

Superman on the Silver Screen: The Political Ideology of The Man of Tomorrow on Film

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The critical and commercial success of Superman: The Movie (1978) by Richard Donner laid the groundwork for the contemporary superhero film boom. In that film, Superman was a moderately conservative character with a strong sense of social responsibility. Man of Steel (2013) directed by Zack Snyder, reintroduced Superman to movie audiences as a very conservative character with an individualistic streak. Before Man of Steel, Superman films had promoted consistently social responsibility, while the conservative and liberal attitudes changed from film to film.

Through contextualized close reading, the six live action Superman films can be placed in the cultural landscape of the United States, and they can be interpreted as ideological articulations. The focus this article is to examine how Man of Steel relates to the previous Superman films and other contemporary superhero movies by examining how it lands on the axes of social responsibility versus individualism and liberalism versus conservatism. The previous films of the series are brought up for contextualization, but instead of tracking how each film of the series represented ideological values, they are discussed rather in context to the latest film of the franchise.

Within the six feature films starring Superman (released between 1978 and 2013), these attitudes manifest themselves, especially through gender representations. Those films that promoted more liberal and progressive gender attitudes failed critically and commercially, while those with attitudes that are more conservative have fared significantly better. Man of Steel would appear to be a continuation of the conservative and darker superhero trend chosen by Warner Brothers as almost as a counter-balance to the more colorful Marvel films released by Disney.

In the summer of 2013 *Man of Steel* was released unto the world. It reintroduced audiences to Superman. After a seven-year absence at a time when superhero films had become almost synonymous with blockbuster films, Kal-El was back, and this time he was not your grandfather's Superman. Gone was any trace of geniality or benevolence, the costume was darker, his expressions grimmer, and most importantly his idealism was replaced by cold pragmatism.

Superman made his first appearance in the pages of *Action Comics* in April 1938 (cover-dated June) (Weldon 2013, 25) and since then has become an enduring cultural icon. (Tye 2012, 299–300) Historian William Savage argues that Superman is not only the first superhero but that he is also the most influential (1990, 5). Over the last eight decades, Superman's adventures have been depicted in almost every media imaginable: comic books, video games, theme park rides, radio shows, novels, songs, TV-shows, Broadway musicals, and films. In the 2010s his perhaps most notable presence is in the DC cinematic universe, which is now being cobbled together by Warner Brothers. This article focuses on the big-budget Superman movies released between 1978 and 2016. *Superman* (1978) and *Superman II* (1980) articulated conservative attitudes, but from *Superman III* (1983) onwards the series began to embrace a more liberal attitude, which culminated in *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (1987). *Superman Returns* (2006) returned the series to a moderately conservative position, while *Man of Steel* (2013), took an aggressively individualist and conservative position, which continued in 2016's *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. These films are built to be blockbusters, and as such, they are aimed towards the widest possible audience. The section discussing *Superman* (1978) will expand on the significance of this issue in greater detail. These films were released within the timespan of 35 years, and explaining and exploring all the societal and political changes of that took place in the United States during that time would be impossible within the confines of one article.[\[1\]](#)

The goal of this article is to understand what kind political ideologies and attitudes each Superman film[\[2\]](#) supports mainly through understanding what the character of Superman represents. Most of these films steadily maintained that the character has a strong sense of social responsibility, while his actions otherwise alternated between conservative and liberal. In 2013, the trend of promoting social responsibility was subverted when *Man of Steel* reimagined Superman as a borderline libertarian.

The analysis in this article is formulated using close reading and contextualization. Close reading is the extraction and internalization of meanings from a text (Paul and Elder 2006, Loc. 174), which Lawrence Grossberg states that is an attempt to connect it to a larger context and determine its intertextual articulations (1992, Loc. 1138). This article aims to connect articulations of these films to the cultural and political contextual landscape of the United States during the time when these films were released. I define ideology as a way of linking actions to principles or values as Hans Noel's describes the concept (2013, 40). I interpret Superman's actions being driven by social responsibility or by individualism and how those actions articulate conservative or liberal attitudes.

Liberals tend to identify themselves as a group that favors change and progress, even if it means government involvement, whereas conservatives want to preserve traditional arrangements, especially if those arrangements are threatened by government interference (Conover and Feldman 643, 1981). Cognitive linguist George Lakoff argues that in contemporary conservative thinking limiting the pursuit of self-interests and economic freedom as not only socialism or communism but immoral as well. They see welfare as detrimental to society as it impedes competition and the advancement of individuals with most talents for operating in a free-market society (2002, 68–95). Lakoff also reminds us that conservatism and liberalism are not monolithic, and as they are radical categories, not one conservative nor liberal worldview would fit all liberals and conservatives, but there are central models and variations on those models (2002, 30).

I treat social responsibility as a set of beliefs that there must be a limit to economic inequality and as a duty to amend social injustices. Individualism, on the other hand, is a belief that is inequality acceptable since the efforts of the self-reliant individual determine success. These concepts are used in the manner Lawrence Bobo defines them in his article “Social Responsibility, Individualism, and Redistributive Policies” (1991, 73–74). Positions on specific issues may vary with time, but these are the fundamental values associated with these concepts. The liberal/conservative divide has been in effect since the 1950s and has only strengthened since then (Noel 2013, 10).

Author and literary scholar Tom De Haven describes Superman’s meaning to the American cultural heritage and ideological landscape as follows:

He embodied our values, celebrated our birthdays, cherished our traditions. Superman was all right. Superman was –if not us, exactly, then ours. Superman by then was ours. He was finned cars and a smoking gross national product, he was the interstate highway system, he was Cinerama. He was big, larger than life, and he was American. (2010, Loc. 942)

The creators of Superman, Jerry Siegel (1914–1996) and Joe Shuster (1914–1992) both came of age during the great depression. The creation process was informed by the crisis that the population of the United States was experiencing. Initially, Clark Kent was a nervous, ineffectual journalist whose job was only to report events to the public, but Superman was a hero who could protect the public with ease (Darowski 2008, 463–464). He seems to be naturally inclined to use his powers for good, and on the very first page of the first Superman story, it reads: “Early, Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind” (Siegel and Shuster 1938). Joseph Darowski identifies this early Superman as a roguish New Dealer, a symbolic representation of a

country divided in half. The Great Depression that started in 1929 gave a huge blow to the United States' confidence, rendering most of the population powerless. It was as if Americans were no longer the masters of their destiny. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal was a promise to fix America, a pledge to make the government the protector of the people (2008, 464). Superman reflected these same ideals and promises.



Image 1. Christopher Reeve as Superman (*Superman* © Warner Bros. 1978)

From 1978 onwards, Superman would no longer be compared only to other superheroes on the pages of comics, TV-shows, or low budget movie serials; he was placed into a new cultural context, as he entered the arena of the cinematic blockbuster. Hollywood had managed to recapture public's imagination and attention, while the director-driven "New Hollywood" films (Galenson and Kotin 2010, 37) were giving way to high-concept blockbusters like *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) (Biskind 1998, 336–343). Due to the high cost of this type films, people making them were (and still are) less likely to take risks, so that they attract the widest audience possible (Cucco 2009, 217). Superman's story was adapted for this new context. Film scholars Scott A. Lukas and John Marmysz claim that powerful dramatic and theatrical myths demand to be retold. They argue that retelling a story is comparable to a ritual, reflecting and reaffirming what values are culturally important (2009, 7–14). Perhaps Superman was similarly "demanding" to be remade in a new context to regain his relevance.

Director Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978) presented the world with a hero who was a polite civic-minded idealist. One who seemed to abhor violence and appears to be motivated by altruism. The film's plot follows Kal-El/Superman/Clark Kent (Christopher Reeve) as he is sent from the Planet Krypton to Earth as a baby, his formative years in rural Kansas, and when he finally moves to Metropolis and settles in his dual life as the mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent and the big blue boy scout, Superman.



Video 1. Trailer for *Superman*. Source: <https://youtu.be/bHw39LmnRJU>.

Superman arrived at a time when the US was in the throes of an existential crisis. Historian Gil Troy describes the United States during the late 1970s as a nation suffering from over-exhaustion. The Vietnam War had been a disaster, The Watergate scandal took down President Richard Nixon, and the economy was crumbling as unemployment increased along with inflation (2005, 27). During the first half of the decade, audiences had been keen on watching films that were morally ambiguous and featured bleak storylines. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), *Dirty Harry* (1971), and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) are but a few examples of such films. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner describe these films as “anti-heroic” (1988, 223). *A Clockwork Orange* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are both identified by Robert B. Ray as being part of what he calls “the Left cycle” films, whereas a movie like *Dirty Harry* would appeal to a more conservative audience. Ray argues that this indicated a rift between ideologies in the US and that the films are attempts to describe same contemporary events from different perspectives. Ray states that the key difference between the films that leaned on the Left and those that leaned on the Right was in how they portrayed heroism. Left-leaning films presented outlaws often as heroes, who clash with the

officials, whereas films that leaned on the Right portrayed the officials as heroes and outlaws as villains (1985, 298–300).

Ryan and Kellner argue that the success of “hero revival” -films such as *Star Wars* (1977), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1980), and *First Blood* (1982) signaled Ronald Reagan’s victory in the 1979 presidential election (1988, 228). *Superman* serves as an early example of this phenomenon but is more moderate in its celebration of strong, white, male heroes than the films mentioned before. In the late 1970s/early 1980s, supporting strict social control was one of the major components of a conservative identity (Conover and Feldman 1981, 639–640). Superman certainly respects the law and obeys it to the letter, but he is almost passive, always polite, and rarely resorts to violence. This attitude sets *Superman* apart from other conservative films as they portray violence as a necessary component of maintaining social order.

Clark Kent’s formative years in Kansas are portrayed as if they are taking place during the 1950s, or at least during some idealized version of the 1950s,^[3] disconnecting Clark from the radical youth culture of the 1960s. Thus, conveniently explaining why teenaged Clark was not involved in any youth movements that questioned the values of the previous generation. During the 1960s, teenagers, and young adults had difficulty conforming to the expectations and values imposed on them by their elders. During the 1970s, a politically conservative hegemony had settled over America and stifled the large reforms, which the counterculture movement had tried to achieve (Suri 2009, 46–53). Ignoring or skipping the turbulent 1960s, *Superman* conveniently avoids addressing any ideologically complex issues openly. In his book *Red State, Blue State, Rich State Poor State: Why Americans Vote the Way They Do* (2009) Andrew Gelman notes that the polarization of American politics, the inability or unwillingness to find consensus, began during the 1960 and 1970s as the country struggled to find consensus on such issues as civil rights and the Vietnam war. He continues to add that the partisan divisions that began then continued onwards to the 2000s (Gelman 2009, Loc. 2259–2271). Ryan and Kellner argue that by 1978, the very year *Superman* was released, the conservative revolution (also called the Reagan revolution) had managed to demonize liberalism and big government to such an extent that the culture was shifting towards strikingly conservative themes (1988, 133–35, 290–92).

In *Superman*, City of Metropolis is not a crime-ridden cesspool, even if it is the setting for an overwhelming majority of crimes and other social problems in the movie. Ryan and Kellner note that films, which represent big cities as dangerous places tend to resonate with conservative audiences (1988, 92). In this sense, representing Metropolis (thinly veiled New York) as a

reasonably decent place to live, but possibly in need of Superman's services, the film mediates a common ground between conservative and liberal mindsets. The larger threat to the well-being of humanity in the film's storyline comes from the main antagonist, Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman). Luthor plans to fire a nuclear missile into the San Andreas Fault, which will cause a massive earthquake that will sink California into the ocean. The primary motivation for Luthor to do this is money: he has bought large properties of land in the area where the new coastline would be after this cataclysm.

The ideological conflict with Superman and Luthor symbolizes the divide between social responsibility and individualism taken to a satirical extreme. If Luthor is successful, he will become a billionaire, but at the cost of countless lives. The people who die are casualties of his innovativeness. Superman represents the need to protect those with less political power from the dramatic changes implemented by those with superior abilities. In Luthor's case, that ability is his intelligence (in the film Luthor claims to have an IQ of over 200) that needs to be kept in check by Superman, once again continuing the movie's theme of moderation and mild conservatism.

Kellner argues that conservative films often create narratives in which a nation is redeemed by a savior (2010, 9). *Superman* does little to establish the character as anything more than a helpful do-gooder. Superman is also not a prototype for a hero for the Reagan age, as Susan Jeffords defines the Reagan era heroes trying to bring back an imaginary glorious past (1994, Loc. 835). Superman is reverent towards the glory days of the past, meaning the utopia of the doomed planet Krypton, but uninterested in recreating it. He also does his best to keep society from being destroyed (or changed too quickly) by overconfident megalomaniacs.

Superman II: Protecting the Heteronormative Hegemony from Disruptions

The second Superman film maintains the socially responsible course set in the previous film, but that responsibility is extended mainly to those who fit the heteronormative expectations of the early 1980s. *Superman II* (1981) celebrates the heteronormative hegemony and visualizes those who challenge it as murderous outsiders. These outsiders come in the form of three Kryptonian criminals who arrive on Earth to create mayhem and destruction.



Video 2. Trailer for *Superman II*. Source: <https://youtu.be/jxD8RIGnP64>.

In the years between the release of *Superman* and *Superman II*, the US had moved on from the Carter years to the Reagan years. President Jimmy Carter held a realist view of the limitations of resources and understood the complexity of the problems facing the nation and believed that with the help of the government, Americans could overcome these obstacles. Despite this, he had begun the process of deregulation, which meant diminishing government involvement with the economy. Such actions made his political priorities seem muddled (*Outline of U.S. History 2005*, 291–92). The Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan, on the other hand, believed that the government was the problem and most definitely not the solution (Troy 2005, 26–31). Reagan maintained three goals during all his years in office: cut taxes, decrease regulation, and increase defense. In his view, America’s military strength was the key to international respect and liberal politics were to blame for the social decline of the country (Troy 2005, 68–69). His ideology spoke particularly to those socially conservative voters who were disappointed in liberal politics and felt alienated by the increase in affirmative action, women’s rights, and permissive legislation towards pornography and drugs (Himmelstein and McCreae 1984, 595). By the time *Superman II* arrived in movie theaters in 1981, the national self-esteem of America was already on the rise and the nation had found its hero in Ronald Reagan, as he had become the 40th President of the United States (Troy 2005, 50–53).

Superman II establishes that not only is Clark a non-sexual entity for Lois, other women similarly ignore him. Jeffords argues that Reaganism generated the powerful male subject to counteract the “weaker” male subject of the Carter years along with the rise of family-oriented values that centered

around a strong male body (1994, Loc. 179). The tension between Clark Kent's supposedly "soft body" and his true Superman "hard body" is created as Clark is presented as an emasculated and repressed version of Superman. This tension associates *Superman II* with the emerging themes of the Reagan era. In Superman, these two sides co-exist, but the Clark Kent persona exists only to emphasize the superiority of Superman.

The previous film characterized Lois Lane as a confident and successful journalist, who is instantaneously swooned by Superman, but her infatuation with him has little effect on her career. In *Superman II*, her character is more passive, and her dreams of domestic bliss threaten to derail Superman's career as a hero. This change is comparable to a trend that took place in Hollywood cinema in the early 1980s. Passive women, whose life revolves around finding a man and starting a family, replaced independent and driven heroines. Susan Faludi sees this trend as a direct response to the feminist female characters of the 1970s (2002, 323–326). At the beginning of *Superman II*, Lois Lane is a daring investigative reporter, willing to risk her life for a story, but as soon as she finds out that Clark Kent is Superman, her career ambitions fade. This regressive attitude towards women's role in society becomes increasingly apparent as the film continues. Lawrence Grossberg argues that the return to traditional family values was one of the crucial components of constructing a conservative cultural hegemony (1993, Loc. 4611). The removal of Lois' career ambitions and her desire to become a housewife for Superman signal an aggressively conservative sensibility.

Superman II treats women and any disruptions to the heterosexual hegemony at worst with contempt and at best dismissively. The female villain, Ursa (Sarah Douglas) is the clearest representation of this attitude. Not only are her actions violent but also, she shows no respect for traditional authorities or values. She also has short hair, which has been argued to be a necessity for radical women (Schneider 2004, 508), particularly within the context of second-wave feminism, which lasted from the 1960s until the backlash of the 1980s (Harlan 1998, 77–78). On the surface, the policies of the Reagan administration seemed to be working towards advancing women's rights and equality, but in reality, they made it more difficult for women to build their professional careers by making day-care options limited. These policies were in line with the Reagan administration's desire to reject feminist values, as they were seen corrupting family bonds that conservatives at the time saw being fundamental for the well-being of the society (Bashvekin 1994, 678–681).

The rebellious actions of the three Kryptonian criminals cause not only material destruction but also pose a threat to the heteronormative hegemony that Superman is actively protecting. The trio disrupts the gender binary with their gender-neutral uniforms, ambiguous romantic and sexual

tensions, and overall contempt for how society has been organized. Zod (Terence Stamp) and Ursa have some vague romantic connection, but both seem equally fond of Non (Jack O'Halloran). Creating a context in which clear binary distinction between the sexes and heterosexuality are naturalized and incontestable is elemental to maintaining heteronormative hegemony. This naturalization means that gender roles are clearly defined as men being masculine (strong and active), women feminine (weak and passive), and that any variation from this or from the heterosexual relationships they form is unnatural (Engel, Dhawan, and Varela 2011, 63–64).

This hegemony is what Zod, Non, and especially Ursa are violently challenging. They do not conform to clear gender roles and demand to be acknowledged. Ursa is the distorted version of the ambition that Lois Lane had in the previous film, depicting the only actually active woman in *Superman II* as a man-hating killer. Valerie Lehr argues that vilifying non-conforming otherness as it struggles for acceptance, visibility, and political power, coincide with the archaic notion that granting these things for it would result in the deterioration of the capitalist society (1999, 54–56). *Superman II* suggests that it is the responsibility of every capable individual to do his/her part in maintaining the status quo and that those who question it are dangerous.

Superman III: Flying Against the Zeitgeist of the 1980s

Superman III (1983) reverses the conservative trend of the series and promotes considerably more liberal attitudes and values than either of the films that preceded it. In a pre-credits sequence, we are introduced to a new character, Gus Gorman (Richard Pryor)[\[4\]](#), who is waiting in line at an unemployment office. He hears that he is no longer eligible to receive welfare checks from the city of Metropolis. This scene suggests that not even the fictional city of Metropolis has been spared from the economic turmoil of the early 1980s. Unemployment had increased significantly due to the 1982 recession (Hanc 2000, 4). While leaving the unemployment office, Gus sees an ad for a career in computer programming and decides to apply.



Video 3. Trailer for *Superman III*. Source: https://youtu.be/uFkii_8vj0M.

Next time we see Gus, he has found work and is receiving his first paycheck. He complains to a co-worker how his salary is eaten up by taxes. The co-worker explains jokingly to him that this way he will have some money by the time he retires. To this Gus responds, “I want mine now!” This type of open dissatisfaction with social security and similar services was a part of the conservative mindset in the 1970s (Noel 2013, 105). Reaganism encouraged materialism and self-absorption to such an extent that the 1980s in America were defined by these individualistic values (Troy 2005, 330–331). Gus appears to have been beguiled by the zeitgeist of the time. Since Gus develops into one of the film’s antagonists, he articulates an open concern over how rampant individualism can result in a moral decline.

In *Superman III*, Clark takes center stage as the “real” person behind Superman. At his high-school reunion party in Smallville Clark meets his childhood friend, Lana Lang (Anette O’Toole) and the two start to develop romantic feelings towards each other. Clark is in no way dismayed by the fact the Lana is a divorcee and a single mother. Grossberg notes that during the 1980s, the conservative rhetoric had moved the family into the place of the individual, making it the primary unit of American social definition (Grossberg 1997, Loc. 5013). *Superman III* does not place Clark as a surrogate father, even though the possibility of a long-term romance is very likely. He is polite to little Ricky, Lana’s son, but more like a friend rather than a father figure. Clark challenges the idea that a nuclear family is necessary to raise a child. This contention is most openly articulated in scenes where Brad Wilson (Gavan O’Herlihy), Lana’s former boyfriend, tries to undermine Clark. When interacting with Lana’s son, Ricky, Brad’s motivation is only to showcase his stereotypical

performance of masculinity to Lana, and how he would make a good male role model for her son. When Clark advises Ricky, his attitude is far from authoritarian or self-congratulatory.

Clark and Brad display several opposing views, most of them ideological: urban versus rural, modernism versus nostalgia, and liberalism versus conservatism. Clark believes that modern life allows for different ways of being, whereas Brad sees that people and things should remain the way they are. It is worth noting that Brad is Clark's adversary, not Superman's, even though Clark does use some of his powers for comedic effect. Clark seems to have a similar outlook on masculinity as socialist feminists had during the late 1970s and early 1980s. In their view, masculinity can have various meanings and is defined by men's relation to women and other men, rather than a singular male sex role (Messner 1997, 58–59). Most explicitly, this viewpoint comes across in a scene where Clark and Brad exchange ideas on how Ricky should bowl.

Brad: For a guy who was lucky to be water-boy on the high school team, you sure got a big mouth, Kent.

Clark: I just think Ricky would rather not get a bowling lesson in front of the other kids.

Brad: The kid needs a man to show him —

Clark: The kid will do fine on his own.

While Clark is busy with his new romantic interest in Smallville, Gus Gorman has used his computer skills to embezzle money from the company he works for. Much to his surprise, the CEO of the company, Ross Webster (Robert Vaughn), does not scold him but wants to use Gus' talents for far bigger schemes. Gorman utilizes various computer networks to manipulate markets so that Webster can reap enormous profits. When left unchecked, big business becomes a global threat, just to maximize earnings. Gus and Webster orchestrate a tropical storm to hit Colombia, the one coffee producing country that will not agree to be part of Webster's cartel. Webster explains Colombia is unsettling the economy of an open market, which opens his ideological views to the audience.[\[5\]](#)

On an ideological level, those who favor individualism over social responsibility see that social and economic inequality is justifiable if one simply has the talents to acquire more wealth than others (Bobo 1991, 77–79). Webster represents such an individualist gone wild. He despises the idea of the market being regulated by anyone. To Webster, Superman embodies a mentality that hinders

economic success. Grossberg identifies demonizing the regulation of the free market as one of the most important unifying conservative concepts that made the Reagan revolution possible (Grossberg 1993, Loc. 4394–4423).

Perhaps the most memorable element of *Superman III* is the sequence where he fights with himself. After being exposed to synthetic kryptonite developed by Gus in cahoots with Ross, Superman becomes selfish, overconfident, and all in all very unheroic. He ignores the mayhem the villains are causing, even helping them by proxy. Eventually, Superman has a nervous breakdown that culminates with him landing in the middle of a junkyard and splitting into two people. The other is Clark Kent and other the Evil Superman.

This brawl forebodes a change, which would take place in American society in general. The juxtaposition between Clark Kent and Superman previously represented a schism between effeminate intellectual male versus the idea that physical strength is an essential component of dominant masculinity, but the latter would become passé as America moved into late market capitalism: the producer became the consumer, and physical strength had little to do with one's position in society (Goebel 2013, 183–84). *Superman III* solves this conflict by letting Clark destroy the selfish Superman (who has a five-o'clock shadow and a dirty looking costume). After the Evil Superman has evaporated, Clark opens his business shirt to reveal the brightly colored Superman costume underneath.

Even though it has been built up only very discretely, the Superman versus Clark fight serves as a symbolic climax of the film's battling ideologies: selfish (individualism) versus selfless (social responsibility). *Superman III* positions Superman against the prevailing ideology of the 1980s and suggests that celebrating the nuclear family and individualism, so highly valued by conservatives, would create more problems than solve them.

Superman IV: The Quest for Peace: Openly Opposing the Politics of Ronald Reagan

Superman IV: The Quest for Peace (1987) continues the ideological direction of the previous film, this time liberalism is not just in the subtext, but in the text as well. The film's main concern is the nuclear arms race, which indicates dissatisfaction with the Reagan-era cold war rhetoric.

The film begins with a scene where a drifting satellite hits a Russian space capsule, and Superman comes flying to their aid. The first lines uttered by Superman are in Russian. According to Christopher Reeve himself, the fourth Superman movie went into pre-production in 1985, with the writers working on a screenplay based largely on his input. Reeve felt anxiety over Ronald Reagan's remarks in which he called the Soviet Union an "evil empire" and believed that the character of Superman could bring about positive change in the world. (Reeve 1998, Loc. 3078–3087). Writer Tom Mankiewicz, who co-wrote the 1978 *Superman*, warned Reeve not to have Superman involved with a real-world problem like nuclear weapons because the character could solve them so easily that the story would not be very dramatic (Rossen 2008, 170).



Video 4. Trailer for *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*. Source: <https://youtu.be/jwuB2ub5aek>.

The cold war was still ongoing, and America's anxieties about it (and hopes for a hero to right the world) could be mined for profit (Troy 2005, 241). Perhaps the most fevered exploitation of these fears and desires had been *Red Dawn* (1984), written and directed by John Milius. *Red Dawn* was heavily criticized especially by liberal publications, which saw it as a paranoid right-wing recruitment film (Lichtenfield 2004, Loc. 2043). The film involves the US being invaded by communist troops as the cold war suddenly heats, up and a group of American teenagers fights guerilla warfare against the communist invaders.

In *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*, Superman slips further away from the savior of the nation he had previously been, showing him become more disillusioned with the politics of his adopted nation. Ronald Reagan had initially cast himself as the hero, the father figure for which the country

yearned for, and he played the role like a professional (Jeffords 1994, Loc. 71). I would argue that Superman's separation from early 1980s ideology of Ronald Reagan reaches its pinnacle in *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*. In *Superman III*, Superman shifted from a conservative to a recognizably liberal character, in a collection of ideological choices and statements. It also indicated that Superman could implement those values with relative ease. Now the choice is much more challenging as he actively opposes the foreign policy of the US.

The concept of the cold war had been a dividing issue between conservatives and liberals consistently since the 1950s as liberals opposed the cold war openly (Noel 2013, 103–107). Superman's actions in *Superman IV* place on a recognizably liberal side on this ideologically divisive issue. In *Superman III*, liberal and socially conscious values were in the subtext and occasionally became a part of the text. In this fourth movie, the text is explicitly ideological. After receiving a letter from a schoolboy, in which the kid asks why Superman allows for the existence of nuclear weapons, Superman begins disarming the world of these destructive weapons. Lex Luthor sees this as a business opportunity and creates a superpowered villain, which he names Nuclear Man. After destroying the Man of Steel, he plans to rearm the world with his business partners. "Nobody wants war. I'd just like to keep the threat alive." Luthor says when explaining his plans to Superman. This kind of reasoning is similar to the idea that the fear of a war that nobody can win is not worth fighting. Nevertheless, rivaling countries (in this case the US and the Soviet Union) must maintain a credible nuclear armament as noted by Robert Jervis (1988, 80–84). According to Jeff Manza, Jennifer A. Heerwig, and Brian J. McCabe, the public support for military and armament spending had peaked around the early 1980s as had the concern over the Soviets which had been so dear to conservatives during the time leading to the Reagan presidency (2012, 130–31). Ronald Reagan's characterizations of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," lead particularly those with liberal views to fear that rising tensions could lead to a nuclear holocaust (Chapman 2010, 102). *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* shows Superman sharing the same fears as the liberals and taking a stand against such hostilities. He also makes the choice of ridding the entire world of nuclear weapons, not just of those that are a threat to the US.

Superman IV: The Quest for Peace seems to suffer from the inability to maintain a believable Superman narrative. In a sense, the film is an attempt to connect Superman with real-world issues, but the resolution can easily seem unsatisfying. The hero simply announces that he no longer will continue his mission, because he had to fight off a creation of Lex Luthor. It does not connect with anything in the film's story, except possibly that Superman had time to think about his campaign

while he was sick or flying from one corner of the world to the next. Critics, fans, and general audiences alike disliked the film, aside from the poor production values and lapses in narrative logic, the concept of Superman taking on nuclear disarmament, a genuine source of angst for viewers, was seen as ill-conceived at best (Rossen 2008, 168–70).

Superman IV: The Quest for Peace ended the Christopher Reeve cycle of Superman movies and put the franchise into hibernation for nearly two decades. Superman did appear in the live-action television series *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, which ran for four seasons between 1993 and 1997 (*IMDB*, “Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman”), while *Smallville* ran for ten seasons, but focused solely on Clark’s years before he donned the red cape (*IMDB*, “Smallville”). Several Superman film projects were in development, but none of them materialized until 2006.

Superman Returns: Authoritarian and Conservative Attitudes Make a Comeback



Image 2. Brandon Routh as Superman (*Superman Returns* © Warner Bros. 2006)

Superman Returns (2006) continues where *Superman II* left off, ignoring parts III and IV, but has a contemporary setting, so it is a thematic sequel to *Superman II* rather than a direct continuation. Director Bryan Singer had successfully brought Marvel’s mutant superheroes to the silver screen in *X-Men* (2000), which was one of the early films of the modern superhero film boom (Lichtenfield 2004, Loc. 3526–3534). His first two *X-Men* films are also notable for their gay-rights subtext (Rauscher 2010, 27–29). In *Superman Returns*, such subtext is nowhere to be found. The film begins with a text explaining that Superman (Brandon Routh) has been missing for five years, ever

since astronomers discovered the remains of Krypton. Early in the film, he returns to Earth, having found no other living members of his race. The world, Metropolis, and especially Lois Lane have gotten used to a life without Superman. Lois Lane (Kate Bosworth) now has a 5-year-old son, Jason (Tristan Lake Leabu). Superman quickly realizes that Jason is his son, but Lois has forgotten this since her memory was erased by Superman in *Superman II*.



Video 5. Trailer for *Superman Returns*. Source: <https://youtu.be/bRqAUqAFhNw>.

Superman Returns rarely if ever addresses the issue of 9/11, which according to Eleni Towns is one of the defining moments for a generation (2011). Kellner notes that the targets that were attacked on September 11th, 2001, were symbols of American capitalism (World Trade Center lies in the heart of New York's financial district), military power (Pentagon being the headquarters of the US Department of Defense), and government (Washington D.C.) (2010, 98). These events hover over the film even if they are not directly referenced. Lois Lane seems to blame Superman for leaving but does not specify what is at the heart of her accusations. She only implies that Superman was not present when he was needed and that the world has been forced to go on without him.

In 2000, Republican George W. Bush won the presidency in a tight election against Democrat Al Gore. These two were seen representing two very different ideologies, Bush being a conservative in the vein of Ronald Reagan and Gore a liberal technocrat with environmental concerns (*Outline of U.S. History* 2005, 332–333). In 2004, Bush was re-elected, and this has been attributed to a seemingly decisive and strong leadership when reacting to 9/11 and managing his subsequent war on terror. Even if he was not seen as highly competent, he did represent consistency at an uncertain

time (Weisberg & Christenson 2007, 298–299). *Superman Returns* tells a similar narrative: A strong conservative leader who is not particularly popular becomes increasingly acceptable due to cataclysmic events. Before Superman reintroduces himself to the world, we see him watching televised news with dissatisfaction, as if the world has taken a turn for the worse during his absence.

The question of privacy had taken on a new dimension in the US, as anti-terrorism laws intended to prevent terrorists from planning any attacks were passed. These laws (commonly referred to as The USA Patriot Act) were seen by organizations like American Civil Liberties Union as permitting the surveillance of almost any US citizen and, through this, as a threat to liberty itself (ACLU 2001). Americans were initially willing to surrender some of their privacy to deter terrorism, but enthusiasm quickly declined after 2001, and more and more felt that control over their personal information was increasingly important (Kasper 2005, 80–81).

In a superhero movie that arrived just two years after *Superman Returns*, *The Dark Knight* (2008), Batman faced a moral dilemma when being able to monitor all cell phone communication in Gotham City. In *Superman Returns*, Superman uses his X-ray vision to spy in on Lois Lane's home and domestic life and his super-hearing to eavesdrop on private conversations, and this presents no moral quandary. These invasions of privacy serve no other purpose than to satisfy Superman's curiosity and help him reclaim his place as a father to his son. Whereas *The Dark Knight* was an articulation of the pessimism and distrust towards the economic and political elite, according to Douglas Kellner (2010, 11), *Superman Returns* seems to advocate trust in those who spy on citizens and accept the status quo. *The Dark Knight* presented invasion of privacy as problematic, no matter what the reason and that overreliance on one individual will yield only short-term solutions for society. Brian R. Farmer argues that the yearning for a charismatic hero from a "better time" is a popular concept especially among extreme conservatives (Farmer 2006, 89–90). In 2005, most conservatives viewed the Patriot Act as a necessary method of fighting terrorism, whereas an overwhelming number of liberals considered it was detrimental to civil liberties.^[6] In a sense, *Superman Returns* gives an "A-OK" to an issue that liberals vehemently opposed while also pandering to a conservative need to see a hero from bygone days reclaiming his place in society.

The 2000s was not an era of overwhelming support for conservative attitudes but rather a time when liberalism had negative connotations. Republican politicians could easily describe themselves as conservative, but their Democratic colleagues had to avoid being labeled as "liberal" (Manza, Heerwig, and McCabe 2012, 137). *Superman Returns* reflects such attitudes and validates them as well. The main narrative of the film is Superman establishing himself as an authoritative leader and

father, while also protecting the established cultural hegemony from transformation. This fear of change is articulated through Lex Luthor (Kevin Spacey), who is planning to use Kryptonian technology to create a continent of his own, which will result in the death of billions. Luthor is working to overthrow the entire capitalist system with his new world order, rather than trying to manipulate that system for his gain. The film seems to suggest that any disruptions of the prevailing social order would have catastrophic consequences.

Entertainment Weekly claimed that *Superman Return's* budget (when including development for unmade Superman films and worldwide marketing) was \$343 million (Jensen 2006). The film made \$391 million worldwide (Boxofficemojo.com, "Superman Returns). Most likely due to the lackluster financial performance, the film did not receive a sequel, and the Superman film franchise was rebooted in 2013.

***Man of Steel*: Introducing the Individualistic Superman**



Image 3. Henry Cavill as Superman (*Man of Steel* © Warner Bros. 2013)

Man of Steel (2013) represents both conservative and individualistic views stronger than any other previous Superman film. It retells Superman's (Henry Cavill) origin story and pits him against other Kryptonians, led by General Zod (Michael Shannon). *Man of Steel* was directed by Zack Snyder, under the wing of executive producer Christopher Nolan. Nolan stated that he gave the initial push for *Man of Steel*, but had no further creative input. Film scholar Martin Fradley argues that there are inherently conservative elements in Nolan's brand of realism and that those qualities are displayed most blatantly in his Batman trilogy. While Fradley's argument is compelling, particularly in the case of *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), Nolan's Batman films emphasize the importance of social responsibility, a value almost completely missing from *Man of Steel*. Fradley lists conservatism, rationality, realism, and masculine gravitas being the core values of *The Dark Knight Rises*. He

considers the way Nolan handles realism is telling of a latent homophobia and anti-feminism (Fradley 2013, 15–27). All these elements are very much present in *Man of Steel*, and aesthetically it is remarkably like Nolan’s Batman movies.



Video 6. Trailer for *Man of Steel*. Source: <https://youtu.be/T6DJcgm3wNY>.

Several contemporary superhero films feature scenes that make a point of showing the physique of their male stars.^[7] While these scenes are not entirely a reversal on the “male gaze,” they could be seen as making the superhero films more female friendly and subverting some of the tropes of superhero films (Velocci 2014). One of the key concepts of the “male gaze” is the depiction of females as passive objects for the male protagonist and/or viewers to gaze upon (Mulvey 1990, 35–36). *Man of Steel* features no scenes where Clark is subjected to such a gaze and the film sticks closely to another trend from conservative films: when the viewers see Clark’s body he is always in motion. Jeffords mentions that films from the 1980s that align themselves with Reagan-era ideals for masculinity portray the male body in motion, never passive, and with a narrative justification for presenting the highly trained and muscular physique (Jeffords 1994, Loc. 459–488). Superman also rarely shows any emotions, and even then, only aggression or mild frustration. This concept of an unemotional man of action is also an ideal held dear in the works of late author-philosopher Ayn Rand (Burns 2009, Loc. 742). Lois (Amy Adams) is a far more independent character than in any of the previous films. She also handles herself well in dangerous situations and figures out Superman’s identity quickly. Lois Lane is a strong independent woman, and as such, her arc in the film is to fall in love with Superman, the strongest man in the film’s universe. In Ayn Rand’s philosophy, women must be strong and independent, so that only the strongest and most dominant males can subdue

them (Burns 2009, Loc. 4701). The relationship between Lois and Clark in *Man of Steel* is virtually identical to the ideal male/female dynamic described by Rand.

Man of Steel also shares some other ideological similarities with the philosophy of Rand. Ever since the 1990s, Rand had become an increasingly important icon for conservatives, despite her atheism (Noel 2013, 6). Rand is particularly influential among libertarians (Wilhelm 2014). The largest political group with a libertarian identity in America is a collection of people called “Business Conservatives,” as they are called in the PEW Research Center political typology report from 2014. This affluent group made up 10% of the adult US population, and while they support many ideals related to traditional conservatism, they see that conservatism is subservient to individualism. They have an overwhelming belief that the US government is spending more than it can afford on helping the needy and that it is best to keep the government’s role to a minimum (Pew Research Center 2014, 101). Similar ideals are present in Clark’s upbringing. In a flashback, we see him as a young teenager saving an entire busload of his schoolmates when the bus drives off a bridge into a river. His adoptive father’s (Kevin Costner) reaction is not elation, but rather disappointment since Clark should keep his powers a secret.

Jonathan Kent: You have to keep this side of yourself a secret.

Clark Kent: What was I suppose to do? Let them die?

Jonathan Kent: Maybe...

Jonathan Kent thinks his adoptive son was sent to Earth for a reason, but apparently saving children from drowning in a bus is not one of them. The reasoning could be that perhaps in the future Clark will save even more people and that by revealing his powers, he puts the future at risk. Either way, he is risking the future his father has planned for him, and the scene gives the impression that he should learn to focus on the big picture. An article by Adam Ozimek in the business magazine *Forbes* praised *Man of Steel* for its brave depiction of utilitarianism and pointed out how rare such weighing of the consequences of “the net present value of welfare” is, and that Hollywood usually depicts such values as a villainous quality (Ozimek 2013). Jonathan Kent dies protecting his son’s secret as he forbids him from saving him from a tornado. Superman interacts with his biological father, Jor-El (Russell Crowe) via an interactive hologram. Jor-El tells Clark that “Your greatness will inspire others.” This inspirational greatness is on display as Superman breaks Zod’s neck in the climactic battle of the film. The film frames this decision as the only conceivable course of action,

not even suggesting the possibility of a compromise. By doing this, the film dispenses with any shred of idealism it had left for a character so closely identified with the American optimism. It serves as an exclamation point on the hard-right-leaning ideology that the film has been building up during its running time. In the polarized climate of the 2010s, even Superman cannot afford to show compassion to those who pose a threat to society.

Unlike the Christopher Reeve or Brandon Routh incarnations of Superman, both of which reflected contemporary presidential politics, *Man of Steel* presents us with a Superman that is aligned political ideologies that oppose those of the sitting president. Max J. Skidmore notes that President Barack Obama's health care reform was met with considerable resistance from conservatives who claimed that Obama's plans reeked of socialism and gave government control over one sixth of the economy. While the Affordable Care Act (ACA) did not meet unanimous praise from the left either, it was a major step towards universal healthcare in the United States. (Skidmore 2012, 104–06) The ACA represents Obama's belief that compromise as the fundamental component of constitutional democracy, which resulted in politics that satisfied neither conservative nor liberal extremist (Pederson 2012, 47–48). *Man of Steel* could be seen a rejection of Obama's political views as it presents "saving everybody" as a problematic concept and compromise as weakness.

Conclusions: Superman Films and their Political Ideologies from 1978 to 2013

Superman (1978), the first film of the series, the character Superman (Christopher Reeve) represents moderate conservative attitudes and acted almost like a mediator between them and liberal attitudes. He exhibits characteristics of a conservative and liberal hero but is decidedly passive and approving of the prevalent social order. He nevertheless sees untethered capitalism, represented in the film by Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman), as potentially dangerous to society and does not yearn to recreate some imaginary gone era (a concept popular among conservatives at the time). Superman displays a general pro- establishment mentality and belief in the fairness of US society, but the film avoids the conservative trope of portraying major cities as grimy, uninhabitable places.

In *Superman II* (1981), Superman stands as a defender of the conservative heteronormative hegemony and Lois Lane was reduced to a docile housewife candidate. Clark Kent is now more clearly than before an undesirable "weak" male, a repressed performance by Superman who has to

masquerade as ineffectual Clark to maintain his double identity, which suggests that Superman is now closer to the masculine ideals of the early Reagan years than previously. The three main antagonists of the do not conform to gender expectations of the time, they wear gender-neutral costumes, and their relationship dynamics are ambiguous, and as such, represent a threat to the nuclear family ideal that Superman is trying to preserve. The disruptive presence of the villains is illustrated by the material destruction they cause, and as such, they are a vilified representation of otherness that struggles for acceptance and political power.

The direction set by the first two Superman films is reversed as *Superman III* (1983) portrays Clark Kent as the “true” identity, while Superman is the person he pretends to be when using his powers. The film reimagines Clark as a more complex representation of acceptable masculinities, rather than just the counterpart to Superman’s conservative mode of masculinity. The film culminates in Superman losing his moral compass and splitting in two, due to the influence of synthetic Kryptonite, which forces Superman and Clark to fight each other. This fight becomes a battle of ideologies, one being the individualistic aggressive Superman and the socially responsible mild-mannered Clark. Through Clark, *Superman III* articulates that the conservative ideals of the 1980s resulted in agony rather than happiness.

Superman IV: The Quest for Peace (1987) continues on the path set by the previous film, but rather than relying on symbolic representations of real-world issues, Superman takes on the very real issue of nuclear weapons. Reflecting the attitudes and worries of actor Christopher Reeve, now his fourth turn as the man of steel, Superman promises to rid the world of nuclear arms while Lex Luthor returns to capitalize on the situation. The film’s critique of the cold war arms race is not articulated clearly and seems to be mostly motivated by Ronald Reagan’s comments describing the Soviet Union as an “evil empire,” making the film’s overreaching and muddled anti-war message aimed towards no particular aspect of US foreign policy. The film concluded with Superman simply giving up on his mission, after exchanging blows with a less-than-impressive villain named Nuclear Man.

The 2006 attempt to revitalize the film series, *Superman Returns* is both a sequel to *Superman II* and a soft reboot. Superman (Brandon Routh) uses same tactics as the administration of George W. Bush to gain information and quietly taking his place as an authoritative father figure with very little fanfare or public support. Superman seems unengaged with the world aside from emoting some vague sense of disappointment towards the way the world has gone without him. Lex Luthor

(Kevin Spacey) this time does not represent so much uncontrolled capitalism but rather a completely new world order, brought upon by using technology that resembles magic.

Since *Superman Returns* failed to generate enough box office revenue to warrant a sequel and the series was completely rebooted in 2013. *Man of Steel* (2013) recreates the conservative visual style of Christopher Nolan's Batman films and for the first time shows Superman (Henry Cavill) questioning the value of trying to save everybody and his main duty to society is to be an example rather than a selfless savior. Superman's libertarian leanings seem to have a subtext that could be interpreted being critical of the policies and beliefs of then president Barack Obama. In *Man of Steel*, Superman is unyielding and uncompassionate as anything else would imply weakness.

Those Superman films, which are recognizably conservative, have a recurring theme of cataclysmic events threatening the status quo of American society. *Superman*, *Superman II*, *Superman Returns*, and *Man of Steel* all seem to suggest that the destruction of the prevailing value system and major changes in society mean agony for all. It would be interesting to see how the latest Superman films, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) and in the upcoming *Justice League* (2017) deal with the concept of change and whether disruptions to hegemony are seen as dangerous, positive, or neutral. Superhero films (and television series) are currently being released at an almost exhausting pace but perhaps the most interesting ones are yet to come. Once the world has been saved enough times, these films might turn to ask complex questions of morality on a textual level, not just in the subtext and they just might do it more successfully than *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*.

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Notes

[1] This article condenses the key findings of my Master's thesis, *This is What Happened to the Man of Tomorrow: The Political Ideology of Superman on the Silver Screen from 1978 to 2013*, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, 2015.

[2] Serials like *Superman* (1948) and *Atom Man vs. Superman* (1950), and the 58-minute theatrical film *Superman and the Mole People* (1951) are excluded.

[3] The chronology of *Superman* is somewhat confusing. The film's prologue refers to Daily Planet being a beacon during hard times like the Great Depression. Clark's teenage years take place in the 1950's (Rock 'n' Roll and Hot Rods) and the rest of the film takes place in contemporary late 1970s (clothes, cars, and cultural references) so Clark would have to be 17 in 1955/56 and in his forties by the time action moves to Metropolis. In Donner's *Superman*, such inconsistencies are irrelevant. The film is building a myth and a Clark as a teenager in the 1950s is a part of that myth.

[4] It should be noted that Richard Pryor is the first African-American actor to have a major role in the Superman series.

[5] In this manner, *Superman III* goes against the advice of someone who would become an influential figure for contemporary libertarians. Ayn Rand warned Hollywood not to depict industrialists, free enterprise, or greed in an unflattering light, in her 1947 pamphlet *Screen Guide for Americans*. (John Belton, "Seeing Red: Cold War Hollywood," *Movies and American Society*, 194–95).

[6] "The 2005 Political Typology: Beyond Red vs. Blue: Republicans Dived About Role of Government – Democrats by Social and Personal Values," Pew Research Center (Washington D.C., 2005), 50.

[7] Such scenes can be found in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *Thor* (2011), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014), and *Guardians of The Galaxy* (2014).