Who Needs a Superhero?

New Trends in Action and Adventure Movies[1]

João de Mancelos

(Universidade da Beira Interior)

1. "Holding out for a hero"

In 1985, a pop song flooded the radio waves and climbed the music charts all over the world. Bonnie Tyler's harsh voice sang a catchy chorus:

> Where have all the good men gone
> And where are all the gods?
> Where's the street-wise Hercules
> To fight the rising odds?
> Isn't there a white knight upon a fiery steed?
> Late at night I toss and I turn and I dream of what I need.
>
> I need a hero
> I'm holding out for a hero 'til the end of the night
> He's gotta be strong
> And he's gotta be fast
> And he's gotta be fresh from the fight.
> (Tyler 9)

This musical hit constitutes one among numerous evidence of the presence of superheroes in western culture, since the thirties until nowadays (Gent/Heatley 4). In addition, the song proves that the concept of superheroes is not restricted to pulp magazines or comic books, but it is also reified in other artistic forms of expression, such as pop music, videogames or cinema.

In the last few years, several superheroes have fled from the drawing boards to conquer the big screen. Movies like *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2010), *Green Lantern* (2011), *Sucker Punch* (2011) or *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) have fascinated both comic and movie fans alike. Due to their popularity, a new wave of muscled and fierce heroes is coming, with *X-Men: Days of the*

Future Past (2014), or *The Fantastic Four* (2015).

The main goal of this paper is to answer the question: why are super-heroes from comic books increasingly popular in cinema? I intend to analyze the possible reasons behind the revival of this genre, in order to explain the phenomenon. I argue that the answer is multifold and complex, resting in Psychoanalysis, myth, History, Sociology and technology. In order to accomplish my mission — so to speak —, I resort to the studies of Carl Gustav Jung, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Joseph Campbell and other reputed specialists.

2. Psychoanalysis: the hero archetype

Few studies have influenced contemporary western thought and culture as much as Carl Gustav Jung's essays, particularly "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious" (1954). The works of this Swiss psychiatrist, in numerous aspects groundbreaking, opened the way to a reinterpretation of Myth, Semiology, History, Literature and Art. According to Jung, all humans possess a collective unconscious, a universal base, regardless their ethnic group, geographic origin or epoch (Jung, *Archetypes* 3).

In that matrix, there are archetypes (a word derived from the Greek "archein" or "old", and "typos" or "pattern"), also known as "primordial images", such as the Great Mother, the Spirit, the Hero, the Creator, the Wiseman and the Magician. At a conscious level, these archetypes can be found in myths, legends and folklore, and are passed from one generation to the next (Jung, *Archetypes* 5). The similarities found among certain narratives belonging to cultures distant in space and time can be explained by this common base.

In this study, I'm particularly interested in the archetype of the hero, a being with extraordinary qualities and supernatural powers. What makes this archetype so special and captivating? As Jung argues, "the hero symbolizes a man's unconscious self, and this manifests itself empirically as the sum total of all archetypes and therefore includes the archetype of the father and of the wise old man. To that extent the hero is his own father and his own begetter" (Jung, *Collected* 333). In short, the hero can be perceived as super-archetype, almost a deity.

In legends and other narratives, the hero emerges with a myriad of names and faces: he or she is the warrior, the crusader, the dragon slayer or the rescuer, for instances. It is not hard to detect the presence of this powerful archetype in the profile of Thor, Gilgamesh, Ulysses or King Arthur. In this context, Jerry Siegel, creator of Superman, acknowledges his archetypical heritage. In an interview, he reveals the genesis of the most celebrated hero: "I am lying on my bed counting sheep when all of a sudden it hits me. I conceived a character like Samson, Hercules and all the strong man I have ever heard tell of rolled into one. Only more so" (Gingeroth 13).

Thus, inspired by Biblical and mythological figures, the first superhero of the modern age was born — and, with him, a model for many that would follow.

3. Myth: is Superman Hercules in tights?

Beliefs do not vanish as centuries go by: there is a continuity, a transformation, a recycling process leading to the rebirth of the hero (Lévi-Strauss 7). For instances, the profile of Hercules inspired the creation of individuals with extraordinary capabilities, such as Superman, green monster Hulk or Iron Man, who combats violent criminals, protected by a cybernetic armor. Similarly, the image of the female warrior and hunter can be found in Roman goddess Diana, the Amazons, Wonder Woman, or, more recently, Buffy, the Vampire Slayer (Gent/Heatley 58).

In other cases, comic books imported heroes directly from myths. The most remarkable example is Thor, inspired by the Germanic and Nordic god of thunder, who uses a magic hammer. Stan Lee, who created Thor, in 1962, for Marvel, explains his origin: "How do you make someone stronger than the strongest person? It finally came to me: don't make him human — make him a god" (Lee/Mair 157).

Regardless the source of inspiration, superheroes constitute a modern pantheon, similar to the Native American, Greek or Nordic gallery of gods. They also have dynasties and problematic relatives; they experience passion and betrayal; weaknesses and dilemmas, and even martyrdom and death (Reynolds 43).

Beliefs were passed down from generation to generation with the help of legends; nowadays, narratives of superheroes are deeply rooted in popular culture, thanks to comic books, movies or videogames. Danny Gingeroth, author of *Superman on the Couch*, asks: "Why do we need that element of fantasy in our heroes, even in many of the so-called realistic ones? What need do these fantasies fulfill? What societal function is served by our sitting around our virtual print, cinematic or electronic campfires, to tell and hear stories (…)?" (Gingeroth 29).

The answer is far from being simple. In my perspective, superheroes reflect our collective hopes for a better world; furthermore, they give us a sense of a security, illusive as it may be, in the age of terrorism; finally, they reveal a deep aspiration: to reach, one day, all the physical and mental potential of the human species.

4. History: Post Nine-Eleven Stress

The devastating terrorist attacks that took place on September 11 2001 were historically

traumatic. For the first time, after the Japanese bombardment of Pearl Harbor, in December 1941, the nation was attacked on its own territory. With the exception of the military personnel who served at the Pentagon, the three thousand victims were working civilians. The next day, the *New York Times* editorial commented: "It was, in fact, one of those moments in which History splits, and we define the world as 'before' and 'after'. (…) Every routine, every habit this city knew was fractured yesterday" (Johnson A26).

In this context of trauma, political psychologist Virginia Chanley argues that 9/11 deeply disturbed the collective psyche of American citizens, and resulted in a multiplicity of reactions. For instances, on the aftermath of the tragedy, statistics proved that trust in the government doubled, rising national pride and unity, fueled by Republican and Democratic rhetoric (Chanley 469). On the other side, the attacks generated feelings of impotence, vulnerability or even guilt. Not surprisingly, the number of cases of violence against Muslims and Asians increased dramatically. Revenge became a national objective, and the retaliation took place, on March 2003, with the invasion of Iraq.

On the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, Americans turned to politicians, to God or to those who, in popular culture, represent the avengers *par excellence*: superheroes. In fact, in the first decade of the new century, there was a boom in comic books, videogames and movies starring heroes. When questioned about this phenomenon, producer Don Hahn stated: "we are seeing so many super-hero movies, so many Captain America or Iron Man, because those characters can defeat bad guys and that's really a great story for us" (Raynaldy 1).

To be sure, readers and spectators enjoy protagonists through a complex process that involves admiration for their qualities (for instances, Superman's altruism, strength and courage) and fascination for power (even when this is ambiguous, in the case of Batman) (Frensham 87). At the same time, super-villains are easily identifiable with terrorists, who murder innocent civilians, in a society where collective security is an illusion and even passenger planes can be turned into deadly missiles.

5. Sociology: from escapism to revenge

In the face of a tragic event, be it an individual or a psychosocial trauma like 9/11, people usually go through several stages: shock, denial, disbelief and despair, before they reach acceptance. The first feeling is perceptible in the comment of a blogger: "As I was watching the buildings burning, knowing they were going to come down, I actually found myself thinking, with a genuine sense of anger and frustration: 'where the fuck is Superman?'" (Anders). The question posed by this woman, absurd as it may seem, is symptomatic: powerless individuals seek help

in the realm of religion or in supernatural beings, like heroes.

It comes as no surprise that, after 9/11, the number of movies featuring superheroes increased substantially. Philosopher Rebecca Housel argues: "Naturally, comic-book superheroes perfectly fit the need, and comic-book based films have set new box-office records" (Housel 75). This does not constitute a novelty: the Golden Age of Comics coincided with the Second World War and its aftermath, when super-heroes like Captain America fought Hitler, the Nazis and the so-called Japanazis. Young people, soldiers, workers and intellectuals avidly consumed comics, in search of solace and comfort, justice and revenge. A few years after the war, the popularity of superheroes declined, in favor of genres like the western, detective stories, terror or romance (Gent/Heatley 7).

In my perspective, adventure movies serve a dual function: on one side, they offer spectators a distraction from the daily fear of a hypothetical attack; on the other, in a world where human power has been reduced, superheroes represent a protection for the weak and vulnerable against the oppressors. This was exactly the role of gods in old mythologies or of holly men and saints in religions.

6. Technology: from the drawing board to the big screen

In the first decade of this century, heroes like Thor or Iron Man met a new life on the big screen thanks to the creativity of screenwriters and directors. In my opinion, there are fundamentally three reasons for this growing tendency. First of all, the cinematic adaptation of plots and popular characters constitutes, if not a guarantee of success, at least, a minor risk, due to the existence of a large fan base. Stimulated by curiosity, marketing, or internet rumors, legions of admirers are willing to know the new adventures of their favorite heroes. This constitutes a strong motivation for numerous producers, directors and actors.

Secondly, the transposition of comic heroes to the world of cinema is highly convenient, since the profile of the protagonist, its mission and network of friends and rivals are already established. Also, the plots of adventure books and films share the stages of hero journey. According to Joseph Campbell, in the renowned study of comparative mythology, *The Hero with the Thousand Faces* (1949), there are several steps common to numerous legends, far in space and time. Campbell summarizes: "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" (Campbell 23). These steps are easily identifiable in adventure and/or superhero movies like *Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977), by George Lucas, or *Superman* (1978), by

Richard Donner.

A third reason: in contemporary movies, heroes look more credible than ever, thanks to computer-generated images and 3D technology; also, directors like Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez use cartooning techniques, in *Sin City* (2005), and Zack Snyder in *300* (2006) (Ndalianis 4). At the same time, creators resort to Barthesian hermeneutic codes (clues, equivocations, jammings), to divide the plot through several media. For instances, characters like the *Watchmen* starred in comic books (1986-1987), by Allan Moore and David Gibson; in the movie *Watchmen* (2009), by Zack Snyder; in the videogame *The End is Nigh* (2009), by Soren Lund, and in several webisodes. As a result, the viewer gets the feeling that heroes are real, and lead a life beyond the adventures.

7. New trends: "the anti-movie of superheroes"

Recently, screenwriters began questioning plots, morals and sexuality. The March 2013 issue of *Empire* magazine was dedicated to the main adventure movies that will premiere this year. While reading several reviews, I noticed a new trend: the humanization of superheroes. In the next feature films, Superman will experience the confusion of being an alien on planet Earth (Nathan 57-58); Wolverine lives tormented by his memories, and even deals with feelings of self-rejection (Smith 74); Hit Girl faces the sour melancholy of youth and endures the pain of love (Hewitt 68).

In short, adventures are clearly more centered in the troubled past, frailties and fears, flaws and wishes of the characters. This brings superheroes closer to the audiences, and generates empathy, since idols also deal with issues and dilemmas in their quotidian lives. James Mangold, the director of *Wolferine* (2013), resorts to an interesting expression to define this innovative wave: "the anti-movie of superheroes" (Smith 75).

New movies also feature a wider range of heroines, and not always with erotic purposes. Through the years, the gallery of heroes was chiefly composed of brave and muscled males, with a wide range of superpowers. Women like Rulah, the Jungle Goddess, or Batwoman emerged mainly as female versions of Tarzan or Batman, and made sporadic appearances on comics. The first heroine to gain attention was Wonder Woman, in 1941, created by psychiatrist William Martson for DC/All American (Gent/Heartley 58). There is strong evidence that this tendency is changing, thanks to teen heroines who can serve as role models. In the realm of literature and movies, I would point out the cases of Buffy, the Vampire Slayer; Katniss Everdeen, from *The Hunger Games*; Babydoll, in *Sucker Punch*, defined by the director as "Alice in Wonderland with machine-guns".

In conclusion, superhero adventures are evolving, occupying new spaces in the media spectrum, and conquering new audiences. They keep in touch with our fears and expectations, while staying faithful to the essential archetype: a hero who can be, at the same time, a human and a god. Mission accomplished.

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Resumo

É um pássaro? É um avião? Não, é mais um super-herói que escapa das pranchas dos desenhadores para conquistar o grande *écran*. Nos últimos anos, películas como *Thor* (2010), *Sucker Punch* (2011) ou *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) têm fascinado tanto os fãs da banda desenhada como do cinema. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar as possíveis razões por detrás da renovação do género. Argumento que a resposta é diversificada, enraizando-se em: a) Psicanálise (teoria dos arquétipos); b) Mito; c) História (o fator 11 de setembro); d) Sociologia; e) Tecnologia (as possibilidades abertas pela CGI). Para completar a minha missão, recorro aos estudos de Carl Gustav Jung, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Joseph Campbell e outros especialistas.

Abstract

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's (yet) another superhero who escapes from the drawing board to conquer de big screen. In recent years, movies like *Thor* (2010), *Sucker Punch* (2011) or *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) have fascinated both comic and movie fans alike. The aim of this paper is to analyze the possible reasons behind the revival of this genre. I argue that the answer is multifold, resting in: a) Psychoanalysis (theory of the archetypes); b) Myth; c) History (the 9/11 factor); d) Sociology; e) Technology (the possibilities operated by CGI). To accomplish my mission, I resort to the studies of Carl Gustav Jung, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Joseph Campbell and other specialists.