Journal of Linguistics & Cultural Studies

Article

Superman: living the American Dream the "American" Way

Grace Yang[1,*]

[1] Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, United States
* Correspondence: Grace Yang, Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, United States

Abstract: This paper examines Superman as a cultural vehicle through which the American film and comics industries negotiated the American Dream, immigrant assimilation, patriotic heroism, and racial hierarchy from the early twentieth century through the 1978 film. Drawing on film history, conflict-era comics and cartoons, legal decisions, and scholarship on Hollywood, it traces cinema's working-class origins, institutional regulation, global conflict propaganda, and the contrasting constructions of Superman and Captain America. It argues that heroic narratives transformed an industry built by immigrants and working-class creatives into a medium for promoting selective forms of national belonging, while immigrant creators simultaneously used superhero figures to pursue assimilation and creative freedom. The 1978 Superman film is read as a partial return to a more humanized hero, but one that still reflects the compromises embedded in the American Dream. By connecting production history, conflict-era representation, censorship, and superhero mythology, the paper shows how popular culture can both democratize cultural participation and reproduce boundaries of race, class, and national identity.

Keywords: Superman; American Dream; Hollywood; conflict-era propaganda; immigration; assimilation; superhero culture; American identity

1. Introduction

On December 10, 1978, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts reverberated with a crowd's electric excitement. Camera flashes lit up the dim venue as high-speed shutter clicks pulsed in the background of conversations. Photographers from the most prestigious publications jostled across the venue to capture a frame of every moment. Assembled diplomats, members of Congress, Hollywood producers, social elites, and even President Jimmy Carter, all waltzed through the room to meet the star of the night: 26-year-old actor Christopher Reeve, the man Hollywood has anointed as Superman [1]. That night marked the first Presidential World Premiere of America's classic, Superman, in Washington, D.C. During the late twentieth century, Hollywood attempted to revive the common American identity of heroism forged in World War II, but that had lain dormant since (As shown in Figure 1).



Figure 1. Superman Presidential World Premiere, Washington, D.C., December 10, 1978. [1]

Received: 26 August 2026
Revised: 17 October 2026
Accepted: 30 October 2026
Published: 05 November 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

The release of Superman: The Movie, directed by Richard Donner, represented the industry's endeavor at that resurrection. That effort revived the blueprint for cinema as a tool for heroic patriotism, a blueprint hailing from Superman's World War II comic book origins and his usage as wartime propaganda. The evolution of the industry's relationship with the titular hero can be traced back to 1938, when Superman was birthed in cartoons by Jewish artists Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster; the hero's net worth was at the time only a dime per copy. Later in 1978, Superman's financial value rose to $1,500 per seat at the premiere of Donner's adaptation [1]. The arc of valuation from a dime to thousands of dollars to access the intrigue and morals of the superhero's stories reveals the profit-oriented face of this industry, where producers learned to monetize heroes shaped by citizens' national pride at the expense of the immigrants and working-class Americans to whom they owed their industry. The tension between their immigrant creators and the created in the film industry reveals the vulnerable desire for assimilation into privileged American culture. The movie business and the comic business from which it drew inspiration served as a device to instill the ideology of the American Dream in the rest of the community through promoting racial order and patriotic heroism.

2. Early Hollywood and the American Dream

Hollywood represents the womb for Superman: The Movie, but it also represents the origin for the inspiration driving the producer's dream of pursuing creative freedom in America. The dream factory rests on foundations built from the bottom up, by outsiders, and by people who used cinema as a desperate opportunity to change their lives. Before its metamorphosis into a cultural colossus, the movie industry was not as glamorous as it now seems. In the late 1800s, the movie business was deemed "working-class entertainment and repository of voice to a mainstream, middle-class industry."[2] In 1905, one of the first theaters in America opened on Smithfield Street in Pittsburgh: The Nickelodeon, which was also known as the "poor man's theater."[3,4] The low admission prices, low rent, and the informality of such theaters contributed to the image of "working class entertainment."[4] The significance of this theater's presence was that it revolutionized accessibility to the arts and enabled the separation of art from the whims of upper-class America, which, until then, existed as the primary consumers and propagators of the arts. Now, "a whole class of people now possessed a form of entertainment and representation that had seemed to appear without either the blessing or the control of the better classes."[4] Motion pictures were displayed solely for leisure and pleasure, not as an instrument to spread certain ideals. Cinema effectively originated as a common man's pursuit of freedom built on the shoulders of working-class creatives.

It was this opportunity for openness and the infinite possibility of the field that drew a particular demographic of dreamers westward. More and more artists moved across the country, some even across the globe, to California in search of the cinematic utopia: Hollywood. The studios they built were unanimously fueled by the promise of the idealistic life of uncaged liberty that was enabled by the opportunity presented in the rise of working-class theaters. Producers imbued their work with the passionate goal of protecting this dream. Studios such as Warner Brothers articulated their mission as a desire to "educate, stimulate, and demonstrate the fundamentals of free government, free speech, religious tolerance, freedom of press, freedom of assembly, and the greatest possible happiness for the greatest possible number."[5] Freedom was the industry's founding promise that attracted people who were most hungry for the promises of that mission: immigrants, working-class, and outsiders who wish to be part of the "successful" America [6].

But this dream had gatekeepers. In 1907 social elite campaigned for the regulation of films and demanded this new form of entertainment become "safe (fear of fire was rampant during the early days of film), clean (the single most earmarked upon aspet of nickel theaters next to their popularity was their smell, often augmented by attendants spraying atomizers of perfume to over the body odor of the viewers), and moral."[4] Their interference, masked by a veneer of civic concern, was driven by undercurrents of a

higher-class desire for domination and the ideological freight of class anxiety. Simultaneously, as Hollywood's commercial footprint expanded, studio management grew increasingly responsive to overtures from the institutions that guard elite and national culture in the United States [2]. This gradual invasion by the whims of the upper class, that the founding fathers of movie theater culture in America yearned to escape, represents the initial turning point in understanding the concrete limitations of the dream factory: who it was for, what it should produce, and what it could produce. The capitulation of cinema to the upper class and authorities that protected the privileged demographics of America over the underprivileged that built the industry fractured the founding ideals of cinema; the art form that was initially created for and by the working class no longer belongs to them. The "better class" and a government whose political aspirations did not align with those of cinema's originators had turned cinema into yet another lever that could be used to bend working Americans to their will [4].

3. Wartime Superheroes and Racial Order

That exploitative leverage became apparent with the advent of World War II. The medium of films, as well as comic books, and their power as a melting pot for reality and fantasy, lured their audiences into subscribing to the "American myth" it presented: the desire for self-creation, to be somebody, and to find a place in the new medium that was making that self-enhancement possible [6].

Superman perfectly encapsulates this sentiment. Authorities and the government forged formal partnerships with film industries, and cinema officially became a weapon for instilling patriotic ideals — a "propagator of Americanism."[2] Although Superman was originated as a comic and was later adapted into a screen, his cultural impact was felt undeniably during the Second World War. Introduced in 1938, he embodies the archetypal American newcomer, one whose hearts brimmed with aspirations of the American Dream [7]. Like the nation's cultural mascot, Superman sets the tone for what it means to be American and to live "the American way."[7] The blueprint for this character is that he is an immigrant who lives an ordinary life as an ordinary citizen, but is capable of being the hero when needed. This narrative marked the emergence of ordinary heroism: "the ordinary, average person who had done something extraordinary."[8] Amid the impact of war on America's stability, particularly in navigating American identity, ordinary heroism instilled hope and pride in Americans by recognizing the immense possibility of greatness and contribution that was available to any "ordinary" person.

However, as the notion of ordinary heroism developed, like any other ideology, the definition of "ordinary" began to take on rigid limits and guidelines. The idea had "special appeal and resonance for white, working-class men, many of whom were, after all, "ordinary" Americans [8]. Power and privilege can only be appreciated through comparison and hierarchy; racism represents the easiest way to instigate this sentiment. As Superman's popularity grew, his studio of origin, Paramount Pictures, seized the opportunity to capitalize on his image in the service of wartime political ideologies. The 1942 Superman cartoon, titled Japoteurs, depicted "treachery in the form of attempted sabotage by a Japanese American who fit many stereotypes." [7] To narrate the Pearl Harbor attack from the American perspective, this cartoon obviously portrays Japanese Americans as the enemy; this depiction instigated segregation and racism towards that demographic. Buck teeth, thick glasses, asian accent, etc., were all features emblematic of the stereotypical portrayal of Japanese Americans, but most significantly, studios behind such cartoons emphasized the untrustworthy and disloyal qualities of Japanese Americans through artistic symbolism. In the light of day, "the poster of the Statue of Liberty suggests his assimilation and his celebration of American ideals; by night and hidden from sight behind drawn blinds, the saboteur's true intentions are revealed as the image transforms into the Rising Sun, to which he bows deeply."[7] The dichotomy of light and dark, private and public, dual faith and disloyalty was all intentional, creating a clear separation and categorization of drawing the bottom line of who belonged in America and who didn't. What made this propaganda most insidious was its target

audience. Superman comics were accessible to easily impressionable and easily molded adults, adolescents, and children. As such discriminatory beliefs were popularized in the media and America's system of culture, it became easy for them to be braided into youths' education and, consequently, their understanding of the world. Racism, then, was registered as an undeniable "truth" for the next generation and not as propaganda that guides society away from equality (As shown in Figure 2).



Figure 2. A Small Boy, Approximately Six Years of Age, Reading a Captain America Comic at a Newsstand, Circa 1942. [9]

4. Captain America, Nationalism, and Belonging

Superman was not the only hero of the creative industry to be seen as the "propagator of America." Simultaneously, Captain America was born during World War II and has since then grown to be recognized as another iconic representation of Americanism. However, there's a fine line that distinguishes Captain America from Superman. The origin of that line can be found in how his creator's identity informed the archetype that the hero represented. Superman's origin mirrors Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel's immigrant narrative, arriving from elsewhere, struggling to assimilate, and fighting for "truth, justice, and the American way" as a prosocial outsider proving his belonging [9] Meanwhile, Captain America is the living embodiment of the American Dream and the myth of an ideal American. Blonde, white, native-born, and masculine, he's the blueprint of the perfect image men in the 1900s were pressured to mold themselves into [10]. His heroism is rooted in his birthright and pride as an American, and this message certainly contributed to the general consensus of what it means to be American.

Captain America also served as one of the many war propaganda pieces that encouraged enlistment and facilitated directions of political mobilization. As children were the main target of his comics, "eugenics was utilized to increase pro-war opinions as kids were easily deceived and spread their opinions for pro-war."[11] Simon and Kirby deliberately used children's psychological desire to feel special and valued with invitational lines such as "Join Captain America in his war against spies and enemies in our midst who threaten our very independence."[12] Such propaganda instilled nationalistic pride in children's beliefs and understanding of virtue, subtly molding them to fit the goals of the authorities and the government for America. As a result, children became mobile forms of propaganda themselves as they "wore badges to signify their involvement in the Sentinels of Liberty [11].

Similarly, in the Sunday newspaper comic strips of 1944, Superman also contributed to instigating war political ideals weekly. Artist Wayne Boring rendered Superman as an explicitly patriotic figure in the color comic strips, depicting him as an active soldier who fought in the war [13]. In a story running from January 16 to March 5, 1944, a young woman named Judy King "can't decide which woman's service to join" and asked

Superman to "help choose which of her male admirers is doing the best job for his country."[13] Onwards came depictions of American soldiers capturing Nazis in Italy, fighting Japanese soldiers in the Western Pacific, and also Marine and Coast Guards recovering from wounds at a military hospital. In all the ways Superman presented modeled examples of noble American men fighting for their country, he never dictated Judy's decision about which men to choose. Instead, he summed up the story with the notion "It doesn't matter which branch of the service you belong to—belonging is the important thing! This is a woman's war too."[13] Though this statement from Superman seems inherently inclusive, its subtext is selective. With the context of wars in Italy and Japan, the framing of "belonging" was only extended to those who were in no doubt aligned with America's war nationalistic imagery. French Jews, Japanese Americans, or other immigrant Americans are not in the range of absolute "belonging" because their loyalty is questioned due to their ethnicity that conflicted with America's interests.

5. Immigration, Assimilation, and Censorship

What was interesting about the pattern of marginalizing certain racial groups was understanding who built it. Artists Siegel and Shuster, creators of Superman, are both Jewish immigrants, as were Simon and Kirby. Most significantly, Superman is also an immgrant himself, coming he's from another planet, from which he was "sent by his scientist father to Earth to escape an unnamed dying planet."[14] Perhaps as wartime ideology took precedent, both the immigrant artist and the immigrant hero produce content that segregated American citizens who came from diverse ethnic backgrounds in pursuit of commericial success of perhaps under government pressure. This phenomenon raises the question of whether the content and stories these heroes traced represent the artists' independent artistic vision or the product of state interest.

The communities targeted by this philosophy largely responded with silence. It's understandable that French jews or Japanese Americans wished to "slip quietly into the mainstream by hiding their scars, as though their experiences had been like everyone else's."[15] Wartime circumstances only intensified that pressure; their foreign background became a liability question for the country. Hence, turning to assimilation was the survival response of these racial minority groups. Even under the alleged freedom America promised to everyone who arrived on this land, it slowly became a conditional offer for immigrants to disappear and assimilate with the crowd. Half willingly, half forcibly.

On top of the existential crisis for immigrants during the war, their silence was reinforced by legal infrastructure. In Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio in 1915, the Supreme Court ruled that the First Amendment, freedom of speech, "could not be used to defend the content of motion pictures." [16] The court framed it as an application of the belief that the movie industry was "a business pure and simple" and could be easily "used for evil." Later, Hollywood filmmakers chose to embrace the directives of the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (also known as the Hays Code) [17]. They were provided with an "ostentatiously formal list of verbal and visual requirements and prohibitions that dictate the way their films could treat everything," ranging from crime, sex, religion, and physical locations [17]. Authority presented their take on the "evil" elements that should be censored and left ambiguity with the "virtuous" content; most significantly, how racism was never addressed in their inappropriate examples. Racial hierarchy became a silent and permissible truth in this society. The code only protected the ideological order Hollywood was built to serve, but does not account for the climbers who built the industry tape by tape. Therefore, the American Dream was only achievable when one limited their worldview to the white perspective. The government had wrenched the endless opportunity for freedom and representation that cinema once offered from the hands of the lower-class Americans who built the industry and handed it to the privileged of America. This policy paralleled their manipulation of the comic book industry to suit the wartime narratives that, too, neglected immigrant populations while idolizing the white American man. The government did not believe

such censorship of the cinema to be "beyond the power of government"; they sincerely believed in it as moral and insightful decision to protect the media field. The policy remained until the 1930s, when a foreseeable backlash unfolded, as political censorship of tyrannical governments did not affect the artists much, the insidious censorship of public opinion, of middle-class morality, of the marketplace, incentivized resistance from Hollywood producers [17].

6. Superman's 1978 Return

Whether it was authoritative restraint, social pressure, or the film industry's culture, Superman's 1978 on-screen rebirth indicated that his audience and producers still yearned for his presence. The cartoon version of this superhero throughout the mid-1900s signals Siegel and Shuster's complex desires to assimilate while also expressing their creative freedom through this perfect model. In the 1978 movie, Donner humanizes the "Man of Steel" by stepping back from using Superman as a political device and allowing him to feel. Near the film's end, Superman travels back in time to rewrite his greatest regret of losing Lois, the woman he had come to love. To save her, he split himself in two, one to save the mass and another dedicated to rescuing Lois. But even so, after ensuring her security, he left the scene swiftly [18]. The immortality of his presence and the surrender to his personal longing sum up Superman's nature. The unrealistic, almost magical dimension of Superman serves as the "edit" to his mortal life and desires. Siegel and Shuster embedded their "mortal desires" of longing to belong while preserving their immigrant identity in Superman; producers molded Superman under legal and commercial pressure that filtered their authentic opinions under nationalistic demands; and together they forged a unanimous vision of nobility for the generations that followed [19] (As shown in Figure 3).



Figure 3. Superman: The Movie (1978). [18]

7. Conclusion

But you always have to surrender something to see the bigger picture. No matter if it's the initial passion for film that diluted into a monetized motivation, hiding your identity to assimilate into society, or swallowing your opinions to align with a nationalistic view, you can't have it all. Not even Superman. Perhaps that's the heart of the American dream itself: to give up something for the greater good.

References

1. "Superman Washington Premiere," *Starlog*, Dec. 1978.
2. P. Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. doi: 10.7312/dech13376.
3. R. C. Allen, "Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan 1906–1912: Beyond the Nickelodeon," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 2–15, 1979. doi: 10.2307/1225438.

4. A. Gaudreault, *American Cinema, 1890–1909: Themes and Variations*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009. doi: 10.36019/9780813546445.
5. C. Yogerst, *From the Headlines to Hollywood: The Birth and Boom of Warner Bros.*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. [Online]. Available: http://site.ebrary.com/id/11238187.
6. L. Braudy, *The Hollywood Sign: Fantasy and Reality of an American Icon*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011. [Online]. Available: https://www.degruyter.com/doi/book/10.12987/9780300158786.
7. A. W. Austin, "Superman Goes to War: Teaching Japanese American Exile and Incarceration with Film," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 51–59, 2011. doi: 10.5406/jamerethnhist.30.4.0051.
8. W. Graebner, "The Man in the Water: The Politics of the American Hero, 1970–1985," *The Historian*, vol. 75, no. 3, pp. 517–545, 2013. [Online]. Available: https://www.jstor.org/stable/24456118.
9. J. Dittmer, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012. [Online]. Available: https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb40339.0001.001.
10. M. Sostaric, "The American Wartime Propaganda During World War II: How Comic Books Sold the War," *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 17–44, 2019. [Online]. Available: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26926687.
11. "Captain America was primarily created as pro-WWII propaganda targeting American society," *South Australian Certificate of Education* sample paper. [Online]. Available: https://www.sace.sa.edu.au/documents/652891/3932077/Sample+2+-+Captain+America.pdf/c6d67f07-5f18-a520-b62e-d18be965dd6c?version=1.2.
12. J. Simon and J. Kirby, *Captain America Comics*, no. 1. New York: Timely Comics, Mar. 1941.
13. *Encyclopedia of Weird War Stories: Supernatural and Science Fiction Elements in Novels, Pulps, Comics, Film, Television, Games and Other Media*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2017.
14. S. Andreadis, "Find Superman in Copyright: An Immigrant's Story," *Copyright: The Blog of the U.S. Copyright Office*, Library of Congress, May 2022. [Online]. Available: https://blogs.loc.gov/copyright/2022/05/find-superman-in-copyright-an-immigrants-story/.
15. I. Buruma, *Theater of Cruelty: Art, Film, and the Shadows of War*. New York: New York Review Books, 2014.
16. *Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*, 236 U.S. 230, 1915. [Online]. Available: https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/236/230/.
17. N. Gilbert, *Better Left Unsaid: Victorian Novels, Hays Code Films, and the Benefits of Censorship*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013.
18. R. Donner, dir., *Superman: The Movie*. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2001. DVD.
19. U. Eco and N. Chilton, "The Myth of Superman," *Diacritics*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 14–22, 1972. doi: 10.2307/464920.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Publisher and/or the editor(s). Publisher and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.