Bordering Fiction and Fact: Images of Public Servants in the Popular Imagination

How are public servants depicted in popular culture: As heroes, understudies, as corrupt or bumbling bureaucrats? How is government depicted in popular culture? And how has that changed over time? And what does this mean in terms of the historical antagonism Americans have toward government? In this paper, I describe a larger research project aimed at investigating these questions by studying portrayals of public service in popular culture. As an example of how public servants can be examined in cultural products, I discuss the changing depictions over time of one public servant character, Commissioner Gordon, of “Batman”.

I explore depictions of public service in popular culture because I argue that something is missing by overlooking characters like Commissioner Gordon in favor of superheroic characters like Batman, or even supernatural villains like The Joker (Tyree 2009). Depictions of super heroes or super villains are less likely to reveal our views of public service, while depictions of the human characters in public service may, because the former possess extraordinary powers or talents, or in the case of Batman or Iron Man, proficiency with technology, while the latter do not possess such skills or powers. My interest in studying public service in popular culture stems from a broader interest in understanding the historical antagonism Americans have toward government, which I believe can be revealed by examining the stories we tell. This is consistent with Henry Kass’ observation that (1990, p. 9):

The role, and thus legitimacy, of public administration in the American republic has always been problematical. While we have recognized the need for an administrative establishment since revolutionary times, we have feared the potential power of an administrative elite to undermine cherished individual freedoms. Accordingly, we have moved from one legitimating myth for public administration to another in a vain effort to

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assuage our discomfort with an administrative establishment we need, but seem bound to fear and even revile.

My analysis shall be guided by the framework set forth by Sandford Borins’ (2011) *Governing Fables*, where he concludes “Clearly, there is in American public sector narratives a strong heroic fable” (2011, p. 244). Do the four dominant values that change public personnel described by Klingner (1993, 1997) also shape characterizations of public servants in fiction? If so, how? For instance, if the dominant values of the New Deal era—Responsiveness, Efficiency, and Individual Rights—required public personnel managers to “adhere to legislative mandates and serve as watchdogs against the spoils system” (Klingner 1997, p. 168), is this reflected in fictional public servants as well? Adams and Ingersoll (1990) suggest that the larger culture does, indeed, influence organizational culture in the public sector.

This project is in its earliest developmental stages, but I plan to restrict the analysis to the film medium (Thomas 2001; Corrigan 2004; Shaw 2008) and science fiction film in particular (King & Krzywinska 2000; Cornea 2007). Unlike the fantasy film genre (Butler 2009), science fiction is aspirational, that is, it depicts events and scenarios that could happen, given sufficient advances in technology and science. As King and Krzywinska observe (2000, p. 7):

> In imaginatively figuring the future (or an alternative past or present) science fiction films can be seen to some extent as measures of the hopes and fears of the cultures in which the films are produced and consumed.

The speculative and aspirational aspects of the genre allow filmmakers and audiences to ask “What if?” and answer in creative and challenging ways that can betray our views on the potential for government authorities and public servants to serve well or poorly: “The speculative mode of science fiction has always included the potential to ask politically-informed questions about our own society” (King & Krzywinska 2000, p. 22). How we answer those questions
through depictions of government and public service reveals society’s faith in or fear of its leaders and public servants to lead and serve.

Although genre boundaries are not absolute—films often contain elements of multiple genres (Grant 2007), science fiction author David Brin draws some interesting distinctions between science fiction and fantasy (2011, para. 5-6, emphasis original):

For all the courage and heroism shown by fantasy characters across 4,000 years of great, compelling dramas, nothing ever changes! Aragorn may be a better king than Sauron would have been … but he’s still a freaking king. And the palantir on his desk that lets him see faraway places and converse with viceroys across the realm is still reserved for the super elite. No way are we going to see mass-produced palantirs appearing on every peasant’s tabletop from Rohan to the Shire. (The way our civilization plopped such a miracle on your tabletop.)

It never even occurs to Aragorn or Gandalf to give the poor the godlike powers they themselves get to wield, let alone provide them with libraries, running water, printing presses or the germ theory of disease … The core thing about fantasy tales is that, after the adventure is done and the bad guys are defeated, the social order stays the same.

Fantasy, on the other hand, commonly involves magic and fantastic characters like superheroes and creatures with supernatural powers. In the science fiction genre, government or the bureaucracy is a common foil. Government intervention or social engineering gone awry is a stock in trade, as is the dystopic vision of capitalism run roughshod over civil society, the selling out of government as a regulator of capitalism. It is in this context that I wish to study depictions of public service to discover the stories we tell and how they have changed over time.

Public service themes are rather common in superhero stories. John Carter served as a captain for the Confederate States during the Civil War. Diana Prince—aka Wonder Woman—served as a nurse in the Allied Army during WWII. Dr. Bruce Banner—The Incredible Hulk—was a physicist in a U.S. government laboratory. The Mighty Thor served New York City as emergency medical technician Jake Olsen. Iron Man is a government contractor. It seems as though we not only need heroes (Fingeroth 2004) but that we need them to serve public service
roles as well. In his analysis of the need that heroes fill, Danny Fingeroth concludes (2004, p. 167-168):

We have a need for a champion who will know the right thing to do, the right amount of force that needs to be applied, and who has the resources to muster that force and set right everything that has veered off track. Although in reality, when mere humans try to do these things the results are often messy and muddled, the superhero ideal exists because we want it and need it to on many psychological levels.

We create supernatural hero narratives to provide satisfying solutions to difficult or irresolvable social problems. Our own efforts are not enough, nor are those of our political leaders or public servants.

Public Servants as Heroes: The Case of Commissioner Gordon

To illustrate how one well-known public servant has been depicted in popular culture, I trace the changing portrayals of Commissioner Gordon in television and film. Is “Batman” science fiction, however? The point has been argued (Britt 2011, para. 7-8):

The greatest science fiction authors have always begun their stories with this premise: [What if?]. … “What if our entire world was indeed and in fact a computer program and all of our notions of humanity were questioned?” Or “What if a robot living with humans turned out to be a more moral person than the humans?” These are all wonderful ethical questions raised by the best kind of science fiction … good science fiction asks great ethical questions in fantastical ways, and Batman does this in spades.

Batman does not possess super powers; he relies on advanced technology. Like any science fiction product, one is led to believe that anyone could do what Batman does, given enough money and psychological baggage.²

² So, does this mean James Bond is science fiction as well? In my larger project, I will likely avoid the Batman films and superheroes in general, and stick to more traditionally-recognized science fiction films in order to avoid these questions and similar rabbit holes.
From the earliest films, “Batman” (1943) and its sequel “Batman and Robin” (1949), through the television series in the 1960s and 1970s, Gordon is depicted as an honorable understudy at best, to at worst, a bureaucrat presiding over a corrupt or inept police force. For more than half a century, Commissioner Gordon provided little more than a justification for Batman’s pursuits. He is given almost no back story, evolves little, and remains something of a representation of government-as-foil to the real hero. Interestingly, the 1954 Comics Code Authority (CCA) criteria would seem to provide the perfect rationale for developing Commissioner Gordon into a primary character, if not a hero in his own right. The CCA declared that “Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals” (CCA 1954, criterion 1).

Gotham City is home to two prominent public administrators: district attorney Harvey Dent, and police commissioner James Gordon. The former becomes villain Two Face, and is given his own story arc and evolves in his role as a Batman foe. Setting aside the question of whether that is the inevitable fate of dedicated, idealistic public servants, it is notable that Harvey Dent himself—as public administrator—is really only there for the eventual creation of a new supernatural foe. Commissioner Gordon, on the other hand, provides the space and justification for Batman’s crime fighting efforts, which is to say that Batman is necessary because the Gotham Police are incapable of cleaning up the city themselves.

To illustrate what may be missed by focusing on the fantastic superhero characters and not the public servants, I examine Commissioner Gordon over time, mainly in film, but also with reference to the television series of the 1960s. What do we learn differently, what is missed by focusing on Batman rather than on Commissioner Gordon? I propose that examining the
changing nature of human characters in fantastic narratives tells us more about how we see
ourselves than does studying the changing nature of the fantastic characters themselves. The
epithet “super hero” indicates a heroic figure that transcends the typical hero, no matter how
extraordinary heroes are in the first place. There really is no day-to-day counterpart to a Batman,
Superman, or Spider Man; but there are real-world counterparts to Commissioner Gordon.

Batman is a quasi-public servant, he “has the approval of the community—he is deputized by the
City of Gotham—to smooth out any rough aspects of his perception by the public” (Fingeroth
2004, p. 18). But he is not a public servant: “Superheroes are not by and large upholders of the
letter of the law; they are not law enforcement agents employed by the state. The set of values
they traditionally defend … has stood for the ideals enshrined in the U.S. Constitution”
(Reynolds 1994, p. 74). The superhero can change over time without much reflection on our own
condition, for we can relate to them only so much; changing their human friends and foes,
however, perhaps tells us something about how we see ourselves.

My proposal suggests that our cultural products reflect our current state, rather than
express revolution or change. That is, the popular culture product that resonates does so because
it reflects our current interpretation of our world, and not because it delineates fault lines in a
changing cultural landscape. These are two different ways of examining cultural products, and I
am currently working out which approach rings truer to me. Many scholars seem to come from
the “representational” perspective, for example (Fingeroth 2004, p. 17):

The superhero—more than even the ordinary fictional hero—has to represent the society
that produces him. That means that what Superman symbolizes changes over time. In the
1950s, he may have been hunting Commies. In the 1970s, he may have been clearing a
framed peace activist against a corrupt judicial system.

Specific to Batman, Fingeroth further concludes (2004, p. 26 emphasis supplied):
Batman in the comics and Batman in the movies and Batman in a cartoon series are the same basic character, the same representation of an aspect of the human condition. Batman is a dark avenger of the night, traumatized by violent childhood loss into an obsessed hunter of criminals, avenging his parents’ murder again and again with his defeat of every criminal he pursues. His lack of ability to achieve closure around the issues of loss and revenge is his personal neurosis, but it is the gain of the city and society in which he operates.

The emphasis on whatever aspect—camp, as in the 1960 TV series, noir-inflected drama, as in the 1990s animated series, future techno-drama, as in the [animated] ‘Batman Beyond’ series—is more a function of the times and the creative team behind a particular incarnation. But the basic mythos is always the same.

Likewise, J.M. Tyree observes that “The perennial nature of the Batman story remains remarkable; it appears to be a kind of ever-adaptable contemporary myth series” (2009, p. 31). Furthermore, Robert Terrill asserts “Batman represents a contemporary archetypal image of the collective Self; fragmented because modern life requires a schizophrenic subject reluctant to pursue psychic integration” (2000, p. 495, emphasis original). The darker and lighter depictions of this character reflect the changing willingness of audiences to engage in such self reflection. For example, over the decades, Batman has taken many forms including “the grim Batman of the 1940s comic book, the amateurish and overly patriotic Batman of the 1940s movie serials, the campy Batman of 1960s television, the postmodern Batman of 1980s comic art miniseries The Dark Knight, and the Michael Keaton Batman of the 1989 blockbuster movie, among others” (McAllister 1992, p. 141). But the 1989 and 1992 Tim Burton films were considered too dark and violent by some, so “Joel Schumacher was hired to replace Burton, and a year before the [third] film went into production, Warner Bros, engaged in a strategic campaign to sanitize the Dark Knight, making him more kid-friendly and wooing back corporate sponsors in the process” (Terrill 2000, p. 494). The Schumacher films were critically panned and failed to meet financial expectations, leading to the revamped vision of the Batman franchise. In contrast, Commissioner
Gordon evolves little, and is given almost nothing to do for years until the Dark Knight series of films (a number of comic one-offs, however, have developed this character in different ways). “For all his prominence in the 71-year history of Batman, Gordon’s rarely had the spotlight to himself. James Gordon actually made his first appearance at the same time as Batman in 1939. The first Batman story … involves the gray-haired police commissioner [who] appeared again the next month, and became a regular part of the Batman supporting cast by 1940 … [as] an aging public servant” (Wolk 2010, para. 2-3). The comic book Batman: Year One (Miller & Mazzucchelli 1987) “put the spotlight squarely on the young Jim Gordon for the first time. Nearly all subsequent appearances of Gordon draw heavily on the way he was portrayed here” (Wolk 2010, para. 7).

“Nearly all”, but not all subsequent appearances; particularly those in film: David Hughes (2004) traces the development of the four Batman films released between 1989 and 1997, and concludes that it was only the relative box office failure of the third and fourth films that prompted Warner Bros. to reconsider the franchise. Only after criticisms and poor box office receipts of the 1995 and 1997 films did the advocates for bringing Year One to film win the day. Key events in Year One, the comic book, place rookie Gotham Police Officer Jim Gordon as the responding officer to the mugging and murder of Bruce Wayne’s parents: “All of this was new to this story, substantially weaving Gordon into Batman’s origins” (Darius 2011, p. 31).

“In the comic book version [Batman: Year One], Gordon is a more important character than in [the 2005 film] Batman Begins” (Darius 2011, p. 57). The Gordon character is developed further in the 2008 film, and is a central character in the 2011 animated film Batman: Year One, where his back story is fully fleshed out. We learn that he is a veteran of the U.S. Special Forces with extensive experience in hand-to-hand combat. We see a younger Jim Gordon, along with
direct indications of his power and virility. First, he arrives in Gotham from Chicago with his wife, who is pregnant. Notably, she gives birth to a son, James Jr., and not a daughter as in previous depictions of Commissioner Gordon. A further indication of his prowess is demonstrated in Year One through Gordon’s affair with the young, intelligent, and desirable Officer Sarah Essen. He is redeemed as an honorable character in the end by confessing to his wife and attending marriage counseling, but the viewer is shown clearly that Gordon is capable of heterosexual male force and attraction, but is committed to his wife and young family.

What does it mean that this has changed, why has Commissioner Gordon changed? Is it that the Batman character has been fully explored, or have his human allies become more interesting to study? If the darker and lighter depictions of Batman reflected the changing willingness of audiences to explore themselves further, as several scholars suggest, does a more complex Commissioner Gordon reflect this as well? It may be that the darker, more complex public servant figure reflects a different kind of interest in self examination because the character is explicitly human, with no secret identity or supernatural myth.

Public Service in Popular Culture: Elements of a Larger Project

Even though I have examined and alluded to a number of superhero stories, my larger project will focus more strictly on science fiction narratives for the reasons given earlier. The conflation of the two types in this paper is a byproduct of the project development process. Science fiction, given its aspirational nature and because it is rooted in the possible rather than the fantastic, provides a more interesting context to study depictions of public service and what those depictions might say about society’s views of government and public servants. The
assumptions that I make and the premises on which this study are founded leave a number of conceptual holes to fill and questions to answer, however:

- Do films express and reflect a culture’s current way of thinking, or do they delineate fault lines of change: i.e., where we might be heading?
- Why would I expect that the human characters would be more suited to illustrating a culture’s views on itself, and not a film’s supernatural characters?
- Why would I expect that story telling would reveal something about how society feels about government?
- Why would I expect there to be an intersection between Klingner’s four values of public personnel management and the depictions of government in film?

Happily, some prior research exists to guide my thinking about the above questions. For instance, Lee and Paddock (2001) address the role of storytelling and filmmaking in understanding society’s ambivalence toward its government. Furthermore, several scholars have linked the film medium to understanding concepts in public administration (Chandler & Adams, 1997; Goodsell & Murray, 1995; Holley & Lutte, 1999; Larkin, 1993; Lee, 2000; Marshall, 2012; McSwite, 2002; Shafritz & Foote, 1999; Wielde & Schultz, 2007). Remaining questions, however, are mine to explore. The most fundamental question to address is: What do science fiction films reveal about society’s views toward government and public service, and what, if anything, can public administration learn from these depictions?
References


