

# Superman. A Hero of the Culture Industry

**Abstract:** *Superman's image symbolizes the utopian and ideal narrative of the American Dream. Yet, the feasibility of the American Dream transformed this national hero into a commodity meant to be consumed. Thus, one of the most beloved heroes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century became what Theodor Adorno foresaw: a commodity designed to be reproduced and to be a part of the culture industry. This paper examines how consumerist tendencies resulted in Superman no longer being able to represent the core principles of the American Dream. The theoretical framework consists of Umberto Eco's interpretation of Superman's heroic structure and its Greek reminiscences. The works of Andrew Terjesen, (*Superman and Philosophy. What would the Man of Steel do?*) and Larry Tye (*Superman. The High Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero*) will be used to analyze the scale on which Superman has been used as a soft-power means of disseminating American values.*

**Keywords:** *American Dream, Commodity, Superman, Film Industry, Mass Culture*

An emblem of justice, democracy and more recently of Hollywood, Superman reiterates in the contemporary imaginary a type of heroism similar to the universal heroes of Ancient Greece. Transposed into a world in which the myth of globalism is omnipresent, this superhero transcends cultural, linguistic and artistic barriers in ways his Greek ancestors could not. Yet this god of the American melting pot loses its superhero essence, paradoxically, due to the context from which he arose, namely, the film industry and its consumerist nature.

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I intend to provide an interpretation of the American hero through the critical lenses of Theodor Adorno and his concept of the culture industry. More precisely, I will look at presumably one of the well-known American heroes: Superman. I will focus on how this heroic image was projected onto the ideal individual as it had been presented by the American

Dream. I aim at portraying how this heroic image gradually started to lose its essence due to the commercial success it had and still has. To do so, I have chosen Theodor Adorno's concept of culture industry through which he criticized the US after the Second World War.

I have chosen this particular concept as it criticizes the mechanism through which any potential authentic creation could fall under the redundant nature of consumerist culture.

The first part of my paper looks at Umberto Eco's analysis of how Superman reenacts the Ancient Greek archetypal hero in the context of a weekly comic book, in order to offer a detailed account of what

changes Superman has brought in the structure of archetypal heroes. To justify the civic and moral element of Superman and how these traits represented the “American Way” I will refer to Andrew Tejesen’s work “Is Superman an American Icon?”

In the second part, I aim at identifying the elements that marked a change in Superman’s development. I argue that due to the rapid technological changes and an increasing tendency towards globalism, Superman could no longer represent the values underlined by the American Dream. Larry Tye analyzes Superman’s international assimilation to local cultures caused by the intense marketing strategies that Hollywood created. As a consequence, Superman fulfilled one of Theodor Adorno’s warning of the over-commodification of artistic representation.

As Umberto Eco noted, there is an important difference between the old traditional gods and the modern-day gods, one of which is undoubtedly Superman.

A close look at the syntax of these two types of heroes shows that the narrative structure itself has changed over time. More precisely, the story of Hercules or Oedipus has already been told. Thousands of years have passed and their stories are almost unchanged. Moreover, the temporal dimension of these myths seems to point to a time that has already gone, thus, the usual grammatical tense of narration is past perfect tense. In contrast, Superman is bound to be referenced in the future, as the comic book in which his narrative structure unfolds appears weekly. This important change could be traced back to the feuilleton era in which many of the greatest writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century published their stories in monthly or yearly episodes. Umberto Eco observes the influence that the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel exerted on our perception of any given hero’s development: “The “civilization” of the modern novel offers a story in which the reader’s main interest is transferred to the unpredictable nature of what will happen” (Eco, 109).

Another nuance that comes forth from this interpretation is the fact that by segmenting any character’s narrative structure, that character has to be easily recognizable in the audience’s eyes. Therefore, Superman had to be held in an unchanged framework:

“The new dimension of the story sacrifices, for the most part, the mythic potential of the character. The mythic character embodies a law, or a universal demand, and therefore must be in part predictable and cannot hold surprises for us (...) The mythological character of comic strips finds himself in this singular situation: he must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable.” (Eco, 109-110)

Superman, as a mythical hero, lacks the “human universal” of the Greek Gods, as they were subjects to human flaws, anger or death, all basic human traits which made them universally comprehensible. Still, Superman had almost no adversaries – except Kryptonite which is the only element that threatens Superman – and he is not subjected to human vulnerabilities such as illness, age or death. This is what makes Superman, in Eco’s terms, “inconsumable”:

“But Superman is a myth on condition of being a creature immersed in everyday life, in the present, apparently tied to our own conditions of life and death, even if endowed with superior faculties. An immortal Superman would no longer be a man, but a god and the public’s identification with his double identity would fall by the wayside.” (Eco, 111)

Therefore, in order to prevent the consumption of the hero, yet giving the illusion of consumption to mask the rigidity of the character, the comic book writers came up with a solution, which is, the appearance of characters such as Superboy, Supergirl or Superbaby that cre-

ate the impression of development, both backward and forward. By doing so, Superman remains in the same immovable and platonic spot. The same holds for his non-existent erotic encounters: “the “parsifalism” of Superman is one of the conditions that prevent his slowly “consuming” himself and it protects him from the events, and therefore from the passing of time, connected with erotic ventures.” (Eco, 115) The reader accepts the fictional pact of suspending the “real- world” rules of causality, logic, etc. As Eco observed: “The greater part of popular narrative is a narrative of redundancy” (120)

Yet, as one may ask oneself, why doesn't Superman solve all the world's problems if he can go back in time or push a planet back in its place? These questions arise throughout most of the films and comics when the audience perceives his potential for justice which is used mostly locally for the prevention of bank robberies or theft. However, this local usage of immense power is meant to reinforce one of the most important elements of the American Dream: private property. The reason why Superman has saved unarguably the biggest number of stolen purses is in order to protect a value that lies at the center of American ideals: “In other words, *the only visible form that evil assumes is an attempt on private property.*” (Eco, 123) Hence, Superman becomes the archetypal hero that best represents the ideal version of the American individual: virtuous, civic and engaged in his community.

Superman gained his place in the American Imaginary as the American Hero. The rise of this symbol of individual power and protector of liberty and justice became more and more in need in the context of the Second World War and later, in the Cold War. ‘The American Way’ is why Superman is able to reaffirm the American Dream. By combining the Emersonian ideal of self-reliance with political discourse, common ground can be identified between the typical 50' American discourse of the American Dream and Superman's reenactment of this rhetoric. An example of rhetoric that justifies the morality of the US in an ideological battle against anything that poses a threat to the core principles of the American Way could be Harry S. Truman's Second Inaugural Address in 1949, in which he emphasizes the role of the US against the communist regime:

Slowly but surely we are weaving a world fabric of international security and growing prosperity. We are aided by all who wish to live in freedom from fear-even by those who live today in fear under their own governments. We are aided by all who want relief from the lies of propaganda-who desire truth and sincerity. We are aided by all who desire self-government and a voice in deciding their own affairs. We are aided by all who long for economic security-for the security and abundance that men in free societies can enjoy. We are aided by all who desire freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom to live their own lives for useful ends. Our allies are the millions who hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Moreover, Superman reiterates some of the founding myths of American culture, namely, the puritan belief in the utopic city surrounded by the tamed wilderness. He embodies the individual who lies at the center of the utopic “City Upon a Hill”, the one who is deprived of a corrupt past and gains in return the values of *life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*. This fortunate melting pot of an individual who is of alien origin but learns the values necessary to achieve the American Dream are lived through his double, namely, Clark Kent, and are further projected onto society by Superman.

Yet, as Andrew Terjesen points out, there is one “flaw” in the American narrative construction of Superman, more precisely, his discourse, he notes, actually denies one concept that is

essential to the “American Way”, and that is *Exceptionalism*. His alien origin impedes the successful unfolding of his authentic American citizenship.

As Terjesen observes:

This may be what Superman meant when he talked about thinking small: patriots tend to focus on preserving their country even if it is not a good thing for the rest of the world. From the perspective of an alien, the conflicts between America and Europe, or America and China, can seem like petty squabbles. (75)

What he implies here is that Superman has gradually moved his initial local affairs, to a rather global perspective. This could be the case of the series of movies made under the DC Extended Universe such as “Batman vs. Superman: The dawn of justice” or “Justice League.” In the latter, Superman is revived to save Earth from the wrath of Steppenwolf. In this attempt, mankind, Greek Gods and superheroes work together alongside national governments to stop this from happening.

We notice, therefore, a change in the mythological aspect of Superman, he is no longer a hero bound by the forces that govern the world in which he was born. He no longer sees the ones who do not speak Greek – or American English in this matter – as barbarians, but he strives towards a global mutual tolerance. By quoting Superman, Terjesen notes: Superman’s decision to renounce his US citizenship seems to reflect a very moderate form of cosmopolitanism. When explaining his decision to the American president’s national security adviser, he says, “Truth, justice and the American way—it’s not enough anymore. The world’s too small. Too connected.” (75)

Technology, therefore, becomes the main player in the development of Superman, as other heroes such as Batman almost equal his powers which he had since birth. However, by acknowledging that he can no longer operate only nationally, the character of Superman had to be adapted to the changing world. For the audience to recognize Superman in a new living context, that is global, his structure became less American. Therefore, as mass Hollywood film consumption rose, Superman had to tone down his national character, in order to be understood as a hero by global consumers.

What Adorno had anticipated was the power of Hollywood culture to change artistic creations into commodities, products that allow the capitalist consumerism to continue. Superman evolved from a national hero into a homogenized international product of soft power. The way in which the culture industry has affected Superman’s narrative discourse was precisely done to promote a cliché heroic image of an individual who succumbed to the illusion of the American Dream. For Adorno, under the pressure of capitalist consumerism and mass production, any individual becomes deprived of authenticity and introspection as the American culture industry creates sameness. Moreover, from Adorno’s perspective, any form of rebellion against the culture industry is assimilated and further conventionalized in order to maintain the illusion of democracy, individualism, and self-reliance. From this perspective, Superman has become the conventional hero and, at the same time, the conventional individual who takes part in a totalitarian regime that is just cleverly disguised in democracy. Thus, the melting pot, in Adorno’s perspective, actually crushes the individual by imposing a false sense of equality.

An emancipated society, on the other hand, would not be a unitary state, but the realization of universality in the reconciliation of differences. [...] The melting pot was introduced by

unbridled industrial capitalism. The thought of being cast into it conjures up martyrdom, not democracy.” (Minima Moralia, 103)

Through mass entertainment and mass dissemination of these ideological products, America has renounced its core principle: the individual. Although the surface values presented appear to be those that reinforce the idealistic nature of the individual, technology combined with mass entertainment promotes, in fact, mass identity. When Superman renounces his citizenship, he actually kills Clark Kent, the individual who is, in theory, a beneficiary of the rights and principles given by the American Dream. By doing so, Superman loses his individual freedom and becomes a source of economic profit through cinematic entertainment. Although technology theoretically provides a higher degree of justice to the world, it would make the culture industry more powerful as well. As a consequence of that, the human soul gets industrialized and commodified. As Adorno notes:

An explanation in terms of the specific interests of the technical apparatus and its personnel would be closer to the truth, provided that apparatus were understood in all its details as a part of the economic mechanism of selection. [...] The dependence of the most powerful broadcasting company on the electrical industry, or of film on the banks, characterizes the whole sphere, the individual sectors of which are themselves economically intertwined. (Dialectic of Enlightenment, 96)

As Larry Tye also observed, Superman, became a hero of all nations, a commodity meant to adapt itself to any local culture in which his image was presented. The face of Superman and his alien strength have become a commercialized image that boosts sales, especially if they are targeted at children:

France and Italy imported the Man of Steel barely a year after his debut here, with kids in Paris calling him *Yordi* and ones in Rome preferring *Ciclone*, or “hurricane.” South American children loved him, as did Germans before the Nazis started railing against his Jewish roots. He was America’s most iconic export. Superman is a hero “for the whole universe,” explains Vincent Maulandi, a lifelong fan in France. The Last Son of Krypton “had no more homeworld and the Earth would replace that home, not only America.” As Superman’s comics and films spread around the globe, so did the international flavor of his wares. From France would come a Superman towel rack, from Nepal a can of cooking oil with a large picture on the front of the Man of Steel, and from Mexico, a papier-mâché pinata built to look like *El Hombre Supre*. Ka-ching. (95)

In conclusion, my paper has looked at the mythic narrative that Superman carries from his heroic ancestors such as Hercules. However, what differentiates him from them consists of a new and modern approach to the idea of a hero: his story could go on forever, as long as the comic book industry and Hollywood invest meaning and finances into one of the most famous heroes since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Superman’s image was undoubtedly a synonym for Americanness. However, cultural and social changes revealed changes not only in Superman’s narrative but in the American political discourse, as well. From being the ideal representation of how feasible the American Dream was, Superman revealed a loss of faith in American Exceptionalism. By renouncing his citizenship, America’s most beloved hero became what Theodor Adorno foresaw: a commodity designed to be reproduced and to be a part of the culture industry.

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