The American *Übermensch*: History of Superheroes

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Every civilization has its own mythology. The Greeks had their Olympians. The Vikings had their Asgardians. Early settlers in the United States had folklore characters like Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill. Today, modern man has the superhero: vigilantes that have power, depth and demand admiration or fear by all. These characters exist on the pages of comic books that continue to entertain readers and enthusiasts. Much like the gods of old, superheroes have a direct correlation to history, and this is most notable in the United States because they remain a viable entertainment and art form that has influenced much of the American experience. In the same way, current events influence the direction a comic takes.

Funny Papers

The "funny papers" gave birth to the illustrated adventure. Enthusiasts frequently cite the arrival in 1896 of a comic strip named *The Yellow Kid* in William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* as the inauguration of North American comics. In the early 1900s, these strips grew into full comic books. The first adventure comics featuring Buck Rogers and Tarzan appeared in 1929.[1] These larger than life swashbucklers led to the creation of more characters. Proto heroes like Zorro, the Shadow, and the Phantom dished out their version of masked justice from panel to panel. However, with every major art medium comes the often misplaced and misguided suspicion, and they quickly became a scapegoat for an alleged moral decay in the youth of the country. Subsequently, as a cultural phenomenon, the comic book carries with it a stigma attached to its methodology, its content, its creators, authors, readers, and aficionados.[2]

By the early 1940s, a profitable comic book market targeting teenagers and young people existed with a range of categories that included adventure, action, mystery, teen, and romance. In 1938, Action Comics #1 presented Superman, the first comic book superhero.[3] As the moniker "super" implies, the superhero was more than the average protagonist. These leading roles often had supernatural abilities such as alien super sleuth Martian Manhunter and the "King of the Seven Seas" Aquaman. In addition, others, such as crime fighters Batman

and the Green Arrow, had access to implausible quantities of machinery and affluence to fight for justice.

It was at this time that the initial public outcry against superheroes surfaced. The 1940 editorial "A National Disgrace" by Sterling North of the *Chicago Daily News* was the first nationwide attack against comic books. Editors republished his work in dozens of newspapers and periodicals. North asserted that the,

> [B]ulk of these lurid publications depend for their appeal upon mayhem, murder, torture, and abduction. . . . Superhuman heroics, voluptuous females in scanty attire, blazing machine guns, hooded 'justice,' and cheap political propaganda were to be found on almost every page. . . . Unless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers throughout America must band together to break the 'comic' magazine.[4]

Assemble

Political agendas creep into every viable medium, whether intentional or otherwise. This is often the case with comic books. A prime example of this is Steve Rogers, or as he is known the world over, Captain America. He is a bridge between the super hero vigilante and super patriot war hero. A creation of a lab experiment gone awry, a frail American soldier is given the amplified peak of human physical and psychological training, as well as a "vibranium" alloy shield covered in stars and stripes. His first assignment: defeat the Nazis. Captain America's super powers are less than most other costumed protagonist like meta-humans Superman or the Incredible Hulk. This promotes his individuality. His actual abilities lie in his strength and his management skills.[5]

Steve Rogers embodies the American soldier marching off to Europe to fight in World War II. Captain America is a flag bearer for American ideals; he expresses this to his troops:

> These are dark and desperate times. I know that some of you are afraid. It's alright. It's perfectly natural. But I want you to know that I am not. I am not afraid to die this day because what we do here is necessary. It may seem impossible, our enemies may appear to be endless, but that doesn't matter. Because there is no one else. Look at me. I believe in an idea, an idea that a single individual who has the right heart and the right mind that is consumed with a

> single purpose, that one man can win a war. Give that one man a group of soldiers with the same conviction, and you can change the world.[6]

Captain America is different than most of the superheroes of his time, as he is "given" his powers and not born with them. Steve Rogers, as a creation of the American military-industrial complex, arises as an instrument of the institution and a replacement for American foreign policy. In his first issue, when a Nazi murders Dr. Reinstein, inventor of the super-soldier serum, Captain America catches the killer and delights the reader when he bursts into a chamber in Germany and beats Hitler with his fists. All this happened nine months before Pearl Harbor. Until the war's end, Captain America saw combat with American soldiers in Europe and the Pacific. In addition, he exposed saboteurs and secret agents at home. Nevertheless, Captain America Comics folded in 1949 but the fear of communism gave him new purpose. In the 1950s he became "Captain America, Commie Smasher" as writers sought to nourish anti Soviet sentiment in the Cold War. This run of the series was short-lived, as the series offered no additional insight into Cold War issues outside the memorandum that Communists were malicious, fat, and poor dressers.[7]

Nevertheless, Captain America interrupted the bad publicity that comic books received at the time. Detractors contended that one-quarter of comics sold in 1953 were crime or horror comics. Such headings as *Crime Does Not Pay* and *Tales from the Crypt* provoked a countrywide anti-comic book campaign that ultimately steered to a self-inflicted industry code for comic books in 1954. This included eradicating most adult oriented comic books. It also helped diminish the comic book marketplace. With sales plummeting as much as fifty percent, the market continued to wane during the 1960s. Many mature categories faded away, and the superhero genre became the largest field in the market.[8]

In the spring of 1954, United States Republican Senator Robert C. Hendrickson stated, "Significant public concern over the possible effects of comic books on the young mind exists."[9] He went on to proclaim that crime comics were crammed with every method of depravity, brutality, and violence imaginable and further said, "They are produced for one reason only—they sell for big money, $20 million annually."[10] Senator Hendrickson went on to tie the publishers of crime comics with drug dealers, pornographers, theft, and general adolescent wrongdoing.[11] However, Captain America was a bright spot on the largely negative opinion of the genre. He was in essence, a hero for superheroes, providing a role model for the youth of America.

As public opinion in the United States changed, so did the direction of the Captain's series. A paradox in Captain America since the 1960s is the deviation amid American principles and American practice. As America evolves, Captain America's traditional character does not allow him to do the same. This anti hegemonic position is uncommon in a fictional genre that is generally about the preservation of the existing state of affairs. Superheroes are about the defense of life and material goods and virtually never seek the structure to transform profoundly.

Any character that pursues partisan activity or seeks monetary gain is, by comic book parlance, branded a villain. Consequently, Captain America inhabits a specific place within the realm of superheroes. The plots have the protagonist acting in the normal and traditional way, maintaining the status quo. Nonetheless, the authors of the scripts integrate rebellious depictions of a geopolitical nature into Captain America's plotlines and dialogues and at the same time strengthen the idea of American individuality.[12]

All New, All Different

In the 1960s, comic books began to leap from the page and find their ways into other mediums. Batman was on television, and splash pages were in art galas. Artist Roy Lichtenstein's dependence on comic books by this time is copiously recognized. He did not create his scenes but bootlegged his characters and thought bubbles from already circulated comics. With only a few exclusions, Lichtenstein dodged distinguishable comic book heroes such as Superman and Batman. As an alternative, he used identifiable sorts and typical passages from the increasing amount of war and romance books distributed for a mushrooming teenage market after World War II.[13]

Topics that are more adult began to ooze from the writers and illustrators of comic books, especially from frontrunners at Marvel Comics. Drug use and racial prejudice were commonplace, especially in books like the *Uncanny X-Men*. "Feared and hated," as the platitude states, by normal human beings for their unpredictable differences and supposed benefits, the X-Men are a race of super-human mutants with powers provided by a coincidence of biology. As the targets of xenophobia, bigotry, or homophobic violence, the X-Men are likewise powerless to castoff or refute their powers but chastised by family, friends, and others for having them.

This is a first appearance of unenthusiastic heroes, left to defend Americans from not just super villains, but other Americans as well. X-Men author

Stan Lee expounds just that "people fear things that are different,"[14] and the comic's innumerable authors and aficionados contend that its anti-despotic meaning can be useful to any individual or populace suffering from one or another form of coercion within a governmental structure. Past X-Men writer Joe Casey states that the X-Men plea to "every oppressed minority and disenfranchised subculture, and numerous decriers have protracted analyses of X-Men outside the typical arenas of race and sexuality in order to deduce the comic book through the discernments of McCarthy-era America and with respect to the anti-Semitism that its authors confronted within the comic book industry itself."[15]

The main protagonists and antagonists of the book were unconventional as far as the typical comic book character went for the time. The story of the X-Men has orbited around the racial maneuverings of the mutant extremist Magneto and the gallant pacifier Professor Charles Xavier. Magneto, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust sees race war with humans as unavoidable. The Brotherhood of Mutants (or his Acolytes) rejects the possibility for conciliation and defends the formation of a mutant state as desirable to the only other scenario: the enslavement of "mutant kind." Contrariwise, the compassionate Professor Xavier and his pupils counter Magneto's thoughts. They would rather work with both their mutant adversaries and humans to achieve nonviolent cohabitation. Magneto and Professor Xavier are in the likeness of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. and that is how the reader should approach these two characters. They both hold true to mutant kind. Magneto has a very separatist outlook, yet Professor X trusts that all men and mutants are equal.

These far-reaching metaphysical equivalents of Xavier and Magneto's connection to the African-American civil rights frontrunners is not a direct parable. A blue-blooded white American who inherited a considerable family wealth, Xavier does not merely pass as a regular human. He even masks the secret motives of his school being a haven for mutants and even his own mutation until he is "outed" by a competitor. While Magneto's distinctiveness is far more fashioned by the violent certainties of discrimination, the regularity with which he declares himself sovereign of one country or another and heartlessly slaughters his rivals scarcely makes him a consistent point of empathy for readers. His actions are a troubling connotation of non-whiteness or strangeness with unwanted and malevolent conduct.[16] Yet, the distinction from right and wrong can become confusing by the actions of these characters, as villains like Magneto or Bolivar Trask felt they were doing what was necessary for their race, and not just for personal profit (i.e. Lex Luthor's ludicrous schemes at global domination which riddled Superman comics at the time).

The fight for equality rests on the shoulders of the mutants and other civil rights activists. The message is clear—youth has influence over adults. This is a very empowering message to teenage readers. Xavier starts an institute to teach mutants, not humans. His justification for doing so is that when humans see that the mutants do not endanger society, they will have no motive to fear them. The analogous stratagem of teaching African Americans on how to work better with Whites was encouraged by some African American leaders in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, principally by Booker T. Washington. Nevertheless, this approach was completely gone by the 1960s, when Malcolm X, King, and other civil rights leaders all supported some sort of opposition. Furthermore, Xavier seldom truly agitates crusades, or even voices out for mutant rights. Instead, he concentrates on persuading the X-Men to use their tremendous talents to defend a world that dislikes and fears them from other, more malicious, mutants. This is comparable to King protecting the White majority from Malcolm X and the Black power crusade rather than struggling for African American egalitarianism and impartiality.[17]

The Vietnam War and race relations polarized America, and comic books echoed these concerns. In a 1968 book, Silver Surfer, (one of the most self-sacrificing and yet most beleaguered cosmic entities in the Marvel universe) bitterly declared: "Of all the countless worlds I've known . . . of the myriads of planets upon which I've trod . . . never have I known a race so filled with fear . . . with dark distrust . . . with the seeds of smoldering violence . . . as this . . . which calls itself Humanity."[18] The 1970s saw a grander amount of social obligation and commitment amongst comic book artists, many of whom had grown up reading comics as storybook essentials and had consequently become aware of the changing times. Particularly, both DC and Marvel were to feature honest, forthright, and open dialogues of drug compulsion, difficulties of the inner city, discrimination, and other present-day social concerns in their superhero titles.[19]

A deeper understanding of the characters allows one to understand the message the writers and illustrators included in their work. Readers eyeing for practical equivalents for Xavier and Magneto should observe the lives and labors of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. du Bois. Like Xavier, Washington stressed the want for the burdened group to work together with the prevailing group (Whites) and saw schooling of African Americans as the principal means to achieving approval and acceptance. In the meantime, du Bois started out as Washington's collaborator but over time grew progressively critical of Washington for his reluctance to refute Whites about African American civil rights. Mr. du Bois called Washington "The Great Accommodator,"[20] but the two men sustained

a continuing interchange about discrimination and the African American fight, long after they began to diverge on the best way to attain these rights. Yet the Magneto/du Bois parallel is also inconsistent. Contrasting to the habitually iniquitous Magneto, du Bois never encouraged wholesale slaughter of Whites and was compassionate towards the egalitarian communist dogma.[21]

In the 1970s, the young male comic fans that patronized comic shops soon found themselves branded as "fan boys." In addition to fan boys, these shops catered to readers of comic book pornography, a profitable genre for both vendors and publishers.[22] Comic book circulation considerably shifted from newsstands and other all-purpose wholesale outlets to distinct comic book shops. The newfangled shops depend on direct distribution, as stores preordered comic books with stringent restrictions on return of unsold books. This transformation led to an adjustment in the proportion and kind of persons reading comics. By the end of the decade, the comic book market was a minor subgroup of teenagers and college-age male readers.[23]

Super villains evolved from the stereotypical world domination scheme to something far much sinister: gentrification and racial genocide. Inhabitants of the "X-universe" are a range of anti-mutant hate assemblies such as Friends of Humanity, Humanity's Last Stand, and Stryker's Purifiers, which signify actual despotic groups like the Ku Klux Klan and a range of other White Supremacy assemblages. It is also noteworthy that, like some African Americans in the pre-civil rights South, many mutants keep their status concealed, hopeful to blend into conventional culture, while others want to be human so much that they agree to take a "cure" with unidentified possibilities.[24]

The X-Men comics do more than simply model a philosophy of acceptance and diversity. They scrutinize the grounds of bigotry and prejudice and pit opposing viewpoints against each other as dissimilar characters try to come to terms with the moral and psychosomatic insinuations brought on by the emergence of a new evolutionary chapter. Chromosomal mutations have given a minority of humans an assortment of various superpowers in this world. Mutants are projected as a parable for persecution overall. X-Men readers oversimplify Professor Xavier's attitude of acceptance and acclimatization to other beleaguered clusters, containing ethnic and racial subgroups and gay communities.[25] Regrettably, the parallels are not at times ample.

The 11th Hour

As Americans climbed out of the 1970s and into the 1980s, they had more

of a mindfulness towards the misgivings of themselves and their government. Skeptical and pessimistic were the status quo, and this mentality poured into the work of comics and superheroes. In such books as author Alan Moore's and illustrator Dave Gibbon's idealistically cynical *Watchmen* of 1986, former hero Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias) blows up a large portion of New York City in an effort to save the world. Yet, the peril of global disarray in *Watchmen* is vital to the main themes of personal interactions and desires. Each of the main characters is based on the comic book heroes of the 1930s and 1940s. These characters turn into masked protagonists who must manage their diminishing powers and changing times through its representation of the breakdown of the superhero order.[26] The anti-hero Rorschach mutters under his breath to his teammates the chilling sentiment Americans felt towards their bitter Soviet rivals: "No. Not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise."[27] The innate fear that Americans felt towards the impending nuclear destruction of the United States and the Soviet Union was palpable, and Moore preyed upon this mindset. *Watchmen* became an instant classic.

Comics in the 1980s became more introspective, and observed more of the internal struggle inside of man. A prime example of this is author Frank Miller, and his new-age noir books like *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Sin City*. In 1987, Miller teamed up with artist David Mazzucchelli to do a protracted series on the beginnings of Batman. The four issues of *Batman: Year One* expand on what was initially a two-page tale in a 1939 issue of Detective Comics. The proceedings that first took place in one or two panels spread over pages. Miller engaged the reader with memories blended with first-person accounts. This produced the air in which Bruce Wayne, unaccompanied in Wayne Manor, finally grasps the means and method in which to take vengeance for his parents' murder,[28] and offers a certain new level of angst to the character.

It was around this time that collectors found that comics had more than just an intrinsic value of entertainment, but a tangible one as well. With the rising interest in comic books in the 1980s, sales amplified into the early 1990s, until abruptly the market entered a calamity with an unexpected and sudden drop. In 1997, popular, mid-level comic books reported to have monthly sales of 40,000-60,000. The most prevalent comic book, *Amazing Spiderman*, had monthly sales of 234,000 in 1995, far outperforming the neighboring contender by more than double the sales.[29] It was safer to buy flag books with household names than obscure characters that most likely would not bring any financial value to a collection.

The 1990s saw a change in the mindset of Americans as well. As victors

of the Cold War and other military engagements like Operation Desert Storm, as well as enjoying a relatively successful economy, Americans dialed down the negative attitudes. The fight for equality and capitalism had moved to the "War on Drugs." This, in turn, echoed in the pages of superhero books, with characters that ironically gained their superpowers from the use of drugs. Captain America, as already mentioned, is a prime example. While the drugs given to him by the United States government may have advantaged his beginnings, his sustained triumph ascribed to his constant hard work. A 1990s story had Captain America lose the gifts of the super-soldier serum, seemingly since it was straining his body. In truth, the editor's column of the book clarified that the creative team behind this decided it was a way to teach the readers about the dangers of performance-enhancing drugs.[30]

Comic books have never been an exclusively American art form or entertainment. The rest of the world also had their own versions that grew to the same heights and notoriety as American books. However, they did offer a different approach to storytelling. These books eventually made their way to the United States, mostly from the growth of internet business. American comic books are still led by superheroes, even though a sundry collection of categories for both youngsters and grownups does exist. Japanese books called *manga* also have become gradually widespread over the last few decades, outfitting an adolescent market.[31]

Nevertheless, books still lost steam in the shops, and Americans just were not buying as many comics as they had done prior. The overall estimated comic book sales in the United States in 1993 were at $850 million. By 2001, when the business stabilized, sales had deteriorated to an appraised $225 million. Efforts to lift comic book sales have incorporated larger collaborations with the feature film industry by making motion picture accounts of comic books. Instances are *the X-Men, Batman*, and *the Incredible Hulk*, as well as different graphic novels, such as *Ghost World*, *the Losers*, and *Road to Perdition*.[32] Film adaptations of comic books have completely rejuvenated the field, and opened up a completely new market for readership that had not been there prior.

However, this is still a venue of art and entertainment that met with some resistance by the media. Comic book content remains branded as attending to macho-imagined identification in superhero comics or aiding in depraved wishes in books with sexually overt material. A vital facet of the stigma of comic books has been worldwide disapproval of them as an art form.[33] Many of the depraved or lower inhibitions that are synonymous with the mentally ill are avenues of storytelling in the comic world. Sex, drugs, and violence are still customary in

most books, and thus receive backlash from the moral majority.

Still, the Information Age opens up for creative minds and artists alike to fashion more superheroes and tales of their adventures. Stan Lee, who toiled exclusively for Marvel for sixty years, engaged in a 2000 contract to pen comic books for DC while he continued to yield the regular *Spiderman* comic strip for Marvel. The main comic producers in spirit have become advertising setups, with production detached to an intricate system of subcontractors. Publishers no longer need to rent costly city center space for their artists, most of whom work from home and make available their own working area and gear.[34] Accessibility to the field is at an all-time high.

Now the superhero has found its zenith, as many of these characters have become household names. There are just as many collectors that refuse to enjoy reading the books as there are that relish in the unique storytelling. On August 16, 2002, eBay had 16,558 auctions proceeding in Silver Age comics as opposed to 5,087 for comics printed before 1956 and 10,181 for comics distributed from 1970 to 1980. Clearly, time has an effect on comics from this period, so value differs extensively and is a main element of a comic's worth. The grading scale that has progressed in the market distinguishes various grades centered on such physiognomies as rips, folds, lightness of the paper, gloss of the cover colors, and state of the spine.[35]

Comic books are a worthwhile entertainment and art form that has swayed much of the American understanding. The proceedings in history openly affected superhero comic books as well. Much as society evolves and changes; so do its heroes and villains. This was not always the case, especially when comic books were in an embryonic state. As Josh Lambert said in 2009 in his piece in *Cinema Journal*, "The basic hero is really rather stupid. . . . [He] is always in trouble, and spends much of his time trying to clear his good name of crimes the villain has committed."[36] Currently, the hero is multifaceted, versatile, and sometime unscrupulous. As time evolves, so does art and literature.

Notes

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2. Paul Lopes, "Culture and Stigma: Popular Culture and the Case of Comic Books," *Sociological Forum* 21, no. 3 (2006): 399.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 402.

5. Jason Dittmer, “Captain America’s Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (2005): 629.

6. Adam Felber and Leonardo Manco, Dark Reign: New Nation #1, *Marvel Comics*, New York City. December 2008.

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8. Lopes, 400.

9. Kris Miranda, “Teaching the Superman: Prelude to a Hero Story of the Future,” *Purlieu: A Philosophical Journal* (Fall 2012): 47.

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13. Cécile Whiting, “Borrowed Spots: The Gendering of Comic Books, Lichtenstein's Paintings, and Dishwasher Detergent,” *American Art* 6, no. 2 (1992): 10.

14. Neil Shyminsky, “Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants: Appropriation, Assimilation, and the X-Men,” *International Journal of Comic Art* 8, no. 2 (2006): 387.

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16. Ibid., 390.

17. Robin S. Rosenberg, *The Psychology of Superheroes* (Dallas: Benbella Books, 2008), 87.

18. Miranda, 48-49.

19. Jeremy Dauber, “Comic Books, Tragic Stories: Will Eisner’s American Jewish History,” *AJS Review* 30, no. 2 (2006): 283.

20. Rosenberg, 87.

21. Ibid.

22. Lopes, 405.

23. Ibid., 400.

24. Rosenberg, 84.

25. Ibid., 77.

26. Miranda, 51.

27. Alan Moore and Alan Gibbons, Watchmen #12, *DC Vertigo* (New York City, October 1987).

28. Miranda, 44.

29. Lopes, 401.

30. Dittmer, 630.

31. Lopes, 401.

32. Norcliffe, 251.

33. Lopes, 403.

34. Norcliffe, 252.

35. Michael Dewally and Louis Ederington, “Reputation, Certification, Warranties, and Information as Remedies for Seller□Buyer Information Asymmetries: Lessons from the Online Comic Book Market,” *The Journal of Business* 79, no. 2 (2006): 696.

36. Josh Lambert, “Wait for the Next Pictures:” Intertextuality and Cliffhanger Continuity in Early Cinema and Comic Strips,” *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 2 (2009): 5.

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