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Musical Topics in the Comic Book Superhero Film Genre

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Musical Topics in the Comic Book Superhero Film Genre

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Dedication

To my wife, for her support, encouragement, and patience.

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Musical Topics in the Comic Book Superhero Film Genre

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The comic book superhero film has become a mainstay amongst Hollywood blockbuster films. However, despite their popularity and financial success, the genre has only recently begun to receive scholarly attention. In particular, there has been little research on what traits distinguish and define the genre, and even less on the music which accompanies the films. This scope of this dissertation can be divided into three parts. First, it is a study of the superhero film genre. I provide a historical overview both of the superhero comic, as well as its filmic adaptations – delineating the semantic and syntactic traits of the superhero film genre and the ways in which it adheres to and differs from its encompassing genre of the action film. Second, it is a study of the music for superhero films. By examining the musical themes of superhero films over time, I establish what musical parameters are held in common amongst superhero films – namely, what contributes to the comic book sound. Finally, it is a study of topic theory, and in particular, how topical analysis can function within, and enrich the study of film music. By expanding on topical theories established for the study of classical music, I further systematize the topical study of film music, using superhero films as a model for

demonstrating the potential for new musical topics to be uncovered through the topical

analysis of film music.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Iron Man, Wonder Woman, Captain America, Captain Marvel, Aquaman, The Flash, Green Lantern, Green Arrow, The X-Men, The Fantastic Four, Daredevil, The Incredible Hulk; the list of American comic book superheroes is seemingly unending. Their names evoke imagery of muscle-bound heroes wearing fantastical costumes of capes, masks, and spandex tights, using their superpowers to save humanity. Though originating in print media, their stories have been adapted to radio, television, and film, establishing them as a dominant strain of American media for nearly a century. They are cultural icons not only in the United States, but worldwide – their popularity often allowing them to be readily identified by consumers who have never picked up a comic book. Writing in 1992, in *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, Richard Reynolds states that

> the superhero genre is tightly defined and defended by its committed readership – often to the exasperation of writers and artists, many of whom have proclaimed it to be a worn-out formula from as long ago as the 1970s. But the dinosaur refuses to keel over and die, and dominates the economics of the American comics industry.[1]

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[1] Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 7.

More than twenty years after Reynolds' self-proclaimed first cultural study of the comic book superhero genre, not only has the dinosaur refused to die, but it has experienced a renaissance – particular through its filmic adaptations.[2]

Filmic adaptations of superhero comics are not new – they have existed for nearly as long as the print medium has. Beginning in the 1940s, film studios sought to profit on the popularity of superhero characters, producing film serials based upon the most successful heroes of the time, including Superman, Captain Marvel, Batman, and Captain America. During the following four decades, superheroes largely only appeared in television adaptations, except for the relatively successful *Superman* films of the 1970s and 1980s. Following Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), superhero films began to appear with more regularity, and over the past decade the superhero film has become a staple of the Hollywood summer blockbuster – consistently releasing films which, while often drawing little critical praise, have become some of the most financially successful movies of all time.

Yet, despite the longevity, popularity, and financial success of the comic book superhero, the genre has been, up until the past five years, marginalized by scholars – regardless of the medium in which the superheroes appear. Prior to Reynolds' work, studies on the superhero comic had largely been produced by the so-called "fan-press," more often than not providing catalogues and cursory descriptions of the genre, or biographical narratives on the authors who created the heroes. In the past five years,

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[2] Released in 1974, Arthur Berger's *The Comic-Stripped American* is arguably the first cultural study of comics, though one not entirely devoted to superheroes. See Arthur Berger, *The Comic-Stripped American: What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks, and Charlie Brown Tell us about Ourselves* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1974).

however, the amount of scholarly work devoted to the superhero comic has increased, discussing both the history of the genre, as well as how it has interacted with American culture over time. Likewise, with the ever-growing number of superhero films released over the past decade, the genre has begun to serve as the focus of study for several film scholars.[3] However, the majority of these studies do not focus on the genre as a whole, nor do they examine filmic adaptations of superhero films throughout history. Rather, they are typically collections of essays, each dedicated to an individual film within the genre, and almost exclusively cover films released after Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978).

Finally, what has been almost absent from the study of superhero films, is a critical study of the music which accompanies them. To date, only two such studies exist: Janet Halfyard's *Danny Elfman's Batman*, and K.J. Donnelly's chapter "The Classical Film Score Forever?" in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*.[4] While both works are rich in insight, they too are dedicated to a single film (or two films based on a single character in Donnelly's case). Yet, the superhero film genre, and the music which accompanies it, spans nearly eighty years, demanding a broader scope of study to account for what has been a significant part of film history – a study with which this project is concerned.

In a 2008 interview with the film score website *Tracksounds.com*, composer Ramin Djawadi discussed a meeting he had with director John Favreau regarding the

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[3] While these scholarly studies can be traced back to Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio, eds., *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Shuperhero and His Media* (New York: Routledge, 1991), the majority of these studies did not appear until after 2007.

[4] Janet Halfyard, *Danny Elfman's Batman: A Film Score Guide* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004); K.J. Donnelly, "The Classical Film Score Forever? Batman, Batman Returns and Post-Classical Film Music," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Stephen Neale and Murray Smith (Routledge, 1998), 142-155.

music Djawadi had begun composing for the upcoming film *Iron Man* (2008). In the interview, Djawadi states that "right after I got the job and before I sat down and met with John (Favreau) I started to write this orchestral theme. I eventually played it for him and he said, "Well, it's a wonderful theme and it's very comic bookish, but it's not the direction I want to go."[5] The score Djawadi would eventually compose for the film would possess a strong rock influence as encouraged by Favreau. However, what is of interest for this dissertation is Favreau's comment on the original theme Djawadi had composed. The description of Djawadi's first theme for Iron Man as "very comic bookish" suggests an understanding that a particular style or type of music has become associated with the superhero film genre by Hollywood directors and composers – a style and tradition of music Djawadi no doubt had drawn on in composing his original theme.

The idea that a certain style of music has become associated with the comic book superhero film genre alludes to what music theorists such as Leonard Ratner, Kofi Agawu, Raymond Monelle, and Robert Hatten among others have termed a musical topic. Topics can be defined as musical figures, which through their contextual use within society have become associated with and signify extramusical meaning. The study of musical topics, however, has largely been relegated to the analysis of classical music – despite the fact that signifying music is commonly discussed as a central trait of music for Hollywood films. The persistent use of themes which share similar musical characteristics for superhero films by Hollywood composers may have led to the

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[5] http://www.tracksounds.com/specialfeatures/interviews/interview_ramin_djawadi_2008_page1.html. Track Sounds. Accessed 11/08/08.

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development of a new superhero musical topic; in which the association of those themes with the films has allowed their musical characteristics to become signifiers of the genre itself. This relationship between musical style and genre no doubt points to the "comic bookish" sound of Djawadi's original theme.

This scope of this dissertation can be divided into three parts. First, it is a study of the superhero film genre. I provide a historical overview both of the superhero comic, as well as its filmic adaptations – delineating the semantic and syntactic traits of the superhero film genre and the ways in which it adheres to and differs from its encompassing genre of the action film. Second, it is a study of the music for superhero films. By examining the musical themes of superhero films over time, I establish what musical parameters are held in common amongst superhero films – namely, what contributes to the "comic bookish" sound. Finally, it is a study of topic theory, and in particular, how topical analysis can function within, and enrich the study of film music. By expanding on topical theories established for the study of classical music, I aim to further systematize the topical study of film music, using superhero films as a model for demonstrating the potential for new musical topics to be uncovered through the topical analysis of film music. To narrow the scope of my project, I will focus primarily on themes from live action film adaptations of comic book heroes from the two major publishers of comics in the United States - Marvel and Detective Comics.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter two of this dissertation discusses the traits of the comic book film genre which distinguish it from other closely related genres such as action films or fantasy epics. As the superhero films discussed are adaptations of their comic book predecessors, Drawing on the research of comic book historians such as Richard Reynolds, Bradford Wright, Jean-Paul Gabilliet, and Paul Lopes among others, I first provide a historical account of the superhero comic. Within this account I discuss the establishment of the superhero character archetype, what characteristics distinguish the superhero from ordinary heroes, and how those characteristics have changed over time.

The focus then shifts to filmic adaptations of these comic books, enumerating both the semantic and syntactic traits of the superhero film, highlighting not only what aspects have been incorporated from the comic book predecessors, but what new peculiarities arise through the process of adaptation. Additionally, I discuss the similarities and differences of the superhero film to the action film genre, in an effort to clearly define what characteristics distinguish the superhero film as a distinct subgenre of action films.

Chapter three aims to forge a stronger link between current work being done with topic theory in the Classical music genre with the study of film music. While the discussion of musical topics by film music scholars has been relatively cursory, topics have received a great deal of attention in the classical music studies. Authors such as Robert Hatten, Raymond Monelle, Kofi Agawu, Leonard Ratner, and others have incorporated the study of musical topics into discussions of the signifying capabilities of

classical music. These studies can help to define what Favreau was referring to while describing Djawadi's film as sounding "comic bookish."

Classical topic theory scholars however, have by and large ignored film music as an object of study, despite the use of signifying music having long been considered an important aspect of film scoring practices. This stems from the use of early collections of music to accompany silent films which were essentially catalogues of signifying music which could fit various scenarios. These examples of signifying music have been discussed by several film music scholars such as Roy Prendergast, Kurt London, Theodor Adorno and Hans Eisler, under varying terms such as leitmotiv, musical illustration, and clichés. By applying the work of topic theorists to film, the goal is to establish a systematic model for the study of signifying music in film. In particular, I aim to expand on Robert Hatten's work in the possibility of developing new musical topics (such as his Musical Plentitude in *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes*) as well as Raymond Monelle's diachronic study of a musical topic to investigate musical themes found in comic book films. These methods of topical analysis can help to enhance the discussion of topics in film music. Likewise, the study of film music can enhance topic theory not only due to the wealth of new music and topics which may be found, but because of the almost immediate link that can be forged between signifier and signified through the pairing of music with a visual medium.

Chapter four provides analyses of several of the superhero themes found in comic book films. I focus on both a diachronic study of superhero themes to demonstrate how their evolution follows the same line as the changes comic books and their film

adaptations underwent, as well as the establishment of a superhero musical topic. The diachronic study focuses on how music used in the early comic book serials as well as John Williams' score for the original Superman film drew on a previously established heroic topic to signify the hero of the film. This heroic topic stemmed from the classical music tradition through the quotation of military fanfares and marches, through the silent film anthologies, to early action sound films before being adopted by early superhero film serials.

However, this heroic topic is essentially reversed in more recent comic book films beginning with the Batman adaptation of 1989. During the 1980s, the change in character archetype towards a darker, vigilante hero not only in superhero films but the action genre in general, led to a change in musical accompaniment as well. While the darker musical theme found in *Batman* has been discussed by authors such as Janet Halfyard and K.J. Donnely, this chapter expands the study of that style to all superhero films which followed - leading to the establishment of a modern superhero topic. This topic is demonstrated through the comparison of several films' themes by various composers, identifying intertextual commonalities among the themes which contribute to the style of the topic, and allow for its definition.

Chapter five investigates the function of music and the superhero topic in comic book films through two case studies. The first investigates how the use of the superhero topic in a film with multiple superheroes and villains is incorporated in the film *X-Men* (2000). The similarities among the musical themes for many of the characters in this film serve to blur the boundaries between hero and villain - a blurring that is achieved through

the use of the somewhat nebulous superhero topic. The second focuses on the motif of secret identities in comic book films, and in particular how John Favreau's *Iron Man* plays with many of the stereotypical plot elements found in comic book films to invert the role of the hero and that of his secret identity. By identifying three naming functions commonly found in superhero films - the musical theme, statement of identity by the hero, and recognition of the hero by society - I demonstrate how each are overturned in *Iron Man* to establish not Iron Man, but Tony Stark as the hero of the film.

Chapter six examines the placement of Captain America within the post-1989 superhero genre. The character represents an old fashioned model of hero – a hero who is one-dimensional and untroubled, who lacks the moral grey area commonly associated with heroes of this time period. However, despite his old-fashioned character design, Captain America has become a central character within four major superhero films. I argue that his treatment, both in terms of film structure and music, has been one of a vintage throwback – and homage to heroes of earlier times, yet one which seems to function as a mythic hero of the people in modern society.

Finally, chapter seven will present my conclusions about the importance of topic theory in the study of film music. By providing an overview of the current state of the superhero genre, examining how the use of imitation of clichés within the genre has been exploited by Hollywood, I posit the genre as an ideal model for the topical study of its musical themes.

Chapter 2: The Comic Book Film Genre

In her 2004 book *Danny Elfman's Batman: A Film Score Guide*, Janet Halfyard

discusses some of the problematic aspects of defining a comic book film genre. Halfyard

writes:

> The fact that there is no true comic-book film genre is born out to a certain extent
> by the remarkably inconsistent and varied terminology used to categorize films
> that fall into the action-adventure category and also contain comic book-style
> superheroes... Star Wars and Return of the Jedi are both described as science-
> fiction fantasy... The Empire Strikes Back is a science-fiction epic; Superman is a
> fantasy adventure... Batman is an action fantasy; and Raiders of the Lost Ark... an
> action-adventure fantasy. The connecting element is quite clearly fantasy: this
> appears to be the true cinematic equivalent to the comic book genre.[1]

The disparity among genre classification of comic book superhero films is even more

wide-spread today than Halfyard's comments suggest.

The *Internet Movie Database* also lists some superhero films in the crime, family,

thriller, comedy, and drama genres, and often sequels based on the same superhero fall

into differing categories. For instance, *X-Men* (2000) is listed in the action and sci-fi

genres, while *X:2* (2003) is also listed in those genres as well as the thriller genre.

Batman (1989) is listed in the crime, drama, and thriller genres, while *Batman Returns*

(1992), *Batman Forever* (1995), and *Batman & Robin* (1997) are listed in the action,

crime, and fantasy genres, and the more recent Frank Miller based installments of

Batman Begins (2005) and *The Dark Night* (2008) are listed as action, crime, and drama.

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[1] Janet Halfyard, *Danny Elfman's Batman: A Film Score Guide* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 48.

Spider-Man (2002) is listed as action, adventure, fantasy, *Spider-Man 2* (2004) as action, crime, and fantasy, and *Spider-Man 3* (2007) as action, drama, and fantasy. Additional genres found include *Superman* (1978) as family, *Iron Man* (2008) as sci-fi, and *The Green Hornet* (2011) as comedy.[2] Likewise, film historian Tim Dirks lists the superhero film as a "minor film sub-genre" of the action, adventure, and science fiction films on the AMC Film Site.[3] While one can acknowledge the superhero film as a sub-genre of the action and science fiction genre, the number of superhero films regularly appearing on the summer blockbuster theater schedule has established it as a significant component of these genres, and one which has demonstrated influence over the design of action heroes since 2000.[4]

The wide variety of genre categories which superhero films fall into seems to beg for a more extensive discussion of the films' genre characteristics than simply declaring them to be unified by the fantasy element as Halfyard does. This is particularly evident given that many films employing superhero characters do not necessarily fall under the fantasy genre. The fact that so many of the superhero films show a consistent pattern of hybridization of other film genres suggests that the superhero film may be emerging, if it has not already emerged, as its own distinct genre. As Rick Altman states, "genre mixing, it now appears, is not just a postmodern fad. Quite to contrary, the practice of genre

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[2] Information gathered at *The Internet Movie Database*, www.imdb.com (accessed 2/17/2011).

[3] *AMC Filmsite*, www.filmsite.org/subgenres2.html (accessed 2/17/2011).

[4] This is taking into consideration not only the personalities of heroes discussed below, but also the apparent increase in physical capabilities on non-superhero characters such as James Bond or Jason Bourne in recent action film installments.

mixing is necessary to the very process whereby genres are created."[5] This chapter then seeks to establish the superhero film genre as its own independent genre by identifying those characteristics which distinguish it from other closely related genres of action, adventure, fantasy, and science fiction films.

Although superhero films have not yet been accepted as a distinct genre by critics, the same is not true for the literary source—the superhero comic—on which they are based. In fact, Ronald Thomas argues that the superhero comic emerged as a distinct genre precisely through the process of mixing of several preexisting genres of comics in characteristic ways. Drawing on Peter Coogan, the director of the Institute for Comic Studies, Thomas writes:

> Although comics have a long history of crossing various genres like Westerns, war, romance, humor, crime, horror, science fiction, and funny animals, Coogan (2006) asserted that the superhero story has established itself as a separate genre. He applied the criterion that [film scholar] [Tom] Schatz (1981) established for defining film genres, specifically that once a genre can be named in a way that distinguishes it from other genres and that name stands the test of time, the genre is established.[6]

Thomas cites Superman as the superhero archetype, which established fixed traits like superpowers, costumes, and secret identities successfully replicated by other superhero comics. As those characteristic traits have also been incorporated into film adaptations of those comics, a basic understanding of the historical development of the superhero comic hero is essential to establishing the derivative film genre. We must keep in mind Altman's caution that, "when a genre already exists in other media, the film genre of the

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[5] Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 143.
[6] Ronald C. Thomas, "Hero of the Military-Industrial Complex: Reading Iron Man through Burke's Dramatism," in *Heroes of Film, Comics and American Culture: Essays on Real and Fictional Defenders of Home*, ed. Lisa M. Detora (Jefferson: Mcfarland Publishers, 2009), 153.

same name cannot simply be borrowed from non-film sources, it must be recreated." Yet, we must also not ignore that many of the defining characteristics of the superhero film genre were derived from the comic book predecessors, whatever transformations they might have undergone in film adaptation.[7] Therefore, I will begin my study of the superhero film genre with a brief history of the two major superhero comic publishers in the United States, Detective Comics (DC) and Marvel, before turning to the issue of film adaptations of comic books.

A Brief History of Marvel and DC Comics

Histories of the comic book are unanimous in pointing to *Famous Funnies*, a 68 page magazine published in 1934, as the original comic book.[8] Nevertheless this origin, like most artistic origins, is not without precedence. As Bradford Wright states in his book *Comic Book Nation*,

> the earliest comic books derived directly from comic strips, but in many respects they owed more to pulp magazines. Most of the early comic book publishers, in fact, came from the pulp magazine industry. Popularly dubbed "pulp" magazines because of the cheap paper on which they were printed, these publications in turn have antecedents in the sensational dime novels of the Civil War era.[9]

[7] Altman, *Film/Genre*, 34.

[8] See Arthur Berger, *The Comic-Stripped American: What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks, and Charlie Brown Tell us About Ourselves* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1974); Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Lisa DeTora, ed., *Heroes of Film, Comics and American Culture: Essays on Real and Fictional Defenders of Home* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers, 2009); Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010); Ian Gordon, ed., *Film and Comic Books* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007); Will Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes: From the Silver Age to the Present* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1985); Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009); Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992).

[9] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 2.

The majority of early comics focused on humor, and borrowed much of their material from newspaper comic strips. However, a few years after the release of *Famous Funnies* a new style of comic book would emerge that would largely transform the industry. In June of 1938 National Allied Publishers, which would eventually merge with Detective Comics to form DC, released Action Comics #1 with a picture of a man dressed in red and blue lifting a car above his head. As Gerard Jones states in *Men of Tomorrow,* both Action Comics and Detective Comics were headed by Vin Sullivan, who "conceived of *Detective Comics…* as a comic book equivalent to pulps, with self-contained stories in a single genre."[10] The names of the two Sullivan-led comics tie them fairly explicitly to preceding mediums from which their inspiration stems – Detective Comics from pulp magazines featuring crime-fighting detectives such as Detective Dan or Dick Tracy, and Action Comics to muscle-bound heroes such as Doc Savage and Tarzan. While it was mostly a collection of preexisting newspaper comic strips, Action Comics #1 also included a work by writer Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster titled *Superman*; a character whose success among readers helped to transform the comic book industry. The cover art of a fantastically dressed Superman lifting a car over his head to terrify tough guy criminals (illustration 2.1) suggests the arrival of a new kind of hero – or at least one which combines aspects of the Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Crime pulp genres already in publication. The Superman character archetype would influence countless superheroes that followed, and established what over time evolved into an American cultural icon.

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[10] Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 120.
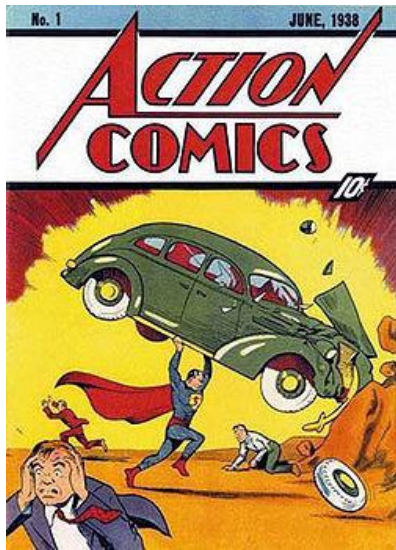
Illustration 2.1: Cover of Action Comics #1

In *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology,* Richard Reynolds argues that many of the characteristics of Siegel and Schuster's Superman were incorporated into ensuing comic book superheroes.

> Superman's arrival created a wholly new genre out of a very diverse set of materials. Today, many aspects of the first Superman story and its narrative approach have the appearance of cliché: it is necessary to keep in mind that the origin of what later became clichés lies right here.[11]

Among the clichés found in the first Superman comic, Reynolds cites the inclusion of lost parents, the man-god, the normal and the super-powered, the secret identity, super powers and politics, and science as magic as those story traits which can be found in countless superhero comics that find their origins in the first Superman comic.[12]

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[11] Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 10.
[12] Ibid, 16.

Obviously, Superman was not a wholly new invention by Siegel and Schuster.

Many of the superhero conventions found in Superman appeared in preceding pulp

magazine characters as well as mythological deities of Roman and Greek cultures. As

Thomas writes:

> Other literary characters like Zorro, the Invisible Man, and the Scarlet Pimpernel, as well as those mythological like Hercules and Achilles, each have some of these characteristics,[13] but only in the superhero genre do they exist simultaneously. In fact, the Nietzschean Übermensch exemplified by Superman rolls all of these traits into one character with the best of all virtues.[14]

This distinctive blending of traits from preceding literary figures distinguishes the

superhero genre from other comic books and forged a new type of hero that would be

imitated by several other comic book publishers.[15]

Prior to the release of *Action Comics #1*, DC had already forged a new direction

for comic books, moving away from the traditional humor-laden books which stemmed

from the Sunday comic strips. Wright states,

> as the title promised, *Detective Comics* differed from the "funny" comic books that had come before it. Announcing itself loudly on the newsstands with a sinister Oriental face leering from the cover, *Detective Comics* signaled a new direction for the industry. It featured adventure and mystery series like "Speed Sunders and the River Patrol," "Buck Regan, Spy," and "Claws of the Dragon," derived not from newspaper funnies but from movie serials and pulp fiction. Visibly more adventurous than other comic books, it contained more inventive page lay-outs, larger panels, and heavier shading to create atmosphere. Most

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[13] These characteristics include superpowers, distinctive costumes and secret identities.

[14] Thomas, "Hero," 153.

[15] In fact most of what is found in the Superman character was in some way taken by Siegel and Schuster from other characters. However, during this early period for comic books, imitation of preceding ideas was rampant, as each publication sought to gain success by copying what was profitable for others – to the point that many ideas were not accepted to publication unless someone else took a chance on it first. Siegel and Schuster had been trying to sell the idea for Superman for six years before Sullivan (who conveniently had just seen *The Phantom* published – another crime fighting hero who wore tights and a mask to maintain his secret identity) agreed to finally move forward with the cape and tights clad hero. For more on this early period see Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*.

importantly, *Detective Comics* signaled a new formula for comic books. Humor was giving way to crime fighting. [16]

This new adventure and crime fighting genre of comic book created by DC provided an ideal medium for the Superman character. Following the commercial success of *Superman*, DC and numerous other comic book publishers looked to imitate the character, flooding the market with superhero comics. [17] In the two years following the debut of Superman, DC would create such iconic characters as Wonder Woman, The Flash, and The Green Lantern. Timely Comics developed such superheroes as Captain America, the Human Torch, and the Sub-Mariner. Fawcett Comics created one of the most successful superheroes of the time, Captain Marvel, from which Marvel Comics (which along with DC make up the two largest American superhero comic book publishers in history) would eventually acquire its name. This rapid growth of superhero comics began what is now often referred to as the "golden age of comics."

While superhero characters grew in number at the end of the 1930s, and several of those created enjoyed great popularity, it was not until the start of the next decade that Superman's biggest competitor in the market over the past 70 years would appear. In 1940, artist "[Bob] Kane and writer Bill Finger designed a character inspired by pulp fiction heroes like the Shadow and Doc Savage, Hollywood adventure films like *The*

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[16] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 5.

[17] The quick success of Superman was noted by *Time Magazine*: "three Superman comic books have a circulation of about 1,530,000 monthly, with an estimated readership of about 12,000,000. Daily and Sunday newspaper strips (in 285 papers) add about 25,000,000 readers. Superman radio programs (85 stations) are tops for moppets. Superman movies show in the majority of some 17,000 movie houses." Staff Writer, "The Press: Superman's Dilemma," *Time* (April 13, 1942).

Mark of Zorro, and an obscure silent picture called *The Bat*."[18] The character proved to be immensely popular, and while Batman shared traits with his superhero counterparts such as wearing a costume and having a secret identity, he possessed no innate superpowers.[19] Batman was an ordinary human whose alter ego of Bruce Wayne relied on his immense wealth to develop technology that allowed him to "clean up the streets" of Gotham City. Having witnessed his parents' murder as a young boy, Batman was a hero driven by revenge in his war on crime. The style of storytelling in the Batman series was also unique. As Wright states Finger "drew heavily from lurid pulp fiction as well as Universal horror films and Warner Brothers gangsters movies."[20] The result was a much darker and grotesque series, featuring a hero who donned his costume not only to pursue the villains in the series, but to terrorize them. Both hero and vigilante, Batman himself was often pursued by the law, willing to operate in moral gray areas to attain justice. This style of superhero comic stood out amidst the morally righteous and often one-dimensional Superman, Wonder Woman, and Captain Marvel – providing readers with a more fascinating character to cheer for.

The superhero genre of comic books found great success during the 1940s, however their popularity fell off after World War II. The increase of censorship laws in the late 1940s combined with the rising popularity of alternative comic book genres such

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[18] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 16-17.
[19] Or at least he did not possess powers that broke the laws of physics.
[20] Ibid, 17.

as westerns, horror, and war themed publications nearly led to the death of the superhero comic genre.[21] As Jean-Paul Gabilliet writes:

> The first phase of the postwar campaign against comic books peaked in 1948. It was organized around several axes. The first was the disproportionate media attention paid to isolated cases of juvenile delinquency, in which the young actors appeared to be inspired by depictions of crimes found in comics magazines. The second was the increasing media fascination with Dr. Fredric Wertham... Wertham's discourse was monocausal, obsessive, and populist. He pointed out that the experts who worked hardest to demonstrate the harmlessness of comic books were employed by various publishers to act as moral and scientific supporters. He postulated that comic books could push *all* of their readers toward delinquency and that, consequently, children needed to be protected.[22]

Wertham's claims influenced a number of committees who sought to control what children were reading, and in particular sought to ban the proliferation of comic books.

Gabilliet continues:

> The National Office of Decent Literature, a proselytizing body created in 1938 by the Catholic Church, began to examine comics and issued lists of "acceptable" comic books from 1947 on. The Committee on Evaluation of Comic Books, founded in Cincinnati in June 1948... focused on comic magazines and for several years published its annual results in *Parents Magazine*. Comics were singled out by all sorts of critics: the American Legion, mayors, district attorneys, teachers, librarians, women's and parents' clubs, lawyers, Parent-Teacher Associations, religious groups, and spokespersons for children. Practically anyone invested with moral authority turned into a virulent detractor of the comic book. Detroit's police commissioner seized all of the comic books on sale in the city because he

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[21] Comic book publishers obviously produced whatever genre the public seemed most interested in, and one would expect that those genres which proved most popular in film during this time period would also be more successful for publishing houses. By the end of the 1940s, the market for superhero comics had been exhausted, leading publishers to move on to new genres - though superheroes would again become fashionable in later decades. The cyclical nature of comic book genres is similar to that of film production during this time period. Historian Tino Balio describes this in his study of film in the 1930s, stating that "Studios reduced risk by producing a variety of pictures every season. Only a few pictures provided something different; whenever one struck the public's fancy, a new cycle began. The cycle lasted until either the producer ran out of fresh ideas to sustain product variation or until a flood of imitations hit the market. Usually, it was a combination of both." (Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* [Berkley: University of California Press, 1995], 310.)

[22] Gabilliet, *Comics and Men*, 216.

discovered that they were "loaded with Communist teachings, sex, and racial discrimination.[23]

The wide-spread attack on comic books obviously had a negative effect on sales during the period. In response,

> a number of actors in the [comic book] industry founded the Association of Comic Magazine Publishers (ACMP)... Its members chose to comply with a self-regulating code, whose six articles pertained to nudity, the representation of crime and sadism, the correct use of language, the representation of divorce, and attacks on racial and religious minorities.[24]

Although the ACMP succeeded in cleaning up some of the material found in comic books, comics still fell under public attack for the next decade, culminating in a New York state ban of the publication of comic books in 1955. It was not until the 1960s when attacks on comic books began to subside, which, as Gabilliet notes, had more to do with changing societal values than any significant changes within the industry.

> Society had changed and the middle-class consensus underwent a transformation that was accentuated as the baby boomers matured into adulthood. What was once the culture of postwar youth became the dominant consensus, overthrowing the values inherited from the Second World War and the cold war - at least from the viewpoint of mainstream mass media. Although it did not disappear by any means, juvenile delinquency no longer obsessed the public, which was increasingly concerned with the Vietnam War and the struggle for civil rights. Having been reduced to a minor role in the daily life of North Americans, comic books were no longer the targets of organized criticisms or attacks.[25]

Despite no longer being the focus of censorship attacks, the damage done to comic book sales over a decade-long struggle had largely eliminated what was once a profitable market for superhero comics. Additionally, the widespread dissemination of television

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[23] Ibid, 217.

[24] Ibid, 218. This response to censorship by the comic book industry is very similar to the action taken by the film industry with the adoption of the Hays Code in 1930.

[25] Ibid, 238.

during the 1950s created additional competition for comic books amongst young readers.

These changes forced the industry to revolutionize the comic book superhero genre for it

again to find success among the public.

Many of the changes to the superhero genre during the 1960s were instigated by

Marvel Comics, led by its young editor Stan Lee.

> In comic fandom Marvel's early success is linked first to editor Stan Lee. Lee
> initiated what is commonly called the "Marvel Method," which, unlike the old
> style of comic book making, involved a more collaborative effort between writers
> and artists... But even more important to the success of Marvel was the style of
> storytelling. Marvel introduced imperfect characters who were vain, malcontent,
> misunderstood, or confused. Stan Lee told *The New York Times* in 1971 that in
> those early years he wanted to do something different with the superhero genre.
> "New ways of talking, hangups, introspection and brooding... I talked to Jack
> Kirby about it. I said, 'Let's let them not always get along well; let's let them have
> arguments. Let's make them talk like real people and react like real people.'" Lee
> presented the example of Spider-Man who could "still lose a fight, make dumb
> mistakes, have acne, have trouble with girls and have not too much money.[26]

Lee's reinvention of the comic book superhero first occurred with the publication

of *The Fantastic Four* in 1961.

> *The Fantastic Four's* characterization immediately set the series apart from all
> other superheroes. In a significant departure from superhero conventions, the
> Fantastic Four make no effort to conceal their identities from the public, who
> regard them with understandable awe and a certain degree of suspicion. The
> heroes' idiosyncrasies often impede their work as a team. They frequently argue
> and even fight with each other.[27]

Several traits of the story line for The Fantastic Four would become staples for Marvel

Comics superheroes. The use of flawed personalities, realistic city settings, gaining of

power through a scientific accident, and lack of secret identities were incorporated by

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[26] Lopes, *Demanding Respect*, 64.
[27] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 204.

ensuing Marvel Comics superheroes such as Spiderman, Iron Man, The Hulk, and X-Men among others.

> By 1963 Lee had finally found the formula to ensure that all his heroes possessed the originality he sought. The key to the formula lay in the idea of a flawed hero. Two of his earlier co-creations, the Thing and the Hulk were monstrously disfigured; now Lee and his collaborators moved on to develop heroes who were more subtly impaired, either by common handicaps or spiritual unease... This served a twofold purpose: first, it set Marvel comics thoroughly apart from those of the competition, populated as they were by flawless heroes; and second, it opened the doors to melodrama, which Marvel's fans valued as highly as adventure. From the latter there also emerged a body of ongoing soap operas that led to the growth of a "Marvel universe," an almost organic entity in which the overall unity of the line took precedence over any single series.[28]

Lee's creation of a universe of superheroes allowed for unlimited storytelling scenarios for Marvel Comics. Rather than being restricted to their individual comics, Marvel superheroes could interact with each other, fight with or against each other, and have their storylines intertwine to create an even more extensive world of fantasy for readers. All of Lee's changes proved very popular among readers and led to a revival of the comic book superhero and the dawn of what is commonly referred to as the "silver age of comics."[29]

> These readers showed enthusiasm for what Lee called "realistic fantasy" stories about superheroes who performed impossible feats but evinced believable human qualities and failings. Significantly, the Marvel heroes resided in New York City rather than mythical locales like Metropolis and Gotham City. If not quite

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[28] Jacobs, *Comic Book Heroes*, 88-89. This formula referring to creating an original style of superhero when compared to those of preceding decades. Though, of course the use of a formula for ensuing Marvel characters led to many of them being created in the same vein – causing a lack of originality.

[29] See Wright, *Comic Book Nation;* Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*; and Jacobs, *Comic Book Heroes*. Comics of this age did not enjoy the same level of popularity as the preceding era, likely explaining the diminutive quality of its name.

"believable," these stories at least took place in a world more relevant to the audience.[30]

One other difference between Marvel Comics and its major competitors lay in how the comics portrayed scientific progress.

> The unknown in DC's comic books was something to be conquered through scientific progress. In Marvel's, it was something best left undisturbed. Even though humanity inevitably overcame the destructive consequences of its own actions, the lesson was always the same: tampering with unknown forces beyond man's control invited trouble. Collectively, these stories sounded a cautionary tone about the fragility of civilization in the atomic age.[31]

The portrayal of technology as something to be wary of drew on the fear shared by many Cold War Americans of a nuclear attack. Radiation or nuclear accidents often led to the creation of both superheroes and super villains in Marvel Comics publications of the 1960s, and also was a prominent crisis from which superheroes would have to save civilization - creating a tension which was instantly relatable to readers.

Under the guidance of Lee, Marvel would become one of the most profitable publishers of superhero comics for the next two decades. It was not until the 1980s, with the publication of graphic novels such as Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* by DC that Marvel Comics began to lose ground to their biggest competitors. These new graphic novels pushed superhero comics towards an even darker, more mature tone than Marvel's reinvention of the heroes. These novels deal much more explicitly with adult issues such as alcoholism, sex, drugs, and death than any superhero comics of the preceding decades. Miller's version of Batman is a retired

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[30] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 207.
[31] Ibid, 202-203.

superhero who drinks heavily and questions his ability to fight crime, while characters such as Rorschach in Moore's *Watchmen* could be likened as easily to a murderer as to a hero. These stories of superheroes facing "real world" issues sought to appeal to an older demographic of comic book readers. However, by this time neither publishing company was making the majority of their profit through the publication of comic books. "By the late 1970s, licensing for television and film, and product merchandising, became the main source of revenue for the major publishers Marvel, DC, and Archie."[32]

The profitability of this shift to television and film production of comic book heroes has never been more apparent than in the past decade. Since 1998, there have been nineteen live action films released in the U.S. based on Marvel Comics superheroes with several more either in production or announced. DC has also released eight films based on their superheroes, the most prominent being *The Dark Knight*, which won two Academy Awards. Many of these films have fared extremely well at the box office and, as Paul Lopes argues, have significantly contributed to the rejuvenation of comic book fandom - much more so than published comics themselves.

> It is striking how over the last seven years comic book culture seems to have captured center stage in American popular entertainment. Hollywood seems addicted to this culture, churning out blockbuster film after blockbuster film based on superhero or another comic book genre. The entertainment industry has also borrowed from comic book culture to create new prime-time television series... but what is most striking about the newfound interest in comic book culture is the decidedly minor presence of actual comic books.[33]

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[32] Lopes, *Demanding Respect*, 74.
[33] Ibid, ix.

Though the number of comic book superhero films greatly increased over the last decade, superheroes have existed in film adaptations for nearly as long as they have been published. The remainder of this chapter will look at the development of comic book superhero films, including what similarities they hold with the comic books on which they are based, and what changes in presentation have occurred to allow for their adaptation to the film medium.

Comic Book Films

Writing in 2004, Halfyard thought that "given the wealth of comic-book characters and story lines available, already presented in a strongly visual and dialogue-driven format, it is surprising that so few of them have been translated into film narratives."[34] Halfyard's comment seems suspect. While a number of comic book-inspired films have been released since Halfyard's book was published, more than fifteen characters from DC and Marvel comics alone had appeared in films - many of them in multiple installments - by the time her book was published in 2004. The number increases even more when comic books from lesser known publishers - titles such as *Sin City*, *Spawn*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *The Phantom*, *Dick Tracy*, and *Mystery Men,* among countless others – are included.

In fact, films based on comic books (and particularly on superhero comic books) have had a historically strong presence in both film and television. Table 2.1 provides a listing of the film and television adaptations of superheroes from DC and Marvel comics.

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[34] Halfyard, *Danny Elfman's Batman*, 47.

A much longer list could be generated if one were to include films and television adaptations from independent publishers such as those mentioned above, direct-to-dvd animated superhero films, television cartoon shows, as well as superhero-themed films and television shows, which were inspired not by pre-existing superhero comic book characters, but the superhero comic book genre in general. Such films would include *Hancock* (2008), *My Super Ex-Girlfriend* (2006), *Sky High* (2005) or any of the *Toxic Avenger* installments (1985-2000), as well as recent television shows like *Heroes* (2006-2010), *No Ordinary Family* (2010-2011) and *The Cape* (2011). These "original" superhero productions further point to the presence of an already established superhero film genre.[35]

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[35] Perhaps most significantly by the film parody *Superhero Movie* (2008), as parodies seek humor through the exaggeration of genre traits.

Films Based on Marvel Superheroes[36]	*Films Based on DC Superheroes*[37]
The Punisher (1989)	*Superman and the Mole Men* (1951)
Captain America (1991)	*Batman the Movie* (1966)
Blade (1998)	*Superman* (1978)
X-Men (2000)	*Superman II* (1980)
Spider-Man (2002)	*Swamp Thing* (1982)
Blade II (2002	*Superman III* (1983)
Daredevil (2003)	*Supergirl* (1984)
X-Men 2 (2003)	*Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (1987)
Hulk (2003)	*The Return of Swamp Thing* (1989)
The Punisher (2004)	*Batman* (1989)
Spider-Man 2 (2004)	*Batman Returns* (1992)
Blade Trinity (2004)	*Batman Forever* (1995)
Elektra (2005)	*Steel* (1997)
Fantastic Four (2005)	*Batman & Robin* (1997)
X-Men The Last Stand (2006)	*The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003)
Ghost Rider (2007)	*Catwoman* (2004)
Spider Man 3 (2007)	*Batman Begins* (2005)
Fantastic 4 Rise of the Silver Surfer (2007)	*V for Vendetta* (2006)
Iron Man (2008)	*Superman Returns* (2006)
The Incredible Hulk (2008)	*The Dark Knight* (2008)
Punisher War Zone (2008)	*The Spirit* (2008)
X-Men Origins: Wolverine (2009)	*Watchmen* (2009)
Iron Man 2 (2010)	*Jonah Hex* (2010)
Thor (2011)	*Green Lantern* (2011)
X-Men: First Class (2011)	*The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)
Captain America: The First Avenger (2011)	*Man of Steel* (2013)
Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance (2012)	
The Amazing Spider-Man (2012)	
The Avengers (2012)	
Iron Man 3 (2013)	
The Wolverine (2013)	
Film Serials Based on Marvel Superheroes	***Film Serials Based on DC Superheroes***
Captain America (1944)	*Adventures of Captain Marvel* (1941)
	The Batman (1943)
	Superman (1948)
	Batman and Robin (1949)
	Atom Man Vs. Superman (1950)

Table 2.1:   List of Live Action Television and Film Productions based on Marvel and
DC Superheroes.

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[36] Not included are films such as *G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra* (2009) or *Transformers* (2007), which although they appeared for a time as Marvel Comics, they began in other media, and do not fit neatly into the *superhero* genre.

[37] Forthcoming films those based on Captain Marvel, The Flash, Wonder Woman, Ant-Man, Nick Fury, Sub-Mariner, Doctor Strange, and the Justice League of America; sequels to Thor, Spider-man, The Avengers, Captain America, and X-Men; and a reboot of *The Fantastic Four*.

Television Series Based on Marvel Superheroes	Television Series Based on DC Superheroes
The Incredible Hulk (1978-1982) *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1978-1979) *Blade* (2006)	*Adventures of Superman* (1952-1957) *Batman* (1966-1968) *Shazam!* (1974-1977) *Wonder Woman* (1976-1979) *Superboy* (1988-1992) *Swamp Thing* (1990-1993) *The Flash* (1990-1991) *Lois & Clark* (1993-1997) *Smallville* (2001-2011)
Television Films Based on Marvel Superheroes	**Television Films Based on DC Superheroes**
The Incredible Hulk (1977) *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1977) *The Incredible Hulk: Death in the Family* (1977) *Dr. Strange* (1978) *Spider-Man Strikes Back* (1978) *Captain America* (1979) *Spider-Man: The Dragon's Challenge* (1979) *Captain America II: Death Too Soon* (1979) *The Incredible Hulk Returns* (1988) *The Trial of the Incredible Hulk* (1989) *The Death of the Incredible Hulk* (1990) *Nick Fury: Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (1998)	*Stamp Day for Superman* (1954) *The Adventures of Superpup* (1958) *Adventures of Superboy* (1961) *Batgirl* (1967) *Wonder Woman* (1967) *Wonder Woman* (1974) *It's A Bird It's a Plane It's Superman* (1975) *The New Original Wonder Woman* (1975) *Legends of the Superheroes* (1979) *The Flash* (1990) *The Flash II* (1991) *The Flash III* (1992) *Justice League of America* (1997) *Return to the Batcave* (2003) *Aquaman* (2006)

Table 2.1, cont.

Live action adaptations of superhero comics began with film serials, which appeared in movie theatres as early as 1941 - just three years after the release of Action Comics #1. The relatively quick transfer of superhero comics to film certainly was aided by similarities of the two media, namely of the inspiration from film that artists of early superhero comics drew upon. As Pascal Lefèvre writes:

> It has been pointed out various times that there is a closer link between cinema and comics than between cinema and other visual arts. Films and comics are both

media which tell stories by series of images: the spectator sees people act - while in a novel the actions must be verbally told.[38]

William Schoell likewise notes the influence of film on comic books:

> From the first there was always a link between comic books and films, with the two providing inspiration for, and feeding off, each other. Veteran artist Jack Kirby, cocreator of *Captain America*, spent much of his childhood in movie houses. He liked the way that a story was told in a succession of pictures, and he has been credited with being the first artist to bring a dynamic visual flair to the comic book page… For artists like Jack Kirby, each page of a comic book became a different "scene." Comic scripts (like screenplays) were divided into long and medium shots, and close-ups. There were wide angles and narrow focuses. A comic page even had its own kind of "editing." A series of small, similar panels would be the equivalent of quick, successive shots in a movie. A full-page panel was the equivalent of a long-held, or establishing shot. Comic artists had their own version of *mise en scène*: the layout of each page. Each page could have one, six, eight, ten panels, or more, or less. The borders could be straight and uniform, or irregular, even circular or jagged. The panels could each be the same size, or different sizes, squares, rectangular, oval or oblong. In this way they would "direct" a comic just as a film director would decide how to cover the action in each scene: long shot, close-up, over-the-shoulder shot, etc. Filmmaker and comic artist could also choose the angles they wanted, with the camera - or the artist's human eye - high above the characters, at shoulder level, or down at the floor looking upward. In this way, comic books (and strips) were just like the movies.[39]

Bradford Wright mentions a similar film aesthetic in the Bob Kane's drawings for the

early Batman comics, stating that

> [Bob] Kane's inventive artwork made use of unusual angle shots, distorted perspectives, and heavy shadows to give the series a cinematic and almost expressionistic look. The comparison may be a bit much for some, but the early Batman series had the kind of cutting-edge aesthetic qualities that made it the *Citizen Kane* of comic books.[40]

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[38] Pascal Lefèvre, "Incompatible Visual Ontologies: The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images," in *Film and Comic Books*, ed. Ian Gordon (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 2. Lefèvre goes on to discuss issues with film adaptations of comics - namely the opportunity comics offer for readers to turn back to previous images, the difference in consumption (private versus public), and the presence of a voice in film as key differences between the media.

[39] William Schoell, *Comic Book Heroes of the Screen* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991), 10-11.

[40] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 17.

This cinematic quality of comic book images can be seen as early on as in the artwork of the first Superman comic. As the cover of Action Comics #1 illustrates, from their beginning superhero comics sought for a much more dramatic aesthetic than their predecessors of pulp comics and comic strips, incorporating an almost proto-cinematic visual style which seems to suggest motion despite the still image. This cinematic visual flair helped the superhero comic to establish itself artistically as a new, unique niche within the comic book market – no doubt aiding its early popularity among readers.

Despite the inspiration comic book artists drew from film, the medium developed certain visual traits unique to the genre which several superhero film adaptations have imitated within their recreations of the comic book predecessors. Dramatic camera angles to show action, the use of a stationary camera to frame the action on screen, and the use of color blocking and shadowing of black and white images to replicate many of the drawn images in comics and graphic novels are just some of the ways in which films have recreated this comic book aesthetic. In his book, *Action Speaks Louder*, Eric Lichtenfeld discusses film directors' strategic "use of primary colors [as] part of a visual style that invokes a comic book-aesthetic."[41] Lichtenfeld discusses the use of specific colors either predominantly or as a tint in films to give them the appearance of a comic book page – such as the use of blue in *X-Men*, a dichotomy of blue and green in *X:2,* green in *Hulk*, black and white in *The Crow*, and blood red in *Blade*. Michael Cohen writes about the visual strategy of "paneling" found in *Dick Tracy* (1990), created

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[41] Eric Lichtenfeld, *Action Speaks Louder: Violence, Spectacle, and the American Action Movie* (Westport: Praeger Publishing, 2004), 261.

through the use of a diopter lens. "The diopeter lens allows the foreground and background characters and objects to be displayed in sharp focus, presenting a striking juxtaposition that defies the reality of their spatial position, and heightens their compositional proximity."[42] Film adaptations of comic books such as *Sin City* (2005), *The Spirit* (2008), and *Watchmen* (2009) even go so far as to copy directly many of the images found in the graphic novels on which they are based.[43]

Illustration 2.2 provides some examples of the comic book visual aesthetic in a variety of films. The upper left photo, taken from the film serial *The Batman* (1943), is an instance of a stationary camera set at a somewhat unusual angle, framing the action on screen. The upper right photo is an example of the "paneling" found throughout *Dick Tracy* (1990), in which the screen is divided down the middle with the name Tracy clearly readable on the door in the front of the shot, while Dick Tracy himself is also shown in clear focus in the background. The middle left image is from *Sin City* (2005), demonstrating one of the dramatic camera angles used throughout both the graphic novel and film, while the middle right image is taken from *The Spirit* (2008), again showing a close-up framing shot as well as the use of both black and white shadow images and a pop of color in the same shot – imitating the aesthetic of Frank Miller's graphic novels. Finally the bottom row of images demonstrates an image of Rorschach entering The

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[42] Michael Cohen, "Dick Tracy: In Pursuit of a Comic Book Aesthetic," in *Film and Comic Books*, ed. Ian Gordon (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 34.
[43] *Sin City* is in fact a shot for shot realization of the graphic novel. This approach seems to be largely due to the involvement of Frank Miller in the production of two of these films (*Sin City* and *The Spirit*), as a similar aesthetic can be found in the film *300* (2007) which Miller was a producer of.

Comedian's apartment taken from Alan Moore's graphic novel *Watchmen* alongside of its

filmic realization.

Illustration 2.2: Cinematic Adaptation of Comic Book Visual Aesthetic

The NBC series *Heroes* also made the relationship between comic book images

and television shots a central part of the show's production. Character Isaac Mendez, the

artist of the fictional comic book series *9th Wonder's,* is an artist who has the ability to

foresee and paint the future. Throughout the series, images from Mendez's comics are

replicated in live action shots. Additionally, despite the fact that they both speak English,

two of the shows main characters, Hiro Nakamura and Ando Masahashi, frequently converse in their native Japanese language. The show moves the subtitles of their conversation to various locations on the screen, imitating the caption bubbles frequently found in comic books. Both of these aspects of comic book adaptation are presented in illustration 2.3.

Illustration 2.3: Comic Book Realization in *Heroes*.

In addition to the visual aesthetic superhero films have incorporated from comic books, film adaptations have also been influenced by comic books through acting style,

props, costumes, and makeup. Cohen discusses a number of these aspects in his article on

Dick Tracy (1990).

> A strategy of "cartooning" in *Dick Tracy* makes the choreography of character actions and behavior implausible, and complements the "aesthetic of artifice" in the production design. Whether it is exaggerated filming effects, such as sped up footage, or the outrageous behavior of the characters themselves, "cartooning" transcends the communication of the story: the narrative referent becomes abstracted into a stylistic representation. "Cartooning" also includes the design of the villains using prosthetic makeup, and the design of their props and weapons, so that they all resemble the caricatures found in the pages of comics. Deployed in combination with an artificial production design, the result is a comic-style diegesis populated by outrageous characters, wielding farfetched weapons, whom look and behave as "cartoons."[44]

Examples of this "cartooning" in comic book superhero films can be found in numerous

adaptations.

Cohen discusses specific posturing done by characters in superhero films, in

which the hero will suspend movement for a time, posing in a heroic manner for the

camera. Additionally, the movements of superheroes tend to be greatly exaggerated when

compared to that of normal action films - for instance the overly dramatic running of

Denny Colt in *The Spirit* (2008) or the full body turns due to a constraining costume in

the Batman films. The acting style and character personas in superhero films also tend to

be exaggerated stereotypes - a brave, confident hero, a helpless woman in distress, a

maniacal villain prone to extended monologues - all of which no doubt stem from the

melodramatic traits of Stan Lee's Marvel Comic superheroes of the 1960s. Another

cartoonish feature of superhero films includes the improbable destruction of buildings,

such as the words "eat lead Tracy" written on a brick wall with gunfire in *Dick Tracy*

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[44] Cohen, "Dick Tracy," 20.

(2000), Wolverine's claw marks on cement or metal in the X-Men films, or any of the instances involving heroes or villains being thrown through walls. Finally, superhero films tend to use exaggerated props which are cartoon-like in nature. The most common being oversized or bizarre weapons such as The Joker's boxing glove-gun he uses to destroy a television in *Batman* (1989), or the frequently used shot of characters reading newspapers with large print as shown in illustration 2.4.

Illustration 2.4: Newspapers in Superhero Films. From top, left to right: Adventures of Captain Marvel (1941), Batman (1989), Iron Man (2008), Spider-Man (2002), Superman (1978), and Watchmen (2009)

Syntax and Semantics of the Superhero Film Genre

In his book *The American Film Musical*, Rick Altman suggests that the formation and description of any film genre relies on characteristic semantics and syntax which are reused by a collection of films to help to define the genre.[45] Such is the case with superhero films, which not only draw on syntax found in the action film genre as well as Hollywood films in general, but are further delineated as a distinct sub-genre of the action film through the use of distinctive semantic traits stemming from their comic book predecessors. In outlining both the structure and style of superhero films below, we can arrive at a clear definition of the comic book superhero film genre.

At the most basic level, a superhero film can be described semantically as any film that is based on a superhero. Yet there are several other aspects of the superhero film genre which help to define it, much of which can be traced to their comic book predecessors. After establishing several of the "clichés" of superhero comics found in the first Superman comic, Richard Reynolds identifies seven traits - lost parents, the man-god, devotion to justice, superpower juxtaposed to normality, secret identity, moral loyalty, and science as magic - that identify the comic book superhero genre.

> These seven headings[46] can be pulled together to construct a first-stage working definition of the superhero genre; a definition which at least has the authenticity of being constructed from the motifs of the first ever superhero comic.
> 1.   The hero is marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents.

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[45] Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
[46] These traits being lost parents, the man-god, justice, the normal and the super-powered, the secret identity, super powers and politics, and science as magic.

2.   At least some of the superheroes will be like earthbound gods in their level of powers. Other superheroes of lesser powers will consort easily with these earthbound deities.

3.   The hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law.

4.   The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings.

5.   Likewise, the extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter-ego. Certain taboos will govern the actions of these alter- egos.

6.   Although ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws.

7.   The stories are mythical and use science and magic indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder.[47]

Each of these traits can be found as major plot points within film adaptations of superhero comics, and serve as an excellent starting point in establishing the basic semantics of the superhero film genre. However, to return to Altman's caution that a filmic adaptation of preexisting media must be recreated, I will also discuss those particularities found, and new rules of the superhero genre which arise in their filmic adaptations.

1.   *The hero is marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents.*

There are several traits of superhero films included within Reynolds' first heading - the separation of the hero from society, the hero reaching maturity, and the hero's loss of parents. Arguably the most common narrative element found in superhero films is that of the origin story. Many of the films feature sequences that show how the superhero came to be in possession of his or her powers. This origin story may account for a large portion of the film, as in *Superman* (1978), where Clark Kent gradually discovers his

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[47] Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 16

abilities as he grows into adulthood, or the more recent *Batman Begins* (2005), which relates a series of events leading up to Bruce Wayne's transformation into Batman, including the murder of his parents, falling down a well and being attacked by bats, and his training with the League of Shadows in Bhutan. Or, the origin story may occur rather briefly as in *Spider-Man* (2002), where early in the film a spider bites Peter Parker while on a field trip and he later discovers his new powers in his bedroom, or in *Fantastic Four* (2005), which depicts the team's exposure to space radiation within the first scenes. Origin stories are also found in early serials like *Captain Marvel* (1941) and *Superman* (1948). Even films that begin with a fully formed superhero often incorporate elements of origin stories into their plot, such as the questions surrounding Wolverine's past in *X-Men 2* (2003). The persistent use of origin stories in film adaptations of superhero comics is not entirely unlike its treatment in comic books. As Reynolds states, in superhero comics "the fixed points which are reinterpreted with most regularity are the origins of major characters – generally heroes, sometimes villains. It has almost become a custom that, when taking over a new assignment, a new writer/artist team will be expected to have a shot at redefining a character's origin story."[48] This retelling of a character's origin serves to reclaim the myth of the hero in the filmic version, allowing directors to either shed new light on the character, or establish aspects of the hero which begin a new string of continuity that contributes to the films' syntax, as discussed below. Filmic adaptations seem to insist upon this origin story concept even more so than comic books, in that

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[48] Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 48.

oftentimes even sequels seem to incorporate some aspect of the origin story within their plots.[49]

Intertwined with these origin stories, film adaptations also usually provide explicit motivation for the character's moral drive toward justice. Most commonly, this motivation derives from the hero's loss of a parent or loved one, and it results in a conscious decision by the character to use the superpowers to promote justice. In *Superman* (1978), Clark Kent loses both his birth parents in the destruction of Krypton and his adoptive parent Jonathan Kent, whose death leads Clark to leave Smallville as he seeks information about his past. Likewise, in *Spider-Man* (2002), Peter becomes the hero after his Uncle Ben, who helped raise him, is shot by a thief and Peter adopts Ben's mantra that "with great power comes great responsibility." Additional instances include *Batman* (1989), which shows Bruce's parents murdered by the man who would become The Joker, the villain in the film, as well as Tony Stark's desire to live up to his father's legacy in *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2*.

The acquisition and mastery of powers and the decision to become a hero typically results in the hero being set apart from society. This can be portrayed quite literally, as in Bruce Wayne's secretive life in a mansion just outside of Gotham City, Xavier's school for the gifted which was created for mutants to be taught away from society in *X-Men* (2000), or the general societal separation of those with powers and those without in films like *X-Men* (2000), *Watchmen* (2009), *The Incredibles* (2004),

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[49] In fact, one could argue that every superhero film has dealt with an origin story of some kind – if not of the title hero, then certainly of the main villain for the film.

Hancock (2008) or the television series *Heroes*. Also common is the hero's decision to separate him- or herself from loved ones in order to protect them. This motif is found in films like *Spider-Man* (2002), *Superman* (1978), *The Dark Knight* (2008), or *The Incredible Hulk* (2008).

2.   *At least some of the superheroes will be like earthbound gods in their level of powers. Other superheroes of lesser powers will consort easily with these earthbound deities.*

Superpowers are an obvious signifying trait of the superhero film genre. However, not all superheroes are in possession of powers, and there is a wide range in the level of powers among those who are. Superheroes like Batman, Steel, and Iron Man rely on the mastery of advanced technology to fight crime, while others like Captain America, The Punisher, or Jonah Hex also draw on natural abilities or military training for their skills as a hero. The early superhero film serials struggled somewhat to depict these superpowers on screen, and the majority of crime fighting was done through hand-to-hand combat rather than through extraordinary powers or technology. Nevertheless, they did attempt to make Captain Marvel "fly" - albeit rather crudely,[50] and special effects in the Superman serials were achieved by inserting animation within the live action to depict for example an exploding planet, flying rocket-ship, or Superman moving live electrical wires.

Beginning with the blockbuster *Superman* (1978), special effects have been increasingly effective in depicting superpowers. Superheroes today rely less on their fists

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[50] This was generally achieved by showing the hero dive off of a cliff and then cutting to a shot of him suspended at an angle in front of a moving screen.

to fight crime and more on powers like teleportation, super-speed, telekinesis, and so forth. When the heroes do engage in hand-to-hand combat, it serves to mark the dividing line between those with superpowers and those without it, by showing, for instance, heroes punch through walls or hit someone hard enough to send them flying across a room. In modern superhero films, superheroes often assume the form of "earthbound deities," most obviously represented by characters like Superman, Thor or Mr. Manhattan in *Watchmen* (2009). Some films feature superheroes of varying levels of powers. This is most evident in films like *Fantastic Four* (2005), the television show *Heroes*, or the X-Men series - the latter of which explores the disparity in the mutants' powers as a plot point in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006). As part of their franchising strategy, films based on Marvel Comics have also exploited Stan Lee's development of a Marvel Universe – in which all superheroes are able to interact with each other across various titles. That is to say, all Marvel superheroes exist within an alternate reality, in which they are aware of one another, can partner with one another to fight crime, or even fight each other. In films, this is usually accomplished by having various superheroes appear in teaser trailers at the end of the film, providing the audience with a sneak peek of the next superhero to be adapted to film.[51]

3. *The hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law.*

This aspect of the superhero genre is depicted in film adaptations in a variety of ways. First, these films commonly depict the superheroes as vigilantes. Heroes may have

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[51] For instance Nick Fury's presence in *Iron Man*, Captain America's shield and Thor's hammer in *Iron Man 2*, or Tony Stark's cameo in *The Incredible Hulk*.

their motives questioned, such as in *Spider-Man* (2002) or many of the Batman films. The films may portray the pursuit of criminals as causing as much harm to society as good, for instance, in *Hancock* (2008). They may be outlawed in society as in *Watchmen* (2009) and *The Incredibles* (2004), or be blamed for crimes they did not commit as Mr. Manhattan in *Watchmen*, who took the fall for nuclear destruction of multiple cities even though he was not responsible for it. Within superhero films, society often confuses law and order with justice. The superhero serves to remind that law and justice do not always coincide.

Second, law enforcement is often portrayed as being nearly unnecessary within superhero films. As early as the first Batman serial, police officers are shown apprehending criminals who have already been caught and left tied up by the superheroes. Police officers in superhero films also tend to stay in the background during a crisis, allowing superheroes to do all of the work, both of which further heighten the heroic status of the superhero. Finally, superheroes often seek out justice beyond what normal laws would permit - particularly when seeking revenge.[52] A few examples include Spider-Man chasing down and accidentally killing the man responsible for Uncle Ben's death in *Spider-Man* (2002), Rorschach's murder of various prison inmates in *Watchmen* (2009), Tony Stark's attack on Middle Eastern terrorists in an area which U.S. military was forbidden to enter in *Iron Man*, or Batman's overly aggressive interrogation of The

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[52] This aspect of the hero will be discussed further below, with regards to the similarities between superhero and villain in using revenge as justification for their actions.

Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008). These instances probably best reflect Reynolds' genre trait of devotion to justice in spite of the law.

4.   *The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings.*

There was little difference between the sets used for the early superhero serials and those you might see in any other film taking place in a city during that time, no doubt partially owing to the fact that these serials were B-level films with low-cost production budgets. Although the portrayal of superheroes in these films was hardly extraordinary, contrast was still established through the showing men in costume running around in a world that otherwise looked ordinary. These costumes not only help distinguish heroes from their surroundings, but also serve as an indicator of the hero's newly acquired identity. As Reynolds states,

> Costume functions as a uniform, binding all super-beings and costumed characters in contrast to the non-costumed ordinary world. The appearance of a costumed character in a story will generate a specific set of expectations… The superhero's costume also proclaims his individuality. Costumes are a riot of different colours and designs; masked or unmasked, caped or capeless, bright or somber colours, revealing or modest… Costume is the sign of individual identity – a new identity, as the alter ego has been shed, if not actually hidden under a mask… Endless variety is possible within the compass of immediate understanding – a costume can be 'read' to indicate an individual hero's character or powers and (incidentally) as a signal that he is now operating in his superhero identity and may at any moment be involved in violent conflict with costumed villains.[53]

The black cape and cowl of Batman reflects his desire not only to capture but also to terrorize his targets, Superman and Wonder Woman both wear the colors of our national flag, establishing them as decidedly American heroes, Spiderman's spandex is detailed

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[53] Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 26.

with web netting to allude to his superpowers. Each costume helps to establish the personality and abilities of the superhero, while at the same time marking them visually as being outside of societal norms – their extraordinary appearance creating expectations of extraordinary actions.[54]

In more recent superhero films, this contrast continues through the placement of superheroes within real-world cities, as though they could exist in real-life societies. Even a film such as *Superman* (1978), which is meant to take place in the fictional city of Metropolis, incorporates numerous shots of iconic buildings that make it easy for viewers to identify the city as New York. Likewise, some superhero films also make use of suburban or rural settings to further enhance the contrast between superhero and his surroundings, as in films like *Superman*, *X-Men*, or *Spider-Man*.

However, some films do not incorporate this contrast into their adaptation. Particularly in the *Batman* films of 1989-1997, Gotham City is established as part of a very stylized diegetic world, with fantastic set design and scenery that borders on cartoonish. The Gotham City in these films also appears to be somewhat removed from

[54] Certainly the costume is not unique to the superhero genre. Though not as flamboyant in design, costumed heroes are found in films such as *Star Wars*, with the traditional robe worn by Jedi Knights, *Indiana Jones* is marked through his signature hat and whip, and even traditional action heroes such as in *Rambo* and *Die Hard* have distinctive clothing that we associate with the hero – defining their identity. Reni Celeste discusses this aspect of the costume serving as the embodiment or iconography of the hero in action films beyond the stars who portray them. In her article "The Frozen Screen: Levinas and the Action Film," Celeste states that "the action figure even eclipses celebrity, which is uncommon for modern cinema. In this sense, he is akin to a comic book hero. Unlike the cult of unique singularity that fuels star worship, the star in these films is replaceable. Five different actors have played the role of James Bond. The action figure is most compelling in his emptiness. Anyone can occupy his form. The action figure exhibits all the vitality of a mask, a type, a doll and a figurine. And yet for two hours the salvation of the world is vested in him." Reni Celeste, "The Frozen Screen: Levinas and the Action Film," *Film-Philosophy* 11.2 (2007): 29.

time, combining futuristic architectural elements and technology while clothing and automobiles appear to derive from a much earlier time period.

5.   *Likewise, the extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter-ego.*

Reynolds' fifth genre trait addresses the secret identities found in superhero comics and their film adaptations. The use of secret identities is found throughout superhero comic books since their inception. Their justification almost always lies in a desire to protect loved ones – to keep family and significant others out of harm's way should a villain try to use them as bait to get at the hero. Yet the disparity between the superhero persona and their usually mundane secret identity also points to a desire by the hero to fit into societal norms. It is a commentary on how citizens are expected to act within society (be normal, do not draw attention) as opposed to the flamboyantly dressed hero who is allowed and expected to stand up for injustices – to take matters into their own hands.

In films, the contrast found between superhero and mundane alter-ego is often times accomplished as much through the initial casting of characters as it is through acting ability or screen writing. The film serial *Adventures of Captain Marvel* (1941) used two different actors to create contrast between superhero and alter-ego: Frank Coghlan Jr., who had his start as a child actor in the silent era, played the role of Billy Batson, whereas Tom Tyler, a regular actor in westerns as well as another comic book serial *The Phantom*, played the role of Captain Marvel. A similar approach was taken in

the television series *The Incredible Hulk* (1977-1982), where Bill Bixby played Dr. Bruce Banner while The Hulk was played by two time Mr. Universe, Lou Ferrigno.

Other films have created this contrast by casting just one character to play both hero and alter-ego, but choosing actors who lack the physique of a superhero. Actors such as Tobey Maguire portraying Peter Parker in *Spider-Man* (2002), Edward Norton portraying Dr. Bruce Banner in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), or Michael Keaton portraying Bruce Wayne in *Batman* (1989) emphasize the mundane nature of the alter-ego. The actor's regular persona creates a marked contrast with the superhero, which helps make the fact that friends or family are unaware of the hero's secret lifestyle more plausible.[55] Still other films, such as the X-Men series, do not incorporate secret identities within their plot, but have superheroes simply hide their abilities from society, while in films like *Iron Man* or *The Fantastic Four*, the identity of the superhero is known to everyone.

6.   *Although ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws.*

While the portrayal of the hero as a patriot has not been a significant plot point of superhero film adaptations, it has had a minor presence. This has been achieved through the distinct costumes of Spider-Man and Superman, where the red and blue designs can be interpreted to represent the American flag, or through marketing photos such as Spider-Man hanging from a pole flying the American flag. *Captain America* (2011) provides the most overtly patriotic superhero of recent film adaptations, centering around

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[55] As opposed to actors like Christopher Reeves in *Superman* (1978) whom audiences are supposed to believe become completely unrecognizable by putting on a pair of glasses.

an American super-soldier who dedicates his life to helping the United States win World War II. Over time, while superheroes stay committed to preserving society, social structures, ideals, and protecting the innocent, and therefore have remained loyal to the state, the comic book representation of the state has drifted towards systemic corruption, often placing the superhero at odds with the government. This clashing of superhero and government has been used as a plot element in several film adaptations. In films such as *Watchmen* (2009), and *The Incredibles* (2004), superheroes are outlawed by the government and forced into hiding for using vigilante justice. In *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), Bruce Banner is constantly pursued by the military, despite living in secrecy and attempting to control the powers given to him by that same military's failed experiment. In nearly all *X-Men* films, the mutants are pursued by government regulators – demanding mutant registration, scientific testing, procedures to eliminate mutations, or even annihilation. In *Iron Man 2* (2010) Tony Stark considers himself the protector of America and keeper of world peace, but refuses to share his technology with the United States military. Finally, in both *Spiderman* (2002) and Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* series, the heroes are at one point pursued by law enforcement as criminals, or menaces to the city.

7. ***The stories are mythical and use science and magic indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder.***

Early comic book superheroes typically had their superpowers explained as the result of magic or extraterrestrial sources. Superman's abilities were originally the result

of his race of Kryptonians being significantly more evolved than humans.[56] The Green Lantern gained his powers through a magic ring. Captain Marvel was given his powers by the wizard Shazam, who allowed Billy Batson to be struck by a magic lightning bolt transforming him into a superhero by saying the wizard's name. Marvel comics of the 1960s sought a "scientific" (rather than magical) explanation of superpowers, an approach that has been more regularly adapted by film adaptations.

Films like *Iron Man* (2008) and the Batman adaptations depict superheroes using advance science and technology to develop futuristic technology and weapons which allow them to fight crime. The X-Men films as well as the television series *Heroes* explain superpowers as a product of genetic mutation and evolution. Other films like *The Fantastic Four* (2005), *Spider-Man* (2002), *Watchmen* (2009) or *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) depict the attainment of superpowers through accidents of scientific experiments, particularly involving exposure to large amounts of radiation. Despite the drive for a "scientific" explanation of superpowers in these films, the science used is beyond futuristic to the point of being impossible - blurring the boundaries between what is science and what is magic, yet most of these experiences take place in a real-world setting.[57]

In defining the typical syntactical formula for the action film genre, Lichtenfeld states that

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[56] Later explanations involved the gravity of Krypton being stronger than that of Earth, as well as the proximately of Earth to our yellow sun allowing Superman's powers to flourish.
[57] Not unlike most science fiction films.

> The action film formula finds the hero, usually a marginalized law enforcer or other warrior striving to subjugate (rather than investigate) some criminal element. Often, the hero will rely chiefly on the signature weapon with which he is associated, possibly on a partner, marginally on puns and one-liners, and never on the bureaucracy that tries to constrain him. Throughout the narrative, he will engage his enemies in a series of violent encounters, usually encompassing some form of a rescue and a climax set in an industrial setting… these heroes would be shades of the urban vigilante on two fronts. The first is the mythological. Here, the filmmakers align urban vigilantism with Western heroism and individuality. The other front is the ideological. Although the films usually come to affirm the hero's actions, vigilantism itself is often debated and discussed with more than token ambivalence.[58]

Lichtenfeld's description of the action film formula is readily applicable to the superhero film – as most feature a superhero that is marginalized by or who exists outside of society fighting a criminal element (a supervillain), relies on a signature weapon (their superpowers or weapon – i.e. Batman or Iron Man), is pursued by or operates outside of law enforcement, and rescues a loved one from the enemy at the end of the film, all of which takes place in a metropolis.

The action film genre then, serves as overarching syntactical structure within which the superhero film tends to operate. This structure, as argued by David Bordwell, also seems to adhere to the normative anatomy of most Hollywood films. In *Minding Movies*, Bordwell outlines the principal norms which tend to govern Hollywood storytelling (including the action film and by extension superhero film genres) as follows:

> Goal orientation – The primary characters, protagonist and antagonist, both want something, or several somethings. The story progression is driven by characters' efforts to attain goals and by the way circumstances alter those goals.

> The double plotline – Typically the goals govern at least two lines of action, and at least one of these involves heterosexual romantic love.

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[58] Lichtenfeld, *Action Speaks Louder*, 17-18.

Discrete plot structure - we typically find a four-part structure: Setup, Complicating Action, Development, and Climax [and usually also includes an epilogue].

Planting causes for future effects - Hollywood script carpentry lays in conditions that will prove important later… An unresolved action is presented near the end of one section that is picked up and pushed further in a later section.

Deadlines - films in all genres set deadlines for the resolution of the plot. Screen writers call it the "ticking clock," the time pressure that can rule any portion of the film but that is virtually mandatory at the climax.[59]

In looking at superhero films, we find that they too tend to adhere to Bordwell's four part structure, with each part being colored by the semantic traits described above to define how films in the superhero genre are constructed.

1. Setup: Within the setup of a superhero film, the audience is typically introduced to the superhero through a telling of his origin story. This telling includes how the hero came to possess their powers, as well as their decision to adopt a new superhero persona and use those powers to seek societal justice – the goal orientation for the hero. As the hero comes to control their powers, a cause is typically planted for additional effects that will come to fruition during the final battle of the film.[60] Additionally, the setup will introduce a love interest for the secret identity of the hero, establishing the double plot line for the film. This love interest is highlighted much more in filmic adaptations than in comic books, likely due to having the film better adhere to typical Hollywood narrative structures.
2. Complicating Action: Here we see the hero established within society – his fame grows as he performs various heroic actions, and become a household name within the media and public. We also see the origin of the main villain for the film, usually motivated by greed and revenge against a society who wronged them. The villain's initial attack on the city is foiled by the superhero.
3. Development: The villain's vendetta against the city is replaced by a personal vendetta against the superhero. Typically both the superhero and villain discover the secret identities of each other, almost always highlighting a previous

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[59] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Minding Movies: Observations on the Art, Craft, and Business of Filmmaking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 114-116.
[60] For instance Tony Stark discovering early on that his suit will freeze if he flies at too high of an altitude – a flaw he later exploits to defeat Iron Monger in *Iron man* (2008).

encounter or familiarity between their alter egos.[61] The villain attacks or kidnaps the superhero's love interest in an attempt to lure the superhero into a trap. The superhero's motivation is shifted to a desire to save his love interest. At this point both hero and villain are motivated out of a desire for revenge against each other – highlighting the darker aspects of the superhero persona. Yet the two are distinguished by the level of destruction and value of human life they each possess. While villains will stop at nothing to succeed, killing anyone in his way, it is rare that we actually ever see a superhero kill anyone within a film except for the main villain.

4. Climax: The superhero and villain have a final showdown, in which the superhero seeks to save his love interest, while also having to deal with the villain's simultaneous assault on the city – the "ticking clock" deadline. Usually the hero succeeds in saving both the city and his love interest, though occasionally the latter is sacrificed (for instance in *Dark Knight* (2008)).

5. Epilogue – Though the villain is defeated, the hero's victory is usually somewhat unsatisfactory – marking him as a tragic hero. This incomplete victory is demonstrated through three possible scenarios: a new villain is introduced at the end of the film as part of the franchising strategy pointing to a sequel, the hero is unsuccessful in his romantic pursuit, usually through a conscious choice by the hero to not put her in harm's way, or despite saving the city, society views the hero as a menace, more destructive than helpful – forcing them to go into hiding.

While structurally superhero films are constructed and share many qualities with the action film genre, they are colored with semantic traits that at least distinguish them as a very significant subgenre of the action film. Many of these traits stem from their comic book predecessors, including lost parents, the man-god, justice, the normal and the super-powered, the secret identity, super powers and politics, and science as magic to serve as central plot points. Superhero films have also developed a distinct visual aesthetic which seeks to replicate many aspects of the art found in comic books and graphic novels. Superhero films blend plot elements from fantasy and science fiction films within real world settings. Finally, superhero films incorporate the strategy of

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[61] Such as the Joker murdering Bruce Wayne's parents in *Batman* (1989) or the Green Goblin turning out to be the father of Peter Parker's best friend in *Spiderman* (2002)

"cartooning" within their diegesis through exaggerated movements and posturing, melodramatic characters and acting styles, and outrageous props, costumes, and makeup.

What is absent from the preceding discussion, is the treatment of sound in filmic adaptations of superhero comics. Obviously, comic books do not have soundtracks, so in adapting them to film a wholly new set of rules needed to be established for the genre in relation to all three aspects of a film's soundtrack. Lefèvre discusses this aspect of adaptation, and particularly those issues found in dialogue. Lefèvre argues

> In comics a reader can never hear the sound of the characters' voices. Of course, the written text can inform the reader about that aspect… but it remains largely an interpretation by the reader. It seems that at least some readers who imagine a particular sound of the characters voices are shocked by the way an actor speaks when playing that character. Not only the sound of a voice is different but also the way the characters speak. The texts in speech balloons are generally not suited for film dialogue and they need some rewriting. Superhero comics, for example, often use very stylistic and bombastic dialogue; a literal screen translation may emphasize such dialogue's artificial nature to the point of unintentional camp. Stan Lee explains how Ken Johnson changed the texts in *The Incredible Hulk* television series (1978-1982): "He changed it quite a bit from the comic book, but every change he made, made sense. In the comics, when the Hulk talked – he'd go, 'Me Hulk! Me smash! Hulk kill!' That type of thing. Well, that would have been corny as hell on the screen. He left that out… He didn't have the Hulk talk at all." [62]

The Hulk is probably the most exaggerated of all speaking characters to choose from, but Lefèvre's argument certainly highlights the often wholesale rewriting of dialogue restricted to the size of caption bubbles and littered with bad catch phrases found in comic books so they can function on the screen. That is not to say that all films were equally successful in this transformation, as remnants of the stylistic dialogue of comic books are certainly found throughout superhero films, yet there seems to have been an

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[62] Lefèvre, "Incompatible Visual Ontologies," 11-12.

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overarching effort to strive for a more refined style of speech within the adaptations to avoid the possibility of camp as Lefèvre suggests.

Sound effects too have to be carefully considered in superhero film adaptations, mostly drawing influence from the onomatopoeic language of comic books. The "kapows," "booms," "whams," and "biffs" suggested linguistically on the comic book page now had audible renderings on the film sound track. According to Celeste, these renderings developed into an explosive and exaggerated sound environment not only in superhero films, but the action genre in general. Celeste states that

> Rather than simply hearing a punch, film began producing punches that sounded like explosions. The sound environment, which had previously favoured dialogue, was now driven by sound effects and music, producing a sonic environment of exaggeration, rapid adrenaline, and even shock. What was classically delegated to the background of the film now becomes the foreground. Modern action film literally becomes a form of musical agitation and rhythm.[63]

The highly exaggerated sound effects of superhero films not only helped to adapt sonic elements suggested by comic books, but helped to establish the supernatural powers and strength of superheroes within their ordinary surroundings.

Finally, the superhero film adaptations have all incorporated musical underscoring (usually rather substantially), despite there being little or no suggestion of music within comic books. As suggested by the opening chapter of this project, this music has coalesced into a distinct style which has been used repeatedly with the film genre. It is to defining that musical style, its traits and use over the history of the genre, that this project now turns.

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[63] Celeste, "The Frozen Screen," 27.

Chapter 3: Musical Topics

Released in 1989, Tim Burton's *Batman* was an instant success among superhero films. During its opening weekend the film grossed over four times the amount of the previous highest grossing superhero film, Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978), and remained the highest grossing superhero film for over a decade. Even today, *Batman* is the eleventh highest grossing superhero film. Underscoring Burton's *Batman*, is nearly two hours of wall-to-wall music composed by Danny Elfman, which as K.J. Donnelly argues "distinctly resembles scores from classical Hollywood films… [using] an extremely large orchestra, up to 110 instrumentalists, [and] leitmotifs."[1] Figures 3.1a and 3.1b show the main theme for *Batman*, first heard in the title sequence, presented here as a piano reduction. Donnelly describes the theme as follows:

> The theme for Batman himself codes the Gothic at its opening, with deep strings and brass, and then the martial, where it leads to a pounding march with snare drum and brass punctuation. It functions directly as a fanfare for Batman, announcing his presence while being associated solidly with both film and character… Elfman's music in *Batman* is pure Gothic melodrama, using a large, dark and Wagnerian orchestral sound. Some reference points apart from Wagner might be Saint-Saëns' *Danse macabre* and horror film music that has formalized Gothic musical traits. Indeed, it signifies directly to the audience through the use of recognizable musical forms and styles.[2]

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[1] K.J. Donnelly, "The Classical Film Score Forever? Batman, Batman Returns and Post-Classical Film Music," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 146.

[2] Ibid, 147-148.

Donnelly's description, though not explicit, uses language indicative of a musical topical analysis of the theme. Terms like "march," "fanfare," and "Gothic" position the theme within a realm of forms and styles found in music of the 18th and 19th centuries, whose study has fallen under the umbrella of topic theory. As Donnelly states, the use of these topics in the Batman theme signifies to the audience – the march suggests the military or battle, fanfare suggests the heroic, Gothic (which I take Donnelly to mean the more common musical name of ombra) suggests the supernatural, demons, witches, or ghosts. The Batman theme, then, signifies all of these aspects of the character and film to the audience by drawing on musical topics well established within the study of classical music, and suggests that the interpretation and understanding of music for this film can be enhanced through a topical analysis of the theme.

Figure 3.1a: *Batman* (1989) Theme, Danny Elfman (Author's Transcription)
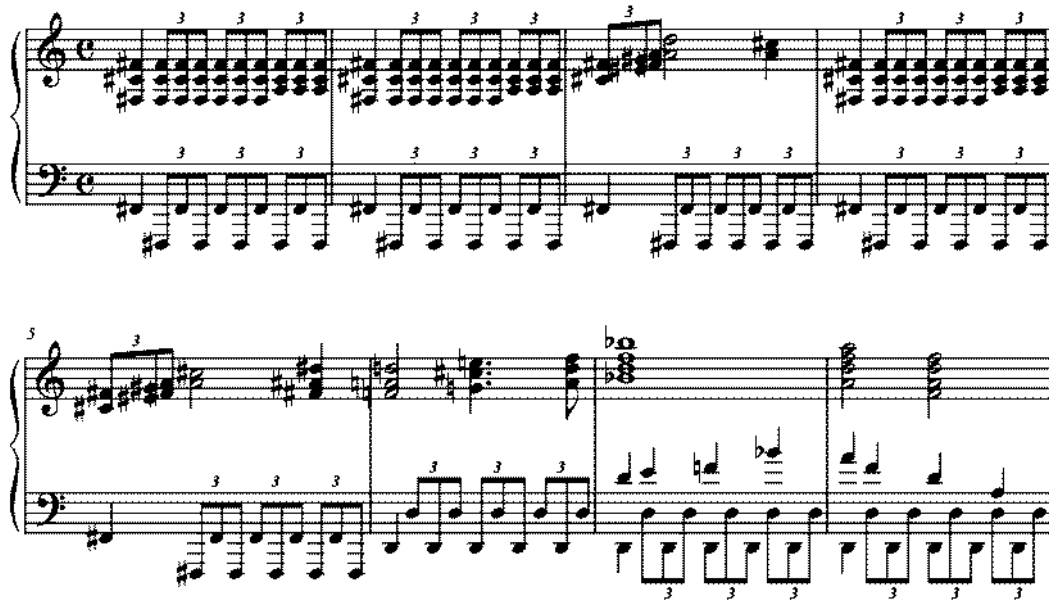
Figure 3.1b: *Batman* (1989) Theme, Danny Elfman (Author's Transcription)

The aim of this chapter is to forge a stronger link between theories of topical analysis in classical music studies and discussions of signifying music in film studies. After an overview and synthesis of some of the major works dealing with musical topics in classical music, those theories are extended into the area of film music studies in an effort to further systematize the analysis of meaning and expression in film scores. Through the interaction of classical topic theory and film music analyses, I propose a model for topical analysis of film music which addresses issues such as interpreting music's interaction with image, leitmotifs, and musical representation of film genres.

Topic Theory in Classical Music

The musical topic, introduced to contemporary music theory by Leonard Ratner in his seminal work *Classic Music*, has become the basis of a number of recent studies.[3] In initially defining musical topics, Ratner writes that

> From its contacts with worship, poetry, drama, entertainment, dance, ceremony, the military, the hunt, and the life of the lower classes, music in the early 18th century developed a thesaurus of *characteristic figures*, which formed a rich legacy for classic composers. Some of these figures were associated with various feelings and affections: others had a picturesque flavor. They are designated here as *topics* - subjects for musical discourse. Topics appear as fully worked-out pieces, i.e., *types*, or as figures and progressions within a piece, i.e., *styles*. The distinction between types and styles in flexible; minuets and marches represent complete types of composition, but they also furnish styles for other pieces.[4]

Thus, for Ratner, musical topics exist as musical objects that inherently possess extramusical meanings and significations due to conventional usage: they were readily understood and identifiable by 18th-century composers and competent audiences. Ratner draws on the work of such contemporaneous music theorists as Heinrich Christoph Koch and Johann David Heinichen to establish that musical topics like singing style, brilliant style, learned style, *Sturm und Drang*, *Empfindsamkeit*, military style, and hunt music, were a recognizable component of the 18th-century musical vocabulary. Identification and analytical understanding of these topics can facilitate and justify expressive interpretation of works from the period.

One of the first musicologists to adopt Ratner's concept of musical topics was Wye Jamison Allanbrook, who, in her book *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart*, discusses the

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[3] Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980).
[4] Ibid, 9.

role that dance topics have in signifying meaning to the audience through their incorporation within arias and ensembles in Mozart's operas.[5] Allanbrook adopts a similar view to Ratner in advocating the use of musical topics to facilitate interpretive analysis. Allanbrook writes that

> an acquaintance with these topoi frees the writer from the dilemma he would otherwise face when trying to explicate a given passage: that he can at the one extreme do no more than detail the mere facts and figures of its tonal architecture, or at the other merely anatomize his private reactions to a work. By recognizing a characteristic style, he can identify a configuration of notes and rhythms as having a particular expressive stance, modified and clarified, of course, by its role in its movement and by the uses made of it earlier in the piece. In short, he can articulate within certain limits the shared response a particular passage will evoke.[6]

From the quote above, Allanbrook seems to regard musical topics as analyzable musical figures that could help mediate the gap that exists between strict structural analysis and the analytical desire to find expression and meaning within music. As Allanbrook's primary focus was on the class implications of varying dance topics, she felt that "rhythm - the number, order, and weight of accents and, consequently, tempo - is a primary agent in the projecting of human postures and thereby of human character,"[7] and her work provides a clear description of those style traits (namely rhythm) that evoke specific dance topics in Mozart's music even when no particular dance is suggested within the opera's plot.

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[5] Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
[6] Ibid, 3.
[7] Ibid, 8.

In his effort to further systematize Ratner's concept of the musical topic, Kofi Agawu was the first to adopt an explicitly semiotic approach to topics. In his book, *Playing with Signs*, Agawu describes topics as signs, stating that

> each sign ... is the indissoluble union of a signifier and a signified. The signifier of a topic is itself comprised of a set of signifiers, the action of various parameters. The musical signifier therefore embodies, even at this primitive level, a dynamic relation... What is signified by a given topic remains implicit in the historically appropriate label invoked - singing style, Sturm und Drang, learned style, and so on. Furthermore, just as low-level signs can combine to form higher-level ones, so topics in a particular local function can combine to form topics on a higher level. And so we have - theoretically, at least - a process of infinite semiotic linkage with regard to topic, reaching beyond the individual phrase, section, or movement to the work as a whole, and beyond.[8]

Agawu's statement points to a critical aspect of musical topics that should be considered in their study and use in analysis. The signifier of a musical topic is a complex entity that must be thoroughly dissected if we are to fully understand it. As topical signifiers themselves are made up of multiple signifiers, the analyst must enumerate each of those signifiers in order to be able to recognize the presence of the topic in a context where all signifiers of the topic are not present. While for Agawu the primary signified of a topic is implicit in its label, it has been demonstrated by others that the signified also relates the topic to a larger field of meaning – that the signified can continue as a signifier for additional meaning at a higher level.[9] The play of signs does not end when the signified is reached, as the signified can be just as complex as the signifier, and deserves careful study and interpretation. Agawu's aim seems to be an initial attempt at categorization, and

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[8] Kofi V. Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 39.

[9] See Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006) and Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

as such his analyses of musical topics in his study rarely go beyond identification of a topic and providing it with the appropriate label.

Agawu also illuminates two critical caveats of topic theory and analysis:

First, competence is assumed on the part of the listener, enabling the composer to enter into a contract with his audience. If something is commonplace, then it is meant to be understood by all competent listeners... Second, the "natural" and "historical" associations of a topic point to an irreducible conventional specificity. In some cases, the combination of topical sequences and essences enables the analyst to construct a plot for the work or movement. By "plot," I mean a coherent verbal narrative that is offered as an analogy or metaphor for the piece at hand. It may be based on specific historical events, it may yield interesting and persuasive analogies with social situations, or it may be suggestive of a more generalized discourse. These are not programs in the sense in which the *Symphonie Fantastique*, for example, has a program; nor are they necessarily literal representations of extramusical events. Plots arise as a result of sheer indulgence: they are the historically minded analyst's engagement with one aspect of a work's possible meaning.[10]

The first of Agawu's caveats is fundamental to the function of a musical topic. Without listener competence, a topic cannot be recognized as a sign and therefore cannot signify any extramusical meaning. It is therefore the charge of the topic analysis to demonstrate that any musical topic, whether new or preexisting, is a commonplace in the competent listeners' musical vocabulary if the topic is to function as a sign at all. The second caveat deals with what is signified by the topic. For Agawu, a topic ultimately points to a specific irreducible object that can help to facilitate the creation of a narrative that explains the succession of topics for a given work. However, even though the meaning of a topic is specific, Agawu suggests that any narrative can only ever be one of many possible interpretations, an analytical indulgence necessary for the analyst to order and

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[10] Agawu, *Playing With Signs*, 33-34.

make sense of the signs, perhaps, but not for either the work or its proper musical understanding. Thus, while topics can serve as points of departure from which an analyst can argue a particular interpretation of a work, they are not concrete enough in meaning to determine only one possible narrative, and the number of interpretations remains possibly infinite - though certain readings will undoubtedly seem better supported by musical parameters than others. For Agawu, whose ultimate goal is to examine the interaction of musical topics with structural harmonic analysis, the creation of plots from musical topics is optional.[11] Yet, he acknowledged the influence that topics could have in narrative analysis, which was subsequently addressed in the work of Robert Hatten.

In *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, Hatten incorporates musical topics as a critical aspect in creating narratives and discussing meaning in the work of the eponymous composer. Hatten begins his treatment of the musical topic with a systemization of Ratner's work, presented in figure 3.2:

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[11] As for Agawu, a narrative reading is an indulgence by the analyst, the structural harmonic analysis occurs naturally – it belongs to the music, not the analyst.

I. Codes of feelings and passions, linked to:
  A. pace, movement, tempo
  B. intervals
  C. motives used to symbolize affect
II. Styles, based on:
  A. locale/occasion/situation
      1. ecclesiastical/church style
      2. chamber style (*galanterie*)
      3. theatrical/operatic style (relative to chamber style)
  B. degree of dignity
      1. high style
      2. middle style
      3. low style
III. Topics, either:
  A. types (fully worked-out pieces), such as dances (minuet, contredanse, etc.) in high, middle, or low styles, or
  B. styles (figures and progressions within a piece)
      1. military, hunt
      2. singing style
      3. French overture
      4. musette, pastorale
      5. Turkish music
      6. Storm and stress
      7. sensibility, *Empfindsamkeit*
      8. strict, learned style (vs. *galant*, or free style)
      9. fantasia style
IV. Pictorialism, word painting, and imitation of sounds in nature.[12]

Figure 3.2:   Hatten's Outline of Ratner's Topics

Hatten not only extracts various musical topics from Ratner's work in the preceding outline, but also presents a variety of other musical parameters that identify a number of other possible signifiers an analyst can extract from a piece through topical analysis. Hatten himself defines a topic as

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[12] Hatten, *Musical Meaning*, 74-75.

> A complex musical correlation originating in a kind of music (fanfare, march, various dances, learned style, etc.; Ratner, 1980), used as part of a larger work. Topics may acquire expressive correlations in the Classical style, and *they may be further interpreted expressively*.[13]

The final clause of Hatten's definition distinguishes his treatment from that of Agawu. While, like Agawu, Hatten adopts a semiotic approach to topics, for Hatten, the signified of any given topic can vary depending on its context within the music. According to Hatten, an instance of a pastoral topic in major mode is not going to signify the same meaning as a pastoral topic set in minor mode. Both instances would belong to the same topical family of the pastoral and therefore share many of the same expressive correlations. But the additional musical parameters that surround each instance help to further shape and refine the topic's meaning thereby allowing greater specificity in the analyst's interpretation of the piece - in linguistic terms the mode functions as an adjective, modifying our understanding of the noun (the topic). Topics can exist in various musical styles, possess high middle or low degrees of dignity, and be manipulated through changes in the codes of feeling provided in Hatten's outline. Thus, for Hatten, every manifestation of a musical topic is potentially unique within the context of the given piece. The interpretation of topics is mobile and dynamic in Hatten's study compared to the relatively static view allowed through Agawu's definition.

To accommodate the possibility of a single topic possessing sufficient flexibility to support a potentially infinite number of interpretations while remaining a cohesive unit, Hatten divides musical topics into types and tokens.

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[13] Ibid, 294-95 (emphasis added).

A type is an ideal or conceptual category defined by features or a range of qualities that are essential to its identity. A type is understood or conceived as an inference at the level of cognition; it does not exist at the level of perception, though acts of perception are fundamental to its inference. A token, on the other hand, is the perceptible entity that embodies or manifests the features or qualities of the type. Generally, those features and qualities are not the only ones which the token possesses; they are merely the ones which are relevant to its being understood as a token of the type. Thus, type and token exist at two fundamentally different levels, but their relationship allows us to pass smoothly from one to the other.[14]

Hatten's type, then, is like the overall family group of a topic, which exists as an agglomerate of the musical signifiers of its various tokens, and maintains the overall signifying meaning of the topic yet never actually exists in the music. Tokens, on the other hand, are any material manifestations within a musical work. While tokens relate back to their type through the incorporation of similar familial signifiers, they can undergo a wide range of variation in their manifestations, allowing the composer to manipulate their overall meaning.[15] This variation stems from the token's interaction with musical parameters not included within the type - that is to say, a musical phrase is not usually constructed exclusively out of tokens from a single type. Types do not generally specify the totality of musical parameters for the token (which is why there are an indefinite number of possible tokens for each type), but those musical parameters not specified by the type affect the total meaning. Moreover, particular tokens rarely possess all of the features common to the type. Because types only exist as an abstraction from the sum of its tokens, and tokens of a type can vary greatly in actual appearance,

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[14] Ibid, 44-45.

[15] Hatten's argument falls somewhat into the "chicken or the egg" causality dilemma here, as types both establish the family group to which a token belongs, but they are also abstracted from tokens as a way of organizing the world of appearance - suggesting that tokens precede the type.

"specifying precisely the invariant features preserving the identity of a type may not always be possible."[16] That is to say, the features common to a type can always expand if enough tokens of that type are demonstrated to share a new quality.

In addition to expanding the flexibility of interpreting the meaning of topics through the use of types and tokens, Hatten proposes two additional facets of topical analysis that can help to refine a narrative reading of a work: markedness and troping. The concept of markedness is built on oppositions, in which one of a pair of opposing terms possesses a narrower range of meaning than its counterpart. For example, in the pairing of man/woman, man can mean either the male gender or mankind (which encompasses the female gender), whereas woman refers only to females and is therefore marked. Hatten compares this opposition to that of major/minor in music, in which minor almost always refers to the tragic in Classical music, while major can encompass a wide range of expression "such as the heroic, the pastoral, and the genuinely comic, or buffa."[17]

Marked musical entities, then, are more specific in their expressive meanings and help to focus an interpretation of a work. Topics can be marked through their strategic placement in a piece, particularly through topical opposition. For instance, a token of the hunt topic can be marked when it occurs in a passage that is otherwise dominated by an

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[16] Ibid, 295.

[17] Ibid, 36. Hatten acknowledges that these two examples do not necessarily mirror each other, as man/woman are a privative opposition (man can encompass woman) whereas major/minor are equipollent (major cannot encompass minor), however both oppositions are asymmetrical with regards to their expressive meaning, as major mode can be used to convey the tragic in Classical music, whereas minor mode is not likely to convey the non-tragic.

unrelated topic, such as singing style.[18] In this context, the hunt is an ideal moment for interpretation in the work, as it occurs at an unusual moment and appears to be a strategic move by the composer. On the other hand, the occurrence of a hunt topic within a pastoral section is likely to be unmarked, as both topics in some sense deal with nature; the hunt does not seem to be out of place, and therefore demands less interpretation.[19] It is also possible for topical opposition to occur where two topics interact but neither topic is the marked entity - resulting in a sort of musical discourse throughout the work.

Troping is an additional way in which Hatten demonstrates that topics can interact in a work.

> Troping in music may be defined as the bringing together of two otherwise incompatible style types in a single location to produce a unique expressive meaning from their collision or fusion. Troping constitutes one of the more spectacular ways that composers can create new meanings, and thematic tropes may have consequences for the interpretation of an entire multimovement work.[20]

Troping is essentially a fusion of two or more unrelated topics, such as the heroic and pastoral, in which the signified meaning of each topic interacts to create a new expression.[21] Hatten provides three guidelines for a trope to exist.

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[18] In some sense any musical topic will be marked when compared to normal musical discourse - presumably that uncovered by more traditional harmonic/structural analysis. By identifying topics, the analyst automatically marks them as distinct from the harmonic framework. Hatten's concern, however, is of the markedness of topics when compared to other topics.

[19] Certainly there are some instances where the hunt may be marked within the pastoral, however as an abstract example, the similarity between the two topics allows for their logical pairing - similar to fanfares and marches.

[20] Robert Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 68.

[21] See Hatten's analysis of the finale of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op 101, in which the heroic and pastoral topics form a trope. "The second trope, formed by the interaction of the learned-heroic and pastoral, is far richer in its metaphorical force... The nature of the heroic victory is one that must be possible within the realm of the pastoral. If the pastoral is interpreted for this sonata in the context of the spiritual ... then the victory will be understood as an inward, spiritual one." (Hatten, *Musical Meaning*, 171).

1.   The trope must emerge from a clear juxtaposition of contradictory or previously unrelated types.
2.   The trope must arise from a single functional location or process.
3.   There must be evidence from a higher level ... to support a tropological interpretation, as opposed to interpretations of contrast, or dramatic opposition of characters.[22]

The first two guidelines are straightforward - the topics involved in a trope must be unrelated—the conjunction of already similar topics such as the military and the hunt would not typically constitute a trope—and must occur in the same musical location.[23] The third guideline relates to interpreting the work as a whole. The topics in question typically will need to occur separately in other areas of the work in order to view their juxtaposition in this section as a strategic fusion or troping to create new meaning. Finally, the consistent troping of two topics by composers in a variety of works is also one way in which a new topic may emerge.

In his book, *The Musical Topic*, Raymond Monelle provides arguably the most systematic study of musical topics to date. Unlike his predecessors, whose goal was to study the ways in which musical topics can interact with other forms of musical analysis such as narrative and Schenkerian analysis, Monelle's work focuses solely on musical topics themselves as objects for study. For Monelle,

> It is not possible to identify musical topics with mere labels... In order to understand a topic, we need to relate a long narrative of fantasy and imagination, as well as to understand social and technological history... Both signifier and

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[22] Hatten, *Musical Meaning*, 170.

[23] Whether two topics are unrelated enough to constitute a trope is dependent on both context, and repetition. That is to say, the combining of hunt and military topics would have been a trope at one time, however their persistent interaction over time lessens the impact of their combination - we come to expect seeing them combined in music.

signified must be investigated if we are to reach some grasp, at least provisional, of the meanings and evocations of each musical topic.[24]

Monelle provides thorough case studies of the military, hunt, and pastoral topics, analyzing both the signifier and signified of each topic and demonstrating how they relate to society as well as how each topic has evolved in form, meaning and social function over time. Along with providing a guide to better understand each of these topics, Monelle also demonstrates that

> in the case of topics, the signifier and signified are not necessarily contemporary or local to each other... [T]he topical signified may be wholly imaginary, a reflection of cultural fantasies... Theorists of the literary and musical topic, therefore, must take care not to assume that signifier and signified are necessarily contemporaneous, or even that the signified was ever part of the social and material world.[25]

As an example of these "cultural fantasies," Monelle demonstrates that the signified of the hunt topic, one of noble masculinity, is in fact a nostalgic cultural fiction that ignores the barbaric practices that actually took place during a Medieval- or Renaissance-era hunt.[26] Likewise, the idyllic world often signified by the pastoral topic was one that did not exist within 17th- and 18th-century society but was actually a creation of writers and poets from as early as the third century B.C.[27] Monelle's argument is that the study of musical topics needs to be as much a study of culture as of music, and that "the primary

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[24] Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 19. Monelle's use of the term "narrative" here refers not to the construction of a musical narrative, but to the origin of topics with in literary narrative – i.e. the pastoral stemming from Greek classical poetry.

[25] Ibid, 12-13.

[26] Actual hunts during this time period often involved chasing the game off of a cliff or into a river to drown, along with fencing off a large area of the forest so the animals had no chance of escaping.

[27] Monelle traces the classical pastoral back to "Theocritus's *Idylls*, which was written in Alexandria in the third century B.C." Ibid, 185.

concern of the topic theorist is to give an account of each topic in global terms, showing

how it reflects culture and society, not to focus on music alone."[28]

Monelle also adopts a semiotic approach to musical topics, however, in a fashion

more similar to Hatten than Agawu. For Monelle,

> the topic is essentially a symbol, its iconic or indexical features governed by
> convention and thus by rule. However, topics may be glimpsed through a feature
> that seems universal to them: a focus on *the indexicality of the content*, rather than
> the content itself. This important feature must be approached with some caution,
> for the indexicality of musical contents is sometimes mistaken for musical
> indexicality itself... Thus, it is possible for a musical syntagma to signify
> iconically an object which itself functions indexically in a given case; the example
> given above of the cuckoo's call ... is such an item, for the heralding of spring is
> an indexical function of the cuckoo itself, not of its musical representation.[29]

This description of the semiotic process of musical topics adopts a Peircian triadic

semiotic model as shown in figure 3.3.[30] In this process, a musical topic (such as the

cuckoo call in the above quote) can be either iconic or indexical of an object (in this case

a cuckoo bird).[31] The object is in turn indexical of some sort of signification or meaning

that can be interpreted by the analyst (such as the cuckoo bird suggesting spring). As

another example of this triadic process, Monelle suggests the topic of the *pianto*, a falling

minor second that first appeared with this signification in the Renaissance period. "The

pianto ... is iconic with regard to its object, because it originally imitated the moan of

someone in tears; it is indexical with regard to its ultimate signification (the 'indexicality

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[28] Ibid, 10.

[29] Raymond Monelle, *The Sense of Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 17.

[30] Robert Hatten also employs this triadic model (Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*) likewise,
Monelle also incorporates Hatten's division of topics into types and tokens.

[31] Iconic meaning that the musical topic imitates the object - as is the case with the cuckoo call played on
an instrument imitating the sound of a cuckoo bird. Indexical refers to the suggestion of an object through
deixis, cause and effect, or stimulus/reaction – i.e. a window with a bullet hole in it is indexical of the bullet
that passed through it.

of the object'), because it came to mean the emotions associated with one kind of

weeping."[32]

Musical Item ⟶ Object ⟶ Signification
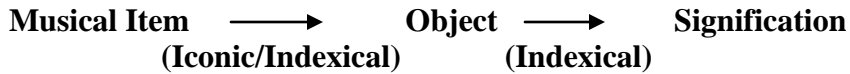   **(Iconic/Indexical)   (Indexical)**

Figure 3.3:   Triadic Semiotic Process of Musical Topics

Monelle also allows for a simpler dyadic model of representation is his discussion

of Arthur Honegger's *Mouvement Symphonique No. 2 - Rugby*. Monelle states that

> A musical icon, like Honegger's picture of a Rugby game, in which the
> indexicality of the topic is not at issue, conforms to a simpler pattern. However,
> the nexus of icon and object is dependent solely on the composer's title, and is
> thus apparently weaker. Even in the latter case, expressions become so strongly
> attached to their content that other composers tend to take them up; presumably
> this is the means whereby idiolectic expressions are converted into topics. In all
> these cases, topics, being by their nature symbols, "come into being by
> development out of other signs, particularly from icons, or from mixed signs
> partaking of the nature of icons and symbols" (Pierce 1940, p. 115).[33]

For Monelle, Honegger's piece seems to suggest more the nascency of a musical topic

than of a fully developed topic. As the proposed "rugby" topic is entirely dependent on

the title of the work, it apparently lacks any interpretive signification beyond its signified

object.[34] However, Monelle suggests that all topics begin from this stage of pure

iconism,[35] either through works with titles such as *march* or *pastorale*, or through

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[32] Monelle, *Sense of Music*, 17.

[33] Ibid, 18-19.

[34] The relationship between the music and title suggests a symbolic, not iconic relationship. Monelle seems to view it as iconic by referring to the piece as a "picture" or "portrait" - comparing the relationship to that of an oil painting to its object of representation - the title necessary for understanding as the composer is attempting to "portray phenomena for which no convention exists." Ibid, 17.

[35] In his description of pure iconism, Monelle includes not only physical resemblances or imitation of the object, but also the symbolic relationship between titles and music.

imitation of hunt calls or military fanfares. Yet when other composers adopt the musical

parameters of Honegger's *Rugby* to signify not only Rugby, but other attributes such as

athleticism or masculinity, the topic can evolve into the triadic model of signification.

Topics are created through intertextual repetitions that signify similar objects. In this

way, musical objects become commonplace and readily intelligible by competent

listeners as required by Agawu's definition. As Monelle states:

> not all signifying items are topics. The central questions of the topic theorist
> are: Has this musical sign passed from literal imitation (iconism) to stylistic
> reference (indexicality) into signification by association (the indexicality of the
> object)? And, second, is there a level of conventionality in the sign? If the
> answers are positive, then a new topic has been revealed, whatever the period of
> the music studied.[36]

A final critical aspect of Monelle's work is the expansion of topical analysis to

music outside of the Classical period. Unlike the work of Ratner, Allanbrook, Agawu,

and Hatten, which focuses almost exclusively on music of the Classical era, Monelle

extends his study of musical topics both backward to the Renaissance and forward into

music of the 20th-Century.[37] Again writing about the *pianto*, Monelle remarks:

> It seems clear that an understanding of topics is necessary in interpreting classical
> music... Yet some topics are to be found throughout our culture, from the
> sixteenth century through the twenty-first; I have elsewhere described ... the topic
> of the *pianto*, the falling minor second that signifies weeping, which begins its life
> in Italian madrigals and can still be found today in a piece like Kurtág's *Stele*, not
> to mention popular music and *Gebrauchmusik*.... [I]n semiotic terms..., it has a
> unitary, simple signifier, the falling minor second, with an equally simple iconic
> signified that is not limited historically; the sound imitated is that of someone
> weeping, and people have wept, alas, in all ages.[38]

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[36] Ibid, 80.

[37] Hatten also expands his more recent work (Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*) to music outside of
the Classical era.

[38] Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 4-5.

Topics like the *pianto* have existed in far more styles of music than just that of the Classical era. Consequently, a thorough study and understanding of the topic that Monelle strives for, requires a historical account of its signifier and signified. Not only does Monelle feel that his predecessors' narrow studies of topics are incomplete, but "there are, in addition, topics that appear *only* in the later period, and therefore have escaped Ratner's and Agawu's nets."[39] Monelle's work seeks to expand the focus of these preceding authors' which are firmly anchored in the Classical era, studying the evolution of topics over time, as well as allowing for the discovery of post-Classical era topics.

Other scholarship, much of which preceded Monelle's work, had already taken a similar approach and traced the historical adoption and evolution of particular style topics. Jonathan Bellman's *The Style Hongrois in the Music of Western Music*, for instance, traces the origins and development of the Hungarian-Gypsy musical style.[40] After establishing a basic "lexicon" of stylistic traits, Bellman investigates the incorporation of the Hungarian-Gypsy topic in the music of Weber, Liszt, Brahms, and Schubert. Bellman also edited a collection, *The Exotic in Western Music*, which contains chapters exploring the deployment and evolution of Turkish, Hungarian, Oriental, and Indian musical styles in Western art music as well as rock music.[41]

Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh's edited collection *Western Music and Its Others* also contains chapters dealing with Orientalism and gypsy music in Western art music, as well as a chapter by Claudia Gorbman dealing with the scoring of Indians in

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[39] Ibid, 8.

[40] Jonathan Bellman, *The Style Hongrois in the Music of Western Europe* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993).

[41] Jonathan Bellman, ed., *The Exotic in Western Music* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998).

film.[42] Gorbman argues that there was a shift in the musical portrayal of Indians from pre-World War II westerns to more recent depictions. While pre-World War II westerns scored Indians as threats or "obstacles to overcome" through the use of musical stereotypes (such as tom tom drums and melodies which feature parallel fourths), more recent westerns (such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990)) have scored Indians in a nostalgic manner.[43] Such scoring allows the Indians to appear not as threats, but as indicative of an ideal America - a reminder of what has been lost to technological progress.

Michael Pisani's *Imagining Native America in Music* also investigates the musical depiction of Native Americans.[44] Pisani traces the presence of an "Indian Topic" in Western art music from 1550 through modern films to investigate how the music represents a culture's understanding and interpretation of Native Americans, as well as what that understanding says about the culture which "fostered such attitudes."[45] In film, particularly of the 1930s, Pisani notes that audiences demanded "authenticity" in the music to depict Indians - though this authenticity was far from accurate. Rather, the audience demanded musical stereotypes which stemmed from the classical music tradition of depicting the exotic or "others" - namely rhythms that are "sharp, rigid, and unyielding ... melody doubled in parallel fourths, conveying ... "ancientness" ...

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[42] Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, eds., *Western Music and Its Others* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[43] Claudia Gorbman, "Scoring the Indian: Music in the Liberal Western," in *Western Music and Its Others*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 251.

[44] Michael Pisani, *Imagining Native America in Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

[45] Ibid, 14.

accompanied by a throbbing drumbeat in two with the same rhythm doubled in the cellos and basses, which drone in open fifths."[46]

From the preceding overview of the major scholarship in topic theory, we synthesize a list of key characteristics of musical topics. First, topics are musical signs, consisting of a set of musical signifiers that are either iconic or indexical of some extramusical object. Topics gain their extramusical signification either through titles, through association with particular dramatic or narrative situations in songs and theatrical works, or through their use and function within society at large. A fully established musical topic will not only signify its extramusical object but will also convey any associations that object possesses - resulting in a triadic process of signification that can be further interpreted.

Second, both the signifier and signified of a musical topic are complex entities that require elaborate study to ensure understanding. Topics have been described as types and tokens, in which the token only need possess enough topical signifiers necessary for the type to be recognized. As topics generally possess a number of signifiers, the analyst must be able to enumerate each of those signifiers in order to be able to identify the topic. Additionally, as tokens of topics will rarely possess all of the signifiers of their type, they will often be combined with other musical parameters that help to shape the full meaning of the particular token, offering topics a great deal of flexibility in their strategic use within compositions - which in turn allows for more interpretive space of the signified for the analyst. Likewise, due to dependence on listener competence for their meaning, the

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[46] Ibid, 302.

signified of a musical topic is as much a cultural study as it is a musical one. The analyst must study how topics have been employed and evolved, and how their social signification may have changed historically to understand their meaning.

Finally, the universe of musical topics is constantly expanding and changing as more analysis uncovers them. Agawu states that "the substantial domain of topics, like that of language, remains open, allowing for the possibility of discovering more topics."[47] Along the same lines, Allanbrook writes:

> The accumulation of a collection of *topoi* for expressive discourse is the natural concomitant of an aesthetic which sets as its goal the mirroring of aspects of the universe. Each branch of the arts will develop a storehouse of devices appropriate to its own medium whereby those universals can be represented - or imitated.[48]

For both authors, topic theory is a dynamic form of analysis, which imposes no limit on the number of topics that may be revealed through musical study and analysis.

Hatten's interpretation of Beethoven's Op. 130 string quartet provides a model for discovering a new topic through analysis.[49] The new topic, which Hatten names *plenitude*, "implies saturation or repleteness, and as such, the prototypical state of plenitude would be one of suffused, contented fulfillment."[50] After outlining the musical parameters that act as signifiers for plenitude, Hatten demonstrates how the topic functions as a thematic premise for the work. Hatten's overall interpretive reading of the work and the role plenitude plays in it is convincing, however, his discussion of the actual musical topic seems too cursory to establish its topicality. As both Agawu and

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[47] Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 49.
[48] Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture*, 4.
[49] See chapter 2 of Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*.
[50] Ibid, 43.

Monelle state, topics require extensive repetition by various composers before they can function reliably as topics, and Hatten's explication of plenitude does not provide much historical context for Beethoven's use of it, either in terms of its prehistory or its historical consequences for later composers.[51] This is not to say that plenitude is not potentially a new musical topic uncovered through analysis, merely that it needs further study and more examples before it can be understood as a readily recognizable musical figure.

Despite the growing study of musical topics over the last thirty years, the focus of topic theory has been almost exclusively restrained to the analysis of classical music. However, as Monelle points out, musical topics are found throughout our culture, which includes music outside of the traditional canon of instrumental music. It is possible that the expansion of topic theory into other genres such as film music might not only facilitate a better understanding and interpretation of music for the screen, but could also aid in the recognition of a much wider universe of musical topics. As such, the remainder of this chapter will focus on discussions of musical signification and musical topics in the area of music for film, aiming to establish a model for topical analysis of film music.

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[51] Tobias Janz does speak of Adorno's concept of *Erfüllungsfelder* or fulfillment. See Tobias Janz, *Klangdramaturgie: Studien zur theatralen Orchesterkomposition in Wagner's 'Ring des Nibelunge'* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006), 158. Hatten cites three examples he has found of plentitude, all by Beethoven - the Presto and Andante of the Op. 130 quartet, as well as the Adagio of the Ninth Symphony. It is likely that Hatten would agree with the need for a newly proposed topic to be well established as a commonplace through its repeated use, as one of the methods he describes that topics can be created is through the repeated troping, or fusing of two unrelated topics to the point that the collision of the topics is no longer unique or unstable, but points to a relatively fixed set of interpretations (See Hatten,*Musical Meaning*, 188-89; and Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*, 71-74).

Musical Topics in Film

Discussions of the signifying capability of music in film begin almost the moment

writing on film music appears. Since Ratner had not yet articulated the concept of the

musical topic, these works discuss the concept under such terms as musical illustration,

musical clichés, and leitmotifs. Within early anthologies designed to facilitate the musical

accompaniment for silent films, one can often find descriptions of the signifying capacity

of music in the forewords provided by the compilers. For instance, in his foreword to

Gordon's Motion Picture Collection, Sol Levy writes

> the motion picture drama, no matter in what country or scene the action takes
> place, is constructed out of the elements of human emotions. Taking these
> universal emotions as the common basis, the author has made use of, or has
> composed descriptive themes for every type of motion picture commonly
> shown.[52]

From early on in the history of film, musicians have been concerned with how films can

use descriptive music to shape the meaning and emotions of film.

In *Film Music*, Kurt London describes the technique of musical illustration, which

served to depict "the title for a predominant mood, a characteristic sentiment, or the

delineation of a person, which may assist the spectator's understanding, and perhaps also

shed some psychological light on the film."[53] In addition to musical illustration, Theodor

Adorno and Hanns Eisler also discuss musical clichés used to evoke a mood or emotion,

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[52] Sol Levy, *Gordon's Motion Picture Collection for Moving Picture Pianists* (New York: Hamilton S. Gordon, 1914), 1.

[53] Kurt London, *Film Music* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1936), 58-59.

as well as music associated with particular geographical locations.[54] While Adorno and Eisler largely criticize the use of signifying music as lessening the aesthetic value of a film's art, and being redundant of the images already present, both their work and that of London's point to the fact that early film composers were aware of music's ability to denote extramusical meaning and incorporated signifying musical gestures within their scores. Though she also does not refer to musical topics, Claudia Gorbman comes the closest of earlier film music scholars to defining the use of one in early film music through her discussion of the "Indian Music" in *Stagecoach* (1939). Gorbman describes how the "Indian Music" incorporates a repeated rhythmic grouping of four with accents on the first beat and open intervals of fourths and fifths which "already signify "Indian" in the language of the American music industry."[55] In short, Gorbman describes the signifiers of an "Indian Music" topic she wrote about in her previously discussed work,[56] which has since received extensive study by Michael Pisani both in classical and film music.[57]

> Monelle writes of the possibility of compiling an "inventory" of musical topics:
>
> Perhaps one day an inventory of topics might be envisaged, offering an indispensable guide to musical interpretation. There are already brief lists of topics in Ratner and Agawu, though these authors give little more than labels. However, musical topic theory may be at its weakest in the area of inventorization. The analysis of music is like the most thrilling archaeological

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[54] Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Composing for the Films* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947) 9-11.

[55] Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 28. Gorbman also discusses narrative cueing and music as signifier of emotion in her seven principles of composition. Ibid, 73; 79-87.

[56] Gorbman, "Scoring the Indian," 251.

[57] Pisani, *Imagining Native America*.

fieldwork; it constantly unearths new topics. The analyst needs to be just as concerned to discover the new, as to confirm the already known.[58]

In fact, such inventories of musical topics do exist: within silent film music anthologies.

In *Music and the Silent Film*, Martin Marks discusses the release of these anthologies (as well as handbooks and articles in trade magazines) around 1910.

> As publishers sensed the growing need for such "suitable" - and readily handy - music, they began to bring out anthologies containing assorted popular favorites, classical selections (often newly "arranged"), and original "incidental" pieces of cinema music. They also brought out indexes of their music for use by the cinema player. These anthologies and indexes classified music along the same lines as the cue sheets: that is, by mood, dramatic situation, tempo, and meter. Thus, they constitute the first typologies of film music.[59]

As Rick Altman points out, these anthologies can be traced to anthologies for theatre productions. "An 1883 Carl Fischer catalog offered twenty-five "New York Theatre Orchestra Melodramatic Music" numbers, from "Rustic" and Hunting Piece" to "Battle" and "Storm Tempest."[60] Many of these collections consisted of music from the Romantic era, particularly from salon music, operas and operettas with which much of the audience would have been familiar, as well as original music written to accompany specific types of scenes. The titles found in the Carl Fischer collection directly correlates to topical categories found in studies on classical music. Additional examples of these anthologies include the *Eclipse Motion Picture Music Folio* compiled by Arthur Lange, the *Sam Fox Photoplay Edition* compiled by J.S. Zamecnik, and arguably the most well-known collection, Erno Rapée's *Motion Picture Moods*.

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[58] Monelle, *Sense of Music*, 80.
[59] Martin Marks, *Music and the Silent Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 9-10. These anthologies really constituted the first topical typologies not only of film music, but of any music.
[60] Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 258. These theater anthologies were not as systematically organized as the film catalogues that would follow.

As one of the foremost conductors, composers and compilers of music for silent films, Rapée provided a very instructive foreword to his collections. He writes:

> This collection is meant to do away with the aforesaid haphazard collection of music and its use for synchronizing pictures... In creating fifty-two divisions and classifications in this Manual, I tried to give the most numbers to those classes of music which are most frequently called upon to synchronize actions on the screen. Let me say here for the information of every man attempting to use this Manual to the best of his advantage that you can't always portray action; one-third of all film footage is used to depict action; another third will show no physical action, but will have, as a preponderance, psychologic [sic] situations; the remaining third will neither show action nor suggest psychological situations, but will restrict itself to showing or creating atmosphere or scenery. If it is action that the organist of pianist wants to portray, he will find a sufficient variety of headings in the index to satisfy almost any aspect of his musical taste; should the portrayal of psychological situations be necessary, he will find it under the heading of Love, Horror, Joyfulness, Passion, etc. In the music of 'Nationalties' [sic] Chinese and Japanese music has been treated as a unit; the less known national airs of Honduras, Uruguay and Venezuela I enclose only for the rare use in news reels; for Tournaments, Skating, or any exhibition of individual skill where the action is not too fast I advise the use of concert waltzes by Waldteufel, Strauss, etc.; should the action be rather rapid, a galop or lively one-step would be suitable... Under the caption of 'Neutral' you will find seven different numbers which are meant for use in situations where none of the aforesaid three situations are present - that is, where *there is neither action,* nor atmosphere, nor the elements of human temperament present in any note-worthy degree. The music found under the caption 'Sinister' is meant for situations like the presence of the captured enemy, demolishing of a hostile aëroplane or battleship, or for the picturing of anything unsympathetic. The eleven pieces included under the caption 'Parties' will be found suitable also for the portrayal of social gatherings in gardens.[61]

We can make a number of inferences about music for silent film from Rapée's foreword. The goal of these collections was to provide music that could be synchronized well with almost any image on the screen. By synchronize, Rapée refers to music that conveys the

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[61] Erno Rapée, *Motion Picture Moods for Pianists and Organists: A Rapid-Reference Collection of Selected Pieces* (New York: G Schirmer, Inc., 1924), iii.

same or similar meaning to the images, evident by the numerous headings of possible scenarios within the film for which music is provided.

The three situations for music described by Rapée point to varying roles by music in shaping the meaning of a scene. Music for action scenes seems to generally reflect the excitement that could already be inferred through the images of the film, and drew on an iconic relationship through the tempo of the music in relation to the image. For instance, Rapée suggested that medium-paced action scenes like skating or tournaments be accompanied by waltzes, whereas quick action scenes would require faster music, such as galops and one-steps. Likewise, headings like "fire-fighting" and "battle" suggest pieces titled "Hurry," "Agitato," and "Furioso," again most likely referring to the fast paced excitement of such scenes. In situations where music was reflecting a psychological situation however, music served primarily to enhance the emotions of the scene. As it is sometimes more difficult to see feelings like love, joy, or passion, the music helped the audience interpret the inner thoughts or emotions of the characters based upon the mood the music resembles. Rapée's category of atmospheric/scenery music seems to be at its most extensive in the area of national music, which possessed a rather simplistic signifying capacity - each country could be represented by its national hymn, anthem, or characteristic folk songs. Finally, while music was meant to be played throughout a film to fit its various scenes, Rapée acknowledged that some scenes did not possess any "note-worthy" meaning, and so provided a selection of so-called "neutral" music - thereby also suggesting that not all music was, to borrow Hatten's term, topically marked - it lacked tokens of any specific type which the audience would easily identify.

Though it deals primarily with television music, Ron Rodman's recent book, *Tuning In*, devotes a chapter to musical topics in both film and television music.[62] In examining another of Rapée's collections, the *Encyclopedia of Music for Motion Pictures* (1925), Rodman writes:

> As the practice of composing for film became conventionalized, catalogs of topical musical cues were published containing both preexisting and newly composed music. One such collection, the *Encyclopedia of Music for Motion Pictures* (1925) by Ernö Rapée, contained preexisting musical pieces cataloged by such topics as "love scene," "chase," "sinister," "aeroplane," and so forth. In fact, Rapée's encyclopedia illustrates an early-twentieth-century theory of topos. Like lists of topics for eighteenth-century music (see Ratner 1980 in particular), Rapée's topics are listed without regard to the object of the topic (the list is alphabetical). Rapée's listing suggests six generic categories of topics based on the nature of the objects they signify.[63]

Figure 3.4 presents Rodman's categorization of Rapée's list of topics, broken down into six broad categories: places, objects, actions, emotions, events, and intramusical (topics which signify through their previous connotations in classical music).

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[62] The chapter's primary aim is studying the role of musical topics in contributing to the narrative process of the episode "Shore Leave" from the television series *Star Trek* (1966); however he extends the practice of using topics in television music back to these early collections for silent film.

[63] Ron Rodman, *Tuning In: American Narrative Television Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 118; 120.

1. Places
　　a. Countries/States/Ethnicities
　　　　African
　　　　Algerian
　　　　Irish
　　　　Spanish
　　　　California
　　　　Indiana, etc.
　　b. Generic places
　　　　The Sea
　　　　Carnival
　　　　College
　　　　Jungle
　　　　Tavern, etc.
2. Objects
　　a. Inanimate
　　　　Aeroplane
　　　　Bagpipes
　　　　Clocks
　　　　Dolls
　　　　Taxi, etc.
　　b.1 animate (real)
　　　　Bees
　　　　Birds
　　　　Butterflies
　　　　Cats
　　　　Dogs
　　　　Lovers
　　　　Children, etc.
　　b.2 animate (mythical and romanticized
　　　　Fairies
　　　　Ghosts
　　　　Witches
　　　　Pirates
　　　　Indians, etc.
3. Actions
　　a. Narrative action
　　　　Battle
　　　　Drinking
　　　　Hunting
　　　　Military
　　　　Hurry, etc.
　　b. Dances
　　　　Antiques dances
　　　　Ballet
　　　　Bolero
　　　　Cakewalk
　　　　Fox Trots
　　　　Tango, etc

4. Emotions
　　Agitato
　　Appassionata
　　Comic
　　Dramatic
　　Eccentric
　　Mysteriosos
　　Fear
　　Furiosos
　　Happy/content
　　Love
　　Tension
　　Tragic
　　Savage
　　Sinister
　　Sentimental, etc.
5. Events
　　a. Social events
　　　　Christmas
　　　　Election
　　　　Halloween
　　　　Weddings
　　　　Bullfight
　　　　Coronation
　　　　Duel
　　　　Beaten army, etc.
　　b. Natural events
　　　　Spring
　　　　Storm
　　　　Fire, etc.
6. Intramusical
　　a. By genre
　　　　Ballads
　　　　Fanfares
　　　　Hymn
　　　　Opera
　　　　Marches
　　　　Overtures
　　　　Processional, etc.
　　b. By tempo
　　　　Allegro
　　　　Andante
　　　　Maestoso
　　　　Presto, etc.

Figure 3.4: Rodman's List of Rapée's Topics

Rodman refers to these early catalogues as lists of musical topics, similar to that found in Ratner's work. Yet, to view these catalogues as inventories of topics overlooks many of the subtleties of the catalogues, as well as oversimplifies the concept of the musical topic. We find listed in these catalogues many of the musical topics already well-established and well-researched by classical music topic theorists, such as hunt, military, pastoral, march, dance topics, *Sturm und Drang*, etc. Additionally, proposed topics relating to countries, states, or ethnicities are based on cultural folk models, and were readily identified by audiences to signify the respective cultures. However, there are also numerous topic headings, such as dogs, cats, doll, taxi, etc., which have little or no precedence for topical significance in music of the Classical or Romantic era, and therefore demand closer study before they are given the status of a topic. These overly specific headings seem more similar to the dyadic model of signification that Monelle found in Honegger's *Rugby*, which may be more suggestive of a sort of "proto-topic" - a topic in nascency with the ability to evolve into triadic signification through repeated use within a culture. This is not to say that each of these musical examples do not signify, or are not potentially topics, but as Monelle points out not all signifying musical figures are topics.

In fact, it may be that a number of the overly determined topical headings found in these collections (such as "cats," "doll," etc.) refer not to topics themselves, but rather to subtypes of a larger topical type. If we return to Rapée's *Motion Picture Moods*, and examine some of the selections under *Fire Fighting*, for example, we find a number of varying titles of pieces including "Hurry," "Agitato," and "Furioso." Under the title of the

first page of each of these selections (shown in figures 3.5-3.7), we find additional instructions as to what kind of scenes these selections are appropriate for and, in a sense, what types of emotions they are meant to signify.[64] Note that none of these subheadings mention "fire-fighting," even though that is the heading under which all of these pieces are listed. Instead, the subheadings refer only to scenes which are exciting, tumultuous, or intense, and in fact the unifying descriptor of these selections seems to be their use for riots. This is not to say that this music would not be perfectly suitable for a fire-fighting scene, only that (to borrow a term from Monelle) there is no inherent "signifyingness" specifically of fire-fighting in this music. The signified is instead a more general notion of excitement - one which would be equally suitable for a fire-fighting scene or a riot, as the scenes possess similar action.

Figure 3.5: *Hurry No. 2*, by Otto Langey, from Rapée's *Motion Picture Moods*

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[64] It is unclear whether these instructions were provided by the composer or compiler.

Agitato No. 2

(Heated argument, or intense situation, leading to a fight or riot, *etc.*)

J. E. Andino

Figure 3.6: *Agitato No. 2*, by J.E. Andino, from Rapée's *Motion Picture Moods*

Furioso No. 3

(Depicting Riots, Tumultuous Scenes, *etc.*)

Otto Langey

Figure 3.7: *Furioso No. 3*, by Otto Langey, from Rapée's *Motion Picture Moods*

There is also the question of how tokens that fall under the same title in these anthologies relate to one another. In looking at another agitato from the same collection (figure 3.8), we find a very different suggestion of meaning in the subheading. This agitato, though listed under the heading "Battle," is also suitable for scenes depicting spirits, witches, or other undead creatures. Again, the lack of congruence of what the music signifies between the heading and subheading, suggests that "Battle" is not the topic of this piece of music, merely one of its possible subtypes. While some musical similarities can be found between the two agitatos (fast tempo, minor mode, short

phrases, binary form), they really are quite distinct in terms of musical content. While

both metrically in two, the constant triplet rhythm of *Agitato No.3* gives the piece the feel

of compound meter, versus the more march-like rhythm of *Agitato No. 2*.[65] Melodically,

Agitato No. 2 is much more angular, and focused primarily in the treble range than the

overall conjunct, bass range melody of *Agitato No. 3*. Finally, *Agitato No. 3* is clearly

modeled on Schubert's *Der Erlkönig* - which not only helps to reinforce its

appropriateness for the use in signifying the supernatural or undead creatures through

quotation, but suggests a possible troping of agitation and the supernatural, both in

Erlkönig and *Agitato No. 2*.

Figure 3.8: Agitato No. 3, by Otto Langey, from Rapée's Motion Picture Moods

As tokens, the Hurry, Furioso, and Agitato seem to possess a level of familial

resemblances, suggesting that they are in fact related to a unifying topical type - namely

that of agitation.[66] The subheadings point to slight variation in their signified, with the

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[65] In fact, *Agitato No. 2* also incorporates a dotted rhythmic effect later in the piece, which when combined
with the fast march rhythm is evocative of the military topic, leading me to wonder if this Agitato may have
been better suited to be included under the heading of "Battle."

[66] Such music has already been discussed as "action music" to some degree by Anne Dhu McLucas, as
arising from music used for American pantomime and melodrama, which was eventually adopted by early

hurry suggesting physical agitation (fights, duels), the agitato to psychological agitation (intense situation, heated argument), and furioso to physical agitation motivated by psychological agitation such as a riot. Under this general topical type of agitation, lie multiple subtypes, such as fire-fighting, battle, infernal, duel, and so forth, which point to the range of signification for each token. Within this framework, the tokens of hurry, agitato, and furioso remain flexible in terms of signification, allowing their suitable use across multiple subtypes. As musical manifestations of a more general topic (agitation), tokens are constructed out of multiple musical parameters, each of which may or may not relate to their intended topical subtype. The subtype which these tokens point to is determined by context - namely, what kind of scene the music is accompanying. When *Agitato No. 2* accompanies a battle, those parameters consistent with the battle subtype are activated, whereas others define the particularity and expressivity of the token; when it accompanies witches, then those parameters consistent with the infernal subtype are activated, whereas the others again define the particularity and expressivity of the token.

In his book *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, Nicholas Cook likens this interaction to that of a metaphor in language, in which the interaction of two media results in a reciprocal transfer of attributes from each, resulting in the construction of new meaning (figure 3.9).[67] In this model, the images of A provide the context that allows certain

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silent film composers. See Ann Dhu McLucas, "Action Music in American Pantomime and Melodrama, 1730-1913," in *American Music*, 2:4 (Winter 1984): 49-72. McLucas describes the short, repetitive phrase structures as being flexible enough to be used for chase scenes, where choreography was often somewhat haphazard, and accompanists needed to be able to quickly alter the length of music through repetition or cutting to fit the action on stage. McLucas notes that over time, these examples of action music evolved to be incorporated into the plot as signifiers of "emotional agitation rather than physical action" (65).

[67] Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

parameters of token X to be isolated. This context provides the specificity and definition

required for token X to be understood as subtype AX, provided that those parameters

necessary for subtype AX are already present in token X.
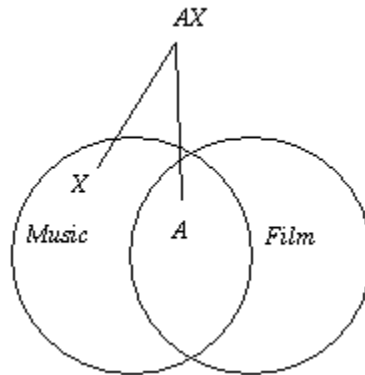
Figure 3.9: Metaphorical Interaction of Music and Image in Films

To use a previous example, the token of the agitation topic - *Agitato No. 2* - would

intersect with images depicting fire-fighting to be understood as the fire-fighting subtype.

While both the images and music in this case convey relatively similar meanings, their

interaction still helps to shape the overall perception of the multimedia - the music adds

to the excitement of the images, while the images shape the specific interpretation of the

music.[68] The process of interpreting meaning of the musical signifiers' interaction with a

visual component is not unlike that which a token undergoes in classical music. There too

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[68] As Cook suggests, there is a wide range of possibility in terms of how closely related the original meaning of music and image are prior to their interaction. Cook provides three categories based on that relationship: conformance - where only one medium projects meaning and nothing is added by the other; complementation - where one medium predominates in projecting meaning, but the other medium projects additional, closely related meaning which the predominant medium lacks (the most common for film music); and contest - where the two media project contradictory meanings, and the result of the interaction is a new meaning, distinct from any which the two media originally possessed. Contest, it would seem, is closely related to Hatten's concept of troping two unrelated topics, and may well be one of the more interesting ways in which music and images can interact.

a token of a type is surrounded by additional, unrelated musical parameters which help to refine and delineate its overall interpretation. Additionally, the interaction between music and image is similar to Ratner's description of a topic's original attainment of meaning through its "contacts with worship, poetry, drama, entertainment, dance, ceremony, the military, the hunt, and the life of the lower classes." Therefore, through the repeated pairing of musical signifiers with one type of image or scene, it is possible for a new topic to emerge from those subtypes created through the interaction of musical tokens and visual context.

A thorough study of the potential topics that may be found in these collections of signifying music for silent films could take up several more pages than it has been afforded here. However, these collections are far from simple catalogues or lists of musical topics as Rodman suggests. To better display the dynamic nature of the topics, types, and tokens they could be organized into three tiers as show in figure 3.10. Here the overarching topical field of Agitation is divided into numerous subtypes, which represent the field of expressive meaning available to their tokens depending on the context they are placed in. Each of the proposed topical headings requires further analysis to clarify whether they are indeed topics, or subtypes, what musical parameters act as signifiers for each of those topics, and what is being signified by the tokens.

```
Topical Field    Agitation

Subtypes
                 Fire Fighting
                 Battle
         .       Supernatural
                 Riot
                 Duel

Tokens
                 Agitato
                 Furioso
                 Hurry
```

Figure 3.10: Re-categorization of Topics, Types, and Tokens

Some headings found are already well established musical topics. Others point to proto-topics, dyadic significations such as National music, where hymns and anthems from various countries are used to signify that country. One can see how a cultural study of these proto-topics can easily lead to a triadic process of signification. For instance, it is likely that the hymns used to signify Germany also evoked any political or personal antagonism toward Germany which American citizens may have had in the years shortly after the First World War - a fact that would include study of American culture of the time for support.[69] Finally, there are some headings of signifying music in these collections which seem so bizarre that I find it unlikely that were in any way intended to function topically. For instance, Rapée's heading of "Aëroplane" includes two musical

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[69] The cultural view of National music in this collection aiding a triadic process of signification is already suggested through Rapée's decision to collapse the music of Japan and China into a single category. Perhaps Rapée felt the music of these two countries was too similar for audiences to distinguish between them, however I find it odd that most of the countries listed are intended to be signified by their own national anthem, yet China has two songs listed in the table of contents - both their own anthem as well as Japan's. This seems to me more a reflection of American society's often narrow view a number of distinct countries of the Asia-Pacific region existing as one culture. It may also indicate that there were not many films set in Asia.

examples written by Felix Mendelssohn - a composer who died nearly a decade before the possibility of air travel began to fully materialize.[70] Any signified meaning of "airplane" for this music likely arose solely through its interaction with the visual aspect of the film. It is in fact this interaction with visual objects on the screen that I would argue many of the subtypes listed in these catalogues gain their specificity. These tokens still possess a level of signification due to their iconic relationship with its topical subtype. As one would expect, the two Mendelssohn examples presented in figures 3.11a and 3.11b imitate the motion of an airplane through presto tempi and disjunct lines (particularly in the left hand) which move up and down across a large area of the keyboard. However, the overall relationship of this music to the Airplane subtype arises from its interaction with image.

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[70] While it is true that the concept for fixed-wing aircrafts emerged around 1800, nothing resembling the type of airplanes being shown in movie theatres in the 1920s existed while Mendelssohn lived.

Scherzo

Figure 3.11a: Airplane Token 1

Figure 3.11b: Airplane Token 2

While these catalogues of signifying music disappeared as silent films transitioned to the sound era, many of the techniques for accompanying films were adapted for writing original scores for films. This is evident from the previously discussed film scholars' acknowledgement of musical illustration, cliché, imitative music, and even Gorbman's "Indian Music," found in sound films of the 1930s and 40s. Therefore, it is possible that extending topical analysis of film music into sound films will continue to reveal the complex nature of topics in film. Such a study could demonstrate a continuation and evolution of topics found in these collections, or could reveal new topics which arise through the repeated interaction of musical tokens and image. In "A Simple Model for Associative Musical Meaning," J. Peter Burkholder provides an example of how topics can evolve and acquire new meanings through their use in films. Burkholder writes that:

> Motives that resemble military calls have become associated with the military, and hence with heroism and adventure. These undoubtedly are associations that led Alexander Courage to use horns and trumpets playing a fanfare-like motive featuring successive rising fourths in a dotted motive, in his theme music for the *Star Trek* television series in 1966. Through this theme, and also through Stanley Kubrick's appropriation of *Also sprach Zarathustra* for the main title of *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1968, the combination of trumpets and other brass playing large intervals, especially fourths and fifths, acquired a new association with space, exploited in the title music for all the subsequent *Star Trek* series (before the most recent, *Enterprise*) and in John William's score for *Star Wars* in 1977, which opens with a brass fanfare... Once again, reconstructing the associations a composer might have intended to arouse requires studying how music in that time and place was used and the associations it had acquired.[71]

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[71] J. Peter Burkholder, "A Simple Model for Associative Musical Meaning," in *Approaches to Meaning in Music*, ed. Byron Almén and Edward Pearsall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 102.

Burkholder's description of a topic acquiring new associations over time is one that requires a diachronic study of the topic, stretching back to the silent-era catalogues (and probably further back to the musical topics of classical music) as well as even further forward than Burkholder goes, as a similar "space-fanfare" can be found at least in *Apollo 13* (1995) if not in other recent space films. Understanding how the signified of the military topic has expanded to become associated with space is of interest not just in terms of understanding film music, but in terms of topic theory in general. Just as Monelle argues that the study of topics in classical music needs to be expanded to music outside the Classical era, as some topics have been reasonably stable since around 1600, so too do topics extend into and over the whole history of film music - justifying its inclusion in topic theory studies.

Leitmotifs as Topics

Several film music scholars have discussed a compositional technique akin to Richard Wagner's concept of leitmotifs in the practice of film scoring, in which the music provides "labels" which reflect actions, characters, objects, or emotions.[72] Typically these leitmotifs are denotative signifiers, gaining their meaning through repeated use within a film score. The relationship between signifier and signified for leitmotifs is one that is artificially constructed through their association within the film. There is no external reference to a previously established relationship between sign and object necessary for

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[72] See Adorno and Eisler, *Composing for the Films*, 2-3; London, *Film Music*, 58-59; Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 3.

the audience to understand the signification, and therefore the leitmotif is not functioning topically.

However, since leitmotifs are music, they do share the same signifying capability of any musical topic, and can be constructed with regards to topical signification of meaning outside of the denotative function in the film. In a criticism of Roger Scruton's analysis of Wagnerian themes in the Ring cycle, Monelle challenges the notion of other authors (namely Scruton and Carl Dahlhaus) that leitmotifs cannot represent extramusical meaning. Monelle writes that

> It is puzzling ... that Roger Scruton fails to notice the level of representation, the inherent signifyingness, in many leitmotivs ... he considers that the signifying nature of music depends on its "expressiveness" in the emotional sense, and that it is heard "as music", not as representation. Thus, he considers that the meaning of leitmotivs depends solely on their function in the drama. "The leitmotif is not attached by a convention to its subject, as is a code... The true leitmotif *earns* its meaning, from the dramatic contexts in which it appears." But manifestly, the leitmotiv of the sword sounds like a military call, and military calls signify manly heroism by an associative code. To ignore this, and treat (for example) the "Notung" song in *Siegfried* as an expressive and symphonic tissue in which we only *come to* associate the Sword motive with its meaning, is to misunderstand the music.[73]

Thus, for Monelle, a leitmotif can function both as a signifier established through its function within a drama, while also drawing on external associative codes (topics) to help contribute to the motif's overall signified meaning. By drawing on external topics, leitmotifs can also further shape the audiences perception of the person or object the motif represents through a transfer of attributes similar to that described by Cook.

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[73] Monelle, *Sense of Music*, 42.

Leitmotifs in film have also been described as capable of referencing external musical signifiers to contribute to their meaning, both by Gorbman, and later adopted by Rodman for his study on television. Rodman writes that Gorbman

> mentions two kinds of leitmotifs: motifs that are arbitrarily assigned to a character or situation and that accrue meaning through repetition ... and motifs that are assigned to characters or situations that have some intertextual reference. The first kind of motif operates exclusively within the narrative realm of the film, whereas the second straddles the narrative and the intertextual, or referential, dimensions of the sign. This latter type is both denotative and connotative while the former is denotative only... Since leitmotifs are musical and music is expressive of, or signifying of, moods and emotions, musical leitmotifs have the potential of carrying a dual signifying capacity.[74]

The intertextual/referential dimensions of the leitmotif in films can often be understood through topical analysis, and a topical consideration of leitmotifs may be required if one is to understand fully the motif's signified meaning and function in shaping the spectator's understanding of a film.

I would also argue that leitmotifs are a central area of film music that should be studied if an analyst's goal is to uncover new potential topics. Even leitmotifs which have primarily a denotative function within the film can be viewed as proto-topics, in that the music not only signifies characters or objects, but also absorbs attributes of that character or object, which can lead to them developing topical signification if the signifiers are further imitated to represent similar objects, characters, or emotions in other films. An example of this process can be viewed through the simple two-note motif used by John Williams to signify an upcoming attack in the film *Jaws* (1975). While this motif began as a denotative leitmotif, cueing the audience to the presence of the shark, it has since

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[74] Rodman, *Tuning In*, 113-14.

become such an ingrained part of our cultural musical vocabulary that its imitation now signifies not just to the shark, but a general feeling of impending danger.[75] In a sense, the leitmotif has evolved into a sort of topic, however one in which a token has evolved into a type, provided that the musical signifiers are abstracted and do not appear as a direct quotation. Such an example can be found in the scene from *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), in which the Fellowship is learning of the fate of the dwarfs of Moria when Pippin accidentally knocks a corpse into a well. The noise from the corpse falling awakens the orcs and goblins inhabiting Moria, and the Fellowship begins to hear drums "in the deep," first slowly and then increasing in tempo - similar to the gradual increase of tempo in the Jaws motif. Here, the attributes originally transferred to the leitmotif through its interaction with its object of denotation in *Jaws* have been abstracted to signify the same type of affect, thereby suggesting the establishment of a type. Additionally, leitmotifs which possess both denotative and connotative functions, can also lead to a topic gaining new signification due to its strategic use in films - as previously discussed through Burkholder's description of military fanfares attaining the additional signification of space.

Topical Representation of Film Genres

Burkholder's "space-fanfare" topic also points to a final consideration for this chapter - that a musical style or topic can come to signify a group of films related by content. That the military topic has become associated with space through its use in film

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[75] Though this connotation was likely already present in the leitmotif.

and television arose because of the fact that multiple films and television shows which share the unifying content of a setting in space. It follows then, that studying the music used for similar types of films - namely, films related by the same genre - may lead to additional examples of musical topics which have gained new signification, or the discovery of wholly new topics.

The idea that film genres tend to incorporate similar styles of music is one that has already received some attention, particularly in the area of psychomusicology in studying viewer reaction to audio/visual stimuli. For example, Claudia Bullerjahn and Markus Güldenring conducted a study measuring film viewers' understanding of plot and genre by pairing the same visual sequence with a variety of different soundtracks.[76] For the music for these studies, three composers were asked to compose original music suitable for specific film genres - music for crime films, thriller films, and an example of indeterminate music. More interesting to our discussion than the results of their study, is the understanding by both the authors and the commissioned composers that a particular musical style was appropriate for each genre.

Along the same lines, compositional guides for writing music for film and television have also suggested stylistic similarities for music of a specific genre. In *Music Scoring for TV and Motion Pictures*, Marlin Skiles discusses several "mood categories"

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[76] Claudia Bullerjahn and Markus Güldenring, "An Empirical Investigation of Effects of Film Music Using Qualitative Content Analysis," in *Psychomusicology*, 13 (1994): 99-118. The article also cites many similar studies, including H.B. Brosius and H.M. Kepplinger, "Der Einfluß von Musik auf die Wahrnehmung und Interpretation einer symbolisierten Filmhandlung," *Rundfunkund Fernsehen,* 39 (1991): 487-505; S Holicki and H.B. Brosius "Der Einfluß von Filmmusik und nonverbalem Verhalten der Akteure auf die Wahrnehmung und Interpretion einer Filmhandlung," *Rundfunk und Fernsehen,* 36 (1988): 189-206; and G.S. Vinovich, "The Communicative Significance of Musical Affect in Eliciting Differential Perception, Cognition, and Emotion in Sound-motion Media Messages,* (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1975).

found in film and television and discusses stylistic traits and orchestration guidelines composers should incorporate in their music in order to reflect those moods.[77] Table 3.1 provides an example of how Skiles suggests particular instruments as being suitable for evoking each of his moods - many of which can be likened directly to well-established film genres. Again, the suggestion here is that each genre has developed its own musical style, yet for us to understand this style as a topic, a thorough study of the music for any genre must occur, illuminating the musical signifiers of the topic, as well as investigating how they may have emerged from previous musical topics or how they have changed over the lifetime of the genre. The next chapter of this dissertation will undertake one such study, analyzing the music used in the comic book superhero films to arrive at the definition of a new musical topic that has been widely used to signify the genre.

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[77] Marlin Skiles, *Music Scoring for TV and Motion Pictures* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975). These categories represent a direct descendent from the silent film anthologies.

Quality	Instruments
Drama	Low strings French horns or trombones Low woodwinds English horn (low register) Bass flute (low register) Contrabass clarinet (low register) Piano
Mystery	Low flute Strings (tremolando) Contrabassoon (low register) French horns (stopped or muted) Novachord of Hammond organ Yamaha organ Moog synthesizer
Romance	Violins (middle and high register) B-flat Clarinet (middle register) Oboe (with caution) Flute (middle register) Bass flute (middle and low register) French horn (middle and high register) Bass clarinet (high register) Violas, celli (middle and high register) Vibraphone
Humor	Bassoon (middle and low register) Oboe (middle and high register) Clarinet (all registers) Xylophone Bass clarinet (low)
Scenic (Pastoral)	Flute (middle and high register) Horn (middle and high register) Trumpet(middle register) Clarinet (middle register) English horn (middle register) Oboe (middle and high register) Violins (high register) Harp (middle and high register) Piano (middle and high register)
Science Fiction	Moog synthesizer Yamaha organ Female soprano voice Vibraphone (haze effects) Many percussion effects Strings (harmonics) Flute (high register)
Horror	Contrabass clarinet Contrabassoon Tuba Low trombones Electronic instruments (effects) Piano (low, bass clef) French horns (low register, stopped) Tympani Bass drum
Narrative Background	Combined strings and woodwind (middle register)

Table 3.1: Skiles' Mood Categories and Associated Instruments

Conclusion

In returning to the *Batman* theme which opened this chapter, we can examine it in terms of the framework discussed above. In this case, the theme is a token of the heroic topical type, through its primary signifiers of the fanfare and march. However, this theme is also expressively motivated through the inclusion of tokens of the tragic and ombra types, which help us to further interpret the hero. Additionally, the theme's usage as a leitmotif for the Batman character causes it to absorb the qualities of that character, which may be further exploited by future composers either through direct quotation, or by abstracting the signifiers of the theme to form a new topical type. External to the film, the theme signifies heroism, the tragic, and the supernatural, and is further shaped and reinforced through its context within the film.

From the previous discussion, it is possible to create a model for the topical analysis of film music, enumerating the ways in which topic theory may help to further systematize the ability film music has in shaping an audience's perception and understanding of a film.

I.   Musical topics, established in the classical music genre, can be viewed as characteristic musical figures which signify an extramusical object or emotion. Many of these figures were adopted into the practice of film scoring as evidenced from early catalogues of signifying music of the silent era, and through discussions of illustrative music in sound film by early film scholars. When used in conjunction with visual images, the tokens of a topical type have a much more specific interpretive meaning than they do when used as music alone.

II.   The combining of musical topics with a visual image results in a transfer of attributes between the two media akin to that of metaphor in language. The signified of the musical topic helps to shape the perception of the image, while the specificity of the image in turn shapes the interpretation of the topic. The repeated combining of a set of musical signifiers with a specific, unrelated type of image can either result in the creation of a new topic (if the signifiers were not previously a token of an existing type), or can result in a kind of troping, where an existing musical topic attains a new signified object (as with the "space-fanfare.")

III.   Leitmotifs can function as denotative signifiers within a film, but can also incorporate musical topics to function as connotative signifiers of extramusical meaning. As they already have a denotative function as signifiers of characters or objects within films, leitmotifs are particularly sensitive to attribute transfer. Therefore, most leitmotifs can be viewed as proto-topics, which through the repetition of signifiers for similar characters or objects in other films can readily contribute to the creation of new topics, or the addition of signified meaning for previously established topics.

IV.   As individual film genres tend to use similar musical styles in their soundtracks, they are potential areas for the discovery of new musical topics. The establishment of these topics requires a thorough study of that genre's music over the course of its history, as both the musical signifiers and signified of the genre may have changed over time.

Finally, I think it important to note that no matter how systematically one approaches their study, it is equally important to remain flexible in considering the

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meaning and function of musical topics. This flexibility can be achieved by dividing topics in film into distinct subtypes which are related through their inclusion within a larger topical field, and are determined by an infinite realm of possible tokens. This division allows for the tokens of a subtype to function as possible tokens for a variety of topical fields, while acknowledging the specificity of a token's interpretation when placed in the visual context of a film. Topics are extremely dynamic musical objects, constantly interacting with other musical parameters, other musical topics, or (in the case of film) visual components, dialogue, plot, etc. - all of which need be considered in their interpretation. Topics have also been shown to evolve in terms of signification over the course of their lifetime, and new topics can constantly be discovered through analysis. The expansion of topical analysis into film music may greatly expand the universe of musical topics, as well as provide further understanding of our culture's musical vocabulary.

Chapter 4: Towards a Superhero Musical Topic

This chapter examines various musical tokens, namely the primary themes that have appeared in comic book films, in order to isolate the characteristics of what I call the superhero musical topical type. Through a historical analysis of the title music for comic book films from the 1940s to today, my aim is to establish a new superhero topical type by focusing on the intertextual similarities of musical parameters held in common among the tokens. In doing so, I discuss how superhero themes have changed over time, establishing two main stylistic periods of the superhero type, the first of which evokes a primarily heroic affect by drawing on military signifiers of the march and fanfare already established in classical music and music for the silent film. The second, beginning with *Batman* (1989), shifts from a strictly heroic style to one of the tragic heroic. This shift relates to the shift found within the construction of the superhero persona, and action film characters in general.

Early Superhero Films: 1941-1978

In *The Musical Topic*, Raymond Monelle demonstrates that heroism in music is often signified by evoking the military topic. Monelle states that:

> It is easy to feel stirred by the vigorous march tunes and rousing trumpet calls of the military topic. Intuitively, the signification of this topic seems euphoric, manly, heroic, adventurous, evocative of noble deeds and reckless courage.[1]

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[1] Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 142. Monelle goes on to discuss that this musical representation of the military always refers to the "myth of the heroic warrior," rather than actual contemporary societal views of the soldier (159).

The signifiers of the military topic, as defined by Monelle, are the military march rhythm, and the incorporation or imitation of the military trumpet call. These trumpet calls, while varied, always consisted entirely of melodic movement within a single triad (owing largely to the capabilities of the instrument they were played on), as well as both triplet and dotted-note rhythms.[2] Examples of these calls (shown in figure 4.1), stemmed from the 17th century, and were later adapted into concert music of the 18th and 19th centuries to evoke military soldiers and the heroic.

Figure 4.1: Reproduction of Monelle's 17th Century Trumpet Calls

The use of the military topic to reflect heroism is found not only throughout Classical and Romantic-era operas,[3] but was also adopted into silent film anthologies for military and battle scenes. Figure 4.2a presents examples of American bugle calls from *Gordon's Motion Picture Collection*, while figures 4.2b and 4.2c show these figures incorporated into "Battle Music" within the *Eclipse Motion Picture Music Folio*, and the

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[2] For an excellent collection of these calls, see Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 282-290.
[3] See for example Monelle's discussion of the sword motive in Wagner's *Siegfried*, in Raymond Monelle, *The Sense of Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 42-45.

Sam Fox Photoplay Collection Vol. 1.[4] Again, the melodies draw on the fanfare figures

outlining a single triad, and dotted and triplet rhythms.

Figure 4.2a: Bugle Calls from Gordon's Motion Picture Collection

[4] Sol Levy, *Gordon's Motion Picture Collection* (New York: Hamilton S. Gordon, 1914). Arthur Lange, *Eclipse Motion Picture Music Folio* (Philadelphia: Eclipse Publishing, 1915). J.S. Zamecnik, *Sam Fox Photoplay Edition* (New York: Sam Fox Publishing, 1919).

Figure 4.2b: "Battle Scene" from *Eclipse Motion Picture Folio*

Figure 4.2c: "Battle Music" from *Sam Fox Photoplay Edition*

The use of these military fanfares in film carried over from the silent film era to appear in the music for countless heroic films from the 1930s-1950s. The music for films such as *Captain Blood* (1935), *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), and *The Mark of Zorro* (1940), presented in figures 4.3a-c, all incorporate the military topic, particularly through the use of triadic fanfares. These occur either within the main theme for the hero, as in the first four notes of the *Captain Blood* theme, or as literal military trumpet calls announcing the arrival of the hero, as in *Robin Hood* and *Zorro*.[5]

Figure 4.3a: *Captain Blood* (1935) Theme, Erich Wolfgang Korngold (From *Hearing the Movies*)[6]

Figure 4.3b: *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) Fanfare, Erich Wolfgang Korngold (Author's Transcription)

Figure 4.3c: *The Mark of Zorro* (1940) Fanfare, Alfred Newman (Author's Transcription)

While the above films predate any cinematic adaptation of a superhero character, and their characters are not based upon superhero comic books, they do share several

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[5] Additional hero films of this era incorporating the military topic include *The Sea Hawk* (1940), *The Adventures of Don Juan* (1948), *The Three Musketeers* (1948), and *Spartacus* (1960).

[6] James Buhler, David Neumeyer, and Rob Deemer, *Hearing the Movies: Music and Sound in Film History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 198.

characteristics of superheroes - not only in their origin story narrative - as with Dr. Peter Blood evolving into the rebel hero Captain Blood, but in the incorporation of secret identities and a striving for justice for oppressed citizens. It is not surprising then, that the music for superhero films which immediately followed this time period would emulate the music of these preceding hero films, and indeed the theme music for the early superhero film serials were mostly composed as triadic fanfares in major keys, incorporating the heroic military topic.

Figure 4.4a shows the theme for the Max Fleischer cartoon serial *Superman* (1941). The melody features a triadic fanfare in 4/4 march time, with dotted rhythms also suggestive of the military topic. The theme evokes the heroic nature of the Superman hero rather straightforwardly, its only peculiarity (discussed below) being the use of a bVII harmony suggesting the use of mixolydian mode until the final cadence. The theme for *Adventures of Captain Marvel* (1941), shown in figure 4.4b, again incorporates the military topic through the use of melodic intervals of fourths, fifths and octaves. The harmony moves from I - VI through a chromatic-mediant relationship, explained here through triadic motion of RP.[7] Finally, figure 4.4c shows the theme for the *Captain America* serial (1944), which once more evokes the fanfare topic through a triadic melody in 4/4 march time, and again incorporates the military topic through dotted

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[7] As many of the themes discussed in this chapter do not incorporate functional tonal harmony, I use a combination of Roman numerals as well as Neo-Riemannian transformation symbols in my analyses. These symbols refer to triad relationships of Parallel, Relative, and Leading-Tone Exchange, where Parallel and Relative transformations refer to our common triad relations (i.e. P = C-Major/c-minor; R = C-Major/a-minor) and Leading-Tone Exchange refers to the lowering of the tonic of a major triad by half-step (L = C-Major becomes e-minor) or raising of the fifth of a minor triad (L = c-minor becomes Ab-Major). See: Richard Cohn, "Neo-Riemannian Operations, Parsimonious Trichords, and their *Tonnetz* Representations," *Journal of Music Theory*, 41/1 (1997): 1–66.

rhythms. Like the Captain Marvel theme, the *Captain America* theme also is also supported by moves through chromatic mediants, beginning in G major, changing to Eb major through PL motion, and then to Gb major through PR motion.

These non-tonal shifts in harmony may allude to the "super" aspect of these heroes, that which distinguishes them from their predecessors. Heroes such as Captain Blood, Robin Hood, and Zorro possess no extraordinary powers outside of prodigious skill with a sword - in short, they could actually exist in reality.[8] However, heroes like Superman and Captain Marvel have powers that are superhuman or god-like, demanding that they can only exist within a fantasy world. The term fantasy, or more specifically phantasie or fantasia, already has topical signification within music. As defined by Leonard Ratner in *Classic Music*,

> the fantasia style is recognized by one or more of the following features - elaborate figuration, shifting harmonies, chromatic conjunct bass lines, sudden contrasts, full textures or disembodied melodic figures - in short, a sense of improvisation and loose structural links between figures and phrases... In 18th-Century opera, the fantasia style is used to evoke the supernatural.[9]

While these themes lack elaborate figuration or a sense of improvisation due to their use of a march rhythm to evoke the military topic, the incorporation of shifting harmonies seems to suggest the fantasia style, suggesting the presence of what Robert Hatten would call a trope of the military and fantasia topic. Thus, while the themes for the superhero

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[8] Batman is more closely related to these adventure heroes.

[9] Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980), 24. While supernatural in this context refers mostly to the closely related topic of *ombra*, or ghosts and demons, Ratner also states its use in depicting gods and feelings of awe, allowing for its logical use in depicting superheroes.

serials are similar in style to those heroic films which precede them, they also distinguish

themselves by reflecting the fantastic nature of the superheroes they depict.
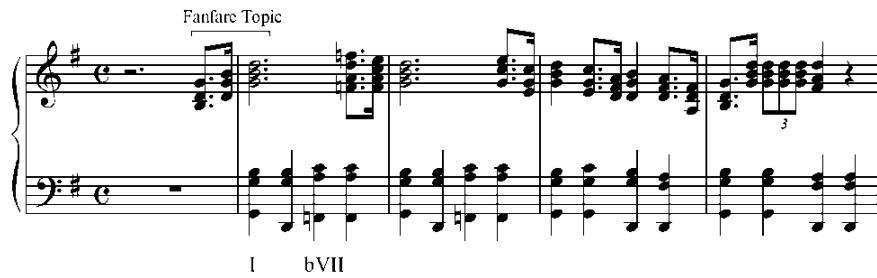
Figure 4.4a: *Superman* (1941) Theme, Winston Sharples and Sammy Timberg (Author's
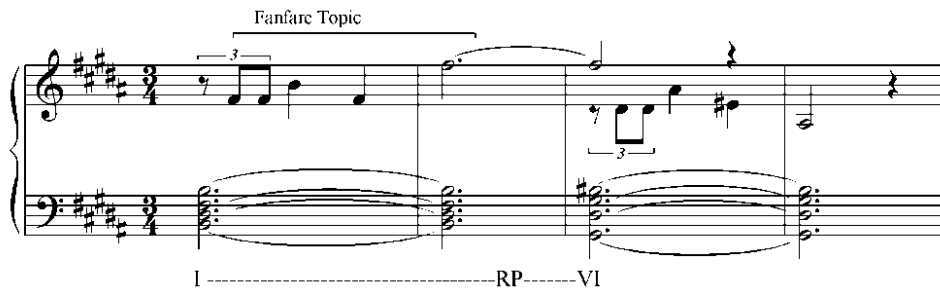Transcription)

Figure 4.4b: *Adventures of Captain Marvel* (1941) Theme, Cy Feuer (Author's
Transcription)

Figure 4.4c: *Captain America* (1944) Theme, Mort Glickman (Author's Transcription)

While the themes for Superman, Captain Marvel, and Captain America essentially reflect the heroic ideality of the early comic book superheroes through the use of the military topic, and their supernatural powers through brash tonal moves, the theme for the *Batman* serial (1943) stands in stark contrast to them. Shown in figure 4.5, the Batman theme is a dark *mysterioso* set in minor mode. While still played by brass instruments, the melody is much more chromatic, incorporating several tri-tones and is accompanied by a constant driving violin flourish. Harmonically, the theme is also quite different from the other heroic themes, as it moves through a functional tonal progression of i-VI-vii°7-V. As discussed in chapter two, the creators of Batman sought to create a different kind of superhero, one which departed from the idealistic personas of heroes such as Superman and Captain Marvel. As inspiration for their new character, the author's drew on heroes such as Zorro and The Shadow, each of whom sought for a type of vigilante justice, as

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well as the silent film noir movie *The Bat* (1926), whose title character which influenced Batman was actually a murderous criminal.[10] The result is a hero who is much more troubled, and whose heroic narrative plays in shades of gray rather than the overt nature of what is right and wrong found in the Superman comics. The music for the Batman serial no doubt seeks to depict this darker, questionable heroism by evoking a mood more suitable for the film noir genre of that time period than a superhero film.[11] Despite the vast differences between the Batman theme and the former, more heroic themes, one aspect which is shared by the Batman, Captain Marvel, and Captain America themes is the use of a harp glissando.[12] This use of harp in all three themes was most likely also used to suggest a fantasy world to the audience, keeping with the science-fiction or fantasy genre of the comics on which the serials were based.

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[10] Also taken from this film was the idea of the mysterious mansion on the outside of town, which in *The Bat* was the place where most of the villain's crimes took place, but in the Batman comics became the hero's place of residence, as well as a correlation to Batman's place outside of normal society.

[11] Particularly I think through the inclusion of the fully-diminished 7th chord, heard often as "stinger" chords in film-noir and murder mystery films. This theme might also be drawing on the *ombra* musical topic, defined by Clive McClelland as music involving "slow sustained writing (reminiscent of church music), the use of flat keys (especially in the minor), angular melodic lines, chromaticism and dissonance, dotted rhythms and syncopation, pauses, tremolando effects, sudden dynamic contrasts, unexpected harmonic progressions and unusual instrumentation, especially involving trombones." Clive McClelland, "*Ombra* Music in the Eighteenth Century: Context, Style and Signification" (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2001), ii. According to McClelland, Ombra is used for the depiction of demons, witches, or ghosts in operas. The violin tremolo, chromaticism, and angular melodic lines of the Batman theme seems to be drawing on this topic. See also Birgitte Moyer, "Ombra' and Fantasia in Late Eighteenth-Century Theory and Practice" in *Convention in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Music: Essays in Honor of Leonard G. Ratner*, ed. Wye J. Allanbrook, Janet M. Levy, and William P. Mahrt (New York: Pendragon Press, 1992), 283-306.

[12] Theses are intentionally omitted from the transcriptions due to the difficulty of accurately representing the glissandi. The glissandi for *Superman* and *Captain Marvel* precede the start of the theme proper, while the glissando for *Batman* occurs between mm. 2 and 3 of the excerpt.

Figure 4.5: *Batman* (1943) Theme, Lee Zahler (Author's Transcription)

Following the early superhero film serials of the 1940s, comic book films largely disappeared from the movie theatre until 1978, when Richard Donner's blockbuster *Superman* films debuted.[13] The theme for the *Superman* films, composed by John Williams, draws on similar topics found in the early serials to establish a heroic mood for the title character. Figure 4.6 shows the theme, again evoking the military topic through a trumpet fanfare set above a march like pedal accompaniment, featuring the interval of a perfect fifth and dotted rhythm; all aspects which signal a heroic quality to the listener. The interval of a major seventh, which is repeated twice in measures 5-7 finally breaks through to the octave in measure 7, possibly suggesting the triumph of the hero. Similar heroic themes composed by Williams can be found in the *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* film franchises. Though these films are not based on comic books, several plot points

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[13] Several heroes made their way to television, including series based on Superman, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, and - arguably the most famous of these - the campy Batman series of the 1960s. The decline of superhero films in the 1950s-60s parallels the general decline in popularity and production of superhero comics due to censorship attacks during this time period as discussed in chapter 2.

found in these films are found in superhero narratives - most notably Luke's quest to gain control the power of the Force, Indiana Jones' dual identities of professor and adventurer, and both characters' estranged relationship with their fathers. The similarities among these characters support the musical relationship of William's themes, as well as their ties to the early superhero serials and the hero films of the 1930s.[14] In fact, William's theme seems even more closely related to the music of the hero films of the 1930s, due to its relatively straightforward incorporation of the military topic without the use of non-tonal shifts in harmony heard in the superhero serial themes.

Figure 4.6: *Superman* (1978) Theme, John Williams (Author's Transcription)

My use of the term breakthrough is essentially gestural in nature. It refers to the achievement of a melody line in reaching some sort of a climatic goal at a local level. The

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[14] One can also see the relationship of the Indiana Jones character to that of the pulp fiction comic hero Doc Savage, which preceded and influenced the Superman comic (both Savage and Superman represented the Nietzschean *Übermensch* figure, and both also had their own "fortress of solitude" in the arctic).

moment of breakthrough is usually anticipated by some sort of melodic figure which is repeated (either exactly or sequentially) at least once until it is able to breakthrough to its goal.[15] Thus, one has at a very local level a sort of obstacle which is overcome. For example, in the *Superman* theme (figure 4.4) in measures 4-6 the M7 leap occurs twice, as though the melody is attempting to reach the octave. Then in measure 7 the leap occurs again, but this time the melody continues upward finally reaching its melodic goal of the octave and a breakthrough is achieved. However, in this example, the melody then immediately collapses back down the octave, suggesting that even if victory was achieved, it was only a brief victory, and more obstacles will soon follow.[16] While among these early superhero themes only Williams' theme for *Superman* seems to demonstrate this use of breakthrough, it will become a central trait of the next era of superhero themes, beginning in 1989.

With the exception of the Batman film serial of the 1940s, the dominant trend in music for early superhero films seems to adhere to a relatively heroic affect, demonstrated to continue as late as William's theme for the *Superman* film franchise of the late 1970s-1980s. This is likely due to the fact that the primary model of superhero character during this time period was based on the Superman ideal, and that while heroes

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[15] In a similar fashion as Susan McClary in *Georges Bizet: Carmen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), as opposed to the more large-scale meaning of the term as it relates to formal structure shown in James Buhler, ""Breakthrough" as Critique of Form: The Finale of Mahler's First Symphony," *19th - Century Music* 20/2 (1996): 125-43.

[16] Lending itself to the franchising strategy of superhero films, in which even if the villain of the current film is overcome, there will be more danger to come.

such as Batman certainly existed, they were not in the majority.[17] If we are to extrapolate the characteristics of a superhero musical topic for this era, it seems to be a relatively consistent troping of the military and fantasia topics, with music featuring major mode triadic trumpet fanfares, march rhythms, and non-tonal shifts of harmony involving third-related sonorities, thereby accurately reflecting the superheroes of this era - combining both the heroic and the fantastic straightforwardly. However, following the drastic decline in success of the *Superman* film franchise during the 1980s, the type of hero Hollywood would come to portray in superhero films and the music used to depict these heroes would transform.[18]

The Batman Model: Superhero films from 1989-Today

In *Games of Terror*, Vera Dika discusses the shift in American societal values demonstrated during the Reagan administration. Dika writes that

> in November 1980, America overwhelmingly elected Ronald Reagan to the presidency. In so doing, it politically enacted the desire to undo the sixties and to return to a style of an earlier period. To underline this fact, Mr. Reagan has often

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[17] Namely the Superman ideal features a persona of unquestionable righteousness - heroes whose moral values are never in doubt. This dominance of Superman is demonstrated by the fact that comics based on the character were one of the few which continued to be published without interruption during the turbulent period of the 1950s-60s - and through the fact that films based on Superman mark both the beginning and end of this era of superhero films.

[18] According to boxofficemojo.com, the opening weekend gross sales for *Superman* (1978) was just below $7.5 million, and its second and third installments at $14 and $13 million (note that the original installment only opened at 500 theatres, versus well over a thousand for the following two, accounting for the smaller opening weekend sales), however the fourth installment, released in 1987 at 1500 theatres, grossed only $5.6 million. While part of this decline may be attributed to the general fall off in popularity (and quality) film sequels can sometimes see, the level of decline here seems striking, particularly when contrasted with more recent superhero film sequels, such as the third installment of the X-Men series (2006) which nearly doubled the opening weekend sales numbers of its first installment, or Spiderman 3 (2007), which has the second-highest opening weekend sales numbers of any superhero film, outselling its first installment by nearly $40 million.

been represented by his promoters as possessing a "Western" esthetic or persona... In his study of the Western, [John] Cawelti discusses the central conflict embodied by this form and so elucidates the source from which Reagan's cowboy image draws its effectiveness. Since America has traditionally seen itself as a redeemer nation possessed of moral purity, Cawelti contends that the Western hero dramatizes the superior, skillful person, who, because of his concern for the safety of others, is compelled to use violence. During the popularity of the Western, this dramatization expressed a fantasy of legitimized violence and one that reconciled America's innocent self-image with the reality of its domestic and foreign violence. But with the present changed historical period, the reuse of this image displayed a desire to *return* to that attitude. The United States again wished to be perceived as kind and good, yet ever-willing and able to use the ultimate force.[19]

For Dika, the election of Reagan reflected a society which wished to undo the attitudes of the 1960s and 1970s by taking a "more conservative stance in personal and sexual matters." Dika argues that this shift in societal values demonstrated through Reagan's election is paralleled within horror films of the 1980s through a move toward a less certain hero within the genre. The stalker cycle films tend to feature a morally pure heroine as the sole survivor of the film who is "enfeebled but when roused is still strong" - one who while not outwardly heroic is still prepared to use violence if necessary to "ensure survival."[20]

A similar shift in the type of heroes portrayed in films during the Reagan administration has also been demonstrated in action films of the 1980s. Though action films of the time did not incorporate enfeebled women to reflect the innocence of America and lessen the certainty of their heroes, they did move away from the confident and clear heroic models of preceding decades, usually by portraying heroes who, while

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[19] Vera Dika, *Games of Terror: Halloween, Friday the 13th, and the Films of the Stalker Cycle* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1990), 133.
[20] Ibid, 138.

representing the tough and assertive nature often attributed to Reagan's presidency through their overly masculine physique, operated outside of the law and within shades of moral ambiguity to uphold Reagan-era societal values. As Susan Jeffords notes in *Hard Bodies*, action heroes such as Rambo "worked out the Reagan foreign policy through battles with the Soviet Union," while films such as *The Terminator* (1984), *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Robocop* (1987), and *Die Hard* (1988) "work out the Reagan domestic policy through home-front battles with internal enemies of Reaganism: terrorism, lawlessness, disloyalty, and the deterioration of the family."[21]

The most successful action heroes of this era moved away from the noble model exuded by the failing Superman franchise and toward Jefford's "hard-bodied" men who, while seemingly indestructible, possessed significant character flaws. In *Dreaming Identities*, Elizabeth Traube writes:

> Looking back over the most popular films of the 1980s, we find no revival of the rugged, authoritative masculinity still conjured up by such names as John Wayne of Gary Cooper. No doubt in deference to the youth market, most action heroes in the first half of the decade were positioned as sons. There were rebellious sons, like John Rambo, Axel Foley, and other renegades, as well as more dutiful, submissive ones, like Luke Skywalker, Indiana Jones, and the Karate Kid.[22]

These "rebellious sons" often operated outside of the law while seeking to stop the destruction of American values and uphold the policies of the Reagan administration. In discussing this character aspect within the heroes of *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard*, Jeffords notes that

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[21] Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 53.

[22] Elizabeth Traube, *Dreaming Identities: Class, Gender, and Generation in 1980s Hollywood Movies* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 138.

Like so many of the other heroes of 1980s action films, the law is for Martin Riggs something that he can shape to his own needs in his own time. Like his mentors, Richard Nixon, Rambo, Dirty Harry, and Ronald Reagan, Riggs believes that breaking laws in the process of achieving a larger good - stopping drug dealers, protecting the presidency, rescuing POWs, or maintaining a contra supply route - is not only permissible but necessary... As long as the "larger good" is being served, smaller violations of law are excusable... *Die Hard* makes the same point. The loyalty of John McClane (Bruce Willis) to the values he upholds as a New York police officer bring him to act against a crime being committed in Los Angeles in defiance of orders from superior officers.[23]

In addition to outwardly fighting against terrorism and drugs, both of these heroes also highlight issues that stem from the deterioration of traditional families, as much of the character flaws found in Riggs and McClane can be traced to their marital struggles - namely Riggs' loss of desire to live following the death of his first wife which allows him to take greater risks as a cop, and McClane who fights not only to stop a terrorist group but to save his estranged wife.[24] As Jeffords argues, within action films of this era

hard bodies came to stand not only for a type of national character - heroic, aggressive, and determined - but for the nation itself. In contrast to what Reagan's public relations workers characterized as the weakened - some even said "feminine" - years of the Carter administration, in which the United States government was brought to a standstill by a Third World nation, the Reagan America was to be a strong one, capable of confronting enemies rather than submitting to them, of battling "evil empires" rather than allowing them to flourish, or using its hardened body - its renewed techno-military network - to impose its will on others rather than allow itself to be dictated to.[25]

Though these hard body action films found incredible success during the 1980s, in the wake of Reagan's presidency the image of the action hero changed dramatically,

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[23] Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 58.

[24] Of course both men reconcile these relationships throughout the film franchises - McClane reconciling his marriage and Riggs overcoming the pain of his past and getting remarried.

[25] Ibid., 25.

installing heroes who were not only morally flawed, but who possessed a much more common physical appearance as well.

In *Action Speaks Louder*, Eric Lichtenfeld discusses the shift in hero type between Arnold Schwarzenegger's character in *The Terminator* (1984) and its sequel *The Terminator 2* (1991). Lichtenfeld states that

> The Terminator, a T-800 model, is not the advanced technology that it had been in 1984. That distinction now belongs to the T-1000, a more streamlined killer. Compared to Schwarzenegger's Terminator, Patrick's has an ordinary physique; he is an everyman that is far more fearsome than Schwarzenegger's walking juggernaut. Not only does this make the hero the underdog - a dramatic necessity - it also repositions Schwarzenegger for a post-1980s action audience and an era where heroes would be more common men than supermen. By 1991, the model of hero that Schwarzenegger had represented just, say, six years earlier in *Commando* is out of date.[26]

The idea of heroes being "more common men than supermen" became a staple of one particular sub-action film genre in the post-Reagan era: the comic book film. As discussed in chapter two, beginning in 1989 comic book superheroes began to be portrayed by actors such as Michael Keaton, Alec Baldwin, Edward Norton, Toby Maguire, Patrick Stewart, Ian McKellen and others who, despite their acting prowess, certainly did not command authority through their physical presence on screen. Jeffords highlights this shift through a discussion of *Batman* (1989) as it relates to the election of George H.W. Bush. Jeffords states:

> In the themes of Bush's inaugural speech, "We as a people have ... a purpose today. It is to make kinder the face of the Nation and gentler the face of the world." The difficulty with achieving this "kinder, gentler" image was that it brushed perilously close to appearing, in the aftermath of a hard-bodied

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[26] Eric Lichtenfeld, *Action Speaks Louder: Violence, Spectacle, and the American Action Movie* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 94.

preesidency [sic], weak and soft. George Bush would struggle throughout his presidency to straddle the images of himself as a man who "cares" about people and as a tough commander-in-chief. The best-selling film of 1989 in what proved to be a record year for box office receipts articulated this Bush dilemma. The movie, which is about a children's fantasy character turned real on the screen, is Timothy Burton's *Batman*. This movie exhibits better than any other the difficulties of masculine identity in the immediate post-Reagan years. For Batman, played by the less-than-heroic-looking Michael Keaton, has been turned from a knowledgeable and confident comic book figure into a troubled and uncertain film character. In *Batman*, Bruce Wayne/Batman presents the divided masculine ideals of external strength and internal goodness that Ronald Reagan had seemed so seamlessly to embody, and that George Bush seemed so perilously to split apart, and in doing so tips toward the films of the early 1990s, in which internal emotions would take the lead over muscles and violent spectacles in defining masculine heroics. But in 1989, like George Bush's new presidency, masculinity seemed as yet unsure of its direction and divided about its performances in a post-Reagan, post-hard-body era.[27]

While it may be true that *Batman* (1989) reflected the weaker persona seen in president Bush's term in office, much of the political correlations made by Jeffords are well outside the scope of this study. Additionally, though she does highlight the shift in superhero characters towards dark, "troubled and uncertain" heroes within films which began with Tim Burton's adaptations, one can find at least three other contributing factors to the darker tone of *Batman* (1989), all of which occurred prior to Bush's election. First, Jeffords' description of Batman as a children's fantasy character is, by the end of the 1980s, rather outdated. Since the 1970s the superhero comic had gradually increased the maturity level of its content, recognizing that a growing number of its readership were young adults who sought the medium both as fans and collectors.[28] The 1970s also saw

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[27] Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 95-96.

[28] The popularity of comic books as collectible commodities among adults is evident from the extreme asking price of several issues. In 2010 the New York Daily News listed Action Comics #1 (the first Superman comic) as being valued at $1.5 million. "10 Most Valuable Comic Books EVER," *New York*

the start of annual comic book festivals such as Comic-Con International in San Diego and Wizard World Chicago, which by 1989 were attracting over 10,000 comic book and science fiction fans of all ages.[29]

Second, though not unrelated, was the rise of graphic novels during the 1980s, particularly through Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, published between1986-87, and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, published in 1986. In addition to obviously targeting an older audience through their more mature images, these writers pushed the comic book superhero genre towards a darker, grittier style.[30] Both of these novels occur in a modern day alternate reality, where the United States is still immersed in the Cold War and under constant threat of nuclear attack. As opposed to action films of the 1980s where heroes espoused the values and principles of the Reagan administration, heroes in these graphic novels have either been forced into retirement by the government and an untrusting society, or work directly for the government and are viewed as pawns by their fellow superheroes.[31] While action heroes of the 1980s occasionally violated the law to serve the greater good - the superheroes found during this decade tended to be outcasts, operating entirely outside of the government and the law to provide a form a vigilante justice.

Finally, much of the dark style of *Batman* (1989) stems from the film aesthetic of director Tim Burton, whose blend of the comic, fantastic, and macabre had already been

Daily News, March 29, 2010, accessed May 4, 2012, http://www.nydailynews.com/news/money/10-valuable-comic-books-gallery-1.46075?pmSlide=0.

[29] Comic-Con International has since grown to over 130,000 attendees according to their website comic-con.org.

[30] A style which had already been developed earlier in the decade by these writers with Moore's work on *Marvelman* (1982-84), and Miller's on *Daredevil* (1979-83).

[31] This aspect is demonstrated most notably by Superman in *The Dark Knight Returns*, and Doctor Manhattan in *Watchmen*.

demonstrated in earlier films such as *Pee Wee's Big Adventure* (1985) and *Beetlejuice* (1988).[32] Burton's take on the Batman character was a complete reversal of the light-hearted, camp style used in the 1960s television series, and continued the dark, troubled superhero style started by the Moore and Miller graphic novels, allowing the film to appeal more readily to an ever growing adult fan base. The success of *Batman* (1989) established it as a model and turning point for superhero films which would be imitated for the next twenty-plus years in terms of plot, character type, and even music within the genre.

The music for the Batman film series from the late 1980s through the 1990s feature themes by two composers; Danny Elfman who scored *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992), and Elliot Goldenthal who scored *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman and Robin* (1997). The themes for these films depart significantly from the dominant trend of untroubled heroic themes found in the early superhero serials and the later *Superman* films. Gone is the major mode triumphant fanfare music found in the Superman films, replaced instead by minor mode and chromatic themes which all but reverse the optimism of their predecessors, not unlike the contrast found in the *Batman* film serial and undoubtedly echoing the dark shift of the superhero persona during the 1980s. The music for these films marked the start of a new type of superhero topic, which was drawn on by nearly every comic book film that followed.

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[32] And which has certainly continued today through films like *Sleepy Hollow* (1999), *Corpse Bride* (2005), *Sweeny Todd* (2007), *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), and *Dark Shadows* (2012)

Figure 4.7a presents an excerpt from Elfman's theme for *Batman* and *Batman Returns*.[33] The theme possesses many musical features common to comic book hero themes. While the most obvious difference from the *Superman* theme is the use of minor mode; Elfman's *Batman* theme retains aspects of the heroic fanfare through an incessant march-like rhythm and the outlining of an ascending melodic triad gesture in measure 3 (F#-A-D with a G# passing tone between the first two pitches). This fanfare-like triadic figure is found in several of the themes for post-1989 comic book films, usually outlining the interval of a minor sixth, which then resolves down a half-step. As described by Monelle, this falling half-step motion of $b\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$ evokes the *pianto* - a typical melodic gesture used to evoke sadness in music. Monelle states that

> the motive of a falling minor second, has represented a lament since the sixteenth century. At first it always accompanied the textual idea of weeping - words like "pianto" or "lagrime" - but it soon began to signify merely grief, pain, regret, loss - in other words, the indexicality of its immediate object. During the eighteenth century the related idea of the *sigh* replaced that of weeping.[34]

The incorporation of this weeping figure in the *Batman* theme certainly suggests a less certain, more troubled type of hero within this film. Finally, in measures 5-6, we see the apparent goal of melodic line undercut, which prevents the theme from attaining a characteristic breakthrough of the kind the *Superman* theme achieves. Within a musical line, I find that these local breakthroughs can be undercut a number of ways, including melodic reversal, harmonic undercutting, or dynamic undercutting. In the *Batman* theme, melodic undercutting occurs when the D# on beat four of measure 5 could have been used to prepare an arrival on the high F# instead of collapsing in on itself with the D#

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[33] This theme occurs throughout the film with various alterations, but is first heard in *Batman* (1989) after the slow canonical opening from approximately 00:01:10-00:01:20 of the DVD.

[34] Monelle, *Sense of Music*, 17. Robert Hatten also interprets these sigh figures, and particularly movement from b6-5, as evoking the tragic in his analysis of the finale of Schubert D. 784, and the finale of Beethoven Op. 132. Robert Hatten, Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 199-200; 278-80.

falling to D-natural. Thus, the *Batman* theme combines the heroic topic (the fanfare) with tragic *pianto* melodic gestures and melodic undercutting, suggesting the figure of a tragic hero.

Figure 4.7a: *Batman* (1989) Theme, Danny Elfman (Author's Transcription)

Elfman's theme also lacks traditional harmonic functionality. The first statement of the theme (mm 3-5) is over pedal F#, and seemingly in the key of F# minor. The music then shifts rather abruptly to D minor in measure 6 – a shift made through a descending chromatic mediant relationship, a procedure already seen in the themes of the early comic book serials to suggest the "super" aspect of the hero, however seen here between two minor sonorities. A diatonic progression may be posited in measures 6-8, as an elongated version of the theme heard in measure 3 moves from i-VI-i, however it occurs entirely

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over pedal D, and seems to derive more from the melodic motion to b$\hat{6}$ than an actual harmonic progression.

Figure 4.7b shows an excerpt of Goldenthal's theme for *Batman Forever* and *Batman and Robin*. The theme is again set in the minor mode, incorporating march-like rhythms and a rising fanfare arpeggiated triad in the melody. While this triad does not outline the minor sixth interval, it does still incorporate the pianto fall of a half step from C to Cb. The possibility for melodic breakthrough is again undercut in measures 3-4, when the trajectory of the C-minor arpeggio in measure 3 is reversed, and falls suddenly to C# on the downbeat of measure 4. Harmonically, the excerpt makes use of a the same chromatic mediant motion seen in Elfman's theme, as C minor moves to Ab minor and back to C minor in measures 1-3 just as Elfman's had moved from F# minor to D minor. The excerpt then moves from C minor to A major in measure 4, and finally from A major to Eb major and back in measures 4-5.

Figure 4.7b: *Batman Forever* (1995) Theme, Elliot Goldenthal (Author's Transcription)

While these sonorities are all triadic in nature, the progression between them is far from tonal. The move between C minor and A major pushes beyond the distant chromatic mediant relationship already used, and A major to Eb major represent two sonorities a tritone apart – about as far away two sonorities can get from each other within tonal space. The harmonic progression of this excerpt can be explained as:

C minor→LP→Ab minor→PL→C minor→PRP→A major→PRPR→Eb major→RPRP→A major

Even explained through Riemannian transformations, it is evident that the chords were selected for distance rather than proximity. Moreover, the extent and varying types of transformations in the passage suggests the use of what I term *triadic disjunctions*, or local shifts between non-functional triadic sonorities. The use of harmonies incorporating triadic disjunctions or root progressions based on chromatic third relations may allude to the supernatural, or god-like nature of the heroes. James Buhler has discussed a similar effect in John Williams' themes for the Darkside in the *Star Wars* films. Along with the theme for Darth Vader, which moves from i-bvi, Buhler describes the theme for the Emperor,

> which unfolds in a series of tonally unrelated triads, once again primarily minor, often a minor third or tritone apart. The untexted male chorus swinging between G minor and Bb minor only to veer suddenly to C# minor is highly effective, well scored, and the whole thing has an elemental, other-worldly quality. It is as if these triads were being moved in sonorous blocks against their tonal will. The music gives the impression that only a very powerful sorcerer, perhaps only a god, could animate these chords thus, could make them progress so against their tonal nature.[35]

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[35] James Buhler, "*Star Wars*, Music and Myth," in *Music and Cinema*, ed. James Buhler, Caryl Flinn and David Neumeyer (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 47.

The harmonic procedure found in these themes from *Star Wars* demonstrates what I have termed triadic disjunction, and can be commonly found in superhero films from Elfman on. Buhler's description of the effect of these harmonies being "other-worldly" and the god-like force necessary for such a progression to exist correlates well to the superhero character - many of which have been described elsewhere as "earth-bound deities."[36] While it is somewhat problematic to attribute an other-worldy quality to the Batman character, given that he possesses no actual super powers and relies instead on technology for his heroic exploits, he certainly exists outside of normal society, and these triadic disjunctions found in his themes may allude to his boldness of purpose and his ability to operate with powers outside of the norm and outside the social law. Regardless of interpretation, the harmonic language established by Elfman and imitated by Goldenthal became the standard for nearly all ensuing superhero films.

Amidst the run of financially successful Batman films of the 1990s, *The Shadow* (1994), based on one of the pulp comic heroes that artist Bob Kane cites as inspiration for the Batman character, made a much quieter theater debut.[37] Given the similarities between the two heroes, it is not surprising that Jerry Goldsmith's theme shares a number of qualities with Elfman's and Goldenthal's themes for their respective *Batman* films. Shown in figure 4.8, the theme for *The Shadow* is a slow, minor mode march, featuring a brass fanfare that outlines the same minor-sixth interval, again evoking the pianto with $\flat\hat{6}$ falling a half-step to $\hat{5}$ as heard in Elfman's *Batman* theme. Additionally, the *Shadow*

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[36] See discussion of Richard Reynolds in chapter 2.
[37] *The Shadow* earned only about a quarter as much on opening weekend box office sales as any of the Batman films according to IMDB.com.

theme has a driving accompaniment played by flutes, and moves harmonically from i-VI-i in the same manner as Elfman's theme. Goldsmith's theme also incorporates an even more extreme uses of triadic disjunctions, as F minor in measure 2 moves to an apparent V/V chord (G Major) in measure 3 before slipping down by half-step twice to return to F minor (Gb Major-F minor). Again, this unusual tonal progression correlates well to the superpowers possessed by the film's hero.[38]

Figure 4.8: *The Shadow* (1994) Theme, Jerry Goldsmith (Author's Transcription)

The X-Men series of films have featured several different themes, as each film was scored by a different composer: *X-Men* (2000) by Michael Kamen, *X2* (2003) by John Ottman, *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006) by John Powell, and *X-Men Origins:*

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[38] The number of Riemannian transformations required to move between these sonorities highlights their distance, as F minor -PRLRP- G Major -PRPL -Gb Major -PRPLP - F minor.

Wolverine (2009) by Harry Gregson-Williams. The plot of the X-Men films also differs somewhat from the other films in the superhero film genre in that it features multiple mutant heroes joined together as a team both to fight other mutants as well as to prevent societal oppression towards their kind. Nonetheless, the music for each of the films features a main theme representative of the X-Men as a group, and those themes draw on similar musical devices found in the Batman films.

Figure 4.9 a provides an excerpt from Kamen's main theme to *X-Men*, heard for the first time as Storm and Cyclops rescue Wolverine and Rogue from an attack by Sabretooth. Though it is again set in minor mode, the theme lacks the complex harmonic progression seen in the other superhero themes, as it occurs over a rhythmically driving E pedal tone. Nonetheless, the triadic fanfare gesture is present, beginning in measures 6-7 where the tragic minor sixth interval is outlined, again resolving by falling a half step and evoking the pianto. Though Kamen's theme is most persuasively interpreted in A minor, the lack of a leading tone creates some ambiguity to the key, and it is difficult to be certain of the scale degrees involved in this minor 6th gesture.[39] If analyzed in A minor the gesture involves $\hat{5}$-b$\hat{3}$-$\hat{2}$, rather than the $\hat{1}$-b$\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$ motion seen in Elfman and Goldsmith's themes, which would certainly change the affect of the gesture. However, with the ambiguity of key and when set over a dominant pedal, the $\hat{5}$-b$\hat{3}$-$\hat{2}$ gesture used here sounds essentially the same as its predecessors, as the intervals above the bass remain the same.[40] The fanfare triad is than repeated twice more, sequencing up a step

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[39] The passage might also be analyzed in E Phrygian.
[40] In that a minor sixth above the bass falls to a perfect fifth above the bass.

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each time until measure 9 where the possibility for melodic breakthrough is undercut. The undercutting is not achieved through melodic reversal, but rather through the oblique motion of the high E, as though it puts an upper limit on how high the melody can ascend, denying its breakthrough and forcing it to retreat back down the scale.

Figure 4.9a: *X-Men* (2000) Theme, Michael Kamen (Author's Transcription)

Ottman's theme for *X2* is shown in figure 4.9b. Again we see the use of the triadic fanfare figure emphasizing the interval of a minor sixth which resolves down a half step (m 3, 5). This fanfare gesture occurs over a driving rhythmic pattern, and harmonic motion between i-VI-i, making use again of third related sonorities and not of more traditional tonic-dominant harmony. In contrast to the other themes examined, Ottman's

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theme actually delivers a melodic breakthrough in measure 6, as the fanfare gesture continues to ascend to A, however, after a brief tonicization of a triumphant C major, the melody returns immediately to tragic minor mode in measure 7.

Figure 4-9b: *X2* (2003) Theme, John Ottman (Author's Transcription)

Figure 4.9c shows Powell's theme for the film *X-Men: The Last Stand*. Again we are given a brass fanfare-like melody, emphasizing the interval of a minor sixth falling by half step in measures 1-2, 3, and 5. Set in C minor, this theme clearly presents two versions of the minor sixth interval, from $\hat{5}$-b$\hat{3}$ in measure 1, and $\hat{1}$-b$\hat{6}$ in measures 3 and

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5, both versions of which fall by half step (b$\hat{3}$-$\hat{2}$ in m. 2 and b$\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$ in m. 5). While the motive in measure 5 is an exact duplication of the previous superhero themes, the initial minor sixth interval in measure 1 carries a very different affect, as a consonant $\hat{3}$ falls to dissonant $\hat{2}$, thereby neutralizing the release of tension one senses in the move from $\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$.[41] Nevertheless, there does still seem to be a sort of gestural relationship between the two motives, which for me alludes to the preceding superhero themes without directly copying them.

The melody is also accompanied by a driving repetitive rhythmic pattern in 6/8 time - a galloping rhythm which evokes another heroic topic, that of the noble horse.[42] Harmonically, the theme begins with triadic third motion in measures 1-8 from i-VI-i-VI, as seen in Elfman and Goldsmith's superhero themes. The excerpt then makes use of triadic disjunctions as Ab-major moves to E minor through an LPL transformation (mm. 8-9), then from E minor to C minor through an LP descending chromatic mediant motion between two minor sonorities, to E minor through a PL transformation, and finally back to Ab-major through a PLP transformation. The entire progression's incorporation of chromatic mediants and third-related sonorities is reminiscent of Goldenthal's theme for *Batman Forever*. Finally, melodic breakthrough is again undercut in measures 7-9, where, although a breakthrough occurs in the leap of a minor seventh (as opposed to minor sixth) in measure 7, that breakthrough is immediately undercut harmonically by the sudden shift from Ab major to E minor in measure 9.

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[41] As opposed to Kamen's theme which was set over dominant pedal, causing scale degree 2 to be consonant.

[42] See Monelle, *Sense of Music*, 45-65.

Figure 4.9c: *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), John Powell (Author's Transcription)

Elfman's theme for *Spiderman* (2002) is presented in figure 4.10. This theme, more than any of the others examined thus far, exemplifies the use of triadic disjunction. The introduction to the theme proper (mm. 1-6) begins with an A minor arpeggiated triad, and then cycles from an E-minor sonority to Bb major through an RPR transformation, and finally to Gb major through a PL transformation. Melodically, the theme is presented ethereally in the high violin part in these measures. The theme is played more definitively by brass in measure 11, now beginning in D minor. Harmonically this passage (mm. 11-18) moves from D minor to Ab major through an RPR transformation, to A minor

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through LPR transformation, back to Ab major through RPL transformation, to F major through RP transformation, to A major through LP transformation. There is then an apparent V-I motion in measures 16-17 (A major to D minor), and then D minor moves to F# minor through a PL transformation of minor to minor chromatic-mediant relation. The theme features another driving rhythmic accompaniment, which also makes use of the $\hat{1}$-b$\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$ gesture (D-Bb-A, see m. 8). The apparent breakthrough in measure 17 (C#-D motion) is undercut harmonically, as the piece shifts from the major mode sonorities of the previous three measures back to the tragic minor. The second half of this theme is driven almost entirely by harmonic motion, as triadic disjunctions take precedence over any sort of clear melodic line. The reckless leaping of the melodic line seems to provide a musical representation of Spiderman swinging about the New York City skyline - as the angular melody moves drastically from high to low, supported by harmonies that twist and turn, mimicking the motion of the film's hero.

Figure 4.10: *Spiderman* (2002) Theme, Danny Elfman (Author's Transcription)

While there are some similarities, these seven themes represent a shift in musical style from that found in the early superhero film serials. While themes of both eras evoke the military topic through the use of brass fanfares and march rhythm, the most obvious

change of post-1989 themes is the consistent use of minor mode. Additionally, whereas melodies for the earlier superhero themes primarily centered around the traditional fanfare interval of the a perfect fifth, these more recent themes all incorporate the pianto gesture at some point in their melodic fanfares.[43] While the early superhero themes did incorporate non-tonal shifts of harmony, mostly chromatic-mediant relationships, many of these more recent themes have exaggerated this harmonic motion, either through an increased use of these chromatic-mediant shifts, or through shifts between even further removed harmonies, resulting in triadic disjunctions. Rhythmically, in addition to a march tempo, most of the post-1989 themes also feature an incessantly driving rhythmic accompaniment reminiscent of Monelle's Noble Horse, only somewhat akin to the *Batman* (1943) serial. Finally, most of these more recent themes incorporate local level melodic breakthroughs, which are often undercut harmonically. While these seven post-1989 superhero themes share a significant number of similarities that may point towards a new superhero topic, they are only a small sample of the numerous superhero films released over the past two decades. Before expounding on further interpretation of this stylistic shift, we will first look at several other superhero themes from this era that, while not as closely related to those already discussed, certainly share some musical signifiers of the proposed superhero topic.

Figure 4.11 shows two versions of Harry Gregson-Williams' theme for *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009). The first version is a brass fanfare that, like Kamen's theme for *X-Men*, features a driving rhythmic pedal point, and a minor sixth interval that arises

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[43] This is with the exception of the theme for *Batman Forever*.

between $\hat{5}$-b$\hat{3}$ falling to $\hat{2}$, again only alluding to the $\hat{1}$-b$\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$ gesture seen in the Elfman's *Batman* theme and Goldsmith's theme for *The Shadow*. However, the half-step pianto figure between $\hat{5}$ and b$\hat{6}$ does occur in an inner voice in measures 1-2. The second version, played by strings, uses much of the same melodic and harmonic material, but also has a pseudo triumphant melodic breakthrough, as the second melodic fanfare figure reaches the octave C over a major sonority, but immediately returns to minor in the following measure. Additionally, despite the constant pedal point, it is possible to hear a middle-ground harmonic motion from i-VI-i, echoing the same motion seen in preceding themes.

Figure 4.11: *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009) Theme, Harry Gregson-Williams
(Author's Transcription)

Figure 4.12 shows Michael Giacchino's theme for the animated film *The Incredibles* (2004). Stylistically, much of this theme departs rather significantly from other films in the genre, as the deliberate march rhythm of themes such as those by

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Elfman is replaced by a syncopated, jazz-influenced theme which bears some resemblance to John Barry's theme for the James Bond films. Despite the more playful nature of this music which likely stems from the film's younger target audience, it does incorporate some of the musical traits found in other superhero themes. The opening three measures resemble other superhero themes, as the music is set in a minor key, features a driving accompaniment in the violins, and incorporates a quick march tempo featuring dotted and triplet rhythms. Additionally, the opening melody is a brass fanfare, beginning with a heroic perfect fifth and then incorporating the interval of a minor sixth between $\hat{1}$-b$\hat{6}$, though lacking the pianto fall to $\hat{5}$, lessening the tragic nature of the theme when compared to others in its genre. The harmonic progression of Giacchino's theme is much less drastic than others in the genre, moving from A minor to F major through L transformation, to F minor through P transformation, and then closes with a V-I cadence in F minor. Also, the second half of the theme has a syncopated fanfare melody outlining a minor sixth, which is repeated immediately before achieving a rather definitive melodic breakthrough at the cadence.

Figure 4.12: *The Incredibles* (2004) Theme, Michael Giacchino (Author's Transcription)

Marco Beltrami's theme for *Hellboy* (2004) is shown in figure 4.13. Although it is again set in minor mode and features a march tempo, the theme seems most closely related to other superhero themes through its use of triadic disjunction and undercutting of melodic breakthrough. Harmonically, the theme moves between A minor and A major through P transformation in measures 13-14, before moving to F minor through LP transformation in measure 15, and then to C# minor through LP transformation. Melodically, the theme is rather chromatic and repetitive, as the same phrase is repeated twice, each time ending with an augmented fifth interval between $\hat{3}$ and #$\hat{7}$. On the third repetition of the phrase, the augmented fifth is reinterpreted as a minor sixth (C-Ab), as the harmony shifts from A minor to F minor, and the G# leading tone which in the first two statements seemed to want to resolve up to A is undercut harmonically, becoming the third of the F-minor triad and falling down to F. One final iteration of the minor sixth

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occurs in C# minor, though now between #$\hat{7}$ and $\hat{5}$, further undermining any pull of G# toward A.

Figure 4.13: *Hellboy* (2004) Theme, Marco Beltrami (Author's Transcription)

While the music for *Iron Man* (2008) is rather untraditional for a superhero film, and will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, much of John Debney's score for *Iron Man 2* (2010) features the musical traits seen in other superhero themes. Although not the main theme for the film, figure 4.14 provides one such example. Accompanying the scene where Tony Stark discovers the molecular design for a new element left to him by his father in the model for the Stark Expo, the theme features a driving accompaniment, minor mode, march tempo, and fanfare melody outlining a m6 between $\hat{1}$-b$\hat{6}$, though again lacking the pianto fall to $\hat{5}$. Harmonically, the theme moves between A-minor and F-major through L transformations before arriving at D-major through an LRP transformation. This arrival marks a true triumphant breakthrough, as minor mode moves to major when the repeated melodic fanfare ends with a major, rather than minor sixth. However, this breakthrough may better be interpreted to reflect the scientific breakthrough achieved by Tony Stark in creating a new element, rather than the heroic achievement by the Iron Man hero.

Figure 4.14: *Iron Man 2* (2010) "Element Theme," John Debney (Author's Transcription)

Figure 4.15a presents Hanz Zimmer's main theme for *Batman Begins* (2005). This theme is rather uncharacteristic when compared to all others in the superhero genre, namely in that it lacks any real melodic content, or at least does not possess the overt fanfare theme heard in the other films examined here. Yet, despite the comparably allusive nature of this theme, it still bears resemblance to its contemporaries through other musical parameters. Again set in minor mode, harmonically the theme is essentially static, moving only between the third related sonorities of D minor and Bb-major, or i-VI-i as seen in several other superhero themes. This harmonic motion provides a hint of the $b\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$ pianto gesture in the bass line, as the D minor sonority in 6/4 inversion slides from A up to Bb and then falls back to A throughout the theme. Finally, the theme

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incorporates a driving rhythmic accompaniment pattern, which is motivated by a rather prosaic wing flapping - providing an iconic sign of the animal for which the hero is named. While the above musical features certainly give the theme for *Batman Begins* an affect similar to other post-1989 superhero films, its melodic ambiguity gives the theme a sense of uncertainty, or at least nascency - that of a theme not yet fully formed. This idea of nascency is seen within the film's narrative as well, as *Batman Begins* pushes the common superhero film plot of an origin story to the extreme - delaying the first appearance of the hero until the second half of the film.[44]

Figure 4.15a: *Batman Begins* (2005) Theme, Hanz Zimmer (Author's Transcription)

In contrast, Zimmer's theme for the second installment of the Nolan Bat-Trilogy, *The Dark Knight* (2008), provides a clear melodic theme. While *The Dark Knight* reuses

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[44] This is evident from the very outset of the film. The opening title sequence for superhero films (particularly preceding *Batman Begins*) is almost formulaic - with the hero's theme beginning during the studio logo, then building gradually as the camera's eye moves through some sort of CGI presentation while credits flash on the screen before arriving at a single shot of the title of the film/name of the hero. No such title sequence exists in *Batman Begins*, only a shot of a cloud of bats gathering to form a vague outline of the Bat-Symbol.

much of the Zimmer's music for *Batman Begins*, it also adds a rather typical superhero melody for Batman, as shown in figure 4.15b. The theme is a low mysterious melody, sharing affective qualities with the melody for the *Batman* (1943) film serial, as well as having melodic similarities to Elfman's music for *Batman* (1989).[45] In contrast to the first film of the cycle, *The Dark Knight* begins with our hero already established, thus allowing for his theme to be fully formed.

Figure 4.15b: *The Dark Knight* (2008) Theme, Hanz Zimmer (Author's Transcription)

Figure 4.16 shows Christopher Young's theme for *Ghost Rider* (2007). Again set in minor mode, the theme has a steady rhythmic accompaniment in the violins, as well as a triplet march rhythm in the brass throughout. Melodically, the theme is rather chromatic, though it does employ the rising minor sixth followed by a falling half-step in measures 5-6. The chromatic nature of the melody resembles the theme for *Hellboy*, perhaps alluding to the somewhat demonic qualities of the heroes for which the music is

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[45] Namely the triadic outlining of a minor sixth which falls a half step to scale degree 5.

written. Harmonically, the theme again is somewhat reserved, moving only from A-minor to F-major sonorities (or i-VI) through L transformation between $\hat{5}$ and b$\hat{6}$ in the low strings in nearly the same fashion as the preceding Zimmer themes.

Figure 4.16: *Ghost Rider* (2007) Theme, Christopher Young (Author's Transcription)

This movement between $\hat{5}$ and b$\hat{6}$ plays a prominent role in Patrick Doyle's theme for *Thor* (2011), shown in figure 4.17. While the theme is still in minor mode, has a driving rhythmic accompaniment which persists throughout, and has characteristics of a military march through the steady percussion rhythms, the slow moving melodic line lacks any of the fanfare traits seen in previous superhero themes, and in fact seems to possess an almost hymn-like spiritual quality.[46] The prominent $\hat{5}$-b$\hat{6}$ motion is heard

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[46] Not unusual considering Thor is, in fact, a Norse god.

immediately in the driving accompaniment figure, and then in the viola line, which descends from tonic to dominant, and then ascends to b$\hat{6}$ in the opening seven bars. The $\hat{5}$-b$\hat{6}$ motion is heard again in the theme proper (mm. 8-16), and then most prominently in measures 21-24, as the melody moves from $\hat{5}$-b$\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$ on the downbeat of each measure, until both scale degrees are heard simultaneously and clash in measure 24. Harmonically, the theme is quite modal sounding, as it avoids the use of a leading tone throughout, and moves from i-III-bVII-v-i in measures 12-17. This modal harmonic language is used within the early *Superman* serial, as well as Kamen and Ottman's themes for the X-Men films, and contributes an antiquated spiritual quality to the themes. This spiritual quality can be interpreted to reflect the god-like nature of these heroes – Thor is literally a Norse deity, while characters like Superman and the mutants are, as Magneto puts it in *X:2*, "gods among insects."[47] Finally, the use of an anvil in the percussion section undoubtedly serves to tie the theme more closely to Thor, by providing a literal musical representation of his hammer.

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[47] Bryan Singer, *X:2* (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2003).

Figure 4.17: *Thor* (2011) Theme, Patrick Doyle (Author's Transcription)

Figure 4.17 Cont.

Figure 4.17 Cont.

Conclusion

The history of the superhero genre can be divided into two main eras - the first beginning with the early comic book film serials and ending with Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978), and the second beginning with Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) and continuing to the present.[48] The early era is defined by relatively uncomplicated, and one-

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[48] It should be noted that while superhero films have become a significant production genre, particularly within the last decade, their presence in theatres during the early half of the 20th century was relatively limited. Following the film serials and leading up to *Superman* (1978), several superheroes made their way

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dimensional characters who exude heroism - the Superman ideal. As such, the music of these films drew heavily upon previously established heroic styles and topical types, through the incorporation of tokens such as major mode marches, and triadic fanfares. However, these films also incorporated a fantasy style to their themes through the use of non-tonal shifts in harmony, and harp glissandi, signifying the supernatural aspect of the hero to the audience.

Along the same lines of action films of the 1980s, which developed heroes who were vigilantes of justice, so too did the superhero film shift to a model of a flawed hero, one who struggles with personal issues and operates within moral grey areas to achieve his goal - the Batman ideal. With this shift in hero archetype came a shift in musical accompaniment. The themes of arguably the most significant franchises of this later era (Batman, X-Men, Spiderman) each incorporate a number of the same musical parameters, which when extracted can be viewed as tokens of a topical type. Still present from the early era as tokens are the march and triadic fanfares, however now set in minor mode, and with a more active driving rhythmic accompaniment. Additionally, rather than outlining fourths and fifths in the fanfares of the earlier era, the themes of this group of films emphasized outlining a minor sixth interval and falling half-step, the pattern occurring between $\hat{1}$-b$\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$. These themes also evoked the fantasy topic through non-tonal shifts in harmony, however in a much more exaggerated fashion, resulting in triadic

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to television - the music for which has been excluded here due to the difference in consumption and presentation of the two media. Additionally, while there appears to be a decade gap between the end and beginning of the two eras established here, the intervening years consisted of 3 sequels of the Superman franchise, each of which reused William's theme, as well as a spinoff film *Supergirl* (1984), with music by Jerry Goldsmith that incorporates the same heroic style as William's music and the early film serials.

disjunctions - moving regularly between chromatic mediants or more distant sonorities. Finally, these films incorporate the strategy of undercutting melodic breakthroughs may be best interpreted in terms of their relationship to the common narrative of post-1989 comic book films. More often than not, these films lack any real closure or victory for the hero, as part of the film's franchising strategy. The films are left open-ended, the villain for the current film only temporarily defeated, a new villain foreshadowed, or the heroes forced to return to their place as social outsiders - all of which prepares for the sequel. Thus, the undercutting of a melodic breakthrough that would otherwise serve as a musical triumph could signify the hero's unending struggle for victory. The regular deployment of the undercut breakthrough coincides with the move to tragic heroic themes, and thus is only found in themes composed after Elfman's. Each of these tokens can be used to establish a post-1989 superhero type.

Other films of this era do not readily incorporate each of the above tokens; however they can still be described as activating the post-1989 superhero type through their use of one or more of the above tokens. The common $\hat{1}$-b$\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$ motion is often reinterpreted between $\hat{5}$-b$\hat{3}$-$\hat{2}$, providing a gestural affinity between the themes, though the pattern of stable and unstable tones has been altered. Additionally, some of the more recent superhero films discussed do not incorporate triadic disjunctions as readily as those of the 1990s and early 2000s. However, they still tend to avoid traditional tonic/dominant progressions, moving instead between i and VI. This less drastic harmonic language (because consistent with, if less usual in, diatonic practice) can still be related to comic book films, perhaps as signifying the dual identities commonly found in

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comic book films, or establishing a conflict between the light and dark aspects of heroes seeking justice which is often vigilante justice.

While this chapter has focused only on the primary leitmotifs for superheroes as those are the musical themes most closely associated with the characters and thereby the most suitable for establishing a musical topic, these themes obviously do not constitute the entirety of the films' scores. Therefore, the next chapter will investigate how the proposed superhero topic is incorporated into an entire film's musical score, how it interacts with other musical themes, and how it may be manipulated to contribute to the film's overall narrative.

Chapter 5: The Superhero Topic in Context

This chapter discusses the role that the post-1989 superhero topic plays within a film's narrative through two case studies. The first case study examines Michael Kamen's score for the film *X-Men* (2000), demonstrating how the relatively ambiguous heroic nature of the superhero topic allows the film to obscure the distinction between heroes and villains by employing the same or similar musical material for both protagonists and antagonists. The second study examines the common motif of the superhero's split identity within the film *Iron Man* (2008). By investigating three common naming functions of the superhero within films - a statement of identity by the hero, recognition by the media and society, and a musical leitmotif which draws on the superhero topic - I demonstrate how *Iron Man* avoids any true establishment of the superhero as the dominant persona within this film. The avoidance of all three naming functions allow for a reversal of the character status between hero and his alter ego.

X-Men: Villains and Heroes

The release of *X-Men* in 2000 marked not only the first adaptation of the comic to film, but also helped to establish Marvel Comics as a major producer of superhero films.[1] The film is centered around a group of super-powered mutants struggling to find their place within a society that is growing increasingly suspicious of them. This suspicion

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[1] Prior to this film, only four films based on Marvel characters had been created, compared to 19 based upon DC characters - an inequality that reversed after 2000.

leads to the persecution of mutants, led by Senator Kelly - a conservative congressman who seeks to enact a mutant registration act. The response to the act by a group of mutants led by the character Magneto, is to enact a plan to convert all of society to mutants, thereby eliminating the prejudice. However, Magneto's plan is stopped by another group of mutants, led by Charles Xavier, who save mankind at the risk of ensuring their own persecution.

In *Superheroes! Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Films*, Roz Kaveney discusses the plot for Brian Singer's *X-Men* (2000). Kaveney argues that

> Singer could not, dealing with a whole group, give us the sort of origin story that is the standard way of dealing with the first film of a superhero franchise; he had to treat the X-Men as an established group, of whose back-stories we are only vaguely aware, into whom our viewpoint characters are inserted and eventually treated as equals, or at least - in Rogue's case - given equal foci of attention. By making this the story of how two members are inserted into the group, he provides a story that makes emotional sense.[2]

While it is true that origin stories had become rather common in comic book films at the time of *X-Men's* release,[3] the idea of beginning the film with established heroes was hardly new. Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) and its sequels, as well as the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* films, all begin with the hero already established in the film's world - though each, *X-Men* included, still spend portions of the film on the origins of the heroes.[4]

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[2] Roz Kaveney, *Superheroes! Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Films* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 257-58. That Singer had to treat the heroes as an established entity may point to the lack of time allowed in a filmic setting to provide an adequate origin story of every mutant within the film.

[3] See for example *The Shadow* (1994), *The Phantom* (1996), *Blade* (1998) *or Mystery Men* (1999).

[4] *Batman* includes a scene where a young Bruce Wayne sees his parents gunned down by a gangster who, in a dramatized film event which has no relation to the original comic book story, becomes his modern day nemesis The Joker. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990) shows how the turtles came to live and study with splinter and gained their size from exposure to radioactive waste, and *X-Men* shows Magneto as a young boy discovering his powers, as well as the origins of Professor Xavier's school and glimpses of how Wolverine's body became lined with adamantium.

Additionally, the motivation for Singer's plot choice did not likely stem from the problem of dealing with a group of heroes, as both the preceding *Mystery Men* (1999) and later released *Fantastic Four* (2004) provide a typical origin story despite focusing on multiple heroes.[5] More likely a typical origin story ill-suited *X-Men* because the characters lack the defining transformative moment when they gained their powers - such as being bitten by a spider or exposure to radiation. Instead, as John Trushell discusses in "Ámerican Dreams of Mutants," "the original X-Men - Angel, Beast, Cyclops, Iceman, and Marvel Girl...were born different, as if the sins of the fathers had been visited upon the children."[6] The mutants represent the next step in evolution of mankind, though one positioned within Cold War America's fear of nuclear warfare.[7] Consequently, what is important is how and why they use their powers rather than how those powers were attained, and in that respect Singer's film provides ample discussion of origin.[8]

X-Men opens in a rain soaked 1944 Poland. Lines of people walk slowly towards a gate surrounded by armed guards. We soon realize these are Jewish prisoners being moved into a concentration camp by Nazi soldiers. The music accompanying the scene (figure 5.1) is a slow ominous sounding orchestral theme that gradually builds in intensity. A young boy, held by soldiers on one side of the gate, is torn away from his mother and father who are locked on the opposing side. The boy cries out for his mother,

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[5] Also of note is the fact that even in films depicting only one hero there are almost always multiple origin stories occurring - both the origin of our hero as well as the origin of the villain.

[6] John Trushell, "American Dreams of Mutants," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 38 (2004): 153.

[7] What Trushell refers to when describing the mutants as paying for the sins of their father - born with their abilities, but born out of a nuclear age that played a common role in most comics of the Silver Age.

[8] I also question the way that Kaveney boils the plot down to how Wolverine and Rogue become a part of the X-Men team, as one could argue (as I do) that this film is as much if not more about Magneto and individual responses to oppression.

reaching with all of his might towards her as more and more guards are called over to help restrain the boy. Eventually the metal gate begins to bend and twist as though the boy is pulling the fence down through magnetic force, until he is knocked unconscious, and we hear the first statement of a superhero topic theme (figure 5.2).
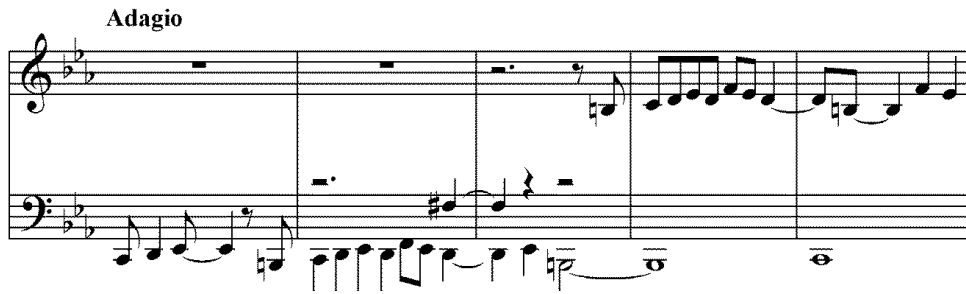
Figure 5.1: Concentration Camp Theme, *X-Men* (2000), Michael Kamen (Author's transcription)

Figure 5.2: Magneto Theme, *X-Men* (2000), Michael Kamen (Author's transcription)

The young boy in this scene is Eric Lehnsherr, a mutant who will grow up to become Magneto - the villain of the Singer's film. Yet, to call Magneto a prototypical comic book film villain would be inaccurate, largely due to the context established by this opening scene. As Kaveney later states, "one of the strengths of Singer's two films is that he raises, as the comic does only occasionally, the possibility that Magneto might be right."[9] Likewise, in *War Politics and Superheroes*, Marc DiPaolo argues that "[Ian] McKellen's complex performance as Magneto as a persecuted gay man, a Jew, and a

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[9] Kaveney, *Superheroes!*, 258.

mutant, casts him at times as a villain, at times as a revolutionary, and sometimes even as a hero."[10] In particular, it is Magneto's role not only as a Jew, but as a Holocaust survivor that forces the audience at least to empathize somewhat with the character. Magneto's childhood experience of extreme persecution serves to motivate his reaction to Senator Kelly's proposed mutant registration act and his willingness to go to extremes to make mutants equals to humans (or in this case to make all humans mutants). As Jesse Kavadlo discusses in "X-istential X-Men," "Magneto...is not evil as much as chastened. He understands that the endgame of intolerance is death, and that it is better to kill than be killed."[11] In this light, Magneto may not be the villain of the film, but an otherwise good person willing to stop an evil situation through any means necessary – a play on the opposition between law and justice, the moral grey area within which superheroes often operate. In fact, it can be argued that Senator Kelly is cast more in the light of a villain than Magneto, as while it may be a bit extreme to define him as the film's modern embodiment of Hitler, Kelly certainly advocates that mutants should be treated much as Jews were by the Nazis. The music presented in the opening scene, as well as the other themes found in *X-Men*, help to establish the idea that Magneto's actions are understandable (though we may not agree with them), as opposed to the inexplicable actions by Senator Kelly casting him as the innately evil villain of the film, though not as

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[10] Marc DiPaolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2011), 233.
[11] Jesse Kavadlo, "X-istential X-Men: Jews, Supermen, and the Literature of Struggle," in *X-Men and Philosophy: Astonishing Insight and Uncanny Argument in the Mutant X-Verse*, ed. William Irwin, Rebecca Housel, Jeremy Wisnewski (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2009), 61. This concept of Magneto as being motivated by his fear of racial intolerance is also discussed in Lawrence Baron, "X-Men as J Men: The Jewish Subtext of a Comic Book Movie" *SHOFAR, 22* (2003).

overtly destructive as Magneto. The film's overall goal seems to lie in blurring the boundaries between hero and villain.

The musical theme associated with the concentration camp occurs two other times throughout the film. The first is during Magneto's attempt to transform Senator Kelly into a mutant. During this scene we learn of Magneto's dogma that humankind only fears that which they do not understand, that mutants are simply the next step in evolution and the logical solution to tensions between homo sapiens and what Magneto refers to as homo superior is to speed up the process of a god who "works too slow." The theme is heard again as Magneto and Rogue arrive at Liberty Island and the two exchange the following dialogue:

> **Magneto**: Magnificent, isn't she?
> **Rogue**: I've seen it.
> **Magneto**: I first saw her in 1949. America was going to be the land of tolerance. Peace.
> **Rogue**: Are you going to kill me?
> **Magneto**: Yes.
> **Rogue**: Why?
> **Magneto**: Because there is no land of tolerance. There is no peace. Not here, or anywhere else.

In both of these instances, the concentration camp theme provides a reminder for the motivation behind Magneto's actions. He is not a typical supervillain, pursuing his terror for greed or power, but a revolutionary standing up for the rights of his kind by any means necessary - even the sacrifice of another to ensure that he does not face the same persecution he experienced as a child. This willingness to sacrifice another gives Magneto the appearance of being extremely egotistical; however it is understood as a necessity by the character - who realized after testing his machine that he was not

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powerful enough to enact his plan. Magneto needed Rogue, whose unique ability of absorbing the powers of others made her the perfect vessel to energize his contraption and save his kind.

Melodically, Magneto's theme (figure 5.2) is rather typical for post-1989 superhero films - a minor mode triad rising up to $b\hat{6}$ and then falling to $\hat{5}$. Stylistically, the theme is quite similar to Elfman's opening music for *Batman* (1989), establishing a dark heroism common for superhero films of this era. Even the way Magneto's character is introduced echoes the story found in many comic book heroes' origins - that of an adolescent boy who suffers the loss of his parents coming to find that he possesses extraordinary powers. With this music and the way his character is introduced, the young Magneto seems destined to be featured as the film's protagonist, according to conventions of the genre.

Of the remaining characters of the film, only Mystique and Wolverine receive their own distinct themes. Of those, only Mystique's theme, presented in figure 5.3 is clearly differentiated from the rest of the music. Played on cello, the theme is rather exotic, no doubt alluding to the mysterious nature of the shape shifting character, and is likely distinguished from the other themes to help identify Mystique despite whatever shape into which she has transformed.[12] Wolverine's theme (figure 5.4) is heard twice

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[12] Though the "otherness" of Mystique's character has been linked by Jason Zingsheim as reflecting the X-Men franchise's general framing of racial and gender equalities. As Zingsheim states "throughout history, the X-Men franchise has been read as metaphorically representing a progressive call for equal rights. However...its literal representations evolve in ways diametrically opposed to this supposed call for equality and wholly in line with contemporary racial and gender inequalities." Jason Zingsheim, "X-Men Evolution: Mutational Identity and Shifting Subjectivities," *Howard Journal of Communications*, 22:3 (2011), 236. In

during the film, when we first see him fight with his adamantium claws in the bar in Canada, and again when Dr. Jean Grey is treating his injuries at Professor Xavier's school. The theme is set in a high register, played by very metallic sounding strings. While distinct for its mysterioso quality, the theme still imitates that of Magneto, as a triad motion to b$\hat{6}$ drops to $\hat{5}$ (Fb to Eb), though separated by two notes. Wolverine remains somewhat neutral throughout the film, as he is hesitant to align himself with Xavier's team. As such, he serves somewhat as a surrogate for the audience, which also remains unsure of which team of mutants is in the right.

Figure 5.3: Mystique's Theme, *X-Men* (2000), Michael Kamen, (Author's transcription)

Figure 5.4: Wolverine's Theme, *X-Men* (2000), Michael Kamen, (Author's transcription)

The two remaining themes incorporating the superhero topic appear serve the purpose of distinguishing Professor Xavier's team of hero Mutants and Magneto's team of villains; however, there is considerable overlap in their use throughout the film. Figure 5.5 provides the X-Men theme, which is very similar to the theme discussed in chapter 4, figure 4.9a. Again, the theme incorporates intervals of the triad rising to the minor sixth ($\hat{5}$ to b$\hat{3}$ and $\hat{1}$ and b$\hat{6}$), followed by a falling half-step as well as a driving rhythmic

this light, the fact that Mystique is not only a female, but a non-white female, the peculiarity of her musical theme could be interpreted as highlighting the fact that she is a minority.

accompaniment. While the affect of $\hat{5}$-$\hat{3}$ differs somewhat from that of $\hat{1}$-$\hat{6}$ in the opening five measures of the theme,[13] the change in harmony in measure 9 means that the $\hat{5}$-$\hat{3}$ figure bears a closer resemblance to the $\hat{1}$-$\hat{6}$ motion of Magneto's theme. The X-Men theme is heard throughout the film, appearing when Storm and Cyclops, for instance, save Wolverine and Rogue from Sabretooth and when Storm attacks Toad on Liberty Island, though it is also heard when Magneto transforms Senator Kelly into a mutant, and again at the end of the film, when Professor Xavier declares that there is hope yet for his friend Magneto.

Figure 5.5: X-Men Theme, *X-Men* (2000), Michael Kamen, (Author's transcription)

The villain team theme (figure 5.6) also incorporates the same rising triad as Magneto's theme, though it stops on b$\hat{6}$ without falling back to $\hat{5}$, and over an irregularly pulsed bass pedal. The theme primarily accompanies Magneto's team of mutants, heard, for instance, when Mystique and Toad abduct the senator, when Magneto goes to check on the imprisoned senator, and when Magneto, Sabretooth, and Toad are leaving the train station having kidnapped Rogue. However, the theme is also heard when the X-Men first arrive on Liberty Island, as well as when they start climbing the statue and begin their final attempt to save Rogue. Therefore, not only do most of the hero and villain themes employ essentially the same musical topic, they are also used somewhat interchangeably throughout the film for both teams of mutants. The themes then might better be labeled simply as Mutant Themes - as they do little to distinguish hero from villain.

Figure 5.6: Villain Team Theme, *X-Men* (2000), Michael Kamen, (Author's transcription)

One final theme which connects the heroes and villains in this film is shown in figure 5.7. The theme, first heard in the opening credits, also occurs when Professor Xavier first uses Cerebro, his telepathy enhancing machine, when Magneto transforms the Senator, and finally when Magneto floats to the torch of the Statue of Liberty as he is about to sacrifice Rogue for the betterment of mutant kind. In essence, the theme

provides a musical link between these two machines, and highlights Xavier and Magneto's views on how mutants and humans should coexist in society. For Xavier, they should live among one another as separate but equal races, whereas Magneto seeks for a universal brotherhood of one mutant kind, whether that is achieved through transforming humans or eliminating them.[14] Xavier seeks for an integration of mutants within society, while Magneto refuses to conform, he wants society to assimilate to become mutants. If we return to the two mutant themes in this context (figures 5.5 and 5.6), we see a musical reflection of these opposing viewpoints in the treatment of the $b\hat{6}$. If we take $b\hat{6}$ as representing mutants, the motion from $b\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$ in figure 5.5 is an integrative movement, the resolution of dissonance as the integration of mutants into social harmony. However, in figure 5.6 $b\hat{6}$ is left unresolved, creating a "heroic" refusal to resolve, or the refusal of mutants to integrate into social harmony. In those terms, what Magneto wants is for the whole world to assimilate to the mutation, that is, to modulate such that $b\hat{6}$ becomes tonic.
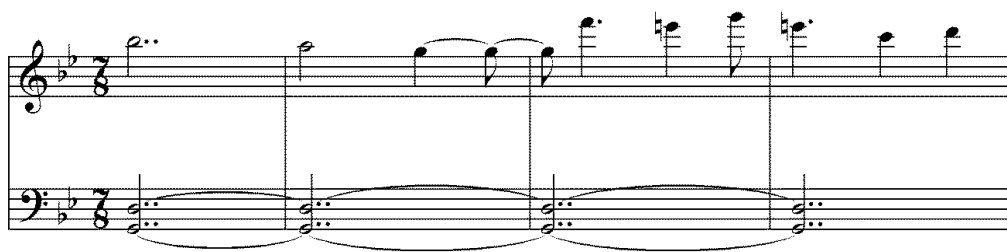
Figure 5.7: Cerebro Theme, *X-Men* (2000), Michael Kamen, (Author's transcription)

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[14] It's at this point that the plausibility of Magneto being justified or heroic falls apart, as even after he learns that his machine kills humans he seeks to carry out his plan - essentially performing the same genocide which caused the audience to empathize with him initially.

The already ambiguous nature of the post-1989 superhero topic allows for Kamen to intertwine musical material for both heroes and villains in *X-Men*. As the topic itself already possesses both light and dark qualities, it is well suited for a film that seems constantly to question who is right and who is wrong in their approach to saving mutants. Even Wolverine, the character who ultimately seems to displace Magneto as the film's protagonist,[15] at one point questions his allegiance to Xavier when asking Storm "Magneto is right, there is a war coming. Are you sure you're on the right side?" The music plays into the narrative, particularly through its treatment of scale degree b6 as reflecting the opposing viewpoints of Magneto and Xavier. Yet the overall neutrality of the music, the aspect of film long viewed responsible for cuing audience reactions to the intent of characters, helps for the blurring of roles to continue throughout the majority of the film.

Iron Man and Identity

> Who am I? You sure you want to know? The story of my life is not for the faint of heart. If somebody said it was a happy little tale... if somebody told you I was just your average ordinary guy, not a care in the world... somebody lied.[16]

The opening lines of Sam Raimi's 2002 film *Spiderman* asks a question standing at the origin of superhero identity: *Who am I*? This is a significant question in the superhero genre because the character is usually divided between a "normal" and secret identity. In his article "The Superhero's Two Worlds," Robert Inchausti discusses this motif. He states that

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[15] Largely due to his willingness to sacrifice his own life to save Rogue.
[16] Sam Raimi, *Spiderman* (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 2002).

in comic book adventure stories the legendary origins of the superhero often focus upon how his or her life was split in two. This splitting is analogous to the split every individual undergoes in his movement into language and culture. Typically, at the hero's origin, he will dedicate himself to some purpose and choose a new name and image. By so doing, he acquires a consciously held personal mythology for the very first time. The old identifications remain intact as private, secret, self-descriptions. But they acquire a subordinate status – living alongside the mythic self.[17]

This motif of dual identities is certainly familiar to anyone who has ever read a comic book or watched a film or television show based on comic books. The crime fighting Batman, Spiderman, or Superman maintain a daily routine of millionaire playboy, photographer, or unassuming newspaper journalist, respectively, while their friends and family generally remain unaware of their nighttime affinity for spandex and tights. *The Incredibles* (2004) even highlights the secret identity motif when conducting interviews with the heroes at the start of the film, asking Mr. Incredible, Elastigirl and Frozone if they have an alter ego to which Mr. Incredible responds "of course, I don't know a superhero who doesn't. I mean, who wants to be super all the time?"[18]

Within the Hollywood film adaptations of comic book superheroes, this motif of dual identities has also been taken up as a common plot point.[19] Within the typical coming-of-age superhero movie, the title character is shown making his transition from common citizen to superhero in almost formulaic fashion. First, the decision is made for

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[17] Robert Inchausti, "The Superhero's Two Worlds," in *The Hero in Transition*, ed. Ray B. Browne and Marshall W. Fishwick (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983) 66-73.

[18] *The Incredibles*, directed by Brad Bird (Disney Pixar, 2004). Throughout most superhero narratives, there is a division between which persona is the alter ego. For society, the superhero is the alter - the other, while for the hero, the mundane persona he adopts is the alter ego - the one he must adopt to fit in to society.

[19] A plot point which is not exclusive to the superhero genre, as examples can be found in characters such as Zorro, Captain Blood, and Indiana Jones, among others.

the character to acquire an alternate heroic identity - usually driven by the death of a loved one. Then the hero experiences some growing pains while learning to control his (or infrequently her) new superpowers, and finally the first act of heroism is performed, thus establishing the superhero within the diegetic world of the film. Here the hero only exists as a result of his actions - he is new persona becomes bound with deed. In "The Technological Subversion of Technology," Rocco Gangle discusses this process within *Iron Man* (2008), stating that

> Tony Stark becomes *one* with the Iron Man suit...When Tony Stark puts on the armor, he creates something new: Iron Man. Yet this creation is nothing other than what Stark himself becomes. Sure, Tony Stark is *inside* the armor. But in an important sense he also *becomes* the armor, and it is by becoming the armor that Tony Stark becomes Iron Man. [20]

The Iron Man persona is particularly difficult to describe in terms of establishing an alternate persona, precisely because Tony Stark is giving life to an inanimate object - so as Gangle suggests, it is necessary for Stark to become Iron Man, shedding his former self in order to establish the new identity.

Equally as formulaic in comic book movies is the process of providing a name for this newly established superhero identity. The identification of the superhero within films typically involves three naming functions: a musical theme that is tied to the superhero, a statement of identity by the hero (the "I'm Batman" moment), and the adoption of the mask - the creation of an iconic representation for the hero recognizable by media and society. Each of these functions will be discussed in greater detail below.

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[20] Rocco Gangle, "The Technological Subversion of Technology: Tony Stark, Heidegger, and the Subject of Resistance," in *Iron Man and Philosophy: Facing the Stark Reality*, ed. Mark D White (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2010), 42-43. Author's emphasis.

These naming functions are commonly found within superhero movies, such that audiences come to expect them as the normal way for a superhero's identity to be established. Given such formulaic naming functions, what happens if one or all three of these naming functions is absent? Jon Favreau's 2008 film adaptation of *Iron Man* is an excellent example of a superhero film where each of these three naming functions is either treated irregularly or avoided completely. The result of this treatment is a film where the identity of the superhero is never firmly established, thereby disrupting the typical balance between the superhero and common citizen – subordinating the identity of Iron Man to Tony Stark.

Set in the present, *Iron Man* tells the story of Tony Stark, a billionaire playboy who inherited a military technology company from his father. After being ambushed in the Middle East during a product demonstration and taken hostage by extremists, Stark discovers that his company's weapons are being sold on the black market. After escaping from capture, Stark returns to the United States disenchanted with the idea of producing weapons of destruction for profit. Stark instead develops the ultimate in military technology – the Iron Man suit, which he personally uses to ensure the safety of humanity.

As discussed both in the case study of *X-Men* and in chapter 4, the typical musical theme for a post-1989 superhero film character is a minor mode triadic fanfare, usually encompassing the interval of a minor sixth and third-related harmonies with a driving rhythmic accompaniment. Usually, the theme is linked to the superhero initially during the opening title sequence, with the theme entering quietly over the studio images,

growing in intensity while moving towards the main title shot, immediately providing a correlation between music and superhero.[21] The melodic content of the theme typically remains unchanged throughout the film; however the theme might gain strength and heroic traits by altering the orchestration throughout the film as the superhero comes to control his or her superpowers. The theme acts as a leitmotif for the superhero, providing a musical name either to announce the character's presence or to hint at the extent of the character's power when absent.

The declaration of identity by the superhero, though somewhat less common than the musical theme, still occurs in the majority of comic book films. This statement will usually occur within the first third of the film and closely follow the superhero's first act of heroism. The superhero is asked by a minor character – either the villain who has just been apprehended, or civilian who has been rescued – "who are you?" The hero responds: "I'm (insert name here)." The simple, ritualistic nature of this exchange of dialogue, its obvious function of providing a name for the hero is what is most striking. Certainly, the film could have continued its narrative line without resorting to such a banal moment of identification. However, its repeated use within the superhero genre of films has posited it as an expected moment for the identification of the hero within the film. It is at this moment that the identity of the superhero begins to subordinate that of the common citizen behind the mask.

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[21] See for example the opening of *Batman* (1989), *Spiderman* (2002), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *The Incredibles* (2004).

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If a statement of identity does not occur within the film, then the superhero's name is typically provided by the media, either through newspaper headlines or news broadcasts (see illustration 2.4). The name is then stated repeatedly within the film by super-villains, reporters, or citizens, acknowledging the arrival of the hero to save the day. Without awareness of its ritual function, this social recognition of the hero can seem as bizarre as the statement of identity, as the name of the superhero is most commonly heard in an unusual grammatical position - not as a second person address, but either first person identification ("I am superhero") or third person objectification ("It's superhero!"). Likewise, when both the statement of identity and acknowledgement by society scenes occur, the film seems to say: "In case you forgot who this superhero is…he's Spiderman." All three of these naming functions are rituals within the superhero film - they are part of the evolution of the hero, his process of transforming from ordinary citizen to superhero.[22] They work together to establish the superhero as the main character of the film, pushing the identity of the common citizen to the background, causing the viewer to identify Batman, Superman, and Spiderman as the hero of the films, and Bruce Wayne, Clark Kent, and Peter Parker as secondary characters.[23]

In a 2007 interview with Movies Online, director John Favreau was asked whether the audience would see more of Tony Stark or more of Iron Man in his upcoming film. Favreau responded that

[22] This process is not unlike the evolution our own personalities undergo, as demonstrated by Jason Zingsheim in "Developing Mutational Identity Theory." Zingsheim likens the change of our personal identities over time to the process of mutation found within the X-Men franchise and NBC television show *Heroes*. Jason Zingsheim, "Developing Mutational Identity Theory: Evolution, Multiplicity, Embodiment, and Agency," *Cultural Studies-Critical Methodologies* 11 (2011).

> Iron Man is different certainly from the DC heroes where Batman's the character and Bruce Wayne is his cover story... [In this film] Tony Stark is the character and Iron Man is his alter ego that he only just begins to explore … so I think you're going to be seeing more of Tony Stark and you begin to learn who Iron Man is as Tony Stark learns.[24]

Certainly, seeing more of Tony Stark than Iron Man is not unusual in a coming-of-age story that focuses primarily on the transformation.[25] However, a typical comic book film would have switched the focus from Stark to Iron Man within the first half of the film with a scene that deployed the naming functions. Yet Favreau's film constantly refuses to give a straightforward instance of these naming functions, calling into question whether Iron Man's identity would ever be fully established as something distinct from Tony Stark.

The opening title sequence of *Iron Man* immediately takes a different approach from other comic book films. It has no introductory statement of a hero theme accompanying the title; rather, the film begins virtually in silence, with no music, and only wind accompanying a shot of an army convoy moving across the desert. The first music is not the hero's theme, not even the orchestral sonority typical of the genre, but "Back in Black" by AC/DC played diegetically from a boom box. Not only is this classic rock song out of place in terms of the genre – but it is also the wrong song and even the wrong group, since as Favreau states in that same interview "most people in this world when you say Iron Man, they think a Black Sabbath song." The title sequence continues with "Back in Black" playing until the convoy is ambushed and sounds of battle take

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[24] http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews_12588.html. Movies Online, accessed 11/03/08.

[25] Also, the age of Tony Stark at the time of his transformation already posits the film's narrative as unusual for a typical coming-of-age superhero film.

over the audio track. Tony Stark, now accompanied aurally by some ambient noise from the orchestra, is abducted by the enemy. At this point, the main title shot is shown, accompanied not by music but anti-heroically by an apparently nondiegetic metallic clank. Finally, the ensuing scene, a flashback, is preceded by an audio advance on the name "Tony Stark."

This title sequence as a whole fails to provide any establishment of a superhero theme.[26] The absence of music at the main title shot, the use of the "wrong" classic rock song, and the minimal use of musical underscoring throughout this extended pre-title sequence not only deny any sort of hero theme but in fact highlight the fact that the expected hero theme is absent. Additionally, the immediate juxtaposition of the title with the "Tony Stark" audio advance marks the character of Tony Stark as equally if not more important from the conspicuously silent Iron Man. Thus from the very opening of *Iron Man*, the audience begins to question who this film is going to be about – a superhero or a businessman.

The sound track for *Iron Man* as a whole is somewhat atypical for a superhero movie.[27] It contains a large amount of pop music, and even the scenes accompanied by original orchestral music differ widely in terms of style from other films in the genre. When asked about his music for *Iron Man* in an interview with *Track Sounds*, composer Ramin Djawadi stated

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[26] The opening might also be termed a prologue or pretitle sequence, as the only credits present are those of the production studio.

[27] Not that the style is entirely unfounded, as films such as *Blade* (1998), and *Daredevil* (2003) both contain soundtracks dominated by a rock music style, but these films remain the in minority within the genre.

> I'm sure people will be surprised with this score because we did do something different. I'm sure there will be some purists that will expect the typical, lush, orchestral score. Some people are going to love it and some people are going to hate it.[28]

Indeed, the score has a strong infusion of rock style, particularly in the themes for Iron Man. Of this change of style, Djawadi said

> I hadn't read the script yet so I didn't know if the film was going to be dark or light or exactly what he was going to do… It was John's vision to use really heavy guitar, rather than a traditional orchestral score… So I had to structure the themes differently. They are more riff or rhythmic based than they are these long thematic melodies.

There is little distinctive melodic content to these riffs, and they are altered throughout the film. One of the clearest statements of an Iron Man riff, shown in figure 5.9 occurs during Stark's mission to destroy weapon stations in Afghanistan. This riff is only one version of the several heard throughout the film, and it is quite typical. Mostly consisting of heavy metal power chords (open fifth sonorities played on an electric guitar), the theme's hook lies more in its rhythm than the descending pattern beginning in measure 3. In fact, the theme is so generic that one could probably find the same riff in dozens of rock songs, which again calls into question its ability to serve as a signifying theme.
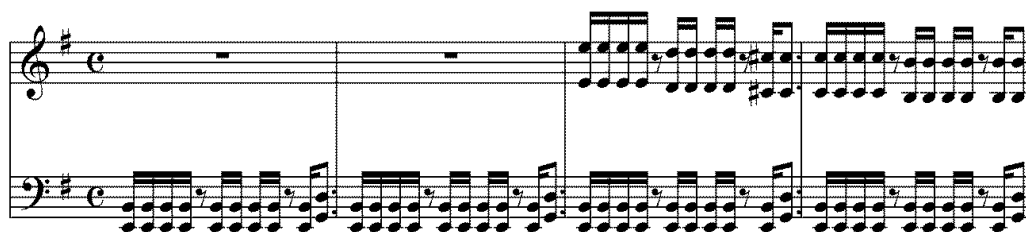
Figure 5.8: Iron Man Riff, *Iron Man* (2008), Ramin Djawadi, (Author's transcription)

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[28] http://www.tracksounds.com/specialfeatures/interviews/interview_ramin_djawadi_2008_page1.htm. Track Sounds. Accessed 11/08/08.

Other aspects of the score are quite traditional for the comic book film genre. For instance, Iron Monger has an orchestrated leitmotif typical for the villain and there is an orchestrated love theme for Pepper Potts and Stark.[29] Yet the music for Iron Man is virtually non-thematic, generic guitar riffs that could accompany virtually any action scene. The traditional leitmotifs for the villain and the love interest complicates attributing a signifying function to these riffs. Also, the constant altering of the Iron Man riffs helps them blend with the generic rock music also present in the score – blurring the boundaries between what is thematic and what is not, and calling into question whether a musical identity of the hero ever comes into existence.

Curiously enough, Tony Stark also receives a leitmotif, though it incorporates a slightly different technique. The use of so-called 'audio Easter eggs' – the borrowing of music associated with a superhero in another film – is a common trend in comic book films.[30] Examples include the street woman singing the Spiderman cartoon theme in *Spiderman 2*, or the music from the TV series *The Incredible Hulk* accompanying David Banner's walk down the streets of Rio de Janeiro in the 2008 film version. Such audio Easter eggs usually have little reason to appear within the diegetic world of the film and essentially provide an inside joke for fans of the comic. They are also always connected to an earlier iteration of that same superhero. An audio Easter egg that borrows the music from the Iron Man animated series also appears in the film version. This theme, shown in

[29] Though one which is rather understated in the score.
[30] The use of Easter Eggs need not be relegated to the audio track, but can occur within the visual realm as well. Cameo's by Stan Lee in various films or Lou Ferrigno in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), or appearances of characteristic props such as Captain America's shield or Thor's hammer in films which precede their adaptations would qualify as examples.

Figure 5.10, recurs throughout the film as a leitmotif for Tony Stark.[31] Because the superhero identity has not even been conceived when we first hear this theme, this music belongs not to Iron Man but to Tony Stark. This unusual use of an audio Easter egg - music that was previously a signifier of the superhero's identity now being used as a signifier for the civilian's identity - again challenges the convention that Tony Stark's character will become subordinate to the character of Iron Man.

Figure 5.10: Tony Stark Theme, *Iron Man* (2008), Ramin Djawadi, (Author's transcription)

The final scene of *Iron Man* presents both a statement of identity as well as a brief recognition of the hero by the media. To this point in the film, the name Iron Man has been noticeably absent from the film's dialogue. In fact, the film has seemingly avoided the name at all costs, referring to Iron Man in close-but-not-quite terms such as an iron soldier, or a man in an iron suit. Also noticeable is the scene following Iron Man's first act of heroism – where we expect the naming to take place. Here, too, the identification of Iron Man is explicitly avoided, and the event is referred to as "an unfortunate incident during a training exercise." In this way the act of the superhero goes unrecognized and is so also for all practical purposes denied. Within this final scene, the name Iron Man is

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[31] The theme is first heard as a jazz band theme while Tony is playing craps in a casino, then as a "James Bond-esque" guitar theme when he seduces Christine Everhart, and finally as a ringtone when Stark calls Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes.

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first presented by a newspaper headline asking "Who is the Iron Man?" The name is immediately challenged by Stark, who calls it "inaccurate, as the suit is actually a gold titanium alloy." Throughout the scene Stark refuses to assume the proposed alternate identity, stating that he would need a girlfriend who was always worried about him, that suggesting he was a superhero was outlandish, and that he is not the superhero type due to all of his character defects—a trait which actually helps define him as a typical Marvel superhero. Eventually, in the final line of the film, the long-awaited statement of identity occurs. However it is not Iron Man, but Tony Stark who declares "I am Iron Man" as the movie closes with the Black Sabbath song everyone associates with the hero.

Throughout, *Iron Man* lacks a satisfactory musical theme for the hero; its statement of identity comes not from Iron Man but from Tony Stark and from a very brief and late recognition by the media – essentially denying all three of the traditional naming functions found in comic book films. If, as Robert Inchausti claims, the origin of a superhero divides a character's life, resulting in the subordination of the character's previous identity to that of the superhero, then the lack of origin here calls into question the existence of Iron Man as an alternative identity. Certainly, Tony Stark's identity is never subordinated within the narrative, as throughout the film he is posited as the most important figure of action and most interesting character of the film. It is Tony Stark, not Iron Man, who receives the musical theme; it is Tony Stark, not Iron Man, who is made a celebrity by the media, and it is Tony Stark as Tony Stark, not as Iron Man, who declares "I am Iron Man." This final statement by Stark – and the way he states it – not only destroys any possibility for a split identity but further pushes Iron Man to the

background, establishing Stark as the film's primary hero. Therefore, within the diegetic world of this film, Iron Man is only ever an extension of the identity of Tony Stark, and it is the identity of the superhero, not the common citizen, which assumes subordinate status in this story of origin.

Yet, to return to Gangle's point regarding the embodiment of the Iron Man suit, one can argue that the narrative structure of Favreau's film was a necessity for Iron Man to ever exist as a hero. As Gangle argues, to establish an inanimate object such as the suit of armor as a separate identity, it requires a complete embodiment of the suit - Tony Stark has to become Iron Man. This requirement of embodiment is relatively unique among superhero characters - it does not readily allow for two separate identities to exist as mutually exclusive, rather the one identity of Tony Stark is responsible for giving life to both hero and citizen. In this light, the final line of the film can be viewed not as a subversion of the Iron Man hero, but as the moment which the technology of the suit is given the human life necessary to exist as a hero - the moment which Tony Stark becomes one with the suit.

Conclusion

Music in both of these films makes a notable contribution to each film's overall narrative theme. In each case it does this, at least in part, by drawing on the convention of the post-1989 superhero topic. As a prime example of a film incorporating this topic, *X-Men* requires the somewhat dark nature of common superhero themes provided by the topic in order for the themes of Magneto and his followers to become fused and confused

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with the themes of the X-men. Had the convention of the tragic-heroic topic not been established in comic book films, Magneto would have been immediately coded as a villain by the music in the film, and the identification of him as a potential hero lost.

Iron Man, on the other hand, purposefully avoids the superhero topic, not in an effort to blur the boundaries between hero and villain (that distinction is never at question in this film) but as part of the effort to delay the typical subordination of the hero's alter ego, and in the end helping to reverse the roles the hero's two identities. *Iron Man* therefore serves as an example of the more recent trend of comic book films, which seeks to escape the formulaic cliché's of their predecessors to heighten the critical reception of the genre. Moreover, the treatment of identity in this film, the establishment of Tony Stark as the embodied spirit of the inanimate Iron Man, may be viewed as necessary for the establishment of an unusual superhero character model.

Both of these films manipulate clichés of the superhero genre, whether they are related to the musical style or narrative structure typical of the genre. As such, the understanding of these films is dependent upon the understanding and study of the genre, in terms of the genre characteristics outlined in chapter 2, as well as the musical traits outlined in chapter 4. By understanding how each of these films draw upon and manipulate the norms of the genre, one can arrive at a richer understanding of the films, and point to how they stand out from and push the genre forward, in an effort to reinvent the genre and ensure a continuation of its popularity among audiences.

Chapter 6: Captain America: Hero of Yesterday, Today

In the final sequence of *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), a brief shot shows children, one of whom has fashioned a replica of the hero's iconic shield out of a trash can cover, playing in the streets of New York in the 1940s. The shot is in slow motion, accompanied by Captain America's theme as heard throughout the film, and lasts ten seconds before the visual and audio are abruptly cut off as the screen goes black. In this darkness we first hear only wind, recalling the beginning of the film.[1] As the audio increases in volume, a radio broadcast of a Brooklyn Dodgers game from 1941 is heard, before revealing an extreme close-up shot of a sleeping Steve Rogers opening his eyes, dressed in a plain military t-shirt and khaki pants. As Rogers awakens and takes in his surroundings, a mysterioso theme played by high violins is heard on the soundtrack. Rogers confronts a military nurse, demanding to know where he is, as he was in fact at the Dodgers game being played on the radio, and realizes something is amiss. Growing suspicious, Rogers escapes from the facility, and emerges on the streets of modern-day New York City, the one-time superhero appearing small and ordinary amidst the backdrop of the contemporary Times Square. As Rogers is surrounded by black sedans and G-Men, a patch-eyed Nick Fury arrives to inform him that "you've been asleep, Cap.

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[1] The film opens in darkness before revealing the Arctic tundra where the aircraft Captain America crashes at the end of the film during the 1940s is discovered in the present.

For nearly seventy years." As the final credits roll, stylized as WWII propaganda, Captain America's theme is again heard.

In terms of his filmic life, Captain America essentially had been asleep for seventy years when the 2011 film was released. Having last appeared in theatres in 1943 as part of a Republic film serial, the character did appear in two made-for-TV films during the 1970s, a Turkish film - *Three Giant Men* (1973), and an attempt at a feature film was planned for release in 1990; but the latter saw only a limited international release before moving direct-to-video in the United States in 1992. However, the Captain America character seems to be in the midst of a renaissance, as at the time of this writing the hero has appeared in two feature films over the past two years, with another two films set to be released over the next two years.[2] This rebirth is somewhat surprising, given the nature of the Captain America persona presented in these adaptations, which is at odds with the post-1989 model of superhero that has dominated the genre for the past 25 years. This chapter examines the two most recent adaptations featuring Captain America, discussing how the films navigate the difficulty of presenting an ostensibly outdated superhero within the framework of recent genre trends, through both plot and music.

Captain America in Comics

In *Comic Book Heroes of the Screen*, William Schoell discusses the first appearance of Captain America in comic books. Schoell writes that

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[2] *Captain America* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), and *The Avengers 2* (2015).

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> Captain America initially appeared on the newsstands in the first issue of Timely Comics' *Captain America* (April 1941). Steve Rogers was a skinny youth who is transformed into a fighting avenger by a superserum, and is meant to be the first of a corps of superpowered agents who will tackle fifth columnists and saboteurs… "Cap" was essentially one-dimensional by necessity: he was a device, a symbol of America's courage and the personification of its fighting strength… Although Captain America is very popular today, contemporary comics readers may find it hard to believe that he was once a household name.[3]

This one-dimensionality is precisely why it is curious that Captain America has again achieved prominence in recent superhero films. As Schoell alludes to, already by 1991, fans of comic book superheroes had come to expect much more complex characters, with troubled lives and moral grey areas. Captain America, however, was forged as a piece of American propaganda – an ideal American citizen who represents what all (1940s) American citizens should strive for. Captain America is the story of a scrawny American boy who wants nothing more then to go to war for his country, but is denied entrance to the military due to his stature. However, following a scientific experiment, Steve Rogers is transformed into the pinnacle of human strength, agility, and health.[4] He dons a costume emblazoned with the American flag, as well as his signature shield made of "vibranium" – a steel alloy capable of absorbing any kinetic energy or vibrations. Together with his sidekick Bucky, Captain America fights for the United States in World War II, aiding in the destruction of Axis powers.

In "America is Safe While its Boys and Girls Believe in its Creeds," Jason Dittmer writes that

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[3] William Schoell, *Comic Book Heroes of the Screen* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991), 95-96.
[4] It is possible to argue that Captain America does not posses any superpowers per say – certainly not to the level of a Superman or Captain Marvel type character – simply that physically he is the ideal man – faster, stronger, and able to heal faster than anyone around him, allowing him to appear supernatural.

> Captain America is an anthropomorphized version of the American identity, uniting the scale of the body politic with the scale of the individual body. Literally embodying the idealized American nation, Captain America provides a role model through which younger readers can imagine themselves as an explicitly American superhero.[5]

While this figure of the idealized American nation certainly proved popular at a time when the country was on the brink of entering World War II, the original traits found in Captain America would quickly become outdated in an ever-changing society – particularly one that has grown increasingly skeptical of its government over time. In order to remain profitable, Captain America had to evolve with the nation he represented.

In "Sold American," Andrew and Virginia Macdonald discuss this evolution of Captain America, writing that

> Captain America … has undergone a metamorphosis that parallels America's movement from the super-patriotic Forties to the disillusioned present. His development is significant not simply for its reflection of emerging American values, but also as an object lesson in the way America's rapid change swallows up its cultural heroes, allowing the out-dated to fall by the wayside, while tolerating only the most flexible in a curious type of Darwinian selection. Captain America is one of the few heroes from popular culture to have survived mostly intact for more than a quarter of a century … from decade to decade he changed with America.[6]

Captain America's flexibility to change along with American culture has been further discussed by Dittmer, who, in another article, traces the various stages of Captain America's evolution from the 1940s through our post 9/11 society. Dittmer writes that in the 1940s

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[5] Jason Dittmer, "'America is Safe While its Boys and Girls Believe in its Creeds!': Captain America and American Identity Prior to World War 2," Environment *and Planning D: Society and Space* 25 (2007): 405.

[6] Andrew MacDonald and Virginia MacDonald, "Sold American: The Metamorphosis of Captain America," *Journal of Popular Culture* 10.1 (1976): 249.

the Captain, as a product of the American military-industrial complex, begins as a tool of the establishment and a proxy for American foreign policy… The title was revived in the 1950s and billed as "Captain America ... Commie Smasher!" in an effort to feed symbiotically on the geopolitical narrative of the new Cold War… The third, and still ongoing, incarnation of Captain America began in 1964 with Captain America's revival after being found frozen in a North Atlantic iceberg since World War II.[7]

Dittmer goes on to discuss the difficulties of writing Captain America comics in a post-1960s society, a time during which a large portion of society did not agree with the American government's role in the Vietnam War, and thus responded negatively to a superhero which represented the military. To combat this negative response, Captain America was during this period most frequently shown fighting domestic battles "against poverty, racism, and pollution."[8] Dittmer further discusses the response of Captain America comics following the events of 9/11, in which the hero seems divided between fighting terrorism on the one hand and acknowledging the role that the military branch of the American empire has played in conflicts around the world and so contemplating that acts of empire may have precipitated the 2001 attacks on the other. All of these authors demonstrate the flexible positioning of the Captain America character within comics: they recognize not only his ability to adapt and evolve with a changing American society, but also his capacity to navigate between views of an increasingly divided society, particularly with regards to military involvement.[9] Yet, despite this flexibility

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[7] Jason Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95.3 (September 2005): 631-32.

[8] Ibid, 632.

[9] In fact, the 1960s version of Captain America seeks to undo the Commie Smasher version of the 1950s – claiming the previous Captain to have been an imposter, and that the real Steve Rogers was trapped in ice at the end of World War II – likely in an effort to allow the Captain to function in a post-McCarthyism America. See also J. Richard Stevens, "'Let's Rap with Cap'": Redefining American Patriotism through

demonstrated over the course of his appearances in comic books, the film adaptations have remained somewhat trapped in the image of the character from the 1940s.[10] It is to those adaptations that this chapter now turns.

Early Captain America Films

As Schoell writes, "the 1943 *Captain America* Republic serial seemed to have little to do with the comic book. Captain America's secret identity wasn't Steve Rogers, but Grant Gardner, a district attorney, who carried a gun rather than the famous Captain America shield."[11] Indeed, this serial bears little resemblance to the stories present in the comics: no military alliance, no sidekick Bucky, no shield, and the villain, a wholly new character never encountered in the comic book, is called The Scarab and uses his power of mind control to cause high-powered individuals to commit suicide. The only recognizable tie to the comics outside of the name Captain America is the costume the hero dons, a variation of the stars-and-stripes outfit, featuring a single star on the chest and back with a striped midsection. It is almost as though Republic sought to profit from the popularity of the Captain America iconography by simply inserting the main attributes of the famous outfit into a prefabricated script, with little regard to storylines

Popular Discourse and Letters," *Journal of Popular Culture* 44.3 (June 2011): 606-632. Stevens demonstrates how of the course of six years in the 1970s, the fan letter portion of Captain America comics actually served as a public forum, in which the comic published "submissions by military personnel, politicians, social scientists … and comic readers from seemingly every walk of life … [covering] such topics as the American military presence in Vietnam, McCarthyism, Watergate, and a host of other political issues" (606).

[10] The two 1979 television movies, however, do make an effort to modernize the character – presenting him as an artist who would rather spend time drawing sketches on the beach than being a hero, and who (in line with the post-1960s comics) fights crime in America rather than overseas for the military.

[11] Schoell, *Comic Book Heroes of the Screen,* 96.

already in place. The musical theme for the serial, as discussed in chapter 4, is a relatively straightforward heroic fanfare, evoking the military through its use of the march and fanfare topics, and the fantastic through harmonic moves by chromatic mediant relationships – a very typical theme for superhero films of this time period.

Forty years passed before plans to create a full-length Hollywood feature based on Captain America began to materialize. *Captain America* (1990) underwent a tumultuous production process during the 1980s, involving numerous director and studio changes, before a final version, directed by Albert Pyun, was eventually slated to be released during the summer of 1990. Producers, including Stan Lee, hoped to profit on the renewed optimism for superhero films following the success of Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989). However, following a pre-screening in early 1990, the film's actors were called back for more shooting, and release dates were pushed back to the fall of 1990 and into 1991. According to Schoell, Lee was quoted as saying that the film was good, but needed more action – that "everyone in the audience [at a screening] kept clamoring for more" of the Captain's heroics.[12] Yet, despite the efforts to fix the issues in the film, release dates continued to be pushed back. Eventually the film received only a limited release internationally, being released direct-to-video in the United States in July of 1992, and quickly fell into obscurity.

As a whole, the film is awful – even when compared to other B-movies in the superhero genre. Its failure, however, is not due to a lack of faithfulness in the adaptation. Unlike the 1943 Republic serial, the 1990 film retains close ties to the story lines found in

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[12] Schoell, *Comic Book Heroes of the Screen*, 110-11.

the comics. The film opens in Italy in 1936, where a young boy is kidnapped for a science experiment to create a super-soldier. This young boy becomes The Red Skull, the villain of the film, and arguably the most prominent villain of the Captain America comics. In 1943, Steve Rogers, a young man unable to join the military due to lingering effects of polio, volunteers for a similar super-soldier experiment for the United States government. The experiment is a success, and Rodgers becomes Captain America, and is sent to stop The Red Skull from launching a missile at the White House. After a short battle, The Red Skull defeats Captain America, and straps him to the missile before it launches. However, when the missile nearly collides with a young boy, Thomas Kimball, who is standing on the White House lawn, Captain America forces the missile to change directions. Kimball snaps a photograph of the Captain as he flies over head, which helps to fuel the ensuing popularity of the Captain as an American hero. The missile crashes in Alaska, where Captain America remains frozen for fifty years. During that time, Kimball goes on to become the president of the United States, while The Red Skull becomes the head of an Italian mob family, responsible for the murders of Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy. Captain America's body is discovered in Alaska in 1993; he is thawed out and, while still in prime physical shape, is disoriented by the time which has passed. President Kimball is kidnapped by The Red Skull, who intends to detonate a nuclear bomb and kill the president. Captain America, having regained his senses and adapting to the new time, saves the President, and knocks The Red Skull off of a cliff with his shield as the film comes to a close.

With low production values, a California setting, and a weak script, the film appears extremely dated, even for 1990 - particularly in the wake of Burton's *Batman* (1989), which succeeded in creating a fantastical Gotham City as a setting for the film.[13] Much of the second half of the film, which takes place in the present, features Captain America fighting Italian thugs. The ocean setting and the tight jeans and shorts of the thugs make the film the feel a bit like a bizarre episode of *Miami Vice* with the protagonist cop wearing a star-spangled jumpsuit. With a score by Barry Goldberg comprised entirely of a synthesized orchestra, the music does little to help. The synthesizer underscores the low production values rather than seeming a musical choice that helps the film. However, despite the sparse and underdeveloped nature of the score, the main theme for Captain America does occur a handful of times throughout the film, and merits some topical consideration. Shown in figure 6.1, the theme sounds over a pedal C, with a fanfare theme in fourths played by synthesized French horn and trombone, ending with a military bugle call. While similar to the 1943 theme with a strong evocation of the military topic, the theme is more simplistic, both harmonically and rhythmically, moving mostly by quarter and half notes, and never truly switching harmonies as the pedal C sounds throughout, though tension is created through the sounding of dominant sonorities over tonic pedal. Not only does the theme move melodically by fourths, but harmonically the two voices move in successive parallel fifths, before briefly sounding in a third in measure 2, and ending on a fourth. These open

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[13] *Captain America* (1990) had a budget of just over $10 million, versus the $35 million spent on *Batman* (1989). See boxofficemojo.com and John Hartl, "Captain America Flies Straight to Video," *The Seattle Times*, July 8, 1992, accessed June 11, 2013, http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1992-07-08/features/9202180524_1_captain-america-direct-to-video-matt-salinger.

sonorities evoke the Americana sound of Copland, or rather an impoverished imitation of it, reflecting the Captain as not only a military hero, but one who is decidedly American. However, by 1992 the overtly heroic style of theme heard here is one that the genre had already begun to move away from, following the success of Danny Elfman's score for *Batman* and *Batman Returns* (1992).

Figure 6.1: *Captain America* (1990) Theme, Barry Goldberg (Author's Transcription)

Captain America: The First Avenger

In "The Prescription to Save Ailing Superheroes," journalist Alex Pappademas writes that

> "Captain America: The First Avenger," directed by Joe Johnston…exists primarily to get Chris Evens's Captain out of the 1940s and into next summer. Yet when the film becomes a World War II guys-on-a-mission movie in which one of the grunts just happens to be a supersoldier in American-flag pajamas, it develops a pulpy life of its own.[14]

Captain America: The First Avenger (2011) was the last in a series of films including those based on the Marvel Comics characters Iron Man, Thor, and The Incredible Hulk, all of which led up to the release of *The Avengers* (2012). Beginning with *Iron Man*

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[14] Alex Pappademas, "The Prescription to Save Ailing Superheroes," *New York Times*, July 29, 2011, accessed February 7, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/magazine/the-prescription-to-save-ailing-superheroes.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

(2008), each character's film has served to tell the traditional origin story found in the genre, while also including teaser trailers which hinted towards the character's involvement in the 2012 blockbuster. As Pappademas states, *Captain America* served that same purpose – not only to establish the origin story for the hero, but to allow for him to be transported to the present day to be a part of The Avengers team, as the scene discussed at the start of this chapter describes.

In terms of plot, there are actually a surprising number of similarities between the 2011 Captain and the failed 1990 version. Again beginning during World War II, the modern adaptation shows a frail Steve Rogers being repeatedly denied entrance to the military, being transformed into Captain America, and fighting The Red Skull to stop his plan of taking over the entire world. Captain America is even shown crashing in the arctic and being frozen for 70 years. The initial conflict scene when Captain America infiltrates The Red Skull's HYDRA base is even quite reminiscent to the 1990 film, likely due to both films' use of the comics as a source of material.[15] Yet, where the recent adaptation appears more successful than its predecessor (in addition to the $140 million budget, cast of Hollywood heavyweights, and 20 years of technological improvements to special effects) is the careful treatment of the film as a vintage throwback. Rather than trying to bring both hero and villain into modern times for their final battle as the 1990 version does, the majority of the 2011 film takes place in the 1940s, with the Captain only awaking in the present at the very end of the film. The film does bring Captain America,

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[15] HYDRA is a criminal organization which features prominently throughout the Marvel universe of comics, presented in the 2011 film as a faction of Hitler's army, led by the Red Skull in the development of advance technology weapons.

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a 1940s model of superhero, into the present so he can become part of *The Avengers* team, but his origin is told as a flashback – an homage to an earlier style of action hero.

On the surface the film has its obvious pseudo-vintage style, blending the old and new. Set in 1940s America and Europe, its props, set design and costumes largely reflect the time, with the inclusion of some futuristic technology. Villains shoot blue energy from guns that vaporize their targets, and characters attend a science expo featuring a flying car, but the dials on machines and computers are analogue, and any airplanes are powered by propellers. The film even has an extended musical performance montage, stylized as a USO production number, used to establish the Captain as a hero of his time. This musical number also demonstrates how the war society of the 1940s efficiently converted heroism into propogandic value – yet it is a conversion that Rogers ultimately rejects. Rogers views his value as a soldier as being greater than that of his value as propaganda – a view that marks him in terms of action hero as belonging to an earlier age.[16]

The film has more subtle nostalgic allusions as well. As Pappademas points out, the film has a guys-on-a-mission plotline that is at least somewhat reminiscent of *The Dirty Dozen* (1967). There are numerous allusions to the *Star Wars* franchise as well. Towards the end of the film The Red Skull talks to his army of HYDRA soldiers in a plane hangar drawing a parallel to Darth Vader and his imperial soldiers. Shortly after this the Captain approaches the HYDRA base on a motorcycle in what seems nearly a

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[16] In modern superhero films, Tony Stark stands as the antithesis to this model – a hero who revels in his propogandic value. The interaction of these models becomes a central plot point for *The Avengers* (2012) as discussed below.

shot-for-shot remake of the chase scene on the moon of Endor. Finally, the Captain and

his crew are only a few lightsabers away from recreating a Jedi assault on the Death Star

as they chase The Red Skull through narrow hallways and automatic steel doors.[17]

The musical score also adds to this vintage style. In a review on allmusic.com of

Alan Silvestri's soundtrack, James Monger writes

> Appropriately stoic and expansive, the main theme for *Captain America: The First Avenger* feels both familiar and iconic, arriving early in the soundtrack (as all good superhero themes must) on a foundation of rolling military snares, sepia-toned brass, and long strings that evoke an endless sea of amber waves of grain. It's enjoyable and effective, but not groundbreaking, which pretty much sums up the score as a whole. Bombastic, melodramatic, and steeped in late-'70s/early-'80s big-budget adventure cinema, the Captain is well served here, even if it all feels a little old-fashioned at times.[18]

The theme is certainly old-fashioned, though one whose style can be traced further back

than the late-70s, all the way to superhero serials of the 1940s and adventure films of the

1930s. Additionally, the theme is first heard not on a foundation of snare drums as

Monger claims, but as a subtle horn call well before Steve Rogers' transformation into

Captain America – a literal call of destiny, foreshadowing the hero the scrawny Brooklyn

native is to become.[19] Presented in figure 6.2, this foreshadowing theme uses a brass

fanfare to encode military as its referent. In fact, the theme is quite similar to that of the

1990 film, placed over a tonic pedal and featuring the same melodic pitch motion of D-G-

C-B, though here lacking the friction between dominant and tonic as heard in the

previous film's theme. The theme proper (figure 6.3) is heard at the moment of unveiling

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[17] Not a surprising allusion given that director Joe Johnston got his start in the visual effects department working for George Lucas on *Star Wars* (1977)

[18] James Monger, "Captain America: The First Avenger [Original Score] – Review," accessed June 6, 2013, http://www.allmusic.com/album/captain-america-the-first-avenger-original-score-mw0002154545.

[19] DVD time: 00:11:00.

of the transformed Rogers – likely the version Monger describes.[20] Now expanded to a full orchestral theme featuring strings, brass, and snare drum, the theme has several ties to those of 1940s superhero serials. Set in the same G mixolydian mode as the theme for *Superman* (1941), the theme is rather optimistic, though lacking harmonic closure through the avoidance of the leading tone and the key remains somewhat ambiguous due to the amount of weight thrown toward C major. Nevertheless, the major mode fanfare recalls the music for the one-dimensional superheroes that dominated the genre for fifty years. The theme also incorporates a harp glissando, a common scoring trait in the superhero serials used to suggest the fantastical nature of their characters but that had entirely disappeared from the genre by 1989. Harmonically, the theme incorporates several open fourths and fifths, often times omitting the third from resting sonorities – again alluding to Copland's style, and likely contributing to the tone of Americana ("amber waves of grain") Monger hears in the score. In terms of harmonic progression, the theme contains a lot of plagal motion, as I-IV-I in measures 1-3, then bVII-IV-bVII-IV-I in measures 5-8,[21] giving the theme an almost spiritual or hymn-like quality – possibly suggesting the savior qualities of the hero.[22]

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[20] DVD time: 00:37:00.

[21] bVII-IV being IV-I in C major.

[22] While not the son of God, Rogers is the son of science, and science is certainly posited as god in this film. Considering also his battle with the devilish figure of Red Skull, Captain sacrificing himself to save humanity, and then being resurrected (or thawed), one does not need to dig deeply to draw the comparison between Captain and Christ.

Figure 6.2: *Captain America* (2011) Steve Rogers Foreshadow Theme, Alan Silvestri
(Author's Transcription)

Figure 6.3: *Captain America* (2011) Full Theme, Alan Silvestri (Author's Transcription)

The heroic theme is heard throughout the film, most prominently in the above scenes, and when Captain America returns from rescuing a number of soldiers from captivity at one of The Red Skull's bases.[23] However, there are a number of instances where Silvestri darkens the theme by shifting it to minor mode, particularly when he is in combat and the outcome is uncertain. These instances are fragmented and indeterminate early on in the film, but gain strength during the final third of the film. The most prominent versions of these minor mode themes are shown in figures 6.4a and 6.4b. In a

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[23] DVD time: 01:10:00.

creative bit of underscoring, Silvestri uses figure 6.4a when Captain America decides that he is going to attack The Red Skull's headquarters by "walking up to the front door."[24] Here, the hero is neither in conflict nor in apparent danger, yet we are given a tragic heroic theme, one that is more in line with typical post-1989 superhero themes. Prior to the theme being heard, Rogers had witnessed his best friend Bucky fall to his death during a mission. Demonstrating a vulnerable side for the first time since his transformation, Rogers is shown trying to drink away the pain, gaining a personal motivation for his attack on The Red Skull. Figure 6.4a sounds during Rogers' decision to act, not out of military strategy, but out of vengeance, a darker motivation more typical of recent manifestations of superheroes. The theme is a direct imitation of the foreshadow theme heard at the beginning of the film – highlighting the transformation the hero is undergoing towards a more complex, troubled individual. During the final battle sequence, this version of the theme gains strength, resulting in the variant shown in figure 6.4b, now transformed fully into a token of the post-1989 superhero topic, with march rhythm, minor mode, and driving accompaniment. Through both of these themes we hear the hero that the Captain has become – one that has witnessed the death of a loved one, and one who ultimately will lose out on a relationship when he is frozen, never to see his love interest again.

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[24] DVD time: 01:31:44.

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Figure 6.4a: *Captain America* (2011) Tragic Foreshadow Theme, Alan Silvestri
(Author's Transcription)

Figure 6.4b: *Captain America* (2011) Tragic Heroic Theme, Alan Silvestri (Author's
Transcription)

When the final instance of the heroic Captain America theme is heard it does not accompany the Captain, but, as discussed above, children playing in the streets of 1940s New York. It is a final nostalgic look back to the hero that was – the innocence and naïveté of the Captain who did not know loss or pain reflected here through children emulating the hero. When Rogers awakens in the 21st century, there is no Captain America theme, tragic or heroic. The hero has been stripped of his uniform, of his theme, of his identity. It is as though the hero that existed in the 1940s, the hero who was an American icon, could no longer function in modern time. He will have to be rebuilt and reestablished in order to reconnect with an American society that has drastically changed from the one he once belonged to.

Captain America in The Avengers

The Avengers (2012) was the culmination of five years of hype, teasers, and buildup by Marvel films. Having already established heroes in preceding films, *The Avengers* was free to focus around how the previously established heroes of Iron Man, Thor, The Hulk, Captain America and two new heroes (Black Widow, a Russian-born American spy, and Hawkeye, a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent who possesses excellent sight and fights crime with a high-tech bow and arrow) could interact and work (or not work) as a team.[25] The conflict in the film centers on Loki, the adopted brother of Thor, who arrives on Earth and steals the Tesseract from Nick Fury's S.H.I.E.L.D. agency. (In Marvel comics, the Tesseract is a cube of unlimited power from Asgard, Thor's home, capable of opening portals to areas all across the universe. It appeared in *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), and *Captain America: The First Avenger*.) Loki intends to use the Tesseract to enslave the human race, and open a portal to allow an invasion by the Chitauri – an alien race featured in Marvel comics that has repeatedly attempted to conquer Earth. The Avenger team has to assemble and learn to work together in order to stop Loki and save Earth. Loki opens his portal in New York City, but the Avengers arrive and stop the invasion by detonating a nuclear missile on the other side of the portal, destroying the Chitauri mothership, and closing the portal.

In his review of *The Avengers,* film critic Anthony Scott states that the superhero "genre, though it is still in a period of commercial ascendancy, has also entered a phase

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[25] Both Black Widow and Hawkeye had appeared in earlier superhero films as minor characters.

of imaginative decadence."[26] *The Avengers*, he says, offers little in the way of innovation in terms of action sequences, and in fact those sequences may be where the film is at its weakest as they add little to the realm of superhero action films not already seen in Michael Bay's *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011). What the film does provide is the opportunity for the audience to see favorite characters interact with each other, in what Scott describes as witty banter, highlighting a recent staple of the genre, the individual struggle of the hero. Also of interest, however, is the commentary the film provides on the superhero character archetype throughout the genre's history. The placement of Captain America, who as Scott points out is at one time referred to as an "out of touch old timer," among modern troubled heroes such as Iron Man and The Hulk, serves to highlight the differences between superheroes based on the Superman model and those based on the Batman model. In these terms, Captain America struggles to compete, not only in terms of his comparatively meager powers, but also in terms of being an intriguing character amidst a sea of alcoholic playboys, spoiled Norse deities and scientists with anger issues. Additionally, *The Avengers* adds to the mix Hawkeye, a bow and arrow marksman, and Black Widow, a superheroine who like Captain America has no strong superpower. As a significant character within what has been (and is in this film) an almost exclusively masculine driven genre, she also draws attention to the underlying premises of the genre, and a comparison of Captain America to Black Widow serve as reminders as to the superhero's cultural origins and social limitations.

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[26] Anthony O. Scott, "Superheroes, Super Battles, Super Egos," *New York Times*, May 3, 2012, accessed September 2, 2012, http://movies.nytimes.com/2012/05/04/movies/robert-downey-jr-in-the-avengers-directed-by-joss-whedon.html?pagewanted=all.

Captain America and Black Widow

In terms of their role within the film, Captain America and Black Widow are somewhat similar. Both heroes' skills pale in comparison to those of Iron Man, Thor, and Hulk – Black Widow even more so than the Captain. In fact, Black Widow relies mostly on her intelligence, crafty combat skills, and boldness. Both characters serve as nucleuses around which the Avengers team functions. By the end of the film, Captain America overtly serves as the leader of the team, acting as the military strategist who motivates and deploys each hero according to where their abilities will best work towards a positive outcome. Black Widow, as her name suggests, acts like a seductive spider, capable of luring men into her web regardless of whether it may lead to their destruction. This is most evident when she acts as an interrogator, tricking the Russian criminal at the beginning of the film into "giving her everything" by allowing herself to be captured and appearing helpless. She later uses the same technique to figure out Loki's plan – demonstrating a vulnerability regarding her feelings towards Hawkeye to get the villain to reveal his plan to destroy the S.H.I.E.L.D ship. Additionally, within The Avengers, Black Widow is a key character in bringing much of the team together. She was sent by Nick Fury to peak Tony Stark's interest in The Avengers Initiative in *Iron Man 2* (2010), and was again sent to recruit The Hulk at the beginning of *The Avengers*. Black Widow also seems to have a relationship with Hawkeye, and is ultimately the one who awakens Hawkeye (whose mind had been controlled by Loki) from his trance and gets him to rejoin the Avengers team.

Yet while both characters serve unifying roles within the team, their character types are quite different. Captain is positioned as a leader, his character is shown giving orders to every member of the team, and he is established as an American hero (though one of a past age) through agent Coulson's fan-boy idolization of him.[27] Black Widow, however, is constantly shrouded in mystery – a character that the film invests a significant amount of time in, though one which we never really learn much about.[28] We learn that she is a Russian-born spy, with what we assume is a criminal history as she refers throughout the film to the "red on her ledger." Yet we never learn what her past misdeeds are, only that at some point she was rehabilitated to become an agent for S.H.I.E.L.D.

Musically, Black Widow is coded as "other" throughout most of the film. Her theme first appears near the beginning of the film, as she fights a group of Russian criminals. The most notable aspect of the theme is its use of percussion – most prominently those of a more ethnic variety, including bongos and congas. The majority of this occurrence of the theme lacks definable melodic content, though a brief melody does occur near the end of the scene, as presented in figure 6.5a. The melody seems to be in the Phrygian mode, centering on half-step motion between $\hat{5}$-b$\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$ and $\hat{1}$-b$\hat{2}$-$\hat{1}$. The chromaticism of the theme, its incorporation of tritones both melodically and harmonically, combined with the ethnic percussion work to suggest the exotic and

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[27] Agent Coulson is Nick Fury's right-hand man, a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent who appeared in several preceding adaptations. One ongoing joke with in *The Avengers* is the consistent reference to his vintage Captain America trading card collection.

[28] The film seems to be setting her up for a feature film of her own, though to date no such film has been announced.

mysterious nature of the character. Throughout the film, Black Widow's theme occurs as just the percussion motive (particularly during her fight with Hawkeye), though the melodic content develops as the film progresses as well. During her interrogation of Loki, figure 6.5b is heard. The percussion now absent, the theme assumes topical form as a plaintive mysterioso – highlighting the uncertainty of Black Widow's past which is being discussed. In this instance, the Phrygian mode is further emphasized, now in E, with a II-i "cadence" of sorts that highlights the $b\hat{2}$-$\hat{1}$ motion. A final statement of the theme (figure 6.5c) is heard during the final fight sequence. Throughout much of the film, Black Widow seemed to be operating out of her own desire to have her criminal record erased. In the final fight sequence, she spends most of her time fighting on the ground next to Captain America, while Thor, Iron Man, Hulk, and Hawkeye are off on their own – a positioning suggesting her inability to function as a hero in her own right, or at least not in the context of this sort of battle. Yet, towards the end of the sequence she chooses to go off on her own, hitching a ride with a Chitauri aircraft to get to the Tesseract and ultimately close the portal. During this scene, her theme grows to a fully orchestrated theme, imitating that of typical post-1989 hero themes. Though reusing the same melodic content, it is now played by strident brass instruments, as a march with driving rhythmic accompaniment. The Phrygian mode disappears, and more weight is given to the typical $\hat{5}$-$b\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$ motion of the superhero topic, and also incorporates harmonic motion of a chromatic mediant, as the C# minor of the first half of the theme modulates to Bb minor for its second statement. It is as though through this action she has finally broken out of

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her role as seductive female spy to stand as an individual hero – though one who strives

not for her personal gain, but for that of society and a positive outcome for the team.
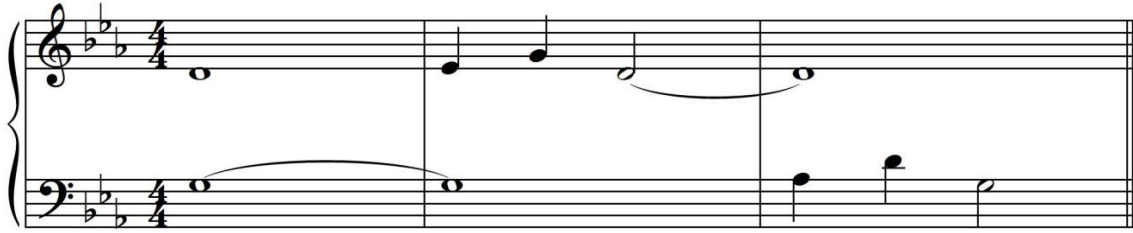

Figure 6.5a: *The Avengers* (2012), Black Widow Theme, Alan Silvestri (Author's
        Transcription)
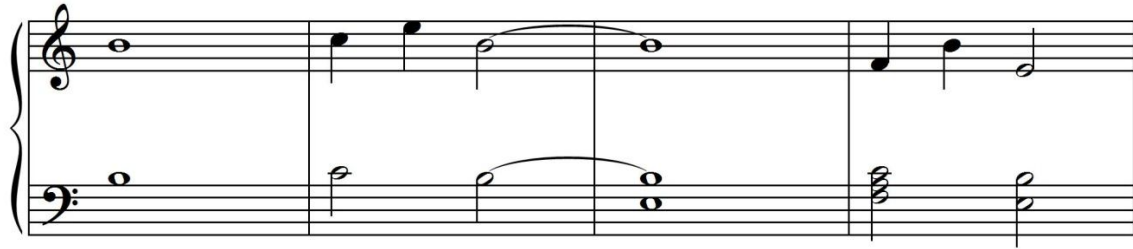
Figure 6.5b: *The Avengers* (2012), Black Widow Plaintive Theme, Alan Silvestri
        (Author's Transcription)

Figure 6.5c: *The Avengers* (2012), Black Widow Full Theme, Alan Silvestri (Author's
   Transcription)

Captain America and Tony Stark

One of the more prominent subplots of the film is the interaction between Captain America and Tony Stark – the two heroes who, ideologically, could not be further removed. Stark spends much of the film making fun of the appearance of the other heroes, calling Thor "Point Break" and accusing him of "wearing his mother's drapes," making light of Bruce Banners "breathtaking anger issues," and calling Loki "Reindeer Games." But with Captain America, Stark takes an even more aggressive approach, questioning not only the appearance of the Captain, but also his ability to function as a

hero. Rogers recognizes that he is out of place early in the film – when he is first brought

in by S.H.I.E.L.D. he shares the following exchange with agent Coulson:

> Steve Rogers: Am I really the right man for the job?
>
> Agent Phil Coulson: Oh, you are. Absolutely. Uh... we've made some modifications to the uniform. I had a little design input.
>
> Steve Rogers: The uniform? Aren't the stars and stripes a little... old-fashioned?
>
> Agent Phil Coulson: With everything that's happening, the things that are about to come to light, people might just need a little old-fashioned.

In fact, visually it appears that the Captain constantly tries to look the part of the hero –

once he puts on the uniform he wears it for the duration of the film, while Stark mostly

appears in jeans and an AC/DC T-shirt. Stark is quick to point this out, as well as the

banal nature of Roger's powers, asking "of the people in this room, which one is A)

wearing a spangled outfit, and B) not of use?"

The ideological difference between the two is highlighted in the following heated

exchanges:

> Rogers: Big man in a suit of Armor – take that off, what are you?
>
> Stark: Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.
> _____
>
> Rogers: You may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero.
>
> Stark: A hero? Like you? You're a laboratory experiment, Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a bottle.

Stark, the model for modern-day superheroes, can function as an interesting character

whether he is himself or Iron Man, whereas Rogers has to dress the part to be taken

seriously as a hero. Stark was a celebrity before he became a hero; Rogers became a

celebrity because of his transformation to a hero. Naturally, throughout the course of the film, Stark comes to find the Rogers does in fact have merit, and ultimately adopts his mantra of sacrificing himself for the sake of others.

The friction between Stark and Rogers plays out in Alan Silvestri's musical score as well, in particular the positioning of Stark as a much more modern and powerful hero. This is best demonstrated in the scene of Loki's attack in Stuttgart, Germany. The scene opens on a museum where a gala is taking place. The music is not Silvestri's, but the first movement of Schubert's "Rosamunde" String Quartet, D804. The music is evidently intended to be heard as diegetic, at least initially, as a string quartet is shown at the gala and the performers' movements are in line with the music. As the piece shifts from minor to major mode (m. 23), it moves to non-diegetic underscoring, as various guards are shown dropping off of buildings, having been shot by Hawkeye, who is under Loki's mind control. Loki appears on screen at the fortissimo return to minor (m. 32), the orchestral music providing a stinger for his arrival. As Loki moves through the museum, he strikes a guard, synchronized to the forte chords in measures 42-43, creating a mickey-mousing effect as the scoring shifts from diegetic string quartet to nondiegetic full orchestra. "Rosamunde" is firmly linked to Loki, as it mimics his movement – drawing on a filmic cliché that correlates classical music with villains.[29]

As Loki moves outside of the museum, the music shifts to Silvestri's original score. Loki forces a large crowd to their knees and is about to kill an old Jewish man

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[29] The same correlation is made in *Captain America* (2011), as The Red Skull not only listens to classical music, but Wagner – as all good Nazi villains should.

when Captain America arrives, accompanied by a single horn statement of his tragic theme from *Captain America* (figure 6.6a). As Loki and Captain engage in battle, a brief statement of the tragic theme is heard again (figure 6.6b), though in an unusual key. While the majority of Captain America's themes are set in the closely related keys of G major, G minor, or E minor, it sounds here in the distant C# minor – as though musically the Captain is out of his comfort zone, his theme struggling to insert itself into Loki's music. Loki quickly gets the better of the Captain, and, as Loki is about strike, the audio track is literally taken over by new music. AC/DC's "Shoot to Thrill" begins blaring as Iron Man arrives, and quickly subdues Loki while the Captain lies helplessly on the ground.

Figure 6.6a: *The Avengers* (2012) Captain America Stuttgart Horn Call, Alan Silvestri
(Author's Transcription)

Figure 6.6b: *The Avengers* (2012) Captain America Stuttgart Full Theme, Alan Silvestri
(Author's Transcription)

This sequence presents an interesting musical commentary on the relationship of all three of these characters. Loki, a god from the pages of history, is accompanied musically by the oldest style of music present in the scene. His alignment with the music is also rather old, operating in an almost operatic or melodramatic fashion. Silvestri borrows music from his previous scoring of Captain America, but it is his tragic, not heroic theme that can exist in this modern time. However, when Iron Man arrives accompanied by heavy metal rock music, the Captain's theme (while perfectly suitable for post-1989 superhero film) is made to sound feeble and impotent in contrast. Despite the Captain's music adapting to the normative style of modern superhero films, it is already starting to sound old when compared to the hard-driven rock idiom of Iron Man. Captain America's theme does gain strength as the film progresses, beginning with the scene where he helps Iron Man to repair the propeller on the S.H.I.E.L.D. ship. Shown in figure 6.7, the theme here is back in one of the Captain's keys – E minor – and presents the first instance of a $\hat{1}$-b$\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$ motion within a Captain America theme. This melodic motion was commonplace initially for films that mimicked the model of Elfman's *Batman* theme, though it had all but disappeared from the genre by the time of *The Avengers*. It is as though, while the Captain has certainly tried to adapt musically to the present, he is still a bit behind a genre that is apparently moving in a different direction.
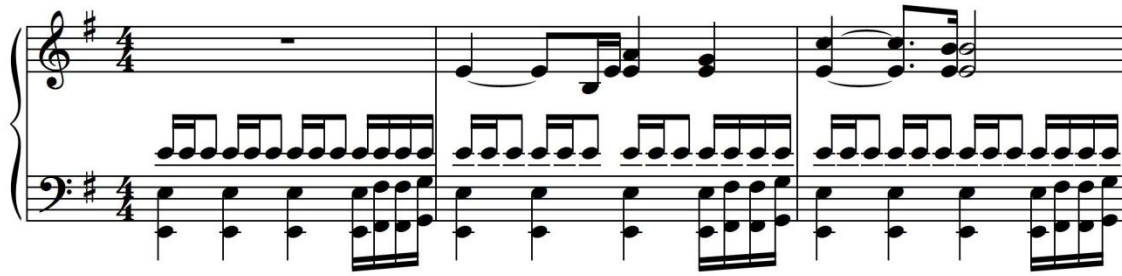
Figure 6.7: *The Avengers* (2012) Captain America 1-b6-5 Theme, Alan Silvestri
(Author's Transcription)

Conclusion

This new direction, I would argue, can be glimpsed in Silvestri's main theme for *The Avengers*. Shown in figure 6.8, the theme is not wholly divorced from other examples of post-1989 superhero themes – it still incorporates driving accompaniment, brass fanfare, march topic, and is set in minor mode. Yet the theme seems far less tragic than those built on the Elfman model, likely due to its harmonies being made up almost entirely of major mode sonorities, as it progresses from i-VI-IV6-VI-VII-i-VI-IV-V. The theme is expansive, its fanfare moving slowly and deliberately, often occupying four or more beats with a single tone. Its regular phrase structure is essentially periodic in structure (though lacking cadence points), as its consequent phrase rises not to a tragic minor sixth interval above the tonic, but a more optimistic major sixth. The affect is one of a minor mode theme that does not sound fated or doomed – certainly troubled, but overtly victorious. Similar themes can be found in *Iron Man 2* (2008), *X-Men First Class* (2011), and *Iron Man 3* (2013), all of which, *The Avengers* included, feature heroes who,

while flawed individuals, generally achieve positive outcomes within the film – both in battle and life.[30]

Figure 6.8: *The Avengers* (2012) Theme, Alan Silvestri (Author's Transcription)

In this light, the Captain America themes in both Silvestri films assume a strong air of nostalgia – of a hero who remains trapped in the past. The heroic theme in *Captain America* can only exist in the 1940s setting; the tragic theme in the present time of *The Avengers*, though more contemporary, nevertheless still appears dated when compared to the music of his peers, especially Iron Man. The result in both films is a Captain who is musically, as Loki puts it, "a man out of time." This, it would appear, is the source of Captain America's troubled persona – his unending quest to fit into a time that has forgotten him. His role is to provide a moral compass for the Avenger team, and as the

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[30] This is compared to the decidedly tragic outcomes of, for instance, the Christopher Nolan Batman trilogy.

waitress from the vintage diner he rescues at the end of *The Avengers* points out, his purpose fulfilled by being the only remaining pure hero in the world.

This trait of the Captain serving as the mythic hero that is needed by society is most evident in the final sequence. Captain is literally the only hero on the ground with civilians amidst the disaster, as Iron Man, Thor, Hulk, Hawkeye, and eventually Black Widow all take to the air and have little if any civilian interaction. Captain America is shown giving orders to policeman, rescuing people from buses, and stopping a bank explosion – all the while immersed in the chaotic movement of the people of New York. The place each hero occupies in this climactic battle reflects the ultimate role each hero plays. Thor is in fact a mythic god, though one who does not seem to serve the modern world – rather he is there to stop his adoptive brother. Hulk is a monster, one whom society is shown fleeing from despite his efforts to save them. Hawkeye is a soldier for a government agency that operates in secret from the public, and one who gains little traction in the film, as he spends much of it fighting for Loki. Black Widow is an "other" – an outsider in America – who only finds her individuality at the very end of the film, and it is again away from the people. Stark is ultimately the hero that the film invests with saving the world; however, he is marked as part of the cultural elite – one whose money and intelligence allows him to tower above society rather than being a part of it. Musically, he is not given a theme; rather he simply appropriates pre-existing commercial music – making him less a mythic hero of the people and more a model of a beneficent corporate America that increasingly seems the new ground of superhero mythology. (The theme of a corrupted corporate power that is redeemed by a wealthy

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superhero/businessman appears in the Nolan Batman trilogy as well.) Captain America, however, retains the traditional superhero music. He fights along side of the people, and ultimately serves to remind that the old model of the mythic hero of the people still has a place in the modern world.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The summer of 2012 saw the release of some of the most highly anticipated installments of the superhero film genre. Among these was the conclusion to the Christopher Nolan *Dark Knight* trilogy. Titled *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), the film marked the tenth time the Batman character had been adapted to the silver screen either through film serial or full length feature film, more times than any other superhero - and the film's protagonist literally had begun to show his age. Set eight years after the events of *The Dark Knight* (2008), the film features a Batman who had by and large disappeared from his heroic place in society. Living as a shut-in within his mansion of Wayne Manor, Bruce Wayne limps around on his bad leg, forcing the audience to wonder not only how he can function as the hero of this film, but, on a larger scale, how much longer can Hollywood continue to reuse this character?

This portrayal of Batman occurs just four years after the release of *The Dark Knight*, arguably the most critically acclaimed superhero film of all time, nominated for eight Academy Awards (winning two), and became the fourth highest grossing domestic film of all time.[1] Yet *The Dark Knight Rises* provides a commentary on the health and sustainability of the superhero film genre, or at the very least the health of adaptations based on DC characters, which (outside of films based on Batman) have struggled to

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[1] *The Dark Knight* is currently the second highest grossing superhero film of all time behind only *The Avengers* (2012).

compete with their Marvel rivals. And in general, this competition for profit is what has

driven the superhero genre, far beyond the desire to create high quality films.

In "The Prescription to Save Ailing Superheroes," Alex Pappademas discusses

this drive for profit in superhero films. Pappademas states that

> More often than not, though, the obligation to turn a profit *and* satisfy a cult *and* tee up multiple sequels and spinoffs turns the work of directing these things into a middle-management gig. Directors are accountable not only to studio heads and producers but to an audience that has spent years or decades thinking about how the pluperfect screen version of Captain America or Thor or Man-Thing would look and act and punch and emote. It's moviemaking by committee with a really big committee, another byproduct of our culture's weird need for entertainment that behaves as if it's been reading our blogs instead of trying to surprise us. I'm not naïve enough to suggest here that superhero movies would become some kind of hotbed of auteurist innovation if Hollywood stopped trying to please the comic-book cognoscenti. I'm old enough to remember the days when studios assumed that A) only kids liked comic books, and B) those kids were idiots, a mind-set that brought us movies like Joel Schumacher's contemptible "Batman Forever" and "Batman and Robin,"...But I'm also old enough to remember when Warner Brothers entrusted the 1989 "Batman" and its sequel to Tim Burton, and how bizarre that decision seemed at the time, and how Burton ended up making one deeply and fascinatingly Tim Burton-ish movie that happened to be about Batman... less than 10 years ago, we got a Freudian-monster-movie version of Hulk by Ang Lee and Bryan Singer's "Superman Returns," [which] represent honest attempts by their makers to impose a personal sensibility on superhero myths instead of just playing to an audience's preconceptions... As a fan of comics, I understand why fans want comic-book-movie directors to act like respectful stewards, but as a fan of movies, I want to see these movies directed by megalomaniac geniuses who'd rather fly to Cannes in coach than crowd-source one iota of their vision. Maybe then we'd get superhero movies that honor comics' tradition of inventiveness, instead of D.O.A. brand-extensions like "Green Lantern,"...[2]

The artistic quality of these films notwithstanding, the popularity of superhero films has

remained constant over the past thirteen years. Hollywood film makers have exploited the

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[2] Alex Pappademas, "The Prescription to Save Ailing Superheroes," *New York Times*, July 29, 2011, accessed February 7, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/magazine/the-prescription-to-save-ailing-superheroes.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

desire for cult fans to flock to the theatres for midnight showings of the latest cape-clad hero, despite the fact that the new installment will likely do nothing to reinvent the genre. Yet it is precisely this deep strain of conventionality that has made the superhero film an ideal object of study within this project.

The superhero genre has been built on cliché, formulaic in every aspect of its presentation, from narrative semantics and syntax, visual style, and even musical underscoring. It is this constant return to the same formula that has allowed the genre to develop a musical style which has come to represent the genre - a style that as Favreau stated sounds "comicbookish." By reusing rather than reinventing, composers for superhero films have established a family of musical tokens suitable for the accompaniment of the genre, which have coalesced into a topical type. This type gained its cohesion precisely following the "deeply and fascinatingly Tim Burton-ish movie that happened to be about Batman" Pappademas refers to, as not only Burton's aesthetic helped to shift the superhero film towards the darker, vigilante Batman model of hero, but Elfman's score shifted the genre also, establishing many of the tokens which have been copied in the ensuing quarter century.

However, the heroes which have thrived in this post-Batman era were not other DC superheroes, but those stemming from Marvel Comics, whose reinvention of the comic book superhero in the 1960s pushed toward this darker aesthetic, creating superheroes more suitable for this era. This was no more evident than in 2012, when a series of Marvel releases including films based on Thor, Iron Man, Captain America, and

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The Hulk, culminated in the release of *The Avengers* (2012) - a film which financially

outperform even the critically acclaimed *Dark Knight*. As Pappademas writes,

> the comics version of the Marvel Universe is one of the most amazing acts of sustained collective creativity in the history of American letters - one ridiculously vast cosmic soap opera about a huge cast of characters brawling and teaming up and falling in love and living and dying and living again, told in tens of thousands of saddle-stapled installments by scores of different artists and writers. Generations of readers have grown up taking it for granted that Spider-Man, Wolverine, the Fantastic Four and the Hulk all live in the same world and can wander in and out of one another's story lines... Plenty of comic-book movies have tried to reproduce the tone and imagery of superhero comics, but no one managed to translate the "shared universe" aspect of the comics-reading experience to the screen until 2008. At the very end of the first "Iron Man" movie...Nick Fury...turns up to tell...Tony Stark about something called the "Avengers Initiative." "The Incredible Hulk" followed in June, with an appearance by Downey's Stark. Subsequent Marvel movies have packed in even more elbow-your-seatmate cameos and secret-except-on-the-Internet teasers, fleshing out an interconnected Marvel movie-verse.[3]

This interconnected universe of Marvel characters in film demonstrates not only an

extremely effective franchising strategy for the genre, but highlights the interconnectivity

of superhero films. For Marvel, superhero films are supposed to feed off of each other,

interact with each other, and even imitate each other - and apparently, the audience does

not mind. This imitation was instilled in the superhero from its inception, with comic

book publishers modeling new publications off of whatever character proved to be the

most recent hot item of the market. Why then should superhero films behave any

differently? Hollywood is appealing to a market of fandom that expects imitation.

Yet, in terms of music, the superhero genre is not alone in imitation. From the

beginning of film, there has been a link between genre and music, with the genre

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[3] Pappademas, "Presecription."

generating an expected musical style which is appropriate to accompany it. These musical styles often achieve their signification through the use of musical topics, some preexisting, and some being created or evolving alongside of the genre. Just as this study examined the stylistic trends of music for the superhero film genre over the course of its history to uncover a musical topic, studies involving other filmic genres and subgenres may reveal new musical topics, or lead to a better understanding of the use of preexisting topics within society. One need only consider the musical similarities found in films such as *Crimson Tide* (1995) and *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003); John Williams' scoring of children in *Hook* (1991) and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001); or any film with a Christmastime setting to realize that these films of similar plot and genre are sharing musical styles which are topically motivated – by topics such as "Children" "Sea" or "Christmas" which certainly span the history of film, and can likely be traced back to music of the Classical and Romantic eras. Studying the strategic use of these topics over time can not only illuminate how signifier and signified may have evolved with a changing society, but can also aid in reading and interpreting a film.

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