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How Hans Zimmer Created a More Hopeful Superman Than Zack Snyder

Over the course of about seven years, Christopher Nolan offered his take on what a superhero might look like in the real, modern world through his work with the Dark Knight Trilogy. From *Batman Begins* (2005) to *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), Nolan tried to develop a grounded Batman story that could feasibly happen in the present-day world. While there will always be some suspension of disbelief in tales of superheroes, many wondered what a similar take might look like with a less realistic character, such as Superman. After *Superman* (1978), starring Christopher Reeve, the character's film presence was portrayed as larger-than-life in a more idealized version of the world. This continued the brand refresh that was *Superman Returns* (2006), starring Brandon Routh. Despite being in a more modern setting, the movie still acted as a loose sequel to the films starring Reeve, being ever-indulgent in its overtly hopeful and optimistic ideologies. So, when Nolan was said to produce a film about the character, many expected a more grounded, realistic tone, while maintaining those qualities of idealism and brightness that Superman has been known to embrace. However, upon the release of Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* (2013), many chastised the overly bleak tone and violent direction that the film took. In a review written by Matt Zoller Seitz, he describes the titular hero as "a glum hunk, defending a planet so scared of apocalyptic conspiracy that it assumes anyone who presents himself as a good guy must have ulterior motives" (Seitz). Despite the character's history of being used as a beacon for hope, *Man of Steel* instead uses Superman's power to turn the world

against him, as well as to evoke destructive imagery of a city skyline being torn down, building by building.

However, tucked away in this film is a score and main theme from composer Hans Zimmer that fights these darker undertones and takes on the old form of hope and optimism. In fact, this main theme from the film, “An Ideal of Hope”, has been used in the trailers and marketing for the upcoming film *Justice League* (2017), set in the same universe. In the trailers, the piece is heard as an uplifting battle cry while each hero smiles before entering the fray again. How is it that such a hopeful song and theme can be written for a character and movie that is riddled with such doubtful and dark themes? Zimmer and Snyder provide mixed messages as to what Superman’s place is in the modern world. While Zimmer’s theme offers up music of hope and optimism, Snyder’s world and imagery offer destruction and doubt.

Before *Man of Steel* hit theatres, Superman served as a cultural icon, on a level similar to that of Mickey Mouse or Mario. In fact, one article from USA Today is titled “Why Superman is the greatest American hero” (Truitt). In it, Brian Truitt discusses some of the character’s origins and how his they have come to embody “the truth, justice, and the American way.” The author talks to several figures in the comic book industry who point out the ideals of Superman that come so close to home. “He’s always been the ultimate immigrant story,” said Mark Waid, a writer in the field. Here, he talks about Superman’s comic book beginnings, as a young alien baby sent away from his dying planet to grow up in a small town in Kansas. Artist Jim Lee added, “It was all about, can you adapt and fit into a society. What’s aspirational about Superman is that he is about truth, justice, and the American Way, but he seeks to be a global champion” (Truitt). Superman, through these lenses, is seen as an American icon, with hope and

brightness always a key aspect of the character, even persevering through some tough story arcs. However, in *Man of Steel*, Zack Snyder tried to avoid the “boy scout” approach to the character.

In this film, the origin of the Superman is largely the same: his home planet of Krypton is destroyed while Clark/Superman (Henry Cavill) is sent to Earth and fellow Kryptonian General Zod (Michael Shannon) is sentenced to be imprisoned in another dimension called the Phantom Zone. On Earth, Clark’s ship crashes into the heart of Smallville, Kansas. The audience is then treated to two interwoven stories of Clark’s upbringing and discovery of powers against his nomad-esque lifestyle as an adult. Eventually, Clark comes across a cave left by his biological father that explains his previous life and why he has these powers. It’s here where Clark receives his traditional Superman suit and learns how to fly. At this point, General Zod has escaped his prison and is on a course to Earth to rebuild Krypton, with or without Clark’s help. While Clark acts as Superman to fight against Zod, the government attempts to bring Clark into custody since they see him as yet another threat. In the final act of the film, Clark fights Zod and his co-conspirators while they try to terraform the Earth to be a new Krypton, levelling cities and killing millions in process. In the end, Clark kills Zod to end the disaster, and Superman emerges victorious, although the government and others are still weary of him and his abilities.

While the first half of *Man of Steel* seems to hold the origins of Superman intact, essentially immigrating to Earth and rising up from humble beginnings to use his powers for good, the second half is where problems come up and this new interpretation of the character strays from the norm. Instead of portraying Superman as a symbol of hope and optimism in this modern setting, he is seen as an angsty superhero who doesn’t know his place in the world. One particular scene that emphasizes this characterization is after he kills Zod. Surrounded by the rubble and debris from buildings around him, giving shocking imagery of a 9/11-esque disaster,

Superman kneels on the ground by a dead body and screams with tears in his eyes. This isn't to say that the character can't be given an emotional story arc, but so much of the film is spent trying to build up the idea of a hopeful Superman. In the middle of the film, Lois Lane (Amy Adams), asks Clark about the S on his suit, which is meant to represent his house on Krypton, as a symbol that means hope in their language. At the very end, Superman destroys a satellite that the military is using to spy on him, and uses it to tell a joke about being "as American as it gets". But Snyder mixes these messages so that we are told that Superman is a symbol for hope, but he barely cracks a smile throughout almost two and half hour runtime. In the end, the audience is left not knowing how to feel about Superman and his actions from the film, which is a rarity in his place as a cultural icon. If it weren't for Hans Zimmer's theme playing through the credits, the tone may be shifted more towards the side of doubt.

However, before Zimmer's theme "An Ideal of Hope" can be analyzed, it is important to understand some of the concepts and theory used in his work. In music, there are two basic ways to break down each chord: whether it is major, or minor. In nature, everything is major, sounding natural pleasant to the human ear. In fact, if a single pitch is played on any sort of instrument, the overtones that reverberate over it build a major chord. Minor chords are more manmade and are used to give darker tones, build suspense, and express sadness. Extra notes can be added to these triad chords to give an extra layer in depth to the sound. In this theme, Zimmer uses a decent amount of major 9ths, which are notes that take place right in between the first two notes of a basic chord. These often give another feeling of "major-ness" for lack of a better term. Zimmer also uses major 4ths in his chords, which are often called "leading tones" that our ear automatically wants to resolve down to a major chord.

This piece from Zimmer is very interesting because he utilizes so many of these musical ideas to inspire thoughts of hope, happiness, and excitement within the listener. In fact, in the very beginning of the piece, the piano plays a C Major chord, before using a few suspended chords to serve as the transition into the more upbeat, percussive portion of the song. At the point where the violins enter the fray, they simply play a C Major scale over top of both major and perfect intervals. Consistently, when a major chord is played and the ear expects a minor chord to be played next, Zimmer defies those expectations and brings in a major chord that isn't necessarily in the same key, but instead borrows notes from other keys to keep those major themes in play. While it's difficult to put music into words, since the purpose of music is to do the opposite, all of these musical ideas are traditionally used to offer up sounds of happiness, and using so many of them at once helps Zimmer's purpose in giving Superman the hopeful, happy theme that the character is usually accustomed to.

Now, in the case of "An Ideal of Hope", this musical theme could be considered a "leitmotif". The book *The Art of Watching Films* defines this as "the repetition of a single musical theme or phrase to announce the reappearance of a certain character" (Petrie and Boggs 258). While this song is more seamlessly woven into the framework of the score, it can still be heard at various points within *Man of Steel*. One key scene that this theme occurs is when Clark is exiting his Fortress of Solitude with his Superman suit for the first time. As he walks out into the snow with his father's encouraging monologue echoing to the audience, Clark gets ready to fly for the first time. He stumbles a couple of times before truly taking the air, but when he does, the music picks up and Clark is smiling to match the major tendencies of the score. This is one of the first times where Clark truly begins to accept his abilities and decides to use them for good,

an idea that Zimmer's music enhances to the fullest extent. Unfortunately, it is followed by a grim story.

“An Ideal of Hope” is a theme for Superman that plays off of his more hopeful roots and offers brief respites of brightness in an otherwise dark film. This message aligns with some of Snyder's apparent intentions to give a sense of hope to this modern take on the character, but more often than not, clashes with the bleak, desperate tones that the audience is left with. Not only does this mix the messaging of what Superman is supposed to be in *Man of Steel*, but it also maligns Warner Bros. future plans to extend their universe of DC Comics characters. While this odd characterization continued in the sequel *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), it appears that the studio is attempting to breathe new life back into the character in *Justice League* later this year. However, no matter how much they readjust this iteration of Superman, it won't change their past missteps in sending these mixed signals. The marketing for *Justice League* displays a monument for Superman from the citizens of Metropolis, even when their care for the hero was never displayed in *Man of Steel*. In fact, the original movie showed that more people doubted his intentions than trusted him. With these sudden changes to the mythos of the film series, their adjustments to future films may retrospectively affect *Man of Steel*. While it certainly helps this interpretation of the iconic superhero, the damage may already be done to the character. Even though Snyder's original vision for Superman may be more or less erased, it is now accident that Zimmer's interpretation is still being used to this day.

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