

The Geopolitics of Man of Steel

Written by Peter Adey

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PETER ADEY, JUN 27 2013

Warning: Some spoilers contained

I recently watched *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder 2013) for the second time, and I want to elaborate on some of the potential geopolitical and security discussions that run through a movie like this. I will say, however, that I did like the film despite the criticism the movie has collected (it has had mixed reviews – 56% on Rotten Tomatoes). Despite all the conventions of blockbuster story telling that overload the last 40 minutes of the movie with so much CGI-violence it looks like a computer game and a Hans Zimmer soundtrack which I liked but that was used so unsparingly it choked some of the interactions with a soap opera sensibility, there is really quite enjoyable fare here. It looks very pretty and there's enough action and events to carry you along (for an excellent review of the superhero trend in post-9/11 cinema see Dittmer 2011).

Man of Steel is a bombastic re-booting of the Superman movies some of us feel nostalgic for, from Richard Donner's initiated films which starred Christopher Reeves in the 1980s, to Bryan Singer's *Superman Returns* in 2006. Of course, deciphering superhero images and storylines is not new to Geopolitics. Colleagues such as Klaus Dodds and Jason Dittmer were some of the first to pioneer the art of taking these figures seriously. Slavoj Žižek even recently wrote at length on the *Dark Knight Rises*, and there's certainly been a plethora of superhero movies to take seriously.

In the last decade and a half, these sorts of films have exploded. With the likes of Marvel and DC Comics duking it out through the latest franchise based around figures like Spiderman, X-Men, Captain America, Batman, Thor, the Incredible Hulk and Iron Man, to name some among others. Disney will be heavily involved in the newest franchises, which is certainly not their first involvement in popular geopolitics or the super hero genre.

Of course, Superman has always been self-consciously aware of its geopolitical origins in build up to the Second World War. Donner's first movie made explicit reference and elision between the character and the journalism of the *Daily Planet* and the context of the anxious economic and geopolitical woes of the United States being drawn into a warring Europe. Viewed today, the 1980's *Superman* movies speak of their Cold War context, set amidst nuclear threats and societal and cultural incompatibility. Some of that still remains in this version. Kryptonian society has been undergoing its own genetic revolution for millennia, weeding out degenerates, reproducing unnaturally on stalk-like birthing pods, babies born into predetermined societal roles – Kal-El's is the first natural birth in Krypton for centuries. Both versions then pitch choice and some sense of chance against decaying centralist pseudo-militaristic totalitarian regimes.

This *Man of Steel*, rewritten and produced by the screenwriter and director of the *Dark Knight* movies, David Goyer and Christopher Nolan, team up with director Zack Snyder of *300* and *Watchmen*. They set the movie today among journalists willing to leak their articles to online social media platforms. We hear of drones, see military remote sensing technologies, and other surveillance devices interfering with press independence and personal freedoms – all very topical stuff, if dealt with rather breezily. Lois Lane does more picture taking than writing, but Amy Adams has enough charisma to carry it off.

Hope

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I'll avoid too many spoilers here, but it's fair to say that even while several commentaries have accused the movie of lacking in hope, this is a Superman movie dripping with expectation and earnestness that films like Marvel's Avengers Assemble have – in the main – avoided with their deprecation and fairly witty backhanders (Captain America is perhaps the likely exception here). *Man of Steel* is full of symbols and (some religious) iconography. Superman's body takes up the shape of the cross (as does General Zod – Superman's nemesis) at least twice in the movie – and his body is forever dazzling from camera flare and the luminescence of his suit, particularly when he levitates above what is presumably an air force base as Earth stages its first diplomatic meet with one of General Zod's compatriots. As it was in the 1978 film, the S on his chest is not actually an S and does not stand for Superman either, but rather the symbol of the House of El, and it means hope. Russell Crowe's Jor-El (Superman's Kryptonian father) tells Superman that he will bring humanity to strive towards an ideal; to believe that they can be better, to lead them to achieve wonders. In this role Superman is not placed as part of a sarcastic and shadowy crack team of military experiments (Hulk, Captain America), previous arms dealers (Iron Man), highly skilled special agents (Black Widow, Hawkeye) or demi-gods (Thor), as seen in the Marvel movies, but a sort of Kryptonian ambassador – a bridge between worlds. How this plays out in future films will be interesting if there are any Kryptonians left, but also because it's not as if any power on Earth can actually challenge Superman militarily.

This hopefulness is tied into particular geographies, especially the Canadian North. As with the previous incarnations of the character, Superman finds out who he really is in the Arctic, amongst polar bears leaping from one piece of ice to another, and the sun's light obliquely reflecting from the snow, piercing mountain peaks. The effect is reverential. These spaces are still mysterious and unknown, as a scout ship from Krypton has lain buried in frozen sea ice for over 20,000 years. It is also Superman's testing ground to a certain extent and where he learns how to fly, although it is in the Indian Ocean, on the other side of the world to New York, where he destroys the Kryptonian planet-engine which is at work terraforming Earth.

Is Superman American?

"I'm about as American as it gets", Superman declares near the end of the film. This is an interesting move because one wonders how they will follow a film up that has been resolutely about planetary destruction, and a lot gets destroyed. Christopher Reeve's Superman seemed to become an international figure for humanitarian assistance, intervening in natural disasters. The screenwriters are apparently deliberating whether this Superman should get involved in civil wars as they plan the next film. Would Superman intervene in Syria?

And so it is a strange position Superman holds inside and outside of national identity as a patriotic figure, a figure that seems to act according to moral virtues that place him above the workings of states and rule of law. Is Superman an American combatant? Well he brings down a drone that is spying on him, trying to find out where he hangs up his cape, and so even while he is eventually recognised not as an enemy — he collaborates with the US military to destroy the terraforming devices Zod brings with him from Krypton — his position is ambiguous. There's a definite trend in these movies that states, governments and military organisations are not necessarily there to be trusted, and these superheroes cannot be controlled by them. His handcuffs, worn only for a few minutes as he gives himself up to the US government in order to be released to General Zod, are there for our sense of security, despite their ineffectiveness.

The way Superman might challenge American superiority of airspace – and particularly remotely flown drones – is an interesting one as he unsettles the apparent dominance of the techno-mediated aerial view. And yet, there's also something the film makers did achieve in portraying some of the wonder of flying which might have lost its gleam. It is about the manner in which flight is shown in the movie which is highly evocative, something to wonder at and is, I suppose, about a kind of awe. Superman launches into the sky like a rocket, the shock wave of flying faster than the speed of sound (he does avoid bullets in this movie) is visible, and the joy is on his face for us to witness.

Urban Catastrophe

Man of Steel is a strange convergence with that of the genres of the disaster movie and alien invasion movie. Many scenes look like *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Independence Day*, or *War of the Worlds* and, of course, Oliver Stone's

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World Trade Centre, which does something odd to the violence witnessed. Although Smallville (Clark's home town) enjoys its own share of alien damage, could the finale have been anywhere else but in a major city? I think that's a question worth asking given the many arguments regarding cities, violence and militarism. Huge parts of Metropolis are destroyed, and we are left with a scene looking pretty much like ground zero following intricately rendered falling skyscrapers and screaming crowds. The film has been criticised for depicting footage so similar to 9/11 that it might be trying to capitalise on some sort of cultural familiarity with these scenes.

This Superman can't prevent the enormous loss of life that must be happening around him, and we're not even sure if he cares or whether we should either given the way he launches himself and others through grain silos, a bank vault and an ihop, train depots, skyscrapers and city centres. We see perspectives on the destruction through several characters like Lawrence Fishburne's *Daily Planet* editor Perry White, and a journalist who is trapped amongst the rubble. It was difficult to worry if yet another building was toppled but I did when the violence touched down upon one or two of the main characters, and again so did Superman. He rushes at several points in the movie to pluck falling people out of the air (most of the time Lois Lane). There's interesting debate (see especially at *Variety*) which hones in on whether this is a particularly distinctive kind of violence since 9/11, and whether *Man of Steel* explores such a theme particularly poorly. There's not the space to really consider whether or not the destruction is warranted, thoughtless or over the top. It is not particularly intimate, I couldn't have cared less about the character White tries to save because we've spent so little time with them. Very little is seen of the consequences of all this destruction. No dead bodies, just broken buildings. But here's the thing, maybe what it does capture is something of the excessiveness, however unpalatable that is.

Gender

The movie is heavily gendered. Even while Lois Lane has more participation in the movie than she might have previously, she is still quite passive. Lois is forced to play the role – in opposition to Superman's ascendance – of the falling body, on more than one occasion. The dominant relationship explored is between father and son. There is no Marlon Brando and so no lines of dialogue of sons becoming the father and vice versa, no seeing through his eyes, but we do have fathers urging their sons to do the right thing while his mothers appear more able to care for his emotions. This is panic as Clark experiences x-ray vision and super-hearing at school and locks himself in a cupboard (Clark Kent's coming-out as Superman, as it were, has also prompted some remarks on the gay allegories). Both of Superman's mothers are, then, unfortunately fleeting. While the film opens on the mother giving birth, she is not much more than a vessel (she launches the vessel that takes him to earth too), and it is his fathers who linger long after their deaths as memories or holograms ready to impart advice.

I quite liked *Man of Steel*, maybe because it struck a chord with some interesting themes although sometimes really very briefly. The film is shot in the main in handheld and the result is in places beautiful and immersive. While it digresses into mega action set pieces in a way that will be too much for many, and the drama is maybe forced, at its centre is a character who learns to do amazing things, shooting contrails as he streaks across the blue sky, and the camera does its best to follow.

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Peter Adey is Professor of Human Geography at Royal Holloway University of London. His research interests are located at the intersections of space, mobility and security and the cultures of flight and emergency. He is the author of several books including *Mobility*, *Aerial Life* and the forthcoming co-edited collection *From Above: War, Violence and Verticality*. He also leads the interdisciplinary Masters programme in Geopolitics and Security at Royal Holloway. Read more from Peter and others on the e-IR blog *GPS: Geopolitics and Security – Critical Perspectives From Royal Holloway*.