

Chapter 4

The Recycled Story Formula: Repeated Narrative Elements in the Superman Sequels

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ABSTRACT

Film sequels are often produced to get more out of a successful movie. However, the Superman movies, which were designed as a sequel project from the beginning, stand apart from other film sequels because the production of the first two films started simultaneously. Besides, sequels were announced to the audience in the closing credits of the first two Superman movies. This study argues that the same narrative elements utilized in the first Superman movie made in 1978 were reused in the first two Superman sequels, forming a recycled story formula. Thus, the audience essentially watched the same story with some alterations over and over again. The purpose of this study is to reveal this recycled story formula, which is used in the first two Superman sequels. In this framework, the dramatic structures of the three Superman movies made between 1978 and 1983 will be analyzed by identifying repeated narrative elements and alterations, to reveal the recycled story formula used in the sequels.

INTRODUCTION

Superman is one of the most globally recognizable superhero figures. As a comic book character in origin, it has been adapted for the big screen since the 1940s. In the 70s, when film sequels became popular (Boogs & Petrie, 2008), Superman returned to the big screen, this time with a larger budget and a globally popular cast such as Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman. Unlike other sequels of its era, the Superman films were designed from the very beginning as a sequel project, and the production of the original film and the sequel began simultaneously in 1978 (Thompson & Bordwell, 2003). Another important feature that distinguishes Superman movies from other sequels is that in the closing credits of *Superman the Movie* (Richard Donner, 1978) and *Superman II* (Richard Lester, 1980), the release of the sequels was announced with phrases such as “next year” and “coming soon”. In addition, in three subsequent sequels, Superman was portrayed by the same actor (Christopher Reeve) who acted in the

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original film. Also, many supporting characters such as the antagonist played by Gene Hackman in the original film were featured again in some sequels. The first two sequels were produced by Alexander Salkind, Ilya Salkind, and Pierre Spengler, the original film's producers. Between 1980 and 1987, three Superman sequels were produced, and each was named numerically: *Superman II*, *Superman III*, and *Superman IV*. After 19 years, the last sequel titled "Superman" was produced in 2006, named *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer). In 2013, a movie was made about the same character, but with many changes to the story universe in the original series and titled *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder) instead of Superman.

Superman movies have a classic narrative structure in nature because they are Hollywood productions. This structure is a guaranteed instrument of commercial cinema, as it is the narrative form the audience is most familiar with. The basic elements of the classical narrative consist of a protagonist, purpose, antagonist, obstacles, conflict, and dramatic outcome (Başol, 2017). When a sequel is made, it is expected to be a continuation of the story told in the original movie or another adventure of the main character, so it is a "new" movie (Jess-Cooke & Verevis, 2010). However, looking at the narrative structures of the first two sequels, *Superman II* and *Superman III*, can it be said that two different stories than in the original film are told here? At what points do the stories told in these films resemble each other, or to what extent do they differ from the original film? When the first three Superman movies are watched back-to-back, it is clear that the stories told in these movies are very similar to each other. This study argues that this is because a story formula set up in the original movie is repeatedly used in both sequels and aims to reveal this formula. In this context, the narrative structures of the Superman films will be analyzed within the framework of the main dramatic structural elements that are repeated or different in each film, which are "the main character", "purpose", "local purpose", "subplot", "antagonist", "obstacle", "conflict", and "dramatic result". This study is limited to the first three Superman films produced by Alexander Salkind, Ilya Salkind, and Pierre Spengler as a sequel project, where the sequels were announced at the end of the previous films.

Film Sequels as a Method of Repetition and Extension

A sequel, in the most general sense, is a second movie made after a movie that was successful at the box office, in which the characters and story universe in the first movie are continued or extended. In remakes, the same story and characters from the first movie are retold. However, in the sequels, it is told what happened to these characters after the end of the first movie (Verevis, 2010). According to Thomas Leitch (as cited in Perkins & Veresis, 2012), in sequels, "the audience wants to know more about the original movie's characters, spend more time with them, and find out what happened to them after the first movie" (p. 2). Loock (2017), who has done many academic studies on sequels, emphasizes that sequels are closed or partially closed narratives that are "continued" or "extended" (p. 94). According to Loock (2017), a sequel is chronologically linked to the original movie: the events taking place in the sequel, take place "after" the story in the original movie in a narrative continuum (p. 94). The sequels bear the same name as the original film but are often distinguished from the original by their roman numerals (such as *Rocky II*, *Rocky III*). Perkins and Veresis (2012) argue that the continuation process is also a process of repetition (pp. 2-3). Characters, plots, themes, and styles are repeated in the sequels. The continuation of a movie story is provided by repeating these elements in another form. Fredric Jameson (as cited in Klein & Palmer, 2016) considers popular movies to be texts in which the audience is eager to see the same thing over and over. Therefore, the audience does not complain about these repetitions.

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