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“I WARN YOU MING, STAY AWAY FROM MY FRIENDS!”:
THE LANGUAGE OF SUPERHERO MYTHOLOGY IN *FLASH GORDON*

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Bachelor of Arts
The Cleveland State University
May 2006

submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree
MASTER OF COMMUNICATION THEORY and APPLIED METHODOLOGY
at
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We hereby approve this Master's thesis

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But First things first,

This project is dedicated to the love and caring career of my grandmother, **Jaylene Regan**. I would surely not be where I am today without you and your demand for excellence. Your constant love, support, and encouragement to “study hard” has always fueled me to achieve something greater than myself. I pray that I have not failed you in that earnest endeavor.

Thank you *Grams Bears*.

From Your Number One Fan and Little Jelly Bean,

Robbie

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For that, I remain eternally humbled and indebted.

“I WARN YOU MING, STAY AWAY FROM MY FRIENDS!”:
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ABSTRACT

The *Flash Gordon* (Stephani, 1936) serial is a profoundly important, indeed seminal superhero film that has not been granted the critical attention that it deserves within modern film scholarship. Its position at the beginning of the genre of the modern screen superhero is examined through its evident thematically mythic implications and its culturally centered historical aspects. The serial *Flash Gordon* is treated and analyzed as a self-standing text that provides clues to the ontological and genealogical foundation and conventions of the screen superhero that is dominant in the media landscape today. This analysis is conducted through the Freudian – Jungian - Levi-Straussian – Barthes – Campbellian vein, which searches for signs in the text to amass evidence of acculturation. It is argued through this extended analysis that *Flash Gordon* articulated the richly nuanced language of what it means to be a superhero, and further provides us with cues regarding the modern superhero placement within the 21st century. The textual analysis of *Flash Gordon* and its findings can then be used as a research template to systematically mark superheroism in American film history.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this present postindustrial age, superheroes have become the modern day mythic embodiments of wish fulfillment that strive to teach the American populous what it truly means to be strong, just, and American. Phenomenologically, this is far from a new concept. We need only look to the Greeks, Egyptians, Persians, and South American tribes in the amazon basin to understand what myth can teach us and illuminate about the subjects, customs, and mores of the culture that it represents. Superheroes are simply modern day extensions of this phenomenon which reflects the accepted cultural practices of the 21st century America (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002). Superheroes like *Batman*, *Superman*, *Spider-Man*, and so forth instill values, attitudes, and beliefs in fairness, justice for all, and community involvement that tend to stick with us throughout our entire lives even after these stories are no longer of great interest to the individual.

The power of myth lies in its ability to be able to discuss openly that which the society holds dear but which often remains hidden, showing only the tip of socio-cultural

construct (Campbell, 1968). We cannot begin to talk about myth without delving into the extraordinarily influential work of culturally centered anthropologist Joseph Campbell. Campbell expanded on the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Claude Levi-Strauss who discussed different aspects of wish fulfillment and condensation within cultural morphology, archetypes of mythology and the unconscious. Moreover, these architects of thought established the anthropological understanding of cultural myth and practices in primitive societies. Campbell directly influenced a young anthropology student named George Lucas at the University of Southern California to begin writing a modern day mythologically centered space opera called *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) in 1974. As such, Campbell is largely credited with influencing the modern study of the globalized superhero (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002; Palumbo, 2008; Reynolds, 1994; Stucky, 2006; Sutton & Sutton, 1969; Zehnder & Calvert, 2004). Globalized is the necessary concept that must be foregrounded for even though these creations are largely American they have resonated with fans all over the world. *Batman*, *Iron Man*, *Spider-Man*, and *Thor* are equally popular in the United Kingdom, Italy, Japan, Germany, France, India, and perhaps surprisingly in media repressed China. These diverse nations have fully embraced these American myths, at least if any stock can be placed in the idea of box office receipts reflecting the cultural acceptance of the viewer of these films. So then what does this transnational packaging of these cultural representations originating in America project about Americanism to other cultures? What messages do these mega million dollar epics broadcast about American ideology? Where did this modern screen superhero get its start and what conventions and mores did this seminal superhero establish as the accepted limits and boundaries of what the superhero of the 21st century

would look like? How was this synthesized into the formula that is so calculatedly used in modern Hollywood filmmaking?

In the following pages it will be argued that the genesis of this contemporary filmmaking formula was first articulated in the seminal superhero film serial *Flash Gordon*. *Flash Gordon* (both the serial and comic strip for they are in many ways inseparable) will be explained not just through the power of myth as briefly discussed above, but also by focusing a spotlight on a wide array of conceptual constructs including cultural hegemony, superheroes in modern popular culture, film serial standards, superheroes in the serialized form, science fiction in America, art deco design in America and the graphic art apparent in the film *Flash Gordon* and the *Flash Gordon* comic strip (Raymond, 1934). Though this may appear to be a broad net to cast, all of these ideas are central to any understanding of what *Flash Gordon* meant to American culture in its time and how the genre continues to function today. *Flash Gordon* codified what it means to be a screen superhero as it systemized the language of the superhero on film. Thusly, its importance to the filmmaking style of the subgenre can no longer be ignored.

For as baffling as it may appear, scholarship on the cinematic superhero (not a large body of work in any right) has largely dismissed this serial. This neglect is at least in part due to the general disinterest of the academic community to discuss with any sustained substance the importance of the serial in general to the film economy in the early 20th century. Superhero films have been more widely acknowledged in the realm of comic book creation (Reynolds, 1994; Klock, 2002; Stucky, 2006) and late 20th century superhero film adaptation (Bould, 2004; Bukatman, 2011; Palumbo, 2008; Wong, 1992) but virtually never through the serial form where these adventures originated. As

narrowly shortsighted as the research on this subject may appear, this deficit is not hard to understand. A majority of film scholars and modern American audiences dismiss the serials as trite, old fashioned, or utterly worthless (Barbour, 1979; Cline, 1984; Davis, 2007; Zinman, 1970). Stemming from that neglect, the origins and structural formulation of these screen superheroes has been preserved and circulated through fans of serials not film scholars. Even the most respected film historians like David Cook, David Bordwell, and Robert Kolker hardly mention serial form, let alone superhero serials that were such a big part of life in America during the 1930's and 1940's. They were extremely popular because they were action packed, fun filled, epic (in total running times), and highly resonant with the American mythos of their time.

Therefore, it is the goal of the present research to finally correct this oversight as to the importance of the serialized superhero subgenre in American film. It is time to finally examine not only the screen adaptation of *Flash Gordon*, but also that of *Captain America*, *Batman and Robin*, *The Green Hornet*, and *The Shadow*. All of which have surged in popularity in recent decades and all greatly warrant and currently lack fundamental cultural understanding. It is impossible to fully comprehend the modern mythical superhero if we do not fully examine where this whole phenomenon started and why? *Flash Gordon* (1936) will provide textual clues as to the cultural mores, values, and beliefs represented by the superhero in the 1930's and 1940's in America. It must be recognized that this film is hardly the pinnacle of cinematic art, is filled with stereotyped characters and situations, often questionable acting, but does begin to establish what it means to be super and what it means to be a hero in America.

Despite its obvious shortcomings, *Flash Gordon* remains seminal because it is the first superhero film produced in America and because it established the language of the modern screen superhero. Its overwhelming impact on the genre of the superhero must be systematically analyzed. Following this model, we can then explore what other superheroes have contributed to the subgenre of the screen superhero. What makes this relevant to the present culture is the fact that *Flash Gordon* is the ontological and genealogical beginning of the worldwide media explosion of the modern screen superhero that dominates modern Hollywood filmmaking today.

1.1 Flash Gordon

Flash Gordon was introduced in William Randolph Hearst's highly circulated *New York Journal* newspaper on January 7th 1934, the creation of King Features' writer and illustrator Alex Raymond (Bould, 2004; Walker, 2011). Blackbeard and Williams (1977) argue that "Raymond's best work was a unique combination of physiological realism and graphic fantasy" (p.328). Reading these strips today, *Flash Gordon* still evokes a visceral connection between reader and character because of its highly stylized comic strip design. The strip is still aesthetically sophisticated in its panel formation, and brilliantly colorized in vivid reds, blues, greens and yellows. "Raymond's style was much more detail oriented than most comic strip work – in fact, other strip artist at King advised him that it was a waste of time to draw so realistically (Murray, 2012, p. 15). *Flash Gordon* contains image after image of war, power hungry villains, and menacing destruction of the Earth. This presentation was not due to mere exposure to science fiction like Jules Verne and Edgar Rice Burroughs by Raymond but based on real life experience of its writer. As a World War I child Raymond understood and knew the

ravages and turmoil of the military and fighting among nations and much more vital the way the northeast United States was progressing and the south with its backward customs and refusal to adopt modernity in many ways (Murray a., 2012). Raymond was raised in New Rochelle, a suburb of New York City and his father was a civil engineer. Young Raymond was surrounded by the affluence of diversity and the technological advantages of the cultural mecca of New York. This provided rich fodder for Raymond to translate into comic adventures. Largely because of this unique approach to writing, the *Flash Gordon* comic strip was an overnight hit and a mere two years later, *Flash Gordon* became first superhero serial film produced in Hollywood. More substantive than other comic strips of its time, *Flash Gordon* talks about and argues for the future of mankind and its connection to mythology through the superhero. “The long reach of Raymond’s legendary creation, *Flash Gordon*, leads to almost every modern incarnation of science fiction and comic book superhero” (Ross, 2012, p.6). The reward for the dialogical interconnection between science and mythology was startling popular with contemporary readers and eventually viewers. *Flash Gordon* showed Hollywood that there was mountains of money to be made from taking the adventures from comic strips and pulp novels and transferring them to film serials. Due to its immediate success, serials based on *Buck Rogers*, *The Green Hornet*, *Captain America*, *Batman*, *Superman*, *The Phantom*, *The Green Arrow*, and *The Spider* to name only a handful were made to offer a constant stream of serialized content to eager theater audiences (Barbour, 1979; Barbour, 1987; Cline, 1984). Had *Flash Gordon* not been successful there would be no conversation about superheroes on film in the 1930’s. However, because it was so successful, the film spawned a vibrant mythology surrounding its making and release. It come as no great

surprise that *Flash Gordon* was the product of Raymond's dedication to pure science fiction realism and demand to present Flash Gordon with modernist ideas and goals (Murray, 2012; Walker, 2015). The popularity of Raymond's creation was accompanied by "a huge array of merchandise...pop-up books, Big Little Books, and coloring books were produced, as were tin rayguns and toy space ships (Murray b., 2012, p. 7). This media blitz of stylized interconnected merchandise heralds what future media consumption would entail with fantastically popular properties like *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Batman*, *Superman*, *Spider-Man* and every other sci-fi fantasy character and technology producing a similarly rich assortment of plastic, metal, and paper collectibles.

1.1.2 Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers: Rivals?

Flash Gordon was an instant fan favorite, far surpassing the earlier *Buck Rogers* (that debuted in print in 1928) in popularity (Misiroglu & Eury, 2006; Walker, 2011). It would be a serious mistake to ignore the obvious impact that the print version of Buck had on Flash. Although Buck came first in the comic strips, Flash was the first motion picture serial adaptation. Raymond was greatly influenced by the creation and popularity of *Buck Rogers* (Murray, 2012, p. 14-15). Within the very newspaper comic pages, these two characters rivaled each other in popularity. Given the inherent conflict and heated competition between Flash and Buck on the comic pages, it is ironic that the star of *Flash Gordon*, Larry "Buster" Crabbe would also go on to star in *Buck Rogers* (Beebe & Goodkind, 1939). So, right from the very creation of Flash, the two characters have a largely shared history (Barbour, 1979).

There exist many other connections between these two films as well, besides from starring the same dashing actor. Both were released by Universal Pictures in the late

nineteen thirties. Both take place in outer space. Both feature incredibly handsome American heroes who are quintessential archetype demi-gods (Campbell, 1968). Both are held up as examples of good battling menacing evil. Most of all, both are guided by donors (scientists) who believe in their power fully and mentor these heroes to become masters of their own manifested destiny. Through the use of the agency of their stylized rocket ships and with the help of their donor scientists, these characters become well-articulated examples of modern popular folktale heroes (Propp, 1928).

As much as these two characters share specific circumstances, there are vast differences between these interplanetary adventurers. Flash's adventures are set in his own time period (1930's) whereas Buck's are set in the future (25th century). *Flash Gordon* is interested in pursuing Ming because he does not believe in subjugation and Buck pursues Killer Kane as the more militaristically principled space soldier. *Buck Rogers* (Beebe & Goodkind, 1939) fights for earth with the help of aliens from another planet (Saturn) who share the view that Killer Kane (a human) must be stopped from dominating the universe. *Flash Gordon* fights Ming and his minions (who are all aliens) to prevent the subjugation of earth by aliens. Buck is replete with images of allying with aliens to unseat humans, whereas Flash is dominated by images of aliens allying with humans to defeat other aliens.

Without Buck, there would never have been a Flash. The success of Buck directly led to the rise of Flash. Buck works in a direct dialogical way with Flash by highlighting the superiority of Flash's heroic journey as a superhero set in his own time and is therefore more directly connected to the 1930's than Buck as he is set in the 25th century. Buck is the catalyst for what Flash would eventually become and is the forerunner to the

superhero that would be serialized first, Flash. Flash may echo Buck but his character represents a more historically grounded superhero by extending the treatment of its villains into the otherness of the “yellow peril” (which will be explored later in this discussion). Additionally, Flash emerges as the more important of the two in terms of both his greater popularity and his appearing first on the screen thereby making him the seminal cinematic superhero archetype.

1.1.3 Universal and Flash Gordon: An Ideal Hollywood Match

In the 1930's, Universal was not yet the major studio it is today and as a small player in Hollywood needed to establish properties other than their classic monster adaptations like Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*. Universal Pictures was searching for a way to gain a financial edge in the mid 1930's as they were hit hard by the Hays Commission production code crack down that was implemented in 1930 and escalated in the lead up to the Great Depression in Hollywood filmmaking (Black, 1996). This was because their popular films like *Dracula* (Browning, 1931), *Frankenstein* (Whale, 1932), and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (Whale, 1935) while very successful were not produced frequently enough to keep the studio profitable and further violated some of the most fundamental rules of the Hays Office (sex, violence, innuendos), so there was a real lack of content. To remedy this need, studio executives suggested buying the film rights to a popular comic strip. Universal could then assemble the films knowing it would have a built-in storyline and audience. “Universal realized that the episodic nature of the comic strips made them perfect blueprints for cliffhanger serials” (a., b., c., d., e. Raymond, 1934; Wass, 2014, p. 3). Raymond's strip has been described by many as tailor made for a dramatization on

the screen. Benson (1985) deferred to film historians Jim Harmon and Donald F. Glut..."Raymond's comic strip was virtually a movie storyboard for whole sequences and the costumes" (p.94). If there was a perfect marriage of medium and media it was *Flash Gordon* and the movie serial. It can also not be lost semantically that *Flash Gordon* was made by a company named Universal and that Flash is a universal traveler through space and time. Had it been made by Columbia or Republic perhaps it would carry the same weight and panache.

Actually, Universal bought several film rights to King Features comic strips in the mid 1930's including *Flash Gordon*, *Ace Drummond* (by Columbus born aviator Eddie Rickenbacker and Clayton Knight), *Secret Agent X-9* (an Alex Raymond creation with crime novelist Dashiell Hammett), and *Jungle Jim* (another Raymond strip, this with pulp fiction author Don Moore) (Barbour, 1979; a. IMDB, 2015). All were made into serials, with widely varying success or failure. *Flash Gordon* was by far the most popular of these properties and the most lavishly produced. Overseen by Henry McRae, head of the serial department at Universal, no expense was spared to make the project special. Frederick Stephani (only 31 years old at the time) was assigned as director, Ray Taylor (uncredited at the time) assisted him, and it highlighted art deco artistic direction by Ralph Berger (Zinman, 1970). *Flash Gordon* was supposedly given a budget of over \$350,000 dollars which was an exorbitant amount of money for a serial at the time (Barbour, 1979; a. IMDB, 2015; Parish & Pitts, 1977). Though, there are wide disparities as to how much was actually allocated to the film. Parish & Pitts report the figure as \$500, 000 dollars, while in the Benson (1985) reports that figure is over \$1 million dollars. Regardless of these discrepancies, what is clear is that *Flash Gordon* was

afforded a budget that was at least three times that of the usual serial though it should be remembered that this budget would have to be stretched out over 13 chapter plays (Davis, 2007). The reason for this huge budget was “because of the importance of the property” and the gamble on its success that Universal was counting on (according to outgoing Universal studio head Carl Laemmle) in 1936 (Kinnard, Cronkovich, & Vitone, 2008, p.20).

Flash Gordon starred Larry “Buster” Crabbe who had been a swimmer that competed in the Olympics in 1928 and 1932 and later decided to turn his hand to acting (Zinman, 1970). Before acting, Clarence Linden “Buster” Crabbe was a law student at the University of Southern California in 1932, but “needing money, he left college for what he believed would be only one year” and soon adopted the moniker “Buster” as it fit with his rough and tumble image (Barbour, 1979, p. 1). Quickly, his amazing physique and matinee idol looks landed him in a film for Paramount called *King of the Jungle* (Humberstone & Marcin, 1933) which was loosely adapted from Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Tarzan*. The viewing of this film would lead Henry McRae to seriously look at Crabbe for the serial adaptation of *Flash Gordon*, but Crabbe was not really interested. Several actors including John Hall tested for the lead in *Flash Gordon* and though Crabbe never even screen tested for the role, he was handed the part by McRae (Barbour, 1979). Crabbe had dark black hair and Flash is blonde haired in the comic strip. Though Crabbe was not keen on having to dye his hair for the part, he did and “through this physical manifestation of the character began to transition into his new superhero role” (Benson, 1985, p. 94). Crabbe was a brilliant choice by McRae and it has been said that: “if there

could be a crown for king of the sound serials; it would rest rakishly on the head of Crabbe” (Cline, 1984, p.85).

Flash Gordon became an overnight smash hit with audiences in its initial run (Barbour, 1979; Cline, 1984; Davis, 2007; Wass, 2014; Zinman, 1970). This success translated into instant pop culture status as “*Flash Gordon* was exhibited in first run or A – picture theaters” (Kinnard, Cronkovich, & Vitone, 2008, p.17). Thankfully, it was not confined to Saturday matinee performance purgatory as so many serials and so had an elevated presence at the box office. This led to its deep rooted connection with not only kids but adults as well. Contemporary audiences clearly enjoyed seeing the comic pages’ character adventures on the screen in their local movie theatres as evidenced by the subsequent rereleases in 1940, 1950, 1957, and 1979. Quickly, *Flash Gordon* morphed into a bigger than life character and helped sell other Universal serial properties like *Ace Drummond* (Beebe & Smith, 1936), *Secret Agent X-9* (Beebe & Smith, 1937) and *Jungle Jim* (Beebe & Smith, 1937) (Barbour, 1979; Cline, 1984; Davis, 2007). Central to this research is the idea that *Flash Gordon* was a precursor to what future cinematic superheroes would achieve in terms of stardom by becoming the first bona fide superhero star of the silver screen.

The commercial success of *Flash Gordon* was actually most surprising to Crabbe himself who articulated this opinion just before he died. In his final interview with *Starlog* magazine (a Sci-Fi fan’s mecca) in 1983, he conclusively determined that he was bewildered by the view that science fiction fans had of him. Crabbe lamented “I didn’t think it would work, that audiences would hold still for three crazy people blasting off for the planet Mongo” (Rovin, 1983, p. 23). Crabbe was not only athletically nimble and

able to do his own stunts but was capable of delivering solid and richly nuanced performances that sometimes eluded other serial actors like Tom Tyler, James Pierce, or Kirk Allyn (Barbour, 1979; Wass, 2014). Regardless what Crabbe thought, many recognized him only as Flash. Forever, for better or worse, he sealed his fate when he pulled on the tunic and tights. By symbolically blasting off to Mongo, Crabbe achieved both superhero stardom and eternal science fiction glorification.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The objective of this review is to shine several beams of light through a sharply focused lens in order to construct a theory based template for studying *Flash Gordon*. The discussion of mythology and society, cultural hegemony, fear of the other and the yellow peril, superheroes in American popular culture, chapter play dynamics, superheroes place within those chapter plays, science fiction mythos in America, and art deco in America and *Flash Gordon* will situate the correct foci through which to view the serial. Along the course of this review, connections will be established between *Flash Gordon* and these various strains of thought.

2.1 Mythology and Society

“Myth is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at taking off from the linguistic ground on which it keeps on rolling” (Levi-Strauss, 1973, p.210). Mythology embodies and circulates the standards and

practices of the society thereby demanding its ongoing reification in the society. Myth can be understood through the language (written, verbal, and visual) that the society uses to communicate issues it wishes to engage in on a regular basis (Barthes, 2013; Hall; 1997; Levi-Strauss, 1973). Mythology is evident in all human cultural endeavors but most determinedly in storytelling, child rearing and through the performance of the fine arts. For there are myths that surround newspapers, medicine, sports, sexuality, education, religion, and almost anything else we can call to mind. Through communication within society these myths are constructed and expanded. “Societies do not exist without communication and representation, and therefore socialization must be, in part, the learning of myths, rituals, and other archetypical articulations of a culture” (Hall, 1997, p. 10). These regular practices become ingrained in the society and allow the society to enter into advanced stages of development. Verbal and visual cues are used to teach the members of the society how to properly perform rituals, rites and passages that accompany the maturation processes in the society (Levi-Strauss, 1973). Thereby, this combination of crossing thresholds in development and constant interchange in terms of the mythology that is ballyhooed throughout society, the formation and reification of mythology allows the members of any community to ponder what their existence means to the civilization of man.

Mythology further allows us the opportunity to understand how a group of people in a society thinks and acts in terms of ritual (film is a ritual experience), ceremony, as well as everyday existence. Mythologies are reinforced daily and therefore are very hard to change or displace as they organically emerge and evolve in the manifested zeitgeist (Barthes, 2013). That is to say that myth exhibits what it means to British, French,

African American or whatever overarching culture one chooses to investigate or adopt. Mythologies explain the political, ritualistic, hedonistic, psychological, physical, and ontological constructions that are forever present within any given society (Levi-Strauss, 1973).

However, the creators of stories (film, television, novels) are not inventing mythology but rather act as conduits through which these ideas can be expressed and circulated. All these manifested stories retrench the mythology into the zeitgeist of the modern civilization. “The happy ending of the fairy tale, the myth, and the divine comedy of the soul, is to be read, not as a contradiction (to myth), but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man” (Campbell, 1968, p. 28). Since life is not an easy but rather an arduous task to perform and endure, mythology enables societies to continue the struggle to survive.

Rituals are all around us and take many forms. We have morning routine rituals (shower, breakfast and brush teeth in a certain order), educational rituals (tests and papers), political rituals (elections and campaigns) and so on until the next ritual takes over from the previous ritual on and on forever until we cease to be. Rituals are simply deeply compulsive and protracted myths. As myths are constantly being reinforced, the myths become powerful forces that exhibit their influence on the society at large and psychologically on the individual engaging in the rituals.

This is very true of the construction of popular culture as well. To be sure, myths discussing and contrasting the context of the cultural product of films, television shows, song lyrics, celebrities, and magazines appear consistently in the acculturation (Barthes, 2013). Mythology related to filmmaking is nothing more than a rich layered cake that

permeates the entire Hollywood production concept. In that sense, films are merely modern myths that allow us to go places and experience dramatic situations we would likely never engage in in our everyday existence (Munsterberg, 1916). In this regard, films are an important type of wish fulfillment.

Carl Jung (1964) dissected this examination of dreams and wish fulfillment where he discussed archetypes and the collective unconsciousness that lies dormant in all of us. Jung conjectured “symbols, I must point out, do not occur solely in dreams. They appear in all kinds of psychic manifestations. There are symbolic thoughts and feelings, symbolic acts and situations” (p. 41). This is noted to illustrate the idea that films and popular culture writ large are all types of wish fulfillment that man engages in on a regular basis. People watch police dramas to experience and learn a little about what it would be like to be a policeman or perhaps a coroner. They listen to certain music to sense the emotions and desires that the artist is trying to invoke either directly in their choice of lyrics and instrumentation or indirectly through the mythologies surrounding their celebrity and lifestyle. People watch films to be transported to other places, times and situations. It is nothing more than the expansion of dream fulfillment.

This is a natural progression of a course of analysis that was started by Freud in his deeply influential work. In that volume’s fifth chapter, “The Materials and Sources of Dreams”, Freud discusses wish fulfillment by explaining that fulfillment takes place regarding works of fiction: “the relation of our typical dreams to fairy-tales and other fiction and poetry is neither sporadic nor accidental. Sometimes the penetrating insight of the poet has analytically recognized the process of transformation of which the poet is otherwise the instrument” (a. Freud, 1900, p.81). This is related to the current study

because it discusses how dreams (awake or asleep) can infiltrate our desires to experience adventures and characterizations that would otherwise be alien to us.

Dreams also involve a tremendous amount of condensation. Freud described this in chapter six of the same work, “The Dream Work” by theorizing that “the dream is meagre, paltry and laconic in comparison with the range and copiousness of the dream-thoughts” (Freud, 1900, p.93). Clearly, when we connect the need for wish fulfillment with the power of mythology it becomes all too apparent that works of fiction have an awesome presence in our everyday consciousness and our unconscious as well. The two forces produce an unparalleled impression on our psyche and attest to our humanistic need to understand what our brain craves and longs for either in everyday life or in the secret well-guarded recesses of our mind.

Campbell (1968) linked Freud with his own study of mythology and dreams when he established that “the unconscious sends all sorts of vapors, odd beings, terrors, and deluding images up into the mind-whether in dream, broad daylight, or insanity” (p. 8) and credited Jung with this line when discussing the notion that the primary task of the monomyth hero is to burst through all the difficulties that are laid in his or her path and become the true self in the face of this present adversity. “The break through occurs when the distorted, direct experience and assimilation of what C. G. Jung has called the archetypal images” have been achieved (Campbell, 1968, p.17-18). There are several archetypes that both Jung and Campbell discuss including: the hero, the temptress, the wise old man, the villain (sometimes the father of the hero in latent form, and the tyrant – monster (could be the villain, the father, or the hero). In the presentation of myths there is a triumvirate among the hero, the villain and the wise old man (Campbell & Moyers,

1991). The hero of the myth must hold fast and remember that his or her goal is to become that which they are destined to become. In a word: their mission is to achieve the objectives of the latent dream that lies within them.

Flash Gordon is an archetypal superhero and as the stakes become greater, he turns into the American hero taken on a journey that the audience would readily follow as he invests more capital in his mantle as the hero. To echo Jakobson (1935), Flash is the dominant in the presentation of the mythology of the hero known as *Flash Gordon*. Handsome and athletically talented, Flash became that hero to systematically challenge and vanquish the tall, lanky marauder Ming. Flash was entrusted to restore the balance and champion truth, justice and reason over the inherent suspicion, vindictiveness, and menacing madness of Ming. Flash stood as the hope for Americans over adversity and oppression by the foreign elements that many at this time believed were a direct threat to the United States known as “the yellow peril.” Flash epitomized the greatness and righteousness of America. He was the seminal screen superhero that ushered in a dominant paradigm that argued that superheroes were never wrong and always did the right thing no matter how far they were pushed by the menaces they chased to lash out in anger and hate.

Flash’s heroic aim is to thwart Ming in his bid to rule the universe and his motivation is to secure the universe for all to live in peace. In that direct but rich characterization, Flash is not simply “good” but unselfishly good. He must be in order that he may befit his status as the superhero (Campbell, 1968; Campbell & Moyers, 1991). Ming then and only then becomes the tyrant monster that must be exterminated by Flash. Flash is a fully functioning superhero because he seeks to destroy the evil Emperor

Ming's (the tyrant monster) imperial hegemonic rule and transform Mongo into a planet that is ruled by peace and humane justice.

Resultantly, Flash will not rest until this tyrant is relieved of his power and the balance of the galaxy is returned to his determination of cultural equilibrium. Flash is engaging in the three necessary stages of the hero's evolution. As described by Campbell (1968) 1) He is cut off from his everyday existence on earth and his Ivy League lifestyle, 2) he is given entrance into a divine power as to what science can provide in the fight against evil, and 3) he is returned to the earth as a more powerful entity. Clues are given as to how this role is enacted. We witness this quality in the way that Flash is regularly graphically depicted in stunning low angle shots to emphasize his already impressive physique in the comic strip and film stills. This visualization makes him appear god-like due to his dominance in the frame which maximizes his power and heroism. He most assuredly is entirely human in his portrayal as a young adventurer, but we view him as superhuman in his abilities to outwit, out fight, and out run (in some cases literally) Ming's minions and even regularly evade death itself. In this way, Flash is no mere mortal and his life is no run of the mill story. *Flash Gordon* is exciting and thrilling for all the ages precisely because he is not "normal" in any conceivable sense. His journey is anything but mundane. Though we must acknowledge that his story reinforces the cultural hegemony that he seeks to undermine.

2.2 Cultural Hegemony

"The consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed by the dominant fundamental group; is historically caused by the prestige which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production" (Gramsci, 2000, p.306).

The hegemony or direct control of the civil discourse of the society is exercised by the dominant group of that society because they are in the power position at that point in time. As Gramsci saw it reinforces elitism and undermines repulsion from that elitism. This control of the flow of information whether cultural or political, is always absolute. Gramsci discussed the operation of cultural hegemony in terms of its systematic nature by stating:

“the political party, for all groups, is precisely the mechanism which carries out in civil society the same function as the state carries out, more systematically and over a larger scale than in political society” (2000. p. 306).

The civil discourse introduced into the society by the dominant group is much stronger and more covert than any direct militaristic or legalistic hold over the society. Gramsci is very clear that the power of the intellectuals (read leaders) are instrumental in controlling the cultural properties and popular political opinions. So, those who lead the conversation direct the conversation. Those who wish to voice dissent from those ranks will therefore be ostracized and treated as agitators who must be silenced. We can carry this over to the present day reality that there are certain artistic properties that do not ever find an outlet in popular culture.

Properties or cultural assets like the fine arts (film, television, theatre, opera), businesses, and industries (film industry, steel industry, educational industry) in a modern society are not controlled by those who consume such things they are actually controlled by the capitalists or dominant figures of that cultural structuration. The intellectuals direct the flow of what movies are produced, what plays are performed, what songs are recorded, what artists get exhibitions and so forth. All that is needed is the acceptance of the populist in that society to buy into the control of the conversation about cultural assets

in that state by intellectuals who systematically decide artistic decisions for the state as a whole.

Indeed, in his own time (the 1920's) Gramsci lamented that his beloved Italy was overrun by popular culture from outside, particularly America and France. "Even European culture has undergone a process of unification" which melded the whole continent into one hegemonic whole (Gramsci, 1999, p.765). The dominance of western culture has far from ceased in the present age. We only need look to Hollywood to witness the saturation of product that that American cultural institution exhibits over the rest of the world. This global obsession with Hollywood has its genesis in the 1920's. For this very reason, the messages and stories that Hollywood chooses to scatter across the globe should be examined closely for impressions that could help formulate opinions that other societies have about American culture. Mythologies are created as what it means to be an American. In *Flash Gordon*, Ming would directly operate from this hegemonic view and Flash would serve as the counterpoint to this cultural domination by playing the liberating American overcoming the narrow-minded elitist Asian-like Ming. The irony is that by so doing, Flash is reinforcing hegemonic control for at the time the United States was seen as all powerful and wise.

In *Flash Gordon*, there are unmistakable power dynamics that tell us of the perceived superiority of Ming and his followers through the way Ming treats other Mongol races. For there are Hawkmen, Lionmen, Sharkmen, and Clay People (in later serials) in *Flash Gordon* who are regarded as half breeds and something less than pure. These half breeds are to be subjugated and are constantly told to stay in their place by Ming. Very few Mongolites are allowed into the dominant culture. Specifically,

following the model of Althusser these cultures are repressed by the state of Ming “predominantly by repression (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology” (1970, p. 12). For Ming, these “others” are not part of his ideological domain and so must be oppressed. The paradox is that Ming also represses his own subjects and will not allow any other world view into his focus on absolute control of both physically manifested power and Mongolitian culture. Ming is the state as emphasized by his presence in every major kingdom decision. This in turn runs contra to the tolerance of the Americans (Flash and company) as they are depicted as level headed, peaceful, loyal, and accepting of other races, such as their acceptance of Prince Thun of the Lionmen as a friend or the releasing of Ming’s prisoners by the party of Flash. This can be defended up to a certain point, but breaks down when viewed through the obvious racially charged overtones in the film. Though we would now denounce this viewpoint on race as flawed it figures into the dialect around the yellow peril in the 1930’s and 1940’s. One of the central cognitions that is evident in the serial is the holding of aliens (the other) in their place in the universe in relation to the earthlings’ dominance (Zinman, 1970; Walker, 2011; Walker, 2015). Nevertheless, this “other” oriented worldview of Mongo is grand, vast reaching, and architecturally contemporary to the 1930’s. The irony lies in the fact that by asserting his dominance over the Mongolitian ruler Flash is reinforcing the hegemonic viewpoint, it is simply shined through the American lens as opposed to the Asian centric one. *Flash Gordon* avers that the dominant American culture should be involved in geopolitical and interplanetary issues because America has a vested interest in remaining dominant.

2.3 The Cultural Threat - The Yellow Peril

In the early decades of 20th century literature and popular culture, there were misconceived illusions that Asians would be ruling over the world in the second half of the 20th century (Barbour, 1979; Davis, 2007; Wu, 1982). This prejudiced view was a direct result of the fundamental mythological principle of the fear of the other. This fear of Asian culture infiltrating the United States traditional sphere of influence was nothing new. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed so as to culturally condemn “their alien looks, baffling language, strange food, clannishness and zest for hard work” (Kagan, 1999, p. 23). The Act was so successful that it greatly truncated the Asian immigration to the United States so that by “1917 virtually all East Asians were excluded from permanent entry” into the United States (Kagan, 1999, p.23). Perhaps somewhat naturally this exclusion led to all-encompassing cultural takeover by non-Asians seeking to dominate those Asians remaining in America. For in the 1920’s, Asians were viewed with abject suspicion and were largely not trusted by whites.

This erroneously perceived mission of cultural ascendancy by Asians over the world would come to be known in literary circles as the “yellow peril” (Barbour, 1979). Wu (1982) describes it as “the threat to the United States that some white American authors believed was posed by the people of East Asia. As a literary theme, the fear of this threat focuses on issues concerning the alleged moral degeneracy of the Asian people” (p.1). This injudicious bias was alive and well in American popular culture in the 1930’s. *Flash Gordon* is an example of this mythological construction of the American media. Historically flawed racist and stereotypical view of Asians was in vogue in practically all of America at the time (Cline, 1984, Wu; 1982).

In the comic strip, Ming was seen as the personification of the yellow peril which would subjugate the earth and in terms of science fiction mythology, the universe (Davis, 2007; Katayama, 2008; Wu, 1982). The moniker “Merciless” further cements Ming’s total rejection of humanity and the systematic hegemonic suppression of any other cultural paradigm outside his empire. Befitting his supervillain status, Ming is the harbinger of pain, death, sorrow and loss. He is the egoistical tyrannical monster who imperils the hero and who must have his power rested from him if balance is to be restored (Campbell, 1968). Ming is akin to the Minotaur in Greek mythology as he believes that what he does is just and right, though in reality he is selfish, prideful, and unfeeling. This reality then places Ming as the epitome of egomaniacal self-involvement, this is a theme that runs throughout yellow peril characters like *Fu Manchu*, and Dr. Daka in *Batman* (Hillyer, 1943) (Katayama, 2008). Ming’s clear Asian overtones and selfishness work to make him all the more hated leading up to and during WWII (Barbour, 1979; Cline, 1984). This depiction fulfilled the American desire to remain the masters of their own destiny. America in the 1930’s was not officially involved in European nor Asian cultural or political mechanisms. This isolationism contributed to the American mythos that Asians were evil and selfish in their motivations. *Flash Gordon* argues that due to the fact that America is a great nation that country must exercise its great power to liberate subordinate cultures from oppression. The hyper-involvement with Asian issues and reconstruction by America after 1945 diminished the mythology surrounding the yellow peril (Wu, 1982). Though admittedly wrongly assigned to Asians, this yellow peril would be extinguished by the superhero *Flash Gordon*.

2.4 Superheroes in American Popular Culture

“The superhero film that has displaced the superhero comic (book) in the world of mass culture; comics, in fact, have become something of a niche market” (Bukatman, 2011, p. 118). Bukatman’s critique is not far removed from the truth as to the station the superhero occupies in the new millennium. That is not say that their position in the pantheon of modern popular culture is not important. Bukatman very effectively articulates that the superhero has become a mass marketing media blitz that tends to focus less on story, setting and character and more on underwhelming spectacle. This is a very legitimate criticism because story does get lost in the technological phantasmagoria of the modern superhero film. Bukatman laments the question as to why scholars have not discussed this. However, we must remember that as a rule superhero comics were not even on the radar of academics for much of the last century. Furthermore, this criticism sells the cultural influence that the superheroes have had far too short.

Reynolds (1992) assessed that comic books were systematically treated with “disdain by the literary establishment, and yet built up its own lively and heuristic critical discourse through what is still rather misleadingly known as the fan press” (p. 7). In other words, a great deal of the literature reviewed here is not rooted in the way scholars view serials and by extension super hero serials but rather the way “fans” of these serials cognitively process the product and content.

That is not to disregard the cultural relevance or validity of the fan press which provides insights into the obvious impact that serials have had on the filmmaking process and the mythology of superheroes but is stated as a simple paradigm that had been set up by the academia intelligentsia until the end very end of the last century. The reality that *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1981), *Back to the Future*

(Zemeckis, 1985), and science fiction/fantasy have been influenced by the serial format and comic strip superheroes, not to mention how television became largely based on the serial template, has never fully been acknowledged by critical scholars (Barbour, 1979; Cline, 1984, Davis, 2007).

The superhero is cloaked in a custom made costume that endows the character with the necessary release from mundane life in a dramatic veil of mystery. “The Costume functions as the crucial sign of super-heroism. It marks our heroes and villains from other characters who do not wear costumes” (Reynolds, 1992, p. 26). So, the costume acts as a sign of what it means to be a superhero. These signs are recognizable to the reader, viewer etc. as removed from every day “normal” existence. Reynolds again: “the conventions of the superhero costume constitute a system of *langue* and *parole* – to use terms first introduced by Sussure.” (1992, p. 26). The language of the superhero is thus first represented through the costume. There is another term in the language of the superhero that must be dissected as well, the supervillain that challenges everything the superhero stands for. Stan Lee (a towering figure of superhero publishing and writing) writes in the forward to Misiroglu and Eury (2006) : “although you certainly can’t have a superhero saga without a superhero, the series would soon be history without a scary supervillain(s) to keep it going” (xi). Beautifully presented by Lee, the superhero cannot nor ever will be a superhero without a supervillain to match his or her wits against on a consistent basis.

Principally, the superhero story must delve into the nature of good and evil, words that encompass the struggle of right versus wrong in the mythology of the society.

“Emotions such as hatred and vengeance, and many of our highest ideals for the civilized

world are, in part, products of our culture: myths, heroes, legends, and rituals” (Zehnder & Calvert, 2004, p. 123). Once more unto that breach the superhero strides to put right what it means to be good over what it means to be evil. Whether one chooses to be good or evil is based at least in part on what values they pull from the legends, myths (to which we can now add superheroes) that the society holds dear. People are not born with attitudes toward good and evil, this is learned through socialization from within the society (Levi-Strauss, 1973).

Central to this distinctive mythology, the superhero must answer several calls to become the individual imbued with the super natural powers that they are required by the society to embody (Stucky, 2006). The superhero passes through many stages along his journey toward his “ultimate boon” (Campbell 1968, p. 23) wherein he or she becomes the fully formed hero of that age. These steps inscribe an entire syntactic language of superheroism such as: saving his loved ones from the monster tyrant by directly challenging the monster tyrant, looking and staring at death in the face and surviving, and atoning his past misdeeds with his father at some point in the journey (Campbell, 1968). As will be elucidated in the analysis, this is very much central to the mythology of *Flash Gordon*.

Not all critics agree with this connection to mythology, ritual, and cultural influence. In his expansive work on superheroes, Klock (2002) grudgingly agrees that Freud, Campbell, Jung, and Fredric Wertham (who created *Wonder Woman*) would all argue that there is “a high level interaction with psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic criticism” (p. 5). In the next breath though, Klock dismisses this tradition. This is evident when he states that he does not believe in discussing the superhero in what he calls “the

light of the Jung-Levi Strauss-Campbell triad” (p. 8). Rather, he presents his argument that this is overly elitist and explains that his book will be “highly selective within its own frame of reference and many works from the superhero genre will be absent” (2002, p. 16).

While on the surface this may appear an intriguing tirade against the highly regarded scholarly legacy that Levi Strauss, Campbell, Jung and Freud have established in psychology, anthropology, mythology, religion, and indeed popular cultural criticism, it would be wrong to deny that there are alternatives to the traditional superhero archetype (costume, superhuman abilities, call to the challenge) that we are attempting to unpack in terms of cultural impact here. Though this present work is not interested in alternative forms of narrative structure within the superhero subgenre, it should suffice to recognize that there are superheroes that do not follow this model of superhero construction. Some of those superheroes would include (in Klock’s opinion) *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *Tom Strong*, and *Promethea* which he determinedly labels “America’s Best Comics” (2002, p. 98). Of course, now that this observation has been put forth into the literary criticism arena only time will tell if Klock can rewrite the rich history of cultural studies in the Freudian – Jungian – Levi Straussian – Campbellian – Barthes vein that argues that there are always present overarching stories and motifs that dominate the analysis of the subgenre known as the superhero. Flash is a conventional hero clad in a costume that announces his entry into heroism.

We must, for a brief moment, return to the concept of the fan press. To be clear, Barbour, Cline, and Davis who regularly appear as the usual suspects in several sections of this literature review are not scholars but simply super fans of serialized super heroes.

Even when scholars such as Bould, Dixon, and Tracey take up the task of writing about the serialized form of *Flash Gordon* and other super beings it is not in a specific depth and breadth about the superhero or the mores of the superhero genre. The approach focusses the discussion on what the serial meant to the industry and filmmaking in general as opposed to culturally subjective questions about the social influence of the serial on modern Hollywood filmmaking techniques. Moreover, there are several conventions that superhero films exhibit in the domain of mythology that has never been thoroughly connected to the serial format. This is vital to the understanding of why the superhero becomes the modern demi-god of popular culture starting in 1936.

2.5 Chapter Plays

The potential of serials to captivate audiences was evident early in the history of narrative film. The groundbreaking work of French filmmaker Louis Feuillade is exemplified by watching *Fantomas* (Feuillade, 1913) and *Les Vampires* (Feuillade, 1915). These serials allow one to see how these chapter plays can become highly engrossing and entertaining, while at the same time achieving an advanced degree of aesthetic appeal. Louis Feuillade is outside the scope of this paper but his work is worth mentioning at least in passing. Though Feuillade's chapter plays are over twenty minutes long, they still help establish the formula that would dominate serial construction until the demise of the serial (as they became more and more trite) in 1956. Cook highlights this stating "the success of Feuillade's serials led to a widespread acceptance of that form throughout the world" (Cook, 2004). This narrative form quickly reached across the Atlantic to America. This would directly influence *The Perils of Pauline* (Gasnier & MacKenzie, 1914) and further establish the structuration of the serial form (Cook, 2004).

A serial in its full essence is based on the cliffhanger, a series of episodes or successive chapters that are played out over several viewings that allow the audience to see the action unfold in an extended period of time with multiple climactic interruptions in between the individual chapters (Barbour, 1979). The phrases used in *Batman* (ABC, 1966-1968) directly come from cliffhanger terminology, these include “when we last left _____ (fill the hero in the blank)”, “last time _____ was in real peril when...”, “for you many long hours have past, for our heroes’ mere seconds.”

The audiences of the 1930’s and 1940’s did not see the next chapter in the serial until the following week, a structure later mirrored in episodic television. The next chapter would recap the action that had led up to the cliffhanger that had concluded the week before. Systematically, there would be twelve to fifteen chapters (*Flash Gordon* is thirteen chapters) lasting twenty minutes or less that forced the hero into a cliffhanger at the conclusion of each chapter (Davis, 2007; Zinman, 1970). The serial format demanded that the hero escape in some miraculous fashion thusly: have the champion of truth and justice perilously “staring into the jaws of death or teetering on the brink of destruction at the end of each chapter” only to triumphantly deny death at the start of the succeeding chapter (Cline, 1984, p. 6). The only time this could be altered is if the hero would be advantaged by having everyone believe he was dead, but the audience must be given clues that he was very much still alive and kicking. It was also standard that at least two people would direct serials as there was so much material to cover in the break neck pace the serials were filmed (Barbour, 1979; Cline, 1984, Davis, 2007).

Equally vital to understand the form is the contention of the twenty minute or less running time of the two reeler. A two reeler is defined as a film that takes two reels or

spools of filmstrip to play through the projector to conclude. Each of those reels lasts approximately ten minutes, depending on how fast the film is played back. This was thought to be able to hold the attention of the audience long enough to witness action and excitement but by its very structure did not allow for long drawn out narrative scenes that might make the audience lose interest in the plot (Cline, 1984). The thin plot points (good vs. evil, right over might, reason always wins) unfolded over the advancing chapters but the main strategy was to “cut to the chase.” This phraseology actually comes from the silent screen days of the Keystone Kops, Buster Keaton, and the like but was borrowed by serial producers and changed to “cut to the fight” (Blesh, 1966; Cline, 1984). Whether this is a weak point of this narrative style or not, (it could be argued either way) little time was given to intricately detailed storylines. Instead, the filmmakers would fill the screen with stark images of struggles between good and evil so as to move the story along without being bogged down by unnecessary bulky dialogue (Cline, 1984).

Economically, the serials allowed for the release of films to the international markets due to their heavy emphasis on action and less attention given to story and character detailing (Cook, 2004). This was significant because it enabled the lesser studios (like Republic, Universal, and Columbia) to release their films to a globalized market and reap the benefits of foreign distribution while not having to worry about producing feature length narrative films that would appeal to that market. All that was needed to change the language was different intertitles (in the sound era this would become hastily executed overdubbing) that did not change the structure of the action in any significant way (Cook, 2004). Despite these stringent structures of the serials there

are some that broke this accepted mold and are considered the gold standards of narrative formulation of this film variety. *Flash Gordon* is an example of one of those rare gems.

2.6 The Superhero in Serialized Form

The public's active engagement with superheroes on screen has its seminal ritual in the film serial *Flash Gordon*. In the serial, audiences saw a modern day champion of truth and justice gloriously bedecked in his skin clinging tights and tunic. As stated earlier, this would be the hallmark of superheroes for the rest of the 20th century, that of costumed demi-god (Wong, 1992). The mythology of *Flash Gordon* allowed the audiences of the 1930's to aspire to be more than they currently were. Perhaps to be more virtuous or more tolerant of the "other" or even to try to do impossible things like climb mountains and build tall buildings. Flash served as a beacon of the American value to achieve something greater than oneself. Fashionably, Flash was created at time when the values of America were being challenged daily by the deprivation of the Great Depression and the lead up to World War II. Flash's virtues of truth, honor, loyalty, bravery, unselfishness, and strength were written directly into the narration of *Flash Gordon*'s mythology. *Flash Gordon* valorized those traits in a systematic and dialect way. By so doing, Flash popularized the American belief that the United States was the only nation that could master space.

As befit its nature, *Flash Gordon* became an instant hit with audiences of all ages in America first and later the world. As audiences bought into the mythology of Flash, the mythology of Flash in turn became even more powerful. As Campbell (1968) explained the greater stake the society has in the myth, the more powerful the myth becomes. Flash was certainly popular and powerful. It is the popularity of the character

that demands further examination in terms of what messages and meanings he conveyed. Through Flash, all their desires, fantasies, and ambitions were explored and expressed. Their belief that the United States was a great nation, that space was going to be conquered first by Americans, and that great futuristic cities were an American reality alone. None of these was entirely true, but in part fulfilled those ambitious wishes of that generation. In the 1930's and 1940's, these myths were best projected in the movie serials that were such an important part of an evening's entertainment (which will be explored in depth below).

The serials became the theatrical showplace for superheroes like *Flash Gordon*, *Buck Rogers*, *Batman and Robin*, *Captain Midnight* and many, many others. Adventures played out from cliffhanger to cliffhanger. These cliffhangers filled adults and children alike with excitement every time they went to see "their favorite champions of truth and justice duke it out with the villains" (Cline, 1984). Here in the darkened theatre for no more than twenty minutes America's fantasies were projected in vivid violence and mechanical dialogue. Though serials were not accorded the prestige that many have argued they were due, serials are considered by many critics to be the greatest outlet for youthful angst (Barbour, 1979; Cline, 1984; Griffith, Mayer, & Bowser, 1981; Thompson & Bordwell, 2003; Zinman, 1970). Perhaps this is one explanation for why the movie serials were so necessary to the Hollywood studio formula. When considering these dynamics, they were indeed an important part of that evening's entertainment.

In the 1930's and 1940's an evening's entertainment was in every sense a whole evening. Historically the studio system can be summed up as "diversified theatre chains, producing features, shorts, cartoons, and newsreels to fill their houses." (Gomery, p.

239). For the reality from the 1920's through the 1950's was that the studios owned a majority of the theatres where their films were exhibited (Mordden, 1988). This in turn demanded tons of content. As a result, there was not just a feature film (which typically was two hours or more), but a B-film (usually no more than an hour or so), newsreels (usually three or four, ten minutes tops), multiple cartoons (usually six or seven minutes each), trailers (a few minutes each), short subjects (usually no more than twenty minutes), and yes, serials (typically less than twenty minutes). It was, in large part, these chapter plays that kept the audiences coming back week after week. Moreover, the status of B-pictures were a vibrant stable of entertainment to studios like Columbia, Republic, and Universal (the major chapter play makers) as these studios had much smaller budgets and lesser star power than the recognized powerhouses of MGM, Paramount, 20th Century Fox, Warner Brothers, and RKO (Mordden, 1988). These serials were an essential component of the bottom lines of Columbia, Republic and Universal.

The serial was tailor made for such adventures because it compacted a great deal of action and suspense into a tightly made package that practically had the audience on its knees begging for more. The serials gave preeminence and social relevance to such unknown actors like Crabbe, Tom Tyler (Captain Marvel in *The Adventures of Captain Marvel* (Whitney & English, 1941) and The Phantom in *The Phantom* (Eason, 1943)), Kirk Alyn (Superman in *Superman* (Bennett & Carr, 1948) and *Atom Men vs. Superman* (Bennett, 1950)), and the as yet unknown Lloyd Bridges (Secret Agent X-9 in *Secret Agent X-9* (Collins & Taylor, 1945)).

2.7 Science Fiction in America

“Science fiction affords the audience the opportunity to discuss how we feel about contemporary issues in the purview of the future by presenting futurized mythology” (Palumbo, 2008, p. 12). Exploring the future through these means, we can talk about complex political, cultural, and social problems in a way that is removed from contemporary reality. The mythology of the future is ever present in science fiction because it concerns itself with what can be in the future and what the society of tomorrow will think about past ritual, popular culture, mores and humankind in general. “Since both myth and science reflect man’s irrepressible curiosity about his origins and his destiny, they each can be seen as a particular human means of structuring the universe” (Sutton & Sutton, 1969, p.231). *Flash Gordon* stands half way (one leg in each paradigm) between science and mythology. In fact, it does quite a superb job of blending the two “worlds.”

Even though Alex Raymond’s *Flash Gordon* and the serialized *Flash Gordon* indeed did change the way audiences thought about the future, this was not novel. An early influence would be the films of Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927) and *The Woman in the Moon* (Lang, 1929). To *Metropolis* we can attribute the highly geometrical city design that highlights skyscrapers, dystopian machine living and flying transportation (Ebert, 2002). To *The Woman in the Moon* we can attribute the imagery of the rocket ship. This vision simply extended from that of the primitive rocket ship presented to us in the film, *A Trip to the Moon* (Melies, 1902). For *Frau im Mond (The Woman in the Moon)* (Lang, 1929), rocket scientist Hermann Oberth (who would go on to work with famed rocketeer Wernher von Braun designed a fully functioning rocket ship (c. IMDB, 2015).

Due to the fact that the rocket ship is part of the imagined technological future in the 1930's and realizing that virtually no one had ever seen a thing called a rocket ship, its symbolization in the science fiction film is very insightful in terms of the advantages that man would one day possess. Furthermore, the rocket ship is a science fiction generated, symbolized, and mythologized mode of transportation in the projected future. Rockets are not simply fast travelling vehicles but the very embodiment of the technological advancement of mankind.

Following that elaboration, *Flash Gordon* can be seen as the natural evolution of the imagery of the rocket ship. Rather than blasting off to the moon, Flash blasts off to the planet Mongo. These images in *Flash Gordon* were the futuristic interpretation of Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* comic strip. This visual iconography was readily used as a major selling point in publicity releases (Barbour, 1979; Cline, 1984; Davis, 2007; Dixon, 2011). Rocket ships are viewed in *Flash Gordon* as aerodynamic, phallic inspired, expensively constructed vehicles. Their presence is necessary to the plot for one cannot simply drive an automobile to Mongo or for that matter back to earth. It has been said that many a future astronaut was inspired by Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* and by extension the *Flash Gordon* serial. The validity of this claim is well documented and is genuine in its praise of the production values of the rocket ships in the serial (Cline, 1984; Davis, 2007; Parish & Pitts, 1977; Zinman, 1970). In this way, *Flash Gordon* introduced many audience members to the technology that would enable a superhero like Flash to save the earth from menacing aliens and that promised a brighter future for all. Writ large, superheroes and their technological advantages would play a fundamental role

in their fight against the adversity and oppression caused by their respective super villains.

Space travel in *Flash Gordon* is presented as exciting, desire filled and educational because it enables us to view other cultures at an accelerated rate of speed. This is justified because it is through the seeing of the other far away cultures that we begin to see our own humanity (Levi-Strauss, 1973). *Flash Gordon* ushered in America's fascination with space as the final frontier. The American notion that humans (specifically Americans) can do anything is essential to the position Flash held in American culture in 1936. "*Flash Gordon* extended the New Deal aerial trend" (Tracey, 2014, p. 1). In other words, Flash told Americans that the next voyage must be into outer space. Recall that this film was released before the start of the Second World War and so there were high hopes that the world would remain peaceful enough to focus on technological evolution. More than anything, Americans wanted to advance society through science, education, and art.

2.8 Art Deco in America and Flash Gordon

Art deco was a major art movement in the 1920's and 1930's in America. Art deco traces its origin to the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs Industriels et Modernes that took place in Paris and was hosted by La Societe des Artistes Decorateurs (society of decorator artists) (Encyclopedia of Art History, 2015). Art deco design is characterized by an inherent elegant sleekness, functionality, sophisticated composition, and highly detailed ornamental trappings. This explains its inclinations and references to cubism, futurism, and constructivism (Encyclopedia of Art History, 2015).

The style quickly and widely spread throughout Europe and soon took a firm hold in American architecture.

Several art deco buildings were erected during this time in major United States cities. The Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building and the Western Union Building “directly influenced by German Expressionism” and by extension art deco were built in Manhattan during this period (Bahamon & Losantos, 2008). The City Hall in Buffalo found “much of the emotional impact of the building is due to its Art Deco styling” (LaChiusa, 2015). The AT&T Building and the Terminal Tower in Cleveland were identified as prime examples of futuristic stylizing and higher occupancy standards in American architecture (Hoefler, 2003; Toman & Cook, 2005). Detroit built the Guardian Building and the Penobscot Building that look like towers from the skyline of *Metropolis* (Cohen, 2000). This fever for deco gripped Chicago with Board of Trade Building and found a warm reception in Los Angeles when the Wilshire Bullocks, Sunset Tower, and Richfield Building were erected in the late 1920s and early 1930’s (Cooper & Cooper, 2005).

These buildings became physical mythological symbols of what the future of construction and design would be like. Sleek, clean, and overtly modern, these structures played to the American ideal that it was the Promised Land for urban growth, artistic triumph, and smart city planning. Justly so, they became projected representations of life in the 21st century. In the 1930’s it was believed that cities would be bursting at the seams with people, businesses and cultural institutions; therefore, city land would be at a premium and upwards would be the watchword (here again we are talking skyward, toward space).

Flash Gordon addresses the rise of urbanization and higher density habitation in the future. This visual representation of the future was preceded by the British film *Things to Come* (Menzies, 1936) released two months before *Flash Gordon*. Whether or not there is a direct correlation, the scenic design of *Things to Come* (Menzies, 1936) mirrors the production design of *Flash Gordon*. *Things to Come* (Menzies, 1936) was written by H.G. Wells and features elaborate art deco set construction and Mise-en-scène (placement within the frame). Ray Bradbury, often labelled as America's greatest science fiction writer and author of works filled with predictions of the future: *The Martian Chronicles* (Bradbury, 1950), *The Illustrated Man* (Bradbury, 1951), *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 1953), and *Zero Hour* (Bradbury, 1955) described by many one of the most terrifying radio plays ever performed precisely because it discusses the fear of the other, in this case, extraterrestrials, was greatly effective by *Things to Come*. Bradbury was completely taken by the metaphor spoken by Cabell at the end of film arguing that it shaped his destiny: it "changed my life...I staggered from the theater, crushed with this revelation, to continue writing times as not yet born" (Bradbury, 2002, p. xxiii). The line was: "which shall it be, all of space, eternity, and immortality, or the grave?" (Menzies, 1936). Bradbury's future work echoed this ambiguous ending which directly questioned the future of man, his society, and his achievements. Bradbury's whole career was spent deciding what man's place would be in the universe. Young Bradbury also loved *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers* comics as a kid, which is clear from its influence on his future work with its focus on technology and artistic rendering (Weist, 2002, p. 10).

Flash's representation of the future has its basis in the newspaper comic pages. Panels in the strip are filled with highly stylized stealthy rocket ships, futuristic geometric

city structures and a recognizable simple though deeply symbolical geometry (triangles, squares, rectangles) in the panel design (Blackbeard & Williams, 1987; Bould, 2004; Walker, 2011; Walker, 2015). These are the hallmarks of art deco design. At the time it was believed that buildings in the future would resemble tall, slim, stacked geometric structures that would house hundreds, even thousands of people (Bahamon & Losantos, 2008). This city dwelling future was epitomized by Bauhaus' "machine style living" and the overcrowding of urban areas (Wolfe, 1981, p.40). This projected world view can readily be seen in the *Flash Gordon* comic strip and serial.

With all of the proceeding as background, the central question can finally arise. *Flash Gordon* is the seminal work that establishes the cinematic language (visual and aural) of the modern day superhero film genre and as such *Flash Gordon* was the first of its kind, and so is worthy of deep rooted exploration. The mythology evident in its visual and aural composition are the most available clues to its place in popular culture. To supplement this, the fear of the other, the superhero himself, and the guidance of the wise old man must also be thoroughly explicated.

Therefore:

Central Research Question: As *Flash Gordon* is a seminal work and

As *Flash Gordon* is a primal superhero film,

How did *Flash Gordon* establish the language of the superhero film subgenre and

How did *Flash Gordon* emerge as the template for the modern superhero film subgenre?

What clues (visual, aural, and contextual) are present within the narrative of *Flash*

Gordon that guide us toward the modern day filmic formula known as the superhero subgenre?

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The theory of textual analysis will be articulated through the working structural anthropology template of Claude Levi-Strass. Through this theory meaning can be derived from how the tribe or society constructs their mythology (Levi-Strauss, 1973). Film is merely modern myth making and superheroes are the present emphasis within that mythology. Ergo, we can extrapolate what a certain superhero film means to the culture by reading into the text of that composition. Extending Levi Strauss to Roland Barthes and his discussion of the reification of mythology in the zeitgeist allows us to arrive at the mythological scholarship of Joseph Campbell. Through Campbell the troupes of the hero, the villain, the doctor, the damsel in distress and the fear of the other can be discovered in the signs present in the film. Signs are evident in the language used within *Flash Gordon*, providing critical scholars with support as to what it means to be super and to be a hero in American society, then and now.

To add more flames to this intense conflagration, Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony as relates to the presence or absence of a threat to hegemony can be assessed properly. Does *Flash Gordon* further this notion and if so, how?

The examination of the serial *Flash Gordon* will be treated as a free standing text to be thoroughly and systematically examined. The results and discussion following this analysis will concentrate on the text comprehensively and in significant specific examples through closely analyzing dialogue passages, acting performances, Mise-en-scène (placement within the frame), editing techniques, camera angles, set pieces and costuming choices. The properties governing its production (financial arrangements, casting, and legal issues), Alex Raymond's comic strip styling, and technical dimensions (physical sets and serialized style) connected to its place in film history have thus far been culturally and historically explored. It now remains to dissect the text itself and discuss what the serial establishes in terms of four major protocols:

Protocol One:

What is the Cinematic Language in use in *Flash Gordon*?

That is to say, are there evident special visual and aural cues in the serial to elucidate *Flash Gordon* as a modern day filmed superhero?

Protocol Two:

What is the cultural threat apparent in *Flash Gordon*?

That is to say, does *Flash Gordon* present us with a specialized cultural threat. Does, in this case Ming, rise to the level of establishing a hegemonic Asian dominated

culture that Flash must challenge? Congruently, does Flash pose a serious and constant threat to Ming?

Protocol Three:

Does *Flash Gordon* present a consistent mythology that remains true to its characteristics and principles of its superhero accepting the heroic mantle?

That is to say does Flash start out as not heroic like and evolve into a fleshed out fully functioning superhero of the modern age?

Protocol Four:

What is the functional position of Dr. Zarkov in the *Flash Gordon* serial?

That is to say, does Zarkov need to be present in the piece and if so, what is his role regarding the formation of the superhero?

Using these protocols, a template can be grounded in textual analysis theory as to what a superhero truly is in American popular culture. Taking root, these protocols can be benchmarked in other properties and serve as a checklist for superhero film review going forward.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The results will be situated and sub sectioned into the above mentioned four necessary protocols highlighting the establishment of the template for superhero textual film analysis. The protocols will examine cinematic language in *Flash Gordon* (both visual and aural cues), the cultural threat present in the text, the arrival of the superhero himself into his heroic mantel, and the guidance afforded by the wise old man as to what the hero must accomplish to become super. Following the protocols, summary will be entered into whether or not any of these categories are lacking.

Protocol One:

What is the Cinematic Language in use in *Flash Gordon*?

4.1 The Language of *Flash Gordon*

The serial presents us with a multitude of examples as to how the language of the superhero is developed by the primal nature and groundbreaking formulaic style of *Flash*

Gordon. The serial contains a plethora of both Visual and Aural cues that mark the superhero realm.

4.1.2 Visual Cues

One of the earliest visual cues as to what a superhero is can be seen when Flash attacks the Captain of the guard's tin men in the first chapter, "The Planet of Peril." Flash throws himself at the tin men in a desperate attempt to escape capture by Ming's minions. This is all for naught as the ever pragmatic Dr. Zarkov (who Flash and Dale accompany to Mongo on a mission of mercy) says "no, no, Flash, we must be taken to the Emperor." Flash agrees but very reluctantly. First cue, Flash (superhero) is a man of action not thought. Though he is shot in low angles and therefore looks more powerful, his mannerisms make him appear ready to jump into the fray without much of a plan. Flash is given the maximum power balance in his battles with his placement in the top half of the frame but spends a lot of wasted energy trying to overtake the slow moving but weapon wielding minions. As the serial progresses Flash learns to quiet his temper and bide his time rather than unsystematically slapping and slashing everything in sight.

Towards the end of this chapter we get the second clue as to what the superhero is when the Emperor Ming is presented as the supervillain of the piece. The superhero must have a supervillain to fight as Stan Lee famously said (2006, p. xi). Ming is intense (dark unblinking eyes), powerful, nasty looking and hate filled. Several shots show him staring Flash up and down, sizing him up. There is a dichotomy being articulated in this exchange of glances. It is obvious that these polar opposites are viewing their meeting through very different eyes. This outlook on the world will be repeated throughout the

prolonged battle of wits. Flash sees Ming as greedy, calculated, and menacing to all life. Ming sees Flash as interfering, disrespectful, and unworthy of acknowledgement.

At first, Flash simply just stares back at Ming but Flash soon grabs Ming when Ming makes romantic advances towards Dale Arden (Flash's trusting and future girlfriend). Flash tells the mighty Ming to "keep your slimy hands off her." Flash then throws Ming backwards into his chair and we see Ming unbalanced for the first time. This is our third cue, the superhero must have someone to love and rescue from a fate worse than death. He warrants an innocent that must always be placed in peril so that we can witness his heroism and bravery. When the supervillain challenges the superhero by causing potential harm to the loved one then the superhero must react with speed and resolve to avert disaster.

The fourth cue comes when we see the superhero thrown literally to his certain doom but as befits this cue he must survive. Even when Flash survives this test, Ming goes back on his promise to let him live if he survives and decrees that he must die. This is another note that is being added to the dichotomy between the superhero and supervillain archetypes. The supervillain is not ever to be trusted by the superhero.

In "The Tunnel of Terror" (the second chapter) we learn that in order to be a superhero Flash must elude capture and exhaust the resources of the supervillain who hunts him in vain. Flash spends the majority of the chapter evading the obviously dense guards and searching for Dale Arden and Zarkov. The guards are shot in a canted or titled angle camera style which literally and cinematically translates to the viewer that they are on the wrong side of the battle. This would later be used to great effect in film noir and

most famously in *Batman* (1966-1968). In the meantime, the supervillain must concentrate on his mad scheme to destroy what the superhero holds dear. In the case of *Flash Gordon*, that would be the safety of Dale, Zarkov, and the earth as a whole. Dale and Zarkov must keep asking “where is *Flash Gordon*.” This is fundamental to the plot of the superhero genre because the supervillain must become enraged when people keep questioning his hegemonic control of what he hopes will be the entire universe by insuring the audience that the superhero is there (if not in form, in spirit) to diametrically oppose that viewpoint.

Expanding this sense of total control over every aspect of life is further discussed in mid chapter when Dale refuses to become Ming’s bride and she subjected to the ghastly mind fogging “dehumanizer,” a vile weapon that turns her into a former shadow of herself. Ming cannot win her love so he will manufacture it. It speaks to the idea that the supervillain stands to complicate the superhero’s belief that people are free to choose who they love, who they want to be, and how they want to live. The supervillain negates these values that the hero holds dear. “Science will overcome all things, even the human emotions” Ming explains to Zarkov who is beside himself with this obvious abuse of knowledge, power and his beloved science. Ming uses technology not to improve the quality of life but to subjugate lives to his will.

At the end of chapter three, “Captured by the Shark Men”, Flash is literally pulled from the top of the screen which holds the most power down to the bottom of the screen towards the attacking Octosack (an octopus like creature). This makes him completely subservient to the creature and fulfills the plot convention that tells the audience that the superhero must beat the odds that indicate his certain death. Accordingly, the superhero

must fight and claw at the monster until it appears that the superhero has no more strength, this strength will of course come back in the succeeding escape ritual. The superhero must be not only loyal, smart, strong, brave, justified and right, he must also be an expert escape artist.

We are made aware of all of these traits over the course of the chapters. We learn that Flash is just when he asks his former attackers to go with him to escape from their rising palace and city, which must stay underwater in order for them to survive. Ming has used his technological advantage to place the undersea kingdom squarely in his power by using a magnetic force ray. Zarkov informs Ming that he has discovered a stronger ray. As murderous and overbearing as Ming is, it is Ming's daughter Princess Aura who attempts to destroy the Palace of King Kala by shooting the underwater controls that effect the oxygen supply and pressured walls with a stolen ray pistol. She is shown as zealous, even giddy, about the destruction in medium shots. She has an eye for Flash and as we see him in a silhouette shot choke out a technician of the undersea palace, shots of Aura are juxtaposed showing her destroying Flash's plan for escape. Aura's motivation might well be misguided love but her treachery allows us to witness Flash's bravery and sense of justice whereas Aura could care a less who dies or who lives as long as she has Flash in the end. Aura is simply another stumbling block that the hero must hurdle.

Throughout the serial, Flash is shown in battle scenes with various would be captors, the formula is always the same whether it is the Hawkmen, Ming's guards, Kala's Sharkmen, or other enemies. Flash is shot in low angled medium close ups. This gives him a huge presence on the screen and shows that he is in command of the battle. He is also almost always on the right side of the screen further emphasizing his goodness

and righteousness. This translates into the audience realizing that Flash is in much less danger than his companions. Dale, Thun (Prince of the Lionmen), Zarkov and the rest of Flash's friends always appear to run right into the danger as they are given more screen space in the frame and are photographed in long or wide shots. They also are invariably traveling from screen left to screen right (which generally is considered proper screen direction) so, the reality that they are running into the danger is fascinating in of itself. This threat to their safety disappears when Flash travels left to right with them.

Ming will not allow anyone to stand in his way of total universal domination no matter how unthreatening that challenger may be to his rule. This is evident when the Lion Men attack the palace in gyro rockets in the second installment, "The Tunnel of Terror", Flash is not fully formed as a superhero yet in that he attacks this unknown cultural threat in one of Ming's rocket ships. Though Flash does not fully understand it he is actually furthering the course of Ming by doing this. Thus, the superhero is not always clear headed in his judgements of situations. Regardless, once again technology is used to control other cultures not further the advance of progressive thought.

In the seventh adventure "Shattering Doom" it is Princess Aura who saves Flash from certain destruction at the hands of the Ming ally, King Vultan (who will later join Flash in his quest to unseat Ming). This love triangle amongst Dale - Flash - Aura has been slowly and deeply building since the first chapter when Aura first cast her gaze in Flash's direction. Flash has not in any way reciprocated this love but Aura has used her wiles time and again to try to undo the obvious affection that Dale and Flash have for each other. Throughout the serial up to this point we have seen Flash and Dale in warm embrace, holding hands, walking together, and generally lusting after each other. This is

not overt though and the subtleness of the love between them is in keeping with the superhero paradigm of the time

This formula of the superhero possessing but suppressing his love would be repeated in serials like *The Shadow* (Horne, 1940), *Batman* (Hillyer, 1943), *The Phantom* (Eason, 1943), and one of the last successful superhero serials *Radar Men from the Moon* (Brannon, 1952). This cuing of subdued love between the superhero and his object of desire has also been referenced in modern superhero films like *Superman* (Donner, 1978), *Batman* (Burton, 1989), *Spider-Man* (Raimi, 2002), and *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2005). It would therefore appear that it does not fit the story structure to have the superhero too invested in a romantic relationship. For all intents and purposes *Flash Gordon* is a eunuch in the piece (Davis, 2007). This nicely fits into the role of the superhero, for it would not due for him to lust after everything that moves as he must stay focused on his battle with the supervillain(s).

4.1.3 Aural Cues

In the initial chapter, “The Planet of Peril”, the opening bars of the film score alert us to the fact that this is not your typical Hollywood story. The music is loud, majestic, triumphant, and embodied with a rich bravado that translates into a promise of high adventure and larger than life spectacle. The music used for the score is a fitting selection: Franz Liszt’s *Symphonic Poem*, *Les Preludes*, and Richard Wagner’s *Good Friday Prelude*. These pieces with their blaring trumpets (arranged for orchestra) perfectly herald the experience of *Flash Gordon* as superhero cinematic poetry. *Les Preludes* gives the listener the vision in their minds’ eye of soaring skyward in an art

deco rocket ship. This score will be used in every chapter of the serial as the theme for Flash.

The usage is as memorably transporting as Danny Elfman's *Batman* score from 1989, Brad Fiedel's *Terminator Main Title* from 1984, or John Williams four-decade involvement with the *Star Wars* franchise that produced the popular *Star Wars Fanfare*, *The Imperial March*, *Luke and Leia's Theme*, *Hyperspace*, *Throne Room Finale* and *The Duel of Fates* tracks. It is not so far a stretch to argue that the trumpet is a superhero/fantasy call sign. The music in *Flash Gordon* is used to create tension, suspense, intrigue, and wonderment. The score fits right alongside any other fantasy/science fiction/superhero score one can readily call to mind.

Among the numerous futuristic sound effects that are used throughout the out of this world adventure, the most essential is that of the whirring, buzzing, and gyrating sounds of the rocket ship engines. Whenever seen on the screen, the rockets are accompanied by this low continuous humming of the retro rockets on the space ships. The whines and whirs become very comforting and familiar to the listener as the chapters progress. That sound transforms the toy prop rocket on wires into a living, breathing and traveling machine that propels the listener directly into the future of mankind. Those engine sounds inform us that this interplanetary saga is exciting, new, and perhaps a tad bit scary as well.

Another cue is provided to us at the end of the first chapter when we hear the creatures that Flash is fighting in the arena (where he has been thrown to certain destruction by Ming) growl and howl at the superhero. This cue will be repeated as Flash

fights organapoids, octosack, and other assorted monsters and menaces. Flash must meet these challenges head on and prove that he is worthy of the title of superhero. Of course this tactic works to great advantage providing the audience with the necessary hazard of safety to the superhero. Just as important as this threat to life and limb, none of these beasts, ghouls, and animals are a match for Flash either athletically or cognitively. Though Flash is not a “thinker” but a “doer” he is definitely smart enough to outwit all that Ming throws at him.

At the end of each episode, there is the sounding of a gong, followed closely by swelling of the music that then follows “SEE (the chapter title) Chapter ____ of *Flash Gordon* serial to be shown at this theatre next week.” This is loud and informs us that the adventure will be put on hold for the nonce. *Flash Gordon* is action packed but when cut into these individual chapters it becomes operatic and even more pronounced in its obvious fragmented structure. It continues to build in momentum and velocity as the chapters progress. Though the danger to the hero is always preposterous and seemingly impossible to best, it is the excitement that we feel when that gong sounds that alerts us that there is so much more to come and we only need wait another week or a few seconds as the next chapter starts in our modern DVD or YouTube playback configuration since our society has become too impatient to wait a whole week.

Protocol Two:

What is the cultural threat apparent in *Flash Gordon*?

4.2 Fear of the “Other”

From the opening scene of the serial there is a direct threat to not only the United States but the whole world. Congruently, there is a threat to Mongo by the United States. This fear of the “other” is twofold; there is the threat of the planet Mongo by earth and the threat of earth as evidenced by the arrival of *Flash Gordon* on Mongo. This existential cultural threat pervades the whole narrative. Professor Gordon (father of Flash) states to his colleague in his laboratory (where he observing Mongo hurtling towards earth) that the “whole world is in a state of frenzy.” We then are presented with a montage of people running amok in London, Paris, Rome, India, Shanghai, Africa, and Arabia. Interestingly enough *Flash Gordon* was on his way home to reconcile with his father and as Professor Gordon utters “be with us for the end.” On the soundtrack we hear people screaming and crying. The overly demonstrative montage shows us that this threat to American life is both real and eminent.

Anchored by his *Fu Manchu* appearance (mustache, oriental robe; bald head) Ming’s costuming serves as a marker of his Asian influence. This works to reference the yellow peril that was in fashion in American culture at the time. His costuming is a sign that announces his obvious intention to disrupt life on earth. In the first chapter Ming emphatically promises “I will destroy your earth in my own time.” Right away we understand that this yellow peril is Ming and Ming is not a threat to trifled with. He does concede that Zarkov is “a remarkable man” that he can use and banishes Zarkov to his private laboratory to work on diabolical methods to conquer the earth. Ming is totally unsympathetic when Flash insists that Ming not destroy the earth or conquer it. Whenever Ming yells “Flash Gordon” or “Zarkov” in his deep rich bass tone he might as well be saying to them how dare to you try to challenge my imperial reign.

In his inaugural presence on the screen, Ming is seated upon a throne perched at the apex of a grand staircase with a large elaborately decorated headstock. Ming is positioned in the very top of the frame showing the long and ornately decorated throne room. This demonstrates his total control over everything below him and his desire to make all his servants revere him. The image is fudged (smeared with Vaseline) in a long shot that then cuts to a clear medium shot at the top of the stairs to add to the mystery of who Ming is and why there is so much tension in the faces of the subjects seen crowded around the grand hall. Ming looks very god-like though this god will not be a god for long because of the forthcoming arrival of *Flash Gordon* and his party. Ming's eyes are unblinking. Not a wrinkle is observable in his robe. He scowls at his subjects and makes menacing gestures towards Flash when he enters. We do not learn of his Merciless moniker until the second chapter but everything that is presented to us on the screen in the first chapter is enough to show us that this man is unfeeling and evil. More than that, we quickly realize that his threats are sinister to not only Flash, but those who are his followers as well.

Ming is not a benevolent ruler in any respect. He blasphemously pushes the clergy around, and causes the clergy to literally fall off the screen several times during his wished for wedding to Dale Arden. Flash interrupts the nuptials by dropping a huge icon of the great Mongolite god Tao on the wedding party. Ming only uses religion for his own gain and cares nothing for what the High Priest thinks of his rule. Eventually, Ming completely dismisses and banishes the High Priest for "insolence." Ming is always attempting to extend his influence and cultural control, even with those that already obey him. He threatens anyone that he views as trying to challenge his stranglehold. In direct

threat to Ming, Flash is constantly challenging Ming's authority and determination to rule over all living creatures in the universe.

As the chapters advance, we learn of the complete control of Mongo by Ming. In the sixth episode "Flaming Torture", when Flash, Dale, Baron, and Thun all take flight to the city in the sky of King Vultan, Ming comments that he is sick of Vultan's disobedience by saying "prepare my rocket fleet at once. We will go to the sky city of Vultan and teach him a needed lesson." Ming scowls at the camera as he says this and then rises majestically exiting screen right. Ming is most displeased that Vultan is eyeing Dale, the object of his own desire, and insists that this is not befitting of a subject of his. Again, we witness that Ming can do whatever he wants to do to threats from outsiders but his servants are not allowed to challenge him in any way. Ming's self-righteous notion that no one can covet but him dominates the entire planet of Mongo and everyone cowers in his presence on the screen.

In chapter nine, "Fighting the Fire Dragon", Ming's total lack of respect for the superhero's fighting abilities is abundantly demonstrated by his illegal (by his own courts) order that he will not let *Flash Gordon* live. The supervillain says "now that we're back in my own domain, I shall assume control of the situation." Once more, Ming is determined to exercise absolute dominance over Flash. Ming has tried in every chapter to kill *Flash Gordon*. He has done this by sending guards after him, inciting creatures to attack him, ordering Flash's allies to assassinate him, and demanding that he battle beasts, swordsmen, and warriors. Each and every time Flash has escaped unscathed. Ming has not been able to rid himself of this "interfering earth man." Does he truly believe he can defeat Flash? It's a loaded question because in order to maintain his

supervillain cultural threat status Ming must fully believe that he can defeat Gordon but at the same time he must realize that Flash is the most serious threat to his total control of Mongo he will ever face. Contrasting Ming, Flash must realize that if he fails in ridding the universe of Ming, the cultural threat to the earth will be devastating.

Ming issues his most direct order to his minions in chapter ten, “The Unseen Peril” when the mighty emperor tells the Captain of the Guard to “seek out *Flash Gordon* in the laboratory and execute him.” He sits and shakes with hatred as he says this. This threat to his kingdom will not go away and Ming is quickly running out of patience. His daughter, Aura, pleads to spare Flash’s life. This is to no avail as Ming shouts “What are you waiting for?” Ming is forced to grab Aura to keep her from running after the departing guards to rescue her beloved Flash. Ming scowls as the image dissolves to the laboratory where Zarkov is attempting to contact the earth. Ming is losing his power advantage that was certain to continue until Flash arrived on Mongo. Flash is actively blocking Ming from asserting his will onto Mongolite culture. Flash, by his presence on Mongo, forestalls Ming’s attempts to attack the earth as well.

Ming’s double dealing is very covert in the twelfth chapter “Trapped in the Turret” when he responds to Flash, Dale, Prince Barin, and Princess Aura (who has finally stopped her plot to win over Flash by becoming an ally of his party), “Why should I regret the departure of one who has thrown my entire kingdom into turmoil.” As Ming says this he is in stark medium close up and is maniacally twiddling his fingers. Ming scowls at the source of his irritation (Flash) as has become standardized procedure in the serial. These shots illustrate that Ming cannot retain total rule over everything until Flash is gone. The chapter is spent plotting how to finally kill *Flash Gordon*. Every trap that

Ming sets is thwarted by Flash. This reminds us that Flash is the thorn that sticks in the side of Ming.

In the final chapter, “Rocketing to Earth”, Ming triumphantly but prematurely (for they are not dead) declares “that finishes *Flash Gordon* and his friends.” Upon learning that they are very much alive, Ming exerts considerable effort to capture the traitors (his words), and ultimately states “perhaps you would like to see what happens to those who dare dispute my power.” Here we see that Ming knows full well that there is a consistent cultural threat to his domain by the maneuverings of Flash to wrest control from Ming. Ming is photographed in a tilted low angle stationary shot that once and for all tells the viewer that he is corrupt, deprived of any sympathetic emotions.

When Thun, Flash and Barin attack Ming’s throne room, Ming cannot reconcile not being the supreme authority on Mongo anymore. He runs off camera and into a wide shot looking frantic and defeated. He decides to sacrifice himself to the great god Tao rather than be conquered by Flash and his group. In a wide shot that is then cut to a medium shot Ming bares himself to the lair of the god. Several thoughts occur at this point. Is Ming truly going to kill himself to escape capture by Flash? Could it be possible that Ming will not be devoured by the great fire god Tao? Can Ming ever really die and if so is Flash no longer a superhero? We do not learn the answers to these questions until the sequel, *Flash Gordon’s Trip to Mars* (1937, Beebe, Hill, & Stephani). In any case, Flash and his friends have finally vanquished the yellow peril of Ming. In so doing, they have averted the cultural threat to earth but Flash has become an imposing figure who threatens the culture of Mongo in the process. His domination of Ming has forever changed the structuration of Mongo.

Charles Middleton (not an Asian, but American actor) who portrayed Ming in *Flash Gordon* is regularly regarded as the perfect supervillain mold:

“The sight of Charles Middleton rigged up as Ming the Merciless – with long, flowing dark robe trimmed in slashing designs, topped with a stiff, arched cowl-like collar jutting up from his shoulders to frame his head like a dark satanic halo – was enough to excite the serial addict.” (Cline, 1984)

Middleton’s physical appearance (tall, lanky, and menacing) is the ideal counterbalance to Larry “Buster” Crabbe’s clean cut handsome Flash (Parish, Anderson, Braff, Cocchi & Purvis, 1978). Charles Middleton was a character actor of great note and appeared in many important films including *Pack Up Your Troubles* (Marshall & McCarey, 1932 with comedy duo Laurel & Hardy) portraying a frightening captain in the Foreign Legion, *Duck Soup* (McCarey, 1933 with comedy quartet the Marx Brothers) where he played a fearsome prosecutor, *Jesse James* (King, 1939), and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (Cromwell, 1940) in which he portrayed Lincoln’s father, Thomas. Despite a versatile career as a very competent utility player, Middleton is primarily known as Ming the Merciless to this day (b. IMDB, 2015). Middleton is so closely identified with Ming that successive serials and adaptations of Flash are based on his 1936, 1937, and 1940 performances. This identification between the dictator of Mongo and the character actor is both a testament and homage to Middleton’s beautifully performed interpretation of Ming. Furthermore, Middleton made a conscious choice to play Ming as an updated Chinese warlord who clearly longs for the days when glory was high for his Asian ancestors. Charles Middleton was not keen on being identified as Ming and like Crabbe could not understand why people so readily identified him with one specific character in his long and successful career (Barbour, 1979; Cline, 1984; b. IMDB, 2016).

Protocol Three:

Does *Flash Gordon* present a mythology that remains true to its characteristics and principles of superhero mantel acceptance?

4.3 Crabbe = The Superhero (Flash Gordon)

It cannot be stressed strongly enough that Flash as a superhero is most manifested in the eye popping appearance of Crabbe on the screen. As observed in *Film Images* magazine discussing Crabbe's performance:

“Never once does he hold himself above the story's world. Instead, Crabbe makes the fantastic real. We believe that he can fly a spaceship, we believe that the perils he fights against are real, and most importantly, we believe in him, as the embodiment of Alex Raymond's character.” (Tracey, 2014)

This is very prominent in the serial eventually, however, Crabbe (read: Flash) does not start off as a hero but rather begins in the tale of *Flash Gordon* as something more akin to a pompous jerk who terrorizes Dale Arden as a plane they are flying in crashes to the ground in the first chapter “The Planet of Peril”. Gordon to Dale: “Scared, huh”, he then proceeds to grab her and hurl himself with her clinging on for dear life out the fuselage door thereby plummeting toward the distant ground. Surely, this not very heroic. True, they have a parachute on but Dale is clearly frightened by this boldness of Flash and their possible death scenario. Gordon does not bat an eye and seems totally at ease in risking other peoples' lives. What's more disturbing is the fact that he is clinging on to Dale's parachute, so in that sense without Dale there would be no Flash because he would have likely died in that scene. Hence, the story would be over. This relationship

involving the pair will change greatly as Flash invests himself more and more into the superhero mantel.

The pair run headlong into Dr. Zarkov who is having serious problems with his rocket ship in a secluded field. Flash again is very unheroic as he curtly answers Zarkov's questions. Zarkov then becomes suspicious of Flash's intentions believing that Flash has been sent by his father to stop Zarkov on this fool's errand to blast off to Mongo to stop its advance towards the earth because as Zarkov deadpans "my friend, the earth is doomed to destruction." Remaining genuine to the template set by Raymond, Gordon agrees to go to Mongo with Zarkov (Dale in tow) but only because it seems like a great adventure. He references his Ivy League pastime of playing Polo to the impending doom threatened by Mongo, off handily replying to Zarkov's request with "I'll bet on a long shot." As they enter the rocket ship Flash begins inspecting the instruments and "gadgets" as he calls them. He asks Zarkov what they all do, Zarkov ignores this and takes off for Mongo. Flash proceeds to disparage Zarkov on his expertise in rocket design by asking "you sure this thing will work." Flash is far from the superhero he will become in this epic as of yet.

The first heroic act emerges when Flash pulls Dale away from the attacking giant lizard beast of Mongo. This accomplishes several things in the mythology and narrative. Namely it points to the fact that Flash's attitudes toward Dale and Zarkov are changing. It illustrates that Flash is indeed not really a jerk but an all-around red blooded American boy. It also highlights that Flash is a man of action and has little time for thinking things through. Flash is seen in the frame with Dale holding her gently and pulling her into the safety of the off-screen space that is to the left of this lizard beast.

However, it is really not until chapter two “The Tunnel of Terror” when we see Flash literally put on the spandex shirt and tights that will come to symbolize him as the superhero of the universe. Flash finds these items in the locker of a Ming rocket ship that he is locked into by Princess Aura. Aura kicks away the ladder to the rocket ship and states to Flash (now inside the rocket) “you will never see Dale Arden again.” Having vowed this, Princess Aura slinks off screen to the right, presumably to make sure this prognostication is realized. Immediately following this invisible exchange (because the characters are not in each other’s sight lines or even in the same physical space) Flash finds the costume that will ultimately become the symbolic representation of his power, strength, truth, justice, loyalty, and bravery.

By the third installment “Captured by Shark Men”, Flash is acting and sounding more like a superhero. He is still action oriented but not nearly as bull headed or gung ho. He’s still an ever ready scrapper when the situation demands it but he starts using his wits to outsmart his would be captors. When Flash and Dale meet Kala, King of the Shark Men, Kala informs them that Dale has been ordered by Ming to return to his palace at once. When Flash questions Kala on the validity of this order, Kala shoots back “one does not question the orders of Ming, they are obeyed.” Flash zeroes in on this obvious weak point in Kala’s rule and retorts “yes, obeyed by you and other puppets.” Here we observe that Flash is beginning to understand the political dynamics present on Mongo under this merciless monarch named Ming. He further starts to use this vindictiveness felt by subjects of Ming to his strategic advantage. Taking the dangling bait, Kala falls hook, line, and sinker, as he insists “I am King” and Flash counters “You, who call yourself a king, are a coward.” Flash is learning that in order to defeat Ming he is going to have to

unseat his minions who blindly follow him, fearing being killed or banished by the miserable misanthrope. Kala then challenges Flash's attack on Kala's manhood and decrees that he will best Flash in mortal combat, but Flash triumphs over Kala with his bare hands. As his reward for challenging and handily defeating Kala in hand to hand combat, Kala throws Flash into a tank with an eerie looking octosack (an octopus with extra tentacles). Kala regains his pride in being "King" of the Sharkmen and contacts Ming on the Spaceograph (a television like machine that is a precursor to modern day video chat). This is a clear reference to experiments with long range wireless telecommunications that were experimented upon by the likes of Nikolai Tesla, Alexander Graham Bell, and Philo Farnsworth prior to the release of this serial. Alex Raymond was known for drawing inspiration from headlines in newspapers and modern science research (Walker, 2015). Kala teleconferences with the emperor promising Ming that "*Flash Gordon* will not trouble you again." This tells us that these minions will not be so easily beaten or turned against Ming. Ming's power and cultural domination is vast and far flung. He rules with an iron fist that will strike out anyone who dares stand in his way.

In episode six of the serial "Flaming Torture", Flash is subjected to the infamous Mongolite static ray in King Vultan's sky city palace. This is punishment for starting a workers' rebellion in the sky city's radium furnace room where he was banished by Vultan to continuously feed the radium ovens. Flash is almost naked at this point because he has been working in the furnace room which is extremely hot and requires constant hard labor to keep the sky city aloft. When we next see Flash, he is presented to us on a cross-like structure with both his hands and feet lashed to the bulky hanging device. He is

dead center of the frame and photographed from a low angle which runs counter to his obvious helplessness in the shot. This is one of the most unique and poignant shots in the whole film (Zinman, 1970). It tells us several things about the nature of the mythology of *Flash Gordon*. Namely that he is a feared earthling, that he is incredibly strong and brave, and most of all, that he is undeniably handsome and loved by his companions. It cannot be made any more emphatically than in this very shot that Flash is no mere mortal human being. He is in every sense of the word a superhero. By placing him in him the universally recognizable sacrificial Christ-like pose it is hammered home to us that Flash is god-like and will risk his own life to save those that he loves such as Christ did in the gospel passages of the Bible. Flash is to be crucified for his belief in reason and justice over tyranny and oppression. This more than anything speaks to the connection between superheroes and demi-gods that Wong talked about with *Batman* in 1992. *Flash Gordon* is the forerunner to that line of evolution. In fact, *Batman* would debut in Detective Comics in 1939 after the release of two Flash serials.

In chapter eight “Tournament of Death”, Flash escapes from the furnace room of King Vultan (where he was sent after having survived the Christ-like demise) by throwing a shovel into one of the radium ovens. This act is very dangerous and again points out the self-sacrificial status Flash has embodied by this point in the film. Flash then runs into the throne hall of Vultan to arrange for his and his companions escape from the sky city. This is a climatic moment in the serial because Flash holds a sword inches from Ming’s (who has travelled to Vultan’s city to “teach him a needed lesson”) chest. Flash commands all the stunned guards “don’t anybody move or I’ll run this through you.” Ming cowers under Flash’s threat and Vultan quips “what now of your power,

mighty Ming.” Flash stands ready to strike out this evil blot on the planet Mongo. He only releases this threatening of Ming because Vultan says that he will free Flash and his friends if he survives a traditional ritual on Mongo called the “tournament of death.” Of course, Flash does survive but as always Ming interferes and states that “he must not live.”

In chapter ten, “The Unseen Peril”, after Flash’s memory is restored by Zarkov following the drug induced state that clouded his memory which Princess Aura had administered to Flash to win his love, *Flash Gordon* reaches the summit of his powers by turning invisible. He is now free to inflict harm on Ming’s royal rule without even being seen. This power is conceived by the genius of Zarkov but it is also demi-god in nature because it gives Flash a power that no one else possesses. This is the entry into the divine that Campbell discusses in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in 1968. He can be omnipresent in this way and further can be heard by other characters as will be acknowledged in the next episode.

“In the Claws of the Tigron”, chapter eleven, Flash chokes the very life out of Ming (but does not quite kill him) without Ming or his minions being able to do anything to stop Flash from inflicting this humiliating beating. Flash’s ultimatum “I warn you Ming, this is only a sample, stay away from my friends”, broadcasts his superhuman demi-god status for all of Mongo and Earth to hear. Ming the Merciless has become Ming the Helpless. Ming will never again gain the upper hand in the film as mightily as he tries to unseat Flash’s ascendancy, his fate of being bested by Flash is now locked fully in place. Ming barks at his minions “Cowards, are you going to stand there and let him kill me.” There is nothing to see, but Flash’s presence is felt throughout the whole scene in

the throne room. Flash has entered into that rare realm where being unseen does not mean you do not have power over the situation.

In the final installment appropriately titled “Rocketing to Earth”, Flash is returned to his earth as a more well-rounded and better positioned hero than when he started the fantastical adventure. This conforms to what Campbell called the reentry into the society (1968). Flash has completed the journey that he was destined to go on and can now demonstrate the abilities that he garnered while on his mission to rid the planet Earth of the threat of the planet Mongo smashing into it. Flash has successfully gone through all three Campbell dictated stages of the major heroic mythological path. He has 1) left his present life status (literally blasts off from Earth to Mongo), 2) entered into a divine and sacred power (became invisible, challenged/bested mythical creatures, deposed the despot) and 3) he returned to the Earth as a more perfect, better informed and centrally positioned hero (Campbell, 1968).

Largely thanks to the success of *Flash Gordon*, Crabbe became known as “the king of the serials” (Barbour, 1979; Davis, 2007). The reality that he dyed his hair that shocking platinum blonde for the part is of no great concern. He looks completely natural in his skin tight space commander uniform, blonde exquisitely curled locks and military style knee high boots. He would reprise the role in *Flash Gordon’s Trip to Mars* (Beebe, Hill, & Stephani, 1937) and *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* (Beebe & Taylor, 1940). His fate too was sealed when he signed up to play Flash, he would forever more (until this very day) be known solely as *Flash Gordon* in the flesh.

Protocol Four:

What is the functional position of Dr. Zarkov in the *Flash Gordon* serial?

4.4 Shannon = The Doctor (Wise Old Man)

Doctor Zarkov is the “wise old man that guides the hero through the journey and nurses his wounds, bringing him back home at the conclusion of the adventure” (Campbell, 1968, p. 23). Furthermore, Zarkov is the donor that lends his power to the hero in order that he may continue on his journey (Propp, 1928). This is akin to that of Alec Guinness’ Obi Wan Kenobi to Mark Hamill’s Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977). Shannon (Dr. Zarkov) must be the counterpoint in terms of knowledge and experience to the largely (initially) arrogant and brute strength man of action that Crabbe enthusiastically exudes.

The hero is only able to thrive because the doctor is present to teach the hero what he must be taught in order to transform into the properly positioned and well-adjusted hero (Campbell, 1968). The doctor knows what the hero needs to accomplish and what the hero must sacrifice to achieve this transformation. Zarkov also donates his brain power and his time to lead the hero into his full bloomed maturity. Without Zarkov and his transference of wisdom to Flash, there is no *Flash Gordon*. Had Zarkov not recruited Flash, Flash would have continued to live his high society Ivy League lifestyle with no regard for his fellow man. Additionally, Zarkov represents the triumph of science over religion. This is because Zarkov uses science to combat the religious zealot that is Ming and to tame the ideologically patriotic positioned Flash who believes no one can destruct America. Zarkov stands midpoint between these two extremes of extremist religion and ideological patriotism.

The first time we truly witness Zarkov's archetype as the doctor administering to the hero is in the seventh installment "Shattering Doom" when Zarkov uses his knowledge of science to save his friend Flash from the effects of the insidious static ray in King Vultan's sky city palace. Zarkov takes up the role of the doctor in full force. In order to revive a unconscious Flash, Zarkov places Flash on a machine called the "Electro Stimulator" which then bathes the superhero in blinding light and slowly revives the would be dead hero. We see blinking and pulsing lights and tubes that turn the white Crabbe an even paler shade of white. When Princess Aura asks "Will he live?", it is Zarkov who gravely responds "yes."

The next time Zarkov saves Flash is toward the end of this chapter when he tells Flash that he will disconnect the high voltage wire that has been attached to Flash because of his rebellious nature in the furnace room of Vultan's palace. Zarkov risks his own well-being by disobeying a direct order from Vultan to dispose of Flash by attaching the charged wire to Flash's wrist. Flash has not asked for help and does not fully understand Zarkov's plan until Zarkov says "throw the shovel into one of the furnaces" and then rush for the safety of the "lead wall." Zarkov saves the superhero by helping Flash continue on his journey unencumbered.

The third time that Zarkov saves Flash is in chapter nine, "Fighting the Fire Dragon" after Flash has been drugged by Aura so that she may run away with him to the sacred palace of Tao where she hopes they will live happily ever after. Flash is lying on a stretcher unconscious because Aura has given him the mind altering wine that will make him forget the past and love her only. Zarkov and Dale find Flash and Aura in the tunnel. Zarkov examines Flash and tells Dale that "I can revive him but I can't promise to

destroy the effects of the drug.” Flash is revived of course by Zarkov and remembers nothing of the past for a time much to the delight of Aura. In shots of her we see her staring at Zarkov and pouting as if to say “who me?” However, sadly for her this effect will not last long. Zarkov will successfully revive Flash.

Zarkov saves Flash’s life for the fourth time when he turns him invisible just before the Captain of the Guard storms into Ming’s laboratory to kill Flash. This act accomplishes what Campbell discussed in 1968 when he talked about the hero entering into a supernatural power. Zarkov uses his scientific know how to give Flash a power that most men only dream of and never achieve. With Zarkov’s awesome brain capacity and equally adaptable talent for assessing situations logistically and quickly, Flash is allowed to enter into the mysterious power that surrounds the hero of the tale (Propp, 1928). Zarkov is fearful about allowing Flash to become invisible for an extended period of time but that befits the hero’s demi-god status as the hero now knows better than the doctor. The superhero decides what to do with the power to challenge the villain of the tale (Propp, 1928). This is precisely what Flash does and in that way he is then returned to the earth in a greater form than when he left (Campbell, 1968).

Frank Shannon is brilliantly direct and deeply somber in his portrayal as Zarkov. Shannon was a character actor of great regard who appeared in such films as *Road Gang* (King, 1936), *The Texas Rangers* (Vidor, 1936), *The Phantom* (Eason, 1943, another popular serialization of a comic strip by Universal peer, Columbia Pictures), as well as all three *Flash Gordon* Universal serials. Shannon was known for his stern acting style and his ability to ground fantastic stories in reel life into “real life” (Cline, 1984). Shannon lends an air of distinction and realness to the futuristic sensationalism and frivolity of

Flash Gordon. Shannon is a major asset to Crabbe, as Crabbe is able to get into all sorts of scrapes because he knows Shannon will be there to bail him out of Flash's constant mortal imperilment at the hands of Ming.

Flash, Ming, and Zarkov (Crabbe, Middleton, and Shannon) are three sides of the narrative triangle. Flash is the hero that must fight Ming and must learn what he needs to fight Ming from Zarkov. Zarkov is the doctor who must donate his time, knowledge, and energy to outwitting Ming while at the same time teaching Flash what he must learn in order to become the full-fledged superhero that he is destined to become (again, like *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977)). Finally, Ming must be the ever present imposing impassible hegemonic ruler that tries in vain time and again to out maneuver Flash and attempt to enlist Zarkov into his evil imperial reign goals. The three are vital to the understanding of a structural discourse on how heroes are disseminated through culture and why heroes are important to the mythology of any society (Campbell, 1968; Hall, 1997; Stucky, 2006; Sutton & Sutton, 1969; Zehnder & Calvert, 2004). All three offer us signs as to what problems *Flash Gordon* discusses and how those problems are either solved or nullified through the classic hero archetype.

The dilemmas of technologically centered evolution, the hegemonic control of the masses, the alienating otherness of cultures outside the United States (racism) and the systematic abuses of absolute power (whether used for good or evil) that arise in modern society are all present in *Flash Gordon*. Therefore, Ming, Flash and Zarkov are interdependent. This triangle further works to allow Flash to remain the dominant in the story line (Jakobson, 1935). Flash is the connection between the scientific objectiveness of Zarkov and the total subjective subjugation of culture by Ming. As Flash stands

between these two worlds, he uses the power of science and religion in equal proportion to maintain the optimal equilibrium of his own universe. Only then does he become the conqueror of the universe and the superhero of the modern age.

The protocols found within *Flash Gordon* are units that must be marked in order to establish a template for examining any superhero film going forward. *Flash Gordon* is a superhero film because it is layered with multiple visual and aural language signs that echo down to the present superhero films. The dichotomous relationship between the hero and the villain, the use of the costume to announce the arrival of the hero into the mantel, the direct cultural threat to the hegemonic control of both the villain's seemingly unlimited power and the threat to that control that the hero seeks in achieving truth and justice for all, and the mandatory presence of the wise old man that teaches the hero what a great responsibility it is to have great power are all evident in *Flash Gordon*. Without these protocols, the material cannot be assessed as superhero-like this is because to lack one of these protocols is to lack the necessary emphasis on the foundation of superheroism.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this investigation was to establish a template through which to view successive superhero films by using *Flash Gordon* as the ontological and genealogical foundation of that genre. The discussion of *Flash Gordon* had been largely ignored by academia and many of those reasons whether justified or not were presented here. The serial is in one sense groundbreaking but admittedly lacks the sophistication that many film scholars demand in “great” films. That does not mean that it is not worthy of discussion. Indeed, we can learn a great deal about film through the viewing of “bad” films. Regardless of perceived quality, *Flash Gordon* is necessary to foreground a logical and justified lens through which to examine all superhero films, past and present.

By utilizing *Flash Gordon* as the foundation: An American superhero can now be defined as someone clad in a costume sent on a journey, that is given instruction by a wise guardian who tells them they must fight insurmountable odds at multiple junctures to thereby best their arch villain rival and restore peace and justice to all in America.

Now that we have defined (at long last) what a superhero is we can discuss what a superhero is not. A superhero is not ordinary in any regard. A superhero is not a tyrant and does not use his power for evil. That characteristic of evil must be within the super villain's purview. A superhero must be marked by a costume to announce that he is not of the general population in either appearance or cognitive elaboration. A superhero is not a sole survivor but indeed is guided by sages that teach them how to accurately and effectively use their power for the benefit of all life forms. Lastly, a superhero is not a person to be intimidated by any evident evil. *Flash Gordon* is the first film to clearly define these terms. This, however, is not the end of the influence *Flash Gordon* has on film.

5.1 Impact of *Flash Gordon* on Science Fiction Film

Flash Gordon is a unique and storied film serial that allows us to begin elucidating the power of mythology and science through its use of technology and critical thinking to solve complex conflict. As the first bona fide entry into this ever expanding science fiction/superhero/fantasy pantheon, *Flash Gordon* establishes signs as to the importance of the scientific process in popular mythos. As Barthes (2013) argued, the hero or object of the mythology embodies the desires, emotions, and wish fulfillment that all people long for. It has long been argued that Americans believe wholeheartedly in the ability of science to solve all its problems in society (Campbell & Moyers, 1991; a. Murray, 2012; Ross, 2012; Sutton & Sutton, 1969). Mythologies, whether anciently presented or as articulated in this contemporary example are powerful and all-encompassing in terms of addressing these social forces. Mythologies are continuously renewed each and every day (Barthes, 2013). Mythology in relation to superheroes is a

huge part of the production and storytelling practices in modern Hollywood. The myth that science can conquer all through reasoned action is propagated no more prominently than in science fiction films. Superhero/science fiction mythology has become a permanent aspect in production and the story telling apparatus.

Flash Gordon spawned two sequels: *Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars* (Beebe, Hill, and Stephani, 1937) and *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* (Beebe & Taylor, 1940). Through all three iterations, the character remained a fan favorite. *Flash Gordon* was not popular just in the 1930's and 1940's, but was repackaged into a full length film in 1950 and into a television series in 1954 (Misiroglu & Eury, 2006). A series was again attempted in 1979 following screenings of the serial in the 1970's, and the superhero finally was made into a relatively successful full length feature film adaptation in 1980 (Bould, 2004). Its latest incarnation was an unsuccessful television series in 2007. Despite these less impressive commercial performances, the 1936 serial remains a necessary viewing for all science fiction fans (Barbour, 1979; Cline, 1984; Zinman, 1970).

Scores of science fiction/fantasy filmmakers have referenced *Flash Gordon* including George Lucas (*Star Wars* saga most notably attested by Lucas himself), Gene Roddenberry (*Star Trek* 1966-1968), Steven Spielberg (*Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984)), Jim Sharman (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975)), Robert Zemeckis (*Romancing the Stone*, (1984) *Back to the Future* (1985)), Jim Mallon (*Mystery Science Theater 3000* (1989-1999)) Nicholas Meyer (*Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982)), David Worth (*Warrior of the Lost World*, (1983)), James Cameron (*The Terminator* (1984)), J.J. Abrams (*Star Trek* (2009), *Star Wars*:

Episode VII: The Force Awakens (2015)) and the list goes on *ad infinitum*. It is through these modern filmmakers that the legacy of *Flash Gordon* is kept alive.

5.2 Conclusion

It was found that there are a multitude of textual clues that can be used as a systematic model to study the clues, whether visual, aural, or contextual within any given superhero film. *Flash Gordon* is a storied film that has not only earned its place in film history but can now reclaim its justified primitive status as a groundbreaking film that unleashed a fount of imitators. Superhero films that followed, more than not preserved this superhero mythological standpoint. That is to say, the successful superhero films of yesterday and today are little more than faint echoes of the first superhero film. That is also a Hollywood myth, for if it makes money, do it over and over again. *Flash Gordon* was popular because it truthfully asserted the American myth that the United States is the loyalist, wisest, democratic and most tolerant nation on Earth. Many would no doubt argue that in reality, this is not the case. Notwithstanding, the serial *Flash Gordon* is first and foremost a product of its time and shows a clear correlation between American elitism and bravery in the face of cultural threats. Far from arguing that that was an ill-conceived notion at the time, *Flash Gordon* captured the attention of its audience because it shouted loud and clear that America can achieve anything it sets its mind to. The truth is that that in of itself is nothing more than a centric American myth.

Flash Gordon aims a razor sharp spotlight on the intersection of scientific logical reasoning and freedom triumphing over the aggression and oppression of dictatorships. This assertion of America using its freedom principles to release imprisoned societies

from tyrants runs contrary to the reality that America was isolated from geopolitical affairs in the 1930's. That spirit recognizable in *Flash Gordon* would not be realized in the United States until the attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Long before that (six years) *Flash Gordon* was deciding the fates of dictators. The serial expressed the proper stratagem for the Americans was to tamp down all oppressive regimes. In *Flash Gordon* that objective is attained through both reasoning and action.

5.2.1 Future Directions

Looking forward, there are many embodiments of American superhero mythology that can be explored following the model of this *Flash Gordon* analysis. Future research could focus on the rise of *The Adventures of Superman* (1951-1958) in the 1950's and the cultural phenomenon that ensued of kids running around in capes and tights pretending to be the man from Krypton. Researchers might delve into how *Superman* was revamped and expanded into popular culture super stardom in *Superman* (Donner, 1978), *Superman II* (Lester, 1980) and *Superman III* (Lester, 1983).

One of the biggest cultural juggernauts that demands further cultural and historical understanding is the explosion of Batmania in 1966, finally culminating in the *Batman* (Burton, 1989) blockbuster bonanza. As the film was so financially and even more importantly artistically pleasing to both fans and critics its rich and varied references in future superhero films should be thoroughly investigated. *Batman* and to lesser extent *Batman Returns* (Burton, 1992) paved the way for what the mythology of the superhero would evolve into in the late 1990's and early 2000's with extraordinarily popular and astronomically successful films like *X-Men* (Singer, 2000), *Spider-Man*

(Raimi, 2002), *Spider-Man 2* (Raimi, 2004), *X2* (Singer, 2003), *Batman Begins* (Nolan, 2005), *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008), *Iron Man* (Favreau, 2008) and *The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012). All tolled these sci fi/superhero entries grossed over \$2.85 Billion dollars (Est) (Box Office Mojo, 2016). These mega million dollar epics added to the ever increasing list of superhero titles made each succeeding year by Hollywood. It is an incomplete list but points to the reality that this type of film has dominated Hollywood production cycles for over a decade.

These films and their individual imprints on the cultural milieu can be studied in several ways. One could look at a particular film in relation to the other films produced by Hollywood in the given year in terms of financial performance. Or one might opt to take a particular superhero franchise like the *X-Men* (which to date has produced seven connected films as of 2016 resulting in a combined box office of \$1.3 Billion dollars) and hone in on what this particular group of films has contributed to the development of the subgenre (Box Office Mojo, 2016). This would employ close textual analysis to find consistent protocols in the seven films as a whole. An immediate connection would be that the X-Man *Wolverine* appears in almost all of these films, but beyond that similarities would need to be found and synthesized. In any event, this course of study in order to be done effectively and properly, would likely require an enormous amount of time and meticulous examination by a dedicated critical scholar.

Pop culture is a never ending river and highlights the often fleeting fancies of the society that has created or modified popular heroes, myths, legends, and rituals. Pop culture can offer a richly nuanced and wide ranging lens as to how the society thinks about its identity, accumulated knowledge, cultural beliefs, and exercised values. The

organic nature of popular culture tells us clearly that if it is not popular it is in most respects not relevant (Benjamin, 1936). It is because superheroes like *Iron Man*, *Superman*, *Batman*, *Spider-Man*, and so on are discussed on a daily basis and engrained in the psyche of the masses that they must be studied carefully to understand what messages are embodied in the mythology of these superheroes. For if they were not popular no one would care about things like canon (what is the official story and releasing of the superhero), revisionism, side stories, background characters, and legends that spring up throughout the discussion of the superheroes in cultural criticism for the academic analysis through social media.

If we are to understand why for example *Spider-Man* and *Batman* resonate more soundly with America in an historical moment as opposed to say *Flash Gordon* or *Captain Marvel* who may have fallen to the way side, then we need to explore what ideas are being circulated between the consumers of the mythology and the mythology evident in the superheroes themselves. Are their respective mythologies more in line with the American psyche at that present moment in history? There are myriad reasons why people hold their favorite superhero(es) so dear. One of those realities is that they apply that superhero's values, beliefs, and attitudes towards the society and towards humanity in general to their own constantly evolving personal mythologies and reflect those elaborations into their personal existences.

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APPENDIX A

SUPERHERO LIVE-ACTION THEATRICAL FILM APPEARANCES TIMELINE

Table A. 1 The 1930's

FILM	DIRECTOR	STUDIO	CLASS	YEAR
<i>Flash Gordon</i>	Stephani/ Taylor *	Universal	C	1936
<i>Ace Drummond</i> ^α	Beebe/ Smith	Universal	C	1936
<i>The Shadow Strikes</i>	Shores	Grand National	B	1937
<i>Zorro Rides Again</i> [^]	Witney/ English	Republic	C	1937
<i>Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars</i>	Beebe/Hill	Universal	C	1937
<i>Secret Agent X-9</i> ^α	Beebe/ Smith	Universal	C	1937
<i>The Lone Ranger</i>	Witney/ English	Republic	C	1938
<i>The Spider's Web</i>	Horne/ Taylor	Columbia	C	1938
<i>Buck Rogers</i>	Beebe/ Goodkind	Universal	C	1939
<i>Mandrake the Magician</i>	Deming/ Nelson	Columbia	C	1939
<i>Zorro's Fighting Legion</i>	Witney/ English	Republic	C	1939
<i>The Lone Ranger Rides Again</i>	Witney/ English	Republic	C	1939

h there are other versions of Zorro before this period including Douglas as Zorro in *The Mark of Zorro* (Niblo, 1920), this version is the first attempt at mass cultural appeal in the sound era.

^α Also properties of King Features Syndicate

Legend: A – Major Feature (over 80 minutes) B – Second Rate Feature C - Serial

Table A.2 - The 1940's

FILM	DIRECTOR	STUDIO	CLASS	YEAR
<i>The Shadow</i>	Horne	Columbia	C	1940
<i>The Mark of Zorro</i> *	Mamouljian	20 th Century Fox	A	1940
<i>Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe</i>	Beebe/ Taylor	Universal	C	1940
<i>The Green Archer</i>	Horne	Columbia	C	1940
<i>The Green Hornet</i>	Beebe/ Taylor	Universal	C	1940
<i>The Green Hornet Strikes Again</i>	Beebe/ Rawlins	Universal	C	1940
<i>The Adventures of Captain Marvel</i>	English/ Witney	Republic	C	1941
<i>Jungle Girl</i>	Witney/ English	Republic	C	1941
<i>The Spider Returns</i>	Horne	Columbia	C	1941
<i>Captain Midnight</i>	Horne	Columbia	C	1942
<i>Spy Smasher</i>	Witney	Republic	C	1942
<i>The Phantom</i>	Eason	Republic	C	1943
<i>Batman</i>	Hillyer	Columbia	C	1943
<i>Captain America</i>	Clifton/ English	Republic	C	1944
<i>Zorro's Black Whip</i>	Bennet/ Grissel	Republic	C	1944
<i>Secret Agent X-9</i>	Collins/ Taylor	Universal	C	1945
<i>The Shadow Returns</i>	Rosen/ Beaudine	Monogram	B	1946
<i>Son of Zorro</i>	Bennett/ Brannon	Republic	C	1947
<i>Superman</i>	Bennet	Columbia	C	1948
<i>The New Adventures of Batman and Robin</i>	Bennet	Columbia	C	1949
<i>Ghost of Zorro</i>	Brannon	Republic	C	1949
<i>King of the Rocketman</i>	Brannon	Republic	C	1949

* First class A superhero film made in the sound era and released by a major studio

Table A.3 - The 1950's

FILM	DIRECTOR	STUDIO	CLASS	YEAR
<i>Atom Man vs. Superman</i>	Bennet	Columbia	C	1950
<i>Radar Men from the Moon</i>	Brannon	Republic	C	1952
<i>Zombies of the Stratosphere</i>	Brannon	Republic	C	1952
<i>Blackhawk</i>	Bennet/ Sears	Columbia	C	1952
<i>The Lone Ranger</i>	Heisler	Warner Bros	A	1956
<i>The Lone Ranger and the Lost City of Gold</i>	Selander	United Artists	A	1958

Table A.4 - The 1960's

FILM	DIRECTOR	STUDIO	CLASS	YEAR
<i>Batman: The Movie</i> *	Martinson	20 th Century Fox	A	1966

*Only major live action film produced about a superhero in America in 1960's

Table A.5 - The 1970's

FILM	DIRECTOR	STUDIO	CLASS	YEAR
<i>Superman</i> *+	Donner	Warner Bros	A	1978

*Ushered in the modern superhero blockbuster film

+DC Comics is owned by Time Warner

Table A.6 - The 1980's

FILM	DIRECTOR	STUDIO	CLASS	YEAR
<i>Flash Gordon</i>	Hodges	Universal	A	1980
<i>Superman II</i>	Lester/ Donner	Warner Bros	A	1981
<i>The Legend of the Lone Ranger</i>	Fraker	Universal	A	1981
<i>Swamp Thing</i>	Craven	Embassy	A	1982
<i>Superman III</i>	Lester	Warner Bros	A	1983
<i>Supergirl</i>	Szwarc	Columbia	A	1984
<i>Superman IV: The Quest for Peace</i>	Furie	Warner Bros	A	1987
<i>Masters of the Universe</i>	Goddard	Canon	A	1987
<i>Batman</i> *	Burton	Warner Bros	A	1989

*Tim Burton's *Batman* paved the way for transnational mediation of superheroes.

Table A.7 - The 1990's

FILM	DIRECTOR	STUDIO	CLASS	YEAR
<i>Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Movie</i>	Barron	New Line	A	1990
<i>Darkman</i>	Raimi	Universal	A	1990
<i>TMNT II: Secret of the Ooze</i>	Pressman	New Line/ 20 th Century Fox	A	1991
<i>The Rocketeer</i> ^	Johnston	Disney	A	1991
<i>Batman Returns</i>	Burton	Warner Bros	A	1992
<i>Last Action Hero</i>	McTiernan	Sony £	A	1993
<i>TMNT III</i>	Gillard	New Line/ 20 th Century Fox	A	1993
<i>The Fantastic Four</i>	Sassone	New Horizons	A	1994
<i>The Crow</i>	Proyas	Disney *	A	1994
<i>The Shadow</i>	Muclahy	Universal	A	1994
<i>Batman Forever</i>	Schumacher	Warner Bros	A	1995
<i>Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers: The Movie</i>	Spicer	20 th Century Fox	A	1995
<i>The Crow: City of Angels</i>	Pope	Disney	A	1996
<i>The Phantom</i>	Wincer	Paramount	A	1996
<i>Batman and Robin</i>	Schumacher	Warner Bros	A	1997
<i>Turbo: A Power Rangers Movie</i>	Levy +/ Winning	20 th Century Fox	A	1997
<i>The Mark of Zorro</i>	Campbell	Sony	A	1995
<i>Blade</i>	Norrington	New Line α	A	1998

^Almost entirely based on Commando Cody serials

*Disney is listed here as the true owner of Miramax Films as of 1993

+Skuki Levy is the co-creator of the *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*.

αNew Line Cinema founded in 1967 was purchased by Time-Warner in 1996

£Sony purchased Columbia in 1989

Table A.8 - The 2000's

FILM	DIRECTOR	STUDIO	CLASS	YEAR
<i>X-Men</i>	Singer	20 th Century Fox	A	2000
<i>Spider-Man</i>	Raimi	Sony	A	2002
<i>Blade II</i>	Del Toro	New Line	A	2002
<i>Daredevil</i>	Johnson	20 th Century Fox	A	2003
<i>X-2: X-Men 2</i>	Singer	20 th Century Fox	A	2003
<i>Hulk</i>	Lee	Universal	A	2003
<i>The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen α</i>	Norrington	20 th Century Fox	A	2003
<i>Spider-Man 2</i>	Raimi	Sony	A	2004
<i>The Punisher</i>	Hensleigh	Lions Gate	A	2004
<i>Blade: Trinity</i>	Goyer	New Line	A	2004
<i>Hellboy</i>	Del Toro	Revolution	A	2004
<i>Batman Begins</i>	Nolan	Warner Bros	A	2005
<i>The Legend of Zorro</i>	Campbell	Sony	A	2005
<i>Fantastic Four</i>	Story	20 th Century Fox	A	2005
<i>Elektra</i>	Bowman	20 th Century Fox	A	2005
<i>Superman Returns</i>	Singer	Warner Bros	A	2006
<i>X-Men: The Last Stand</i>	Ratner	20 th Century Fox	A	2006
<i>Spider-Man 3</i>	Raimi	Sony	A	2007
<i>Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer</i>	Story	20 th Century Fox	A	2007
<i>Ghost Rider</i>	Johnson	Sony	A	2007
<i>Iron Man</i>	Favreau	Paramount	A	2008
<i>The Dark Knight</i>	Nolan	Warner Bros	A	2008
<i>Hellboy II: The Golden Army</i>	Del Toro	Revolution	A	2008
<i>The Incredible Hulk</i>	Lestirrer	Universal	A	
<i>Punisher: War Zone</i>	Alexander	Lions Gate	A	2008
<i>The Spirit</i>	Miller +	Lions Gate	A	2008
<i>Hancock</i>	Berg	Columbia	A	2008
<i>The Watchmen</i>	Snyder	Warner Bros/ Paramount	A	2009
<i>X-Men Origins: Wolverine</i>	Hood	20 th Century Fox	A	2009

+ Director Frank Miller is also a graphic novel writer with titles under his belt like *Ronin*, *Sin City*, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (which was the basis for Burton's gothic noir *Batman* (1989)), and several other famous creations.

αIn scholar Geoff Klock's opinion one of the only true superhero titles of the modern age, though many would argue with that viewpoint including this researcher

Table A.9 - The 2010's

FILM	DIRECTOR	STUDIO	CLASS	YEAR
<i>Iron Man 2</i>	Favreau	Paramount	A	2010
<i>Captain America: The First Avenger</i>	Johnston	Paramount	A	2011
<i>Thor</i>	Branagh	Paramount	A	2011
<i>X-Men: The First Class</i>	Vaughn	20 th Century Fox	A	2011
<i>The Green Hornet</i>	Gondry	Sony	A	2011
<i>Green Lantern</i>	Campbell	Warner Bros	A	2011
<i>Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance</i>	Nevelidine/ Taylor	Sony	A	2011
<i>The Avengers</i>	Whedon +	Paramount	A	2012
<i>The Amazing Spider-Man</i>	Webb	Sony	A	2012
<i>The Dark Knight Rises</i>	Nolan	Warner Bros	A	2012
<i>The Wolverine</i>	Magnold	20 th Century Fox	A	2013
<i>Iron Man 3</i>	Black	Paramount	A	2013
<i>Man of Steel</i>	Snyder	Warner Bros	A	2013
<i>Thor: The Dark World</i>	Taylor	Disney *	A	2013
<i>The Lone Ranger</i>	Verbinski	Disney	A	2013
<i>X-Men: Days of Future Past</i>	Singer	20 th Century Fox	A	2014
<i>The Amazing Spider-Man 2</i>	Webb	Sony	A	2014
<i>Captain America: The Winter Soldier</i>	Russo/ Russo	Disney	A	2014
<i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i>	Gunn	Disney	A	2014
<i>Ant-Man</i>	Reed	Disney	A	2015
<i>Fantastic Four</i>	Trank	20 th Century Fox	A	2015
<i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i>	Whedon	Disney	A	2015
<i>Deadpool</i>	Miller	20 th Century Fox	A	2016
<i>Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice</i>	Snyder	Warner Bros	A	2016

*Disney is listed as the true owner of Marvel Studios having purchased them in 2012

+ Joss Whedon also is a comic book writer having written for Marvel, Dark Horse, and DC Comics.

This list does not include any direct to video (DTV), animated features, television movies, studio film extra released on DVDs and BluRay, comedies, musicals, or any majority foreign financed films (including Canada and Mexico). For the sake of space, this truncated list provides a brief look into the two major surges in live action superhero film production: the late 1930's – early 1950's and the 1990's to the 2010's. The present upsurge in production was largely due to the astronomical successes of *Superman* (1978) which netted WB over \$ 135, 000, 000, *Superman II* (1980) which raked in \$108, 000, 000, 000, and Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) which grossed over \$250, 000,000 worldwide. The evidence is overwhelming that this trend will continue as the world becomes more media dependent, more diverse and more in need of a champion of truth and justice.