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Law Text Culture

Volume 16
Issue 1 *Justice Framed: Law in Comics and Graphic Novels*

Article 11

1-1-2012

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Recommended Citation
Peters, Timothy D., Comic book mythology: Shyamalan's Unbreakable and the grounding of good in evil, *Law Text Culture*, 16(1), 2012, 243-276.
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc/vol16/iss1/11

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Abstract
'It's a classic depiction of Good versus Evil' Elijah Price tells the potential buyer of a piece of art. This 'piece of art' is an early sketch of a battle between two characters in a comic book and is on display at Price's art gallery, Limited Edition, in the world of M. Night Shyamalan's 2000 film Unbreakable. Popular culture is replete with such dualities of Good and Evil – the good hero invariably battling the evil villain. One of the clearest spaces where this battle is given visual and bodily form is in the comic book superhero genre that Shyamalan draws upon in Unbreakable and to which Elijah Price is referring. While this genre is inherently absorbed with matters of justice, legality and criminality – and of Good and Evil – it has traditionally been dismissed as not only a form of popular culture and mere entertainment but as the lowest form of popular culture – that is, as 'crude, poorly-drawn, demi-literate, cheap, disposable kiddie fare…' (McCloud 1993: 3).

This journal article is available in Law Text Culture: http://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc/vol16/iss1/11

Comic Book Mythology: Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* and the Grounding of Good in Evil

Timothy D Peters[1]

1 Introduction

'It's a classic depiction of Good versus Evil' Elijah Price tells the potential buyer of a piece of art. This 'piece of art' is an early sketch of a battle between two characters in a comic book and is on display at Price's art gallery, *Limited Edition*, in the world of M. Night Shyamalan's 2000 film *Unbreakable*. Popular culture is replete with such dualities of Good and Evil – the *good* hero invariably battling the *evil* villain. One of the clearest spaces where this battle is given visual and bodily form is in the comic book superhero genre that Shyamalan draws upon in *Unbreakable* and to which Elijah Price is referring. While this genre is inherently absorbed with matters of justice, legality and criminality – and of Good and Evil – it has traditionally been dismissed as not only a form of popular culture and mere entertainment but as the lowest form of popular culture – that is, as 'crude, poorly-drawn, demi-literate, cheap, disposable kiddie fare…' (McCloud 1993: 3). That is not to say that the comic books and graphic novels have not been recognised as being able to deal with serious issues[2] or engage with serious social problems.[3] However, given the connection of recent superhero comics and their filmic adaptations to post-September 11 anxieties around terrorism and

the need for 'extraordinary measures' to contain, overcome or respond to terrorist action, this genre is too easily seen as reinforcing an over-simplified, Manichaean, un-nuanced perspective on the world and the existence of forces of Good and Evil as opposed to a legitimate space for discussion of philosophic or jurisprudential matters.

It is the argument of this article that *Unbreakable* challenges such a dismissal of popular culture in general, and superhero comics in particular, inviting us to take a serious look at these mediums as being able to provide real insight into our understanding of ourselves, the world and the *construction* or consideration of Evil. Released in 2000, at the beginning of what has been called the decade of superhero films (Gray and Kaklamanidou 2011: 1), *Unbreakable* is a pivotal text that crosses and blurs the boundaries between mediums and genres (between comic books and film; melodrama and superhero adventure). At the same time, *Unbreakable* can be situated in relation to the resurgence of scholarship on Evil that began at the end of the last century (see for example, Bernstein 2002, Copjec 1996, Matthewes 2001). Scholarship which has increased in intensity since the rise of references to Good and Evil in both political and religious rhetoric following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and the following 'war on terror' (see, for example, Singer 2004, Bernstein 2005, Jeffrey 2008, Hirvonen and Porttikivi 2010). Released the year prior to the September 11 attacks, *Unbreakable* pre-empts the anxieties regarding terrorism that are picked up later by the 21st century superhero genre. In addition, the film invites us to take it, and comic books, seriously as texts that illuminate questions of justice and of Good and Evil in light of our current times. This article seeks to take up this invitation by engaging in a jurisprudential reading of popular culture (MacNeil 2007) in relation to an understanding of Evil and its connections to law and justice. Such a reading seeks to explore how popular culture (*Unbreakable*) provides an alternative space where questions of law and Evil are 'made strange', imagined differently and made available for critique.

The first half of this article focuses on the form and presentation of Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* as well as the presentation of the apparent

duality of Good and Evil in comic books. In parts 2, 3 and 4, I examine the way in which *Unbreakable* explores the importance of story-telling in popular culture and how it not only draws upon comic books but presents itself to us as a comic book, recreating the links with justice and with what appears to be a Manichaean battle between Good and Evil in superhero comics. The second half of the article reads *Unbreakable* 'jurisprudentially', complexifying this apparent duality of Good and Evil and the superhero's relation to law. Part 5 goes beyond the Manichaean starting point by identifying the way in which the film presents a construction of Good and Evil as a way to make sense of suffering. Such a focus, however, reflects the problems that modern considerations of Evil (as opposed to the traditional privation theory) encounter because they start from the 'self-evidence of Evil'. For, as explored in part 6, when we start from the point of the self-evidence of Evil then any definition of the Good becomes that which responds to or eradicates Evil and legitimises any action taken to that end (a not uncommon trope of the superhero genre). Part 7 then connects this construction of the Good with the law and its inadequate attempts to explain and deal with either suffering or Evil: first in its attempt to achieve justice and restore order through the punishment of the criminal; and second through the inability to explain the committing of evil or the reason for the victim's suffering. The article concludes by questioning whether superheroes are able to provide a means to consider not just a Good constructed in and by Evil but the possibility of a Good in and of itself.

2 Superheroes and Justice: Comic Books as Visual Mythology

In the introduction to their edited collection on *The 21st Century Superhero*, Richard J. Gray II and Betty Kaklamanidou note that while the first decade of the new millennium will be remembered for many things, in relation to Hollywood it will likely be remembered as the 'superhero' decade (2011: 1). The dominance of the blockbuster superhero film since 2000 has been unprecedented – a dominance

which, with the recent release of *Marvel's The Avengers* (2012), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) and *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) (amongst others), seems unlikely to wane anytime soon. Yet, the superhero genre has, from its earliest beginnings, influenced and been reinterpreted in multiple mediums (Christiansen 2000: 107) and has had commercial success in both film and television, as well as in comic books and graphic novels. Notable here is that each of the mediums where superheroes have particular success are forms of *visual* narrative. Given the genre's focus on the capabilities of the physical body of the superhero, and his/her capacity for spectacular feats, the visual forms of comic books, television and film (particularly with modern special effects and CGI in relation to the latter two) naturally lend themselves to depicting such visual aspects. In terms of the *filmic* depiction of superheroes, this focus on the spectacular and the incredible is one of the criticisms of superhero films (as well as the modern blockbuster more generally). Such criticism tends to proclaim the demise of 'narrative as a central or defining component of Hollywood cinema, or at least its dominant spectacular form' (King 2000: 2). Yet, as King points out, modern blockbuster films 'still tell reasonably coherent stories, even if they may sometimes be looser and less well integrated than some classical models' (2000: 2). Despite the depiction of the 'spectacular' in the modern superhero blockbuster, the superhero genre itself has a focus on a particular type of narrative, one that generally results out of the relation or interactions between the superhero and the supervillain. That is, the narrative of the superhero genre is one tied to forms of *visual* storytelling depicting a battle between 'good' and 'evil'.

M. Night Shyamalan, as a director and visual storyteller, focuses in his films on the importance of narratives and stories as means for creating meaning. As Jeffrey Weinstock has identified, Shyamalan's films are a series of stories about stories (2010: xi). When Shyamalan turned to address the superhero genre in particular, his focus was *not* so much on the spectacular nature of the genre as on the underlying form of the stories told. That is not to say that Shyamalan ignored the form of visual storytelling inherent in the superhero genre. Rather he drew on the forms of depiction used in comic books themselves to explore

the potential for superhero stories to create meaning. In focusing on Shyamalan's film *Unbreakable* (2000), considered by comic book artist Grant Morrison as the 'high-water mark of the cinema's treatment of the superhero theme' (Morrison 2011: 323) and released at the very beginning of the 'superhero decade', an alternative insight into the superhero genre is provided.

Unbreakable stakes a claim for taking the superhero genre, and superhero comics in particular, seriously. At one level, this is effected by presenting a 'realistic' superhero story (one which pre-dates the recent attempts at superhero realism of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy – Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)) by focusing particularly on the 'everyday' rather than the extraordinary, as well as drawing on the genre of melodrama as much as superhero adventure (see Palmer 2010, Yockey 2010). At another level, *Unbreakable* is a particular engagement with superhero comic books themselves (Regalado 2007: 132). For the film poses the question: what if comic books were not simply a medium of entertainment, but in fact a form of mythology through which we both tell stories about ourselves and look to for guidance, direction and meaning?

This argument is the one presented by Elijah Price (Samuel L. Jackson), the proprietor of the comic book art gallery *Limited Edition*. Price, having been born with the disease Osteogenesis Imperfeta (which makes his bones extremely fragile and susceptible to breaking), spent much of his life reading and studying the form of comic books and believes that they are 'our last link to an ancient way of passing on knowledge'. Price explains to David Dunn (Bruce Willis) and Dunn's son Joseph that comics are a form of mythology that can tell us something about ourselves and speculates about the possibility of people like superheroes (and thus supervillains) potentially existing. Therefore, as Regalado points out:

> *Unbreakable* … argues that superhero comic books (and, by implication, mass media more broadly) are cultural productions that do more than merely entertain audiences or reflect cultural realities. Instead, they are

> dynamic forms of cultural expression that individuals actively employ to shape and give meaning to individual as well as social existence (Regaldo 2007: 133).

Shyamalan's 'realistic' portrayal of the possibility of superheroes thus situates itself specifically within debates about the place and importance of mass or popular culture, as well as the legitimacy of comic books themselves as texts worthy of both cultural and philosophical study. While such debates about popular culture in general have been going on for decades,[4] Shyamalan specifically focuses on the role and legitimacy of comic books themselves. In creating a film that takes comic books seriously he sees the potential of popular culture to engage and respond to serious questions and provide a depth of understanding that goes beyond mere entertainment.

Shyamalan presents this argument by situating the film in relation to these debates about high and low culture, the legitimacy of comics and their historical lineage. The character of Elijah Price is the central vehicle through which this argument is presented. Price runs a comic book art gallery, *Limited Edition* and takes the artistic quality of his collection quite seriously. This is clearly evident in Price's enraged response when a prospective purchaser of a piece of comic book art discloses that he is shopping for his four-year-old son. Price's demand for the prospective purchaser to leave countermands the traditional view of comic books as one of the 'lowest' forms of popular culture or as 'irredeemably corrupt and corrupting form of discourse, or else suitable only for children and the semi-literate' (Reynolds 1992: 7). Instead comic books are elevated to a form of high culture – a form of art. Shyamalan thus aligns himself (or at least his character Price) with the views put forward by Will Eisner (1985, 2008), Scott McCloud (1993), Arthur Asa Berger (1969, 1974, 1996: 91-110, 1997: 99-110) and David Carrier (2000), among others. These scholars argue the case for the legitimacy of comics as a form of graphic storytelling (which Eisner describes as 'sequential art') and that comic books are a form of art in their own right.

In addition to elevating comic books to art, Price identifies the

substantial historical lineage of the comic medium when he outlines his theory of comic books as a 'last link' to a particular form of history (noting that the Egyptians drew on walls and that countries all over the world still pass on knowledge through pictorial forms). Scott McCloud traces such a lineage of the comic book, arguing that the predecessors of comics actually go much farther back than the traditional view (which normally dates only to Rodolphe Töpffer's satiric pictures 150 years ago) (McCloud 1993: 17). Rather, McCloud's history of comics includes the French Bayeux Tapestry portraying the Norman conquest of England beginning in 1066 as well as Egyptian paintings.[5] The historical lineage of comic books can also be traced in a different direction, focusing on the way in which comic books both covertly and overtly draw on mythological sources. Richard Reynolds identifies how Siegel and Shuster, the creators of Superman, drew on the myths of Hercules and Samson for their inspiration (1992: 53). Reynolds also explores how the Superman comics tend to conform to Joseph Campbell's concept of mythological 'atonement with the father' (Reynolds 1992: 65, Campbell 1968). Price's theory that comic books present a form of mythology (and the centrality of superheroes to this myth) thus references both their visual and narrative/thematic history and has more substance than would initially appear.

Price's character, however, is not the only connection between the film and comic books; *Unbreakable* is not simply a film about the importance of comic books, but a comic book itself presented in the form of a film.

3 (Re)Presenting Comics: Crossing Visual Mediums

The creation of most superhero films is the result of adapting a story and content from one medium to another. Such adaptations involve a number of challenges. While both comic books and films are inherently visual mediums, each have their own characteristics and, what Pascal Lefevre describes as, different visual ontologies (2007: 9).

That is, despite their visual aspects, each medium involves different types of representation. Drawing styles are more readily understood to include a certain interpretation of reality (based on the abstraction in the drawing) whereas photographic images or film, by their optic natures, tend to imply a 'more realistic' depiction of reality (McCloud 1993: 28-29). The creation of a superhero film generally involves the attempt to re-present drawn images, or at least stories initially presented in drawn form, in a photographic/filmic medium. As Lefevre identifies, such a re-presentation or adaptation of comic books to film involves a number of problems/decisions for the filmmakers. These include: the unique characteristics of page layout versus film screen; the dilemmas of translating drawings to photography; and the importance of sound in film compared to the 'silence' of comics (2007: 3-4). While *Unbreakable* is not a direct adaptation of a specific superhero comic or character, Shyamalan does specifically reference a number of the features of the comic book medium in the creation of his film.

As an audiovisual text, film makes use of images, dialogue and other sounds in its visual narratives (Dick 2005: 6). That is, while comic books and film share the characteristics of visual narratives, film is always more than simply visual but rather engages 'images, sound, affect, memory, plot, episode, character, story and event' (Young 2010: 5). For example, the use of sound by the filmmaker assists in the creation of mood, the differentiation of who is speaking and the identification of what individual characters sound like. In contrast, a comic book is a single-sensory medium where the artist has to create the entire atmosphere, including ambient noise, dialogue, smells and touch, through the singular visual sense (McCloud 1993: 89-90, 135-139). *Unbreakable*, while obviously an audiovisual text, references the single-sensory nature of the comic book medium through the use of a minimalist soundtrack and singular form of dialogue where voices and sounds never overlap – generally only one voice or sound is heard at a time. This restrictive use of sound attempts to recreate a sense of the 'silence' of the comics in his presentation.

One of the major features of the medium of comic books is the way

they present both word and image in a unified form, both working together to tell a single story (Carrier 2000: 67-68, McCloud 1993: 47-49). Will Eisner describes this as the presentation of 'a montage of both word and image' (1985: 8). As a result, the reader is required to exercise 'both visual and verbal interpretive skills' (Eisner 1985: 8). In addition to this connection of word and image, the comic is able to tell its story via the sequential presentation of images – which is why Eisner describes comics as 'sequential art' (1985: 38). Whereas film makes use of moving images, the images presented in comic books are static. The 'movement' or action in a comic comes from the sequential nature of the presentation of the images; this juxtaposition indicates that there is a necessary connection between them and that the action should move from one to the other (McCloud 1993: 62-73, Eisner 1985: 38-49, Carrier 2000: 53-57).

Part of the unique element of the comic book experience then, is not just what occurs within images but what occurs *between* images. The comic book creator needs the readers to do a large part of the work in terms of 'filling in the gaps' between the frames or panels (what McCloud describes as 'closure' (1993: 62-73)). Because we see two images side by side, we automatically work to associate them and provide a logical explanation of their connection. While Shyamalan does not need to make use of this notion of closure in the same way, he does reference the panel/frame nature of the comic book. This is not so much in the direct multi-frame or split screen imagery that was used in Ang Lee's *Hulk* (2003) (see Lefevre 2007: 6) but more about using the physical props in his shots to recreate panel like perspectives. Examples of this include when the audience first meets Dunn as a passenger on the train. There the seats in front of him frame the shots. We only ever see Dunn and the lady who sits next to him in individually framed shots – never together. A few scenes later, curtains at the hospital frame Dunn in a similar way. Shyamalan's use of such framing throughout the film recreates the visual effect of the comic book.[6]

In addition to the way Shyamalan specifically references the form of the comic book in his cinematography, the content of the film (the

narrative storyline) is obviously drawing on a traditional comic book thematic: the telling of a superhero 'origin' story. In Price's search for evidence that superheroes actually exist he comes to believe that Dunn is a superhero. Here Shyamalan draws directly on the thematics of the superhero genre where the superhero is presented as a figure of justice and *the Good* who works to fight crime and restore a disrupted social order (Vollum and Adkinson 2003: 104, Phillips and Strobl 2006: 308). In this sense, the superhero's role is related to the law and the legal system. However, while sharing the superhero's goal of justice, the law is often presented in comic books as corrupt, ineffective or otherwise deficient. As such, the superhero operates as a supplement to the law's goal of justice, achieving what the law cannot attain by itself (Bainbridge 2007: 460, Reyns and Henson 2010: 51). This supplementary operation of the superhero tends to interact with the law in either a complimentary or authorised way (generally represented by Superman's submission to the state and connection with the law and due process) or in an antagonistic way (represented by Batman's clear willingness to break the law in the course of achieving justice) (Vollum and Adkinson 2003: 100-1, Reyns and Henson 2010: 51). In either form the superhero is aligned with the goal (if not the operation) of the law as a particular Good – that is, the desire to do justice and restore balance or order to society.[7] Price's construction of Dunn as a superhero thus aligns with this notion of the figure of justice. Price describes the superhero has someone who is 'put here to protect the rest of us' and to inspire people to do extraordinary things in 'mediocre times'. With the superhero genre's specific focus on crime control (Bainbridge 2007: 463, Reyns and Henson 2010: 51) it is not surprising that the first act that Dunn performs as a superhero is one of dealing with a criminal house invader and thus restoring the social order (a scene to which we will return to later).

Having identified the way that Shyamalan draws on both the visual and narrative aspects of comic books to present us with a comic book in the form of a film, we will now turn to the film's focus: the relationship of the superhero to the supervillain.

4 Manichaeism: Visualising the Battle Between Good and Evil

While many of the threats and disruptions to the social order presented in comics books are simply petty crimes or street violence, one of the characteristic recurring tropes of the superhero stories is the supervillain or archenemy who returns to battle it out again and again with the superhero. It is here where the battle between Good and Evil is effectively played out in bodily form. Superman battles it out with the criminal genius Lex Luthor, Batman with The Joker, Daredevil with the Kingpin, and so on. The superhero as the figure of justice and the Good is counterpoised with the supervillain as the figure of injustice and Evil. Yet this oppositional framing of the hero and villain belies their very connectedness. For, as Reynolds points out, if we simply invert a couple of the key characteristics of the superhero – their devotion to justice and loyalty to the state – we end up with a strong working definition of the supervillain (Reynolds 1992: 16-17).

This connection between the superhero and the supervillain has, at times been extended, inverted or subverted with certain characters moving from villain to hero or oscillating in the space in-between. One such example is Catwoman role in the Batman comics whose role has ranged from villain to quasi-heroine. Another example is the various transmutations between the 'good' Jean Grey and the 'evil' Dark Phoenix in the X-Men comics (see Kaveney 2008: 227). Yet in other circumstances the connection between the superhero and supervillain is underlined by a specific psychological link. Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) as well as Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* (1988) highlight such a connection between The Joker and Batman. Conversely the hero and villain may share a form of commonality or friendship. For example, while enemies, Professor Xavier and Magneto in the X-Men share a connection based on their longstanding acquaintance and old friendship. Shyamalan's *Unbreakable*, in drawing on the superhero genre also undergirds the battle between Good and Evil with the connection between the superhero and the supervillain. In fact, much of the focus of the plot of *Unbreakable* is on the connection between Dunn who is

the superhero and Price, who, as we discover in the concluding moments of the film, is the supervillain.

In exploring the depiction of Evil and the necessary battle between Good and Evil in comic books generally, and *Unbreakable* specifically, one starting point could clearly be the mythological/theological touchstone of Manichaeism – a dualistic understanding of the world as divided between two forces in Being. In Manichaeism, the Good King of Light and the Evil Archon of Darkness are in an ongoing cosmic battle, with the universe as their battlefield (Renick 2004).[8] While such an analogy, at one level, appears superficial (surely the concept of the battle between Good and Evil is consistent across other popular culture tropes as well as other mythologies and religions), it becomes particularly relevant here when you take into account McCloud's history of comics discussed above. For, uniquely, Manichaeism held as part of its official canon Mani's *Picture-Book* (or *The Image)*, a solely pictorial 'volume' attributed to the founder of their religion (Gulacsi 2011). More than any other religion, Manichaeism made particular use of didactic art as part of their mission (Gulacsi 2011). In addition, Mani's *Picture-Book* would be reinterpreted (as was the imagery used in their mythology and teaching in general) based on the particular cultural setting in which it was being communicated (Gnoli 1987). Thus, what could be seen as a throwaway reference to Manichaeism as the source of these dualist battles between Good and Evil (based on a later Christian tendency to accuse any dualist heresy of being Manichaean – see Davies 1987) actually identifies comic books in the same mythological lineage. For, we can see here a connection between the ongoing battle between forces of Good and Evil (consistent with a dualist mythology), their *visual* depiction of these forces and the reinterpretation of such a battle into many different forms and versions (with the corresponding plethora of superheroes and supervillains in each of the comic book universes).

This connection of the superhero genre to Manichaeism's use of didactic art becomes particularly relevant when you consider the fact that the superhero genre is itself inherently visual. That is, part of the

superhero genre is about the *visual* depiction of the bodily form of the superhero and the supervillain. In comic books, for example, the costumes of the hero and the villain, as well as their physical forms, are constructed as contrasting. This construction is a visual shorthand, indicating who is 'good' and who is 'evil'. As Eisner points out, comic books traditionally tend to work with stereotypes in order to quickly or even instantly settle the nature of a character (2008: 12). Comic book artists can and do make use of physical characteristics as indicators as to whether characters are 'good' or 'evil'. As Kaveney observes, superheroes themselves are almost always good-looking and muscular, wearing costumes that emphasise the fact (2008: 10). Villains, on the other hand, can range from the muscular to the grotesque. While not strictly a superhero, the villains against whom Dick Tracy would fight (villains who would serve as precursors to many later superhero villains) were known for being visually repulsive making it clear that Tracy was 'good' and they were 'bad' (Berger 1996: 98).

At first glance, *Unbreakable* also appears to demonstrate the dualism described above. At the end of the film Price, believing that Dunn is the superhero he has been looking for (the figure of light, justice and the Good), reveals himself as the supervillain (the figure of darkness, destruction and Evil who has committed a number of terrorist acts and killed hundreds of people in his quest to find a superhero). The presentation of the characters in this respect *also* reflects some of the visual duality described above. Dunn is physically strong, muscular and at times is presented in a dark rain jacket that could be mistaken for a cape. Price, on the other hand, wears purple suits, suffers from a disease that makes his bones easy to break and, for much of the film, is confined to a wheelchair. Shyamalan's depiction of Price as disabled references a long (and fraught) tradition in which filmic depiction of a character's physical infirmity is an indicator of their internal/psychological flaws (see Norden 2007). However, while such a depiction of Price and Dunn seems to reference this Manichaean dualism, what *Unbreakable* actually makes clear is how this reference point over-simplifies what is going on.[9] For in fact we find that Price's theory is not simply a representation of Good and Evil as depicted in comic books, but rather that there is a *construction* of Good and Evil.

Price is in fact trying to explain his experience of the world by constructing the dichotomy of Good and Evil. This construction would appear to find that the Good that is constructed is constructed and developed by, or in the cause of, Evil itself. Price's desire to find a superhero is not really because he believes in the need for someone to protect us or to give people the inspiration to do extraordinary things (though, as we noted above, he says both). Rather, his search for the superhero is a search for an explanation as to *who he is*. It is in his very search for meaning – for an explanation of his suffering and a reason for his existence – that provokes the need for this construction of Good and Evil reflecting the comic book battle between the good superhero and the evil supervillain.

This identification of the reason for Price's focus on the comic book mythology aligns *Unbreakable* with Shyamalan's other films, all of which present a search for meaning in response to suffering – a way of explaining or understanding what would appear to be meaningless suffering.[10] In *Unbreakable* Price experiences this form of suffering in relation to his disease and the resulting injuries. His lifelong experience of this disease seems to be without explanation or meaning. Price's recourse to comic books as a modern form of the Manichaean mythos is an attempt to resolve this meaningless suffering – to find meaning for what otherwise appears meaningless. However, in Manichaeism the explanation of Evil is as a result of the forces of Evil. What we find with Price is rather that he wants to explain his suffering by identifying it as an indicator that he should be the supervillain and thus *enact* Evil.

5 'Meaningless Suffering' and Evil that Demands a Response

As noted above, Shyamalan's films depict those who are trying to make sense of physical or emotional suffering. Yet these films, and *Unbreakable* in particular, highlight the connection between Evil and the meaninglessness of such suffering. That is, the way in which the concept of Evil itself is employed to make sense of what would otherwise be considered meaningless suffering (Jeffrey 2008: 28-30).

While Manichaeism provides one response, Saint Augustine, the great Manichaean turned Christian identified its inability to explain the evil and suffering experienced in the world. In response, Augustine developed, in a synthesis of Neo-Platonic philosophy and Christian theology, what became the traditional understanding or 'privation theory' of Evil. For Augustine determined that Evil in itself, as a positive force, does not exist. Rather, Evil is a taking away, a privation, a tendency to nothingness, an absence of Good (Evans 1982). It is not seen 'as a real force or quality but as the absence of force and quality, and as the privation of being itself' (Milbank 2003: 1). This view does not mean that there is no Evil in the world or that Evil does not have an effect. Rather, it is that Evil as an end or position in itself does not exist. It can only exist as a corruption or deficiency of the Good – as a result of the seeking of a lesser or deficient good. Evil is that which turns away from, detracts and corrupts that which actually exists. Thus, Evil is not opposed to the Good in an ontological sense (as in Manichaeism) but is the very lack of the Good. It can only be defined in regard or relation to the Good.

This view can be opposed to a more recent theory of Evil, which tends to be traced back to Immanuel Kant (1960), and, in particular, his reference to 'radical Evil' in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. This is usually considered the starting point for an alternative, positively existing view of Evil (Milbank 2003: 1-2). It is argued that 'Kant sees evil as uniquely the product of a free humanity, and it is this that is new in his thought' (Copjec 2002: 139). For Kant, human beings, as finite rational agents, are free and thus solely and completely responsible for their moral choices (Bernstein 2002: 33). As such, it is the will and not natural inclinations or reason which is the only possible source of Evil. He notes that we call a man evil not because he performs actions that are evil, 'but because the actions are of such a nature that we may infer from them the presence in him of evil maxims' (Kant 1960: 16). That is, Evil is the failure to adopt good maxims; failing to give priority to the moral law. Radical Evil, for Kant, then is the fact that there is a universal propensity in the human animal to evil, which is both innate and inborn. It is the propensity to *not* do what duty requires, or, to do

your duty but for a reason that is not solely the moral law. As a starting point, Kant's position is seen as a more palatable understanding of Evil than the privation theory. For the question that arises with the privation theory is how, with such a plethora of what would appear to be Evil in our world, can it be that Evil does not exist? Surely both the evils of everyday life, as well as what would appear to be the 'grander' evils of the 20th and 21st Centuries (totalitarianism, the Holocaust, genocide, terrorism) indicate that Evil is a 'something' rather than a 'nothing'.

Shyamalan's films provide a sense of the pervasiveness of these everyday evils.[11] In *Unbreakable*, when Dunn starts to explore his 'superhero intuition', Price tells him that he will not need to go far. In fact, standing in the midst of a train station, every person he touches seems to have committed a crime (theft, racist violence, rape). These crimes are visually presented to us as having occurred (though within the film they are psychic visions in Dunn's mind). Surely the very self-evidence of these evils in the world would indicate that the privation theory is not an adequate explanation? Surely the fact that *we see suffering* infers that Evil is a positively existent entity? However, part of the problem here is the starting point of the self-evidence of Evil itself. For while Kant identifies the concept of radical Evil, the universal propensity to moral Evil, this concept has very little explanatory power at all (Bernstein 2002: 33). It is rather a description or concept in regards to the species – something that is universally applicable to all human beings. That is, all human beings have a tendency to not adopt good maxims. Yet, as Bernstein points out such a claim to a universal, for Kant, needs to be justified by a 'deduction' or proof (2002: 34). It cannot simply be inferred from experience. But, Kant does not proceed with a deduction of proof. Rather he identifies:

> That such a corrupt propensity must indeed be rooted in man need not be formally proved in view of the multitude of crying examples which experience of the actions of men puts before our eyes (1960: 28).

The very self-evidence of Evil – Kant's examples which are before our eyes – are used as the evidence of radical Evil. Rather than there being any formal deduction, we have a self-evidencing of Evil – we see Evil all around us. What seems to be lost here from the traditional

view is the identification that Evil can only be understood in relation to, or from the perspective of, the Good. This is one of Augustine's clearest points, that it was only when he identified the Good, that he could find a satisfactory explanation of Evil.

It is this point that Alain Badiou (2001) takes up in response to the formality of modern Ethics (that follows, at least loosely, the Kantian tradition of the potential of a universal moral law or ethical position) and the arguments of the self-evidence of Evil in general. For the problem with the notion of the self-evidence of Evil is that it defines what Evil is by the existence of things which are 'harmful to Man', without any value judgment as to what is Good in itself. It is an a priori determination of what is Evil, and when we then look at the multiple examples from this perspective, all we see is the self-interested actions of humanity aimed at survival or 'perseverance in being' (Badiou 2001). Badiou's argument is that if Evil exists, it must be conceived from the starting point of the Good (2001: 60).

While Shyamalan's films provide plentiful examples of the self-evidence of Evil (the visual depiction of 'Evil' actions and the suffering that results), what we *do* see in *Unbreakable* is this very connection of Evil to the Good. For isn't this where Elijah Price gets it right? That is, in his desire to justify his position as Evil, he needs a Good to battle against. In searching for meaning to his suffering and for a place in this world, he is seeking to define himself as Evil. But, this can only be done if there is a Good to which he can relate. He can only actually take a position of Evil, a position that justifies the committing of terrorist acts, if there is actually a Good in which to oppose himself. Evil as such only has its position as a rebellion or reaction against the Good. Without a notion of the Good, Evil has no meaning or purpose. Yet, one of the terrifying things about Evil *is* that it appears to *have no purpose*. That it is what seems to be beyond explanation or comprehension. What we see with Price, however, is that it is his very desire for meaning that drives his Evil actions. The Evil things he does have no direct meaning for those he killed, but rather his terrorist acts are driven by the terrifying search for reason itself.

6 Eradicating Evil: A Good By Any Means Necessary

Part of the problem with starting from the self-evidence of Evil is that it attempts to define Evil without a reference to the Good; rather, the Good is something that responds to Evil. When ethics or law operates as the a priori ability to discern Evil, the only resulting Good is that which seeks to deal with or eradicate Evil (Badiou 2001:8-14). Such a position, of the a priori determination of Evil, also fails to think the singularity of the current situation, but rather tries to fit the evil acts/occurrences into pre-existing categories with pre-determined causes and therefore necessary responses. Richard Bernstein, in his analysis of the abuse of the rhetoric of Good and Evil post September-11, identifies a similar point in that the identification of Evil also assumes a particular response to Evil – that is, to fight it or eradicate it (Bernstein 2005). In this framework, the only possible Good is that which responds to Evil.

Is this not the function of the superhero and the end result we see in *Unbreakable?* For as Price builds the framework for Dunn's construction as the superhero we find that the Good is being constructed by and in response to Evil. Dunn's role as the superhero is only discovered and developed by Price, who is trying to construct himself as the supervillain. In this sense Dunn did not come to the realisation of his superhero abilities himself, it was only through his interactions with Price. As such, we find that Dunn's role as a superhero is restricted to a response to Evil. Dunn does not seek a Good itself but only ever a response to Evil. Evil as such is only that which can *and must be* eradicated. We can see the effects of this when Dunn goes to engage in his first 'heroic act'. As we noted above, Dunn, at Price's prompting, goes searching not just for someone who has committed crimes, but for one who is *going* to commit one. He finds a man who has broken into a family's home, killed the father, raped the mother, tied up the two children and is now living in the home, with the mother and children as prisoners. Dunn follows the man back to the house, breaks in and frees the children. When he goes to help the mother, however, he is found by the man who throws him out the window into the pool. As

water is the one thing Dunn is vulnerable to, he struggles in the pool, almost drowning. He is only able to get out with the aid of the two children that he has already rescued. Dunn then goes back into the house, attacks and, in what must be one of the longest strangle scenes on film, kills the man. The following day we find that Dunn has been written up in the newspaper as a superhero. This seems to fulfill Price's vision: Dunn has finally realised that he is a superhero and has started to commit heroic acts (as noted elsewhere he also regains his manhood, saves his marriage and gains the respect of his son (see Palmer 2010, Abele 2010)).

At first glance, Dunn seems to have 'found his true place in the world' and will now spend his nights fighting crime, while reunited with his family and enjoying a 'normal' life during the day. He has taken his first step towards a superhero career of fighting crime and Evil. However, what is the nature of this role that he has taken? Let us explore this scene in a little more detail. What did Dunn actually do? He broke into a private residence and strangled a man to death. On what evidence or authority did he do this? Simply the speculative theorising of an art gallery owner and an intuition regarding what the man had done. This intuition – Dunn's psychic vision – is visually depicted for the audience, thus convincing us that it has actually occurred in the filmic universe. Now, in the circumstances as presented, these people obviously needed helping. Yet, in the process of taking matters into his own hands he almost got himself killed and, in an extremely physical way, killed the perpetrator.[12] A 'normal response' would have been to call the police. However, because of Price's positioning of Dunn as a superhero he stepped in and took matters into his own hands.

Dunn's 'heroic act' could easily have gone horribly wrong.[13] Price dismisses this risk with the notion that 'life does not fit into little boxes that were drawn for it'. However, there was no ethical consideration of how Dunn should approach the situation – it was simply that he would step in and deal with the apparent criminal. Is this the responding to the singularity of the ethical situation as presented that Badiou calls us to (as opposed to a reference to a formal/universal law that fails to

see the singularity of the situation in front of it)? Or is it rather a very enactment of the formal law with complete disregard to the multiple potentialities of the situation? Given Dunn's positioning, the latter seems more likely. Dunn sees himself as fulfilling the role of the superhero – such a role he believes is focused on crime control and prevention and is thus inherently tied to the goals of the law itself. Yet the framing of this duty as built on the self-evidence of Evil, positions Dunn as judge and executor that deals a form of justice based on the assumption of the self-evidence of the Evil act before it. It is *not* a justice in response to the singularity of the situation, but a justice in response to the general self-evident Evil as presented – a response specifically to what *Dunn sees* as being Evil.

Dunn's role is thus aligned to that of the law in its desire to do justice and to restore a sense of order and reason to what is otherwise a senseless, disordered or unjust act. While Dunn is certainly acting outside the law, he is acting as its supplement to fulfill the goal of justice – a goal which the law appears to fail to achieve. Fulfilling the function of the law, Dunn determined that the actions of the perpetrator disrupted the social order and Dunn thus assigned blame to him. As such, the superhero (acting instead of, or on behalf of, the law) reintroduces reason and order into what would otherwise be a senseless act (Berger 2008: 107). While the superhero is able to achieve this process much faster than the law (and, apparently in place of the law altogether as it seemed that the existing mechanisms for identifying crime had failed to identify the actions of this perpetrator), he still suffers from the same problem that the law has in relation to this type of justice. That is, that while the law can determine a measure of blame, denouncing certain actions as blameworthy and aberrant to society and punishing those carrying out such actions, this operation does not actually completely restore order or resolve the senselessness to which it is attempting to respond (Berger 2008: 107). While the perpetrator can be designated as Evil and processed in relation to justice, the victim cannot. As Berger notes, 'Punishment does not speak to *why* the act happened in the first place, so the senselessness of victimhood remains untouched' (2008: 108). Thus the law's ability to explain the suffering

of the victim – the sense of 'why me?' or 'why do I suffer?' – is limited. Where the superhero takes on this role in enacting justice / inflicting punishment, the same problem arises. Connecting the superhero to justice does not explain the suffering that has been experienced. The law can only designate this particular act as of the type that is Evil. It cannot respond to the reason why this particular act occurred to this particular person in this particular way. Thus, starting from the point of the self-evidence of Evil and constructing a Good that responds to it and seeks to eradicate it, still will not actually explain the very suffering caused by Evil itself. The committing of violence (whether it be by the superhero or by the law) does not counter-balance the violence already suffered by the victim.

What lies behind the issue with the actions taken by Dunn is not just the fact that killing the intruder and saving the children cannot explain the suffering experienced. It lies further in the question of the ability to accurately and consistently determine justice (which is also the problem/difficulty faced by the vigilante or superhero operating beyond the law). That is, what if Dunn's understanding of the situation had been wrong? What if, in his desire to respond to Evil, Dunn had in fact attacked and killed the wrong person? Such an action would clearly have enacted Evil and inflicted senseless suffering rather than responding to it. While it is clear that this is *not* the case here, there is little reflection on the possibility that it could have been. This is where the law's awareness of the possibility of its own failure is inherent and instituted in the requirements of due process. The risk for the law is that it will inflict suffering (i.e. wrongful conviction/punishment) where none is due and thus act as Evil instead of doing justice and restoring the Good. Such a risk is known to the superheroes in comic books, many who have a reluctance to killing and who demonstrate ethical struggles in relation to the actions that they do take beyond the law. This questioning of Dunn's actions, however, does not occur at this stage – this is a result of the way that he has been constructed as a Good that responds to Evil. For in starting from the point of the self-evidence of Evil the actions that need to be taken are to respond to it and little thought goes into that response.

7 The Precariousness of Law's Response to Evil

This analysis brings us to the final scene of the film where Elijah Price is unveiled not only as a supervillain but also responsible for all the apparent 'accidents' or disasters that have been referred to throughout the film: a hotel fire, a plane explosion and the derailment of the train Dunn was a passenger on at the beginning of the film. Price comments 'it has begun', referring to the fact that the origin story of the hero has been told and what now should begin is a series of films/episodes/encounters between the supervillain and the superhero. Now that Dunn has been identified as the superhero, Price's theory about comic book mythology has been validated. Price can not only explain his suffering but he can also find his place in the world as a supervillain. He can also justify the terrorist acts he has committed. As such, in line with the comic book genre what can now be expected is the ongoing battle between Good and Evil, Dunn (the superhero Security Man?) and Price (the supervillain Mr Glass). As Palmer (2010) notes, while this was the initial open-ended conclusion that Shyamalan envisaged for *Unbreakable*, the end *we actually see* is not as open. That is, *Unbreakable* was to be the first of a series of films Shyamalan had considered about Dunn as the superhero (and there have been rumours ever since about a potential sequel). However, in response to prerelease marketing feedback, Shyamalan became convinced that there was a need for at least some sort of token gesture towards a restoration of the social/moral order – that is, some sort of sense of justice at the end of the film. As such, instead of the film ending simply with Dunn's shock at the discovery of Price's terrorist acts and the naming of the supervillain (as Mr Glass), the final scenes are resolved with the inclusion of the following text:

> David Dunn led authorities to Limited Edition where evidence of three acts of terrorism was found.
>
> Elijah Price is now in an institution for the criminally insane.

This post script introduces quite a different element into the finality of the story.[14] It provides an introduction of, and return to,

law (which, despite the connection of the superhero's role to justice, is almost completely absent in the film in the form of courts, lawyers and even law enforcement). This introduction of law in one sense seems to completely undermine the entire framing of the film around the potential for superheroes to actually exist. For, in contrast to the earlier scene where Dunn took matters into his own hands as the superhero, deciding not to call the police, here Dunn's reaction is precisely to lead the authorities to Price. Dunn, having now discovered that his source of meaning and construction of the Good was completed by and through the very acts of Evil itself, has given up the possibility of his role as the superhero and any commitment to the Good. The apparent result of these actions is the dissolution of Dunn as the superhero: instead of taking matters into his own hands he calls the police; instead of fulfilling the role of the Good himself, he defers to the authorities. As such, this reflects the problem of a Good constructed in Evil – it needs Evil as much as Evil needs the Good. To think the possibility of the Good only in light of Evil means that the very eradication of Evil that is demanded can never be completely performed for in doing so the Good would no longer be needed. In part this is the reason for the ongoing battle between Good and Evil in comic books – without Evil to fight, the superheroes would have little to do. Thus the superhero's role in restoring the social order – in fulfilling justice – can never actually be completely fulfilled. At the same point in time this also reflects the way the law itself is inherently tied to crime and acts of Evil. For the law's focus is on determining actions which are aberrant to society and in punishing those who commit such actions – its focus is on responding to Evil.

In another sense, however, this introduction of the law does not change the position for Price. For he is looking for meaning and purpose – he is desiring to become a subject recognised and responsible. This reflects in part why his acts are all incredibly public and high profile – at one level he wants to be caught so that he can be defined as the villain, so that his life can have meaning. The movement from the superhero doing the catching to the law doing it does not necessarily diminish this role of subjectification that Price seeks – his demand for an agent

to recognise him as a subject (Salecl 1993: 12). Such recognition would accord with the superhero who identifies his acts of terrorism as the acts of a supervillain as well as an agent of the law who identifies his acts as those of a criminal or terrorist. As such Price's punishment can bring relief to him by bestowing on him this recognition (Salecl 1993: 12) and providing the meaning or explanation he desires.

Yet, while this introduction of law seems to diminish the role of the superhero and dismiss the comic book mythology that has been presented throughout the film, there is a complexification of this position. That is, Price is not simply in prison but in an institution for the criminally insane. This reference point is once again to comic book mythology (think of Gotham City's *Arkham Asylum* which has, instead of the relevant prisons, housed The Joker, Twoface and numerous other Batman supervillains). However, what is worth noting here is that the law itself would be unlikely to determine that Price is criminally insane. The traditional test for the insanity defence requires that the accused either did not know the nature and quality of the act he was doing or, if he did know it, that he did not know that what he was doing was wrong.[15] Price would not appear to have satisfied either limb of this test. At all times he appeared very aware of what he was doing in planning and committing the terrorist acts. In addition, it cannot be said that he was unaware that these acts were against the law (the traditional measure of whether an act is wrong) nor that they were morally wrong. For in his desire to see himself as the supervillain he specifically *wants* to commit acts that he knows are wrong and are against the law.[16] He specifically desires the law's response to him – to find him guilty – in order to determine his purpose/meaning.

More than simply being a pop culture simplification of the actual application of law for narrative effect, this precise reference to the comic book theme (of placing the supervillains in an institute for the criminally insane) explicates the very precariousness of the law's ability both to determine blame and to distinguish between the status of victim and the status of perpetrator. Placing Price in an insane asylum reflects the 'increasing difficulty in trying to maintain a stable sense of

the criminal as perpetrator rather than as victim' (Berger 2008: 112). That is, it demonstrates the uncertainty of punishing someone for evil because in doing so it cannot explain this evil. For, as Berger points out, the law's attempt to do justice and to provide a restoration of order via the denunciation of certain actions as criminal, is inherently caught up with the search for reason and explanation. But the law's search for reason and for explanation seems to uncover rather the overarching senselessness of crime and punishment – the fact that even when acts are designated as criminal, their impact still seems to be meaningless or unexplained. As the law attempts to explain the world it must also explain the perpetrator who looks more and more like a victim of society:

> Because it is enamoured with a rationalized and therapeutic conception of the subject, the modern criminal law is locked in categorical confusion among victim, perpetrator, and society itself. In this way, instead of bringing order to the senseless, modern criminal law is very much at risk of making no sense at all. This ever-present risk creates an abiding state of disorder in which the criminal law is always inadequate and, worse, senselessly violent. Under the shadow of this precariousness, the criminal justice system, even at its best and most accurate, begins to feel deeply unjust. In this way, the modern criminal law is on a collision course with itself. As the rationalist understanding of crime grows, the order and justice of society itself becomes deeply problematic (Berger 2008: 116).

The introduction of law at the end of *Unbreakable* thus *does not* provide the certainty and closure that Shyamalan apparently intended. Instead it identifies the very uncertainty of the ability of the law to make sense of suffering and to explain the criminal. As such, Price is placed beyond the understanding of the law and treated as Evil, other, insane. As opposed to Shyamalan's other films, instead of the conclusion bringing together the explanatory power of the narrative and with everything making sense we find the opposite.[17] The conclusion in *Unbreakable* is about the very *meaningless* of suffering and the *inability* to explain Evil.

8 Conclusion

Superhero stories have the potential to inspire us and to take us beyond where we have been before. As Bainbridge points out, superheroes, in both comics and film, are 'capable of doing intellectual work about law and justice' (2007: 476). They give us a powerful way to think differently about our understanding of law, potential deficiencies or inconsistencies of the legal system as well as ways of dealing with the gap between law and justice (Bainbridge 2007: 476). Thus, we should take seriously Shyamalan's encouragement to explore the mythological frameworks and potential impacts of superhero comic books. Such explorations can make clear both ways in which the law seeks to provide justice, but also its inherent precariousness in doing so.

At the same time, we need to be aware of the risks of such analysis that are inherent in the needs of the genre – the need for the superhero to have a supervillain to fight. For what Shyamalan's filmic exploration of superheroes makes clear in its preempting of the 'superhero decade', is the precariousness of a Good (the hero, democracy, the law) that is constructed in and via Evil itself (the villain, terrorism, crime). That is, the presentation of a Good to be constructed in terms of an Evil that must be defeated. Yet such a concept of the Good is inherently unable to explain either the nature of Evil or the suffering it inflicts. This insight raises the question of whether we need *another* hero; one that is not defined by his/her relation to the villain – a hero that can conceive of the possibility of the Good in and of itself. Such a hero would be *very super* indeed.

Notes

1 The author would like to acknowledge the anonymous reviewers for their feedback and suggestions as well as the helpful comments of Professor William MacNeil (Dean, Griffith Law School, Griffith University), Dr Andrew Peters (Pastoral Theologian, AE & LA Peters Outreach Enterprises) and Dr Kieran Tranter (Griffith Law School, Griffith University).

2 Art Spiegleman's *Maus* (1991) is one of the first and most cited examples of this.

3 The anti-drug issues of *Green Lantern / Green Arrow* (1971) are an early instance.

4 See, for example, Leslie Fiedler's work in relation to 'high' and 'low' culture in literature dating from the 1960s: Fiedler 1960, Fiedler 1983. In relation to comic books specifically see Fiedler 2004.

5 McCloud specifically notes, however, that Egyptian hieroglyphics, like the ones seen behind Price when he outlines his comic book theory to Dunn and his son, are not the ancestors of comics. Rather, at least under McCloud's definition, hieroglyphs are *not* pictorial in the sense of actually looking similar to what they are representing. Instead, hieroglyphs represent sounds and are thus the antecedent of the written word and not comics per se (McCloud 1993: 12). For a further historical analysis of the comic strip see the two volumes by David Kunzle (1973, 1990).

6 Another appropriate example is later in the film when Price falls down the stairs and his glass cane shatters. There we see upside down shots of the man he is chasing, as well as a close-up shot of the shattered class that could easily have come directly from a comic book panel.

7 It should be noted here that depicting the superhero as a figure of 'the Good' who restores the social order does presuppose that the social order is good in itself. This point belies the traditionally conservative tendencies in superhero comics, which would indicate that any injustices in the existing social order are likely to be maintained. Having said that, there are certainly critiques presented of this conservatism as well – Frank Miller's depiction of Superman in *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) would be a case in point.

8 'Manichaean dualism and its resulting cosmic war are used to account for the existence of evil in the world: Evil emerges in this realm when the Archon of Darkness wins a battle over the good, but not omnipotent, King of Light' (Renick 2004).

9 This point is particularly relevant given both the political rhetoric of Good and Evil in post September 11 (see Bernstein 2005) and the responses of recent superhero films to anxieties around terrorism. See for example, Muller (2011) and Phillips (2010) in relation to *The Dark Knight* (2008).

10 For example, in *Signs* (2002) Graham Hess has lost faith in God as a result of his wife's death in a car accident. The end of the film presents a restoration of this faith in God and an explanation or meaning given to his wife's death. In *Lady in the Water* (2006) Cleveland Heep (Paul Giamatti) is trying to come to terms with his grief and suffering as a result of the earlier murder of his wife and children.

11 Think of *The Village* (2004), in which every member has experienced a tragic loss as a result of some violence, thus believing they need to leave society and start their own village. In *The Sixth Sense* (1999), we are presented with the need for the dead to tell their story – for us to see the evil done to them. *The Happening* (2008) presents us with nature's response to the evils we have enacted against it (i.e. nature seeking its revenge). In *Devil* (2010), Shyamalan's latest release (directed by John Dowdle), we again find that everybody trapped in an elevator has committed Evil.

12 This is in contrast to the 'more restrained' depictions of superhero justice (with Superman or Batman rarely, if ever, killing a criminal or villain). Here Shyamalan depicts Dunn brutally strangling the perpetrator in what is an intense, discomforting and drawn out display of physical violence.

13 What is interesting here is the point made by both McCloud (1993: 62-69) and Eisner (2008: 49) about the complicity or contract between the artist and the reader of comic books. In a comic book version of a similar encounter it is likely that much of the actual battle and killing of the man would have occurred in the space between panels, requiring the reader to make the connection about what is going on in-between. It is thus the reader's imagination that does the killing. One of the differences with film is that we are presented with the actions themselves and can potentially hold ourselves apart from the killing/actions that are going on. We can believe that we are not as complicit in those actions as McCloud argues that we are in comic books.

14 One that indeed makes it more difficult for a sequel to work for in a realistic version of the superhero story, for how would Price break out of the institution for the criminally insane?

15 The traditional test for insanity is derived from the *M'Naghten Rules:* '…to establish a defence on the ground of insanity, it must be clearly proved that, at the time of the committing of the act, the party accused was labouring under such a defect of reason, from disease of the mind, as not to know the nature and quality of the act he was doing; or, if he did now it, that

he did not know he was doing what was wrong': *M'Naghten's Case* (1843) 10 CL & F 200 at 210.

16 For an excellent analysis of Supervillians and the Insanity Defense, along with other fantastic law and comic book related topics, see Davidson (2011).

17 I.e. that Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) is a ghost in *The Sixth Sense* or that the last words of the wife of Graham Hess's (Mel Gibson) in *Signs* are actually warnings from God.

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