First of all, I feel obligated to admit, up-front, that I am not a die-hard Superman fan. Growing up in the 1980s, I remember his superhero presence looming large in my popular culture experiences, but because I was so young when the Man of Steel debuted on the big screen, I never wondered how he had come to figure so significantly into American media. For me, Christopher Reeve simply was Superman, and I have never known a time when he did not exist in all his red-caped glory.

Therefore, I had practically no expectations for the return of the icon, but reading the press leading up to the film, I had a sense that there was something significant about this long-awaited venture, Superman Returns. And, as it turns out, I was right. For me, the film was a unique pastiche of nostalgia and awakening; it served to re-create something I’d half-forgotten at the same time that it presented Superman in a way that I had never seen him before: as the ultimate symbol for a nation teetering on the brink of postmodernity. In an era of constant change and uncertainty, we find ourselves searching our shifting social and technological landscapes for something familiar. At once full of idealized longing and poignant melancholy, Superman Returns reveals the impact of the potentially destructive uncertainty of postmodern realities.

And who better, I say, to symbolize American socio-political transformation, than the figure who is arguably the most significant superhero icon of the 20th century? Superman was the ideal that spawned the comic book industry, and his initial popularity was fueled by the nation’s turmoil. As Wright (2001) observes, “Postindustrial American society raised new tensions. . . twentieth-century America demanded a superhero who could resolve the tensions of individuals in an increasingly urban, consumer-driven and anonymous mass society” (p. 10). Since that time, the iconic significance of Superman has been reestablished through his various representations since his Depression-era rise to fame. As Brad Meltzer, who has written for Superman in more than one DC Comic series, explained to USA Today, “Just as the Greek gods represented their society, Superman is like the avatar of the United States. It’s how we want to see ourselves” (Breznican, 2006, ¶ 7). Because of this perceived sense of cultural “ownership,” Superman transcends the private sphere in a way that is not typical of comic superheroes, and this acceptance of Superman as a cultural icon, his visibility in print, film, television, and beyond has only perpetuated his mythic status. As Drucker and Cathcart (1994) point out, “public places become important as media of communication used for transmission of the hero myth and significant
communal public rituals of hero creation and maintenance” (p. 6). By penetrating so many public spaces of communication, the Superman mythos has become a communal icon who has transformed over the years in response to the shifting media of public spaces.

What's notable about how we see Singer's Superman, then, is that he is at once fully recognizable as the familiar icon—simple, clean, and handsome with his trademark curl—and yet, he is distant, intense, vulnerable, and isolated. He is not exactly the Man of Steel we knew from comic books or previous films—the self-assured, impervious archetype—but he's not exactly something altogether different, either. This same tension between old and new pervades nearly every aspect of what Stephanie Zacharek (2006) calls “a modern-day fable marked by a strong sense of continuity with the past, and not just the recent past” (¶ 4). Indeed, the production design and lighting radiate with art-deco influences, expressed in the lines and hues of both indoor and outdoor sets. In keeping with this theme, the fabulous costuming—tweed suits, hats and flowing dresses reminiscent of 1940s movie-star garb—somehow seems perfectly appropriate among digital picture phones and news footage on terrorism.

It is this complex quality of the film that I believe makes it the perfect period piece for this particular philosophical and cultural moment in American history because it demonstrates how deeply steeped we are in nostalgia in the midst of a multi-media, hyper-technological, rapidly-shifting society. In Superman Returns, Bryan Singer (2006) successfully rewrites the legend against a distantly contemporary, yet virtually ageless setting that merges the thematically old with the technologically new. This tension between old and new speaks to the philosophical and cultural transformation expressed in the multiplicitous term “post-modernism.” As Doll (1993) explains,

post-modernism, as the hyphen indicates, looks to the past at the same time it transcends the past. This means the new is built, often literally, on the old. In this complex relationship, the future is not so much a break with, or antithesis to, the past as it is a transformation of it. (p. 8)

Similarly, Singer builds the “new” Superman on the old superhuman archetype, rewriting the icon in a way that is both appealing to postmodern uncertainties and reminiscent of a time when adoring young women flocked to stage and screen to worship the handsome male stars of the afternoon shows. This was not the original fan base that propelled into stardom the “old” Superman, who was created in the 1930s by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, two shy, bespectacled comic strip writers who dreamt of the kind of power and success that their character symbolized (Wright, 2001). However, Singer’s handsome, brooding idol, a humanized, romanticized version of his predecessor, draws us into a fantasy of a past that never existed. By recreating Superman in the likes of worship-worthy, early 20th-century matinee idols like John Barrymore, Singer generates a model of “a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal,” a superhero simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1). As Zacharek (2006) observes, this Superman is a “matinee idol” in a decidedly a “post-matinee” America (¶ 8).

True to the implicit message of the film, this is a post-matinee moment, a time in which we are desperately clinging to the nostalgia of a matinee world, where Truth with a capital T still existed, where meanings and identities, particularly the gender roles that propelled the matinee idols into hero worship, were stable and dependable, while at the same time embracing a knowledge society where certainties and binaries no longer exist.

In the context of postmodernity, Singer’s film provides a unique example of Giroux’s (2004) supposition that “culture is the primary sphere in which individuals, groups, and institutions engage in the art of translating the diverse and multiple relations that mediate between private
life and public concerns” (p. 62). As a nexus of cultural translation, Superman reminds us of the similar tension that underlies our fascination with superheroes, a subtle friction that Fingeroth (2004) calls “superhero comic consciousness”—“the hope (and fear) that there may be more to this world than what we see.” It is precisely this tension, this uncertainty, this sense that there is something lurking beyond the seemingly “safe” facade of reality, of truth, that makes this moment decidedly post-modern.

What does it mean to accept what Lyotard recognized in 1979 as “the postmodern condition”? It depends. The term, which has become faddishly common in the popular lexicon, applies to a multitude of disciplines as well as multiple tenets and, as it is often employed to recognize the instability of meaning and innate truth, the term is nearly impossible to define. However, generally and philosophically speaking, it is most closely associated with Lyotard’s (1984) collapse of overarching, unifying themes, in The Postmodern Condition. Postmodernism calls into question themes or “grand narratives,” such as race, gender, and class, which seek to explain the nature of humanity. It is a movement of transformations that is seen as having grown out of the modern era of progressive art, architecture, music, and literature that occurred in the early decades of the 20th century. Along with the blurring of race, gender, and class distinctions, the meta-narratives called into question by postmodernism include other grand, large-scale theories and philosophies of the world, such as the progress of history, the potential to know everything through science, and the possibility of absolute freedom. Lyotard (1984) argues that we have ceased to believe that narratives of this kind are adequate to represent and contain us all. We have come to understand that we simply just can’t explain everything or make sense of the world by employing a traditional framework. We have become alert to difference, diversity, the incompatibility of our aspirations, beliefs, and desires.

If you are open-minded and attuned to theoretical trends, the dismissal of metanarratives might not sound particularly threatening at first, but the philosophical jargon I present here belies the volatile potential of this symbolic release. These ideas—that things are always getting better, that science has the ultimate answers to everything and will save us from our own destructive ignorance, and that indisputable absolutes exist—are so pivotal to our identities as Americans. Ever heard of rugged individualism, statistical certainty, the American dream? Or consider the descriptive terms we use to write our identities, straight, middle class, Caucasian: how do we understand these terms, indeed, how do we even know who and what we are, in the absence of essential meaning? The persistent threads of post-modernity—ambivalence, ambiguity, relativism, pluralism—add those to “Truth, Justice and the American Way” and what you have is a nihilistic nightmare. The maelstrom of inconsistencies that is this moment is precisely why the world does, indeed, need Superman. I would argue that the Superman we need is precisely the one Singer presents, because Superman, like any good superhero, is representative of the society in which he emerged. As Fingeroth (2004) has observed, what Superman has symbolized to us has changed over time:

In the 1950s, he may have been hunting commies. In the 1970s, he may have been clearing a framed peace activist against a corrupt judicial system. Either way—the hero does the right thing. Perhaps more importantly, he knows what the right thing is. (p. 14, emphasis in original)

In a post-binary world where the distinction between right and wrong are no longer clear, that kind of certainty is something that we both fear, and, at the same time, hope to realize.

Thus, Superman Returns serves as a public arena for the negotiations of these tensions, a cultural text that brings to light our private concerns, hopes mingled with fears, that are brought
about by our shifting subjectivities. In this way, the film, and the icon serves as an American cultural text, a testimony to Giroux’s (2004) assertion that culture “plays a central role in producing narratives, metaphors, and images that exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think of themselves and their relationship to others” (p. 62). Allow me to include a bit of autobiography here, a personal narrative of the problematic tendencies of postmodern philosophical thought, which illustrates why this film the world, or at least, my world, needs a Superhero.

In 2001, at the ripe old age of 25 and already a wife and mother of two young children, I began a doctoral program in Curriculum Studies, where I had an earth-shattering confrontation with educational philosophy. To satisfy my constant need for reflection, I had been keeping a journal since beginning graduate school a few years earlier, and I recorded there much of the inner turmoil I experienced as I progressed through my doctoral coursework. Apparently, nervous breakdowns are one of the implicit requirements of doctoral study, so it should come as no surprise that, by my second semester, my head was spinning. Picture here Kevin Spacey’s supremely bald Lex Luthor, Evil reincarnated, his hands poised delicately over the fortress crystals, beautiful, brilliant, blinding instruments of doom. “Possibilities,” he says. “Endless possibilities” (Singer, 2006). It was precisely those possibilities, the awareness of the infinite transformation of meaning, the utter emptiness of essence, that terrified me. Here’s how I explained my fears, which, appropriately, suddenly came to light, not in the middle of a doctoral course lecture, but in the context of a film.

I’m scared. Scared to tears. I can’t seem to stop the spinning sometimes and I feel anxious. Overwhelmed. I did not want this, did not ask for this, but I am not the person I was before. I can’t go back. There is no clarity, no more than glimpses. I am so afraid. I am trying not to give in to the fear but it draws me in like a magnet. Why did I have to know this now?

More than ever I hear those lyrics echoing like a theme song—there’s more than one answer to these questions pointing me in a crooked line, and the less I seek my source for some definitive, closer I am to fine…. But you can never stay there. You always fall back into the routine, go back to making the same kinds of decisions, in the same way as before…. The fear is beginning to fade now as those images of Fight Club (How powerful is the mind?) already are drifting into the ether.

For a moment, perhaps I moved beyond myself, into the limit space, beyond the boundaries of my own understanding. How can light be so warm and so blinding all at once? Alone with myself, that’s how this all started. We fill our lives with things, a million talking, noisy things so that we don’t have to be alone with ourselves. We pretend that the biggest challenge is out there, in the world somewhere, between the levers and pulleys of power, when the ultimate obstacle lies within us all.

As I wrote this reflection and many others that would follow, I was caught up in that historical moment that I believe Superman Returns so brilliantly illustrates, fully aware of the massive transformations that had emptied my mind of clarity, of the simultaneous detriment of absolutes, and yet, at the same time, I couldn’t help wishing for a return to certainty.

This is the moment in which we find Bryan Singer’s new Superman, a moment in which those shifting public spaces have reinterpreted the communal rituals of hero creation to reflect the kind of icon that a transformed society demands. The Superman of today is a far cry from his invincible, perfectly drawn comic book counterpart. As Drucker and Cathcart (1994) observe, the medium
was the culprit, the force that inadvertently unmasked the superhero by revealing the hero's lack of perfection. Superman could probably withstand the devastating revelation of his double identity, but not the wrinkles which marred his uniform and suggested that perhaps behind that frayed exterior could be found a torn and tattered soul—someone closer to us. (p. 60)

He is and is not the Superman of the past. He's simple and clean and warm, and yet he's isolated, tormented, and vulnerable. The son is the father, and the father is the son. He might be in love with Lois and he might be gay. His return figures perfectly into his big screen history at the same time that it rewrites that same history by obliterating the events of the third and fourth films. There is no apology for this revision, no attempt to convince us that no one actually notices that Clark Kent and Superman have reappeared at precisely the same moment, no effort to explain how no one ever notices Clark's absence when he's off saving the world, which is all fine because it doesn't have to make sense. As Richard Eckersley (1999) explains,

That’s postmodernity for you, and I sometimes think that the appeal of postmodernism to many people, myself included, is that it relieves us of the effort of trying to make sense of a world that no longer seems to make sense. (¶ 7)

Beyond the dismissal of sense-making, I like the way Walter Chaw (2006) articulates this juxtaposition of old and new, past and presence, clarity and uncertainty. He calls this Superman “a figure at a juncture in the middle of pagan and Christian just as he's become something like a transitional icon bridging science and religion, classic comics and the modern superhero era, and Americana and the Wasteland” (¶ 1). It is this in-between, this third space between the binaries of good and evil, right and wrong, past and present, meaning and emptiness, that is so relevant to the locations of our postmodern identities. Chaw continues, noting that Superman is

a character warring between what he wants and the destiny his father has charted for him—and aren’t we all. When a child in Superman Returns takes a picture with his cell phone that we recognize as the cover for Superman’s debut, 1938’s “Action Comics” No. 1, it's at once bemused and in love with Richard Donner’s original vision of the hero, but most of all it’s eloquent in its assured, maybe even prickly, recognition of where we were and what we’ve become. (¶ 1)

It is in this moment that these terms: eloquence, assured, prickly, can share a context, and wouldn’t it be nice, then, to welcome the return of a flawless superhero, who could help us recreate the distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong. But Singer’s Superman is not a superhero with an essence. He is conflicted, he drifts in and out of complexity, only able to define himself not in terms of what he is, but what he no longer is: infallible, pure, unadulterated. Like Singer’s Superman and city of Metropolis, as Toulmin (1982) observes in Return to Cosmology,

We must reconcile ourselves to...the thought that we no longer live in the ‘modern’ world. The ‘modern’ world is now a thing of the past...[Our post-modern world] has not yet discovered how to define itself in terms of what it is, but only in terms of what it has just-now ceased to be. (p. 254, emphasis in original)

There is a sadness in that loss of certainty, a mourning that I explored through poetry:

' Theory creeps in
' Trickles into your veins
Settles in your bones  
Fills your soul with emptiness  
Brings unbearable lightness  
Clouds the still life  
Steals your peace  
Promises you possibility  
Leaves you aching  
And raw  
And afraid  
And the you that was  
Is no more.

When we are confronted with uncertainty of our times, the simultaneous shattering of both the frightening fundamentalism that fuels holocaust, genocide, and terrorism, as well as our beacons of progress, meaning, and identity, we’re not sure whether to feel light and hopeful or raw and afraid. We have found ourselves, as Marshall Berman (1983) said, “in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world, and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are” (p. 15). We are confronted with both limitlessness and the absence of absolute freedom, if, that is, we allow ourselves to arrive at such an awareness. Otherwise, we can simply bemoan the sweeping cultural and philosophical changes and call them trash, not unlike the critics who scoffed at the idea of a post-Reeve revisionist Superman. Here’s how Michael Horton puts it:

Call me dismissive, but I cannot get beyond the notion that pop postmodernism is little more than the triumph of popular culture with its obsessions with technology, mass communications, mass marketing, the therapeutic orientation, and conspicuous consumption. Postmodernism—or whatever one wishes to designate our brief moment in history—is the culture in which Sesame Street is considered educational, “sexy” is the term of approbation for everything from jeans to doctoral theses, watching sit-coms together at dinner is called “family time,”...films sell products, and a barrage of images and sound bites selected for their entertainment and commercial value is called “news.” (2006, ¶ 6)

While Horton certainly paints a fairly accurate picture of contemporary American society, I think post-modernism cannot be simply explained as the triumph of what he sees as cultural “trash” over high art and high standards. The technological and cultural changes that have taken place in the 20th century have profoundly transformed our understanding of the world and ourselves, whether or not we accept or value those changes. In light of these changes, what we need today is not the Superman of the 1980s, predictable and triumphant, the icon of who we as a nation thought we were in the world, the harbinger of all that was good and right and rugged and western, the savior of democracy. As much as we may long for that fundamental certainty that has long since been shattered by more holocaust, genocide, and terrorism, what we need is a way to reconcile and confront a transformed world. As Drucker and Cathcart (1994) describe, the renegotiation of a public sphere that is characterized by relentless, pervasive visibility, has transformed the role of the hero:

It is not catharsis that the audience seeks, but rather revelation. Most persons, even heroes, would like to protect their wrinkles from public exposure, but it is the collective medium that has created a national pastime—the revelation of the wrinkle. An audience
nurtured by penetrating media comes to expect the elimination of the public face and demands insight into the private. (p. 60)

That “revelation of the wrinkle” pierces the invincibility of the once unshakable hero, and from the rubble of certainty emerges the Matinee Man of Steel, a fallible figure, someone closer to us.

Of course, there will always be the intriguing notion of the impossible that Superman symbolizes, but in light of the massive, ever-expanding and potentially destructive technological capabilities we are faced with, whimsy alone is insufficient. As reviewer Anton Bitel (2006) observes,

those gravity-defying aerobatics and bullet-blocking feats may just be so much fantasy, but then so in the end is the American Dream that is embodied by Superman’s square-jawed red-and-blue heroics. Sure it is comforting, but when America sleeps and dreams its happy dream, the rest of the world is often left wide-awake to face the all-too-real consequences of U.S. actions. (¶ 4)

And yet, in spite of the limitations of fantasy, we find ourselves longing for a hero, for something that transcends what we alone can achieve. “You wrote,” Superman tells Lois, “that the world doesn’t need a savior, but every day I hear people crying for one” (Singer, 2006, ¶ 4). And he’s right, at least for me. But what I am crying for, what I appreciate so much about Singer’s Superman is not his gravity-defying feats or his super-human strength, but his complexity and his vulnerability, for it is only the acts of mere humans that allow Superman to return from the brink of death and disrupt Lex Luthor’s evil plan, at least for the moment. If not for the compulsion shown by Lois and Richard as they fly back into dangerous territory to save Superman for his fate, our hero would be no more. What I take away from this film then, is an allegory not of Christianity, but of postmodernity. Lex Luthor is not dead—he is only stuck for now on a remote island somewhere until he finds a way to creep back into our lives—and the same goes for pain, human suffering, uncertainty. We can push it away, distance ourselves from confronting those issues, but we are only postponing the inevitable. At the same time, we are reminded by our vulnerable Superhero that the possible persists in us, that only through our own actions can we move toward the realm of possibility. As Serres (1991) reminds us, “the possible accompanies us all through time. Without these temporal plateaus mixed with valleys, there would be no future; there would never be any change” (p. 47).

Thus, it seems, the world does indeed need Superman, at least this new version of our beloved icon, because he reminds us both of our limitations and our possibilities. He illustrates the precarious position we occupy between past and present, meaning and emptiness, and he encourages us to believe in ourselves, to cling to the meanings that we make for ourselves. As Stephanie Zacharek (2006) writes,

It’s as if Singer and his actors were acknowledging that, like Superman himself, we can’t go home again…. But Superman Returns gives us something valuable in exchange: We can’t control the fate of the world, but the myths we create—the myths we love—will endure long after we’re gone. (p. 2)

Maybe we can’t go home again, but through cultural texts we can access narratives, metaphors, and images that enable us to negotiate through our uncertainties. We can recognize our own “wrinkles,” confess our insecurities, and empower ourselves, through public cultural texts, to unearth our hopes and fears, to translate the diverse and multiple relations of our postmodern
existences. And so, I end with one last excerpt from my personal collection, a poem which I wrote only recently and upon reflection have found to symbolize the reasons why Singer’s Superman is significant to my personal philosophical journey, and the comfort that I find in a hero who can’t go home again.

Postcards from Beyond
Don't look back, it said.
Unshackle your dreams.
Believe in things unseen.
Ask questions without answers.
Touch the unreachable,
if only for one glorious moment.
Tear away the veil
And walk blindly into the light.

Trust me, it said.
Be naked, and raw.
Be afraid, and uncertain.
Stumble, fall, wander.
Look beyond limits.
Seek up.
Live.
Write.

References