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‘It wasn’t so long ago. We had heroes’: Superheroes and Catastrophe in the Early 21st Century

In the (fictional) prelims to Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) an article by James Olsen for *The Daily Planet* describes a meeting of old-timers in a bar in downtown Metropolis: “They get talking again. About the old days. The glory days. They remember. They were right there. In the thick of it. Back then. It wasn’t so long ago. We had heroes.” (Miller [9]) Heroes, it seems, rather like the countryside, home cooking or the weather, were always somehow better in the past. In contrast, contemporary heroes are frequently represented as at least partly problematic: The official DC website, for instance, explicitly locates its 2016 release *Batman v Superman: The Dawn of Justice* (dir. Zack Snyder) in a world that “wrestles with what sort of hero it really needs”, while the would-be saviour Superman and the dark vigilante Batman fight each other rather than the villain and only at the very last moment avert large-scale catastrophe.

Comics have a track record of dealing with catastrophe, both imagined and real: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* deals with the Holocaust as much as the various incarnations of Superman or Batman struggle to prevent catastrophe in their respective universes. Superheroes in mainstream comics and in blockbuster cinema are stereotypically cast as representatives of positive cultural values and as the ones who ‘save the day’. Even Batman, DC’s darker and more tortured version of the long-serving superhero, clearly wishes to fight – vigilante-fashion – against crime and for justice.

Despite such clear alignments of superheroes and culturally accepted values, in the context of the ‘catastrophe boom’ of recent decades, both comics and films foreground the costs of heroic action more than its glories. Recent productions in the superhero genres circle around questions of change – both dramatic change caused by catastrophes and more gradual change in the role and status of superheroes. Going beyond the frequently noted similarities between heroes and villains, recent productions actually suggest that it is villains, rather than heroes, that are the

more reliable fighters against impending disaster (e.g. David Ayer’s *The Suicide Squad*). On the surface, it appears that a postmodern wobble in moral certainties has also caught up with the superhero universe.

This paper will argue that the ambiguities in recent representations of the superhero indicate a search for (new?) principles of the heroic in a world where old principles have been (temporarily) displaced by catastrophes. Despite postmodern influences, the genre does not, in the end, question either the need for heroes, the possibility for heroic action or even the existence of ‘goodness’. The time–space disruptions of catastrophe include the disruption of ideals, but they do not allow for stasis. In other words, whether or not it is clear what really represents ‘truth’, ‘justice’ or ‘goodness’, the hero needs to act, if he wants to prevent (further) disaster. In the radical dislocations of catastrophic events, recent superhero fictions give more attention to the costs of being ‘good’, but the general parameters of the need for heroic action remain in place: there is still a conviction that ‘justice must be done’. The choices that need to be made are harsher than they used to be, but they nonetheless indicate the cultural ideals of something that could be described as ‘disaster heroism’. In the following I will focus on the recent DC cinematic universe, especially on Zack Snyder’s *Batman v Superman* (2016), though a similar argument could be put forth also for the recent Marvel cinematic universe.

Catastrophe Boom

Catastrophes are booming. Not so much because catastrophes seem to happen more frequently these days, but because we are attuned to noticing them as such. In this sense, catastrophe is about perception and cultural ascription (cf. e.g. Frank 24 or Weber 17), and perceiving events as catastrophe furnishes a “cultural pattern” for interpretation (Utz 11). Catastrophes

are narrated as natural or man-made disruptive events that threaten “the welfare of a substantial number of people for an extended period of time” (Esnard/Sapat 17).¹ A catastrophe is also, in the literary (Aristotelian) sense, a sudden turn of events towards the tragic which initiates an emotional response in the audience and brings about catharsis. Our sensitivity to catastrophe has been sharpened by the natural sciences, that have favoured catastrophe theories since the second half of the twentieth century (cf. Mosbrugger 58). At the same time, real-time global transmission of catastrophic events such as the attacks on the Twin Towers or the 2004 Tsunami have created worldwide participation, shock, or even trauma, as François Walter phrased it: “Das Trauma ruht von nun an im Herzen der abendländischen Kultur.” (Walter 25) In the field of politics and economics as well “the trope of revolution has been superseded by the trope of catastrophe as a primary means for imagining social change.” (Cintron 231) This ‘catastrophic turn’ resonates with the much older cultural pattern in the Judeo-Christian tradition which also views the world as a place of catastrophes (cf. Moltmann). Noah’s flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah or the Apocalypse provide, if no longer necessarily models for explaining otherwise inexplicable events, certainly a still current iconography to describe them and express one’s horror (cf. Walter 23). Critics have also claimed an inextricable link between modernity and catastrophe (cf. Rosario 27). The radical disruptions and chaos that catastrophes provoke destabilise current cultural narratives and expose the ideological as well as material vulnerabilities of societies. Catastrophes “simultaneously demand and defy conceptual understanding and cultural representation and thus force our cultural imagination to invent new concepts and new modes of understanding.” (Meiner/Veel 1) This would suggest that events which are interpreted as catastrophes almost inevitably create heroes that act as protagonists, literally as ‘heroes’, of new or at least modified cultural narratives that seek to come to terms with catastrophe.

While catastrophes are always disruptive, they are not exclusively destructive. The “dynamic system of spatial reorganization and capital accumulation” that comes with both modernity and catastrophe can also be considered as a chance to rebuild and thus work as a catalyst for creation (Rosario 14). Marx, as much as later Marxist critics such as David Harvey or Edward Soja, stressed the rhythms of catastrophic destruction and rebuilding that comes with capitalist processes of progress (ibid. 3, cf. Harvey; Soja). Catastrophe thus makes possible the kind

of creative destruction that is in fact a necessary prerequisite for (capitalist) progress and the opening of new markets. Naomi Klein makes the connection explicit when she describes the strategies for opening new markets by allowing, even encouraging, large-scale destruction in order to sweep away established systems and thus free assets and provide access to new markets as “disaster capitalism” (Klein).

America in particular is considered to be deeply rooted in the (also biblical) idea that destruction and disaster can become a source of “moral, political, and economic renewal” (Rosario 3). “Regeneration through violence” has long been considered part of the national mythology of the United States (see Slotkin). This would suggest that iconic American superheroes not only provide protection during catastrophic events, but also lead the way in reconstruction afterwards. The constructive reaction to disaster is to rebuild and to learn from past mistakes. Bruce Wayne (Batman) says as much to Diana Prince (Wonder Woman) at the end of *Batman v Superman*: “Men are still good. We fight. We kill. We betray one another. But we can rebuild. We can do better. We will. We have to.” (BvS 2:13:40)

Paradoxically, catastrophe links chaos and extreme change (such as the eruption of a volcano or large-scale explosions) with a moment of freezing in time (people caught in mid-action). The experience of catastrophe thus combines dynamics and stasis. The chronotope of catastrophe is “in the middle of”: it irretrievably interrupts action and prevents its completion (Murray 156). Catastrophe is in this sense “invitational” (ibid.), it asks for the completion of interrupted events and thus demands closure. To come to terms with the disruptions that are experienced as catastrophic, cultures create narratives and sites of commemoration that provide forms of closure. The monument or the repeated story about catastrophic moments also combine the dynamics of extreme change (the catastrophic event) with the stasis of the repeated story and the memorial. Catastrophe’s necessary ‘other’ is thus the arrested moment in time that simultaneously recreates the time-space disruption of catastrophe through remembering it and at the same time anchors this moment in a fixed space.² Commemoration on the one hand needs distance from the chaotic and inexpressible events of catastrophe itself, on the other hand it remains “infected” by the catastrophic moment, keeping it forever present (Klinkert/Oesterle 3). While the stasis of commemoration provides a temporary space of stability in the radical “time-space compression” that characterises catastrophic events (Harvey 240), it also

reduces flexibility and limits cultural discourse to a specific aspect of the catastrophe. Commemoration might in fact become a stumbling block and thus hinder adequate cultural response: tradition provides stability but can also slow people down. This tension between stasis and dynamics affects the cultural status of heroes.

Static vs Dynamic Heroes

The films in the Batman and Superman franchise (certainly since Tim Burton's *Batman*, 1989) play on this tension between stasis and dynamics by juxtaposing the stasis of commemorative statuary with the dynamics of the superhero's actions.³ Particularly Joel Schumacher's *Batman & Robin* (1997), which temporarily killed the cinema franchise, crowds museum spaces and monumental statues into the frames and turns them into the sites for the obligatory fight scenes and car chases with the Batmobile racing off the arm of the giant representation of man. Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005), the successful reboot of the franchise, by contrast almost completely dispenses with established statuary⁴ and makes the audience a witness of Bruce Wayne's careful construction of the Batman suit/symbol in place of old (and useless) memorials. As he tests materials and assembles parts, we watch him turn himself into a piece of sculpture. *Batman v Superman*, finally, adopts an extremely critical stance towards musealisation, rejecting the stasis of once useful actions that now have merely historical value. Alexander's sword for instance, which Senator Barrow praises as "the sword that cut the Gordian knot – a triumph!" (BvS 47:39), is revealed to be a fake. Batman's suit is explicitly presented as a (possibly outdated) museum piece, as it is shown next to Robin's old suit in a glass box with the Joker's taunt on it: "Ha, Ha, Ha! The joke is on you Batman." (BvS 36:28) When Wallace Keefe, the maimed victim of General Zod's attack on Metropolis, defaces the monumental statue of Superman in 'Hero's Park' with the graffiti "Fake God", he vents his anger about the perceived failures of the hero on the hero's static representation in a monument.

In place of monumentalised (and basically static) heroes, the film favours the active, moving and fighting ones. This becomes clear for instance in the contrast between the statue of President Andrew Jackson and the moving figure of Superman who replaces the statue in the frame composition: Senator Finch gives a press statement about "good" in a democracy in front of President Jackson's statue who, on account of his long cape and skin-tight uniform, has more than a passing resemblance to Superman. A

few minutes later, Superman replaces Jackson in the central frame position as he moves along the same space (a corridor inside the Capitol) and past more statues, towards the congressional hearing. Senator Finch and her reliance on (static?) democratic values are insufficient to defeat the villain – she is killed in the bomb attack arranged by Lex Luthor. Superman, on the other hand, survives the bomb. How useless monumentalised values are in an actual crisis is visualised in the final showdown with the monster Doomsday when a diagonal frame composition aligns Superman's statue, the monster Doomsday and the living superhero (BvS 2:23:04). While the gigantic statue of Superman looks away from the fight, the (living and moving) hero, though much smaller than both his opponent and his memorial, faces the challenge and eventually rescues Metropolis from the impending catastrophe.

Throughout the movie, Superman struggles with conflicting ascriptions through the media, politicians and Batman, who fights him, because he misinterprets his actions (as indeed Superman misinterprets Batman's actions). As his environment tries to fix the 'meaning' of Superman as either hero or threat, Superman is in fact hindered from being as effective a hero as he could be. The media debate and political demands force him to attend a hearing at the Capitol which actually enables Lex Luthor to blow up his political enemies and Batman weakens him with Kryptonite which hampers his fight with Doomsday. The message seems to be that any lock-down on the cultural significance of the hero-signifier in fact hinders the hero from doing his job (which is 'to save the day'). It is only the acute danger of Doomsday's attack, and Superman's eventual death as he defeats the immediate threat that removes all doubt and restores his uncontested hero status. The barely averted catastrophe clarifies (for the moment) cultural values – and at the same time once more fixes and monumentalises the cultural meaning of the hero. The cycle starts again.

Flawed Heroes

In many ways, long-term, serial heroes supply an ideal platform for negotiating change within basically stable parameters of repetition. The seriality of the superhero genre, and with it the superhero's long-term presence in a culture, assures his status as a cultural icon: the superhero is "one of the most resilient archetypes of American popular culture" (Croci 164) and indeed a symbol for American values. A serial hero needs to be stable over time in order to be recognisable

as the same person. In this sense the superhero acquires, as Umberto Eco has pointed out, the unchangeability of a mythical hero who assembles collective hopes and ideals in his person as an easily recognizable emblem (cf. Eco 196). On the other hand, in order to remain interesting for a mass audience that demands new adventures with every weekly or monthly installment, the plot needs to offer sufficient variation to maintain audience interest. His creators are faced with the paradox of permanence in a world of transience (ibid. 199). Connected to this is the necessity that the superhero's victory necessarily needs to be flawed. Not only is there always another villain, always another catastrophe, waiting around the corner, it is frequently the same villain that comes back to wreak havoc: the Joker haunts the Batman, Lex Luthor is Superman's permanent nemesis. Batman spells out the Sisyphos work of heroes: "Criminals are like weeds [...]. Pull one up, another grows in its place." (BvS 1:21:00) Apart from the ineradicable villain, the cross-over event provides another justification for the continued serial as one hero teams up with or fights against a hero from a different comics universe (as in *Batman v Superman*).

It would, however, be hasty to conflate the characteristics of the genre with the characteristics of the hero and conclude that the genre requirements actually subvert the hero as hero. The serial (super-)hero shows similar character traits as the much older romance and adventure hero who also moves through the narrative space from adventure to adventure, never conclusively defeating evil, though of course defeating various localised manifestations of it. This does not, in the end, weaken or question the hero as hero. Rather, it reflects a (basically Christian) view of the world as irretrievably fallen, a world where evil cannot be finally conquered, even though it is – and must be – temporarily contained. As the world is flawed, so is the hero. The serial superhero narrative in this sense reproduces a more general cultural pattern.

In fact, the point has frequently been made that hero and villain need each other, create each other and in many ways are so like each other, that the boundaries between good and evil become blurred and that it seems merely an arbitrary decision whether to judge the Batman's violence or the Joker's violence as morally reprehensible.⁵ The overlap between hero and villain goes so far that in many cases the 'good' side actually empowers the 'evil' side or the hero's intervention unintentionally causes more destruction than it prevents. In *Suicide Squad*, it is

Amanda Waller's ploy to use the Enchantress as a weapon of defence that enables the witch to break free and unleash her destructive powers. In *Man of Steel* (2013), Superman's presence on earth draws General Zod and his plans to destroy humanity. While Superman defeats Zod, this causes such large-scale destruction that it clouds Batman's judgement of Superman's intentions, and the fight between the two superheroes creates further devastation in *Batman v Superman*. Not only that, Superman carelessly leaves Zod's body lying around, and this enables Lex Luthor to create the monster Doomsday from his own and Zod's DNA. This very obviously raises the question whether heroic action in fact increases the evil in the world.⁶ When, in search for some reassurance about his mission on earth, Superman communes with his (dead) foster father in the mountains, Mr. Kent spells out the danger of collateral damage in heroic action from his own experience as a boy when he prevented a flood from damaging their farm: "We saved the farm [from flooding]. Your grandma baked me a cake. Said I was a hero. Later that day we found out we blocked the water all right, we sent it upstream. The whole Lang farm washed away. While I ate my hero cake their horses were drowning." (BvS 1:19:25f)

If *Batman v Superman* dwells on the possible ambiguities of heroic action, the awareness that a heroic rescue might actually be the cause of further and greater trouble down the road is not new in recent superhero films. In Richard Lester's *Superman II* (1980), for instance, Superman diverts the hydrogen bomb that is about to destroy Paris into space. The bomb's explosion in space accidentally frees the villain General Zod and his companions and sets them loose to devastate the earth. There is, in other words, a clear awareness in superhero fiction, recently foregrounded, that heroic action comes at a cost and that these costs might be very high. Critics have concluded from this that a typically postmodern "moral impasse" has arrived in the superhero genre and that, especially the revisionist superhero narratives (like Alan Moore's *Watchmen* or Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*)⁷ "stage the tension between the intrinsic modernity of a character conceived in the late thirties and the postmodern crisis of metanarratives." (Crocchi 166) The awareness of the cost of heroic achievement creates hero characters that are visited by doubt about their mission and their code of conduct. In the wake of catastrophe they start to query their values.

Recycling the Old or New Departures?

The characters in *Batman v Superman* struggle with the changing status of superheroes, their responsibilities and their failures. Alfred Pennyworth expresses his concern that intended good might actually turn into evil to Batman: "Everything's changed. Men fall from the sky [...] Innocents die. That's how it starts. The fever, the rage, the feeling of powerlessness, that turns good men cruel." (BvS 21:30f) Perry White, editor of the *Daily Planet*, regards both superheroes and the ambition to somehow save the world as superceded concepts. When Clark Kent (Superman's journalist alter ego) protests angrily against being assigned a football report instead of further investigations into the activities of the vigilante-turned-torturer Batman ("When the *Daily Planet* was founded it stood for something!", 47:10), White points out that it is no longer 1938 (the year in which *Action Comics* #1 introduced Superman to its readers). White's position is that only country bumpkins (people from Smallville, like Clark Kent) worry about ethics and claims that "the American conscience died with Robert [Kennedy], Martin [Luther King] and John [F. Kennedy]." (BvS 30:20f) After the explosion in the Capitol, Superman is inclined to agree with White: "Superman was never real. Just the dream of a farmer from Kansas." (BvS 1:12:10f) Faced with repeated disasters they cannot prevent and without public support, superheroes feel that they lose their purpose. They need an appreciative audience to perform as heroes, both in the diegetic world of the film and in the cinema. Foregrounding this uncertain dependence on audience and media, the films expose the instability of any kind of 'truth' or 'value' constructions and thus question, as Croci has claimed, the validity of metanarratives and the very possibility of 'good' generally.

Such moral uncertainties, associated with a postmodern stance by Croci, are enhanced by representational strategies which, in the wake of Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, have also been associated with postmodernism: the open recycling of pre-mediated material and the uncertain boundaries between 'actual' and 'virtual' realities. Though perhaps a consequence more than a characteristic of superhero narratives, the intertwining of action cinema with our perception of what is called the 'real world', turns the real into a simulacrum as the audience delves into the passive consumption of spectacle. The question whether recent superhero fictions simply recycle old material or in fact offer something new continues the tension between stasis (recycling) and dynamics (change) on the level of formal composition and on the level of audience response.

Elements of self-reflexive recycling are typical of postmodern storytelling and point to the fictionality of the story and the constructedness of all meaning. A few examples from *Batman v Superman* will illustrate the high degree of intermedial allusion in the film: The opening sequences replay the frequently told story of the murder of Bruce Wayne's parents. Down to individual frame composition, the film recreates images from Miller's *Dark Knight Returns*, such as the mugger's gun that rips Martha Wayne's pearl necklace and scatters the pearls. The flashback to the funeral (marked as a flashback through the sepia colours that characterise dream sequences in the film)⁸ recreates images from Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* when little Bruce Wayne falls down a shaft and is frightened by the bats. Graffiti alludes to the *Watchmen* with "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" which is the main theme of that graphic novel (BvS 1:39:58).⁹ Wallace Keefe keeps press clippings of Superman on a pin board, including a version of the front cover of *Action Comics* #1 (BvS 24:40). This allusion also crosses from the story level to the level of 'real world' publishing and thus creates a moment of metalepsis. The list could be continued. All of these self-references create an intricate layer of intertextuality for comic book insiders, indicating on the one hand a form of continuity within the superhero universe, but on the other hand allowing the sign systems to proliferate into an endless chain of already told, already watched, already revised stories, and conflating the fictional with the real that is so typical for the postmodern.

Equally insistent as the references to earlier comic books or films is the relentless evocation of two forms of cultural catastrophe that are central to American (and partly also Western) self-perception: 9/11 and the biblical Apocalypse. *Batman v Superman* recycles not only well-known images of skyborne objects crashing into skyscrapers and causing them to collapse into a cloud of dust onto streets full of panicked people. It recycles these already recycled images from *Man of Steel* (2013) which shows the same scenes. This insistent re-use of a fictionalised version of very familiar actual events recalls the observation that has frequently been made about the prefiguration of the events of 9/11 in action cinema, which made the televised images of the collapsing Twin Towers "reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others." (Žižek 11) *Man of Steel* and *Batman v Superman* (as well as countless other action movies) add yet another layer to this relation: the cinema repeats real-life iconic images that had already been projected in cinema. *Batman v Superman* presents this exchangeability of real and virtual events in

conjunction with a media that is shown to create (often faulty) versions of the world as we watch lengthy and ideologically-driven television discussions about the role of Batman and Superman. The enmeshing of reality and the virtual draws heavily on the postmodern idea of the simulacrum and hyperreality.

The second dominant cultural trope that is used very insistently throughout the film is Christianity, in particular, the Last Judgement and the Apocalypse. These allusions further develop the trope that so-called absolute truths are merely a matter of ascription. In several recent superhero films the main threat (usually an invasion from some alien power) has come from the sky.¹⁰ In most cases this is depicted as a very bright opening in the sky around which cloud or rock formations circle and through which the invading ship or monster descends onto earth. This, of course, draws on the well-established iconic trope of the Last Judgement, depicted in a very similar manner by artists since the Renaissance, among them, Jean Cousin the Younger's *Last Judgement* (late 16th century) or Gustave Doré's *Fall of the Rebel Angels* in the illustrations to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1866). Discussions about the role of superheroes throughout the film inevitably draw on religious vocabulary and describe Superman as a saviour, angel, or devil. A stained-glass window in the Wayne memorial chapel depicts an angel with a Superman-like red cape (BvS 33:15). Wallace Keefe defaces the Superman statue with graffiti stating "False God" (BvS 26:26). And centrally, Lex Luthor is intent on demonstrating that "God is dead" and that the conventional depiction of the Last Judgement is the wrong way round – that the "devils don't come from hell beneath us, no, they come from the sky" (32:50). To demonstrate his point, Luthor turns his painting of the Last Judgement upside down (2:16:50).¹¹ The film also starts out with several references to "fall" or "fallen", both in the voice-over and in the actions of the boy Bruce Wayne, who falls as he runs through the forest and then falls down the shaft into the bat cave. In the context of the insistent Christian vocabulary, this fall also alludes to man's fall from grace in the Christian framework. Bruce Wayne is rescued, not by his father as in the equivalent Nolan scene, but by circling bats that carry him back towards the light – an image composition that seems to borrow from Gustave Doré's illustration to Dante's *Paradiso*, Canto XXXI (1857),¹² where circling angels form a tunnel upwards towards the light of Empyrean (the highest heaven). In *Batman v Superman* it is bat wings that flap around the boy, not angel wings, but they still carry him upwards toward the light, confirming Batman's ambiguous association

with the cruelty and fear of the dark side in order to prevent crime. Clear dichotomies of good and evil are thus undermined.

The multi-layered references to previous comic books, films or iconic religious representations create a web of intertextuality and intermediality that present the world as a patchwork of pre-used, pre-mediated, even, to use Adorno's term, pre-digested images, phrases and narrative snippets. *Batman v Superman* seems to be intent on assembling already well-known fragments and at the same time plays with the inversion of their meaning: devils come from the sky, good people fight with cruelty, rescue actually kills people. Related to the aspect of hyperreality and pre-processed popular art is the fascination with spectacle which actually dislodges the original Aristotelian function of catastrophe (cf. Nussner 126). Instead of experiencing catharsis, the audience passively consumes the spectacle of destruction. They remain untouched, uninvolved and eventually unengaged: "We become consumers of the spectacle of catastrophes and crises as well as of art, because we can lean back in the cinema in cosy and cathartic reassurance that the atrocities are happening to someone else." (Meiner/Veel 10) The question is, does this present the superhero as a hodge-podge of basically tired, already used-up cultural ideas and ideals or does this reassembly of consumer experiences allow for new departures? A purely postmodern stance would be a simple recycling, an empty pastiche that aimlessly reproduces and reassembles fragments. Such a pastiche, merely revelling in spectacle, would also be uninterested in any kind of learning experience that is commonly associated with the catharsis produced by catastrophe. It would turn superheroes from an emblem of cultural ideals into mere "freaks dressed like clowns" (BvS 41:10) as Batman describes Superman and the Joker in one breath.

However, this is not what the film does. Either it does not have the courage of its convictions or it labours towards a slightly different and more optimistic point (though the rather clumsy plotting does not necessarily make this very clear): In the end the film emphatically defends both the existence of good in the world and the need for heroes, despite the doubts and problems that come with heroic action. Jonathan Kent's wife releases him from the guilt he felt resulting from his ill-fated heroism when he saved his own farm at the cost of the neighbour's: "She gave me faith that there was good in the world" (BvS 1:20:10). Superman in the end does indeed save the day, even though he has to sacrifice his own life (for the time being). What Faora (Zod's companion) in *Man of Steel* had identified as Superman's

weakness, his sense of morality and responsibility for others (*Man of Steel* 1:29:34), in the end turns out to be his strength, because it enables him to appeal to Batman's sense of compassion which brings Batman back to his side.¹³ And Batman finally acknowledges, "Men are still good" and forms a plan to build a better world (BvS 2:13:40). These are fairly trite positions, and they might still indicate "the intersection between a naively and largely debased commercial art product and the most profound dilemmas of the contemporary situation", as Susan Sontag characterises action cinema and science fiction (Sontag 225). Despite the naiveté, the film nonetheless asserts a clear moral stance – and one that affords space for emulation even by people without superpowers: The inscription on Superman's grave encourages (in rather clichéd fashion) everyone to find the heroic around and in themselves: "If you seek his monument – look around you" (BvS 2:14:50). Crucially, this asks people to internalise the hero's monument and to actively 'look' for traces of the heroic in the world around them, the world that Superman saved for the time being. In the face of doubts, the broad parameters of heroic action are confirmed, and justice is done (Lex Luthor is locked up).

Central, it seems to me, are four aspects in this return to a basic defence of moral and heroic fervour after the excursion into postmodern instabilities of truth, value and representation. And while the central example here was *Batman v Superman*, the argument could easily be extended to other products of the DC as well as the Marvel cinematic universes of recent years.¹⁴ Thus, recent superhero cinematic fictions insist that it is necessary to overcome stasis in any form: a static defence of tradition, a lock-down on ideals, a fixed notion of what constitutes heroic action and what constitutes 'good'. Secondly, the more dynamic version of heroism focusses on heroic action more than on heroic character. While the heroes themselves might continue to be psychologically troubled (like Batman) or even down-right 'bad guys' (like most of the (anti-)heroes in *Suicide Squad*), an action to protect others at the risk of one's own safety counts as heroic. And it is very clear that the world continues to need such action in order to survive. In fact, one could argue that the play with wavering media constructions and uncertain moral positions has become so widely used by now, in and out of the superhero world, that it joins the list of recycled tropes – a mere playful allusion to the postmodern play with morals which in the end actually strengthens an awareness for moral complexities. And further, the hero's response to post-catastrophe devastation is to try and rebuild out of the surviving fragments of tradition. Herein lies

a crucial difference to the villain who also wants to rebuild after catastrophe but without reference to other stakeholders and exclusively for his or her own benefit and profit, in the manner of disaster capitalism. General Zod (in *Man of Steel*), for instance, wants to rebuild earth into a new Krypton but the prerequisite is a complete annihilation of life on earth as it is now. Poison Ivy (in *Batman & Robin*) wants to eliminate human life so that plants can rule the earth. Batman, in contrast, sets out to recruit a team to "rebuild" out of the fragments that are left and from the heroes of the past, so that not only *did we have* heroes – as the men in the shady Metropolis bar nostalgically reminisce – *we will have* heroes again (and incidentally also a marketable sequel to the film: *League of Justice* by the same director has been announced for a November 2017 release). The final point worth noting is currently only a hint: it seems that the rebuilding of the heroic ideal will involve women. The superhero genre is notoriously dominated by men and notions of heteronormative masculinity (cf. Sina 202). For Wonder Woman, this man's world is a destructive one and intrinsically not worth fighting for: "Man made a world where standing together is impossible" (2:13:40). The very fact that Wonder Woman will eventually join the Justice League (as she has done in the comics) gives grounds for hope that the heroic makeovers Hollywood is planning for the year 2017 will – convincingly – include heroines as well.

Batman v Superman questions both Superman's naive heroism and Batman's uncompromising pursuit of justice. Both superheroes in the end understand that their notion of heroism has been used (by Lex Luthor) – Superman pays with his life, and Batman overcomes his cruelty borne of a feeling of powerlessness. The cathartic effect of the final catastrophe (in the literary sense) leads to a learning experience for the protagonists which enables regeneration out of destruction. This after all revives a cultural pattern that has been central to American self-definition. It leads to defiance in the face of catastrophe – and the building of a taller tower on the site of the destroyed Twin Towers.

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- 1 Esnard and Sapat actually insist on a difference between 'disaster' and 'catastrophe', describing the latter as the more comprehensive disruption. In this article I will follow the practice of other critics and use the word 'catastrophe' and 'disaster' as synonymous (see, for example, Gerstenberger/Nusser 2)
- 2 The increased need for security measures that come with the growing awareness of risk is another aspect of this combination between extreme loss of control (dynamic) and lock-down (stasis).
- 3 A similar juxtaposition can be noted in the Marvel franchise, especially in *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* which repeatedly contrasts the (necessarily stationary and in this sense pointless) statues of past heroes with the rapid movements of the fleeing populace of Sokovia.
- 4 The exception are a few statues in the Wayne mansion swathed in dust sheets and some classical busts in the board room of Wayne Enterprises. In both cases those statues signal an environment that is no longer viable: Bruce Wayne has abandoned his mansion, and the board is trying to dis-mantle Wayne Enterprises.
- 5 See, for instance, Fricke for a detailed outline of this argument, also Brooker, *passim*.
- 6 The same point is driven home in the Marvel Avenger series. For this see the article by Jonatan Steller in this issue.
- 7 Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* is one of the sources for *Batman v Superman*, and Snyder also directed *Watchmen* (2009).
- 8 Moore and Bolland's *The Killing Joke* also uses this colour-coding to indicate flashbacks.
- 9 Compare the detailed list of comic-book and film self-references on "WTF: Batman v Superman" (2016).
- 10 Almost identical depictions of invasions of hostile powers from outer space can be found in other superhero films: *Suicide Squad*, *Avengers*, *Man of Steel*. In contrast, in earlier Batman films the threat comes from below: the Penguin in Tim Burton's *Batman Returns* (1992), for example, creeps up from the sewers.
- 11 The painting of the Last Judgement in Luthor's study is another example of the iconic mash-up the film presents: it is a depiction that looks entirely familiar, but is in fact a conglomeration of several famous images of this scene, notably Gustave Doré's biblical illustration, *The Last Judgement* (1897), and Rubens' *Fall of the Damned* (ca 1620).
- 12 Given the borrowing from Doré's Bible for Luthor's painting, it seems quite possible that Doré was a more general inspiration for the film.
- 13 This happens, it must be said, in a completely unconvincing plot turn: Batman is ready to forget 18 months of obsessive hatred, because he finds out that Superman's foster mother has the same name as his own mother.
- 14 The ambiguities of heroism are also explored in Marvel television or Netflix series like *Jessica Jones*, *Daredevil* or *Luke Cage*, though in these series the superheroes tend to operate on a more local level, rather than engaging in nation-wide catastrophes.

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