



# Applying Suspense to Archetypal Superheroes:

## Hitchcockian Ambiguity in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, the superhero genre has grown to account for a significant amount of studio profits. However, superhero films are largely presented as action films, and critics simultaneously tire of and hope for the genre's simplicity. Nevertheless, superheroes are not merely disposable entertainment, but an important part of how society understands justice. Their cinematic association with simplicity propagates a detrimental focus on capture or death that obscures the complexities of justice and reduces society's ability to overcome crime. This is reinforced by the predetermination of heroes and villains by their iconic identities, which are built over the course of their respective histories. While *Logan* (2017) was lauded for its Western influence, *Wonder Woman* (2017) for its *Superman* (1978) influence, and *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) for its myriad of other influences, the influences of *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) have largely been ignored. Despite its action-oriented title, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* warrants analysis as a particularly ambitious development within the evolving superhero genre. It applies a remarkable amount of the Hitchcockian thrills present in Hollywood's foundations to a story pitting two protagonists against one another, unfolding within a villain's conspiracy in order to create the first live-action Hitchcockian superhero thriller featuring branded, culturally established characters. By displacing its protagonists from their inherently justified positions, it creates a critical moral ambiguity that directly deconstructs the assumptions at the heart of Western society's two most archetypal superheroes. The film's implications lie in ambiguous themes and techniques that experiment with commercial art to challenge a mass audience to critically engage with society's assumptions. Reflecting on democracy in a polarized world of manipulated media and xenophobia, it is a nuanced exploration of the complex concept of justice, and is thus a film worth critical consideration. In this essay, the themes and techniques of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), *To Catch a Thief* (1955), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), and *The Birds* (1963) will be analyzed, as well as how they, along with a crucial element of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), are utilized in the original theatrical cut of *Batman v Superman*.

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### INTRODUCTION

KNOWN AS THE MASTER OF SUSPENSE, Alfred Hitchcock has been credited as "one of the founding fathers of the cinematic art... help[ing] define its visual language"; he remains "a figure of ever-renewed popular and academic interest, even as critics remain divided over the meaning of his art" (Lewis 458, 464). His work utilized every dimension of cinema in broadly entertaining ways that drove the industry forward, from visual exposition to dolly zooms, with box office and critical successes that integrated studio assets (Allen; Daniel-Richard; Mock;

Truffaut). Whether birds descending upon schoolyards, cars careening down highways, or assailants bursting into showers, Hitchcock has been a central influence on Hollywood thrills.

In recent years, these thrills have largely taken a backseat within the superhero genre, which currently accounts for a significant amount of studio profits ("2017 Worldwide Grosses"). *Iron Man* (2008) introduced Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) in a post-credits scene modeled after a comic book cliff-hanger, heralding a connected

Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU); many studios have since pursued Marvel's successful formula of interconnected entertainment (D'Alessandro; Kroll; Siegel). Yet superhero films are largely presented as action films, and critics simultaneously tire of and hope for the genre's simplicity. For instance, *Logan* (2017) may have been deemed "good enough that you might forget it's a comic-book movie," alluding to a cultural dismissal of the genre's potential (Dargis), but *Wonder Woman* (2017) received praise as a "straightforward pleasure" (Orr "With *Wonder Woman*"), its

earnest insouciance recall[ing] the 'Superman' movies of the '70s and '80s more than the mock-Wagnerian spectacles of our own day, and...gestur[ing] knowingly but reverently back to the jaunty, truth-and-justice spirit of an even older Hollywood tradition. (Scott)

*Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) may have had "more noisy scenes of CGI mass demolition...than its predecessors combined" (Chiang "*Thor: Ragnarok*"), but it was embraced as "entertaining but profoundly silly superheroism—which, again, may be what we ought to have expected from the beginning, had the likes of Christopher Nolan not come along to implausibly elevate our expectations" (Orr "The Overdue Comedy"). Hollywood's superhero renaissance reflects a supremacy of simplicity.

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Superheroes, however, are not merely disposable entertainment, but an important part of how society understands justice. Their cinematic association with simplicity propagates a detrimental focus on capture or death as the ultimate outcome for villains, which

obscures the complexities of justice and reduces society's ability to overcome crime (Boucher). This simplistic binary is reinforced by the predetermination of heroes and villains by the iconic identities they build over the course of their respective histories—superheroes are inherently good. For instance, *Batman* (1989) explores the troubled origins of the Dark Knight, but is clear that Batman is good and the Joker is evil. Further, the film praises Batman's murder of the Joker when the Caped Crusader is subsequently adopted by Gotham. Similarly, *Hulk* (2003) focuses on the trauma of Dr. Bruce Banner, but Banner's moral role is not in question, and for all the anxiety created by the titular character, the Hulk's outbursts are depicted as justified and heroic. In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), the world is ambiguous and guilty, but Steve Rogers is not. *Wonder Woman* and *Logan* were acclaimed for their complex themes, but *Logan* was celebrated for its intimacy and *Wonder Woman* for its innocence (Adams; Brody; Chiang, "The Stirring *Wonder Woman*"; Dargis; Klimek; Morgenstern; Sims). In essence, superhero films have seldom stepped outside the bounds of inherently justified protagonists who reinforce society's practices, or at least allow for only so much objectivity. Even amidst Batman's questionable actions and personal conflict in *The Dark Knight* (2008), he is both protagonist and superhero icon.

While *Unbreakable* (2000) and *Split* (2016) demonstrate the potential of Hitchcockian-thriller ambiguity for the superhero genre, they explore original characters reflecting on superhero themes rather than culturally established characters, and are clear in their morality. Similarly, *Watchmen* (2009) is a direct adaptation of characters created to deconstruct superheroes. *Logan* was lauded for its Western influence, *Wonder Woman* for its *Superman* (1978) influence, and *Thor: Ragnarok* for its myriad of other influences (Burr; Chiang, "*Thor: Ragnarok*"; Dargis; Darling; Hartlaub; Klimek; O'Sullivan; Scott; Sims; Tobias). However, the influences of *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), Warner Bros.' response to Marvel which in turn inspired *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) (Brzeski), have largely been ignored. Despite its action-oriented title, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* warrants analysis as

a particularly ambitious development within the evolving superhero genre. It applies a remarkable amount of Hitchcockian thrills to a story pitting two protagonists against one another within a villain's conspiracy to create the first live-action Hitchcockian superhero thriller featuring branded, culturally established characters. By displacing its protagonists from their inherently justified positions, it creates a critical moral ambiguity that directly deconstructs the assumptions at the heart of Western society's two most archetypal superheroes. The film's implications lie in its ambiguous themes and its techniques that experiment with commercial art; these themes and techniques challenge mass audiences to critically engage with society's assumptions about justice. Reflecting on democracy in a polarized world of manipulated media and xenophobia, it is a more nuanced exploration of the complex concept of justice, and is thus a film worth critical consideration. In this essay, the themes and techniques of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), *To Catch a Thief* (1955), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), and *The Birds* (1963) will be analyzed, as well as how they, along with a crucial element of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), are utilized in the original theatrical cut of *Batman v Superman*.

## HITCHCOCKIAN JUSTICE

Thrillers delve into the shadows beyond conventional notions of justice, as Pablo Castrillo and Pablo Echart demonstrate in their proposal of the genre's five primary characteristics: crime victim as protagonist; states of intense emotion; an "ambiguous" world; a realistic world; and a disorientation in navigating the extraordinary (112). According to Mathieu Deffem, Hitchcock's thrillers create further ambiguity within the concepts of societal guilt and innocence:

Most often in Hitchcock's films, public guilt implies factual innocence, manifested by the image of the hero who is wrongly accused. By contrast, private guilt occurs when the characters in a story recognize themselves as guilty.

In Hitchcock's movies, private guilt is experienced by those who committed the illegal act of which the hero is falsely accused, but also by the hero, albeit...for other reasons. (214)

"Strikingly, private guilt applies in Hitchcock's universe to almost everybody, even and especially those who are victims of circumstances" (213-214). This Hitchcockian ambiguity of the personal and the societal is not merely thematic, but also cinematic, as it fuses technique with character to explore societal tensions. This section will summarize by highlighting the following: juxtaposition in *The Birds*; setting in *Rear Window*; motif in *North by Northwest*; linear time in *Vertigo*; and information in *To Catch a Thief*.

*The Birds* contrasts characters within the frame as avian aggressors externalize the turbulent emotions underlying a quaint, sunny American town. As Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) meets the women who rival her affections for Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor), the scenes rise in intensity between long tensions, in which the eye contends with multiple character perspectives distributed throughout the frame, and quick attacks of birds increasingly brought out of the woodwork by those tensions. When Melanie meets cautious matriarch Lydia Brenner (Jessica Tandy), Lydia gives Melanie a glance from the foreground as Melanie stares at a portrait of the late Brenner patriarch in the background and realizes the family's pain under the surface (Fig. 1). This juxtaposition creates an experience of cinematic conflict for the eye. As the audience gets to know Mitch's ex-girlfriend Annie Hayworth (Suzanne Pleshette), the frame positions Annie's reflections in the foreground with Melanie in the background, and the scene is punctuated with a dead bird between them as the tensions manifest. At Cathy Brenner's (Veronica Cartwright) birthday party, Melanie reveals she was abandoned by her mother, and the camera pans to a hurt Annie and disapproving Lydia before a child shouts, "Look, Look!" as the emotions rain down with the first mass bird attack. As the conflict spreads to the community at the Tides restaurant, the frame fills with points of view, including a preaching drunk, an ornithologist, a



**Fig.1** | Juxtaposition of tensions brings avian aggressors out of the woodwork in *The Birds*.

waitress, a concerned mother, a fisherman, and a glaring hallway of the town's women, who blame Melanie for the attack. Annie sacrifices herself to replace the lifeless bird on her porch, Lydia releases her grief, and Melanie confronts the darkness of a bedroom in the Brenner house. As Melanie grasps Lydia's wrist, the characters drive away, and all that remains are the tensions that surrounded them. As Deflem writes, although the hero at Hitchcock's conclusions "is cleared of all formal charges and accusations...this cleansing always comes at a price, after a long and intense period of suffering and loss" (216).

While *The Birds* explores juxtaposition, *Rear Window* immerses its protagonist L.B. Jefferies (James Stewart) in a setting that Jefferies and the audience must cinematically engage with to overcome a murderer in the midst of a disjointed community. Any witty murder mystery featuring James Stewart, Grace Kelly, and Thelma Ritter would be a hit, but *Rear Window*, according to Hitchcock, is "a purely cinematic film" (Truffaut Location 3546), in which Jefferies is a voyeur observing "a display of human weaknesses and people in pursuit of happiness" through the windows surrounding his apartment (3680).

He is always at a distance, striving to piece together the puzzle by looking and listening at the right places and times. This is reflected immediately upon the film's opening, in which character and technique are united with panning exposition shots. To succeed, Jefferies and his friends must rise from their front row seats to place themselves amidst the danger of their surroundings. They go in and out of the courtyard, gasping at what they see. The monster, Lars Thorwald (Raymond Burr), sees Jefferies and comes out of the cinematic action into the real world of Jefferies' apartment. But Jefferies' community becomes the audience when neighbours and law enforcement run out with quick cuts as the final truth rises and falls between Jefferies and Thorwald; no longer will neighbours be suspicious, wondering which among them could be a murderer of humans or dogs. The film ends with the effect of its art; Miss Lonelyhearts (Judith Evelyn) says to Mr. Piano (Ross Bagdasarian), "I can't tell you what this music has meant to me."

In *North by Northwest*, motif accentuates Roger Thornhill's (Cary Grant) disruption of the Cold War when Soviet villain Vandamm (James Mason) mistakes him for a fictional agent, forcing Thornhill to run





**Fig. 2** | The Cold War defacing the symmetry of Mount Rushmore in *North by Northwest*.

from both Vandamm and the authorities. The film experiences its chaotic society with a repetition of stark crisscrossing lines, from the opening titles, to Route 41, to Thornhill scaling the beams of Vandamm's house, to the subtle defacing of the steady symmetry of Mount Rushmore (Fig. 2). The visuals are underscored by "the restlessly chromatic and fragmented nature" of the music, creating "an imbalance that is subconsciously felt by the viewer" (referenced by Daniel-Richard 55 from Brown 29). While the audience never learns the full truth about this chaos—"FBI, CIA, ONI, we're all in the same alphabet soup," one agent says—Thornhill and his ally, Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint), inspire a break in the pattern. When the heroes are saved by the open intervention of American authorities, Vandamm replies, "[t]hat wasn't very sporting, using real bullets."

*Vertigo* takes yet another approach to exploring societal tensions, recreating the trauma of its detective by lifting the audience from its linear perception of time. John "Scottie" Ferguson (James Stewart) is drawn into a scheme that feeds his desire and costs him his sanity, transforming him into the person he is following. Madeleine Elster (Kim Novak) appears to be repeating

the past, transforming into her late great-grandmother who committed suicide, and when Scottie allows himself to fall in love with her, he plays into the hands of the villain, Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore), to witness a murder that truly begins to repeat itself. Ultimately, both Scottie and Judy Barton (also Kim Novak, and the real Madeleine) continually revisit the murder, traumatization, and death. Robin Wood writes that "before the film proper has begun, we are made aware that the vertigo of the title is to be more than a literal fear of heights" (110). The film builds its concept through the emotional disorientation of Scottie, Madeleine, and Judy, opening with a rooftop chase revealed to be both a memory and a dream, not specifying which the audience sees. *Vertigo* disrupts "our classical conception of time—how we live it, its linearity (or nonlinearity), its ability to make co-present always the past, present, and future...[and] represents one of the first films to portray non-linear concepts of time and space to an audience" (Smith 79, 88). As Sheri Biesen writes, "[i]n creating suspense... [Hitchcock] sought to shake viewers beyond ordinary, mundane existence" (2). This separation from linear reality encourages audiences to consider both the cause-

and-effect foundations of the films they experience and the assumptions that support their understandings of crime, punishment, and individuals.

Finally, *To Catch a Thief* cinematically puts the audience into the shoes of a reformed criminal one step behind the culprit mimicking his methods. Opening with a cat walking across rooftops and human hands stealing jewels, one might wonder whether the film is about a shapeshifting feline, but the film puts that to rest with a newspaper article about the Cat, the criminal persona of Cary Grant's former thief John Robie, and both Robie and his cat look up when they hear investigators approaching. As it turns out, the rooftop cat is not the real thief. Shortly after Robie meets H.H. Hughson (John Williams), an insurance man, Robie is chased and escorted away by police. After a fade to black, Robie is suddenly enjoying wine on his porch with Hughson, and the audience must wait to learn that Robie was temporarily released. Another scene fades to the characters discussing, "[h]ow much did he get away with last night?" and musing that "[t]he gems were insured for 35,000...in dollars." While it at first appears that the characters have been robbed, they are actually discussing a Madame Leroux, who is never seen. The film's withholding of information cultivates the uncertainty of its ambiguous investigation, and encourages an active role in piecing it together.

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## ***Batman v Superman ambitiously combines superhero action with a remarkable amount of Hitchcockian themes and techniques.***

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### **HITCHCOCKIAN SUPERHEROES**

*Batman v Superman* director Zack Snyder's inspirations reflect Hitchcock's pervasive influence. Snyder is interested in "bizarre movies" that challenge audiences (Cruz et al.). John Boorman, referenced by Mike Hale as being influenced by Hitchcock in *Point Blank* (1967),

directed Zack Snyder's favourite film, *Excalibur* (1981). This film was formative for Snyder in the visceral and surreal way it applied psychological turmoil to the heightened reality of the legendary hero King Arthur, as in an early sequence that juxtaposes the violent death of Uther Pendragon's political rival with the cursed conception of Arthur (Abele n.p.). Another influential film for Snyder was *Blue Velvet* (1986), a detective story that builds on the voyeurism of *Rear Window* and the trauma of *Vertigo*. Snyder was astounded how it pushed the genre forward with its unabashed depiction of the consequences of violence (Cruz et al.).

Snyder has said that "[t]he DC characters really represent...that first idea, like what is a superhero?" (*Uniting the World's Finest*), and when he directed *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, he attempted to "recapture" the movies that inspired him with "cinematic markers" to explore a superhero story within a realistic, blockbuster context (Doll Maker). Snyder has said that he views superheroes as part of society's modern mythology (*Gods and Men*), and *Batman v Superman* is meant to "challeng[e]" its heroes as "icons" through the "public persecution of Superman...to bring the two of them at each other after these sort of psychological events" (HeyUGuys). Snyder wanted audiences to not only get the fight of the title, but also "a lot more" (Tribute Movies). *Batman v Superman* ambitiously combines superhero action with a remarkable amount of Hitchcockian themes and techniques to create a critical moral ambiguity that actively challenges the assumptions underlying the heart of Western society's two most archetypal superheroes. Like *Vertigo*, its title advertises a simple climactic showdown, but while pitting the philosophies of its two lead icons against one another, it reflects on the foundations of democracy in a polarized world of manipulated media and xenophobia.

Like many thrillers, *Batman v Superman* is driven by a villain, Lex Luthor (Jesse Eisenberg), who is unaware of superhero conventions as he deconstructs audience expectations. Like *Vertigo*'s Gavin Elster, *The Birds*' Lydia Brenner, and countless other Hitchcockian

figures, Luthor is focused on preserving the past, leaving his father's room "just the way it was." His world is built upon the pain of his father, both oppressed by tyrants in East Germany and the oppressor of Lex. Lex's view of Superman (Henry Cavill) as an oppressive foreign power and a false, ineffectual god manifests as a resentful xenophobia; Superman might represent the first of other "metahumans." Luthor sets out to punish his own past by exerting his will on present society through politics and public opinion. A villain with a penchant for puns, he communicates this in euphemisms, as when he substitutes "monsters" with "tyrants," and "hate" with "security."

As in *North by Northwest*, Luthor capitalizes on a polarizing debate already at the forefront of his culture. In the darkness, Batman (Ben Affleck) brands villains, and in the light, Superman acts unilaterally on an international stage. Police support Batman, Metropolis reveres Superman, and the media debates the implications. As Luthor exploits and pollutes legitimate discourse about these archetypes, he widens the void between them as both they and the audience are confronted by their assumptions. An early sequence revisits Superman's destructive battle in Metropolis with the Kryptonian General Zod (Michael Shannon) in *Man of Steel* (2013) from Bruce Wayne's point of view, destroying the foundations of Superman and replacing them with Bruce's animosity. From this devastation emerges the presence of Luthor, in the discovery of the iconic green glow of Kryptonite amid the ruins. Soon afterward, although Superman smiles when he rescues Lois Lane (Amy Adams) from General Amajagh (Sammi Rotibi) in Africa (the general himself is an ambiguous reflection on international politics), mercenaries set Luthor's plan to incriminate Superman into motion by murdering Amajagh's soldiers, and the Man of Steel takes Amajagh through a wall. The aftermath is seen through the eyes of society and the audience. As with *To Catch a Thief*, both society and the audience must feel one step behind and fill in the gaps—society reacts with media speculation, and the audience must speculate about media. Lois, who asks questions from the beginning,

assists as a mediator in piecing the thriller together. The audience uncomfortably assumes, like the film's citizens, that Superman has learned nothing from his murder of Zod in *Man of Steel* and has killed again, which puts the audience in an uncomfortable position until Clark Kent later insists to Lois that he did not, in fact, kill anyone. Nevertheless, his immediate reaction is, "I don't care what they're saying." Clark supports humanity, but is ambivalent about the complexities of his actions. As a member of the media, he attempts to redirect the conversation by projecting his uncertainties onto Batman.

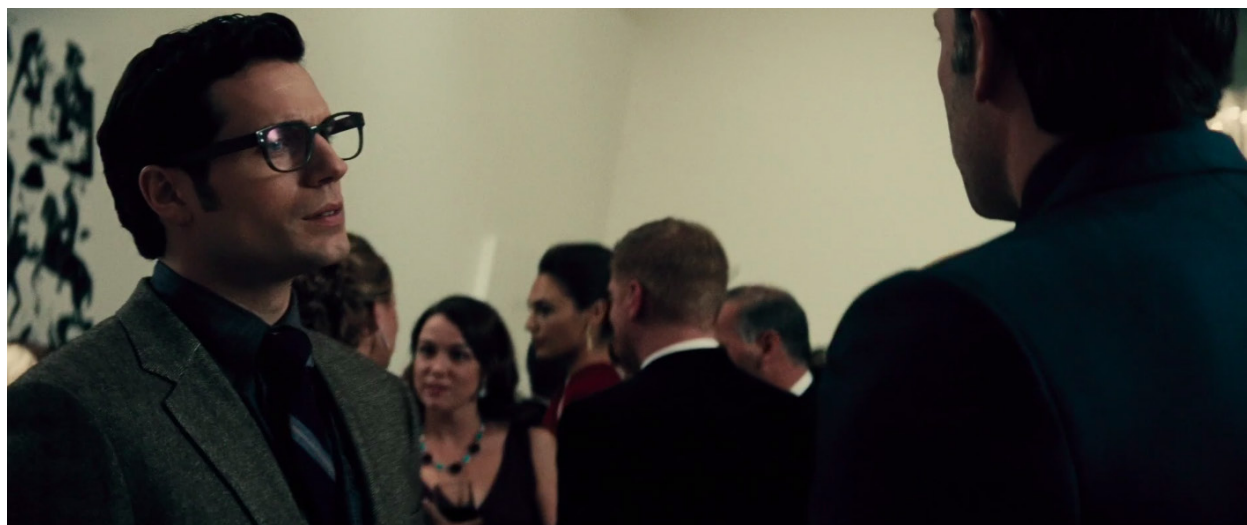
Neither hero's justice is accountable to the society they ostensibly serve, and Lex Luthor uses these uncertainties to transform both into the guilty victim-protagonists of a Hitchcock thriller; subsequently, their core idealism becomes questionable. Like *Vertigo's* Elster, Luthor gives them what they want. When Batman chases Lex Luthor's motorcade, he is being led—the chase is not about Luthor's crimes, but about obtaining Luthor's Kryptonite to kill Superman. Lex simultaneously feeds Clark's projections by anonymously sending him a newspaper clipping about Batman's crimes, as well as photographs of a bat-branded criminal murdered in prison. This causes Superman to end Batman's motorcade chase while strengthening Batman's resolve. The typical layers of the superhero chase are subverted, and viewers cannot merely go along for the blockbuster ride. Lex exploits Bruce's early statement to Alfred Pennyworth (Jeremy Irons) that "[w]e've always been criminals," and drives Superman to reveal that the Last Son of Krypton is not supporting humanity altruistically, but "living [his] life the way [his] father saw it. Righting wrongs for a ghost," and thus not truly connected to the world he protects. Like the avian aggressors in *The Birds* that lack an explicit origin, how Luthor ostensibly knows Superman's identity does not matter. Lex's purpose is to be the expected villain, externally manifesting the tensions of a society of superheroes.

In his revenge against his father, who did not have access to reliable media, Luthor uses a benefit

for the Library of Metropolis as the venue for Clark and Bruce to meet as their citizen selves. It is a central scene that, like *The Birds*, builds the tensions of the intricate personal emotions of a community toward an expected battle. As Hitchcock would say, “[d]on’t worry, they’re coming. The birds are on their way!” (Truffaut Location 4738). In this scene, six characters converge: Bruce and Alfred, hoping to hack Luthor; Clark, hoping to interview Bruce for his Batman exposé; Diana Prince (Gal Gadot), looking for a photograph; Luthor’s associate Mercy Graves (Tao Okamoto), delaying Bruce; and Luthor, watching his plan play out with feigned ignorance. The song “Night and Day” signals the quintessential relationship between Batman and Superman, and the frame follows Diana as she passes between them in the periphery, not as a bird or Thorwald monster, but as Wonder Woman, the “dawn of justice” who will ultimately externalize not tensions, but a superhero union (Fig. 3). For now, Clark and Bruce accuse one another’s superhero personas: Clark is sanctimonious about vigilantes, and Bruce disparages an “alien.”

Luthor’s plot exploits the Hitchcockian turmoil of the protagonists. The film begins with yet another retelling of the murder of Bruce’s parents, Martha and Thomas Wayne (Lauren Cohan and Jeffrey Dean Morgan), which plays out in the present of

young Bruce’s memories in slow motion. The scene at first seems extraneous: why spend so much time on another, and in this case, particularly emphatic, retelling of this iconic sequence? Like the orchestra that plays at the opening of Hitchcock’s own remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, it is the foundation for what comes later, but this time, there are no explanatory titles. When Bruce falls into his iconic cave, the bats lift him impossibly from the ground, carrying him up into a fade to white light, which Bruce reveals not only as the foundational dream of Batman’s ideology, but also as “a beautiful lie” (Fig. 4). The audience glimpses both a memory and a dream: an evolution of the opening rooftop chase of *Vertigo*, in which Bruce and the audience must immediately confront a central superhero myth that becomes both twisted and revealed over the course of the film. Reality becomes increasingly blurred with Bruce’s delusions. He is a superhero who, like Scottie, lets his pain transform him into a villain. When Bruce next dreams, it is again unclear whether it is actually a dream or a memory alone. As he brings flowers to his mother’s tomb, the dream is contaminated by the echoes of Zod’s world-poisoning World Engine, conjuring Bruce’s mother’s blood and a bat that, like the birds in Hitchcock’s titular film, bursts from the grave to bite Bruce and turn him further toward hatred.



**Fig. 3** | *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Juxtaposition of tensions brings heroism out of the woodwork.



In one of the film's most ambitious sequences, Bruce has a dream that serves a dual purpose of driving forward both the film and its larger universe. Suddenly finding himself in an apocalyptic environment reminiscent of the African desert at the centre of society's speculation about Superman, Batman looks for Kryptonite. However, he must now contend with flying monsters of DC lore and the judgment of a warped, murderous Superman. This dream is layered further when Bruce awakens to the warning of a mysterious red visitor, the Flash (Ezra Miller), who shouts, "[y]ou've always been right about him!" Bruce's fears of Superman are validated, and the flying monsters bear a strong resemblance to the demons in the painting of Luthor's father, which to Luthor represent Superman. But was the Flash talking about Superman? And when Bruce wakes up a second time, what does that make the Flash? This sequence goes beyond *To Catch a Thief*; the audience must wait beyond a scene unfolding for a series of films. The dream directly integrates the Marvel post-credits scene into the story, cinematically combining the current thriller with the future threads of a larger blockbuster journey. The film's final dream, experienced by Clark, begins to bring the heroes back to reality. After being convinced that Superman was merely "the dream of a farmer from Kansas," Clark sees his late father Jonathan Kent (Kevin Costner) at the top of a mountain. Jonathan reminds Clark that,

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***Batman has become the very thing that made him Batman in the first place—a person who let pain lead him toward murder.***

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while Superman's actions will always be more complex than they initially seem, Superman can nevertheless contribute good through the love that binds him to the world. The "dream of a farmer from Kansas" transforms Superman from a thriller protagonist back into a superhero.

Like the dichotomy that Deflem identified in Hitchcock's work, Luthor's plot juxtaposes the personal guilt of these heroes with the public guilt of the media-saturated dimensions of contemporary society. Deflem writes that Hitchcockian "labeling of guilt... includes various public instruments and symbols of condemnation," and identifies "[t]wo cinematic types of Hitchcockian affliction" as "the wrong man and the chase" (215), such as Cary Grant's on-the-run protagonists in *To Catch a Thief* and *North by Northwest*. *Batman v Superman* cinematically chases its protagonists across media. When Alfred announces to Bruce how "[e]verything's changed," he contrasts a series of



**Fig.4** | *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Scottie falls down, Bruce falls up.

Superman clips on the Bat-Computer with Bruce's private guilt of compromised uncertainty, fear, and hate toward the otherworldly visitor to America's shores (Fig. 5). When Superman rescues a girl from a burning building in Mexico, the film does not merely depict the rescue. As Superman brings the girl to her family with his signature smile, solemn voices from society begin to reflect around the act, and the music transitions from alien, to hopeful, to conflicted. As Zack Snyder has said, the film is concerned with what is happening around Superman in the context of the implications of his actions:

The sort of third character in the movie is media, and it's the third character now in all of our lives...And I think it's an interesting way to see how Batman perceives Superman 'cause he doesn't know who Superman is, all he knows is the public face of Superman. (*Gods and Men*)

As in *Rear Window*, this sequence could have merely depicted the action of Superman rescuing someone in need. Instead, the solemn voices lead to a montage of media figures asking questions about “a paradigm shift,” “moral constraints,” individuals enacting “state-level interventions,” humanity’s “horrible track record of following people with great power,” and “our own

sense of priority in the universe.” When the real-life Charlie Rose asks, “[m]ust there be a Superman?,” Clark is listening. The audience does not merely watch Superman—it must confront his world and the real world, both with Superman and at a distance.

Against a backdrop of protestors praising Superman as a god and demonizing him as an alien, Senator June Finch (Holly Hunter), an institutional representation of truth, justice, and the American way, attempts to convince society to work together openly as a democracy to come to a consensus on Superman's actions in order to move beyond the “superhero” reality of individuals that the audience expects. Unfortunately, although the senator raises valid questions about Superman, the plot is simultaneously driven by a supervillain eluding scrutiny, and Finch's speech is interrupted by a jarring imposition by Luthor at her desk:

This is how a democracy works. We talk to each other. We act by the consent of the governed, sir. I have sat here before to say that shadow interventions will not be tolerated by this committee. Neither will lies. Because today is a day for truth. Because only by speaking—only by working together can we...can we—can we... can...we create a free and a...

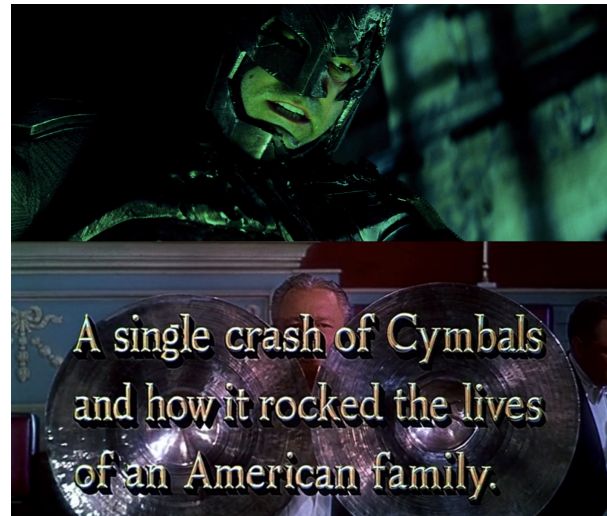


**Fig. 5** | *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. The public guilt of Superman contrasted with the private guilt of Bruce Wayne.

As in *The Birds*, the community again converges, this time to witness Lex Luthor's destruction of civil discourse when he detonates a bomb that kills everyone in the room, shocks the protesters, and intensifies media speculation about Superman. Superman is convinced of his futility as a hero, and blind anger distracts Bruce from his horror at the explosion on television in a Wayne Enterprises boardroom when he opens a note scrawled on a clipping of *Man of Steel's* devastation of Metropolis that reads, "[y]ou let your family die." Superman says to Lois, "Superman was never real," and "[m]y world doesn't exist anymore." Batman becomes completely deaf to Superman's pleas for help at their next meeting, and they are unable to productively communicate in person.

Thus, the rising emotions culminate in superhero action, for as much as *Batman v Superman* is a Hitchcockian thriller, it is also a superhero film. On one hand, Luthor kidnaps Clark's mother Martha Kent (Diane Lane) to pressure Superman to kill Batman; on the other, Superman, although unsure of the outcome, intends to alert Batman to Luthor's plot. The film's central contest is more straightforward, with marketable clips of CGI punches, but like the final confrontation of *Vertigo*, it is made visceral with rich, subdued lighting and colours, utilizing personal, tangible darkness. It is resolved not with a punch, but with an intimate moment. At the end of the fight, Batman has beaten Superman. He balances a Kryptonite spear overheard, the instrument Lex had been sharpening for him, snarling, "[y]ou were never a god. You were never even a man." But Superman appeals, "[y]ou're letting him—kill Martha...Find him. Save Martha."

Bruce then "wakes up." His dreams rewind from his mother's grave to her death, bringing him back to the present. He repeats the Wayne murder in his mind, now with new meaning, as both Batman and the audience realize that although Superman is referring to his own mother, history is repeating itself. Batman has become the very thing that made him Batman in



**Fig. 6** | *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice; The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Batman is the instrument of death.

the first place—a person who let pain lead him toward murder. He is not only Scottie in *Vertigo*, but is also revealed as the man with the cymbals in the orchestra of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*; the signal the villains need to complete their plot of assassination. In Hitchcock's words, "the man is unaware that he is the instrument of death. He doesn't know it, but in fact, he's the real killer" (Truffaut Location 3821) (Fig. 6). As in *Rear Window*, it is when the protagonists leave their seats in the audience to work to understand and communicate directly with those around them that the tide begins to turn. It is Lois, the reporter, who uncovers Luthor's conspiracy, tells Batman Martha's identity, and saves Clark's life and Bruce's soul. These are not simply thriller protagonists who watch their lovers fall, but heroes who must work with the society they serve. From their lowest points, they return stronger, overcoming their pain and redirecting their energy toward making society better.

As in *The Birds*, Batman and Superman must contend with the ultimate fallout of their pain: the monster Doomsday, a personification of the hatred spawned by the film's building delusions. Doomsday's attack takes Superman to a Metropolis memorial, where the creature sneers at Superman's representation and beats the Man of Steel with the names of those he failed. The



**Fig.7** | *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Doomsday defacing the symmetry of Superman.



**Fig.8** | *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. A unity externalized.

stakes of Doomsday lie not in desensitized destruction, but in emotion, and societal symmetry is sullied not as a thriller on Mount Rushmore, but with superhero mayhem (Fig. 7). Doomsday overtakes Luthor, the media, the military, and the government, which reacts with systematic disposal by nuclear weapons while knowing that its citizen, Superman, would be a casualty. But violence only makes Doomsday stronger, and reflects back from a red glow within.

Then, Wonder Woman, a hero who “walked away from mankind. From a century of horrors,” joins the fray. After receiving an e-mail from Bruce about

Luthor’s files on metahumans—“Where have you been?” it reads—and seeing Doomsday’s destruction, Diana Prince is so affected by the prospect of the existence of others like her that she becomes the fruit of the unity between Batman and Superman. The frame unites three disparate heroes working together, beyond the characters of *The Birds*, to face their externalized adversity. Wonder Woman represents the film’s blockbuster goal, but also moderation; a larger purpose that unity in heroic differences can achieve. As executive producer Geoff Johns has remarked, “she’s a bit of both Batman and Superman” (*Uniting the World’s Finest*). Only when



***Building on the ambiguous themes and techniques that Alfred Hitchcock left to Hollywood, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* creates the first live-action Hitchcockian superhero thriller.***

Doomsday is held in place by Wonder Woman's Lasso of Truth and Batman's Kryptonite can Superman's hope finally overcome Doomsday's hatred (Fig. 8). At the end of Superman's crucible, he sacrifices himself to humanity's embrace (Chitwood).

As a result, the audience gets the validation of a superhero film combined with the questions of a Hitchcockian thriller, in which "the final phase of the ritual performance must end in some tragedy, which in other respects represents liberation" (Deflem 225). Although Luthor succeeds in killing Superman—in his words, "[d]ing dong, the god is dead"—the Man of Steel is not a fraud, but a beacon. Kal-El receives both a private and public funeral united by "Amazing Grace," the song of redemption, as society is able to more clearly reflect on the ideals of hope and selflessness that Superman represents. As a superhero film, *Batman v Superman* links the hope of the individual to the hope of society. Diana tells Bruce, "[m]an made a world where standing together is impossible." Bruce responds, "[m]en are still good. We fight. We kill. We betray one another. But we can rebuild. We can do better. We will. We have to," as the camera pans across a frame filled with the faces of America, holding candles to the words, "If you seek his monument look around you."

While Bruce realizes that the Flash was not talking about Superman in his dream, Luthor's painting is reintroduced, this time with its demons turned toward the sky, and juxtaposed with a tease of a future threat: "[o]ut in the dark, among the stars." Like



**Fig.9** | *Vertigo*; *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*.

A frame is never fully explored, whether in its questions on morality or its intentions to build a blockbuster universe.

*Vertigo* revisiting the painting of Madeleine's great-grandmother from another angle when Scottie realizes that Madeleine and Judy are the same person, *Batman v Superman* demonstrates the multiple layers of a frame, whether in its questions on morality or its intentions to build a blockbuster universe (Fig. 9).

Society's transformation is reflected in a finale that echoes the visual bookends of *Rear Window*. The film begins with the coffins of Bruce Wayne's parents, and Bruce's narration: "[t]here were perfect things. Diamond absolutes." At Clark's funeral, Lois extends her diamond engagement ring to the foreground and releases earth onto Clark's coffin. The nature of Bruce's inspiration changes. History has repeated itself, yet the soil rises back to the surface. The film leaves it up to the survivors to determine what happens next—from Batman, who no longer brands villains but is still a vigilante, to the reeling citizens of Metropolis, to the audience who watches. As with Hitchcock, although society and its "tormented" heroes have been cleansed, there has been "a transference of guilt from one to another, and a universality of various degrees and kinds of guilt among many, possibly even all who are involved in a movie (and its viewing)" (Deflem 203-204, 216).



## CONCLUSION

Building on the themes and techniques that Alfred Hitchcock contributed to Hollywood, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* creates the first live-action Hitchcockian superhero thriller featuring branded, culturally established characters. Reflecting as a thriller on democracy in a polarized world of manipulated media and xenophobia, it

brings more layers to how commercial art and mass audiences analyze their archetypes and engage with the complexity of justice. Further study might pursue this film's place within Western society's cycles of questioning and affirmation. ■

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