far West' a landscape defined as 'western' by the absence of familiar signs encoded as female – the pastures, fields, farms, and more obviously schoolyards, church steeples, and store window displays that signal the domestication of space. The varying and violent conditions involved in constructing oneself as a man in film Westerns are intimately linked to a landscape that defines the essential attributes of what it is to be a man' (Mitchell 2001: 178).

elements of ethical corruption and compromise instead reside in the savagery of villains. When comparing heroes and villains, their differing applications of violence also bring to mind key sets of cultural contradictions. In American frontier mythology in particular, the male cowboy, by having no aristocratic social standing or privileged lineage carves his identity from out of the wilderness, roaming the plains as a 'free and equal individual', defined by values of ethics, equality, strength, honour, independence and virtue (Wright 2001: 6). Whenever violence erupts this will test when the hero's body in some way, helping to define its masculine features (e.g. being 'tall in the saddle' or 'quick on the draw'), so reaffirming yet more positive traits of restraint, taciturnity and endurance (Mitchell 2001: 176). The hero's counterpart however, the 'Urban Easterner', is instead privileged with the heritage of an old-world hierarchy, being both egotistic and anomic, and so performs on private self-interests often at the expense of social decency: dependent on lies, cheating, deceit and betrayal as a means of achieving personal goals, driven by prejudices of racial intolerance, class oppression and religious persecution, namely corruption, oppression and aggressive class monopolies (Wright 2001: 133).

Developing this reasoning further, I argue that there is a balletic grace invested in the violent actions of the hero, and a contradictory kind of spasmodic erraticism employed by the villain: forming two key kinds of rhythm in the spectacle of violence, which bring to mind important cultural contradictions. The 'play off' between these two rhythms then manages to tell a tale of 'purity' overcoming 'corruption', or more specifically, a 'dominant' kind of masculinity that attempts to prevail over 'non-dominant' kinds of male savagery. Later in the thesis I show how cultural values of masculinity are a construction often carried along with the hero's grace, aestheticised or 'celebrated' as more appropriate, while the villain's spasmodic antics instead function to make a critical comment or even 'condemn' a less tolerated kind of manhood. My argument will also interrogate the exact way these physical rhythms manage to glorify, yet denounce conservative conceptions of masculine identity.

To round off this section of the introduction, it is important to outline the essential themes at work in spectacular displays of violent masculinity. A certain set of themes unfold between the two types of violence displayed by the westerner hero and the antagonists that test his resolve. On the one hand, the hero endorses a restrained, self-contained masculinity that does not give into emotional outbursts or excesses. It is a type of violence that only responds whenever the need be, and will check itself as soon as the job is done. The male cowboy hero does this by resisting the desires of excessive violence,

reluctant to employ the 'wanton shedding of blood', opting not to seek out combat for its own sake (Cawelti 1984: 87). On the other hand, John Cawelti explains, the villain introduces a lack of restraint, an absence of inhibitions, being quite unprepared to regulate his violent activity. The villain operates as an agent of excess, using violence as a means of satisfying his own desires (Kendrick 2009: 72-73), delighting in slaughter, readily embracing combat with manic glee, and determined to fulfil 'an uncontrolled lust for blood' (Cawelti 1984: 87). The villain, then, stands for a kind of indulgent, *illegitimate* savagery that stands in opposition to the cowboy hero's patricidal code of restraint and honour, being coerced into combat, and so a more *legitimate* form of violence (Kendrick 2009: 73). Legitimate violence is palpable not only because it is restrained, but also no matter how brutal the act may be, it is provoked by injustice and crime, driven by the virtues of purity, integrity and discipline.

To summarise the key cultural tensions invoked by violence, the masculinity of heroes are thematically coded as *pure* and graceful in motion, while villains are somehow thematically *corrupted* and spasmodic in motion. The classic western hero's quick-draw is 'disciplined and pure', avoiding prolonged bouts of punching with fists and stabbing with a knife (Cawelti 1984: 88), killing with a single shot, confirming a 'reluctance' to kill, but also his 'control, and elegance' in doing so (*Ibid.* 87), clean, fast, only taking a life as a last resort. Contemporary action heroes similarly use the gun in the same fashion delivering violence from a distance, suggesting 'a level of proficiency and purity that both ennobles and sanitises the violence' (Kendrick 2009: 95). While the superhero uses fists far more often than the gun-slinging westerner hero, it is nonetheless still a type of aggression that attempts to quell criminal activity in an efficient manner, neat, contained and to the point (which is an issue that will be explored in detail later in the thesis). An emotional detachment accompanies the cowboy's reluctance to use violence, giving the hero a sense of aesthetic and moral propriety (Cawelti 1984: 88). Despite the flamboyance of the cowboy's costume (e.g. yoke stylised shirts, fringe jackets, necktie, embroidered waistcoats, denim trousers with copper rivets, leather chaps, ridding boots with spurs, large belt buckles, white ten gallon hats), his performance of self-control reveals an exhibition of 'manly restraint', emerging through repeated bouts of violence, recuperation and composure (Mitchell 2001: 177). The cowboy also shares similar attributes with the superhero's mask and costume of colourful, chevron-emblazoned, caped apparel that signals individuality yet is a form of free expression that must continually be checked. There is a concerted effort to maintain an inexpressive visage and vocal inactivity, (e.g. the

stone-faced expressions of Gary Cooper, Alan Ladd, Clint Eastwood), in that self-effacement checks self-preening, as does restraint quell exhibitionism (Mitchell 2001: 179). The restraint displayed by a cowboy hero allows him to be uninfluenced by the talk or persuasion of others, valuing action over words, with his silence drawing attention primarily to the male physique, and the drama of masculinity (Mitchell 2001: 179). This restraint also aims to distinguish the cowboy from other men lacking in self-control, who either talk too much, or laugh too easily and express fear far too readily: by contrast performing an 'inability to maintain composure under the pressure of vivid sensation' (Mitchell 2001: 179).

Villains on the other hand become especially driven by excesses, giving in to the temptations of easy money or bodily pain, in a sense, falling short of behaving like 'true men,' intolerant of suffering in silence (Mitchell 2001: 180), preparing to be outspoken and uninhibited. This is evident in the notable villains that find their archetypes in Trampas (Water Huston) in Victor Fleming's *The Virginian* (1929) or Little Bill Daggart (Gene Hackman) in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1989), showing their distain for restraint, finding self-control as both inappropriate and unsuited to the violent world these characters reside in (Mitchell 2001: 180). The overt sadism displayed by westerner antagonists is a recurring trope evident across a period that includes Newman Haynes Clanton (Walter Brennan) in *My Darling Clementine* (1946), to Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin) in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), to Mapache (Emilio Fernández) in *The Wild Bunch* (1969), to Robert E. Lee Clayton (Marlon Brando) in *The Missouri Breaks* (1976), to Butler (Kim Coates) in *Open Range* (2003), or Charlie Prince (Ben Foster) in *3:10 To Yuma* (2007).

Violence, then, offers two interesting thematic tensions in regard to the western's construction of masculinity: (i) there is a *celebration* of the male physique in one sense; (ii) yet, there is also an aim to *destroy* this body in the storytelling, by beating, knifing and whipping it, propping it up once more, then knocking it down again, kicking it in the side, punching it in the face, lacerating it, clubbing, battering and torturing into 'unconsciousness' (Mitchell 2001: 181). The action hero's stamina is tested in a similar way, undergoing torture and maiming as 'a fundamental component of the action genre' being 'crucial to its meaning' (Kendrick 2009: 93). The cultural contradictions outlined by Mitchell, Cawelti, Wright (and Kitses) – purity versus corruption, integrity versus compromise, legitimate versus illegitimate, sanctioned versus unsanctioned, self-restraint versus indulgence – collectively combine together to produce an essential set of values,

which provide the thematic impetus driving violence in the contemporary action film. An important question emerges however, in the way Western antinomies are rhythmically treated through violence: in what sense is a notion of 'beauty' celebrated by the attractive grace performed by heroes, and how does a kind of 'horror' emerge in the intolerable erraticism cruelly enforced by the villain? The thesis will continue to build on these two sets of rhythms and themes – namely purity and balleticism juxtaposed with corruption and the spasmodic – as a means of exploring just how spectacular displays of violent action are narrativised by these rhythmic elements: making tangible an abstract tale that gradually attempts to reconcile social anxieties concerning the way masculinity should or should not channel savagery.

Spectacular Rhythms: Chapter Structure

Developing the pertinent ideas raised in the literature review of the Spectacle/Narrative debate, *Chapter One: A Rhythm of Body and City* explores spectacle in both a physical and spatial sense: ascertaining how the relationship between physical movement and the surrounding environment rhythmically resonates with thematic ideas. The major case study is *Spider-Man 2* (2004), which presents a sense of flamboyant 'freedom' invoked by the hero's super-human body that is progressively played off against the congested, 'restrictive', cityscape and prosaic urban dwellers of Manhattan. The juxtaposition between body and setting potentially functions as a set of repetitive beats, suggesting an entire set of binary oppositions pertinent to this rhythmic play off between extraordinary individualism and social propriety. A series of varied accentuations of differing stylistic devices also continually innovate the positioning of the hero's body in relation to his city setting. This includes the editing, camerawork, framing and digital visual effects that 'sensationalise' heroic feats of rising and falling as an interplay between ascent and descent, momentum and inertia, introducing tensions surrounding freedom and restriction: such as spontaneity and stability, euphoria and despondency, elevation and declivity, intensity and hiatus, as well as exertion and relief.

Chapter Two: Rhythms of Chaos and Order builds on the ideas explored in the first chapter, analysing the way physical movements rhythmically invoke thematic ideas, but by focusing far more closely on the spectacle of specific performance techniques exchanged between superheroes and their villainous adversaries. If the first chapter explores spectacle on the larger scale of a body physically negotiating an entire city environment (and the

cultural and formal arena of debate this generates), then chapter two explores a far more intimate arena of debate altogether: based solely on the close proximity of two competing figures that clash against one another through two differing kinds of performance strategy. These two (larger and smaller) scales of spectacle often work together in an action sequence, and so a closer focus on performance techniques is warranted for this reason. Using 'The Interrogation Room Scene' in *The Dark Knight* (2008) as a key case in point, a thematic rhythm becomes evident at the level of performance between the hero Batman, and villain, the Joker.

In *Chapter Three: Glorified Rhythms* I explore how much of the thrilling escapism incited by superhero onscreen action is dependent upon displays of particularly violent action. Violent displays bring to mind more critical concerns regarding the social ritual behind this application of brutality, and the implications of the hero's identity or placement in society. Violence to a great extent is also presented as palpable and thrilling in the superhero-action film, in effect being 'hidden' behind conventions of 'good', morally-sanctioned, cleaner kinds of aggression versus 'evil' tainted types of savagery. This chapter explores how violent action is employed by predominantly male heroes who conventionally brawl against effeminate villains (in order to rescue a helpless, often female damsel-in-distress figure). Male heroism is celebrated in the superhero film in much the same way as the Western, with a certain set of rhythms that emphasise linear bouts of precision, invoking values of self-control, discipline and professionalism. While masculinity is, in effect, glorified, the apparent dangers – again, akin to Western genre formats – are evident with the potential lack of professionalism that condemns conceptions of the ideal masculine role model, giving into more emotionally-excessive displays, which tend to be associated with patriarchal notions of the feminine. These erratic, imprecise rhythms unfold as a contrary set of beats and accents that resound with an overzealous application of violence, verging on notions of 'hysteria'.

In *Chapter Four: Rhythm Interrupted* I continue to expand on the issue of male, heroic normativity that violently contends against the villainous feminine 'other'. The minority of cinematic superheroes, even with the promise of future film projects in the pipeline, continue to be female, and this disparity warrants an investigation into the way certain themes and rhythms are associated with super-heroines. The chapter will explore how these hero-*ines* are similar to – yet deviate away from – the normative model of male heroism and violent action incited by popular film genre formats: by examining the

androcentric imperative driving most reconciliations of thematic tensions (and their rhythms) across superhero films.

Finally, the thesis conclusion will summarise the advantages gained by an analytical perspective that uncovers particular rhythmic movements exchanged between thematically-significant formal properties. To show the future scope of this study, the topic of race and the superhero will also be alluded to as the future avenue of research the thesis argument shall continue to explore.

A Rhythm of Body and City

Freedom, Restriction and Spectacle in *Spider-Man 2* (2004)

This first chapter demonstrates my definition of narrativised spectacle, applying key ideas on audio-visual rhythm and cultural themes (raised in the introduction) to the superhero film. To show the richness of my analysis I work closely with one action sequence in particular, isolating each of its formal components to find the rhythm of the spectacle. Then, I put into action a social ritual approach to genre theory to uncover the thematic tale invested in the spectacle. In doing so, the chapter will explore how the rhythm develops these themes as a distinct kind of evolving narrative arc. The monorail train action sequence in *Spider-Man 2* (2004) offers an exemplary case study for narrativised spectacle, because it presents one of the most spectacular displays of physical exertion across an expansive spatial vista featured so far in the contemporary superhero film cycle, being laden with many implicit thematic tensions.

When a malfunctioning public transport train careens out of control in Manhattan, the hero must singlehandedly cease its immense momentum to avoid the chain of carriages plummeting down to the street below, saving the commuters onboard. In terms of the film's plot, the spectacle supports this narrative event, but as a small part of the wider chain of cause-and-effect: to which the hero must fight a villain atop the train to locate the whereabouts of an experimental laboratory, so eventually foiling the antagonist's plans to destroy the city, as well as rescue a kidnapped damsel-in-distress also imprisoned in the lab. Embedded within the structure of this spectacular fight atop the train, however, is another dimension of narration that contributes a far more thematic arc of causality, telling a tale of cultural conflict essential to superhero narratives. The hero's extraordinary physical power in this sequence invokes values of 'freedom' and individualism, while the surrounding city infrastructure stands for the 'restriction' and constraints of social responsibility tied to the society he protects, populated by a larger quotidian collective populace.

The physical and spatial elements of the spectacle are heavily invested with conflicting cultural themes associated with the iconography of body and city, visualised as the superhero's innovative sense of physical kinesis in tension with a congested, rigid urban infrastructure (as discussed in the work of Scott Bukatman on superheroes and the cityscape, the ideas of which will be explored in depth throughout this chapter). These themes revolve around the conflict of freedom versus restriction: including issues of

individual and community, self and society or power and responsibility, many of which hark back to genre conventions of the Western and Musical. Such genre conventions belong to a tradition of ritually-testing and reconciling the cultural contradictions stated above, and the way this process works will be explored in the chapter, as well as how the superhero film appropriates these tropes. An analysis of the physical and spatial components in this scene is a useful method for showing that spectacle not only supports and moves forward the film's plotting, but also how the spectacle's rhythmic qualities become narrativised in a distinct way, by invoking and evolving thematic meanings over time.

(i) *Narrativising The Spectacle*: An Analysis of The Monorail Sequence in *Spider-Man 2*

Throughout the monorail sequence in *Spider-Man 2*, two key audio-visual elements are forcibly concentrated together: namely the value of freedom associated with the hero's body against notions of restriction invoked by the congested city setting. To put this sequence into context, the cybernetically-enhanced antagonist Doctor Otto Octavius, aka Doc Ock (Alfred Molina) – a megalomaniacal scientist who has grafted four artificially-intelligent, mechanical limbs onto his own spinal cord – has kidnapped Spiderman's (Toby Maguire) love-interest Mary Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst). The villain's plan is to root out Spiderman, incapacitate the hero, and claim a bounty that will fund his deluded and unstable experiments of advanced nuclear fission that threaten to destroy the entire city. In this action sequence then, what is narratively at stake is the goal of defeating the villain in order to find the whereabouts of the damsel-in-distress and also save the city from potential destruction. I however am focusing more closely on the implicit and abstract kinds of cultural themes invested in this action. At the energetic pinnacle of the spectacular action, when attempts to slow down the train before it hits the end of the track, he shoots several web projectiles out from his wrists against the surrounding city walls, using a makeshift rope in each hand to act as an anchor against this momentum. Here, there is a quick succession of cutting between shots of the hero's superhuman physical exertion and shots of the closely approaching end of the monorail line. This editing pattern juxtaposes Spiderman with the city limits ahead, shifting from his body to the surrounding city walls, and then again from his body back to the commuter-packed train, and vice versa. The sounds of the train-spokes screeching under pressure in turn compete with the hero's own roars of pain. The non-diegetic musical accompaniment also builds up in volume to heighten this same dramatic tension between body and city. It is this rhythmic switching

from differing images of body and city that suggests a thematic pattern of sorts. The train, an imposing piece of urban infrastructure (e.g. designed to direct the populace through the city) is a restrictive hurdle that resists Spiderman's adaptive superhuman body, which instead expresses a contradictory value of exceptional individualism. It is the rhythm between these two kinds of image, this chapter will prove, that picks up on each of the themes central to a spectacle of body and city in the superhero film: invoking and developmentally evolving these values throughout the duration of the action sequence.

Taking into account this consistent pairing of body and city, the monorail sequence carries the themes (that these images represent) along two distinct types of editing rhythm. These two rhythms not only expose the thematic meanings, but also the way in which these cultural values – i.e. a sense of physical freedom in conflict with notions of an urban setting of restricted congestion – develop and evolve over time. The first portion of cutting unfolds as a heightened form of spectacle (a term argued for by Geoff King in *Spectacular Narratives* (2000), as summarised in the thesis introduction), with fast-paced editing schemes that present a rapid succession of multiple medium shots and close up shots of body and city, building up to an energetic climax of halting the train. This energetic cutting continues to escalate, as medium shots frame Spiderman's arms and torso while they are stretched apart by the relentless speed of the train. At the same time the web-strands he is holding begin to fray: this is then juxtaposed with yet more shots of the city walls that resist the hero's efforts as the brickwork crumbles apart under the strain. Extreme close ups emphasise his costume tearing at the seams, with agonised facial expressions contrasted against the uncompromising rigidity of the barrier ahead. More cutting also occurs between the hero's incredible physical strength and the mass of terrified civilians onboard (and the quotidian associations this huddled group represent).

The fast-paced rhythm described above moves with a frenetic energy that becomes quite aggressive in just how quickly and unrelentingly it contrasts shots of the hero and his urban surrounding: emphasising a tumultuous relationship between the images of the hero's body and its city setting. Look closely, for instance, at the editing structure of the heightened spectacle as it reaches the most energetic pinnacle of the action (Figure 1.0).

Figure 1.0 Heightened spectacle achieves an energetic, aggressive juxtaposition between shots of body and city in *Spider-Man 2* (2004)

From left-to-right, in the first few shots the contours of the train (e.g. standing for the rigidity of the societal order) are directly juxtaposed with Spiderman's muscles and limbs (e.g. standing for the flamboyance of non-conformity). This kind of heightened spectacle in effect *tests* the thematic ideas represented by body and city. Then consider how, as the front hull becomes crushed under Spiderman's back, several shots start to show the metallic panels imploding, while shattered glass fragments from the windows and headlamps are hurled out toward the screen. In these images the thematic oppositions associated with physical freedom and environmental restrictions come to a head. When the train finally impacts with the barrier, the shot of Spiderman's stretched, screaming body as he reaches the absolute limits of physical endurance becomes eclipsed by the debris of broken wooden sleepers thrust to the immediate foreground. This is a point of uncertainty, when it is unclear whether one thematic value will fully prevail over the other. The deeper implications that this intense impact aesthetic has upon the treatment of the thematic content will be explored and explained in more detail throughout the chapter.

The second portion of the sequence, after the front spokes finally thump over the track edge and the train eventually comes to a complete halt, then shifts to a more contemplative mode of spectacle (again, a term argued for by King in *Spectacular Narratives*, outlined in more detail in the thesis introduction). Employing a single long shot and long take (Figure 1.1) from below at the street level, the train is framed in its entirety,

lingering on the front carriage as it hangs over the precipice. The energetic musical accompaniment has also lost its velocity, leaving only a defiant reverberating hum of the last chord that echoes the vibration emitted by the tracks, slowly decreasing in volume.

Figure 1.1
Contemplative spectacle brings hiatus to the action in the form of a drawn out long shot/long take of the stalemate between body and city.

In this shot, the intense momentum has ceased completely, with the only remaining motion noticeable in the smoke coming off the brakes, and the clouds calmly drifting across the skyline. The fight between body and city in effect has reached a stalemate, and this is accentuated by the change in rhythm: resulting in a pause or *hiatus* that relieves the action, bringing in a gentler 'balancing out' of the textual elements. Here, the previous tension between the audio-visual elements of body and city are *ruminated* over more carefully with the contemplative framing of the wide, expansive vista of the cityscape that, while it centers around the hero's defiant body, dwarfs it to a mere speck. A far gentler rhythm now unfolds developing into a slow-paced cutting as the commuters carefully carry the hero's exhausted body through the carriage. The change in pace prompts a comparatively firmer sense of resolution and closure to the previous struggle of superhuman physical prowess against the urban environment, the thematic significance of which will be also expanded upon in more depth at a later stage of the discussion.

The chapter primarily focuses on the rhythmic evolution from heightened-to-contemplative modes of spectacle in the monorail sequence, and the impact this change in tempo and pacing has upon the thematic content of the superhero film. I argue the case that this changing of pace in editing and shot composition carries key themes – namely freedom and constraint – in a dynamic way: audio-visually playing one value off against another, testing and complicating what these competing ideas mean, while seeking out a firmer sense of resolution. An overarching concern of this discussion is to distinguish this kind of rhythmic pacing between physical and spatial components of spectacle as *distinct* from the rhythmic pacing that drives forward the primary narrative causality of the film's

plot. This is for the reason that, while spectacular displays always support our comprehension of the main plot, my approach will prove that the rhythms of the spectacle also add another dimension of narration, which, I claim, tells a distinctly thematic kind of story arc. The spectacular rhythms of the sequence in effect narrativise the abstract cultural tensions embedded in the spectacle in a way that contributes to, but is not exactly one and the same with, the pacing of the plot's chain of cause-and-effect.

Throughout the monorail sequence, the editing generates what I am calling a distinct rhythm of narrative causality that explicitly favours an arc of thematic development. Consider, for instance, how a film's plot is presented in a coherent fashion that viewers can follow through *continuity editing*, a system of cutting that maintains continuous and clear narrative action, achieved by matching screen direction, position, and temporal relations from shot to shot (Bordwell and Thompson 2013: 500). Superhero films, like several forms of popular cinema, use a continuity style to present an easily recognisable sense of time and space for narrative events to unfold. The primary intention of the fast/slow-paced cutting of the monorail sequence I have described earlier, then, is to favor the narrative scenario of heroism. The continuity editing strategy is not designed to draw too much attention to its mediating role as a storytelling aid, instead functioning as a 'transparent window' for the rhythm of the film's plot to shine through. The combination of heightened and contemplative spectacle, first-and-foremost, systematically guides the forward rhythm of plot events and character actions. The use of rapid, fast-paced spectacle does this by intensifying the storytelling of the monorail sequence, propelling the urgency of the hero's plight forward, while the slower kinds of spectacle allow for the careful rumination that dwells on the repercussions of rescuing these helpless passengers.

However, a closer analysis of the monorail sequence will show that the rhythmic interplay between audio-visual elements also presents its own set of important story information, not necessarily tied to the specifics of the plot's cause-and-effect. The play off between images of body and city, for instance, suggests a secondary narrative rhythm, made up of the *management* of shots and graphic shapes of the hero's costumed body and surrounding urban infrastructure. It is a management in the sense that the shots and graphic shapes not only denote a coherent representation of this storyworld, but these formal components are consistently arranged in a particular fashion that emphasises a thematic interplay and culturally-significant relationship. Such an arrangement of shots can become so spectacularly prominent as to briefly draw attention away from the specifics of plot cause-and-effect, instead emphasising the immediacy of visceral thrills that hold their own

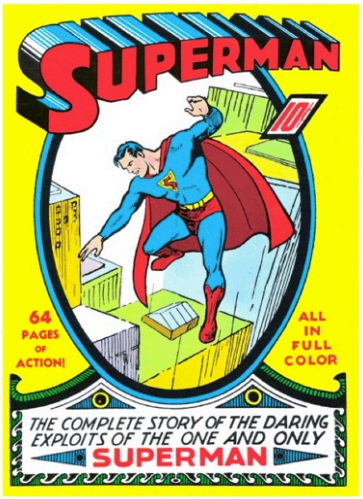
particular kind of thematic significance: which narrativises the spectacle in a distinct way. The rapid-editing aims to challenge the values this imagery represents, but the gentler rhythm of the drawn-out long take instead allows for a far calmer state of reconciliation to occur.

The continuously evolving juxtaposition between body and city across the monorail sequence, my argument will prove, resonates with an underlying thematic significance invested in these textual elements, forming an alternative storytelling route for viewers to follow. The rhythm of the spectacle contributes this other dimension of narration by telling a narrative arc of 'Theme A', the physical power of individual 'freedom', as it challenges, prevails over, and then becomes reconciled with 'Theme B', the social responsibility of collective, domestic 'restrictions'. Through this narrative arc, Theme A/Freedom clashes with Theme B/Restriction during heightened modes of rapid editing, and eventually seeks out a firmer reconciliation through more contemplative kinds of long shot framing.

Taking the above line of reasoning further, the chapter will now outline and unpack the thematic content associated with the images of body and city, specifically in relation to the superhero film, the origins of which are evident in the Western and Musical. After doing so, the argument can then proceed to show how thematic values are introduced, built up, and destabilised through heightened spectacle, after which being reconciled through contemplative spectacle. In this way, the monorail sequence does not only adhere to the primary narrative trajectory of plot actions, but can potentially offer another distinctive, melodic arc of thematic information: made up of audio-visual beats and accents that rhythmically unfold over time.

Cultural Themes: Body and City, Freedom and Restriction

This section justifies the monorail sequence's preoccupation with juxtaposing images of costumed bodies and towering cityscapes, which has roots in the visual iconography of the superhero comic book genre as a whole. I will show in this section how the contrast between body/city is directly informed by an established thematic significance. At the level of the body, a theme of freedom is apparent. For example, superheroes are figures designed to stand out from the ordinary city-dweller, adorning colourful masks, ostentatious capes and chevron-emblazed chests. The city images that these libertarian bodies are framed by, however, are more conformist landscapes of mass-populated, densely structured municipalities. Such visual markers are evident in the early comic publications of archetypal characters, including Superman, Spider-Man, and Batman (Figure 1.2).



Superman #1 (1938) © DC Comics.

Amazing Fantasy #15 (1962) © Marvel Comics.

Batman #1 (1940) © DC Comics.

Figure 1.2

I declare that this visual pairing between body and city continues to be a familiar constant of superhero film texts, having undergone treatments of repetition and variation across the contemporary cycle: e.g. in *Man of Steel* (2013) staging Superman's vertical battle with a villain along the side of skyscrapers in Metropolis; or in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), as Batman looks down upon a crime-ridden Gotham City in dire need of rescue. The marketing campaigns of both *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) and *Avengers Assemble* (2012) also aim to frame these heroes against an enveloping backdrop of New York's expansive urban infrastructure (Figure 1.3).

Superman battles against General Zod in a vertical descent of skyscrapers in *Man of Steel* (2013) © Warner Bros.

Batman looks to the Gotham City horizon in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) © Warner Bros.

Spider-Man is framed against a backdrop of the New York cityscape in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) © Sony Entertainment.

A superhero team is enveloped by an urban arena of destruction in *Avengers Assemble* (2012) © Paramount.

Figure 1.3

This pairing between body and city traditionally lays down a thematic conflict central to the genre, namely between oppositional values that revolve around freedom versus restriction. I propose that freedom is a value initially tied to the superhero's body, in terms of its superhuman abilities that afford an enhanced motion. A superhero's individualism depends upon this extraordinary physical presence. The bright, colorful designs of these conspicuous costumes are a means of explicitly projecting the body (and its theatrics) out on display, so as to noticeably stand out from the wider populace. As superheroes are effectively able to choose their own trajectories across the city skyline, rising high above the hustle-and-bustle below, this physical prowess affords an exceptional sense of autonomy when compared to the quotidian existence of ordinary city-dwellers.

Restriction is a value that tends to find manifestation in the urban claustrophobia of city environments brimming with the rigidity of urban obstacles, as an endless grid of blocks crisscrossed with linear streets, sidewalks and vehicle-congested roads. This is because cityscapes, in contrast to the superhero's willful eccentricity and playful exuberance, are ordered, directive spaces, intended to guide the larger populace, demanding mass conformity and designed to restrict any outlandish behaviour. Using

urban debris as a personal playground, the superhero can manipulate walled surfaces, and lampposts, fire hydrants, trashcans, newsstands, phone booths, girded bridges transcending the teeming mass of crowded city dwellers and towering buildings below.

Scott Bukatman points out that the superhero is a free body precisely because this is a *kinetic* body, always adapting to the situation, and unrestricted in its movement. This costumed extravagance and muscular absurdity would be nothing if it were not for the 'enhanced powers of motion' that enable these super-bodies (Bukatman 2003: 189). This distinguishes the superhero as a physically and kinetically expressive individual, and a tension emerges whenever this flamboyance is confronted with external barriers, such as environmental hurdles, that would hinder this dexterous energy. Importantly, it is this kinetic struggle between a free body and the contours of the restrictive city that is a key means of staging the juxtaposition between deeper thematic tensions, which will be explored later when the chapter focuses more closely on the way narrativised spectacle unfolds in the monorail sequence of *Spider-Man 2*.

The types of aesthetic and thematic dualities described above, I shall now affirm, have their origins in two longstanding Hollywood genre formulas, specifically the Western and Musical. As though echoing the superhero's physical presentation of freedom, Leo Braudy notes how both genres are structured around the 'private energy' of individual bodies. This private energy again invokes a theme of freedom, resonating from a character's physical display of individual expression, unleashing this non-conformist talent in the face of, and despite, public disapproval. Westerns attempt to resolve conflict in the community through physically violent acts, while the musical does so through feats of spontaneous dance (Braudy 1977: 139-140). The superhero film similarly resolves this thematic conflict between a hero's individual freedom and social constraints by appropriating conventions from both of these genres. Saige Walton's work on generic crossovers is especially useful in developing the idea that superhero films draw on both Westerns and Musicals. For instance, a superhero film series such as director Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man Trilogy* (2002-2007), Walton declares, reworks the traditional confrontational shootout as a more choreographed, public duel, which takes place across the upper reaches of New York City for all to see:

> Superheroes no longer require the external draw of the weapon that had dominated the Western; the almost-superhuman properties of the weapon have been internalized and the body is the only vehicle needed for flight and fight… This elaborate choreography of tension and release [also] indicates the dynamism of the musical… at the same time as it

> is matched with the energy of the Western… combin[ing] the *morality* of the Western, outlaw hero with the *freedom of movement* offered by the musical [performer] [emphasis added] (Walton 2009: 93-94).

This line of reasoning suggests that superhero films adopt the physical violence and conflicted morality of Westerns, while at the same time adapting this thematic energy alongside an especially dynamic form of choreography typical to musical performances.[8] By outlining the key genre components of Westerns and Musicals in relation to the superhero's body and setting, and showing the cultural values that seek out reconciliation, this will support my claim that spectacle does not simply support the specifics of plot causality and exposition, because its very structure becomes narrativised in a distinct way that contributes another (decidedly thematic) dimension of narration to the storytelling process.

***Western Antinomies*: Self and Society, Power and Responsibility**

The Western is a significant genre in Hollywood cinema, and provides a template which action-adventure genres inherit: a formula that continues to be elaborated in innovative ways by the contemporary superhero film. The same themes central to the Western also arise in the superhero film, which continues a ritual of popular entertainment that deals with these same social anxieties. When considering how cultural concerns tied to body/city work in the Western, the westerner cowboy is a figure faced with the dilemma of being positioned on the boundary between two paradoxical environments. The westerner must either embrace the joys of pioneering *individualism* afforded by the 'open frontier' way of life; or, instead, cater towards the wellbeing of vulnerable 'town settlements' in the very infancy of their *societal development*, and so abide by comparatively restrictive borders of cultivation.[9] A conflict emerges when attempting to reconcile these differing sites of open frontier and town settlement, and the values they each represent. Dwelling on this paradox in more detail, genre theorist Thomas Schatz has pointed out that the trailblazing westerner

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[8] The superhero carries the same ethical burdens and obligations as would any other hero protagonist, but does so with a spectacularly exuberant physical exhibitionism that can continue to exaggerate and intensify these traditional tensions to new extremes (e.g. with the audio-visual presentation of superhuman dexterity frequently benefitting from technological advancements in contemporary digital visual effects).

[9] When considering filmic representations of American Westward expansion from 1830 to 1890, see Jim Kitses's Hollywood genre study *Horizons West* (1969). Kitses points out how the western environment functions as a cultural site that instigates several contradictions, developing two sets of beliefs introduced by historian Henry Nash Smith: i.e. the West as a 'Garden' paradise, pure and ripe for settlement versus the West as a savage, untamable 'Desert'.

protagonist initially has the status of a rugged individualist, but, after deciding to become involved in the day-to-day endeavours of fledging towns, also acts as an agent of civilization: a contradiction which resists this previously unencumbered individualism (Schatz 1981: 31).

As has been outlined in the thesis introduction, the sets of Western antinomies described by Jim Kitses (i.e. testing the distinction between cultural contradictions of Wilderness versus Civilization, Individual versus Community, and Freedom versus Restriction) primarily revolve around this tension between the hero protagonist's dual role as frontiersman (i.e. facing a savage, untamable Desert) and town-dweller (i.e. instilling a lawful, domesticated Garden paradise). In terms of the mise-en-scene, the cowboy literally stands on the boundary between these two sets of values (Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4 From left to right: war veteran Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) is poised on the threshold of a homestead in *The Searchers* (1956), deciding whether to rejoin civilised society or walk into the wild desert behind him; lawman Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) sits on the porch, overseeing the cultivation of the wilderness ahead in *My Darling Clementine* (1946). Below: ex-bandit Wil Munny (Clint Eastwood) protects his two children and isolated pig farm from the potential threats of the great plains, physically negotiating the tension between domestic and savage spaces in *Unforgiven* (1992).

Though the cityscapes of superhero films are actually more complex, dense and urbanised than the homesteads of the old West, the antinomies of the Western prove valuable in making the distinction between a space that is tamed by domesticity, and a space that presents a far wilder, untamed frontier of exploration. For this reason, the visual markers of body and city in superhero narratives also begin to gain a firmer thematic significance when the Western antinomies or binary oppositions mentioned above are taken into account. This is because the contemporary superhero film cycle participates in an ongoing debate of freedom/restriction initiated by the Western, exploring the tension between

'individualism' as an expressive, flamboyant body in tandem with 'societal responsibility' imposed by infrastructural environments. Indeed, Peter Coogan affirms how superhero narratives explore the conflict between self and society by 'show[ing] the dangers of selfishly withdrawing from the group and refusing to use ones abilities to help others' (Coogan 2006: 25). When considering the type of freedom conventionally represented by superhero characters, these figures have often been described as promoters of peace, safety or nostalgic harmony (Gray and Kaklamanidou 2011: 3), fighting for notions of democracy or protecting the American way of life (Geraghty 2011: ix). However, Coogan points out that although the superhero's mission is prosocial and selfless (Coogan 2006: 31), this state of freedom is frequently suggested as the power to act without consequences, either from the law, families or romantic relationships (i.e. due to the identity-concealing mask), using superhuman abilities to resist everyday restrictions, such as gravity (Coogan 2006: 14).

However, when applying western antinomies specifically to the superhero protagonist, the possibilities of the open-frontier are exaggerated in terms of what the character's body represents, in what this physically-enhanced 'pioneer' can achieve, namely a true freedom-of-movement, an exceptional individualism, and an empowered, autonomous identity. This state of autonomy becomes especially tangible when understood in a physical context. Consider, for instance, how the convention of the superhero's costumed body shows a flamboyant riot of bright colours and designs, which physically proclaims 'the sign of individual identity' (Reynolds 1992: 26). These extraordinary bodies are also able to accomplish a spectacular freedom of movement, neither constrained by the societal order, nor the urban grid of cities (Bukatman 2003: 188). A major appeal of superhero characters is the freedom and power closely associated with physically casting away an ordinary persona (Duncan and Smith 2009: 230), displacing the awkwardness of everyday life, and in its place unleash the private energy of a hidden self (Walton 2009: 94), so unveiling an exceptional individualism. These super-bodies swing to incredible heights above New York City in *Spider-Man* (2002), or fly beyond the skyline of Metropolis into the stratosphere, lingering on the edge of space in *Superman Returns* (2006). Like the westerner, whenever the superhero uses his or her body as a physical weapon, this act of violence is tethered to moral conflictions. In essence my analysis equates the wild nature of freedom with the extraordinary feats performed (and endured by) the superhero's 'super-powered' body, and finds a counterpoint to this power by mapping urban space onto the threshold of a far more restrained value of domesticity. For

example, as the battling bodies of superheroes and villains collide with skyscrapers, a series of antinomies come to blows: Wilderness, Individualism and Freedom emanate from the uncertain potential of superhuman abilities; while Civilisation, Community and Restriction are tied to the domesticity imposed by the urban environment below, the inhabitants of which collectively demand that these physical powers are employed responsibly for the benefit of all, rather than the one.

The westerner's physical shifting from savage to domestic spaces is also evident in the costume design. The theme of wild nature 'breaking free' from urban domesticity is echoed in the iconic trope that depicts the superhero pulling the civilian shirt apart to reveal the colourful alter ego costume underneath. At the level of costume the *masked alter ego/secret civilian identity* convention is another key means of negotiating the contradictory nature of a superhero's freedom, again specifically in terms of self and society, as well as power in relation to responsibility. In *Spider-Man* for instance, the protagonist must negotiate his sense of individualism between two personas: the empowered, vigilante alter ego 'Spiderman', and the ordinary, civilian identity 'Peter Parker'. The *Spiderman/Parker* tension presents freedom as a complicated value, split between two roles. On the one hand, his superhuman abilities and masked vigilantism empower the hero to achieve physical feats impossible to the ordinary city-dweller. The hero's enhanced motion also allows him to fulfil his own personal ethical prerogatives as a crime-fighter: protecting the liberty of the vulnerable civilian. On the other hand, no matter how fulfilling or exhilarating this masked individualism may appear to be, this alter ego actually infringes on his day-to-day lifestyle as ordinary citizen freelance photographer Parker (i.e. impeding the development of meaningful relationships with friends and family, focused namely on the love-interest Mary Jane Watson, as well as hindering his ability to pay rent, excel as a scholar of physics, etc.). It is this problematic tension between these thematic values that, my analysis shall show, drives the rhythm and kinesis of narrativised spectacle.

In essence then, the superhero's narrative and thematic arc revolves around the way superhuman agility and dexterity is empowering, yet prompts the choice to live a life of responsibility. Nonetheless, while western antinomies provide the moral tenets underlying the thematic content of superhero films, the way in which these values are carried by the kinetic energy of such enhanced abilities is also important to consider: a super-heroic performance which has its roots in the Musical.

***Musical Performances*: Physical Exuberance and Social Propriety**

While antinomies found in the Western are key to defining the cultural conflicts associated with the iconography of body/city, bringing into play tensions of freedom/restriction, individual/community, self/society or power/responsibility, the superhero's physical kinesis can also be tied to these thematic notions. Much of a superhero's enhanced motion, Bukatman suggests, owes a great deal to dance choreography, a mode of performance that has some of its deepest roots in Hollywood musicals: 'The soaring acrobatics of the increasingly popular genre of superhero films inherits the musical's emphasis on virtuoso bodily performance' (Bukatman 2009: 115). An essential genre feature of the superhero body is an ostentatious form of kinesis, with 'a costumed flair for the theatrical', and it is this energetic, hyperkinetic feature of battling, enhanced bodies that take centre stage (Walton 2009: 93). Every film genre will have its characters perform some form of choreographed movement – the dashing contortions of detective, gangster or swashbuckler narratives included – but the physical expression in musicals is comparatively overt, being well-suited to the type of exhibitionism associated with superheroes.

To appreciate the cultural themes at stake, it is pertinent to better understand the choreography of a *super-heroic performance*, i.e. the reliance upon theatrics structured by the boldness of posture and pose, being a full-bodied, kinetic expression, similar to musical performances (Bukatman 2009: 115). The dynamic energy enacted by superheroes evokes the type of bodily performance found in a seminal musical genre film such as *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). Taking the example of the iconic "Singin' in the Rain" dance sequence itself, the performer Gene Kelly embraces the downpour, splashing in and out of the puddles with joyous abandon, swinging around a lamppost, and saluting passersby desperate to stay dry, defiantly looking up and facing the falling raindrops head on.

Throughout the number, Kelly is distinguished as flouting convention by refusing to shelter from the rain like other pedestrians retreating down the street. More importantly, this performance achieves a state of nonconformity, not only through 'increasingly outsized' movements, but also by way of using the surrounding objects and environment (i.e. lamppost, umbrella, puddles) as 'vehicles' of Kelly's own personal 'euphoria' (Bukatman 2009: 117). The notion of freedom is also relevant to this discussion of Kelly's "Singin' in the Rain" routine. Freedom, as a thematic value, finds iconographical tangibility in this rebellious choreography that spontaneously adapts to the rain-soaked street, framed by Kelly's manipulation of an everyday lamppost that fuels his anti-social

vigilantism. Hanging from his makeshift platform, this virtuoso display takes Kelly's freedom of movement to increasing heights (Figure 1.5).

Figure 1.5 Gene Kelly dances with liberatory euphoria in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). © MGM.

Figure 1.6 Kelly's performance becomes restricted by socially ascribed limitations. © MGM.

As the sequence unfolds, Kelly's performance employs several increasingly intensified bursts of euphoria, which follow one after another, and build into a sense of a man liberated by his actions. But his escalating dynamism soon tempts the intervention of environmental forces that would subsume this individualism. As though materialising from out of the street's contours, a cop suddenly appears into the frame: disapproving, stone-faced, unflinching and decidedly *non*-euphoric (Bukatman 2009: 117). Upon noticing this agent of mass-conformity, Kelly freezes in mid-turn, bringing the dance to an abrupt halt (Figure 1.6). At this instant, a key moment of conflict is evident: when the performer's energetic engagement with the mise-en-scène inevitably becomes challenged, faced with a hurdle that can neither be avoided, nor overcome.

At crises such as this, the musical performer's exuberance is forcibly diffused, made inert by the rigidity of regulated infrastructure that aims to curtail any outlandish, rebellious energy. After Kelly quickly brings his performance to a premature close, he has now become physically subdued, receding back into cover away from the officer who threatens arrest for loitering. Kelly's retreat, Bukatman points out, is also reminiscent of a superhero's own melting-back-into-the-crowd after completing a spectacular deed of derring-do, returning to the comparatively mundane status of a civilian persona without the mask, a dilemma that carries overarching thematic implications:

> The expressive body exists at the limits of the law, its virtuosity here constrained by socially ascribed limitations… [T]here is some opposition here between the liberatory euphoria that marks the city as one's personal territory and the realm of law, which enforces the colder reality of social norms (Bukatman 2009: 117).

This analysis implies that the musical performer's flamboyant, expressive body (e.g. as a vessel of energetic liberatory euphoria) is in direct tension with the social decorum that accompanies communal infrastructure (e.g. an unavoidable obstacle that entirely hinders nonconformity). By framing this oppositional clash between aesthetic components of body/city at their most intense point of impasse, the aftermath results in a pause or hiatus of sorts: explicitly staging one value to problematically prevail at the expense of the other, prompting a firmer sense of reconciliation to unfold. Such a moment of crisis, the discussion will claim, actually carries the thematic energy of freedom/restriction to the fore, particularly when staged through the visually spectacular extremes associated with superhero films.

Throughout *Spider-Man 2*, for instance, the hero employs his superhuman abilities of incredible agility and superior dexterity, able to crawl on any surface, shoot web-like projectiles from his wrists, and sling across great heights, as well as possessing extraordinary strength and stamina. The interplay between freedom and restriction is achieved through several action sequences that frame Spiderman's tactile engagements with the street. This process is evident whenever the hero utilises acrobatics to apprehend criminals in an extraordinary manner, an example of which will be analysed here.

During one such action sequence at an early stage in the film, the protagonist rides his scooter on the way to an evening show, in the guise of his civilian persona Parker. Suddenly, a getaway car driven by two criminals (in the midst of evading police vehicles) bursts into the frame and smashes into his bike's rear wheel. Parker reacts by performing a backwards flip high in the air, avoiding the fate of the now crushed moped, landing on his feet safely away from the speeding cop cars that rapidly follow. On the sidewalk, two children are amazed at the fluidity of these seemingly impossible theatrics, demanding to know how he achieved this extraordinary feat. Almost immediately, Parker's defiance of ordinary decorum instigates distrust and concern by disapproving passersby. Dressed in a rented tuxedo, this physical garb, while meant to be glamorous, is noticeably of a cheaper quality, hanging on his frame as though off-the-peg rather than tailored specifically or belonging to haute couture, and this muted appeal to high-society is a failure that cannot help but kowtow to the same awkwardness and vulnerability experienced by the everyday

city-dweller. The social propriety restraining Parker's body to the sidewalk continues to be exacerbated by the loud, aggressive noises of car-horns, screeching tries and roaring engines sounded out by the pursuing police vehicles.

Responding to this urban claustrophobia, Parker retreats into an alleyway out of sight, and only after donning his bright, red-and-blue vigilante ensemble can he fully unleash an inner exuberant agility, lassoing the surrounding urban contours of lampposts and building brickwork by shooting strands of webbing to propel himself across the city, soaring several feet above the everyday pedestrian, towards the careening joy-riders. Gestures and mannerisms of this sort are of the utmost importance to an enhanced, 'super-heroic' choreographed freedom of movement, using the environment in ways that the majority of city dwellers are either physically incapable of or socially reluctant to enact. It is in this regard that the superhero body functions as a vehicle through which freedom can be mediated.

Superhero characters are able to consolidate antinomies of freedom/restriction through the onscreen action by performing a series of bold statements of nonconformity (such as the antics described above), doing so by repeatedly manipulating any strictures imposed by their city environment. The next shot, for example, frames a length of road ahead, with bustling sidewalks either side, in response to which Spiderman simply swings between the crowded corridor, continually anchored to a myriad of lampposts and tall building surfaces as he thrusts forwards and upwards. By adapting urban barriers (that would otherwise slow the hero's hyperkinetic trajectory) into enabling materials, the hero leaps from the foreground of the screen towards the background, away from the viewer, darting in the small gap between a passing freightliner truck and its cargo in tow, manoeuvering these citified fortifications as the performer pleases.

Constraining urban hurdles are now 'remolded' into props, a physical process involving enhanced manoeuverability akin to the musical performer. Consider how an exceptional 'dormant magic' bursts through the performances of Fred Astaire as he suddenly dances up along the side of a wall, as is the case with Spiderman whenever he becomes a "Wall-Crawler" (Bukatman 2009: 120), dallying with environmental hurdles by manipulating surrounding infrastructures to their own advantage. In the same way that Kelly uses the lamppost as a vehicle of euphoria, much of Spiderman's air-bound agility relies on the tensile flexibility of a flagpole that fortuitously breaks his fall: a platform that in turn will provide the springboard for future leaps to the next available perch the city can offer (Bukatman 2009: 120). As Kelly strides towards the lamppost with a fluidity of

motion in tandem to the accompanying "Singin' in the Rain" composition, Spiderman's own sense of liberatory euphoria (whilst weaving between a multitude of streetlight pillars) gains further emphasis when underscored by composer Danny Elfman's heroic musical leitmotif, which soars in volume alongside his elevated body. This level of exuberance is simply inaccessible to the rest of the comparatively less flamboyant city-dwelling populace firmly grounded to the streets below.

The *prop/hurdle* interplay discussed so far enables Spiderman to literally re-figure the materials of an urban infrastructure from hazardous obstructions to manageable tools, manipulating fragments of the city as the hero performer sees fit. Continuing his pursuit of the joyriding criminals, Spiderman manipulates the urban debris with improvisational dexterity. As one of the cop cars veers out of control, about to collide with a group of unsuspecting pedestrians, Spiderman swiftly anchors the vehicle with a large web between two nearby lampposts, leaving the object to dangle above the amazed, appreciative civilians. Catching up with the joy riders, the hero's innovative spontaneity also allows him to then tether their bodies to more available nearby lampposts with a webbing lariat.

By using the surrounding terrain as props, the superhero, similar to the physically adaptable and maneuverable performances of Kelly or Astaire, makes 'something new out of the mundane objects of daily life', effectively acting out the role of an improvising 'bricoleur' or handyman that can construct and create from a diverse range of varying materials close to hand, be it the smallest of domestic items, or even entire buildings and mountains (Bukatman 2009: 120). In this way, physical choreography is a key means of challenging and stabilising cultural concerns related to body/city, reaffirming the ongoing negotiation between freedom/restriction.

After having outlined the moral tenets stipulated in the Western frontier and the escapism expressed by Musical performances, these conventions can be said to form the thematic core of the contemporary superhero film. The next step is to explore the way these thematic trajectories potentially emerge as narrativised kinds of spectacle. By analysing the superhero's body and its physical interaction with the environment, a rhythm unfolds that negotiates the divide between thematic values of the costumed body as 'freedom' (as 'self', 'alter-ego', power, individualism, extraordinariness, flamboyance, expression) and the city setting as 'restriction' (social decorum and responsibility, environmental strictures, ordinariness). This will now be achieved through focusing on the rhythmic energy of the monorail action sequence in *Spider-Man 2*.

(ii) *Narrativised Spectacle*: Repetitive Beats and Varied Accents

So far, the chapter has outlined a series of thematic oppositions pertinent to the superhero iconography of body and city. The pairing between the costumed superhero body and its surrounding urban infrastructure carries a set of cultural contradictions revolving around freedom and restriction, individual exuberance and societal propriety. To consolidate this thematic content, the eight-minute monorail action sequence presents the spatio-temporal movement of Spiderman's body across his New York City setting in two ways: consolidated as a set of *repetitive beats*, which are then developed though *varied accents*. This combination of beats and accents forms a thematic rhythm able to narrativise the formal components of the onscreen spectacle, a process that will now be analysed in detail.

Repetitive Beats of *Body/City*

To introduce thematic content, the rhythmic editing pattern of the monorail sequence depends upon the *consistent juxtaposition* between imagery of body/city, which reoccurs as a set of repetitive beats. The sequence revolves around a conflict atop this public train, pitting Spiderman against the cybernetically-enhanced antagonist Doc Ock. The exchange between hero and villain employs a great deal of impact aesthetic (see King, *Spectacular Narratives* (2000), i.e. rapid-paced editing, objects flying toward the screen; refer to the thesis introduction, repeatedly thrusting Spiderman against the city setting. This is evident whenever the hero must suddenly bend over backwards to evade bridges that speed past pass overhead, or quickly attempt to leap over them. For example, after Ock hurls Spiderman's body up into the air at a riveted public bridge overpass, the hero narrowly slips through the gaps in-between the metal struts, brushing pass terrified civilians in the blink of an eye, before re-emerging on the other side back on the train's upper hull. Here, the heightened staging, framing and editing strategy aggressively pits shots of body/city in a brief moment (Figure 1.7).

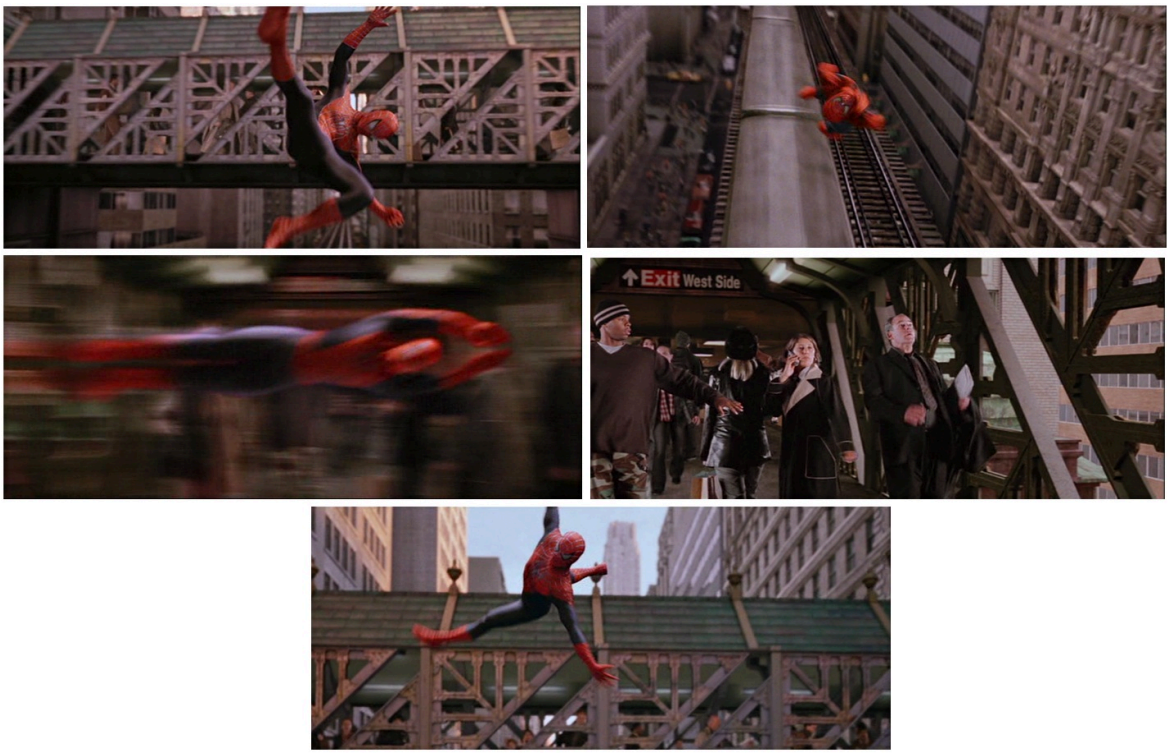

Figure 1.7 Moments of juxtaposition between body/city are often aggressive and brief in the monorail sequence, such as when the hero must evade the overpass bridge.

The first shot frames the bridge's rigid contours in the background, as a barrier that the hero's wildly flaying body in the foreground is about to collide with. Here, the individual body seems threatened by this piece of urban infrastructure (that directs pedestrians along a set path, and civilised decorum and domesticity it represents). The next shot follows seconds later, as his body's trajectory negotiates these contours, propelled past in an exuberant blur of colour that literally causes the day-to-day routine of everyday city-dwellers to stand aside in surprise, in effect performing a bold statement of anti-social nonconformity. The last shot, following immediately afterward, returns to the body once more, but in this instance the impact aesthetic forcibly thrusts the hero out towards the screen, eclipsing the bridge, and triumphantly leaving the barrier behind.

In this brief moment, a rhythmic beat unfolds between the three shots, carrying and developing the thematic implications along in the process. Firstly, the image of the body collides with the city, which introduces the tension. Secondly, the body negotiates the city. Thirdly, the body is repositioned as triumphant over the city, reaching a brief sense of resolution. The play off between (i) *flaying*-body/*rigid*-bridge, (ii) *improvisational*-body/*surprised*-pedestrians, and (ii) *triumphant*-body/*distant*-bridge propels thematic values. Spiderman's physical freedom, individualism and exuberance, unachievable by

other city-dwellers, is directly contrasted against the social propriety and quotidian constraints imposed by the urban environment.

The above is only one example of a beat of body/city among several in the sequence. Indeed, the hero will be forced to leap away from other trains shooting past on the opposing set of tracks. Moments later, for instance, the fight between Spiderman and Ock takes them to the side of the train, and the loud exchange of punches are a diegetic set of audio beats that promise and anticipate yet another visual juxtaposition between body/city. The first shot shows Spiderman performing his superhuman exuberance, while the next shot shows an adjacent train speeding past, bringing with it the dangers faced when an individual pushes against the societal order. In this instant, the urban environment literally propels another piece at infrastructure directly towards the hero. In the next shot, he is forced to press back against the window panel to continue negotiating this ongoing struggle between physical freedom and environmental restrictions (Figure 1.8).

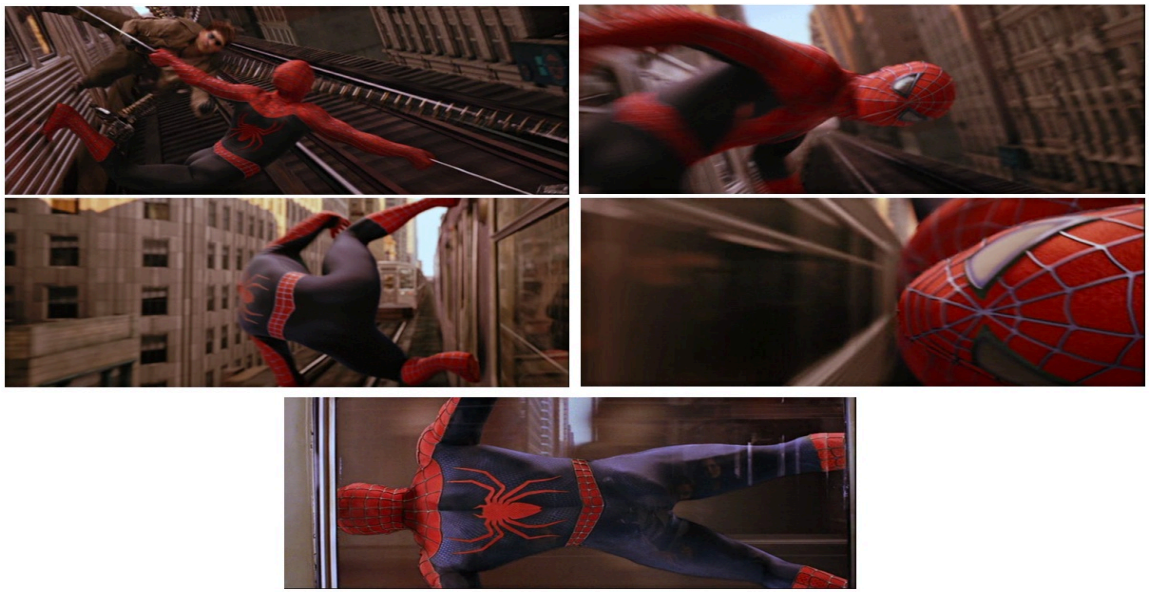

Figure 1.8
An aggressive beat of body/city: the impact aesthetic literally thrusts out another piece of urban infrastructure to challenge Spiderman's physical display of non-conformity.

In this brief instant, a quick succession of cutting continues to carry the thematic content along a literal rhythmic trajectory of beats that repeatedly shift between shots and graphic shapes of the hero's individual body against the urban environment. By examining how the superhero body is positioned *in relation to* the surrounding city environment this will illuminate the way thematic tensions are negotiated in a rhythmic fashion. To better

understand this interplay between pairs of shapes and movements, this process can more specifically be described as a *montage* editing scheme.

Montage has its roots as an editing strategy developed by soviet filmmakers during the 1920s, emphasising dynamic, often discontinuous, relationships between shots and the juxtaposition of images to create ideas not present in either shot by itself (Bordwell and Thompson 2013: 503). The essence of montage is in the cutting of two different images, in the way they each follow one another. Among the most influential soviet filmmakers is considered to be Sergei Eisenstein (active from 1923-1946) and the methods of montage he provides.[10] Using the analogy of Egyptian hieroglyphs, Eisenstein explains how the cutting together of two separate images cause the sum to equal more than the parts, that would not be achievable if these images were viewed in isolation from one another. The symbol of water on its own, for instance, suggests no more than a literal interpretation, however when water is juxtaposed with the drawing of an eye, this equates a new value that interrelates both symbols, perhaps of crying or tears (Eisenstein [1922-34] 1988: 139). Similarly, if the image of an 'ear' were to be contrasted with that of a 'door', the viewer may conclude this resulting concept is 'to listen', as would 'dog' when presented alongside 'mouth' might well suggest the verb 'to bark,' as would 'mouth' and 'bird' equate singing, or 'knife' and a 'heart' collectively suggest the impact of 'sorrow' or suffering (Eisenstein [1922-34] 1988: 139).

In relation to the visual beats of body and city, the immediacy of this impact aesthetic arguably confronts the viewer with a series of thematic values pertinent to urban anxiety. Whenever the freely brawling bodies of Spiderman and Ock cling onto the train's side panels speeding past a station this action causes commuters situated on the platform to forcibly lean backwards, to make way for this imposition. This type of action-packed physical spectacle would instill what Lisa Purse deems as an 'assertive, self-directed movement,' that brings with it a sense of 'pushing through the city's barriers, of rising out of its strictures' (Purse 2011: 65). It is the immediacy or stimulation of the train's trajectory and its immense momentum that takes centre stage, as viewers are primarily concerned with the threatening presence of speed pitted against the body, the pull of gravity and the forceful impact of the city setting.

The original intention behind Soviet Montage differs from Hollywood's commercial

[10] See Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (1949), and the five methods of montage: (i) Metric; (ii) Rhythmic; (iii) Tonal; (iv) Overtonal/Associational; and (v) Intellectual (73-82).

prerogative to hold attention solely on the continuity of time and space directing narrative events, e.g. aiming to fully immerse viewers within a comprehensive storyworld.[11] Eisenstein did not wish to guide the audience into an illusory, fictional reality, but to create a destabilising effect in order to draw attention away from the narrative and cause viewers to question what they were seeing (i.e. becoming aware of the political ramifications that transpire not only in the plot, but additionally in their own day-to-day lives). Montage, then, turns to a form of *discontinuity editing*, or the *mismatching* of temporal and spatial relations that violates narrative continuity, and in its stead firmly places emphasis on the similarity between different shapes (i.e. through graphic matching) (Bordwell and Thompson 2013: 501). Soviet montage primarily attempts to promote viewers into a state of active engagement, e.g. one that highlights 'the contradictions of capitalism; effectively, to batter the audience into some kind of new dialectical synthesis' (King 2000: 98), rather than passively accept the reality presented onscreen and the conventional bourgeois values (i.e. conservative, conformist, middle-class hierarchies) being advocated.

In *Strike* (1925) for example, the people and events onscreen follow a narrative arc of oppressed workers resisting the oppressive factory owners. However, during the abattoir scene towards the end of the film, a specific editing sequence juxtaposes the *cutting of the bull's throat* alongside the *massacre of hundreds of workers and their families* whilst they are cut down by the vanguard serving an elite hierarchal class. The edit breaks up the space of the fictional reality being portrayed, and distorts the flow of causality, promoting an association between the workers as butchered animals, and the owners as the butchers. A comment is made here about the negative repercussions of capitalism, with the bourgeoisie and its captains of industry presented as exploitative or merciless, and the working proletariat as a victimised lower class that must revolt to survive this injustice. In this moment, as attention is drawn away from the storytelling, what stands out above all else is the way one image of slaughter is comparable to another: prompting an intellectual participation in the audience that requires a complete disregard for the narrative events talking place at that specific time and space. In this respect, Eisenstein aims to use elements of discontinuity in order to induce a state of political epiphany.

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[11] Perhaps the most common usage of montage sequences in Hollywood cinema is as a means of proficiently compressing long passages of time, enabling narrative events to be easily summarised. Montage is featured in the training sequence throughout the *Rocky* film series (1976-2006), presenting the boxer Rocky Balboa's extensive weekly exercise regimen as he prepares for the big fight over a matter of minutes, and also quickens the pacing in *Forrest Gump* (1994), presenting Forest jogging across most of North America over a period of three years in a compressed seven-minute sequence.

However, placing Eisenstein's original intentions aside, the rapid cutting of heightened spectacle nonetheless shares filmic elements comparable with the editing strategies employed in Soviet Montage. For example, taking the action-epic *Gladiator* (2000) Richard Rushton declares that its action sequences are filled with 'virtuosic', 'montage-laden' patterns that achieve 'shock-effects' in a manner reminiscent of the complexity and displacement associated with Eisenstein's editing strategies (Rushton 2001: 36). The visual display of these fighting scenes cater to a mode of spectatorship that immerses the viewer into the fight, but doing so through the disjunctive impact of 'clashing, clanging and squelching of swords' alongside abrupt physical collisions (Rushton 2001: 37) that viscerally affronts and dominates onlookers.

Similarly *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), *The Rock* (1996) and *Independence Day* (1995) each feature action sequences where there is a 'quick-fire series of shots from several angles and positions', resulting in the combat being presented repeatedly, as though happening multiple times 'together with the element of temporal overlap' (King 2000: 94). The result of the editing, King suggests, is greater than the sum of the parts. In this respect that the filmgoer does not undergo a politically-charged paradigm shift (i.e. seeking to be 'awoken' to a new understanding of the societal order, and the need for reform in hierarchies therein), but instead becomes *stimulated* by the sensuous pleasure this spectacular escapism provides (King 2000: 94), e.g. for a moment ignoring the trivial problems associated with quotidian reality.

In the monorail sequence, the patterned-rhythm of Spiderman's playful defiance with urban hurdles also stimulates viewers, but into engaging with an evolving thematic trajectory of body and city. This is because by continually adapting to the train's speed, using the rooftop as an enabling platform (or else become consumed by the surrounding fragments of infrastructure), this is a trait of editing and staging in action cinema that allows viewers 'to *rehearse* the possibility of rising up out of the twenty-first century's urban congestion, these strictures of clogged traffic systems and overprice housing, the unruly territorialisation of urban space, the intensities of urban social inequality and crime [emphasis added]' (Purse 2011: 64).

Montage-editing strategies are particularly useful when exploring the rhythmic beats of body/city associated with spectacular action sequences in the popular modes of cinema such as the superhero film. This is because montage is potentially a means of introducing, negotiating and reconciling the thematic tensions built up by the collation of these images. Towards the climactic finale of the sequence, for instance, there are certain moments that

directly contrast shots of Spiderman's flamboyant, costumed body with shots of the Manhattan infrastructure of concrete walls and metallic girders. Consider how the shot of Spiderman's straining arms is directly juxtaposed with the sparking spokes of the train's resistance (Figure 1.9). Here, a beat of body/city stimulates antinomies of individual freedom struggling with environmental restriction in an explicit fashion.

Figure 1.9

Other beats will continue to reiterate the same cultural contradictions. Moments later, while he attempts to halt the monorail by shooting two strands of webbing against the wall surfaces, three shots follow one another in quick succession. The first and third shots pit the crumbling window frames on the left of the hero, and the fragmented brickwork on the right-hand side. The second shot, an extreme close up of Spiderman's strained facial expression, is sandwiched between these images, unfolding as a sequence that tests *city* against *body* against *city* (Figure 1.10).

Figure 1.10

It is repetitive beats such as these mentioned above that reaffirm the cultural contradictions at stake (freedom and restriction, extraordinary and ordinary, flamboyance and propriety, individual and community, wilderness and civilisation). As the themes are tested to new extremes, however, the rhythm will continue to further *accentuate* the montage editing strategy through innovative and varied ways. Although the series of recurring rhythmic beats of body/city form the structural backbone of the spectacle, then the way these shots are varied is essential to developing the rhythm as a narrative arc that tests (and gives dramatic conflict to) the thematic tensions. Varied accents are not only a part of the structure of spectacle, but key to developmentally evolving and progressing the thematic meanings along, so narrativising the spectacle.

Varied Accents of *Kineticism*

So far, the chapter has explored the kinds of thematic tensions at stake in physical and spatial spectacle of the superhero film, with freedom invested in images that present the hero's extraordinary, colourfully-costumed body, and restriction invoked by images of the congested, densely-populated, and claustrophobic cityscapes these heroes physically traverse. These cultural themes, it has been shown, are reaffirmed through a montage editing strategy, pairing body and city together as a series of repetitive beats. These beats consolidate the thematic tensions embedded in the structure of the spectacle, consistently

maintaining the cultural contradiction of freedom versus restriction. This repetitive juxtaposition between the themes, it has been suggested earlier, forms the effective 'backbone' of the narrative that the spectacle attempts to tell through its formal components of editing and framing. This interplay between freedom and restriction, however, generates a trajectory of narrative information that becomes further complicated and developed along an evolving style of camerawork and framing typical to action-adventure cinema: heightening the 'sensational', visceral thrill-ride experience of exhilaration and trauma faced by the superhero.

In terms of the rhythm unfolding in the monorail sequence, each beat of body/city shifts according to the enhanced motion the hero performs. As such, the themes are not only picked up on by the body and setting, but by the kineticism of this interaction. In this way, it is the superhero's movement that propels the narrativised spectacle along by providing a set of innovative accentuations, or *varied accents*. In musical terms, an 'accent' works alongside a repetitive beat to place a distinct emphasis on a particular note or chord, by means of stress or pitch. While repetitive beats of body and city reaffirm the cultural conflict between freedom/restriction, accents then drive these thematic tensions to clash against one another in varied ways, with one value attempting to prevail over the other, in the same fashion as dramatic conflict. It is the kinetic accent, I shall now show, that gives developmental movement to the narrative arc embedded within the structure of the spectacle.

Ascent and Descent

Within the structure of the spectacle, there are often upward movements of 'ascent' which are played off against countering motions of 'descent'. These two conflicting kinds of motion, I argue, each from an accent, because it is this to-and-froing that emphasises one cultural theme as in competition with the another, as though undergoing a trajectory of evolving storytelling information, so developing these thematic tensions in the same fashion as an evolving narrative arc. Consider, for instance, how the first accent of descent is evident after Ock forcibly throws Spiderman off the train, slamming his body against the road surface below. Here, as the hero's body plummets, the dimension of gravity is emphasised, resulting in him becoming surrounded by a network of cars. The hero's fall along a downward trajectory presents a *negative* emphasis on this array of hurdles. In effect, he has become engulfed by the same urban claustrophobia that ordinary city-dwellers must contend with. The camera then tracks this action close to the ground level,

and in doing so immediately instils the expectation of a renewed surge of elevation, prompting the anticipation that the hero will get back up to the train roof once more. A competing accent, that is, one of ascent, emerges along with the hero's desire to rise upwards once more, bringing forth *positive* associations of physically transcending environmental strictures. Bukatman suggests that superhero narratives are purposefully structured around the compulsion of propulsion and thrust, and by literally rising above the ground level, this physical spectacle causes the hero to evoke power and mobility through a freedom of movement: a liberation that is in part *graced* by interacting with urban materials.

The thematic tensions are effectively carried along these positive/negative associations of rising and falling, moving along with accents of ascent/descent. To better understand this process, consider how these characters often *rise above* the 'negation' imposed by the urban grid below (Bukatman 2003: 189), achievable through the physical act of both manipulating and transcending infrastructures in equal measure. As previously cited in the chapter, Bukatman argues that superheroes conceivably play the role of bricoleur (i.e. making something new out of the mundane objects of daily life). For instance, shooting web-strands, Spiderman quickly anchors himself to the rearmost carriage as it hurtles away high on the flyover, adapting the train situated above into an enabling prop that allows him to skid his body along the road below, weaving through the cars. Finding the slack to propel his body up into the air, he then uses the sides of several buildings as a ramp to vertically run upwards, with the digitally simulated dolly-crane also trailing in tow as his body thrusts towards the monorail train's upper hull.

Here, as the hero vaults back towards the train, an emphasis is placed on his body's literal airborne trajectory up across the city though a medium shot/long take rapidly following him from behind while ascending up the brickwork (Figure 1.11). Accordingly, the thematic values at stake follow this dynamic between physical elevation, (i.e. enabled by dexterous interactions with the city) and physical declivity (i.e. whenever infrastructure becomes too much to handle). As composer Danny Elfman's heroic, musical underscoring soars in volume alongside his elevated body, this non-diegetic punctuation also reiterates that a renewed invigoration of energy is associated with the rise.

Figure 1.11

The brief moment discussed above suggests that by accentuating the hero's literal downward/upward movements along a vertical axis, this is a way of negotiating the themes tied to the duplet of body and city. The value of freedom quite literally in a kinetic fashion struggles upward against the gravitational pull of a value of restriction. In a more general sense, the to-and-froing between these two motions generates a kinetic trajectory that gives a temporal unfolding to the two themes. This passing of time, with one value challenging another, also establishes an arc of cause-and-effect, namely freedom constantly clashing with restriction, gradually developing an understanding of what one value means in relation to another: so narrativising the spectacle as an evolving thematic tale of cultural conflict. There are several moments when Spiderman will physically fall/rise in the city setting, and this brings forth an overarching thematic interplay between an *elevated flamboyance of freedom*, which attempts to prevail over *declivity of environmental restrictions* imposed at the ground level. The freedom, individualism and power represented by the hero's body are directly tied to his flexible ingenuity, enhanced dexterity and non-conformist innovation. In contrast, restriction emerges as the threat of stumbling and falling prey to gravitational constraints and the urban claustrophobia promised therein. In this sense, the exuberant movement of rising above and taming obstacles evokes an exhilarating sense of euphoria (akin to Kelly's escapism when singing in the rain-soaked street). When hurdles become untamable, however, and the body succumbs to the city's rigidity, this introduces a state of despondency. An accent is evident in this stylistic dynamic, bringing to the fore far deeper thematic implications: varying between the motion of *ascent as euphoric freedom*, and *descent as constraining despondency*.

When discussing the evocative impact behind a digitally-enhanced portrayal of verticality in action-orientated blockbuster productions, Kristen Whissel offers useful ideas to develop audio-visual thematic accents of rising and falling. The phenomenological or physiological associations of this kinesis are illuminating:

> Upward mobility gives dynamic expression to feelings of soaring hope, joy, unbridled desire, and aspiration; it implies lightness, vitality, freedom, transcendence, defiance, and lofty ideals. In turn, falling and sinking give expression to dread, doom, and terror and are linked to heavy burdens, inertia, subordination, loss, and the void (Whissel 2006: 24).

With this in mind, thematic oppositions tied to freedom and restriction can conceivably present themselves over the course of several action sequences in the superhero film. '[The] protagonist's upward vertical movement is frequently symbolic of a leap towards a new future,' Whissel declares of the action-adventure hero, '[and] downward verticality is inseparable from the rapid approach of an inevitable end' (Whissel 2006: 25). In this sense, particular meanings can become attached to a character's movements along a vertical axis, accentuating the cultural concerns at stake.[12] The cityscape, as Bukatman has also noted, is a material site for the superhero that potentially affords many avenues of a 'playful defiance of the spirit of gravity' (Bukatman 2003: 188), as only these extraordinary bodies are adaptable enough to elevate to the environment's highest peak, soaring far above the habitual hustle and bustle below.

Whissel's approach, however, primarily tends to focus on spectacle and theme in terms of how digital visual effects form an emblem, i.e. a heraldic device or distinctive badge that serves as a symbolic or allegorical representation of a particular quality or concept (*Oxford American Dictionaries*). An emblem, due to the specificity of its allegorical representation, differs slightly from a symbol, which may visibly stand for a variety of abstract ideas. In describing *Titanic* for instance, Whissel states that the ship

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[12] Indeed, since at least the early 1990s, action film sequences have conventionally employed platforms in the form of skyscrapers, national monuments, elevator shafts, high towers, hilltop cities, and deep chasms to visually play out conceptual values along spatial coordinates of extreme highs and lows: namely a milieu designed to induce the protagonist's willfully *insurgent* rise, as a means of resisting the *devastating* fall (Whissel 2006: 24).

Contemporary forms of stylistic devices found in action cinema are in many ways a continuation of Hollywood's classical use of mise-en-scène, recognizable, for example, in domestic melodramas of the 1950s, using household decor to convey the rise and fall of emotional extremes, e.g. with the hazardous implications associated with staircases, such as in *Written on the Wind* (1956) (Whissel 2006: 24). The stylistic dimensions in the superhero film achieve a similar emotional heightening effect, particularly by stressing emphasis on the vertical axes of skyscrapers or high-tower iconography.

stands as a digital emblem of historical inertia. The computer-generated tracking shots that follow the length of the ship, and the wide shots that frame the front bow gliding through the ocean's expansive surface is an effect that links 'the prevailing order with a seemingly endless horizontality' (Whissel 2006: 26). Taken in the context of the ship's voyage in 1912, if the prevailing order situated aboard the vessel were to remain unchallenged then the course of history would continue to follow a direction of power imbalance, namely between the upper and lower classes, as well as the gender inequality of the patriarchal status quo (Whissel 2006: 26).

In Whissel's view, digital effects 'herald' thematic content as the relationship between power hierarchies that evolve along a historical trajectory. Whissel would also argue that when this reasoning is applied to the spectacular effects of gravity defying bodies – such as the superhero – this expresses a crisis rooted in that character's 'problematic relation to the historical, familial and traditional past' (Whissel 2006: 25). Verticality, then, portrays the *force* of gravity, and instils the *laws* of time and space, 'dramatis[ing] the individual's relationship to historical forces… stand[ing] for temporal and historical continuity which, when ruptured by the upsurge of a fall or a vertically articulated mass, creates a dynamised movement, a temporal-historical break that radically changes the course of events' (Whissel 2006: 24). Whissel's argument for the digital emblem is useful, to the extent that it supports the cultural themes described earlier (e.g. a new freedom equated with the hero's rise, and social constraints rooted in the forces of gravity and the strictures of urban infrastructure). This being said, the most useful aspect of Whissel's argument for this discussion is the way verticality can offer the *pleasurable spectatorial* 'position of being caught in the middle of violent conflict between polarised extremes' (Whissel 2006: 27). It is this rhythmic interplay between ascent/descent, more than only the allegorical struggle behind it, that benefits an argument for narrativised spectacle.

Whissel's point about the spectatorial pleasure associated with 'being caught' between two extremes also echoes King's view that filmgoers of popular cinema enjoy engaging in 'some kind of negotiation between the two extremes' of ideological conflict or other 'contradictory items' in the storytelling (King 2000: 105). Applying these ideas to this discussion, it is not only important to outline the thematic tensions at work, but also necessary to explore the pleasure induced by their rhythmic negotiation, as viewers attempt to follow each audio-visual element presenting these violent extremes. For this reason, in order to continue ascertaining how themes are negotiated as a series of rhythmic accents

over time, Whissel's ideas on verticality can be used in conjunction with Bukatman's analysis of kineticism, as well as King and Purse's insights that different branches of spectacle propel the narrative forward in differing ways (detailed explanations are outlined in the thesis introduction).

The approach taken in this discussion is similar to the idea of a digital emblem that heightens narrative drama, and for this reason the chapter can draw from how gravity-defiance negotiates thematic content (e.g. freedom/constraint, the individual/collective). What differentiates my argument, however, is that it focuses on theme as an ongoing distinct rhythm, with implicit cultural tensions unfolding *parallel* to the pacing of plot actions and events, offering another dimension of film narration. Rather than expand on the allegorical significance behind digital images, my argument aims to uncover spectacle's audio-visual, spatial and temporal trajectory that rhythmically carries themes along, allowing a secondary narrative resonance to emerge. The ways in which spectacle differentiates a distinctly thematic route of story information from the primary arc of narrative plotting (i.e. character actions and events linked by a chain of cause-and-effect) is a process that will be expanded upon throughout the chapter.

Up to this point, the chapter has shown how throughout the monorail sequence there is the combination of repetitive beats (e.g. body/city) and varied accents of ascent/descent that present thematic information (e.g. freedom/restriction) along a kinetic trajectory (e.g. upward and downward motion). With this in mind, the chapter will now show another varied accent often found in superhero-action cinema, which is key to continuing the rhythmic unfolding of narrativised spectacle: the stylistic conflict between immense forward *momentum* in conflation with stagnant *inertia*.

Momentum and Inertia

The stylistic tension between momentum and inertia pervades the physical and spatial spectacle of the monorail sequence, forming an essential accent that develops themes associated with body/city. Similar to the visual cadence of ascent, momentum accentuates Spiderman's energetic freedom that comes from physically manipulating the urban environment. Accents of inertia, particularly whenever executed alongside moments of descent, stress the hero's inability to properly improvise with the cityscape, as his body becomes subsumed by its strictures.

When this interplay between momentum/inertia is applied to the antinomy of power and responsibility, for instance, Spiderman's value of power comes from using his

enhanced motion to literally juggle the responsibilities tied to the everyday civilian. Whenever Ock hurls passengers off the train for instance, the hero is required to contain this momentum, swinging and catching them with webbing, safely implementing a gentler state of inertia. In this sense, unregulated momentum, while standing for a physical freedom of movement, also invokes an open, savage wilderness that domesticity simply cannot fully contain, and the hero, as a mediator of tensions, is required to counteract this erratic motion by bringing it gently to a stand still.

The kinetic trajectory of momentum/inertia (described above) proceeds to bring each theme to the surface in an especially explicit and stimulating fashion towards the climactic end of the action sequence. Consider when Ock smashes the cockpit window, incapacitating the driver and ripping the navigational control system apart, in which he disembarks and leaves the monorail to hurtle out of control towards the end of the track at immense speed. Now tasked with halting this careering hazard, Spiderman crawls over to the front of the train and gazes forwards to the end of the track in the distance. It is at this point when the spectacular immediacy of intense kineticism in effect 'strains' or overemphasises the track's literal trajectory, briefly grabbing more attention than the wider narrative context inciting this spectacle. This process is evident in an extended and digitally constructed zoom that presents the action.

Observe how in Figure 1.12, from right-to-left, the camera suddenly propels itself from Spiderman's digitally-enhanced point of view, 'sprinting' closely along the steel rails and wooden sleepers, which causes the rest of the setting to appear as though in a blur. This rapid bouncing motion along the track forms a rhythmic pattern which viewers are prompted to follow. As though about to collide with the barrier, the motion suddenly slows down, and the camera takes an extreme close up to visually insist on the rigidity of the buffer's metallic, hard surface. Continuing to track and pull backwards high above the track edge, an extreme long shot from the right-hand side highlights the-end-of-the-line as a vulnerable point of impasse above several cars and vulnerable pedestrians situated underneath.

Figure 1.12

This continuous long take lasts only for a few seconds, and is important for two reasons. Firstly, on one level of analysis, this digital effect follows a continuity editing style, designed to support the narrative rhythm of the physical conflict between Spiderman and Ock, by establishing a story-world with coherent dimensions of time and space. Much like being situated in front of a theater stage, the audience requires some sense of the spatial and temporal proportions to be fluently outlined for them. Spectators would find it disorientating if stage performers, for example, were to suddenly appear in different locations around the platform, or perhaps venture beyond the edge itself, emerging from behind them, etc. The continuous motion adheres to this fundamental principal of continuity editing in Hollywood cinema, maintaining an *axis of action*, also referred to as the 180° rule: a system which places the camera on one side of the action in order to ensure consistent left-right spatial relations of the elements appearing from shot to shot (Bordwell and Thompson 2013: 503). The effect is meant to establish a clear sense of how the action is unfolding, in where people and objects are positioned in relation to one another, without ever confusing the viewer of this placement. This is also true in so far that the monorail physically follows the axis-of-action line, as viewers are always aware that Spiderman and

Ock are situated *upon* the train roof, and continually attempt to cling to this platform as it hurtles *through* an area of New York City.

Secondly, on another level of analysis, rather than only reiterate the hero's placement in the Manhattan location (providing narrative coherence), Spiderman's gaze towards the track end actually accentuates the spatio-temporal dimensions and the literal momentum of the city. The kineticism presenting the axis-of-action line is strained to the point of *over*-emphasis, for a few seconds briefly directing attention away from the coherence of narrative space-time continuity, and momentarily shifting it toward the immediate rhythmic momentum and eventual inertia of this trajectory.

In order to explore this idea further, it is useful to point out that while continuity editing first and foremost offers a coherent story-world for narrative events to unfold, superhero-action cinema nonetheless tends to intensify[13] these spatio-temporal dimensions to an almost hyperbolic point of exaggeration. This is because action-adventure genres conventionally emulate a thrill-ride experience (i.e. by the increased pacing of rapid cutting alongside free-ranging camera movements). By viscerally straining the axis-of-action in this way, the superhero film arguably *promotes* the rhythmic interplay that unfolds between an agile body and its densely-packed city location to spectacular extremes.

To gain a better insight into the way cutting can present such a rhythmic immediacy, Steven Shaviro states that sometime during the last two decades, contemporary Hollywood action cinema has seemingly reached a point where the mere 'intensification of established techniques' has 'mutated' into increasingly disjunctive editing schemes (Shaviro 2010: 123), able to significantly distract viewer attention away from narrative coherence.[14] The *post-continuity* style, Shaviro writes, is arguably 'a preoccupation with

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[13] Action sequences depend upon a form of *intensified continuity* editing treatment of the axis of action. Intensified continuity editing, a term first introduced by Bordwell, is an amped up equivalent of traditional continuity editing, raised to 'a higher pitch of emphasis', employing fast cutting, a reliance on close shots as well as wide ranging camera movements (Bordwell 2006: 120-121), or specifically: more *rapid editing*, *bipolar extremes* of lens length, more *close framings* in dialogue scenes, and a *free ranging* camera (Bordwell 2002: 16-12).

[14] For instance, if the Hollywood model of continuity editing crystallised both prior to and during the studio era (i.e. 1910s, 1920s and 1930s), and the *new* Hollywood renaissance of the 1970s sought to intensify these established conventions, then the type of stylistics featured in the high-budget blockbusters of Hollywood since the 2000s onwards have in turn been 'exploded' beyond all proportion, pushed to an absurd, hyperbolic point (Shaviro 2010: 122-123).

The post-continuity stylistic tendency reaches it full potential (i.e. forming incoherent temporal and spatial dimensions), in the exploitation film, such as those lower-budget productions that tend to subvert, Shaviro suggests, rather than cater to mainstream storytelling conventions, and

immediate effects [that] trumps any concern for broader continuity – whether on the immediate shot-by-shot level, or on that of the overall narrative' (Shaviro 2010: 123). Shaviro's insights on stylistic immediacy are primarily concerned with a major disruption of classical Hollywood coherent storytelling strategies, and so cannot be straightforwardly applied to an analysis of popular, 'easy-to-follow' superhero-action narratives. Nonetheless, Shaviro provides a useful means of isolating how an alternative type of rhythmic narrative resonance emerges alongside the primary narrative trajectory of causality.

Gunfights, martial arts battles, and car chases, Shaviro explains, are presented through shaky handheld cameras, impossible camera angles, rapid cuts, deliberately mismatched shots, all finished with a sheen of digital composition. In this sense, the contemporary spectacular action sequence becomes a 'jagged collage of fragments of explosions, crashes, physical lunges, and violently accelerated motions. There is no sense of spatiotemporal continuity; *all that matters is delivering a continual series of shocks to the audience* [emphasis added]' (Shaviro 2012). Shaviro's analysis, by extension, brings into question a relevant insight proposed by Bordwell, in describing how contemporary action sequences of combat or pursuits present a vast, yet vague *busyness* or blurred confusion where a 'flurry of cuts' gives 'a sense that something really frantic but imprecise is happening' (Bordwell 2008). This is also apparent in the way in which montage editing can generate a competitive flurry of images of body and city, and the impact the body has when bursting through the screen to negotiate these urban contours can *bombard* the viewer with a series of cultural associations tied to physical freedom and a congested metropolis.

The monorail sequence in *Spider-Man 2* also arguably participates in this general sense of confused, cluttered or bustling, intensified action and impact aesthetic achieved with special effects bursting through the screen alongside rapid cutting. When a post-continuity analysis is applied to the most intense feats of physical prowess featured in the monorail sequence, it is actually this sense of *vast* or *vague* 'busyness' specifically, that indeed seems too visually-excessive for the purposes of narrative causality and motivation.

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tend to deal with controversial subject matter, intentionally challenging rather than placating audience expectations. Both Tony Scott's *Domino* (2005) and Mark Neveldine/Brian Taylor's *Gamer* (2009) are examples of action films that 'fit' within the exploitation bracket, funded as semi-independent productions with below-average budgets, both featuring erratic, disjunctive cutting techniques.

As a consequence, this audio-visual clutter *draws attention* to the immediacy of the editing style, so prioritising the cutting:

> In contrast to both classical and modern cinema, post-continuity filmmaking abandons the ontology of time and space; it no longer articulates bodies in relation to this. Instead, it sets up *rhythms of immediate stimulation and manipulation*. The shots are selected and edited together only on the basis of their *immediate visceral effect* upon the audience moment to moment. There is no concern for any sort of pattern extending further in space and time [emphasis added] (Shaviro 2010: 187).

By using the model of post-continuity Shaviro advocates, the monorail action sequence, although it may follow a continuity editing scheme of coherent spatio-temporal dimensions, is similarly packed with shots selected and edited together on the basis of their immediate stimulation, prized for an ability to manipulate through visceral impact. One way the monorail sequence achieves this sense of immediate stimulation is that, by presenting a great deal of the 'busyness' Bordwell points out, the spectacle diverts attention away from the logical flow of plot causality over time and space towards other kinds of evolving (cultural) associations. Also, the degree of physical spectacle this sequence employs can be said to sit somewhere between classic-, intensified- and post-continuity editing strategies: performing dual roles of confirming yet, at the same instant, trivialising the spatio-temporal plot coherence to an extent. In this way, the stylistic techniques presenting the spectacular action in the monorail sequence do not so much disregard the rules of the continuity system, but rather employ key *elements* of a post-continuity editing scheme. As the monorail sequence draws nearer to its climax, the spectacular editing and visual effects instigate a preoccupation with the immediate stimulation of a rhythmic pattern.

The intensified axis-of-action presenting the monorail's momentum can, I argue, become a literal evolving trajectory of images imbued with a thematic significance: doing so by highlighting the speed and duration of shots and shapes that depict the duplet of body/city. The kineticism of the monorail, for instance, explicitly highlights a specific set of positive and negative values associated with the hero's own physical exhilaration and trauma. This movement propels Spiderman's body and the commuter-laden train forward along a state of unstable momentum towards the solid, uncompromising stillness of the city limits ahead. The heavy momentum of the train is thus asserted as something that is 'unstable', and the hero's body is affirmed as a potential source of inertia that will reinstate 'stability'.

The accents in the spectacle can be used in a number of differing combinations, alongside beats, to achieve an arc of evolving narrativisation. The heightened spectacle first plays off beats of the hero's individual, exuberant body against the train as a constraining piece of city infrastructure. The heightened spectacle then picks up on these cultural themes in a visceral and sensationalised manner through the negative accents of descent that are played off against positive accents of ascent. Thereafter, the themes continue to be developed along other accents of momentum, and the negative value of instability these promote, against accents of inertia, and the positive stability these promise. Notice how in his first attempt to quell the train's speed, a low angle shot looks upward at Spiderman through the flickering ruts. Before jumping downwards into the tracks, his physical hesitation signals the despondency ahead of him, and the sudden impact after digging his feet into the sleepers, splicing plank fragments apart, painfully propels him towards a state of instability (Figure 1.13). In this way, the trajectory of descent and momentum is confirmed as carrying a set of negative values.

Figure 1.13 Both descent and momentum become emphasised as negative values.

The negative values invoked by momentum and descent are essential in contrasting shots of body and city to achieve a rhythmic form of montage. While rapidly running out of track, the hero employs another improvisational strategy of shooting multiple strands of webbing onto the surrounding buildings, holding a makeshift rope in each hand, binding himself to the surrounding brickwork. As the ropes of webbing eventually tear apart, fragmenting the walled surfaces attached to these strands, this causes the hero to loose his balance for a brief instant, and falling towards the rails he is forced to strain in a horizontal

angle to resist this descent/momentum. This first shot of the hero's strenuous efforts is immediately followed by a second shot of the terrified gasps and facial expressions of the commuters onboard, framed reeling back in fear. This montage cut directly confirms descent and momentum as tied to the wild savagery of the malfunctioning monorail, and the threat it imposes on domestic, civilian spaces (Figure 1.14).

Figure 1.14
A shot portraying the savagery promised by gravitational descent and unregulated urban momentum is followed by the shot of vulnerable civilian domesticity.

When Spiderman rises upwards to compensate for the fall, this renewed surge of ascent carries the more positive possibility of transcending the dangers of gravity, instilling the hope that the hero will continue on his mission of instigating inertia on unregulated urban momentum. In this instance, both ascent and inertia stand for positive values – played against their negative counterparts – resonating with the hero's individual power to protect the community, and uphold a prerogative of social responsibility.

Also, there are several shots throughout the sequence that directly contrast Spiderman's physical exertions with the panicked commuters behind him, as they watch each failed attempt. The hero will often turn around to reassure or warn the passengers, and at one instance the conductor even criticises his efforts. On a spectatorial level, this is a prompt that allows viewers to feel as through they are represented, collectively participating in the thrill-ride of the impact aesthetic. On a thematic level, this rhythmic cutting between Spiderman/the commuters confirms the antinomies that express a vulnerable community's reliance on an extraordinary individual.

Spatio-temporal continuity, in the examples given above, is not eclipsed in the sense Shaviro advocates, but instead becomes *re-directed* from plot causality and *shifted* over to

the threshold of immediate spectacular stimulation. This overemphasis on the literal length and direction of the axis-of-action continues to unfold as an audio-visual rhythmic pattern, forming an *evolving arc* between body and setting, and the thematic values these images stand for. The recurring beats of body and city resonate with cultural contradictions of freedom and restriction, extraordinariness and ordinariness, flamboyance and propriety, power and responsibility, self and society, individual and community, wilderness and civilisation. The varied accents then help to develop and vary these themes through stylistic inflections typical of the exhilaration/trauma thrill-ride experience. The rhythmic play off between ascent and descent negotiates the antinomy of freedom and restriction along through movements that evoke euphoria and despondency or elevation and declivity. A rhythm of momentum and inertia similarly develops questions of individual power and social responsibility through physical movement across space that specifically elicits juxtapositions between instability and stability, danger and safety.

So far, the discussion has outlined the antinomies and cultural contradictions significant to the monorail sequence, and then ascertained the audio-visual beats and accents that carry these values along. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, at the climax of Spiderman's struggle with the train there is a significant shift from heightened to contemplative modes of spectacle. It is at this energetic change in pacing of the cutting, framing and staging that thematic tensions come to a head, taken to new rhythmic extremes from a peak of intensity to a pause of hiatus, from exertion to relief, and instability to stability. With this in mind, the next stage in the argument is to explore how these themes become challenged and tested to an absolute breaking point, and then seek out a firmer sense of reconciliation. After doing so, the chapter will lastly see how this narrativisation of spectacle in the monorail sequence works in action sequences taken from other contemporary superhero films.

(iii) *Rhythmic Limits*: From Heightened Uncertainty to Contemplative Reconciliation

This section refers back to the analysis of the climatic resolution of the monorail sequence outlined earlier in the chapter, when Spiderman attempts to halt the train. The discussion has previously established the thematic tensions associated with the superhero iconography of the costumed body and city setting evident in the sequence. Through montage editing strategies, it has been shown that the rapid juxtaposition between images of body/city invokes a series of repetitive beats, which consolidates the themes. Also, the discussion has explained how a rhythmic interplay unfolds when these beats are varied and developed

through the stylistic accentuations of ascent and descent, alongside the accents of momentum and inertia, which in turn carry their own pertinent thematic significance.

The chapter has also began to show how the structure of spectacle tells a distinct kind of evolving narrative arc, based on the play off between two competing sets of audio-visual rhythm and the thematic values these rhythms invoke. The themes of freedom/restriction associated with the montage of body and city are consolidated through beats that repeatedly juxtapose these two sets of images. The thematic tensions are then tested through the accents that vary the stylistic presentation of these two images. Yet, the argument can now explore the eventual process of resolution between these themes, which occurs through the shift between two types of rhythmic pacing in particular: (i) the intensity of heightened spectacle that challenges these cultural values, and (ii) the calm hiatus of contemplative spectacle, which allows for a profound state of thematic reconciliation to unfold, so completing the narrative arc embedded in (and generated by) the spectacle. Up to now, the majority of the monorail analysis has focused on the way thematic tensions are built up though the heightened spectacle of rapid montage editing strategies. When the sequence eventually reaches an energetic pinnacle however, the beats of body/city and accents of ascent/descent with momentum/inertia reach a spectacular impasse: being a turning point of thematic negotiation, which ultimately leads to a firmer state of equilibrium.

The heightened spectacle has ultimately presented an intense editing pattern displaying extreme physical exertion, creating a sense of *uncertainty* as to whether Spiderman will successfully hold back the momentum of the train before colliding with the track buffers ahead. During his final attempt to quell the train's speed the hero deploys three times as many web strands than before. The ropes audibly and visibly crack with tautness, but reluctantly stay anchored. Keeping a firm grasp onto the lariat of webbing, the ropes tighten and the hero's arms and torso are increasingly stretched apart, ripping his costume at the seams, causing him to scream in agony, which escalates the physical tension to its most pronounced point of spectacular intensity.

The uncertain outcome of this physical and environmental impasse propels the narrative causality forwards,[15] but it also carries the themes toward new audio-visual

[15] Action sequences are the first port of call in convincing us of whether or not the hero will be capable of eventually overcoming the 'ultimate obstacle' that looms at a distant point in the narrative arc (Purse 2011: 33). The hero's struggle towards attaining physical mastery is all the more impactful during momentary losses in the body's control of a given situation (Purse 2011: 45), followed by the elation of regaining composure, and overcoming the hurdle.

extremes. To put this idea of the uncertainty of spectacular elements into context, it is useful to mention that any action sequence provides 'an aspirational, empowering vision of a human functioning at the extremes of what is physically possible' (Purse 2007: 8), and it is in this sense of spectacular 'extremity' or intensity during key moments of narrative crisis that wider questions of "what's thematically at stake" may also find their own climatic framing. Part of the climatic framing in the monorail sequence also depends on properly establishing the rules (or what Purse terms to be the 'physics') of a given fictional story-world at an early stage in the narrative arc. Only then does an action body have the potential to eventually push itself 'hard enough' against these prescribed limits, thus able to match these barriers, and then proceed to *crossover* the boundaries of 'physically achievable action,' allowing the viewer to become thrilled at the exciting possibilities the hero might achieve next (Purse 2011: 47). Similarly, during the struggle with the train, Spiderman is redefining the limits of his own enhanced motion, which also arguably redefines the limits of the audio-visual and thematic energy invested in this physical exertion.

Purse's approach to understanding narrative progression allows this discussion to explore how viewers engage with thematic tensions directly alongside the exertions of an action hero body: as it experiences the evolving shift from an unsettling feeling of uncertainty, and gradually attains a more stable state of physical self-mastery. Any effort to properly resolve thematic tensions of freedom, accordingly, becomes *most* exhilarating and exhausting when the superhero body faces its *most* physically demanding endeavour. Cultural tensions and questions resonate from the extent to which the hero is able to match, or somehow excel beyond such absolute physical limits? The beats and accents match this tempo and pacing, bringing into question *what conclusions can be raised when this rhythmic struggle comes to an impasse*?

As the ropes begin to fray and the train is gradually crushed under his back, the cutting (refer back to Figure 1.0) accentuates the hero's physical relationship with the setting in a way that also carries the beats and accents to a breaking point. Crying out in agony as the train begins to slow down, it is here in this brief moment that a simultaneous clash occurs between all of the filmic elements outlined in the chapter so far. The *free*-body is pitted against its *restrictive*-city infrastructure (i.e. the sheer scale of the monorail train; arms anchored to the brickwork). The gravitational confrontation between *euphoric*-ascent (the aspiration to maintain the train's elevation atop the track platform) and *despondent*-decent (forces of gravity that threaten over the track edge) comes to a head.

The *unstable*-momentum of the monorail train, and the pressing need to reach a *stability* of inertia (before it hits the end-of-the-line) also are forced to clash and confirm a victor.

The impact with the barrier is the pinnacle of this scenario of uncertainty. When Spiderman is pushed, stretched and tasked to the absolute limits of physical and emotional endurance, yet the train still moves closer to the edge, this causes him to become unsure of his own abilities, shocked at whether or not he has accomplished the goal. Here, the textual elements presenting a flamboyant body and city strictures are concentrated together, reaching their most intense, spectacular impasse as neither is prepared to give way to the other. The body attempts to prevail over the surrounding urban infrastructure, and vice versa with equal resistance. As a result, the tension between the cultural contradictions is also consequently unable to escalate any further. The consequent stalemate between body and city carries forward an impasse between the antimonies of freedom/restriction, power/responsibility and self/society. This is for the reason that the uncertainty presented by this heightened spectacle has significant implications for the themes, posing the question of where does *self*, *power* or *freedom* actually sit in relation to oppositional values of *society*, *responsibility* and *restriction*?

After the physical exertion of this heightened uncertainty has reached its pinnacle, the sequence now shifts into a contemplative mode with the extended long take/long shot of the train hanging over the edge (see Figure 1.1). In the wake of the long take, it initially becomes problematic to determine whether the body or urban infrastructure has fully prevailed over the other? What then transpires in this pause or *hiatus* of the action, however, is that the spectacular energy of these textual elements becomes dissipated and balanced out, again influencing the themes. For instance, although the hero has successfully managed to slow and halt the train's immense speed, he does so at the cost of losing consciousness, ready to fall off the precipice. In this sense, the freedom of movement invested in the hero's body prevails to an extent (ascent is maintained, inertia is instated). The body, though, now unconscious and about to fall, has achieved this victory at the cost of being entirely overwhelmed by the constraining forces of environmental and gravitational restriction (now susceptible to a renewed accent of descent, and so a renewed accent of unstable physical momentum). In a kinetic sense then, the thematic value of freedom has very much prevailed, yet been defeated; in the same way, a value of restriction has also prevailed, but is too defeated.

Such a point of hiatus exemplifies the way antinomies are often challenged, yet at the same time reaffirmed. Genre theorist Thomas Schatz points out that as Hollywood

narratives reach a state of resolution, these storytelling formulas often attempt to resolve antinomies not only by challenging or criticising a set of social issues, but also by reinforcing and renegotiating the values, beliefs, ideals and tenets of American culture informing them (Schatz 1981: 35). Superhero films similarly take part in a wider problem-solving strategy employed by Hollywood genres, as a process concerned with juxtaposing basic cultural conflicts. This process of resolution, however, as shown above, can rhythmically invoke the antinomies along a trajectory of kineticism that unfolds as a set of repetitive audio-visual beats that shift between differing varied accents.

Taking into account Schatz's line of reasoning, Spiderman's physical freedom of movement has indeed conquered the monorail's momentum, yet the hero has also become physically incapacitated by the force of the train. In this sense, the hiatus of the long take suggests that while body and city can *conquer* one another, they can also be *conquered by* each other. There is a compromise of the antinomies in this interplay: individual power emerges as an extraordinary freedom of movement, yes, but this freedom is in fact an autonomy that wishes to fulfill a pro-social mission of responsibility to the collective, which is a prerogative that inevitably restricts this enhanced motion, perhaps halting it entirely. The thematic content implies that, for the superhero figure, the notion of an extraordinary 'self' is inherently wrapped up in continually defining oneself though the ordinariness of the 'societal order'. The narrativised spectacle carries this same negotiation, but in a purely kinetic sense, along an arc of spatio-temporal movement between body/setting that tests and resolves cultural contradictions through an explicit, visceral level of rhythmic stimulation and immediacy (that benefits, but is not identical to, the intricate pacing of the main plot content).

After the hiatus of the long take, the contemplative mode then allows the narrativised spectacle to bring the dramatic conflict between these themes towards a firmer sense of closure, unfolding into a series of slow-paced shots that proffer a renewed sense of *reconciliation* to unfold. Here, the hero's extraordinary freedom of movement has reached its limits, and gravitational descent now consumes him, pulling his body down into the depths of the street level below. A shot shows his limp body about to fall off the precipice, but the hero is quickly grasped by several grateful commuters, who proceed to gently and slowly carry his motionless body through the carriage. This brief moment of the near-fall is a turning point that prompts a firmer resolution to the hiatus preceding it. Consider how Spiderman's downward trajectory of descent – the despondency of which has so far in the sequence presented urban restrictions and social responsibility as a

negative value – is intercepted by the city setting itself, which now brings his body into its fold. This is because the hands of the commuters are not only representative of the community, but also the urban mise-en-scene. Indeed, no one commuter stands out as an individual character in the narrative, and the diversity of ethnicity, gender or age across the passengers collectively form a part of the city-dwelling populace that flows through in and around the infrastructure as a whole.

In this way, as the commuters carefully carry him across the carriage on their shoulders, this far calmer interaction between body/city is a gradual, gentler merging of physical flamboyance with urban prosaicism. The slow paced staging and editing of this tranquil movement across the carriage (accompanied by a non-diegetic musical lament) is in stark contrast to the previous rhythmic intensity faced earlier during the heightened spectacle. Instead, the contemplative mode insists on a drawn out rumination over the hero's efforts, which helps to assuage the cultural tensions between body/city (Figure 1.15).

Figure 1.15 After momentum has been rendered inert, and ascent has now fully prevailed over descent, the shift from heightened to contemplative spectacle dissipates the previous energetic tirade between the *free*-body/*restrictive*-city: now offering the possibility of a calmer reconciliation between the values of self/society and power/responsibility.

It is useful to briefly point out here that earlier in the sequence a burst of flame from the damaged cockpit console set the hero's mask alight, causing him to pull the burning

garment away. This was key to straining the thematic tensions in the heightened mode. The hero's pained facial expressions were amplified to new extremes when the train collided with the barrier, fully exposing a civilian vulnerability in the hero that compromised his non-conformist individualism and vigilante heroism. In terms of the cutting, there was a rhythmic jump from shots of the hero's exasperated visage against the end of the track, emphasising the tension between the body as savage vigilante (i.e. an extraordinary, empowered masked *alter-ego*) and the body as a domestic urban dweller (i.e. ordinary *civilian status*).

More importantly, during the contemplative mode the thematic tension embedded in the spectacle achieves a state of full reconciliation through a more docile and tamer kind of audio-visual rhythmic cutting and physical motion. Placing him gently down onto the floor, Spiderman soon regains consciousness, and a point of view shot from the hero's position peers up surrounded by admiring city-dwellers. Here, when a grateful passenger returns the hero's discarded mask and Spiderman pulls it back over his face there is a final sense of relief that brings the contemplative mode to a close. The placidity of this interaction allows the city setting to help the body make peace with its costume. The tensions have now been alleviated. Covering up his civilian quotidian vulnerability, this helps to reinstate the hero's physical freedom (to resist environmental restrictions and social propriety). Through the rhythm and kineticism of a contemplative reconciliation, freedom is now no longer simply a value reluctantly tethered to social responsibility, but actually driven by a personal fight for 'the everyman'.

By risking his life to save them, Parker experiences a new type of social integration: a hero who receives recognition for his pro-social mission. While a hero does not seek validation, such an explicit communal appreciation for heroism nonetheless celebrates and confirms Parker's exceptional individualism when donning the Spiderman suit. The interplay between body/city has thus been re-considered as a symbiotic relationship rather than a constant struggle, now conceived as a platform that provides Parker with endless opportunities to don the Spiderman costume and unleash his inner potential. In this instant, the relief felt is an explicit means of reconciling the tensions at work, because the city is now no longer viewed as only a restrictive value against his freedom of movement, but an enabling platform for him to physically perform his role as a

vigilante: balancing the masked Spiderman with the civilian Parker,[16] the free-body and restrictive-city, power and responsibility, individualism and community, and so forth.

By staging a spectacular cutting and framing between rhythms of heightened uncertainty and contemplative reconciliation, this dynamic offers up a distinct thematic storytelling arc essential to the superhero film. This narrative arc infers that extraordinary physical freedom has the power to tame environmental restrictions. The prerogative of social responsibility, on the other hand, will always prevail over such individual power, rendering the hero's agile momentum and euphoric ascent as inert and vulnerable to gravity. When the thematic tensions (e.g. in particular, those antinomies adapted from the Western and Musical genres) are applied to the superhero figure, a secondary narrative resonance begins to become clear. For instance, the hero's physical freedom of enhanced motion, the savagery of superhuman abilities, and the costumed flamboyance, spontaneity and improvisation tend to manipulate the rigidity of the city into a vast wilderness or open frontier that can potentially overcome everyday environmental constraints and social propriety. This extraordinary power, however, is inevitably compelled to protect vulnerable, civilian domesticity when it fails to regulate its own momentum, hence kowtowing to these stipulations in a manner that compromises the hero's initial kinetic freedom. These narrative arcs of rhythmically-developing images and graphic shapes unfold parallel to plot causality, emphasising a sequential pattern primarily based on important thematic information. Taking this into account, it is plausible that narrativised spectacle establishes its own dimension of narration that contributes in a distinct way to a viewer's comprehension of the film's main narrative causal trajectory.

The final stage of the chapter will now summarise the key aspects of narrativised spectacle explored throughout my analysis, showing how these ideas on thematic stimulation are discernable from the exposition of plot causality in *Spider-Man 2*. To round off the chapter, I will then ask whether such a narrative trajectory – an arc made up of distinct audio-visual rhythms of editing, framing and staging strategies that invoke themes which move along an evolving pace of intensity, hiatus and relief – are also found in the action sequences of other superhero films.

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[16] In narrative terms, Parker's aspirations as a civilian for a socially integrated lifestyle (i.e. personal fulfillment through a meaningful-relationship with love-interest M.J.) have become reconciled with his desire to fight for a pro-social mission of selflessness: a compulsion that can only be granted by the physical freedoms when playing the role of the vigilante crime-fighter.

(iv) *A Tale of Two Rhythms*: Narrativised Spectacle and Narrative Causality

This final section of the chapter explores the relationship and differences between narrativised spectacle and narrative causality. Using the analysis from the monorail sequence as a case study to build on, this section will show how a rhythmic, kinetic trajectory unfolds across superhero films in a way that emphasises thematic development above all else, being quite discernable from the rhythm of narrative actions and plot events that follow along a chain of cause-and-effect. This will prove my definition of narrativised spectacle as not one and the same with narrative causality, being action sequences made up of spectacular audio-visual rhythms that generate a distinct pattern of narration, able to unfold alongside, but at a different pacing to the main plot events.

As discussed in the thesis introduction, spectacle and narrative are inseparable from one another in Hollywood filmmaking practices, because special/digital effects primarily motivate the viewer's engagement with goal-orientated characters and their locations. Explosive pyrotechnics aim to heighten a state of peril or adversity, while expansive vistas and endless horizons emphasise the individual's pioneering spirit or journey of discovery. The hurtling speed of the monorail train, in the same vein, also propels the plotting forward, forming a challenging platform that gives energy to the ongoing provocation between protagonist and antagonist. With this being said, the monorail sequence in *Spider-Man 2* does not only serve the purposes of plot, but also, as I have argued, offers another avenue of narrative information for audiences to engage with, which benefits the wider storytelling process as a whole. As the previous analysis of the chapter has shown, a secondary kind of narrative trajectory resonates from the rhythm of the montage editing patterns that juxtapose iconographies of body and city, telling a tale that plays-off the thematic tensions this pairing invokes.

Initially, a brief plot summary of *Spider-Man 2* will help outline the distinction between the primary narrative trajectory of causality, and the secondary narrative trajectory of narrativised spectacle. The primary narrative trajectory revolves around the tension between the two identities of the hero protagonist: (i) the crime-fighting vigilante Spiderman; (ii) and freelance newspaper photographer Peter Parker. Both narrative and thematic conflict attempt to resolve the tension Parker faces by being split between his dual personas of everyday *civilian* and extraordinary *hero*, as well as the power and responsibility each can afford or impose. The crux of this tension is developed around one character in particular: the love-interest MJ, fulfilling the passive role of damsel-in-distress

to which motivates the protagonist to achieve his state of heroism, or question what it means to be a hero. Several narrative events, the monorail sequence included, develop the protagonist's attempts at reconciling his dual identities, in relation to either protecting or becoming reunited with MJ.[17] In terms of the plotting, the mentally-unstable[18] scientist Doc Ock plans to ignite a self-sustainable sphere of nuclear fusion, that could destroy most of New York City, and the monorail train sequence plays a role in this chain of cause-and-effect. This is because Ock has kidnapped MJ in order to draw Spiderman out into a confrontation to kill the crime-fighter, and prevent any interference with his next experiment.

The editing rhythm of the monorail sequence supports the plotting to a great extent. The physical brawl between Spiderman and Ock atop the train is a compelling feat of spectacle that stimulates exhilaration and shock which emphasizes what is at stake if the hero successfully manages (or fails) to apprehend the villain. Also, the pervasive speed and danger of the sequence help propel events along the narrative arc towards a distant closure: i.e. the protagonist's ultimate goal of conquering the villain by putting a stop to his destructive experiments, saving New York City, rescuing and becoming reunited with the love interest. As Purse points out, many action sequences can function in this way, 'depict[ing] key plot developments, develop and explore the film's themes, and progress our sense of the hero's growing powers and capacity to bring the drama to its resolution'

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[17] The narrative arc reaches full closure after the hero rescues MJ by defeating the villain in his laboratory on an abandoned pier, deactivating Ock's unstable fusion reactor saving New York city from being annihilated. The exhausted hero decides to pulls his mask off to reveal the civilian identity underneath, reiterating a prior conversation Parker once shared as a student with Octavious as a mentor: that intelligence is a privilege for the benefit of all, rather than the one's personal obsessions and desires. Narrative equilibrium is restored.

This act signifies Parker's struggle with balancing power and responsibility between his own identities, in turn prompting the villain to reconcile his own split identity. The villain's rational, humanitarian persona 'Doctor Octavious' is then able to prevail over the influence of his 'Doc Ock' identity, fueled by the artificially intelligent cybernetic extensions that indulge his inner compulsions. To this end, Octavious agrees to help Spiderman safely drown the sphere down in the Hudson River. As MJ also observes this unveiling of a hidden alter-ego, the hero protagonist is able to become reconciled with the love-interest. Now aware of Parker's double-life as a crime-fighter, MJ decides to embrace him, later eloping from her wedding to another man, and choose to stay with the hero protagonist. This allows the plot to end with MJ – although somewhat tentatively – to look out of the hero's apartment window with approval as he swings away to face more criminal activity, accepting his vigilantism, and so reconciling both the freedoms and restrictions associated with both the Spiderman and Parker personas.

[18] The story context is that Ock must redeem the failure of his previous experiment, because this resulted in an accident that resulted in the death of his wife, and also caused the newly installed sentient cybernetic devices to compromise his rationality with grief and pain.

(Purse 2011: 35).

Nonetheless, in terms of the monorail sequence as a source of immediate, visceral, entertaining thrills, the narrative rhythm of cause-and-effect – while supported by the spectacle, camerawork and editing – is not entirely identical to same exact rhythm of cutting that stresses Spiderman's prolonged physical exertions with the train as he attempts to defeat Ock and save the terrified commuters. This is due to the aspect of 'busyness' – suggested earlier by Shaviro and Bordwell – evident in many action sequences that presents a set of intense rhythms of stimulation. The rhythm of the cutting between physical and spatial spectacle, for instance, highlights the *immediate visceral impact* of repetitive beats exchanged between: Spiderman/train, Spiderman/commuters, Spiderman/track-end, Spiderman/bridges, Spiderman/girders, Spiderman/city walls, etc. alongside their varied accents of ascent/descent and momentum/inertia. Consequently, for a few brief moments viewer attention is fixated on the spectacle of the hero physically contending with the urban infrastructure, which somewhat trivialises the wider impetus for rescuing the damsel-in-distress, or stopping the villain, making the immediate narrative context become quite vague at this point, i.e. slightly dimmed or less imposing than before.

In order to develop this secondary narrative trajectory of audio-visual thematic rhythms proposed above, it is useful to consider how the formal properties behind the thrill-ride experience of physical and spatial spectacle in superhero films function as an alternative means of emphasising or punctuating the storytelling. This is because brief instants of the thrill-ride experience can momentarily stress spectacular 'stimulation' above narrative 'content', by focusing on the hero's physical placement within the city setting. Kristen Thompson's discussion on audio-visual rhythm is useful when arguing for a secondary narrative resonance that primarily emphasises thematic tensions. In *Ivan The Terrible: Part I* (1944) the broken rhythms of action, mismatched cutting of mise-en-scene, and sustained overemphasis of certain stylistic devices collectively '[call] attention to the material of the film' (Thompson [1981] 1986: 136), more than story content alone.[19] At the beginning of the illness sequence, during the series of shots of Boyars and ambassadors in the courtyard, viewers are invited to pay 'attention to small shifts of space, to faces and textures of fur and brocade, to the changing visual overtone of the cathedral

[19] Thompson's formalist approach is reductionist, isolating the rhythm of the cutting and shot lengths, and how bodies move around the mise-en-scene to remain solely within the film text at the expense of narrative content and entirely separate from genre context. It is more fruitful in the context of this discussion, however, to explore how textual signs impart cultural meaning alongside Thompson's analysis of filmic rules and devices.

icon, and to the rhythmic chiming of the various bells' (Thompson [1981] 1986: 137). Rhythms such as these work to 'draw attention to themselves far beyond their importance in the functioning narrative', and that the repetition or variation of a particular device, when done multiple times, can actually 'far outweigh its original motivation and take on an importance greater than its narrative or compositional function would seem to warrant [emphasis added]' (Thompson [1981] 1986: 136). Similarly, the rhythm of the audio-visual elements in the monorail sequence are in a sense over-emphasised, in no way at the expense of narrative guidance, but rather as a purely thematic type of punctuation that can run parallel to – but not subsumed as one and the same with – the pacing of main plot events and character actions.

Throughout the monorail sequence, it is the savage barrage or *rhythmic over-emphasis* of shots and shapes (e.g. the spectacular clash between body and city) that invites viewer participation in the thrill-ride experience, and also arguably prompts a different level of narrative resonance to unfold. The visceral immediacy of movements and pacing presented by the editing style and special effects briefly takes attention away from the specifics of carefully organised narrative exposition (e.g. hero and villain fighting over the damsel-in-distress), and in its place makes explicit the important thematic information. It is during the thrill ride of the monorail sequence that such a secondary narrative resonance can be said to emerge: highlighting the implicit subtext at hand by playing-off abstract values invoked by the exhilaration, shock and awe of this spectacle. On those occasions whenever the hero swings through New York City, using forward momentum to negotiate the urban infrastructure and debris, the physical and spatial spectacle combine together to tell a rhythmic/thematic story of self in confliction with society. Audio-visual accentuations of 'rising' bring forth a sense of 'extraordinary individualism', which then come into conflict with accents of 'falling', that in contrast infer an 'ordinary, quotidian state of existence': playing-off the positive values associated with a *free*-body that euphorically moves upward *against* the negative values tied to city-*constraints* or the despondent-fall.

The themes described above evolve along a kinetic trajectory. Whenever the rhythm is presented though a heightened uncertainty (rapid-paced editing, impact aesthetic) this works to test the meaning of each thematic value. Secondly, as an action sequence comes to a close, the themes seek out a firmer sense of resolution, and pacing allows for this by reaching a more contemplative rhythm (slow-paced editing, the long shot/take), prompting the question: "What conclusions can be drawn from the physical clash of extraordinary

individuals against the spatial dimensions of an ordinary societal order?" In this fashion, the thematic tale of struggle between self and society is a storytelling arc that kinetically unfolds as an audio-visual rhythm, rather than being measured only through the guidance of plot causality or the narrative exposition of character actions and events alone.

To clarify then, narrativised spectacle can be termed as kinetic trajectories that develop thematic values by playing-off rhythmic beats of body/city, with accents of ascent/descent and momentum/inertia, and with a pacing of heightened/contemplative modes that contribute to the narration of implicit themes. There is evidence of narrativised spectacle being employed across the contemporary superhero film cycle. Take the example of *Superman Returns* (2006) when the hero is tasked with catching the freefalling mass of a malfunctioning airplane, which steadily plummets down toward Metropolis city below. Heightened spectacle introduces and tests the themes at stake by showing the beats and accents in a kinetic, visceral sense. As Superman attempts to slow the plane, a rapid-editing scheme presents huge pieces of wing fragments to become detached, and the impact aesthetic then thrusts these hurdles toward Superman's speeding body. As he smashes through them in mid-air seemingly bursting out at the foreground of the screen, a set of positive and negative values follow suit. Both descent and momentum are negative values in this instance, invoking a sense of despondency and instability that accentuates the values of social responsibility this compromised piece of urban infrastructure represents (e.g. vulnerable civilian domesticity). Only the joy and hope associated with the possibility of ascent, and (in this context) the stability of inertia can allow the positive values to prevail: namely the freedom, individualism and power of the hero's body that will counteract the restrictions faced by the city-dwelling collective onboard and situated in Metropolis below.

Only a short distance from impacting with the ground level, this heightened spectacle then builds up a tension of uncertainty after the hero grabs onto the plane's front nose, gradually imposing a gentler state of stable inertia on the unstable momentum of the aircraft. The pacing then shifts into a contemplative mode, as Superman safely places the vessel within the expansive vista of a crowded baseball stadium. Here, coinciding with the jubilant non-diegetic heroic musical leitmotif composed by John Williams, the energy of this triumphant score unfolds alongside a series of extreme long shots of thousands of fans roaring their approval. A series of other long and medium-long shots then present different echelons of the appreciative populace observing this event on television screens. Standing in the street in front of a store window, offices and bars, hundreds of people collectively

cheer and applaud Superman's efforts. The iconography of these huddled city-dwellers is then followed with the long shots of the hero rising upwards into the skyline. Here, the accent of ascent invokes positive values of euphoria and power, as after having received recognition for this act of valour, Superman unleashes his freedom of movement in front of both the diegetic inhabitants and theatre audience, rising up into the sky once more, embracing unencumbered heights that the common city-dweller might only aspire to reach. The hero has made the city safe and whole again. In this case, the power of the individual has been unproblematically and positively reconciled with social responsibility, but this dynamic will continue to shift the thematic balance between self and society across later action sequences of the film.

The rhythmic trajectory of beats and accents making up a narrativised spectacle can also unfold throughout the course of a superhero film, surfacing and resurfacing alongside the primary narrative causality. In *Iron Man* for instance, ascent and descent is a rhythmic motif that heightens the narrative drama, but also overemphasises the thematic values. As noted in the thesis introduction, when the hero Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) is taken hostage by a terrorist group in Afghanistan, he builds a technologically-advanced suit of armour that allows him to fight his captives and propel out of the camp, rising above his confinement and escaping to freedom. When the suit fails moments later, both descent and inertia signal his despondency as he falls back to the ground again. This rhythm surfaces periodically in the film.

Later in the film for instance, when perfecting the design, the hero ignites his rocket-powered propulsion system to take flight high above his home city Los Angeles. This soaring ascent again carries with it an expressive value of freedom, with rapid-cutting showing him thrust from one corner of the sky to the next. This elation reaches a peak, being an elevation that brings with it the euphoria of achievement. In pushing the limits of these mechanisms, edging closer to the stratosphere, the sub-zero temperatures clog up the turbines with a frosty rime that shackles the hero with gravitational declivity. Enveloped by the despondency of this helpless inertia, his body plummets back down to the streets below, and the shift to an accent of descent turns his previous euphoria to that of anguish and dejection, about to collide with the cityscape.

When the hero manages to regain control over the suit's apparatus, breaking and thawing the ice barely just before colliding with the road surface, he cries out in fear closely brushing past the concrete, but with this new bout of exuberant mobility he roars with a renewed sense of invigorated euphoria, triumphant at his ingenuity. In terms of the

plotting, this training scenario develops the hero's character arc along in a fashion similar to Purse's narrative of becoming model (explained in the thesis introduction). In terms of the themes, however, the purpose behind the rhythm of beats and accents develops its own story of the limits and potential of freedom and restriction, power and responsibility. Again, towards the end of the film when he fights Iron Monger (Jeff Bridges) an industrial tycoon who has build his own war-suit, as the hero makes the villain give chase up into the sky, with a plan to similarly clog up the antagonist's armour with ice fragments, Iron Monger falls while the hero remains airborne. The accent of ascent/descent again performs two roles here: supporting the delivery of the plot's causal resolution on the one hand (i.e. the villain falls and the hero rises), yet also develops a thematic resolution through a far more kinetically visceral kind of stimulation (e.g. the sheer energy of power and freedom is now reconciled with the stasis of responsibility and restriction).

These moments of rhythm are spread out at intervals in the film, but at the climatic battle of *Iron Man 3* (2013) the accents of ascent/descent actually develop themes in a more continuous fashion. In the midst of a battle hundreds of feet up above scaffolding and girders on a shipyard, the hero Stark summons an army of Iron Man suits he has put together in order to fight dozens of corrupt mercenaries. The unmanned suits each fly automatically, opening on command whenever one becomes damaged, so allowing the hero to keep leaping from one model to another. During each leap, when successfully reaching another suit, Stark is jubilant and free to continue flying. When he fails to do so however, potentially falling to his death, there is instead the impact of despondency and restriction imposed by gravity. At each jump, there is an ongoing exchange of the positive values associated with rising, and the negative values tied to falling, and the implicit thematic meanings at stake are reiterated and developed along this ongoing spatio-temporal trajectory of jumping and leaping. This allows the spectacle to tell an evolving thematic tale of cultural conflict.

Hence, ultimately it is during those action sequences that shift between differing rhythms of physical and spatial spectacle that prompts viewer attention to be re-directed away from the specifics of narrative causal coherence and instead be re-focused on the duration of shots, shapes and movements at work (i.e. crosscutting, the axis-of-action). In this way, a rhythmic pattern develops, and makes explicit those implicit, abstract thematic tensions by carrying these values along an evolving arc of immediate stimulation and over-emphasized spatio-temporal dimensions: a discernable pacing that supports the storytelling

in a fashion that would not be effective in presenting more detailed, specific intricacies tied to the exposition of narrative cause-and-effect alone.

This first chapter has focused on the way narrativised spectacles emerge in the spectacular display of physical and spatial spectacle essential to superhero-action cinema, namely the interaction between body and setting, and the conflict between individual freedom and societal restriction. Throughout the discussion, however, there is one textual element that is key to both the heightened and contemplative modes of spectacle, which has so far been mostly overlooked: the role played by performance techniques. The conflict between Spiderman and Ock (that instigated the monorail climax) was in turn a rhythmic exchange of differing acting methods, which again carries their own particular sets of thematic values.

In any superhero film the hero protagonist and villain antagonist confront each other not only through physical fighting, but also through the conventional delivery of stoic declarations and self-indulgent monologues. There is a kinetic energy behind these two kinds of recital, with this interaction also able to establish an uncertainty of tensions, which then attempts to seek out some firmer sense of reconciliation. With this in mind, how, if at all, does the rhythmic montage of audio-visual beats and accents pertain to the spectacle of performance techniques? The next chapter explores this question, showing how each gesture and mannerism can rhythmically carry a deeper thematic tale of its own.

Rhythms of Chaos and Order

Superheroes, Villains and Dueling Performance Techniques

In the previous chapter, the discussion explored how spectacular action sequences of physical exertion, by way of the editing and framing of superheroes as they move across their expansive city settings, generate an audio-visual rhythm. It was argued that by rhythmically shifting back-and-forth from images of the body to shots of the city, this visual pattern is able to invoke and develop a set of thematic concerns central to the superhero film, so 'narrativising' the formal structure of the spectacle.

To recap my earlier claim, a series of repetitive beats work to sustain the contrast between shots of the hero's flamboyant costumed body against shots of the more densely-packed urban congestion of the city: so bringing to mind cultural associations of freedom versus restriction, and individualism versus the community. Alongside these continual beats, the discussion explained, are also a series of varied accents, which continue to stress this interaction between images of body/city, but through stylistic inflections of physical rising and falling, as an experience of euphoria and despondency, or inertia and momentum, as a conflict between stability and instability. A rhythmic tempo also helped to carry these thematic associations, in the way fast-paced editing built up the cultural conflicts of freedom/restriction and individual/community to a point of impasse, eventually shifting to a more slow-paced cutting of these shots, allowing for a process of contemplative rumination, leading to a resolution of these tensions.

Building further on the narrativisation of physical and spatial spectacle discussed in the first chapter, this second chapter will now explore how this process works with the specific kind of performance techniques employed by superheroes, analysing each gesture and mannerism in detail. Much like the interaction between body and city, whenever performance techniques are exchanged between superheroes and their villain adversaries this process generates another key set of audio-visual rhythms, able to invoke and develop yet more cultural thematic oppositions pertinent to the superhero film. Many of these audio-visual rhythms and cultural themes are evident in the Interrogation Room Scene of *The Dark Knight* (2008), which will provide the key case study for this chapter. After the villain has been arrested, two innocent attorneys are soon kidnapped by the criminal's henchmen in retaliation, with each lawyer strapped to a ticking time bomb in two separate unknown locations, leaving the hero tasked with interrogating the antagonist as to their whereabouts. One attorney is the hero's love-interest, and so he is motivated to save the

damsel by extracting this information before it is too late. The Interrogation Room Scene is useful to work with, consisting of two heated and especially 'dueling' kinds of performance exchanged between the vigilante crime-fighter hero Batman (Christian Bale) and his psychotic criminal counterpart the Joker (Heath Ledger).

Firstly, consider the kinds of physical motion and rhythm generated between hero and villain throughout the interrogation room scene. The Joker with his clownish appearance often grins, audibly cackles, speaks frequently, swirls both wrists around, is never entirely still, moves eyes from left-to-right, usually tilts his head from side to side, hunches inwards and extends his shoulders outwards, rotates his torso from one angle to the other, while often fidgeting or adjusting his clothing in the process. Batman by contrast, in his thick-set full-body suit of Kevlar-weaved black armour consistently holds a more rigid posture, with arms down by his sides, only revealing through the mask a still mouth, unblinking eyes, gritted teeth, very subtle head movements, steady breathing and brief monotone responses. These differing methods of performance each have their own distinct kinds of physical movements: subtle and composed in the hero, but blatant and mischievous in the villain.

Secondly, consider the kinds of cultural themes invoked by the rhythms described above. Each of Batman's gestures – stone-faced expression, brief vocal delivery, rigid posture – are considerably more composed or 'ordered' in a restrained fashion than the villain, so invoking wider associations of protecting the established decorum of the 'societal order' through strictly containing any threats made against it. The Joker's gestures, on the other hand – hyperactive arm and hand positions, shifting head tilts and mischievously long-drawn out vocal inflections – instead configure him as an unrestrained, opportunistic, anarchic force to be reckoned with, resonating with a 'chaotic' type of energy that unsettles the value of civil stability associated with Batman's persona (who desires to maintain social decorum at all costs). At the heart of any performed interaction between superhero and villain, I explain in this chapter, resides this tumultuous conflict between the cultural values of *order* versus *chaos*. Batman's subtle movements, I argue, stand for a kind of 'armoured persona', bringing to mind thematic values of stoicism, self-control, and a steady 'propriety' that verges on autocratic discipline. The Joker's motions, however, invoke quite the opposite set of cultural associations, namely what I declare to be an energetic display of hyper-activity, giving into bouts of 'hysterical' outbursts, lacking in the same self-restraint displayed by his counterpart, as though fully embracing an uninhibited exhibitionism.

More importantly, this second chapter will show how it is the differences between the performance techniques of the two adversaries of hero and villain that allows for a potential rhythmic interplay to unfold. The argument will prove that these two modes of performance are played off in such a way that invoke and rhythmically develop a particular set of cultural contradictions. This is because during interactions between superheroes and villains, a clash of two differing modes of performance generates an evolving audio-visual rhythmic trajectory, much like the one of body/city explored in the first chapter. These dueling performances between hero/villain resonate with cultural conflicts essential to superhero narratives, telling a tale that challenges and eventually reconciles (the viewer's understanding of) thematic tensions over time. In developing this point further, the basic definition of filmic rhythm provided by Bordwell and Thompson becomes especially useful, being:

> The perceived rate and regularity of sounds, series of shots, and movements within the shots. Rhythmic factors include beat (or pulse), accent (or stress), and tempo (or pace) (Bordwell and Thompson 2013: 504).

I will show how as the interrogation sequence unfolds, an ongoing rhythmic pulse is evident in the way the editing consistently juxtaposes shots of the differing two mask and costume designs at the center of the performances by Batman and Joker. A series of repetitive beats, it will be argued, can be found in this repeated cutting between each mask and costume over time, which sustains the contrast between these starkly opposed designs, and the differing themes they each invoke: that is, cultural notions of an 'uninhibited' hilarity associated with the Joker's clownish appearance that contrasts with the protocol of disciplined 'propriety' tied to Batman's armored body.

The argument will then explore how the physical inflections of these performances, in terms of the directional changes and movements of competing gestures and mannerisms exchanged between hero and villain all work to establish a series of varied accents. These accents are evident in the clash between Batman and Joker's differing modes of facial expression, deliveries of dialogue, intonations of vocal cadence and timbre, eye glances, slights of hand, wrist, arm, shoulder, torso and other noticeable quirks, foibles or idiosyncrasies. It is each of these gestures and mannerisms that have the potential to rhythmically stress the themes at stake. As varied accents escalate, this competing series of gestures and mannerisms will carry and parry the themes against one another, at first in a condition of imbalance that eventually, the discussion will explore, seeks out a firmer state

of balance or compromise towards the end of the scene. It is this arc of imbalance that evolves into a state of balance, the chapter shall show, that forms the crux of the narrativised spectacle of performance techniques between superheroes and villains.

(i) *Narrativising Performances*: Causality and Theme in The Interrogation Room Scene

Throughout this chapter I prove my claim that the spectacle of performance in the interrogation room scene is not only a clash between two types of characterisation[20] that drives forward the causal progression of plot actions and events. Such a spectacle of performances (much like the physical and spatial spectacle of the monorail action sequence explored in the first chapter) also manages to contribute another distinct storytelling dimension in the film narration. This dimension of narration is achieved by an interplay of dynamically-shifting physical movements that literally 'carry' and tell an evolving arc of thematic significance. While any rhythmic interplay between competing elements of performance supports the film plot's primary narrative chain of cause-and-effect, the

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[20] While this approach is primarily concerned with ascertaining a thematic significance behind performance techniques, to find an in-depth psychological study into characterisation, narration and spectatorship refer to Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters*: *Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford University Press: 2004), which lists three levels of imaginative engagement with fictional characters that enables viewers identification with their situations and circumstances, or a 'structure of sympathy'. Smith argues that there are three levels which combine together to create a sense of either 'attraction to' or 'repulsion from' a particular character in relation to our experience of the text (75).

Firstly, the process of *recognition* allows for a spectator's mental construction of a character's body and appearance, based upon a set of traits forming a 'legible' and 'consistent' body, (75), acting like 'like psychological dispositions, subject to change, and not merely through the process of ageing: plastic surgery or injury may, for example, intervene… bodily attributes [also] can and often do imply psychological traits: shifty eyes, an honest face' (113). Also, there are those 'exterior' perceptible traits of performers (such as body, face, voice, etc.) that are able to play an essential role in the 're-identification of characters' (113).

Secondly, there is an *alignment* or 'access' a spectator is given to a character's actions and motives, what they might know and feel, focusing along the spatio-temporal path of that character throughout the course of the storytelling (83), Smith points out that: 'in watching a character perform certain actions, and in seeing the character adopt a certain kind of posture and facial expression, we may infer that the character is in a certain kind of mental state, or possesses certain traits – say, anger as the state, or brutality as the trait' (85).

Thirdly, the spectator forms an *allegiance* with the character, in terms of the 'moral evaluation', including attitudes towards issues of gender, nation, age, ethnicity and class, backed up by reliable information, such as a full understanding of the context of that particular character's actions and behaviour as well as a reliable access to their inner state of mind (84). Smith states that while recognition and alignment allow the spectator to understand and comprehend traits and mental states making up a character, allegiance goes further in allowing through an evaluation and an emotional response to these traits: 'Recognition and alignment require only that the spectator understand that these traits and mental states make up the character. With allegiance we go beyond understanding, by evaluating and responding emotionally to the traits and emotions of the character, in the context of the narrative situation' (85).

spectacle also offers up a distinct story arc that prioritises the delivery of important thematic information. For instance, when Batman argues with the Joker in the interrogation cell, trying to ascertain the location of the two kidnapped attorneys – that is, a staple plot trajectory of 'hero fights villain to rescue victims and damsels' – the delivery of this story information depends upon a continuity-editing scheme (i.e. maintaining continuous and clear narrative action with coherent spatial and temporal dimensions).

The editing strategy presents the two performances through a series of *shot/reverse shots* that present the hero and villain in relation to one another as seated either side of a table engaged in conversation. The definition of a shot/reverse shot can be termed as 'two or more shots edited together that alternate characters, typically in a conversation situation. In continuity editing, characters in one framing usually look left; in the other framing right. Over the shoulder framings are common in shot/reverse shot editing' (Bordwell and Thompson 2013: 504). This process of presenting one image of the hero speaking, followed immediately by the image of the villain's response, is a shot-to-shot combination designed to drive the rhythm of narrative coherence, guiding the viewer through the plot, following the character actions as Batman demands the Joker to tell him where the attorneys are hidden, while the villain evades these questions (Figure 2.0).

Figure 2.0

However, although this editing strategy first-and-foremost supports plot progression, this flitting between shots, by consistently shifting from one mode of performance to another, additionally offers up a particular kind of audio-visual pattern that emphasises implicit kinds of thematic concerns in an explicit fashion. Consider how this shot/reverse shot alternation (refer again to Figure 2.0) flits between a pair of competing textual elements: presenting a pairing of *two* types of mask, *two* costume designs, *two* kinds of facial expression, as well as *two* sets of eye glances, vocal cadence, hand gestures and postural mannerisms. It is this sustained cutting between medium close-up shots of Batman/Joker that works to reaffirm a set of tensions resonating throughout the scene: consistently juxtaposing the 'stoicism' projected by the hero protagonist, against the provocative 'hysteria' invoked by the villain antagonist.

The argument will show just how scenes that depict the interaction between superheroes and villains (by employing shot/reverse shot cutting) do more than only

maintain a coherent narrative chain-of-cause-and-effect: but also generate an *audio-visual collation* of two distinct performances of shifting editing rhythms and physical movements that makes explicit the themes invested therein. Interestingly, the shot/reverse-shot pattern of the Interrogation Room Scene arguably shares key similarities with a montage editing strategy, which, as explained in the first chapter, is a cutting together of two different images, the result of which equates a meaning far *greater than the sum of the parts* that would not be achievable if these images were taken in isolation from one another.

To clarify, montage can be likened to what soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein explains as an effect of Egyptian hieroglyphs, e.g. in that the symbol of water on its own suggests no more than a literal interpretation, but when juxtaposed with the drawing of an eye, this equates a new value that interrelates both symbols, such as crying or tears (Eisenstein [1922-34] 1988: 139). It is the rhythm generated by a constant cutting between two differing modes of performance, the chapter will prove, that is able to pick up on, carry and then evolve thematic meanings integral to superhero-action film, so forming a distinct narrative trajectory of sorts. Such a 'montage effect' is able to rhythmically sweep from one performance to another, in the process telling a tale that favours the exposition of abstract thematic values: doing so at a pace with its own particular energy and direction that is quite discernable (but in no way separate[21]) from the main narrative impetus of causal coherence and guidance.

Examples of narrativised spectacle are evident from the very beginning of the scene. After being detained and placed in a darkly-lit interrogation cell, the Joker is questioned by the police commissioner (who attempts to gain information on the whereabouts of two kidnapped attorneys). This information is key to the primary chain of cause-and-effect that drives the plot forward. However, a closer analysis reveals a more implicit, ongoing thematic tale of cultural conflict based around the development of

[21] An overarching concern of the thesis argument deals with how narrativised spectacle presents a *distinct rhythm* that runs at a different kind of pace to the main narrative rhythm of actions and events. While this definition does not propose theme as counter-narrative (e.g. entirely compromising or disregarding the guidance of character actions or the chain of cause-and-effect) there is nonetheless a significant, discernable level of thematic exposition that unfolds alongside – but not one and the same with – plot exposition.

This is because the rhythm generated between a body and its setting presents the space of this interaction in a distinctly *temporalised* fashion (e.g. shifting and changing according to a particular sequence of time). This spatio-temporal movement flows parallel to, but is distinguishable from, the primary narrative direction and timing of character actions or events. Conflict is not only generated simply by character actions, but in the way the juxtaposition of audio-visual elements 'narrativises' thematic oppositions: rhythmically playing one value against the other.

‘chaos’ in relation to the value of ‘order’. When the scene begins for instance, the Joker’s jests dominate, continually mocking the commissioner, and his posture is relaxed, showing no respect for the lawful authority this public official represents, eventually causing him to leave in failure. The Joker’s gestures here resonate with an anarchic disregard to the infrastructures of law and social order. As an immediate counterpoint to these rhythms, hidden in the shadows Batman’s first appearance coincides with instantly grasping the criminal’s head and smashing it directly onto the table in a sweeping linear arc just as the lights are turned back on, suddenly covering the room with glaring brightness. Here, the hero now physically asserts himself, and in doing so, introduces a new cultural value: enforcing an uncompromising motion that stipulates societal decorum.

The play off between these two performances continues straight after the severity of Batman’s autocratic gesture, as each of the Joker’s physical movements resist this blunt swipe of aggression, regaining composure by (quite literally) shrugging off the preemptive strike, unabashed at this display of sheer force. Yet, Batman strikes the Joker again, this time with even more force, punching the villain’s hand as it rests on the tabletop in an attempt to impose another bout of decorum. The Joker however simply gives a look of exasperation, rolling his eyes, unperturbed, refusing to validate such autocratic control.

Every time the Joker antagonises the hero, toying with Batman either by pouting or smirking his mutilated lips, this implements a renewed value of anarchic disrespect, which stands in sharp contrast to the firmly set jaw and stone-faced facial expression of Batman’s rigid, solid mask-covered visage, which instead incites a strict sense of stability associated with discipline and self-control. Hence, as superhero and villain interact with one another, they gradually use these techniques as a means of influencing, counteracting, dominating or subverting one another’s performance. It is the pairing of two distinct roles such as these, the chapter shall show, that has the effect of rhythmically carrying key themes along the heated hostility of each competing gesture and mannerism performed by superheroes and villains.

My approach builds upon traditional analyses of performance, which tend to focus primarily on the way cultural ideas find a means of tangible representation. Andrew Klevan for instance argues that the way a performance interacts with the surrounding mise-en-scène is useful in generating ‘‘truthful’ analogy and metaphor’ (Klevan 2005: 5). Whenever intelligibly witnessed by others, Elin Diamond suggests that any performance stands for social ideas by ‘embed[ding] features of previous performances: gender conventions, racial histories, aesthetic traditions – political and cultural pressures that are

consciously and unconsciously acknowledged' (Diamond 1996: 1). Susan Melrose also agrees that a body's appearance and movements tend to *evoke* something in the viewer (Melrose 2006: 6), bringing to mind some 'sense' of these historical, political or socio-cultural associations.

The approaches of seminal writers on performance studies noted above are useful to uncovering an implicit subtext invested in a performance, but there is also the potential to explore just how these cultural conflicts can unfold audio-visually in a dynamic way: working in tandem with every movement afforded by a performance, able to rhythmically evolve throughout the duration of a scene, all the while seeking out a firmer sense of resolution. The performances exchanged between superheroes and villains emphasise thematic exposition in a rhythmic fashion, not simply representing an allegorical or metaphorical subtext, but also tell a narrative trajectory that favours themes above all else: consistently challenging and reconciling implicit cultural contradictions, as though in a dynamic, ever-shifting arena of debate. Before beginning a closer analysis to show how this process works in the interrogation scene however, it is first useful to explain the cultural themes invested in these performances in more detail, and show the kind of story that the narrativised spectacle is attempting to tell.

(ii) *Debating Chaos and Order*: The Roles of Superhero and Villain

The cultural conflict between the values of 'chaos' and 'order', this section will explain, is a central thematic concern integral to the superhero-villain relationship. This is because superhero narratives conventionally stage this feud as the clashing together of a *selfless* hero against a *self-serving* villain. The hero primarily wishes to fulfill a pro-social mission, standing for peace and balance, seeking no other benefit or gain, so fighting for the stability of the societal order. Villains, conversely, are opportunists, fulfilling an anti-social mission, desiring to exploit the current-state-of-affairs in a way that benefits them and them alone, believing that it is their right to do so, prepared to compromise the stability of the societal order.

Archetypically, this is evident in how both hero and villain tend to acquire great power at the expense of even greater hardship and sacrifice. The hero protagonist Superman, for example, has been endowed with superhuman abilities, but this is due to being a refugee from an alien world, the last of his kind, and so he must use his superior power among the human race with a degree of moral responsibility, doing so though abiding by existing systems of law and order. 'For Superman,' criminology theorists Scott

Vollum and Cary D. Adkinson explain, the value of 'law and the justice system are bright and shining examples of "the good guys." Law and justice must always prevail and are always to be respected' (Vollum and Adkinson 2003: 100). As a hero, Superman wishes to employ his enhanced abilities to save others from pain and suffering, but it is often by sacrificing his personal freedom when playing the role of journalist Clark Kent: an identity that must always remain unimpressive, insular and receive no recognition, so as to ensure protection for his close friends and family, and love-interest Louis Lane.

The villain antagonist Lex Luthor, however, has been granted with extraordinary human intelligence and cunning from birth, and feels that utilising this intellect is a natural means of unleashing his inner potential. Engaging in corporate espionage and organised crime to fulfil his personal ambition, Luthor is adamant that not to do so is not only unfair, but ethically unjust. Luthor's actions result in great pain and suffering, yet it is his only means of fulfing his potential: an irrational compulsion that defines the villain morally and socially. When discussing the criminals of superhero narratives, Vollum and Adkinson argue that while 'most simply want money, many commit their crimes for a sense of accomplishment, sport, or vengeance. All these reasons are prevalent throughout the pages of superhero comic books. While money always seems to be a goal, challenging the superhero (sport), gaining revenge, and gaining power are extant motivations of the villains' (Vollum and Adkinson 2003: 103).

For this reason, superheroes and villains view principles of entitlement very differently from one another, which has significant repercussions for the societies they influence. A hero, upon being treated unjustly will state: "The world will never again be as unfairly treated as I was." A villain will respond to the same circumstances of inequity as: "This cruel world owes me for such unfair treatment." In this sense, heroes assume rights on the behalf of others, regardless of whether or not this help is requested, because it is his/her autonomous decision to fight for those in need of saving. Villains claim rights on behalf of themselves, regardless of whether or not others respect this claim, benefitting from the decision to succeed as a prosperous individual because it is his/her autonomous decision to exploit those that would hinder this process, or be reluctant to comply.

The superhero then, is closely aligned with a sense of the greater 'good', fighting for an ordered, safer society for the benefit of all, whereas the villain takes the mantle of a lesser morality bent on self-centeredness, driven by a solipsistic 'evil' that disrupts social stability to fulfil the ambitions of the individual alone. Writing on the sociology of crime in

relation to popular movies, Nickie D. Philips remarks of the relationship between hero and villain in *The Dark Knight* that:

> Unlike Batman, whose ultimate goal is to protect the innocent and create social stability, the Joker operates to create disharmony. For the superhero genre, the super-villain serves as the physical manifestation of the threat to the social order. In *The Dark Knight*, collective societal fears are embodied in the Joker, who is portrayed as a self-described agent of chaos – his unpredictability is his greatest weapon. The most frightening of villains are those that seemingly have no pain, no rationale to their mayhem, and no conscience which to be deterred – the manifestation of evil' (Phillips 2010: 33).

As tensions of *good versus evil* create the dramatic conflict of the superhero-villain relationship, then this interplay plays a dynamic purpose. The 'dichotomy of good and evil in contemporary superhero films,' Johannes Schlegel and Frank Habermann argue, are not absolute values, but *permeable,* 'first and foremost negotiated, performatively generated and constantly debated, rendering it an unstable phenomenon of produced and ascribed meaning that has to be reaffirmed perpetually' (Schlegel and Habermann 2011: 31).[22] In this respect, the play off between *what* is considered to be 'good' or 'evil' can become expressed as the struggle to challenge and reconcile any number of thematic associations.

Nonetheless, this chapter emphasises that among the most important thematic associations pertinent to the superhero film, the defining factor of a cultural 'good' is found in an 'ordered' type of stability that benefits society in a positive way. This positive value of order is then measured against its oppositional negative counterpoint of a disruptive form of 'evil', which threatens such social cohesion with 'chaotic' repercussions. Heroes, for instance, believe that the rights of the community must be maintained as a whole, often enforcing this mission at their own personal cost, but benefit nonetheless because they maintain that helping others is the right course of action to take. Villains instead believe as a misunderstood individual, that entitlements must be must be claimed at the expense of others, achievable through manipulation and exploitation of the societal order, the integrity of institutions and the welfare of citizens. This dynamic of

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[22] Johannes Schlegel and Frank Habermann provide a detailed study into the duality of *good versus evil* in *The Dark Knight*, but their approach focuses primary on the way this process functions through the narrative content rather than how themes become negotiated as an ongoing rhythmic pattern at the level of performance.

The article is beneficial to uncovering themes at work in the film text. "You Took My Advice About Theatricality a Bit… *Literally*": Theatricality and Cybernetics of Good and Evil in *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, *Spider-Man* and *X-Men*' in *The 21st Century Superhero; Essays on Gender, Genre and Globalisation in Film*, (eds. Richard J. Gray II and Betty Kaklamanidou), (McFarland: 2011).

good-as-order and evil-as-chaos also adheres to what Robert Jewett and John Lawrence term as the American Monomyth, a storytelling formula in which:

> A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out a redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisical condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity (Jewett and Lawrence 2002: 6).

In this sense, villains are antagonists that tend to embrace opportunities of change, with all the erratic and unpredictable potential a lack of social stability can afford, while superheroes are more concerned with maintaining the placidity of the status quo (Reynolds 1992: 51) reacting to disruptions until a renewed state of equilibrium is restored. 'Superheroes represent a point of balance, or order, or harmony,' Raymond Aaron Younis points out, '[as] a kind of ontological centering or ethical anchoring in a world that would otherwise drift towards perdition, apostasy, chaos, disorder, catastrophe, meaninglessness [or] purposelessness' (Younis 2007: 109). Comic illustrator and writer Danny Fingeroth also declares that superheroes assume a position of protecting the status quo, by overseeing the equilibrium of balance already in place, whereas villains are opportunists, instead working as agents of change and unrest (Fingeroth 2004: 160-164), anticipating the chance to disrupt this social stability for their own ends. Hence, villain antagonists can be said to function as *proactive agents of unrest* that continually face off hero protagonists that, in contrast, play the opposing role of *reactive agents of containment*.

The dichotomy of an ordered 'good' versus a chaotic 'evil' also invokes similar cultural contradictions belonging to the themes tied to American frontier mythology and action-adventure genres. The superhero, with both a vigilante and civilian set of personas, is much like the Westerner protagonist, who takes on the role of a pragmatic, self-sufficient pioneer of the savage frontier on the one hand, yet also guards and becomes involved with the running of the domestic town on the other. Both superhero and westerner defend normative judicial influences in the urban sites they oversee, as each is tasked with containing criminal activities through a self-appointed credo of vigilante justice. The thematic antinomies that inform Westerns provided by genre theorist Jim Kitses (refer to the detailed explanations in the thesis introduction and the first chapter) test the distinction between individual self-sufficiency and obligation to a community, and these binaries become especially appropriate when applied to the confrontational dynamic of the superhero and villain relationship. Kitses' proposed tensions, for instance, introduce the

conflict between Savagery versus Humanity, Solipsism versus Democracy, Self-Interest versus Social Responsibility, Refinement and Brutality and the implications these factors have on Change versus Tradition (Kitses 1969: 11). Each of these tensions also bring to mind the struggle between 'order' (as tied to notions of humanity, refinement, democracy, social responsibility and civil tradition) and 'chaos' (which leads to savagery, solipsism, self-interest and change). In the superhero film, concerns for an ordered protection of society and the status quo are, in effect, weighed up against the chaotic feats of persecution enacted by the whims of an opportunistic individual.

In terms of how the themes (explained above) are challenged and resolved, the confrontation between superheroes and villains adheres to what can be termed an 'arena of debate' that aims to challenge and complicate the balance between oppositions of order and chaos. Many Hollywood genre films, for instance, are conventionally structured around a dueling dynamic between a protagonist and an antagonist, following a dualistic narrative structure, or what Rick Altman has termed as *dual-focus* texts in *Film/Genre* (1999). In the Western, a sheriff will always face an outlaw during a shootout, while the gangster is similarly 'doubled' by the competition afforded by a FBI agent or a rival gang leader, as in fantasy or science fiction films when the human hero must confront *in*human monsters, e.g. aliens from outer-space or creatures from prehistory (Altman 1999: 24). Even Fred Astaire, Altman notes, is required to share billing with his counterpart Ginger Rogers, and the single individual, such as a divided, schizophrenic figure of Dr. Jekyll aka. Mr. Hyde manages to hold these separate entities under the same spotlight (Altman 1999: 24).

The dueling dynamic between protagonist/antagonist establishes an arena for debate between the two characters, creating a dramatic conflict that can play off thematic oppositions. This is because film narratives tend to organise the images of people, objects, or movement 'distributed' throughout a film, Teresa De Lauretis[23] explains, into two zones of difference 'from which they take their culturally pre-constructed meaning… [as] *subject* and *obstacle* [emphasis added]' (De Lauretis 1984: 138). The subject, that is, the hero protagonist, must perpetually be defined by means of comparison with an 'other' or a contrasting obstacle, or the villain antagonist, that represents and 'literally mark[s] out the

[23] While De Lauretis is closely associated with feminist film theory at the time of writing *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984) the distinction between subject/obstacle provided in this text is especially useful in relation to the narrative structures of Hollywood genres in general, highlighting a dynamic that works to great effect in the superhero-villain relationship of the contemporary 2000s-present film cycle.

place (to) which the hero will cross… Or [they] may resist confinement in that symbolic space by disturbing it, perverting it, making trouble, seeking to exceed the boundary – visually as well as narratively' (De Lauretis 1984: 139). The interaction between superheroes and villains sets up two separate thematic boundaries (e.g. one figure represents the value of order, the other figure stands for chaos), and then as the interaction becomes more aggressive, these thresholds eventually become crossed, blurred, and seek to be made distinct once again.

The crossing and blurring between two thematic boundaries impacts greatly on us as an audience, Nick Crossley proposes, in that we need these interactions between two binary characters to not only make sense of our societies and our cultures, but also to gain a better understanding of ourselves and our reality. Accordingly, protagonists and antagonists stand for, represent, make tangible, personify or embody the cultural values defining them. 'Societies,' Crossley continues, 'emerge out of and depend for their continued existence upon the embodied interactions of social agents. Practices are done, *roles are played or performed* and processes are effected by the embodied work of [these] agents [emphasis added]' (Crossley 2006: 4). Essentially then, the interaction between superhero and villain causes one agent to 'learn' from the other, so each becoming 'intellectually transformed' because of that experience. The way this process works in popular films through the performances of superhero and villain as they each argue over the shape their society should take is a pervasive concern that will be addressed throughout my analysis across the chapter.

Up to this stage of the chapter, the discussion has so far established that the superhero-villain relationship is one driven by a debate that challenges, yet also seeks to reconcile, thematic tensions based on the clash between order and chaos. The next step in the argument is to explore exactly how these themes are actually negotiated at the level of performance, unfolding as a series of audio-visual rhythms. Initially however, any rhythmic pattern first depends upon establishing (and maintaining) a sustained pulse or repetitive set of beats over time: the qualities of which will now be analysed in depth.

(iii) *The Rhythmic Pulse of Carnival and Propriety*: Sustaining Thematic Statements through Explicit Costumes and Masks

This section ascertains how a rhythmic pulse is established through the audio-visual pairing of superheroes and villains, specifically in terms of their differing *costumes and masks*: the result of which *sustains a thematically-significant juxtaposition* or pattern over

time. Alongside the way costume and mask is contrasted in the shot/reverse shot sequence of the Interrogation Room Scene in *The Dark Knight* (Figure 2.0), consider how this process unfolds in other exchanges between hero and villain, such as Spiderman and Green Goblin in *Spider-Man* (2002) (Figure 2.1), or Captain America and Red Skull in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), (Figure 2.2).

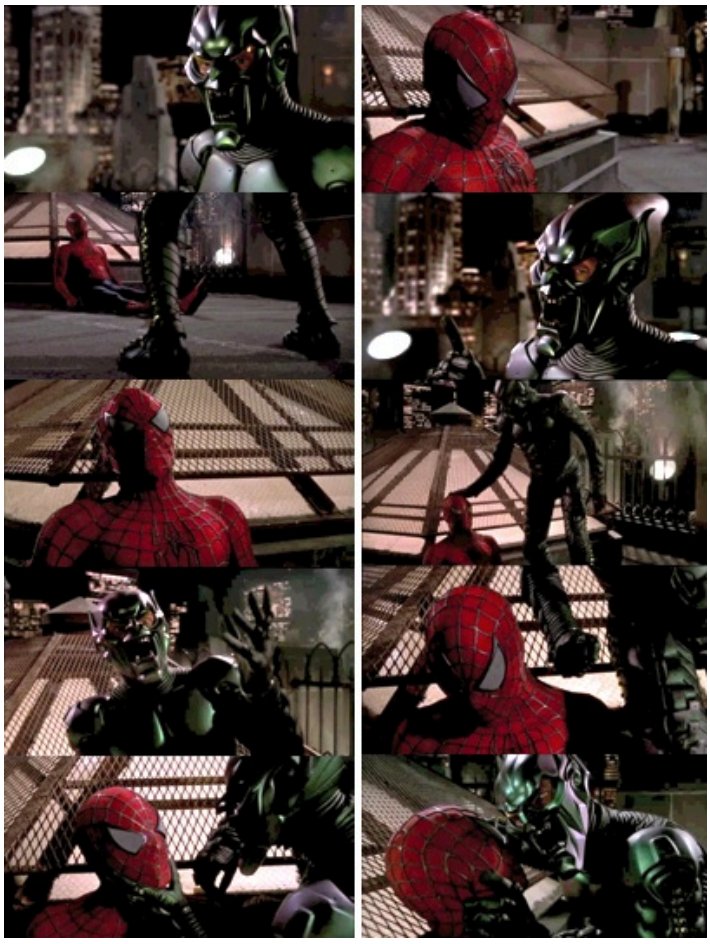

Figure 2.1

Figure 2.2

Shot/reverse shot sequences that present interactions similar to those above coherently maintain spatial and temporal dimensions so as to establish narrative continuity. The shots naturally shift from one character to another, primarily catering to dialogue and plot exposition. On a more implicit level, however, there is also a consistent shift in cases such as these between two types of thematic meaning: (i) initially invested in the hero's appearance, which is then juxtaposed with (ii) the ideas invoked by the visual design of the villain.

The masks and costumes worn by Joker/Batman in the Interrogation Room Scene consistently invoke and carry between them the thematic pairing of chaos and order. Consider how our introduction to the Joker's physical configuration is one of disheveled, long, lank, green-dyed hair falling directly into his face. The face itself is caked in clown make-up that erratically flakes away. The costume is complete with a colourfully-ostentatious zoot-suit made up of vibrant tones of dark purples and garish greens, and would be considered obscene when compared to the dull, grey and black tones of the average attire of the professional workplace (e.g. lawyers, public officials, administrational clerks). His clownish persona evokes a sense of insanity, madness, mania, the crudeness, cruelty, the ambiguity between humiliation and humour, aggression, brutality, clumsiness, mockery, rudeness, fear, trickery, anarchy and the unpredictability of chaotic forces.

Presenting an agent of chaotic mischief, the character's carnival iconography invokes the anarchic, indecent lack of modesty this symbolic codification represents, made visible in the ridiculously-exaggerated red painted smile that literally extends from cheek to cheek, affronting onlookers as provocatively impudent and vulgar. The Joker cannot help but project a simultaneous symbol of comedy and anarchy through his intensely carnival appearance, specifically in terms of the *carnivalesque*. Mikhail Bakhtin describes how during the Middle Ages, the carnival event was a period of public revelry at a regular time each year, functioning as a social cycle that employed chaotic ridicule. The event was intended as an exciting, riotous procession of music, dancing and the use of masquerade as a means of dealing with hierarchal authority or established mores, an undertaking that sociologist Ian Burkitt explains in detail:

> Carnival imagery also contains a form of 'grotesque realism', in which the material body appears in exaggerated form, and can be linked to the festive world of giants, monsters, dwarves and fools... The suspension of social rank and hierarchy during carnival time... led to a special type of communication... which was free and frank, permitting no distance and liberating people from the norms of etiquette and decency imposed at the time (Burkitt 1999: 46).

In this respect, the 'clown' mask is interpretable as a humourous means of escapism, yet also incites fears felt at this disruption of day-to-day living. Clowns are figures of ridicule, yet they also provide a sense of entertainment through acts of humiliation. For this reason their smiling visages declare mirth on the one hand, and a deeper sorrow on the other. Audience members wish to revel in the entertainment provided by the circus performer's torment. Yet an audience does not want to be treated with the same ridicule that this very humour depends upon, nor be reminded of any personal experiences of past humiliation. The Joker's own facial design picks up on the value of uninhibited laughter invested in the perpetual grin of the clown, but it is a smile that is neither purely genuine nor voluntary, instead likened to that of a 'scar' or wound unable to fully heal, representing past trauma so severe that this mirth is always in danger of veering towards pained, hysterical outbursts (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3 Both in the comic book mythos after an unfortunate disfigurement in a chemical factory (left, *The Killing Joke*, published 1988) and the lacerations shown in the film adaptation (right, *The Dark Knight*, 2008), costume and mask in effect form the energetic impetus at the core of the Joker's performance of chaos, anarchy and hysteria.

An essential feature of the carnival mask then, is the *grin*, a point Bakhtin emphasises in how 'most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wipe-open bodily abyss' (Bakhtin 2005: 92). Throughout graphic novels, comics and film adaptations, the Joker will carve this symbol with criminal artistry upon the visages of others, e.g. poisoning beauty products, and televising the disfigured victims in *Batman* (1989); painting smiles onto the photographs of potential victims in newspapers, or turning to mutilation in *The Dark Knight*. The Joker often attempts to re-figure Batman's costume, using the outline of the bat-symbol as a grinning mouth by painting eyes above it, as though in a form of competition that transforms and challenges his adversary's chevron. As a villain archetype, the grotesque mouth is a key element of mask and costume because it is tied to the value of carnival, so inferring the themes of the chaos and instability therein (Figure 2.4).

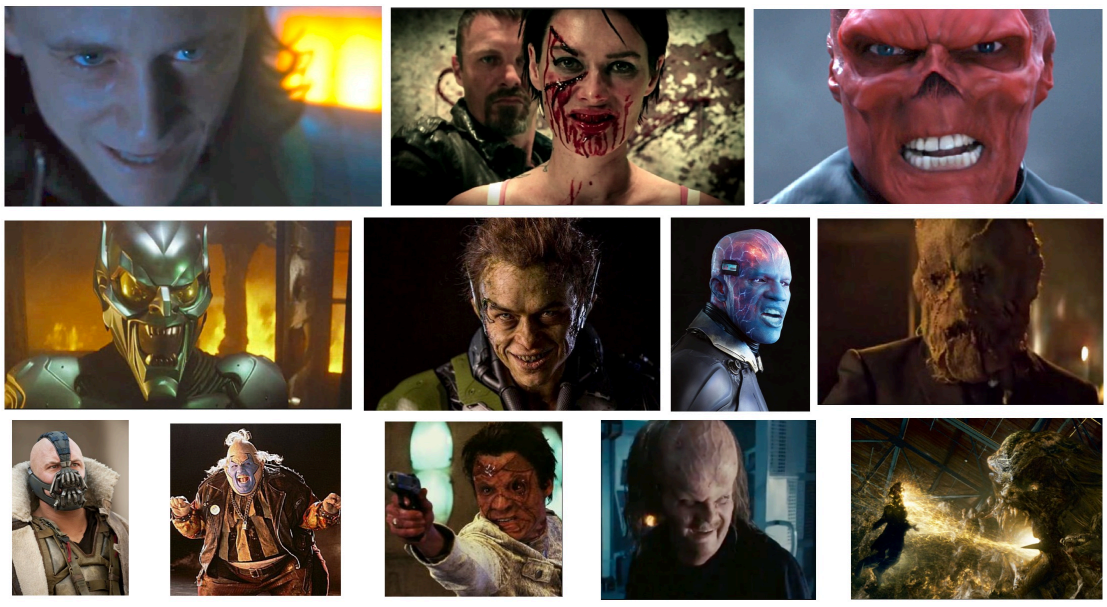

Figure 2.4 Bakthin's 'wide-open bodily abyss' is evident in the grotesque mouths of several super-villains, extending into the exaggeration of mask and costume. From left to right, the grin or grimace is over-emphasised at the level of mask, make-up or performance: with demi-god Loki in *Avengers Assemble* (2012); mob-leader Ma-Ma in *Dredd* (2012); army commander Red Skull in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011); and other psychotic anarchists, such as Green Goblin in both *Spider-Man* (2002) and *The Amazing Spiderman 2* (2014); Electro again in *Amazing Spiderman 2*; The Scarecrow in *Batman Begins* (2005); Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012); Clown in *Spawn* (1997); Jigsaw in *Punisher: Warzone* (2009); as well as the genetically-modified Hector Hammond and his monstrous master 'Parallax' in *Green Lantern* (2011).

If the Joker's visual design invokes a cultural value of chaotic unrest, then our introduction to Batman's physical presence in the Interrogation Room Scene brings into play an entirely different dimension of costume and mask, standing in sharp contrast to the Joker's design by counterbalancing ideas and themes invoked by the carnivalesque. Covered from head to toe in black armour, shrouded in a dark cape of all the same dark tone, Batman's sense of firm stance is internalised into the rest of his body, most tangibly in the form of the bat-suit's protective, synthetically fibered, high-tensile strength Kevlar material. The firm quality of being wrapped-up in an armoured sheath elicits a sensory overlap with the firmness of reinforced textures, and balance of unflinching limbs. Effectively, Batman embodies or invokes a statement of self-control that is as solid and grounded as a rock. In thematic terms, this armoured body, with its stable composure and discipline, brings to mind the values of propriety, civility and order (Figure 2.5), which all work to counterpoint the purpose underlying a carnival event.

Figure 2.5 Comic book illustrations of the character show him as a solid part of the established city foundations, overseeing Gotham city from the same vantage point of antiquated stone gargoyles. This is also true in both *Batman Begins* (2005) and *Batman* (1989) as the character lays dormant in the darkness, in a position ready to react against threats that would disrupt this equipoise.

Batman's costume allows for a rigid, still posture, and his visage, half-hidden behind the cowl, only permits a stone-faced expression, quiet diction, and minimal mouth contortions, extending outwards as a performance of sobriety. As a superhero archetype, Batman's armoured-costume and hidden-face is a means of covering up exposed, overt exhibitionism, and, unlike villains, closing the orifice and expression of the mouth. Heroes then, don costumes and masks that allow for a more composed performance, closed mouth, minimal facial expression that supports the value of rational stoicism in the face of irrational hysteria (Figure 2.6).

Figure 2.6 From left to right: Armoured costumes and hidden, closed mouths protect the superhero from revealing vulnerability, acting as a means of containing and warding off the anarchic, uninhibited exhibitionism of villainy in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *Iron Man* (2008), *Spider-Man* (2002), *Dredd* (2012), *Thor* (2011) and *Green Lantern* (2011).

It is the thematic statement of self-control and rigidity invoked by Batman's costume and mask that attempts to dissipate the Joker's exhibitionist carnival antics, and unpredictable, ostentatious volatility. Also, when considering Kitses' Western antinomies, among the thematic dualities that draw from The West as Desert/Garden or Savage/Domestic include the interplay between White Settlers and Native American Indians: itself being a conflict of opposites that are laden with associations of *Naked*/*Clothed* (i.e. Indians/Settlers, Red/White, Pagan/Christian, extending into Danger and Helplessness, Strength and Weakness) (Bignall 2002: 196). A trope of Western narratives is when fully clothed, urbanised European settlers regard the unclothed, bare flesh of Indian nomadic tribesmen and women on the Great Plains as an indication of being *un*civilised savages. Similarly, the

Joker *emulates* the same associations invoked by refusing to wear clothing considered to be socially-moderated forms of dress. Whilst not 'unclothed' as such, the Joker nonetheless dons a wardrobe of unconventional cuts and garish colours that openly expose an unrepressed, inner primal nature, which then laughs through a wide orifice that unashamedly bares yellow teeth and a saliva-drenched tongue without concern for the offense this display may elicit to the sensibilities of other civilians.

In contrast, Batman is a more fully clothed body, that not only hides nakedness but acts as a protective veneer from expressing, or being exposed to, baser primal urges. Discussing the coded significance underlying clothed bodies, Burkitt notes how during the period of the Renaissance, in contrast to the spirit of medieval carnival exhibitionism, 'bodies and objects began to acquire a private, individual nature, one that was closed off to the world and complete within itself,' meaning that modern physiques, rather than expressing themselves through the extrovert and grotesque, instead became 'civilised, armoured bodies', and were far more reserved in such expressions (Burkitt 1999: 48).

The above dynamic is evident throughout the superhero/villain exchange. In *Iron Man 2* (2010) for example, when the villain Ivan (aka Whiplash) attempts to kill hero Tony Stark (aka Iron Man), turning on a set of electronically-powered plasma whips, he rips away his boiler suit, bearing a half-naked, unkempt, tattooed-covered body packed with threatening motifs and insignias. Stark counteracts this aggression only after an emergency suit is thrown at his feet by one of his aids, allowing the hero to cover his bodily surface with the mechanical armour before engaging in combat. As the villain lashes out, he attempts to carve through the metallic protection, to expose the hero's vulnerability, compromising this authority and control (Figure 2.7). Similarly in *Hancock* (2008), as the drunken, disillusioned superhuman protagonist begins to embrace the true responsibility of his enhanced abilities, he eventually dons a more respectable uniform to emphasise his status as a hero and law enforcer (Figure 2.8).

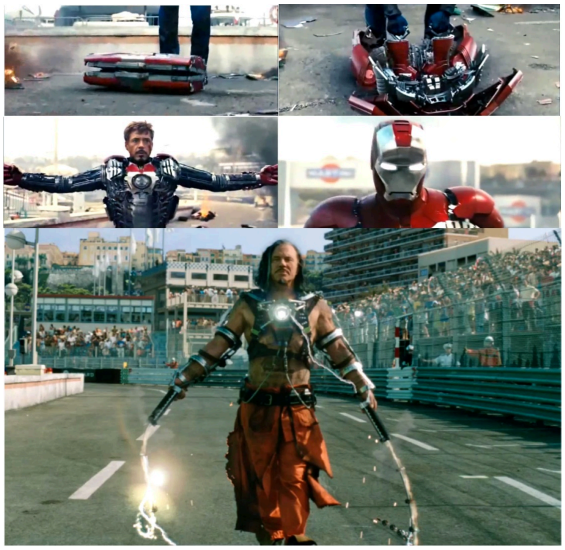

Figure 2.7

Figure 2.8

For the superhero, the suit is a means of channeling an inner primal savagery, through self-control and discipline, for the purposes of policing the social order, but it is this autocratic control over one's emotional excesses and those of others that also invokes a rather discriminative, or fascistic potential. Consider how the hard, carved, engraved, statuesque, monumental musculature of the suit covering a soft, fleshy body underneath is evident with the hyper-intelligent, athletic, muscle-toned figure of Ozymanidas in *Watchmen* (2009), who wishes to be recognised as the absolute epitome of physical perfection, with his outer-suit moulded to look like the proud, bare upper chest of thick muscle segments. His dark grey and bronze colour tones are also similar to the textures of an old monument or statue, echoes that of ancient Egyptian Pharaohs and Roman Emperors, with hieroglyphs around the waist and a wreath donning his head, emulating great leaders of antiquity, chiefly Alexander the Great and Rameses II, complete with an adorning purple cape that affirms a royal majesty.

A demure stance further protects against ruptures of emotional excess, solidifying his persona of armoured entity, with an upright posture and hands folded behind the back, accompanied by slow, calm gestures and mannerisms, outwardly emanating a genuine confidence to others around him. His facial expressions rarely show any excessive emotion, rather preferring to be reserved. Ozymandias neither shouts nor talks too quickly, instead choosing his words carefully and taking the time to articulate them fully. These physical attributes and voice is also evocative of a connotation of ideas associated with the

übermensch figure, complementing the fact that Ozymandias strives to reach absolute perfection in anything and everything he undertakes (Figure 2.9).

Figure 2.9

A self-sufficiency that strictly resists compromise is evident in Ozymandias in *Watchmen* (left); and a Freikorps soldier fighting during the First World War (right).

The superhero body, armoured, toned, and carved with a form of monumental muscularity shares similar traits with the concept of a German *Freikorps*, each declaring a self-sufficient (essentially masculinist) professionalism that wards off constant threats of insufficiency, weakness and emotional excess as 'an armoured entity, protected against the floods of sexual desire, femininity and Communism' (Baker 2008: 25). The Freikorps were early-1920s militia-men and ex-soldiers that eventually became a paramilitary unit fighting for the Nazi party (Baker 2008: 24-25), which aimed to 'pursue, to dam in, and to subdue any force that threatens to transform him back to the horribly disorganised jumble of flesh, hair, skin, bones, intestines and feelings that calls itself human – the human being of old' (Theweleit 1989: 160). No matter how 'hard' or armoured these bodies might appear to be, crucially it is nonetheless an inherently anxious body, with its 'display of musculature paradoxically both disguising and revealing its fragility' (Baker 2008: 25). In this sense, the suit, as a protective veneer, shields the 'purity' of one's own moral mission from any threat that would otherwise 'corrupt' or compromise this ethical integrity: namely, the incompetent transgressions of a perverted, abnormal other. The questions surrounding whether such an ordered, disciplined masculinity (designed to resist giving into more chaotic forms of emotional hysteria) can dangerously veer towards fascistic forms of violence will be dealt with in more detail in the third chapter.

Although displays of self-sufficient 'order' are coded as a value of cultural good in the superhero film, by warding off bouts of emotional vulnerability and an inner irrational

hysteria (that would otherwise compromise one's personal mission) this also reveals the negative aspects to order, which becomes an endeavor of *autocratic discrimination*. During the Interrogation Room Scene of *The Dark Knight*, Batman's own armoured, facial stoicism consistently works to hide any outward display of vulnerability against the Joker's verbal barbs. At a distance from one another, seated either side of the table, Batman is comfortable in his performance, able to ward off the Joker's hysterical rants, but as the villain begins to lean in closer, these antagonisms gradually become increasingly frustrating, and the distribution of these two set of traits begins to change. The hero's relatively inexpressive series of facial contortions are stark when compared to his eccentric nemesis. Yet, after the villain begins to concentrate his deranged hysterics, this starts to prompt a slight alteration of the hero's visage (revealing flashes of concern), announcing an inner turmoil that refigures his stoicism into a traumatic state of hysteria.

A short point here should be made on the performance conventions of 'hysteria', the roots of which originate in the genre of *melodrama*. To clarify, the basic definition of melodrama can be termed as a sensational type of dramatic style or genre, which can apply to literature, theatre plays, radio, television or film, consisting of hyperbolic characters and exciting events intended to appeal to the emotions,[24] influencing a number of popular subgenres.[25] In its dramatic staging, it has been considered an *exaggerated rise-and-fall pattern* in human actions and emotional responses (Elsaesser [1972] 1987: 52), and at the core of a melodramatic style resides the tragic sense of pathos or sadness that saturates highly emotional situations. When melodrama works as a *mode* in other genres, pathos can also be combined with feats-of-action to present the dramatic revelation of moral legibility, emotional truths, integrity and virtue (Williams 1998: 59-60). The action hero soldier John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) relies on pathos as a means of instigating cathartic and explosive violence, with suffering acting as a 'catalyst' for the action (Gallagher 2006: 62). Before Rambo undertakes his rescue-revenge mission

[24] For an extensive history behind pre-filmic modes of melodrama, refer to Thomas Elsaesser's seminal 1972 essay 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama'. The basic term melodrama, for the purposes of this discussion, can best be defined as the way 'melos' (i.e. the succession of musical tones constituting a melody) is given to 'drama' (an exciting, emotional, or unexpected series of events or set of circumstances), i.e. by means of lighting, montage, visual rhythm, décor, style of acting, music, in how the mise-en-scène translates character traits into action, and how performance action is invested through means of gesture, and its dynamic impact on space (Elsaesser [1972] 1987: 55).

[25] Linda Williams lists some of these as: the *western* melodrama, *crime* melodrama, *sex* melodrama, *backwoods* melodrama, *romantic* melodrama, *stunt* melodrama, *society* melodrama, *mystery* melodrama, *rural* melodrama, *crook* melodrama, *underworld* melodrama, *comedy* melodrama in addition to the *action* melodrama (Williams 1998: 50).

(emancipating mistreated prisoners of war from the depths of a Vietnam jungle) he first suffers multiple indignities with pathetic impotence that challenge his physical prowess, which in turn elicits audience empathy for his plight that follows, playing the role of the 'virtuous sufferer' alongside the 'active hero' (Williams 1998: 59).

Going as far back to the domestic family melodramas of the 1950s, a sense of pathos, loneliness and isolation experienced in suburban, middle-class American society elicits a hysteria that must constantly be 'checked' by the protagonists of these films. Note how the affluent widow Cary Scott (Jane Wyman) in Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), when engaged in a romantic entanglement with her gardener, much to the community's disgust, attempts to maintain a stoic face with long-suffering restraint against irrational abuse from her ashamed children and disapproving country-club peers. By consistently withholding any explicit, outward display of emotional pain, this composed propriety consistently clashes with (and places an exaggerated emphasis upon) the inner hysteria that always threaten to antagonise Cary.

It should also briefly be outlined that villains tend to expose their hysterical inhibition in a literal way through baring unclothed portions of flesh, e.g. such as Mystique in *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014), as do some morally-compromised anti-heroes. This is the case with the animalistic savagery performed by *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) or *Wolverine* (2013); or the metaphysical and ethical instability of Dr. Manhattan in *Watchmen* (2009) (see Figure 2.10). Conversely, villains that instead adopt an armoured costume that hides the face behind the mask often possess a megalomaniacal obsession to impose order through their own sense of self-discipline, rather by an overt lack of inhibitions. This is the case with freedom-fighter terrorist Magneto in *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, the demi-god Loki in *Thor* (2011), or wealthy mogul Dr. Doom in *Fantastic Four* (2005) (see Figure 2.11).

Figure 2.10

Figure 2.11

When the aforementioned aesthetic and thematic juxtaposition of *naked/clothed* costumes and masks is applied to the shot/reverse shot that continually alternates the images of performances between superheroes and villains, then a noticeable rhythmic pulse emerges, continually playing off these cultural ideas as a series of beats. In the interrogation scene (refer back to Figure 2.0), the shot/reverse shot exchange between Batman and Joker brings in a thematic negotiation that revolves around the hero as *Ordered* and the villain as *Chaotic*. As the sequence unfolds there is an ongoing pairing that carries and parries these competing values, which include: Batman as *Stoic* / Joker as *Hysterical*; Batman as *Armoured* / Joker as *Exposed*; Batman as *Statuesque* / Joker as *Grotesque*; Batman as *Restrained* / Joker as *Uninhibited*; Batman as *Decent* / Joker as *Obscene*; Batman as *Disciplined* / Joker as *Unpredictable*; Batman as *Civil* / Joker as *Rude*; Batman as *Rational* / Joker as *Irrational*.

Hence, the consistent rhythmic editing scheme of shot-reverse shot alternation between an *armoured bat-suit* and an *exposed carnival-grin* resonates with a continual thematically-significant rhythmic pulse, pitting values of 'order' against associations tied to 'chaos'. The same can be applied to other shot/reverse shot sequences, such as the exchange between the grotesque gaping mouth of Green Goblin against the statuesque integrity of Spiderman (see Figure 2.1 again), or the exposed mutilation of Red Skull compared to the unmolested visage of Captain America (refer back to Figure 2.2). As the editing flits between these two designs, the differences in Spiderman's covered, smooth calm face as a statement of moral integrity and social responsibility emphasises the wider orifice of the Green Goblin's mouth and jagged fangs that invoke the devil-may-care values of solipsistic impulse and animalistic rage. The shots that contrast Captain America with Red Skull, by looming closer to the characters with a gradual zoom from medium shot to close-up also shows the hero's cleaner, unscarred skin as trustworthy when compared to the villain's act of pulling away one synthetic face to reveal the deviant qualities of a lipless mouth of snarling teeth, severed nose cavities and imploded eye sockets underneath.

Shot/reverse shot exchanges between superheroes and villains, work akin to a process of montage, pairing the meanings of order/chaos, and form the bedrock or foundation to achieving a thematically significant rhythmic pulse. This is because the design of superhero costumes and masks work in a particular way when compared to other genre characters, presenting and repeating a pair of simplified, evocative *statements* over time. To close this section, the argument will now clarify exactly how the superhero film achieves this process, which will then allow discussion into the way certain themes (invested in masks and costumes) become extended into individual performance techniques.

Initially, it is important to point out that actors, since the classical Hollywood studio system, have always traditionally been required to cater their performance styles to suit the specific conventions laid out by a given genre formula, being appropriate to that fictional reality. For this reason, an actor tends to base a role in and around the design and ideas represented by costume, mask and make-up. Humphrey Bogart, for instance, typically turned to the dapper, debonair attire of fedora hat, double-breasted suit and black tie to portray the roles of his shrewd, sagacious private detective characters Samuel Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* (1946). Such garments helped to energise the delivery of a cunning intellect. Accordingly, Boris Karloff's grotesque

prosthetics are appropriate in emphasising each of his awkward, erratic, jerking movements of the monster in *Frankenstein* (1931) or the stiff, ponderous, incremental motion of a re-animated corpse in classic horror thriller *The Mummy* (1932).

Discussing the impact of costume, Bruce F. Kawin declares that this apparel functions as a signifying practice, because these garments undeniably make 'a *statement* about the character who wears it [emphasis added]' (Kawin 1992: 352). As viewers, we attempt to know all we can about diverse figures, be it Snow White and the Witch, or Laurel and Hardy, simply 'just by the *look* of them' (Johnston 2007: 150). Similarly, the importance of the mask or make-up in producing their own statements cannot be overstated, as '[p]utting on a mask,' Wendy Doniger affirms, 'gets us closer to one self and farther from another, and so does taking off the mask' (Doniger 2005: 231). The mask, then, is a key means of invoking significant statements about the personality of a performer's character. The viewer appreciates just how, from the perspective of a performer, the 'first sight of oneself wearing a Mask… reflected in the mirror should be so disturbing. A 'bad' mask will produce little effect, but a 'good' mask will give you the feeling that you know all about the creature in the mirror. You feel that the mask is about to take over' (Johnston 2007: 151). The same can be said of superhero characters that describe their own performances in the diegesis, such as when Crimson Bolt in *Super* (2011), when donning the suit for the first time states he has finally "found his skin", or when Night Owl in *Watchmen* admits to feeling "impotent" whenever standing naked in front of the case displaying his own full suit of body armour.

Hollywood genre films employ costume, mask or make-up to the effects described by Kawin and Doniger, in order to invoke clear statements that create an alternative persona for viewers to follow and acknowledge. However, when analysing the superhero character, this is a figure that sports a particularly *exaggerated* form of outfit, garishly colourful and blatantly symbol-crested, which can emphasise statements in a far more *explicit fashion* than other genre conventions tend to allow for. Superheroes, for example, often hide the eyes and mouths with masks, causing their bodies to be presented in a manner similar to automatons, having a monolithic, statuesque appearance (Lichtenfeld 2007: 297). This, in effect, functions as a blank canvas, providing a surface on which to illustrate or inscribe a particular meaning that leans towards the threshold of extreme elaboration, intended to invoke only a marginal threshold of interpretation, consequently having a specific series of connotations attached to it.

For instance, in the comic book mythos of Batman, Peter Coogan points out that the

character first formed his identity after an encounter with a bat, in his eyes a symbol to be feared by both himself and others, 'striking terror' into the hearts and minds of the criminal underworld, resulting in the fact that 'his codename embodies his biography' which is also the case with the identity of Superman, literally being that of a *super*-man that represents humanity's unlimited potential (Coogan 2006: 33). In this sense, concepts and statements are easily noticeable through the medium of *over-emphasised* physical attributes of superheroes. These figures, like any character, are embellished with a specific set of ideas: but the superhero is designed to represent the most *recognisable* or evocative depictions or incarnations of the concepts they carry, being an absolute epitome.

This idea of the superhero costume or mask functioning as an 'epitome' can be attributed to what illustrator Scott McCloud describes as the theory of *amplification through simplification*.[26] Both designer and viewer amplify and highlight concepts portrayed in images and pictures by *simplifying* or *focusing attention* on specific details, 'stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning'' (Coogan 2006: 33). By proclaiming the superhero persona through the emblematising power of costume, and symbolic chevrons, such as the one emblazed upon Superman's chest, Coogan declares that this process 'emphasise[s] the character's codename and is itself being a *simplified statement* of that identity [emphasis added]' (Coogan 2006: 33). In this way, superheroes have their most essential features exaggerated so as to embellish an underlying meaning. This is evident in how Captain America, by being covered from head to toe in the stars and stripes of the American flag and by throwing his star-spangled shield into the path of enemies denotes a fundamental value of nationalistic patriotism in both *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Captain America: The Winter Solider* (2014). Also, the devil-horned *Daredevil* (2003) enacts feats of perilous bravery, standing for the value of fearless stunts, in the same way that the sharp-clawed Wolverine conjures up an animalistic, wild savagery in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009) and *The Wolverine* (2013).

The artistic process (and spectatorial reception) of amplification-through-simplification endorsed by McCloud supports an argument that, when superhero costumes are concerned, there is a sense of *immediate evocation* that brings to the surface an association of specific cultural ideas. These ideas are then extended through the heroes' performance and this is evident throughout the comic-book literature that contemporary film cycles adapt. For example, the strict autocracy associated with the law enforcer in

[26] See Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, (Harper Collins: 1993) for the full spectrum of representation, i.e. from 'the picture plane' to 'reality' to 'meaning' (52-53).

Judge Dredd (1995) and *Dredd* (2012) emanates from his costume, which has been crafted out of insignia originating from a fascistic dictatorship, complete with a proud golden eagle carved into a shoulder pad, and a constabulary helmet built to hold back any usurping rioters that might demonstrate their indifference to laws of the state. The moral integrity of the vampire hunter *Blade* (1998), in both his identity and ethical mission, are tied down to the very sword he holds, and the manner in which he employs it. *Spider-Man* dons a suit made of web-covered fabric, being an obvious expression of his web-shooting, wall crawling 'spider-like' agility and persona. *Iron Man* is quite literally a man empowered by an indestructible, gleaming suit of protective metallic armour, without which he would be unable to perform the role of guardian to the people.

Keeping the above examples in mind, each performance technique employed by superheroes and villains adopt traits from other genres as a point of reference (i.e. 'swashbuckling' or 'action' for the hero; and 'horror' or 'gothic' and the 'grotesque' for the villain), but for these attributes to be efficiently illustrated, avoiding any misinterpretation, the artist tends to employ elements of *caricature*. Derived from the Italian *caricare* meaning to 'charge' or 'load', the aim of the caricaturist is to invest an image with as much meaning as possible, in effect crafting a 'loaded portrait' (OED). Caricaturist Lenn Redman defines caricature as 'an exaggerated likeness of a person made by emphasising all of the features that make the person different from everyone else. It is *not* the exaggeration of one's *worst* features… The essence of a caricature is *exaggeration – not distortion*. Exaggeration is the overemphasis of truth. Distortion is a complete denial of the truth [emphasis added]'(Redman 1984: 1).

To exaggerate a super-figure, then, is to in effect 'magnify' the limits of truth associated with them (i.e. the sheer size of Superman's chest) and to caricature them is to then take their most distinguishing features (i.e. pointed ears, thick eyebrows, thin chin and warped smile for the face of 'Green Goblin'; huge, thick fists attached to tree-trunk muscular arms for the hands of the 'Hulk') and magnify them even further, streamlining them to depict just how 'different from everyone else' they are. While the most positive parts of a hero's body and behaviour will be exaggerated to heroic effect, caricature will often result in grotesquery in the case of villains.

When applying ideas on caricature to performance, superhero figures portray meaning through a combination of their exaggerated physical attributes *alongside* behavioural movements, gestures and mannerisms. The comic artist Jack Kirby is one of many illustrators who 'seldom made his characters static, "as anyone in a costume was

either moving or poised to move into action", tearing and jumping out of the panels and all over the page' (Duncan and Smith 2009: 235). *Spider-Man*, in his agility (i.e. wall-crawling, jumping from one surface to the other, walking on all fours) mimics a spider. *Wolverine*, in his wild stances (i.e. holding out his claws, constantly ready to pounce, lunging at enemies) moves as would a beast. 'Storm' in *X-Men* (2000) creates a tirade of thunder, lightening, hurricanes and tornadoes around her, being reflective of her inner nature and identity. *Catwoman* (2004) is poised as a cat. 'Swamp Thing' moves as a part of the swamp. 'Sandman' moves with the sand. 'The Flash', by moving in a flash, faster than the eye can see, confirms his very name.

In magnifying and exaggerating the performed movement of these bodies, the process of making a thematic statement might also be subtle, rather than overt or blatant. This is particularly the case with the filmic portrayal of hero Hellboy (Ron Pearlman) enhanced by prosthetics and make-up, appearing as a huge, muscular, red-coloured, horned man, gaining the designation due to his demonic and devilish appearance. In *Hellboy* (2005), Pearlman plays the character as a stubborn, arrogant aggravator who intimidates those in close proximity. As viewers we do not learn these traits simply from his colossal body type or aggressive behaviour (i.e. the act of consistently jibing his superiors, etc.) but also from his hunched postures when sitting and ape-like swaying motions while walking. As he moves his huge arms and broad shoulders, we feel the space (and its inhabitants) move with them. Viewers expect the environment to eventually be altered by these mannerisms at some point: whether it is pushing another person out of the way or smashing through a brick wall. We equally anticipate the same potential occurrences in moments of reduced activity, such as simply standing still. Hellboy is a dominant force, and to be reckoned with: he enacts this role not just by his brawn, but also by the subtle motions and postures of that muscularity. The more understated his gestures, the greater the degree of his self-assertion. As a highly active force, he intimidates and overpowers: but the gentle movements of this body are additionally able to amplify these associations further.

A final point to make about the simplified evocative impact that caricature and exaggeration has on superhero costume/behaviour is the prominence of CGI (computer generated imagery) in relation to the 2000s-to-present film cycle. Contemporary superhero action films have naturally coincided with the increasing sophistication and possibilities afforded by advanced digital visual effects, enhancing these physical attributes, costumes and masks to a great extent. Stephen Prince, in describing superhero films such as *Spider-*

Man 2 (2004), *Catwoman* (2004), *Blade: Trinity* (2005) and *X Men 3: The Last Stand* (2007) states that alongside the tools of digital technology, filmmakers now possessed the ability to bring into manifestation a type of body that beforehand was formed only in the imaginations of comic-book panel illustrators (Prince 2004: 26).

Consider how the Human Torch and his fiery personality literally displays itself through the digital flames shifting upon his body surface in *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007). Spiderman in the *Spider-Man Trilogy* (2002-2007) could never be manifested as a web-shooting or wall-crawling, agile acrobat swinging through Manhattan without the aid of digital tools. This also includes the intricate mechanisms functioning throughout Iron Man's suit in *Iron Man* or Wolverine's indestructible claws unsheathing themselves in the *X-Men* film series (2000-2014). The same can be said to Green Lantern's ability to form objects made out of green light with his imagination in *Green Lantern* (2011) or the ability of Batman's cape to extend itself in flight in *The Dark Knight*. The digitally enhanced portrayal of the Hulk's massive muscle density, huge, thick fists attached to tree-trunk muscular arms and gargantuan torso in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) allows this body to be one of anger and unlimited rage, consequently recognised as an anti-heroic figure as these features highlight everything this character constitutes.

Thus, it is arguably the explicit way these exaggerated costumes invoke simplified thematic statements or cultural concepts that sets the superhero character apart from other hero figures. For instance, the conventional action hero may well stand-out-from-the-crowd, possessing what Yvonne Tasker would term as an 'overdeveloped' and 'over-determined' type of muscular dimensions that signals an extraordinary authority or 'triumphant assertion' of masculinity (Tasker 1993: 109). This is evident with the Sylvester Stallone war veteran John Rambo in *Rambo: First Blood Part 2* (1985), Arnold Schwarzenegger's John Matrix in *Commando* (1985), Bruce Willis's police detective John McLean's in *Die Hard* (1988) or swashbuckling treasure hunters equipped with a variety of equipment, such as Harrison Ford's hero in *Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), as well as the muscular contours and texture of Angelina Jolie's action heroine in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001). It is true to say that Rambo's renegade soldier and McClean's maverick cop are presented as 'atypical' from the institutions or societies they reside in. However, neither the soldier's attire nor cop uniform is as aberrant and provocative as the bright red-and-blue spandex worn by Superman or Spiderman. Also, superhero muscular qualities differ somewhat, in that it is not only *super*-human and amplified through digital effects, but also 'masked' from society, endowed with symbolic

chevrons engraved upon the chest and an alter-ego or codename that hides their civilian status more than the action hero costume. The superhero costume and mask evokes themes in an essentially explicit (rather than implicit) fashion.

So far, the argument has established the kinds of thematic statements invoked by the two designs of costumes and masks worn by superheroes and villains, e.g. Batman and the Joker. The shot/reverse shot editing schemes that present these designs, the chapter has suggested, constantly pit values of disciplined 'order' against 'chaotic' hysteria. The next stage of the chapter is to explore how this rhythmic pulse of carnival and propriety invested in costume and mask undergoes variation through gestures and mannerisms that stress and accentuate these antinomies in new directions. A 'montage effect' gradually unfolds through this repetition, blurring the two sets of values: the sum of which results in an overlap of meaning between the two. In time, the rhythm of the spectacle confuses the roles played by villains, who are quite disciplined when channeling their unrestrained hysteria, and this also impacts upon the heroes, who become increasingly hysterical when unleashing their own 'fascistic' method of discipline. The narrative arc of thematic development between order and chaos that such a spectacle of performance tells will now be analysed closely.

(iv) *The Rhythmic Stress of Action and Intrigue*: Accentuating Thematic Tensions through Competing Gestures, Mannerisms and Vocal Cadence

In the previous section, the chapter has shown that when juxtaposing shots of costume and mask between heroes and villains, a series of thematic statements unfold: emphasising notions of an 'ordered', restrained propriety versus an uninhibited, 'chaotic' exhibitionism. This section now directly explores the shifting, temporal line of the performance, in how each gesture and mannerism exchanged between hero and villain physically continues to accentuate and evolve these antinomies further, e.g. propelling chaos/order and carnival/propriety along a rhythmic trajectory.

Christian Bale's performance as Batman, for instance, rigidly seated on the opposite side of the table with a still posture, stone-faced expression, quiet diction, and minimal mouth contortions (i.e. half-hidden behind the cowl) is a role of sobriety, staying dormant until provoked. Heath Ledger's movement as the Joker, however, causes the character never to stay still, always shifting his body around this space, altering direction, and ready to seize the next opportune moment to incite anarchic unrest, with a brutal and

unpredictable nature that confirms his role as a proactive agent of chance. Bale chooses Batman's physical movements sparingly, and with subtlety, only investing physical energy if the situation so demands it, confirming the superhero as a reactionary figure that only desires to quell upheaval, and maintain a state of equilibrium. Ledger's ceaseless shuffling of the torso, nodding of head, jerking shoulders and flaying hand gestures, constant smiling, licking of lips and loud intonation alternatively suggests an unrestrained intoxication that laughs directly in the face of his opponent's self-restraint.

It is the pairing of performance techniques such as those mentioned above that brings into play a distinct rhythmic pattern, based on certain aspects of human movement. Janet Goodridge would term this movement as the 'arrangement of components' or a 'sequential pattern or series of patterns' (Goodridge 1999: 25). A physically rhythmic form of pacing, Goodridge affirms, results from a 'patterned energy-flow of action, marked in the body by *varied stress and directional change*; also marked by changes in level of intensity, speed and duration (including duration of both *action* and *stillness*) [emphasis added]', with the specificity of this action, *confining* and *shaping* the flow of the performing body (Goodridge 1999: 43).

Applying Goodridge's reasoning to the Interrogation Room scene, certain gestures and mannerisms parry against one another, resulting in a rhythmic interplay that stresses deeper values (e.g. of carnival and propriety) in a progressive way. For instance, during Batman's continued efforts to impose some sense influence of authority over the Joker, each attempt is always countered by the antagonist's contortion of patronizing smiles and smirking mirth. Even when subtly giving the side of his mouth a slightly crooked smirk, this grin extends from the mask, stretching out the red make-up line wiped back to the farthest edges of his cheeks. As the villain continues to taunt his opponent with provocation, the hero will ward off this erratic behaviour with facial stoicism, protecting his upper face with the cowl, and moving the corners of his mouth in a minimalist fashion, again echoing his armoured persona. The Joker's performance is a compulsion to counter the authoritative figure towering over him, by ridiculing Batman with outbursts of hysterical laughter and snide remarks that prompt a response. It is in this regard that one performance not only plays off the energy of another, but also accentuates the thematic associations as a succession of competitive turns (Figure 2.12)

Figure 2.12

As the themes continue to follow this patterned energy-flow of physical action, undergoing the varied stress and directional change Goodridge advocates of human performance, the hero will gradually begin to loose his composure, inevitably compromising the integrity or propriety invested in these theatrics. Although Batman holds back explicit displays of emotion, the Joker's exhibitionism continues to strike one taunt after another, goading him with traumatising insights into the troublesome savagery that lays dormant within humanity and is inherent to the societal order. Whenever this torment elicits the slightest flinch of doubt from beneath the hero's mask, Batman's facial and physical stoicism inevitably begins to falter, noticeably manifested in perturbed expressions that reveal glimpses of internalised pain. By betraying flashes of concern through the occasional blink, widening of glistening eyes, closing in corners of the mouth, and infinitesimally reeling backwards, these slight gestures also prompt the viewer to question the supposed 'grounded protection' his suit of armour provides (Figure 2.13).

Figure 2.13

To counteract Batman's display of resistance, the Joker will have to continually compose himself, ready to unleash another precise bout of hysteria at the next opportune moment. The calculating exactitude displayed by Joker reveals an intrinsically rational temperament that compromises the villain's supposedly anarchic role. In this way, as each performer stresses his own theatrics, the scene builds up a sense of tension: with a composed *posture of propriety* resisting idiosyncratic *quirks of hysteria* and vice versa.

As this competition then escalates these dueling theatrics to a breaking point this results in complicating the thematic values at a juncture that coerces Batman's disposition of order to gradually kowtow to the Joker's opposing binary of chaos. In both the earlier Figure 2.0 and Figure 2.13 above for instance, the dynamism of the cutting between the two performances presents shots of the Joker challenging the value of moral integrity that Batman represents: doing so by framing the villain using conniving schemes of verbal manipulation that gradually compromise the hero's identity as a guardian of protection and order. This imagery is juxtaposed with shots showing the hero counteracting the violation of his self-control, responding only with a tactic of uncompromising facial stoicism or immediate brief replies. Then, as a means of yet still attempting to counter Batman's guttural snapping responses, the Joker will continue to antagonise his opponent by delivering a detailed explanation of the worst aspects of society in his defiant, mocking

voice by using carefully manipulative phrasing, subtle coercion and cunning gerrymandering to push the odds in his favour. This results in a dynamic contest of vocal parrying between the hero's brief *guttural* statements, and the villain's *whiney*, self-indulgent passages. In this sense, the struggle between these two performance techniques functions as an ongoing negotiation, as the stoic hero attempts to contain his adversary's uninhibited antics.

What ensues in the aforementioned analysis of the interrogation scene is a performance that rhythmically complicates and negotiates the drama between two thematic tensions: a process that hinges on the genre convention of the *monologue*, being the verbal equivalent of grandiose posturing (Bukatman 2009: 115). To better understand the purpose of monologues, Peter Coogan in his study on the superhero genre discusses this term in detail: 'The term monologuing,' Coogan writes, 'refers to a super-villain's tendency toward self-absorbed, self-destructive talking; instead of killing the hero they sprat off on their greatness, the hero's feebleness and the inevitability of their victory' (Coogan 2006: 89). Both in narrative and thematic terms, the monologue acts as the linchpin of a villain's performance, and the main impetus for the hero's response during this interaction.

At the heart of the villain's monologue however is not only 'grandiose self-aggrandisement' but an underlying sense of victimhood, 'originating in a wound that the super-villain never recovers from' (Coogan 2006: 83). It is the wound that motivates an antagonist to engage with the hero, Coogan affirms, as well as the original maltreatment causing this injury and anguish that forms a tale in need of telling: 'Physically and socially defective, [villains] are in love with the story of their wound, unable to get past whatever happened in their past and turn their energies toward healing or redemptive therapy' (Coogan 2006: 84). To compensate for such deformity, and feelings of 'inferiority and inadequacy,' the villain employs a 'superiority complex' as a defense mechanism, (Coogan 2006: 84) so as to combat the hero's own apparent physical, social or moral superiority (Coogan 2006: 89). As a means of confirming the 'virtuousness' of their mania, and the 'reasonableness' in discussing the wound, the villain's attempts at negotiation depends upon the fact that:

> If the villain can gain the hero's respect and approval [they yearn for], then his villainy is justified and he is reincorporated back into the community that ostracised and rejected him. Approval by the hero will heal the victim's wound. But the hero never gives this approval and that is what keeps the villain coming back to the same hero over and over again… pouring salt into the wound (Coogan 2006: 89).

The interrogation scene adheres to the monologue convention of the un-healing wound or scar. The monologue itself is driven by a narrative impetus: i.e. presenting a scenario of interrogating the villain over the whereabouts of innocent attorneys held hostage, the dialogue of Joker berating Gotham City's civility, and also attacking Batman's moral fiber. During the scene Batman only has only one goal: to ascertain the whereabouts of kidnapped District Attorney Harvey Dent, and reinstate law and order. The Joker is reluctant to give up Dent's location without first engaging in this debate, deriding the values of law and order as a fallacy.

As well as driving forward plot causality and delivering narrative exposition, the monologue also offers a platform for hero and villain to complicate and negotiate an arc of implicit themes (i.e. tensions of carnival and propriety), doing so rhythmically through the performance. This is because, thematically, Batman acts to maintain the divide of civility as 'right' and anarchy as 'wrong', but the Joker aims to switch and blur these categories altogether. In terms of the performance techniques of vocal cadence and timbre, for example, a section of the dialogue shows Batman to speak with brief, spartan statements, that demand single answers, whereas the Joker indulges in much longer, drawn out passages that pose more difficult questions (Figure 2.14) raising convoluted issues.

Figure 2.14

This difference in rhythm is especially evident in the oral delivery of dialogue exchanged between them, that aurally pit Batman's short, sharp retorts against the Joker's lengthier, drawn out ruminations:

> Batman: Where's Dent?
>
> Joker: Those mob fools want you gone so they can get back to the way things were. But I know the truth, there's no going back. You've changed things, *forever*.
>
> Batman: Then why do you want to kill me?
>
> Joker: [Laughs] I don't want to kill you. What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off mob dealers? No! No. No. No, you… *You complete me*!
>
> Batman: You're garbage. You kill for money.
>
> Joker: Don't talk like one of them. You're not! Even if you'd like to be. To them you're just a freak, like *me*. They need you right now, but when they don't, they'll cast you out, like a leper. You see their morals, their 'code', it's a bad joke, dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. I'll show you, when the chips are down, these err… these 'civilised' people, they'll eat each other. See I'm not a monster… I'm just ahead of the curve.
>
> Batman: [Leaps up, aggressively grabbing Joker] *Where's Dent!?*

Here, there is a definite negotiation in terms of the narrative content (arguing what is meant by civil 'morality'), but this debate also unfolds as a rhythmic performance of two evolving thematic values. The vocal timbre of Batman's dialogue presents a low grating sound that growls as though on guard. The hero's vocal cadence follows a platitude of sorts, always at the same volume, and very much to the point. The Joker's vocal timbre is in many ways the opposite of Batman's performance, whining and high-pitched. The cadence is also contrary, being drawn out, stopping and starting intermittently, inflecting certain words over others (e.g. "You've changed things, *forever*"), deviating erratically (e.g. "No. No. No. No, you…") as well as rising and falling with lyricism, evolving in a sing-song fashion that verges on rhyme at times (e.g. "You see their morals, their 'code', it's a bad joke").

Writing on the voice as an extension of the body's physical movements, Michel Chion declares that: '"The presence of a body structures the space that contains it"… Let us paraphrase this to say that *the presence of a human voice structures the sonic space that surrounds it*' (Chion 1999: 5). The interrogation room is designed with minimalistic décor, possessing only a metal table and two chairs, a concrete floor, with unpainted brickwork and a series of two way mirrors, coloured with various types of grey and black tones,

without elaborate furnishings. In this way, it is the voices projected by both hero and villain that act to saturate this space with textual significance. The differences in the volume of dialogue, as stated earlier, as well as the contrast in vocal cadence and timbre, unfold as a rhythmic trajectory of *whiney/guttural*. The difference in vocal techniques rhythmically resonates a thematic struggle in keeping with the antinomies of whiney *as* chaotic carnival, and guttural *as* ordered propriety. This is for the reason that: (i) Batman acts as an agent of honest 'action', speaking *to the point*, carrying themes of order, containment, self-restraint, protection of the status quo; and (ii) Joker plays the agent of deceitful 'intrigue', spending a great deal of time *dwelling* what it actually means to be 'civilised', challenging the supposed moral integrity of the societal order, so bringing in anarchic permutations.

Much of this rhythmic tension unfolds between the way these two performances engage in a long-established dispute employed by action-adventure genres: pitting feats of *action* against more manipulative strategies of *intrigue*.[27] Action heroes conventionally do not need to question themselves, as they are supposedly on the side of right, and so only need to act upon that truism, rather than think on it in any way. Villains, conversely, plot, scheme and collude, perverting the ramifications of the hero's actions, complicating wider issues of morality, interrogating or challenging the conviction and gusto held by the protagonist, so inciting a degree of uncertainty. Consider for example, how, going as far back as the early swashbuckling 'Merrie England cycle' of the late 1930s Nick Roddick points out that the relationship between an individualistic hero against strictures of authority has conventionally been a terse one. The heroic roles played by swashbuckling performer Errol Flynn, Roddick argues, were often presented as 'upholder[s] of true values' that faced off the 'entrenched potions of intrigue' found in hierarchal establishments, functioning as a storytelling dynamic which has been influencing later genres ever since, in that:

> [T]he commitment to an action movie has, as in the later Flynn epics, a broader ideological significance: men following their instinctive sense of humour are more likely to take the right decision than men demeaning themselves in political intrigue… *Action is right*, *intrigue is wrong* – a Hollywood philosophy intrinsic to the kind of narrative produced by the studio system at its peak [emphasis added] (Roddick 1983: 239).

[27] In terms of plot exposition for instance, consider how the performance follows a rhythm of action, which is aligned with the might and immediacy of spectacle, impact aesthetic, against intrigue, which resides in the cunning intricacy of dialogue content.

In *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) for example, sitting opposite a group of nobles, Flynn plays the role of medieval vigilante Robin Hood, as an agent of upheaval with characteristics of joviality and mirth, disrespecting the authoritarian Norman court, which by contrast stands for the stability of an established hierarchy, being dour, haughty and filled with pomposity. When Hood's jesting finally incites indignation from the lords seated before him, suddenly causing a concealed dagger to strike inches away from the hero's face, Flynn's performance immediately springs into action.

Here, Flynn unleashes the archetypical theatrics of heroic derring-do, of agility and spontaneity, thrusting his chair back, adapting it into a weapon, flaying his sword in hand-to-hand combat. The Normans instead give the archetypical performance of villainous intrigue, using aggressive tactics to foil the hero, but staying rigid, remaining in the background, looking on as the guardsmen close in on Hood, continuing to plot, conceit and collude together, maintaining a firm grasp on the damsel-in-distress Maid Marian as a bargaining ploy. In this instant, Hood's theatrics stand for chance and opportunity, while the Normans invoke established institutions, infrastructure and the current (all be it corrupt) status quo (Figure 2.15).

Figure 2.15

Above: while dining, Robin Hood (Errol Flynn) uses humour and banter to provoke the corrupt lords seated before him. After a dagger is thrown, the hero responds immediately by jumping to action, thrusting his chair back, adapting it into a weapon, and engaging in hand-to-hand combat in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938).

Below: The nobility look on as the guardsmen close in, continuing to plot and collude.

Similarly, when the Joker's monologue provokes Batman to a point where he is no longer prepared to tolerate the villains' curious musing, this causes the hero to leap up into action, grabbing the antagonist from the other side of the table. The table is a significant element of the mise-en-scene, playing an important role in this competition of gestures and mannerisms, in effect being the figurative boundary that separates the themes both hero and villain carry, and is a line to which each performer crosses when the negotiation reaches a greater level of intensity. The table is a site that energises the performance, building up the rhythmic tension between the balance and imbalance of carnival and propriety, as well as the resistance between action and intrigue instigated throughout the scene. Batman performs bursts of action (i.e. grabbing the villain from the table, throwing him against the brickwork, hurling him back onto the table) to counteract each retort of manipulative intrigue (i.e. bouts of grotesque smirking, chortling) projected by the Joker. Each feat of physical aggression is met with a mocking comment, and vice versa.

Every time one performance competes with another, there is the visual impact with the environment's brickwork and table, as well as the diegetic sound of the Joker's body colliding with these surfaces. This 'to-ing' and 'fro-ing' from gestures and mannerisms of action and intrigue stresses the competitive negotiation between values of carnival against concerns of propriety: unfolding as a rhythmic pattern of *chaos/order*, *chaos/order*, *chaos/order*, and so on (Figure 2.16). Also observing this exchange from a darkened room behind the two-way mirror on the other side of the glass is a group of police detectives. This huddled crowd, in effect, takes the position of diegetic spectators that give further gravitas to this arena of debate, waiting to see if Batman is still in control, and whether order will successfully prevail over chaos.

Figure 2.16

The rhythmic interplay of action/intrigue forms an evolving arc of cultural conflict that develops the meaning of one thematic value in relation to another. In following this play off between two competing rhythms of performance, this spectacle tells a distinct narrative trajectory of order kinetically clashing against chaos. This kind of narrativised spectacle is evident across superhero-villain exchanges featuring the monologue. In *Spider-Man* (2002) Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe) has incapacitated the hero (Toby Maguire) upon a skyscraper rooftop with both his hands and feet bound. Using this moment as an opportunity, the villain debates with intrigue whether exceptional individuals, by their superior intellectuality or cunning, have a right to rise above or be placed upon the shoulders of others (refer back to Figure 2.1). Green Goblin's grotesque mask places even greater emphasis on the voice, so resonating with themes of the carnivalesque. The villain's mask covers his face, but has a large gaping mouth carved into the front, emphasising the voice as the primary source of expression at this point. While the lips are unseen, the voice carries forward a thematic significance of whiney, cackling glee, self-assured, but spiteful whenever challenged. The hero's face is also covered, but the mouth is hidden behind a blank surface, placing less emphasis on the voice as overt, but instead confirming its adherence to propriety, only responding with brief, weary statements that aim to trivialise and ignore the villain's irrational jabbering, focused only on jumping into action to put a stop to these plans.

In *Thor* (2011), even without any mask that emphasises the gaping mouth or a whiney voice, the villain Loki (see Figure 2.4) (Tom Hiddleston) stands for carnival themes by using his quiet, eloquent and carefully chosen diction in a manner that manipulates his brother, the hero Thor (see Figure 2.6) (Chris Hemsworth) with disruptive feats of intrigue. Thor, even though he loudly projects his voice at a high volume, in effect 'booming out' truisms about his prowess as a warrior, and capability as a leader, which at times verges on brash confidence and arrogance, this performance nonetheless stands for the honesty of unadulterated action. A rhythm of action/intrigue emerges as Loki continues to challenge his brother's right to rule the Kingdom of Asgard, desiring to impose his own state of order. Loki's voice will attempt to *match* Thor's volume, snapping aggressively, but will inevitably *deviate* into sharper, spiteful bursts, rather than the deeper resonance of the hero who begins to learn the sheer responsibility that accompanies great power.

In *Green Lantern* a thematic rhythm occurs when hero and villain are exhausted from combat in an underground laboratory, lying on the floor next to one another. The villain Hector Hammond (Peter Sarsgaard), empowered yet deformed by advanced alien technology, begins to talk in detail about his personal obsession with fear, harming the fleeing scientists and personnel while he does so. Ignoring this drawn out speech, the hero Hal Jordan aka Green Lantern (Ryan Reynolds) attempts to stand up and save these victims, but is forcibly thrown back to the floor by Hammond's powers of telekinesis, desperate to continue this debate. Using telepathy to probe the hero's thoughts, Hammond laments about how they have both experienced past traumas, trying to bring the hero down to his own level of fear. Here, chaotic intrigue resists ordered action. Whenever Hammond smirks and cackles, these shots are juxtaposed with the hero's solemn silence, who is only focused on putting a stop to Hammond's violence. Eventually using his own powers, the hero places his green lantern power ring to Hammond's head, propelling him across the other side of the room to cease the monologue. Here, frank action has finally overcome devious intrigue (Figure 2.17).

Figure 2.17

More importantly I argue that this juxtaposition of shots between carnival/propriety forms a montage effect, the sum of which first pairs together ideas of order and chaos, so equaling another third overlapping value that conflates the two themes. The physical motion and shot/reverse shot editing structuring the spectacle are able to achieve this by developmentally blurring the boundaries of what each idea actually means in relation to one another. Consider the exchange between Green Lantern and Hector Hammond as exemplifying how, whenever the hero's ability to jump into action is in any way compromised by the villain's methods of intrigue, then there is a *problematic ambiguity* to the roles they each play. By listening to Hammond, Green Lantern begins to succumb to his own internal distress and fear, allowing an inner, chaotic hysteria to surface that comprises this display of stoicism. Hammond, on the other hand, while maniacal, shows an intense, ordered concentration and focus that guides his lack of inhibition along a specific direction aimed at the hero.

The idea of problematic ambiguity (stated above) is also applicable to the exchange between Hood/the Normans, as these roles seemingly become *switched* later on in the narrative. Hood for instance fights to destabilise the tyrannical status quo of King John's Court, this is clear, but it is for the very purpose of *re*-instating another kind of status quo: the re-equilibrium of King Richard's Reign. The narrative eventually rehabilitates Hood as an outlaw figure by rewarding him with a knighthood and lands, so drawing the protagonist away from the realms of chaos and back into the fold of law, order and establishment. Conversely, the corrupt figures of authority typical to the swashbuckler (e.g. self-serving noblemen, politicians, aristocracy, clerics) form their own solipsistic, nefarious, unethical, unruly, chaotic status quo, but by employing methods that favour order, stability and control, coercing the populace with rationality and discipline. This is an ambiguous validation of order as a common 'good' on the one hand, yet an oppressive, authoritarian 'evil' on the other, and presents chaos as a disruptive force that can set citizens free from autocratic rule, as much as it can harm a paradisiacal, harmonious equilibrium. Referring back to Schlegel and Habermann's point on the 'permeability' of good versus evil discussed earlier in the chapter, the ambiguity that problematises these notions of order and chaos is essential to enabling a dynamic interplay between the two cultural values.

Swashbuckling heroes (as does the *action*-, *super*-hero) use proactive, unpredictable performance techniques as a means to imposing a new state of societal establishment, instigating chaos to fight for the goal of order. Villains use performance techniques that implement genuine discipline, but as a method of establishing and maintaining their (discriminatory, disordered) status quo. In each case there is an evident 'ironic switching' of these roles, complicating the thematic values invested in each performance. While the theatrics of order/chaos will differ depending on the particular hero-villain relationship, if the superhero stands for some sense of stability (i.e. selflessness, protection, tradition), and the villain aims to disrupt it (i.e. through selfishness, persecution, change), then these values are undeniably permeable, being susceptible to ambiguity and constant negotiation. In the case of the dynamic between such heroes as Batman and villains as the Joker, the hero similarly stands for action, and the villain for intrigue: but again in this case it is the jovial antagonist (Joker) who has the disrupting sense of humour that argues chaos as the only absolute form of unbiased justice, which is a notion that the autocratic protagonist (Batman) attempts to quell, control and contain. This ironic ambiguity functions as a dynamism that draws out the thematic

complexity invested in the superhero-villain relationship, both stabilising, yet challenging the cultural contradictions these figures invoke.

Swashbuckling heroes are a positive force of chaos that attempts to displace the corrupted, established hierarchal order of nobles or politicians. This tradition has been adopted by superhero films in a particular way in that, while the hero might initially be an chaotic instigator of unrest (a city in a state of injustice), it is for the purposes of redefining the status quo, and then maintaining it as such. Similarly, there are several super-villains that wish to instate a renewed sense of law and order upon the world, no matter how chaotic it might seem to others. Comic book writer and theorist Danny Fingeroth points out that villains are schemers with their own agendas that desire to impose a new world order, instating themselves as the figureheads such as freedom-fighter terrorist Magneto in the *X-Men* film series who attempts to protect his fellow mutants from persecution by the intolerance of humanity (Fingeroth 2004: 162), but often at the cost of causing mayhem and unrest. Screenwriter Christopher Vogler also affirms how: 'A dangerous type of villain is 'the right man,' the person so convinced his cause is just that he will stop nothing to achieve it' (Vogler 1998: 74).

This section has shown there to be an ongoing rhythmic shift from those performance techniques that depend on heroic action to renditions of villainy that employ intrigue: i.e. working together to build up thematic tensions of chaos and order. The themes are stressed by the two rhythms of performances, carried along a distinct kinetic trajectory. It is the rhythmic stress of this spectacle that introduces, heightens and negotiates these cultural contradictions as though in the fashion of dramatic conflict: the pace of which differs slightly to the pacing that drives forward the plot causality. Building further on these ideas, the last section of this chapter explores where the rhythmic arc of dueling performances eventually leads the clash of order/chaos, and the evolving tale of problematic ambiguity that unfolds between these themes: a process, I claim, that depends on the tragedy of hysteria and the absurd hilarity tied to notions of *irony*.

(v) *Playing The Victim*: An 'Ironic Compromise' Between *Hysteria / Stoicism*

So far, the discussion has shown how, throughout the Interrogation Room Scene, the editing juxtaposition between two distinct designs of mask and costume between Batman and Joker works to sustain an audio-visual rhythmic pulse heavily invested with the cultural conflict of order versus chaos. These conflicting values are then developmentally

stressed by the differing gestures and mannerisms exchanged between the hero's stoicism and the villain's hysterical outbursts, which, in effect, escalate as though in competition with one another. What inevitably unfolds in this exchange of performance techniques then, is a competition that rhythmically builds up in tension. This section explores just how this rhythmic escalation not only complicates the themes represented by each figure, but also why, when positioned in close proximity, the physical clash between hero and villain eventually seeks out a compromise between these conflicting values: as these roles undergo an apparent 'ironic switch over'. Much of this process is evident in the way expressions of emotional outbursts are exchanged between Batman and Joker.

As noted earlier in the chapter, the convention of emotional hysteria in Hollywood genre films has its roots in melodramatic modes of performance. Gallagher and Williams – explained in section (iii) – have pointed out that action heroes adopt a melodramatic kind of hysteria to introduce a sense of pathos to morally justified deeds of derring-do, e.g. such as when the solider *Rambo* undergoes great hardship whilst rescuing prisoners-of-war, so playing out the role of a virtuous sufferer. Many villains also employ the same convention of hysteria, as Coogan has stated in section (iv), by playing the role of a victim obsessed with seeking recognition for past mental trauma, so as to validate the fact that their physical scars and wounds are unable to properly heal (e.g. the Joker's mutilated face). When comparing the way hysteria is expressed by either the superhero or villain, a terse ambiguity emerges between a *tragic* value expressed through this pain, but, at the same time, the way this pain also invokes an absurd *hilarity*. Throughout the interrogation cell scene the Joker has the appearance and behavioural traits of a seemingly laughing, yet crying clown, bringing into play an anarchistic performance that often blurs the line between comedy and tragedy. Similarly, when Batman, the stoic authoritarian, fails to dissipate the Joker's joviality and disrespect for law and order, he begins to lose his own sense of self-control, gradually giving into bursts of emotional excess that causes him to shake with outrage in an increasingly erratic, deranged manner entirely unbefitting of a protector of the peace.

A heightened level of tension is achieved by the way these performances between hero and villain slowly become confused, reaching a peak when each role has effectively *switched-over* in an ironic fashion. To briefly clarify this conception of irony, the basic definition is considered as 'the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect' (Oxford American Dictionaries). It is ironic for instance, that a self-disciplined hero should behave

like an undisciplined, hysterical villain, or vice versa, when typically the converse is the normative expectation. Consider how as the interrogation scene draws to a close, the Joker mocks Batman's performance of fortitude as a means of energising his own rendition of outlandish revelry, accusing the crime-fighting vigilante of being as much of an anti-social monster figure as him. To achieve this feat, the villain becomes increasingly civil and courteous, employing careful, precise bouts of manipulation that slowly chip away at his opponent's self-restraint and stoicism. Batman, when facing up to the Joker, physically grabs his torso, with his snarling jaw inches away from the villain's composed grin, conversely exposing an inner rage that compromises his performance techniques of self-restraint and control, instead becoming refigured with bouts of anger, hysteria and uncontrollable savagery. Here, an ironic switch over occurs towards the end of the scene, in how the Joker now becomes an agent of order and self-control (akin to Batman's autocratic tactics), while the hero's display of disordered pandemonium actually unveils a more chaotic streak more appropriate to the Joker (Figure 2.18).

Figure 2.18: When Joker is on the floor, with Batman leaning over him with fists clenched, the thematic tensions associated with each character reach their greatest level of intensification, complicated by a dynamic of pathos and irony (i.e. the laughing/crying clown faces off the stoic/hysterical autocrat).

When hero and villain move into closer proximity with one another, they increasingly trouble the boundaries defining their performance techniques. As Batman and Joker confront one another, the villain's manipulative intrigue becomes so carefully articulated that the offended hero eventually looses his self-control entirely. After jamming the door shut with a chair to stop any interference from the concerned audience of police detectives outside, Batman then walks towards Joker, violently grabbing his head, throwing him into the glass, and then hurling the villain's body to the ground. Becoming verbally incoherent, Batman's performance techniques have now been swayed by a hysterical impulse, compromising his attempts at autocratic control, which now appear irrational and even foolhardy. Batman punches Joker, screaming out demands for the two hostages' location, then hits him a second time, again crying out with rage, savagely seizing him by the waistcoat. This performance of rapid breath breathing, heaving his chest inwards and outward, vividly shaking with anguish shows that his goal for order is intrinsically driven by the very hysteria he hopes to contain: bringing in a quality of ironic compromise useful for negotiating these cultural contradictions.

Irony can serve to negotiate thematic tensions in a film text in different ways. Irony can, for example, provide a *reinforcing* role, able to underline a point in everyday conversation, 'deemed necessary for emphasis, and often for greater precision of communication, especially the communication of an attitude' (Hutcheon 1995: 48). Linda Hutcheon writes that irony also has a *complicating* role, in a positive sense providing a reflexive richness to this verbal and structural ambiguity or complexity (Hutcheon 1995: 48) that may prompt further contemplation. When used in a negative sense, on the other hand, this ambiguity can 'breed misunderstanding, confusion, or simply imprecision and lack of clarity in communication,' provoking irritation in the listener (Hutcheon 1995: 48-49). Ultimately, irony has an *oppositional* function, where 'what is approved of as polemical and transgressive to some might simply be insulting to others; what is subversive to some might be offensive to others' (Hutcheon 1995: 52).

Taking into account Hutcheon's ideas, after Batman's second punch, leaning over the Joker with fists clenched, torso shaking, and teeth snarling as the villain is lying flat on the floor, the hero has compromised his propriety to the point that he now looks ridiculous in his bat-suit armour, no longer a symbol that instills fear against those that would disorder the status quo, but, rather, is consumed by the impulse of carnival pandemonium. Revealing his teeming inner emotional turmoil he also unveils an inherent victimhood. The Joker's own frequent eruptions of hysteria performed throughout the scene have confirmed

his status as an unfortunate, misunderstood victim. However, in order to express his faith in chaos and mayhem to the autocrat standing above him, the villain needs to carefully administer his carnival lack of inhibition, depending on a great deal of self-control, and at times, even self-restraint to do so. Hysteria and hilarity are both key to Joker's carnival performance, this is clear, but the autocracy and protocol of propriety are equally important in allowing him to effectively direct these theatrics at the hero. Yet again, an ironic compromise ensues in this overlap of roles, and the themes of chaos/order and carnival/propriety associated with each character. It is because *both* superhero *and* villain seemingly share and play the role of the 'traumatised victim' that this contrariness prompts the viewer to question not only what cultural values are being presented, but the ways in which they are seemingly contradictory or conflated, benefitting the process of challenging and stabilising deeper cultural conflicts narrativised by each performance.

The ironic compromise raises a series of pertinent questions pertaining to the tale of thematic tensions invested in the spectacle of these dueling performances. For Batman, as a protector of social order and its status quo, is the correct course of action to kill this criminal outside of the law once and for all, or to abide by the imperfect, corrupt judicial system? For the Joker, as a persecutor that employs chaotic opportunism so as to benefit only himself, the sociopath actually desires to be eradicated by Batman, anticipating that this action will effectively *re-figure* the type of stability the hero propagates, so corrupting it with anarchic connotations.[28] This process benefits the process of reconciliation greatly, as subsequent interactions between hero and villain later in the film work to stabilise this challenge as the narrative progresses and reaches closure. Batman's thematic associations have been challenged severely, but also confirmed as a result, in that his subsequent interactions with the Joker will continue to attempt to contain this hysteria. The Joker, while turning to careful, disciplined bouts of manipulation, only does so to continue declaring himself an agent of chaos. Echoing the ideas offered by De Lauretis and Altman earlier in the chapter, it is this debate between two diametrically-opposed figures of the ordered-hero versus the chaotic-villain that allows one subject to be properly defined

[28] All the while, on a non-diegetic level, the rhythmic performance between order/chaos is punctuated and underscored by the villain's musical leitmotif 'Why So Serious?', heightening the tension underlying these questions. Director Christopher Nolan, in closely working with Composer Hans Zimmer, intended to bring out an escalation or mounting sense of extraordinary tension, eliciting an unpleasant, unsettling experience conflated with qualities of being edgy, grubby and ragged, that suited Health Ledger's performance, enhancing the thematic ideas invested in the character (Nolan 2008).

against the other, and the apparent ironic overlap in performances such as those by Batman and the Joker which helps to facilitate this process.

Thus, it is exaggerated performance techniques exchanged between superhero and villain (such as those explored above) that do more than act as a site of allegorical and metaphorical interpretation, or drive forward the plot's chain of cause-and-effect. Instead, these dueling theatrics actually carry, complicate and evolve thematic meanings within a rhythmic arena of debate, taking these unbalanced antinomies to a point of compromise. This rhythm, while working in tandem with the dramaturgy that guides narrative structure and content, is nonetheless distinct in its own right, emphasising implicit values in an explicit fashion. It is this alternative story arc of important information, driven by its own energy and direction, that arguably becomes discernable as a rhythm with its own pulse between shots of mask and costume, stress of directional changes in physical gestures, as well as the pacing of this cutting and bodily movements when the roles between hero and villain are switched in close proximity: in the process resonating a profound performance of thematic exposition.

To sum up the key themes and rhythms at stake, at an aesthetic level, many of these performance techniques carry a cultural significance, able to develop these meanings though the physical shifts in motion performed by hero and villain. The hero's performance, as evident with Batman, is one of composure and subtlety, resonating with the themes surrounding the cultural values tied to an ordered society, propriety, stoicism and discipline. The mask and costume design present an armoured, statuesque body. The gestures and mannerisms accentuate this stoicism with minimalistic facial movements of a firmly closed mouth alongside a still torso and limbs that only spring into action if required to do so, represses outward displays of emotional excess. These stoic gestures and mannerisms also discriminate against maniacal, manipulative villains lacking in such self-control, and solipsistic criminals that exhibit what can be considered as a degree of *over*-emotional, hysterical behaviour. The villain, as seen with the Joker, has a more carnivalesque kind of mirth, grotesque visual design, and employs movements that are far less composed and subtle, but more blatant, hyper-active and erratic, so resonating with the themes of chaotic unrest, lack of inhibitions and anarchic provocation.

So far in the thesis, the themes invested in the superhero film have been considered primarily in terms of the aestheticisation of the image. The physical strain between the hero's body and its environment have been explored in the first chapter, analysing how Spiderman is torn apart by the force of the monorail torn in *Spider-Man 2*. The aggressive

interactions between heroes, such as Batman, and villains, such as the Joker, were discussed in relation to *The Dark Knight* in this chapter. In looking more closely at these kinds of violent displays however, the thesis will now proceed to take a more critical stance to this apparent 'beautification' of spectacular brutality. If the violence of the superhero protagonist is restrained, regulated and controlled, coming into conflict with the savagery employed by villains that in contrast is far more self-indulgent and erratic, what is the cultural impetus behind these conventions? As consumers of these films, does the clash of two (predominantly *male*) bodies of hero and villain reveal insights into our own (Anglo-American) conceptions of the kinds of identity these figures invoke? The answers to these questions, the argument will show, are tied to a dominant or 'glorified' construction of masculinity. The superhero with (his) enhanced superhuman physical attributes and abilities brings to mind certain qualities of manhood, namely self-discipline and professionalism that discriminates against decidedly unprofessionalism threats (i.e. the sadism and self-indulgence of villains). The next chapter explores such socio-cultural paradigms tied to violence in the superhero film, and uncovers the thematic narrative of masculinity told by this spectacle.

Glorified Rhythms

Violence, Masculinity and the Superhero

The first and second chapters have so far each explored the key audio-visual rhythms making up spectacular action sequences and performances in the superhero film. The previous two chapters have also uncovered the main thematic tensions invested in these rhythms. This was for the purpose of showing how a thematic dimension of film narration potentially unfolds in the structure of the spectacle. The rhythms of editing schemes and physical movement, it was explained, contribute a distinct storytelling arc of cultural conflict. The spectacle, although it supports the forward progression of the film plot's chain of cause-and-effect, in turn grants a kind of temporal and causal development to implicit thematic tensions. This process, which I term as narrativised spectacle, generates a narrative trajectory that primarily evolves (and so gives dramatic conflict to) a viewer's understanding of cultural contradictions invoked by the onscreen action. The spectacle in effect offers up a developmental arc of thematic exposition that runs alongside but is not one and the same as the pacing of the main plotting exposition.

Yet up to this stage in the thesis, in order to illustrate my definition of narrativised spectacle the close analysis has tended to focus solely on the *aesthetic appreciation* of 'thrill-ride' confrontations. By this I mean the discussion has primarily assumed an aestheticisation or beautification of the violent action performed by the superhero. Graceful exertions of derring-do, melodramatic theatrics and escapism into the storytelling has taken precedence in my analysis of the onscreen spectacle: but aestheticised violence does more than offer up a value of entertainment for audiences to enjoy. There are many symptomatic concerns invoked by spectacularised aggression and brutality, namely the socio-cultural paradigms tied to politics of identity (i.e. issues of gender) and personal agency (i.e. self-autonomous decision making influenced by changing sociological factors). By focusing on the beautified filmic qualities of violent action, my approach has so far trivialised these wider societal issues.

The third chapter deals more firmly with socio-cultural concerns and implications by applying a critical stance to the brutal imagery of superhero films. This chapter will interrogate the conservative paradigms underlying superhero violence, rather than analysing the escapist appeal alone. I argue that spectacular sequences of violence in the superhero film through physical and filmic rhythms of brutality narrativise a fundamental cultural question: Whether a (predominantly male) hero can properly channel the primal

nature of his *masculinity*? Much like in the first and second chapters, narrativised spectacle generates an arc of narrative development that carries and complicates key themes, but this chapter will show how the process unfolds in relation to the masculine identity implied by the superhero. As was explained in the thesis introduction, a series of pertinent cultural contradictions are heavily invested in the history and representation of masculine aggression in the Western genre. By interrogating the spectacle of violence in Westerns, it will become apparent that there is a thematic tale at work here that dynamically shifts between moments that *glorify* and *condemn* the presentation of masculinity. This process of thematic conflict can then be applied to the superhero film in detail.

A formalist analysis and genre study of violence in the Western is a useful method as it offers up a series of productive questions for the chapter to build upon in relation to the superhero film. To what extent, for instance, are thematic tensions tied to masculinity in the action-adventure genre? How are these themes then picked up on by the superhero's own rhythms of violence? In what way do these rhythms then successfully develop an ongoing thematic tale based around concerns of masculinity? In answering these questions the chapter will prove that displays of violence generate a storytelling arc of narrativised spectacle that gives insights into Anglo-American dominant notions of 'manhood' in popular culture, as well as the kinds of male role model superheroes present to us as viewers. It is by isolating themes of masculinity in the Western that the chapter will explore how and why the superhero film adopts and adapts these cultural paradigms through the spectacular rhythms of superhuman abilities. I will then explain just how the narrativised spectacle of superhero films not only evolves ideas on masculinity, but primarily does so through digital visual effects in a particularly heightened fashion.

Initially, before beginning the argument proper, it is first useful to briefly put into context exactly what is meant by the concept of a 'heroic' kind of masculinity. What, the discussion first needs to establish, is the cultural significance of violent male action heroes?

(i) *Heroic Role Models*: Interrogating Cultural Values of Manhood

Much of the ferocity required to enact feats-of-heroism in contemporary superhero films – and the social anxieties these performances bring to mind – is a modern continuation of similar plights faced by erstwhile lone-wolf male movie heroes, the earliest of which include the cowboy pioneer or vigilante detective. 'The main business of many movies,' as Richard Sparks declares, 'is just the evocation of *an heroic masculinity* whose principles of absolute individuation, solitude, probity, and personal resourcefulness themselves *demand* the social marginality of the principle figure, much as their Western antecedents did [emphasis added] (Sparks 1996: 353). Westerns and action movies also tend to be written, produced, directed by and intended for men and/or male audiences, in that the 'protagonist is mythologically, psychologically, and culturally designed to function as *a role model of masculinity*' (i.e. to which war movies, marital arts movies, spy movies, gangster movies, road movies can be included) (Schubart 2007: 9).

For the majority of law-abiding, socially-conformist filmgoers seeking outlandish entertainment, such a 'realm of transcendence and of heroised masculinity is available vicariously… [through] the kinds of 'dizziness' that we so enjoy (Mel Gibson's 'crazy' performance in *Lethal Weapon*, for instance)… legitimated and given permission by being attached to hero law enforcers' (Sparks 1996: 358). Hence, regardless of the escapist value at stake, most notions of 'heroism' in action film become interwoven with the significant question: "*What does it mean to be a 'man'?"* The heroism depicted in action-adventure genres conventionally achieves an audio-visual punctuation by way of the stunning, thrilling, and dizzying pleasure this physical spectacle induces, aggrandised as something worth imitating or perhaps even idealizing, and this kind of pleasure can also potentially be wrapped up in culturally-specific notions of what constitutes an impressive display of masculinity. Indeed, the dictionary definition of 'manhood' taken from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* naturalises the association of particular values such as courage, determination, and vigour with qualities considered *appropriate* to being a man. The primary means of energising these male action 'role model' heroes however is none other than the onscreen *audio-visual violence* that enables this masculine prowess: in how physical aggression is channeled from hero protagonists to villain antagonists, i.e. unfolding as a set of varied rhythms, which will be explored in detail later in the chapter.

There is a particular kind of pleasure taken in seeing the male action hero 'get the job done', with a major part of this enjoyment instigated not simply by the visceral impact of violence itself, but the manner in which it is *responsibly* manipulated by manly restraint. A celebration of masculine competence is apparent in terms of certain key virtues, such as: courage, e.g. the swift swashbuckling antics of treasure hunter *Indiana Jones* (1981-2008); determination, e.g. calculating detectives such as the sleuth *Sherlock Holmes* (2009); and vigour, e.g. the adaptive intellectualism and physical capabilities of space-faring explorers throughout the *Star Trek* film franchise (1979-2013). It was the male heroes of the 1980s and 1990s that most effectively combined and developed these virtues as part of the action genre, namely through the protagonists played by Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, and Jean-Claude Van Damme. The extraordinary energetic capacity of these men dominated the environment and its inhabitants, doing so with a competent physical prowess that has become increasingly exaggerated and further enhanced via digital visual effects in later years, e.g. *Die Hard 4.0* (2007) and across the *Expendables* franchise (2010-2014).

For the purposes of my discussion, it is precisely the pleasure taken in watching a traditional action genre trope of 'masculine control' over (and manipulation of) onscreen brutality that offers up an essential avenue of interrogation: i.e. isolating and unpacking the critical aspects behind a male superhero's own physical rhythms of violence. The contemporary 2000s-present superhero film cycle continues to develop the conventional masculine virtues mentioned above further, but with derring-do spectacularised in the form of *super*-human abilities, presented in, what I shall argue throughout the course of this chapter, a more heightened fashion via digital visual effects than is the case with erstwhile male heroes. Digital technology allows huge portions of an environmental infrastructure and its populace to be physically manipulated by the superhero. These super-men possess enough strength to halt the speed of an entire malfunctioning public transport train in *Spider-Man 2* (2004), or to catch the sheer weight of a falling aeroplane in midflight during *Superman Returns* (2006) (for a more detailed analysis refer to the first chapter). Superhero-action films such as these show a professional tenacity akin to the spy-thriller film franchises that feature heroes James Bond (1962-2012) or Jason Bourne (2002-2007), compelling the viewer to take gratification in experiencing these feats of extraordinary competence. For example, whilst foiling an antagonist's plan to bomb innocent civilians on a partially-constructed skyscraper complex in *The Dark Knight* (2008), the vigilante crime-fighter Batman will savagely, but expertly, incapacitate multiple henchmen, efficiently

breaking several bones and limbs to quick effect. Then, in the midst of combat, the hero is forced to covertly tie up a swat team attempting to arrest him, using the trooper's own ropes and harnesses against them. Finally kicking one trooper off the edge of the building, which pulls the rest of the squad down with the incapacitated man, Batman leaves the team to dangle safely, allowing the hero to continue his initial search for the explosives. A similar example is evident in *X-2* (2002). Protecting children from a high school kidnapping the hero Wolverine lunges at several mercenaries with proficiency, using his claws to carve into these attackers one-by-one, killing each assailant instantly and without error.

Any urge to deconstruct the superhero's brutality in a negative light actually becomes sidetracked in favour of celebrating his (genre coding of) professionalism, which unfolds onscreen as a glorified type of adaptability able to overcome any hurdle. The uninterrupted manoeuvers of a superhero's choreographed combat comes across as balletic or even graceful due to the astounding extraordinar*iness* of this physical aggression, as well as the impressive impact of its audio-visual immediacy. There is also a social ritual[29] function in the mass-consumption of these 'entertaining' forms of violent action. The proliferation of film productions that deal with conventional themes of male professionalism through violence, and the compulsion by large groups of film-goers to consume these narratives, arguably suggests a ceremonial undertaking of sorts: one that predominately validates *a conservative paradigm* on the *construction of masculine identity* and power. Consider how the superhero's violence is a means of bestowing virtues of a self-sufficient, self-determined and self-realised role model of masculinity for other viewers to emulate, trust in and/or respect. It is the personal mission of self-discipline these professional male heroes follow with a competency required in fulfilling it that 'sanctions' and justifies the brutal imagery of superhero films as an *acceptable* kind of violence. As was explored in section (iii) of the thesis introduction, a key idea offered by Slotkin is that 'violence that can be purchased by the wealthy is oppressive' whereas violence that is 'a response to injustice is redemptive' (Slotkin [1992] 1998: 603). In this sense, regardless of how aggressive the application may be, employing violence as a means of exploitation or for personal profit is culturally coded as a shameful act, whereas whenever violence is turned to as the last resort to protect vulnerable groups, then that aggression is coded as

[29] Action-adventure genres and superhero movie productions much like the Western or action film do deal with conservative mores in a ritualistic way (refer to the overview of Rick Altman, Thomas Schatz, John Cawelti and Jim Kitses in the thesis introduction).

admirable. It should also be reiterated here that characteristics like adaptability or professionalism are not naturally masculine qualities, but coded as such through recurring tropes that go back as far as the Hollywood Western (again as discussed in section (iii) of the thesis introduction), and way these paradigms are represented will be interrogated at length, both in this (and the next) chapter.

A sanctioning of audio-visual violence is mainly achieved by the support of (rather than detraction from) the storytelling, in adhering to an imperative of escapism that treats a myriad of attacks, punches, kicks, harm and injury as palpable to watch at all times. The performance of superhero aggression is deemed culturally acceptable by being 'caught up' in the genre conventions guiding it (e.g. an aesthetically-pleasing 'good' protagonist must overcome a repulsive 'evil' antagonist), in effect taking the troublesome punch out of this violence. The more troubling associations tied to this extreme, stylised level of brutality are promptly swept-under-the-carpet by way of several assumptions and expectations belonging to the action genre formula, e.g. namely that heroes use violence for the sole purpose of rescue and protection, while villains do quite the opposite. Violence is beautified with innovative digital visual effects alongside narratives of heroism, and this is often for the purpose of validating a culturally dominant kind of masculinity: one both properly disciplined and driven by a legitimate moral mission.

Yet throughout such a pleasurable ritual that sustains an idealised, legitimate and professional masculine application of physical force, underneath the surface always resides the chance for a sudden *bursting forth* of spectacular violent behaviour. Any display of a calm, carefully-considered genre code of manly restraint is consistently weighed *against* the intensified (i.e. rapid-paced editing), choreographed exuberance of this brutality, thus resulting in a paradox. The contradiction emerges in the fact that these apparently 'restrained' role models of heroic masculinity nonetheless employ 'excessive' violence on a grand scale. Developing this idea further, I argue the artifice behind this violence – a deliberate display of excessive force that stages immense harm and injury – has the potential to *undermine* the ideal masculine role model at stake, so challenging conservative conceptions of male heroism, e.g. by de-constructing the calm competence required to nullify reckless villainy.

The chapter will continue to unpack how a superhero's professional (and pleasurable) manipulation of physical violence can *glorify* conservative conceptions of masculine identity. At the same time, this savage proficiency is so excessive it also manages to *de-glorify* such an idealised notion of manhood by drawing attention to the

more troubling aspects inherent to this entertaining brutal imagery. Significantly, and to reiterate this idea, the term 'manhood' is understood to be 'the *state* or time of being an adult male' made up of a 'composite of *qualities*, such as courage, determination, and vigour, often thought to be *appropriate* to a man' (as stated in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Languag*e). In turn, the concept promotes a confirmed biological or natural disposition, e.g. 'a euphemism for a man's genitalia' (in *The Collins English Dictionary*). At the basest level of terminology, manhood suggests a pre-determined comprehension of masculinity, i.e. a category of existence that depends upon meeting applicable criteria ('natural' behavioural traits and physical attributes). This explanation of masculinity will undergo further examination throughout the chapter alongside the term 'de-glorify', listed as 'to deprive of *accustomed* glorification' (in the *Unabridged Merriam-Webster* dictionary). It is the interrogation of this 'conventional' praise or established expectation of splendour that shall remain important throughout the discussion, specifically in relation to the representation and construction of masculinity in popular (and superhero) film. To build towards my proposed binary of glorify/de-glorify, the argument shall now critically isolate a series of pertinent cultural contractions that seemingly celebrate yet condemn the perfect 'male role-model' hero. To achieve this, I will build on a genre convention first introduced by the Western: professional displays of precision pitted against incompetent bouts of imprecision.

(ii) Rhythms of *Precision / Imprecision*

As a starting point to better interrogate the critical aspects and cultural concerns of masculinity invested in superhero violence, I argue that the physical rhythms of this spectacle originate from the established genre format of Hollywood Westerns. This is because violence to a great extent is 'embedded' in the behaviour and actions of male hero protagonists such as the westerner cowboy or outlaw, and the contemporary superhero vigilante follows suit. Each figure is compelled to use brutality as part of an obligation in saving innocents (traditionally vulnerable women and awkward children) unable to physically protect themselves from harm. A physical professionalism resonates from the heroic exuberance and flamboyance of more capable men, as they channel their violent action through the performance of certain rhythmic patterns.

Consider how in the films of director Howard Hawks especially, the open frontier is a space for challenging and defining masculine prowess, i.e. such as the cattle drive in *Red River* (1948), negotiating and weaving the herd through a myriad of hurdles, e.g.

bandits, Indians and natural threats (Grant 2011: 57). Throughout *Red River*, male professionalism, control and bonding is performed directly by way of hand gestures and bodily movements when contending with dangerous situations. In the midst of an Indian attack on the Great Plains, for instance, the cattle rancher Groot (Walter Brennan) throws a knife to his business partner Dunson (John Wayne) who then, in true heroic fashion, catches it with absolute precision, without so much as looking up while engaged in hand-to-hand combat against an Indian raider, *then* proceeds to stab the assailant in one smooth motion (Grant 2011: 59). This 'unhesitating yet completely implausible catch' is a motif that later becomes repeated with a rifle that Groot tosses to Dunson when fighting mutineers on another cattle drive, with this honed violence solidifying the bond these (professional) men share (Grant 2011: 59). Here, it is not simply the act of violence, but the *proper use* of that violent action that poses a central theme in the Western genre. Much of this thematic impetus, Barry Keith Grant affirms, is directly equated with the task of somehow physically '*taming* the wilderness', so proving one's manhood in the process (Grant 2011: 59).

If feats-of-professionalism seal the bond between the men who employ these skills, then it is plausible that the proper use of violence is consistently associated with the appropriate application of masculinity. Hawks' films use gestures to reveal such professionalism, which have become a key masculine trope in action genres that announces how 'action tends to speak louder than words', emphasising 'moral and spiritual values through physical engagement' (Grant 2011: 59). In citing Jacques Rivette's views on Hawk's oeuvre of films, Grant states it is telling how, as viewers, 'we are not concerned with John Wayne's thoughts as he walks towards [the character of] Montgomery Clift at the end of *Red River*, or of [Humphrey] Bogart's thoughts as he beats somebody up: our attention is directed solely to the *precision of each step* – the *exact rhythm of the walk* – of *each blow* – and to the *gradual collapse of the battered body* [emphasis added]' (Rivette 1962: 19).

Notions of proficient masculinity and precise feats of violence go hand-in-hand in Western-action cinema. Venturing and capably taming new territories, westerner heroes are conventionally driven by an impetus for honed violent action, being necessary to survive the open plains: seeking to define this harsh wilderness primarily through their aggressive behaviour. Significantly, much of the precise violence imparted by male

westerners is closely wrapped up in what can be termed a reactionary *nostalgia*,[30] or the regret of loosing a slowly diminishing historical era: i.e. the sentimentality felt for a gradually receding frontier or *horizon of self-discovery* that promises fewer and fewer opportunities for new adventure.

Developing the idea of nostalgia further, male westerners not only hope to protect an ever-dissipating frontier, but more importantly express personal fears for the decline of 'a certain form of masculinity' integral to the West (essential to defining an epoch and the genre's narrative structure) (Grønstad 2008: 130). The traditionally open, agrarian, savage wilderness affords the lone individual an empowered masculinity enabled by freedom: honourable, pragmatic and uncompromised by the many foibles shared by larger groups of settlers (a trope explained in the thesis introduction). As modernised town settlements begin to gradually alter the landscape however, Asbjørn Grønstad states that this sense of masculinity will invariably become refigured by a new set of restrictions: obligations of cultural responsibly, collective democracy, Christian virtue, technological innovation, industrial modernity and societal decorum. Situated within the threshold of either world, the westerner (physically) struggles to maintain a balance between the gains and losses that a civilised and/or wilder kind of masculinity can afford.

The circumstances of modernisation also provoke a sense of nostalgia felt for a long-lost competence and professional precision, kindling the desire of reclaiming a more primal, purer kind of masculinity. For instance, compare Groot and Dunson's professional masculine proficiency (described earlier as a rhythm of precise hand gestures) with the very *un*professional antics of their domesticated assistant cook accompanying them on a journey across the plains (Grant 2011: 60), who frequently succumbs to the allure of indulgent temptations offered by a cultivated lifestyle. The cook will unpredictably steal from refined sugar barrels in the food stores (a decadent resource not found naturally on the frontier) licking his fingers from time to time and sticking them into each container.

[30] Nostalgia indeed plays an important role the transitional production period that stretches from the classical to revisionist Westerns (circa mid-to-late 1960s to early 1970s). As the genre's classical conventions seemed increasingly outmoded and in need of revision, the old West portrayed in Hollywood became viewed as an 'invention of the modern, urban (California) mind' (Cameron, Kenneth. 1997. *America on Film: Hollywood and American History*. New York: Continuum, 150). Initially, the decade dealt with a 'sadness and melancholia' over the loss of the past, but this sentiment soon evolved into the anti-westerns that turned to 'piercing cynicism' and sceptical nihilism (Grønstad 2008: 135). The onscreen fury of these productions (e.g. *The Wild Bunch*, released on June 18 1969) recognised this confusion felt towards the West by projecting an intense anger at its apparent charade (Grønstad 2008: 133). Westerns such as *Wild Bunch* are indeed what Asbjørn Grønstad deems to be a work of *mourning*, decrying the death of the old American West, an entire historical era, in turn forsaking a core of ethics.

His unrestrained – even rather childish – habit is simply not in keeping with negotiating the surrounding wilderness, entirely disrespectful of this environment, which eventually results in disaster for the heard of cows grazing nearby. On one such moment of indulgence near the kitchen tent, he accidently knocks several pots and pans together, with this foreign clanging of metal causing the nervous cattle to suddenly stampede, resulting in the death of an innocent young man in the camp (Grant 2011: 60).

Interestingly, the cook's lack of professionalism in this instance is equated with a lack of self-discipline, giving into emotional excesses: which tends to be coded as *other* to conceptions of the masculine. For example, in the morning after an Indian raid on their camp, Dunson and Groot find another young man who managed to survive the violence, but he is entirely *un*-composed. 'Wandering aimless and rambling incoherently,' Grant explains, the character 'seems to have succumbed to hysteria, a condition associated in Freudian psychoanalysis with women. To bring him back to reality, Dunson slaps him in the face' (Grant 2011: 67). Many of Clint Eastwood's characters also possess this stoic professionalism that faces off against the over-emotional, in what can be termed a 'male silence [that] has been sanctified with an almost religious fervour' (Mellen, 1977: 13), such as when playing the role of 'The Man With No Name' in *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966); or 'Dirty' Harry Callahan in *Dirty Harry* (1971). In *Red River* then, an evident genre convention emerges that tends to code the physical precision of professionalism as 'male', i.e. confirmed as something to admire and a means of protecting against the vulnerability and dangers of emotional excesses. Emotional excess, on the other hand, and implied acts of imprecision, are explicitly coded as non-male, or indeed a trope of hysteria more appropriate to notions of a contrary 'feminised' status, i.e. associated with a less capable physical performance of self-restraint. These engendered tensions, as shall be seen in the next section, become essential in defining gloried notions of violent masculine power against condemnable, non-dominant and somehow very un-masculine physical acts of aggression.

(iii) ***(Masculinist) Professionalism / (Feminised) Domestication***

A cultural paradigm introduced in the previous section is that at the core of violence in the Western-action genre lays the nostalgic reclamation of a purer, long lost, competent manhood: an idea that is dependent on the unwanted imposition of a less capable, emotionally excessive and 'feminine' form of compromise. Developing this insight further, in thematic terms the tenets of civilisation and its encroachment on the wilderness

conventionally tend to be associated with a pre-dominance of women's culture, which in the context of the American West era (1940-1890) emerged during the period of 1880 to 1920. These gradual changes began to influence the cultural climate through a range of social activities, among which Grønstad and Jane Tompkins list as campaigning for suffrage, higher education, the prohibition of alcohol, among other areas of the public sphere. It was this social shift that instigated such an increased popularity of Western narratives at the time (Tompkins 1992: 44), because the process of feminisation in 'the public domain implied the corrosion of traditional masculine values,' resulting in the desire to 'reclaim one's manhood by *embracing violence and confronting death*, and the Western became a fictional outlet for this fantasy [emphasis added]' (Grønstad 2008: 140). Male westerner heroes are in many ways *sympathetic figures* 'threatened by the encroachment of a new social order' (Lenihan 1980: 159), with the impact of modern urban civilisation being a de-humanising force (Grønstad 2008: 134). Grønstad points out that a recurrent motif in *The Misfits* (John Huston, 1961), *Lonely are the Brave* (David Miller, 1962), *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962), *Ride The High Country* (Sam Peckinpah, 1962) and *Hud* (Martin Ritt, 1963) is that of the condemned, anachronistic man, conspicuously old-fashioned, belonging to a bygone way of life, now wholly inappropriate for a time of increasing change and modernity.

The earlier sixties Westerns are especially sympathetic to men that have 'outlived their welcome' (e.g. *Ride The High Country*, *Lonely are the Brave*), but the later westerns of 1969 (e.g. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kidd* (Roy Hill) and *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah)) began to make explicit the sheer sense of displacement felt by those men who choose to survive in an 'increasingly technology-driven modernity', challenging deep-set assumptions about the genre (Grønstad 2008: 135) and its take on masculinity. Many of Sam Peckinpah's male protagonists also feel nonconformity, alienation and loneliness (i.e. Joel McCrea in *Ride The High Country,* William Holden in *Wild Bunch*) (Grønstad 2008: 136) due to being afflicted by the 'paradox of individual isolation in the midst of a group' (Parks 1982: 116). The isolation and lack-of-purpose experienced by male westerners is a fundamental genre convention, the basis of which is closely associated with fears of emasculation. These ethical concerns drive the main storytelling impetus of the Western genre and so provide the pretext for displays of male violence (Sparks 1996: 352). This is because 'cultural signifiers of an emergent civilisation' are tenets that western narratives began to challenge and interrogate (Grønstad 2008: 140), enabling the compulsion to spurn effeminate forms of civility (i.e. domestication, church congregations, regimes of

schoolyards). In doing so, a man is granted an opportunity to become *one again* with the freedom afforded by his 'wild nature' (Tompkins 1992: 37).

The nostalgia (described above) that longs for the more competent channeling of a 'wild' kind of masculinity is a convention, I claim, also adopted by and essential to displays of violent action in the contemporary superhero film. The male superhero finds himself situated in a fully-settled cityscape, urbanised, wholly domesticated and offering a peaceful site of security with the occasional pocket of criminal activity, which for the most part is soon quelled by the municipal law-enforcement. Whenever crime does strike however, the domesticated masculinity of the average citizen is incapable of properly resisting it. Although civilised masculinity is often regarded as something to aspire to, as evolved and refined, values of societal decorum nonetheless tend to be ineffective whenever extreme savagery encroaches on this peaceful equilibrium.

In showing the lack of control city-dwellers have against waves of criminal activity, superhero narratives comment about the upheaval of societal orders, such as economic unrest (the Great Depression of the 1930s) or 21st century tragedies (such as 9/11 and the war on terror).[31] As these films declare such exasperated comments, superheroes are figures that manifest in times of peril, whenever heroism is required to overcome a transgressive evil of some kind, allowing America/the world to become whole again, and experience the joy of reverting back to a less complicated, more 'civilised age', before such unimaginable savagery was conceivable. In this sense, super-heroism stands for a kind of authoritative, dominant patriarchal rule that audiences are conditioned to trust and believe in. As viewers we, alongside the diegetic city-dwellers onscreen, the message we are effectively presented with here is one that asks us to give over our personal freedoms to the superhero protagonist as a guardian, in return for the protection of social justice and equality granted by an uncompromising, primal instinct that the everyday civilised man is simply lacking in.

To combat threats made against them, the only new horizon of self-discovery afforded to more modernised, civil male heroes seeking to re-claim their manhood is no longer found in escaping the densely populated, debris-ridden city, nor earned by heading towards a new territorial frontier. Instead, masculine agency is to be found in the self-determined individualism provided by the hero's *body* in physically negotiating this urban terrain (i.e. as seen in the *Spider-Man* film series and *Superman Returns*). In this regard, a

[31] For a more detailed overview, refer to: Stephen Prince, *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (Columbia University Press, 2009).

wilder, more primal masculinity is unleashed whenever the superhero's mask, costume, fighting choreography and digitally-enhanced abilities spring into violent action. For instance, consider how the plight faced by the westerner is heightened in the superhero's body, now manifested as a dual site of the civilised alongside the wild, constantly seeking out balance. The superhero protagonist possesses two identities, everyday civilian (a vulnerable, 'checked' kind of masculinity) and masked vigilante (a stronger, untamed manhood). Note the sensitive, non-confrontational performances of Toby Maguire's 'dweeb' Peter Parker in *Spider-Man* (2002), Brandon Routh's bumbling Clark Kent in *Superman Returns*, Christian Bale's laissez-faire Bruce Wayne in *Batman Begins* (2005), Eric Bana/Edward Norton's paranoid recluse Bruce Banner in *Hulk* (2003)/*The Incredible Hulk* (2008), or Robert Downy Jr's swarve but fastidious Tony Stark in *Iron Man* (2008). These civilians each embody the values of the town settlements they belong to, namely the tenets of domesticity and decorum.

By embracing a masked vigilante persona on the other hand, these heroes begin to revert back to a far more primal, decidedly savage nature. Peter Parker is accidentally bitten by a radioactive arachnid, so gaining an animalistic strength and agility lacking in the swelling mass of New Yorkers he web-slings high above as a spider(man). To overcome his own fears and incite terror in others, Bruce Wayne decides to embrace an image of the nocturnal creature, literally a bat(man). Clark Kent, an American citizen yet alien refugee from the distant planet Krypton, must physically fly upward to the sky to empower his more evolved 'super(man) abilities', rising high above the clouds and absorbing the sun's rays, becoming directly energised by its *natural*, cosmic forces. Bruce Banner in turn embraces the savage side of his own nature, allowing an unconscious rage to burst forth and morph into the roaring, muscular, apelike Hulk. Even the captain-of-industry Tony Stark, although working with modern technology, nonetheless uses these materials to mold a suit of protective armour that shields his body, with gauntlets that enhance the strike of his fists, so fulfilling the most basic tools donned by the fierce iron(man) warrior.

For the superhero, civilian status is directly equated with that of a flesh-and-blood man, vulnerable and with only a limited means of enforcing his own self-determined agency. Alternatively, as 'the savage man' persona, he is now afforded a primal strength that empowers his agency, which is achieved by way of a more *digitalised* kind of transformation. By embracing superhuman abilities through this digital enhancement, the civilian body is re-figured as quite *un*stable, mutable, volatile, and unruly (as will be

explored in detail in chapter section (vi) '*Brawling (Digital) Textures*: Tensions of *Pro-filmic/Mutable*, *Stable/Volatile*') which is in direct contention with the more stable, physically conformist and behavioural decorum of human civility. Such concerns over presenting the male superhero as '*civil' flesh-and-blood* on the one hand, yet as '*wild' digital manipulation* on the other emphasises the central question in action films of what it means to be constructed as a 'man' in our contemporary society. Again, by applying this idea to the question of violent spectacle in the erstwhile genre templates established by Western-action cinema, it is clear that images of brutality seemingly act as a key means of re-affirming conventional notions of manhood (e.g. an argument that Lee Clark Mitchell raises in detail[32]). Grønstad develops this line of reasoning by stating how spectacular kinds of physical aggression, while may show the power of masculinity, are inevitably concerned with an '*un*making' of that very masculinity:

> According to Mitchell, the Western, in its obsession with violence, aims to reaffirm the notion that manhood is in fact ***a biological process*** rather than ***a culturally acquired mode of behaviour***…. [However] the fact that it is being explored, deconstructed and reassembled is in itself sufficient evidence to flaunt the *inherent constructed-ness of manhood*. In its indication of this process, film violence performs an unmaking of masculinity, a radical undermining of the conditions upon which the fabrication of manhood is founded [emphasis and bold added] (Grønstad 2008: 143).

In this description of man's inherent constructed-ness, a conflict unfolds between two key terms: 'biological disposition' and 'cultural acquisition'. If masculinity is neither entirely primal nor natural in origin, but instead re-defined as a cultural fabrication or malleable artifice, this infers that manhood is in fact a never-ending work-in-progress always *seeking out a firmer state of solidity and stability*: resulting in a profound sense of displacement felt by the hero when his own personal sense of self is challenged. The westerner's endless struggle to reconcile a natural, biological manhood with a culturally edified construction of maleness is noticeably exaggerated with the superhero's own pro-filmic (i.e. the photorealism of the human body) flesh-and-blood form (coded as civil, rational, yet vulnerable) against digital mutability (as wild, irrational, yet empowered). This difficulty in reconciling notions of the biological with the cultural results in what Steve Neale has dubbed a 'doomed male narcissism' (Neale 1993 [1983]: 15), or an unhealthy preoccupation with masculine self-absorption. For the disenfranchised male of either the traditional Western frontier or the modernised superhero city, violence offers such a means

[32] Refer to the discussion of Lee Clark Mitchel in '*Savage Men*: Western Antinomies of *Purity/Corruption*, *Integrity/Compromise*' in the thesis introduction.

of agency and empowerment against discrimination of one's own personal identity and placement in society. It is this very sense of power to act as a free agent afforded by violence, the next section will show, that is not only celebrated but also condemned through each of the physical rhythms that shift between glorifying and de-glorifying the male hero.

(iv) A Rhythmic Binary of *Glorify / De-glorify*

As has been stated in the previous section, a central thematic concern found in the Western – of which I argue also becomes pertinent to the superhero film – is the preoccupation with whether masculinity is a natural state or artificially constructed. It was in turn noted earlier that a 'feminine' code of domesticity is crucial to generating this paradox and similar social anxieties invested in the Western: questioning if manhood is a primal state or domesticated, animalistic or effeminate, biological or cultural, wild or civil, strong or weak, empowered or disempowered? This section now proceeds to more closely investigate the kinds of audio-visual rhythm generated by the Western genre's celebration of a wilder, more primal, violent manhood, being glorified as natural and pure. These glorified rhythms are then pitted against other rhythms that instead espouse the compromising 'unnatural' influences of civilisation that render masculinity emasculated, leaving any notion of the male as no more than cultural edifice or fabrication. Such a thematic celebration and condemnation is primarily achieved onscreen through what Grønstad declares as a violent process of *de-domestication*, and it is here, I shall now show, that an explicit audio-visual rhythmic pattern begins to become discernable.

Consider how near the opening of *The Wild Bunch* at the San Rafael massacre scene, in the midst of a bank robbery the bunch (a group of outlaws in need of money to flee an increasingly urbanised California) must escape several bounty hunters lying in wait. The bunch do manage to evade the hired-men, taking their fortune of dollar coins with them (which later turns out to be plain metal rivets, a 'bureaucratic' form of domesticated deception) and flee the town on horseback, riding towards the freedom of an open horizon. Their combined efforts of manhood are assured, because this escape required great courage and determination. Yet, the deed was also accomplished at the cost of obliterating a large majority of the populace, leaving multiple piles of blood-soaked bodies. For instance, moments before these men begin their gunfight, a Temperance Union marches through the main thoroughfare (mostly comprised of women) lamenting the virtues of sobriety. Here, the doctrine of feminised Christianity and 'technocratic, consumerist modernity' that the

Union stands for becomes a target for each of the male character's fierce exchange of gunfire, inferring that the act of reclaiming one's 'masculinisation' must be achieved through 'a revitalised negation of domesticity' (Grønstad 2008: 140) that would otherwise threaten this identity. Male violence, when understood as a strategy of dealing with problems of masculine identity, is wrapped up in resisting (the more feminine code of) ideals-of-domestication that aim to constrain and quell a masculine primitivism deemed civilly undesirable. To reclaim glory in the face of personal displacement (instigated by radical social change) requires great courage, but also a ruthless resolve that cares not for modernity and progression. This is because male savagery, no matter how morally pure or legitimate the intention (e.g. reclaiming one's identity, fighting for a code of ethics) invariably causes so much pain and destruction (e.g. innocent pedestrians caught up in this attack) that such excessive displays of violence inevitably devolve into apathetic compromise (e.g. dismissing notions of an 'honourable' manhood).

In an audio-visual sense especially, this aforementioned act of savagery subsequently becomes a spectacular outlet for masculine self-expression: rhythmically projecting the celebration of a wilder, untamed brand of male agency and self-determination. In terms of the physical movements and editing schemes, the degree of violence at San Rafael as Stella Bruzzi points out, is quite hypnotic. The fatalities of the Temperance Union procession unfold by way of 'frantic editing; frenetic action interspersed with slow motion; bullets travelling though men's bodies causing blood to fountain out of them; cutting mid-action; and men in their death throes convulsing and pirouetting mid-air' (Bruzzi 2013: 79). However, in saying this, Bruzzi also points out that this audio-visual hypnotism is equally 'assaulting' on the viewer. Indeed the assault of this bloodbath, although choreographed into a 'magnificent dance' (Bruzzi 2013: 79) acts as a *perverse* ballet of death (Langford 2010: 142).

A key cultural contradiction stated earlier in the chapter – i.e. that a capable role model of masculine action, although professional, nonetheless tends to employ intense, excessive levels of violence – begins to become starkly apparent in the onscreen rhythms of the spectacle. It is clear in both Grønstad and Bruzzi's analysis of the San Rafael massacre that no matter how gloriously capable, hypnotic or beautified the masculine brutality may be, consider that the deaths of the innocent Union members are still *excessively macabre*. Although the bunch's collective masculinity prides itself as primal, savage in nature, destined to be free from the restrictive tenets of civilisation, no longer able to refigured through domestication, this spectacularisation of violence eventually

begins to show a definite artifice underlying such a celebration. The restlessness of the editing style does not allow viewers to fully experience a 'pure' unadulterated, fetishised enjoyment of the brutality, due to the fact that there are frequent interruptions to the 'straightforward closure' of this action (Bruzzi 2013: 86). The gunning down of one man is a journey that becomes constantly intercut in mid-action with the killing of yet another man who is in the midst of his own death throes. This confusion, Bruzzi points out, compromises an enjoyment of the violent action somewhat, even to the point of intellectualising it.

The viewer, I agree with Bruzzi, is forced to ponder over the sadistic brutality employed by these men as they mercilessly kill innocents as well as each another, and I wish to develop the rhythmic potential behind this idea: seeking out a story arc in which the spectacle of the violence somehow calls the 'proud' masculinity of these characters into question. Consider how the frenetic style of the bank robbery escape emphasises a theme of nostalgic *admiration* for a wild, empowered manhood capable of defying institutional control, but by resulting in the bedlam of the Temperance Union slaughter, the violence inexorably invokes a value of intense despair and *dismissive-ness* felt towards these savage antics (Bruzzi 2013: 70). In celebrating itself with such bloodthirsty gusto, the spectacle of masculine prowess shows an uglier side, gradually inciting grave concerns for this brutal display.

I propose that a set of conflicting thematic tensions emerges in each of the hypnotic, yet assaulting audio-visual rhythms of brutality performed by male westerners, being key to facilitating the differing methods of aggression exchanged between superheroes and villains. This is because such hypnotic/assaulting modes of brutal imagery allow a particular kind of movement and energy, resonating with the positive associations of professionalism tied to the precision of balletic grace set against comparatively negative bouts of 'hysteria', imprecision and spasmodic erraticism. Again, in *Red River* especially, 'heroic' gestures are associated with precision (efficiency in handling guns and knives while fighting Indians), pitted against antagonistic acts of imprecision (the clumsy, reckless clanging of pots and pans that cause the cattle grazing nearby to stampede). These cultural concerns, I claim, are generated through, then developmentally and narratively evolved by the rhythms of the spectacle in superhero films: dynamically shifting across kinetic arcs (whilst carrying themes) of professionalism and zealotry, which is a process explored in the next section.

(v) Narrative Arcs of *Professionalism / Zealotry*

I argue that superheroes, in acting with a morally legitimated form of violence, get-the-job-done by containing this destruction through precise, linear, brief bursts of aggression and careful steps. Villains on the other hand, with an ethically illegitimate kind of brutality, enact violence with an uncontained, chaotic bedlam. The conflicting rhythms of this spectacular violence proceed to tell a tale of dominant constructions of professional manhood channeling violence with self-discipline. As the thematic tale evolves, the hero's professionalism risks deviating towards compulsions of a non-dominant, 'tainted' masculine savagery advocated by villains (i.e. as over-emotional, hysterical, irrational, 'feminised'). In *Dredd* (2012) for instance, the hero protagonist Judge Dredd (Karl Urban) operates in a distant future where cities have become so expansive in size and populace that police officers are granted extraordinary law-enforcing powers, acting as judge, jury and executioner. Dredd, authorised to use any necessary means of force as stipulated by the law, is tasked with taking on an entire tower blog controlled by drug-dealing gang members loyal to their mob boss MA-MA (Lena Heady). From the outset, Dredd's (disciplined) violence is sanctioned by law and an impetus to enforce justice, while MA-MA, an ex-prostitute-turned-illegal-distributor-of-narcotics is driven by the (emotionally excessive) desire to exploit the vulnerable.

Throughout the film Dredd's display of violence is a celebration of professional masculinity, following a physical rhythm of precision and discipline, only shooting if necessary, with brief bursts of gun shots that kill instantly, implementing quick punches and efficient limb-breaking, giving offenders the initial opportunity to lower their arms and prepare for arrest or sentence. MA-MA by contrast delights in messy pain infliction, either to make an example of others (e.g. skinning the bodies of competing gang members and throwing the wriggling mass of flesh from atop the tower block to splatter blood in the main public thoroughfare below) or to strengthen her own drug cartel (e.g. using her fingers to gouge out the eyes of a reluctant technician, so he can be fitted with cybernetic implants to oversee the surveillance of her block). MA-MA's physical rhythms invoke the value of condemnation and dangers attributed to an unprofessional savagery, or more importantly, a *compromised* self-discipline that caves into a volatile hysteria. Also, MA-MA's unchecked violence governs the rest of her male gang members, inciting their drawn out, indulgent, imprecise streams of gunfire and the prolonged slicing of victims' flesh.

The stark contrast between these rhythms becomes most apparent after MA-MA's cartel eventually corners Dredd onto one of the upper floors, as she and her gang members

use three Gatling guns to sweep a torrent of gunfire from the left hand side of the storey over to the right. The violence is reckless, careless of the repercussions, carving apart dozens of domiciles and apartments filled with families cowering in fear as their walls and ceilings cave in, crushing their bodies as bullets rip at their flesh. There is a sadistic enjoyment taken by the villain in this brutality, as several innocent men, women and children have been murdered in her attempt to kill Dredd: her application of violence here is impure, undisciplined, channeled incorrectly and entirely unsanctioned by the law.

During the mindless carnage of this imprecise attack, and its lack of containment, the brutal imagery actually aids a spectacular emphasis on a celebratory pleasure invested in Dredd's performance as a capable, precise, disciplined (masculine) role model. Managing to successfully contend with this hail of gunfire, Dredd confidently strides away, with each careful step mere inches from death, all the while maintaining his firm, uncompromising resolve. MA-MA, on the other hand, invokes the more hysterical emotional excess reminiscent of the indulgent cook in *Red River*. Her chaotic sadism, aided by the digital-visual/special effects of intense bullet fire, crumbing walls complete with blood spray, is a comment on just how threatening (a feminine code of) emotional excess can be if unchecked by (a male code of) self-control. Indeed her quite literally explosive approach to the destruction of this community is equated with a lack of masculine professionalism, which is in direct contrast to Dredd's efficient ducking and diving, and the contained precision of his future reprisals.

However, while Dredd's professional response to violence is a means of glorifying his competent masculinity, he is often overzealous in the application of this proficient brutality: bringing more problematic concerns into play that undermine the celebration, i.e. much like the self-determined escape at the San Rafael bloodbath in *The Wild Bunch*, resulting in dozens of slaughtered innocents. When Dredd punches and strangles an arrested suspect in order to uncover the true extent of the drug operation for example, the law-enforcer's behaviour mimics that of the hysterical sadist, intolerant of his own self-restraint, now snarling and throth-ing salvia through the teeth, only stopping the violence and regaining rationality when asked to do so by a (female) rookie law-enforcer accompanying him. The masculine professionalism here begins to reveal its artifice, condemned as equally volatile as MA-MA's ruthless self-determination.

A narrative arc soon becomes apparent in the physical rhythms making up the spectacle, telling a thematic tale that *masculine heroism is complicated by the violence it employs*. This arc reveals not only the merits of masculinity, but also its inherent dangers.

As part of telling a story arc that challenges thematic tensions, MA-MA, accordingly, although is quite prepared to resort to any means of violence to achieve her goals, often curbs her emotional excess so she can consider what the next 'plan of action' should be, firmly closing her mouth while gritting teeth together: so revealing a calculating, rational degree of focus reminiscent of a (masculine) role model. In this respect, there is a dynamic, complex shifting from themes of professionalism to zealotry in the physical rhythms exchanged between hero and villain. Dredd's physical rhythms have the potential to become increasingly erratic, resulting in a process of de-glorification, yet MA-MA sometimes emulates Dredd's own firm-jawed stoicism, which is associated with a more glorified kind of masculinity.

Regardless of any celebratory pleasure taken in viewing (masculine) professional self-control over spectacular violent action, or the condemnable (feminine) emotional excess that exasperates this violence, the male role model hero is always in danger of becoming undermined by the excessive savagery he displays. Near the climatic end of *Kick Ass* (2010) for instance, when the hero hovers with a jetpack outside the top floor of a mafia headquarters, he uses two automatic mini-guns attached to either shoulder to cut down the mobsters inside. By shooting the henchmen in a straight line, moving across from right to left, and immediately ceasing the brutality as soon as the task is complete, this confirms the hero's violence to be driven by firm-jawed discipline. This discipline, however, becomes compromised somewhat as the hero begins to cry out – open-mouthed, and with profane language – in joy at the death of these criminals. His roar of defiance aurally matches the cadence of the soaring non-diegetic musical chorus performed by Elvis Presley, who sings out "Hallelujah" during a rendition of 'An American Trilogy', providing a thrilling audio-visual source of catharsis for the character (and viewer) glorified by a celebratory applause at the end of the song. This brutal imagery, by working as an outlet for the hero's emotional excess, actually causes his self-restraint to veer far closer to the same sadistic enjoyment indulged by villains such as MA-MA in *Dredd*.

Although the hero Kick Ass primarily targets the mobsters in a precise and linear fashion, a lack of containment becomes noticeably emphasised that draws attention to the destruction of the entire apartment *rather* than the swift elimination of the henchmen alone: causing the hero's violence to no longer be taken as professional, but lean towards the *over*emotional. While the action lasts for only for a period of 30 seconds, consider how the sequence is visually drawn out with a *slow motion* effect (i.e. utilising a camera speed that appears to prolong the pacing of character movements, simulating a process of 'over-

cranking', in which the shot rate moves faster than 24 frames-per-seconds to achieve the desired result). Here, the brutal imagery is not simply sanctioned as getting-the-job-done effectively and efficiently with manly restraint, but instead becomes tainted by a potentially overblown hysteria. As chunks of desks, bookshelves, table tops, furniture fragments and the debris from wall paintings are forcibly ripped apart, the escalation of this unruly mess threatens to compromise the integrity of the hero's linear sweeping motion that has, up till now, swiftly mowed down the group of antagonists. When the last henchmen falls it is only after the hero quickly ceases the gunfire, so completing his precise swipe, and puts a stop to the euphoric happiness of his excited respirations and beaming grin, that he gradually becomes stone-faced again. By finally restraining this explosive, imprecise attack, he manages to somewhat sanitise the ugliness of his violence in a professional light once more: as a brief bout of necessary but not excessively destructive aggression. The celebration of superhero masculinity, then, is always in some danger of becoming undermined if this violence is not checked appropriately. The passionate dedication of the hero is in constant need of being kept brief, to the point, unfolding as a precise set of physical rhythms, in the fashion of quick bursts of gunfire and careful steps, as opposed to the drawn out disheveled unruliness of an endless spray of bullets. It is also useful to point out at this stage that *Kick Ass* is a self-reflexive treatment and pastiche of the superhero film, and it is this degree of parody that helps to subvert the archetype of the chivalrous, clean-cut hero: both reaffirming yet troubling these genre tropes of masculine heroism. The subversive impact of parody in terms of violent displays in age-restricted versions of the superhero film will continue to be explored in more depth across this section, and also more closely in chapter four in relation to the superheroine.

The same kinetic arc that pits rhythms of precision against imprecision, so telling a thematic trajectory of professionalism versus zealotry is most evident in *Super* (2011). The self-proclaimed vigilante Crimson Bolt (Rainn Wilson) although driven by an impetus of focused, linear attacks, constructing an array of weaponry from gloves with spring-loaded blades to pipe bombs, is nonetheless frequently overzealous in his application of swift justice. There is no major judicial distinction, in his mind, between what he considers to be evil, seriously injuring child molesters, drug dealers, thieves, car vandals or simply members of the public for 'butting in line' at a local cinema theatre. Masculine professionalism is questioned whenever Bolt's initial stoicism soon becomes compromised by his mad grinning, arms that flail wildly, or as he repeatedly cracks criminals' skulls wide open with a wrench rather than merely incapacitate them: all the while taking far too

much joy and pleasure in this precise, yet volatile, messy brutality. The violence employed by Crimson Bolt is so excessive it veers on the horrific alongside the absurd, causing his aspiration to act as a devoted professional adept at nullifying wrongdoers to instead be conflated with an over-zealous, erratic energy.

To clarify, it is the treatment of brutal imagery seen in *Dredd*, *Kick Ass* or *Super* in playing off rhythms of (glorified) precision against those following (a condemnable) imprecision which generates a distinct storytelling arc able to reinforce yet challenge cultural paradigms. The evolution of this narrative arc is one that consistently questions whether a vigilante hero's approach to getting-the-job-done professionally may in fact be akin to a mission of self-determined zealotry. It is the physical rhythms of the hero that then grants a temporal and causal development to these conflicting cultural themes. Consider how in *Watchmen* (2009) the crime-fighter Rorschach (Jackie Earle Haley) employs physical aggression with precision, making each punch and head-butt count, morally sanctioned by the perverse nature of the assailants that receive these attacks (e.g. paedophiles, psychotic criminals). Regardless of this precision though, his state of male professionalism – much like Dredd or Crimson Bolt – is always in danger of indulging an overemotional hysteria that runs deep within his wild nature. Cornering a child molester who murdered an innocent young girl, Rorschach grabs a meat cleaver and smacks the blade down into the perpetrator's skull in one smooth motion, killing him instantly, but then proceeds to repeat the action with fluidity several times long after the man is dead, increasingly splattering more and more blood around the room. The rhythmic violent action Rorschach performs in these moments is itself a bold statement: while the first killing sweep is morally justified, each of the later motions, while driven by vigilante heroism, soon becomes inordinately and ethically savage.

Other displays of Rorschach's professionalism also inevitably become wrapped up with an inability to compromise, to reel in the ferocity driving his mission to enforce an ethical code he stipulates as appropriate. Be it breaking several bones of a retired villain for information, or crushing a snitch's fist in a bar as he holds a glass, Rorschach will use whatever erratic rhythms of brutality are necessary to get the job done, even if at the expense of the stoic stillness essential for manly restraint. The momentum of this escalating rage also becomes apparent in the ever-shifting digital textures of his white mask, made up of a 'heat and pressure sensitive' black viscous fluid set between two sheets of latex. These inkblots constantly alter in shape depending on the blood flow across his face, aurally punctuated with a voice that snarls and wobbles uncontrollably, so

emphasising an inner emotional current always in danger of erupting outwards as untamed violent action.

By using disciplined, uncompromising violence too zealously, these rhythms of precise strikes and swift motions – along with an apparent glorification of professional manhood – inevitably risk condemnation after gaining enough momentum to become unreasonable or turbulent. Brutality can only be taken so far to a point before it leaves the weaker threshold of palpable, tolerable entertainment and shifts into an assaulting realm of ugliness and shock. *Dredd*, *Kick Ass*, *Super* and *Watchmen* are each films with a restriction censorship-rating appropriate only for adult audiences, rather than a family-based demographic, and for this reason the violence enabling super-heroic masculinity is more easily undermined, questioning the intentions of these vigilante 'heroes'. With this in mind, the more chivalrous superhero archetypes (*Spider-Man*, *Superman Returns*, *Batman Begins*) will not necessarily deride their masculine action in such an explicitly gruesome fashion as Rorschach or Dredd. Nonetheless the 'softer' brand of violent punches, kicks and bone-breaking performed by a hero such as Spiderman has the same potential to bring forth troubling associations of where the line between *professional/zealous* brutality actually sits, because the momentum of this savagery is always in need of being carefully 'checked'.

The value of professionalism introduced by westerner heroes (e.g. skillful gestures of tossing or catching knives and guns) is in turn heightened by the digitally-enhanced violence in both *Super* and *Watchmen*, with the digitally-crafted cracking open, or slicing into of skulls (and the resultant blood splatter) undergoing an exaggeration that *over*-emphasises the impact each of these physical rhythms have. The clumsiness enacted in the Western (e.g. that results in cattle stampeding, causing harm and injury to the innocent) is also heightened in *Dredd* and *Kick Ass*, with the immense digital visual effects of gunfire and collapsing buildings spectacularly exaggerating the sheer 'messiness' of the destruction.

There is, in effect, what I term as a rhythmic tug-of-war that unfolds between thematic tensions of precision/imprecision and professionalism/zealotry, which are further enhanced by the treatment of digital visual effects. For this reason, a clash of cultural contradictions surrounding the question of masculinity becomes especially apparent in the physical aggression exchanged between superhero and villain, the digital textures enabling these bodies, and the violence they each enact. Developing this idea further, I shall now explore in greater depth how the rhythms performed by hero/villain afford a means of

reconciling a key struggle between: (i) the wild instability of a digitally-empowered manhood, against (ii) the civilised stability of a pro-filmic flesh-and-blood male body.

It has already been established that superheroes ultimately seek to define their self-sufficient masculinity by channeling their violence in an appropriate fashion, and I wish to add that an inherent part of this process in contemporary superhero movies (building on Mitchell and Grønstad's ideas) involves seeking out a firmer state of physical solidity and stability. Many of the superhero's own bodily textures are almost always digitally enhanced to some extent, which inevitably exacerbates the distinction between professional/zealous types of aggression. This is because digital textures can be an impressive wonder to behold, *accentuating* dominant constructions of masculinity (e.g. allowing Hal Jordan's pro-filmic, quite human muscular dimensions to be mostly unaltered by the coating of green energy that forms his costume in *Green Lantern*), but also *troublesome* in their equally nonhuman, mutable appearance (e.g. the bulging, animalistic, animated thick layers of muscle forming *The Incredible Hulk* (2008)). This set of concerns that were mentioned earlier in the chapter – i.e. a tension felt for the male superhero's shift from '*civilised'* flesh-and-blood to a '*wilder'* digital manipulation – are made explicit in *Watchmen* for instance when nuclear physicist Jon Osterman (Billy Crudup) becomes accidentally trapped inside a radiation chamber during a laboratory experiment at a military base. Here, Osterman's ordinary flesh-and-blood civilian body becomes ripped apart by nuclear energy, refigured into the omnipotent demi-god Dr. Manhattan.

At first Osterman cries out for help, but as his bodily layers become fragmented, this messy, painful tearing apart of skin, muscle tissue, organs and bones is the unmaking of one kind of masculinity – that is, the weak everyday civilian – and the *re*-making of another manhood: now empowered by (fierce, more savage) cosmic forces of nature. Calmly closing his eyes, breathing out slowly, he finally resists giving into anxiety or anger, instead telling himself to brace for the impact, and that he will feel the emotion of fear for the last time. Disappearing into thin air Osterman is quite literally deprived of any sense of personal identity or placement in society, but as the sequence continues, the possibility for reinvention presents itself. Days later outside the military facility grounds, a circulatory system is seen trying to reconstruct itself, but fails. After a few more days a vexed skeleton attempts to piece itself back together, smashing its fist against a corridor wall within the building complex, again ending in failure, and a frustrated eruption of energy particles.

Eventually a more concrete bodily form manifests itself in a cafeteria room filled with seated scientists. Precipitated by a blue glow, the buzzing of electricity in the air and an explosive rupture, a digitally muscularised Osterman emerges, shaking the room's tables, throwing people back from their chairs. Floating weightlessly in mid air, confidently stretching his arms outwards, the monumental muscular luminosity he openly extends (Figure 3.0) is again evocative of the same übermensch or *Freikorps* armoured persona of Ozymandias described in the second chapter (see Figure 2.9): being a celebration of the 'de-domesticated', evolved, empowered, considerably more 'elemental' frontier of masculinity he has fought for.

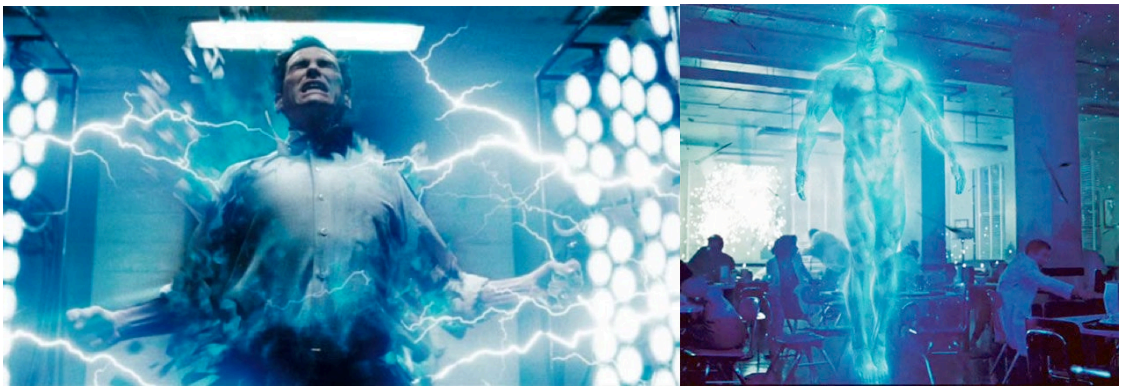

Figure 3.0

As though praising the coming of a divine messiah, the non-diegetic aural lament 'Prophecies' chants out hymns in unison against the intense tones of 'Pruit Igoe' (composed by Phillip Glass). This celebratory singing follows a series of images that depict Dr. Manhattan achieving amazing feats, such as deconstructing apart a war tank with his newfound powers of telekinesis, or showing his potential as a peacemaker that can decompile nuclear weapons of mass destruction. However, this celebration of the (super)man soon becomes undermined by the overzealous nature in which he employs his enhanced abilities to destructive effect, such as not simply incapacitating but actually ripping apart gangsters of the criminal underworld in a bar. Manhattan's telekinesis disintegrates these gangsters with a precise, efficient immediacy before they can even raise their machine guns, so nullifying the threat they pose before any harm comes to other innocent patrons in close proximity.

Nonetheless, Manhattan's lack of emotional investment, silent stoicism and subtlest of arm gestures causes the mobsters' blood to splatter across the entire room, coating shocked bystanders while leaving pieces of bone-and-flesh embedded in the ceiling, unceremoniously swaying from side to side. His enhanced, extraordinary musculature and calm channeling of violence is applied with such an intensity that this professional control over the elements is not so much precise as it is 'stark', not carefully contained, but rather, 'bluntly' enforced. Manhattan's violence against these criminals shows some quick precision at first, which is a merit worthy of being initially glorified. As the digital textures presenting this violent action become increasingly unstable or volatile however, the sheer unruly, messy and erratic ramifications of this uncontained brutality is so savage that it soon invokes a *de*-glorification of the hero's supposed capable, self-sufficient and evolved manhood.

Ultimately then, spectacular displays of violence in the superhero film are a means of celebrating, yet also undermining an empowered construction of masculinity. This is achieved through the presentation of the physical body, the gestures this body takes, and also the interaction with the mise-en-scene and the cinematography presenting it. More importantly, it is the rhythms of violence unfolding from this combination of elements in these film texts that not only carry important themes, but bemoan an anxiety about conservative conceptions of what it means to behave as a 'man'. These rhythms enacted by and presenting the superhero, it will be shown in the next section, proceed to heighten further still the same thematic concerns taken from Westerns and action cinema: unfolding as the violent, tug-of-war between the digital and bodily textures of brawling superheroes and villains.

(vi) *Brawling (Digital) Textures*: Tensions of *Pro-filmic / Mutable* and *Stable / Volatile*

The chapter has shown how the spectacle of superhero violence through its inherent rhythms of precision versus imprecision tells an evolving thematic tale of masculinist professionalism in conflation with emotionally excessive hysteria. This section now explores how digital-visual-effects manage to invoke several other cultural contradictions pertinent to conservative paradigms of masculinity, while at the same time managing to heighten the narrative conflict between these thematic tensions. Of the thematic tensions invested in the two differing types of violent physical aggression enacted by superheroes and villains, I argue that the most useful binaries to develop in relation to issues of

masculine heroism revolve around *purity versus corruption* and *integrity versus compromise*, which in turn invoke legitimacy versus illegitimacy, sanctioned versus unsanctioned and self-restraint versus indulgence. As was pointed out in the thesis introduction, heroes conventionally channel brutality via a restrained, disciplined, legitimate, and sanctioned form of violence. Villains do so by means of a less worthy, antagonistic masculinity that instead incites negative associations of corruption and comprise, indulging in unrestrained, sadistic, illegitimate and unsanctioned savagery, lacking in any moral integrity. Following on from the genre conventions of heroic masculinity stated in the Western, I claim that these cultural values become visually manifested through the digital effects depicting the superhero and villain's bodily textures: i.e. as the human form in contention with digital transformations (founded on anthropocentric[33] concerns of physical 'stability' versus 'volatility').

I shall show how the digitally enhanced textures and abilities that physically morph the superhero and villain's limbs or torsos carry the same weight of themes of purity/corruption and integrity/compromise. This is because superheroes attempt to contain the violence they employ, to minimize destruction to the surroundings and dangers to others, shape-shifting or extending their bodies in a stable, predictable, never venturing too far away from conventional flesh-and-blood template of the human form. Villains, by contrast, unleash violence in an explosive, volatile manner, as their digital textures are less stable and mutable, more likely to fluctuate erratically away from the human form, acting with unpredictability. This section will continue to address the thematic significance invested in the digital textures compromising the superhero's body and superhuman abilities, as well as the villain's physique and powers. By isolating each of the themes at stake, this will benefit an exploration into the process of narrativisation that spectacular rhythms of violence play, particularly as a means of rhythmically mediating and developing the evolving meanings of cultural paradigms.

Digital visual effects in the superhero film almost always bring to mind the distinction between two main cultural paradigms: (i) what can be termed the pro-filmic (Souriau 1953: 8)[34] body (i.e. people, places and events recorded directly in front of the

[33] A view or doctrine regarding man as the central fact of the universe, to which all surrounding facts have reference (OED). In this context, it is a preoccupation for the human form above all else.
[34] The term 'pro-filmic' was coined in the 1950s by French film academics (led by Etienne Souriau in his discussion on diegesis and the seven levels of filmic reality), denoting everything (or the selection of elements) intentionally placed in *front* of the camera and recorded on film as reality;

camera); and (ii) the mutable body (i.e. entities liable to change shape or alter in form). Analysing the superhero film *Hulk* (2003) for instance, Lisa Purse points out how the hero protagonist Dr. Bruce Banner (Eric Bana) conforms to the pro-filmic representation of a flesh-and-blood actor, that is, an undoubtedly 'human' bodily form. When becoming enraged, however, Banner physically transforms into his alter-ego the 'Hulk': an animated creature that increases exponentially in height and width, with these new green bestial contours no longer able to offer the viewer any 'pro-filmic body referent' attributable to Banner's original figure (Purse 2007: 13). As Banner's transformation unfolds there is a distinct separation of these two disparate personae of *actor*-Bana/*animated*-Hulk, in effect 'setting up a "before and after" opposition that emphasises their physical differences' (Purse 2007: 13). There is an *unease* implicit to this transformation, not simply in terms of the shift from vulnerable human to alter-ego beast, but more importantly in what Purse explains as 'the inherent visual *instability*' invoked by the manipulative enhancements of computer generated imagery (Purse 2007: 13), a prospect viewers arguably find 'challenging' to accept, or perhaps even undesirable:

> [O]nce the comic-book body, frozen in arrested motion, is recreated in film – that is, once the *unstable*, *unpredictably* mutable body is *in motion* in a live-action film – it *problematises* our instinctive expectations about the physical behaviours of bodies in a live-action environment. The animation of the human body in a live-action context modifies the potential limits and behaviours of that body. Indeed, it re-figures the human body as *disturbing* and *unnatural* in its elasticity and capacity for infinite transformation and *re*configuration [emphasis added] (Purse 2007: 15).

The signaling of two separate identities, then, one pro-filmic (e.g. that is stable and familiar), the other mutable (e.g. as unstable, unfamiliar) brings into play an interesting set of thematic tensions. Firstly, there are a set of negative connotations associated with digitally mutable bodies (i.e. *disturbing*, *unnatural*, *unstable*, *unpredictable)* and their potential for infinite *re*configuration. Secondly, this brings to mind a set of positive values invested in the original, non-digital pro-filmic body, which provides *reassurance*, seeming more *natural*, *stable*, *predictable*, with a *finite* configuration. The distinction inevitably results in conflict in the superhero film text. This is because the mutable body, with its 'instrumental realisation of physical metamorphosis' has the effect of causing the pro-filmic to potentially become obliterated, perhaps resulting in our own 'shattered and dispersed selves' (Purse 2007: 15), or the self being *lost* somehow (Purse 2007: 16). For

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including actors, costume, props, décor, etc. In this context, in is intended to describe the tangible qualities of a 'flesh-and-blood' onscreen actor.

instance, in terms of the violence enacted in *Hulk*, Banner's transformation is always precipitated by events that trigger the release of pent-up anger, which then escalate to an *uncontrollable* degree and *untameable* destruction when operating as the Hulk (North 2008: 172). Consequently, as Dan North points out, the Hulk's lack of pro-filmic correspondence with an original Banner form now works to distance viewers from contemplating the character's human identity, because the film text only emphasises the physical exertions of this body and its emotional nature.

I propose that the juxtaposition between the pro-filmic human form and digitally-mutable manipulations also coincide with the same thematic dualities attributed to paradigms of violent masculinity in the Western, including purity versus corruption, integrity versus compromise, legitimate versus illegitimate, sanctioned versus unsanctioned and self-restraint versus indulgence. The purity of the human form is sanctioned by the legitimacy of its physical integrity, both composed and restrained as such. Counteracting this purity, however, is the corruption of digital re-figuration that renders this human flesh malleable, compromised, and illegitimate by way of indulging such an unsanctioned transformation. In *Hulk* especially, by digitally manipulating the 'pure' human form at the level of flesh-and-blood, this body then somehow becomes *im*pure, no loner fully human, and threatening to an anthropocentric paradigm that regards humankind as the central most important factor of existence in the universe. Again, when applying this reasoning to the violent destruction wrought in *Hulk*, the spectacle is empowering and thrilling to observe, but it nonetheless threatens conservative mores of the 'appropriate behaviour' that is expected of ordinary members belonging to a civilised society. In Banner's human form he often is compelled to conform to the confines of the societal order, such as when the military uses force to extract genetic secrets from his body. When his rage physically empowers him as the monstrous Hulk, he can repel the intervention of social institutions, because these new bodily proportions are socially volatile and unpredictable enough to do so. The Hulk's corrupted physical form and volatile rage is an expression of lack of agency felt by an individual unable to achieve personal goals as an ordinary citizen, by violently resisting the intervention of institutional factors that usually would constrain one's day-to-day life.

The same cultural tensions of *profilmic/mutable* and *stable/volatile* are also active in the violent brawling exchanged between superheroes and villain adversaries. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition metamorphosing monsters, shape-shifters and hybrids or any disconcerting mutability 'equates to villainy' (Purse 2013: 66). 'In the Christian heaven,'

Marina Warner writes, 'nothing is mutable, whereas in hell, everything combines and recombines in terrible amalgams' (Warner 2002: 35-6). This paradigm is applicable to heroes, because for these figures any 'physical inconsistency is much less tolerable' (Purse 2013: 66), especially when compared to the mutability of villains:

> [A] heroic body's *physical integrity* can be *compromised* in the course of the narrative, by violence or illness, for example, but it must possess a legible and understandable structural integrity in the first place, with the extent and nature of its correspondences with real-world physical and physiology clarified. Films set in fantastical universes or featuring comic book heroes who physically transform in some way might initially seem to problematise these distinctions. But actually they remain predominantly faithful to the underlying principle, by *policing the distinction between metamorphosis and modulation* in their visualisation of the body's transformative possibilities [emphasis added] (Purse 2013: 66-67).

Purse's insights suggest a thematic quality of physical 'integrity' in the hero, while villains embody malleable 'compromise', drawing attention to a useful dialectic of *modulation/metamorphosis.* While metamorphosis gives a sense of unpredictable possibilities, being malleable or pliable, modulation is far more schematic, characterized by an 'underlying fixity' by adhering to 'a predetermined set of possibilities' (Shaviro 2010: 13). The tension between bodily modulation and metamorphosis can present *purer* methods of violence in contention with resisting *corrupted* kinds of savagery. For example, in *Fantastic Four: Rise of The Silver Surfer* (2007), Reed Richards, aka Mr. Fantastic (Ioan Gruffudd) stretches the textures of his body in all manner of contortions to tie up criminals, which is pure in terms of ethical intentions (i.e. peacefully containing threats), but also shows an anthropocentric purity in the form his body takes, because he will immediately retract back to the stability of his original human template. In *Green Lantern* the hero uses his abilities to manipulate energy to create an infinite number of shapes and objects around him, creating water to extinguish fires, or brick walls to shield civilians from bullets, or catapults to catch missiles and then fire these projectiles back again. No matter how many variations his creations take however, at the core of these digital textures resides the ever-present form of the pro-filmic body. Here the digital textures mutably stretch outwards but always returning back or dissipate to reveal the solidity of the hero's pro-filmic form.

To continue stretching bodily textures too far would be to venture well beyond the realms of violence sanctioned by values of heroism (i.e. self-discipline, moral integrity). Consider how the hero's digital textures often unfold in a straight direction, affecting one specific area, emerge briefly and then disappear instantly after the task is complete. Thor, for instance, attracts lightning from the sky, firing this energy in isolated bursts to hold

back alien hordes descending on New York in *Avengers Assemble*. Captain America will hurl his digitally-constructed circular shield, using it as a discus to bounce off and around enemy soldiers so as to incapacitate them, which like a boomerang returns back to his palm shortly after the final impact in *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Superman will use his cold breath to cease a volatile fireball running rampant through the gas lines of Metropolis, and then continue breathing normally after the blaze is quelled in *Superman Returns*. Superheroes will often shield their pro-filmic body with a digitally-enhanced texture of armour to protect their limbs and torso from becoming compromised in any way, e.g. such as the mechanisms operating in the suits worn in *Iron Man* and *Batman Begins*. Accordingly, the violence these heroes enact on others will also resonate with an impetus for maintaining a purity of form (e.g. the digital visual effects of flares fired from Iron Man's shoulders temporally distracts attackers, but causes them no physical damage; Batman's summoning of a large animated swarm of bats briefly provides him cover, again without harming or mutilating anyone in the vicinity).

In contrast, the violence of villains will continue to stretch digital textures without any concern for retraction, venturing into the threshold of unsanctioned savagery. This is because as the digital textures of antagonists stretch and morph, there is an instability (and reluctance) in returning back to any firmer state of the profilmic, which is reflected in their approach to violence. Villains will both transform and attack without warning, as is the case with the frequent metamorphoses of Mystique in *X-Men* (2000), or the barbed, toxic tongue of Viper (Svetlana Khodchenkova) as she suddenly unleashes it while spitting acid to scar the faces of her victims in *The Wolverine* (2013). In extreme cases, villains will forever forsake the profilmic in favor of the corrupted physical form, as does the huge, monstrous genetically-refigured soldier 'Abomination' in *The Incredible Hulk*, or the disfigured professor Hector Hammond (Peter Sarsgaard) in *Green Lantern*, both of which are fully prepared to harm and permanently mutilate anyone standing in their way. The 'Lizard', aka the genetically-altered, mentally-deranged Dr. Kurt Connors (Rhys Ifans), uses his elongated claws to slash open the flesh upon the hero Spiderman's chest, and also releases a gas toxin that transforms much of the populace of New York City into reptilian creatures made in the villain's own image in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012). Mutability, then, in the context of violence and digital textures works as an illegitimate, corrupt and compromised form of morphing, stretching and contorting: causing destruction and mayhem in its wake. The same applies to those digital textures that show the repercussions of the body's actions in the surrounding environment. The terrorist Bane (Tom Hardy) for

example uses explosive charges, causing the computer-generated spectacle of an entire football stadium's grounds to implode on itself, as well as collapsing all the major bridges of Gotham city in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). In this way, unlike the brief precision of the hero's violence, the digital textures extending from villain's savagery unravels in multiple directions, impacting with several surface areas, lasting for a great period of time that lingers in the aftermath, having wrought its mark. Even at the level of editing, the space and time depicted in violent montages often presents brawling bodies in a way that is quite 'plastic' or 'unstable', particularly in the case of revisionist Westerns such as Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (Prince 1998: 70).

The digital textures outlined above, it can now be claimed, actually take on two distinct thematic associations: (i) firstly, the profilmic stability of the hero stands for moral purity and physical integrity, enacted through legitimate, contained violence based on discipline and self-restraint; and (ii) secondly, in the villain, there is a mutable instability that invokes moral impurity and physical compromise, extending into a corrupt, illegitimate, uncontrollable form of savagery based on indulgence and perverse enjoyment. After having established these two sets of thematic tensions pertinent to the brawl between superhero and villain, the next step of the argument can now fully explore how these values rhythmically and narratively unfold through the spectacle of male violence enacted between the two adversaries. The theme of whether a hero can properly channel his masculine violence is explored through the interplay of digital textures between superheroes and villains: the spectacular rhythms of which achieve an ongoing tug-of-war effect that kinetically, temporally and causally evolve over time.

(vii) *Purge / Devour*: A Rhythmic Tug-of-War

In this section I show how a narrativised spectacle of masculine themes unfolds during the violent brawling exchanged between superheroes and villains. Each of the overarching thematic tensions associated with masculine heroism explored so far in the chapter, namely precision/imprecision, professionalism/zealotry, purity/corruption and profilmic/mutable come to a head at what I argue to be the rhythmic interplay of a textual and bodily *tug-of-war*. This is because embedded within the structure of spectacular fighting sequences reside a series of conservative paradigms that glorify dominant conceptions of masculine violent action as gracefully professional and de-glorify condemnable kinds of masculinity

as (emotionally) erratic and overzealous. These cultural paradigms are not only invoked by the spectacle but, it will be shown, are also complicated and then reaffirmed along a kinetic trajectory of digital and bodily textures that rhythmically tug against one another. By moving back-and-forth these digital textures carry key masculine themes in an evolving fashion, and it is this motion that grants a temporal and causal development to opposing sets of negative and positive values, contributing a storytelling arc of thematic exposition to the film narration.

I claim that the rhythms generated by spectacles of violence in the superhero film tell a thematic tale of the hero and villain each achieving their own particular states of *cathartic release*. During this exchange of physical aggression, a thematic narrative arc is generated that evolves key themes associated with catharsis-through-violence: as, what I propose to be, a process of 'purging' and 'devouring'. When contending with a villain, the disciplined hero attempts to *purge* the negative values tied to his opponent's undisciplined, emotionally excessive masculinity, doing so with sanctioned forms of violence (precise, morally-legitimate). The hero's violence is driven by protecting the welfare of others, often prepared to harm himself as part of achieving a catharsis that purges undesirable qualities of manhood from the villain. Yet, the hero's self-masochism is never fully corrupted by any self-indulgence or hysteria, as his masculine heroism is consistently 'purified' by manly restraint and stoicism. Conversely, the far more self-indulgent villain achieves catharsis by instead succumbing to a non-dominant masculinity that gives into temptation and emotional excess. Villains use unsanctioned violence (unruly, morally-illegitimate) and behave with a degree of sadism, taking immense pleasure in harming victims: in effect consuming the welfare of others by undertaking forms of brutality that *devour*. The villain's sadistic (and so culturally-negative) value of 'violent devouring' compels him to feed on the hero's pain, increasing this torment to continue the devouring process, so corrupting his opponent's positive values of restraint and self-control. In this regard the two fighting styles generate a thematic dynamism.

The thematic dynamism generated by a kinesis of violence (exchanged between hero/villain) offers up a visceral kind of storytelling arc to the superhero film's narration that is able to tell and develop conflicting paradigms of masculinity. The digital effects presenting these physical brawls depend on the male superhero's rhythms of precise motion and contained destruction being pitted against the villain's imprecise motion and messy pain infliction. In turn, a hero purges his opponents with brief bouts of linear precision, but villains devour victims with drawn out attacks of erratic imprecision. This

process is evident in *The Wolverine* (2013) during the final climatic struggle between the hero Logan, aka Wolverine (Hugh Jackman) and villain Silver Samurai. The fight is a spectacle that shifts between a kinesis of violence that 'cleanses' both the hero and villain's masculinity, which is then played off against movements that 'sully' one another's manhood, which weaken the hero but energise the villain. It is this dynamic that narrativises the spectacle in a distinct fashion: developmentally expressing concerns of whether male 'role models' channel their aggression appropriately. Logan is a mutant with retractable claws and enhanced abilities of rapid healing, animal instinct, extraordinary strength and bones coated with an indestructible metal. His abilities allow him to age gradually overtime with longevity, able to live for centuries. An implicit thematic significance is invested in Logan's mutations, because in being gifted with an immortal lifespan there resides a value of purity or vivacity in this power, especially when used for purposes of selfless heroism that undergoes extensive injuries. Such a value of purity however is the envy of those who would corrupt this ability by employing it for selfish purposes, driven by a solipsistic desire to preserve one's own personal welfare and existence.

To put the main plot exposition into context, at an early stage in the primary narrative chain of cause-and-effect Logan is held in a Japanese prison camp in Nagasaki during the Second World War, and forced to use his durable body to shield a young solider Yashida (Ken Yamamura) from the destructive shockwave of an atomic bombing. In the aftermath of the detonation, Yashida is grateful and Logan does not require any further gratitude from him. As the film plot progresses, years pass and a much older, wealthier Yashida (Hal Yamanouchi) now offers to give Logan peace from his eternal immortality, so the hero can finally avoid watching loved ones grow old, and die, again and again. In exchange for allowing Logan to live a normal lifetime with inevitable closure, Yashida would in turn transfer the hero's regenerative abilities over to his elderly and rapidly degenerating body to prolong his own lifespan. Logan, ever the responsible hero, turns down this reckless deal. A thematic tension is gradually set up here in the main narrative exposition, in that there is a moral purity ingrained in Logan's lack of temptation, and an ethical corruption inherent in Yashida's desire to defy the laws of nature, continuing his existence at any cost. Keeping this narrative context in mind, consider the spectacularly violent brawl that breaks out between the two men near the film's closure. Yashida builds and dons an armoured suit to protect his frail body, made from the same adamantium metal that allows Logan's bones to be so indestructible. Now resembling the mythological Silver

Samurai (a figurative guardian figure that watches over his family in the afterlife) Yashida towers high above Logan in a laboratory, matching his strength and invulnerability, prepared to take by force what the hero would not give willingly.

During the final spectacular fighting sequence in the laboratory, there is a kinesis of precision pitted against imprecision that carries masculinist antinomies of purity versus corruption and integrity versus compromise in an explicitly rhythmic fashion, doing so through the struggle between digital and bodily textures that purge and devour one another as though in a tug-of-war. For instance, when Yashida, suited in the Silver Samurai armour, cleaves straight through Logan's claws with a huge katana blade the sheared metal now exposes the mess of snapped bone and the bloody muscle sinews within. Using retractable drills from his metallic fists to clutch at Logan's wrist, Yashida then begins to pierce deep into the hero's severed knuckles. This constant burrowing movement causes Logan to convulse in pain, being a violating motion that erratically shakes and invades the hero's body. The shrill sound of metal colliding with bone elicits agonised screams from Logan as the villain proceeds to grab his other arm, repeating the procedure. Here, there is a drawn out spasmodic, shaking rhythm of violence that actively devours the hero's vitality, which in turn compromises Logan's manly restraint. The destruction is uncontained as blood sprays from the drill's impact, causing Logan to become weaker while Yashida increasingly appears more rejuvenated and younger, consuming the life-force from out of the hero's body into the villain.[35] The digital textures follow suit, as Logan's eyes glaze over, loosing colour along with his grey face and lips, sunken cheeks and gasping mouth, prompting Yashida's now younger skin and facial features to riotously laugh and lean his head back with eyes closed in ecstatic pleasure while consuming all this vitality. Here, then, the digital textures of colorful vitality are 'sucked out' of Logan's face and then 'moved towards' Yashida's increasingly younger-looking flesh, adhering to an ongoing rhythm of absorption, violation and invasion, becoming more pronounced as the hero's own life force continues to drain away (Figure 3.1).

[35] A sexual metaphor is also suggested in this exchange, which implies notions of aggressive virility and violation. The hero's vitality is literally drained away here, but in essence, the villain is performing a molestation that aims to abuse his adversary's virtue. In this sense, villains are very much in love with their own wounds (see performance chapter), and receive pleasure by imposing it upon the hero, so demanding a reaction that validates (and offers release for) the antagonist's personal pain. As the process often includes the piercing of one another's bodies, the brawl between hero and villain is arguably one of rape assault or defilement, not for sexual pleasure proper, but a pleasure that perhaps *verges* on the sexual which eroticises their conflicting methods of violence (and the thematic values at stake).

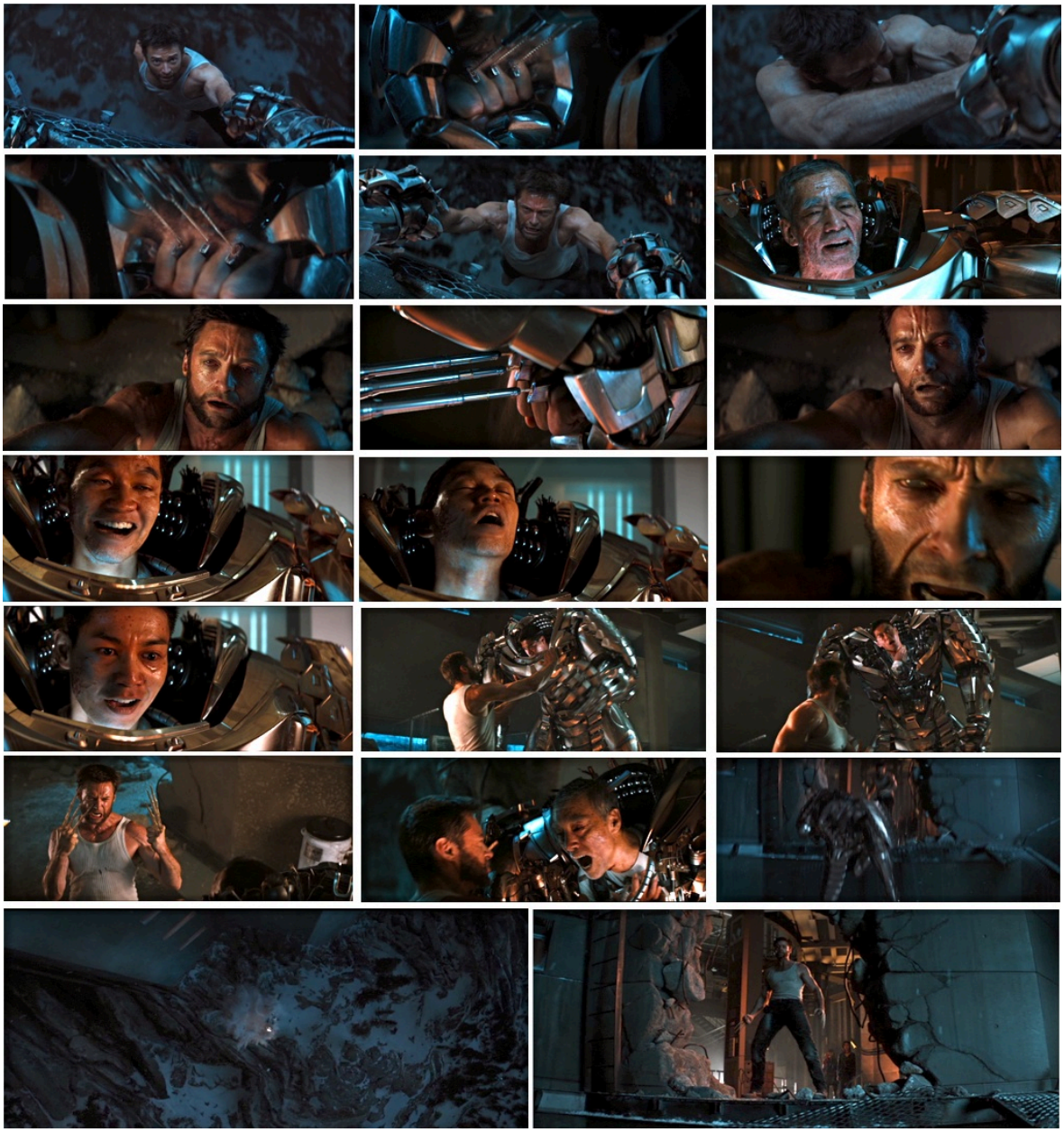

Figure 3.1

Soon the digital textures begin to shift and change, introducing a new type of rhythmic violence between hero and villain. Witnessing this attack from the other side of the laboratory, Yashida's shocked granddaughter picks up a handful of Logan's severed claws, throwing them into the villain's skull and neck to incapacitate him, so breaking his grip on Logan's body. When Yashida's sadistic, ravaging consumption is interrupted, this allows Logan's facial pigmentation to naturally return back to its original colour, while it is the villain's weakening complexion that now begins to drain away, gradually becoming reconfigured back to his older state. At this point the digital textures start to follow a tug-

of-war trajectory that no longer emphatically devours, but instead emphasises a rhythmic purging and cleansing of Yashida's physical corruption and compromise. Logan purges Yashida's sheer sadism through physical rhythms of precise tearing that pull away at the (digitally-constructed) silver breastplate to reveal the villain's now gradually aging torso. Using linear strikes to pull the villain's armour backwards, the hero effectively tugs all of this digital material *back towards* him as a means of rejuvenating his own vitality once more, while reverting Yashida back to an original elderly form. By uncovering Yashida's no longer mutable, but increasingly profilmic flesh-and-blood form underneath, this purges Yashida's transgression of physical re-figuration, by deconstructing his mutability back to a far more acceptable and 'humble' humanised shape. Remember that Logan's aggression is in no way sadistic here (i.e. consuming, devouring) but driven by purposes of purifying a corrupted kind of indulgent masculinity through means of the purge. Finding an open space in the villain's armour, Logan in another brief, single linear lunge, plunges his claws into Yashida's chest, exacerbating his adversary's rapid aging once more, so purging the last of the illegitimately stolen life-force.

Logan's act of precise purging reaches its pinnacle after dragging Yashida's dying body over to the cliff edge when he hurls the adversary into the depths. As the body plummets downwards, becoming broken apart on impact with the rock, smashing the distant ground in a blaze of sparking metal fragments, there is a finality in the efficient eclipsing of darkness of the mountain shadow: with the value of corruption invested in the villain now having been entirely purged from view. As the camera then pans upward toward Logan's position, the hero stands over the precipice, heaving in a sigh of relief, having finally achieved full thematic catharsis: physically purging all of Yashida's negative values of corruption, compromise and mutability in favour of the more positive themes invested in the hero's own physical and moral integrity, purity and profilmic form.[36]

[36] It is useful to briefly note that before completing the purge Logan's re-vitalised physical integrity also establishes his 'methods of violence' as pure, wholly justified, sanctioned, legitimate and self-controlled, but more importantly *palpable*.

This is evident when Logan gives one last retort to the antagonist, reiterating how he was tricked into seeing Yashida under the premise of seeing an old friend for the last time, to say goodbye before passing away on his deathbed. Logan's tongue-in-cheek usage of the term "Sayōnara!" to show his disdain at his disappointment in Yashida's deception further confirms the violence as morally tolerable. This is because 'the witty quip, pun or one-liner' is an effective convention that aligns viewers with the humourous aspects of heroism and violence, functioning as a distancing device that acts as 'a release valve' to the tension (Kendrick 2009: 93).

Throughout this brawl, then, an evident textual tug-of-war takes place between innate differences in the two rhythms of violence enacted by hero and villain. The viewer may well notice the shift in direction of the digital textures, as well as the themes being invoked and developed. As hero and villain fight once another, this process of purging/devouring results in a forward and backward motion that carries along thematic values tied to masculine heroism (i.e. harking back to the Western genre), namely moral discipline versus emotional excess. These masculinist themes are then further heightened by tropes of physical stability versus digitised volatility so essential to the superhero film. As Logan's (digitally-coloured) vitality is sucked away from him and moved toward Yashida, Logan indeed betrays an outcry of undisciplined hysterical pain, *but then* uses manly restraint to suppress this emotional outburst. While Yashida is disciplined in his firm resolve and quite precise when extracting the blood from Logan's knuckles, the villain nonetheless hysterically cries out with a sadistic self-indulgent joy at the pleasure of regaining youthful energy, shaking Logan around in a volatile fashion. Yet, in retaliation Logan's own precise pulling of Yashida's armour fragments becomes just as increasingly erratic as the villain's earlier attacks, teetering on the brink of zealotry, no longer professionally driven and so in danger of compromising the legitimacy of his morally-sanctioned violence. Hence, as digital textures allow for a greater contamination of each body, this process continues to break down yet reinforce the boundaries between thematic dualities of masculinity. Ultimately, this spectacle of violent brawling unfolds as a kinetic tugging 'toing-and-froing' motion that asks, and then narratively attempts to resolve the question: To what extent is masculine aggression applied with professionalism, or does it invariably succumb to zealotry?

At this stage in the discussion it has been explained how a spectacle of physical violence in *The Wolverine* is structured by digitally-enhanced bodily textures. These textures work as a vehicle for narratively developing a kinetic trajectory that espouses and conflates *dominant/transgressive* paradigms of masculine heroism. Glorified and condemnable thematic qualities of masculinity are given a temporal development through

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Eric Lichtenfeld has also noted that the one-liners employed by 1980s male action heroes, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Clint Eastwood or James Bond, have cinematic roots going as far back as John Wayne growling 'That'll be the day' in *The Searchers* (1956) (Kendrick 2009: 94). The final 'punch line' near the end of the purge confirms Logan's aggression as justified action, legitimising his violence in the face of illegitimate sadism. The one-liner helps to berate the illegitimacy of Yashida's unsanctioned violence, mocking the character for taking pleasure in such an excessive display of sadistic indulgence.

the movement of the spectacle: as the 'positive' precision of male heroism is played off against the 'negative' imprecision that compromises manhood. It is this to-ing and fro-ing motion that then results in a causal knock on effect, which develops a series of Theme As (such as manly restraint, physical integrity) in relation to contradictory Theme Bs (such as hysterical excess, physical compromise) that contributes a particularly thematic dimension of dramatic conflict to the overall film narration. This distinct kind of narrativisation of the spectacular violence – again, what I declare to be a tug-of-war effect – is not an isolated case but applicable across other contemporary superhero films that employ digital visual effects. For instance, the kind of narrativised spectacle I am proposing in *The Wolverine* is also evident in *Spider-Man 3* (2007) in that the clash of digital effects between the hero protagonist Spiderman (Toby Maguire) and villain Venom can thematically and rhythmically tell a similar tale of 'celebrating' yet 'condemning' feats of masculine violent action. To briefly put the main narrative causality into the context, Spiderman has come into contact with an alien pathogen, covering his entire suit in black, tar-like organic textures. The (digital) alien textures engage in a symbiotic relationship with their host, giving him added strength, but this aggression is sustained by negative emotional excesses of jealousy, greed and selfish desires, compelling the hero to experience these feelings more frequently. Aware that the symbiote substance is clouding his judgment, causing him to give into temptations that compromise his heroism – so sullying the (masculinist) virtues of self-control and restraint – the hero makes the decision to begin physically ripping away the stubborn organism.

Finding an isolated space atop a church bell tower, Spiderman attempts to cleanse his body of this foreign substance through a process of self-inflicted pain in the hopes of reverting back to a state of physical (and profilmic) purity. The symbiotic alien textures resist this peeling action, immediately clasping back onto his torso and chest, eliciting more agonising cries and facial contortions from the hero. The organic strands of the suit are inflexible at first, with the slightest tear of the mask immediately repairing itself to seal the gap once more. Here, in formalistic terms, as the digital textures sitting upon the hero's body surface are pulled away, they are coerced down a kinetic trajectory that forcibly stretches these tendrils outwards. The pulling motion is also a 'purging motion' of barbed fibers that then cause the symbiote's textures to flail around in a state of confusion and rage, making their own audible agonised protests as they spring back in resistance, devouring the surface area of his flesh and bones once more. It is this consistent pulling away motion that is then always met with a clinging back motion that generates a distinct

kind of rhythm. In a thematic sense, there is a discernable tension to this rhythmic tug-of-war between the concrete form of the hero's profilmic male body (as pure, stable), and the more abstract shapes and tendrils of the very alien symbiote textures (as corrupted, volatile) that in turn try to find a firmer state of solidity by becoming re-attached to the familiarity of his skin. The disciplined stoicism represented by the hero's body attempts to sustain itself here through very linear peeling motions that repeatedly tear away at the messier mass of erratically flailing, hysterically screaming (and decidedly 'other', nonhuman as well as digital) spasmodic strands which desire to compromise the integrity of this male form.

A series of physical rhythms that complicate tensions of stability versus volatility soon become heightened even further with the introduction of the villain. Seated on the lower level in the church's main atrium, looking up at the alter with self-pity, is the antagonist Eddie Brock Jr. (Topher Grace), a disgraced freelance newspaper photographer and recent social pariah rebuked for his maltreatment of others. Brock' s construction of masculinity is that of an agent of emotional excess, prepared to use violence as a means of satisfying his own desires. This representation of a negative, undesirable, disenfranchised form of masculinity is manifested in his weak, scrawny physique, short height, bellow-average muscle density, and thin build. Throughout his behaviour and actions he is presented as an ambitious and opportunistic individual, but driven by a selfish set of prerogatives, being disloyal, untrustworthy and out for himself. He is presented as smarmy, unctuous, deceitful, manipulative, self-centered as well as cowardly and accused as "spineless" by others. He is also lacking in empathy towards others, expressing merely superficial concern for their welfare at best. Throughout the main plot, whenever thwarted or prevented in any way from achieving a goal, his mouth will curl downwards petulantly, and his eyes will flare up in spite, and the dialogue he uses to communicate with others is laced with praise, respect and sycophantism, yet all the while his eyes are correspondingly disingenuous, glazed over with impertinence and insincerity. Brock's weak construction of masculinity is important for the rhythmic pattern of stability versus volatility that soon unfolds in the church sequence.

An extended montage editing effect begins to unfold after Brock hears the commotion atop the bell tower, walking directly below the struggling hero crouching above. A pairing of shots now switches between the two men. Firstly, there is a series of images depicting the hero's continued efforts to stretch and peel away the clinging tar-like sinews from his body. Secondly, this imagery is contrasted against another set of shots that

frame the black organic globs falling directly onto Brock. Here, a juxtaposition ensues between: (i) Spiderman's evolving attempts at purification, and (ii) Brock's gradual consumption of these black textures, first falling onto his jacket, which he discards, then slopping onto his wrist which he tries to shake off, increasingly sullying his body as it becomes coated in this thick material. The cutting manages to establish the two conflicting rhythmic movements of these digital textures. Spiderman's linear peeling (that purges the negative values invested in the symbiote) is contrasted with Brock's messier drenching in the substance (so becoming devoured by this volatile entity, and the negative values it invokes).

The montage-based cutting between Spiderman's pulling of digital textures and Brock's engulfment by the alien substance then combine to form a distinct rhythmic (and kinetic) trajectory, generated by the way these two bodies move within the frame. This is because the cutting between hero and villain forms a vertical arc of sorts from the top of the tower to the entrance below, and the textures are stretched and altered across the trajectory of this space. The upper end of the vertical arc stands for purging, as the hero rips away yet more of the strands that keep fraying apart in his hands, rapidly reattaching themselves back onto his arms and torso. The mutable textures of the symbiote cling onto Spiderman, attempting to find a concrete shape, always moving towards the hero. It is through his rigorous rhythms of pulling and stretching that the hero undergoes his purge: protecting the purity of his physical integrity. The symbiote's counter rhythms however, in failing to resist the hero's efforts direct their aggressive clinging, clasping and wrapping motions toward Brock below, with its detached textures now moving across a downward trajectory, ready to consume his limbs instead. A storytelling arc is evident in this juxtaposition, as a narrative trajectory that pits a *cleansing*-purge against a *sullying*-consumption, invoking the values of purity against corruption, as well as a moral and physical integrity in conflation with compromise.

There is a *backward* motion as the hero tugs and stretches these textures *away* from his flesh, and a *forward* motion as the textures spring *on* him again. The backward motion eventually alters the material by congealing it into a sludge that drips off the hero's arms and over the ledge, shifting into an outstretched palm complete with fingers that now grasps forwards out at Brock. As the symbiote moves downward to seek out Brock, this forward motion soon sticks onto the antagonist's shoulders and arms by coating every surface, soon meeting a contradictory rhythm of backward motion again as Brock resists by pulling this black material back in fear. This forward-and-backward motion is a play off

between ‘backward pulling as purging’ and ‘forward engulfment as devouring’. Indeed the now naked hero, lying exhausted down in the shadows, has completely pulled back (and so purged himself of) the symbiote. The non-diegetic musical score becomes choral at this stage, employing a chant akin to hymns and vocal laments of spiritual praise for having regained his original profilmic form and human male shape once more. This image is juxtaposed with the next shot that shows the huge forward leering mass of ooze continue to fall down the vertical arc onto Brock as his human flesh and profilmic shape disappear under the black textures, penetrating his mouth. As the symbiote’s textures are stretched downward Brock becomes devoured by this entity, but has also in a sense equally consumed the symbiote, ingesting the substance, along with the negative values invested in these fibers. By giving into the forward momentum of these tendrils and ooze, Brock has thus given in to the temptation and hysteria of this force, becoming engulfed by it entirely.

As Spiderman’s catharsis is one of purging unwanted textures and emotional excesses, so reverting back to his disciplined original human form, Brock’s personal catharsis is instead achieved by being ‘wrapped up’ in this physical refiguring. This is because, taking the form of the creature ‘Venom’, he is refigured as an empowered body, now depicting another type of masculinity, no longer physically weak but strong, not unimpressive in appearance but imposing, not merely smarmy in behaviour but aggressive, brutal and vicious. Able to devour others he is a venom*ous* masculine construction to be feared and respected, and a dangerously savage (mutably digital) force to be reckoned with. Venom is tall, with well above-average muscle density and strength. The creature is covered in a protective texture that extends itself into barbs that can lash out and grapple. The musical timbre also becomes more aggressive and threatening, aurally punctuating this monstrous visual reconfiguration. Beginning to smile, Brock’s emotional frustration at social alienation now finds physical expression and agency as a more savage construction of masculinity. He will sustain this newfound masculine savagery by continuing to devour and harm the welfare of those that would stand in his way. The villain’s value of sadism becomes explicitly manifest with a fanged mouth, sharp claws and predatory eyes that project malice, lunging forward toward the screen as though about to consume the entire image (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2

The film's final climatic brawl between Spiderman and Venom especially narrativises a thematic and rhythmic tug-of-war trajectory between 'dominant' versus 'transgressive' cultural values of masculine violent action. Fighting atop a partially constructed skyscraper, the hero's approach to violence is far more composed and pragmatic than Venom. Driven by a mission of purging and precise gestures of professionalism, Spiderman picks up two metal poles and beats them together to emit a high-pitched reverberation that unsettles the symbiote's foothold on Brock/Venom. The hero's agile antics are professional in just how balletic he is when carefully and efficiently leaping around the building site with grace, picking up more poles along the way, hitting the villain whenever he lunges to attack, then striking the rods together to create more sounds that incapacitate him, continuing to loosen the integrity of Venom's textures. Smashing the poles into the ground, Spiderman forms a perfect circular boundary that contains the impaired antagonist. Then hitting the poles, so pulling and stretching the tendrils away from Brock/Venom's body, the positive associations of Spiderman's professional precision intensifies the backward motion that invokes a purging of unwanted masculine qualities

from the villain. Running around the circle, striking and reverberating one steel pole after another, this elegant sweeping motion is a kind of violence that *efficiently contains the destruction* in a small space as is expected of masculine heroism. As Venom's textures spasm in shock and scream with pain, with several layers actively being ripped, torn, taken apart, and peeled off, his act of resistance is ineffective, unruly and volatile. The same can be said for the villain's methods of violence, as he leaps around and slashes wildly at the hero, crashing into walls and against the scaffolding that is a *widespread destruction* that is clumsy, awkward and less contained, 'spreading' this savagery around most of this space.

Masculinist virtues and sins resonate throughout the kinetic trajectory of this spectacle, the meanings of which are developmentally played off against one another. This is because Spiderman's violence is noticeably far more balletic in poise when compared to the spasmodic gestures enacted by Venom. There is a positive association of manhood tied to Spiderman's violence when physically negotiating the space, as the beauty of sanctioned, legitimate aggression that is restrained, composed, graceful, neat-and-tidy, and so more palpable than Venom's sadism. Whereas Spiderman's rhythmic purging elicits this degree of balletic fascination, Venom's lack of self-control invokes the value of intolerable revulsion, devouring the hero by gouging into his flesh, snapping with fangs and slicing his exposed chest with claws. A narrativised arc unfolds in this kinesis, evolving paradigms of masculinity with the physical rhythms of tugging and pulling that increases the gap between Brock's concrete human form and the more abstract symbiotic textures of his Venom persona that now fray away. Whenever Spiderman hits the poles, this elicits a (hysterical) scream from the symbiote, as more and more of the textures becomes loosened and detached, as though to the beat of each strike. The screeching hum of the metal bars also causes a vibration that rips apart at the villain's textures, now spread in all directions. This purge successfully unveils Brock's exasperated facial expression as a vulnerable, weak, cowardly and unrestrained masculinity that desperately attempts to hold onto his former layers that earlier granted him the empowerment of savage rage.

The narrative arc across this space becomes increasingly explicit as one type of digital texture directly competes with another. Next, the hero shoots a strand of webbing from his wrist onto Brock's exposed back. Spiderman's long single strand of webbing is a linear projectile that extends outward from the hero's profilmic proportions. Much like the masculine cowboy hero with a lasso attempting to herd together a stampede of cattle, Spiderman's digital textures are closely associated with the civility of his disciplined male form that attempts to tame a wild and unruly contorting mass of undefined digital

proportions found in the Venom symbiote. This digital tug-of-war reaches a pinnacle as the symbiote retaliates, pulling Brock back into its fold again, attempting to wrap its tendrils around him, but Spiderman persists in his purge and eventually rips Brock free who cries out pitifully, trying to clasp back at the safety of the black textures. After Brock has been successfully separated and pulled out of harms way, this extraction consequently leaves behind the absolute essence of his transgressive masculinity: a fabric of contorting textures roaring in outrage, with no stoic restraint, no professionalism, no precision, none of the hero's grace, and with no profilmic human flesh and blood form, but only a wildly stretching, spreading digital mass that twitches and judders around, vibrating erratically, repulsively contorting awkwardly with a spasmodic ugliness.

It is this ongoing play off between balletic and spasmodic rhythms during the tug-of-war that structures the spectacle of the brawl, eliciting dramatic conflict in the dual fascination and revulsion invested in such a violent ripping away of the symbiote's textures. The interplay between balletic and spasmodic rhythms is also necessary for heightening the way cultural themes are invoked and narratively developed in the superhero film. Consider how now without a host, the symbiote expands in size as a mess of horrific webbed textures with a lack of neatness, shaped into a monstrous creature without a concrete form, possessing only mere remnants of a head, arms and torso. As the creature continues to tremble and convulse, spasm, jolt, shake and grow further in size, it is ambiguously situated in the threshold situated between *tangible/intangible* forms, and it is this display which invokes a degree of fascination yet revulsion at this spectacle. Spiderman's expression is one of uncertainty, wary but amazed. Brock is glad, yet also surprised the creature has survived. In this way, the symbiote is in a state of flux, repulsive to behold, but also a fascinating display of relentless rage.

The horror and beauty of this digitally-enhanced violence, I argue, helps to negotiate a set of masculinist thematic tensions within the film text that build on a binary of notions of the concrete (profilmic) and the abstract (mutable). Firstly, there is the ugly, messy savagery of the symbiote that spasmodically devours Brock, but its empowering masculine physique offers the villain a sadistic means of cathartic release and personal agency from the strictures of his ordinary human persona. Secondly, Spiderman's purging of this mutable mass is done as a balletic act of grace that offers catharsis by wiping this hysterical alien substance clean from view, so sustaining the hero's manly restraint. Note how as soon as Spiderman throws an explosive at the flailing symbiotic, Brock again leaps back into the comfort of its black textures. Here the hero shouts out in warning with no

desire to destroy Brock's profilmic form, but Brock, by screaming in desperation has entirely given himself over to a temptation of indulgence, quite prepared to be devoured by the transgressive entity and forsake his male human body in the process. When the explosive finally detonates, it erupts in a bright haze of light, contained, brief and leaving no trace of either the hysterical symbiotic or the sadist Brock, completely cleansing this space of the illegitimate entity and the negative construction of manhood this union stood for. Across the spectacle of this brawl, the action has moved back and forth along a horizontal arc that extends from one end of the building site to the other: carrying, introducing, reinforcing and challenging key cultural themes along the way.

Throughout the spectacle of the brawl Spiderman's professional violence (coded as stoic male heroism) and Venom's unprofessional violence (coded as un-masculine, or hysterical) are developed alongside the movements and patterns articulated by their digitally-enhanced attributes. To clarify, the hero is graceful in resisting the creature Venom, with digital visual effects that show his body leap up and across the building site as smooth linear arcs. The digital webbing he shoots from his wrists is as equally linear and precise as his punches and kicks. As long as the hero continues to use each step and strike with precision, his professionalism will be ensured. Most importantly, what is also invested in the hero's carefully considered physical rhythms is the display of an 'appropriate' masculinity defined against '*in*appropriate' male traits evident in the villain's emotional excess that unfolds as the erratic slashing of talons, or the snarling and snapping of fangs, with the flailing of limbs. A pleasure can be taken in observing the elaborate details of these digital strands that painfully erupt around Venom's body, confirming the pro-filmic/mutable duality, in which the hero's male body is glorified as stable and disciplined in one sense, and the villain is de-glorified as volatile and more erratic by comparison.

A final point to develop in the fight sequence is that notions of dominant and transgressive paradigms of masculinity at times become conflated across this kinetic storytelling arc. Notice how, as is the case with previous examples set out in the chapter, Spiderman's celebratory self-sufficient manhood is always in danger of venturing into the threshold of the overzealous. Whenever Venom is successful in gauging open deep cuts into Spiderman chest, the hero screams out with pain, compromising the 'armoured entity' (see the second chapter) of his male professionalism. Accordingly, the hero's rhythms of precision and positive virtues of manhood for a moment almost give into the same erratic, retributive and indulgences endorsed by the villain. While Spiderman's digital web

projectiles are mostly graceful, they often do misfire, appearing as spasmodic as Venom's gnashing of teeth and swiping of claws. When beating the metal poles this causes Brock incapacitating pain, and Spiderman's own swiping motions rest on the brink of being far too drawn out, inefficient, almost venturing into the realm of sadism. It is only by quickly pulling Brock from the symbiote with as little pain infliction as possible that alleviates concerns as to whether the hero has succumbed to the same indulgent rage that fuels his adversary.

Ultimately then, the superhero/villain brawl in *Spider-Man 3* is a clash of two male bodies, making a critical statement about socio-cultural paradigms of manhood. In a generic sense, the superhero's monumental kind of male musculature (again, refer to the second chapter) and self-sufficient professionalism does tend to invoke a glorified celebration of masculine violent action, defending against the emotional excesses, self-indulgence, hysteria and irrationality of sadistic villains. There is, however, as ever, a fascistic potential in the hero's traits of extreme determination, courage or valour that, when done with enough ruthless zeal, tends to invoke an autocratic zealotry that can de-glorify notions of an idealised manhood, in danger of overlapping with the villain's sadism. It is the playing-off of one audio-visual rhythm against another in the spectacle that articulates an affirmation of conservative expectations pertaining to masculine heroism: posing the question of how to properly channel masculine violent action, then offering a degree of alleviation to this tension.

***Theme As Rhythm*: Summarising The Analytical Perspective**

The analytical perspective proposed throughout this chapter, and across the thesis argument as a whole, considers how thematic meanings unfold and evolve through audio-visual rhythmic motion: an idea crucial to my proposed definition of narrativised spectacle. The third chapter has argued this claim of *theme as rhythm* to be evident in displays of violence in superhero films that invoke a clash between a series of two oppositional values. These values, the discussion has explained, revolve around masculist concerns of heroism adopted from the Western genre, namely purity versus corruption, and integrity versus compromise. Superhero violence, it has also been shown, tends to challenge and negotiate the thematic duality of purity/corruption in a spectacular sense, doing so through the differing rhythms of physical aggression exchanged between superheroes and villains.

To summarise the key points of my argument, consider how the struggle between purity/corruption becomes evident during close quarters brawling, whenever comparing the differing methods of violence employed by hero and villain. The hero's punching and kicking is done with precision and neatness, containing damage to an absolute minimum. By contrast, the villain's attacks are far more erratic and disorderly, resulting in a greater degree of destruction to the wider environment. In this sense, heroes use a stable(r) kind of violence in their attempt to counteract the (increasingly) volatile type of savagery enforced by villains.

The thematic clash of purity/corruption becomes most audio-visually explicit during what can be termed a rhythmic tug-of-war that literally rips and pulls on one another's bodily textures, unfolding as an evolving pattern. Heroes will pull at the bodily textures of villains, ripping these layers *backwards* away from the antagonist. This is because such layers are considered corrupted or 'non-human' in some way, e.g. bionic extensions or alien symbiotes, as referred to in preceding sections that analyse the mechanical suit worn by villain Silver Samurai in *The Wolverine*, or the organic substances constituting the monstrous figure Venom in *Spider-Man 3*. In removing and discarding these mutable extensions – be it monstrous fangs or barbed mechanisms, and the inherent degree of corruption represented therein – the hero achieves a purging of sorts, revealing a 'purer', fully human form hidden underneath, now no longer tainted, e.g. in reverting Brock and Yashida back to their original bodies. Villains instead consume the bodily textures of others to energise a 'transgressive' type of masculine savagery. Antagonists use these digital textures to lunge *forwards* and devour the hero's vitality, consuming his moral and physical integrity to sustain their personal sadism. The spectacle of superhero violence is one of a physical rhythm that pulls backwards (in a positive sense) and pushes forwards (in a more negative sense), carrying and developing thematic tensions along this trajectory in the process.

The rhythmic tug of war between purity and corruption resonates with a series of other pertinent thematic tensions. There is an apparent 'integrity' invested in the hero (again, in both a moral and bodily sense), which must stand against the threat of 'compromise' imposed by antagonists. The brutality enacted by heroes are considered 'legitimate', i.e. heroism driven by self-control, discipline, always sanctioned by the need to protect the vulnerable. The savagery of villains is accordingly quite 'illegitimate', i.e. villainy tempted by sadism, indulgence, unsanctioned attacks driven by the desire to harm the vulnerable. Indeed there is a physical 'stability' associated with a hero's violence,

established primarily through the source of their profilmic form (i.e. the photorealism of the flesh-and-blood human body). This stability resists the 'volatility' of a villain's violence that by comparison tends to emanate from a mutable and malleable source (i.e. being more digitally manipulated or re-figured). By isolating such a convention (i.e. violence as a rhythmic tug-of-war) and the inherent antinomies it invokes, this aesthetic display is arguably a fundamental rule that can then be applied to other superhero films of the contemporary production cycle.[37]

The analysis of violence in this chapter has also provided a critical interrogation of a superhero's male identity as a role model of heroism or virtuous manhood: undermining the initial celebration of what it means to be a 'man'. If the impetus driving violence is wrapped up in notions of getting-the-job-done, then this speaks true of the same anxieties concerning the superhero's sense of professionalism. The superhero's professionalism depends on acting with an acceptable kind of heroic masculine action that protects his self-sufficiency from giving into self-indulgence. The violent profession of the superhero, much like the westerner and action hero uses brutality to preserve these ideals of masculinity in as much as this aggression compromises these same conceptions. The superhero in this respect is presented through an aestheticised violence that glorifies manhood, i.e. notions of courage, determination and vigour, yet the brutality of this spectacle is always in imminent danger of undermining these very qualities. The superhero celebrates his masculine identity through feats of disciplined violence, but only in so far as he can disdain notions of indulgent violence that are typically coded as hysterical (i.e. an emotional excess exhibited in the villain). The superhero, I have argued, uses his violence to construct a glorified kind of male identity, but with a ruthless zeal that verges on the autocratic, even enforcing a kind of fascistic elitism. With this in mind, as the superhero uses violent means to advocate virtuous qualities of manhood this is a celebration of masculinity as primal, natural or undomesticated, rather than culturally constructed. However, by adhering to a doctrine of masculine primitivism that depends on brutal feats of aggression this celebratory aggrandisement soon devolves into a spectacle of de-glorification, showing this supposed natural manhood to be no more than an insecure fallacy of cultural artifice and fabrication.

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[37] There is also a potential application to the wider threshold of action-adventure genres that employ modes of 'super-heroic' effects, e.g. as in the science fictional *Matrix Trilogy* (1999-2003) and *Star Wars Saga* (1977-present) or perhaps even the style of horror in the *Resident Evil* franchise (2002-present).

Displays of violence in the superhero film, akin to the Western and action genres raise several questions about legitimate and illegitimate forms of brutality in binary terms primarily between the hero and villain, yet these films do not fully subvert or complicate these distinctions to a great extent. This is due to how Hollywood storytelling tactics aim to appease as wide an audience demographic as possible without inciting offense. Violence is permissible in the superhero film so long as it conforms to a dominant convention of masculinity: promoting the use of 'necessary' force (i.e. disciplined, righteous), while attempting to dismiss problematic anxieties surrounding this aggression (as too anarchistic or transgressive). Masculine heroism is gloried by the superhero figure, yes, but it is always undermined whenever applied too zealously. Masculine villainy is condemned, yes, but also quite glorified in showing just what this ruthless ambition is capable of achieving. Resultantly, masculinity is constantly glorified, yet undermined, confirmed yet questioned, as disciplined superheroes are ever in danger of succumbing to temptation and compromising their professionalism. A process of aestheticisation (through digital effects, escapist and fantastical elements) makes this process of glorification possible, beautifying the hero's graceful physical rhythms. Yet it is the 'ugliness' of onscreen savagery (the vicious infliction of pain and wounds) that, although may be carefully negotiated, still manages to complicate this paradigm.

What the narrativised spectacle of violence in the superhero-action film suggests, then, is a covert storytelling strategy. The spectacle is able to introduce concerns of any apparent savage traits in the male hero and then promptly brush these anxieties under-the-carpet. The spectacle tells a tale that reinforces and complicates paradigmatic themes of masculine heroism, but in the same fashion as the male hero is always careful in checking this aggressive momentum before it becomes too troublesome to contemplate.

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After having explored in detail violence and masculinity in relation to the superhero, the final chapter next focuses on an issue so far neglected in the thesis argument: the superheroine. My analyses of action sequences and superhero-villain exchanges mentioned up until now have focused primary on male protagonists and antagonists, engaged in a duel over the damsel-in-distress archetype, and the construction of masculinity. Yet, how do the cultural themes so intrinsic to superhero films unfold in relation to the rhythms that present

the female superhero's theatrics, physical clashes with the surrounding setting, violent encounters with villains, or the roles played by super-villainesses?

The superhero, like the westerner, police detective and action hero employs qualities conventionally coded as male (self-discipline, rational), but these genre formulas also deem emotional excess and hysteria as 'feminine' to the masculine. Indeed it is a truism of action-adventure films that any value of 'action' or 'destruction' is typically ascribed to masculine characteristics, whereas 'domesticity' and 'emotion' tend to be tied to notions of the feminine (King 2000: 112). Superheroes are often masculinised and villains feminised: dictating a male norm that contrasts against some value of feminine 'other'.

Action films traditionally present male characters as 'active' agents capable of decision-making that drives the storytelling forward, whereas female characters are relegated to 'passive' objects that await the heterosexual male hero's attention, perhaps as a distractive love-interest or meddling moralist mentor to advise him on his journey. For this reason the impact that sexual objectification has on narrativised spectacle is an important issue yet to be properly explored in the discussion. I argue that the sexual objectification of male heroes often tends to affirm their masculine prowess by maintaining the integrity of their personal agency, taking place in the context of dangerous scenarios or sometimes even nullified with humour. In contrast, although the eroticism of superheroines achieves a similar purpose, it seemingly compromises their personal agency by interrupting this activity to a greater extent. The final chapter of the thesis approaches each of these issues, asking how the themes and rhythms so integral to narrativised spectacle play out in terms of the gender representation of female superheroes?

Rhythm Interrupted

Superheroines and The Burden of Androcentrism

The previous chapter explored how narrativised spectacle tells a thematic tale of masculinity through the violence of superhero films. This final chapter now deals more closely with the way a narrativisation of spectacle works in relation to superheroines and the representation of femininity. The purpose behind this chapter is to critically interrogate how superhero film narratives are driven by what I term to be an androcentric imperative. Androcentrism is the paradigm of privileging male experience as an absolute truth, but at the expense of denigrating female perspectives, and herein lies a central cultural contradiction that aligns masculinity with themes of activity, whereas femininity is tied to themes of passivity. There is often a culturally dominant duality in superhero narratives that shows male characters as 'active' agents (i.e. the hero protagonist) that carry the narrative action forward, against which female characters (i.e. the damsel-in-distress) are 'passive' catalysts whose only function is to provide motivation for the male hero.

Nonetheless, when positioned as the main protagonists of their own narrative arc, superheroines are also afforded an active role that drives the film plot forward. However, I argue that the superheroine's activity as a free agent conventionally comes at the cost of participating in an 'androcentric rhythm'. Androcentric rhythms, I claim, are generated by physical and filmic motions that present an apparent 'gender blindness' of sorts able to neutralise any sense of heroism associated with feminine characteristics: instead favouring masculinist virtues as the default template of heroism to aspire to. For this reason, any deviation away from an androcentric rhythm *interrupts* the kinesis structuring the spectacle of superheroine action, until an androcentric rhythm is reinstated once again.

In terms of the narrativised spectacle at work, whenever channeling violence with precision (so developing a cultural theme of professionalism) to fight against villains, or using flamboyant exuberance (so evolving themes of freedom) to prevail over environmental hurdles, the superheroine's activity will frequently be 'checked' by some form of 'male supervision' to reaffirm the importance of emulating masculinist traits. This interruption of the narrativised spectacle, it will be shown, does not really occur with male hero protagonists to the same extent, affording insights into the patriarchal rhetoric invested in the superhero film. Although there is an extensive volume of research taken into the differences between male and female modes of spectatorship, my discussion instead takes androcentric conventions of the action genre as the primary focus in order to

better interrogate these tropes by applying them to the arguments of seminal feminist theorists and writing on popular film.

The first two case studies of this chapter are spectacular action sequences taken from the superheroine films *Elektra* (2005) and *Catwoman* (2004). This is because these are currently among the only few film texts of the contemporary superhero cycle to feature female superhero protagonists leading the narrative, setting up two ends of a spectrum along which future superheroine films can then be situated. At one end of this spectrum is an active threshold, and at the other end is a passive threshold. During spectacular action sequences superheroines forever shift between these two poles, impacting on the way cultural themes are carried forward by the spectacle. For instance, moments of sexual objectification that erotically dwell on the heroine's potential for physical attractiveness can intrude on the storytelling process by briefly freezing the narrative action, bringing stillness to the kinesis (a line of reasoning taken from Laura Mulvey's seminal and polemic essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), which will be referred to throughout the development of this chapter argument). Only the activity of heroism can again generate kinesis and so bring back narrative progression once more. In *Catwoman* (Halle Berry) instants of sexual objectification occur frequently, often *interrupting the energetic kinesis* of spectacular rhythms, which in turn interrupts the arc of thematic development at stake. The sexual objectification in *Elektra* (Jennifer Garner) is less frequent however, and so the spectacular rhythms and themes they carry are not interrupted as often.

Yet, I claim that in either case the activity of these heroines always conform to an androcentric paradigm that devalues their personal agency in some way. Male and female hero protagonists share certain rhythmic qualities, namely precise, linear movements that unfold in a graceful fashion, channelling violence in a disciplined manner, so resonating with a thematic value of professionalism. These professional rhythms in turn become compromised by bouts of imprecise, erratic motions that unfold in a more spasmodic sense, so invoking a quality of undisciplined self-indulgence, or an overzealous use of force (as discussed in the previous chapter). The chapter will show that the frequency in which linear, precise audio-visual rhythms of professionalism in the superheroine are interrupted by the theme of 'over-indulgence' appears to occur more often when compared to their male superhero equivalents.

Later in the chapter I show how although many androcentric tropes have remained constant across the contemporary superhero film cycle they have also evolved when applied to the more recent superheroines 'Black Widow' (Scarlet Johansson) of the

'family-friendly' Marvel's *Avengers* film series (2008-present) and 'Hit Girl' (Chloe Grace Moretz) from the age restricted and parody of *Kick Ass* (2010). Before doing so, it is first useful to explain how and why active agency is coded as male in superhero-action films, and tends to drive the plot forward, while erotic objectification is coded as female, and instead briefly halts the storytelling momentum.

(i) Conventions of *Masculine / Feminine*: Narrative Agency and Erotic Objectification

When analysing the superheroine *Elektra* (2005) a telling set of similarities and differences between male and female hero protagonists begin to emerge. Elektra shares a set of core genre conventions with the traditional, chivalrous male superhero archetype, e.g. featured in *Superman Returns*, *Batman Begins* or *Spider-Man*. A capable assassin, Elektra is a decidedly professional free agent akin to other male action/super-heroes, in that she employs heroism with disciplined self-sufficiency, e.g. such as throwing her bladed sai with skilled bouts of linear precision, all the while kicking and punching in an efficient manner that neatly contains destruction to a minimum. Another key convention of the superhero archetype that Elektra adheres to is being tasked with a legitimate moral mission, i.e. defeating a bloodthirsty sect of assassins bent on kidnapping and indoctrinating an innocent young girl destined to be the next chosen martial arts protégée. Accordingly, Elektra's goal of saving this damsel-in-distress figure, and her application of violent action in achieving this task, is morally sanctioned from the outset (again conforming to the generic expectations of action-adventure genre formats).

To all extents and purposes then, Elektra stands as the typical superhero archetype, driven by the compulsion to enforce her own personal sense of vigilante justice, all the while fighting for moral integrity against criminal deceit. Elektra, as do all superheroes, takes no explicit pleasure in harming enemies, which helps to sanitise her physical aggression, or in the very least define her moral purity against the corrupted savagery endorsed by unscrupulous villains. The composed posture of the heroes such as Superman, Batman and Spiderman whilst brawling with their own respective antagonists is an energetic display that only ever springs into vibrant action if and when it is necessary to do so, rather than haphazardly or unpredictably (see chapter one and two for more detailed analysis of these aesthetics). Elektra in turn favours this same kind of stoic performance – i.e. firm facial expressions with subdued gestures and mannerisms – which collectively have the effect of repressing any noticeably sadistic enjoyment taken in her work. Instead, she channels violent energy properly, by completing an attack swiftly, always reverting

back towards a calmer state of self-control as soon as the task is complete (as outlined in the discussion of professional violence and manhood in chapter three).

In continuing the above comparison between Elektra and her male vigilante equivalents however, a number of troublesome differences become evident that appear to destabilise the character's status as a professional superhero. Consider, first of all, how the superhero archetype itself is conventionally an armoured figure. This is especially true of the Kevlar-weaved textiles that protect the entirety of Batman's limbs and torso in *The Dark Knight*, or the caped, chevron-emblazed garments that rest upon Superman's statuesque build in *Superman Returns*, as well as the toned, hard body of Spiderman which is covered from-head-to-toe in a fabric of webbed spandex in *Spider-Man*. Elektra's vigilante attire by contrast reveals a noticeably larger surface area of skin, laying bare the shoulders, upper chest, stomach and back. This exposed portion of naked flesh, and the themes this design carries, is what begins to differentiate superheroines like Elektra from other (male) superheroes.

Her comparative lack of armoured protection not only draws attention to the skin, but in turn emphasises yet other exposed regions of the body. Her mouth becomes increasingly apparent as an orifice that hangs open slightly, and the hair is also 'unconfined' by a masked surface, swiveling around the face. Neither of these traits are in keeping with the far more *rigid* dispositions portrayed by Batman and Superman, the sense of which suggests *firmer* jaws and/or *covered* mouths that project a classic heroic (and male) omnipotence, i.e. inciting a sense of 'extraordinary' power and prowess.[38] It is also useful to point out here that the male superhero body tends to expose smaller portions of flesh (refer back to chapter two, Figure 2.6), whereas anti-heroes and villains tend to show naked torsos and limbs, which enhance a remarkable *lack* of self-control, revealing a *susceptibility* to emotional instability (refer back to chapter two, Figure 2.10). The costume design in *Elektra*, it seems, tows an uneasily line between the thresholds of a *clothed* rational self-restraint versus a *naked* emotional vulnerability (see Figure 4.0 below).

[38] Consider the 'silent religious fervor' invested in Clint Eastwood's firm-jawed male self-control as discussed in the preceding chapter.

Figure 4.0

Yet it is also true that Elektra's 'semi-nakedness' belongs to a long-established convention of objectifying the action hero for purposes of entertainment, allowing the viewer to engage in the spectacular thrills these extraordinary bodies offer. The superhero body in turn participates in this tradition, even arguably belonging to a *pornographic polemic* that causes the physical proportions of both men and women to act as a site of spectacle and fetish (Taylor 2007: 345). Male superhero designs for example often display pin-heads, boulder-muscles and steroid-veins, pouches covering the genitals, while females perpetually bend over, while arching their backs with heaving breasts (Jones and Jacobs 1997: 340). In this sense, it is not only the super-heroic bodies of women that play the role of objectified physiques, because 'male super-heroes embody a correspondingly exaggerated and kinky form of macho sex appeal, which puts them, in the fetish stakes, on a par with many of the superheroines' (Reynolds 1992: 81). With glistening musculature, glorious anguished contortions, endless posing, these are figures akin to preening bodybuilders, but in the garb of capes and spandex (Taylor 2007: 352).

Although a heroine such as Elektra is equally as sexualised[39] as a male hero (e.g. like the close-fitting spandex of Spiderman), on closer examination another telling

[39] Rikke Schubart in *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema 1970-2006* (2007) however lists five female archetypes that precede the action heroine, dating back to relaxed attitude to censorship in 1970s exploitation films, adapting the mythological figure of the *femme castratrice* (who castrated those men that have wronged her in some way). These include: **The Dominatrix**, e.g. *Ilsa: The She Wolf of the SS* (1975), *Coffy* (1973) *Foxy Brown* (1974), *Barbed Wire* (1996); **The Rape-Revenger**, e.g. *Hannie Caulder* (1971), *Rape Squad* (1976),

difference surfaces. Consider that the male action hero body is traditionally constructed as an *idealised*, *impressive* vessel for violent action, so objectified with a *powerful physical prowess*. The soldier John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) in *First Blood Part II: Rambo* will often become shirtless in the midst of hand-to-hand combat or when tortured under interrogation, in the same vein that the maverick-cop John McClane (Bruce Willis) dons only a vest when facing off terrorists and saving hostages in *Die Hard* (1988). Regardless of the degree of objectifying different portions of these male bodies, the display of naked flesh is not necessarily eroticised from the outset, but primarily wrapped up in the autonomous act of fending off violent attacks (e.g. when tortured) or in contending with dangerous scenarios (e.g. single-handedly fighting terrorists). Whenever Rambo's naked-chest is penetrated with a large blade, or McClane's exposed torso becomes increasingly covered in sweat, this objectification of the male body is closely interwoven with the narrative impetus at hand: first and foremost *enhancing the hero's autonomous sense of self-determination* (Figure 4.1, *top row*). In the case of Rambo, if this scenario were to feature an action heroine, it would most likely be eroticised as a kind of sexualised violence (note the half-naked Charly Baltimore tortured on a wheel mill in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, Alice being sexually assaulted by a pack of 'red neck' outlaws in *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007), or when Black Widow is tied up and interrogated by Russian soldiers with sadistic aggression in *Avengers Assemble* (2012), which will be discussed later on in the chapter).

Even when male bodies are eroticised as sexually desirable, their status as an 'object' is in part deflected by a humorous undertone. In *Thor* (2011) a situation arises in which the hero claims to be a demi-god to the sceptical members of a close-knit small town community. The hero for instance is bemused over how to wear the clothes of mere mortals, resulting in the spectacle of his naked torso being exposed, stirring lewd comments between the female characters observing the display. Yet this is an absurd narrative scenario, in that Thor's love-interest Dr. Jane Foster (Natalie Portman), although may be admiring the hero's body, nonetheless believes he is clinically insane, when in fact it is she who is in a state of ignorance, being fully unaware of his celestial demi-god status. Thor's self-determined agency is protected by the lack of awareness performed by this onscreen female spectator, which causes her own sexual arousal to last for only a brief,

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Lipstick (1976), *I Spit on your Grave* (1978); **The Mother**, e.g. *Aliens* (1985) *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), **The Daughter**, e.g. *Red Sonja* (1985) *Lady Dragon* (1992), *Kill Bill: Vol 2* (2003); and **The Amazon**, e.g. *Conan the Destroyer* (1984), *Xena: Warrior Princess* Television Series (1995-2001) (23-36).

awkward moment that, while slowing the narrative momentum to a point, quickly allows plot exposition to continue onwards: drawing attention back towards the issue of the hero's personal journey of self-discovery once more. In *The Wolverine*, when the muscular, disheveled hero Logan is asked to disrobe and clean up before meeting an old friend, the maids that brush his glistening body are met with shouts of protest that deflect much of the eroticism, more akin to a humorous spectacle of slapstick comedy (Figure 4.1, bottom row).

Figure 4.1

Applying the ideas above to the more armoured superheroes of Superman, Batman and Spiderman, each male superhero is to a great extent objectified by a promise of physical strength made prominent by muscular dimensions: as a set of curved textures that literally form part of the contours and very fabric defining their suits. This objectification of an armoured masculinity, however, manages to deflect explicit sexual connotations in favour of emphasising the *physical prowess* of this characterisation along with the *narrative energy* these physiques channel. These male muscular dimensions then, not only promise extraordinary strength and agility, but support expectations of enhanced superhuman abilities: a process that tends to do so at the expense of explicit erotic potential. In covering up their bodies, the male superhero is protected from any outward display of vulnerability, and by having either a stone-faced expression or the 'monolithic' impact of a mask, these

features work to hold back emotional outbursts (i.e. as noted in chapter two on the issue of performance techniques).

Classical Hollywood editing strategies are also conventionally designed in a way that dissuades (heterosexual) male viewers from objectifying the main (again, heterosexual) male protagonist in a sexualised manner. Again, the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her seminal polemic essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' states that much of this process depends on how the viewer projects '*his* look on to that of *his* like, *his screen surrogate*,' in how the presentation of narrative events 'coincides with the active power of the erotic look' *belonging to the male hero* when gazing at other female characters, 'giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence [an unlimited power to achieve anything he desires]' (Mulvey [1975] 1985: 310). Steve Neale has also suggested that action genres use the masculine body in a way that allows heterosexual male spectators to identify narcissistically with the narrative agency at work, repressing any erotic objectification of that masculine display (see Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle,' 1983). There have of course been many critiques of Mulvey's original claim that the male hero is always a screen surrogate for male viewers, because such an approach tends to assume spectatorship revolves from a male position, so overlooking the pleasures experienced by female viewers. By focusing on themes and tropes of androcentrism this chapter by necessity perpetuates Mulvey's much-critiqued correlation of equating the spectator's gender with that of character's gender up on the screen, assuming in particular a paradigm of the 'hetero-normative male viewer' vying for the 'hetero-normative male hero', or female viewers perhaps rooting most for the damsel-in-distress.[40] This is because androcentrism is wrapped up in the assumption that only a male (heterosexual) viewer can most easily associate with the male (again, heterosexual) hero, which belongs to a

[40] Laura Mulvey's significant polemic essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) is seminal, but nonetheless assumes that spectatorship originates from a male position, overlooking the pleasures experienced by female viewers. Claiming that Hollywood cinema's spectatorial position is primarily a 'masculine' one is an inherently problematic approach, and this concern is addressed in later works. E.A. Kaplan (1976) argued that male characters were not always dominant forces, and neither were female characters in each and every case a passive object, because female viewers can potentially become aligned with the passive *or* the active positions. Rosemary Betterton challenges the point that if female sexuality is catageiorised as 'spectacle for male pleasure… what kinds of pleasure are offered to women spectators within the forms of representation… which have been made mainly by men, for men?' (Betterton 1985: 4).

Mulvey's own later article 'After Thoughts On Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' (1981), also explored how protagonists can potentially shift from the role of passive femininity to regressive masculinity. Later studies, e.g. undertaken by Jackie Stacey, in declaring 'if feminist film criticism in the 1970s was characterised by debates about the male gaze, debates in the 1980s were characterized by their emphasis on female spectatorship' (Stacey 1994: 22).

longstanding set of cultural conventions and popular storytelling formats intrinsic to mainstream Anglo-American Hollywood cinema, to which the superhero-action film is also quite complicit. Yet Mulvey's analysis still proves essential for isolating the key sets of thematic qualities invested in the spectacle.

Neither can male 'screen surrogates' conventionally 'bear the burden' of sexual objectification, mainly because male spectators (i.e. heterosexual, cisgender) are unwilling to gaze at these hero protagonists in an exhibitionist manner (Mulvey [1975] 1985: 310). In this regard, the construction of masculinity adopted in action-adventure genres is arguably one of a 'self-restraint' flying in the face of self-indulgent exhibitionism. The male movie star, with his glamorous characteristics is wholly appropriate to the hero persona as 'extraordinary' from the ordinary (e.g. the statuesque attributes of chiseled chin, strong jaw, blue eyes, broad torso and shoulders, imposing muscular dimensions). Nonetheless, the objectification of these exceptional physiques is not intended to be explicitly eroticised for the fact that these traits become associated with the egotism of the spectator (himself), 'conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror'.[41] By contrast, this 'mirror' reflection of a de-erotised male heterosexual identity, when applied to the superheroine Elektra, instead results in a *struggle to redeem her own sense of self-autonomy,* unable to reconcile her narrative agency with the impact of erotic objectification (imposed on presentations of her physical prowess) in the same way.

To explain this above discrepancy between narrative agency, as masculine, and erotic objectification, as feminine, consider how the spectacular action sequences that carry the plot forwards in *Elektra* may well afford the heroine a high degree of physical strength, but only endows her with a markedly 'less pronounced' muscular density. In the next section I explore in more detail exactly how the female action body attempts to achieve a kind of 'muscular masculinity' to compensate for such anxieties of a supposedly diminished physical power and strength: building on what Yvonne Tasker has termed as a

[41] Mulvey's argument here draws on the work of Jacques Lacan, who placed psychoanalysis within a structuralist approach: 'She refers here particularly to Lacan's theory of 'the mirror phase' (Lacan 1977). Lacan offers an account of the unconscious origins of pleasure in identification… He describes how a child's initial recognition of itself as spectator from the external world, a subject, is a vital step in the condition. Lacan uses a mirror to illustrate his point, but the process might also occur in relation to the mother… The child's image 'reflected' back to itself is gratifying unified, yet the child is still physically uncoordinated. The sense of unity in the image is pleasing to the child since it does not experience a feeling in its own body. This initial recognition of self in an image is, then, simultaneously a misrecognition. Lacan argued that the child will continue to make such identifications as it grows up and that this is how the ego will be constituted' (Stacey 1994: 21-22).

state of 'musculinity'. Her bare flesh only shows slightly toned textures of muscle sinew on the arms, shoulders and stomach, which is usually assured by the contours of the armored suit (see analysis of *Watchmen*'s Ozymandias in chapter two). To be lacking in the muscular dimensions of the suit (alongside missing portions of an armoured costume) is to reveal a vulnerability that compromises traditional notions of agency afforded to the masculine superhero. By exposing ruptures in Elektra's armour, the firm textures meant to ward away emotional compromise actually become substituted for another set of traits: an accentuation of the tactility of her skin, the breathing in and out of the torso, the wetness of the tongue, etc. Elektra then, whenever exposed by this partial nudity operates with a compromised kind of professional discipline, an insufficient construction of self-sufficiency. There is a thematic balancing act at stake here, one between heroic 'activity' and non-heroic 'passivity', resulting in a masquerade of sorts tied to a feigned poise that adopts narrative agency so long as it resonates with a 'masculine essentialism', emulating what can be termed an androcentric masquerade.

(ii) An Androcentric Masquerade: Compensating for Tensions of *Norm/Other*, *Active/Passive*

This section outlines the term androcentrism as a paradigm of *male*-centeredness. This is because androcentrism provides a thematic impetus for many action-adventure film narratives, especially impacting upon the social value invested in superheroine protagonists. In confirming the wider cultural implications of this concept, it is true to say that:

> [Androcentrism] is the habit of viewing males and male experience as the norm for human behaviour. Females and female experience, when considered at all, are viewed as deviations or exceptions from the norm… Males are the *norm*; females are the "*other*"… [which] fits in with a patriarchal power structure, one in which males and their experience are privileged. Whereas patriarchy reveals who has the power, androcentrism reveals how that power is perpetrated psychologically and culturally [emphasis added] (Bastow 2001: 125-126).

The thematic impetus at the heart of androcentrism revolves around these tensions of a masculine *norm* and a feminine *other*. A binary logic is implicit in a 'masculinist Western society' that employs women as a means of representing some 'other' to which male subjectivity can be defined, in that if a fictional character were to stray too far outside acceptable norms, then this would directly threaten the established order with a series of impermissible transgressions (Taylor 2007: 353). Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*

(1949) was among the first feminist writers to make popular an argument that any value associated with the female gender and sexuality is not simply determined by biological, psychological or economic factors, but actually becomes manifest as a cultural product (de Beauvoir 1984 [1949]: 295). The designation of 'she', De Beauvoir explains, is 'defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other' (de Beauvoir 1984 [1949]: 16). Female characters serve many motivating functions in film narratives, following the myth that they are *devices which energise male agency*: being an idol for worship, the helpful servant, the power of darkness, artifice, gossip and falsehood, healing presence, sorceress, man's prey, his downfall, everything he is not yet longs for, his utter negation as well as ultimate *raison d'être* (de Beauvoir 1984 [1949]: 175). The *norm/other* binary, then, sets up the further binary of male as active and female as passive, and this androcentric paradigm and patriarchal consumer culture governs popular film genres, dominates the industry, and influences how films are produced to appeal to as wide an demographic audience as possible.

However, while the active and passive binary may be prevalent in most genres featuring a male protagonist and female love interest, Marc O'Day argues that action-adventure films led by heroine protagonists are able to blend functions of activity/passivity to an extent. The subject of the narrative (i.e. usually attributed to male characters) and the object of visual spectacle (i.e. that tend to be female characters, as they freeze the plot with erotic spectacle) can each be viewed as 'simultaneously active *and* passive, *both* in action and on display [emphasis added]' (O'Day 2004: 203-204). The conventionally masculine qualities of 'hardness, strength, muscles, activity, rationality, decisiveness and power', are reconciled with the contrary feminine traits of 'softness, weakness, curves, passivity, intuition, indecisiveness and powerlessness' (O'Day 2004: 202-203). This is because, O'Day declares, qualities of activity and passivity can also be physically 'traded' between action heroes and heroines. Consider for instance how the 1980s bodybuilder action heroes (e.g. performed by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone) express characteristics of being 'soft', 'vulnerable', 'weak', and so 'feminised' as part of the physical exertions of brawling and torture they must endure before defeating their respective antagonists (O'Day 2004: 203). Action heroines of the same period manage to combine femininity with an active masculine strength. This is evident with what Yvonne Tasker has termed to be a kind of 'musculinity', considered the enactment of a 'muscular masculinity' that depends

upon how physical power and strength are displayed through the female's body (Tasker 1998: 70). 'In order to function effectively within the threatening, macho world of the action picture,' Tasker affirms, 'the action heroine must be masculinised. The masculinisation of the female body, which is effected most visibly through her muscles,' allow 'the qualities associated with masculinity… [to be] written over the muscular female body' (Tasker 1993: 149), evident with Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in the *Alien Quadtrilogy* (1979-1997).

Yet while O'Day suggests this 'trading' between hero/ines is beneficial to the agency of the female hero, it also brings to mind other cultural tensions that complicate her engendered identity in a negative light. Indeed to show too much strength, determination and physical toil, while appropriate to tropes of masculinist heroism, is to nonetheless mark these heroines as somehow 'unfeminine' (Tasker 1998: 69). It is important to reiterate that these bodies are not simply men-in-drag, but still marked 'as women', discernable from their male counterparts (Tasker 1993: 149). Also, much of the musculinity of heroines such as Ripley or Connor is still invested with themes tied to motherhood, or indirectly linked to notions of the maternal alongside patriarchal authority that deals out action and destruction (Tasker 1998: 70-71). In this respect, O'Day concedes that regardless of appeasing a 'young adult cross-gender audience', or providing exhilarating set pieces that conform to established genre formulas, the action heroine can never be too violent so as to cause enough offense to upset hetero-normative expectations: highlighting an ongoing balancing act that plays with femininity under the false pretense of a *masquerade* (O'Day 2004: 209-210).

O'Day's insights on the heroine as trading traits with the male hero – in effect, undergoing a 'masquerade' of sorts – are key in understanding just how the superheroine attempts to juggle her own dueling values of (masculinist) activity against (feminised) passivity, as well as the attempts of reconciling (male codes of) *physical prowess* with (female codes of) *sex appeal*, a binary which will be explored in more detail in the next section. In a general sense, the term masquerade suggests the wearing of a disguise, and feminist film theorists have developed the concept to explain those performances by women who desire to emulate the sense of authoritative self-autonomy usually afforded by a patriarchal societal order. The very act of a masquerade, according to psychologist Joan Rivière, is driven by the 'wish' for more 'active' traits associated with masculinity, such as seeking and receiving recognition for personal talent, accomplishments or intelligence,

achievable by putting on a 'mask' of womanliness to 'avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men' (Rivière 1929: 35), hiding the rivalry and prejudices these women face in competing for power with their male counterparts.

The action heroine is similarly placed in such a position of masquerade, posing as an 'active' subject that heads the narrative, becoming aligned with a conventional template of self-autonomous masculine heroism. Yet she is also required to still retain a degree of her feminine body and behaviour, which carries values that are considered 'other' to an active agent: as an erotised object that freezes the plotting with the spectacle of her sexual appeal. Deemed 'passive' to the action, this brings to the fore associations of more catalytic roles such as damsel in need of rescue from peril, or the love interest that must be won over. Hence, this conception of masquerade is decidedly an androcentric one, in that the pretence disguises values of normality (i.e. as closely interwoven with notions of manhood), while deflecting a contrary sense of otherness (i.e. tied to representations of the feminine).

By attempting to distance femininity from conventional expectations of passivity and hysteria, and moving it closer to an ideal of physical strength, Tasker argues that the female action hero offers up a fantasy through 'narratives that repeatedly seek to explain her (and to explain her away)' (Tasker 1998: 69). This process is achieved by carefully balancing a heroine's physical prowess with sex appeal, as well as her apparent stoic self-restraint against instinctive outbursts of emotional excess. These heroines are capable and professional, decisive and focused. However, the narratives of these films will also present the female action hero as somehow *less* rational than their male counterparts, perhaps 'under the sway of an instinctive, irrepressible maternal drive or the hysteria of a mentally strained mind' (Purse 2011: 77).

In respect to the action heroine there is a 'persistent tendency to downplay' the implications of physical violence, the repercussions of feeling pain, and the impact of 'appearance-warping injuries' such as swellings and broken bones (Purse 2011: 81). The exertions of the male body will reveal 'sweat, become bloodied, will grunt, will contort his face in the moment of exertion, veins popping, face red… unflappable, but permitted to sweat, stein, and be bloodied as he engages in combat' (Purse 2011: 81). However, whenever the exposed portions of flesh attributed to the semi-naked armoured body of Elektra take a direct blow, no noticeable bruises or scars will be present. This censoring of any referents of physical action assures notions of implausibly for the viewer by reiterating that the heroine is *lacking* in any noticeable injury.

Consider that even the invulnerable Superman who shows minimal physical injury whenever smashing through solid buildings and into the earth's crust will still draw some blood after being stabbed with a shard of kryptonite by Lex Luthor in *Superman Returns*. This is rarely the case with the superheroine however. This presentation of women seems to stand up as a *sanitised version* of female physicality, a purification process that somehow omits any explicit 'biological and psychological realities of physical exertion, stress and violence' (Purse 2011: 85). Indeed, when Invisible Woman in *Fantastic Four* overexerted herself to contain the villain (i.e. by using her powers of force-field generation) a small droplet of blood ran down from her nose, yet there was no apparent physical impact that caused this, and the red streak did not spread any further, which then disappeared from view entirely. This mode of presentation in many ways invokes more ladylike postures, favouring 'perspiration' rather than sweating, 'sighing' as opposed to grunting, or sitting with 'legs closed' rather than wide open, all the while maintaining a consistency of 'perfect hair and make-up' (Purse 2011: 82). Those superhero films with a restricted age rating will of course often show explicit violence enacted against the heroines (e.g. such as when Silk Spectre is kicked in the stomach, smashing her head into a set of concrete stairs in *Watchmen*; or as Boltie's head is blown apart in *Super*, showing exposed brain tissue and skull fragments), but in the family-based demographic to which the majority of these films belong, this kind of brutal imagery is usually never permitted.

There is a *preservation* at work in presenting action heroines in this way, which reaffirms 'the woman's status as sexual object in spite of the action' by consistently managing the image so that she can properly 'retain her erotic appeal' (Purse 2011: 82). The superheroine's own masquerade of a masculinist physical aggression (i.e. as a protagonist than can give-and-take physical exertion for purposes of furthering along the narrative progression) closely follows the same beats and rhythms of the male hero, but it will simply not permit the same level of visceral savagery, or else risk destabilising the integrity of those tropes that code her as 'feminine'. Much of this beautification is almost always in some respect tied to sexual desirability, which in turn introduces an aspect of passivity (in being the 'object of the look'). Both male and female superheroes can potentially become sexualised, even when engaged in violence, but the superheroine does not benefit from the same protective layer of armoured textures as male heroes: inexorably displayed as far more vulnerable, which arguably compromises her ability to properly repress and channel an inner emotional excess (explored later in section (iv)). The implications of age certification also apply here, in that family-friendly PG-13 treatments

of the superheroine (e.g. *Elektra*, Invisible Woman in *Fantastic Four*, *Catwoman*, Black Widow in *Avengers Assemble*) are more likely to preserve a traditional feminine erotic appeal, whereas less commercially viable age-restricted 18+ certificates (Hit-Girl in *Kick Ass*, Boltie in *Super*) are not as likely to do so, instead subverting these norms in a potentially more offensive fashion than family-based sensibilities are prepared to accept, which is an idea that will be explored later in the chapter.

This idea of preserving a (feminised) erotic appeal is useful when applied to the superheroine in that, even when superheroines are not directly objectified, they often play the role of catalyst rather than an agent in their own right, with this hindering of the action tied up in their sexualised value, often accentuated whenever positioned as a 'damsel' in need of rescue, or the love-interest that asks for erotic validation. To show these ideas of sexual preservation in action, this is particularly the case for those superheroines that take on the role of 'sidekick' as opposed to lead protagonist, and an analysis in section (v) will examine these figures in detail at the level of their physical movements, as well as the editing, shot composition and aural punctuation presenting this motion. Before undertaking this analysis however, an androcentric masquerade reveals more useful insights into the predominantly heterosexual male paradigms invested in the designs of these superheroine bodies. Among these insights is another key thematic tension that emerges in the spectacle presenting superheroines: the cultural contradiction of 'physical prowess' versus 'sex appeal'.

(iii) Aspirations of *Physical Prowess / Sex Appeal*: Superheroines and The Male Gaze

After having introduced the distinction between narrative agency and erotic objectification, this section explains in more detail exactly how the female sexuality of superheroines is put out on display by the spectacle: invoking a key thematic dichotomy. Whenever spectacular displays present any sense of 'power' invested in a superheroine's female sexuality there are two aspects to this process. Firstly, there is the *physical prowess* of these heroes that confirms their status as freethinking agents able to drive the narrative. Secondly this physical prowess is invariably weighed up against a value of *sex appeal* that instead aims to suspend the narrative. Richard Gray suggests that female sexuality has always been expected to incite a degree of erotic spectacle (e.g. if intended to lure the predominant Blockbuster movie demographic of adolescent heterosexual males), but paradoxically that same convention of sexual impact is also assumed to support a wider

compelling plot and story. There is 'a delicate balance' at stake here, requiring constant maintenance of the self-autonomy afforded by the superheroine's physical strength on the one hand, and the impact of her sex appeal on the other (Gray 2011: 81). Gray states that this balancing act between the heroine's dual role as an agent that supports the plotting as well as providing a performance of sexual titillation has so far been a commercially successful one. 'In the last decade,' Gray affirms, 'the superheroine offers [heterosexual] men a "best of both worlds" scenario: they possess both the physical ass-kicking strength and strong sexual attractiveness that men need in order to satisfy their "scopophilic drive" [the pleasure felt in sexualizing imagery of women]' (Gray 2011: 81). 'To achieve box office success', Stephanie Mencimer also agrees, 'the new action babes have to celebrate women's power without being so threatening that men would be afraid to sleep with the leading lady' (Mencimer 2001: 18).

However, while this formula is financially viable within the threshold of industry expectations, at a more critical level the majority of female hero protagonists are not simply presented in a way that reflects male desire, but as the *aspirational ideal* means of attracting men. This includes in-vogue fashions that dictate which body types, clothing designs or cosmetic styles are at any one time deemed to be the most effective in appealing to the sexual desires of a heterosexual male demographic. Although there is a degree of impressive power that idealised women characters such as Wonder Woman might wield over the male reader/viewer, this control is nonetheless an *artificial construction* created mostly by male writers and artists, thus 'attributed to woman by man himself' (Gray 2011: 79). Additionally in the comic-book industry illustrator Bart Sears points out how: 'You have to be careful not to draw them [superheroines] bloopy or dumpy, but at the same time, if you draw them too hard and chiseled, they start to look masculine, which is definitely not good' (Sears 1992: 38). It is this qualification of what is considered to be "not good" that affords an avenue of interrogation, raising the question: What are the differences in the audio-visual representation between the superhero/ine (and the underlying thematic significance) that divides a balance of *narrative agency/erotic objectification*?

At the heart of these concerns lies an apparent eroticised *voluptuousness*, which it would seem provides the 'standard' that heroines can be measured against (Taylor 2007: 353). This is because if female musculature were to 'drift [too far] out of difference… [then it would cease] to be a radically different female body, [so morphing] into an unsettling sameness, a body that seems no different from a 'male' body' (Schulze 1990:

78). Compare for example the typical marketing strategies applied to present male superheroes, with their outstretched arms as though giving a celebratory salute to the self-determined power of masculine action (Figure 4.2) against the voluptuous curvature of thighs-and-chest of the superheroine silhouette that promises sexual attraction (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.2 Marketing posters show an omnipotent phallic arm of the male superhero. From left to right: *Superman Returns* (2006), *Spider-Man* (2002), *Green Lantern* (2011), *Thor* (2011) and *Batman Begins* (2005).

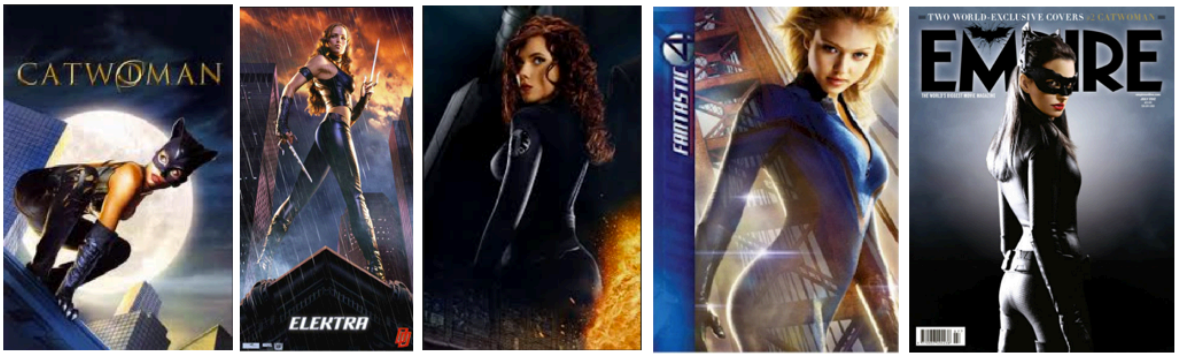

Figure 4.3 Marketing posters show off voluptuous curvature of the female superhero silhouette. From left to right: *Catwoman* (2003), Elektra in *Daredevil* (2003), Black Widow in *Iron Man 2* (2010), Invisible Girl in *Fantastic Four* (2005) and Catwoman in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012).

What such action film and comic-book genre conventions collectively suggest, Mencimer also points out, is that the target male audiences of these popular cultural products are reticent to follow heroines who are *too* violent, *too* tough or, in effect, somehow considered *too* 'masculine' (Mencimer 2001, taken from Gray 2011: 77). Yvonne Tasker also suggests that if male heroes compensate for their sexual presentation by reiterating their activity in the narrative, then heroines appear to compensate (in an apologetic fashion) for their own activity by instead over-emphasising an erotic appeal (Tasker 1993: 19). While there are examples that contradict this reasoning, such as the heroic stoicism of C.I.A. Agent Evelyn Salt (Angelina Jolie) in *Salt* (2010), ex-marine Mallory Kane in (Gina Carano) in *Haywire* (2011), and young assassin Hanna (Saoirse Ronan) in *Hanna* (2011) that each manage to deflect the sexual advances of other male characters and continue on their heroic mission, there are still action heroines in recent years, that, when placed in a

position of 'sidekick' to a larger ensemble continue to abide by Tasker's paradigm of apologizing for any self-determined autonomy by constantly drawing attention to their erotic potential. In *Red 2* (2013) for instance, the retired C.I.A. operative Frank (Bruce Willis) brushes off the advances of competing Russian spy Katya (Catherine Zeta-Jones) for the purposes of focusing on the mission at hand. Although the highly skilled Katya has her own agenda to fulfil, she mainly does achieve this feat by continually drawing the hero's attention to her seductive appeal which enables her to undertake her mission. In *Expendables 3* (2014), the sole female member of the mercenary group, Luna (Ronda Rousey), attempts to fulfil the same mission as her other teammates, but during one moment in the heat of battle she is propositioned by her fellow fighter Galgo (Antonio Banderas) who, by declaring his admiration for her beauty, manages to *mark* the character with an erotic appeal. Later in the chapter I give a detailed analysis of how the superheroine tries to fulfil her own narrative mission when continually faced with the prospect of being objectified as a sidekick to other male heroes.

For both the male and female superhero the balance between spectacle and narrative is always at work in the storytelling process, affording momentum to the causal chain of plot actions and events. Yet the superheroine is constantly faced with *juggling* this tension between her status as a narrative agent of physical power and a site of erotic impact. While superheroines drive narrative progression forwards (e.g. by using graceful fighting choreography), at times this activity ceases: instead emphasising the immediacy of their physical contours, posture and gestures, in the fashion of an *objet de désir*, no longer an active agent but a passive figure of observation. Elektra does try to nullify bouts of sexual objectification through the skillful channeling of physical aggression in completing her mission. Such brief spectacles of sex appeal are initiated at a presentational level through close ups that fragment her body into parts, e.g. emphasising buttocks and cleavage. After these brief spectacles have passed, her influence as a leading protagonist can then once more contribute to plot progression. Yet, while Elektra's physical prowess and ability to drive the narrative is marred by a trait of naked*ness* that deviates away from the traditionally armoured male superhero archetype, the superheroine protagonist *Catwoman* leads the plot in a fashion that continues to exaggerate the tension between *physical prowess/sex appeal* even further: causing the rhythm of narrative action to often become completely broken by bouts of overt erotic spectacle.

Throughout *Catwoman*, the heroine uses enhanced abilities of superior agility, able to leap at great heights and lunge with extraordinary speed. When engaged in physical

combat with assailants, the editing style of the fighting is much the same as male superheroes, following the impact of fists that punch faces, and legs that collide with chests. There are often times, though, when this physical and filmic rhythm is interrupted. For instance, after the heroine's secret identity is revealed and she becomes arrested, Catwoman tries to escape incarceration from the county jail by squeezing though the bars of her prison cell, leaping out of a nearby window. The descent follows the same rhythms and themes as other male heroes, in that the gravity constrains her efforts, but a renewed ascent will allow her to continue her trajectory onto freedom (note the rhythm of *body/city* that unfolds in *Spider-Man 2*, explained in chapter two). Nevertheless this rhythmic arc is interrupted after landing on the ground level when a car screeches to a halt with the front bumper gently tapping into her thighs and buttocks. The shot is brief, but the immediacy of fragmenting this portion of her body with an extreme close up incites an erotic exhibitionism above other narrative or thematic concerns.

The emphasis of Catwoman's buttocks and thighs in the prison escape scene affords insights into how fragmenting the female body into a series of voluptuous 'parts' breaks the storytelling flow of the diegesis, so hindering her activity as a forward moving narrative agent. This *male gaze*, as Mulvey has argued on the subject of spectatorship, displays female characters as sexual objects through an erotic spectacle that plays to and signifies male desire (i.e. pinups to striptease) as she *holds* the look (Mulvey [1975] 1985: 309), so halting the action. 'For a moment', Muvley explains, 'the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the film into a no-man's-land outside its own time and space… [with] conventional close ups of legs… or a face… integrat[ing] into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the illusion of a depth demanded by the narrative; it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude [or life-like quality] to the screen' (Mulvey [1975] 1985: 309).

While Hollywood filmmaking practices attempt to be accessible to as wide a demographic as possible for purposes of commercial viability, the erotic spectacle of action films conventionally tend to favour a style that promotes a heterosexual male perspective, which has implications on the audio-visual rhythms presented onscreen. The eroticised female character is essential to offering a form of spectacle in the film narrative, but 'her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be

integrated into cohesion with the narrative' (Mulvey [1975] 1985: 309).[42] The male gaze audio-visually manages how the female figure is presented, fulfilling an 'exhibitionist role', both 'simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for storing visual and erotic impact', otherwise known as a value of *to-be-looked-at-ness* (Mulvey [1975] 1985: 309). There is a split of sorts, Mulvey proposes, between the spectacle of erotic voyeurism (of the female form), and narrative driven by the protagonist's role as an active agent who moves plot actions and events forward, made possible 'by structuring the film around a main [male] controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify' (Mulvey [1975] 1985: 310).

When the male gaze is applied to classical continuity editing schemes, the camera will adhere to the same point-of-view shots as though from the eye-line match of male characters onscreen, who look with desire in the direction of the female characters, which is subsequently accentuated by the consistency of shot/reverse-shot cutting techniques (Stacey 1994: 20-21). In *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2013) for instance, after a training session the heroine Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) stands in a lift with two male colleagues and another female contestant while preparing for the battle royal ahead. The other woman, seeking to impose her sexuality in this small space undresses in front of the others: prompting Katniss to look away disparagingly, while the two men look on with desire. The camerawork cuts from her naked back in the foreground with the ogling men in the mid-ground to a close up of her front upper body with the cleavage just out of frame, then to a close up of each man's aroused expression, then back to a close up of her front face and torso as she pulls down more clothing just out of frame below. Much of this camerawork is dominated by the men's perspective, because as they look increasingly aroused this prompts the filming to continue to cut to and frame the focus of their arousal. In this respect it is the men's sexual excitement as onlookers that gives energy to the cutting and framing. Each of the male character's motivation to watch this spectacle in turn motivates the pattern the camerawork takes, and incites the divide between sexual desire as

[42] In terms of spectatorship Muvley does also point out that with regards to the showgirl trope, this process does differ in driving forward the narrative causality: 'Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the onscreen story, and as erotic for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. The device of the showgirl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis. A woman performs within the narrative, the gazer of the spectator and that of the male in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude' (Mulvey [1975] 1985: 309).

either active (e.g. men prompting the act of looking) or passive (e.g. women as complicit with the act of being being-looked-at). This imbalance between sexual objectification (connoted to female characters), and the pleasure in looking (tied to male characters) forms a division in the narrative structure, again invoking a thematic dialectic between masculinity as 'active' and femininity as somehow 'passive' (Mulvey [1975] 1985: 309). However, O'Day states that although Muvley might link 'the physical beauty and alluring sexuality of the female stars' to the value of vulnerability and erotic appeasement, this value of erotica can nonetheless provide 'a source of active feminine strength, and one by which heterosexual men in particular are all too easily seduced' (O'Day 2004: 205), which helps to blur the boundary between active-male/passive-female.

Katniss nonetheless still stands as the main protagonist hero and so an agent of narrative activity, fulfilling the role of a screen surrogate rather than an erotic object. Katniss is not sexualised herself in the lift because the editing between each man's expressions of pleasure at the woman's off-screen disrobing refracts the male gaze away from Katniss onto this other promiscuous female contestant. This gives distance and does not mark Katniss as an eroticised object, benefitting her heroic characterisation of self-control that ignores and avoids emotional excess. Yet without the promise of nudity offered by some other female contestant Katniss would potentially then bear much of the burden of this gaze herself. In applying this analysis of the promiscuous contestant in *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* to *Catwoman*, the heroine is often presented through close-ups of breasts and thighs, which reveals a similar degree of exhibitionism and *self-gratified promiscuity*. By this I mean that she takes an over-indulgent enjoyment in flamboyantly presenting her body, which (as stated in section (iii) in the thesis introduction) is considered decidedly too unrestrained and undisciplined for the westerner protagonist archetype, who must always undergo a concerted effort to check self-preening and quell such exhibitionism (Mitchell 2001: 179), and never be driven by an 'inability to maintain composure under the pressure of vivid sensation' (Mitchell 2001: 179). Catwoman indulges her tactile sadism with the henchmen to the point that she hinders any performance of stoic heroism (i.e. that Katniss achieves), so compromising the heroine's self-discipline in a problematic way, which is an issue that will be explored further in the next section. The male gaze then, offers a useful template to work with in critically interrogating the androcentric paradigms invested in the spectacle and performances of superheroines.

It should again be pointed out here that this chapter is not a study in spectatorship that develops either the male gaze according to Mulvey, or the female gaze in the work of Jackie Stacey to audience reception. Rather, my approach is a textual analysis that deals with the way the formal strategies presenting superheroines work to interrupt the display of their physical rhythms, so hindering the expression of themes of heroism these bodies invoke. This is especially the case when compared to the way this process unfolds with the male superhero's physical spectacle and performance techniques (the conventions of which are discussed across the prior three chapters). This chapter observes the way that the superheroine is represented on screen, in how she looks and acts, but does not aim to provide confirmation of how a group of spectators are processing this information. I instead focus on the how editing schemes have the potential to audio-visually fragment the superheroine, reducing her right down to the spectacle of an eroticised body, employing close up shots of portions of legs, lips or cleavage to do so. I also explore how other elements of camerawork and shot compositions then further highlight the female silhouette of voluptuous curves to the point that this body is required to remain still, ceasing the evolving thematic rhythms at stake due to what I term to be the superheroine's 'compromised armour'.

(vi) Compromised Armour: Balancing The Spectrum of *Self-Restraint / Emotional Excess*

In continuing to build on my earlier analysis of *Elektra*, notice how the stoic performance of this superheroine differs when compared to *Catwoman*, which I argue sets up a spectrum. This spectrum emerges in how, although these are both armoured bodies, Catwoman noticeably shows far more portions of flesh than Elektra. Catwoman indeed has a higher proportion of exposed skin than most archetypical male superheroes (i.e. Batman, Spiderman). By baring more flesh, I propose that this spectacle works to compromise Catwoman's rhythms of heroism that are necessary for driving the storytelling forward. This is because by projecting a pronounced spectacle of erotic associations Catwoman's active agency as a disciplined heroine 'passively' gives into the kinds of emotional excess usually reserved for anti-heroes (e.g. *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, *The Incredible Hulk*; see chapter two) and sadistic villains. Elektra however does not expose the same amount of naked skin, and so avoids compromising the rhythm of her heroism to the same extent: resulting in her being a far more effective, active agent that developmentally drives the narrative forward.

On one side of the spectrum rests the armoured Elektra, and the standard of disciplined heroism she abides by. Catwoman does conform to these same established sets of genre standards, and in keeping to these tropes acts as an active agent able to drive the narrative. Catwoman, much like Elektra, is a morally-sanctioned hero (i.e. driven by the goal of bringing down a corrupt beauty products company that aims to make a fortune by selling defective goods that deform the wearer). She is also equally as proficiently skilled in terms of her physical prowess as Elektra (i.e. cracking a whip across large spaces to incapacitate multiple henchmen with ease, lunging with kicks and jabs that confirm her precision). Also pertinent here is my argument stated in the third chapter that there is a masculinist (or androcentric) rhetoric invested in rhythms of heroism: tending to glorify and code professionalism as 'male'. This is because classical Hollywood storytelling (e.g. in the Western, gangster film) portrays violence and toughness as closely associated with the domain of heroic masculine action, revolving around the question of whether a man can successfully employ a professional application of these traits, e.g. through virtues of manhood, courage, valour and self-determination. Within the confines of this androcentric paradigm, to not behave as a man is to 'resist' channeling violence in an appropriate fashion, and both Elektra and Catwoman, with their precise, linear rhythms, do manage to adhere to this convention.

Yet, on the other side of the spectrum, the semi-armoured Catwoman also often leans more towards notions of self-indulgence than Elektra, and so abides by a convention of 'non-dominant' and very 'non-masculine' behaviour (i.e. again an erstwhile trope of Western-action genres). *Catwoman* is of course more aligned with a comedic tone, playfully reworking the conventions of a dominatrix figure while invoking a degree of escapist absurdity to the superhero genre: but it is for this very reason that she provides the other most extreme end of a spectrum between the chivalrous self-restraint of Elektra and Catwoman's own excessive indulgence. In the final section of the chapter, the parodic figure of Hitgirl from *Kick Ass* will be closely analysed to explore just how far staple conventions of heroism can continue to be subverted as a way of transgressing altogether the simplified model of agency afforded to a female 'dominatrix' archetype bent on emotional excess. Unlike Elektra's professional assassin persona, Catwoman invokes the idea of a dominatrix addicted to pain infliction and swayed by emotional excesses. Although Catwoman channels her superhuman abilities with controlled precision, she is still frequently tempted by compulsions of self-indulgence that give into erratic motions able to intermittently eclipse the core heroic tenets of self-restrained disciple and self-

sufficiency. Catwoman is therefore always in danger of almost forsaking her performance of professionalism for one of an overzealous exhibitionism, especially whenever harming others. There are also times when she gives into the temptation of an excessive 'self-preening' admiration and sex-appeal: a factor that would comprise the classic Western and action hero's display of manly restraint. This erotic exhibitionism is akin to a self-indulgent pleasure taken in her provocative behaviour when interacting with other characters, such as whilst interrogating a henchman by suddenly leaping onto his lap, stroking his cheek and then with a jerking swipe scratches deep into his face, which nullifies her state of self-control so essential for heroism (see Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4

Catwoman veers away from heroic rhythms whenever betraying mannerisms of pleasure, with a smirk erupting from the corner of her mouth, which is intolerable for the statuesque, monolithic iconography of masked heroes such as Superman, Spiderman or Batman. Unlike these archetypical male superhero protagonists, Catwoman shows great enjoyment in harming assailants, often getting close to their faces, moving a finger down their checks in a tactile and intimate fashion in anticipation of inflicting injury. Her use of the whip is an extension of this performance, complete with the leather costume, confirming her persona as one of a dominating sadist whose violence is heavily invested with notions of sexualised aggression. While any superhero can embrace a wilder, visceral or animalistic side to fuel their vigilantism, an eroticised type of impulse drives Catwoman, and in this

respect qualities of 'wildness' become eroticised in superheroines in a way that differs with the male superhero, being presented as somehow more unstable or uncontrollable.[43]

Where Catwoman differs most from Elektra, then, is in the explicit sex appeal invested in the structure of her spectacular violent action: prompting a *lapse* in her active agency with faltering facial and physical stoicism, and a *lack* of self-restraint when employing brutality, taking too much pleasure in harming others. These factors combine together to compromise her ability of channeling violent action in a fashion considered appropriate to heroes. As a result, her activity as a disciplined narrative agent temporarily becomes passive, giving into the temptation of inner emotional excesses. As the spectacle of this sexualised display narrows down the focus of the action to the visual elements of cleavage, thighs and buttocks, it is this fragmentation of the heroine's individual body parts that arguably dominates much of camerawork and cutting, emphasising her feminine sex appeal as the most important focal point of attention, rather than the progression of intricacies of plotting, or the development of key themes. Consider how, when attempting to steal gems from a jewellery store the heroine clashes with two thieves already in the midst of a heist, leaping around the room. At first this kinetic arc tells a fundamental thematic tale that develops cultural values of a glorified professionalism invested in her balletic physical rhythms versus a condemnable lack of professionalism invoked by the spasmodic mannerisms of the thieves. She shows grace in incapacitating these thugs, and the camera moves closely with her physical leaps as she runs along the wall, following her precise lunges and jabs at the two men. The thugs by comparison are more erratic, awkwardly throwing their fists with lackluster gunfire: conforming to a spasmodic set of rhythms typical of sadistic antagonists that completes the play off of values making up the tale of *glorified/condemned* violence. Up to this point the evolving kinetic arc of this thematic tale is uninterrupted.

Nonetheless there are moments during this action sequence in which the spectacle dwells on sexualised displays that soon interrupt her graceful rhythms and so compromise the flow of the thematic storytelling arc of *glorified/condemned* violence. As she takes increasing pleasure and shows arousal in inflicting brutality her balleticism becomes increasingly sullied, confusing the dynamic balance of thematic tensions. For example, later in the action the violence is effective, but in no way efficient, prolonging the pain to

[43] Racial differences are also significant here, in relation to the normative white, heterosexual, middle class, conservative male that seems to equate African American heroes with an exoticised, mystical 'otherness', akin to an animalistic status, note the vampire *Blade* (1998) or the demon *Spawn* (1996), or tribal king *Black Panther* (2017).

indulge in this harm and injury, which are methods akin to that of a dominatrix: all the while struggling to control the impulses of her wilder, savage nature. The cutting and close ups that fragment Catwoman's physical proportions also starkly mark her with notions of the erotic. Whenever lunging towards the thieves various close ups of buttocks and breasts occur, reducing this body to an eroticised 'object': compromising her status as an active agent and so briefly suspending the evolving narrative and thematic action. This value of erotica also extends into the spectacle of her fighting. Whilst incapacitating one of the thieves she does not achieve this attack with a clean strike but by grabbing a clump of his hair. Neither does she finish the attack with a single takedown but by pulling him along as she slowly walks around the room. Nor does she use a gesture of firm-jawed stoicism, but bears her teeth in a mocking smile and only then giving a sharp kick to the face to complete the takedown. Here, the perverse enjoyment of pain infliction momentarily allows the theme of self-indulgence to prevail over the theme of self-restraint, compromising her thematic tale of heroism.

By veering too far from the realm of self-restraint, then, this emotional excess forms the other end of an androcentric spectrum to which superheroines can be placed. When Catwoman deals out acts of brutality channeled by self-restraint she conforms to the androcentric standard of professional heroism. However, whenever passively giving into temptations of emotional excess, sex appeal or feeding an addiction to the perverse enjoyment of savage antics, the androcentric paradigm marks her as unprofessional: it is only after regaining a degree of discipline that her narrative themes of heroism can continue to be active.

Like Catwoman, the spectacle that presents other superheroines also leans towards the 'over-emotional' end of the spectrum, because their superpowers have some interruptive kind of instability that impact on displays of heroism. In *X-Men: Last Stand* (2007) Storm's (Halle Berry) power of manipulation over the weather requires great concentration, as does Jean Grey's (Famke Janssen) telekinesis and telepathy. However, Storm often gives into her emotions, such as feeling despair at the trials facing her team, and a thunderstorm will threaten on the horizon. Jean Grey also looses control over her evolved cognition, transforming into the maniacal persona 'Phoenix' that tears apart entire environments on a whim. The same can be said for Liz (Selma Blair) in *Hellboy* whose ability to create fire and enflame large spaces instantly is often erratic as she not yet in complete control over these abilities. The theme of sex appeal is also associated with this emotional instability. Many superheroine super-human abilities conform to traditional

conventions of what is deemed to be 'female power', e.g. abilities of manipulation, the masquerade of sexuality, so matching the provocative leather jumpsuits and wigs that comprise their costumes (Lindsey 1996: 288, extracted from Gray 2011). Several of these powers tend to be an extension of the 'accentuation of physical elements' or a 'stylised position' of the idealised female form, achievable by voyeuristic shots that make emphatic the breasts, legs and hair (Gray 2011: 83).

Any spectacle of sexualised display depends upon freezing the narrative action, and it is this interruption that compromises thematic rhythms of heroism. Catwoman often gives into the passivity of sex appeal imposed by the male gaze, but can evade this interruption through consistently generating precise rhythms and impressive feats of physical prowess channeled by self-control. Elektra also compensates with a consistent combination of physical prowess and stone-faced reserve. An imposition of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' can interfere with Elektra's activity, but whenever the cutting and framing does not fetishize her body by reducing it down to a series of fragmented parts the spectacle then continues to drive forward her thematic rhythms of heroism. In this way Elektra's self-restraint refrains from sexualised displays more often, and this situates her much closer to the traditional archetypal (male) active narrative agent. Most importantly, the Elektra/Catwoman distinction brings to mind another binary between a *preferably active* kind of heroism, invoking the *pro*activity of 'male' self-restraint and physical agency against an *unacceptably passive* type of heroism, inciting the *react*ivity of 'feminised' codes of emotional excess and erotic distraction. The way this process works through the narrativised spectacle will now be explored through an analysis of more recent superheroines of the film cycle.

(v) *Rhythmic Proaction and Reaction*: The Spectacular Violence of (Sidekick) Superheroines

Currently, while there are several action-adventure narratives helmed by action heroines, there are only a few contemporary superhero films in which the lead protagonist is female (i.e. *Elektra*, *Catwoman*).[44] The majority of other female characters are actually relegated

[44] There are those critics (Gray 2011) that would include the comic-book action heroine *Æon Flux* (2005), but the narrative and thematic criteria do not strictly abide by the superhero formula (e.g. in terms of the trope of vigilante alter-ego/civilian persona). Among the earliest superheroine productions include the *Wonder Woman* television series (1975-1979), *Supergirl* (1984). Both the *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Captain Marvel* (2016) movies, when released, will also feature their own leads. For the moment however, superheroines predominately follow the convention of playing a sidekick role to the protagonist and/or supporting a larger ensemble group, e.g. such as

to the role of sidekick, playing a *supportive* role to a primary (male) hero figure, or tend to form part of a wider team and/or family of (masculinised) vigilantes. The sidekick superheroine exemplifies the role of masquerade almost every female character plays in action-adventure genre formats. The sidekick is an active character, with her own self-autonomy in the narrative that often takes the reins from the lead hero, but also she is also quite passive, compliant with the agency afforded to male protagonists.

An androcentric imperative resonates in the actions and behaviour of these superheroines, in that they often have to save the male hero from harm, but are still – especially during the climatic events of narrative causality – placed in a position of damsel-in-distress, requiring a timely rescue herself (note how in *Kick Ass* Hit-Girl saves both male heroes Kick Ass and Big Daddy from mobsters, but later needs to be saved from harm by Kick Ass when she is cornered by the same group of gangsters, which will be discussed in detail later). The sidekick superheroine is often more capable than the male hero, appearing most physically strong and highly professional when the male protagonist is at his weakest and emotionally unstable (e.g. the enthusiastic, but 'mentally-unhinged' sidekick 'Boltie' collects herself to mentor the male hero Crimson Bolt whenever he becomes disillusioned with his own crime-fighting mission in *Super*). She will also, however, give into her own temptations of hysteria, to which the male hero can impose a sense of rational self-determination (e.g. Crimson Bolt often needs to tell Boltie to curb her overzealous attitude when harming criminals). The superheroine sidekick is an agent in the narrative, driving events forward, and will often mock the hero's own lack of (masculine) self-sufficiency, in as much as she is the catalyst that causes this very lack of restraint (becoming the damsel), prompting an impetus to refine his heroism. She does perform impressive feats of heroism, showing vigour and courage, putting the tenets of the hero's own manhood to shame, yet, she is also a site of eroticised spectacle, and the impact of this promiscuity is displayed as an object for the hero's desire that again threatens to freeze the narrative to a point, halting his agency along with it.

I propose that what emerges in this dialectic above is a conflict between the values of 'pro-activity' and 're-activity', and this is important for analysing how the superheroine generates narrativised spectacle. Both superheroes and superheroines effectively tell the same thematic tale of narrativised spectacle that works alongside the primary plot chain of narrative causality: generated by and evolving a professional set of rhythms (the actions of

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Invisible Women in *Fantastic Four*, Silk Spectre in *Watchmen*, Black Widow in *Avengers Assemble*, and Hit Girl to Big Daddy/Kick Ass in *Kick Ass*.

precision and impressive grace) that face off the sadism of antagonists (the erratic, spasmodic convulsions resultant of an irrational lack of professionalism). Yet the thematic, kinetic and rhythmic arc of the superheroine, more often than her male counterpart, is interrupted whenever the heroine's sex appeal eclipses her physical prowess, through fragmented shots of eroticised body parts, or giving into self-indulgent enjoyment at pain infliction and emotional instability. When this sexualised display does happen, then her rhythms of heroism are compromised, and the thematic tale along with it. To compensate for these interruptions an androcentric masquerade of heroism unfolds in the physical antics performed by these heroine sidekicks. The androcentric masquerade enables these superheroines as capable, active (masculinised) agents as much as it then checks these male-centric qualities so as not to compromise any traits deemed to 'belong' to females: also constraining these heroines as inept, passive (feminised) objects of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' in the spectacle.

An analytical comparison between the superheroines 'Black Widow' and 'Hit Girl' best exemplify these tensions in action, in the way they employ rhythms of linear precision and graceful balleticism that, while invoke a theme of professionalism, become more frequently hindered or interrupted by bouts of erotic objectification than their male superhero equivalents. These interruptions, as shall now be shown, work to halt the momentum of the narrativised spectacle generated by the heroines, causing their heroic rhythms to become imprecise and undisciplined for purposes of preserving some feminine code of passivity.

Black Widow: Carefully Carrying The Burden of Androcentrism

The superheroine Black Widow (Scarlet Johansen) is a key case in point for my argument of androcentrism, enlisted to fight alongside a collection of other heroes, all of which are male, i.e. *Iron Man*/Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.), *Thor* (Chris Hemsworth) and *The Incredible Hulk*/Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo), as well as other men throughout the *Avengers* film series (Captain America, Hawkeye, Nick Fury and Falcon).[45] Often adopting a civilian alter-ego (e.g. Natalie Rushman and/or Natalia Romanov), but trained as a spy with her own leather-suited, vigilante persona 'Black Widow,' she is iconic of the deadly species of spider that shows an initial quality of kindness to those close to her,

[45] The character has long been rumored to be placed as a protagonist in her own film production, but this has currently (circa 2014-2015) been cancelled, relegating Black Widow to continue playing supporting roles to other ensembles (i.e. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* in 2015).

which can quickly turn to ruthless aggression. Black Widow's superior physical skills and intellect are balanced with an array of specialist martial arts techniques and interrogation practices. Although not endowed with superhuman powers, she nonetheless possesses a similar set of extraordinary abilities on par with the crime-fighters Batman in *The Dark Knight Trilogy* (2005-2012), Rorschach and Nite Owl in *Watchmen* (2009), or the hero protagonists of *Kick Ass* (2010) and *Dredd* (2012). Throughout her appearance across the *Avengers* films Black Widow employs physical aggression by enacting the same sets of rhythms as her male teammates, so carrying similar thematic values invested in these violent acts. Her status as a sidekick heroine, however, works to interrupt these heroic rhythms in each film text in ways that her male counterparts do not experience.

Black Widow's introduction to the *Avenger* film series in *Iron Man 2* (2010) is under the cover of her civilian alias, lawyer Natalie Rushman, when she climbs into a boxing ring to spar with a bodyguard. Under the guise of a job application for Tony Stark's legal team (but to covertly gain Intel on his future intentions and psychological disposition as the mechanised vigilante Iron Man), the eccentric Stark takes the interview in his gym, looking at her file, while demanding she prove her alleged fighting abilities for his amusement. Observing from the stands below, the viewer's attention is drawn immediately to Stark's gaze, valuing Black Widow's heroic potential, but as an *erotic promise*. Flicking through Black Widow's resume, Stark lists out the several languages she can speak, her intellectual capacity, and her professional achievements, but soon happens across a series of modeling photographs in a lingerie shoot. The moment is brief, but Stark's admiration of her professional capabilities is closely interwoven with a sexual value, and this affects the rhythms of editing and physical motion to follow.

As Stark looks up from his seat, his bodyguard ringside attempts to sucker punch Widow, who in a quick, fluid, graceful motion grabs his arm, twists around his torso and brings him firmly down to the ground with a heavy thud, incapacitating him entirely. This swift violent motion carries with it the same thematic properties so integral to masculine heroism (summarised in chapter three), namely stoicism, self-control, precision, neatness, efficiency, and no outward enjoyment in carrying out this brief, necessary, and sanctioned act of pure self-defense. Yet it is the bout of sex appeal appearing before this display of physical prowess whilst Stark admires her body which stands as an interruptive patriarchal approval.

Although Widow conforms to heroic rhythms coded as masculine physical prowess, the initial eroticisation of her body assures she is marked with a conventionally

feminine code of sex appeal beforehand. It is only after being marked with '*non*-masculine' virtues (e.g. self-indulgent expression of one's physical desirability) that a fluidity of more 'masculinist' virtues is allowed to come through. In this respect, it is the brief shot of the male gaze at the photographs of her semi-naked posing that brings to mind what Lee Clark Mitchel has termed as a self-indulgent kind of expression that comprises the male hero's ability to channel violence in an 'appropriate manner' (as discussed in the thesis introduction). While much of Widow's stoicism seems to be tied to her eroticisation, in her putting up with sexual approaches in order to get her mission done, she is nonetheless complicit in this patriarchal system: using her lingerie shoot as a form of impressive sex appeal that would compromise the stoicism performed by an archetypical masculinist westerner hero such as Clint Eastwood, John Wayne, Sylvester Stallone or Bruce Willis. While these men may take their shirts off and bare their torsos in the midst of warfare or gunfire, it is not for the same seduction tactics employed by Widow, which in an androcentric paradigm devalues such a kind of stoicism against being objectified as an attractive or pleasure-inducing figure. Indeed, a part of Widow's power as an agent does come from catering to sexual desire as a seduction technique, and this affords her a sense of heroic agency, as O'Day has argued to be 'a source of active feminine strength' (see section iii). Yet if Stark were to continue dwelling on the spectacle of this eroticisation for too long it may threaten to encroach upon the fluidity of her physical rhythms of precision in the editing flow. The editing of the takedown in the ring would be interrupted by shots that keep returning back to a self-indulgent sexualised display of the photographs of Widow proudly showing off her semi-naked body, as well as Stark looking at these images with desire. Such a sexualised display would threaten to compromise her self-sufficient professionalism. In this brief moment of sex appeal, then, a central binary opposition emerges that arguably resonates throughout the Widow's physical violent action across the *Avengers* film franchise: an antinomy of 'self-indulgence' versus 'self-sufficiency'.

The tensions described above equate an antinomy of *self-indulgence/self-sufficiency*, which becomes most apparent in terms of the explicit balletic and spasmodic physical rhythms that unfold during each of Widow's fighting sequencers. A narrativised spectacle of *self-indulgence/self-sufficiency* occurs later in *Iron Man 2* for example, when Widow and Stark's bodyguard are tasked with infiltrating a compound harbouring a maniacal terrorist, encountering a group of mercenaries on the way. A humorous element unfolds in each of the bodyguard's desperate attempts to take down a single mercenary, while Widow by contrast singlehandedly incapacitates dozens of men. The bodyguard

throws his punches in a haphazard hit-and-miss fashion at the lone mercenary, with the two men impacting against the surrounding terrain of desks and concrete pillars. The framing is close and the cutting is frenetic, emphasising the erratic nature of each failed punch and awkward jolt. Widow however is far more graceful by comparison, taking down one mercenary with a single carefully deployed jab, sliding along the floor to hit another in the crotch, then leaping upwards to grasp the arm of another. The motion is fluid, confident, and akin to an intricate dance. The gadgets she deploys are an extension of this choreography, with two small discs thrown simultaneously across the corridor to fall neatly next to two guards, electrocuting them and rendering them unconscious. Stretching a garrote wire, she capably wraps the cord around the neck of one man, while at the same time punching another, focusing by entwining the two and tying them up. The editing enhances this escalating sense of fluidity, shifting across each shot to the beat of every arm movement and each leg thrust, emphasising that each of these limbs have a specific self-sufficient purpose.

The fluid cutting of Widow's bout continually becomes juxtaposed with those shots that emphasis the bodyguard's now long-drawn out, incompetent spasms that try-and-try-again to take down his own opponent. Eventually biting the mercenary's ear, the bodyguard lands a final knockout blow, turning around exhausted, but taking self-indulgent pride in his work soon expresses shock and confusion at the long line of unconscious bodies dispatched by Widow in the corridor before him. The bodyguard's exhausted, red face is sweat-drenched, with a heaving and panting tongue that lends itself to notions of the same emotional excesses that damsels-in-distress project whenever taken hostage or anticipating rescue. Widow's performance throughout the action has been one of stone-faced resolve and a consistent, firmly-closed mouth that helps to confirm her restrained brand of heroism, e.g. invoking the paradigm of the conventionally masculine stoicism performed by such archetypical figures as Eastwood's 'Dirty' Harry Callaghan or Schwarzenegger's John Matrix in *Commando* (1985).

More importantly the bodyguard's erratic rhythms of ineptitude work as a source of humorous intrigue that not simply glorify Widow's linear, precise gestures as heroic, but show this heroism to be invested with what Purse states (in section (ii)) is a 'sanitised version' of appealing feminine physicality. As the bodyguard becomes increasingly injured and sweat-drenched this confirms the physics of his physical exertion and stress as hard won or a grueling feat. The graceful ease of Widow, on the other hand, neither bruised nor bloodied, although able to achieve the extraordinary feats of exertion that ordinary

individuals are unable to fulfil appears quite fantastical[46] when *consistently measured against the everyday man's physical strength and endurance*. The frequent shots of the bodyguard struggling against his sole mercenary opponent impose a series of interruptions to Widow's rhythms in the spectacle: confirming her violent action as a masquerade that matches and aims to excel beyond a datum point of masculine violent action. If the bodyguard finds it impossible to take down all of these mercenaries singlehanded, then that reassures the fantasy element of the storyworld in which Widow operates as a superheroine with enhanced fighting abilities. Yet, by having the male bodyguard present throughout the action, all the while fighting other male mercenaries, this defines Widow's performance of heroism as one always measured against an androcentric standard.

A narrativised spectacle that plays-off themes of self-indulgence against self-sufficiency is also true of any male hero, e.g. in controlling and gaining mastery over an inner vulnerability or pain threshold (e.g. Spiderman using his back to stop a moving train in *Spider-Man 2*, or Superman lifting a mountain of kryptonite in *Superman Returns*; see the first chapter). For Widow however, this temptation to give into emotional excess is often presented alongside the immediacy of sexual objectification. In *Avengers Assemble* (2012) she is tied-up to a chair on the top floor of an abandoned warehouse in Moscow, interrogated by a group of Russian soldiers, threatening to tip her over the precipice. While Widow maintains a physical stoicism, they exclaim how physically attractive she is, to which in the narrative exposition she attempts to deflect this erotic gaze, simply replying that she is "surprised" they should think so. The gaze compensates for this deflection by bringing an element of sadism, as one soldier grabs her face and opens the mouth, threating to pull out a tooth, which elicits a breathy gasp. The sadistic nature of this assault forces a spasm from her body, for a moment compromising her self-restrained rigidity. When the male superhero is tortured by assailants, this can elicit similar responses, such as when Superman weakened by kryptonite is beaten and kicked by a group of Lex's thugs, crying out pitifully in *Superman Returns*, or when Spiderman is tied up and harassed by Green Goblin, who grabs his head to force the hero to look at the villain face-to-face in *Spider-Man* (see the second chapter, Figure 2.1). In these each cases though, when the stoic performances of their self-sufficient masculinity become compromised by giving into hysterical outbursts this does not so explicitly emphasise the same degree of physical

[46] For more on the 'credibility continuum' between highly naturalistic and radically non-naturalistic feats of heroism, refer to Lisa Purse, *Contemporary Action Film* (2011), Chapter 2.

tactility and intimacy in forcibly drawing attention to the exposed orifice of the mouth or the sensitivity of the lips.

To rectify this imbalance of eroticised emotional distress, she shifts her rhythms to grace and control once more, breaking free from the chair and taking out each soldier with admirable precision. The smooth, well-choreographed fight sequence re-inscribes her as an active agent that continues to carry the themes forward as well as move along the narrative causality (i.e. removing the threat of antagonists), rather than a passive catalyst (a potential damsel that requires the help of other characters). In saying this, it is not until the General of these soldiers receives a phone call from Widow's own *male* ranking Agent – who threatens to send a fighter jet that would bomb the complex if they do not cease the torture – that provides the impetus for Widow's window of opportunity to break free, injected with a renewed sense of energetic, heroic vigour. Again, Widow can negotiate the distinction between agent/object, active/passive, and self-restraint/emotional excess, but it is always measured against the force of male antagonists, and the interruptive, opportunistic *deus ex machina* of a patriarchal benefactor.

Widow achieves her own self-determined agency, but it is mostly interrupted by some patriarchal supervision in the narrative or an aesthetic invested with an androcentric agenda. This is also because the strength and courage she performs is during scenarios that frequently benefit the heroism of her other male teammates. Consider how there are times when Widow is placed in a position that forces out eruptions of emotional excess 'unbecoming' of the other male heroes presiding over her, and while unleashing her skill she is always closely observed by a male figure of physical and authoritative power. Later in *Avengers Assemble* for instance, the team's airship is bombed and begins to descend from the sky, and Widow is caught up in the wake of the Hulk's confused rage as he tears through the vessel's engine section. The Hulk, with bulging muscles, and saliva spewing mouth, invulnerable to bullets and unlimited in strength, embodies the most unrestrained kind of wild, primal masculinity. Tearing through the ship's underbelly, ripping apart metal piping and floor grates, the Hulk is lacking in any professional resolve, indeed so spasmodic in his destruction that Widow's sense of precision is pushed to the absolute limits, with each step and lunge keeping her mere yards away from the hurtling debris. As Hulk chases Widow, his reckless motions resonate with the value of an indulgent rage, which helps to confirm her own physical movement as one which proficiently dances through this challenging terrain, driven by careful haste and resourceful improvisation. Widow's self-determination is celebrated in this attack, admirable and impressive. Her

self-sufficiency is gloried as disciplined and capable here, while Hulk's animalistic imprecision is condemned as indulging hysteria and savagery.

Widow's pacing nonetheless invariably reaches a limit of endurance, after Hulk manages to achieve a strike, smashing her body against a wall. In this instance, Widow's self-sufficiency becomes compromised with the immediacy of writhing in pain and distress against the wall, now loosing composure and giving into the same spasmodic convulsions as her attacker. Her panicked gasps mark her with the demeanour of a damsel-in-distress that indulges in emotional outbursts, and although she is partially bloodied, the armoured textures afforded by her leather suit hide any other noticeable injuries, so maintaining (the appeal of) her sanitised feminine form. It is at this point that the rhythms of precision originally performed by Widow are transferred over to a new avenue of spectacle as the male demi-god Thor, also caught up in the confusion, suddenly intervenes by flying in and saving Widow with a linear, bullet-fast lunge as he physically flies into this massive figure of muscular density, colliding with the approaching Hulk.

Here, Hulk's improperly-channeled masculine violence is quelled by the exact same rhythms of heroism that Widow performed, namely linear motions of precision, but it is the intervention of a male omnipotence that ultimately has the last word on the spectacle currently narrativising the cultural themes at stake. In action sequences such as this, a rhythm of graceful self-sufficiency competes with spasmodic self-indulgence, but it is by a *male* teammate against a *male* antagonist figure, with Widow caught up in the middle, vulnerably heaving inwards and outwards, helpless and violated. It is only after several minutes later, in the wake of an extended montage of other fight sequences depicting Thor fighting with Hulk, as well as Iron Man and Captain America attempting to save the falling airship together that Widow finally receives a radio call from her (male) superior officer requesting reinforcements to protect the vessel, enabling her to regain a renewed sense of stoic composure.

Widow's physical prowess, however competent, becomes completely nullified when attacked by the 8-foot tall, muscular mass of the Hulk. In this instance, she is temporally shifted away from her thematic and rhythmic status as an active, strong, self-restrained agent, to the passive, weak and hysterical victim, injured and cornered, and in need of rescue. When Thor defends her, his own display of strength by contrast does not ever loose self-control, and continues to match the Hulk's savagery with a masculinist virtue of discipline. In this moment, Hulk acts as the irrational savage nature that the hero Thor can define his masculine virtues against. Black Widow's precise rhythms, however,

are forcibly interrupted by a bout of erratic convulsions and passive inertia that reinstate an androcentric paradigm of (appealing and sanitised) femininity.

Interestingly, what the sequences discussed above each have in common is the way the rhythm of vocal sounds distinguish the superheroine Black Widow from her male teammates as well as aggressors. Conventionally, male heroes tend to shout and grunt with a 'brevity' and 'force' that brings to mind how this individual *asserts control over* the brawl with henchmen, mercenaries or other fighters (Purse 2011: 72). The flat timbre and low pitch of this voice, Purse explains, does not simply convey determination but a *masculine* kind of vocalisation, 'low not high, rational not emotional'. Henchmen, for example, when beaten by the hero often gasp out 'animal utterances', the indignity of high pitched noises, or the 'whimpering gurgle' when 'symbolically castrated by a kick to the genitals', which renders the 'opponent's body as feminised and animal-like' (Purse 2011: 72). In saying this, Purse continues, 'hardly any inhalations or excellations of air to and from the hero's body' imply that 'this is a stoical, inscrutable body, whose physical power is conveyed by its silences as well as its sounds. In short, this is a body so controlled, so powerful, that it does not seem to *need* to breath' (Purse 2011: 72). The superheroes Superman, Batman, Captain America, Thor, Green Lantern, and Dredd explored throughout the thesis chapters *rarely* heave in and out during a brawl, and this is especially difficult to notice with the fully masked heroes and covered bodies of physiques belonging to Spiderman or Iron Man. Only the more anti-heroic male figures, like Wolverine or Hulk, tend to show animalistic inhalations as they lunge from one prey to another.

Many superheroines however seem to reveal more accentuated displays of breathing. Both Elektra and Catwoman will breath in-and-out, not just due to sheer exhaustion, but as part of their capable display-of-power, with the mouth being visibly open. The same can be said for Invisible Women, Silk Spectre or Boltie mentioned earlier in the chapter in that their physical endurance coincides with a panting mouth that often needs to gasp for yet more and more air. Purse offers a useful description of this trope for deconstructing the thematic significance invested in these differing physical rhythms:

> Hearing more breathing sounds emanating from the female heroine, louder and less controlled than in equivalent scenes featuring a male hero, contributes to a sense that the heroine's body is ***reactive*** rather than ***proactive***, *weaker* rather than *stronger*. At the same time, the persistent aural emphasis on the 'breathiness' of the female body also refers us to conventional cinematic representations of female sexual abandon, the sound track *eroticising the display of female physical agency* [emphasis added] (Purse 2011: 74).

Developing this quality of a 'reactive breathiness' further, the female action heroine's body of Alice (Milla Jovocich) in the *Resident Evil* film franchise (2002-present) for instance 'is a paradoxical site of innocence and aggression' (Schubart 2007: 287). Alice is not always a master over her physical prowess, as these skills will 'erupt instinctively, almost automatically, as an expression of uncontrolled anger… not a willed action but a *spontaneous reaction* [emphasis added]' (Schubart 2007: 288). This process coincides with sexual objectification, such as when a group of outlaw rednecks try to sexually assault her in *Resident Evil: Extinction*. Her kick that snaps outwards to kill one of the perpetrators is instantaneous, whipping his head backwards with the spray of an almighty blood spatter, revealed in less than a second alongside a sharp scream that breaks through her rigid facial expression and bodily posture. Alice only responds when *provoked*, which is also true for the male action hero, but there is a key difference though, in that action heroines such as Alice arguably use 'extended, longer shouts, relatively high-pitched and tremulous at times, and as such coincide with normative conceptions of female vocal delivery under stress, even as her throaty, ragged voice locates her as unable to conform fully to stereotypical female traits of vocal softness and smoothness' (Purse 2011: 74). In another fight scene in *Resident Evil* (2002) for instance, Purse explains how:

> The shout as Alice kicks [a zombified] dog rises in pitch across its delivery, implying an assertion of hope rather than certainly, a moment of assertive force rather than a continuous assault. This reflects the rhythm of the action sequence as a whole – *pauses* between thumps or shouts are extended, isolating action in *short bursts* rather than as a continuum, a flow of action. The implication seems to be that this is an action body that cannot extend itself for too long [emphasis added] (Purse 2011: 74).

The analysis has so far shown that Black Widow carries the androcentric rhythms of heroism carefully. She is capable of proving herself as a professional heroic agent by attaining the physical grace and self-control invested in linear motions of precision. Even so, hers is still a masquerade of self-sufficient 'masculine' heroism: always supervised and partly instigated by male protagonists and antagonists. This intervention in the spectacle objectifies her in a way that draws attention to a self-indulgent susceptibility always open to physical and emotional attack, eroticised and coded as feminine. Consider for example that during the alien invasion of New York in *Avengers Assemble* all the other (male) members of the Avengers use linear, targeted violence in terms of extending their bodies outwards, using punching and kicking, or (digitally-rendered) tools that glorify their masculine physical prowess. Captain America throws his shield outward in the same way

as Stark shoots out energy beams and missiles in the Iron Man suit. Nick Fury fires pistols and rocket launchers, as does Hawkeye's arrows dart across the sky. Thor hurls his hammer outwards, causing it to fly in and around his enemies while projecting streaks of lightning. Bruce Banner expands to twice his muscle density when stretching outwards as the Hulk with huge fists and arms, leaping fifty-feet at a time into the endless alien hordes.

In contrast, although Widow uses similar tactics, taking and firing alien weapons, for the most part she uses her body in an intimate fashion, wrapping arms and legs around adversaries, strangling and incapacitating with the force of her thighs, e.g. also in *Iron Man 2* and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). Widow has gadgets, such as an electric Taser, but by comparison she is far more tactile, hugging her opponents at close quarters, closely wrapping all of her body around them. Her black leather jumpsuit affords her an armoured body (that covers up more flesh than either Elektra or Catwoman) but the front zip is still pulled down enough to expose a vulnerable portion of cleavage, revealing more skin than her disciplined male teammates (except for the savage, hysterical Hulk). She carefully conforms to the androcentric hero archetype then, doing so in a way that grants her the same narrative and thematic agency as other male heroes, but to reinstate a value of femininity the spectacle still manages to dwell on and objectify her as erotically intimate, empowered by the sensitive tactility of thighs, buttocks and breasts as opposed to the efficiency and distance afforded by fists or arms. This objectification is not only achieved in terms of the editing and framing that fragment her body, nor the narrative exposition of an emotional, vulnerable damsel in need of rescue, but mainly in the interruption of the physical rhythms she enacts in trying to get the job done with professionalism. The spectacle freezes her proactive self-sufficient linear movements for a brief moment to visually indulge in the silhouette of her female form, or imposes bouts of spasmodic erraticism to show self-indulgent reactions of shaking and heavy breathing that have given into the passivity of emotional excesses.

If Black Widow adheres to notions of a chivalrous, dominant type of androcentric male heroism, then other superheroines such as Hit Girl in *Kick Ass* can distort these values in a transgressive way, achieving what Taylor described in section (ii) as impermissible transgressions able to threaten the established masculinist societal order. If the *Avengers* film series caters to a family-based demographic, then *Kick Ass* belongs to a restricted age rating that treats these conventions in a parodic fashion with explicit gore and profanity. This is because Hit Girl's interactions with other male heroes and villains manage to trouble paradigms pertinent to the superhero film genre formula by achieving a

rhythmic pattern of proactive agency that *violently resists* being objectified as a passive, reactive or eroticised catalyst. In channeling erratic mannerisms of hysteria as a means of disciplined strength, Hit Girl is able to deflect the androcentric imperative to an extent, protecting herself from the same hindrances that incite compromise, passivity and weakness in the heroism of Black Widow, Elektra or Catwoman.

Hit Girl: Transgressing The Androcentric Imperative

When the male hero 'Kick Ass' (Aaron Johnson) goes into a crime den to threaten Rasul (Kofi Natei) a drug dealer, demanding he stop emotionally-manipulating his girlfriend Rachel, in this moment this protagonist stands for a male heroism that defends the honour of a vulnerable damsel. *Kick Ass* (2010) on the surface would seem to adhere to conventional binaries of masculine as active and feminine as passive. In saying this, the rationalism and self-control behind his threat, while morally-sanctioned, stoic, and shows resolve, soon begins to crumble when challenged by Rasul. To defend himself against Rasul's attack, the hero's carefully aimed Taser strike at the drug dealer's head is not enough, leaving him vulnerable to a beating from the dealer's group of lackeys seated in the room.

Here, *Kick Ass* abides by a masculinist code of chivalry, but the hero protagonist's proactivity becomes inherently flawed: his agency is limited, so weak in potency that he becomes relegated to the status of a catalyst in the plot, in effect the damsel figure in dire need of rescue. He starts to cry out in fear, hysterically shaking at the prospect of a painful death, and these erratic rhythms match the frantic, sadistic impulse of the criminals holding him down. As the head drug dealer picks up a samurai sword ready to cut the hero apart while he flails helplessly on the floor, a new rhythm of precision emerges in this unruly chaos that counters these imprecise, spasmodic convulsions. At the very moment the drug dealer hurls his sword down, a far longer blade suddenly bursts through his chest and then retracts, introducing a new influx of linear precision that carries its own value of self-sufficient autonomy. As his body drops this reveals not an adult heroine but the adolescent 'Hit Girl' (in the diegesis the character is 11-years old, and actor Chloe Grace Moretz was 13-years old at the time of filming) who, armoured and wielding a double-bladed staff then swiftly and surely proceeds to take down the entire room of thugs singlehanded.

A significant juxtaposition unfolds in the frequent cutting that follows between shots of Kick Ass, who stares open mouthed in shock and confusion, against images of Hit Girl's cocky smirking, while bearing her teeth in a confident snarl. Hit Girl's physical

rhythms exude precision, control and efficiency: but this professionalism does not so much deflect the dangers of an improperly channeled emotional excess, but gives in entirely to the temptations of self-indulgence. Rather than emulate the archetype of a chivalrous, self-restrained hero – of which Kick Ass has failed to represent with any merit, indulging both fear and panic – Hit Girl *embraces an overzealous energy to channel her application of violence*. In the narrative causality her application of an indulgent overzealous violence has an interesting effect on her agency in the spectacle. Her activity as a narrative agent is not compromised as such by any sexual objectification, but enabled by transgressing this convention of an appealing, eroticised femininity. Her spoken dialogue for example collectively insults the thugs with a derogatory term for female genitalia, proudly declaring: "Ok you c*nts. Let's see what you can do now!" From the outset, this establishes aspects of her characterisation in the plotting that will soon unfold into a distinct rhythmic pacing, generating a kinetic arc of narrativised spectacle: yet, the narrativised spectacle that unfolds here soon works differently to the examples analysed in the previous chapters. As soon as the action starts off, Hit Girl codes these men as non-masculine with an androcentric imperative that terms weakness and passivity as equated with femininity (e.g. these men are 'vulnerable' to harm in terms of the symbolic threat of her phallic double-bladed staff, which results in literal penetration). Much like the final girl of the slasher-horror genre who becomes phallicised by taking a knife to attack the serial killer,[47] Hit Girl uses these blades in a way that emphasises a powerful, wild display of masculine violence: yet, one channeled not by self-restraint but by self-indulgence. This is where the narrativised spectacle begins to undergo a different treatment.

The physical and filmic rhythms that follow her vocal slur are immediately unleashed as a set of the stabbing motions that push her blades into the chests of these men, slicing off limbs and carving into their flesh: but this generates a very different kind of kinetic arc that blurs the conventional boundary between thematic tensions of self-sufficiency versus self-indulgence. As the vocal slur continues, Hit Girl's drawn out reference to the nursery rhyme of making a choice, "Eeney… Meeney… Miney… *Mow*!", brings to mind a childlike disposition. The non-diegetic score 'The Banana Splits (The Tra La La Song)' (composed by The Dickies) has an excitable, repetitive cadence that cries out as though a 'pulse' of impulse: "La, la, *la*. La la la *la*. La la *la*. La la la *la*!", in turn matching the visual rhythm of her enthusiastic spinning in mid-air across the room, leaping

[47] Refer to Carol Clover's detailed analysis on the 'final girl' trope of the slasher-horror genre in *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender and Modern Horror Film* (1993).

from one assailant to the next. In addition to her adolescent appearance, the juvenile connotations tied to this series of audio and visual beats nullify any feminine sex appeal, asexualising her, stopping the spectacle from eclipsing or freezing the violent action of her physical prowess with erotic contemplation (e.g. as is so often the case with the compromised armour donned by Catwoman). She behaves like the capable archetypical masculinist hero that kills with linear efficiency, using her blades and gadgets as a means of attacking from a distance. This resembles the same tactics as Batman's batarang-throws, Spiderman's web-projectiles, Superman's heat vision, or the Hulk's extended 'tree-trunk' arms and hands, who each avoid up-close tactility of sensitive body parts of thighs or buttocks akin to the methods adopted by Black Widow or Catwoman. Even when there are moments of tactility, such as when Hit Girl wraps her legs around the necks of the drug dealers, she is not explicitly eroticised in the same manner as Catwoman, Elektra or Black Widow due to the her status as a young child, which helps to refract the male gaze away from her throughout this spectacle of violence.

By deriding the men in the room as weaker and more 'feminised' than her, Hit Girl may at first seem to adhere to an androcentric masquerade, but by deflecting any potential for a balancing factor of feminine sex appeal she instead transgresses the masquerade. On the one hand for instance, Hit Girl's motion closely adheres to the self-sufficient, restrained male superhero androcentric standard, resonating with carefully-considered precision. On the other hand however, much of her proficiency gives into, and becomes fuelled by, a spectacularised display of self-indulgence. Also, this self-indulgence does not allow itself to become checked by a male gaze that freezes the action for purposes of eroticising a sex appeal at the expense of physical prowess. Instead, Hit Girl's violence continuously flows as an explicitly gratified arc that enacts the most elaborate means of harming each thug. By avoiding erotic objectification, Hit Girl does not have to abide by the same stipulations of other superheroines. The thematic tale told by the spectacle becomes out of balance, no longer simply coding self-restraint as positive or masculine, and self-indulgence as negative or feminine, but transgresses the integrity of these values altogether.

However, while the androcentric paradigm is parodied and re-defined in this action sequence, the audio-visual components still grant Kick Ass the moral high ground in this situation. Hit Girl's transgression of the androcentric imperative is a violent action constantly *intercut* with close-ups of facial distaste expressed by Kick Ass, as though she seeks some *professional approval* from an older male crime fighter. After killing another

assailant with a single stabbing moment she immediately swishes her head around to look over at the shocked male hero, gratified that he has seen the attack. Hit Girl is, to all extents and purposes, *react*ing to Kick Ass's ogling of her fighting techniques. Cutting the leg off another thug, then spinning round to land the final blow, she looks up *again* at Kick Ass as the thug screams in agony: interested in her colleague's reaction, who, once more, shows only a traumatised expression at this appalling brutality. Sprawled against the far wall watching Hit Girl slaughter these men from one side of the room to the other, Kick Ass is the damsel figure who acts as the catalyst that instigates this rescue. Yet his outrage at Hit Girl's violence provides an outlet of for the spectator to participate in. The camerawork often corresponds to Kick Ass's own point-of-view, with the action often framed as though looking up as from near the floor level. In visually darting back and forth from her violent action to his increasingly horrified facial expressions, this intermittent interruption of Hit Girl's rhythmic trajectory across the room invokes a patriarchal concern over the severity of her savagery and the delight she takes in seeing each of his reactions. This specular brutality is beautified in the sense of how effective it is, physically extending and shifting around the room with graceful ease, but an element of horror comes through in the hero's disapproval of just how much enjoyment she is taking in this violence. Her rhythms are not erratic as such, but her lack of self-control does cause her to unpredictably crack a pleasurable smile in the midst of the action, unbefitting of masculinist heroism.

Nonetheless, regardless of a lack of sex appeal or the proficiency of her strikes, when this self-indulgent enjoyment becomes excessive enough it can pause the action. After another thug emerges from the bathroom, surprised at the bloodbath, he takes out a switchblade, to which Hit Girl pauses, smiles, nonchalantly stabs her staff into a dead corpse, and delights in gradually taking out her own switch blade, happily flicking the hinges of the device to show off her high level of skillful dexterity. This elaborate display of skill is impressive, but again excessive in getting-the-job-done quickly and efficiently which is expected of the professional hero. Throwing the blade into the man's sternum, she then leaps and kicks it in for good measure: linear and focused, but not necessary if she were more precise in her initial throw.

Hit Girl's over-indulgence can slow and pause the action then, but never in the same way as other superheroines whose activity is made passive to sexual objectification, e.g. Catwoman succumbing to the pleasures felt as a dominatrix torturer, or Black Widow frozen in place as a lingerie model photo. For instance, the last survivor of the drug dealer's entourage is a woman dressed in a revealing suit akin to the attire of a prostitute,

who smashes a bottle to protect herself. Hit Girl reclaims her staff, slowly walks towards the woman, takes her time in splitting the staff in two, and, now wielding two separate blades, impales the victim on both pieces of steel. In employing this elaborate display that requires two blades rather than one, she has ventured beyond the threshold of what is necessary to incapacitate this adversary, but more importantly, in being so brutal to the prostitute, Hit Girl is seemingly condemning the sex appeal this figure stands for: in effect, nullifying the male gaze where and when the heroine can. By piercing into the woman with such gusto, Hit Girl is effectively devaluing the value of emotional (and sexual) temptation this promiscuous figure invokes in others onscreen, as well as off-screen, or potentially in the theatre audience. Hit Girl derides desirable, objectified femininity as weak and reactive. Her heroic rhythms that condemn this sexualised femininity do so not only with a proactive accuracy that emulates the conventional displays of disciplined masculinity, but also with an overzealous application. This channeling of violence is not simply that of a male-centric, stoic self-restraint, but an immature, childlike hyperactive kind of vigour and courage that avoids the levels of eroticisation usually imposed by the male gaze. She uses self-indulgence, not self-restraint, to tarnish all the men and women around her as weaker, passive, with Kick Ass being the most emasculated of all: again, blurring a thematic binary that androcentrism depends upon.

While androcentric themes are transgressed in the drug-den fight sequence because Hit Girl refuses to comply with the standards of a stoic, restrained active agency as stipulated by masculinist heroism, the editing and camerawork nonetheless manage to compensate for this deviation from the generic norm by employing other means of interrupting the rhythm of the action: pausing her kinetic arc to objectify Hit Girl as passive and (a non-masculine) 'other'. For instance, soon after the brawl, whilst she is busy boasting to Kick Ass about her feat of endurance, a final thug hiding outside the apartment door sneaks up behind her, ready to attack with a knife. Hit Girl's outburst of self-indulgence here allows for a punishing lapse in concentration, refiguring her to the role of damsel: to which it is the *patriarchal intervention* of her vigilante mentor (and literal father figure) 'Big Daddy' (Nick Cage) who must 'swoop in' and save her. Having watched the whole fight from a nearby rooftop through the scope of a sniper rifle, Big Daddy's linear, quick impact of a silent bullet shot straight into the head of her attacker causes Hit Girl to turn around in shock, erratically flinching, helpless, no longer self-sufficient. Akin to the dive made by Thor in saving Black Widow (outlined in previous section) this last minute rescue by a male teammate confirms suspicions that Hit Girl's professional heroism has its

limits. Reminding the heroine of the importance of always-watching-one's-back, Big Daddy educates his little girl with a 'masculine rational' she struggles to match. The intercutting that takes place in this sequence between the two patriarchal *overseers* is a means of framing her physical aggression as impressive, yet also marking it as troublesome in requiring constant supervision by rational men.

Hit Girl perhaps best shows the plight of the 'sidekick' female hero, because her rhythms of heroism are always closely judged, checked and briefly paused to affirm the importance of patriarchal authority. Later in the film, when Kick Ass and Big Daddy are both tied up in a warehouse, beaten, tortured near to death, doused in gasoline and about to be set on fire by mobsters, Hit Girl cuts the lights and under the cover of darkness uses absolute, finite precision to kill each henchmen. From the point-of-view of her night-vision goggles, she carefully takes aim, making clean kills with a variety of perfectly deployed headshots. This fluid pattern of bodies falling with one quick kill after another is intercut with the flashes of gunfire that illuminate Big Daddy and Kick Ass in the darkness, cowering in their chairs as the henchmen fire haphazardly. Switching from shots of this partially-lit, spasmodic jerking to complete black, and then back again to the flinching bodies of the afraid mobsters, then back to black, and so forth throughout much of the fight sequence helps to establish two distinct rhythms of balletic grace against erratic spasms. Hit Girl's point-of-view compared to the mobsters remains driven by a collected and precise set of rhythms that are clearly lit by the green hue of the infrared headset. She is entirely calm, taking her time to make each shot count, whereas the henchmen project a spasmodic lack of self-control. Her sweeping from one man to another is noticeably more balletic, unloading and reloading her pistol with efficient ease, without mistake, e.g. making a killing shot as a thug runs between metal pipes, or as soon as these lackeys show a small portion of their head around the corner of pillars.

Hit Girl's perfect free-flowing rhythm, however, soon becomes compromised yet again by the influence of a patriarchal overseer, i.e. as was experienced earlier in the drug dealer's apartment. In the confusion, after a henchmen manages to set Big Daddy on fire before being shot down, Hit Girl removes the goggles and looks over from her cover in distress: needing to be reminded by her dying father about the next best strategy to deploy. Although in terrible pain, he bears the brunt of the searing flesh, crying out code words for her to follow. Hit Girl listens to her father, and with his help continues to carry out a rhythmic slaughter, but with a precision and grace indirectly, and intermittently, guided and channeled through her father's constant supervision. One code word reminds her to

deploy a blue flickering light on a shelf that blinds two henchmen in the midst of firing at the heroine's direction. The erratic lighting composition literally accentuates each of their spasms, flinches and jerks, but a professional rhythm breaks through as two single shots from Hit Girl take these men down one after another to cease the disarray. As Big Daddy barks out the next order, she suddenly stands completely still to register this advice, and only then uses a flashing light beam to distract the last remaining attackers, running around their flank.

Soon she leaps across the room to save her father, the shot framing this action unfolds with slow motion treatment, showing her body lunge with a convexity that cuts from her blue-tinted figure to black, and back again in a continuous fashion. This compositional technique works to accentuate the trajectory of her upward arc, spectacularly aestheticised as graceful, standing out from the mess-ridden confusion of gunshots, screaming and blazing fire around her. Here, she is the agent, saving the two damsels (i.e. working as passive narrative catalysts), and the audio-visual rhythms support the thematic meanings invested in these motions: but it is still Big Daddy that nonetheless enables her movement across this space, providing impetus whenever she becomes inert from a lack of her own autonomous rational. Finally, making the last two kills she shoots the light with one precise shot, bringing calm equilibrium to the scene, covering up Big Daddy in a rag to douse out the flames and then in one smooth motion shoots the camera broadcasting this torture on the web. Hit Girl's physical heroism is of the highest androcentric standard, in every way matching, and even exceeding the same agility, speed and innovation expected of more superhuman kinds of superhero protagonists (e.g. *Spider-Man*, *Dare-Devil* (2003)). In this respect Hit Girl *exemplifies the physical superhero* that engages in close-quarters brawling, but is not explicitly eroticised in these rhythms (i.e. as is the tactility of Black Widow whenever she wraps herself around the bodies of her assailants, or Catwoman's sadomasochistic tendencies that thrill her dominatrix persona). Hit Girl is objectified, however, during each of the brief interruptions of patriarchal intervention that frame and freeze her in place, then intercutting back-and-forth between the heroine standing still awaiting advice from her father and Big Daddy bestowing his rational.

Interestingly there is one moment during the warehouse rescue sequence that attempts to sexually objectify Hit Girl, but for purposes of bringing a feminine appeal to her (male-centric code of) self-autonomy, briefly trivialising her physical and mental agency. After shooting the web camera, a jump cut to other spaces reveals some of the

people watching this spectacle (i.e. two shocked male members of the crime family, an approving male policemen), who judge this feat. Yet from a café, while watching the spectacle on a laptop a teenage boy exclaims to his male friend (while his girlfriend buries her head into his chest away in fear at the violence) just how sexually attractive Hit Girl is, regardless of her young age. Again, here her heroism unfolds as a rhythmic masterpiece of precision, but it is *always intermittently paused or underscored by some patriarchal validation*.

A patriarchal intervention is also apparent at the non-diegetic level of musical accompaniment. Later in the film Hit Girl infiltrates the headquarters of mob boss Frank D'Amico (Mark Strong) who organised the torture of her father Big Daddy. Entering through mob boss's penthouse lift and met by multiple henchmen, her action is underscored by the track 'No Power, No Responsibility' (composed for the film score by Henry Jackson) being the heroic leitmotif that surfaces throughout the film. The music shifts into a timbre and melody of 'grubby' metallic electric guitars conventionally employed in spaghetti Westerns (i.e. Ennio Morricone's scores in *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966) and *Once Upon A Time In The West* (1968)). The musical score brings to mind associations of the loner westerner heroes as enforcers of vigilante justice, which carries over as she emerges from the elevator. Here, Hit Girl adopts the same disciplined violence as male westerners, with each attack precisely timed. The music increases in volume and tempo, as she sports a weaponised lasso complete with a metal hook upon the end of the rope, she swings the barb into the neck of one guard, killing him instantly, *then* quickly swings it left to slice into the face of a second man, *then* twists round to her right to leap on top of another and stab the spike end into his neck. The music track matches the disciplined channeling of this violence from one specific point to the next.

Yet as the fight continues down the corridor, and although she uses the exact same rhythms of absolute innovative precision, the musical accompaniment now changes to a rendition of 'Bad Reputation' (first composed by Joan Jett, founding member of all female punk[48] band *The Runaways*, but covered by *The Hit Girls* for the soundtrack). The track follows a rapid-paced tempo and lyrics that mimic this cadence, crying out "I don't give a damn about my bad reputation…" and the vocal variations thereof match the rest of the

[48] The punk genre has been defined as 'a loud, fast-moving, and aggressive form of rock music, popular in the late 1970s and early 1980s' (Oxford American Dictionaries). The style is aggressive, and the themes deal with defying conformity through cynicism, embracing anarchy to revolt against conservative values, and using shocking imagery and verbal profanity to transgress the status quo.

onscreen action. Here, the music explicitly suggests that Hit Girl's actions, while conform to the same conventions of the celebratory violent action adopted by (male) heroes, is a display of physical power and self-determined agency that requires an *apologetic* repudiation. This is because the anarchic style of musical rhythms invokes a childish irresponsibility that remedies androcentric anxieties by granting a status of some non-masculine 'other' onto Hit Girl akin to an immature adolescent type of emotional excess. Indeed, although having been disciplined up until now, as soon as the song ends Hit Girl gives into the temptation of channeling her violence with indulgent abandon, and quickly becomes punished and frozen in place for doing so. Here, an unarmed cowering henchman lies on the floor terrified, begging for his life, and Hit Girl does not quickly punch, bound, gag or incapacitate him, but betrays a wry smile, taking her time to aim the pistol closely at his head and then pulls the trigger, only to find, in her abandon, the barrel is empty. Here, she stands still: objectified as a sadist, whose improper enjoyment of violence sullies her previous rhythms of self-control and focus, now giving into a hint of hysteria.

In performing this slaughter down the corridor with proactivity (the pragmatic self-control of the lasso-hook, careful pistol fire) alongside reactivity (the anarchic hysteria that ends up in miscalculating the number of rounds left in her gun) Hit Girl conflates the distinction between the precise efficiency of self-sufficient restraint with the emotional hysteria of excessive indulgence. Her violence is channeled in a way that complicates the androcentric paradigm, but it is this transgressive kind of agency that then prompts a series of patriarchal interventions that reinstate clearly defined androcentric values once more. Seconds later, now without any ammunition she starts to become objectified as a vulnerable damsel, cornered as more remaining henchmen emerge from the lift at the end of the corridor. Leaping behind a tabletop block of kitchen cupboards, she has now become a catalyst in the narrative, susceptible to harm, in need of rescue from rational agents, to which a male hero can assert his own degree of narrative agency. A henchman walks into the kitchen with a machine gun, and haphazardly sprays bullets with a lack of accuracy. To reclaim some self-autonomy, Hit Girl counters this spasmodic attack by accurately throwing two chopping knives that plunge straight into the man's chest in quick succession. While this linear attack resonates with proficiency and connotations of phallic precision and power, another henchmen soon returns with a rocket launcher from the store as a even more dominant symbol of immense (again, phallic) destructive proportions.

As Hit Girl's adolescence affords no sex appeal this refracts the male gaze, but the action sequence still imposes a code of feminine 'other' by consistently marking her as

vulnerable and helpless in a domestic space. As she cowers, hiding behind the kitchen cupboard, and before the henchmen can fire the rocket, it is now the hero Kick Ass who imposes the most dominant bout of phallicised, linear, professional control. Hovering outside the penthouse window, harnessed to a jet pack with two Gatling guns on either shoulder, he proceeds to wipe out the threat by spraying bullets across the apartment, saving his vulnerable female teammate. It is only after this interruption of male dominance that Hit Girl is then allowed to emerge from out of the kitchen cupboard as a narrative agent once more, driven by the mission to kill the mob boss Frank.

These interruptions of phallic power continue to disrupt her rhythms of heroism during the final fight with Frank. Her fight is intercut with another brawl in the next room between Kick Ass and the mob boss's son Chris (Christopher Mintz-Plasse). The two teenage boys wrestle one another as a cumbersome, amateurish and humorous spectacle, which emphasises Hit Girl's rhythms of heroism against the physically stronger and taller Frank as far more skilled: but this is a physical prowess still measured by *a benchmark of masculine power and control*. As Frank kicks her in the face she spews out blood, again refracting any potential eroticised objectification by deflecting the importance of an idealised, desirable or 'ladylike' feminine appearance. However, regardless of her skill or lack of sex appeal in facing off against the mob boss's brutality, her kinetic arc of heroism is still paused at times by patriarchal validation. Beating her to the ground until she lies down, Frank exclaims he wish he "had a *son*" like her, reducing the extraordinariness of her physical prowess down to the specific merits stipulated by a normative androcentrism. The statement infers that Hit Girl is more capable than his weaker heir, but only in so much as she is *more capably masculine* than his effeminate son. Here, although she has successfully emulated the tropes of masculinist active heroism, to compensate for the androcentric concerns invested in this brawl sequence the spectacle then marks her with a feminine passivity: reduced once more down to a vulnerable damsel, now physically *stilled* in her movement, lying injured, convulsing and gasping out in pain as Frank continues to punch her in the face. Hit Girl has masqueraded as an impressive, active fighter, in so much as the masquerade has devolved into an objectified, passive, *failed* kind of masculine omnipotent power. A patriarchal overseer is called upon yet again to supervise this *sense of lack*, and it is Kick Ass who saves-the-day. Finding the (phallic) rocket launcher discarded earlier by one of the henchman, the hero fires a missile in one straight arc of linear attack directly into Frank, propelling the villain outside in a final explosive eruption of masculine heroic dominance. At the very end, it is the hero Kick Ass whose last bout of linear force

confirms Hit Girl's status as a superheroine sidekick. She is invested with the value of capable discipline (i.e. driven by graceful balleticism), but unable to fully shake off the roles of inexperienced student or damsel-in-distress that frequently interrupts her rhythms, bringing into play a passive, helpless inertia.

Although Hit Girl is a proficient crime-fighting protagonist and her physical rhythms tell a thematic tale of professional heroism, she nonetheless still only plays out a masquerade that emulates her male hero teammates: in that whenever her agency is compromised, we are reminded of her sidekick status, and her dependence on patriarchal overseers. The other self-determined male characters (Kick Ass, Big Daddy, Frank) if and when objectified as passive, or no matter how sexualised, seemingly remain idealised as narrative agents. Hit Girl, regardless of her confident forceful display of self-determination, tends to be objectified as passive and emotionally turbulent to a frequent extent, causing this sense of agency to be uncertain. Any objectification of the male hero's body does not seem to interrupt the rhythm in same way as superheroines, e.g. it is more humorous with men, as the sexualisation is deflected. For this reason, a patriarchal gaze is apparent that intermittently interrupts each of the superheroine's achievements, reminding the viewer of an androcentric imperative that stipulates *masculinity as active and self-controlled*, while *femininity is a site for passivity and emotional excess*. Hit Girl in this respect, regardless of how much she successfully transgresses androcentric tropes, hers is still a mission can only emulate the former value, which, despite her best efforts, invariably at some point succumbs to notions of the latter.

***The Androcentric Rhythm Prevails*: Summary of Chapter Argument**

The chapter has shown how there are a set of androcentric expectations and assumptions tied to the spectacular rhythms of thematic development performed by superheroines. For this reason, the narrativised spectacle these heroines generate works differently when compared to male superhero protagonists. Superheroines can drive forward thematic development by employing the same rhythms as their male superhero equivalents, i.e. with precise motions and themes of self-restraint. There are moments, however, when the aesthetic, narrative, and thematic rhythmic trajectory of themes carried by superheroines is interrupted or halted intermittently. In these moments, there is an emphasis on the female character's sexual objectification through erotic contemplation, or an obligation to function as a passive device (e.g. as a helpless damsel) in the narrative. It seems that a theme of

eroticised or vulnerable femininity is essential in defining masculinist constructions of heroism in these films.

While the male superhero is potentially objectified in terms of masculine physical prowess, this spectacle does not hinder narrative progression to a great extent, or compromise the thematic values at stake. This is because androcentric themes in the action-adventure genre promote masculinity as a positive set of values that drive the narrative and spectacle, which are celebrated and tested. Physical strength is generically-coded as masculine strength, honour, independence and virtue (Wright 1977, see thesis introduction). It is this male restraint, taciturnity and endurance, as well as an inexpressive visage and vocal inactivity, such as stone-faced expressions that can provide a form of self-effacement able to check any self-preening or quell exhibitionism by not giving into the pressure of vivid sensation (Mitchell 2001, refer to thesis introduction). In terms of the action genre formula, male sexual objectification is also invested with these positive values of self-restraint and self-effacement, that – as was discussed in the thesis introduction in relation to the violence of Westerns – are checked by more virtuous traits of professionalism and discipline that resist the temptations of indulging emotional impulses.

Those positive virtues traditionally coded as masculine, however, tend to only be emulated by female superheroes: in order to provide the thematic impetus for their spectacular energy and narrative agency. This androcentric emulation is a masquerade that temporarily becomes eclipsed or compromised whenever heroines are sexually objectified (e.g. with the camerawork dwelling on fragmented parts of the body, breasts, thighs or hair), kowtowing to a more negative set of themes that revolve around the excesses of self-indulgence, lack of control and hysteria. Once these brief moments of sexualisation pass then the superheroine's body can continue to operate with the physical strength and agency essential to their role as a protagonist. In this way, whenever the heroine undergoes an objectification that emphasises her femininity, this is often done in a sexualised fashion that acts as a disruptive foil: drawing attention to a negative set of cultural themes that compromise her display of heroism.

The chapter argument has also shown how there lies an uneasy thematic tension in the superheroine that shifts between the active and the passive, as an interplay that pits the (masculinist) norm of heroism against the (feminised) otherness of objectification. As the superheroine's narrative trajectory becomes interrupted by an (erotic) objectification, one set of themes become overshadowed by another. To compensate she must continue along those rhythms of spectacle, performance and violence that are coded by conventional

constructions of masculinity: reinstating more positive values of the hero's self-restraint that resist the unworthy traits of self-indulgence (as sexualised, emotional, irrational, etc.). An androcentric rhythm resonates through the violent action employed by the superheroine, unfolding through narrative events and spectacular displays. Whenever she undergoes objectification, rendered as sexualised or passive, the androcentric rhythm is halted, but it does not remain so for long, as the heroine will re-double her efforts in portraying a stoic performance that lends itself well to masculinist themes. This moment of erotic contemplation does not draw too much attention so as to become disjunctive or counter-narrative, but in thematic terms there is a brief suspension that confuses the distinction between competing sets of cultural contradictions.

The superheroine abides by the same identical set of precise, linear rhythms of professionalism expected by male superhero protagonists, doing so with the same delivery of grace and balleticism. It is the intervention of the male gaze however that can interrupt this rhythmic pace with an intermittent erotised close-up that emphasises the figure's voluptuous curves in a fashion appealing to heterosexualised sexual desire. There are also those brief moments that objectify the character in an inert, passive state, lying exhausted on the floor as a damsel in need of rescue from a male peer. She may in turn suddenly stand still, giving into unprofessional bouts of hysterical inefficiency that require advice from a more capable, self-sufficient patriarchal overseer.

Ultimately the audio-visual rhythmic motions of narrativised spectacle generated by both the superhero/ine are ultimately one and the same, save for those hindering moments made up of male-centric filmic qualities that bring the action to a halt, working as a burden that only the heroine is obligated to carry along. Therefore, despite being objectified or made inert by the male gaze, superheroines nonetheless always successfully manage to reclaim a renewed sense of physical momentum that continues to drive the action forwards: an endeavour that faces interruption from time-to-time by a decidedly male-centered prejudice.

Thesis Conclusion

The Future Scope of Narrativised Spectacle

Throughout the course of this thesis I have argued the case for a new analytical perspective to the study of contemporary superhero films, proposed as narrativised spectacle, which explores how spectacular action sequences tell a thematic tale of cultural conflict. I have stated my claim that narrativised spectacle consists of action sequences made up of spectacular audio-visual rhythms that generate a distinct pattern of film narration which unfolds alongside, but at a different pacing to, the main plot events. The purpose of my thesis has been to justify exactly why this new definition of narrativised spectacle is useful in examining the subject of popular action genres within the discipline of film studies.

The crux of my argument rests on the reasoning that this new concept brings an innovative mode of analysis to popular action-adventure film genres. This is because my analytic model is able to compensate for an overlooked aspect of existing debates on the interplay between spectacle and narrative: dealing with the question of how thematic meanings are narratively developed by spectacular audio-visual rhythms. As was shown in the thesis introduction, current film criticism and theoretical writing on spectacle and narrative tends to primarily focus on how spectacular displays of entertainment move forward the specifics of the narrative plotting. Spectacle, the debate explains, drives forward character actions, motivations and decision-making as well as energises the unfolding of key events, scenarios and circumstances. The existing literature on how this process works is comprehensive and extensive, fully ascertaining the way spectacle supports a viewer's comprehension of plot progression by bringing forward momentum to the narrative chain of cause-and-effect as it unfolds over time and across the different spaces of a fictional story-world.

Yet, as I proposed at the beginning of the thesis, whenever cultural themes are considered in this light there is often the assumption that these values mainly emerge through means of symbolic representation or as motifs that surface intermittently during the film's duration. By engaging with the seminal and current literature on spectacle and narrative this reveals a series of useful suggestions that allude to the possibility of there being a similar kind of evolving narrativisation in play when themes are concerned. Note Geoff King's argument that key kinds of conflicting motif symbolise tensions of North American frontier mythology, or the historical 'heraldry' invoked by Kristen Whissel's model for digital emblems, and Lisa Purse's narrative-of-becoming trajectory. An as of yet

underexplored aspect of the debate, then, is the way that an on-going rhythmic dynamism and kinesis of spectacle can be applied to themes, which has provided the impetus for my own thesis argument. As stated earlier, it is true to say that spectacle indeed grants causal development to a film's plot by moving along actions and events, as well as helping the passage of time occur across different spaces of a fictional story-world. However, my thesis approach has shown exactly how thematic values also noticeably benefit from the same kinds of causal and temporal elements generated by displays of spectacle: with cultural themes, in effect, being causally and temporally 'carried' along and driven forward in a fashion that contributes a distinctly 'kinetic' narrative trajectory to the storytelling process.

My central claim throughout the thesis argument has been that spectacular displays are more 'narrativised' than theorists and writers have otherwise explored, because spectacle does not only act as a vehicle for driving forward the progression of the film plot, but is also able to developmentally, causally and temporally narrativise themes. I have supported this claim by showing how a series of audio-visual rhythms are embedded in the very structure of the spectacle. These rhythms are able to contribute another dimension of narrative causality and temporal passing to an action film's narration by offering up a storytelling arc that favours thematic patterns of development above all else. It is through an analysis of how these rhythms operate in the storytelling of action films that an evident narrativisation of the spectacle emerges, evolving the cultural meanings invested in these spectacular motions. An analysis of the superhero film has been central to showing my definition of narrativised spectacle in action. This is because the superhero does not simply achieve extraordinary feats of spectacular action, but generates this spectacle through an enhanced kinesis. The forward momentum performed by the superhero supports the primary arc of plot progression, yes, but the physical rhythms of these bodies, as well as the rhythms of editing and camerawork that present this motion, also manage to grant this storytelling energy to the cultural themes at stake, by generating a kinetic arc that carries thematic development along.

The thesis has explained how spectacular action sequences not only move the film plot along but are narrativised in a distinct way that developmentally evolves a viewer's understanding of cultural themes invested in the storytelling. This narrativisation of the spectacle is achieved as one visceral thrill is rhythmically played off against another, invoking key cultural associations and thematic tensions along the way. The thesis has argued therefore that there are a series of 'spectacular rhythms' that can be *read* and

culturally interpreted in a thematic sense. It through this reading of rhythm that an analytical perspective can be applied to existing debates on spectacle and narrative: as a means of picking up on a new kind of dynamism that audio-visually negotiates themes.

Without a definition of narrativised spectacle to work with, a conventional analysis of spectacle and narrative (that tends to favour plot progression over theme) would neglect the storytelling dimension I claim is invested in the structure of the spectacular action: that operates as a *kinetic arc*. This is due to the way that, as I have shown in the thesis, an analysis of narrativised spectacle in the superhero film picks up on three aspects to this kinetic storytelling dimension. Firstly, the analysis isolates the differing kinds of physical and filmic movement at work between hero and villain, or between the hero and the surrounding environment. Secondly, one can then ascertain how these motions are audio-visually played off against one another, generating a sense of rhythm and conflict. Thirdly, this lastly uncovers the thematic tale of cultural contradictions invested in these conflicting rhythms.

The thesis argument has shown there to be two overarching kinds of spectacular rhythms of thematic development invested in the superhero film: namely, the linear precision of balletic grace versus the unruly imprecision of spasmodic erraticism. The beautified precision of balletic grace invokes a positive, celebratory professionalism of stoic self-control associated with the superhero figure. These rhythms of heroism are then played off against the far uglier imprecise, spasmodic erraticism typical of villains, which invoke a negative, condemnable lack of self-control that gives into self-indulgent sadism. Within the clash of these two differing rhythmic movements lies a very simple, kinetic story arc that consists of 'Theme and Rhythm A (i.e. Heroism)' contending against 'Theme and Rhythm B (i.e. Villainy)'.

The to-ing and fro-ing between such rhythms of heroism and villainy establishes their differences until eventually one set of values has to prevail over the other, or there is some kind of reconciliation between the two, which brings closure to the thematic tale. There are also times when the rhythms seemingly 'switch-over' between hero and villain, conflating the cultural oppositions at stake, which destabilises and so confuses the thematic balance. It is this dynamic overlapping of spectacular rhythms that grants a dramatic conflict upon the themes, bestowing narrative causality and temporal unfolding. The play off between conflicting sets of spectacular rhythm kinetically *causes* each cultural value to become instated, challenged, deconstructed and then reinstated *over the course of time and*

space, all the while seeking out a state of equilibrium once more as the hero and villain revert back to their own rhythms to conclude the tale.

Perhaps the most imperative insight gained from my analysis is that it is the nature of the simple narrative of 'good versus evil' favoured by superhero-action films that allows this dimension of narrativised spectacle to be played-out at all. This is because it would be rather difficult to organically achieve such a thematic and rhythmic tale when using a more complex narrative, e.g. such as the intrigue and plot intricacies of the murder mystery genre. It is a feature of the simplicity of superhero narratives that tell a conservative tale of a heroic 'good' versus a villainous 'evil' that ultimately allows narrativised spectacle to properly flow through.

More important still is that, regardless of the overall complexity of the superhero narrative, it is only through the action sequences of the spectacular rhythms in these films that kinetic arcs of thematic tales can be generated. While there may be similar kinetic moments of spectacle in other films, such as in the murder mystery genre during the actual act of a murderer killing a victim by brutally flailing a weapon or firing a pistol, this kind of spectacle drives forward intricate narrative details in a way that hides plot points (e.g. the murder happens in the dark, or off-screen in another room) and does not afford the same sort of explicit rhythm found in action films. Narrativised spectacle is very much a spectacle that narrativises the thematic conflict pertinent to the energetic forward momentum of heroism and villainy displayed in texts that emulate the superhero-action film. In this way the physical and filmic clash between superheroes and villains is an effective vehicle for making narrative sense of the distinction between the positive paradigms of what is conceived as heroic against negative notions tied to what it means to be villainous.

The four main chapters have provided the key evidence for how narrativised spectacle works in the superhero film, doing so by showing how thematic meanings are rhythmically developed and negotiated across the three conventions of spectacle most essential to the action genre: namely the structure of action sequences, performance techniques, and violent fighting. In the first chapter I argued how the superhero's sweeping kinetic trajectories of agility carry a value of exuberance and a freedom of expression, while the surrounding skyscraper-ed cityscape imposes a more rigid, constraining sense of inertia to this flamboyance. A rhythmic negotiation in effect unfolds in the physical and spatial spectacle between body and city, telling a story of feats accomplishable by an extraordinary individual in conflict with the social responsibilities tied to a community. In

the monorail train action sequence of *Spider-Man 2* this thematic tale unfolds as a literal kinetic arc of energetic momentum that stretches along the length of the track, introducing, destabilising and reconciling the themes along the way.

The second chapter then applied my definition of narrativised spectacle more specifically to the differing rhythms of performance techniques exchanged between superheroes and villains. I argued that the superhero's stern gestures of discipline and stoicism are invested with themes of order, which resist the villain's mannerisms of hysteria and a lack of inhibition that instead stand for a contradictory value of chaos. These duelling performance techniques generated a thematic negotiation of sorts, evolving with each gesture and mannerism, the play off of which complicated and reconciled these cultural contradictions as hero and villain physically clashed with one another.

The third chapter proceeded to critically interrogate the spectacle of violent brawling that pervades both action sequences and duelling performance methods utilised in the superhero film: uncovering conservative paradigms of masculinity invested in the rhythms of violence employed by heroes and villains. A self-sufficient value of masculinity, I have shown, is celebrated in the controlled violence superheroes enact, but, at the same time, that same degree of aggression actually introduces deep-set anxieties pertaining to the autocratic or even 'fascistic potential' of the hero's stern, absolutist professionalism. If the hero is too ruthless in implementing his ideal of manhood (e.g. extreme determination, courage, valour, boldness) he may give in to the same emotional excesses (e.g. hysteria, irrationality) as the villain antagonists facing him. The superhero tows the line between a state of violence that glorifies his masculinity, and the presentation of brutality that may undermine or compromise the integrity of his male heroism and identity.

Much of this interrelation between violence and masculinity is a tradition inherited from the Western genre, to which the vigilante superhero figure can be said to be a continuation of these tropes, but in a particularly heightened fashion, primarily at the level of digital visual effects. This heightening is achieved by a tug-of-war effect between hero and villain, with a forward and backward motion that shifts between their digitally-rendered textures. The hero's self-restrained moral integrity is invested in his stable, pro-filmic and human form, which is in contention with the villain's self-indulgent lack of ethics tied to a physically compromised and digitally-unstable set of mutable transformations.

The final chapter then explored how each of these rhythms and themes work in relation to the superheroine. While many of the rhythms were identical, it was the masculinist origins and rhetoric of these themes that resulted in heroines becoming valued through the lens of an androcentric paradigm. Superheroines carry forward the same themes as male superheroes, presented by the same physical and filmic rhythms, but this kinetic arc is often interrupted intermittently with moments of erotised contemplation that emphasise their femininity as somehow 'other' to masculinity. In this respect, the rhythms of heroism are briefly paused as heroines become frozen in place, portrayed as an object of sex appeal, or a vulnerable damsel in need of rescue from (more rational) male characters. The superheroine can generate rhythms of heroism once more, but only by conforming to tropes conventionally coded as 'masculine'. It will be interesting to see whether *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Captain Marvel* (2018) also adhere to androcentric paradigms in the same way as their predecessors, or perhaps transgress this established trope altogether. Currently at least, Marvel's television series *Agent Carter* (2015-present) has been critically praised for affording the heroine protagonist more agency than has been granted in previous decades.

While the first two chapters explored the key conventions of narrativised spectacle in the contemporary superhero film, the remaining two chapters then applied these aesthetics and cultural themes to a more critical interrogation of the symptomatic concerns surrounding these productions, with the film industry adhering to conservative conceptions and representations of gender. It should briefly be noted that there are other aspects to socio-cultural identity and personal agency that may also be applied to a definition of narrativised spectacle. Alongside the representation of masculinity and femininity, it is interesting to analyse whether tensions of class, politics, theism and fluidity in the spectatorship of sexuality have their own distinct rhythms that play off against one another in the superhero-action film, but among the most challenging cultural aspects is the construction of race and ethnicity.

Predominantly the superheroes analysed in this thesis conform to the normative model of white, heterosexual, cisgender males and females, but there are significant differences in the representation of superheroes of colour that my analytical perspective has not yet given full attention. In relation to the African-American superheroes mentioned in the thesis, for instance, both the irresponsible vagrant *Hancock* (2008) and the cat-burglar dominatrix *Catwoman* (2003) have been presented with an exoticised, mystical value of 'otherness'. This is also apparent with other films, namely the vampire *Blade*

(1998) or the demon *Spawn* (1996). There is in turn a trope of worldly-wisdom alongside bureaucratic impotence invoked by Nick Fury of the Marvel's *Avengers* film series, who is relegated to the status of a mentor to the Caucasian heroes. Whether any of these tropes will feature with the tribal-king protagonist *Black Panther* (2018) shall be worthy of note.

Herein lies a potential future scope of whether my argument for narrativised spectacle will also uncover if spectacular rhythms invoke and carry themes tied to a racial gaze as well as concerns of orientalism invested in the superhero film (i.e. a paradigm introduced by Edward Said that the West romanticises foreign cultures, namely the middle east and the far east (Said [1978] 1994: 1-2), classifying these communities as exotic, mystical, ancient, wise and 'other-worldly' to modern Anglo-American societal norms). Indeed what thematic tensions do such rhythms generate? How do they then developmentally evolve and, if these rhythms do contribute another kinetic arc of storytelling, then what are the similarities and differences that these narrative trajectories have when compared to the case studies already explored throughout this thesis?

The commercial future of the contemporary superhero production cycle itself has enough momentum to last until at least 2020 (as discussed in the thesis introduction), but beyond this point that scope is uncertain. Much of the appeal of superhero films does of course reside in the fact that these narratives recycle and innovate on similar conventions set up by the action heroes of the 1980s and 1990s. Even so, the continual advancement of digital technology that presents the escapist appeal of these extraordinary physiques is the single most important feature that distinguishes the superhero movie from other types of films belonging to the action-adventure genre. The dynamic kinesis and rapidly shifting size of one's physical mass in *Ant-Man* (2015) for instance would be difficult to achieve to the same extent 15-years ago, and there are new possibilities afforded every year by new innovations of digital effects, with the kinesis of *Flash* (2018) or *Aquaman* (2018) being granted new bodily and spatial horizons of expression than ever before.

There are interesting applications of my model *beyond* the contemporary superhero cycle. When narrativised spectacle is understood as a superheroic mode of kinesis, for instance, then this is applicable to other hero figures in fantasy or science fiction genres that possess superhuman abilities. Note the sorcery of wizard Gandalf the Grey in the *Hobbit Trilogy* (2012-2014) or the powers of the 'force' employed by Jedi Knights in the *Star Wars* saga (1977-present). These are still figures that only partially adopt modes of super-human kinesis that superheroes embrace with full measure, being so integral and distinctive to the rhythm of storytelling to these films. More specifically however,

narrativised spectacle offers up a model for *superheroic modes of masculinity* that build on the hard-boiled masculine tropes of earlier heroes, e.g. such as the police detective roles played by Humphrey Bogart or Bruce Willis, and the soldering roles by Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger. In the recent *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (2015) for instance, the male hero Finn (John Boyega) is tasked with becoming a trained rebel fighter, and so abides by the same liner bouts of (masculinist codes of) precision explored throughout this thesis. Indeed, much of these physical rhythms are in part a reflection of his evolving training, professionalism and dexterity with a lightsaber. Also, in the same way that villains in the Western will whip and stab the innocent, taking great pleasure in this sadism, the rhythms that the Dark Jedi villain Kylo Ren (Adam Driver) performs are quite literally amplified by his humming, flickering lightsaber, accentuated through the erratic slashing actions he takes: with the blade reverberating with the cultural themes of a lack of self-restraint. Kylo Renn also points to a decidedly misogynistic and toxic form of masculinity (as well as a masculinist 'gatekeeper' of tastes) in the way he treats and undermines heroine Rey (Daisy Ridley), whose own stoic rhythms with the sabre are far more linear and graceful by comparison. Narrativised spectacle, then, has applications that move well beyond the superhero film: but only by drawing attention to those genres that employ superheroic modes of spectacular action, and the cultural thematic binaries this activity attempts to challenge and resolve.

Perhaps the most insightful line of reasoning gained from the thesis argument is that narrative themes in the superhero-action film are not simply a source of cultural meaning, nor only a means of generating dynamic patterns, but these themes provide the intrinsic structure of the spectacle presenting them. Spectacle carries the film plot forward, yes, but spectacle is also an *activity of movement* in these films, invariably generating many kinds of rhythm onscreen, and it is these rhythms that developmentally narrativise the themes through this momentum.

It is also now useful to state near the close of my argument that any methodology which relies on aspects of textual interpretation invariably collects data together depending on the experiences and 'frames of reference' of the reader, rather than in a strictly empirical fashion. This is particularly the case when some genre conventions are assumed as eternal and everlasting over others, in effect *a*historicising these tropes and trivialising the wider institutional contexts that surround the filmmaking process. However, while ahistoricism can be a problem when analysing genre formulas, by isolating a pattern of recurring conventions across the current superhero film cycle this offers up an empirically-

grounded source of information that can continue to be transferred from film to film. When applying genre theory to the superhero narrative, there films are built on similar formulas that recycle the same sets of conventions. A certain collection of themes ritually recur across the action-adventure genre, adopted by the superhero film in a particular way, perpetuated throughout the 2000s-present production cycle time and time again. Regardless of their variation or innovation, these themes will always emerge as oppositional values invested in the hero/villain relationship.

The formal and filmic qualities of spectacle (physical movements, the pattern of editing and camerawork, special effects) will also follow audio-visual patterns established in/reproduced by superhero films over the course of the last 15 years. These motions form their own distinct kind of rhythms that are in turn 'read' as invested with the same pertinent thematic meanings and cultural contradictions. My model of combining a social ritual approach to genre theory with neoformalist analysis has afforded a means of gaining a better understanding into how this process works. The future scope of this analytical perspective of spectacular rhythms of thematic development is intertwined with the potential evolution of the superhero film over the course of this decade, as well as those action, fantasy and science fictional genres that may contribute super-heroic arcs of kinesis to their storytelling practices.

After a close analysis of each superhero film collected together in this thesis, and in gathering together the evidence from the formal components of their displays of spectacle, alongside the generic conventions invested in their narratives, there remains one insight that becomes clear. In order to generate the momentum for a storytelling ritual of cultural conflict that pits heroism against villainy, much of this process relies on continuing to repeat and innovate dynamic dimensions of kinetic and thematic narration. When looking to the future of these films, and in order to make any structured sense out of their conflicting cultural meanings, for the cinematic superhero at least, it all seems to be in the rhythm.

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Film Titles

3:10 To Yuma (2007)
A Dangerous Method (2011)
A Good Day to Die Hard (2013)
The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938)
All That Heaven Allows (1955)
Alien Quadtrilogy (1979-1997)
The Amazing Spider-Man (2012)
The Amazing Spider-Man 2 (2014)
Avatar (2009)
Avengers Assemble (2012)
Batman (1989)
Batman Begins (2005)
The Big Sleep (1946).
Blade (1998)
Blade Runner (1982)
Blade: Trinity (2005)
Bonnie and Clyde (1967)
Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kidd (1969)
Casino Royale (2006)
Commando (1985)
Captain America: The First Avenger (2011)
Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014)
Captain Blood (1935)
Catwoman (2004),
Daredevil (2003),
The Dark Knight (2008)
Die Hard (1988)
Die Hard 4.0 (2007)
Dirty Harry (1971)
Domino (2005)
Dredd (2012)
Expendables (2010)
Expendables 3 (2014)
Fast Five (2011)
Fantastic Four (2005)
Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer (2007)
Forrest Gump (1994)
Frankenstein (1931)
Gamer (2009)
Gladiator (2000)
The Good, The Bad and The Ugly (1966)
The Great Train Robbery (1903)
Green Lantern (2011)
Hancock (2008)
Hanna (2011)
Haywire (2011)
Hellboy (2005)
Hellboy II: The Golden Army (2008)

Hud (1963)
Hulk (2003)
The Hunger Games: Catching Fire (2013)
The Incredible Hulk (2008)
Independence Day (1995)
Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981)
Iron Man (2008)
Iron Man 2 (2010)
Iron Man 3 (2013)
Ivan The Terrible: Part I (1944)
Judge Dredd (1995)
Kick-Ass (2010)
Kick-Ass 2 (2013)
The Killer (1989)
King Kong (2005)
Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (2001)
Last Man Standing (1996)
Lethal Weapon (1987)
Lonely are the Brave (1962)
The Long Kiss Goodnight (1996)
Mad Max (1979)
The Maltese Falcon (1941)
Man of Steel (2013)
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962)
The Matrix (1999)
The Misfits (1961)
The Missouri Breaks (1976)
The Mummy (1932)
My Darling Clementine (1946)
North by North West (1959)
Open Range (2003)
Punisher: Warzone (2009)
Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985)
Red 2 (2013)
Red River (1948)
Resident Evil (2002)
Resident Evil: Extinction (2007)
Ride The High Country (1962)
The Rock (1996)
Rocky (1976)
Salt (2010)
The Searchers (1956)
Sin City (2005)
Singin' in the Rain (1952)
Spawn (1997)
Sherlock Holmes (2009)
Spider-Man (2002)
Spider-Man 2 (2004)
Spider-Man 3 (2007)
Super (2011)

Superman Returns (2006)
Star Trek (2009)
Strike (1925)
Terminator 2: Judgement Day (1991)
Thor (2011)
Thor: The Dark World (2013)
Titanic (1997)
Tombstone (1993)
Unforgiven (1992)
The Virginian (1929)
Watchmen (2009)
The Whistle Blower (1986)
The Wild Bunch (1969)
The Wolverine (2013)
Written on the Wind (1956)
X2: X-Men United (2003)
X-Men (2000)
X-Men: Days of Future Past (2014)
X-Men: First Class (2011)
X-Men Origins: Wolverine (2009)
X-Men: The Last Stand (2006)