

# Secret Identities The Superhero Simulacrum and the Nation

Matt Yockey (*Cineaction* 77 2009)



There is a sequence early on in Matthew Ogens' 2007 documentary *Confessions of a Superhero* in which one of its principle subjects, Christopher Dennis, sitting on a worn couch in a Superman costume, says, "I like to consider myself to be a historian of Superman and the keeper of artifacts." The moment is central to the film, which is a study of Dennis and three other performers who portray superheroes on Hollywood Boulevard and hustle tourists for tips. This shot of Dennis echoes the film's poster art, dvd cover, and dvd menu guide, in which he is lying on the same couch as if in mid therapy session. As with the film's title, the viewer is cued that this is a moment of potential insight into the mind of a fan who perhaps pathologically over-identifies with Superman, especially as portrayed by Christopher Reeve (Dennis bears a faint resemblance to the late actor). The image, along with an assortment of attributes expected of cinéma vérité (hand-held camera, direct address) promises the revelation of truth that is the domain of documentary film. Prior to Dennis making the assertion about his relationship to Superman, we see a series of shots of him donning his Superman costume in his modest apartment, which is crammed with a plethora of Superman merchandise. While images of Superman in a variety of incarnations (trading cards, coffee mugs, figurines, posters, curtains) dispassionately look on, Dennis squeezes his scrawny frame and flaccid belly into a skin-tight Superman costume. Ogens briefly cuts to a close-up of an ashtray festooned with butts beside a gift shop trophy that says, "Hollywood Hero of

the Year.” The irony is heavy, though Ogens seems to suggest that self-awareness is Dennis’s Kryptonite.

The sequence articulates the manner in which Dennis sees himself and desires to be seen and how Ogens emphasizes the apparent disparity between self-image and how Hollywood tourists and the film’s viewers might be inclined to see Dennis. Dennis asserts his cultural authority over Superman as a text, in fact writing himself onto the cultural palimpsest as another iteration of super-textual density that nourishes his sense of identity. What Dennis sees and what he wants others to see is superficially at odds with the inclination to view him as the proverbial troubled fan, the aficionado who takes his devotion to a particular strand of pop culture “too far.” This moment is so compelling, however, because rather than negating Dennis’s authority, it compels the viewer to confirm it. It is a moment of truth inasmuch as it underscores the mediated nature of truth and the liberating potential that comes with wholly embracing a version of reality that speaks to you. This is the power of the mediated superhero body reconfigured by the aesthetics of documentary filmmaking. The visual and visceral excesses of blockbuster superhero films are here remediated as a comparable excess conveyed via the body and the narrative context in which we are asked to read that body. Dennis wants us to read him as a certain kind of hero in relation to images of Superman, drawing upon familiar narrative tropes of sacrifice and the recognition of ourselves in his alterity. Ogens’ deployment of reflexive documentary techniques actually reinforces Dennis’s perspective rather than invalidates it. The viewer is brought closer to Dennis by virtue of the disparity between the ideal and the image, not despite it. In relentlessly pointing the camera at Dennis, and Dennis’s unblinking response, his humanity emerges intact. Rather than allowing the viewer the cathartic distancing of the freak show, *Confessions* expands upon a cultural familiarity with and attraction to the superhero in order to suggest that the very instability that the superhero impersonator (and indeed the superhero) indicates is an assertion of a plurality essential to a postmodern American identity. Writing of the documentary subject, Michael Chanan notes, “Being filmed is to give up your own authorship of yourself.”<sup>1</sup> To some degree this is apparent in the way in which *Confessions* treats its subjects, all of whom are seen in varying degrees as social misfits or dissatisfied souls pursuing the Hollywood Dream. Dennis himself is even marginalized by two of the other performers profiled in the film, Max Allen (Batman), who describes Dennis as “weird and out there,” and Jennifer Gehrt (Wonder Woman), who characterizes him as a “train wreck.” Dennis is the special subject par excellence and his claims as historian and archivist are potentially diluted when we see some of the prizes of his collection: soundtrack LPs of *Superman* and *Superman II* autographed by the films’ casts and a crude cardboard diorama of his own construction (complete with modified action figures) of a scene from the 1978 *Superman*. These objects seem to place him as a social subject in the same place his Superman costume does: the category of the fanatic. However, Dennis’s earnestness penetrates the too easily maintained detachment between subject and audience. While Allen and Gehrt assert a distance from Dennis, they are also his friends and respect his commitment to the idea of Superman. At one point in the film *Superman* actress Margot Kidder, who has a friendly relationship with Dennis, defends him, saying, “There are a lot of awful things you can take too far and Superman’s terrific so, hey, if you want to wear that outfit twenty-four hours a day, go for it. It’s a lot more appealing than a lot of other things I can think of.”

By willfully embedding himself into the Superman meta-text, Dennis compels you to reject or accept what he does, but, more importantly, he demands that you make social space for him, regardless of your feelings. In this regard, Dennis is a political agent, pushing the limits

of social boundaries and, in doing so, affirming the pleasurable instabilities of the postmodern subject in America. In fact, he is radically actualizing the utopian promise of America: the proverbial life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. This speaks to the essential tension of *Confessions*: Dennis's authorship of himself is predicated on being looked at by others in a very specific way that he determines. He can only be recognized as a social subject when seen and photographed, photographed and seen, not just by tourists on Hollywood Boulevard, but by Ogens and the film's viewers as well. We are thus complicit in Dennis's manufacturing of self. Whether we endorse what he does is incidental; what matters is that we are looking, for, as Dennis observes, "There's really no such thing as bad publicity. As long as it's publicity." And what he is publicizing is an image of ourselves, the mediated and mediating postmodern subject who defines him or herself in relation to mass culture. The project of *Confessions* is thus to reveal/not reveal the "true" Christopher Dennis. Is he really the son of actress Sandy Dennis as he claims (and her family denies)? Is he delusional and, if so, to what degree does he reflect our own delusions and disillusionments about mass culture, American society, and personal identity? The questions Dennis provokes compel the viewer to confront that part of themselves mirrored in the simulacrum, for Dennis is not simply impersonating Superman or channeling a culturally constructed idea of Christopher Reeve, he is reflecting back to us our own ambivalent relationship with pop culture and our vexed identities as 21st century Americans.

As Bill Nichols observes, a documentary film is an "external trace of the production of meaning we undertake ourselves every day, every moment."<sup>2</sup> Thus the correspondence between Dennis's body and the body of the viewer is central to the film's discursive deconstruction and consequently self-conscious reaffirmation of the superhero ideal. This is the central tension that informs Dennis's persona, for the disparity between his real-life body and the imaginary body of Superman is so vast as to produce a kind of cognitive dissonance when we look upon him. However, Dennis's commitment to the Superman ideal, his vision of Superman reinscribed onto his own body, becomes a way in which Dennis articulates an American body politic which acknowledges and even embraces multiplicity as a paradoxical form of identity formation. The Superman emblem on his chest thus contains the sub-textual message, E pluribus unum. This, in fact, is the perennial symbolism of Superman in the comics and movies, expressed via mass commodity consumption. By representing a real-life American body that literally dons the Superman persona, *Confessions* penetrates the obscuring artifice generated by those commodities, in particular the special effects-laden movies starring Christopher Reeve. In his direct invocation of Reeve, Dennis directs a kind of x-ray vision onto this idealized pop culture figure (the condensed signifier of Superman the character and Christopher Reeve the actor) to reveal ourselves underneath. Dennis brings us closer to the utopian potential embodied by Superman by indicating a way in which we can all be like him—a transcendent figure reveling in the possibilities offered up by the intersection between popular culture and a democratic society.

While Dennis defines himself according to Superman meta-texts, Ogens foregrounds the manner in which we all produce individual meaning in relation to textual codes and systems by inserting footage of Sandy Dennis from *The Out of Towners* when Christopher Dennis first speaks about his purported background. Dennis himself stitches in another textual thread when he claims that he decided to attempt a career in acting per the deathbed wish of his mother. Thus he subtly invokes one of the primary narrative tropes of the superhero genre, the sacrificing son who is morally impelled to continue a family legacy. This is placed beside another thread within *Confessions*' textual network, footage of Sandy Dennis's niece, Pam Dennis, being interviewed by Ogens. In this sequence, Pam merely comments on the

generosity of her aunt and makes no reference to Christopher. The sequence concludes with a close-up shot of Christopher on the couch maintaining that his mother was a very private person and did not want “a lot of this stuff out.”

It is not clear what “this stuff” exactly is and here Ogens hints at a latent tension between Christopher and Pam Dennis’s understanding of the truth. This is fully realized in the next two segments of the film to focus on Dennis, the first of which begins with footage of Antonio Banderas receiving a star on the “Hollywood Walk of Fame.” Suddenly the space that we have previously seen occupied by Dennis as the imitation celebrity re-produces Dennis as the authentic fan, for he is among the throngs of people who have come to catch a glimpse of Banderas and his wife, Melanie Griffith. More importantly, Dennis is seen as the most vocal of fans, announcing to the crowd that Banderas’s limousine has arrived and then shouting and jumping to get the attention of Banderas and Griffith. All of this proves successful for Dennis, as he gets Banderas’s autograph, a fact he proudly announces to the camera. Tellingly, Dennis is wearing his Superman costume throughout, suggesting that Hollywood is simultaneously a work space and a recreational space, that, in fact, there is no fundamental division between his public and private selves, that the specific space of Hollywood in fact encourages such liminality. Such dissolution is affirmed by the familiar manner in which fans frequently engage with stars, the aura of intimacy generated by the cinematic and televisual image clinging to the social subject. This is exemplified here by Dennis’s informal address of Banderas and Griffith and, later in the film, by his very friendly interactions with Kidder at a Superman convention in Metropolis, Illinois. It perhaps further explains Kidder’s response to Dennis. His appropriation of an iconic signifier and his passing resemblance to Christopher Reeve mark him quixotically as a “safe” subject. In his excess he generates an aura of familiarity as well as confirmation of the appeal of celebrity and the power of art.

Dennis wears his Superman costume in nearly every scene in which we see him, affirming this collapse of the public into the private and the leakage of the private into the public. Whether at work on Hollywood Boulevard or at home, he is in costume. He even wears it when he publicly proposes to his girlfriend Bonnie (at the Superman convention) and when they are later married. Both events take place in Metropolis, indicating the manner in which public space is conflated with private space via identification with mass culture. The small town of Metropolis has produced a modest tourist industry by virtue of its name alone (it bears no other tangible connection to Superman). Thus Dennis and the town are comparable texts, reinscribed and meant to be understood in relation to pop culture iconicity, each gesturing towards the collapse of sign and signifier manifested by Hollywood, the simulated space of iconicity, the shadow city in which Dennis as Christopher Reeve/Superman is as much an indexical trace of the movie industry as hand and foot prints in the cement at Grauman’s Chinese Theatre. Thus, per Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as an “imagined community,” here America is both imagined and imaginary when the foundational understanding of its meanings is derived from the movies. Thus a textual and cognitive incoherence is both produced and ameliorated by the collapse of sign and signifier.

Ogens introduces the segment on the Superman convention in Metropolis with a series of shots of this small town in southern Illinois that aesthetically evoke an 8mm home movie. Ogens juxtaposes comments by the town’s mayor about his town’s association with the character with images of weathered Superman signs and murals around the town, as if it is small-town specter of the Hollywood commodity-scape that dominates the rest of the film. This also speaks to the inherent tension between the comic book Metropolis (the bustling

and vibrant equivalent of New York City) and this town, which, on the surface, more resembles Smallville (and, thus, a culturally produced idea of a generic “Middle America”). Even that association is undermined by an interview with a shirtless young man whose chest is emblazoned with a barbed wire and flame adorned Superman logo. He characterizes his town thusly: “Lot of drugs, stuff like that, around here. Criminal activity. Whole bunch. Dangerous little town, man. Really is. Lot of black people’s moved here. Used to be none. But lots of black people moved in.”

When Ogens asks him, “Why is everyone so obsessed with Superman here?” the young man replies, “You tell me. I been here all my life and I don’t know. My comic books say New York. I don’t know why they put Illinois in Metropolis.” His accidental reversal of terms, Illinois in Metropolis, conveys a sense of the instability and incoherence produced by writing a pop culture text onto the surface of a small town that itself has escaped a more traditional and conservative understanding of the town’s better (utopian) past (as indicated by his naked racism).

Ogens does not limit the significance of this instability and disparity to the space of Metropolis; rather it follows Dennis wherever he goes. The ambivalence that reinscription produces is revealed in an exchange between Dennis and a tourist on Hollywood Boulevard. While tipping Dennis, a young woman asks him if he does this all the time. His reply, “When I’m not working in movies and TV shows,” prompts the woman to laugh and Dennis responds, “I’m serious. I’m also an actor.” Ogens cuts to Dennis on the couch, where he elaborates: “Let’s see, I’ve been in, like, eighteen movies, nine TV shows, four commercials, and a couple of music videos.” Ogens then cuts to a clip of a film in which Dennis appears as an extra dancing in the background. The insertion of this textual thread confirms the incredulous attitude the viewer is expected to take regarding Dennis’s claims. His body of work is what you might expect of someone whose primary strategy for becoming a rich and famous actor is dressing up as Superman on Hollywood Boulevard. It is a moment of easy disavowal; too easy, in fact, for while Ogens may superficially give the viewer an opportunity to mock Dennis, such an outcome is subverted by the larger context in which this meaning is produced. The revelation is utterly anti-climactic; we have already positioned Dennis at the margins of the entertainment industry because he has done so himself. The only shock that could be produced here would be if we saw Dennis “really” acting in a “real” film. We use the same standards of “good” filmmaking that Dennis implicitly endorses through his devotion to the Christopher Reeve Superman films. The more deeply felt revelation at this point in the film, if we allow ourselves, is that Dennis’s modest self-aggrandizing duplicates the ways in which we all re-produce ourselves to one another (and ourselves) as social subjects. The promise of a confession is the promise of revelation but disclosure always comes with a price. The confessor must be prepared to live with the knowledge being granted him or her and the intimacy the shared secret generates between confessing subject and confessor facilitates empathy. The confessional subject reveals, in part, because he or she believes the confessor will understand. The basis of such an understanding is self-recognition.

Dennis’s utter zealotry by which he engages in his self-construction is thus enhanced by his Superman costume and Ogens suggests that it is just this earnestness that Pam Dennis charitably responds to in the following sequence. To emphasize the geographic (and ontological) distance between Christopher and Pam Dennis, the segment opens with a series of establishing shots of the countryside and then returns the viewer to the backyard setting that previously introduced the Dennis family. This time, however, Pam Dennis addresses Christopher’s claims regarding her aunt. She examines a photo of him as

Superman and remarks, "This is something that comes from his soul, it's what's driven him. Just like my aunt was an actress and it came from her soul and that's what she had to do." Though Pam ultimately expresses strong doubt regarding Christopher's assertion that he is Sandy's son, it is tinged with telling ambivalence. Not only does she apparently understand and seemingly admire what motivates Christopher, but she equates it with her aunt, echoing Christopher's explanation that acting is in his blood. Like Christopher himself, she makes him meaningful via Sandy Dennis as a textual template. Further, throughout this segment, Frank Dennis, Sandy's brother, sits impassively in the background, occasionally looking towards Pam but never making a comment. The lack of testimony from such a close relative, one who could presumably speak with some authority on Christopher's claims, can obviously be read in a number of ways, including an admission to the possibility that Christopher is telling the truth.

Thus the entire sequence, which, according to the culturally constructed logic of the "fan-as-other" narrative should confirm Christopher as the problematic social subject, does no such thing. It further invests him with ambiguity, not necessarily because it compels us to accept the possibility he is telling the truth, but because it informs us that, whether he is lying or not, this family has not, cannot, completely disavow him. This is the culture of celebrity as embedded within the familial narrative. Christopher is not regarded as threatening, simply as a possible liar. Pam says, turning to Frank, "I don't think she's his mother. I mean, when would she have had a baby?" We see no response from Frank. Instead Ogens cuts to a scene from *The Out of Towners*, in which Sandy Dennis's character finds a child lost in a park and declares, "Well, I'm not going to leave him." Ogens stitches together a number of textual threads here to confirm the manner in which we use cinema to sustain identity formations. Ogens deploys the simulacrum of Sandy Dennis as a reflexive defense of Christopher Dennis, placing the viewer in his subjective relationship to the actress. The underlying suggestion is that Sandy Dennis may not be his mother but that Sandy Dennis the doubly mediated simulacrum on the screen can be. Beneath this is the trace of Superman's foundling narrative, which haunts and reflexively validates the textual history Christopher presents.

To speak of a shared cultural memory of a pop culture myth as a haunting is to speak of presence through absence, which is a function of the simulacrum. The simulacrum reminds us of what it is not by virtue of our awareness of its mimetic qualities and in that revelation (the confession given up by the imitative body), we recognize the presence of the authentic. "Authentic" because it is a self-recognition; the phantasm in the mirror is us and thus no longer a phantasm. It is André Breton's surrealist dictum for the modern age, "I dream, therefore, I am," as expressed by materialized cinematic subjectivity. Dennis embodies the ghost in the machine that digs below the rational consciousness of the movie-goer. He is our dream self, projected on the screen, come to life and, in then re-projected by Ogens, by Dennis, by ourselves, onto our mind's eye again. "Superman" as a composite signifier takes on another layer of meaning, produces another iteration – Christopher Dennis – which, like the others, is grounded in, and grounds, our own subjectivity.

He is thus a Chimera, the hybridized real and unreal, a cyborgian composite of flesh and celluloid memory. Michael Chabon argues that the superhero costume "can be said not to exist, not to want to exist – can be said to advertise, to revel in, its own notional status."<sup>3</sup> The superhero costume, a signifier of hysterical overcompensation, always denotes a lack, but it is a lack that the public is meant to deny. Such denial, Chabon argues, becomes impossible when the superhero costume leaps from comic books and movie screens and

onto real bodies. We are thus confronted with the costume's resistance to history, its essential nonexistence and mediated, constructed meanings. Thus, when the superhero costume in question is idealized as a consummately American one, as is Superman's, we are faced with the ahistoricity and imaginary status of America itself. In donning the Superman costume, Dennis asserts America as a postmodern space and Americans as postmodern subjects. Tellingly, we tacitly accept what he represents, and thus create social, cultural, and geographical spaces that he is expected to occupy (Hollywood Boulevard, Metropolis, Illinois). And while we allow ourselves the potential comforts of distance by restricting him to those spaces, he in fact becomes another reason to visit them. He is both Self and Other, as indicated by the tourist's desire to be photographed beside him, placing the Self with and separate from the Other simultaneously. By making him a primary subject of his film, Ogens does much the same, and by being self-conscious about his relationship to his subject, he finally brings the viewer closer to it. Thus the film opens with a series of still images of Hollywood, presented in a slide show style, as if we are looking at a the photographic residue of an aunt and uncle's trip to the west coast, as if we ourselves are visiting Hollywood from middle America. The collision between two imaginary segments of America indicate a collision between history and memory.

The film is thus documenting an American subjectivity in familial and familiar terms that intersect with Dennis's own deployment of such tropes. Ogens brings this together vividly when he cuts to a sequence of shots of Dennis that approximate the look and affective aura of a home movie: square aspect ratio, grainy image, lack of diegetic sound. Over these images Dennis tells us, "I was born here in California. I decided that I was going to become an actor because my mother was an actress." His personal history is constructed as a generic American narrative of following family tradition, pursuing the American Dream within the Dream Factory that is Hollywood. Continuity with the past is doubly affirmed by his narrative and Ogens' aesthetic strategy, thus implicating his film in an ironic relationship with its subject, not simply Dennis but American identity and mass culture. The disparity between what Dennis says and what we see and how we see it distances rhetoric from (mediated) reality, bringing us closer to the subject, not further from it.

What further brings individual and national subjectivities together is the intimation of memory and the continual project of memory loss and recovery. This speaks to an important trope of many documentary films, the representation of crisis and its affective aftermath, what Nichols calls the restoration of magnitude. The question of representing crisis and thus restoring the degree of magnitude affectively produced by it is a problem for fiction film, which tends to reduced magnitude by narrativizing and aestheticizing crises. According to Nichols, documentary film is particularly well-equipped to circumvent the problems created by the formulaic narratives and spectacle of Hollywood cinema by foregrounding the tension between narrative, indexicality, and myth. The self-reflexive nature of documentary thus compels the viewer to look upon the documentary subject as one constructed according to narrative terms (Dennis as "character" in *Confessions*), as an indexical trace of historical time and real bodies (Dennis as a real person), and as an iteration of myth (Dennis as the Other). The inherent self-reflexive qualities of documentary are underscored in *Confessions* by the self-reflexive nature of its subject. It is a mediation of a mediation of a mediation into perpetuity. Dennis is a highly self-conscious narrativized and narrativizing agent and the film engages with mythic tropes within its own narrative structure, which then becomes a comment upon the function of mythologizing fictional characters and movie stars, thus deconstructing the magnitude-reducing qualities of spectacular blockbusters such as Superman.

The textual linkage Dennis asserts between himself and the Christopher Reeve Superman films is suggestive of the layers of magnitude that are addressed within *Confessions*. Within the loose narrative of the film itself we have a primary magnitude expressed by Dennis, drug addiction, which informs a larger magnitude, death. This is articulated in a scene in which Dennis speaks of an epiphany he had one day while in a speed-induced stupor: "I was sitting there watching TV and I see a death scene. For like an instant it was like I was seeing my own death, which, that was like a spiritual awakening." The historical subject recognizes his indexical trace within the narrativized space of the televisual. Ogen strongly suggests that this encounter with magnitude, the penetration of distancing aesthetics of Hollywood, informs Dennis's paradoxical immersion into a Hollywood-produced textual universe by then becoming a Superman/Christopher Reeve impersonator. He brings himself closer to the magnitude of death by embracing the iconicity of Superman and Christopher Reeve.

This is the deconstructivist power of the fan-as-producer and, by extension here, the deconstructivist significance of the documentary film as testimonial to this. This is compounded by the two other magnitudes in Dennis's life: the death of his mother (as he reports it) and the death of Christopher Reeve. He uses both as a means to more fully construct a mythologizing narrative that allows him social agency and historicity. Dennis recalls his reaction to the news of Reeve's death this way: "Chills ran up my spine right there. There's no way he could be dead. He's Superman. The Man of Steel himself. He - there's no way. He can't be dead. And I'm sure there's people out there who don't realize that Christopher Reeve has passed on. [voice cracks with emotion] So..." As with the death of his mother, Dennis reconfigures loss as access to meaning. The death of his mother impels him to become an actor, the death of Christopher Reeve to become something more than the term "impersonator" conveys. The death of a celebrity mother (possibly) and the real death of a celebrity made personal are understood here in relation to Dennis's own imagined death. In response he transforms himself into a kind of living tribute to the actor and his mother. Tellingly, Dennis expresses a more vividly emotional response to the death of Christopher Reeve than to the death of his mother. In this moment we witness the power of the Hollywood blockbuster to simultaneously acknowledge and repress magnitude. Further we see that it is the documentary film that more fully represents the magnitude of multiple losses that are rendered mythic in the text of Superman. The presence and absence of Reeve is contained within the figure of Dennis in costume

Dennis offers a solution that can only be realized by looking at him, thus the documentary fills in the gaps left over by the Hollywood blockbuster. The documentary resists closure, it affirms the ongoing power of mass culture to be absorbed and used by individuals to assert social agency. If the blockbuster superhero film evades death via iteration – the constant recycling of conflict between superhero and supervillain – *Confessions* confronts death via the remediation of the superhero body. Dennis simultaneously responds to the symbolic power of the superhero but also lays bare the manner in which we react to mass culture as a means of mediating our own deaths. This is emphasized by the confessional mode of documentary, which Nichols argues "grants us the power to extract and manage (secret) knowledge – what the body knows but cannot openly say."<sup>4</sup> Here we see the intersection between documentary and the representational strategies of the superhero film, in which the body is a perpetually unstable signifier, always in the process of accessing meaning, always eluding final meaning. The documentary pins down meaning by acknowledging its construction, both by the subject and by the filmmaker him or herself.

Central to this process is, to use Nichols' term, vivification, the production of affect that

exposes the contradictions that representational strategies of Hollywood films obscure. Vivification in *Confessions* is about the historicity underlying the representation, about the conflicting meanings that reside beneath the surface of the superhero costume in fiction films and the inherent contradictions of the superhero costume in reality. *Confessions* vivifies the tensions between the individual and mythology, between subject and society, between life and death. What requires vivification is not “the sound and fury of spectacle...but the experiential awareness of difference that, in the social construction of reality, has been knotted into contradiction.”<sup>5</sup>

In *Confessions* place becomes a central component of understanding and working through these contradictions. We understand bodies in this film in the context of place that is inherently unstable (whether Hollywood Boulevard or Metropolis, Illinois) but which also can be used to stabilize individual and collective identity. This is evident in a scene in which a police officer assigned to patrol Hollywood Boulevard indicates for Ogens’ camera the line between private and public property that the street performers cannot cross. There is, however, a gap between the two lines he points at and he says, “I’m not quite sure about the DMZ there, but, uh...” The inherent instability (multiple meanings/meaninglessness) of Hollywood Boulevard (and Hollywood more broadly as a culturally constructed space and idea) is exposed by the inability of social authority to fully apprehend this space. This is reinforced by the presence behind him of two signs in a storefront window that say “London” and “Tokyo.” The mutability of space gives agency to the mutability of individual subjects occupying that space. This sequence indicates the ongoing social need and desire to create and sustain boundaries, the inherent instability of those boundaries, and an essential attraction to liminality and the reorganization of social meaning.

Reflections on place inevitably bring us back to the ways in which *Confessions*, like most superhero texts, is engaging with the constructed nature and meaning of an American identity, America as a liminal space and an “in-between” state of mind, always transforming, always being reinvented, always in the process of becoming. The superhero indicates this by always being transformative; a primary element of the genre is the moment of transition from secret identity to superhero identity. Dennis, as the transparently average person inhabiting the Superman costume, bears the tension of the transformative moment perpetually. He is neither average nor super, but both. He is an identifiable figure because we understand this liminality as the inevitable symptom of modern American life in which the transformative qualities of the American zeitgeist are channeled through popular culture. The ongoing “becoming” of America has been historically understood in terms of utopian ideals, which indicates the necessary place of bodies, and especially superhero bodies, in this process. Nichols confirms that the documentary film “is an active reassemblage of the body as the repository of personal meaning and of a utopian unconscious of collective values.”<sup>6</sup> In his appropriation of the Superman persona, Dennis indicates how Hollywood superhero blockbusters are comparable repositories. In documenting this, Ogens reveals the fluid relationship between mediations and subjects, between nation and citizens.

Such a relationship is made manifest by an image that appeared on the streets of Los Angeles in the month prior to the 2008 presidential election. It is a synthesis of an iconic image of Christopher Reeve as Superman and an image of Barack Obama. Here we see the space of Hollywood not as the Other space in contrast to a “real” America but as an iteration of the dream space that is all of America. Rather than a sharp dividing line between Hollywood and America, we see that mass culture (as represented by both Superman and Obama) reflects who we are by demonstrating the malleability of our own meaning to

ourselves. The transformative properties of American identity are the paradoxical source of stable meaning in American society. With this hybrid image of Super-Obama we acknowledge the dualistic pleasure and fear that Obama's socially constructed hybridity has provoked and inspired in Americans. He is both black and white; simultaneously from Kenya, Hawaii, Indonesia, Kansas, and Illinois; a Christian and, if some on the right were to be believed, a Muslim. By merging the fluid signifier "Obama" with the signifier of Christopher Reeve as Superman, we see the utopian promise of American democracy exposed as the underlying ethos of the transforming and transformative superhero and vice versa. Suddenly we are reminded that, despite his normative whiteness, Superman is an alien, the ultimate American immigrant, the consummate Other. By hybridizing him with Christopher Reeve's Superman, we make Obama, and ourselves, more recognizable. It becomes a way of containing the cultural threat of his racial hybridity, or, better, a means by which we can celebrate that hybridity. Obama himself has exploited this by posing in front of the very same Superman statue in Metropolis, Illinois that Christopher Dennis was married beside. Both Obama and Dennis represent the "in-between-ness" of American society, the nation's essential hybridity. Each is the Other assimilated into the Self, the Self embedded in the Other. If we accept one, surely we can – and must – accept the other.

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Notes<sup>1</sup> Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary*, BFI, 2007, 215.2 Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," in *New Challenges for Documentary*, Alan Rosenthal, ed., University of California Press, 1988, 59.3 Michael Chabon, "Secret Skin," in *The New Yorker*, March 10, 2008. 4 Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*, Indiana University Press, 1994, 5.5 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Indiana University Press, 1991, 235.6 Ibid, 264.