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“The Superman Exists, and He is American”: Graphic Novel Film Adaptations and Masculine Heroism in Post-9/11 Culture

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“The Superman Exists, and He is American”: Graphic Novel Film Adaptations and
Masculine Heroism in Post-9/11 Culture

An Honors Thesis

presented by

Richard Charles Abate

to

The Department of Film Studies

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Abstract

This senior thesis paper discusses the representation of masculinity and heroism in post-9/11 culture and how filmic adaptations of graphic novels have helped to shape these representations. Following the events of September 11th, the cultural definitions of the masculine hero shifted, allowing the average, working class man to become the embodiment of American heroism. This new understanding of the American hero was marked by sexual difference and a redefinition of the masculine “hard-body” that allowed for the possession of a heroic masculine identity to appear more attainable. This thesis primarily examines the filmic adaptations of works by Frank Miller and Alan Moore in order to track these changes in masculinity and to observe how these films have helped to define new perceptions of masculinity and heroism. In the chapter that discusses the adaptations of Frank Miller’s work, I focus on the films *Sin City* (Rodriguez & Miller, 2005) and *300* (Snyder, 2006) to argue that Miller’s conservative viewpoints and his problematic representations of gender help to inform contemporary understandings of masculinity and heroism and that the film adaptations of his work maintain these ideologies. In the chapter on Alan Moore, I discuss the ways in which the films *Watchmen* (Snyder, 2008) and *V for Vendetta* (McTeigue, 2005) have been changed to fit a post-9/11 narrative. While some of aspects of these films aspire to move outside the realm of post-9/11 gender representations, I argue that the cultural understandings of masculinity and heroism force these films to remain part of America’s conservative cultural narrative that is based on traditional values.

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Introduction

The action film has long been a staple of Hollywood film culture. These films are typically viewed as profitable products of the Hollywood system; big budget spectacle films with the intent of drawing in a wide audience who are eager for a visual thrill ride. One major commonality between the films of the action genre is the focus around a male hero, who, when faced with a formidable threat, rushes in to save the day, usually through acts of explicit, yet justifiable violence. In recent years, the action genre has seen a significant shift, as these films have come to rely heavily on preexisting characters and narratives adapted from comic books and graphic novels. While comic book heroes are certainly not a new phenomenon to Hollywood (one of the first big budget Hollywood comic book adaptations being *Superman* (Donner, 1978)), the past decade has seen a surge in the popularity and marketability of these adaptations. But why have these adaptations become increasingly prominent in film culture over the last few years?

One possible explanation can be derived from the state of our nation after the events of September 11th, 2001. In the wake of these events, America clung to notions and images of heroism in order to maintain a sense of stability and security. Between the photographs of the clean-up effort at Ground Zero and the constant news coverage of the events and the aftermath, one thing became clear: in America's eyes, its heroes were men.

Hollywood recognized this new nationalistic sense of masculine heroism and turned its attention to some of America's most predominant representations of heroism: its superheroes. In the years following September 11th, Hollywood produced numerous blockbusters based on superhero characters including three Spiderman films (Raimi,

2002, 2004, 2007), two Batman films, (Nolan, 2005, 2008) and a slew of other films primarily based on characters from the major comic book companies. If America was obsessed with its renewed sense of heroism, media culture was definitely prepared to play a role in perpetuating this phenomenon.

While these films were commercially successful and resonated with the American public, they did not truly encapsulate America's new understanding of heroes. What differentiated the heroes of September 11th from past notions of heroism was that these heroes were ordinary men. They were the firemen, policemen and citizens (also men) who risked and lost their lives on that tragic day in order to save others. While firemen and police officers specifically had always held a certain amount of respect as heroic individuals, their actions on September 11th positioned these individuals as the embodiment of American heroism at a time when images of heroism played an increasingly important role in maintaining the illusion of strength and security.

This thesis will examine the role that films based on graphic novels play in understanding how masculinity and heroism are portrayed in post-9/11 culture. Before delving into the reasons why the graphic novel is important in this study, it may be useful to actually define what a graphic novel is and as opposed to what many know as the comic book. In terms of its form, there is little difference. Both the graphic novel and the comic utilize images and text to tell a story, with the images divided into panels and the text and dialogue generally written in speech bubbles. The primary difference is the way that each of these forms presents a narrative, and the implications that these narratives have.

The American comic book has generally been a serialized text that follows one particular character. While each book may have a beginning and end, the series' are meant to continually track the heroes as they deal with various situations and foes. These serializations may continue for years and in some cases even decades. Often, different writers and artists will work on a comic book over its extended run which is another aspect exclusive to the comic book medium. That is, rather than having a single writer and/or artist, the comic book may have a variety of different creative minds working on a comic book line throughout the years, each bringing new narratives and new interpretations of the character on which the text is based

The graphic novel, however, exists as a single complete text. In some cases, the chapters of graphic novels have been serialized in a similar fashion to comic books, yet the intention of these books is to be seen as a text that stands on its own with a complete narrative structure. Narrative is then another important aspect of the graphic novel. Whereas the comic book is primarily focused on its characters and the situations that they will encounter in their weekly or monthly issues, the graphic novel is deeply rooted by its narrative and by the themes that this narrative intends to communicate. To create and maintain this narrative, graphic novels are generally produced by a single creative team (composed primarily of a single writer, a single artist, pencilers and inkers) that works on the text from start to finish. The graphic novel's relationship to narrative, along with the single, cohesive vision of its team, allows for the text to engage with social and political themes and issues in ways that a long-running comic book cannot.

Throughout the past decade, Hollywood's revamping of the action genre has included many filmic adaptations of graphic novels. But why are these adaptations

important to study critically as opposed to comic book adaptations? The answer lies primarily in the graphic novel's ability to be studied as a complete text. Since comic books are primarily concerned with a specific character, comic book adaptations films have the freedom to create new stories and situations with these characters. Sam Raimi's *Spiderman* (2002), for example, creates an entirely new story based on the Marvel Comics characters. Graphic novel adaptations, however, must adhere to a particular story and have less leeway in representing characters differently, as they must remain true to the artistic vision of the graphic novel's creative team. The graphic novel, in its existence as a complete, narratively structured text, is then reliant on a single author's vision of how this text integrates itself with the social and political climate in which it is written. In simultaneously examining these filmic texts through a post-9/11 lens and comparing them with their original texts, these filmic adaptations aid in an understanding of the ways in which masculinity and heroism are understood after the events of September 11th. That is, in comparing the original graphic novel texts of the 1980's and 1990's with the filmic adaptations produced in post-9/11, one can track how notions of masculinity and heroism have changed through the process of adaptation. By taking into account the changing nature of masculinity and heroism in post-9/11 culture, I intend to argue that these graphic novel adaptations attempt to shape a new image of masculine heroism that is grounded in the emergence of the average working class male hero and the reemergence of strict heteronormative roles.

In discussing how these films reflect the problematic representations of gender and heroism, this thesis will primarily focus on the graphic novels and filmic adaptations of authors Frank Miller and Alan Moore. Both authors have rather firm political beliefs

and ideologies that are evident within their work as authors. What is interesting, then, is how these filmic texts frame these ideologies given the shift in artistic medium. The differences and similarities that emerge from a comparison of these two texts aids in understanding the post-9/11 masculine identity while simultaneously propagating problematic representations of the gender.

In examining the ways in which these texts engage with post-9/11 understandings of masculine heroism, it is important to understand why the definitions of masculinity and heroism changed after September 11th. The terrorist attacks of September 11th came as a shock to Americans not only because of their unpredictable nature or their magnitude, but because the nation suddenly came to realize that America was not as safe and secure as it was perceived to be. The 1990s was an era of infrequent turmoil in which less attention was paid to the nation's status as an international police force. As author Ira Chernus discusses in his book *Monsters to Destroy: The Neoconservative War on Terror and Sin*, conservatives believed that the neglect to emphasize our own national security during the Clinton years made us susceptible to attack. He writes:

For the neoconservatives, 9/11 was a shock but not really a surprise. The stories they had been spinning for so many years prepared them to see the attack as something to be expected, perhaps even predicted [...] Now they would use the dreadful events of September 11th to renew their call for a return to the traditional virtues that would stem the tide of cultural chaos (Chernus, 115).

According to Chernus, conservatives believed that the events of September 11th mandated a restructuring of American values and ideologies that would help to strengthen the

nation in its time of crisis. From this perspective, the lack of conservative principles prior to September 11th partially contributed to America's vulnerability.

Cultural representations of heroism were also in flux in the years before September 11th, and this unstable perception of masculinity would allow new understandings of the male hero to permeate American culture after the terrorist attacks. While the male hero did indeed exist in the 1990s, this hero lacked a consistent masculine identity. In their book *The Myth of the American Superhero*, John Lawrence and Robert Jewett discuss the prominence of what they call "president films" whose protagonist was often a fictional American president who was put into action. Lawrence and Jewett write, "The most commercially successful of [the 'president' films] –*Air Force One* and *Independence Day*—present their presidents as action –adventure heroes [...] we can see that these fictional presidents conformed more tightly than ever to the monomythic model of the nation's highest office" (Lawrence & Jewett, 144). These films were based on the commodity of the *president* as hero, and not necessarily his role as an ordinary citizen. In *Air Force One* (Peterson, 1997), Harrison Ford's character of President James Marshall always retains the role of president, even as he fights off terrorists singlehandedly. As Lawrence and Jewett suggest, these films are not about these male characters becoming ordinary heroes. Instead, these films are interested in the spectacle of the President as an action hero. Therefore, there is a certain disconnect between the ordinary male spectator and the male protagonists of these films, as the average male spectator cannot fully identify with the class difference of the presidential action hero.

Likewise, the queering of the male hero in film also disrupted heteronormative understandings of masculine heroism in the 1990s, allowing new perceptions of heroism

to easily permeate post-9/11 culture. This idea is exemplified by two films based on the iconic character of Batman directed in the 1990s, *Batman Forever* (Schumacher, 1995) and *Batman and Robin* (Schumacher, 1997). These films chose to do away with the dark and ominous tone of the Batman films directed by Tim Burton in the 1980s and early 1990s and instead opted for a more colorful and upbeat take on the character. In her book *Superheroes: Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Film*, author Roz Kaveny writes that, “Schumacher had talked at great length about the pop sensibility he wanted to impart; this was in large part the worst kind of music video-glitzy, an over-miked sound-track and the use of a particularly garish palette in the design work [...] [Schumacher] made the decision to opt for a light touch, in the name of making the franchise more ‘family friendly...’” (Kaveny, 244, 246). The backlash against this particular representation of Batman was based on audience identification with the character from Burton’s films, *Batman* (Burton, 1989) and *Batman Returns* (Burton, 1992), in which Batman (played by Michael Keaton) was positioned as a hardened individual who was committed to justice. Schumacher’s films, however, poked fun at this genre, placing actors typically associated with action films (such as Val Kilmer, Tommy Lee Jones, and Arnold Schwarzenegger) into more colorful and playful roles. If conservative Americans were concerned about the nation’s image of strength and the retention of its heteronormative values, the action films of the 1990s suggested that Americans did not have a cohesive vision of masculinity and heroism, and that these representations deviated from the conservative agenda of reinstating its traditional values.

The lack of an identifiable male hero implied that America had been weakened and the attacks of September 11th only fortified the idea that America had lost its source

of strength. As feminist author Susan Faludi suggests in her book *The Terror Dream*, the Twin Towers, America's phallic symbols representative of national power and stability, had been destroyed, leaving behind the rubble of Ground Zero, a constant reminder that the nation was unable to protect itself (Faludi, 12). This single event shattered the notion of peace and stability and proved that America could indeed be wounded.

In this vulnerable state, Americans hastily searched for stability and comfort. What emerged was a newfound respect and admiration for America's police officers and firefighters. While September 11th was a day unlike any other, these individuals were simply doing the jobs they had always done by rushing into burning buildings and maintaining order. However, at a time when America needed to feel protected in the face of a threat which they had not previously witnessed, firefighters and police officers seemed to be the most visible candidates for the title of hero. But these were not the only heroes who emerged. In Pennsylvania, another hijacked plane was supposedly reclaimed by passengers who overcame the hijackers before the plane crashed into a field, killing everyone onboard. Unlike the firefighters and police officers who had risked their lives every day, the passengers of Flight 93 were average civilians who without hesitation, were willing to sacrifice their own lives in order to save the lives of those at the hijackers intended target (presumably, the White House) and the lives of the other passengers onboard. The common theme that emerged amongst the heroes of September 11th was their willingness to protect those who were unable to protect themselves.

Yet a far more important commonality that these heroes shared was their gender. Specifically, the firefighters, police officers, rescue workers, and the passengers who overcame the hijackers on Flight 93 were typically men. As Patricia Leigh Brown, a

contributor to the *New York Times*, wrote in October of 2001, “They are the knights in shining fire helmets. They are the welders, policemen and businessmen with can-do attitudes who are unafraid to tackle armed hijackers—even if it means bringing down an airplane [...] The operative word here is men. Brawny, heroic, manly men” (Brown). But why were men the go-to heroes in the wake of September 11th? In America’s rapid search to maintain stability and security, the nation reverted back to its traditional and conventional understandings of gender roles. These understandings of sexuality positioned the man as the strong and empowered gender who must protect the weak and vulnerable woman. To return to Faludi’s assertion, America’s phallic symbols had been destroyed in the September 11th attacks. (Faludi, 12) While the phallus is ultimately meant to connote power, it is also intrinsically linked to power related to male sexuality. The destruction and subsequent lack of these phallic symbols not only represented America’s vulnerability, but, in terms of traditional definitions of gender, represented its status as a weak and feminized nation that was now in need of protection. In its search for comfort and stability, America would quickly latch on to the perceptions of gender roles that it had long been accustomed to while subsequently redefining how these roles portrayed sexual difference.

These traditional gender roles that had seen a resurgence in post-9/11 culture are rooted in illusions of fundamental differences between the societal expectations of men and women. Men are expected to function as protectors and are required to be physically able to protect their nation’s women, and to be sexually potent in order to both provide for these women and to reproduce. This ideology places women in the position of the weaker sex, who are incapable of fending for themselves and are in need of protection.

These roles that promote sexual difference have always been a part of American culture. However, the shift in America's understanding of heroism also shifted how gender roles were defined. That narrative that emerged after September 11th positioned real men as the symbol of American heroism. While Americans had often relied on fictional heroes as the symbols of strength and unity, our cultural obsession with the firefighters, police officers and the passengers of Flight 93 suggested that ordinary men could fully embody a heroic masculine identity. This new understanding of heroism proved to be problematic in America's understanding of heteronormative roles. If the everyman was the symbol of idealized masculinity, a position generally reserved for America's fictional heroes such as John Wayne and Superman, this new standard of masculinity would have to be differentiated from femininity in order for a new masculine hero to connote strength and power. Masculinity and femininity were thus differentiated by the reemergence of traditional gender roles that were intended to allow the American man to function as a national symbol of strength. Susan Faludi addresses this phenomenon, stating that, "In the aftermath of the attacks, the cultural troika of media, entertainment, and advertising declared the post-9/11 age and era of neofifties nuclear family 'togetherness', redomesticated femininity, and reconstituted Cold Warrior manhood" (Faludi, 4). Faludi argues that American society regressed back to post-WWII understandings of gender, in which the roles of men and women were firmly situated. Yet what became equally important were the images that supported these roles and the new standard that they set for all American men.

The post-9/11 man became much more than the protector of the weak and the feminized. What defined the post-9/11 man as a hero was his unique positioning as

someone who exhibited individual acts of self sacrifice while still remaining part of a collective group of men who were representative of all American men nationwide. The story that emerged about the passengers of Flight 93 is indicative of the male hero's relationship to his own moral code and to the morals of a collective male identity. Faludi writes that "Flight 93 heroism rested on a few brief cell phone calls—most notably, medical-device executive Thomas Burnett's remark to his wife that they were going to 'have to do something'—and the last enigmatic words of software salesman Todd Beamer, after reciting the Lord's Prayer, overheard by an Airfone Operator: 'You ready? Ok. Let's Roll'" (Faludi, 72). The phone calls and recordings from Flight 93 individually situated each of these men as heroes as they suggest that in this moment of utter chaos and violence, these men knew that they had a role to play: it was their duty as men to protect those on board and to stop any more lives from being lost. However, Burnett's statement that "they" planned on taking action in addition to Beamer's exclamation of "Let's Roll" alludes to the takeover of Flight 93 being a group effort and that while individually they each answered the call to act as heroes, their heroism also rests in the ability to band together as American men to thwart a foreign threat. Few doubt that Burnett, Beamer and other male passengers planned on physically engaging with the hijackers. Yet the media's attention to both the collaborative effort of the attack and the courage exhibited by each individual man suggests that America's new male hero was expected to exist as one with their own individual moral standards as well as a loyalty to their country and fellow countrymen.

This aspect of the new form of male heroism is perhaps best exemplified by the firefighters and rescue workers of September 11th. These men in particular were praised

as heroes for following their own moral codes to do what they believed was right, but were also heroic in their belonging to a larger group of rescuers whose brotherly bond was representative of the sense of nationalism and patriotism that America strove for in its weakened state. In a BBC interview conducted in the years after 9/11, fire captain Jay Jonas discusses rescuing a woman in the North Tower of the World Trade Center. He states that “Her name is Josephine Harris and we carried her down the stairs to safety, which greatly slowed our exit although every fibre in our being was screaming at us to get out of the building, but we wouldn’t leave her. That’s what firemen do” (“9/11 Experiences”). The interview focuses on Jonas as an individual, framing him as one of the heroes who had the courage to protect others in the wake of these events. However, Jonas’s retelling of saving this woman with the other firemen in his unit suggests a sense of unity, that these men bonded together in an effort to save this one woman’s life. Similar to the male passengers of Flight 93, the heroism of the firefighters was deeply rooted in their ability to represent a group of protectors whose duty to save lives translated into a duty to work together to protect their entire nation.

In addition to the male hero’s ability to exist as both an individual and as part of nation of protectors, the post-9/11 male hero was also expected to look like he had the ability to protect the weak against whatever threats he or the country would have to face. The heroes who emerged after September 11th embodied the epitome of traditional masculine imagery; they were tall, muscular, and sexually potent. In her *New York Times* article, Brown quotes Camile Paglia, a “conservative social critic,” who stated in 2001 that she “can’t help noticing how robustly dreamily masculine the faces of the firefighters are [...] These are working class men, stoical, patriotic. They’re not on Prozac or

questioning their gender” (Brown). Furthermore, Susan Faludi references *Newsweek*, which wrote that the male passengers on Flight 93 “ ‘ [...]were large, athletic, decisive types’ ” and that each had an athletic background in sports such as rugby or football (Faludi, 73). Both Paglia’s and Faludi’s statements allude to the definition of the post-9/11 male hero. As Paglia points out, the male firefighters were part of the working class. Prior to their heroic acts, these men had amassed a certain amount of respect as Americans who worked hard on a day to day basis in order to survive. The fact that these men would then go on to save countless lives and sacrifice themselves for others would frame them as heroes with which all Americans could identify.

Paglia and Faludi also illustrate the physical attributes of the post-9/11 heroes. These men were very much in shape and possessed a fair amount of strength. However, the physique of these heroes did not resemble the bulging biceps and hulking form of America’s superheroes or its bodybuilders. These male bodies were familiar; they were big, well built, and had the ability to protect, yet they were natural, recognizable, and identifiable.

Sexuality also played a role in the new masculine image. Harking back to traditional perceptions of masculinity, male sexual power was an intrinsic aspect of the male’s identity as the more powerful sex. Along with having the power to protect, the post-9/11 man had to also be sexually desirable and sexually potent in order to assert his power over the female sex. The images and narratives of the heroes of September 11th suggested that the true post-9/11 man would be able to fulfill all of a woman’s needs by both protecting her and keeping her sexually satisfied. Faludi writes that “A couple of weeks into the post-9/11 era, the media declared the ‘trend’ of women lusting after

firefighters and the phenomenon became international news, hailed under headlines like 'Firefighters Are A Hot Commodity in the Dating Game' and 'Firefighters Are Hot Hot Hot; Unprecedented Female Adoration' (Faludi, 89). While these images of men as both physically and sexually powerful were meant to provide stability and comfort during this traumatic time, what resulted was a cultural defining of gender roles and sexual difference. In reverting back to heteronormative understandings of masculinity at a time when America was anxious and unstable, these perceptions of manliness became less a way to cope and more of a cultural adoption of gender roles grounded in the notion that in times of crisis, the American man, with his brute strength, unwavering individualism, and loyalty to his country, would stand up to fight and protect those who were less powerful than he was.

Indeed, this new understanding of the masculine identity would become an integral part of the nation's ongoing crusade to strengthen America's image, both at home and abroad. These ideologies and understandings of gender would become infused within American society, allowing for, as Faludi puts it, a "myth" of masculine identity to develop (Faludi, 380). In other words, the country's obsession with masculinity directly after September 11th soon influenced various aspects of our culture that created a national understanding of how Americans viewed masculine identity, despite its reliance on stereotypes of sexual difference. Specifically, the Bush Administration and conservative Americans seemed intent on perpetuating the myths of gender identities throughout American society after September 11th in order to reinstate the nation as an international superpower while simultaneously promoting the traditional values of the conservative party. Chernus references a quote from George W. Bush who stated that America under

Clinton was “the impotent America...a flaccid, you know, kind of technologically competent but not very tough country...” (Chernus, 135). The events of September 11th, along with America’s desire for protection and stability seemed to give conservative Americans the excuse they needed to toughen up the national image and reinstate conventional heterosexual gender norms.

Bush’s most blatant propagation of the post-9/11 masculine identity occurred in May of 2003 when he triumphantly proclaimed that the Iraq War was a “Mission:Accomplished”. However, Bush was intent on making a spectacle of his own masculine image, and of the strength of the American military. Bush arrived on the USS Abraham Lincoln in a fighter jet, exiting onto the deck of the aircraft carrier adorned in a full flight suit. Here, Bush connoted his own role as a member of the armed forces and as a possessor of a masculine identity, as the suit made him appear bulky and muscular. His presence in front of the “Mission: Accomplished” banner represented Bush’s role as a masculine protector of the American nation, a hero who was steadfast in his own morals and values but, in his flight gear, was still a part of the national effort to bring security to the United States and to the world. Here, Bush attempted to connect with ordinary American men, acting less as the President and more as an average man who was taking on the task of protecting his country. The reaction of the media is testament to the ways in which post-9/11 gender identities had become an integral part of American culture. In an article from the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Bush is described as having “had an aviator’s swagger as he walked off the plane in full flight suit [...] wearing a go-guy grin on a flight deck scented with the kerosene burn of jet fuel”. Furthermore, Stephanie Baroni, a female “operations specialist seaman” “[...]had been too excited to sleep the

past three days” and “spent hours yesterday tracking President Bush’s movements around the 1,092 foot-long aircraft carrier, finally coming face-to-face with a sweaty commander in chief in a T-shirt and shorts as he left a workout room onboard” (Lyke).

The widespread praise of Bush’s performance is representative of the nation’s 16errorism to the illusion that American men would stand tall and protect its weak and powerless women. A year and a half after the events of September 11th, the press was captivated by Bush’s chiseled and well-built body in his flight suit, just as the American people had been obsessed over the bodies of the firefighters and police officers at Ground Zero. Additionally, the female officer on board is not depicted as equal to the male officers. Instead of being cast as a soldier who is also protecting the nation, she instead plays the role of the Bush’s female admirer who is taken by his masculine presence and who finally confronts him after he perfects his masculine form in the weight room. Thus, America’s search for a sense of comfort and security after the terrorist attacks of September 11th soon became a redefining of gender identities in American culture that was rooted in specific roles for men and women that exploited sexual difference. In terms of masculinity, post-9/11 gender roles situated the ideal American man as one who had firm moral beliefs, exhibited a loyalty to his country, and had the physical power to defend those weaker than him, specifically the female sex. In shaping a masculine hero who did not embody an unattainable masculinity but was instead based on the masculine identity of the average male, these aspects of gender difference became crucial in separating the new hero from perceptions of femininity.

The years following September 11th were not the first time that America was plagued with national anxieties concerning that country’s security, nor was it the first

time that these anxieties were intertwined with conservative politics and a subsequent reversion back to conventional gender roles. The decade of the 1980s was also an era in which America felt threatened and vulnerable. The Cold War, even in its final years, kept Americans constantly on edge with the threat of an attack seeming to be more real than ever before. However, Ronald Reagan, like George W. Bush, presented himself as America's male hero, who would keep America safe while still upholding his own personal morals and beliefs. Similar to American culture in the years after September 11th, Reagan's persistence in maintaining national strength became an integral part of the culture of that era. Specifically, Hollywood films of the 1980s began to adopt the ideologies of masculinity and heroism that the Reagan administration was so adamant about upholding, and these films in turn reinforced these representations in American culture. In understanding how modern Hollywood films, especially graphic novel adaptations, play off of and reinforce heterosexual gender relations, it is crucial to understand how film has previously intersected with national ideologies of masculinity.

Similar to the Bush Administration, Reagan took advantage of America's vulnerable state during the final years of the Cold War by promoting himself as a masculine hero who would protect the nation and ensure its status as a world power. In her book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, Susan Jeffords explains how Ronald Reagan played off of the national mythology of masculine identity. She writes that "Reagan learned a vital political lesson: that the success of the story, especially a story in which he could figure as a hero, was more important than any facts involving the events themselves [...] examining Ronald Reagan, both one of the best manipulators of those images and one of the best images himself, can show how that

identity worked in the 1980s” (Jeffords, 5-6). She goes on to point out how the nation was inundated with images of Reagan “[...] as a president *and* as a man—chopping wood, breaking horses, toughing out an assassination attempt, bullying Congress, and staging showdowns with the Soviet Union” (Jeffords, 12). The images that Jeffords recalls are strikingly similar to images of George W. Bush after September 11th as he surveyed the damage at Ground Zero, worked on his Texas Ranch and donned his flight suit on the USS Abraham Lincoln. These images convey the attempts of both Reagan and Bush to align themselves with traditional representations of gender that were utilized in order to connote strength and security. Specifically, the images that Jeffords references reflect the Reagan administration’s desire to fortify the notion of America’s national strength and power by relying on gendered understandings of strength, positioning Reagan as an individual with firm beliefs and values, but who was also physically strong and capable; so much so that he can even take a bullet and survive when John Hinckley Jr. attempted to assassinate him in 1981.

In a similar fashion to the years after September 11th, national understandings of masculinity in the Reagan era would soon permeate many aspects of American culture, especially American film culture. As America’s perception of masculinity was heavily reliant on images of masculine bodies and men serving as the protectors of their nation, film functioned as a visual medium that effectively engaged with these ideologies, further perpetuating their influence on how Americans viewed gender relations. During Reagan’s presidency, Hollywood action films changed significantly in terms of their male characters. The male hero was no longer the impotent man who struggled to juggle his own needs and that of his family, like Roy in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*

(Spielberg, 1977), nor was he the scrawny teenager struggling to find his identity like Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977). Instead, the 1980s heralded the age of the “hard-bodied” man; bulky, muscular heroes who were confident and determined to play the role of the protector of the weak. These films emerged as a direct result of America’s newfound fascination with traditional representations of gender brought on by Reagan and the nation’s involvement in the Cold War. Characters such as John Rambo and the Terminator (played by Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, respectively) stormed the screen as heroes who were the embodiment of cultural understandings of masculinity: strong in their bodily image and unwavering in their convictions and goals. The success of these films was rooted in their ability to inspire a sense of awe within the heterosexual male viewer. These masculine identities were unattainable through both their bodies and through the unique situations in which these bodies were placed. As Susan Jeffords argues, the hard body served as an American symbol of masculinity, rather than one that could actually be possessed. Jeffords suggests that in these hard-bodied films, “[...] there is dual identification taking place: first with the individual body as citizens might choose to see themselves *as* that body, desiring its strengths, expressions and stances; second, with that body as a national emblem, as a collective symbol for a nation that individual citizens receive pleasure from feeling themselves a part of” (Jeffords, 26). Here, Jeffords suggests that the male viewer identifies with these hard-bodied characters on two distinct levels; identification based on gender and the ultimate male form and national identification, as the male hero in these films is representative of how men are meant to act in order to serve and protect their country.

Understanding the ways in which the male spectator identifies with the onscreen male hero is crucial in studying how these films and the graphic novel adaptations that will be examined in this thesis perpetuate problematic representations of masculinity. In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” that focuses on looking relations in classical Hollywood film, theorist Laura Mulvey argues that, “As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (Mulvey, 63). In relation to the hard-bodied films of the 1980s, the male spectator identifies with the main character because of his gender and in doing so, the spectator attains the illusion of also wielding this masculine power. However, Mulvey also argues that “Recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject, which, re-introjected as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others” (Mulvey, 60). While the male spectator is able to identify with the gender of the hard-bodied man, he also comes to realize that characters are in control of the idealized male body, one which the male spectator lacks. Unlike Rambo or The Terminator, the average male viewer will not be able to ward off numerous attacks on his own or use his body in the stylized way that these characters do. In other words, it is the very spectacle that the film creates that allows for this simultaneous identification and misidentification. These films, then, create an unattainable masculinity, a masculine identity that can only be defined on screen, yet it is this filmic illusion that allows for the desire to inhabit this body.

Contemporary representations of masculinity draw heavily from the hard-bodied image, however these representations attempt to bridge the gap between identification and misidentification. As previously stated, American heroes after September 11th were real men, not idealized representations of masculinity on screen, yet they were still expected to possess a masculine body in order to protect. This does not imply that the hard body of the 1980's was not impossible; surely both Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger possessed the bodies that were exhibited on screen. But these men, representative of the body-building culture of the 1980s were a small section of American men. They were individuals whose bodies stood out as an extreme, as a goal that the average, working class male could not possibly attain.

The bodies of the heroes of September 11th, while still portrayed as brawny and muscular, were closer to realistic expectations of a masculine image. While these images suggested that the ordinary male still had an expectation to which to live up, it was possible for the average man to possess these bodies, without training to become a body builder. These bodies, then, were meant to establish a national identity, rather than to a “national emblem” that Jeffords argues is integral to the hard-bodied image. That is, while the hard bodies were a symbol of American strength, the men of September 11th were both a symbol of strength and a symbol of national masculinity that every man should strive towards.

The hard-bodied actions films also convey how these bodies are not truly invincible, drawing connections between the vulnerability of the male body and the vulnerability of the nation that that body is meant to protect. While it seems that the threat of the Cold War, even in its final years, did serve as a reason for America to adopt

a newfound sense of strength and power, Yvonne Tasker, author of *Spectacular Bodies*, an examination of the male image in the action film genre, argues that fundamentally, the reliance on these images is meant to mask the inevitable fact that America and its men could indeed be harmed. In her discussion of bodybuilding, a cultural trend that was closely associated with the hard-bodied image in film and in American society, Tasker writes that “The discourse of bodybuilding aspires to make the body signify a physical invulnerability, but the fact of vulnerability always remains a key part of the bodybuilding narrative” (Tasker, 123). In other words, Tasker argues that the performance of body building is grounded in the anxiety of being vulnerable; that strength is a reaction to the constant fear of being overcome. Tasker goes on to state that “If, for some, the figure of the body builder signals an assertion of male dominance, an eroticizing of the powerful male body, for other critics it seems to signal an hysterical and unstable image of manhood. The muscular body of the action star seems to provide a powerful symbol of both desire and lack” (Tasker, 80). For both the nation and masculinity, depictions of strength, Tasker argues, are nothing more than a response to the fear of losing power and control. Despite Reagan’s persistent use of images of strength and Hollywood’s adoption of these images, an understanding of the way in which masculinity plays a role in both politics and society as a whole calls for an understanding of the way in which representations of masculinity function as a consequence of an ongoing anxious mentality.

This anxiety of weakness and a lack of power was very much present after post-9/11 and was imperative to structuring the post-9/11 hero. This fear of powerlessness accounted for the intensive gender differentiation of notions of heroism. In constructing a

masculine hero who was more identifiable and did not serve as an extreme representation of masculinity (like that of the hard bodies of the 1980s), it became crucial for post-9/11 masculine imagery to distance itself from femininity and homosexuality. While it is arguable that the films of the post-9/11 era fail in doing this, I will argue that the goal of these graphic novel adaptations is to present its audiences with representations of ultimate masculine identities that fall in line with the images of cultural post-9/11 heroes.

An understanding of how film culture functioned in the Reagan era is thus imperative to understanding how the films of the post-9/11 era contributed to traditional gender representations. In addition to the Reagan and George W. Bush presidency both being led by Republican leaders who were interested in reclaiming their party's traditional beliefs and values, both eras were faced with external threats that had the potential to compromise American life. The response in the 1980s and the 2000s was for the nation to regain its sense of strength, turning first and foremost to its traditional symbols of strength, its men. As this thesis will go on to examine, what made these two historical periods particularly similar was the way film culture played a major role in the understanding and perpetuation of representations of masculinity. Yet while aspects of the hard bodied movement are still very much present in post-9/11 representations of masculinity, it is important to note that American culture's new understanding of heroism focused on a more realistic male body and sexual difference that separated heroes from representations of weakness, and also made him more identifiable to the average working class male.

Along with film, comic book culture has often been an artistic medium that has both reflected and contributed to cultural understandings of American heroism and

masculinity. Beginning with Superman in the 1930s, comic book superheroes have functioned in a way very similar to the hard-bodied images of the 1980s film culture, representing male characters who were identifiable, but who also connoted the reader's lack of the perfect masculine identity. One comic book character who embodies this idea is Captain America. Captain America was introduced in 1941, during a time where international tensions were high and the nation was on the brink of war. The character's story originates with Steve Rogers, a scrawny, yet uber-patriotic youth who is rejected from the military because of his size. He is instead admitted into a scientific program in which he is given a serum that enables him with super-strength, instantly transforming him into a well-built soldier. As he fights with American soldiers, his enemies reflected America's enemies, as he commonly fought Nazis, and later on, Communists as well. Captain America's identity, then, embodied the American masculine identity; he was strong, an individual, and was loyal to his country, often fighting alongside fellow soldiers in combat. Yet like many American superheroes, Captain America was equipped with superpowers, in this case his added strength. Similarly to the filmic representations of masculinity that were popular in the 1980s, these superpowers highlighted the comic book readers lack of an ultimate masculine identity; an identity that was unattainable yet was one that symbolized America's strength.

The advent of the graphic novel in the 1980s had the potential to challenge how masculinity was represented in the comic medium. In its existence as a complete, narrative text, the graphic novel did not have to follow the precedents set by the comic book industry in focusing primarily on character. Instead, the narrative structure of the graphic novel allowed authors to provide social commentary on social and political

issues, including how gender and heroism were represented. On the other hand, authors could use this new form of the comic medium to propagate already existing representations of masculine identity, allowing it to instill itself further into the national identity.

Frank Miller is one such graphic novel author whose work has generally conformed with representations of gender that are reliant on sexual difference. While Miller had worked on various comic series, his breakout work *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) was a gritty take on the superhero Batman, positioning the usually campy hero as a middle-aged vigilante who was determined to maintain order in his domain of Gotham City. His later works, such as *Sin City* (1991), a collection of graphic novels that adapted a film-noir aesthetic to the comic genre, and *300* (1998), an exaggerated and historically inaccurate retelling of the Spartan battle at Thermopylae, both focus on large and muscular men who embody heteronormative understandings of masculine identity and who evoke aspects of the hard body movement. In his book *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, Bradford Wright argues that “Frank Miller spearheaded a loose movement among comic book writers in the 1980s who worked to deconstruct superheroes while revitalizing them in the process [...] Miller envisioned the superhero as a right-wing force fighting to preserve social order [...] (Wright, 268-269).

Wright’s assertion that Miller takes a conservative approach to his characters is evidenced by how these characters uphold representations of gender that were popular during the Reagan and Bush era. In an interview with *New York Magazine* in 2007, Miller stated that “A hero wasn’t necessarily the best-looking guy in town, or the one who got the woman or got all of Harry Potter’s schoolmates to cheer for him. It was the

person who did the absolute right thing, even if it meant he would die, forgotten, in disgrace”(Itzkoff, *Unmasked Avenger...*). Both *Sin City* and *300* reflect Miller’s understanding of heroism and masculinity. For example, in the *Sin City* series the character of Marv is massive and exhibits brute strength. He is a loner, but is steadfast in his convictions and beliefs, and in the series he is determined to avenge the death of his one-time lover, Goldie. In *300*, King Leonidas, the leader of the Spartan army, is both a King and a soldier, leading and fighting alongside his soldiers in order to defend the women and children of his homeland. These characters and many others in Miller’s work, represent an adherence to conservative ideologies of masculinity and heroism and maintain the ideology that men must exhibit a sense of individualism and remarkable masculine form.

Alan Moore is a graphic novel author who took a different approach to the medium. Moore’s work tends to question how heroism is perceived in society. Wright references a quotation from Moore, who states “‘I don’t believe in heroes’ he later confirmed. ‘A hero is somebody who has been set upon a pedestal above humanity,’ and ‘the belief in heroes...leads to people like Colonel Oliver North’ who assumes that the best interests of society are consistent with their own political views” (Wright, 272). Here, Moore equates the problematic representations of masculinity and heroism with conservative ideologies that supported these traditional representations of masculinity and heroism. In tackling understandings of heroism, Moore frequently comments on heroism’s relation to gender roles and identities, often referencing comic book history, yet also critiquing it in the process.

Watchmen, for instance, presents an altered 1985 America in which Richard Nixon has been re-elected for his third term and masked vigilantes (superheroes who were once an established and accepted group of individuals) have now been outlawed. Published as a complete work in 1986 and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* revolutionized the typical comic book narrative of the good guys triumphing over the bad guys and instead presented a work that was more aware of shifting power relations and the political climate of the 1980s. The story follows several masked ex-heroes as they attempt to uncover what they believe to be a plot to kill off their vigilante brethren. Rather than present one clear protagonist, the graphic novel employs a sort of ensemble cast, as each character has their own unique psychology and contributes in some way or another to the story's final outcome. However, the storyline is made more complex by the fact that America is on the brink of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union and the Doomsday Clock ticks closer and closer to midnight.

Another of Moore's works, *V for Vendetta*, amplifies the feelings of the fascistic nature of the Reagan/Thatcher era through the creation of a future Britain that is ruled by a totalitarian government known as the Norsefire Party. The novel's main protagonist is V, a man identified only by his black cloak, black top hat and a Guy Fawkes mask that hides his true identity. V is the only person brave enough to stand against the Norsefire regime and he does so by committing acts of terrorism, such as blowing up significant landmarks and killing important party members. V soon becomes acquainted with Evey, a young girl who is about to begin her career as a prostitute until V comes to her rescue from a group of crooked police officers known as the Fingermen. V eventually shows

Every the true nature of the power hungry Norsefire government and she soon becomes his protégée in his quest to spark anarchy across the nation.

In one interview, Moore states, “[...] I wonder if the root of the emergence of the superhero in American culture might have something to do with a kind of an ingrained American reluctance to engage in confrontation without massive tactical superiority” (Rogers). Moore’s statement suggests an understanding of the way that heroism functions in relation to national identity; that these images of heroism are a way to muster an illusion of strength, even in times of weakness and vulnerability. Moore’s work then seems intent on subverting these representations of gender and heroism that had become an intrinsic part of Western culture.

In the years following September 11th, Hollywood began adapting the graphic novel texts of Miller and Moore onto film. Miller played a large role in the production of the films based on his work, acting as a co-director on *Sin City* (Rodriguez, 2005) and as an executive producer on *300* (Snyder, 2006) (Garret). In an interview in which he discussed the comic book adaptation, Miller stated that “Comic book pages are vertical, and movie screens are relentlessly horizontal. But it’s all the same form. We use different tools, but we get the job done. I’m completely in love with CGI. It’s great for conveying a cartoonist’s sense of reality” (Garrett). Miller was more than willing to adapt his works through a filmic medium and his involvement in both projects suggests that he played a role in how these works were adapted. However, Miller was not fully aware of the impact that these films would have when placed within the cultural context of post-9/11 America. When asked in an interview with *New York Magazine* if there was a relation between post-9/11 America and the Spartan nation depicted in his film, Miller stated that

“ I think there’s no denying that the same ideas are at stake, just that the odds are very, very different. [And] I don’t think that anyone would mistake my Xerxes [the film’s and graphic novel’s Persian villain] with Osama Bin Laden” (Itzkoff, “Unmasked Avenger”). While Miller is then aware of how the films based on his texts have the potential to function as an allegory for post-9/11 America, he is insistent there is no direct relationship between the two. Yet while Miller may not be conscious of the connection between the films based on his work and the national sense of insecurity following September 11th, the chapter that follows will discuss how these films engage with post-9/11 ideologies.

Alan Moore, however, fully distanced himself from the filmic adaptations of his work. In an article from the *New York Times* in which Moore discusses the *V for Vendetta* film, Moore states that he had “read the screenplay [...] It’s rubbish” and also “demanded that his name be removed from the ‘V for Vendetta’ film, as well as from any of his work that DC might reprint in the future” (Itzkoff, “The Vendetta”). Despite his clear disdain for filmic adaptations of his texts, many of his works have been made into films. Most of these adaptations attempt to recreate Moore’s vision by emphasizing narrative elements and plot points from the original texts. However, in adapting these graphic novels, certain changes were made to both accommodate the transition from comic to film and to appeal to the modern viewer.

The remainder of this thesis will examine a selection of the films based on the works of Frank Miller and Alan Moore and will discuss how each of these works, produced after the events of September 11th, perpetuate the conservative and traditional representations of gender roles, specifically masculinity. These filmic adaptations are

worth examining primarily because of the ties that these works have to their original texts, their authors, and to the social and political issues on which they comment. In examining Frank Miller, I will argue how Miller's conservative ideologies translate neatly into post-9/11 film culture. While the films based on Miller's work are similar to the graphic novels, the adaption of these texts and the changes made contribute to the ideologies associated with the post-9/11 man. The filmic adaptations of Moore's work, however, exhibit a significant number of differences from the original graphic novel texts. While these films attempt to remain faithful to Moore's attempts to question the role of masculine heroism, I will argue that these films also fall victim to the stereotypical representations of masculinity and gender relations.

Perhaps one way to understand Frank Miller in relation to post-9/11 culture is to take a look at the publicity surrounding his most recent project, a graphic novel entitled *Holy Terror, Batman!* in which the iconic comic book hero Batman fights against Al Qaeda terrorists (Sardar). In a 2006 article with the *New Statesmen*, Miller is quoted as saying that this work is “a reminder of who we’re up against,” but he also notes that it is primarily “a piece of propaganda” (Sardar). Miller’s comments on his new graphic novel encapsulate the conservative ideologies that permeate his work, including the filmic adaptations of his graphic novels. While details about *Holy Terror Batman!* are scarce, Miller’s choice of Batman (a vigilante hero who works outside of the law) to fight the nation’s enemies is fitting when compared with America’s understanding of the new male hero as one who takes justice into his own hands while still remaining loyal to one’s country. Yet more importantly, Miller’s awareness that the work is a piece of propaganda speaks to the ways that Miller’s work perpetuates problematic representations of heroism and gender relations. The fact that Miller is conscious of the conservative ideologies and traditional beliefs that are tied to his work aids in understanding how the film adaptations of his work, *Sin City* and *300*, retain these ideologies and maintain the belief that these representations are socially acceptable.

Brutes and Broads: Gender Representation and Heroism in *Sin City*

As referenced in the introduction to this thesis, Frank Miller co-directed *Sin City* with Robert Rodriguez and as a result, the film remains very faithful to the original

graphic novel text. As Rodriguez states in a special feature documentary on the *Sin City* DVD, his intention was to “take cinema and make it into this book, cause the mediums really are very similar. So these are snapshots of movement” (*Sin City* DVD). The similarity between the two texts and Miller’s extensive involvement is precisely what makes examining this film important in terms of its inclusion in post-9/11 culture. While the original *Sin City* books were published in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the political climate was changing. Whereas Miller’s characters and situations were more in line with the hard bodied movement during the Reagan era, these books were released at a time when this phenomenon had begun to fade and the liberal policies of the Clinton era were beginning to take effect. The film, however, was produced and released at a time in which these conservative ideologies on nationalism and patriarchy had seen a resurgence and the content of *Sin City* was more in line with America’s current cultural values.

While Miller himself does not shy away from his own intentions with his work (he states in the DVD commentary, “I came up with *Sin City* completely as an act of self satisfaction. I decided I was going to sit down and do a book that would feature all the things that I liked to draw; the fast cars, and hot babes, guys in trench coats” (*Sin City* DVD)), the film works under the guise of an homage to film noir rather than an endorsement of post-9/11 representations of masculinity. While shot predominantly using green screen technology (*Sin City* DVD), *Sin City* is a black and white film save for a few stylistic moments of color. The film is divided into three vignettes, each representing a different chapter in the graphic novel saga, and each portraying a male character who narrates his own story of uncovering corruption and administering justice in a nod to the film noir genre. The film’s passing as an homage also seems to make heteronormative

understandings of gender relations excusable, as the film noir genre frequently played into patriarchal representations of gender. In one scene in the film, the character Dwight, a young and handsome criminal who is in pursuit of an abusive cop, slaps a prostitute named Gail across the face for arguing with his plan of action for disposing of a group of dead bodies. After he hits her, she recoils for a moment and then immediately grabs him for a prolonged kiss. Dwight's reasoning for hitting her is justified by the film's style as exaggerated film noir in which these instances of male dominance are commonplace and go unquestioned. In other words, representing Gail as a female who cannot be reasoned with but is grateful and aroused by Dwight's dominance over her is excused by the fact that the film attempts to reference a genre where these gender relations were acceptable.

However, the film's exaggeration of film noir elements consequently removes it from the genre and instead positions it as an action film that maintains post-9/11 gender representations. The film is rife with explicit violence, with depictions of cannibalism, dismemberment, and castration that are not related to film noir. Additionally, the film's characters, whose heroes are large, muscular and unflinching are more reminiscent of the hard bodied heroes of the 1980s than the men of film noir. Therefore, while the film stylistically attempts to reference film noir, it ultimately falls into the category of the action genre, a genre that has typically reflected and contributed to America's conventional representations of gender relations.

Sexual difference plays a key role in *Sin City* and maintains the heteronormative gender constructions that were revitalized after September 11th. At first glance, the women of *Sin City* appear empowered. For instance, the second segment of the film (based on the graphic novel chapter *The Big Fat Kill*) introduces the women of Old

Town, a group of prostitutes who run a section of Sin City and are heavily armed with weapons of every kind. When threatened, these women do not hesitate to enact the same stylized violence as the men in the film. In one scene in which the crooked cop Rafferty (Benicio Del Toro) and his group of cronies intimidate a young prostitute in an alley in Old Town, one such armed woman named Miho springs down from a nearby building top, reveals two katana swords, and impales two of the men through the roof of their car. These women are undoubtedly powerful, yet it is the source of their power that is truly problematic. The women of Old Town are first and foremost prostitutes whose power is derived solely from their ability to profit from sex with men. Furthermore, the women's control over Old Town is maintained by an agreement that the women have with the patriarchal figures of Sin City that stipulates that the cops and mob will stay out if the men are allowed full use of the prostitutes. Whatever power that these women wield is thus granted to them by men. When Rafferty is killed and it is revealed that he is a cop, the pact is broken and the women's power quickly fades, transforming them into helpless female victims who Dwight must protect. Despite wielding guns and swords, any power that these women have is the result of a patriarchal system.

The women in *Sin City* thus convert back into the role of the weak, helpless woman who must be saved and/or avenged by the able-bodied male. As Jessica Nathanson writes in her article on *Sin City*, "The women are presented as warriors, as women who are able to take care of themselves, yet in each story, it nevertheless takes a man to ultimately rescue the women from rape, torture, and murder [...] they cannot, in the end, protect themselves or each other" (Nathanson, 165). In addition to the prostitutes

of Old Town, the other female characters rely on men for protection, and the men, in the true spirit of the post-9/11 male hero, readily take on this role.

The relation between helpless female/protective male can most clearly be seen in the vignette based on the graphic novel chapter *That Yellow Bastard* which is split into two parts in the film. The sequence is narrated by John Hartigan (Bruce Willis), a cop who is nearing retirement. On his last day on the force, he investigates the kidnapping of a young girl named Nancy who is being held captive by Junior, the son of Senator Roark, a corrupt political figure in Sin City. After castrating her kidnapper, Hartigan is sent to prison for eight years where letters from a grateful Nancy keep him sane until he is visited by a now yellow and disfigured Junior, who threatens to find and kill Nancy, who is now nineteen years old. Upon his release, Hartigan tracks down Nancy and saves her from Junior once again, who he finally kills. The segment ends with Hartigan killing himself, despite Nancy's love for him, as he believes that his connection to Nancy will always put her in danger and that his death is the only way to keep her safe.

Hartigan's profession as a police officer is the first indication that he is meant to be portrayed as a post-9/11 masculine hero. In a similar fashion to America's views on the police officers during the terrorist attacks, Hartigan is a cop who relentlessly follows his duty to protect those who cannot protect themselves. Therefore Hartigan's profession does not necessarily allow him to stand out as a post-9/11 hero, but the actions that he takes with the power with which he is bestowed. Sin City is rife with crooked and corrupt police officers. However, these morally ambiguous authority figures are not portrayed as figures that embody a masculine identity, as they are more interested in using their power

to harm others. Hartigan is one of the few who takes on the position of a police officer in order to fulfill his masculine duty to protect the weak and the innocent.

In the first part of the vignette, Nancy is not portrayed so much as a female who needs protecting, but as a child who is helpless when faced with Junior's perversions of sex and violence. The scene in which Hartigan confronts Junior on the docks prior to castrating him serves to differentiate the male hero from the villain. If Hartigan is an embodiment of the post-9/11 man who is sworn to protect the weak and the vulnerable, and to use his sexual energy in a positive way, Junior represents the opposite of this idealized masculine identity. He is small and scrawny, using his sexual power to hurt the weak rather than to protect them. At this point in the film, Nancy serves as a catalyst that differentiates these two opposing understandings of masculine power; however, because of his role as a protector, it is Hartigan with whom the audience identifies.

While Hartigan's first interaction with Nancy portrays her as a helpless child, his reunion with Nancy eight years later proves to be more problematic in terms of the film's recurring theme of sexual difference. Upon being released from prison, Hartigan finds Nancy as a dancer at Kadie's, a dive bar in which many of the men of Sin City gather. Nancy's role in the graphic novel is slightly different than in the film's sequence. In the original text, Miller's illustrations make clear that she is a stripper, with full page drawings of Nancy dancing topless. The film instead portrays Nancy as a dancer who is fully clothed, yet who nonetheless performs for the men in the bar. Nancy's identity as a grown and highly sexualized female thus serves to highlight Hartigan's own role as the masculine hero who must protect her and care for her. Upon laying eyes on Hartigan, Nancy leaps off the stage, grabs Hartigan, and kisses him. "It's always been you

Hartigan,” Nancy tells him later. “Sleep with me...I tried to fall in love with boys, I thought I did once or twice, but I was already in love with you.” Nancy’s obsession with Hartigan further conveys the gendered implications of heroism in that as a result of Hartigan saving Nancy, she has come to rely on him to protect her and to fulfill her sexual desires. The relationship between Hartigan and Nancy not only maintains the idea that it is the post-9/11 man’s duty to protect the weak and vulnerable woman, but also that the post-9/11 woman desires to be protected and to be viewed as the inferior sex.

The character of Marv is another male hero in the film who fulfills the role of a protector of the weak and inferior women of Sin City. Played by Mickey Rourke and based on Miller’s character in the chapter *The Hard Goodbye*, Marv narrates the story of his mission to avenge the death of Goldie, a prostitute who was murdered as she slept next to him. Marv ultimately finds her killer to be Kevin, a young man who kidnaps women only to engage in cannibalistic acts with their bodies, and who also has connections to Cardinal Rourke, the major religious figure in Sin City. Goldie had learned about Kevin and Rourke’s cannibalism and was killed for her knowledge of this. After brutally disposing of Kevin, Marv murders Cardinal Rourke only to be caught and sent to the electric chair.

What differentiates Marv from the other male characters in the film is that he ultimately fails in his duty to protect the woman he loves, as Goldie is murdered in bed beside him. Yet instead of Goldie’s murder functioning as an example of failed masculinity, Marv sets off on a quest to avenge her death, ensuring that those who caused her death will pay. This sequence of the film parallels the narrative instilled in American culture after the events of September 11th. While the nation was indeed in a vulnerable

state, little attention was paid to how or why these events occurred. Instead, the nation focused on how America could exact its revenge on those who wished to do harm and protect its weaker citizens, and did so by invading Afghanistan and later, Iraq. While Miller wrote Marv's story well before September 11th, the narrative's inclusion in the film contributes to traditional understandings of heroism in post-9/11 culture.

Marv's search for Goldie's killer brings him into contact with an assortment of characters who serve to highlight Marv's positioning as a male whose duty it is to protect the women of Sin City. At one point in the film, he is captured by the prostitutes of Old Town and Wendy, Goldie's twin sister, who believe Marv to be Goldie's killer. Tied to a chair, Goldie hits Marv in the face with a pistol as the other prostitutes watch. Laughing as blood runs down his face, he calls Wendy "a crazy goddamn broad," explaining to her that Goldie came to him because she believed he could protect her. "So go ahead doll," he says, "shoot me now or get the hell out of my way." Deciding not to kill him, Marv releases himself with ease from the ropes to the surprise of the women in the room. When Wendy asks why he let her torture him, he replies that he would have had to use force get them to listen to him, stating "I don't hurt girls."

This scene conveys why Marv must protect these women. Here, the film portrays the women, who believe that they are empowered by their weapons and autonomy, as feeble and easily duped. While Wendy's questioning of Marv leaves him bloodied, he laughs constantly throughout the ordeal, enjoying the women's attempts to make him feel pain. Additionally, his ability to free himself from the ropes and the revelation that he had been in control the entire time conveys his superiority over these women. While the scene portrays his superior physical power, it also suggests his intellectual power over his

female captors. This dynamic between Marv and the prostitutes of Old Town endorses the idea that women are incapable of effectively protecting themselves and that men, as a stronger sex, have the power needed to shield the weaker sex from harm.

Self sacrifice is also a theme in the film that differentiates male from female characters. Sacrifice is an important aspect of post-9/11 masculine identity, as the narrative that emerged about the heroes of September 11th was rife with stories of men who gave their lives in order to protect others, including the firefighters in the World Trade Center and the passengers of Flight 93. The scenes of self-sacrifice in *Sin City* parallel America's newfound obsession with martyrdom and maintain the connection between sacrifice and one's masculine identity.

Hartigan's suicide best exemplifies the relation between sacrifice and the post-9/11 man. After killing Junior and rescuing Nancy, Hartigan narrates that Junior's father, Senator Rourke, "will use all his power to get revenge on me. He'll go after me through Nancy...She'll never be safe, not as long as I'm alive." Hartigan then drops to his knees in the snow and the shot cuts from the normal black and white film-noir style to a silhouetted shot in which Hartigan is colored fully in white against a black background. During this shot, Hartigan pulls his revolver out of his coat and shoots himself in the head. As he falls to the ground he narrates "I love you Nancy" and the segment ends.

Hartigan's framing in this final shot suggests that his suicide is meant to be an act of heroic sacrifice. The shot cuts from a close up to a medium shot in order to show Hartigan's entire body silhouetted in white, making him look angelic against the black background. His narration also makes clear that his act of sacrifice is for Nancy in an attempt to keep her safe. The film then follows the post-9/11 narrative by positioning the

male as the hero whose duty it is to protect, even in the face of death. Just as the heroes of September 11th were honored as heroes because of their willingness to sacrifice their lives, Hartigan's character perpetuates this understanding of heroism by paying the ultimate price in order to protect Nancy.

The bodies of the male heroes in *Sin City* also represent the expectation of the post-9/11 man to be physically able to uphold the image of American strength and security. While the male viewer recognizes and identifies with the gender of these heroes, their superhuman feats of strength remind the viewer of their lack of the perfect male body. But as opposed to the films of the hard body movement that depicted men with extraordinary bodies in a more realistic setting, the CGI environment of *Sin City* places these male heroes in a filmic world that exaggerates our own. Therefore, while the male viewer cannot fully possess the bodies viewed on screen, he comes to realize that a physically masculine body is nevertheless imperative in the role of the everyman hero. The viewer realizes, then, that these bodies are exaggerated given the filmic world in which they are positioned and as a result, less of a desire is felt to inhabit that particular body in the specific filmic world. What the viewer does come to realize is that a masculine body is essential to a heroic identity nonetheless.

While not superhuman, Marv is a character who perhaps most closely resembles a superhero. He is significantly larger than the other men of *Sin City* and possesses cartoonish masculine features, such as his square and protruding jaw. As the character of Dwight narrates in a voiceover, Marv would "[...]be right at home in some ancient battlefield swinging an axe at somebody's face, or in a Roman arena taking a sword to other gladiators like him." Yet Marv does not possess any superpowers and there is no

indication that he is anything more than human. He is, however, able to perform extraordinary feats with his body and endure extreme amounts of pain. This exaggeration of the male body and its capabilities is just one aspect of the style of *Sin City* in which everything is exaggerated, from the harsh color tones to the lofty and embellished dialogue of the characters in the film's attempt to capture the essence of film noir. While the male viewer is not expected to believe he can possess Marv's specific body as a result of the film's stylistic elements, these representations remain problematic in their ability to link notions of heroism to a muscular male body.

For instance, in one scene during *The Hard Goodbye* segment of the film, Marv is confronted by Wendy who at this point still believes him to be her sister's killer. As Marv is about to enter his car, Wendy speeds towards him and the camera zooms in on her vengeful eyes. The shot then cuts to a medium shot of the car hitting Marv, sending him flying through the air and landing with a thud on the pavement. The film employs a specific sound effect when the car hits Marv, resembling metal hitting metal, suggesting that the car is not a formidable opponent for Marv's body. Not surprisingly, he rises from the ground unscathed as Wendy pulls around, hitting him again, and the film once more utilizes the same, unnatural sound effect that could not possibly reflect the real sound of metal hitting flesh and bone. Hitting him once more, Wendy drives away and Marv stumbles to his car with no visible injuries sustained.

In the fictional world of *Sin City*, Marv's ability to remain unscathed is believable. Rodriguez and Miller create a filmic realm in which the laws of reality do not apply, so within the diegesis of the film, this scene is not particularly problematic. What is problematic is the way the male viewer identifies with Marv in this scene and

throughout the rest of the film. While the typical male viewer understands the concept that Marv's abilities are part of a fictional universe, the viewer does come to identify with the fact that Marv possesses a male body. These images, then, become infused into contemporary understandings of masculinity, suggesting that a "true" masculine identity is one that must include a strong and solid masculine body.

Bruce Willis' character Hartigan also reflects the relationship between viewer identification with the male body and representations of masculinity. However, while Hartigan often sustains injuries similar to Marv, Hartigan's body is representative of the political implications of the hard body, paralleling the images that Republican leaders like Reagan and Bush put forth when they believed the nation to be at risk. Like Marv, Hartigan's body is impossible; he unflinchingly takes a bullet to the shoulder, calling it only a flesh wound, and in one scene is actually hanged, but frees himself and survives. Yet unlike the other males of Sin City, whose bodies are reminiscent of the youthful and brawny firemen of September 11th, both the graphic novel and the film pay particular attention to the fact that Hartigan is past his prime; his body is deteriorating and he suffers from a heart condition that kicks in during moments of stress and pressure. What then makes Hartigan's body impossible, yet identifiable given this resurgence of national heroism, is that rather than succumbing to the pain of his old age, his will to protect Nancy allows him to persevere and triumph over the limitations of his own body.

These images of Hartigan pushing through the confines of his deteriorating body reflect the images of America's conservative male leaders, who, despite their own physical limitations, were still interested in maintaining images of national strength and security. Hartigan's character in the graphic novel is reminiscent of Ronald Reagan and

the ways that the President was intent on conveying that, despite his age, he was still able to protect the American people. As Susan Jeffords writes, “In Reagan’s self-promoted image –chopping wood at his ranch, riding horses, standing tall at his presidential podium—his was one of these hard bodies, a body not subject to disease, fatigue, or aging” (Jeffords, 25). As Jeffords points out, Reagan was intent on maintaining that idea that even at his age, he was still capable of protecting the American people. These images, then, functioned as a political tool, suggesting that if Reagan was strong enough to keep the country safe, his conservative policies must be necessary in maintaining America’s sense of security. Miller’s depiction of Hartigan in the original graphic novel text is conscious of these images of Reagan, positioning Hartigan as a character who refuses to give up his hard body when it is needed the most.

While Bruce Willis’ portrayal of Hartigan is quite similar to the graphic novel, the film’s release in 2005 also parallels George W. Bush’s attempts to maintain his own image of the hard body. While not as elderly as Reagan, Bush was also intent on presenting himself as having a hard body, such as donning his flight suit, or working out at the gym on board the USS Abraham Lincoln. Willis’ depiction of Hartigan as an aging hard-bodied hero who is still in control of his body adheres to the image that Bush and the Republican party hoped to maintain; one which depicts conservatives as men with bodies capable enough to protect the nation in its time of weakness. Moreover, Hartigan’s body suggests that the everyman had the potential to live up to the expectations of the masculine hero, and that age should not limit a man to do so. Thus, while both hard bodies are meant to simultaneously be identified with and desired, Hartigan’s body has

specific political implications that link to America's leaders who are proponents of the resurgence of traditional heteronormative gender roles.

The male heroes of Sin City also play in to understandings of post-9/11 heroism in their ability to both act as individuals and work as part of a collective that represents a sense of nationalism and patriotism. The film is primarily concerned with the male characters roles as individuals. The film's separation into three distinct vignettes focuses on the three main male characters (Hartigan, Marv, and Dwight) and each of their individual missions to bring justice to Sin City. However, the setting of Kadie's, the dive bar in which Nancy dances, connects all three men. In this space, all three chapters of the film intertwine. In Marv's segment, Dwight can be seen sitting in a nearby booth watching him as Marv sits down at the bar to watch Nancy dance. While the segment is decidedly Marv's story, the camera cuts to Dwight and in a voiceover he comments on Marv's likeness to a gladiator. Similarly, in Hartigan's chapter, Marv can be seen sitting at the bar when Nancy jumps off stage, reuniting herself with Hartigan. The camera then cuts to Marv who raises his eyebrows and then turns his attention back to his drink.

These cameos from the other male characters can, in one sense, be viewed as clever inclusions on the part of Rodriguez that serve to connect the different chapters of the film. However, these scenes indicate a sense of brotherhood amongst these characters. While these characters do not act together outside of Kadie's bar, and while there is little indication that they formally know each other, their interactions are amicable enough that there is a form of acknowledgement amongst each of them that they are the men who bring justice to Sin City, while others cannot because they are too weak or too corrupt. In its adherence to cultural understandings of heroism and masculinity, these cameos are

necessary in highlighting that, while these heroes are individuals and in most cases, vigilantes, there is a sense of camaraderie that is an integral part of their definition as heroes in post-9/11 America.

While the film adaptation of *Sin City* is perhaps the most closely related to its original text out of all the films that this thesis will discuss, it plays an integral role in perpetuating cultural understandings of masculinity and male heroism in the post-9/11 world. The film both reflects and contributes to understandings of gender roles and representations of the male body and heroism in its status as a post-9/11 action film. While the graphic novel text and the film are quite similar both visually and ideologically, the placement of this adaptation within post-9/11 culture serves to strengthen the relation between gender representation and America's national sense of anxiety. The connection between Miller's work and conservative representations of masculinity is not limited to *Sin City*, as *300* is also intent on maintaining themes of sexual difference while contributing to post-9/11 understandings of gender expectations.

“Never Retreat, Never Surrender”: Masculine Identity in *300*

Unlike his co-directorial role in *Sin City*, Frank Miller worked as an executive producer on *300*, having significantly less influence on the film's production. As he stated in an interview with *IGN.com* in which he discusses handing his work over to director Zack Snyder, “If I'm not the director, I'm not the director; otherwise, it's just an exercise in futility and I'm going to make a fool of myself. It's Zack's movie, [and] there won't be any competition over who the director is. It's his movie” (Gilchrist). While Miller himself played less of a role in the production of the film, *300* draws heavily from

its original text, a graphic novel which reflects Miller's own conservative beliefs and ideologies that stem from the idea of men as protector of the female sex. Much of the content, including the dialogue and plot lines, are the same or at the very least strikingly similar to the graphic novel, an aspect of the film with which Miller was very happy (Gilchrist). However, as a result of Snyder's control of the film some stylistic changes were made, including Snyder's trademark use of slow-motion and the addition of scenes not included in the graphic novel. In contrast to *Sin City*, in which Rodriguez's goal was to directly translate the graphic novel to film with Miller at his side, *300* is an adaptation in a more traditional sense, in which a director attempts to capture the essence of the original text, but ultimately retains authorship over the filmic text.

Snyder's take on *300* allows for an examination of how the film interacts with the cultural understandings of gender at the time of its production and release. Like *Sin City*, the similarities between the film version of *300* and its original graphic novel text are important in understanding how the film maintains cultural perceptions of gender roles: specifically the role of men as heroes. However, this section will also examine the differences between the two texts, and how additions to the film highlight and contribute to these problematic representations that emphasize sexual difference.

300 remains faithful to Miller's portrayals of gender roles in his work, and, like *Sin City*, *300* depicts men as protectors of a nation of weak women and children, who would not be able to survive were it not for the men whose constant duty it is to fight off evils that threaten the sanctity of these women. The film does make an attempt to present a strong female character with Queen Gorgo, King Leonidas's wife. In the beginning of the film, a Persian messenger arrives in Sparta to bear the news of Xerxes' intentions to

take over the country. When Gorgo tells the messenger to “not be coy or stupid” in his dealings with the King, he is taken aback that he has been spoken to by a woman. Gorgo replies that she can “speak among men” because “only Spartan women give birth to real men” in an attempt to insult the messenger. Not only does Gorgo have a voice, she also uses her voice to inspire the King in his moments of doubt. In a scene in the film that is not part of the graphic novel, Leonidas ponders and questions the morality of sending his soldiers to war one night in his bed chamber. Gorgo attempts to sooth his conscience, telling him, “it is not a question of what a Spartan citizen should do, nor a husband, nor a king. Instead ask yourself, my dearest love, what should a free man do?” In the graphic novel, Gorgo’s role is limited, serving primarily as Leonidas’s love interest and a representation of the motherland of Sparta in which she truly embodies the role of the domestic female. Snyder’s inclusion of this scene, however, suggests a desire to include a strong willed female in a film dominated by men. Gorgo’s characterization in the film signifies Snyder’s acknowledgement of the role of men as protector in both the film and American culture and demonstrates Snyder’s attempt to question these roles.

Yet Gorgo’s representation ultimately has the opposite effect in the film, as her ability to speak freely is governed by the patriarchal society of which she is a part. Her reply to the Persian messenger, that she can speak because of her ability to give birth to Spartan men, conveys that her freedom relies solely on her role as a mother of future soldiers, her speech being the byproduct of her relation to men. Additionally, the scene in the bedroom does not end with Gorgo merely consoling the King. After she persuades him to go to war, she embraces Leonidas and kisses him passionately. The screen fades to black momentarily, and then fades into a shot of the couple kissing again, yet this time

the film uses a slow motion technique. The soundtrack of the scene also changes, as the film introduces soft, ambient music and focuses on the sounds of Gorgo's heavy breathing. The scene is composed of close-up shots of Gorgo in sexual bliss and is intercut with frequent fadeouts to black in an attempt to highlight the shots of Gorgo's pleasure in a variety of sexual positions. The slow motion technique is also employed in all of these shots, emphasizing both Gorgo's female body and the pleasure she is experiencing.

Rather than empower her, this scene conveys how Gorgo is reliant on Leonidas' masculine role as a protector of femininity in order to receive sexual satisfaction. In many of the shots in this scene, Leonidas is shown in positions of sexual power, frequently on top of Gorgo or behind her. Gorgo is thus dependent on Leonidas's ability as a member of the male sex to provide for her. Furthermore, Gorgo's female body in this scene parallels Laura Mulvey's theory of the female's positioning as an object of the male viewer's desire (Mulvey, 62). The close-up shots of Gorgo's facial expressions coupled with Snyder's use of slow motion emphasizes Gorgo's body as a means of male sexual desire. Here, the slow motion effect adds to the existing voyeuristic quality to these shots by prolonging and exaggerating each of Gorgo's movements. Thus, rather than presenting Gorgo as the strong and able woman that Snyder initially shows the audience, the film instead regresses back to conventional gender roles, with Leonidas as the powerful male figure and Gorgo as the submissive female who is representative of male heterosexual desire.

Additionally, Gorgo's counseling of the King is in itself problematic, as her advising the King to go to war highlights her adherence to the patriarchal society of

Sparta, and to the ideologies of post-9/11 gender relations. As Melissa Elston writes in her examination of gender and power relations in *300*, “Queen Gorgo’s ensuing advice seems to parallel (and endorse) contemporary American presidents’ authoritarian tactics during wartime—paradoxically, by recasting a leader’s seizure of war powers as an expression of freedom [...]” (Elston). As Elston points out, Gorgo supports Leonidas’s decision to go against the wishes of the Spartan council and go to war, similarly to how George W. Bush invaded Iraq without a legitimate declaration of war from the United States Congress. Yet in addition to the connection to post-9/11 politics that Elston implies, Gorgo’s encouraging of Leonidas conveys her support of the male’s role as a protector of the weak, that it is the duty of “a free man” to protect his country and its citizens who cannot protect themselves. Therefore, while the film attempts to introduce a feminine hero to the film by giving Gorgo a voice that has the ability to influence Leonidas, her power is ultimately controlled by the male figures in the film, figures whom she also relies on to provide for her.

True to Miller’s notions of male heroism, the film version of *300* also includes themes of self sacrifice in relation to its heroes and, like sacrifice in *Sin City*, these themes parallel the role that sacrifice plays in the definition of the post-9/11 male hero. In one of the film’s final scenes, King Leonidas, with his fellow soldiers dead at his feet, turns toward the Persian archers who stand perched above the cliffs. In a close-up on Leonidas’s face as he faces his certain death he yells, “My queen! My wife.” The shot then cuts to an extreme close-up of one of the archers as he aims and then cuts again to a close-up of the tip of his arrow, building tension for their eventual release. However, the archers allow Leonidas a few more parting words, as the scene cuts back to him as he

whispers, “My love.” As the shot cuts once more to a medium shot behind Leonidas, he is seen lifting his arms as he welcomes the barrage of arrows that are sent his way.

After a fade out to black, the film resumes with a fade in on Gorgo who is receiving the news of Leonidas’s certain death by Dilios, one of Leonidas’s most faithful soldiers who was sent back to Sparta to tell the story of the three hundred men who stood up to the Persian invasion. After Dilios returns a necklace that she gave to Leonidas, she puts it around her son’s neck, signifying that he will continue to protect Sparta like his father. As Dilios addresses the Spartan council he tells them that Leonidas’s last request was to “remember us, that was his simple hope.” As Dilios speaks, the shot cuts to Leonidas, lying dead on the battlefield surrounded by other fallen Spartan soldiers. The camera pulls back, revealing his outstretched arms and his entire body, punctured by Persian arrows.

These final shots of Leonidas and the references to Gorgo embody the role that sacrifice plays in the post-9/11 man’s duty to protect and is representative way that masculinity is defined by sexual difference. Leonidas identifies Gorgo not by her name in the moments before his death, but by the roles that she plays: his queen, his wife, and his love. Leonidas’s self sacrifice is not only meant to protect Gorgo, but to protect the roles that the women of Sparta play. Through his own death, which justifies all of Sparta going to war against the Persians, he not only attempts to protect the women of Sparta, but initiates further conflict that will perpetuate the roles that each gender is expected to play.

Like Hartigan’s death, Leonidas’s death is also glorified and even conveys religious symbolism. Leonidas’s dead body, with his arms outstretched and his legs close together, is reminiscent of Christ on the cross, with the arrows protruding from his body

representing stigmata. In one sense, this connection to religious imagery resonates well with conservatives who are proponents of the reinstatement of a heteronormative masculine image, as their values and beliefs tend to be deeply rooted in Christian beliefs. But in a larger cultural context that does not necessarily include the Christian faith, the framing of these shots does depict Leonidas as a savior of his country, with his outstretched arms welcoming death, knowing that his fall will ultimately save his people. In addition to the film glorifying war during a time in which America was indeed at war, (as Elston writes, some scenes in the film “bear closer resemblance to a United States Marine Corps recruiting ad” (Elston)), this scene in particular speaks specifically to the role in which men play, that they are the ones who must fulfill their duty to protect, as they are represented as the sex that has the ability to do so. *300* then maintains and endorses the idea that sacrifice is an essential aspect of the ideal post-9/11 male and that by adhering to these gender roles that are rooted in sexual difference, men can also be viewed as saviors and martyrs.

In addition to the film’s differentiation between the roles of men and women, *300* presents cultural understandings of masculinity visually through the bodies of the Spartan soldiers. While Miller’s graphic novel exaggerates the bodies of the soldiers, portraying them as bare-chested fighting machines, these bodies are not the focus of the graphic novel’s artwork, and instead it focuses on the chaos of the battle against the Persians with emphasis on the soldiers spears and shields as they huddle together to fight. The film, however, is much more interested in exposing the bodies of these soldiers and suggests that these bodies are a vehicle of masculinity.

Similarly to Marv and Hartigan in *Sin City*, the Spartan soldiers in *300* exemplify how the male viewer desires the male bodies of the film, and simultaneously understands that they lack this masculine body. However, unlike *Sin City*, the male bodies of *300* are believable and identifiable within the diegesis of the film, and while they are exaggerated, they resemble the body that the average male could possibly possess. These bodies are then drastically different than those of *Sin City* and even the 1980's hard body movement in that, while they do convey an ideal masculine form, these bodies can be identified with by the American everyman. Snyder's use of slow motion, however, creates the illusion that these bodies have the ability to perform in ways that the regular body cannot, thus setting a standard for the masculine identity that cannot fully be attained. Therefore, the viewer comes to identify more closely with the physical body, and it is the impossible performance of this body that conveys the existence of a masculine identity that the average male spectator cannot possess.

Leonidas's role in leading these men is crucial in understanding how the male viewer identifies with the on screen male. Leonidas is the king of the Spartans, and as a result, the working class post-9/11 spectator cannot truly identify with him. However, Leonidas takes on a role similar to that of George W. Bush on the flight deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln. In the film, Leonidas is portrayed as a soldier, who fights alongside the other Spartans as one of their own. Similar in dress and in body type, Leonidas becomes an average citizen of Sparta, whose average male citizens are its soldiers. Like Bush's attempts to be seen as an ordinary soldier when he donned his flight suit, Leonidas simultaneously functions as both the leader of the Spartan warriors and as a Spartan warrior himself.

The male spectator views Leonidas in this way when the Spartan soldiers break from their usual huddled battle formation to fight Persian soldiers individually. Although Leonidas constantly stresses the importance of fighting as a cohesive group, this scene allows the viewer to experience his individual body in action. The scene focuses on Leonidas at the front of the group of soldiers, and the camera moves with him as he slaughters the Persian infantry. With every lunge of his spear, the scene employs Snyder's signature slow motion technique, allowing the viewer to fully appreciate Leonidas's form and the control that he has over his body. The shot then zooms in on his spear as he throws it, taking down two Persians at once, and then pans back to Leonidas as he unsheathes his sword, ready for more. The scene is choreographed in such a way that the slaying of these men is depicted as graceful, with Leonidas dancing around his enemies as he slits their throats and chops off their legs. His final kill comes when a Persian runs towards Leonidas, which Leonidas effortlessly puts a stop to by holding out his shield. As the Persian flies backwards, Leonidas's body turns towards the camera while he gazes at his enemy on the ground. The slow motion technique makes this moment last longer than it should, but the shot gives the audience a glimpse of Leonidas's half-naked, masculine body; his abs and muscles bulge as he readies himself to make the killing blow. As he moves closer to the Persian on the ground, the scene speeds up one last time as Leonidas's sword plunges into his enemy's chest.

Snyder's use of slow motion allows the audience to comprehend that these are indeed human male figures who are fighting, not super powered beings with which they cannot as easily identify. But this technique also highlights specifically how these filmic bodies act as a result of the choreography of the scene. Snyder holds the viewer's

attention on the instances in which Leonidas strikes any one of the countless enemies who blunder into his warpath. Leonidas's ability to fight all of these men off effectively is a direct result of the film's placement of these enemies. However, to the viewer, the use of slow motion highlights Leonidas's ability to perform extraordinary feats with his male body, feats which the average male viewer can only wish to be able to perform.

The film's preservation of post-9/11 gender norms in relation to the male body suggest that the ideal body should be attempted to be attained. Interestingly enough, the film inspired a workout routine in order for men to imitate the bodies that the film presents. A *Men's Health* article published after the DVD release of the film discusses the actor Gerard Butler (who plays Leonidas in the film)'s training routine for the film. "Butler's training for *300* simultaneously built muscle, increased muscular endurance, and stripped fat fast [...] [*Men's Health* "strength and conditioning coach" Craig] Ballantyne put together this workout video series for you to follow along with and – provided you're fit like a king—try out for yourself" ("The 300 Workout", *Men's Health*). The existence of such a workout routine and the desire of men to utilize it in order to mirror the bodies seen in the film is testament to the ways that these films perpetuate contemporary masculine ideologies and have an influence on how these ideologies are dispersed throughout culture. By playing into America's obsession with protectiveness and self-image in the wake of September 11th, films such as *300* have allowed these understandings of gender to further infuse themselves within American culture.

300 also highlights the expectations of the post-9/11 male body by illustrating the opposite of this body through the film's villains. The film's main villain, Xerxes, is a tall

menacing figure who believes himself to be a God among men, and who will stop at nothing to conquer as much land as he can. However, the film goes to great lengths to portray Xerxes as sexually ambiguous, as opposed to Leonidas, whose heterosexuality enables him to provide for his queen and allows her to be reliant on him. In one scene in which Leonidas comes face to face with Xerxes, the Persian leader walks down from his throne, adorned in a full array of jewelry, which emphasizes the feminine aspect of his character. Soon after, Leonidas turns around and the camera cuts to a low angle shot as Xerxes moves behind Leonidas, puts his hands on his shoulders and stares at Leonidas seductively, urging him to surrender. Xerxes seductive manner when dealing with Leonidas in this scene implies Xerxes's homosexuality. Paralleling conservative feelings after September 11th, *300* plays off the idea that homosexuality is threatening, having the potential to overthrow America's traditional heterosexual belief system in which notions of heroism and masculinity are based.

The film also condemns male bodies that do not fit a well-toned, muscular image, portraying them as weak and ineffective. In the first scene of the film, Dilios tells of how Leonidas was chosen to be a Spartan warrior. "When the boy was born, like all Spartans, he was inspected. If he'd been small or puny, or sickly or misshapen, he would be discarded." One of these "misshapen" boys does survive however, as a deformed creature known as Ephialtes. Ephialtes secretly follows the Spartan soldiers to war, and upon confronting Leonidas about his ability to fight, he is rejected based on his inability to lift his shield high enough. Upon being rejected, Ephialtes defects to the Persians, betraying the Spartan army and ultimately aiding in their deaths. The only bodies that the viewer

can truly identify with, then, are the bodies of the Spartan soldiers, who, despite their exaggerated features, best resemble the bodies of the standard male viewer.

Finally, *300* also reiterates cultural understandings of heroism and masculinity in relation to individualism and patriotism. The film emphasizes the battle formation that the Spartan soldiers take: side by side with shields raised, edging rhythmically towards the enemy. As Leonidas explains to Ephialtes when he is unable to raise his shield, “We fight as a single, impenetrable unit. That is the source of our strength. Each Spartan protects the man to his left, thigh to neck with his shield. A single weak spot, and the phalanx shatters.” In the scene that follows, the Spartans are shown employing this battle strategy. Using frequent close-up shots, the film illustrates the men working together as a unit, bashing the Persians with their shields and killing them with their spears. This fighting technique is representative of the notion of the male hero as part of a greater collective of males, who all fight together in order to protect their nation.

Yet the film emphasizes the notion of the male hero as an individual who plays a vital role as part of the nation, but also acts on their own with the intention to protect. While Leonidas stresses the importance of the Spartan battle formation as “the source of our strength,” the film also shows these soldiers breaking off from the group and fighting on their own, such as the slow motion scene which highlights Leonidas’s male form. The film then suggests that while the ideal male must adhere to the group mentality of their nation, individually, they must also hold beliefs of patriotism and nationalism and go out of their way to express these specific beliefs.

Unlike the work of Frank Miller, Alan Moore's graphic novels are grounded politically in liberal ideologies and are concerned with overturning the ways in which readers understand heroism both in comic books, and in society. If Miller attempts to take on a conservative approach to his work through highly sexualized imagery that portrays men as protectors of both the female sex and their country, Moore attempts to subvert these roles, often depicting men who do not fit the requirements of heteronormative gender types. This attempt to undermine gender conventions speaks to a recurring theme in Moore's work in which characters are much more psychologically complex than traditional comic book heroes and the hard-bodied cinematic heroes who were popular when Moore's two major graphic novel works, *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* were written.

The filmic adaptations of these graphic novels make a concerted effort to maintain the subversive themes and ideologies that Moore conveys through his work. Zack Snyder's adaptation of *Watchmen* attempts to visually capture the narrative of the original text and is indeed concerned with the changing nature of heroism and notions of good and evil. Likewise, James McTeigue's adaptation of *V for Vendetta*, while changing the narrative slightly, remains faithful to V's characterization as an intellectual terrorist who defies an oppressive government.

However, despite these efforts both *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* tend to fall back into the conservative representations of masculinity on both a visual and a narrative level. The films based on Moore's work, then, illustrate the ways in which cultural values permeate and ultimately construct American society. Specifically, it is these conservative

notions of masculinity and heroism, rather than the liberal ideologies that Moore addresses in his original texts, that take precedence as a result of the way in which they engage with America's fears and insecurities.

Masculine Power in *Watchmen*

Alan Moore's *Watchmen* is considered to be one of the most revolutionary graphic novel texts for its unique perspective on the superhero and its consciousness of America's societal concerns. The story takes place in an alternate reality in which masked heroes, who once were seen as celebrities, are now banned under law, and Richard Nixon has entered his third term as President of the United States. The graphic novel begins with the character Rorschach (a psychotic and violent outlaw hero whose mask resembles a Rorschach test) as he investigates the murder of his former teammate, the Comedian, a hero with a disregard for human life who was eventually hired by the government. Rorschach enlists the help of two other ex-heroes, Nite Owl II (aka Dan Dreiberg, a now flabby and middle-aged man who had taken over the mantle of Nite Owl from an old friend, but is now retired himself) and the Silk Spectre (aka Laurie Juspecky, also retired, whose mantle she had inherited from her mother) to find the Comedian's killer, believing themselves to be the next victims. The plot is made more complicated by the fact that America is moving closer to nuclear war with the Soviet Union and that the nation's most valuable weapon, a matter-defying, blue colored superhuman dubbed Dr. Manhattan, has deserted the planet, believing human life to be meaningless. These two plot points intersect when the hero killer is revealed to be Ozymandias, an ex-hero himself, who succeeds in a plot to stage a fake alien invasion that kills the majority of

New York city's population in order to bring the United States and the Soviet Union together to avoid total global annihilation.

Unlike other comic book characters such as Batman or Captain America, the characters of Moore's *Watchmen* are generally not defined by their physical image or their unwavering loyalty to their country. Instead, Moore is more interested in a new type of superhero, one who must face off against the zeitgeist of their culture, in this case, 1980s Cold War America. While the comic book heroes of the mid 20th century embraced society's notions of masculinity and heroism, *Watchmen*'s characters must come to terms with new expectations of these concepts. In his discussion of Alan Moore as a critic of the one dimensional, morally rigid comic book hero, comic book culture writer Bradford Wright states that, "To place faith in such icons, [Moore] argued, was to give up responsibility for our lives and future to the Reagans, Thatchers, and other 'Watchmen' of the world who were supposed to 'rescue' us and perhaps lay waste to the planet in the process" (Wright, 273). As Wright argues, *Watchmen* effectively brings together Moore's anti-conservative ideologies and a new form of storytelling. Author Douglas Wolk also contributes to this concept in arguing that "*Watchmen* systematically undermines the entire premise of adventure stories: not only that evil can be vanquished and that doing good can save the world but that 'good' and 'evil' are easy to apply" (Wolk, 240). Moore's graphic novel, then, calls these notions of good and evil into question in a way that not only subverts the typical comic book narrative, but also the societal narrative that America's stance in the Cold War was correct and justified.

While Snyder's 2009 film adaptation of Moore's graphic novel also takes place in an alternate, ultra-conservative 1985, its release in the years following 9/11 places the

film in a much different context than the work on which it was based. In his discussion of the graphic novel, Wolk argues that, “Our New York is theirs, without the pretty plug-in electric cars; the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 chillingly recalled the one in *Watchmen*; most of all the ‘destroy it to save it’ calculus of *Watchmen* is the same one its readers face in the atomic era” (Wolk, 243). However, while Snyder’s film takes place in the “atomic era,” it was released in the post-9/11 era. And while Wolk makes a valid argument that reading the graphic novel after September 11th anticipates ideologies and themes of the War on Terror, the film’s inclusion of the historical events of the Cold War (such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) instead reflect current anxieties of America at war. Specifically, the film’s ending differs drastically from the graphic novel where, instead of an alien invasion, an atomic bomb made from the particles of Dr. Manhattan’s body is set off in New York City. Dr. Manhattan, who comes to see the rationale in Ozymandias’s plan, leaves the planet while the world is united over its new common enemy. As theorist Stuart Moulthrop writes in his essay “*Watchmen Meets The Aristocrats*,” “In both comic and film, Dr. Manhattan remains at large, whereabouts unknown; but in the film, this absence constitutes an impending threat [...] the world will always live in fear of Dr. Manhattan’s judgment-in every sense of the word” (Moulthrop). Moulthrop’s statement regarding this sense of “fear” parallels the national anxiety of terrorism after September 11th. This profound change in the narrative’s ending suggests that Snyder was well aware of the cultural climate of the years after September 11th. And while this new ending harks back to the fears of the Cold War era, it is the knowledge of an untraceable enemy (such as Osama Bin Laden) that resonates within post-9/11 America.

Much like the films based on Miller's work, *Watchmen*'s positioning as a post-9/11 film also evokes modern representations of masculinity. While the graphic novel strays from the hard-bodied depiction of the Reagan era man in its attempt to comment on how heroism can be defined at this time, Snyder's film embraces these images of hyper-masculinity at a time in which the sexualized masculine body was experiencing a resurgence as a result of the fearful climate of post-9/11 society. This emphasis on the images of the sexualized and powerful male enables the film to reproduce and further shape post-9/11 representations of masculinity and heroism. Specifically, the film's insistence on images that connote sexual and physical power detracts from the intention of the original text to question the portrayal of heroism and instead highlights the expectations of the post-9/11 man. Furthermore, the changes to the film's ending also represent the nationalistic and individualistic aspects of male heroism in post-9/11 culture.

The filmic adaptation of *Watchmen* evokes these ideas of male representation and identification most notably through the character of Dr. Manhattan, who is *Watchmen*'s only true super powered hero. Once known as physicist Jon Osterman, Dr. Manhattan is born when Osterman becomes trapped in a chamber used for nuclear experimentation, is zapped by tachyon particles and is thought to have been killed. Soon after, however, he is resurrected as a glowing, blue-skinned version of his former self, who now has the power to control matter and can move freely between time and space. Soon after his rebirth, he is named Dr. Manhattan, after the Manhattan Project, and becomes America's ultimate weapon against the impending threat of the Soviets.

On one level, to study Dr. Manhattan's masculine identity seems ironic when neither the graphic novel nor the film directly divulge if he is actually human. With his blue skin and his ability to conquer time and space, Dr. Manhattan's humanity is questioned to a certain extent. Yet Dr. Manhattan is depicted as a character who possesses an explicitly male body, a fact that is emphasized by Dr. Manhattan's nakedness, including illustrations that reveal his human male penis. Notably, Dr. Manhattan's body has no relation to his new superpowers. Instead, his body in the film represents an idealized masculine form that connotes sexual potency and power.

In the graphic novel, Dave Gibbons' artwork depicts Dr. Manhattan's penis simply as another aspect of his male form. Gibbons' style of illustration is reminiscent of the art of early comic strips in that it is simplistic, yet tends to emphasize the proportions of human form. The inclusion of Dr. Manhattan's penis is represented by a few drawn lines, making it proportionate to the rest of his body. If anything, the Dr. Manhattan of the graphic novel, while not entirely human, seems to connote the beauty and symmetry of the human form.

Snyder's film, on the other hand, goes to great lengths to detail and thus emphasize his male genitalia. The importance that the film places on the visualization of Dr. Manhattan's naked body and, more specifically, his penis, relates to the perpetuation of post-9/11 masculinity through the way in which the male viewer identifies with Dr. Manhattan and through the sexual power that his literal phallus implies. In his discussion on what constitutes the "new man," Sean Nixon paraphrases Frank Mort in stating that "what marked out the new image was the way it offered a more sexualized representation of the male body in ways which drew on codings traditionally associated with

representations of femininity in consumer culture and, in addition, resisted the assertion of a fixed or true sense of maleness in its styling of appearance” (Nixon, 3). Here, Nixon suggests that the male form has taken on the typical female role of being determined by the eroticized body, thus becoming an object of desire. In classical Hollywood cinema, the female form was typically fetishized, and objectification was usually determined by a body part that connoted male sexual desire. As Mulvey argues, “[...] conventional close-ups of legs [...] or a face [...] integrate into a narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of the fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative\ [...]” (Mulvey, 62). Nixon argues that images of the new man have been used in a similar way and that the reversion to hard-bodied imagery has also fetishized the sexualized male body. Dr Manhattan’s image differs slightly from the images that Mulvey and Nixon discuss in that fetishization is usually based on a body part that connotes sexual desire, but does not directly present sexual organs. However, Dr. Manhattan’s penis is fetishized in the way in which it is symbolic of his masculine identity; in other word’s Dr. Manhattan is definitively masculine because of the existence of his penis.

Arguably, this idea of viewing and desiring the onscreen male connotes a homosexual desire on the part of the male viewer. As Robert Corber suggests in his book *In the Name of National Security*, “[...] according to Freudian theory, the male spectator’s identification with the hero of the classical text involves the repression of a potentially destabilizing homosexual cathexis: he unconsciously desires the hero of the classical text, or else he would not identify with him” (Corber, 60). In identifying with and desiring the sexual power that Dr. Manhattan puts forward, there is indeed a form of

homosexual desire occurring. However, as Corber points out, the heterosexual male viewer represses this desire. Repression of this desire is key to how the post-9/11 man engages with these films. If he, the ordinary American male citizen, is meant to embody a heroic masculine identity, than he must consequently not identify with representations of non-heteronormativity. While this concept is not new to film spectatorship, it is especially important in the construction of the post-9/11 man, who, in his status as an everyman, must especially differentiate himself from an identity that could potentially connote weakness. The heterosexual male spectator, than, can only fully identify with Dr. Manhattan's penis through the ways in which it works to connote heterosexual power and desire.

In the film, these images of his penis function as a way for the male viewer to both identify with the male form on screen and realize that it is something that they lack, suggesting that not only does Dr. Manhattan have a body that has the ability to protect, but also a body that connotes sexual power. In one scene, Dr. Manhattan, in a display of his ability to move between space and time, transports the film's only female heroine, Laurie, to Mars in his attempt to show her that human life is trivial and meaningless. As Dr. Manhattan escorts Laurie onto the giant clock-like structure that he has created, the camera reveals Dr. Manhattan's penis through a medium shot that allows the viewer to observe the penis in relation to the rest of his male body. Along with the color scheme of the shot, in which Dr. Manhattan's blue body is highlighted by the contrasting red background of Mars, this scene allows the viewer to identify with Dr. Manhattan as a male figure, but connotes a sense of lack among the viewer as well. Here, the film pays particular attention to the penis, highlighting the spectacle of Dr. Manhattan's naked

body, conveying that the sexual power granted to him through his penis is an extension of his physical masculine identity. In the medium shot in which Dr. Manhattan is standing next to Laurie, the viewer is allowed to witness Dr. Manhattan's penis for an extended period of time, and realizes that not only is Dr. Manhattan physically strong, but he is also sexually well endowed, connoting the extent of his sexual power.

In another scene, the shot reveals Laurie's face as she and Dr. Manhattan have sex. When she opens her eyes however, she sees that he has made multiple copies of himself in order to simultaneously perform sexually and finish his work on what (unbeknownst to him) will soon become a nuclear weapon that will destroy New York City. After a brief dialogue sequence between Laurie and Dr. Manhattan, which is mostly shot from the waist up, the shot then cuts to a longer shot of four Dr. Manhattan's merging into each other, and each is shown to be completely naked. In the graphic novel, this sequence of events is shown in a series of a few quick panels, none of which reveal Dr. Manhattan's penis in an attempt to focus more on the narrative rather than the spectacle. The film's final shot of this sequence, however, pays particular attention to each copy of Dr. Manhattan and his fully naked body. Additionally, this scene exemplifies Dr. Manhattan's enhanced sexual power through his ability to pleasure Laurie. Yet while the male viewer recognizes the sexual act, the impossibility of the ability to perform to the extent at which Dr. Manhattan can (by producing multiple copies of himself, with each focusing on a different way of stimulating Laurie) connotes a sense of lack: the viewer cannot perform to the extent at which the on screen male is performing.

Through these scenes, Dr. Manhattan's body is clearly meant to be a spectacle representing the perfect male form. The graphic novel is aware of this notion of the spectacle, but in a different way. The novel's framing of Dr. Manhattan with panels that cover his penis or show his entire body in proportion, suggest a celebration of the human form, as Dr. Manhattan is framed in a similar fashion to Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, an image which the graphic novel makes use of in a chapter describing Dr. Manhattan's role in the Cold War since his birth. In his discussion of how masculine bodies had been portrayed in comics before *Watchmen*, theorist Tim Nelson writes that "the superheroes' version of masculinity had been drawn from bodybuilding, but was discretely covered up, with skin-suits and morality tales in order to dissuade young boys from pursuing a homosexual lifestyle" (Nelson, 254). Moore, however, focuses primarily on presenting and admiring the human male form as an object of beauty, rather than as an object of sexual desire and in doing so, attempts to subvert how the comic book hero is traditionally understood in regards to his masculine identity.

Yet Snyder's film is more interested in presenting Dr. Manhattan as a male who connotes sexual power through the emphasis on images of the penis. Male sexual power is an important aspect of the post-9/11 masculine identity, as it signifies potency and the ability of the male to provide for the female sexually. In similar fashion to the way the viewer identifies with the male bodies in *300*, the male viewer identifies with Dr. Manhattan's penis as an exclusively male part. However, Snyder presents Dr. Manhattan's penis, along with the rest of his body, as a spectacle in the film, where it functions as an impossible feature that highlights the impossibility of the ideal man. The scene in which Dr. Manhattan is reborn is evidence of how Dr. Manhattan is meant to be

positioned as a spectacle for the male viewer. The scene takes place in the cafeteria of the facility in which Jon Osterman used to work, and as his former girlfriend and his former co-worker sit and eat lunch, Osterman reappears as a blue, physically enhanced version of his former self. The graphic novel presents this scene in a single, larger panel, in which Osterman/Dr. Manhattan is at the center of the frame and the spectators in the cafeteria look on from below him. The reader, however, does not share the same space as these spectators and instead exists outside of the frame. Thus the reader, while able to view the spectacle of Dr. Manhattan's body, is positioned as viewing the spectators as they view Dr. Manhattan, and is more concerned with their awe than they are with their own.

The film, however, frames this scene differently. Whereas the illustration shows Dr. Manhattan from directly in front and slightly below his body, the film pulls the camera back and shows him in more of a panoramic shot. As opposed to being situated outside of the frame of the comic, the viewer shares the space, and the spectacle of Dr. Manhattan, with the on-screen spectators. This spectacle, however, is not solely due to the amazement of his being reborn, but also by the display of his enhanced sexualized male form. In this scene then, the viewer comes to see Dr. Manhattan as human, but his positioning as spectacle also suggests that his erotized male body is different from the average male spectator and represents what the male spectators desire: the perfect sexual body which signifies man's ability to protect and exert power over the woman.

Dress also functions as a way to highlight the erotic male form while simultaneously suggesting identification and desire. Furthermore, these images of the sexualized man are intertwined with the notion of man as a protector of his country and of the female sex. In her discussion of fashion after September 11th, Susan Faludi writes

that “if the post-9/11 woman was dressed for domestication, her mate had to be adorned in the protector gear. Soon after the attacks, men’s fashions began tending toward hard hat and ‘military chic,’ as the new style was invariable called” (Faludi, 177). According to Faludi, fashion after 9/11 took on a more militaristic style, a trend that suggests how American’s perceptions of strength were also rooted in the perceptions of the hard-bodied masculine form. Similarly to George W. Bush in his flight suit on the USS Abraham Lincoln, dress in the post-9/11 era emphasized the ideal, enhanced male body. While these images connoted male strength and the ability to protect, they also served to 68errorism68 the male body as an object of sexual power.

The character who perhaps best represents this concept in *Watchmen* is Nite Owl II, also known as Dan Dreiberg. Dreiberg, now retired as a superhero, is far from the poised muscular superhero seen in early comics. In both the graphic novel and in the film, Dreiberg is depicted as middle-aged, flabby, and sexually impotent, in what initially seems to be a stark contrast to the images of Dr. Manhattan. Dreiberg *is* the average American man, who has the potential to possess a fully masculine identity according to the post-9/11 cultural narrative. This possession occurs when he dons his costume. As theorist J. Keeping suggests, “[...] the second Nite Owl appears to be more himself in the costume than out of it. Hesitant and self-doubting as Dan Dreiberg, he is confident and assertive as Nite Owl” (Keeping, 54). In portraying Dreiberg/Nite Owl in such a way, Moore critiques Western understandings of heroism in that Dan is able to transform from an out of shape nobody into a suddenly secure and poised hero. Moore then suggests that culture is eager to find placeholders for its heroes in order to maintain an image of security.

This ability for the average man to adopt a heroic masculine identity is a defining element of the post-9/11 cultural narrative, and as a result, the graphic novel and the film differ in how Nite Owl is depicted after he dons this costume. In his article on superheroes and fashion, Frederick Weitzen writes that, “these costumes are the exact opposite of camouflage; unlike all combat uniforms since World War I, these costumes want to attract attention” (Weitzen, 241). Like Dr. Manhattan’s enhanced body, these costumes connote a spectacle. Gibbon’s artwork in the graphic novel pays particular attention to the spectacle of Nite Owl’s costume, highlighting its symbolic features that are meant to signify that Nite Owl is recognizable to the public. Gibbons uses a series of close-up panels that focus on the symbols of the costume; the moon-shaped belt buckle, the cape, and the mask are all meant to represent an owl. The graphic novel thus strays from images of Nite Owl’s masculine body and instead focuses on the ways in which the use of symbols allow him stand out and be seen as a hero who is interested in protecting the public. It is this aspect of Nite Owl with which readers of the graphic novel then identify: his ability to be seen and acknowledged, and it is this confidence that gives him power.

The film, however, takes a different approach to Nite Owl’s costume. Snyder’s film removes the recognizable emblems from the suit and instead portrays it as more of a suit of armor. While the graphic novel focuses on Dreiberg’s suit as a symbol of his ability to watch over and protect the citizens of New York, there is no evidence that it transforms his body. He is frequently illustrated as being covered up, with his cape wrapped around most of his body. The film’s costume, however, literally *alters* Dreiberg’s body. As Dan and Laurie are about to depart on a rescue mission, the camera

moves in as Dan is revealed for the first time in his costume. As steam billows around him, the wind picks up his cape, revealing Dan's heavily armored chest (complete with pectoral outlines) and confident stance with his hands on his hips. Unlike the graphic novel, there is little that is recognizable from Nite Owl's costume; its dark colors and non-existent emblems make it almost impossible to recognize that Dreiberg's outfit is meant to represent an owl. Instead, Dan's body has become eroticized, specifically through the armor's outlines of muscular abs and chest. Like the bodies of the men in *Sin City* and *300*, Dreiberg's body is meant to be seen as not only a protector, but a protector with a hard body that connotes physical strength and power.

Dan's new sexualized identity is further emphasized during a sex scene which takes place between he and Laurie on the Owlship, an airship that Dan would use during his Nite Owl II days. The scene in the graphic novel is short with a few quick panels that show the characters undressing and moving towards the floor. These panels do not show the sexual act and are mostly used to imply what occurs. The film however, cuts between close-ups of the characters in the act of sex and shots that show Dan and Laurie in various positions, and the film is not hesitant about showing the bodies of both individuals. Therefore, putting on the suit ultimately allows Dan to make use of his body now that he has become a sexualized man. His newfound physical power that allows him to protect once again also enables his sexual power that allows him to finally please Laurie. Like the image of Dr. Manhattan, the costume allows the male spectator to identify with Dan's new body, but it also signifies to viewers their own lack of this body. However, this scene also indicates that the average man can easily step into the role of hero and fulfill his expectation to protect, just as Dan does when donning his costume.

The decision to use this alternate costume and to emphasize the impact it has on Dan's sexuality correlates with the perception of masculinity after September 11th. Faludi writes that the attacks created a sense of "...impotence that afflicted the nation at large" because the majority of America was unable to act (Faludi, 69). If there was indeed a sense of impotence and lack of power after September 11th, Nite Owl's combination of the hard-bodied image and sexual potency suggests the desire to reclaim America's powerful masculine identity.

Another important aspect of the image of the male body after 9/11 is the presence of the phallus and its ability to connote power. In his writings on masculinity in post-9/11 culture, Ducat writes that "The buildings *were* phallic, not just in the crude sense of being towering monoliths that penetrated the sky, but because they, along with the Pentagon, represented (for America, as well as its enemies) fantasies and attitudes associated with U.S. global economic, political, and cultural hegemony" (Ducat, 225). As Ducat suggests, the idea of the phallus conveys much more than just the presence or implication of a penis. The phallic object connotes strength and power and, like the new militaristic fashion sense, also helped in further emphasizing the hard-bodied post 9/11 man. Ducat writes:

Among the many product tie-ins to this trend was a "2003 Calendar of Heroes," featuring twelve specimens of bare-chested firefighter beefcake. The man on the cover is posed in front of the Empire State Building, now the tallest structure in New York. The photo is framed so as to establish a kind of equivalence between

the firefighter and the phallic monument—the former positioned on the left, and the latter on the right, making them appear to be about the same size. (Ducat, 227)

The presence of the phallic object in the photo that Ducat references serves to empower the firefighter. As Ducat points out, the positioning of the firefighter next to and on the same level as the building conveys the sense that the firefighters live up to this sense of mammoth power and strength. Moreover, it is the image of the man's *physical body* that is being compared with a *building* that signifies great strength and power. If America supposedly lost its phallic symbols in the events of 9/11, it certainly invoked phallic imagery in order to renew its perception of strength.

Snyder's film makes great use of phallic symbols in relation to the male body, most notably with the character of Ozymandias, also known as Adrian Veidt. Veidt is considered to be the world's smartest man and is the closest character to a villain in *Watchmen*, with his plot to save the world from nuclear holocaust by sacrificing millions of people, an example of Moore's ability to blur the lines between good and evil. His status as a character who exists between good and evil also helps in understanding the contested ways which the spectator comes to identify with Veidt. While the power gained from his possession of a masculine identity allows the male spectator to identify with him, his class removes him from spectator identification, as the post-9/11 male spectator is meant to identify with the lower class, average male hero. The film introduces Veidt while he is talking with a reporter and simultaneously posing for pictures against the backdrop of his office window which overlooks the New York skyline. In most of these shots, he is positioned as next to and equal in height to the Twin Towers. On the most basic of levels, the inclusion of the Twin Towers represents the time frame in which the

film is set: an alternate 1985, a date in which the towers would have still been standing. However, when compared with Ducat's description of the firefighter calendar, the two images are very similar. The images are meant to represent the amount of power that Veidt holds. Yet unlike the calendar photo, Veidt is not particularly brawny or muscular in this scene. Only when Veidt attacks an "assassin" (who is actually a pawn of Veidt's whom he uses to mask his plot to destroy New York) does the audience see his true might when he wields the phallus in the form of a pole taken from inside the lobby of his office. The film utilizes a slow motion shot that emphasizes Veidt's movements as he picks up the pole, and moves toward his opponent. The shot then returns to normal speed just as Veidt makes contact with the assassin who falls forcefully to the ground. While this scene also appears in the graphic novel, Snyder's use of slow motion effects further emphasizes Veidt's stylized movements and his wielding of the phallic object.

Another example of phallic imagery with Veidt's character comes with his obsession with ancient culture, especially that of the Egyptians. In addition to his Manhattan skyscraper, Veidt also owns an Antarctic hideaway in which Rorschach and Nite Owl II travel to confront him, as they believe he is the murderer of their fellow ex-teammate, the Comedian. The film portrays Veidt's arctic fortress as a giant pyramid that emerges from the ice. Inside, obelisks and other phallic structures adorn the room in which he stands in front of a wall of televisions as he gathers information from all around the globe. Once again, Veidt is continually surrounded by objects that signify his masculine identity, substantiating the idea that Veidt serves as a protector of not only the nation, but of the world. Yet the phallic symbols in this scene also serve to problematize how the viewer identifies with Veidt. These ancient Egyptian phallic artifacts that are

present when he reveals his plot allow the viewer to realize that this man has the ability to pervert this power. Veidt's status as a rich businessman also plays into his misuse of his masculine power and the questionability of his role as a hero. Veidt is not the average American man who steps up to the challenge of defending his country. While he supposedly has good intentions in trying to save the world, Veidt ultimately fails at protecting his country by destroying most of New York City. This ability for the viewer to identify and consequently misidentify with Veidt highlights the importance of the new American hero as the everyman, a man who, according to the culture narrative has the interest of his country in mind first and foremost. Thus, while the male spectator may identify with Veidt in the way he utilizes his masculine form, his class and the deeds he performs as a result of his class allow the spectator to realize that he is not meant to be fully identified with.

As a medium that creates images, film has the ability to either play into socially accepted representations or attempt to change them. Likewise, the graphic novel has a similar ability and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* proves that it is possible to successfully subvert these images while still appealing to a mass audience. Snyder's version, however, relies on the contemporary understandings of masculinity to adapt Moore's 1986 graphic novel to film. These representations of masculinity are problematic, then, not only in their inaccuracies to the graphic novel, but in the way that they adhere to notions of masculinity that are defined by a sexualized and powerful masculine image.

“And it is not an idea that I miss. It is a man”: Gender Subversion and Construction in *V for Vendetta*

While *Watchmen* subverted the narrative conventions of the comic book genre, Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* challenged understandings of heroism in 1980's culture through the antihero named V. James McTeigue's 2005 film adaptation of the graphic novel shifts Moore's Reagan/Thatcher era narrative into the mentality of Bush-era, post 9/11 society in which America has mostly collapsed as a result of its "war" (it is suggested in the film that this is meant to be the war on terror) and England's Norsefire regime rules over one of humanity's last Westernized nations. To ensure that England retains its status as a world power, the Norsefire regime enacts strict surveillance and censorship laws reminiscent of The Patriot Act that was instilled after September 11th, yet to a new extreme. Households are constantly listened in on, homosexuality has been banned, and the possession of non-Christian works (specifically, the Koran) are punishable by death. The film thus takes the conservative values and strategies that were utilized throughout Bush-era politics and associates them with a totalitarian regime.

Additionally, the film positions a terrorist as the narrative's hero at a time when terrorism was linked solely to perceptions of evil. McTeigue's film, then, takes on a stark critical view of Bush era policies and its world view. In doing so, the film also attempts to subvert post-9/11 views on masculinity by criticizing hyper-masculinity and deemphasizing the hard-bodied image. While these attempts are notable and are important in understanding how masculinity is often perceived, the film is also problematic in its tendency to also promote the constructions that it attempts to

undermine, including representations of the stereotypical heterosexual power structure and a focus on body movement and fighting skill. Thus, while the film succeeds to a certain extent in challenging post-9/11 politics and representations of masculinity, its shortcomings ultimately represent the ways in which these conventions of gender easily continue to permeate American culture.

The scene in which V is formally introduced to the audience sets the film's tone of being critical of the conservative male image, as it suggests that contemporary representations of the sexually powerful man are responsible for an abuse of this power and that the soft-bodied intellectual, as opposed to the more muscular working class man, also has the power to be viewed as a hero. Evey, one of the film's protagonists and V's eventual protégé, is shown walking down a dimly lit alley as loudspeakers above announce that a curfew is in effect, conveying the Norsefire's strict control over its citizens. Suddenly, two men appear and when Evey refuses their sexual advances and threatens them with mace, they reveal themselves to be Fingermen, henchmen of the Norsefire police force, who threaten to arrest Evey if she does not comply with their sexual demands. Instead of glorifying the police force, or any man for that matter, who is supposed to be a protector of the people, the film instead presents the Fingermen as men who are overcome with their own sense of power, and they believe that this power enables them to exert their sexual desire however they please.

Comic book theorist Keith M. Booker writes that "The Fingermen who accost Evey make sexually aggressive remarks and then make it clear that they plan to gang rape her, thus providing an early comment on the hypocrisy of the Norsefire regime, which pays lip service to piety and morality, but in fact pursues its agenda through obscene and

vicious programs of self-serving brutality” (Booker, 190). As Booker suggests, this scene conveys the way the power structure works within this regime, in that while Norsefire asserts that its main purpose is to protect the people, it is more inclined to abuse this power. As it is the *Fingermen* who commit this heinous act, the film thus seems to criticize the way that men use their societal power and the way in which they view their bodies and sexuality as an instrument of power.

Furthermore, Evey’s own role in the film also helps to convey male abuse of sexual power. In the graphic novel, the story begins with Evey getting ready for her first night as a prostitute, and she finds her way into the alley in an attempt to entice her first customer. The film, however, makes no mention of her role as a prostitute and it is later revealed that she is instead heading out on a date with her co-worker. By changing Evey’s role in the film and thus, by desexualizing her, the film portrays the *Fingermen*’s sexual advances as even more unwarranted, further suggesting that they are abusing the power that has been bestowed upon them, both as government officials and as men.

Just as the men grab Evey, V enters the alleyway equipped with daggers and a Shakespearian monologue that the *Fingermen* are at a loss to understand. Punching one with the blunt end of his dagger, he cuts the belt of the other, leaving him exposed and powerless. Here, V’s cunningness and intellect combat and defeat the sexual power of the *Fingermen*, who are only defined by their authority and by their sex. In the film, the *Fingermen*’s sexual power and brute strength are no match for V’s calculated stylization. The cutting of the belt in this scene also suggests a castration of sorts, signifying that V’s intellectual abilities easily overcome the sexual power of the henchmen. The scene, then, seems to draw a line between how the powerful and sexualized man must act in relation

to the romanticized intellectual liberal. According to McTeigue's film, strength means little when compared to someone who is well spoken and learned. The film seems to take a standpoint that the male hero is not limited by his body and his duty to his nation. On the contrary, heroes such as V can work outside of and even in opposition to their government to perform selfless and moral acts.

The film also comments on the conventional heterosexual male hero by deemphasizing V's male body and portraying him as sexually androgynous. Unlike superheroes such as Batman or Superman, who are either heavily armed to suggest a masculine body or are themselves well toned and muscular, V's dress does not address his body type. Instead, his black cloak covers his entire body both when he is in action and when he is in the Shadow Gallery, his hideout and cache for all of the materials that have been censored by the government. The body suit that he wears under his cloak only reveals that he is relatively fit, but it does not outline masculine pectorals or other muscles like other superhero costumes. The most recognizable aspect of V's costume is his mask, which is pale white with pink blush, and is ironically his most feminine feature. While V's body is by no means out of shape, the androgyny of this character suggests that a body that fits the expectations of a contemporary masculine identity is not necessarily needed to perform heroic acts.

This adherence to a feminine identity is further exemplified in the film's opening scene. As V sits at a vanity and puts on his mask, the camera pans to another vanity, Evey's, as she applies lipstick. As Evey combs her hair while watching the media pundit Prothero spurt pro-England propaganda, the scene quickly cuts to V as he primps and watches as well. The scene utilizes more matches on action, such as Evey clipping her

necklace and V equipping himself with daggers, to set up the differences between the characters (she is going out on a date, he is getting prepared for a night of terrorism) while simultaneously portraying their ritualistic habits as equal. The film, then, alludes to its attempt to break down the masculine image by comparing the female character to the male hero, who also primps and perfects his appearance in front of a vanity. What is interesting, then, is that the scene begs the question: is V's prepping for a night of terror all that different from Rocky preparing for a fight or Batman donning his suit of armor? These images are not unrelated and suggest that the conventions that define masculinity and femininity may not be all that different.

Therefore, this scene points out the constructed nature of gender and that it is, in essence, a performance. Just as Evey is "putting on her face" to go out and impress Gordon with her femininity, V is also putting on a performance, a theme that is consistent with both gender and terrorism. James Keller states in his book *V for Vendetta as Cultural Pastiche*, "In the opening scenes, V prepares his costume in a space reminiscent of an actor's dressing room, and his subsequent activities are conducted with an affective dramatic flair" (Keller, 44). As Keller argues, in order to be seen as a terrorist, V must perform and show off his feats. Furthermore, V's performance suggests the fluidity of these gender conventions and the ease in which they can be deconstructed. While V is portrayed as a male and can be identified as a male due to his masculine voice behind the mask, his outward appearance does not parallel the usual expectations of the male body. If masculinity is to be partially defined by a sexualized body that connotes physical and sexual power, V is situated as proof that these notions can be subverted, and that he can still be identified with by the male spectator. Thus, McTeigue's film adaptation does

make a significant amount of headway in subverting certain gender connotations in the post-9/11 graphic novel film. However, what the film lacks in muscles and extreme patriotism on the part of the hero, it makes up for in traditional heterosexual gender power relations, specifically between V and Evey.

Evey's role in *V for Vendetta* is not very different from that of the post-9/11 woman. In the scene in which Evey is attacked by the Fingermen, she is unable to defend herself and is seen as the victim of a violent, sexually driven crime. It is V, the stable man who is not corrupted by a false sense of sexual power, who is able to come to her rescue. Despite efforts to portray V as somewhat sexually ambiguous, the voice of actor Hugo Weaving makes it apparent that V is meant to be viewed as a man. While the dialogue used conveys that V is an intellectual, Weaving's voice is powerful and deliberate; it suggests that V's motives are not to be questioned and that he is in control. Keller writes that V "is gentle and considerate in his interaction with Evey, his overblown gestures of formality, cordiality, and deference reminiscent of the early modern courtier or the suitor in an eighteenth century romance" (Keller, 41). However, it is V's cordial manner toward Evey that is in and of itself problematic. V's chivalrous nature is not meant to empower Evey; if anything his graciousness serves to counteract Evey's violent encounter with the Fingermen. V does not treat Evey as his equal through his acting as a romantic. Instead, she is delicate and, in line with the new masculine ideology, her status as a woman makes her worthy of protecting, and thus, less powerful than V.

Yet what Keller fails to reflect on is that V's manipulation of Evey solidifies the gendered relationship in which he wields the power. In the film, Evey is captured after attempting to escape from Gordon Dietrich's house and is put into solitary confinement

until she reveals the whereabouts of V. Throughout this ordeal, her head is shaved, she is repeatedly tortured, and is eventually told that she will be shot and killed. Evey, however, comes across a letter left by a previous inmate, detailing her experiences as a lesbian during the early Norsefire years. The woman's ordeal reveals to Evey that V's cause is worth fighting and dying for. A man enters her cell, cast in shadow, and when he tells Evey that it is time for her execution, she tells him that she is not afraid to die anymore. V then reveals himself to be the one who put Evey through this entire process as a test of her loyalty. Instead of having an equal relationship, V has the power and ability to manipulate Evey, even planting the letter to ensure that Evey would find it. Here, the power relationship between the male and female characters becomes quite evident; it is V who exerts power over Evey in his ability to control her. While she may seem strong in her capacity to resist interrogation, she is no match for V's intellect and manipulation, brought on by his masculine role.

The difference between the end of the film and the graphic novel is also indicative of this power relationship. In the last few panels of the graphic novel, Evey takes on V's wardrobe and takes on the role of leader of the revolution against Norsefire. As Di Liddo writes, "Evey has understood that there is no need to unmask V. Instead, she is now going to *become* V, and as his spiritual heir she will perpetuate his role as a rebel and an avenger. Once again, it is a woman who takes control of the situation [...]" (Di Liddo, 115). However, the same cannot be said for Evey in the film. In the final scene, Evey loads a lifeless V into a subway train laced with explosives that is headed towards Parliament. Evey pulls the switch, watches the train leave and goes up to the roof with Detective Finch to watch the explosion. However, instead of donning his signature mask

and cape, Evey watches and the scene cuts to V's body in the train speeding toward the building. Whereas the graphic novel suggests a shift in power from V to Evey that implies the fluidity of these gender conventions, as she is easily able to assume his role, the final shot of V in the train suggests that the power still lies solely with him. While the film may attempt to undermine certain conventions of gender, it ultimately must revert back to the myths surrounding masculine identity and power. If the post-9/11 man was meant to be seen as a hero and the female as a victim, *V for Vendetta* certainly falls back into this myth with V identifying as the hero who exerts power and Evey as the victim of both hyper-masculinity and V's manipulation.

Additionally, while the film does at times succeed in removing itself from the gendered constructions of the hard-bodied male, *V for Vendetta* falls back into these conventions in V's role as hero, specifically through the "revealing" of his identity and through the ways in which he uses his body. In the film, the investigation of the murders that V commits, along with the diary of one of his victims, reveals that V is actually the result of a biochemical experiment gone wrong. While the film hints at the fact that V may have gained some form of enhanced strength from these experiments, the full extent of V's potential superhuman qualities is left ambiguous. The film, then, seems less intent on dubbing V a superhero and more interested in revealing his identity as a man. In the scene in which his "identity" is revealed, the facility in which V is being kept ignites into flames, and chaos ensues all around. The scene then cuts to a long shot of a well-built man emerging from the flames, and then cuts again to a medium close-up of the man, who is identified as V, screaming in a monstrous roar. Thus, while V's body is usually not shown and is depicted as being somewhat feminine, the scene reveals that V does

indeed inhabit a masculine body, thus subverting the notion that the film attempts to be unconcerned with gender constructions and stylized hard body representations.

Booker also points to way in which V performs in his masculine body. For example in the fight scene that eventually leads to his death, V engages with a slew of thugs armed with guns. As he engages them, the camera follows his daggers as they fly through the air in slow motion, eventually hitting two of the men simultaneously. He then disarms the rest of the men using fast paced martial arts moves until he defeats them all. While these fighting sequences may not depict V's masculine body, his stylized movements suggest this ideal body as he is able to easily overpower and subdue these men through the use of his body. Additionally, V's use of his daggers suggests a wielding of the phallus. His use of phallic object, and not just the use of his hands, suggests that his power is granted to him through his adherence to a mostly masculine identity.

Furthermore, as Jeffords suggests, these masculine images create a collective idea of how masculinity is to be perceived (Jeffords, 26). The film also conveys this notion with the final scene of the film, in which the citizens of London all dress as V when watching the spectacle of Parliament explode. V's image, as a masculine revolutionary, is adopted by a nation through these images of his body in motion. His image, then, becomes more than just a symbol of national masculinity. V becomes a symbol of the nation itself and in doing so, he signifies the role that men should play, especially when it comes to the way in which the masculine body performs.

V for Vendetta's contributions to deconstructing the masculine image are undoubtedly important given society's views of the post-9/11 man, as the creation of an identifiable hero who breaks from the conservative ideology of masculinity is uncommon

in the modern action film. However, *V for Vendetta* proves how easily these gender norms are ingrained in American society and how they circumscribe perceptions of the male body image, especially through the construction of power relations and how the male body is used. Thus while *V for Vendetta* makes significant headway in deconstructing the façade of masculinity, the film suggests that the genre is still dominated by a conservative, hard-bodied ideology.

Conclusion

America has changed drastically since the end of the Bush Administration and with the election of Barak Obama in November 2008. For the first time in eight years, Americans voted in favor of the liberal policies of Obama, which included his promise to bring American soldiers home from Iraq during his presidency. (Barry). If one were to follow the trends between politics and representations of gender, it seems likely that the Obama administration would usher in new ideologies of how Americans define gender, ideologies that would question traditional and conservative values. However, an examination of cultural attitudes towards the Obama Administration and Hollywood's recent excursions in the action genre reveals that while some progress has been made, Americans still find themselves clinging to understandings of gender that are rooted in sexual difference and that are a product of American's fear of change.

In one sense, Obama has taken steps to diminish America's obsession with national security by reevaluating the consequences of the nation's added sense of security, such as the war in Iraq. Much of Obama's campaign rested on changing policies that many liberal Americans believed were morally questionable, yet were maintained in the nation's effort to reinstate itself as a strong and formidable world power. As a February 2009 *Newsweek* article states, Obama's "opposition to the Iraq war, and his pledge to withdraw U.S. troops out of Iraq within 16 months of his election gave him a critical edge among the Democratic faithful over Hilary Clinton" (Barry). By electing a President who supported withdrawing from a war that was at the center of the Bush Administration's "War on Terror," and also through the support that Hilary Clinton garnered in her hopes for the Presidency, it seemed that America was ready to change its

view of America as a weak and feminized nation that needed to constantly be protected by its men.

Yet despite Obama's election, Americans retain the sense that their nation is vulnerable and subject to attack, falling back into heteronormative understandings of gender to uphold this sense of security. Recently, controversy has erupted over Khalid Shiek Mohammed, a captured terrorist who was to be sentenced in a New York Court. A *New York Daily News* article states that "the [Obama] administration has vigorously argued that terrorists should be provided with civilian rights, insisting that this is the policy most consistent with our security and our values" (Sessions). The article goes on to blast the administration's decision to try a terrorist in civilian court arguing that "a decade was spent trying to transform America from the failed pre 9/11 law enforcement model to one that prioritizes intelligence gathering over criminal prosecutions—and that recognizes we are in a war" (Sessions). The article suggests that post-9/11 fears of the nation's vulnerability are still very much in the minds of Americans and that an anxiety still exists about America's own safety and stability.

Despite the public backlash against some of Obama's policies, Americans have still attempted to forge him into a hero as a result of these anxieties of national instability. Shortly after Obama's election, pictures surfaced of Obama shirtless in a swimsuit, an image after which both the media and Americans lusted (Travers and Tapper). Unlike Bush's bid to the media that he was in shape and tough enough to stand up to anyone who would do harm to the nation, an ABC news report quotes Obama scolding the media for paying attention to his image, and not the issues that mattered. "The problem's not that the info's not out there,' Mr. Obama said 'The problem is what you guys have been

reporting on. You've been reporting on how I look in a swimsuit" (Travers and Tapper). The report goes on to show the cover of an issue of *The Washingtonian* that reprinted the image with the headline, "26 Reasons to Love Living Here [in Washington D.C.]: Reason #2, our new neighbor is hot." While unlike Bush, Obama may not endorse this image of himself representing an idealized masculine body, the American public is fascinated by this image, suggesting that America is still very much interested in a national leader who embodies a hyper-masculine identity in order to protect and lead the nation.

Hollywood has also seen a slight shift in the ways that films deal with masculinity and heroism, but in a similar fashion to American's tendencies to revert back to stereotypical gender norms, the industry has also resorted to making films that follow conventional understandings of gender, especially within the graphic novel and comic book genre. Some of these films have attempted to question the role of heroism and its ties to masculinity. *Kick-Ass* (Vaughn, 2010), an adaptation of a graphic novel by Mark Millar and John Romita Jr, tells the story of teenager Dave Lizewski who decides to fight crime as the vigilante known as Kick-Ass. As the trailers and promotional materials for the film imply, Kick-Ass is the antithesis of a masculine hero, as he is nothing more than a scrawny, inexperienced teen (Hewitt, *Kick Ass*). The film has been marketed as a mix between an action film and a comedy that parodies the comic book genre, despite being based off of a graphic novel itself. Films such as *Kick-Ass* and other films that have parodied the comic book genre (such as *Meet the Spartans* (Friedberg & Seltzer, 2008) and *Superhero Movie* (Mazin, 2008)) suggest an understanding of American's obsession with representations of heroism in film and attempt to comment on these representations

through comedy, or in some cases, usher in new understandings of heroism and masculinity, as *Kick-Ass* has the potential to do in its status as a cross-genre film.

Still, the male hero has continued to dominate big-budget Hollywood blockbuster films with no plans of stopping anytime soon. Marvel Studios has announced its plans to produce a slew of films based on its superhero team The Avengers, having recently cast actor Chris Evans as the iconic American superhero, Captain America (Mashall). By bringing one of the nation's most well known and most patriotic male superheroes to the big screen, this film has the potential to heavily reinforce the connections between American masculinity and heroism. The fact that other recent comic book films that have perpetuated the hard bodied image, such as *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008) or *The Incredible Hulk* (Leterrier, 2008) have also been successful suggests there is a desire and a market to see representations of heroism dominate Hollywood.

By examining graphic novel adaptations produced during the Bush Administration in the years following September 11th, it becomes clear that these films, which are rooted in predominantly narrative texts, maintain America's cultural understanding of heroism and masculinity that is rooted in stereotypical gender conventions and the expectation of the male's ability to protect. As the nation moves into an era of new leadership and new challenges, it is important to look back on films such as these in order to understand how film culture helps to sculpt the ways in which we as a nation engage with cultural issues.

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Notes

The quote in the title of this thesis, “The Superman Exists, and He is American” is taken from *Watchmen*, directed by Zach Snyder, 2008.

“Never Retreat, Never Surrender” is a quote taken from *300*, directed by Zach Snyder, 2006

“And it is not an idea that I miss. It is a man” is a quote taken from *V for Vendetta*, directed by James McTeigue, 2005

