

“No Capes!” Über Fashion and How “Luck Favours the Prepared”.¹ Constructing Contemporary Superhero Identities in American Popular Culture.

Vicki Karaminas (University of Technology Sydney)

In the fictional world of superheroes, the dialogue between supernatural abilities and fashion is not new. Since the emergence of comics in the 1930s as a distinct entertainment medium in American popular culture, the superhero wardrobe has been communicating narratives through a combination of text and sequential illustration that functions within an aesthetic vocabulary of coded symbolism. The superhero wardrobe speaks of the identities of the wearer and serves to highlight the supernatural abilities and attributes of his/her heroic status. As part of an iconic signifier, the über garment and its accessories, armoured breastplates, masks, epaulets and gauntlets constructed of steel, separates those with superhuman strength from ‘mere’ mortals and sets the costume-wearer apart from conventional society. As an embodied practice, fashion succeeds in signifying industrial strength associated with the ideal hyper-muscular superhero body: *the look* of power, virility and prowess. In the domain of superheroes, fashion really does matter.

The global release of the animated Pixar movie, *The Incredibles* (2004) based on the adventures of a family of ‘displaced’ superheroes who rediscover the source of their powers, has introduced a new theoretical understanding of the superhero wardrobe in the field of cultural theory. The film’s character Edna Mode, the eccentric fashion designer to

¹ Edna Mode. *The Incredibles*, Brad Bird. Dir, Pixar, 2004.

the 'supers', not only takes the aesthetics of the clothes into account, but also interrogates their practical uses and protective qualities and provides an analysis on how the garments can provide functional support to the powers of the wearer.

Rather than situating superhero dress in the domain of the costume and masquerade, *The Incredibles* places superhero attire in the field of fashion. By renaming the costume as a 'suit', superhero fashionability begins to operate within the complex influences of a system governed by notions of realism, performance, gender, status and power.

This paper will draw on cultural theorists such as Roland Barthes and Levi Strauss to examine the construction of superhero fashion in contemporary North American popular culture. It will also investigate the impact of nanotechnology and techno-augmentation associated with the superhero imaginary and will comment on the way that the superhero wardrobe constructs notions of identity and nation.

Masked Avengers

In the discourse of clothing, the mask acts as a material object and as a trope for concealment that characterizes all forms of dress. For superheroes, the invisibility offered by the mask is embodied in the formulations of costumes that obscure the body and provide a distinction between the dual secret and private identities essential to the superhero genre. Masks and costumes also complicate the undefined nature of the symbolics of dress, by appearing to cover the body whilst simultaneously alluding to and

illuminating the hidden powers invested in its adornment, which separates and connects the costume/wearer to the doubling of dress as both a boundary and a margin.

In *Fashioning the Frame. Boundaries, Dress and the Body*, Warwick and Cavallaro state that in the language of symbolism, one of the key features of all 'screening' garments is their ability to conceal and expose, insulate and mediate which invites the viewer to unmask the secret of the wearer's identity. "The mask magnifies the notion of dress as a structure endowed with autonomous powers, based on the ability either to sustain or shatter the wearer's identity" (1998:129).

Costumes are symbolic constructions, denoting the incorporation of the wearer into the symbolic/mythic realm of superheroics by blurring the line between the identity of the hero and the wearer. As noted by Bongco (2000), the adaptation of the superhero costume sets the wearer apart from a society that is predicated on conventional fashion, marking the costume-wearer as a member of a particular group; in this case superheroes. "Theatricality and deception are powerful agents", Henri Ducard warns Bruce Wayne whilst undergoing martial arts training in a monastery in China. "You must become more than a man in the mind of your opponent." (*Batman Begins*, 2005)

There is a consistent totemic appropriation evidenced in many costumes, which resemble shamanesque figures who by summoning their superhuman powers subsequently ward off or combat societal enemies. In the study of symbols, the wearing of masks is related to the summoning of supernatural agencies, especially those that mediate between

ordinary and non-ordinary realities in order to transform and endow the wearer with spirit powers, such as the call for protection from ancestors, or the summoning of the acute instinct of animals.² The discourse of superhero fashion (cap, masks and cloaks) and its reliance on harnessing paranormal energies from totemic animals figuratively marks the body through linguistic and sartorial codes and ushers in new enunciative powers. The superhero, in this respect, is a shaman of sorts, whose costume (complete with accoutrements) endows the earthbound deities to connect with their superhuman strength.

The notion of dress as a hybrid discourse finds similarities between the embodied/disembodied meaning attached to clothing and the shamanistic process of initiation into *Other* worlds.

This process of initiation, state Warwick and Cavallaro:

“may include the dismemberment of the subjects body, the removal and substitution of flesh: a ritual that could be read as metaphorically redolent of the phenomenon of decorporealization triggered by the entry into the symbolic, which dress both ratifies, by positing itself as a substitute skin or flesh, and challenges, by foregrounding its own irreducible materiality (1998:129).”

² In *The Way of the Masks* (1998), structural anthropologist Levi Strauss states that the mask functions as part of a system of diacritical signs (with their origin myths and the rites in which they appear) that become intelligible only through the relationships that unite them. In other words, a correlational and oppositional relationship exists between the mask and the function assigned to it.

The significance of the mask as costume and as a potent source of animal force is suggested by Bob Kane's *Batman, the Dark Knight*, who assumes the appearance of a bat to fight criminals and develops into a symbol of justice for the community; or Peter Parker's alter ego Spiderman who develops "spider powers" when bitten by a radioactive arachnid and who wears a spider-inspired costume in tribute. His unusual accident also grants Peter spider-senses and the ability to detect danger along with the ability to scale walls and suspend himself high above the cityscape using newly acquired spinnerettes, which emit sticky webs from his wrists. His costume in this case is light and functional; perfectly designed for hanging upside down and swinging between buildings.

The double discourse of the mask as a vehicle for self-effacement functions as a shield that protects the wearer's identity yet acts as a conductor for channelling powers. An ancient myth is played out when an Egyptian Mau cat, indebted to Selina Kyle for saving its life, breathes life into her murdered body. In a twist of fate, she is transformed into the embodiment of feline subjectivity, complete with speed, agility, ultra keen senses and the ability to sew latex. The superhero genre is full of hybrids; creatures simultaneously human and animal, which populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted.

As a garment, the mask conceals whilst revealing the emphatic surfaces and historicities inscribed on the hypermuscular superhero body. It serves to protect the wearer's subjectivity from the world whilst at the same time affectively hints at the *origin* stories and secret identities firmly embedded in the superhero genre. "Identity", states Bukatmen (1994:100) "is the obsessional centre of superhero comics, as revealed by the endless

process of self-transformation and the problematic perceptions of others” as identity is negotiated, constructed and performed.

Efrat Tseëlon (2001:108) explains the constructive aspect of masking, which she uses interchangeably with notions of masquerade and disguise as an analytical tool that creates a subjective space; what she refers to as a ‘technology of identity’. As an analytical category, states Tseëlon, [the mask] “deals with [a] literal and metaphorical covering for ends as varied as concealing, revealing, highlighting, protesting [and] protecting” in the field where social practices are carried out. Functioning as a means of transgressing one identity to another, the superhero mask guarantees the body’s passage into the field of the symbolic by marking its liminal presence as a sign of salvation in the doom and gloom narrative of modernity gone horribly wrong.

Similarly, the doubling function of the mask is also analysed by Bahktin (1990) in his examination of the differing ways that masks have been used historically and in shifting social and cultural attitudes. He writes of the mask as an ‘involvement’ shield, protecting privacy whilst at the same time allowing for interaction with others. “The mask”, he says, “is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries... it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image” (1984:40). Borrowing from the analysis of Bahktin and Tseëlon, the superhero genre and its reliance on visual artefacts (glasses, bat and cat ears, horns, eye masks and hats), as well as the metaphorical disguises routed in the symbolic ordering of fashion, come to convey the subjective dual identities of the

superheroes, as they shift from mild mannered geek (think Spiderman, Catwoman and Superman) to mercenary vigilante taking the rules of justice into their own hands.

Fashioning the Super Nation

Fashion speaks a distinct language, which emblematises the essence of its social and cultural context. Whether local or global, historical or contemporary, dress acts as a ‘confessional’³ that offers evidence of the practices and ideals of a given time. Fashion in this sense is not merely a passive reflection on society, but serves as a vehicle for circulating patterns of consumption and ideology that are tied to notions of the body and the self.

The superhero costume operates as a language; a mode of communication that functions on numerous levels within a structured system of meanings. Such meanings speak of the identity of the wearer as a champion of liberty, and comments on the supernatural abilities and attributes of their heroic status as arbiters of good. Although the design of the superhero garment remains fixed, the values of the society that produces the superhero identity changes over time. Superman might have been fighting communists in the Cold War of the 1950s, but by the beginning of the twenty-first century he was confronting societal fears of technological doom and battling a super computer as well as taking on global fears such as the nuclear arms race and atomic testing (Fingerroth,

³ I am borrowing Foucault’s notion of the ‘confessional’ to address the power that is invested in dress as an embodied practise that circulates within a system of signs that place discourses of identity, including sexuality and gender, at the heart of existence. “Confession”, he says, [is] “the examination of the conscience, all the insistence on the important secrets of the flesh. (Foucault: 1988: 152-67) ”

2004:17) Most recently, in 2004, Captain America, Daredevil and the Hulk enlisted as ‘supersoldiers’ in illustrated comic books and were sent to defuse nuclear facilities in Iran, Iraq and North Korea (Botzas, 2004). Thus, the figure of the enemy has shifted and changed across historical and political specificities, but the superhero’s wardrobe remains quintessentially the same, except for the modernization of fabric.

These larger than life heroes who rescue the weak, preserve humanity and fight evil ‘in all its forms’ invoke discourses about culture and national consciousness and can be located in the mythic narrative construction of the American dream of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Constructed around the melting pot metaphor and narratives of overcoming immigrant hardship on arrival, the United States of America has come to represent a synthesis of peoples, religions and ethnicities bound by the common ideals of freedom and opportunity. “Wrapped in the flag”, writes Kevin Smith, “[Superman] has come to stand for the American dream” (2001:24).

Emulating the ‘perfect’ immigrants, Superman and Wonder Woman arrive in America from mythic lands; Superman from the planet Krypton and Princess Diana (Wonder Woman) from Paradise Island. Both eagerly adopt the nation’s enduring values of truth, justice, democracy and the ‘American way’. Wonder Woman arrives adorned in red, white and blue. Her pants are spangled with white stars. Her red high-heeled boots are striped and a golden eagle, the symbol of American pride, is worn on her halter-top. “Like all home-grown immigrants”, writes Mathew Smith, “[Wonder Woman] represent[s] the variety of ready made patriots America has come to expect from its

immigrants” (Smith, 2001:134). Other superheroes like Captain America and Superman adorn equally patriotic outfits. Superman is a child who is adopted by average American parents and given an everyman name of Clark Kent. Raised in the ‘safety and security’ of rural America, he is taught to respect clean, wholesome living and traditional values and eventually moves to the city of Metropolis, where he lives out the American dream of middle-class ambitions. Clark encapsulates the sacred American right of freedom of speech through his job as an investigative reporter for the *Daily Planet*. Dressed in a white shirt, tie, corporate grey suit and thick black glasses, he successfully blends into the urban environment. His status and identity as a superhero is effectively obscured.

In *Banal Nationalism* (1995) Michael Billig argues that a great deal of nationalist practice is embedded in the rituals and practices of everyday life. Billig states that in the contemporary world, entire peoples are simply embedded in their national symbols. Their flags flutter as adornments to public buildings; the news categorises events as home affairs or foreign reports; the weather-forecast reinforces the awareness of political geography and boundaries; sporting heroes embody national virtues and mobilise collective loyalties; moments of crisis - especially war – produce patriotic addresses from political leaders and national languages and histories, through their transmission constitute a sense of communality.

In this kind of formulation, the image of costumed superheroes functions as a cultural articulation of nation and subsequently constructs a series of relations around state and citizen, then of state, then of citizen and *Other*. The national superhero is reduced to a

series of enunciations that reverberate around two fundamental concepts: identity and difference.

The contemporary positions signalled by the red, white and blue outfits of Captain America, Superman and Wonder Woman circulate in a network of signs, where the garments themselves are transformed into the *signs* of America. From its existence as an artefact, the superhero costume has evolved into a hybrid form, operating in many registers. Whereas it once existed as a single functioning garment, it now proliferates within a larger network of relations that comes to represent the values inscribed on the garment as a representational sign of ‘truth, justice, democracy and the American way’.

Body Technologies

In *The Fashion System* (1990), Barthes is interested in the way that sign systems produce not clothing, but the abstract notion of fashion as an independent, autonomous system, and an inscription that results from a technique that is normalised by a code. He notes that ‘real’ clothing must not be known by sight, for its visual image does not reveal all its intricacies, but rather through the mechanical process of its production such as the seams and the pleats as they are manufactured. In the dress/body relationship, Barthes emphasizes *coenaesthesia* as pivotal to understanding the multiple attributes played by cloth and fabric and stresses the need to think in terms of a coalescence rather than mutual exclusion of bodily effects:

“Here is a group of variants whose function is to make certain states of the material signify: its weight, its suppleness, the relief of its surface, and its transparency....

No variant is in fact literal: neither the weight nor the transparency of a fabric can be reduced to isolated properties: transparency is also lightness, heaviness is also stiffness; in the end, coenesthesia leads back to the opposition between comfortable and uncomfortable....(Barthes, 1990: 123-124).”

The transposition of the garment’s attributes and the feelings that it invokes is not simply the effect of the overall garment as a casing, but the body itself. Barthes stresses the intimate relationship between the body and the garment as one that positions clothing as a kind of surrogate for the body:

As a substitute for the body, the garment, by virtue of its weight, participates in man’s [sic] fundamental dreams, in the sky and the cave, of life’s sublimity and its entombment, of flight and sleep: it is a garments weight which makes it a wing or a shroud, seduction or authority; ceremonial garment’s (and above all charismatic garments) are heavy; authority is a theme of immobility, of death, garments celebrating marriage, birth and life are light and airy (Barthes, 1990: 126)

Sartorial images of superheroes and their associations with nation, the law and authority, advertise themselves as symbols of loyalty and patriotism. The superhero garment, and its matching accessories makes explicit reference to the symbolism of the American nation by means of colour and pattern; most obviously, through stars, stripes and phoenix motifs.

The impact of technology is also breeding a generation of superheroes who are fitted with clothing attached with remote-control systems, signal transmitters and power-grids. Although cinematic images of superhero nanotechnologies have been inspired by scientific research, they also encapsulate an entire semiology of visual narratives on military cyborgs and superhuman techno-augmentation associated with the superhero imaginary. Scenes from Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005) depict Bruce Wayne's body altered or completely transformed by nanotechnological prostheses of militaristic origin. His symbiotic suit of armour is fitted with carbon fibre plates to control body temperature and his cloak is made of 'memory fabric' whose soft and subtle texture takes on a rigid shape when electrical currents are applied via electrodes embedded within his glove. The film uses high-tech systems and materials to establish a dialogue between Batman and the environment, while exploring the extent to which cloth; engineering and science can be integrated in a single design.

Director Christopher Nolan wanted to capture the romantic quality and essence of Batman's cowl whilst still maintaining subtlety and lightness in cloth. "The finest parachute silk constructed of waterproof nylon was used," states costume designer Lindy Hemming, "and then flocked by tiny hairs so that the cloak ended up looking like a velvet pile. It has an animal feeling on the outside and the waterproof nature and lightness [of the fabric] allows it to fly" (*Batman Begins*, 2005)

The formal features of lightweight super fabrics are coupled with the sensation of airiness associated with flight and invests the wearer with the attributes, such as in the case of

Batman, of a bat, or in the case of Superman, *a bird, or a plane*. The tactile and visual qualities related to the synthetic fibres ‘favoured’ by superheroes encase the body in a solid architectural frame rendering it weightless to the point of transparency as it moves *faster than a speeding bullet*, becoming *more powerful than a locomotive* and *able to leap tall buildings in a single bound*.

In cinematic adaptations, superhero costumes were traditionally made from natural fibres such as wool or cotton. Tight, figure-hugging fabrics such as the synthetic elastic lycra, developed in 1958, revolutionised the cinematic superhero wardrobe and was popularised on television and in film because of its “stretch and recovery” qualities as well as being lightweight, colourful and moisture repellent. Similarly, the superhero fashion of underwear as outerwear was popular for certain characters and was a key feature of ‘action’ clothing, because of its flexibility and suitability for high level action. The lycra superhero suit was designed to streamline the actor’s silhouette and to effectively cut down drag and resistance in the water and air. It also compressed the muscles and controlled bodily deviations for maximum performance. Microfibre technology has since transformed the properties of many superhero costumes, from bodysuits, to capes and knee-high boots.

In *The Incredibles* (2004) the animated character Edna Mode, Pixar’s ‘fashion designer to the superheroes’, hints at the future of smart-fibre technologies, in the manufacturing of *smart* superhero fashions for a contemporary superhero.

“Your suit can stretch as far as you can without injuring yourself and still retain its shape,” she says to Elastigirl,

“Virtually indestructible...yet it breathes like Egyptian cotton. As an extra feature, each suit contains a homing device, giving you the precise global location of the wearer at the touch of a button.” (*The Incredibles*, 2004)

These new age fabrics offer thermal control through quick-absorbing fabric enhancement by pulling perspiration away from the body, drying it quickly and keeping the body cool and comfortable. Spill and stain-resistant fibres (synthetics, wool, rayon) are used to repel a range of liquids. The developments of permanent static resistance treatments to reduce cling and deter static substances are described to improve the overall appearance and comfort of superhero garments. Nano-technology also promises performance-enhancing qualities and control mechanisms, and body adjustment or maintenance such as vitamin, perfume or steroid release. With fabrics such as the aerosol spray-on Fabrican, already being used in the fashion industry to produce super tough-street wear, as well as Kevlar-treated or Tyvek-infused fibres to produce practical, lightweight and extremely durable clothing, the future of Superhero fashion, should it exist, is limitless.

Conclusion: Dressed Bodies

The discourse of superhero fashion pertains simultaneously to processes of historical, social, cultural and ideological structures, which are foremost in the powerful role played by the clothing and accoutrements in the construction of superhero personas. As such, dress is significant in both the development of superhero identities and in the critical

decoding of the languages, practices and representations enacted by fashion as a signifier of superhuman abilities.

Superhero bodies are dressed bodies; dress transforms the body and appropriates it for specific contexts, endowing the superhero psyche with attributes and energies that are beyond the 'natural' world. Materials, fabrics and accoutrements also add a whole array of meanings to the hypergendered superbody that would otherwise not be there. In this way, dress serves as a visual metaphor for identity.

The symbolically encultured body of the superhero is physically translated into the realm of the superhuman by means of a strategy of complete disguise. The functional role of the superhero attire is to conceal, or at least obscure the identity of the wearer, whilst attracting attention at the same time. Outwardly, the superhero appears to be a normal, everyday individual that is not differentiated from others in the crowd. But underneath this commonplace persona lies a shadow side that possesses all of the hero's superpowers and abilities. "It is not who I am underneath [what I wear]", announces Batman, "but what I do that defines me (*Batman Begins*, 2005)". The dressed super body is always positioned in the in-between space of self and identity, continually vacillating between the human persona and the *Other* side, never living a full existence in either one.

On writing about the fashion system, Barthes said that "[fashion] gives the reader of signs the feeling of mystery it deciphers; fashion dissolves the myth of innocent

signifieds, at the very moment it produces them; it attempts to substitute its artifice...
[fashion] does not suppress meaning; it points to it like a finger (Barthes, 1990:303).”

Edna Mode herself states, “*Luck favors the prepared.... I never look back darling. It distracts from the now (The Incredibles, 2004)*”.

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Vicki Karaminas is Director of Research in the School of Design at the University of Technology Sydney, where she also teaches Fashion Theory and Design Studies. She is a cultural studies scholar with a background in visual culture and gender studies and worked as a freelance photojournalist in the media industry before commencing an academic career. Vicki has been published in the area of fashion, identity and representations of the body in western discourse.

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