# Superhero Renaissance: The Ascendance of Heroes on the Silver Screen in the Post-9/11 Era

## Seyf Eddine GUETTAIA[1]

[1]Department of English, University of Tlemcen, seifeddine.guettaia@univ-tlemcen.dz

*Abstract ;*

*Superhero movies, a global cultural phenomenon, captivate audiences worldwide with their portrayal of characters possessing extraordinary abilities. These films unfold through gripping action sequences, larger-than-life scenarios, and thematic explorations of heroism, morality, and personal growth. Iconic titles like the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) epics, "Spider-Man," "Batman," and "Wonder Woman," have become staples in modern cinema. Following the events of 9/11, superhero cinema gained increased significance, providing solace, inspiration, and excitement for audiences navigating a complex world. With their blend of escapism, symbolism, and exploration of relevant themes, superhero movies have solidified their place as a dominant cultural force, shaping and reflecting societal narratives while offering a symbol of resilience and collective aspirations.*

## 1. *Introduction*

Superhero movies are a popular genre of film that typically feature characters with extraordinary abilities, often using their powers to fight evil and protect the world. These movies are usually based on comic books or graphic novels and have gained immense popularity over the past few decades. They have been around for several decades, but they gained significant traction in the early 2000s with the release of films like "Spider-Man" (2002) and "X-Men" (2000). These films helped pave the way for the modern era of superhero movies. The success of superhero movies can be attributed to a combination of factors that have converged over the years in the example of nostalgia as many superhero movies are adaptations of well-established comic book characters and storylines that have been beloved for decades.

Audiences who grew up reading these comics often have a strong emotional connection to the characters, making them excited to see their favorites come to life on the big screen. Moreover, the advancements in computer-generated imagery (CGI) and filmmaking technology have allowed filmmakers to create visually stunning and realistic depictions of superpowers, epic battles, and otherworldly environments. This has enhanced the cinematic experience and made it possible to portray superhero stories convincingly. In addition to this, many superhero movies have made efforts to include diverse casts, both in terms of ethnicity and gender. This commitment to representation has helped the genre resonate with a broader range of viewers, making it more inclusive and relevant. Finally, studios invest heavily in marketing campaigns that build anticipation and excitement for upcoming superhero movies. Teasers, trailers, merchandise, and promotional events create a buzz that draws audiences to theaters. These factors, combined with effective storytelling, relatable characters, and captivating visuals, have collectively contributed to the immense success of superhero movies in modern cinema.

Yet, the events of 9/11 had a profound impact on superhero movies, shaping their themes, character dynamics, and tone. The genre became a lens through which society could explore complex issues, grapple with moral dilemmas, and find solace in stories of heroism and resilience making it more significant and solid becoming  cornerstone of modern cinema, offering audiences thrilling action, complex characters, and thought-provoking themes.

## 2. *From Zero to Hero : Superhero Movies Conquering the World*

Superhero movies have indeed conquered the world in a cultural and entertainment sense. They have achieved worldwide popularity by tapping into universal themes, leveraging technological advancements, and creating stories that resonate with people from all walks of life. Their ability to entertain, inspire, and bring people together on a global scale has solidified their place as a dominant force in the entertainment industry. Superheroes have been household names since the birth of comic books in the 1930's. Entrenched in the Great Depression and on the cusp of another World War, America needed both a savior and a distraction (Hsiao 2016, 1).

The history of the superhero movie genre is a fascinating journey that spans several decades and has seen significant evolution in storytelling, technology, and cultural impact. The genre has its roots in the early 20th century with characters like Zorro and The Shadow appearing in silent films and serials. One of the earliest examples of a superhero film is the 1940 serial "The Adventures of Captain Marvel," featuring the superhero Captain Marvel (not to be confused with the Marvel Comics

character of the same name). Prior to this, the era of Superman and Batman serials has came back to the 40's and 50's of the last century as they made the first significant adaptations of these iconic characters in film. These serials introduced audiences to the idea of superheroes on screen, even though the limitations of the time affected the production quality.

The 1960's was marked the campy and comedic adaptation of "Batman" with the TV series starring Adam West. Later on, in the 1970s, movies like "Superman: The Movie" (1978) starring Christopher Reeve helped define the modern superhero film formula. This film was particularly notable for its special effects and grand scale. This movie is categorized till now as one of the greatest superhero movies of all time. The 1980's witnessed a shift in the tone of such movies as we saw Tim Burton's "Batman" (1989) and its sequels bringing a darker and more stylized approach to superhero filmmaking. The 1990s also saw the release of films like "Batman Returns" (1992) and "Blade" (1998), showing that superhero movies could cover a range of tones and styles.

The early 2000s marked a turning point for the genre. "X-Men" (2000) and "Spider-Man" (2002) demonstrated that superhero movies could be both commercially successful and critically acclaimed. These films laid the groundwork for the modern era of superhero movies and this will lead to the core attempting to explore the event of 9/11 and its influence on such movie genre..

## 3. The Rise of Superhero Movies in the Big Screen after 9/11

The events of September 11, 2001 (9/11), had a notable impact on various aspects of society, including the film industry. Superhero comics and movies have a rich cultural history. But in the wake of the devastating attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, superheroes met their moment, perfectly suited as they were to meet Americans' deep psychological needs for reassurance and vengeance (Rosenberg 2021, 1). The emergence of superhero franchises as the prevailing worldwide entertainment trend is an impressive accomplishment within the realms of both filmmaking and marketing. Additionally, it holds a connection to the aftermath of 9/11 that is often overlooked.

A fresh cohort of adults has come into existence in an America shaped by the aftermath of 9/11. They have grown up in a country engaged in prolonged warfare, yet intriguingly, these conflicts are scarcely evident in mainstream media or daily routines. They seem to have become distant concepts imported from elsewhere. On screens, the wars depicted are, in a way, more tangible to Americans than those happening overseas. These portrayals generate greater discussions and offer ordinary citizens more influence over their resolutions. post 9/11 superhero films reflect a vision of the world

primarily informed by both the trauma of 9/11 and America's global "War on Terror." (Bruno 2019, 13).

In the aftermath of the tragic events of 9/11, there was a widespread desire for escapism and hope. Superhero movies provided a form of entertainment that allowed audiences to escape from the grim realities of the world and find inspiration in stories of heroism and triumph over adversity. Moreover, Superheroes often embody qualities such as courage, selflessness, and a commitment to doing what's right. In the wake of 9/11, these qualities took on added significance as people sought role models who could inspire a sense of unity and resilience. These movies also offer a sense of reassurance by depicting characters who could confront and overcome great challenges. This provided comfort to audiences who were grappling with feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability. The early 2000s saw a resurgence of optimism in pop culture. Superhero movies, with their themes of justice prevailing over evil, resonated with this renewed sense of hope and positivity.

Post-9/11, superhero movies began to incorporate themes of terrorism, security, and moral complexity, mirroring the changing global landscape. Films like "Spider-Man" (2002) and "X2: X-Men United" (2003) explored the responsibilities of power and the challenges of balancing personal freedoms with societal safety and often depict heroes from diverse backgrounds coming together for a common cause. This sense of unity and collaboration struck a chord with the post-9/11 emphasis on national unity and international cooperation. Furthermore, this genre reinvigorates as The success of movies like "Spider-Man," "X-Men," and later "The Dark Knight" (2008) proved that superhero movies could be both critically acclaimed and commercially successful. This reinvigorated interest in the genre and encouraged studios to invest in further superhero adaptations. Finally, Superhero movies tapped into the cultural zeitgeist of the time, offering narratives that aligned with the emotions and values of the post-9/11 era.

Overall, the rise of superhero movies in the big screen after 9/11 was influenced by a combination of factors, including a societal need for optimism, a desire for heroes who embody positive values, and a means of exploring complex real-world concerns through fantastical storytelling.

### *4. Exploring the Reflections of 9/11: Superhero Movies that Portray its Impact*

There are multiple superhero movies which incorporate themes, symbolism, or narratives that are connected to the broader impact of that event such as heroism, fear, unity in the context of 9/11 serving as a medium for societal reflection, capturing the complexities and emotions surrounding a significant historical event and its ongoing influence on the collective consciousness.

*4.1 Spiderman Trilogy (2002-2007)*

The original "Spider-Man" trilogy, directed by Sam Raimi and starring Tobey Maguire as Peter Parker/Spider-Man, coincided with the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. While the trilogy was not directly about the attacks, it contained elements that resonated with the mood and sentiments of the time.

The Spider-Man character, particularly in Raimi's trilogy, embodies themes of heroism, responsibility, and sacrifice. These themes struck a chord with a nation seeking heroes and role models in the wake of the attacks. The trilogy is set in New York City, a city deeply affected by the attacks. The movies showcased the iconic skyline and the sense of unity that emerged in the city during that time. In the first "Spider-Man" film, there is a scene in which Spider-Man captures criminals in a helicopter by creating a web between the two towers of a suspended bridge. Although this scene was created before the attacks, it was briefly altered in the film's promotional materials as a mark of respect. The image of Spider-Man swinging through the city, often depicted with the American flag as a backdrop, carried a sense of resilience and hope. This imagery resonated with the spirit of unity and strength displayed in the aftermath of 9/11.

There is also another scene in the second film released in 2004 where Peter Parker intervenes to halt a runaway subway train. Following his successful rescue of the passengers, his fellow citizens of New York City come together to carry the unconscious superhero to safety. Their care for the young Spider-Man evoked Shannon Stapleton's iconic photo of 9/11 first responders carrying Father Mychal Judge from the wreckage of the World Trade Center. Both the fictional and real-life scenes captured the resilience and solidarity of New Yorkers (Rosenberg, 2021, para.6).

Finally, the trilogy offered audiences an escape from the harsh realities of the world while also providing a source of inspiration. The idea of an ordinary person, like Peter Parker, rising to become a hero was comforting during a time of uncertainty. Furthermore, The positive messaging of the trilogy, emphasizing that anyone can make a difference and do the right thing, aligned with the national sentiment of coming together and striving for a better future.

While the Spider-Man trilogy was not explicitly about the 9/11 attacks, it was released during a period when the nation was grappling with the aftermath and seeking ways to heal and move forward. The themes, setting, and messages of heroism in the trilogy tapped into the collective emotions of the time, making it a notable cultural artifact of the post-9/11 era.

*4.2 Iron Man (2008)*

"Iron Man," released in 2008 and starring Robert Downey Jr. marked the beginning of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and was released several years after the 9/11 attacks. While the film does not directly address the attacks, it reflects certain post-9/11 sentiments and themes.

The character Tony Stark, portrayed by Robert Downey Jr., is a wealthy industrialist who becomes the armored superhero Iron Man. The film explores how Stark's realization of the negative impact of his weapons business on the world prompts him to shift his priorities. This critique of profiting from warfare resonates with discussions around the military-industrial complex in a post-9/11 context.

Additionally, there is an acknowledgement of a perspective aligned with liberal interventionism regarding the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. In the movie, Iron Man arrives in Afghanistan to safeguard villagers from terrorists. This action also allows the Afghan people to independently address and administer justice to one of the main instigators involved. Also, Stark's transformation from a self-absorbed businessman to a hero who acknowledges the consequences of his actions reflects a broader societal shift towards accountability and recognizing the impact of one's choices.

Stark's personal journey from a self-centered mindset to a desire for redemption and positive change echoes themes of rebuilding and renewal that emerged in the post-9/11 era. The hero's decision to take matters into his own hands aligns with the notion of individual heroism and taking action in the face of adversity, which became a significant theme in the wake of the attacks.

Although "Iron Man" doesn't directly mention the 9/11 attacks, it mirrors the evolving societal environment and the rise of fresh viewpoints regarding heroism, responsibility, and ethical considerations tied to technology. These perspectives were shaped by the aftermath of the post-9/11 era.

### 4.3 Man of Steel (2013)

Man of Steel directed by Zack Snyder has been analyzed in the context of the 9/11 event due to its themes, visual imagery, and the societal climate of the time. While the film does not directly reference 9/11, there are parallels that can be drawn.

Firstly, Man of Steel" features intense scenes of destruction, particularly in the climactic battle between Superman and General Zod. The widespread urban destruction in the film has been compared to the imagery of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent collapse of buildings. The climactic battle between Superman and General Zod in Metropolis is a key scene that draws comparisons to the 9/11 attacks. The widespread destruction, collapsing buildings, and clouds of debris parallel the images of

the World Trade Center towers collapsing on September 11, 2001. Also, the film explores the concept of collateral damage caused by superhuman battles. This mirrors discussions about the real-world impact of terrorism and military intervention that emerged after the 9/11 attacks.

Secondly, this movie addresses society's fear of powerful individuals who could potentially become threats. This fear of the unknown echoes post-9/11 concerns about security and the potential for hidden dangers and adopted a more serious and grounded tone, reflecting the broader shift in superhero movies post-9/11 toward more complex and morally ambiguous narratives.

Finally, the film delves into Superman's struggle to find his place in a world that is wary of his extraordinary abilities. This resonates with the feeling of insecurity and identity shifts that were present in the post-9/11 era.

It is important to note that the film's creators have not confirmed explicit references to the 9/11 attacks. However, the visual and thematic similarities between certain scenes in "Man of Steel" and the events of 9/11 have led to discussions and interpretations about the film's resonance with the post-9/11 landscape.

### 4.4 The Dark Knight Trilogy (2005-2012)

The "Dark Knight" trilogy, directed by Christopher Nolan and consisting of "Batman Begins" (2005), "The Dark Knight" (2008), and "The Dark Knight Rises" (2012), has been analyzed in relation to the 9/11 attacks due to its themes, storytelling, and socio-political context. While the trilogy is not a direct commentary on the attacks, it reflects certain post-9/11 sentiments and themes.

The theme of fear and the idea of terrorism are prominent in the trilogy. Batman's struggle against the League of Shadows and the Joker's acts of chaos parallel the concerns about terrorism and the societal response to it after the 9/11 attacks. The trilogy delves into moral complexity, depicting characters who must grapple with ethical dilemmas. This reflects the shifting moral landscape and the questioning of traditional values in the aftermath of the attacks.

Gotham City becomes a symbol of societal decay, corruption, and the struggle for its soul. This mirrors the societal introspection that followed 9/11, as well as the symbolic importance of cities in the wake of the attacks. he trilogy explores themes of heroism, sacrifice, and the idea of rising to the occasion in the face of adversity. These themes resonate with the desire for role models and sources of inspiration in the post-9/11 world. The trilogy's overarching theme of "rising" and "falling" echoes

the cyclical nature of societal transformation, reflecting the sense of renewal and rebuilding that emerged after the attacks.

While the "Dark Knight" trilogy does not directly reference the 9/11 attacks, it captures the shifting societal dynamics, fears, and reflections that emerged in the post-9/11 landscape and multiple scenes show that similitude.

In "The Dark Knight," the Joker orchestrates the explosion of a Gotham City hospital. This scene's chaotic aftermath and the destruction of a symbol of healing and safety have been seen as evoking the shock and destruction of the 9/11 attacks. In addition to this, The use of Scarecrow's fear-inducing gas in "Batman Begins" draws parallels to the heightened sense of fear and chaos that followed the 9/11 attacks. The film's exploration of how fear can manipulate society's actions resonates with post-9/11 concerns about security measures. Finally, n "The Dark Knight Rises," Bane's occupation of Gotham City and its descent into chaos have been interpreted as allegorical for the aftermath of a large-scale disaster and the resulting societal breakdown, akin to the response to 9/11.

The Dark Knight Trilogy captures the shifting societal dynamics, fears, and reflections that emerged in the post-9/11 landscape. The trilogy's exploration of moral ambiguity, surveillance, fear, and heroism resonated with the complex questions and concerns raised by the events of September 11, 2001.

## 5. Evolving Landscapes: Pre and Post 9/11 Superhero Movies

There is a division between pre and post 9/11 superhero movies. This distinction highlights the changes in storytelling, themes, and cultural context that occurred in superhero movies as a result of the events and aftermath of 9/11.

Pre-9/11 superhero movies often had a more lighthearted and optimistic tone. They focused on entertaining audiences with larger-than-life adventures and straightforward hero-villain dynamics. These movies usually featured straightforward themes of good vs. evil, with clear-cut heroes and villains. Moral ambiguity and complex character motivations were less common. These cinematic works did not often touch on real-world events or their implications. They were more focused on telling self-contained stories within fictional universes.

On the other hand, Post-9/11 superhero movies often adopted a darker, more realistic tone. They delved into moral ambiguity, exploring themes like sacrifice, heroism, and the consequences of power. These films carry a notable level of cynicism, to the extent that Zack Snyder, who directed several of

these films, has acknowledged and reacted to fans' optimistic views : It's a cool point of view to be like, "My heroes are still innocent. My heroes didn't fucking lie to America. My heroes didn't embezzle money from their corporations. My heroes didn't commit any atrocities." That's cool. But you're living in a fucking dream world (Abad- Santos 2019, 8).

Snyder's skepticism effectively highlights the contrast between superheroes before and after 9/11. While pre-9/11 superhero movies embodied clear moral values in their portrayal of heroes, post-9/11 superhero films navigate a state of exception, characterized by heightened uncertainty and complexity. That is, post 9/11 superheroes live in the world of the Patriot Act and Guantanamo Bay, where rights and laws can be suspended indefinitely in service of security against any threat deemed too dangerous. In the global "War on Terror," this state of exception is made permanent (Agamben 2005, 4).

In essence, the transition from superhero movies before 9/11 to those after the event marked a notable transformation in narrative approach, tone, and thematic focus. The post-9/11 films captured the shifting dynamics of culture and politics, delving into intricate facets of heroism and authority within a world indelibly shaped by the occurrences of September 11, 2001.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In the end, as the American people suffered both mentally and emotionally from the shocking attacks of 9/11, the surge of superhero movies on the big screen after the post-9/11 came as refuge to them and can be attributed to several influential factors such as this a collective desire for stories that could provide hope, resilience, and positive role models. Superhero narratives, with their emphasis on heroism and triumph over adversity, resonated deeply with audiences seeking inspiration. Also, Superheroes often embody qualities such as courage, selflessness, and determination. In the wake of 9/11, these attributes took on added significance as people sought figures that represented unity and strength.

Moreover, Superhero movies offered an avenue for escapism from the grim realities of the world. Audiences sought relief from the distressing news by immersing themselves in fantastical worlds where good triumphs over evil and began incorporating themes of terrorism, security, and moral complexity, which mirrored the shifting global landscape. Films like "Spider-Man" and "The Dark Knight" delved into the responsibilities of power and the ethical dilemmas of safeguarding society.

In addition to this, the advancement of visual effects technology allowed for more realistic and visually captivating portrayals of superheroes' extraordinary abilities. This, in turn, heightened the appeal of superhero films to modern audiences. This also helped to prompt a reevaluation of heroism

and its complexities. Superhero movies, especially in the form of morally conflicted characters like Wolverine or Batman, reflected this evolving understanding.

Finally, the post-9/11 landscape brought about changes in societal attitudes, values, and concerns. Superhero movies were able to tap into these shifts, providing narratives that resonated with evolving worldviews. Plus, the success of early post-9/11 superhero movies like "Spider-Man" and "X-Men" demonstrated that the genre could be both critically acclaimed and financially profitable, encouraging studios to invest in further adaptations propped by the shift in pop culture as the early 2000s saw a resurgence of optimism. Superhero movies, with their narratives of justice prevailing over evil, aligned well with this renewed sense of positivity.

Essentially, the ascent of superhero movies in the big screen after the post-9/11 era can be interpreted as a response to the cultural and emotional needs of that time. These films blended elements of fantasy, inspiration, and reflection on relevant societal issues, all presented through the distinctive lens of extraordinary characters.

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