

Original Research Article

Narrative of "individualism" in north American superhero films

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Abstract: This paper examines the changing narrative logic of individualism in North American superhero films from the classical period to the streaming media era. Instead of treating superhero films only as products of the entertainment industry, it focuses on how cinematic texts imagine the relationship between the self and the community. Through close reading of representative works, this paper argues that superhero narratives have moved through three major forms: Vertical salvation, identity anxiety, and relational individualism. This change does not mean that individualism has disappeared. Rather, superhero films have gradually shifted from celebrating the isolated savior to exploring responsibility, social identity, trauma, and emotional connection.

Keywords: superhero films; individualism; cultural psychology; identity anxiety; relational individualism

1. Introduction

Superhero films are one of Hollywood's most influential popular genres. Their lasting appeal comes from a basic tension: The superhero is an extraordinary individual, but his or her power must be justified through service to others. This tension makes the genre a useful site for observing how American culture understands the relationship between personal freedom and collective responsibility.

In superhero narratives, individualism is not a fixed concept. In different historical moments, it takes different forms. In the classical period, the superhero often appears as a figure of vertical salvation who protects the existing order from above. Around the turn of the millennium, heroes become more ordinary and more anxious, and their powers are linked to hidden identities, social exclusion, and moral burden. In the Marvel Universe and streaming media era, individual heroism is increasingly reorganized through teams, emotional bonds, trauma, and transmedia networks. The following discussion follows this three-stage structure and examines how each stage reshapes the meaning of individualism.

2. The cultural genealogy of individualism and the emergence of superhero types

The narrative foundation of superhero films is closely connected with the tradition of American individualism. American individualism does not simply mean private self-interest. It also contains a public dimension: The individual must prove his or her value by contributing to the community. Superhero stories dramatize this contradiction in a highly visible form. The hero is exceptional, but the hero's legitimacy depends on whether that exceptionality can protect ordinary people.

Comic-book storytelling also strengthens this individualist pattern. Heroes repeatedly face new crises, and the audience is invited to believe that personal agency can still repair a damaged social order. When superhero stories entered Hollywood cinema on a large scale, this pattern was adapted for mass audiences. The superhero became both a fantasy of personal power and a moral figure who had to seek public legitimacy^[1].

For this reason, individualism is not merely a secondary theme of the superhero genre. It is one of the genre's basic narrative engines. The superhero's double identity, secret life, moral code, and relation to the public all return to the same question: how can an exceptional individual live within, and act for, a shared social world?

3. Vertical salvation in the classical period

3.1. Superman and the fortress of solitude

The 1978 film *Superman* established an important paradigm for modern superhero cinema. Christopher Reeve's Superman is presented as almost divine: He has overwhelming physical power, clear moral judgment, and a visible commitment to public good. The film repeatedly contrasts Clark Kent's ordinary appearance with Superman's transcendent ability. This double identity turns solitude into part of the hero's dignity. He must remain close to ordinary society, but he can never fully belong to it.

This structure can be seen in the film's rescue scenes. Superman does not transform society through political action or collective organization. Instead, he intervenes at moments of crisis, saving individuals and restoring order. His power is therefore vertical: It descends from above, solves the immediate danger, and then returns the world to normal. Classical superhero individualism is built on this confidence that a morally pure individual can protect society without changing its basic structure.

3.2. Order concept under vertical salvation

Superman's individualism is not rebellious individualism. Although the character has obvious connections with the idea of the superman, the film does not present him as someone who overturns existing values. On the contrary, Superman uses absolute power to defend the existing moral and social order. His legitimacy comes from restraint: He is powerful enough to dominate the world, but he chooses to serve it.

This point is central to the classical model. The hero is above ordinary people, yet he is not outside morality. He represents an ideal version of the individual who can rise above institutional weakness and social disorder while still protecting the collective contract. In this stage, individualism is optimistic because it imagines that a single virtuous subject can still stand for public justice^[2].

4. Identity anxiety at the millennium turning point

4.1. The temporal turning point of narrative transformation

Around the turn of the millennium, superhero films began to move away from the image of the distant savior. *X-Men* (2000) and *Spider-Man* (2002) are useful examples of this change. Their heroes are still exceptional, but they are placed much closer to ordinary social life. Power in these films is not treated simply as a blessing. It also brings secrecy, pressure, isolation, and conflict with the surrounding world.

This change moved superhero narratives from vertical salvation to horizontal anxiety. Heroes now stood beside the audience rather than above it. Their main problem was not only how to defeat external enemies, but also how to live with a split identity. The superhero became a figure through whom modern audiences could recognize the pressure of self-performance, social judgment, and moral responsibility.

4.2. Spider-man and ordinary divinity

Peter Parker in *Spider-Man* is significant because he brings superhero individualism into everyday life. He is not an alien god or a wealthy adult. He is a student who worries about money, family, school, love, and social embarrassment. The sentence "With great power comes great responsibility" changes the meaning of superpower. Power is not a privilege that separates Peter from others; it is a responsibility that makes his ordinary life harder.

The film gives this idea concrete dramatic form through Peter's repeated choices between personal desire and public duty. He wants recognition, romantic happiness, and a normal private life, but the superhero identity constantly interrupts those desires. His mask protects his loved ones, yet it also isolates him from them. In this sense, *Spider-Man* turns individualism into a burden of self-management. The hero must perform strength in public while hiding vulnerability in private.

4.3. X-men and mutant metaphor

The *X-Men* franchise pushes identity anxiety into a broader social and political field. Mutant powers function as visible or invisible identity markers. They make the characters special, but they also expose them to fear, exclusion, and surveillance. The problem of individual difference is therefore no longer

limited to private morality. It becomes a question of recognition, rights, and social belonging^[3].

Professor X and Magneto represent two responses to this pressure. Professor X seeks coexistence and gradual integration, while Magneto believes that oppressed individuals must resist domination through force. Their conflict shows that individual rights cannot always be defended by isolated personal virtue. In *X-Men*, superpower is not simply a symbol of strength. It is also a sign of trauma and social division. The millennial superhero thus becomes a cultural allegory of identity politics and minority anxiety.

5. Relational individualism in the marvel universe era

5.1. From iron man to the avengers

Iron Man (2008) opened the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but its hero is not simply another version of the classical savior. Tony Stark first appears as a confident and wealthy arms dealer, a man whose sense of self is tied to technology, money, and public attention. The origin story then turns this confidence against him. After seeing the damage caused by his own weapons, Stark has to rethink what his talent and power are for. The first Iron Man suit is therefore more than a tool of escape. It also carries his guilt, his will to survive, and his attempt to correct himself.

Tony Stark's individualism is unstable in a way that earlier superhero individualism often was not. He does not hide behind a secret identity for long. When he says, "I am Iron Man," he breaks with the older tradition of the masked hero. At the same time, this openness makes the hero into a public image. Stark is not only saving people; he is watched, discussed, marketed, blamed, and judged.

The formation of the Avengers in 2012 further changes the structure of superhero value. The team does not erase individualism, because each hero still has a distinct personality, trauma, ability, and moral position. What changes is the condition under which individual power becomes meaningful. In *The Avengers*, no single hero can resolve the crisis alone. The narrative value of the hero is produced through conflict, cooperation, and mutual dependence^[4]. Individualism is therefore reorganized as relational individualism.

5.2. Streaming media and the de-hierarchization of heroes

In the streaming media era, superhero narratives turn more strongly toward private emotion and psychological repair. *WandaVision* is a clear example. Instead of building its story around a conventional world-saving mission, the series uses the form of American sitcoms to stage Wanda's grief. The changing television styles are not decorative; they become a visual structure for denial, memory, and emotional control^[5].

Wanda's magic gives her a place where loss seems to stop for a while. What looks like a private fantasy, however, also reveals a changed kind of superhero story. Wanda is not mainly trying to defeat a villain outside herself. She is trying to hold together an inner world that has been broken by grief. The problem is that this repair is built at the expense of others. The people trapped in Westview are forced to live inside her pain. In this sense, *WandaVision* turns personal trauma into a shared ethical problem: Wanda's emotion is private in origin, but public in its consequences.

5.3. The collective rise of anti-heroes

The popularity of anti-heroes also expands the boundaries of superhero individualism. Characters such as Venom and Deadpool weaken the solemn moral image of the classical hero. Venom presents identity as a parasitic and unstable coexistence, while Deadpool uses self-mockery and direct address to undermine heroic seriousness. These characters do not simply reject individualism; they expose its selfish, comic, and marketable sides.

This anti-heroic mode shows that contemporary audiences may no longer fully accept the pure savior myth. They are attracted to flawed figures who act from desire, anger, humor, or survival instinct rather than noble duty alone^[6]. Traditional heroism is therefore not destroyed, but it is made less sacred. Individualism becomes more ironic and more openly connected with pleasure, consumption, and self-display.

5.4. The ghost of individualism in transmedia networks

The transmedia structure of contemporary Marvel narratives further complicates the logic of individualism. In a media network made up of films, streaming series, comics, games, and fan productions,

the superhero is no longer a self-contained figure. Each hero becomes a cultural node that is repeatedly reinterpreted across platforms.

At the same time, fan communities transform individual emotional attachment into collective participation. Viewers discuss, rewrite, imitate, and extend superhero stories online. Individualism therefore survives in a new form: Not as the solitary hero standing alone above the crowd, but as emotional investment circulating through networks of audiences and media texts. The problem is that visual spectacle can also reduce individuality to armor, symbols, and special effects. Contemporary superhero cinema must therefore decide whether it can still preserve real concern for the hero's inner world while operating inside an expanding industrial system.

6. Conclusion

The individualistic narrative in North American superhero films has evolved from vertical salvation to identity anxiety and then to relational individualism. This transformation does not mean that individualism has disappeared. It means that the genre has changed the way individual value is justified. In the classical period, the hero proves himself through moral purity and decisive rescue. Around the millennium, the hero is defined by hidden identity, social pressure, and responsibility. In the Marvel Universe and streaming era, the hero's value increasingly depends on relationships, teams, trauma, and audience networks.

The history of superhero cinema therefore shows more than a change in film style. It also suggests a changing idea of what an individual hero can mean. Earlier films could still imagine one powerful figure standing above the crowd and restoring order. Later films place that figure inside relationships, emotional damage, and social consequences. The superhero is still exceptional, but this exceptionality has to be answered for. Contemporary superhero films keep returning to this tension between personal power and shared responsibility.

About the author

Jing Li (2003.06-), female, Han ethnicity, from Shangqiu City, Henan Province, holds a bachelor's degree. Her research focus is on exploring the cinematic representation of the evolution of American individualist cultural psychology.

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