Ideological Window Dressing: Advertising Superman Cinema for Religious Audiences in Post 9/11 America

Brent Yergensen, Ph.D
Associate Professor of Communication, University of Texas at Tyler

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Abstract
This study explores contextualized ideological window dressing, or simultaneous appeals to niche audiences while still advertising to the general public, with focus on the heightened, and consequentially ongoing, trajectory for religious advertising in post 9/11 America. With the then growing market of Christian popular culture, cultural marketing for differing audience readings were driven by the opportunity to offer polysemic audience experiences, sparked in post 9/11 with reawakened religious ideologies connected to American Christianity. The religiously interpretable 2006 *Superman Returns* teaser trailer uses a crescendo format with the rhetorically charged and nostalgic voice of Marlon Brando, an increasing religiously symbolic discourse, and explicit religious iconography. The balancing of secular popular culture while still pursuing Christian marketability continues, despite generational resistance to religion, and yet contemporary Superman marketing suggests he will remain in his religiously symbolic form.
Key Words: Advertising, Superhero, Window Dressing, Superman, Religion

With an iconic hero who leads the masses, is tortured by his enemies, has his arms flung out at one point as if he's on a crucifix, and even has a resurrection of sorts, Superman Returns could have been called 'The Passion of the Clark.'
– Film critic Richard Roeper (2006)

Three months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, The Pew Research Center concluded that "The Sept. 11 attacks have increased the prominence of religion in the United States to an extraordinary degree" (Pew Research Center, 2001). Further, in times of war, religiosity easily and readily aligns with the prevalence of superhero narratives (Jewett, 1984). The power of these rhetorics and narratives appeal to niche audiences of mass culture. Specifically, after the 9/11 attacks, the re-emergent American heroism discourse drew upon America's historical religious tones, awakening a new age of theological themes in political discourse and popular culture (Taylor, 2005). The trajectory of those moves led to an ongoing religious appeal in advertising, social

media, and branding, such as the contemporary "He Gets Us" campaign, referring to Jesus, and captures the heavy presence of religious popular culture, even to the degree in which the "He Gets Us" campaign costs $100 million, and "Aims to Make Jesus the 'Biggest Brand in Your City'" (Baer, 2022). Coinciding with the densely religious themed *Superman Returns* (Singer, 2006) film several years after the 9/11 attacks, and subsequent American wars in the Middle East, Christian popular culture found rich opportunity for marketing toward believing audiences who are drawn to Christian heroism.

Because of the massive Christian culture that is intertwined with non-religious popular culture as, albeit less explicit, sites for religious engagement, I argue that the post 9/11 secular market was enabled to adopt polysemic meanings to include heightened religious resonances, illustrating an ideological window dressing based on an available religious audience that was ripe for Christian iconography. By window dressing, I mean that advertisers code advertisements enough for the religious audience reading while still maintaining a general secular form, enabling diverse interpretations and meanings. Such ideological window dressing enables filmmakers to advertise their secular productions to the prominent Christian culture that is obsessed with Christian iconography as central to tales of heroism.

On December 9, 2005, the trailer (DC, 2013) for *Superman Returns* was released with the opening of Walt Disney and Walden Media's biblical allegory *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Adamson, 2005). The grand opening of this children's fable that is rich with Christian symbolism followed the heavy marketing that Walden Media did in churches before the film's release (Berkowitz, 2005), and simultaneously introduced the new Superman film. The trailer is rich with Christian symbolism, yet not so overt as to alienate its potentially non-Christian focused audience. Following the *Superman Returns* teaser trailer, Christian window dressing continued subsequently in *Man of Steel* (Snyder, 2013) trailers and television ads (Warner Brothers Pictures, 2012; Warner Brothers Pictures, 2013).

Superman mythology provides intertwined associations between Christian faith and superhero iconography, described by Stephen Skelton (2006) in the same year *Superman Returns* his theaters as Superman cinema being "epic, mythic, even evangelistic" (p. 11). These themes emerge more apparently as the trailer was released with *Narnia*, whose hero also dies and resurrected, similar Superman's own demise and victory in the *Superman Returns* film itself. Thus, the transcendence over death theme is taken seriously and treated epically, even reverently, and is delivered as the key climactic moments of both films, with both instances following the precursory theological nature of the *Superman Returns* trailer.

Two historical contexts heightened the post 9/11 opportunity for Christian advertising with the release of the first *Superman Returns* trailer. First, Christian audiences were freshly serviced by the deep affect experiences of Mel Gibson's (2004) *The Passion of the Christ* two years earlier (Chang, 2004), where the emotional film and its large profits captured the weighty success both commercially and critically for religious media (Brown, Keeler, & Lindvall, 2007). Second, the presence of religious resonances in the George W. Bush presidency reawakened the hyper-religious fervor that was declining in the decade before his presidency (Thompson, 2019). ABC News (Yang, 2006) described the religious depth of Bush's leadership as an energized focus on Christianity with his prioritizing "faith-based initiatives." Further, during the Bush administration's tenure, overtly celebrated Christian cinema paralleled Bush's awakened religiosity and assisted in the re-establishment of religious priorities, which Ted Turnau (2012) calls *Popologetics*.

Hence, post 9/11 theological heroic discourse showed an awakened American hero complex (Jewett), bringing obsession with Christian themed popular culture products (Chidester, 2005). Gregor Goethais (1990) described this trajectory of evangelical popular culture as "The traditions that historically rejected images have, ironically, made the greatest use of television," bringing "new electronically vivified icons" (p. 126). This takes place in window dressing opportunities with religiously interpretably symbols, specifically with Superman.

Window Dressing of Ideologies

Leading up to 9/11, the weight of Christian iconography in film was pervasive in academic studies (Hurley, 1970; Martin & Ostwalt, Jr., 1995; Tatum, 1997; Baugh, 1997; Benne, 1997; Kupfer, 1999; Godawa, 2002). In post 9/11, the religious iconography turned toward emphasizing the dichotomy of having a savior figure dueling with an opposing devil figure, thereby driving an ideology that further bifurcated the world into good and evil (Birzer, 2002; Higgins, 2003; Dalton, 2003; Seay & Garrett, 2003; Meyer, 2003; Richardson). Danae Clark (1993) described the advantages of appealing to dual audiences in advertising, "consumer culture thrives on" audiences whose ideologies are catered to by "institutions by taking its cues from their fixations," with the key to such efforts being display through ambiguity and allowing polysemic readings

where "consumers do not notice these subtexts," which enables advertisers "to reach various audience markets without ever revealing their aim" (p. 188). Subcultural themes of advertisements provide easily noticeable appeals to market to for the sake of economic gain by drawing in those niche consumers, "Much of what gets negotiated, then, is not so much the contradictions between the so-called 'dominant' and 'oppositional' readings, but the details of the subcultural reading itself" (Clark, p. 192).

The timing of the trailer's release in post 9/11 America, just as the digital world was emerging (Westera, 2012), allowed for Burkean identification to thrive between audience and theologically laced texts, particularly in the catering of messages that enable political associations between timed and easily aligned worldviews of Bush-themed politics amid war (Burke, 1969). Amid the years following the trailer while the digital world grew with the emergence of social media, Christina Foust (2008) described the digital turn as the end of the explicitness of typography and the emergence of "the colorful still and moving images, sound, hypertext, and experimentation of the digital aesthetic," of which the *Superman Returns* trailer was at the forefront (p. 124).

Linell Cady (2008) offers insight into the Bush presidency's re-focus on religion in post 9/11 America, which empowered religion against growing secularization, thereby bringing the heightening of "religious resonances" into public discourse and popular culture (p. 184). Yogi Hendlin (2021) describes this identification process as "evoking emotions which lead to commitments," which can lead audiences to "fundamentally reconfigure lifestyles" (p. 532). Similarly, Chi-Ying Yu (2021) describes cinematic identification as triggering "a transcendental transformation of the psyche" (p. 913). Getting to these influences, movies trailers are carefully crafted, associative texts of worldview identification.

While contemporary trends remove deity themes from the superhero figure (Benjamin, 2018), the older, predigital era was theologically driven in the post 9/11 world, and displayed a more celebratory and honorarium appeal to depictions of superheroes, such as Spider-Man as observable savior (Richardson, 2004). Other theological superhero resonances of Christian iconography are noted in Charles Bellinger's (2011) reading of *The Dark Knight*, "Christ is not a character in the movie, but he is present throughout" (p. 10). Diane Corkery (2011) calls this religious iconography "Christic resonances" (p. 13). The *Superman Returns* trailer crystalizes this post 9/11, theological world that was in the infancy of the digital turn.

Subcultural aesthetic appeal of window dressed ads is observable in ideologically engrained themes, written into the more generic storytelling but still produced with enough delicacy to avoid controversial backlash that would accompany advertisements that are overtly ideological. As the trailer was released with *Narnia*, religious resonance appeasement was available and masterfully crafted. Foust describes this as, "aesthetics help conjoin contemporary conservatism," which was heightened in the Bush presidency's era of religious priorities available for coverage and often celebrated in media (p. 128).

The Movie Trailer as Rhetorical Situation

Movie trailers are high quality productions, offering "a unique form of narrative film exhibition" in their appeal to audience pleasure (Kernan, 2004, p. 1). Scholarship in recent years on movie trailers has increased. Jon Ruiz (2012) calls this "the growing attention towards movie trailers" because of "the creative work of trailer makers and their artistic virtues" (pp. 1877-1878). As part of the study's theoretical foundation, I explore the *Superman Returns* trailer not as an isolated text, but as an answer to the exigence of a rhetorical situation, where the cultural elements surrounding the trailer allow the trailer to respond to and represent cultural trajectories where "a specific time and place" accords "opportunity to speak on some urgent matter" (Bitzer, p. 2). Thus, rhetorical situations, such as a heightened religiosity, are "invite[d]" in a religious presidential administration and war age for American audiences. The exigence in post 9/11 America was an appeal for heroism in a reawakened Christian-themed American era.

Movie trailers are loaded with cultural representations, masterfully created for big screens, and played repeatedly, operating as "multimodal discourse genres because they combine meaning manifested through different semiotic modes such as moving and still images, sound, music, written and spoken language," which enables them to be captured moments of cultural taste and appeal in an advertised format (Pollaroli, 2014, para. 4). As sites for scholarly endeavor, trailers serve as opportunity to explore the "wider analytical context" because trailers carry a "multilayered relationships with verbal and aural" meanings (Maier, p. 159). In essence, trailers are timestamps of social priorities. The movie trailer serves as connection between audience and their appeased sentiments. Burke describes this intimate appeal of identification where "the speaker draws on identification between himself and his audience" (p. 46). Finding Burkean identification within trailers allows for conceptualizing the window dressing

of ideologies, and done in specific moments of time, or rhetorical situations.

The study of a single movie trailer offers both challenges and opportunities. In the study of mediated texts as the cultural milieux, scholars typically study texts with more content as well as thematics across numerous texts. While this cultural text is studied in its brevity presentation to the public, scholarship focused on the significance of film trailers allow heavy cultural baggage to be unpacked as trailers serve as amalgams of advertising tastes, storytelling craft, popular themes and appeals of style and music, while being representations of larger stories, and packaged with state-of-the-art production quality. Further, other studies that methodologically focus on a singular trailer include the use of sound for emotional resonance (Noad & Barton, 2020), the pursuit of women empowerment (Lozoya, 2020), and of video game characters depicted in film (Schaefer, Grebin, & Giudice, 2013).

Superman Returns Trailer as Ideological Window Dressing

Focusing on both dialogue and imagery of the trailer, the display of ideological window dressing grows increasingly apparent within the advertisement, offering a systematic crescendo of increasing engagement of religious resonances, or the "synergy that builds identification substantially and stylistically" (Foust, p. 132). Three statements in the one-and-a-half-minute advertisement are delivered as voiceover by Jor-El, Superman's father, allowing the voice to provide an "ontic experience" (Ehret, 2018, p. 160). The voiceover's nostalgic use of Marlon Brando's voice, reverberating from the 1978 Superman (Donner) film, is accompanied by the crescendo musical score in the trailer.

Jor-El's first statement, "Even though you've been raised as a human being, you are not one of them," serves as an attention appeal for the upcoming film. Although not initially exposing that the subject is Superman in the first moments, the trailer teases a pending satisfaction to the Christian need for transcendence as the plot is establishing a theme available in both theology and science fiction: a single visitor arrived on Earth and dwelt among humanity. By introducing the trailer with a statement that establishes that distance between humans and a mysterious other, the advertisement primes the religious viewer for a 'covenant' experience into a brief, passive, but readily religious experience with the trailer, described by Burke (1970) as the permanent religious nature of rhetorical discourse.

Dialogue as Theological Window Dressing

The opening statement's accompaniment of a blank image offers polysemic opportunity for diverse audience experiences, particularly with the use of Marlon Brando's famous acting voice, which is recognized as exemplifying both "powerful emotions" and "promises" (Kinney, 2014). The trailer's opening statement, "Even though you've been raised as a human being, you are not one of them" also taps into the public fascination with alien civilizations following 1990s popular culture (Bader, 1995), offering a simultaneous alternative initial understanding of the trailer experience. Clark describes this polysemic abstraction as key in advertising to dual audiences: keeping one of the forms of reading available in an ambiguous state, and thus initially subdued, while still drumming interest as the opening statement lingers for forty seconds before another phrase from Brando's God-themed voice is heard.

The subsequent but temporary ambiguity of images of Superman are displayed before the explicit and later religious statements emerge, which by being delayed enable polysemic readings and avoid overly religious expression in the trailer's early stages. The opening phrase comes in the first few seconds of the trailer, openly inviting a multiplicity of ideological interpretations with the careful pacing of wording, specifically the delayed explicit religious parallels that could, if offered too early in the trailer, alienate non-religious consumer, thereby showing a strategic abstraction in interpretability. Burke (1969) describes this nostalgic capacity for identification through the successful use of rhetorical craft, "we must think of rhetoric not in terms of some one particular address but as a general body of identifications that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill" (p. 26). The cumulative effect of biblically laced identifications in the trailer demonstrate that repetitiveness in the movement toward worldview reinforcement, or the opportunity for ideological window dressing.

The second phrase in the trailer captures the appeal of Superman, who at that point has been identified repeatedly through imagery as the subject of the film, "They could be a great people Kal-El, they wish to be," enabling the non-religious audience to simply observe the return of the nineteen-year absent from cinema superhero. Yet, the religious audience is geared, in the progression of the end of the trailer, to see accumulating religious iconography in the trailer in the context where 9/11's events created the "heroic structure" that takes on "a primordial form of the epideictic speech," or what Michael

Hyde (2005) describes as a heroic-themed oratorical voice, which is demonstrated in the significance of using Brando's voiceover charge to his son Superman to act heroically (p. 1).

In the second sentence, the religious-interested consumer is pulled deeper into the upcoming film as a Christian allegory as the advertisement draws upon the then market for popologetics, while still being a less ideologically driven secular, science fiction adventure. With the theological assumption in humanity's 'fallen' state, or of humans as sinners and in need of aid from something godlier than themselves, they therefore live with desire to overcome their fallen state, to "be a great people," as Jor-El identifies humanity. Utilizing Superman's less common name, Kal-El, which is his real name given to him by his father that is speaking in the voiceover, mirrors the New Testament description of Jesus as intimately connected to God.

For religious audiences, the appeal to transcend their fallen state as they hear Jor-El's echo-y Marlon Brando voice brings intimacy between the long estranged, savior-like hero who is being charged by his father to lead lesser beings. This nostalgic and epic-themed use of voice with an echo format enables Christian notions of transcendence for a religious audience who is primed for a religious experience following Gibson's more explicit Jesus story, and is ripe with 9/11's aftermath and the theme of "The Rhetor as Hero," manifest in Jor-El's charging his son to look after humanity (Hyde, p. 1).

The third and final statement in the trailer, "They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I've sent them you, my only son," presents Superman as a messenger, a teaching theologian to address humanity's assumed fallen state, as suggested earlier in the trailer. The trailer situates Superman as recipient of a saving mission, capturing the 9/11 religious rhetoric that offered "a moral directive heard as a call of conscience" (Hyde, p. 1), dictated by Jor-El to his son to "show the way." Superman becomes an emotionally charged allegory of Jesus as "the light," situated to be a source of transcendence in a symbolic narrative of, as theorized in Burke's theoretical treatment of symbolic action as theological in nature, a fall state. The visual "interactive" aesthetic of nostalgic voiceover with imagery creates what Burke described as audience finding, "vicariously," the "role of leader" in the Superman iconography (1969, p. 227). This pervasive theme in rhetoric's tendency to reflect theology is also described by theologian Jack Kuhatschek (1995) as *The Superman Syndrome*, or the linking of daily life to religious audiences' conception of grace—a suggestion prescribed increasingly in the trailer's narrative.

As Jor-El's statements become increasingly religious as the trailer progresses, the religious resonances climax with Jor-El's statement that paraphrases "The Most Popular Bible Verse", John 3:16 (O'Neal, 2018, May 13). The near perfect matching wording in Jor-El's phrase with the John verse demonstrates the seriously religious nature of the trailer, a continual movement toward encapsulating the religious mindset as the Superman Returns trailer's final phrase, "I've sent them you, my only son" mirrors John 3:16's "That he gave his only begotten son." As the most recognized scripture in the Bible is paraphrased in this trailer, along with its release to audiences who gathered to watch a rather overtly Christian allegory in *Narnia*, the religious implications of Jor-El's appeal to a Christian audience illustrates the appeal of the Jesus story being observable in blue tights and a red cape, appealing to religious audiences in the coded context of 9/11's "evocative nature" that was ripe with rhetorics of heroism (Hyde, p. 1). Barry Brummett (1991) describes this intimate identification process as "audience identifies with those texts that parallel their own particular experiences" that, in the text, are "articulated so that we understand that we are not alone" (p. 112). That comfort is bolstered as scriptural paraphrases are accompanied with the emotive power of music amid religious and war-themed cultural discussions. Within such a rhetorical opportunity, Bitzer describes the abstract but available interpretability of texts as comprising cultural milieux that is "loosely structured," where a rhetorical situation is presented as "simple" (pp. 11-12). Simplicity serves the brief, ninety-second theological resonance.

Imagery as Theological Window Dressing

The trailer's imagery is also ripe with symbols that become more explicit as a window dressing advertisement in its progression toward more blatant religious iconography. Three specific sequences in the trailer situate Superman with the sun, which, as a manifestation of nature, allows inanimate objects to drive the religious "rhythm" of the trailer and the film it previews, giving symbolic meaning to both the trailer's plot and images (Levine, 1974, p. 3). The first image of the mailbox of the Kent farm after the first phrase of the trailer, "Even though you've been raised" situates the mailbox, which display's Superman's given human name, Kent, next to the sun as it rises above the horizon. As the shot comes directly after this first phrase, it begins the trailer's ongoing association of Superman with the sun, a manifestation of the Jesus description in the Gospel of John as

the "light of the world" (King James Version Bible, 2022, John 8:12), from which the trailer's frequent use of Superman being associated with the sun offers religious resonance through biblical symbolism (Levine).

Imagery of Superman's association with the sun continues as he, as a young boy, elevates above corn fields. In this shot, Superman jumps directly in front of the sun, eclipsing it as the Superman theme increases in volume and speed, demonstrating his symbolic transcendence into heroism in comparison to the shot of the sun situated next to Kent farm. Foust describes the "active cognition and physical engagement" as the process where visual symbols replace the written word (p. 124). The religious symbolism of Jesus with the sun is illustrated in Kevin Duffy's (2022) analysis of the biblical Jesus being described as life sustaining, like the sun, and described as reigning over the earth, with which the trailer exhibits Superman as symbolic.

The third and most significantly iconographic image of Superman as the metaphoric light of the world, in his association with the sun, comes as the last phrase from Jor-El begins to be heard. In this shot Superman is majestically hovering above golden clouds and rising to eclipse the sun for a second time within seventeen seconds as Jor-El's wording, "They only lack the light to show the way" increases in volume as the brass Superman score intensifies at the moment Superman is placed in front of the sun, suggesting Superman's accepting his place as humanity's "way." Reflective of the biblical description from Jesus as "I am the light and the life of the world" (John 8:12), the Bible's similar declaration that the believing will be "in the clouds" to "meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:17), offers an increasingly explicit theological interpretation and display of religious window dressing as he is charged by Jor-El to guide humanity. Demosthenes Savramis (1987) calls this the "salvific personage" of Superman in film, as he offers a would-be "utopic universe near to popular religiosity" (p. 77).

In his final association with the sun, Superman slowly ascends to and stops in front of the sun as his father explains that Earth's people "lack the light to show the way." Through this, the crescendo nature of the trailer harmoniously combines imagery, sound, and biblical metaphor, thereby tracing Superman's ascension into a savior figure—all showing Superman's capacity to elevate first above cornfields, to being amongst clouds, and finally, in the last shot, above the earth and overseeing it as a protecting god-figure as his eyes are closed while he listens intently for the cries of humans who need him. As the John Williams 1978 *Superman* score increases along with the increasingly explicit religious iconography, Superman has been shown to grow in from boy to man, and increasingly eclipsing the sun, illustrative of the biblical description of Jesus, that "He will grow in wisdom and stature," and potentially readable as such, if not in the moment of viewership, then in interpretable discussion (Luke 2:52).

Late in the trailer a large body of people are standing in stunned awe as they look up at the sky, illustrative of what Gilles Deleuze (1986) calls the affection-image, a cinematic strategy where audience is prepared to experience other shots that are subsequently shown, thereby situating audience to experience both emotional and physical stimuli where "our immobilized receptive facet absorbs" what characters are experiencing (p. 66). Intensifying the affection-image's association between religious audience and the trailer's imagery, the shot of bystanders is accompanied with Jor-El's phrase "They only lack the light to show the way." At this moment a post 9/11 religious audience is offered similar enrapturement, identifying vicariously with the trailer's humans in seeing Superman in the sky as the affection-image's subsequently transferred shot is of Superman rising to and hovering in front of the sun. Thus, the affection-image displays the act of looking up into the sky at Superman as he is "the light to show the way" that Jor-El's voice articulates with ever-increasing volume in his voice and the score. By identifying with the people standing in the street as being "a great people" as their enraptured posture and expressions direct the affect experience, the religious association of an American icon character who will "light the way" is a growing explicit representation of the biblical description of Jesus as the "light of the world."

The trailer's last image of Superman comes directly after the image of him in front of the sun and in the clouds. In outer space, Superman is above the earth as his head appears higher than the top of the Earth, overlooking it. This omnipresent depiction of Superman is accompanied with Jor-El's final statement, "For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I've sent them you, my only son," paralleling the famous John 3:16 verse in sequence with a Christ-thematized being hovering above the earth as he waits for crying humans to save. In this shot Jesus's position over the earth is that of the sun, more explicitly aligning him as the representation of '*Jesus the Sun*,' spelled 'sun' in reference to the aged association of Jesus with the sun (Duffy). As a demonstration of Burkean identification, the offering in these scenes provide "the possibility of communion" with the text's capacity to parallel audience psyche with the presentation of symbolism (Burke, 1969, p. 115).

With Jor-El's final phrase, "my only son," his voice becomes shaky, implying a greater presence of emotion, illustrating the seriousness of Jor-El's sending his "only son" to Earth. This moment capstones the ideological window dressing as the John 3:16 paraphrase accompanies Superman, with his eyes closed in concentration, listens with concern for the world's needs, demonstrating how "The metaphor that informs the eloquence" as the trailer's nostalgia, symbolism, orchestra, and crescendo "lends it further force" in American audiences' post 9/11, hero-centric years (Hyde, p. 1).

Noteworthy is how the trailer's religious iconography continues in the film itself, released the following year. In the final sequences of Singer's film, Superman dies in space in a crucifix position, the same setting where he oversees the earth in the trailer. He is then later resurrected. Thus, the religious intimacy of the trailer, its film that was released a year later, and the appeal to dress films for polysemic readings allow Superman, as America's central icon, to be simultaneously religiously interpretable (Gordon, 2017), yet also allow the character to operate secularly as American popular culture's "final elixir" for identifying social trajectories (Stucky, 2006, p. 9).

Conclusions

Seventeen years after the release of the *Superman Returns* trailer, religious voices remain and are met with equally strong non-religious responses. Yet, campaigns such as the "He Gets Us" keeps theological appeals alive. At a center point between Singer's films and 2022 came another Superman tale, *Man of Steel*, which was also richly enmeshed in religious iconography in both the film itself as it also portrays Superman in a crucifix position and receiving a heavenly voiceover charge to save humanity, along with similarly portraying his death and resurrection in its sequels (Snyder, 2016; 2017). The continuation of these religious themes further bolster the interlinking of the Jesus narrative into Superman as a central icon in American religious culture. Thus, the appeal of Superman as crucified savior-symbol never seems to waiver.

Yet with the growing resistance to religion, as prognosticated in Singer's 2006 film in Lois Lane's continual claim that "the world doesn't need a savior," the appeal for religious resistance is prominent. Millennials and Generation Z are less religious than Baby Boomers and Generation X (Pew Research Center, 2018), the latter of whom *Superman Returns* would have been the film's target audience. As current younger generations are commonly more resistant to religious faith, an element of the 'Generation Wars' (Bristow, 2019), Superman's form and purpose continues to be a site to identify the debate for American identity.

Man of Steel (Snyder, 2013) actor Henry Cavill's return as Superman has long been debated and speculated as unlikely due to Warner Brothers' efforts to create more diverse versions of Superman in recent years, specifically as a Black hero (Behbakht, 2022), and also as bisexual (Betancourt, 2021). Yet, religious-focused responses continue in this battle for utilizing and advertising Superman as a symbolic Jesus. Superman returns in the post credits scene of DC Comics' *Black Adam* (Collet-Serra, 2022), appearing as the traditional figure (Abdulbaki, 2022) who, only a few years ago, was placed into crucifix positions and died, was resurrected, and more recently returned in the classical religious form of the hero with his appearance in Black Adam (Holmes, 2022), continuing the history of Cavill treated as a Superman Christ figure. Thus, for now, the appeal for a religious audience seeing Superman in his religious iconography continues amid cultural identity and generation debates while advertisers labor to find the right modes to window dress the ideologies of their audience tastes.

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