

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Heroism has long been recognized as a significant concept in human culture, often associated with moral courage, sacrifice, and the willingness to act for the benefit of others (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011). In storytelling, particularly in film, heroism becomes a central theme through which values such as courage, justice, and responsibility are communicated to audiences. Superheroes, in this context, function as modern representations of these ideals, embodying both moral strength and social responsibility (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Since his first appearance in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938, created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Superman has become a cultural icon symbolizing hope, integrity, and the struggle for good. Over the years, the character has evolved through various portrayals, from Christopher Reeve's classic interpretation to Henry Cavill's modern version in the DC Extended Universe (DCEU).

The 2025 film *Superman*, directed by James Gunn and starring David Corenswet, introduces a new version of the hero for today's audience. This film combines traditional heroic ideals with modern themes such as identity, emotional depth, and social responsibility. In a time marked by political conflict, environmental issues, and ethical challenges in technology, the portrayal of heroism in media has strong cultural significance. Films like *Superman* (2025) are not only entertainment but also reflect and shape the moral values of society.

Earlier portrayals of Superman often focused on perfection and invulnerability, while more recent versions highlight his humanity, moral struggle, and sense of belonging. James Gunn's approach to *Superman* (2025) explores both the mythic and emotional sides of the character, portraying him as empathetic and self-aware while still representing strength and justice. This new interpretation reflects a cultural shift toward heroes who are not flawless, but deeply human. This shift raises important questions about how heroism is represented in contemporary cinema and whether traditional heroic ideals remain relevant in today's complex social and cultural environment.

The release of *Superman* (2025) has generated extensive discussion among film critics and online audiences. Anika Isabella (2025), writing on Substack in her essay "*A Critical Analysis of Superman (2025)*," argues that the film presents a version of Superman defined primarily by radical kindness and moral integrity. She highlights how this adaptation emphasizes dignity toward all individuals, regardless of social or political differences, suggesting that the character reflects contemporary cultural anxieties surrounding division, identity, and belonging. According to her analysis, the film reimagines Superman not merely as a powerful figure, but as a symbol of compassion and ethical responsibility in a fragmented society.

Similarly, Matt Singer (2025), in his review for ScreenCrush titled "*Superman Review: The Man of Steel Returns, Better Than Ever*," observes that James Gunn's interpretation makes Superman significantly more vulnerable both physically and emotionally. Singer notes that this version of the character loses

battles, questions himself, and is visibly affected by failure. Rather than portraying him as a distant, godlike savior, the film presents Superman as a flawed yet deeply caring individual. This reinterpretation is described as a refreshing shift from earlier cinematic portrayals that emphasized invincibility and grandeur.

In addition, Eric Deggans (2025), writing on Substack in “*Superman Reviewed: A Story About the Cost of Heroism in a Cynical World*,” emphasizes the film’s engagement with contemporary political and social issues. Deggans interprets the narrative as an allegory for immigrant identity and public distrust in a media saturated society. Through the character of Lex Luthor, the film portrays manipulation of social media, misinformation, and suspicion toward outsiders. Deggans argues that this contextual framing positions Superman as a figure who must defend not only humanity, but also his legitimacy within it.

However, these reinterpretations have also sparked debate among certain audiences who are more accustomed to traditional portrayals of Superman as an invulnerable and morally certain figure. As noted by Singer (2025), some viewers may resist a depiction of the Man of Steel that includes emotional openness and visible doubt. The varied reception indicates that contemporary audiences hold differing expectations regarding what heroism should represent. These debates demonstrate that heroism is not a fixed concept, but a cultural construct that continues to evolve in response to changing social values and audience expectations.

Several previous studies have explored the concept of heroism in modern cinema from different perspectives. Tavana and Santosa (2021) examined *Black Panther* using Thomas Carlyle's theory of heroism and found that the film presents Black heroism as a response to racial oppression. Their analysis emphasized how the character of T'Challa challenges Western stereotypes of power and masculinity by connecting leadership to cultural identity and collective responsibility. Arupanjalu, Rhizky, and Arifina (2025) analyzed *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, arguing that modern superhero films often present morally complex heroes who blur the line between hero and villain. Meanwhile, Khair (2019) explored *Moana* using Farley's concept of heroism and found that heroism can also be expressed through female characters in non-Western settings, highlighting courage, self discovery, and responsibility toward community and environment.

From these studies, it can be seen that contemporary heroism in film has become more diverse and reflective of global issues, ranging from race and gender to moral complexity. However, limited research has examined how *Superman* (2025), as one of the most enduring symbols of heroism in popular culture, reconstructs heroism through both narrative and visual representation. Existing studies have generally applied either Stuart Hall's Representation Theory or Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory separately to examine representation and meaning in film. While Hall's theory explains how heroism is represented through cultural meanings and social contexts, it does not provide a detailed framework for examining how specific visual and narrative signs generate those meanings. Conversely, Barthes' Semiotic Theory enables the analysis of denotative,

connotative, and mythological meanings embedded in cinematic signs but does not explicitly explain how these meanings operate as broader cultural representations. Combining these two theories offers a more comprehensive analytical framework by linking the interpretation of visual and narrative signs with the cultural processes through which heroism is represented and reconstructed. Accordingly, this study aims to address these empirical and methodological gaps by examining how *Superman* (2025) redefines heroism through its narrative and visual representation while connecting it to contemporary cultural and social realities.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How is heroism shown both visually and narratively in *Superman* (2025), especially through Superman's character development and his relationships with supporting characters?
2. How does *Superman* (2025) reconstruct traditional views of heroism within a contemporary social context?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to analyze how heroism is represented visually and narratively in *Superman* (2025), particularly through Superman's character development and his relationships with supporting characters. It also aims to examine how the film reconstructs traditional views of heroism within a contemporary social context by emphasizing values such as empathy, moral responsibility, humanity, and ethical complexity.

1.4 Limitation of the Study

This study focuses exclusively on *Superman* (2025) as the primary object of analysis. The study is limited to the representation of heroism as portrayed through selected dialogues, character development, character relationships, and significant scenes relevant to the research objectives. The analysis focuses on how these narrative elements construct and reconstruct the meaning of heroism within a contemporary social context. Technical aspects of filmmaking that are not directly related to the representation of heroism are excluded from the analysis.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is expected to provide a better understanding of how heroism is portrayed in *Superman* (2025) through both its story and visual elements. By analyzing the film's depiction of heroism, this study may help readers see how traditional heroic values such as courage, justice, and sacrifice are presented alongside more human traits like empathy and vulnerability. The findings of this study may also serve as a reference for future researchers who are interested in studying heroism, film representation, or modern interpretations of superhero characters. In a broader sense, this study aims to encourage a deeper appreciation of how films can reflect and shape human values in contemporary society.

1.6 State of the Art

This study applies two main theoretical frameworks to analyze the representation of heroism in *Superman* (2025). The first is Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, which explains how meaning is constructed and

communicated through media. According to Hall, representation is a process in which cultural values are produced and shared through images, language, and symbols. This theory helps identify how the film portrays Superman not only as a strong and powerful figure but also as a symbol of empathy, moral struggle, and social responsibility within a contemporary global context.

The second theoretical framework applied in this study is Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics. Barthes (1977) expands Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of signs by distinguishing between two levels of meaning: denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal or surface meaning of a sign, while connotation involves the cultural and ideological meanings associated with it. Through this framework, media texts such as films can be analyzed as systems of signs that communicate deeper social values and beliefs.

Barthes further introduces the concept of myth, which refers to the way cultural meanings become naturalized and accepted as common sense. In this context, myth does not refer to traditional folklore, but to dominant ideologies embedded within everyday representations. Through repeated exposure, these meanings appear normal and unquestioned, shaping how audiences interpret reality.

This theory is particularly relevant to the analysis of Superman (2025), as the film constructs heroism not only through narrative but also through visual and symbolic elements such as costume, color, lighting, and gesture. By applying Barthes' semiotic framework, this study examines how these elements function as signs that produce meanings related to heroism, morality, and identity. The

analysis focuses on how denotative and connotative meanings contribute to the construction of Superman as a modern heroic figure, as well as how certain representations reinforce or challenge dominant cultural myths about heroism.

By combining Stuart Hall's theory of representation with Barthes' semiotics, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how heroism is constructed, communicated, and interpreted within a contemporary cinematic context.

