

EXTENDED ESSAY

The Evolution of Heroic Masculinity in Superman (1978) and Spider-Man Homecoming (2017)

Research Question: “To what extent do Superman (1978) and Spider-Man: Homecoming (2017) reconfigure heteronormative heroic masculinity through their treatment of physicality, emotional expression, interpersonal networks, and civic space, and how do these shifts reflect the sociocultural climates of late-Cold-War America and late-millennial Gen-Z culture?”

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Table of Content

Introduction.....	1
Background Information.....	2
Rescue Scenes.....	3
Emotionally Expressive Scenes.....	6
Civic Space Scenes.....	9
Conclusion.....	12
References.....	13

Introduction

Since 1930s superheroes have permeated popular culture and everyday life. Superheroes have served as cultural barometers, reflecting society's values, ideologies and fears. Customarily, these characters were presented in a narrow way, in which they embodied a heteronormative form of masculinity. The superheroes were physically predominant and showed nearly no signs of weakness or emotion. Emotion was viewed as a form of weakness. Superheroes were displayed as natural protectors of the whole society. In this essay, through the superhero films, *Superman (1978)*, directed by Richard Donner, and *Spider-Man: Homecoming (2017)*, directed by Jon Watts, the way heroic masculinity is reconfigured in terms of physicality, emotional expression and civic space is analyzed. Nearly four decades between these films result in portrayal variances reflecting sociocultural shifts. From strong support to concepts like individual strength and stoicism in the Cold War times, to late millennial values that focuses on vulnerability, collaboration and diversity; the shift in superhero portrayals can be linked to the era it was created in.

As it was created in the midst of Cold War tension, Superman presents its hero as an invincible character. Clark Kent disguises his true powers, revealing them only to help those needing saving, the most iconic being the rescue of Lois Lane. The film establishes Superman as a solitary savior, as the ultimate embodiment of 1970s masculinity. On the other hand, heroism is reconstructed in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. Protagonist Peter Parker, who is a high schooler, doesn't show a heroic side solely through physical strength, but through emotional resilience, dependence on community support. He excels as a superhero by the help of technology, his mentors and friends; so his masculinity is created around his relatability rather than dominance. In this essay, the extent to which each film reinforces or resists heteronormative ideologies is examined through a comparative analysis. Based on ideologies surrounding heteronormative

and hegemonic masculinity, the essay focuses on critical moments in the films such as, dramatic rescues, emotionally expressive scenes and scenes involving civic space. These critical moments show how the image of a superhero is reconstructed and modified across different cultural moments in time.

Background Information

Grasping how these superhero films are created and support or challenge ideas of heroic masculinity, is done by defining key concepts such as heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity, which both have an important role in establishing gender norms embedded in popular culture. Heteronormativity is the assumption that heterosexuality is the natural and accepted sexual orientation. Especially in the previous decades and in the mainstream media, male superheroes are paired with their female love interests, who they are meant to protect and provide. Romantic side narratives in superhero films support the idea that emotional fulfillment is only acquired through a traditionally acceptable pairing of opposite sex. *Superman (1989)*, directed by Richard Donner, serves as an example of these types of narratives. One of the favorite scenes in the movie where Superman takes Lois Lane flying is constructed as romantic fulfillment. In the storyline, the female figures function as an object of desire or a “reward” to the hero rather than an independently developing character. In this essay, how *Spider-Man: Homecoming* and *Superman* hold up to these norms surrounding heteronormativity will be evaluated. Especially the way romantic sub-plots are presented and the dynamic between the love interest and the hero plays a crucial role in this analysis.

Hegemonic masculinity represents the dominant cultural model of male identity, which is upheld by a patriarchal society that holds power over not only over women, but also over any other way of showing masculinity. According to this idea, emotional suppression, aggression and power is idolized. Superhero films traditionally have supported this idea through physically

powerful, emotionally underdeveloped and dominant heroes. In *Superman (1978)*, Christopher Reeve's portrayal illustrates the traditional model of hegemonic masculinity: his authority is established in spectacular features of physical dominance, from catching a falling helicopter to single-handedly reversing the destruction of an earthquake, while his emotional underdevelopment is revealed as he rarely expresses fear, doubt, or vulnerability. Conversely, in *Spiderman: Homecoming (2017)*, Peter Parker achieves success in both his personal life and against the antagonists through the help of those surrounding him, such as his friends and mentor, Tony Stark. Throughout this analysis, assessing how the protagonists' masculinities are being portrayed, not only physically but also emotionally, through the characters' relationships.

Rescue Scenes

A genre classic when it comes to superhero films are rescue scenes where the superhero is portrayed as the one true savior. Those needing rescue often reflects the era's perception of vulnerability. Also, the way the superhero rescues those in need of rescuing varies through the decades. Certain aspects of the time and community such as gender roles, cultural anxieties, race relations and national identity struggles have effects on the era's perception of cultural norms, which have reflected onto the rescue scenes as well.

Even though both films have rescue scenes in the film; the causes of the rescues and the stakes hanging on to these rescues differ, which reveal how much each hero's masculinity is constructed. In *Superman*, the need of rescuing many civilians including Lois Lane, who is the love interest of Superman, is caused by a nuclear missile strike created by Lex Luthor. The mis-en-scene includes, collapsing highways, cracked earth, and falling cars. These create an apocalyptic visual. Superman moves among ruins, framed centrally in every composition. He is positioned as the only stable element in moving chaos, the masculine savior holding

civilization together both metaphorically and physically. Emotional needs of Superman are subsumed under the monumental responsibility of saving the nation. This sense of isolation supports the hegemonic model of masculinity, as a man in the position of a solitary savior carrying the burden of the nation on his shoulders. During this scene cross-cutting is used where the scene alternates between Superman chasing one missile and Lex Luthor's smug confidence with the ticking countdown. This creates tension and emphasizes the stakes at risk, all of which exalts Superman's solitary intervention. Superman is portrayed as surpassing human ideals, promoted as the embodiment of the "perfect man" due to the accolade he receives for his actions and the rewards he gets as a result of the savings that he has done. Lois being the helpless female in danger and her being presented as the reward Superman receives, objectifies women. This rescue reinforces the traditional gender dynamics. Even though Lois is a reporter, making her a career woman, which aligns with what the second wave of feminism around 1970s was trying to promote; the film declares the male dominance in the 70s society, as she is reduced to a girl who needs saving during her time in the car, which is swallowed by the fissure. In this scene, Lois Lane is the embodiment of what the scholar Laura Mulvey describes as the "male gaze", where Lois is presented as a passive figure whose vulnerability validates Superman's masculine power (*Mulvey, 1975*). Even though she is an excellent journalist, in this moment in correlation with what Simone de Beauvoir termed "the Other", Lois exists solely as the object through which Superman can present his heroism. After the Vietnam War and the Watergate Scandal, the faith and trust the public had in the government and institutions regulated by the government was low. Hollywood characters were idolized and were viewed as capable of fixing the system the government wasn't able to. This rescue scene reflects this public fantasy of when an institutional problem arises, a hero whose intentions solely regard the betterment of the society and is physically "perfect" or capable will save the day. With the help of the ariel tracking shots that follow Superman as he chases the missile through clouds and mountains, Superman's speed

and precision are framed as physical and moral superiority. The late-1970s American military was marked by technological anxiety, moral doubt, and declining public confidence which shows the usage of Superman as a sign of hope for the nation. This mis-en-scene is a reflection of the Cold War fears of nuclear wasteland. The missile the antagonist reprogrammed was launched by the U.S. military. The fact that a civilian was able to hack the U.S. military's database, shows the little faith the public had in the government. Superman saving the whole state by himself supports the "perfect man" fantasy as well (*Cuordileone, 2000*).

On the other hand, *Spiderman: Homecoming* (2017) displays a rescue scene that is more contained and self-inflicted. The vulnerable state the classmates of Peter Parker is left in is caused by a miscommunication that occurs between Peter and his friends, Ned. Ned mishandles the alien tech that wasn't secured by Peter Parker. As Peter's heroic moment is due to his indirect fault as a result of his inexperience. The scene highlights Spiderman's youth, inexperience and the emotional distress caused by his inexperienced nature. The wide shot used to show Spiderman against the monument makes him look small, this allows for humility to replace magnificence. The diegetic sounds integrated into this scene such as the whirring of the elevator cables, the snapping of metal beams, the screams of Peter's classmates, his heavy breathing all contribute to the masculinity that is formed around him. Liz, who is the girl Peter shows interest towards, is part of an academically successful and high-achieving team of students and is not single-out from the group as they are all in need of saving. Their inclusion visually embodies Gen Z's pluralistic values, where civic identity is collective and multicultural rather than centered on a white male protector figure. Around 2017, the third and fourth wave of feminism has started the conversation regarding representation, heteronormative romance and its limits (*Pedwell, 2006*). Films and especially Hollywood began to expand its rescue scene dynamics and making space for female figures with agency. Scholars like Jennifer Baumgardner (2011) and Gillis, Howie, and Munford (2007), stated that by the fourth wave of

feminism, the concept was deeply tied with digital culture. As Rosalind Gill (2016) states, fourth-wave feminism is marked by a demand for visibility in cultural production, all of which has impelled Hollywood to diversify its portrayals of heroism (*Mohajan, 2022*). All of these patterns are viewed in *Spiderman: Homecoming* as well. The AI integrated into Spiderman's suit telling Peter, "Now's your chance to kiss her!" functions as a comedic relief in a stressful situation like the rescue. It mocks the traditional masculine fantasy of rescue resulting in a romance. Peter never manages to get the kiss as it is not the aim anymore. After the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. governments surveillance and law enforcement was strengthened, however the attacks were more than enough to create skepticism surrounding the government's ability to protect its nation (*Kazin, 2011*). Contrary to the single hero Superman, *Spiderman: Homecoming* shows government bodies present, yet they are ineffective. Even though, police helicopters are surrounding the Washington Monument, their actions do not resonate as helpful to the viewer, but they also get in the way of Peter helping his classmates. Peter is forced to act, but is constantly judged, watched either by Tony Stark, government officials or his friends. This constant judgement and supervision show how masculinity not just admired, but also controlled by the society.

Emotionally Expressive Scenes

Emotionally expressive scenes play an important role in digging into the heroes internal conflicts and the dimensions of his masculinity as these scenes allow for an emotionally vulnerable side of the heroes to be viewed. The way a superhero handles intense emotions such as grief, fear and love can tell a lot about the way they view masculinity.

In *Superman(1978)*, emotional vulnerable scenes are limited, yet are portrayed as these disruptive forces, which can easily translate to the scream Superman lets out as he finds the cold body of Lois Lane under the wreckage caused by the fracture in the dam. His anguished

scream ruptures his stoic personality that has been portrayed throughout the film. As the orchestra swells and Superman is shot at a dramatic spinning angle the stress and the unmanageable emotions are made clear to the viewer. The scream is elongated and minimal dialogue is used afterwards, which allows for the visuals and music to portray the story. The breakdown of musical order mirrors the breakdown of emotional control. This loss of control is only justified through a romantic loss. Lois is used as an emotional trigger, the feeling of losing her is what caused the outburst. Such emotional pain leads to a superhuman action, in which Superman reserves the time. The emotional outburst is compensated by this divine action that restores his masculine outlook. How after Superman's grief, he was able to reverse time and save the day, is targeted to boost the morale of the audience in despair. As he turns grief into omnipotence, and validates the viewers that in hard times, which in this case is an age of nuclear dread and political instability, the great saviour can, restore the order. During the Cold War, many of the propaganda was created around the belief of a nation dependent on the strength of one figure, "the American Man" (Raymond, 2024). Superman is the ultimate display of this ideology, as the masculine savior. Additionally this scene supports what the hegemonic masculinity ideology stands for; even though he loses control over his emotions for a brief time period, this functions as a prelude to restoring the order alone, solely reliant on his strength and powers. The camera tilts upward as Superman rises into the sky; through this low angle shot, grief transforms into literal elevation. This visual ascent symbolizes how he reclaims his dominance. Masculinity is announced through flight and divine strength. This scene perfectly correlates to 1970s masculinity, where signs of emotion is permitted and viewed acceptable under extreme conditions such as feminine or the nation. These are symbolically a part of the Cold War imagination. Emotion is tied to action rather than vulnerability. Whereas in *Spiderman: Homecoming* (2017), Peter Parker uses his vulnerability as a part of his masculinity, and through his openness he achieves success as a superhero, he learns and grows from his past

mistakes. Like in *Superman (1978)*, traditional superhero narratives shows heroes as fully capable men who have strength out of this world and seem already emotionally complete. They don't need to develop emotionally as they represent fixed ideals of masculinity.

On the other hand, *Spiderman: Homecoming (2017)*, offers a grounded and emotionally expressive approach to masculinity. This can be seen in the scene where Peter has a breakdown under the rubble, where the audience is able to witness his fear, self-doubt which he gradually overcomes by finding his confidence. In this scene, Peter's visible distress- the diegetic sounds including crying, pleading for help, and rapid breathing- exemplifies emotional vulnerability. The debris reflects internal weight, at that moment vulnerability is in control. The dim lighting and dripping shadows visualizes fear. Unlike Superman's grief, which transforms into an act of omnipotence Peter's breakdown under the rubble epitomizes Gen Z's reconfiguration of masculinity. As it creates an understanding that allows fear and tears to coexist with courage, the film rejects the Cold War model of stoic omnipotence and instead affirms emotional openness, and interdependence as central to heroic identity. His self-doubt is visible through his cries for help. The way he approaches the danger he is left in, reflects Gen Z values, where emotional openness is viewed as a strength rather than a flaw. His cries are framed not as weak, but as a pivotal moment in his heroic development. Contrary to older superheroes such as Superman, he doesn't repress emotions, he works through them. This scene alligns with a Gen Z ethos strength is achieved through processing emotion, not hiding it. Masculinity valued by Gen Z, incorporates resilience, which is the ability to grow from pain. The mantra Peter whispers to himself of "Come on, Spiderman." shows how he works through self-doubt and regains confidence not through tech or physicality, but through mental and emotional strength. This challenges what the hegemonic masculinity stands for. A males worth is not evaluated by the dominance he achieves; in the scene it is earned by working through vulnerability. Peter's growth supports the Gen Z model of masculinity, that views emotional struggles as valid

experiences. Gen Z culture rejects external validation. It encourages finding identity internally, specifically against rigid roles and expectations (*Storytellers, 2026*). As he is trapped under the rubble, stripped from the identity he found through the suit and alone he needs to decide whether he is “still Spiderman without the suit?”. Even though, a grand answer is not presented, it is determined. Collaboration and interdependence are key factors of Gen Z masculinity. The strength Peter finds comes from the knowledge he acquired from his community such as, Tony Stark’s mentorship or his best friends Ned’s support. Even when isolated from the others under the rubble, mentally he is not alone. In this scene, Peter rescues himself and the fear of not being able to get out is visible in his facial expressions. Peter relies in his own worth, rather than Stark’s tech. This serves as a symbol of earning masculinity. Through his new found identity without the suit, his confidence and self-worth increases, all of which are viewed as key factors in defining masculinity. In the movie, Peter portrayed as still growing both physically and mentally. He is trying to show that he belongs in it rather than trying to save it. His main obstacle is himself, which mainly includes his dependence on validation and his fears. In this narrative, heroism no longer limited to power over others.

Civic Space Scenes

Civic space is the physical or digital medium that allows people to get together and interact. The way civic spaces are crafted in superhero films reveals a lens to examine the shifting constructions of masculinity. Public spaces such as, towering cities or a crowd of observers not only show the relationship the hero has with the society, but also cultural norms and gendered presumptions of the time in which the film was made. Masculinity is often evaluated according to the performance one does in front of the public eye, so civic space becomes the space where heroism and with that masculinity is judged or affirmed. The actions of the hero in civic space shows how the hero is integrated into society.

In *Superman* (1978), the civic space is filled with skyscrapers, helicopters and many press, all of which are viewed as essential parts of the metropolis look. Metropolis is presented as the ideal American city, that is modern, rational and secure which is provided with the help of Superman. This multi-layered and complex life style is all in the hands of the hero and his capabilities regarding maintaining the order is what boosts his masculinity. Heroism is turned into a spectacle through the constant exposure to press in civic spaces. Superman's masculinity lies in the control he has over civic structures. Civic trust in government and other institutions controlled by government was shaken. As a result, people longed for a moral figure to restore the order. Through each chaotic event, Superman flies above the crowd and also above the chaos which complements his almighty presence. The low angle shot used when Superman is hovering above the Metropolis skyline, reinforces his dominance over civic space. These all add to the idealized alone hero that steps in when institutions fail. 1970s New York which is the equivalent of the metropolis in *Superman* was viewed as a chaotic place, filled with crime. Issues such as, white flight, infrastructure collapse and economic decline had all shaken the public. This feeling of uncertainty can be viewed in the film as well. The constant danger civic space is under from the earthquake to the collapse of the dam are examples of how the public is left in dangerous situations. Superman's masculinity is affirmed through his dominion over civic instability. The city's chaotic diegetic noise such as the sirens or the traffic is silenced by John Williams's theme when Superman appears in a moment of distress. The non-diegetic sound replaces civic disorder with heroic harmony. The soundtrack reasserts masculine control. The control Superman has over the public represents the fantasy of restored power of the U.S. In 70s, after the challenging times U.S. went through, a cultural reassurance of moral and physical superiority was wanted. Superman is nearly a nationalist symbol as he protects America from both external and internal threats (*Bezci, 2025*). The wide shots of crowds in rescue scenes, where citizens look upwards, cheering shows how civic space becomes a public

stage of worship. Superman is viewed as a figure of collective reassurance. This protector and provider role of Superman and the praise he receives after he saves the day supports the idea of hegemonic masculinity. Men are expected to be tough and provide to and protect those surrounding them, only then they are considered masculine.

In the movie *Spiderman: Homecoming* (2017), a different approach towards civic spaces can be seen. Around 2017, civic spaces are always under surveillance and are bureaucratic and also fragmented. Institutions are present, however are mostly ineffective. This is also portrayed in the film through, The Department of Damage Control (DoDC). It is used as a commentary towards modern institutional power. It was introduced as an organization supported by the government, which's purpose is to regulate and clean up the collateral damage of the superhero battles. A sense of irony is created in the film, as the Department of Justice creates the very villain that causes mayhem throughout the film. The organization dismisses Adrian Toomes, who is the main villain in the movie, without taking accountability. The DoDC embodies real-life institutions of the post-9/11 and post-recession that were associated with qualities such as, unresponsiveness, complicity in creating social inequality. The financial crisis in 2008, caused extensive frustration with regulatory organisations, that have failed to prevent corporate abuse; resemblance can be found in the film as the DoDC's decisions led to, Toomes' descent into trafficking arms. The way Peter Parker views civic space, shows heroism shouldn't rely on government institutions. He forms his masculinity through small, helpful actions during his daily life such as, when in school or the suburbs.; instead of being in accordance with the authoritative formations. Conversely, with Superman's alignment with epitomized civic order, Peter operates within a civic space where institutions exist but are largely ineffective.

Conclusion

In this essay, how *Superman (1978)* and *Spider-Man: Homecoming (2017)* reconstruct heroic masculinity through emotional expression, interpersonal networks, and civic space, reflecting their respective cultural moments was inspected. 1970s Cold War America was filled with anxiety, regarding economic and political corruption as well as nuclear war. Low trust in government and its institutions after the Vietnam War and Watergate, resulted in a need for hope in the community, the one true savior, which was the main reason behind the way Superman has been portrayed as the way he has been. The isolated saviour with a mythic strength that restores the order in the country, was the hope the country needed at the time. These expectations of a singular savior played a significant role in shaping traditional masculinity. Whereas, Spider Man was shot during the post 9/11 times, where it was a highly surveilled world. Terms such as “diversity” and “self-worth” became more mainstream and the importance of self-discovery became more apparent. Spider-Man is presented as a vulnerable, imperfect and awkward superhero, aligning with the Gen Z openness and fluidity. According to Judith Butler, who has made many contributions to the feminist theory, gender is not innate, but something we “perform” repeatedly according to cultural norms. Masculinity and femininity are roles learned and acted out, not biological truths. This supports the belief that ideals of masculinity are performed differently due to cultural context throughout time (*Butler, 1999*). These films show that masculinity is not fixed, but culturally constructed. The ideology of masculinity has shifted from stoic and heteronormative dominance to relational and self-reflective figures. Superhero movies are a reflection of societal norms. Masculinity, like other social ideologies, continues to evolve alongside cultural shifts.

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