Patchworking the Man of Steel

Myth, Classical Heroes, Circus Strongman and the Creation of Superman

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Abstract

This investigation into the origin of Superman sets the first superhero in relation to the tradition of the classical heroes of antiquity and their socio-cultural function. In combining contemporary hero scholarship and Campbell's notion of the monomythic hero journey with current attempts at defining the superhero, Superman emerges as simultaneously steeped and based in established traditions of heroism and representing a specifically dynamic and postmodern iteration of the classical stereotype. Following a methodology based on Foucauldian discursive archaeology, Superman – and by extension the superhero as such – is seen to possess a patchwork identity made from discourses of myth, ideology and popular culture.

Introduction

Currently, superheroes are dominating global (popular) culture with a plethora of texts flooding the media channels. The tentpole films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and the DC Extended Universe (DCEU) are without doubt the primary means by which the superhero is disseminated into global culture, reaching a diverse audience far beyond the original target audience of superhero comics or even the superhero films produced before the millennium. In this regard, these films serve as so-called 'motherships', "an industrial buzzword to indicate the primary text that a transmedia story is built around."[1]

As mothership texts, they help organise the ever-increasing intertextual and intermedial network that constitutes the contemporary superhero discourse. This discourse has always been characterised by a multi-mediality and multi-modality that not only housed an ever-expanding canon of superhero characters but also necessitated and generated a synchronicity of character variants within the different media. The most recent mothership text, *Thor: Love and Thunder,* introduces Omnipotence City which is ruled by the Olympian Gods.[2] The direct juxtaposition of Thor with the Greek gods emphasises and problematises the fact that Thor is, indeed, a god *and* a superhero. Thor's nature as a god has been a

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[1] Suzanne Scott: Who's Steering the Mothership? The Role of the Fanboy Auteur in Transmedia Storytelling, in: Aaron Delwiche / Jennifer Jacobs Henderson (eds.): The Participatory Cultures Handbook, New York 2013, pp. 43–52, here p. 46.

[2] Cf. Thor: Love and Thunder, USA 2022. Dir. Taika Waititi.

subject of discussion within the MCU.[3] Thor, a god who has become a superhero, is juxtaposed with (mainly) classical Greek Olympian gods, who are depicted as decadent, self-centred and morally reprehensible. This juxtaposition simultaneously evinces the roots of superheroes in the classical heroic tradition and drives home the sharp differences between the ancient and the postmodern archetype of the hero and the heroic.[4] Superheroes negotiate their roots in the classical tradition within a (post-)modern context that thrives on patchworking together a multiplicity of influences that interrelate and interpenetrate their respective discourses. A case in point is the post-credit scene of *Thor: Love and Thunder*, which features Hercules himself, set up as an agent of Zeus's wrath towards Thor. More so than Thor, Hercules has long been a blatant symbol of the sustained connection between the superhero and the heroic and mythological tradition of Greek and Roman antiquity.[5]

Since the superhero exists in such a great variety of characters and, additionally, individual superheroes more often than not exist as a number of variants, the discourse is difficult to frame theoretically in terms of narrowing down a definition that is applicable to all superheroes. This, in turn, makes it problematic to ascertain exactly a) what the relation between the hero and the superhero is, b) which elements of pre-modern and modern heroes have contributed to the superhero as a postmodern iteration of the hero archetype and c) which notions of the 'heroic' or 'heroism' are negotiated through superheroes to make them meaningful in and for contemporary audiences. I will tackle these three aspects by looking back at the figure of Superman and the cultural context that created him. Looking back at a time when the superhero discourse was in its infancy and treating Superman as the quintessential prototype of the superhero will allow me to carve out the

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[3]   This is a subject that has been retconned and re-imagined a number of times in the MCU. At the beginning (cf. Thor, USA 2017. Dir. Kenneth Branagh), Thor explains to Jane Foster that Asgardian powers appear as magic but are in fact only a highly advanced form of science. This strongly suggests that Asgardians are not really gods, but a highly advanced and long-lived race of beings only perceived as gods by lower-level civilizations. By the time of *Thor: Love and Thunder*, there is a clear race of gods present whose existence depends on being worshipped.

[4]   In the DCEU, the notion of a superhero god(dess) was also introduced via Gal Gadot's *WonderWoman* whose origin in the classical Greek myth is explained and staged in both her solo movies (WonderWoman, USA 2017. Dir. Patty Jenkins; WonderWoman 1984, USA 2020. Dir. Patty Jenkins). Here, however, the divide between superhero and divine being is not drawn as harshly as in the MCU. Like Thor, however, WonderWoman needs to learn morality, justice and selflessness through her exposure to humanity and love.

[5]   Hercules as a character has a Marvel comic book history which is almost as long as that of Thor. He first appeared formally in 1965 in *Journey into Mystery Annual #1* and then became a recurring character in the Thor comic series (starting with #126 of March 1966). Eventually joining the Avengers, Hercules features in the five-issue *Marvel Zombies vs The Army of Darkness* (Marvel Comics, 2007) and in the limited series *Hercules* (Marvel Comics, 1982, 1984) which chronicles his exploits in an alternative 24th century future.

"half-hidden cultural transactions [...]"[6] that went into the shaping of the first true superhero and show "how collective beliefs and experiences were shaped, moved from one medium to another, concentrated in manageable aesthetic form, offered for consumption."[7] Through the exemplary analysis of Superman as a postmodern iteration of the hero, contemporary processes and re-negotiations of heroism and the heroic will be explicated. Before delving into the analysis of Superman, however, the relationship between the concept of the hero and the superhero will be investigated in some depth in order to establish a framework within which to understand the combination of new and appropriated elements that constitute the figure of Superman and, by extension, the superhero in general.

To sum up, I will proceed in three steps. Firstly, I will put into relation the hero and the superhero to show both their similarities and differences. Secondly, I will circumscribe the difficulties in defining the hero and illuminate how this also complicates an assessment of the superhero's heroic function in contemporary society. My final step will be a reading of Superman that will proceed along the lines of an archaeological analysis in the sense of Foucault. In addition to notions of the heroic stemming from antiquity, which are central in the creation of Superman, I will be differentiating selected layers and discursive formations that have seeped into and constituted the superhero. Such an analysis

> seeks to discover that whole domain of institutions, economic processes, and social relations on which a discursive formation can be articulated; [...] what it wishes to uncover is the particular level in which history can give place to definite types of discourse, which have their own type of historicity, and which are related to a whole set of various historicities.[8]

Foucault's method tackles discourses during their time of emergence, showing how they develop through a combination and merging of modalities, rules and power-relations appropriated from other existing discourses. Superman as a node of the nascent superhero discourse lends itself to such an approach as he emerges from an amalgamation of numerous modern iterations of the heroic as a postmodern patchwork sown from various prominent cultural discourses of the early 20th century. Unveiling these discursive influences will shed light on the negotiations of heroic discourses that partake in the superhero discourse today and show how this generates the contemporary dominant iteration of heroism and the hero figure.

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6   Stephen Greenblatt: Shakespearean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England, Berkeley 1988, p. 4.
7   Ibid., p. 5.
8   Michel Foucault: The Archaeology of Knowledge, New York / London 2002, p. 182. For the archaeological method cf. also Michel Foucault: The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences. New York / London 2002.

The Hero and the Superhero

If a hero is generally seen as an extraordinary being, superior to the common person, a superhero is an even more exaggerated version of this figure. The term 'superhero' is a typically postmodern exaggeration of traditional concepts in that it adds to the established type of the hero the epithet 'super' to differentiate itself from the regular hero. Like the vexing question of whether postmodernism is a radical continuation of Modernism or a radical break with it, so the notion of the 'superhero' unmoors its own signification. It is far from clear if a superhero is supposed to be something new or simply a variant of the classical hero figure. What can be said is that since "what is postmodern about western societies is the fact that the old is not simply replaced by the new, but is recycled for circulation together with the new,"[9] no postmodern concept or process is ever detached from previous traditions. "[P]ostmodern culture is […] a culture of quotations. Instead of 'original' cultural production, we have cultural production born out of other cultural production."[10] The same is true for the figure of the superhero. It is inevitably and intrinsically linked to that of the hero through intertextual quotations and the implicit recycling of traditional hero tropes. Based on this, it can be argued that "the superhero was an original, not an aboriginal creation."[11] Indeed, many influences come together in the shaping of the superhero and the superhero discourse. Among the plethora of influences, one of the most fundamental ones is the traditional figure of the hero as such. This is most clearly visible in the direct appropriations of classical heroic figures that have appeared throughout the history of the superhero. George Kovacz states that from the early years of superhero comics, "most of the major superheroes of American comics were making regular sojourns to ancient Rome, Pompeii, or Egypt. Sometimes the ancient world would visit them."[12] Indeed, "Marvel and DC, the two biggest producers of hero comics in North America, have developed the Greek pantheon and integrated these gods into their larger meta-narratives,"[13] which – as was briefly elaborated upon above – has now also been employed in the filmic versions of these meta-verses. The relation between classical hero and superhero runs deeper, however, than simply citing classical characters or appropriating references to antiquity in superhero comics, TV and film. Luis Unceta Gómez explains that

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[9]   John Storey: Inventing Popular Culture. From Folklore to Globalization, Malden, MA / Oxford 2003, p. 71.

[10] Id.: Postmodernism and Popular Culture, in: Stuart Sim (ed.): The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism, London / New York 2001, pp. 147–157, here p. 150.

[11] David Hyman: Revision and the Superhero Genre, New York 2017, p. 10.

[12] George Kovacz: Comics and Classics. Establishing a Critical Frame, in: George Kovacz / C.W. Marshall (eds.): Classics and Comics, Oxford 2011, pp. 3–24, here p. 3.

[13] C.W. Marshall and George Kovacz: Introduction, in: C.W. Marshall / George Kovacz: Sons of Comics and Classics, Oxford 2016, pp. xi-xxx, here p. xix.

[m]any of the constitutive elements of these characters – understood as prototypical and not mandatory ones – strengthen that relationship [between superhero and classical hero]. Besides the aforementioned superhuman powers, it is worth mentioning a few more identifying features: the name, the emblem, the uniform and the mask – that become the iconic representation of their personality and safeguard the secret of their identity –, the use of technological or magical weapons that make them invincible, and the regular presence of a younger companion and of an opponent, represented by the villain, which serves as a counterpoint and contributes to the creation of their identity.[14]

The classical hero is thus inscribed into the very core of the superhero and functions as a major element of this new, postmodern archetype of hero.

When looking at the superhero as a postmodern patchwork creation, the question of locating a point of origin loses its meaning. Still, when speaking of the beginnings of the superhero, it is not difficult to pinpoint the birth of the figure. As Hyman states: "the superhero's inaugural moment is relatively uncontroversial: the first issue of *Action Comics* in 1938 featuring the debut of its first avatar, Superman."[15] As the first of his kind, Superman constitutes the blueprint for all superheroes to follow. "The elements of the superhero genre fully came together for the first time when Superman first appeared, and he was soon followed by Batman, Wonder Woman, and hundreds of others."[16] While having such a clearly apparent locus of origin to work with might seem serendipitous (which it is in many ways), this is undermined precisely by the superhero's inescapable connection to the traditional concept of the hero. Superman does, in an exaggerated manner, what heroes have always done – protect, save, help, bring justice – and he serves the same cultural function as the classical hero. Precisely because of this strong connection, it is necessary to firstly define what exactly a hero is in order to fully understand what makes a superhero *super*. Contrary to the superhero, the origin of the hero-archetype is, however, lost in the mists of pre-history. In any case, as Campbell has shown,[17] there never was one original moment when the figure of the hero was created; rather, the hero-archetype emerged and re-emerged time and again in countless societies and civilisations as an expression of "the basic outline of the universal mythological formula of the adventure of the hero."[18] Ndalianis, referring to Campbell, elaborates on the close relation and the interdependencies of hero and superhero, noting that the hero story, Campbell's monomyth, is

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[14] Luis Unceta Gómez: From Hero to Superhero. The Update of an Archetype, in: Rosario López Gregoris / Cristóbal Macías Villalobos (eds.): The Hero Reloaded. The Reinvention of the Classical Hero in Contemporary Mass Media, Amsterdam / Philadelphia 2020, pp. 1–17, here p. 6.

[15] Hyman: Revision and the Superhero Genre (Fn. 11), p. 10.

[16] Joseph J. Darowski: Preface, in: Joseph J. Darowski (ed.): The Ages of Superman. Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times, Jefferson / London 2012, pp. 1–4, here p. 1.

[17] Cf. Joseph Campbell: The Hero with a Thousand Faces (Commemorative Edition, Bollington Series XVIII), Princeton / Oxford 2004; Joseph Campbell (with Bill Moyers): The Power of Myth, New York 1991.

[18] Campbell: Hero (Fn. 17), p. 20.

so ancient that it is found in all of the earliest mythologies, as well as in religious stories of Moses, Christ, the Buddha, and Mohammed. The dominance of superhero narratives in our own world has many parallels with the proliferation and popularity of hero myths and religions of the past. Likewise, when scrutinized closely, many parallels between past and present emerge: the underworld journeys of Batman and Odysseus; the Utopian society of Plato's Atlantis and Aquaman's underwater world; the iconic Savior status of Jesus Christ, Superman and the Silver Surfer. It could be said in the first instance that the superhero's massive presence in our contemporary popular culture–in comic books, television shows and films–has its parallel in mythical narratives about heroes.[19]

In addition to illustrating the connections between heroes and superheroes, Ndalianis specifically focusses on the great variety of superheroes and the proliferation of their stories which is, in terms of discursive structure, a similarity to the classical hero discourse. With respect to the similarities between hero and superhero, Umberto Eco, in an early attempt at defining the superhero, takes recourse to the connections mentioned by Ndalianis above. Eco engages the two concepts of hero and superhero by first drawing on their shared traditions and then trying to carve out the unique status of the superhero. Looking more closely at Eco's attempt at differentiating hero from superhero will exemplify the obstacles encountered in trying to define the hero in general and the superhero in particular.

In his seminal essay "The Myth of Superman," Umberto Eco seeks to differentiate Superman, the first modern comic book superhero, from classical heroes. He begins by embedding Superman within the long tradition of heroic characters noting that the "hero equipped with powers superior to those of the common man has been a constant of the popular imagination – from Hercules to Siegfried, from Roland to Pantagruel, all the way to Peter Pan."[20] Eco sees Superman (and by extension all other superheroes) as part of this long-established concept, speaking of an "undeniable mythological connection"[21] between classical heroes of antiquity and Superman. However, striving to establish Superman as a unique brand of hero, Eco contends "[t]here is, in fact, a fundamental difference between the figure of Superman and the traditional heroic figures of classical and nordic mythology, or of the figures of Messianic religions."[22] Speaking of a "fundamental difference," Eco clearly suggests that there is not only a difference in degree between modern superheroes and classical heroes, but of kind. For Eco, classical hero narratives are fixed and the characters signify a stable myth, despite possible embellishments and variations around the central story. Due to the influence of the novel, Eco argues, modern characters and, consequently, modern heroes are expected to develop and change. This requirement of superheroes to be 'round characters' is the fundamental difference Eco

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[19] Angela Ndalianis: Introduction, in: Wendy Haslem et al. (eds.): Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman, New York / London 2009, pp. 1–9, here p. 2.
[20] Umberto Eco: The Myth of Superman, in: Diacritics 2.1, 1972, pp. 14–22, here p. 14.
[21] Ibid., p. 14.
[22] Ibid., p. 15.

ascribes to the modern superheroes, essentially differentiating them from classical heroes by mean of this element. Based on this, however, Eco's superheroes become paradoxically incoherent. They "must be an archetype, the totality [...] immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature"[23] while simultaneously they "must be subjected to a development which is typical [...] of novelistic characters."[24] Eco's argument here is somewhat normative as heroic narratives usually do show a development in the central characters. This is also pointed out by Luis Unceta Gómez, who notes that "Eco did not consider a narrative element, which brings closer the paradigm of the superhero to traditional tales."[25] While it is true that heroic characters of classical and Nordic literature do not possess the same development as modern characters in realist fiction, heroes, almost by necessity, need to grow beyond their initial state to fulfil their social function. "Heroes embark on their journeys to achieve a goal that requires the acquisition of an important quality that the hero lacks. All heroes start out 'incomplete' in some sense. They are missing some essential inner strength or quality that they must develop to succeed."[26] The narratives into which the heroes are inscribed provide the context within which the growth of the hero is communicated. Since narratives are easily embellished and expanded, epic stories sport an often baffling range of variant stories throughout time to the point where heroic characters sometimes exhibit mutually exclusive motivations and differing reaction to the same narrative context. Christian Zgoll's elaboration on the complexities and the interrelatedness of sources and cultural influences of myth is pertinent here and deserves to be quoted in full:

> The creation and constant reworking of a mythical *Stoff* depends on many factors, all of which contribute to each specific *Stoff* manifestation. These factors include social customs, religious rites, theological concepts, literary traditions, political conditions, the topographical "lie of the land", historical records, and many others. [...] In this way, a *Stoff* incorporates many elements from a wide variety of origins, not only from other *Stoffe* or *Stoff* patterns but also from different significant elements of its own culture or neighbouring cultures. It is quite simply impossible for a concrete *Stoff* to have been created, and transmitted, and not to have come into contact with other cultural influences, *Erzählstoffe*, and ideas, etc. One result is that a mythical *Stoff*, as a rule, does not exist in a "singular form", but only as a "multiform" entity in the shape of numerous more or less distinct variants. Above and beyond that, the prolonged transmission of mythical *Stoffe* also affects every single one of the medial manifestations of a *Stoff* variant in that these *Stoff* variants are usually not made all of one piece but rather resemble a patchwork of elements which still carry the traces of their various revisions and reworkings. In other words: a single, individual medial manifestation of a *Stoff* variant, such as for instance a text, will typically

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23   Ibid., p. 15.
24   Ibid., p. 15.
25   Unceta Gómez: From Hero to Superhero (Fn. 14), p. 7.
26   Scott T. Allison et al.: Introduction, in: Scott T. Allison et al. (eds.): Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership, New York / London 2017, pp. 1–16, here p. 3.

display multiple layers – or strata – of the processes of transmission and revision to which it has been subjected.[27]

The range of and contradictoriness between its variants, therefore, does not negate or reduce a narrative's mythological nature, but, on the contrary, strengthens it. In this sense, the figure of Superman, due to its comic book origin and its widespread media appearances, has developed a polymorphous depth and polystratic range which parallels those of classical myths and their variants. In terms of mythological stories, what must remain relatively stable throughout the variants is the archetype they represent and thus the mythical function they embody. Thus, changing behavioural patterns or narrative contexts, i.e., growth and development of character, do not negate the heroic and mythological status even though the archetype does not remain fully fixed. Indeed,

> the polymorphy of a mythical *Stoff* and the polystratic nature of the *Stoff* variants can be cited as indicators for the importance of the *Stoff*. Irrespective of individual themes and types of content, both the polymorphy of a mythical *Stoff* and the polystratic nature of its variants point to an elevated degree of importance: as a rule, only something that is considered worthy of variation and reworking will have multiple variants and layers of reworkings.[28]

Classical heroes, it can thus be said, have always already exhibited both change and fixity. Eco's notion of the novelistic requirement for change in character thus does not truly separate the superhero from the hero of mythology. On the contrary, it brings them closer together and emphasises continuity between the two types rather than a rupture in tradition. Based on this reading of Eco, it appears that the difference between classical hero and superhero is indeed only one of degree after all. If, therefore, the classical hero and the superhero are not fundamentally different, the question is how and to what extent the superhero channels the central function of the hero figure.

When we see the figure of the superhero as an early expression of the cultural shift from Modernism to Postmodernism, the very term "superhero" can be seen as a self-reflexive term that emphasises overtly what has always been at the centre of the hero figure, namely that these characters were in some way or form *super*ior to common human beings. The figure of the superhero thus embodies

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[27]   Christian Zgoll: Myths as Polymorphous and Polystatic *Erzählstoffe*. A Theoretical and Methodological Foundation, in: Annette Zgoll / Christian Zgoll (eds.): Mythische Sphärenwechsel (Band 2). Methodisch Neue Zugänge zu antiken Mythen in Orient und Okzident, Berlin / Boston 2020, pp. 9–82, here pp. 52–53. Zgoll bases his approach to mythological analysis on the concept of the hyleme, which is defined as "the minimal action-bearing unit of an *Erzählstoff*, which is not exclusively associated with a particular manifestation in a specific medium or in an individual language, we propose the term hyleme, derived from the Greek word hyle (ὕλη, "stuff", "raw material"; German: Stoff, plural: Stoffe)" (p. 28). Based in this a "Stoff" is "a non-finite quantity of variants of a polymorphic hyleme sequence" (p. 34) and a 'Stoff variant' is a self-contained sequence of multiple independent hylemes of a specific *Stoff;* a *Stoff* variant is determined in its details (p. 34).

[28]   Ibid., p. 67.

with a self-reflexive awareness the established elements of the traditional hero and negotiates these for contemporary culture. Therefore, to understand what a superhero is, to define the type and comprehend how it figures and partakes in cultural processes and exchanges, it is necessary to clarify the interdependencies between hero and superhero and base a definition of the superhero on that of the hero, the former being a new iteration of the latter. It is exactly here that a major obstacle emerges. The superhero eludes narrow definition. Although the superhero genre has its origin in Superman, the character and the genre are highly unstable and impossible to define narrowly as they exist as "an amalgam of factors including myth, memory, nostalgia, intellectual property regimes like copyright and trademark, authors, readers, fans, collectors, comic books, comic strips, radio series, movie serials, television shows, animation, toys and collectibles, and feature films."[29] To exacerbate matters, the condition of the superhero discourse equals that of the traditional hero. The hero as a general category exists in all areas and spheres of culture and "there are many different subtypes of heroes, each with its own unique definition."[30] This is an effect of the hero's function for society. "The hero transcends culture, religion, race, gender, age, and speaks without discretion, to all humanity"[31] and always serves the function as "a concrete manifestation of an abstract concept that speaks of the struggle of civilization to survive and maintain order in a world that threatens to be overcome with chaos."[32] The need for a concrete manifestation within a unique socio-historical context accounts for the unlimited proliferation of individual heroes (and superheroes). Taking recourse to the traditional figure of the hero to arrive at a narrow definition of the superhero is bound to be fruitless as there is no stable type of the hero but an excess of iterations. Considering the apparent futility of trying to approach the superhero and the hero via a narrow definition, it seems more pertinent and helpful to concentrate instead on elucidating the connection between these two concepts in terms of their function for and in society. This will shed light on the continuities and also the discontinuities in terms of the functions of heroics and heroism between the traditional idea of the hero and the contemporary and postmodern notion of the superhero.

A first step will be a brief enquiry into the functions of the traditional hero. Very generally speaking, heroes are "those individuals who come from humble origins, experience early setbacks, and receive assistance from unlikely sources, overcome obstacles, and returns [sic!] with gifts to society, akin to the classic hero journey described by Campbell."[33] This definition nicely combines the two

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[29] Ian Gordon: Superman. The Persistence of an American Icon, New Brunswick, NJ 2017, p. 3.
[30] Allison et al.: Introduction (Fn. 26), p. 5.
[31] Ndalianis: Introduction (Fn. 19), p. 2.
[32] Ibid., p. 3.
[33] Elaine L. Kinsella et al.: Attributes and Applications of Heroes. A Brief History of Lay and Academic Perspectives, in: Scott T. Allison et al (eds.): Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership, New York / London 2017, pp. 19–35, here p. 25.

elements that oscillate in every discussion of heroes and the heroic, but remain largely unvoiced. The hero negotiates stability and malleability through the two aspects of 1) mythical function (stability) and 2) performance of heroic deeds (variable, changing). The mythological function of "returning gifts to society" is expressed through the performance of the hero in question ("overcoming obstacles") within the context of their specific time and culture. The stable element is the function of reflecting, enacting and embodying a society's core values and identity, which, within the discourse, gains additional stability through the mythological or divine origin of the hero. Based on this stable element, the malleable element works through the potential for dynamic adaptation of the narrative the hero is embedded in. Ndalianis phrases this in the following way:

> Heroic narratives have a history that's as old as that of the establishment of human socialization. This major cultural construct began before Hercules slew the Nemean lion with his bare hands or Odin killed the giant Ymir, and often reflects the social need for extraordinary action. Hero myths contain universal elements and have a continued presence in cultural memory, yet they're dynamic beings who shift and metamorphose to accommodate themselves to specific eras and historic-cultural contexts.[34]

The mythical function is relatively stable throughout history. The hero functions as an embodiment of the core values of a society and their actions serve as examples of proper behaviour. Heroes act altruistically and are ready to sacrifice themselves for their community.[35] The way these aspects are performed is variable and dependent on the society in question and the historical moment. Based in this, the hero cannot be defined by means of attributing features to the character as such, but it is through performance that members of a society attribute the trait 'hero' to a person or character. The potential of the narrative for change allows the universal elements to be re-interpreted in the light of a society's constantly changing attitude towards them. As societies develop and change, the universal elements of their myth are put into new contexts and thus open up new perspectives which, in turn, are cast in new variations of the heroic narrative or even mandate the introduction of entirely new heroes to represent the universal elements for the changed historical context.

Allison and Goethals present an outline of performative scripts that, when enacted within a narrative, facilitate the ascription of the epithet hero to the character. The first element is that "[m]oral choices are typical of heroes;"[36] closely connected to this aspect is the hero's high level of competence which allows heroes to realise the moral choice by accomplishing their goals. Allison and Goethals identify "morality and competence as the two basic dimensions

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[34]   Angela Ndalianis: Introduction, in: Angela Ndalianis (ed.): The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero, New York / London 2009, pp. 3–15, here pp. 3–4.
[35]   Cf. Campbell: Hero (Fn. 17); Kinsella: Attributes (Fn. 33).
[36]   Scott T. Allison / George R. Goethals: Heroes. What They Do & Why We Need Them, Oxford 2011, p. 8.

of heroism"[37] around which are clustered a number of further traits that find expression in the performance of heroes and thus determine our perception of them as heroic. Allison and Goethals group them into what they call The Great Eight traits. Each of these eight traits itself organises more (sub-)traits that have to be deduced from the character's performance and that, when present, facilitate that a character is perceived as a hero. These are the Great Eight:

> Smart: intelligent, smart, wise
> Strong: strong, leader, dominating, courageous, gallant
> Selfless: moral, honest, selfless, humble, altruistic
> Caring: compassionate, empathetic, caring, kind
> Charismatic: eloquent, charismatic, dedicated, passionate
> Resilient: determined, persevering, resilient, accomplished
> Reliable: loyal, true, reliable
> Inspiring: admirable, amazing, great, inspirational[38]

These eight traits can again be associated with the two fundamental qualities introduced above:

> we can say that heroes are moral, that is, good, by being Caring, Selfless, and Inspiring. The competence dimension signals that they are also strong and active, and those traits, as noted earlier, are represented by the other five of the great eight: Resilient, Reliable, Charismatic, Smart, and Strong.[39]

If the hero character possesses a big enough selection of the above traits, this will narratively manifest itself in the character being "in complete control of himself and his environment"[40] and in that they "inspire or show great leadership, and they do this either directly, through our interactions with them, or indirectly, through their deeds and works."[41] Story-wise, these deeds and works often emerge from "heroes frequently hav[ing] to overcome one kind of obstacle or another,"[42] which can take the form of villains or objects, but can also manifest as internal, psychological obstacles. Consequently, the "[h]ero status is often achieved by making a great personal sacrifice for a cause"[43] before the obstacles are finally overcome.

The hero identity is thus achieved through a repeated performance[44] of character traits that, by means of this repeated enactment, become permanently associated with a certain person or character. Like all identity, the hero's identity is thus performative which links it closely with the main mythological function of the hero, namely as an exemplary image of good social behaviour that should

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[37]   Ibid., p. 63.
[38]   Ibid., p. 62.
[39]   Ibid., p. 63.
[40]   Ibid., p. 8.
[41]   Ibid., p. 44.
[42]   Ibid., p. 19.
[43]   Ibid., p. 13.
[44]   Cf. ibid., p. 73.

be emulated. In the context of gender, Butler theorises that "gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be."[45] This notion of performativity entails that every performance is also performative of other performances, i. e., identity is constructed for the individual whenever it is performed, but it is also, by being perceived publicly, imitated and thus constitutive of similar performances by other agents. Applied to the hero this means that by performing in an exemplary fashion, the hero character achieves the mythic function described above as their performance is emulated by the other members of the community.

Defining the Superhero

Now, the superhero, by nature of being 'super', is, as was briefly noted above, at the same time linked to the traditional notion of the hero – and therefore also the functions and traits delineated above – and represents a new, self-reflexive iteration of the hero that congenially taps into the postmodern *zeitgeist*. Before elaborating on this aspect by means of the origin of Superman, the definition of the superhero advanced by Coogan shall serve to establish the superhero's link to and dependence on the hero concept as described above. Any definition of the superhero is constructed in close proximity to that of the hero. Coogan's definition of the superhero is arguably the one most commonly used and referred to in superhero scholarship today. He contends that "definitions of the superhero overlook the idea of generic distinction, that is the concatenation of other conventions that Henderson calls family resemblance. Generic distinction can be used to divide superheroes from non-superheroes."[46] Coogan

> makes the point that whilst heroes may contain 'super' traits, they differ from superheroes in terms of their powers, their identity, and in their generic characteristics. He concludes that conventions of plot, setting, character, iconography and theme are distinctive enough to create a superhero genre.[47]

What makes Coogan's definition particularly useful is that it boils the great variety of iterations in terms of superheroes and superhero narratives down to the simple formula of MPI: Mission, Power, Identity. Coogan argues that "[t]he superhero's mission is prosocial and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda."[48] This mission equals the quali-

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[45] Judith Butler: Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, New York / London 1999, p. 33.
[46] Peter Coogan: Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre, Austin 2006, p. 43.
[47] Ndalianis: Introduction (Fn. 19), p. 4.
[48] Coogan: Superhero (Fn. 46), p. 31.

ties a hero must exhibit described above. Indeed, Coogan notes that this convention "is not unique to the genre."[49] In contrast to this, powers, or

> [s]uperpowers are one of the most identifiable elements of the superhero genre. [...] These abilities are the heroes' powers – or superpowers, to emphasize the exaggeration inherent in the superhero genre – and they are the first area of real difference between Superman and his pulp and science fiction predecessors.[50]

While there is no doubt that superpowers are the most prominent element in today's superheroes and a differentiating element between superheroes and their direct predecessors in popular culture, pulp and science fiction heroes, these superpowers do not differentiate superheroes from classical heroes, but, again, rather emphasise the continuity between these two iterations of the hero type. In the last element of Coogan's definition, he adds that "[t]he identity element comprises the codename and the costume, with the secret identity being a customary counterpart to the codename."[51] For Coogan, this element is the most important one in distinguishing the superhero from hero. He states that

> [w]hile generic distinction can be used to define some characters as superheroes, it can just as easily be used to establish that some characters are not. [...] Typically, the identity convention (codename and costume) plays the greatest role of the three elements in helping to rule characters in or out of the genre.[52]

Taking Coogan's definition of the superhero as a basis, it can be argued that the aspects of mission and power are not distinguishing markers between superhero and hero. In terms of mission, the mythic journey of the classical hero, if it follows Campbell's trajectory, equals Coogan's in that heroes set out on a selfless and prosocial endeavour, which is best represented by the boon they gain and with which they return to the community, affecting a positive social change achieved through personal hardship and sacrifice. In a nutshell, the Campbellian

> 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.[53]

Coogan's power aspect is quite obviously also not a distinguishing feature between heroes and superheroes: just like there is a wide variety of superpowers in the superhero discourse, ranging from relatively lower-tier powers like enhanced intelligence or increased strength to god-like powers such as flight, so do the powers of classical heroes vary enormously. There is, for instance, Odysseus who possesses advanced intelligence; there is Hercules who is enormously strong. It is relatively easy to draw exemplary comparisons between classical heroes and gods, and modern-day superheroes: Orpheus plays the lute as skil-

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[49] Ibid., p. 31.
[50] Ibid., pp. 31–32.
[51] Ibid., p. 32.
[52] Ibid., p. 47.
[53] Campbell: Hero (Fn. 17), p. 28.

fully as Hawkeye shoots his bow and Hermes is as quick as the Flash, Hephaistos is a similarly clever technological inventor as Tony Stark. These examples do not even include obvious re-iteration of classical figures such as Thor. Coogan's third aspect, the identity convention associated with costume and secret identity, does not show such obvious analogies to the central traits of classical heroes, proving Coogan right in his contention that "the identity convention (codename and costume) plays the greatest role of the three elements in helping to rule characters in or out of the genre."[54] Indeed, it is especially the combination of codename *and* costume that works as a defining marker of the superhero. Hercules, for instance, exhibits a costume in the sense that he is commonly depicted and described as wearing the Nemean Lion's skin and having a huge club as his weapon. This is Hercules' iconic outfit, but it is not combined with a unique codename to go with it. Classical heroes often have epithets connected to their names, for example 'blond' in the case of Achilles, but these are variable (often depending on the metrical needs of the Alexandrine line in question) and never singularly related to the outfit of the hero in question.[55] In epic poetry, heroes strive to be known throughout the world by their real name, because only this guarantees eternal life through the perpetuation of one's name and story. In the time of the superhero, the secret identity needs to be cultivated to allow these heroes to at least attempt to live a normal life and also to protect their loved ones. In essence, this creates a split identity as the foundation of all superheroes, something that is decidedly postmodern. The codename and costume together create "iconic representations of the superhero's identity."[56] That identity is, however, kept separate from the everyday identity of the character. In this way, the codename and costume often also connect and represent the powers and/or the central traumatic experience of the character (cf. Batman, Hawkman, Catwomen etc.).

Coogan's definition of the superhero thus simultaneously emphasises the connection to central elements of the classical hero myth and tradition and is able to carve out elements that are specific to the superhero. Those differentiating elements can be subsumed under the term 'identity'. Where the hero is a type, the superhero is a type with a uniquely postmodern identity. The central concern with identity (gender identity, personal identity, group identity, regional and national identity, corporate identity, brand identity and so forth) that characterises the postmodern age goes hand in hand with the proliferation of superheroes and their respective identities.

I will now embark on a reading of Superman as the point of emergence of the postmodern superhero. I will show how the seemingly stable and whole

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54 Coogan, Superhero (Fn. 46), p. 47.
55 For the classical epithet, cf. as a useful exemplary text: Milman Parry: The Traditional Epithet is Homer (here abbreviated TE), in: Adam Perry (ed.): The Making of Homeric Verse. The Collected Papers of Milman Perry, Oxford 1987, pp. 1–191.
56 Peter Coogan: The Definition of the Superhero, in: Wendy Haslem et al. (eds.): Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman, New York / London 2009, pp. 21–36, here p. 26.

identity of Superman is constructed from several diverse discourses in order to demonstrate that Superman is actually a composite character and his identity therefore essentially fragmented in a postmodern fashion. As previously stated, I will work broadly within the methodological framework of Foucault's notion of archaeology with regard to the superhero discourse in terms of "determin[ing] its conditions of existence, fix[ing] at least its limits, establish[ing] its correlations with other statements." [57] Superman will here serve as an exemplary node of the discourse. I will excavate and contextualise three discourses that partook in the creation of Superman: 1) The biblical discourse of Moses in the context of the function of the divine in mythologising of the hero figure, 2) The discourse of the American Dream and associated US-American ideological concepts and 3) The implications of the strongman and early bodybuilding / progressive weight-lifting discourse. Each of these three discourses relates, in one way or another, to Coogan's identity convention and combine to form the identity of Superman as the quintessential superhero. Superman was constructed by patchworking these discourses into a new identity that in turn established a specifically postmodern, identity-centred hero-type: the superhero.

In order for Superman as a character to negotiate contemporary discourses powerfully and effectively, it was imperative at his conception that he would be able to tap into the mythological, because "myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made."[58] Only by being fundamentally a mythological figure can Superman functionalise and negotiate contemporary discourses in a manner that de-emphasises or even completely masks particulate or ideological meanings. The masking or naturalising function of myth helps to achieve a general popularity as mythologised characters and stories tend to have a more general appeal. Hence, as particulate and ideological discourses will also be mythologised through the character and his performance in the narrative, they will not (directly) be perceived as ideological as their origin is veiled. It thus makes sense to first look at the mythological discourses that Superman channels. In my analyses, I follow the method of Peretti and, "[t]o delve into how Superman stories resonate mythically, I will analyse a generalized version of the Superman story."[59] As with the following two discourses, the analysis can only be circumscriptive as all else would go beyond the scope of this text.

Superman is constructed as a mythical figure through the appropriation of the notion of divine heritage in a more general sense, and the story of Moses in particular.[60] The parallels to Moses are blatantly obvious. In the bible, Exodus tells the story of Moses:

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[57] Michel Foucault: The Archaeology of Knowledge, New York 2002, pp. 30–31.
[58] Roland Barthes: Mythologies, New York 1972, p. 142.
[59] Daniel Peretti: Superman in Myth and Folklore, Jackson, MS 2017, p. 145.
[60] The origin of Superman especially in terms of the contributions by his creators Shuster and Siegel, their immigrant experience and Jewishness, are still being hotly debated in the field.

And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. And when she could not longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink. And his sister stood afar off, to wit what would be done to him. And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it.[61]

Structurally, Superman's generalised origin story follows the biblical example closely. He is born into a family that sees no other way but to send their child away in the hope of a better future for him. Where Moses is put onto the river, Superman is shot into space to travel to a new destination. In the biblical story the fact that Moses is found by the Pharaoh's sister, is adopted and thus receives a good education is to be seen as the will of God and predestined; Superman's real parents are scientists and have carefully chosen the planet Earth as a destination. This is, however, no less mythical, because, as Reynolds' has already observed, science and magic (or belief) work interchangeably in the superhero discourse:

Scientific concepts and terms are introduced freely into plots and used to create atmosphere and add background detail to artwork - but the science itself is at most only superficially plausible, often less so, and the prevailing mood is mystical rather than rational. Explicitly 'magic' powers can coexist quite comfortably with apparently scientific ones.[62]

Since the two aspects of science and magic / divine are functionally the same in the superhero discourse, the mythological impact is not negatively affected in Superman's origin story. Also, more to the point, the fact that Superman was

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What I am arguing here and on the following pages, is a simplified version of the argument tailored to elucidate in exemplary fashion the interaction of the chosen discourses in the light of the construction and negotiation of the hero type and the notions of heroism. In any case, as Lund succinctly summarises: "Siegel and Shuster's Superman was not the 'boy scout' he has been in recent decades, but a tough guy who dished out his own rough brand of justice. [...] He had neither X-ray vision nor super hearing at first. This was a Superman who could not fly. [...] Almost everything about this Superman is different from today's character, and much of what is known about him now was introduced by others than Siegel and Shuster, facts that any study must acknowledge" (Martin Lund: Re-Constructing The Man of Steel. Superman 1938–1941, Jewish American History, and the Invention of the Jewish-Comics Connection, Cham 2016, p. 5). Since the aim of my argument is to elaborate on the mythical effect of Superman and where it draws its energy from, I will presuppose a Superman based on, as Lund calls it above, "what is known about him now." For closer examinations of the development and history of Superman, cf. the following: Ian Gordon: Superman. The Persistence of an American Icon, New Brunswick, NJ 2017; Glen Weldon: Superman. The Unauthorized Biography, Hoboken 2013; Martin Lund: Re-Constructing The Man of Steel. Superman 1938–1941, Jewish American History, and the Invention of the Jewish-Comics Connection, Cham 2016; Jens Meinrenken: Eine jüdische Geschichte der Superheldencomics, in: Lukas Etter et al. (eds.): Reader Superhelden. Theorie-Geschichte-Medien, Bielefeld 2018, pp. 211–228.

[61] Ex 2:1–5, in: Robert Caroll / Stephen Prickett (eds.): The Bible: Authorized King James Version (with Apocrypha), Oxford 2008.

[62] Richard Reynolds: Superheroes. A Modern Mythology, Jackson, MS 1992, p. 16.

adopted by the Kents remains as serendipitous as Moses being accepted into the Pharaoh's family. By tapping into the story of Moses, Superman becomes closely linked to the divine and to the mythological voyage of Campbell's hero. Moses' function is to lead the Jewish people to freedom from the bondage of Egypt, to free and save his chosen people. This is true of Superman as well who is constructed as a saviour figure for humanity and, conversely, humanity is thus constructed as the chosen people. Indeed, in the Superman origin story, humanity is specifically chosen by Jor-El as the destination for his son. Superman's divine heritage and the implication of humanity as the chosen people both tap into the same biblical myth. This is emphasised by Superman's Kryptonian name of Kal-El. Gary Engle notes that "[a]s an affix, *el* is often translated as 'of God,' as in the plenitude of Old Testament given names: Ishma-el, Dani-el, Ezeki-el, Samu-el, etc."[63] In the best of mythical traditions, this makes Superman heaven-sent. Even more so, in combination with his role as a saviour for all humankind, he is stylised as the son of God. The link to Moses underlines this. Moses was charged with saving the Israelites only after he had been raised in his foster home and had then spent several years with a foreign tribe. He received the charge through the burning bush. Similarly, Clark Kent is raised by the Kents and lives among the human population into early adulthood before he is charged with the protection of Earth by his father Jor-El in the Fortress of Solitude. The Moses story mixes here with the Jesus myth. Jor-El takes the position of God in the narrative, but he is not speaking to a chosen prophet as God does in Exodus. Jor-El is speaking to Kal-El, his son, thus ascribing to Superman the identity of the son of God. In the last blockbuster outing of the character, the Zack Snyder DCEU films, this aspect has been particularly emphasised, culminating in Superman sacrificing himself for humanity in his fight against the aptly named Doomsday[64] and his resurrection as an even stronger version a film later.[65]

   "Superman mythologizes many things"[66] and the above examples and arguments are only a very cursory delineation of the classically mythological content and discourse that went into the creation of this new type of postmodern hero. The classically mythological and divine notions mentioned above link up congenially with the discursive formations I will circumscribe below. The mythological aspect that is fundamentally present in all these discourses functions as a central node in the process of merging these into the superhero. One of the many things Superman mythologises are core elements of US-American ideology that combine in the figure of the superhero and Superman in particular. Since these ideological elements are themselves already mythological, the mythopoetic effect is increased.

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63 Gary Engle: What makes Superman so darn American?, in: Jack Nachbar / Kevin Lause (eds.): Popular Culture: An Introductory Text, Bowling Green 1992, pp. 331–343, here p. 342.
64 Cf. Batman v Superman, Dir. Zack Snyder, USA 2016.
65 Cf. Justice League, Dir. Zack Snyder, USA 2017.
66 Peretti: Superman in Myth and Folklore (Fn. 59), p. 152.

When talking about US-American ideology, the notion of the American Dream is always one of the first to be mentioned. It is clearly one of the central tenants that iterates core US-American values and as such it is tied closely, in function as well as manifestation, to myth. When dealing with the concept,

> we must be critical of it, asking, for example, 'whose dream?' and 'at what cost?' For example, the idea of America as a new Eden, a place of new birth, mission and promise has been perpetuated in various forms throughout its history. Through interrogating these myths and ideologies we see the lines of power that have structured and given preferred meanings to particular renditions of the past and privileged certain groups as a result. However, this is not a simple corrective, for that would imply that a 'myth' can be opposed by a 'truth' when, in fact, culture is more usefully viewed as a series of dynamic and contested ideological forces and interpretations.[67]

In terms of utilising already mythologised concepts of ideology, Superman taps into two main notions of US-American ideology, namely the frontier hero and the USA as an immigrant country. When we talk about the heroic notion of the superhero, vigilantism is an important aspect. Almost all superheroes are essentially vigilante heroes because they take the law into their own hands and mete out a higher form of justice than the regular law enforcement of a society is capable of. Vigilantism is closely tight to the frontier experience of the American West where, in the absence of a reliable system of law enforcement, people often had to take matters into their own hands. Brown notes that "[v]igilantism arose in response to a typically American problem: The absence of effective law and order in the frontier region."[68] Superman's vigilantism thus essentially characterises him as a frontier hero. Indeed, the following definition of the frontier hero reads like a definition of Superman:

> Just as the West was a vague place set somewhere among the mountains of the Rockies or the deserts of Utah and Arizona, the heroes (almost always White Anglo-Saxon males) who populated this mythic landscape were a vague combination of integrity, morality, chivalry, honor, courage, and self-reliance. This was the ideal hero. The hero is the embodiment of good. He is an upright, clean-living, sharp-shooting WASP who respects the law, the flag, women, and children. He is self-reliant and solves problems his own way. He is always the best fighter and wins fistfights and gunfights.[69]

Based on this, it can be argued that Superman channels not only the classical, divine iteration of the hero archetype, but simultaneously also embodies and enacts the Frontier hero. When Superman appeared in 1938, the official closing

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[67]   Neil Campbell / Alasdair Kean: Introduction, in: Neil Campbell / Alasdair Kean (eds.): American Cultural Studies. An Introduction to American Culture, London 2012, pp. 1–24, here p. 12.

[68]   Richard Maxwell Brown: Train of Violence. Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism, New York / Oxford 1975, p. 22.

[69]   Jeremy Agnew: The Creation of the Cowboy Hero: Fiction, Film and Fact, Jefferson 2014, pp. 12–13.

of the frontier was only 48 years before.[70] For the older generation, the frontier was within living memory and the early Hollywood cinema of the time kept the frontier and its heroes popular through its romanticising depictions on the silver screen. Especially during the formative years of Superman's creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, a renewed popularity and

> boost to the heroic cowboy image came in the 1920s and 1930s. While the written word about the West, whether serious fiction, nonfiction, or the pulps was popular, the prime mythmaker of the Western hero was the motion picture industry. The movie hero was a cowboy who rode the open range and fought outlaws and other villains until social stability and moral order were restored.[71]

The intersection of the two discourses of classical myth and US-specific frontier myth accounts for the great impact of Superman in terms of mythical potential and also for his immediate popularity in popular culture at the time. Since today's global popular culture has been largely shaped and dominated by products from the culture industry of the United States, it is no wonder that Superman, and by extension his superhero peers, were easily exported to virtually all countries around the world and found sustained popularity outside the US as well.

In a reversal that functionalises US-American ideology narratively, Kal-El is not found by royalty, but he is found by the Kents, a benign couple of hard-working farmers who live in the small-town world of the aptly named Smallville. Where Moses switches from poverty and enslavement to riches and royalty, Kal-El leaves his aristocratic family and is taken in by poor farmers.[72] In this way, "Superman raises the American immigrant experience to the level of religious myth."[73] Ideologically, the Kents represent the ideal US family. They are hardworking and plough the land in emulation of the settlers during the frontier time. Their small-town life breeds and perpetuates common sense, a practical and down-to-earth attitude based on traditional US-American values. In short, the Kents represent the ideal hegemonic image of the perfect American family with a value system to match which they instil into their adopted son. This is why Superman is a hero of the status quo and he upholds and enacts traditional values. By thus combining the classical hero function of the saviour with the bareknuckle vigilante gunslinger hero of the American frontier steeped in the simple and quotidian morals of small-town America, Superman generates a new type of mythical hero that inserts itself seamlessly and successfully into the secularised world of the bourgeoning culture industry and mass media. The last exemplary discourse

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[70] Cf. Frederick Jackson Turner: The Significance of the Frontier in American History, in: Frederick Jackson Turner: History, Frontier, and Section, Albuquerque 1993, pp. 59–91.

[71] Agnew: Cowboy Hero (Fn. 69), p. 134.

[72] Of course, it depends on the iteration whether or not Superman's parents are to be perceived as royalty. The House of EL, however, strongly suggest an aristocratic context. Even without it, Jor-El being the leading scientist of his planet suggest that the family belongs to the upper echelons of Kryptonian society.

[73] Gary Engle: What makes Superman so darn American? (Fn. 63), p. 343.

that intersects in the formation of Superman as the blueprint for the superhero comes from the realm of show people, circus and travelling shows.

The superhero's connection to the circus world is far from obvious, but, again, Superman can serve as an example to unveil these half-hidden discursive interactions. A story from the life of Sandow, one of the most famous and influential strongmen of the waning 19th and early 20th century, will serve as the central example. Although almost completely forgotten now, "*Strong as Sandow!* Not very long ago that phrase had a potent meaning to millions of people all over the globe. [...] Our fathers and grandfathers considered Sandow the epitome of masculine beauty."[74] At the beginning of his career when he was first trying to make his name in London, Sandow had challenged the popular strongman Cyclops. Sandow was unknown to the London audience and

> came to the stage dressed in a fine suit of evening clothes especially prepared to be ripped off at once. Underneath he wore an athletic costume complete with tights and Roman sandals. To make his appearance seem even more debonair, he also donned a stylish monocle. [...] As he came on stage, thanks to the monocle, Sandow tripped over some weights and other properties on stage causing a great deal of derisive laughter to come from the hall. The mood of the audience quickly changed, however, when he finally got rid of the pesky eyepiece, ripped off his foppish evening dress, and revealed a beautiful, well-formed, athletic physique.[75]

Sandow's performance here is fundamentally repeated in every Superman story. The moment when Superman loosens his tie and rips off his suit to reveal his costume, including the famous tights, is one of the most iconic moments of the character and seems to follow the Sandow script to a tee. The monocle to complete the 'foppish' disguise is represented by Clark Kent's glasses which are, of course, equally unnecessary and only exist to complete his disguise. Even the clumsiness exhibited by Sandow here (real or not) is inscribed into Clark Kent through his mannerisms and his social awkwardness. This anecdote about Sandow was well known during his lifetime. Sandow's performances in New York and Chicago and especially his subsequent tour of America (1894–1896) made him famous in the US.[76] It is therefore quite possible that Shuster and Siegel had heard the anecdote in their youth, especially since the Jewish community had a strong presence in both the sports of boxing and strongmen competitions as well as associated discourses of the time. Lund comments on this connection, saying that

> [t]here were also Jewish strongmen like Siegmund Breitbart and Joseph Greenstein touring the country in the 1920s and 1930s, putting the lie to the idea that Jews were 'milquetoasts,'

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[74] David L. Chapman: Sandow the Magnificent. Eugene Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding, Urbana / Chicago 2006, p. ix.
[75] Ibid., pp. 26–27.
[76] Cf. ibid., Chapters 4 and 5.

to use Tye's word; Shuster, as an aspiring bodybuilder, knew of, admired, and was inspired by these men."[77]

Breitbart in particular was advertised as "Superman of Strength"[78] and along with Sandow he seems to have had a direct influence on the outward appearance of Superman. Take Sandow's athlete's costume with its skin-tight fabric that lets every muscle shine through, and combine it with Breitbart's Roman centurion's uniform featuring a cape and the colours of gold (yellow), red and blue,[79] and you have the iconic Superman costume.

The strongman discourse thus added the theatrics of the bodily performance and the flamboyance of the costume of the superhero to Superman. While the direct predecessors of the superhero, the pulp heroes, did wear disguises and costumes, these were nowhere near as tight-fitting and colourful as those of the superheroes. Neither did the pulp heroes feature such a muscular physique that the costume could accentuate. In the cultural climate where the notion of Muscular Christianity still had currency and Jesus was perceived to have "challenged the idolaters, kicked the money changers out of the temple, and confronted the most powerful empire ever assembled"[80] with "manly resolve,"[81] the strongman discourse, like the frontier hero discourse, easily joined with the mythological discourse of the classical hero. Indeed, "Jesus was viewed as a reformer who cared for the downtrodden and worked with others to save humanity. He was thus worthy of emulation. [...] Both God and Jesus served as masculine ideals in industrializing America."[82] Although by the 1920s, "strenuous Christianity was by no means dead,"[83] the movement was on the decline given the disillusionments with Christianity in the wake of the Great War. Superman thus filled the lacuna and became the secular embodiment of the muscular saviour figure that channelled all the mythical and divine power of the classical hero while acting in the vigilante style of the frontier hero, dressed flamboyantly for the new century.[84]

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[77] Martin Lund: Re-Constructing The Man of Steel. Superman 1938–1941, Jewish American History, and the Invention of the Jewish-Comics Connection, Cham 2016, p. 168.

[78] Thomas Andrae / Mel Gordon: Siegel and Shuster's Funnyman. The First Jewish Superhero, Port Townsend 2010, p. 47.

[79] For an image of Breitbart's Centurion costume, see: www.sandowplus.co.uk/Competition/Breitbart/breitbart-index.html [09.02.2023].

[80] Michael Kimmel: Manhood in America: A Cultural History, New York 1996, p. 177.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Susan Curtis: The Son of Man and God the Father: The Social Gospel and Victorian Masculinity, in: Mark C. Carnes / Clyde Griffen (eds.): Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America, Chicago / London 1990, pp. 67–78, here p. 72.

[83] Clifford Putney: Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880–1920, Cambridge, MA / London 2001, p. 200.

[84] There are pop-culture texts which have Christ appropriate the superhero figure in order to re-assert his divine power in a secular world. Here, Christ taps again into the cultural vein of Muscular Christianity by deliberately referencing the superhero discourse, thus forging a

One could argue that the rise of the superhero in blockbuster cinema goes hand in hand with a resurgence of the classical world on the big screen. The year of the first *X-Men* (2000) is also the year of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*. Parallel to the expansion of the superhero film genre, the early 2000s saw Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004), Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004), Zack Synder's *300* (2007), Tarsem Singh's *Immortals* (2011), Jonathan Liebesman's *Clash of the Titans* (2010) and *Wrath of the Titans* (2012); perhaps the annus mirabilis in terms of sheer number of films dealing with classical subject matters, the year 2014 featured the release of Noam Murro's *300: Rise of an Empire*, Paul W. S. Anderson's *Pompeii*, Renny Harlin's *The Legend of Hercules* and Bret Ratner's *Hercules: The Thracian Wars*. The simultaneous (re-)emergence of these two related discourses shows their close relation. Their apparent popularity suggests that they serve a similar cultural function, a demand for mythical heroic characters and plotlines that are simultaneously timeless and current. The re-functionalisation of heroic content from antiquity in the appropriation of received classical content as well as via the superhero archetype facilitates this demand. In this article, coming from the earliest attempts at defining the superhero by Umberto Eco, the challenges and obstacles in differentiating the superhero from the classical hero have been delineated with the result that there really is no differentiation possible as the superhero represents the newest iteration of the hero archetype. What is new and special in terms of the superhero is that the figure exists in a medialised world where heroics and heroism are constantly negotiated in all modes and all discourses. Superman as the original superhero epitomises the fragmented mode of postmodern meaning-making in his genesis from very different discourses as circumscribed above. There are undoubtedly more discourses that partook and still partake in the (re-)creation of the character with every new appearance. What this shows, especially in the light of the notion of the construction of the hero through performative acts elaborated above, is that in the postmodern age, heroics are found, seen and made; they are constructed through their performance just as their performers are, the superheroes themselves.

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link with contemporary culture and society. Key texts of this discourse are *Ultrachrist* (USA 2003. Dir. Kerry Douglas Dye), *The Second Coming* (Ahoy Comics, 2020), *The Second Coming: Only Begotten Son* (Ahoy Comics, 2021).