

Naming Power: What's (in) a Superhero?*

Jean-Guy P. Ducreux
Université Lyon 1

Nomen est omen

The superpower is in the name. Let us try a simple commutation test. Take a man in a penthouse, let him don a cloak, puny bat ears atop a stiff mask, and call him Bruce Wayne: you will never get a superhero. At best, you might get an entrepreneur engaged in cosplay activities. Conversely, take any man on the street, let him call himself Batman, and watch. He might raise a few dubious eyebrows, or, at least, cast shadows of doubt over the relevance of his statement (before being rushed off to Bedlam City), but the trick would probably work, as a plain-clothed Harvey Dent (played by Aaron Eckhart) demonstrated in *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008). Roland Barthes pointed out that (the) name is “the prince of signifiers”.¹ Nowhere is this truer than in superherodom. Richard Reynolds, Lawrence and Jewett, Peter Coogan, Robin S. Rosenberg,² or even Stan Lee himself,³ list an endless litany of traits, props, and missions that purportedly characterize superheroes, when in fact, the common denominator, or pith of the myth, lies in their name. A superhero name is a synecdoche and/or meta-sign, representing the sum total of an array of hypo-signs subservient to (the) Name. Alluding to Derrida's *On the Name* (1995), Christian Moraru writes: “names no longer are solely, or primarily, a method of inquiry. They become subject matter”.⁴

Onomastics thus becomes a signifying realm unto itself. This article strives to offer a semiotic perspective on superhero names in film and television (intentionally leaving aside superhero groups), review some of them, give pointers towards a connotational taxonomy of superhero names, and try to draw some sense out of the whole system. It concludes on the current fare and fate of a popular – but decadent – genre, which reflects on the United States as a superpower and as a herald of capitalism.

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¹ “A proper name should always be carefully questioned, for the proper name is, if I can put it like this, the prince of signifiers;” Roland Barthes, “Textual Analysis: Poe's ‘Valdemar’,” in David Lodge, ed, *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (London: Longman, 1988), 172-195. French edition: Roland Barthes, “Analyse textuelle d'un conte d'Edgar Poe”, *Sémiotique narrative et textuelle*, textes réunis par François Rastier (Paris: Larousse, 1973), 29-5.

² Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: a Modern Mythology* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1994); John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002); Peter M. Coogan, and Dennis O'Neil, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin, Tx: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006); Robin S. Rosenberg ed, *What is a Superhero?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³ Stan Lee, “More than Normal, but Believable”, in Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogan eds., *ibid*, 115.

⁴ Christian Moraru, *Memorious Discourse: Reprise and Representation in Postmodernism* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), 88.

Naming and Re-naming

Ancient heroes were wont to be re-named, or re-called (so as to be remembered). A second name would guarantee glorious posterity. Heracles was not born Heracles. His actual birth name was Alcaeus or Alcides.⁵ Charles I, King of the Franks, was better known as Charlemagne or *Carolus Magnus*. Richard I of England was the Lionhearted (*Coeur de Lion*, or Lionheart). Important classical heroes and rulers often had dual names. So did the members of many Native American tribes. Similarly, Catholic Popes and Greek Orthodox patriarchs don a second name when they are deemed worthy of taking their charge, and dutifully elected by their peers. Any virtue, be it courage, piousness, or intelligence is necessary to attain this “two-name” status. The situation has not changed much in today’s world, and popular culture(s). Who was El Cordobés, the bullfighter, for instance? His real name was Manuel Benítez Pérez. Pelé, the Brazilian football player, was born Edson Arantes do Nascimento. *Ad libida*. Popular heroes, imaginary or real, classical or otherwise, quite often sport a different name, a *heronym*⁶ (or *ironym*) that sings their praise, whatever the nature of their prowess.⁷

A *heronym* is thus a sign or badge which re-names a person based on his/her capacity or merits (or even his/her sins). It comes as the result of fame or renown.⁸ The hero is therefore re-named, or named a second time, by public volition. Consequently, a hero cannot re-name himself. This is, I believe, a cardinal rule. A hero cannot be the author of his own semiological text, his poetics or fable. He lives his story, and others report his feats. A superhero is called (by others) and only extraordinary prowess will enable him to make a name for himself, whereupon the awed multitude (represented *in textu*) will grant him one. His calling thus comes as the result of their naming. It is a deterministic process, informing a specific community (originally the U.S., now possibly much more⁹).

Most modern superhero myths, which primarily define “heroes” or “superior heroes,” follow this re-naming convention in very much the same way. They need to be heroes before being superheroes, the prefix only adding to their initial fame, like a superlative (see below). In search of greater purpose, they hide behind a *nom de pouvoir* (literally, “power name,” following on the French *nom de plume*), an empowering alias that vests them with supernatural virtues, and thus transcends their human immanence. The street name, or “common name,” deals with the material world and reality; the power name refers to a

⁵ The term “Heracles” literally means “Glory of Hera.” Though unattested, the belief that there is a relationship between “hero” and “Hera” is extremely widespread.

⁶ The terms heronym and ironym, based on the Ancient Greek roots ἥρωας/ ἥρωας (usually transliterated as “hero”; modern Greek: ἥρωας /ἥρωας, thus transliterated without an initial “h”) are the fruit of my coining, courtesy of Tufts University’s online dictionary, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>.

⁷ On the other hand, heroes such as Ulysses, Theseus or Cadmus do not seem to possess a heronym, or second (fame) name. One might assume that they were less renowned, or that their original patronymic surname (or, sometimes, heronym) has been lost.

⁸ Etymologically: Middle English *renoun*, from Anglo-French *renum*, *renoun*, from *renomer* to report, speak of, from *re-* + *nomer* to name, from Latin *nominare*, from *nomin-*, *nomen* name. First known use: 14th century. Source Merriam-Webster. URL: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/renoun>.

⁹ See Jean-Guy Ducreux, “‘Power to the People’: Le déclin de la figure du superhéros dans les films américains après 2001”. (PhD diss., Université de Lorraine /Nancy2, 2013), 354-369 for details.

more spiritual plane, a higher level of consciousness. As such, it is an ideological concept. In a Baudrillardian sense, the power names reflect on the principle of “rule,” whereas the common name is concerned with “law”.¹⁰ This dichotomy is shared by Joseph Campbell, who views the (matured) hero as the “master of two worlds” (material vs. spiritual), thus able to go freely from one to the next, and back.¹¹ Campbell further insists, presumably citing Nietzsche:

It is possible to speak from only one point at a time, but that does not invalidate the insights of the rest. The individual, through prolonged psychological disciplines, gives up completely all attachment to his personal limitations, idiosyncrasies, hopes and fears, no longer resists the self-annihilation that is prerequisite to rebirth in the realization of truth, and so becomes ripe, at last, for the great at-onement. His personal ambitions being totally dissolved, he no longer tries to live but willingly relaxes to whatever may come to pass in him; he becomes, that is to say, an anonymity.¹²

Thus, symbolically a hero loses himself (his street name) in the heronym. In terms of agency, he, as an object, receives a name; but, as a subject, he becomes nameless. A power name is the greatest dialectic guise. No mask or costume is further needed to hide the superhero from the public eye, because the public itself is the original sign-maker, the actual power-giver through the naming process, and the staunchest supporter (and sometimes critic) of the hero’s statue once the latter has been named.

A heronym is like a synecdoche, composed of sub-signs and meanings which draw a clearer and more complete picture of the semiotic fable any given superhero myth covers. Each subordinate hypo-sign reveals a specific property associated with a hero’s power. All of them organized together in an array reveal a syntagmatic sequence, variable (changing diachronically and/or intertextually) but unique to a myth or franchise. Some are simple binary toggles. Others are open paradigms. All somehow refer directly to the power name itself, as each sub-item draws its own atom of meaning from (qualifying) the hyper-sign. The two (inexhaustive) tables below show examples of such properties, in no particular order.

Supernatural powers	Yes
Earthly assets	NA
Mask	No
Cape	Yes
Vehicle	NA

Fig. 1. Superman (power name)

“Superman” exhibits the full power of the name, through the absence of any memorable external properties (bar the cape, for instance); whereas “Batman” may be hiding other facets of his power elsewhere (see below). Determining whether the superpower defines the superhero becomes a moot point. Reynolds’ observation: “Costume

¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1990, *De la séduction*, Paris: Galilée, 1979, 180) 134.

¹¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), 196.

¹² *Ibid.*, 237. The word for word reference to Nietzsche appears dubious here, at least in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “Before Sunrise” (III, 4), where the Cosmic Dancer appears. I have not found such wording, and neither have half a dozen other researchers quoting Campbell – who might have thus paraphrased Nietzsche, rather than citing him.

functions as the crucial sign of super-heroism”¹³ can only be a surface criterion. Props do not define a superhero; they simply give his myth a flavor and direction.¹⁴

Supernatural powers	No
Earthly assets	Wayne Enterprises
Mask	Yes
Vehicle	Batmobile

Fig. 2. Batman (power name)

The Bullhorn Effect

Fame, or “re-nown,” requires a bullhorn effect, an amplifying process whereby the reputation of the superhero will spread to the farthest corners of his imaginary territory in a timely manner and establish his second name. In ancient times, poems, odes, songs, epics or sagas would play that role. Nowadays, the media (press, entertainment, social media, etc.¹⁵) seem to have taken over in the world of superheroes. In a superhero movie, which, through an obvious *mise en abyme*, is the tale of a tale, the bullhorn needs to be included within the narration. Ontologically speaking, the *raison d’être* of all these dailies and their employees in feature films or TV shows, is the promotion of a superhero, and much more so than the announcement of any impending chaos requiring the superhero’s services. Aptly enough, for instance, it is journalist Lois Lane who gives Superman his power name.

All the intradiegetic press organizations found in superhero movies: the *Gotham Globe*, *Gotham Gazette* (*Batman* franchise), *Smallville Ledger* (*Smallville*, Warner Bros. Television, 2001-2011), *Daily Planet* (*Superman* franchise), *Daily Bugle* (*Spider-Man* franchise), *Daily Sentinel* (*The Green Hornet*, Michel Gondry, 2011), *Starling City Sentinel* (*Arrow*, Warner Bros. Television, 2012-), etc., are meant to recount the superhuman fable, and symbolically re-name the superhero. Elsewhere, a TV channel (*Fantastic Four*, Tim Story, 2005) or a public relations professional (*Hancock*, Peter Berg, 2008), or anything that booms and tweets, will produce the same effect. This bullhorn might appear as mimetic, but it is, of course, pure poiesis, staged as a hero’s hieratic pedestal surrounded by moving images.

Sometimes, this promotion can be negative, resulting in demotion for the superhero (or even promotion of the supervillain). We have such examples in *The Incredibles* (Brad Bird, 2004), *Hell Boy* (Guillermo del Toro, 2004), or *Hancock*. In *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006) Lois Lane’s famous headline, for the article which earned her a Pulitzer Prize, runs loud and clear: “*Why the World Doesn’t Need Superman.*” Such sallies deny the superhero his power name and renege on the promise of a superior prospect for the nation he represents.¹⁶ Obviously, these cannot exist on their own and need a previous referent.

¹³ Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 26.

¹⁴ B. J. Oropeza suggests a taxonomy in 7 points which might prove useful here. B. J. Oropeza, “Introduction: Superhero myth and the restoration of paradise”, in B. J. Oropeza ed., *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Pop Culture*, New York: Peter Lang, 2005, 1-2.

¹⁵ In *Captain America, the Winter Soldier* (Anthony & Joe Russo, 2014), Steve Rodgers’ second name is established via a museum exhibition, which speaks volumes as to the relevance of the superhero model in this century.

¹⁶ For more on this subject, see Ducreux, “Power to the People”, 278.

Self-anointed heroes, like lackluster Kick-Ass in *Kick-Ass* (Matthew Vaughn, 2010), do not possess a heronym *per se*, since, as previously stated, they cannot call themselves. There are other exceptions, which raise alarming questions as to the superhero quality of those characters, or their legitimacy to “re-nown.” What Kick-Ass exhibits is a stage name, and not a power name, meted out by an intratextual third party. *Stricto sensu*, Kick-Ass is an inchoate superhero; he is a poser, a wanna-be vigilante roaming the streets of Staten Island, dressed in a costume.¹⁷

The Chorus Sign

The most striking element in the bullhorn construct is that the spectator himself is included in the representation process, as a potential interpreter. The reporter onscreen is an avatar of the viewer. So are the editors who dictate their point of view to the audience. As the intradiegetic media reflect on their view of the world, the spectator is imperatively led to comment on the hero’s actions, express a timely interpretation on world affairs, and thus assume a critical position (be it positive or negative) in the naming process. The media (whichever its form) in a superhero movie is germane to a chorus in ancient Greek plays, seemingly homogeneous in their opinion as to the stakes at hand (the social or political dilemma introduced by the supervillain) and the merits of the hero (his stance as he faces his opponent, and later solves the current crisis¹⁸). Editors Perry White, J. Jonah Jameson or Mike Axford¹⁹ are like conductors introducing – and setting the tone for – the *choreia*, in a corner of the screen. Intratextually, they pre-exist the hero and the text. Their anteriority, though imaginary, is semiotically needed. Clark Kent or Peter Parker do not found the newspaper they work for. Similarly, in *The Green Hornet*, Britt Reid inherits his father’s tabloid, therefore establishing precedence. In the origin story of any genuine superhero, the critical medium quite logically precedes the text (an implicit chronological code), creates it, and steps in again to amend the myth once it has been properly established. Superhero and intratextual public opinion, thus shaped (and continuously transformed with the flow of time), compose a self-sufficient, “self-defining” and “self-regulating” *Gestaltenheit*, a model very much like language itself.²⁰ Coogan somehow regrets that “unlike the western, the detective and the gangster genres, the superhero genre is not well defined”.²¹ In response, I propound that the presence (or absence) of this chorus sign in an action movie be used as a

¹⁷ Most of his onscreen time is spent getting his “ass kicked,” hence the title, probably. Nevertheless, the lack of power in his name is significant in 2010, in very much the same way as the absence of a prefix in *Heroes* (2006-2010) reflects impotence rather than power.

¹⁸ Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, 6.

¹⁹ Editors for the Daily Planet (*Superman* franchise), the Daily Bugle (*Spider-Man* franchise), and the Daily Sentinel (*The Green Hornet*, Michel Gondry, 2011).

²⁰ According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gestaltseinheit* or unity of form can take precedence over meaning, see “Composition and Interpretation” [“Dichten und Deuten” (1961), *Kleine Schriften*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1967], in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 66-73.

²¹ Peter Coogan, “The Definition of the Superhero”, in Wendy Haslem et al, eds., *Super/heroes: From Hercules to Superman* (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, LLC, 2007), 21.

methodological test for determining whether a film belongs to the superhero genre or not.²² There is no such thing as a superhero without a chorus, a popular faith or fervor to call them heroes and give them a second name. The plot creates the hero, and makes it one of its functions. The cathartic resolution of most (if not all) superhero narratives is to restore the superhero icon to its initial glory (as well as the community he/she serves) in any given text or for the myth at large. By doing so it also influences the viewer, for, as Terence Hawkes puts it: “art acts as a mediating, moulding force in society rather than as an agency which merely reflects or records”.²³

Although superhero movies²⁴ are essentially a-historical, in a Jamesonian sense, they do reflect the *Zeitgeist* which presided over their birth. As Angela Ndaliansis puts it: “(...) superhero narratives seem to be inextricably linked to the realities of social and political life.” Christian Moraru further claims:

the postmoderns are drawn to the literary and that they treat names as intertexts, onomastic representations. In postmodernism, I submit, names, too, re-present. They say other names while saying themselves, and by the same token flaunt their own “positionality,” their place in a culture's or literary tradition's nomenclature.²⁵

As far as superhero franchises are concerned, the transformation of the *choreia* from one installment to the next yields some sort of nonpareil *Weltanschauung*, like memorious place/time coordinates (corresponding roughly to the shooting date of the text itself). Names, like narratives, carry “positional” meaning, but so do the “namers” and what they have to say about the “named.” For instance, all those superheroes being booed (a negative *choreia*) in films between 2002 and 2010 (like Hancock, Mr. Incredible or Hellboy) reflect poorly on all real-life heroes, such as U.S. soldiers and other American champions of democracy mired in a dubious battle in Mesopotamia, between Tigris and Euphrates, during that period of time.

From a semiotic point of view, any change or transformation in what the chorus has to say from film to film carries meaning, and allows for a degree of intertextuality between texts within a franchise. Reboots for those palimpsest-like superhero tales fulfill the same meaningful function. They are so many *paroles* to the original *langue* of the myth. The latest hypertext (or reboot) contains the remnants of the previous hypotext (a variation of the same myth), written in invisible ink under the current layer of film narration.²⁶ The role of film semiotics also involves decoding this voluntary or involuntary steganography.

The postmodern chorus quite often uses different names for the superhero, nicknames like: “Spidey,” “Webslinger” or the “Webmaster” (*Spiderman* franchise); the “Last Son of Krypton” or the “Man of Steel” (*Superman* franchise), etc. These are *noms d'affect* rather

²² But not the only one: the dilemma embodied by the supervillain, and the triadic relationship between man, villain and hero is another such indispensable test (Ducreux, “Power to the People”, 196).

²³ Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 41.

²⁴ The superhero genre begins with *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978), despite the release of numerous superhero movies before that date (Ducreux, “Power to the People”, 54-57).

²⁵ Moraru, *Memorious Discourse*, 86.

²⁶ “if we genuinely define the myth as ‘consisting of all its versions’ it will remain ‘the same’ as long as it is ‘fit’ to do so”, Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* ([1958] trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Gundfes, London: Penguin Books, 1972), 217; cited in Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, 33.

than power names. An “affect name” is not dissociable from a power name, as it implies recognition and a previous referent. “The Dark Knight” or “The Caped Crusader” are phrases that inform the “Batman” meta-sign. This rhetorical trope, called *antonomasia*, can be negative as well as positive. Typically, non-superheroes do not possess an affect name, because their power name is only superficial. Nor do their tales include a chorus sign. Onomastically speaking, each name has its own rules and codes, involving the next syntagmatic element in more complex relationships. The affect name sign, if present, will qualify the power name and give it a specific hue, firmly anchored in the time period in which the text at hand was released.

Super-Names

What typically distinguishes superheroes in American comics and movies from other heroes is the dual composition of their power name, one element being used as a prefix, the other as a root motif: “Super” “man,” “Iron”-“Man,” “Green” “Lantern,” “Bat”“man,” “X”-“Men,” “Cat”“woman,” “Dare”“devil,” “Hell”“boy,” “Captain” “America,” etc. There are very few exceptions to this rule for heroes defined using the chorus sign as a sieve. Elsewhere, and later in the chronology of the genre, irony will play a part, going against the classical formula, for superheroes that may not be heroes after all: “Kick Ass” or “Crimson” “Bolt,”²⁷ for instance.

The absence of a prefix is also eminently meaningful: The TV series *Heroes* (NBC Universal Television, 2006–2010) portrays pseudo-heroes who shine essentially through their powerlessness, even though they possess supernatural “abilities” (ranging from moderately-useful to completely-useless). Each individual superhero has his/her own mock *choreia* in the form of a prospective comic strip which recounts their future death, but only two characters have actual power names: Sylar, the watch-maker-cum-villain (who represents *grosso modo* the old-fashioned male superhero, *à la* Superman, down to the consonance of his common names: Gabriel Gray) and the immortal Cheerleader (who is quite the opposite, and not just a feminine symbol²⁸) fighting for her survival. The supervillain’s objective, episode after episode, is to kill off all the micro-heroes found in his path, thereby absorbing their individual ability, and reconstructing the ideal silhouette of the superman. This quest seems rather natural at a time when America wages war on terror, and needs to summon the support of public opinion.

In the linguistic construct described above, the prefix, which I shall call pre-name, acts as a quantifier. It is usually hyperbolic, which befits America’s exceptionalism, at least since World War I. Denotatively, the meaning of a pre-name can be extremely varied, from a strict adverb, to an animal totem, to a place, a color, etc. But semiotically speaking, a power name needs to be fueled with the connotation of some sort of (metaphorical) power, energy, or wealth. The pre-name will provide it.

In the case of Superman, power is best represented by space. “Super-man,” the *superior* entity, masters vertical space in 1978 the way a cow-boy would have contemplated vast horizontal stretches of western land decades earlier.²⁹ Beyond his name, elevation is

²⁷ The use of humor will be discussed later.

²⁸ The question of gender is not important here. For details, see Ducreux, “Power to the People”, 150.

²⁹ This consideration also applies to Lex Luthor’s fixation on real estate in *Superman* 1978.

Superman's number one supernatural power. This mastery over space further enhances his extraterrestrial strength, which appears limitless. Clark Kent, Superman's human persona, stuck in a phone booth, is powerless in comparison, despite the implicit power of his pen (in the seventies).

As Dan Hassler-Forest has demonstrated, superheroes are the vectors of a strict capitalistic ideology.³⁰ Batman or Spider-Man, even though their pre-names refer to an animal or an insect still speak "capital," directly (a vampire drawing energy from other live beings can be construed as a mogul or company exploiting workers or employees, like Wayne Enterprises) or indirectly (a spider preying on anything caught in its web, or refusing to do so, thus taking an anti-Osborn – the entrepreneur type again – stance). The basic semantic image behind some of these heronyms is the "swarm" or the "beehive", a metaphor for the city and accumulation of wealth, as in *The Green Hornet*. Other superhero pre-names can be explicated in the light of this "capital" criterion: "green" as in greenback; "black" as in black oil; etc. "Captain America"³¹ who was extremely late in reaching the big screen, only surfaced after the invasion of Iraq, thus reviving the superhero-as-GI trope, whose wealth, I believe, is to be found in the military-industrial complex.

The *X-Men* franchise exhibits a different model, though in the same vein. The pre-name, "X", refers to their mentor, Professor Xavier, a man of incomparable wealth, who takes them in his fold one by one, but its interpretation also points in the direction of Gen X, the generation born after 1965. The *X-Men* franchise is not a monomyth *per se*, unless the mosaic of minor superheroes it portrays can be said to compose a whole.

Of Wealth and Super-Men

It is often argued that Superman's forerunners are characters like the Scarlet Pimpernel³² or Zorro, but I believe this assertion remains highly debatable. Both superficially look like superheroes, but they are eons away from other twentieth-century superheroes, mainly for political reasons. Twentieth-century American superheroes are not aristocrats, but plebeian men (and the occasional woman) who find it in themselves to reach some sort of elevation, both physically and morally. Opportunity for transcendence is the essence of their ontological entity, immanence being the lot of everyone else. This opportunity is also the cornerstone of the American Dream. Thus, this upward movement is their *raison d'être*.

Zorro and the Scarlet Pimpernel proceed from a different perspective, with a top-down rather than a bottom-up view. Their power names draw their stamina from their street personae under an earthly title³³ (Sir, Don), rather than in their superhero, onomastic signs, which carry much weaker connotations in their signifieds (a small, albeit cunning, mammal; a

³⁰ Dan Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age* (Ropley: Zero, 2012).

³¹ "Captain" rings like "capital." If military hierarchy were at stake, his power name would be "Marshal," or "General" America. Captain America is the epitome of the General Infantryman, rising in the ranks.

³² Cf. Coogan, "The Definition of the Superhero", 26.

³³ Barthes uses the label "social code" for this criterion: "(e) Saying 'M(onsieur) Valdemar' is not the same thing as saying 'Valdemar.' In a lot of stories Poe uses simple Christian names (Ligeia, Eleanora, Morella). The presence of the 'Monsieur' brings with it an effect of social reality, of the historically real: the hero is socialized, he forms part of a definite society, in which he is supplied with a civil title. We must therefore note: social code" (Barthes, "Textual Analysis", 321).

delicate flower on a card).³⁴

Secret identity	Power Name	Born	Author
Scarlet Pimpernel	Sir Percy Blakeney	1903	Baroness Emma Orczy
(Señor) Zorro	Don Diego de la Vega	1919	Johnston McCulley

Fig. 3.

Both men affect dandyish ways, as if to undermine their powerful street name. This is a major change, a syntagmatic, rather than paradigmatic, shift from the typical naming sequence. They are secret layers of the hero, sitting opposite (or possibly ‘under’, like a mole) would-be superior or noble social beings, aristocrats or members of a political group associated with the ruling class. Metaphorically speaking, they seem to be stooping lower than their actual social station. This ambiguous constructs could make them traitors to their own caste, but a transnational (or a different national) perspective corrects this erroneous assumption. Both have highly political agendas, but on different political territories. Sir Percy Blakeney, a foreigner, fights Robespierre’s gang of revolutionaries and rescues French aristocrats from the guillotine;³⁵ Don Diego de la Vega, a local nobleman posing as an outlaw, intends to rid California of the Spanish rule. But the most salient motif in both myths, as opposed to purely American superheroes, is the fact that the heroes’ feats occur on adverse territory. They are rebels. Their legend is thus built *a contrario*.

Power name	Common Name	Earthly assets
Batman	Bruce Wayne	Wayne Enterprises
Iron Man	Tony Stark	Stark Industries
(The) Arrow	Oliver Queen	Queen Consolidated
The Green Hornet	Britt Reid	Daily Sentinel

Fig. 4.

Closer to us, Bruce Wayne, Tony Stark, Oliver Queen, And Britt Reid walk the same tight rope, but do so in their own backyard, while initially respecting the archetypal superhero formula. Their country has not been invaded, nor is it going through a new revolutionary period (until 2012 and Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight Rises*). Even though they do not possess a nobiliary title, their terrestrial belongings might be construed as a sign of power in American cultural metrics. Compared to Superman or Spider-Man, they are the next step in the evolution of the successful *homo americanus*: the second generation, so to speak. The fundamental ambiguity here lies in the fact that their superhero’s usual syntagmatic sequence is unbalanced, and slightly perverted, because

³⁴ To underline this observation further, Zorro’s actual original name is “Señor Zorro,” the title being added for good measure, like an afterthought meant to counterbalance the street title (“Don”). The loose English translation for his power name would thus be “Foxman.”

³⁵ The French Revolution represents an allegory of the Russian Revolution, an ideological scarecrow for the British gentry at the turn of the twentieth century.

judge and culprit, superhero and supervillain, are essentially the two sides of the same coin³⁶ (via their common names).

More often than not, the supervillain in a superhero narrative represents the silhouette of the bad capitalist, one who does not stand upright and does not abide by the rules of neoliberalism. On the TV show *Arrow* (Warner Bros. Television, 2012-), for instance, the superhero (common name: Oliver Queen, heir to a huge business organization) kills off any one of Queen's peers who – in a nutshell – cheats the system. This wicked arrangement thus includes some of his competitors. The *Batman* franchise follows more or less the same model. But since Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), the character has undergone tremendous changes in his attitude towards what I have defined as the chorus sign. Back in 1989, Bruce Wayne's courting of reporter Vicki Vale made perfect sense semiotically. Rather than answering any mundane call of the flesh,³⁷ Bruce Wayne needed the press to pass judgment on Batman, and establish his power name. In other words, this was the formal guarantee that "Bruce Wayne" would remain a common name. But in *The Dark Knight Rises*, the media pay polite lip service to a superhero embattled in Manhattan, besieged by a group of hostile would-be rebels, while the social fabric around him is in tatters. This syntagmatic shift had actually started earlier, in Nolan's *Dark Knight*. Rather than keeping to the heights that normally define the superhero, Batman stoops so low as to hit the Joker repeatedly in a police precinct. Hence, the characters and their signs are playing a game of musical chairs: "Bruce Wayne" is the power name, spelling out the ideological guidelines (the rule) for the narrative, and "Batman" becomes the common name, at street level, doing the police's job (the law). Master of two simultaneous worlds, Bruce Wayne engages in a tug-of-war with Batman, each vying for the master sign post. And Wayne wins. This is a perilous motif, but, most of all, it amounts to mythological nonsense. This formal contradiction is comparable to having Warren Buffet write Thomas Piketty's books. Let us now address the name's radical.

The Mensch of Steel³⁸

The table below demonstrates Superman's syntagmatic array. This superhero initiated the cinema genre, and conveniently provided the *ur*-sign for all superheroes. So much so that Superman has been turned into an archetype. Indeed, in everyday life, someone capable of extraordinary prowess is called a "superman."

Power name	Original name	Common name	Affect name
Superman	Kal El (Jewish name)	Clark Kent (WASP)	<i>Man of Steel</i> (2013)

Fig. 4.

The *Man of Steel* set the tone for all postmodern superheroes in film in the Richard Donner classic: *Superman* (1978), or *Superman: The Movie*. This alternate title, although no

³⁶ This trait is very different from having Clark Kent or Peter Parker belonging to the "chorus" of newspapers and overseeing their own plays. This is another ambiguity worth investigating.

³⁷ A classical superhero is essentially sexless, though without any explicit vow of celibacy (Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 15).

³⁸ I borrowed this subtitle from Larry Tye, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* (New York: Random House, 2012).

more than a postmodern afterthought, singles out the medium involved for this new text of the Superman mythos as if it were a primer, and sets it apart from all previous transmedia attempts: from comics to cartoons, animes, novels, TV and even film itself.³⁹

Superman, as a pioneer, boasts an extra name, an origin name which basically tells the story of the American Dream: from the rage of the pogroms and the rags of the East European *shtetl* to the riches of Manhattan. Kal-El the Jew becomes Clark Kent the Gentile, eager to advance beyond the rung on which he was re-born, aiming as high as opportunity can lift him. In other words, making a decent living in the new world is not quite enough. You need to add a touch of American Dream to your ambitions, and make it big, in the superlative. This constitutes the groundwork for a gambler's (rather than a realistic) social contract.

Much has been written on Superman as Moses or as a Messianic figure.⁴⁰ But the most striking trait of this founding myth is probably its Jewishness. Larry Tye writes:

The three legs of the Superman myth—truth, justice, and the American way—are straight out of the Mishnah, the codification of Jewish oral traditions. “The world,” it reads, “endures on three things: justice, truth, and peace.” The explosion of Krypton conjures up images from the mystical Kabbalah, where the divine vessel was shattered and Jews were called on to perform *tikkun ha-olam* by repairing the vessel and the world. The destruction of Kal-El's planet and people also calls to mind the Nazi Holocaust that was brewing when Jerry and Joe were publishing their first comics, and it summons up as well the effort to save Jewish children through *Kindertransports*. Superman's lingering heartsickness was survivor's guilt. A last rule of thumb: When a name ends in “man,” the bearer is Jewish, a superhero, or both.⁴¹

I shall not dwell on the historical allegations this quote contains, or the philosophy, which clearly links Superman and his super followers to Jewish mysticism.⁴² I would like to focus on the notion that the Man of Steel's *heronym*, like Christianity itself, has some Jewish grounding. Clearly, what Tye is saying firstly in this piece is that “Superman” (or “Iron Man,” “Spider-Man,” “Batman,” etc.) rings like “Goldman” or “Silverman” (for men associated with precious metals).⁴³ Secondly, he evokes the bearer's *menschlichkeit*, in the Yiddish sense of his capacity to help others, be righteous, and serve peace. The phrase “Truth, Justice, and the American Way” follows a similar pattern: The American Way standing for physical wealth (“super”), the rest for a hero's metaphysical moorings (“man”). And so does Spider-Man's motto: with great power (wealth) come great responsibility (philosophy).⁴⁴

³⁹ There had been several Superman feature films prior to this one, including *Superman* (Spencer Gordon Bennet and Thomas Carr, 1948), or *Atom Man vs. Superman* (Spencer Gordon Bennet, 1950). However the 1978 label “The Movie” posits its uniqueness, ignoring any actual precedence.

⁴⁰ See Rosenberg, Coogan, Reynolds, Lawrence and Jewett, among many others.

⁴¹ Tye, *Superman*, 66.

⁴² And later, to the warrior class in Plato's *Republic* (cf. Ducreux, “Power to the People”).

⁴³ Historically, the name “Goldman” or “Goldmann” seems to derive from “Servant of Golda,” a person with fair hair. The emergence of an analogous construction with “Silver,” as in “Silverman” or “Silbermann,” implies a later evolution of the name to the craft of those bearing it and, by extension, possible connotations of wealth, through this work.

⁴⁴ This aphorism, commonly attributed to Voltaire or to politician William Lamb (both unattested), has been used throughout the *Spider-Man* saga both on paper and in film: in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (Marvel, August 1962), though not in Ben Parker's mouth; then used again in 1987, in *Spider-Man vs. Wolverine* #1; and it was

The common denominator between all these power names is the use of “man” as a denotational element. On a semiotic level this surface notion has obviously nothing to do with gender *per se*, but it rather constitutes a reference to moral authority in a patriarchal system,⁴⁵ in which the philosophical rule is received from the father, and bestowed upon the son. Such is the framework of the *ur*-superhero myth, which somehow binds Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, Iron Man, etc.

But despite a common measure, each of these “men” is light-years away from their chronological priors in film. The transformations which have occurred between the “man” in Donner’s *Superman*, very much tied to the prefix, and the “-man” in the semi-detached *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002), or the later, father-care-free, *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) are nothing but formidable. For, over a period of some forty years, Western culture has witnessed the collapse of the male model (and maturity in general) with very little to replace it in terms of authority. This is a phenomenon which Anthony Oliver Scott calls “The Death of Adulthood in American Culture” in the *New York Times*, judging that “adulthood as we have known it has become conceptually untenable”;⁴⁶ Guy Garcia and Gary Cross concur.⁴⁷ Thus the “man” affix in a power name, attached or not, is no longer a stable beacon for the viewer, but a rather shifting paradigm (if not a drifting one). As a corollary, the *menschlichkeit* of the superhero remains equally elusive.

In *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), for instance, Tony Stark’s entrepreneurial skills and spontaneous bravado become all too over-powering for the superhero’s tale. We are no longer dealing with a hypo-sign, feal to the power name. Rather, we are witnessing the rise of the common name as a preeminent sign in the superhero’s semiotic DNA. A permutation may help to prove our point: having the common name come to the fore amounts to having Clark Kent in the limelight, and sending Superman back to the phone booth for most of the show. It may also mean, implicitly, that superheroes are nearing exhaustion, if the power name fails. Many an observer in magazines, newspapers and blogs, think the genre is coming to an end. Anthony Oliver Scott, for instance, writes in *The New York Times*:

The Dark Knight praised by critics for its somber themes and grand ambitions, has proven to be a mighty box office force in a summer already dominated by superheroes of various kinds. But any comic book fan knows that a hero at the height of his powers is a few panels removed from mortal danger, and that hubris has a way of summoning new enemies out of the shadows. Are the Caped Crusader and his colleagues basking in an endless summer of triumph, or is the sun already starting to set?⁴⁸

eventually spoken by Uncle Ben in February 2002, in *Amazing Spider-Man*, Vol. 2, #38. Director Sam Raimi uses it faithfully in the first *Spider-Man* (2002) film several months later.

⁴⁵ In the 3% of matriarchal systems around the world, the myth would probably revolve around the principle of the eternal feminine rather than masculine. But this is another debate. Superheroes are phallic myths in essence.

⁴⁶ A. O. Scott, “The Death of Adulthood in American Culture”, *The New York Times*, September 11, 2014, accessed September 21, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/magazine/the-death-of-adulthood-in-american-culture.html>.

⁴⁷ Gary S. Cross, *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity* (New York/Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2010); Guy Garcia, *The Decline of Men: How the American Male Is Getting Axed, Giving up, and Flipping Off His Future* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

⁴⁸ A. O. Scott, “How Many Superheroes Does It Take to Tire a Genre?” *New York Times*, 24 July 24, 2008, accessed August 26, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/24/movies/24supe.html>.

This appraisal is rather widespread in the press. Other commentators have expressed a similar opinion, like Geoff Boucher in the *Los Angeles Times*, under the title: “The Superman problem: Can he still fly in the 21st century?” Boucher is rather harsh in passing his judgment: “Leave the pure heroic nature of Superman intact, or don't bother putting that famous costume on him!”⁴⁹

What we have been witnessing for the past fifteen years in American superhero films can be encapsulated in Baudrillard's oxymoronic formula: “L'impuissance de la Puissance” (“Power has become impotent”).⁵⁰ We ought to contemplate contemporary superheroes with doleful optimism. If the power name amounts to nil, then the figure of the superhero becomes an empty shell, and the common name is thrown into the limelight, willy-nilly – but nevertheless fully empowered.

Iron Man 3 (Shane Black, 2013) is a case in point, as it introduces the now pervasive⁵¹ trope of the drone-cum-remote, a posthuman hero whom anybody can control, including Tony Stark himself. Iron Man is thus represented as a robot, an Un-man, a machine rather than a human being, no longer unique (his armor has been duplicated over multiple specimens), and now devoid of any one of those higher principles which made up the essence of the superhero myth. Such a model is no longer spiritual in essence.

In this context, the man on the street becomes, *ipso facto*, a celebrity (as the primary or sole beneficiary of the bull-horn effect), who owes his fame to prior wealth, indolence, or technical savvy rather than to heroic deeds. This is the age of everyman (no capital). Oliver Queen or Britt Reid, who generally pose as otiose playboys rather than responsible citizens, are other such examples. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bruce Wayne is too busy tending to his bruises to actually rise at all above his street name. In *Iron Man 2* and *Iron Man 3*, Tony Stark makes the headlines as Tony Stark. Why should these two show any interest whatsoever in further promoting their (no longer so) secret identity? And can they actually do it in this date and age?

Is Superman Un-American?

My last onomastic argument briefly addresses superheroes' common names. Much has been written about Clark Kent, Peter Parker, Bruce Banner or Rick Riker, in various mediums, especially regarding their Waspitude of Waspishness, so much so that the label “American” affixed to “superhero” might have sounded altogether redundant in the past.⁵² There have been a few revisions of this pleonastic assertion over the years, with Hancock or most of the X-Men (amongst others) contradicting or going against the original White Anglo-

⁴⁹ Geoff Boucher. “The Superman problem: Can he still fly in the 21st century?” Hero Complex - movies, comics, pop culture, *Los Angeles Times*, accessed September 6, 2014

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/herocomplex/2008/09/the-superman-pr.html>.

⁵⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (trans. Chris Turner, London/New York: Verso, 1988 [“l'impuissance de la puissance”, *Amérique* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1986, 105)], 107.

⁵¹ For characters, especially women, controlling drones of flesh and blood, see, amongst other recent productions, *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012), where Maya (Jessica Chastain) pilots a SWAT team; and *24: Live Another Day* (Century Fox Television, 2014), in which Chloe O'Brian (remotely) supervises Jack Bauer in London for three quarters of the show.

⁵² Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero*.

Saxon Protestant model, but all remained within the influence sphere of the United States.⁵³ Of course, there is no denying that Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark are quintessentially American characters, and the chances are this will not change in the foreseeable future. But what of the heronym?

The recent collapse of the power name – and the rise of the common name – I have been foregrounding also reveals the immense hiatus which has arisen between these two previously inseparable notions: “American” + “superhero.” Even if the street-name currently dominates the scene, this does not necessarily mean that the power-name has disappeared from the surface of the earth – but only from America, mostly since the U.S. subprime mortgage crisis and the recession that ensued. Subsequently – and this came as a shock to a few keen commentators (see quotes below) – the fictitious character known as Superman renounced his U.S. citizenship in the 900th issue of *Action Comics* (2011), an event very much in keeping with screenwriter, producer, and director David S. Goyer’s world view, since he penned the story. The news was received with mitigated enthusiasm in press columns and blogs, from right to left. Fox411, for instance, reports:

“Besides being riddled with a blatant lack of patriotism, and respect for our country, Superman’s current creators are belittling the United States as a whole. By denouncing his citizenship, Superman becomes an eerie metaphor for the current economic and power status the country holds worldwide,” Hollywood publicist and GOP activist Angie Meyer told FOX411’s Pop Tarts column.⁵⁴

Whereas Mat Elfring, on the *Comic Vine* fan blog, thinks otherwise:

He’s not anti-American. He’s pro-Earth. The fact that what separates us is imaginary lines on a globe and minor tweaks [*sic*] in culture, yet the fact we’re all so “cliquey” is pretty outrageous. Superman gets that. It’s not about American rights. It’s about human rights and standing up for “truth, justice, and the Earth way.” On the grand scale of things the world is too small, and we are all connected.⁵⁵

Observing that Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophical concept of the *Übermensch*⁵⁶ never stopped at borders, Scott Thill writes, in *Wired*:

The genius of Superman is that he belongs to everyone, for the dual purposes of peace and protection. He’s above ephemeral geopolitics and nationalist concerns, a universal agent unlike any other found in pop culture.⁵⁷

Is this a sure sign that contemporary superheroes are no longer American, or might not be American any more in the near future? The matter remains questionable, since superhero movies are inextricably linked to the cinematic medium, and American expertise in that field: Hollywood’s budgets, technical savvy and special effects.

Nonetheless, the point is very well worth raising, for the superhero icon is becoming

⁵³ Wolverine, for instance, is Canadian, in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (Gavin Hood, 2009).

⁵⁴ Hollie McKay, “Superman Renounces His U.S. Citizenship in 900th Issue of Action Comics”, *Fox News*, April 28, 2011, accessed September 6, 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2011/04/28/superman-renounces-citizenship-00th-issue/>

⁵⁵ Mat Elfring, “Is Superman Un-American?”, *Comic Vine*, May 2, 2011, accessed September 11, 2014, <http://www.comicvine.com/articles/is-superman-un-american/1100-143021/>.

⁵⁶ Which should have been translated as “overman,” rather than “superman.”

⁵⁷ Scott Thill, “Superman Defies God, USA in Action Comics’ Landmark 900th Issue”, *Wired*, April 27, 2011, Accessed August 30, 2014, <http://www.wired.com/2011/04/action-comics-900/>.

more and more transnational, for a number of reasons,⁵⁸ and it is also coveted by others. In *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013) for instance – written by the very same David S. Goyer – Zod's pursuit is not just U.S. territory, but also the figure of Superman himself, loaded with data and memories of power past. Could this be a sign that America will have to relinquish the symbol of the movie superhero, and pass on the baton and power name to other nations, some day? My question is purely rhetorical. For I believe, as the reader must have surmised, that U.S. superhero productions currently sell viewers on the packaging, without the actual product inside.

Louis Giannetti defined four stages in a film genre: primitive, classical, revisionist and parodic.⁵⁹ Superhero films have already gone through all four. Superman initiated the Age of Lights⁶⁰ (1978-1989); Batman went on to establish the classical Age of Darkness (1989-1997); Spider-Man and the X-Men inspired revised versions of the myth (2000-); finally numerous cartoons, animations introduced a simultaneous parodic stage, starting with *The Incredibles* (Brad Bird, 2004), all the way to the joyfully (but superbly) crafted *Superhero Movie* (Craig Mazin, 2008), which respected the superhero syntagmatic formula to the letter. Now comes what may be a fifth.

The Poleless Tent

To conclude, the modern superhero simulacrum, as described above, has become a deceptive mediation of the myth itself, thus a simulation, in Baudrillardian terms. Most of the necessary ingredients are there, but the underlying mythemes are arranged helter-skelter on the syntagmatic scale, sometimes making little sense, but extremely viable, money-wise. As Martin Fradley puts it, regarding one installment of the Nolan trilogy: "The political incoherence of *The Dark Knight Rises* is thus a commercial strategy, a marker of its status as a shrewdly constructed commodity."⁶¹ One might dispute the adverb "shrewdly" in this comment, but the fact remains that most superhero productions nowadays aim at building commercial tentpoles for which there is no distinguishable central pole. What is left seems to be an inflatable structure full of hot air, emblazoned with the superhero's chevron, surrounded with stalls chock-full of popcorn and other artefacts and by-products based on the commercial logo rather than the myth itself. If that cultural temple is not cleansed at some point in the future, the bloated balloon will fizzle to its death soon enough.

Nowadays, the chevron seems to have superseded the name as the ultimate sign of a superhero. The commercial logo has been turned into the number one signifier of the franchise, which implies that the name has become a signified. So where is the myth in all that? The fundamental contradiction which every new superhero movie faces is that they are – most of them, at least – shooting themselves in the foot: they bank on the absence or the demise of the superhero myth rather than its promotion. They are selling (the) name as a merchandise. This, obviously, will last only as long as the studios can make a profit on products which have little relationship to the underlying narrative. After which the bloodless

⁵⁸ This is developed in Ducreux, "Power to the People", 356.

⁵⁹ Louis Giannetti, *Understanding Movies*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2011.

⁶⁰ For further details on this classification, see Ducreux, "Power to the People", 67.

⁶¹ Martin Fradley, "What Do You Believe In?" "Film Scholarship and the Cultural Politics of the Dark Knight Franchise", in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No.3 (Spring 2013), 6.

remains of the American superhero, milked of any last ounce of mythical substance, will be discarded. It is a sign of our times. We, the audience, are clapping our hands to shows that amount to cultural *seppuku*, or ritual suicide.

Is this a fifth stage in Giannetti's film genre cycle, one in which the product itself takes precedence, as a commodity, no matter how inconsistent its "cultural" contents are? In the twenty-first century Batman franchise, for instance, the chevron is taking over as the power sign, leaving the name to reflect on its own inanity. The chevron looms large in the sky of Gotham City, above the shadow of felled skyscrapers, while the superhero is desperately struggling far below, at Ground Zero.

Extra textum, the bullhorn effect works for a cultural product in very much the same way as what I described earlier for the hero. Box office figures hail the advent of every new billion-dollar super-duper behemoth, in which every ticket holder chips in, their donation like a cultural *auto da fé* cast in the global mass collection. Extra-textual sales redefine the superhero film, more so than any myth. Those Revenues (with a capital) no longer inform the Name, which subsequently becomes a Brand, leaving aside its initial intent.