RUNNING HEAD: The Superhero Film

The Birth and Death of the Superhero Film

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The Birth and Death of the Superhero Film

In the late 1970s, when one of the authors of this chapter was at an impressionable age, his parents took him for the first time to a movie theatre. The experience was, in a single word, overwhelming. The epic music, accompanied by dazzling visuals and a delightful story, transported the young boy to a brand-new and brightly colored universe where just about anything seemed possible. When lights switched on and the credits appeared, our boy felt alive and bursting with energy. Indeed, as the movie ads had promised, he found himself believing that a man could fly.

The movie, of course, was Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978), the first superhero story to come out as a major feature film. Although the movie was critically acclaimed and attracted large numbers of viewers around the world, subsequent superhero films were only marginally successful until the 1990s, when the *Batman* movies achieved a comparable level of acclaim. The true rise of the superhero film, however, was realized in the 21st century. Since 2000, more than forty major feature films with superheroes have been adapted to the silver screen, a number that is steadily growing. Films such as Sam Raimi's Spiderman trilogy (2002-2007), the *Dark Knight* (2008), the *X-Men* (2000 onwards) and *The Avengers* (2012) have attracted hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide, and rank among the highest-grossing movies ever made. With this recent revival, the superhero film has evolved into one of the largest and most commercially successful genres in the cinematic industry.

Why has the superhero film come to enjoy such a large and enduring popular appeal? In the present chapter, we seek to provide some psychologically informed answers to this question. Throughout our discussion, we highlight the significance of the superhero in the superhero film. To be sure, we acknowledge that much of the popularity of the superhero film may be explained by such factors as good storytelling, a strong cast, or effective advertising. However, these factors are common to many other forms of cinema. In this chapter, we focus

on what is unique about the superhero film: Characters that use their superhuman (or at least highly extraordinary) powers to promote some greater good, commonly known as superheroes. In what follows, we first take a closer look at the modern superhero and consider its ancient mythological roots. Next, we relate the popular appeal of the superhero film to universal human motivations that stem from people's confrontation with existential realities. Finally, we discuss the recent trend towards deconstruction of the superhero myth, and consider the possible psychological ramifications of this trend.

The Modern Myth of the Superhero and Its Ancient Roots

I come from a place where magic and science are one.

Chris Hemsworth in *Thor* (2011)

Superheroes are undeniably American icons. They were invented during the 1930s by the creators of comic books, a quintessential American art form that began as re-printings of newspaper comic strips. Most superheroes are therefore situated in an urban landscape that is based on life in modern American cities. For instance, the web-slinging that is famously Spiderman's preferred mode of transportation would be hard to imagine in a city without skyscrapers. The Americanism of the superhero extends to the values and ideals that superheroes propagate. Indeed, Superman, the oldest and most famous of superheroes, was heralded in the 1940s and 50s as fighting for "truth, justice, and the American way". Likewise, Captain America is a superhero whose costume design is intentionally based on the American flag and who began his career battling the Nazis in the 1940s. Beyond such blatant displays of patriotism, scholars have suggested that the very notion of a superheroic character, that can single-handedly save humanity, is an outgrowth of the American ideology of individualism (Gray & Kaklamanidou, 2011).

Although superheroes are as American as hamburgers and Dutch apple pie, their cultural significance goes far beyond the USA. For one thing, the superhero film nowadays

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draws hundreds of millions (perhaps billions) of viewers outside the USA. To illustrate this point, consider the highest-grossing superhero film to date, *The Avengers* (2012). This superhero film earned $622,217,210 in North America as of Sept. 16, 2012, and $882,300,000 in other countries, as of Aug. 2, 2012, for a worldwide total of $1,510,617,210 (Source: Wikipedia, September 20, 2012). Notably, *The Avengers* set opening-weekend records in countries with little direct contact with American culture, such as Taiwan, Indonesia, and the United Arab Emirates. These impressive box-office results, along with those of other superhero films, suggest that the superhero film has a universal appeal that extends well beyond American pop culture. Indeed, various superhero films have recently been (co-) produced outside the USA, including the American/Spanish production *Faust: Love of the Damned* (2001), Japan's *tokusatsu* films *Ultraman* (2004) and *Casshern* (2004), Malaysia's *Cicak Man* (2006), Bollywood's *Krrish* (2006) and *Ra.One* (2011), Thailand's *Mercury Man* (2006).

In actuality, the superhero is closely connected with older hero mythologies from other cultures. Jerry Siegel, who co-created Superman with Joe Shuster in 1938, recalls in a 1941 interview that ancient myths were a major source of inspiration:

I am lying in bed counting sheep when all of a sudden it hits me. I conceive of a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I have ever heard tell of rolled into one. Only more so. I hop right out of bed and write this down, and then go back and think some more for about two hours and get up again and write that down. This goes on all night at two hour intervals, until in the morning I have a complete script (cited in Fingeroth, 2004, p. 14).

Siegel's recollection suggests that the invention of the modern American superhero was directly influenced by myths and stories of ancient heroes. This influence is notable, because Superman's breathtaking commercial success in the 1930s heralded what has become known as the "golden age" of American comics, the era of the Great Depression and World War II, which spawned a host of other superheroes, of which Batman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, The Green Lantern, and Captain America became sufficiently iconic to be adapted to the silver screen during the 1990s and 2000s. Several of the golden age superheroes have explicit mythological references. For instance, Wonder Woman was conceived as a warrior princess of the Amazons of the ancient Greeks, and The Flash wore a stylized metal helmet with wings that were reminiscent of the iconography of the Olympian god Hermes (see Levitz, 2010, for more on the golden age).

Ancient mythology has time and again inspired superhero artists. This is probably nowhere clearer than for Jack Kirby, the 'King of comics'. As one of the most prolific and admired superhero artists of all time, Kirby co-created Captain America, and contributed to the rise of Marvel Comics by co-creating, writing, and drawing The Hulk, The Fantastic Four, The Avengers, The Mighty Thor, and The X-Men, which all have recently been turned into blockbuster movies. Kirby's vision of the superhero was more mythological than that of any previous artist. For instance, The Mighty Thor, one of Kirby's co-creations in the 1960s, was a god that was directly imported from Norse mythology, along with a supportive cast of gods like Odin, the supreme god of the Normans, and Loki, the god of mischief. In the 1970s, Kirby created an new mythos for DC Comics called the *Fourth World*, which included a pantheon of the New Gods, a race of divinely super-powered beings who appeared after the death of the Old Gods during the apocalyptic battle of Ragnarök, which is described in the mediaeval Edda Poem of Norse mythology and the central topic of 19th century composer Richard Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods* (or *Götterdämmerung*).

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In sum, although the modern superhero was first created in the USA during the Great Depression, the superhero figure has deep roots in ancient myths. Joseph Campbell (1968/2008), in his ground-breaking volume *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, suggested that all world myths draw from a common archetypical structure, which he called the mono-myth. Campbell (p. 28) described the core of the mono-myth as follows,

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

The notion of a mono-myth remains speculative. Nevertheless, in keeping with this idea, mythologists have noted numerous common elements across different hero mythologies. For instance, Lord Raglan (1936) identified 22 common traits of mythical heroes such as Hercules, Moses, Siegfried, and Robin Hood. Likewise, modern cognitive scientists have suggested that folk ideas about the supernatural have elements that are universally shared across all cultures (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Boyer, 2001). These universal cognitions, which likely form the basis of mythological and religious traditions, may originate in evolved, biologically prepared mental templates that allow people to understand the world (see also IJzerman & Koole, 2011). Consistent with these ideas, experiments have revealed that intuitions about the supernatural display remarkable parallels across members of Western cultures and members of cultures who have had little or no contact with Western culture (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004). In view of these findings, it is conceivable that hero myths have some universal elements that amount to something akin to

Campbell's mono-myth. This universal hero mythology likely contributes to the appeal of the superhero film.

The Existential Significance of the Superhero

Why would hero mythologies have arisen among people from cultures anywhere and at any time in recorded history? This question was central to the work of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker. Becker was dissatisfied with the fragmented nature of conventional theories in the social sciences. Therefore, Becker set out to develop a general theory of human nature that synthesized central discoveries from the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and psychiatry. He wrote down his insights in *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1962) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Denial of Death* (1973).

According to Becker, heroism is central to the functioning of both individual human beings and their larger cultural world. The human mind has developed a great potential for anxiety, because its intelligence allows people to realize the utter inevitability of their own death. Cultures allow people to manage this existential anxiety by convincing themselves that they can achieve something of lasting worth and meaning, something that will allow themselves to outlive or at least outshine their own death and decay. To this end, cultures provide people with guidelines whereby they can achieve such a heroic status, or " feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning" (Becker, 1973, p. 5). Cultural hero systems are based on the hope and belief that one's cultural achievements are of enduring value. Indeed, heroic achievements often involve a literal or symbolic victory over death, for instance, by the saving the lives of innocent children. Lord Raglan (1936) noted that hero myths have death-denying aspects, by letting the hero die under mysterious circumstances, or failing to bury the hero's body.

The groundbreaking ideas of Becker (1962, 1973) inspired psychologists to develop terror management theory (TMT) a systematic framework for examining the influence of

death concerns on behavior (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). TMT researchers have put Becker's notions to the test by examining people's responses to brief reminders of death. If cultural hero systems protect people psychologically against death concerns, then reminding people of death should lead people to uphold the hero systems of their own culture. Indeed, in line with this, hundreds of TMT experiments have shown that reminders of death lead people to defend their cultural worldviews more vigorously (for a recent review, see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, & Koole, 2010; see also Chapter 2, this volume). Moreover, reminders of death lead people to strive harder for heroism, or as psychologists prefer to call it, self-esteem.

Given that terror management processes enhance people's interest in real-life heroism, it stands to reason that these motives can also explain the appeal of fictional heroes such as those depicted in the superhero film. We are aware of no research that has directly examined how terror management influences the appeal of superheroes. Nevertheless, TMT research has examined a number of phenomena that bear on key characteristics of superheroes. By taking a closer look at this research, we believe we can indirectly shed light on the potential terror management functions of superheroes.

The first and arguably most direct way in which superheroes may alleviate death concerns lies in superheroes' own invulnerability to death and decay. Superheroes are generally young and able-bodied, and, despite their decades-long careers, show virtually no signs of aging. Moreover, superheroes display an uncanny ability to overcome mortal dangers. TMT research has shown that people, when contemplating death concerns, are inclined to deny their personal vulnerability to diseases and accidents (Goldenberg & Arndt, 2008; Greenberg et al., 1993). The striking invulnerability of the superhero may thus be regarded as an outright denial of death. For instance, the otherwise disappointing *Superman Returns* (2006) has a visually stunning scene in which Superman calmly walks towards a

gunman who fires several rounds of heavy ammunition directly onto Superman's body. When this fails to hurt Superman, the gunman fires a bullet at point blank range at Superman's eye. In a close-up, however, the viewers can witness how even Superman's eye is completely bulletproof, and simply causes the bullet to ricochet and fall to the ground. By identifying with invulnerable and eternally young superheroes, people may psychologically reduce their own sense of vulnerability to death and decay.

The invulnerability of several superheroes like Superman is so absolute that it has become challenging for writers to sustain dramatic tension in superhero stories. One solution to this problem has been to let superheroes fight against villains that are similarly super-powered. In other cases, the superhero has to fight evil versions of themselves. Spiderman, for instance, was set up to fight against Venom in *Spiderman 3* (2007), an enemy that was created from an alien who initially served as Spiderman's suit, and whose appearance is a blackened version of Spiderman. Another solution is to weaken the superhero. The latter is a somewhat tricky move, given that it undermines the superhero's invulnerability. As a kind of compromise, many superheroes have at least one critical weakness. The most famous example is probably Superman's famous intolerance for kryptonite, which is purportedly the only substance that can kill him. Notably, the theme of a singular weakness causing the hero's downfall also features in many ancient hero myths, such as the Greek hero Achilles of Homer's *Iliad*, who was invulnerable in all of his body except for his heel. The proverbial Achilles heel may serve as a warning against arrogance and hubris, because even those with god-like powers will be ultimately overthrown by death.

Most superheroes, however, have decidedly more vulnerabilities than Superman. For instance, Batman is only relatively bulletproof because of his armor and training, and Spiderman has to completely rely on his agility to dodge bullets. Probably the most vulnerable of superheroes is *Daredevil* (2003), a blind superhero with no superpowers except

for his heightened remaining senses (including a bat-like radar sense). Despite his notable handicap, however, Daredevil still manages to beat his opponents in direct combat, aided by no other weapon than his famed billy club. Daredevil's blindness and lack of invulnerability, though they break with the regular superhero scheme, thus serve to enhance the character's heroic stature as the "man without fear."

Superheroes may further alleviate death concerns by promoting symbolic forms of death transcendence. A first path towards symbolic death transcendence relates to the superhero's supernatural abilities. The natural world is strongly associated with death (Koole & Van den Berg, 2005). By putting the superhero above nature, supernatural powers implicitly suggest that there may be an escape from the naturalness of death. By bending steel with their bare hands, superheroes may bend the natural laws that dictate that life must be finite. People are indeed more inclined to believe in supernatural powers, such as the existence of ghosts or foreign deities, after they have been experimentally reminded of death (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006). In this regard, the supernatural power of flight may have a special existential significance (Cohen, Sullivan, Solomon, Greenberg, & Ogilvie, 2011). Death entails the absolute cessation of movement, whereas unhindered flight signifies the ultimate freedom of movement. Flight is therefore a powerful metaphor for healthy life (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; IJzerman & Koole, 2011). In line with these notions, reminders of death (versus a control topic) lead people to report an increased desire to fly, and, conversely, flight fantasies reduce the accessibility of death thoughts (Cohen et al., 2011). By fostering such flight fantasies, the flying powers of many superheroes may thus help people to ward off existential concerns[1].

A second path towards symbolic death transcendence relates to the superhero's moral character. All superhero stories are about the fight between the forces of good and evil, which are separated much more clearly in these stories, than they can be discerned in everyday life.

Indeed, superheroes typically battle others who can be clearly identified as criminals, such as bank robbers or drug dealers, or super-villains with evil plans towards world domination. This exaggerated separation of good and evil, or "moral amplification" (Haidt & Algoe, 2004), has important existential functions. Moral amplification makes people feel like they are part of a highly meaningful cosmic drama, by assuring people that they are part of a team fighting for virtue and against evil. The moral nobility of the superhero is uplifting because it reminds people of humanity's better nature. Indeed, people who witness someone commit a morally praiseworthy act may experience the emotion of elevation, a sense of awe at a display of moral beauty (Haidt & Algoe, 2004). Those who inspire elevation are often given a special status as moral heroes. In the Catholic Church, for instance, people who commit the highest moral actions are given the formal status of saints, a special class of people who mediate between humanity and the divine.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that superheroes may inspire feelings similar to those inspired by saints. For instance, Christopher Reeve, the actor who starred in the first four Superman films during the 1970s and 80s, once confided during an interview with Otto Friedrich in 2001:

"It's very hard for me to be silly about Superman," says Christopher Reeve, who plays the role in the movies, "because I've seen firsthand how he actually transforms people's lives. I have seen children dying of brain tumors who wanted as their last request to talk to me, and have gone to their graves with a peace brought on by knowing that their belief in this kind of character is intact. I've seen that Superman really matters. It's not Superman the tongue- in-cheek cartoon character they're connecting with; they're connecting with something very basic: the ability to overcome obstacles, the ability to persevere, the ability to understand difficulty and to

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turn your back on it."

The way Reeve was received by Superman fans seems strikingly similar to the way religious believers treat their holy figures. This near-religious reverence makes psychological sense in that Reeve was seen as the embodiment of Superman (Indeed, Reeve's performance continues to be regarded by fans as the most convincing interpretation of Superman, and Reeve remained associated with the character until he died from the consequences of a horse-riding accident in 2004).

The elevated morality of superheroes is accentuated by the baseness of the villains that they battle. Curiously, people may also derive existential comfort from this very baseness. As Becker (1973, p. 144) points out, having villains enhances people's sense of significance in life:

> It helps us to fix ourselves in the world, to create a target for our own feelings even though those feelings are destructive. We can establish our basic organismic footing with hate as well as by submission. In fact, hate enlivens us more, which is why we see more intense hate in the weaker ego states. The only thing is that hate, too, blows the other person up larger than he deserves.

The battle between good and evil that is central to the superhero mythology thus helps people find meaning in a meaningless universe.

Supernatural powers and moral amplification are germane to virtually all superhero narratives. However, superheroes may also offer a third path to symbolic death transcendence, in the form of a cosmic or pseudo-religious mythology. This final type of symbolic death transcendence has become rather tenuous in modern times, in which science

has increasingly restricted the realm of religious sense-making. Probably for this reason, cosmic mythology is only faintly present in the more humanistically oriented superheroes, such as Batman, Spiderman, or Daredevil. Nevertheless, cosmic or pseudo-religious themes are clearly present in superheroes like Superman, The Mighty Thor, and the Green Lantern. The latter are endowed with an expansive cosmic awareness, as an alien from a distant galaxy (Superman), a Norse deity (The Mighty Thor), or an agent of an intergalactic police force (the Green Lantern). By their nature, these superheroes refer to a cosmic mythology that imbues all aspects of existence with a deeper symbolic meaning. As such, the narratives of these superheroes inevitably have religious overtones. According to Becker (1973), religious meanings are particularly effective in managing death anxiety because of their universal, all-encompassing nature. In line with this notion, TMT research indicates that religion is an important resource in dealing with death concerns (Koole et al., 2010; Vail et al., 2010). The cosmic and pseudo-religious themes of superheroes may thus contribute to their existential significance.

Twilight of the Gods: Deconstruction of the Modern Superhero

... in modern times, the hero seems too big for us, or we too small for it.

Ernest Becker (1973, p. 4).

The mythological nature of the superhero is problematic in modern times, during which people pride themselves on their rational, enlightened thinking. Scientific advances have undermined all forms of mythology, religious and otherwise. The imperative of logical-analytic thinking has thus become so strong that many people cannot even bring themselves to indulge in fantasies about irrational beings, even when these purport to be no more than fantasies. Indeed, recent studies have shown that subtle manipulations that trigger analytic thinking promote disbelief in supernatural beings (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012; see also Pennycook et al., 2012). These findings suggest that, as modern living requires more and

more people to get scientific training, and hence engage in logical reasoning, people may find it harder to suspend their disbelief to enjoy a fantastical genre such as that of the superhero film.

Luckily, the superhero is endowed with clever defenses against skepticism. One classic trick has been to dress the superhero up in (superficially) believable scientific terms. An all-time favorite is to present superpowers as the unexpected side effects of a scientific experiment. For instance, the bestial strength of the Hulk is attributed to the effects of exposure to gamma radiation, and the powers of the Fantastic Four are explained as the product of exposure to cosmic rays. In a more original vein, the superpowers of the X-men are explained in terms of chance mutations within the human genome. Further lending credibility to superhero narratives, the alter egos of superheroes are often scientists or engineers, like Reed Richards of *The Fantastic Four,* Bruce Banner in *The Hulk*, and Tony Stark in the *Ironman* movies.

The flirtations with science and technology are designed to convince the audience to believe in the magic of the superhero. Indeed, a case could be made that, in modern times, science and technology have acquired their own kind of mythology. Most people nowadays have little idea of what makes technology like personal computers or smart phones work. And so people must rely on faith in operating these devices. Banking on this faith are superheroes like Ironman and scientist Reed Richards, the leader of the Fantastic Four, whose scientific and technological wizardry promises to make anything possible.

Another antidote against skepticism has been to infuse the superhero with visual and psychological realism. Superheroes started their successful career in comic books, a medium that allowed for spectacular graphic displays of their supernatural abilities. Initially, film makers could not match these visuals with special effects, so that they had to resort to caricaturesque portrayals such as the popular Batman TV show of the 1960s. The first script

for the first Superman movie was written in the same campy spirit. However, director Richard Donner insisted on what he called "verisimilitude," the creation of a believable ambiance to the notion of a powerful superhero appearing in the modern world (see Christie's [2010] biography of Donner). To achieve this goal, Donner worked with hundreds of technicians and artists to create the illusion that a man could fly. Ever since, filmmakers have spent countless millions on special effects to enhance realism in the superhero film.

Realism can also be enhanced psychologically, by adding complexity and moral ambiguity to the character of the superhero. This strategy was pioneered in the superhero comics of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in the 1960s. Whereas superheroes previously had uncomplicated personalities, Lee and Kirby's characters displayed a complex array of emotions and inner conflicts. For instance, Ben Grimm of the Fantastic Four gained superhuman strength, but simultaneously acquired a monstrous appearance as the Thing, and thus was deprived of his humanity. Due to their volatile character, Lee and Kirby's superheroes spend as much time bickering among themselves as they do fighting villains.

Following Lee and Kirby, comic book artists in the 1980s introduced other complexities in superheroes. For instance, Frank Miller's acclaimed *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) depicted a middle-aged Batman operating in a landscape of urban decay and political corruption. Around the same time and equally revolutionary, Alan Moore and Davis Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986-1987) contained a complex narrative questioning the morality of the superhero, by portraying superheroes as masked vigilantes who are driven by arrogance, greed, or mental illness. At the end of the Watchmen story, the superheroes must decide whether they are willing to expose a conspiracy that led to the massacre of half of New York, or cover this conspiracy up to prevent a global nuclear holocaust. Rorschach, a masked crime fighter whose simplistic morality most resembles that of the classic superhero, wants to

expose the conspiracy but is vaporized by Dr. Manhattan, the only truly super-powered character in *Watchmen*.

The psychological and moral upheaval of the superhero in comic books has been paralleled by similar developments in the superhero film. The first superhero film *Superma*n (1978) was optimistic in tone, and portrayed Superman as a human, but essentially uncomplicated and good-natured character. However, the first superhero film to approach the commercial success of *Superman* (1978), Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), had a much darker and grimmer outlook on the superhero. In interviews, Burton stated that he had never been much of a comic fan but that he was impressed by the dark tone in the Batman comics *The Dark Knight Returns* (by Frank Miller) and *The Killing Joke* (by Alan Moore and Brian Bolland). An important theme in *The Killing Joke* is that Batman and his nemesis, the Joker, are each other's psychological mirror image. This also became the guiding vision behind *Batman* (1989), because according to Burton, "the whole film and mythology of the character is a complete duel of the freaks. It's a fight between two disturbed people" (Salisbury, 2006). The darkness of Burton's *Batman*, however, was considerably softened by the film's highly stylized appearance, which referred to 1930s pulp magazines, including the stunning Art Deco designs of Gotham City, Batman's homeground. Through this hyper-stylized aesthetic, Burton's *Batman* is more an elaborate dark fantasy than a truly dark view of reality.

Sam Raimi's later *Spiderman* trilogy (2002-2007) struck a more nostalgic note, by embracing much of the humanism and optimism of Donner's *Superman* (1978). Peter Parker, the secret identity of Spiderman, displays much of the clumsiness and social awkwardness that we know from Clark Kent, the secret identity of Superman. However, Peter Parker/Spiderman is an altogether more vulnerable character than Clark Kent/Superman. Though both characters are orphans, Clark Kent has positive relations with both his adopted father (Jonathan Kent) and his biological father (Jor El, who communicates with his son

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through crystalline technology). By contrast, Peter Parker is surrounded by highly ambivalent father figures. Peter Parker is (indirectly) responsible for the death of uncle Ben, his main father figure, and suffers from tremendous guilt because of this. Moreover, Jonah Jameson is a newspaper man who employs Peter but at the same time wages a publicity war against Spiderman, and Norman Osborne, the father of Peter's best friend and fellow scientist who takes kindly to Peter, turns out to be the Green Goblin, Spiderman's mortal enemy. Raimi's *Spiderman* trilogy thus adheres to the psychological realism of Spiderman comics of Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, published during the Lee and Kirby era of the 1960s.

A high point of realism and moral ambiguity in the superhero film has been Christopher Nolan's trilogy *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). *Batman Begins* examines the relationships between Bruce Wayne's initial fear of death, the death of his parents, and his journey to become Batman. In the vision of director Nolan, "the world of Batman is that of grounded reality. [It] will be a recognizable, contemporary reality against which an extraordinary heroic figure arises" (cited in Grazer & Dunkley, 2004). The theme of the film, according to Nolan, is "a person who would confront his innermost fear and then attempt to become it." *The Dark Knight* continued the same dark and realistic style. The premise of the movie is that Batman's presence in Gotham city attracts a terrifying new breed of criminals, who are purely bent on causing chaos and anarchy. This new kind of criminal is personified by the Joker, played by Heath Ledger in an Oscar-winning performance. The Joker continually forces Batman to make impossible ethical choices, for instance, by threatening to kill a new victim each day unless Batman reveals his secret identity (see Ebert, 2008). Evil thus triumphs over good in *The Dark Knight,* in a startling reversal of the classic superhero mythology.

Beyond Heroism

To infinity… and beyond!

Buzz Lightyear in *Toy Story* (1995)

With Nolan's *Dark Knight*, the deconstruction of the superhero mythology seems complete. The superhero is left without supernatural powers, his motivations questioned and attributed to mental illness, and his actions only provoke counter-actions, so that the superhero ends up doing more harm than good. Thus deconstructed, the superhero is stripped of all its life-affirming and death-denying symbolism. This deconstruction of the superhero is perhaps inevitable in the modern scientific age, about which Becker (1962; p. 128) noted,

> One of the terrifying things about living in [modern times] is that the margin that nature has been giving to cultural fantasy is suddenly being narrowed down drastically. The consequence is that for the first time in history man, if he is to survive, has to bring down to near zero the large fictional element in his hero-systems.

The superhero film increasingly confronts its viewers with the absurdity of existence and the pointlessness of being a hero. In response to these disturbing realities, viewers may strike back, sometimes with tragic consequences. While we were writing this chapter, a horrifying incident occurred during the midnight premiere of *The Dark Knight Rises,* Christopher Nolan's third Batman movie, in Aurora, Colorado, on July 20, 2012. During this incident, a disturbed young man set off tear gas grenades and started shooting into the audience, killing 12 people and injuring 58 others. When the police apprehended the shooter, they found that he had dyed his hair red and called himself "the Joker', after the principal villain in Nolan's 2008 Batman movie *The Dark Knight*. Although there have been similar

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shooting incidents in the US and elsewhere, the Aurora shooting was directly connected with the *Dark Knight* movies and even to the very act of going to the cinema.

It is tempting to regard the Aurora incident as testimony to the symbolic bankruptcy of the superhero myth. When people draw more inspiration from villains than from superheroes, doesn't this mean that the fundamental notion of a superhero has become meaningless? Perhaps, as Becker's (1962) analysis of modern heroism suggests, the superhero has at last become too big for modern audiences, so that people can no longer identify with heroes that are larger than life.

However, the need for hero systems is likely to remain undiminished, along with people's need to envision a higher form of being that transcends death. Presumably because of these deep-seated needs, hero myths display a stubborn persistence, and seem to have a knack for reinventing themselves. The Edda Poem in ancient Norse mythology already described how the death of the old gods leads to the rebirth of a new and fertile world. This cyclical view of hero systems was apparently shared by one of the greatest creators of modern superheroes, Jack "The King" Kirby (1971; pp. 9 & 33), when he wrote:

> There came a time when the old gods died! The brave died with the cunning! The noble perished, locked in battle with unleashed evil! It was the last day for them! […] The holocaust which destroyed the old gods split their ancient world asunder -- and created in its place […] homes for the new forces to rise and grow and achieve powers to move the universe in new ways.

One interpretation of Kirby's words is that the deconstruction of one superhero myth will only lead to the birth of another superhero mythology. In an apparent bid to confirm this notion, four years after Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) and in the same year as *The Dark*

Knight Rises (2012), Marvel Studios released the *Avengers*, which delivered the superhero mythology on a grander scale than ever seen before, with a team-up of superheroes Captain America, the Hulk, The Mighty Thor, Ironman, Hawkeye, and the Black Widow. The film received generally favorable reviews, and broke records at the box office, grossing over 1.5 billion dollars worldwide. To some, the *Avengers* may signify the vibrancy of the superhero mythology as a global form of pop culture. To others, the *Avengers* may be little more than the death rattle of a genre that is well beyond its prime. Which of these views will ultimately turn out to be accurate will depend on whether film makers can continue to make us all believe that humans can indeed fly.

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Footnote

1. Superman was even able to fly backwards in time in Donner's *Superman* (1978) to save the life of Lois Lane, Superman's main romantic interest. Although time travel does not quite guarantee immortality, we suspect that the imagined ability to rearrange historical events helps to reduce existential anxiety.