

Bright and Colorful Masks

Assessing the Literary Potential of the Superhero Genre

By Kristian Bjørkan



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Kristian Bjørkan

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Introduction.

The Superhero genre has long stood as an emblem of American popular culture. Since Superman's first appearance in 1938, during the Great Depression and with World War II on the horizon, superheroes provided simple, morally unambiguous entertainment that fit the national mood and immediately became massively popular. After a turbulent period in the early post-war years which saw the genre supplanted by violent crime and horror comics, superheroes returned to prominence in the late 50s and 60s, and have remained dominant in the American comics industry ever since. In fact, while in Europe and Japan comic books have a long and varied tradition, in America the words "comic book" and "superhero" have historically been so closely linked together as to be almost interchangeable.

Throughout the modern history of the medium, comic books have been considered an unserious format, capable only of delivering mindless entertainment fit for children. In America, when comic books began appearing that strove for mainstream literary acceptance, one of the big lessons the public took away from it was that the comic book medium was capable of much more than just superhero stories. Texts like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* rightfully garnered great praise. However, with the exception of a few high-profile titles like Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, the superhero genre itself was still perceived as being almost inherently unserious.

Today, almost thirty years after the first wave of graphic novels appeared, comics with mainstream literary success have become common, and no-one questions the merit of the medium. However, the superhero, still the most dominant popular genre within American comics, continues to languish in mediocrity. The lesson learned, it seems, was not that all varieties of comic books have the potential to be proper literature, but instead that the way for comics to become proper literature was to step away from the superhero, the genre which had dominated the medium but which was still dismissed as mindless entertainment for children.

In the aftermath of the movement towards more respectable, literary comic books, the superhero genre also developed a greater diversity and variety of styles. The purpose of this thesis is to consider the superhero genre as literature, to ask why it is the way it is, where and why the stigma of childishness is rooted, and to consider some particular superhero texts that attempt to resolve the problems of the genre and take on a more mature and profound aspect.

This thesis is divided into three main chapters.

Chapter 1: “Genre History” takes a detailed look on the historical development of the superhero genre, with particular attention paid to devices and conventions that suffer from accusations of childishness, overreliance on formula, and lack of depth. There is also a focus on how the conventions and characteristics of the genre can be traced to particular historical events and periods.

Superman's arrival in 1938 was an immediate, astonishing popular success, which spawned a host of imitators so closely-knit in style and content that it formed its own genre. This new genre gradually distinguishing itself from the old adventure comics it had sprung from, and quickly grew to dominate the entire American comic book industry. Throughout World War II, the superhero genre remained dominant, but faded in the early post-war years as other genres rose in popularity. The superhero returned to prominence, however, as it was better able to adapt to the Comics Code, a draconian censorship regime that all but ended the violent crime and horror genres that had taken over the industry. While the superhero genre beat its competition, it still languished under a strict array of regulations. The Comics Code was intended to keep all comic books fit for children, and did so by forbidding anything which would make them interesting to adults, thus cementing the reputation of the genre as being childish and simplistic.

By the 1980s, the Comics Code had lost its bite, and a wave of more thought-provoking, literary comic books were released. The publishers marketed these as “graphic novels”, to associate them with the more serious literary form of the novel and consequently escape the stigma of the term “comics”. Still, even as non-superhero comic books became more visible and gained mainstream acceptance, the superhero genre faced difficulties generating works that were more than just formula and mindless entertainment.

The next two chapters look at specific superhero texts that strove to bridge the divide between generic superhero narratives and mainstream literary credibility. The chapters analyze how these texts relate to the genre conventions laid out in chapter 1, and how they use those conventions to more thought-provoking, literary purposes.

Chapter 2: “Alan Moore’s ABC Universe and *Promethea*” looks at a cross-title project by comics legend Alan Moore. The ABC Universe is a cohesive literary project by Moore that lays out multiple different approaches to adventure and superhero comics that operate semi-

independently within a shared universe, occasionally interacting with one another. The most important titles for the purposes of this thesis are *Tom Strong* and in particular *Promethea*. These two titles present a striking contrast between different ways of employing and considering the superhero genre.

Tom Strong is nostalgic and classical in style and structure, and presents the central conventions of the genre earnestly and without irony. The title character is a throwback to Superman at his most innocent and uncontroversial, even as the series implies throughout that Tom Strong is a fascist, an authoritarian who maintains order in his home city by being set above the law.

Promethea, on the other hand, is a highly experimental series that manipulates the central genre conventions almost beyond recognition. *Promethea* tells the story of a superheroine whose mission is to protect humanity on a spiritual level more than a material level. Rather than engaging in battles for the ‘right side’, *Promethea* attempts to raise humanity above waging battles in the first place. Her mission often requires her to oppose the status quo of human society rather than protect it, as is almost universal in the superhero genre, from outside threats. *Promethea* uses the conventions of the superhero genre to discuss ideas about religion, gender and sexuality, and life in modern society in a more thought-provoking and literary fashion than the superhero genre is normally credited as being capable of doing. These texts are analyzed on their own, and in light of the specific genre characteristics identified in Chapter 1.

Chapter 3: “Social Commentary in the comics of Warren Ellis” looks at three comic book titles by writer Warren Ellis: *Planetary*, *Global Frequency*, and *Transmetropolitan*. Like the comics by Moore in the previous chapter, each of these grapples with and explores the genre conventions of the superhero, and attempts to manipulate them to literary effect. Unlike the ABC comics of Moore, Ellis’s work is located much more on the outskirts of the genre, approaching it from different perspectives and pushing its boundaries to the point where it is unclear what should be included in the genre and what should not.

Planetary introduces its readers to superpowered archeology, and employs a superhero framework to tell a story about the consequences of who is permitted to write history, about American and superhero cultural imperialism, as well as the history of the comic book industry itself.

Global Frequency discards superhero main characters entirely in favor of an organized network of special agents who use communications technology to crowdsource superhero work, matching agents with more or less ordinary human skills to situations that call for those skills in particular. It also discards the continuity storyline structure in favor of an episodic special operations structure, resulting in something reminiscent of the stand-alone structure common to early comic books rather than the elaborate serial dramas the genre later adopted.

Transmetropolitan, the largest and most successful of the works under consideration, tells the story of Spider Jerusalem, a gonzo journalist in a futuristic science fictional America. In this series, Ellis uses the tropes of the superhero to tell a story about social decay, political corruption, and the journalistic profession.

All of Ellis's work lends itself to a Marxist or socialist interpretation. The heroes are invariably suspicious of authority, and actively seek to disseminate their gifts of technology or knowledge to the public at large, while the antagonists are wielders of power within society who desire to control the public and restrict power and knowledge so that it benefits them alone. All three series have recurring themes and devices which employ the genre characteristics of the superhero for purposes of social commentary and critique.

Chapter 1: The construction of the superhero genre.

The purpose of this chapter is to gain an overview and an understanding of the construction of the superhero genre, with a particular focus on the question of childishness, or the stigma of being deemed unserious or unworthy of study. I argue that specific incidents in history have directly set the course of this genre, which has developed for itself the task of functioning as a barometer of American culture, and revising itself over time to remain relevant and up to date. I also argue that specific conventions that have served to keep the genre confined to the realm of frivolous children's entertainment are not intrinsic to the genre, but developed or were created in response to particular publishing models or specific historical events. When we understand how the specific conventions that render the genre childish function, it becomes clear what steps would undo them, and thus perhaps stripping away the stigma and creating worthy literature.

The superhero is a young genre, and historically has been limited to a particular mode of publishing, the serial comic book. The comic book has had a troubled relationship with the larger literary world. For most of its history, it has been an emblem of 'popular' rather than 'high' culture. Like the film medium before it, the comic book superhero genre has had to prove itself, to demonstrate that it has the potential for depth and insight such that it deserves to be treated as seriously as any other genre. This development has been slow. For decades, the industry worked under a rigid regime of self-censorship that forbade anything subversive or risqué. Overall, the publishing model behind the superhero prizes consistency to the point of stasis, for which the whole field has acquired a reputation of being formulaic, cliché, and simplistic.

When it did finally change, it did so in a stark, brutal fashion. The 1980s saw the release of Alan Moore and David Gibbons' *Watchmen*, and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, two self-contained stories that treated the superhero from an altogether darker and more adult perspective. Their influence proved inescapable, and the superhero would never be the same after them.

However, initial optimism that this marked a coming of age for the genre, that from now on superhero comics would be a valid and respectable form of literature, was proven wrong. Much as the success of Superman had inspired copycats in 1938, *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* was followed by a large number of cynical, excessively violent,

unsympathetic 'heroes', copying *Watchmen's* surface atmosphere but lacking its quality. Rather than lead to a more intelligent and varied approach to the genre, these books had created just another formula to be followed until it was used up.

In the following years, the superhero industry struggled to find its footing. The genre began pulling in different directions, as some creators tried to carry on in the old vein as though *Watchmen* had never happened, while others wrestled with its influence and tried to achieve an equilibrium, and still others moved on in different directions entirely.

Between those different approaches, the genre has been widened. Today, many different superhero works explore very different territory, leading to a plurality of styles and themes. While the clichés and formulas that the genre is known for have not disappeared either, that perception no longer dominates as it once did.

An Exceptionally American Genre.

In his 1969 article "The Concept of Formula", John Cawelti notes that genres can have nationalities, and "reflect the particular preoccupations and needs of the time in which they were created and the group that created them: the western shows its nineteenth-century American origin while the spy story reflects the fact that it is largely a twentieth-century British creation."¹ Like the western, the superhero genre is a particularly American phenomenon. Created in the United States, and as a rule located in a metropolis modelled on New York or Chicago, superheroes have become icons of American popular culture on par with Hollywood and Mickey Mouse. For most of the genre's history it was produced exclusively in the United States, and only reached other countries as imports. And while in Europe and Japan, the other major producers and consumers of comics throughout the 20th century, comics were always treated as a versatile medium that could encompass a large variety of genres and styles, in America superheroes have generally been so dominant as to be almost synonymous with 'comics' in the public consciousness.

The superhero certainly carries political content that is specifically American: from the beginning, heroes served as embodiments of American national ideals and symbols of patriotism. Although the creation of superheroes, much less the genre's earlier predecessors, predates the United States's emergence as a global superpower, the superhero aptly symbolizes that power. Whether rightly or wrongly, wisely or unwisely, the United States is

¹ Cawelti, John G. *Mystery, Violence and Popular Culture*, 9

prone to see itself as such a figure, that must lead, inspire, and wield great power for great good. Superheroes can have clearly political content, and conversely American politicians have been known to employ superhero imagery, to tie themselves to American values in symbolic fashion, and present themselves as defenders of all things good.

With that in mind, it comes as no surprise that the genre has been shaped primarily by American cultural and political developments, beginning with the Great Depression. Superman appeared at a very particular point in history. In 1938, America was still in the midst of the Great Depression, and the prospect of war in Europe was growing. At the risk of sounding trite, it was a time in need of heroes. Superman began his superhero career as something more of a labor warrior, a somewhat boisterous advocate of the common man, and in fact initially an opponent of American involvement in Europe's conflicts². Captain America, the best known in the tradition of ultrapatriotic superheroes, was created, and was seen fighting the Axis, several months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war. Once the war began the superheroes, like every other aspect of popular culture, rallied to the war effort and served as powerful symbols of American ideals.

After the war ended, however, American society and its concerns changed drastically. Left without their greatest enemy, superheroes no longer resonated with the public as well as they had before. Over the next decade, superheroes steadily declined in popularity and as a share of the comic book industry. Only the very most popular and iconic superheroes, Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, survived this period without any break in publication. The industry diversified into a more varied collection of genres. Horror took over from superheroes as the most popular genre. In fact, in 1949, the publisher of Captain America attempted to retool his magazine as a horror title, *Captain America's Weird Tales*. This lasted for only two issues before the magazine folded.

It was not a given that the superhero genre was going to survive at all, but an accident of history brought the genre back and set it off down a new course that would cement its reputation for a long time. Claims that comics were not just childish but a destructive and corrupting influence on children were nothing new. The psychologist Fredric Wertham had already been campaigning against comics for many years before he got the government to act on his charges. But during the war, superheroes had served as patriotic symbols; American soldiers were given comics along with their field equipment and comics outsold major

2 Hatfield, Charles. *Hand of Fire*, L2345; Also, Sabin, Roger. *Adult Comics*, 145; Sabin, Roger. *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels – A History of Comic Art*, 61

magazines many times over on army bases³. This popularity may have given some cover from the medium's critics. But that popularity had waned, and a hostile new zeitgeist was taking over. In the era of Joe McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee, Wertham's accusations against comics found greater traction. Wertham charged that comics were a subversive, disturbing, and perverse influence that was corrupting America's youth. His main targets were the popular and gory horror, crime, and war comics, but superheroes did not escape his notice either. His polemic book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, was a popular success. Congressional hearings were held about the alleged danger of comics, and the comics industry was issued an ultimatum: either censor themselves to abolish any hint of subversion or deviance in comics, or the government would do it for them. Thus the industry agreed to a regime of self-censorship loosely modelled on Hollywood's Production Code in 1954. Every comic had to be submitted to the Comics Code Authority to see if it adhered to the rules of the Comics Code. Any comic that did not was denied access to the distribution network.⁴

Under the Comics Code, every comic had to obey strict rules for what they were allowed to contain. These rules forbade the kind of violence that was the bread and butter of the horror comics, essentially killing the most popular field of the industry. Unlike the horror comics, however, the superhero genre was able to adapt to the new rules, and with the horror comics gone, the superhero once again rose in popularity. But the genre had been sanitized. Nothing subversive could be portrayed in comics. The superheroes all had to be blandly generic, clean-cut, upstanding model citizens, and social or political authority could not be questioned. The superheroes' stereotypical simplicity and lack of realistic nuance was enforced by industry-wide sanction, once again reinforcing its reputation as a childish genre in a childish medium.

The early 1960s saw the rise of Marvel to compete with DC, the owner of just about all the most famous superheroes up to that point. Helmed by writer-editor Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby, Marvel laid out a different approach to the superhero genre, one arguably more suited to the strictures of the Comics Code in various ways. Adopting and adapting conventions from the popular romance comics⁵, they made characters like the Fantastic Four who, in addition to fighting supervillains, wrestled with personal dramas, argued with their friends and family, and had relationships that developed over time. At around the time

3 Sabin, Roger. *Adult Comics*, 147-148

4 Ibid. 161

5 Hatfield, L508

Umberto Eco wrote his seminal article about oneiric time, Marvel was already doing away with it in favor of the new continuity-approach that would later spread throughout the genre. Forbidden by the Comics Code from engaging in any meaningful social commentary, Marvel stepped further into the realms of pure fantasy, introducing a multitude of worlds entirely removed from our own, where characters like Thor roamed and fought menaces that threatened whole universes. This also made the genre even more susceptible to the stigma the fantasy genre also carries of being unserious literature.

The genre carried on in this vein for the next two decades, a period that came to be known as the "silver age" of comics, with the period before it going back to the creation of Superman being the "golden age". The silver age superhero genre was marked by camp, flamboyance, and general silliness. This was the age of the Batman tv-show, with its famous sound effect inserts. As always, the general perception was that the genre was only fit for small children's entertainment, not worth serious study. It was this perception that Alan Moore and Frank Miller were responding to when they wrote the two seminal graphic novels of the so-called revisionist movement. *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* attempted to paint a more realistic image of the superhero. What would the superhero, that strangely-dressed character who tries to improve the world by beating up criminals and performing acts of heroism in the streets, do if they existed in the real world? Superheroes were suddenly subjected to psychological analysis, their motivations questioned, their methods evaluated. But what was most obvious was the violence. Far from the bright, colorful model citizen proscribed by the (by now toothless) Comics Code, vigilantism was portrayed as brutal and destructive, and the vigilantes as political extremists or outright sociopaths. Superman and Dr. Manhattan, the characters with actual superpowers, were both portrayed as servants of an amoral US foreign policy, mere weapons to fight the Cold War as the President directed. The two comics were hugely successful, and managed to break out of the usual comic book readership to achieve genuine mainstream literary success. The industry was thrilled; here was proof that the superhero genre could be more mature, more realistic, more intelligent. But sadly what mostly happened instead was that they became more violent.

Eager to latch on to the next big trend, creators attempted to follow Moore and Miller, and copied their 'dark' style of storytelling, but without the quality. The genre was flooded with unsympathetic, mentally unstable and excessively violent 'heroes'. Some, following the pattern of the golden and silver ages, call this the "dark age". In attempting to reject childish

things in favor of the trappings of maturity, the genre found itself in an obnoxious adolescent phase instead. Alan Moore himself regretted the role he played in this development, and stepped away from the deconstructionist trend in his later career:

When Alan Moore briefly left super-hero comics shortly after *Watchmen*, it was partly because he felt he'd said all he wanted to say, taken the genre as far as he felt it could go; he was interested in telling human stories like that of Sally Juspeczyk and didn't need the super-hero construct to do that. When he returned to super-heroes in the 1990s, he had come to reject the entire idea of writing highly realist super-hero stories, preferring instead to embrace their unreality and sense of joy and wonder.⁶

Arguably, the entire history of the superhero genre since *Watchmen* has been an attempt at recovery, to regain sound footing from these multiple shocks. Many creators and fans, including Alan Moore himself, regret the influence *Watchmen* had, and have attempted to move the genre away from the grim realism of the 80s, either by attempting to move backwards and carry on as though the 80s never happened, or by grappling with that legacy and moving forward without forgetting. Mark Waid and Alex Ross's *Kingdom Come* pits the aged classic DC superheroes, led by Superman, against a new generation of heroes who use their powers indiscriminately, who are happy to kill villains rather than merely arrest them, and who dismiss the morality of the old heroes as naive and outdated. In attempting to forcibly reform these new heroes, Superman himself risks turning into a fascist figure. Kurt Busiek's *Astro City* returns to the old superhero morality without discussion, but treats the superheroes almost as backdrops to tell more personal stories about the inner lives of the people, be they heroes, villains, or bystanders, of Astro City.

If nothing else, the developments of the 80s and 90s have raised awareness among genre fans and creators of the genre's history, and its inner workings. It is now recognized that the genre has a 70-year long history's worth of material, in a large spectrum of styles, for creators to draw upon, instead of constantly reaching for the single new big thing. In addition, having now seen what a truly literary superhero comic looks like, and having seen the contrast to everything else the genre had been able to present, many creators have worked to create more intelligent and mature superhero comics. An awareness of the conventions of the genre, and a gradual loosening of the demands for those conventions by the publishers, has opened the door to a more diverse and flexible interpretation of the superhero.

What came first, the super-chicken or the super-egg? Defining a genre.

6 Darius, Julian. "58 Varieties: *Watchmen* and Revisionism." L1844

The superhero genre is generally recognized to have begun with the first appearance of Superman in *Action Comics* in 1938. From the beginning, Superman exhibited many of the elements that would become major conventions of the genre. A costumed crimefighter, fighting for justice, possessing superhuman abilities and strength, who had a secret identity as an ordinary person. As it happens, however, none of those conventions were unique or original to Superman, but were all already present in the pulp adventure literature that was popular at the time. The genre very much grew out of story conventions that already existed. What were these conventions, and where did they come from? And how can we define the genre at all when it is so closely related to other genres that most things that are true of the genre are also true of other stories we don't include in that genre?

We can compare the idea of a genre to that of a species in biology. A species is defined as a population which is capable of interbreeding and producing fertile offspring. Two living individuals either are of the same species or they are not, and at a glance the divide between species seems rather clear-cut. Nor do living creatures ever have offspring that are of a new and different species than the parents. The paradox arises when, over the course of long periods of time, the genes mutate to the point where individuals of Generation 1 would be unable to interbreed with individuals of Generation 10 000. Even though they are directly descended, never changing species from one generation to the next, they are still different. A new species has appeared, and the old one has died out, but the development was so gradual that it is impossible to point to any one generation and say that *this* is where it changed from one to the other. Any such point would be arbitrary.

Is it so with genre? It is generally accepted that Superman was the first superhero, but this is not because Superman was actually something entirely new in the world of comics. It would have been difficult for a neutral observer at the time to see any terribly significant difference between the pulp heroes and the early superheroes, and this line to mark the point where they split is also arbitrary. The style of creation and story are very similar. Yet Superman was an explosive hit, which spawned a host of followers and outright copyists that based themselves specifically on him, rather than on the adventure tradition Superman himself had sprung from. These heroes grew in number, and were fairly quickly recognized as a new genre, distinct from the other masked heroes that preceded them. But how, precisely, do we distinguish them?

It is no simple thing to define a genre. For one thing, different genres are not all

defined by looking at or comparing the same points. Coogan points out that "[d]efining the superhero character is a necessary part of defining the superhero genre because the genre takes its name from the character."⁷ This is in contrast to other genres like comedy, romance, tragedy, which are defined by story type, plot structure, or the specific emotions those genres wish to evoke. In this regard, the superhero genre is closer to the detective genre, or the western: genres defined to a large part by what sort of character is a common protagonist. These are all also what Cawelti sees as popular genres, prone to formula and convention, which have had to struggle to be recognized as art.

Coogan's lists three characteristic conventions that define the superhero: a mission to fight for good, special powers beyond that of ordinary humans, and a secret identity.⁸ These are all quite general conventions, however, which can be found quite commonly in the pre-Superman adventure genre, for instance in characters like Zorro, the Phantom, and the Shadow, all characters who are not commonly considered superheroes. To further narrow it down, Coogan goes on to make specific claims for how each of these conventions functions differently with superheroes than with other adventurers. These differences can seem trifling, however.

Coogan points to Superman's superpowers as the first key difference between him and his pulp adventurer forebears, but of course not all superheroes have superhuman powers. Most prominently, Batman, who along with Superman was one of the earliest superheroes, having first appeared in 1939. Batman is a normal human, but uses advanced technology in place of actual superpowers. Many later superheroes have followed this format as well. Batman, in turn, draws inspiration from earlier masked avenger-figures like Zorro.

Also like Zorro, the first generation of superheroes all used secret identities, showing a stark contrast between the unimpressive ordinary citizen, and the amazing and powerful hero. What distinguishes the superhero from the older costumed heroes in Coogan's analysis are the specific conventions of the superhero costume and codename. The costume of a superhero, according to Coogan, has to do more than simply conceal the wearer's identity. It has to thematically tie together the character, the character's origin, and the character's powers, as does the hero's name. Hence, Superman's name is more of a description than an actual name: he is a human, but superior, stronger, faster, tougher. His costume, styled after the tights of a circus strongman, with its emblazoned S across the chest proclaims the identity of Superman

7 Coogan, Peter. *Superhero – the Secret Origin of a Genre*, 24

8 Ibid. 30

rather than concealing the identity of Clark Kent. In addition, Superman's costume is made from the very cloth he was swaddled in as a baby when he was sent to Earth from Krypton in a spaceship. Thus his costume is directly connected to his origin story. Batman's name, and his costume with its prominent bat-sign, likewise thematically represent his hero work: he is a nocturnal and stealthy predator, hunting criminals that only come out at night. Batman's sidekick Robin wears the costume he wore as a young circus acrobat, which also refers to his origin story; Batman took him in after his circus performer parents were killed during a performance.

Does this sufficiently distinguish the superhero from the pulp adventurers though? All these points are arguably true of a character like the Phantom, who is not generally considered a superhero. The Phantom has a mission to fight injustice wherever he goes. He has a costume with a skull mark (admittedly on his belt rather than his chest, which makes it much smaller and less obvious), which refers back to the character's origin, as each new Phantom swears an oath upon the skull of the pirate who fought the first Phantom centuries earlier. His name, and the skull mark, reflect his persona as a unstoppable undying avenger, returned from the grave. And he has a secret identity as ordinary person Kit Walker. The Phantom has no actual superpowers, but then neither does Batman. Just like Batman, the Phantom uses his own athletic and combat training, and the superstitions his enemies have about his mystical nature, to his advantage.

Coogan argues that the Phantom and Zorro are insufficiently iconic and thematic in their designs. Coogan's point is that this level of attention to presentation serves to distinguish the superhero from the similar but not identical pulp adventure heroes like Mandrake, The Shadow, The Phantom, and Zorro. In Zorro's case, this argument is quite strong. Zorro is Spanish for fox, but Zorro's character is not especially fox-like: Zorro's fox-like qualities are limited to his cunning and his agility. He has no origin story to speak of, much less one involving foxes as an important element. Zorro's costume has no iconic mark, (the signature Z he leaves behind him notwithstanding) and indeed no part of it resembles a fox. For the Phantom, though, all the criteria Coogan sets for the conventions to fit within the superhero mold are arguably met. Are there other conventions that will more clearly separate the different kinds of characters?

Coogan lists a fourth point to try to make the boundary clear: Generic Distinction. Generic Distinction means simply that genres and their conventions are not absolute, that a

text which fits the surface criteria for inclusion in a genre can still be excluded if it functions differently, or more like another genre, or that a text which fails to meet those criteria can still be included if it does not fit better into any other genre.⁹ This kind of 'I know it when I see it' line of thinking has its own problems, however. While a certain flexibility in a genre is inevitable and desirable, it can also render discussion about the genre's boundaries fuzzy and imprecise, open to biased judgements. Under this reasoning, one could, if one were so inclined, insist that an important part of the functioning of the superhero genre is exactly its childishness, its simplicity and utterly unambiguous morality, and that a work like *Watchmen* therefore shouldn't be counted as a superhero text at all. After all, *Watchmen* generally adheres to convention only in the most wide interpretation of those conventions, and its story is closer in structure to a murder mystery than anything else.

A very strict view of these key conventions may serve to distinguish the early superhero genre from its pulp forebears, but as time passed and the genre took root, it became less necessary to cling to these distinctions. The superhero genre soon flourished, while the pulp adventure genre slipped into the superhero's shadow, rendering comparisons between them moot. Later superhero stories are not held so strictly to the conventions described above, or else those conventions have so changed over time as to function completely differently than they did when they were first encoded in the 30s and 40s. For example, when Marvel created their most successful superheroes in the 1960s, the secret identity convention had become less prominent, and characters like the X-Men and the Fantastic Four would generally appear in their superhero personas at all times. Stan Lee was initially determined to not give the Fantastic Four costumes at all, but found that the readers wanted them.¹⁰

In a sense, merely being recognized as a separate genre was sufficient to render the specific characteristics of that genre more flexible. Whereas in the earliest days of the genre, it would be necessary to include an iconic costume and secret identity because otherwise it simply wouldn't be a superhero story, later in the genre's development it would be possible to manipulate the conventions to literary effect. There is little in *Watchmen* that matches the conventions above, yet no-one questions that *Watchmen* is a superhero comic.

The superhero had other forebears besides earlier comic-book adventurers. Another prominent antecedent was the Nietzschean science fiction superman. The Nietzschean superman was already a well-worn theme in science fiction by the time Superman himself came along.

9 Coogan, 40.

10 Ibid. 42-43

Coogan names Philip Wylie's novel *Gladiator* as a prime example: the novel's main character possesses physical and mental abilities greatly superior to those of mere humans, and attempts to use his powers in various ways to make the world a better place, but always fails.¹¹

Coogan lists many other examples of stories that explore similar ideas, and identifies three particular directions the superman would take: ruler, savior, and destroyer. All three revolve around the idea of the Superman as a superior being who becomes a threat to existing power structures. Alternately, the superman could reject all three and become a hermit. But before Superman, there was no way the lower case-s superman could actually be a friend to humanity while also leaving humanity in charge of its own fate. The way to escape this situation was to place the superman as a protector of human society against an equally superior menace, one which can never truly be vanquished because then the superman would return to being a threat. This is the common superhero formula in a nutshell, which had not been seen before Superman appeared: this device alone turned the super-man into the superhero.

Unlike the stereotypical superhero, the science fiction superman was not the subject of formulaic, childish stories bereft of any social relevance. As is common in the science fiction genre, these stories took an idea that already existed in the public consciousness, and explored how it might impact real-world society if it came about. If that sounds familiar, it should: when the superhero writers set out to strip away the childish tendencies of the genre and write more serious stories in the 1980s, they ended up (inadvertantly or not) recreating the social commentary-laden science fiction treatments of the superman that had existed before the superhero genre as we know it even existed. In view of this, it can almost seem as though the 'superhero' is just a subgenre to the 'superman' genre which predates it.

Perception and Stigma.

As we can see, the superhero genre has always been known as a childish one. Comics in America has historically been a cheap, accessible medium with stories that characteristically dealt in simplistic, populist attitudes and ideas, and as a result the superhero became a symbol of low or popular culture, as distinct from the respectable high culture of serious literature. Whether or not it has ever been true that superheroes have nothing significant to say of general literary merit, this has always been the perception, and this sort of

¹¹ Coogan, 136-137

perception tends to be self-fulfilling. One of the peculiar things about this kind of stigma is that it functions both descriptively and normatively: critics will not only believe in the stereotypes, they will also seek to actively enforce them, and be offended at proof that the stereotypes are false. Take the case of Fredric Wertham and *Seduction of the Innocent*. On the one hand, the dismissive view of the mainstream was that all comics were only for small children. On the other hand, any comics that were *not* aimed at small children, were condemned for being unsuitable for small children. Finally, a set of rules was put in place which commanded that all comics be suitable for small children. Perhaps the real crime was that comics were not so one-dimensional as critics believed.

On the face of it, it is easy to understand why this stigma developed. Comics were mass-produced in the cheapest way possible, making the actual books or issues little more durable than a newspaper. The artwork was rushed, created in settings not unlike a factory assembly line, and the crude printing process favored simple art and color, without great detail. Likewise, the stories were, in all fairness, generally lacking in quality, at least in the usual qualities of respectable literature. As Scott McCloud puts it, "Sure, I realized that comic books were usually crude, poorly-drawn, semiliterate, cheap, disposable kiddie fare—but—they don't have to be!"¹²

A lot has changed since McCloud wrote *Understanding Comics*. Today it is common to see graphic novels on bestseller-lists and being reviewed in reputable newspapers. But 'graphic novels' covers a huge swathe of texts, and superheroes specifically remain in a more questionable position. According to Hyman,

Furthermore, the elevation in status that the comics medium has undergone in recent academic discourse has been due in large part to the influence of works that fall outside the generic conventions of the superhero narrative and the formal constraints of the comic book (...) However, a collateral effect of the well-deserved acceptance of these and other works has been the relegation to secondary status of the commercially-driven generic texts that dominated the comics medium for much of its history. Thus the superhero, most notorious of these victims of generic revulsion, remains marginalized as childish, indulged in shamefully, if at all, by intelligent adults; the reign of the leveling Muse that inspires so much contemporary scholarship in the fields that comprise the shifting terrains of English studies has yet to extend over it.¹³

It is true that with the exception of a few prominent examples (*Watchmen*, *The Dark Knight Returns*), the bulk of successful graphic novels are not superhero stories. Some critics

12 McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*, 3

13 Hyman, David. *Notes Towards a Super Fiction: Revision, Temporality and the Superhero Genre*, 3-4

go even further, and conclude that what has held the comics field as a whole from achieving mainstream recognition is precisely the childishness and literary poverty of the superhero genre. Even within the comics industry it seems that the superhero has suffered the stigma of childishness, as seen in this letter quoted by Reynolds:

Indeed, vilification of the superhero genre (and its readership) has become increasingly the stock-in-trade of a large section of the critical press. The following excerpt is from a letter published in *The Comics Journal* in 1993:

"...Morons and children read 'normal' superhero comics. Adults with taste and a sense of humour (like myself, of course) read alternative comics. The two types of comics have nothing at all to do with each other, and in fact, may as well be sold in different stores."

Such views are regularly advanced by those who wish to 'get comics taken more seriously'. The anti-superhero stance can at times be almost reminiscent of the strictures of Fredric Wertham back in the fifties – only this time, the attack comes from within the caucus of comic fandom itself. (...) The comics hierarchy is thus restructuring itself as a diminutive reflection of the mainstream culture which still largely rejects it.¹⁴

One would hope the writer of that letter had changed his mind in the past twenty years. Cawelti discusses the divide between 'high' and 'low' culture, and notes that while every cultural product contains both 'convention' and 'invention', to some degree, "the intellectual elites have placed ever higher valuation on invention out of a sense that rapid cultural changes require continually new perceptions of the world". While high art, then, is characterized by a focus on invention, 'low' or popular culture is marked by dense convention.¹⁵ Part of the superhero stereotype is indeed its overly conventional, formulaic nature. Reynolds attempts to explain this reliance on formula, and in doing so touches upon several of the other key points to note about the genre:

From time to time it is asserted that the plots of superhero comics are dull and formulaic. The initial plot development predictably leads to a violent confrontation with a costumed villain. A five-page fight scene is the obligatory result. In a sense this is all perfectly true: superhero stories have not usually been based on the conventions of mystery or suspense, which are arguably the literary conventions which the unprepared reader takes to their reading of the comic. To avoid melodrama, narrative demands a unity of character and plot, or that character development should be the result of plot development. Characters treated in such a manner are 'rounded', they 'live', they are defined for us by 'decisions under pressure'. All this is true of the superhero, but much of it takes place through the development of the character's origin and powers over a protracted period of time, and generally as a result of internal conflicts rather than conflicts with villains.¹⁶

14 Reynolds, Richard. *Superheroes – A Modern Mythology*, 121-122

15 Cawelti, 6-7

16 Reynolds, 50

Again we see the focus on mode of publication as determining the structure of the narratives. We can see that Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum that "the medium is the message" is crucial to a discussion of superheroes.

Reynolds's attempt to explain away the formulaic nature of superhero storytelling does bring in another problem of superhero scholarship: it treats the superhero genre almost as an entirely separate entity from all other forms of literature, to which the normal rules of good literature do not apply. Some scholars attempt to explain away the genuinely unliterary traits of the genre, whatever their causes, as mere neutral traits to be acknowledged, but not criticized. The complaint that the superhero is formulaic is rooted in a conventional understanding of literature, and treats the superhero as a piece of conventional literature. But Reynolds's response seems to say that the superhero *isn't* a piece of ordinary literature, and should be judged by other criteria. For example, a superhero text shouldn't be judged by the formulaic narrative that it contains, but rather by some other things that are outside that text entirely. If there is a goal for superheroes to be treated seriously as literature, such excuses will not fly. A superhero text, like a text of any other genre, must be judged on its own merits, and not be treated more gently under a preferential ruleset. Conversely, the genre should not be judged by a more strict and dismissive ruleset than other genres either, which brings me to my next point.

Sturgeon's Law.

All these flaws, that the genre is formulaic, unimaginative, and unchanging, lend themselves particularly well to stereotyping and generalization. This is a well-known problem in geek circles. In various genres which are accustomed to being considered unserious or unworthy, particularly those associated with 'geek culture', such as comics, fantasy, or science fiction, there is an aphorism held up to defend the genre from the dismissal of the mainstream culture. This aphorism, though it should properly be called Sturgeon's Revelation, is commonly known as Sturgeon's Law.

The Law dates back to the 1950s, coined by science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon. Sturgeon, tired of seeing the worst of science fiction held up by critics as representative of the genre, and tired of being told that "ninety percent of science fiction is crud," observed that "ninety percent of *everything* is crud," with the implication that science fiction was no worse

than any other genre, but was only being judged by the worst it had produced. The best work in science fiction, Sturgeon continued, is comparable to the best work in any other genre.

The problem of fantasy: Escapism.

Superheroes are also a subgenre of science fiction and fantasy, and is also afflicted with the problems those genres have had with being taken seriously. One crucial problem, which also leads to the perception of childishness, is the problem of escapism. Superheroes do not, in fact, exist. The superhero, by definition, does not have the problems of normal humans (Marvel-style melodrama aside). At no point in the human life cycle can we leap tall buildings in a single bound or stride through a hail of gunfire to capture the bad guy. How can a genre that is by definition so removed from the real world tell us anything meaningful about the human condition? How can it possibly be anything other than a childish pursuit, a flight of fancy, of wishful thinking?

There are many answers to this question. J.R.R. Tolkien argues that "escapism" is not really a bad thing, that fantasy is not about foolishly rejecting reality out of a cowardly unwillingness to face facts, but about holding on to and keeping alive things that are good in the face of a world rapidly getting worse. If it is escapism, he argues, it is the commendable escape of the prisoner from tyranny, not the cowardly escape into triviality.¹⁷

While many fantasy writers, taking their cue from Tolkien, look with scorn on the idea of fantasy as allegory, it is also true that fantasy ideas and concepts can be metaphors and analogies for real-world matters of importance. The superhero, in particular, has always functioned as a barometer for the culture that created them, the United States, and its view of its role in the world. Though the superheroes are not real, they are generally active in a world that is otherwise like ours, and reflect a certain ideology or worldview. Origin stories particularly tend to encapsulate a given attitude or ideal about the zeitgeist. Superman is raised by common hard-working Americans to fight for truth, justice and the American Way. Batman is scarred for life by inner-city crime. Spider-Man and the Hulk both gain their powers through mishaps of atomic science. The Fantastic Four are space-race explorers and scientists, who are transformed by 'cosmic rays' when they launch their spaceship without waiting to see if it is safe.

Defenses of fantasy aside, comics creators have wanted to avoid the fantasy aspects

¹⁷ Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories", 79-85.

themselves. The central point of the post-Silver Age revisionist movement of the 1980s was literary realism, to attempt to place the superhero in something as close to the real world as possible and follow the consequences as realistically as possible. Julian Darius: "At its highest, revisionism sought to place the super-hero into an utterly realistic world and show what might happen if he had to reckon with such an unfriendly environment. Or better yet, what *would* happen, managing to convey the sense of inevitability common to so much great literature."¹⁸ Darius illustrates this with a quote from Neil Gaiman: "There are three classic tropes of science fiction: "What if," "if only," and "if this goes on." (...) "What if" says, let's change one thing. What if aliens land? What if the sun goes out? (...) You keep everything else the same and watch how it gets distorted by the "what if"s."¹⁹ Notably, here literary realism is explained in terms of the supposedly unrealistic genre of science fiction.

Why Comics? The significance of the medium.

The superhero has always been closely tied to the comics medium. But why is it so? And will it remain so in the future?

The 'why' is fairly easily answered. Comics have always been recognized as a medium well-suited to depicting fantastic scenes. Coogan retraces comics history to Popeye and Alley Oop as the most influential comic strips that established that the medium was especially well-suited to this type of content:

[Popeye and Alley Oop] helped to establish comics as a medium in which fantastic feats could be depicted, even though neither strip strove for plausibility. Within the world each cartoonist established, feats of incredible strength fit in well. (...) Comics offer a possibility for depicting the superman that was seemingly not available to the prose fiction writers or to the artists working in other narrative media, such as radio or film. Comics can depict the fantastic with equal realism as the mimetic, so things that might not be acceptable or might look ridiculous in another medium do not appear so in comics. In comics, everything—whether a building or a talking tiger—can have the same level of surface realism.²⁰

The latter point – that comics depict the fantastic and the mundane with equal realism – is particularly important. It is an ability almost unique to the comics medium. With the exception of animated cartoons (which share many of the stereotypes of comics) no other medium can do this as easily or as cheaply: "It costs DC comics no more to have John Byrne

18 Darius, L1757

19 Ibid. L1785

20 Coogan, 167

draw Superman replacing a space-station in orbit or bathing on the surface of a star, than to show Clark Kent crossing the street on his way to the office."²¹

On those occasions when other visual media attempt to venture into fantastic worlds, they run into various problems. Tolkien, in fact, argues that "[i]n human art Fantasy is a thing best left to words, to true literature", and that even paintings fall short. I confess I think he is wrong on that point simply by empirical proof, that visual fantasy has proven successful by its fruits, but he is on more solid ground when he says that "Drama is naturally hostile to Fantasy. (...) Fantastic forms are not to be counterfeited. Men dressed up as talking animals may achieve buffoonery or mimicry, but they do not achieve Fantasy."²² As theatre demands that everything is physically present upon the stage, and since fantastical creatures by definition do not physically exist, fantasy in theatre is unavoidably problematic. Films are better off, but have only in recent years caught up with what comics could do since the dawn of time. Conversely, when the comics or cartoon media attempt to step wholly into photo-realism, they encounter problems of their own. Scott McCloud discusses the comics medium's iconic abilities. McCloud argues that, by stepping away from realism in artwork, you create icons that are more generally applicable, in which a larger portion of humanity can see itself reflected.²³ In Coogan's analysis, the iconicity of superheroes is crucial to the genre, which makes the genre and the comics medium a well-suited match.²⁴

That said, it is a fact that, in spite of the overwhelming perceived connection between the superhero genre and the comics medium, superheroes appeared in other media, some obvious and some less so, almost immediately after the genre's creation, and have continued to do so ever since. Superman starred in a popular radio show, *The Adventures of Superman*, starting already in February of 1940, which lasted until 1951. Many elements of the Superman mythos, such as Kryptonite, were originally created in the radio show rather than the comics. A series of 17 animated short films starring Superman were also created in 1941 and 1942. Many animated series were created over the years for the most popular heroes. Batman became so famous through the camp Adam West tv-show that the characteristics of that show - not even a comic - became ingrained in the public consciousness as characteristics of comics as a whole. Newspaper headlines like "Biff! Bam! Pow! Comics are growing up!" would become a common source of vexation for comics fans and creators when comics drew

21 Reynolds, 17

22 Tolkien, 70-71

23 McCloud, 31

24 Coogan, 33

mainstream attention in the 80s and 90s, as a sure marker that the author of the article didn't know anything much about comics. Still, live action film generally lagged behind animated film due to the great cost of the medium, and the technological challenges of replicating fantastic feats on film and making them look real. However, film technology continues to grow more advanced, to the point where dazzling displays of fantasy can be portrayed in convincing detail, and in the past decade superhero films have become common among summer blockbusters. Marvel Comics now releases at least one major superhero film a year, and DC has enjoyed great success with Christopher Nolan's Dark Knight trilogy.

When technological advances in film have made superheroics on the screen as visually true as they have always been on the page, the superhero might just be shifting media altogether. When superheroes have a larger audience in films than in comics, will the link between superheroes and comics fade away? Would that be a bad thing for either party?

There will probably always remain a strong connection between comics and superheroes. Partly from tradition, partly because comics is a much cheaper medium than film. Cheaper to produce, cheaper to buy, and therefore with a much lower barrier to entry for aspiring creators. That said, summer blockbuster films reach a wider audience by far than the serial comic books, whose demands that the reader come back month after month to follow the story can push away the broad casual audience, leaving only a devoted core that is comfortable maneuvering the intricacies of serialization, which brings us to the next topic.

Tune in Next Week: the serialized publishing model.

Mr. Fantastic: "We are a boatful of monsters and miracles, hoping that, somehow, we can survive a world in which all hands are against us. A world which, by all evidence, will end extremely soon. Yet I posit we are in a universe which favours stories. A universe in which no story can ever truly end; in which there can be only continuances."

(...)

The Thing: "Reed—you spoke of transmutations. Can you restore to me my humanity? I have been a monster too long."

Mr Fantastic: "In truth, I do not know, my friend. The natural sciences say yes, a cure is possible. But the laws of story would suggest that no cure can last for very long, Benjamin. For in the end, alas, you are so much more interesting and satisfying as you are."²⁵

The history of literature is no stranger to the serialized publishing model. Serialized

25 Gaiman, Neil. *1602*, ch. 7 (np)

novels have been written by such luminaries as Charles Dickens, for example, and it is known that this model has specific effects on the content of the story. In the world of mainstream literature this model is a thing of the past, long since abandoned in favor of publishing complete novels. The American comics industry, however, has always existed completely immersed in this particular mode of publishing, and as a result the mode has had a huge effect on the development of the superhero genre. In addition, unlike serialized novels that were published one chapter or batch of chapters at a time, but which formed a whole novel when completed, the mode of serialization common to superhero comics is endless by design, a scheme which brings with it a wide array of consequences for the texts and the reader and scholar's response to them.

In fact, the superhero genre is so dominant in the American serialized comics industry that they have become almost inseparable in the public consciousness, including the academic scholarship on superheroes. Even though our ordinary understanding of genre does not touch upon the circumstances of publication of any given work within that genre, when it comes to superheroes scholars have commonly conflated the genre and the medium: they have treated the general characteristics of comic book serialization as specific characteristics of superhero stories. Umberto Eco's article "The Myth of Superman" is perhaps the very earliest example of academic study on the superhero, and a key point is his concept of 'oneiric time' which he ascribes to Superman specifically. In fact, this oneiric time is a device shaped by the medium, and does not belong to the superhero genre in particular. We should recognize these two as separate entities, and be aware of which conventions belong to which, the genre or the medium.

The link between comic book serialization and superheroes is neither unique nor inescapable. There are non-superhero comics that share the effects of serialization, such as Archie comics and Donald Duck comics, and there are superhero comics that do not share them. In fact, we can go a significant step further, and say that the superhero being in thrall to the neverending serial is a crucial reason why the genre lacks literary credibility. The open-ended serial model necessarily strips away so much of the literary technique that creates texts worth studying and taking seriously as literature. Notably, those superhero comics that have attained literary respect are all removed from that format. The conventions of that mode of publication are exactly those things which run counter to the common understanding of what makes for good literature. Some prominent examples:

Storytelling structure. Two major routes have developed from the comic book serial for long-running franchises. The first is an episodic structure, which is what Eco is analysing when he talks about 'oneiric time': each episode is entirely disconnected in time and causality from any other episode. Anything that happens in one story cannot affect any other story. Everything always returns to the status quo, either by the end of each story, or off the stage before the beginning of the next story. The other is the continuity structure, which is (at least superficially) exactly the opposite: everything is connected, every story directly follows and builds on previous stories, and is followed and built on by future stories, not only within each series but between every series set in the same universe. Vast amounts of detail across many disparate titles leads to the stereotype of the comics geek with a boundless knowledge of esoteric comic book minutia. Continuity is the main paradigm of the major comics publishers today, but both exist and create their own specific problems.

Cliffhangers. Crucially, no story can ever be allowed to truly *end*, all loose threads tied up and plot and character points resolved. Instead, every ending is only the beginning of the next story. There is always a hook at the end to keep the reader coming back to see what happens next.

Reader interference. Unlike in a novel, where by the time the reader begins reading, the story is finished and complete, in serials the readers can and do make their feelings known on an issue to issue basis, airing their own theories about where the story might be going, and complaining about developments they do not like. This adds new layers of work to the creators' jobs, as whether they like it or not, future issues will be influenced one way or another by the reader response to earlier issues.

Retconning. As time passes, writers retire from writing on certain comics, and new writers with their own ideas take over. Later, those writers also move on, and are replaced by newer writers still. As the continuity grows, and build up vast stores of canonical facts by a large number of different creators, contradictions emerge. Society moves on, rendering earlier story elements unpalatable. A particular story is so poorly received that everyone pretends it just never happened. This is where retconning comes in. Retconning, short for "retroactive continuity", is the practice, common to long-running superhero franchises, of rewriting past events to suit current story needs. This point alone, though quite unavoidable in serials, is a huge obstacle for serious literary criticism. When the entirety of the text exists only in perpetual working drafts, forever subject to unpredictable future revision, how can any

analysis be more solid?

Reboots. On occasion, when the universe gets too convoluted to follow, and prevents new readers from jumping into the eternally ongoing stories, the entire publishing line will be unceremoniously scrapped and begun over from scratch.

What many of these conventions have in common is simply that the serial medium makes it impossible to have an actual plan for where the story is going as a whole. Successive storylines can have a beginning, a middle and an end with an overarching plan, but that story will not be allowed to enshrine irrevocable developments that might limit future stories by other writers.

New canonical texts are being added every month. Any definite metatextual resolution is therefore indefinitely postponed. That is to say, the DC or Marvel Universe is not finally defined until some future date when superhero texts cease to be published.²⁶

Of course, the only reason this would ever happen is if those comics lose their popularity entirely and are subsequently abandoned by the publishers, or perhaps if a natural disaster destroys Marvel's and DC's corporate headquarters and kills everyone inside. Neither is likely to happen anytime soon, and neither is likely to result in a proper ending suitable to the story that has been told all these years. There can never be a complete, start to finish story of the career of Superman. But in the absence of such a story, what is a literary critic to do with him?

***: See issue 498 for details. The Oneiric Climate and continuity.**

Many of the conventions discussed above tie in directly with the concept of 'oneiric time', coined by Umberto Eco. Due to its significance, it deserves to be treated in more detail by itself. Umberto Eco's "The Myth of Superman" was written in the early 1960s, really quite early on in the development of the genre. Looking at Superman specifically, Eco described how superheroes functioned in two distinct types of time: the mythic and the novelistic form. In the mythic form, Superman plays the part of a timeless archetype. Like Hercules, the canonical events of Superman's life are known to all. As a character, he is already locked into place in the cultural consciousness, and cannot be changed. His backstory is immutable, eternal, mythic. And like an ancient myth, the story of Superman can be retold innumerable times, in different styles, with fresh details added in, without the core of the story that

26 Reynolds, 43

everyone is familiar with being significantly rewritten. Nobody reads these retellings in order to find out what happens, as the reader is already familiar with the key facts. And much as how we do not know or particularly care what Hercules was doing before or after his adventures, we just accept at the beginning of each adventure that Hercules is Hercules, so do we accept that as each story begins, Superman is Superman. As Eco describes it, "The stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate-of which the reader is not aware at all-where what has happened before and what has happened after appears extremely hazy. The narrator picks up the strand of the event again and again as if he had forgotten to say something and wanted to add details to what had already been said."²⁷

The status of superheroes as a 'modern mythology' hinges on this timeless, archetypal structure. But since DC wants to continue making and selling comics, Superman must also, like a character in a novel, experience new adventures and challenges: "The mythic character embodies a law, or a universal demand, and, therefore, must be in part *predictable* and cannot hold surprises for us; the character of a novel wants, rather, to be a man like anyone else, and what could befall him is as unforeseeable as what may happen to us."²⁸

The compromise between these two forms is what results in 'oneiric time'. In the absence of a coherent timeline or progression of events, individual stories take place which have no evident 'before' or 'after', only a 'now'. Superman remains unchanged, because nothing that happens in any one story can touch upon anything that will happen or has happened in any other story.

Eco connects this form to the unique qualities of the superhero. Being mythic and archetypal, it is suitable that oneiric time removes the hero from 'real' time, which makes people grow older and, as he puts it, consume themselves, with each new development gradually limiting the possibilities of future development, until inevitably nothing remains save death. So long as Superman exists in this timeless fashion, however, he can keep his boundless potential.

However, this 'oneiric time' is not unique to superheroes, but comes from the serialized format. Not only do there exist superhero stories without oneiric time, but there are also non-superhero stories with it. Eco himself identifies detective serials in the tradition of Sherlock Holmes as working under similar terms, arguing that the serial form rests upon "a hunger for

27 Eco, Umberto. Chilton, Natalie (trans.) "The Myth of Superman", 17

28 Ibid. 15

redundance"²⁹, for an abundance of new, but familiar stories in a form that the reader is comfortable with and will not be challenged by. "A novel by Souvestre and Allain or by Rex Stout is a message which informs us very little and which, on the contrary, thanks to the use of redundant elements, keeps hammering away at the same meaning which we have peacefully acquired upon reading the first work of the series".³⁰ This, once again, is a characteristic of popular art, distinct from high art which "proposes schemes in evolution, grammars which mutually eliminate each other, and codes of continuous alternations."³¹

For another example of both time schemes in action, we can compare the disposable, undistinguished stories from the *Donald Duck & Co.* weekly comic book to Don Rosa's Eisner Award-winning graphic novel *The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*. The classic Disney characters, originally created in the 20s through the 40s, all continue to appear in the weekly comics in an oneiric now and appear to have not aged since their creation. Rosa's graphic novel, on the other hand, places Scrooge McDuck squarely in a Disney version of real-world history where each chapter takes place in a specific place and time, and shows Scrooge growing from boyhood to old age.

In fact Rosa has himself written an unofficial timeline of the Duck family, according to which Scrooge died in 1969 at one hundred years of age.³² This little detail, which in real life would not in principle be particularly tragic and which defies belief only by how old he got to be rather than by the fact that he eventually passed on, is about as far as we can imagine from the child-friendly, everything-always-works-out-well Duckburg universe. Add to this the fact that *The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck* includes some surprisingly serious themes for a Disney work—the death of Scrooge's parents, Scrooge breaking from his sisters in anger and never reconciling with them, Scrooge abandoning his only chance at love to pursue gold instead—and we begin to see that the Disney universe has also been the subject of revisionism not entirely unlike that worked on the superhero. Rosa portrays Scrooge as an obsessive workaholic, whose pursuit of wealth and success leads him to abandon his closest relationships.

Still, just because a convention also exists outside a genre does not necessarily mean it isn't important to that genre. Eco argues that oneiric time has an effect on the content of the stories that ties back to the essence of the genre as a whole, helping to place the superhero in

29 Eco 21

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 <http://stp.ling.uu.se/~starback/dcml/creators/rosa-on-himself.html#dates>

the realm of mythic archetype. When Eco wrote his article in the early 1960s, this may have been true, but as the genre developed, the function of time also changed. At around the same time as "The Myth of Superman" was written, Marvel was stepping away from that time scheme in favor of ongoing stories that followed one another in a more conventional sequence, and which would grow into the Marvel continuity, a scheme that DC would also eventually embrace and which has spread throughout the genre.

Continuity means simply that all the various heroes and villains belonging to the same publisher all live in the same world, and can interact with one another. It also means that rather than stories taking place in a vacuum, with no before or after and no lasting consequences, every storyline is shaped by what happened before, and what is happening to other heroes in the same world. At its most extreme, massive storylines require readers to follow a huge number of separate series in order to fully understand what is happening in any one of them. Marvel Comics, for example, has not been above pushing this effect intentionally to hook readers.³³ The end result, however, is quite often a horribly convoluted storyline that confuses old readers, and frightens away new readers who don't know what's going on or where to start reading.

Mind you, the continuity structure can only superficially cover up the deeper point that Eco had put his finger on. The superhero comics do never seem to change, no matter how many elaborate storylines they live through, no matter how many times the publisher promises that after the latest upcoming crisis, nothing will ever be the same again. Even when heroes die, it is taken for granted that they will not remain dead for long, as any popular (read: profitable) character will not be allowed to be sacrificed for mere story-needs. After the "Death of Superman" storyline in the early 1990s, hero deaths even became a fad, an easy way to inject drama and hold on to the readers' interest, which quickly became overused. The lighthearted Marvel comic *GLA Misassembled* made fun of this trend by promising to kill a member of the titular hero team the Great Lakes Avengers in every issue. So it remains true, as Eco observed, that the story remains static, because any genuine change would limit the potential for future stories and bring that character that much closer to genuine death. Hence, the major properties are forbidden the use of one of the major literary themes and tools, change.

Can the superhero change? For any other genre this wouldn't even be a question.

33 Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels*, 74.

Genres develop over time, eventually becoming barely recognizable from its origin. And the superheroes of today are barely recognizable in the golden and silver age comics which birthed them. Yet change is slow. The mode of publication, the reluctance of the major IP's corporate owners to alter their most iconic and successful properties, and even the committed readership which continues to find itself at home with the way things are, all contribute to a climate of rigid structure. But new superhero stories can be created outside of that structure; this is the reason why *Watchmen* features original characters rather than the pre-existing Charlton Comics characters they were based on. In the same way, Warren Ellis's *The Authority*, and Mark Busiek's *Astro City* both create original characters that are recognizably based on famous DC and Marvel superheroes, in order to freely take them in new directions.

Chasing a moving target: cultural relevance and revision.

Whether the superhero finds its roots in ancient mythologies or takes shape as the quintessential commodity of the 21st century's world marketplace, it must be acknowledged that as long as the superhero has been in existence, it has been 'in the making,' working through a series of revisions[.]³⁴

Endless serialization means that any character who attains a degree of popularity can continue indefinitely. The oneiric climate means that the actual date of any given comic is unimportant, and generally unstated. Retconning means that a comic's history, as a matter of precedent, poses no problem. As time progresses in the real world, society changes, and superheroes have set themselves the particular task of steadily updating themselves to current times, to remain a reflection of contemporary society. Superheroes, oddly enough, are both timeless archetypes, and also constantly contemporary, unchanging and yet constantly being revised and updated for changing times. The superhero, apparently, has always been at war with Eurasia.

Superman has a fictional past seemingly as immutable as that of Hercules. He was born on Krypton; saved by his parents from his home planet's doom by being launched in a small rocket; discovered after landing on Earth by the wholesome couple Jonathan and Martha Kent, who raise him as their own; grew up to become reporter Clark Kent, whose mildmannered *persona* serves as direct counterpart to the courage and power of Superman. However, this fixed past is much more fluid than appears at first glance. Due to the fact of ongoing textual production, Superman's fictional past is constantly in a state of potential retroactive reconstruction; textual additions made in the present emanate backwards in the character's narrative temporality, and reconstruct that temporality with revisions that then function in future texts as if they had always

34 Wandtke, Terrence R. *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!*, L69

already been part of the story[.]”³⁵

Rare is the superhero whose past has never been reimagined. The Fantastic Four, created when the space race was on everyone's mind, were initially space explorers locked in a race against the Soviet Union. Thirty years later, the Cold War ended, and their story has since been retold with a different ideological underpinning. Lex Luthor, Superman's archenemy, was originally characterized as a mad scientist; today, he is an embodiment of rapacious corporate power.

This willingness to change to fit the times is what allowed the superhero genre to survive under the Comics Code. For that matter, it did not have to be Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman who returned in revised form after the rise of the Comics Code. The publishers *could* have made new superheroes instead, to suit the new paradigm. But of course, they wanted to continue with their most famous and successful properties, even if that meant altering them as far as they could while remaining recognizable as the same characters. This set a precedent, and major heroes have been reimagined many times since.

This also has consequences for the content of the stories beyond capturing the zeitgeist. The need for the story to remain recognizable as a reflection of the real world means the hero can never cause major change by him- or herself. "Thus, the intersection of a serial narrative's need for storytelling continuity and its commercial need to resemble the reader's reality means that these narratives can never lead the way in systemic change; instead they can only reflect it."³⁶ As we saw in the pre-superhero science fiction superman, when the superman does anything other than protect society from outside threats, he risks becoming a destroyer or dictator. But without that possibility, the superhero always ends up defending the status quo, an inherently conservative position.

While it helped the genre survive, this tradition of revision presents problems for a genre that aspires to be taken seriously as literature. You don't get to rewrite the past as it suits you on a whim and still claim literary value, because part of literary value is that to a certain extent, you have a plan and know what you are doing. Neverending serials, by definition, do not.

Superheroes, many of the critics agree, are a barometer of culture, changing along with the times. Not just the genre as a whole, but many of the individual heroes themselves. The

35 Hyman, 39-40

36 Dittmer, Jason. "Retconning America: Captain America in the Wake of World War II and the McCarthy Hearings", L521

question rises, is this even a proper function of literature? The more common novelist's attitude is that a text should capture a *particular zeitgeist*. Would we rewrite *The Great Gatsby* to replace the Roaring Twenties atmosphere with a 1930s Great Depression atmosphere, and then again in the 40s, 50s, 60s, etcetera? Would we rewrite Gatsby's own personality, motivations, and background to fit later cultural and political developments? The answer seems obvious: if we did, it would not be *The Great Gatsby*. But with superheroes, this sort of revision is common.

Once again it is worth noting that those superhero narratives that have achieved literary acclaim are all removed from the neverending serial format. *Watchmen*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Sandman*, *Transmetropolitan*, and, *Promethea* all are stories that had a plan, with set beginnings and end points, sometimes with topical political content. They were serialized, but not neverending or open-ended, or what are now commonly called graphic novels.

Graphic Novels: the solution to the problem of stigma, or just another layer of it?

So, what exactly is the 'graphic novel'? This has been a subject of some contention. According to some, there is no real difference between 'comics' and 'graphic novels', and believing that there is, is to succumb to advertising spin and fad thinking. According to others, there is a real and significant difference, and it is the difference between disposable entertainment, and real literature.

The term first appears in the 1980s, as a descriptor for the new wave of comics that were attracting mainstream attention. According to Sabin,³⁷ the term was dreamt up by public relations engineers as a way to avoid the stigma of the term 'comics', to gain press attention, and to try to seize by association some of the respectability of the novel. Also, while the term did signify a particular kind of comic, this kind was not actually new. Scott McCloud charged that the term was often used only as a sales gimmick, "cynically, to repackage run-of-the-mill stories from popular mainstream titles"³⁸ Neil Gaiman has in the past insisted that from his perspective as a writer, there is no real difference at all.³⁹

But there *can be* a difference, both as a genre and as a form of publication. We have seen how the circumstances of publication can impact the content of the stories. The medium

37 Sabin, *Adult Comics*, 93

38 McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics*, 28.

39 Bender, Hy. *The Sandman Companion*, 4

can be seen as a mold, and any story you pour into it will tend to change shape to fit in the mold. Going from 'comics' to 'graphic novels' could conceivably be a way to introduce a new mold, with a different shape than the old. But this requires that a new approach to publication goes with the name change.

If the comic in question is actually structured as a novel, rather than as an open-ended serial, it makes sense to call it a graphic novel to distinguish it from those comics which are not structured as novels. This means stripping away the medium-based conventions of the serial, which are described above, and instead adopting the medium-based conventions of the novel. Note that it does *not* mean that the comics cannot actually be serialized (many graphic novels were originally serialized) but it means that the story must be crafted in the fashion of the novel, that it must form a complete whole with a beginning and an ending that can be read as one unit rather than as merely a segment of an open-ended narrative. Indeed, it is nigh-impossible to find a superhero comic that has achieved mainstream success that doesn't follow a novelistic, rather than an open-ended serial, structure.

Note that this demand that a story be planned as a completed whole is a limitation on the potential longevity of a property that the publisher may be unhappy to accept. For much of the history of the modern comics industry the publishers, not the authors or artists, were the owners of the intellectual properties in all their forms. Eager to keep their popular franchises running forever, the publishers, as we have seen, do not want to allow writers to end them, or even alter them for very long. This is not to glorify authors and artists overmuch, to say that creators are always noble and idealistic and never compromise an artistic vision for profit. But putting control of the properties in the hands of the creators themselves is still more likely to result in titles being structured more for artistic, literary purposes than for purely materialistic ones.

That is the direction things have been moving in. It was not until the silver age that readers could actually know which writers and artists had created any given comic, but over time creators have gotten more attention and respect, and it has grown common for readers to follow the work of particular creators more than particular titles. In the 1990s, intellectual property became a major point in publisher-creator relations. Image Comics was founded as a publisher that gave creators ownership of their work. Of course, Image Comics was no superman that immediately defeated all the genre's problems and ushered in a new age of prosperity for the superhero. But Image's lackluster fortunes has not ended the movement

towards greater creator's rights.

Conclusion.

As we have seen, the superhero genre has been shaped by a confluence of specific historical events and the formal requirements of the serialized comic book publishing model. Overwhelmingly, events conspired, sometimes intentionally and sometimes as an unintended consequence, to shape the genre into something for children, something uncomplicated and nonthreatening to existing power structures, something that would not provoke critical or subversive thinking. And yet, as creative thinkers will, comics creators have continued to use the genre to reflect upon the culture and the age in which they lived.

The strictures of serialization has always complicated their task. But the emergence of the graphic novel, a comic narrative freed from the strict demands of serialization, has allowed the comics medium as a whole to be recognized as a valid artistic medium. The superhero specifically has lagged behind the rest of the medium; having historically been so closely linked to the serialized format, superheroes have seemed to be an emblem of the stigmatized, childish, and frivolous aspects of the medium that creators have worked so hard to shed. But the superhero genre has also matured, and now a much broader spectrum of narratives are being told through it. In the following chapters, we will look more closely at some notable superhero narratives that would never have existed earlier in the genre's development.

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Chapter 2: The Superhero Genre as a tool for other discussions in Alan Moore's ABC Universe.

I suppose ABC is an attempt to build an ark, where all of my favorite concepts, things that I think should be included in comics, you know, can maybe survive the deluge.
-Alan Moore.⁴⁰

Alan Moore had been one of the biggest names in comics through the 80s and 90s, with titles like *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen* being central to the development of the superhero genre after the Silver Age. But after the success of *Watchmen*, Alan Moore withdrew from writing superhero comics entirely. When he returned to them years later he took an entirely different approach to the genre, one that discarded the revisionist ethos and the grim realist trend he had helped to begin. His new superhero project took the form not of a single title, but of a carefully constructed superhero continuity made up of multiple titles, published by an imprint of WildStorm set up specifically for this project, named America's Best Comics, ABC for short. ABC consisted of five titles, each of which worked with and commented on the functions of the superhero genre in different ways.

Running from 1999 to 2005, the ABC line is placed solidly in the post-revisionist era, after the major developments of the 80s and 90s had played out and resolved themselves. What does a superhero comic look like long after the superhero was deconstructed and turned inside out? This chapter discusses the ways the ABC line works with and relates to the genre conventions analysed in chapter 1, with a particular focus on one of the biggest ABC titles, *Promethea*. While the other titles focused more on telling conventional stories, *Promethea* was self-consciously didactic, even preachy, and overtly analytical in its storytelling. *Promethea* followed the adventures of the titular heroine, who served as a vehicle for an exploration of ideas about psychology, religion, sexuality, New Age cosmology, and about storytelling more generally. In *Promethea*, the actual superheroics would often be put aside for several issues at a time while characters discussed the hidden meanings of the genre. Although criticized for its lecturing tone,⁴¹ *Promethea* combined the conventions of the superhero genre with a narrative that was dense with literary and psychological symbolism. The fantastical aspects of the genre turned out to be a powerful tool for handling these

40 Quoted by Millidge, Gary Spencer. *Alan Moore – Storyteller*, 210.

41 e.g. Kraemer, Christine Hoff. "The Undying Fire: Erotic Love as Divine Grace in *Promethea*." L2137.

concepts. Throughout the series, *Promethea* is filled with manipulation and experimentation with superhero conventions. The end result is a story which can be described entirely accurately by invoking all the usual characteristics of the superhero genre, but which when read quickly demonstrates that it functions completely differently.

A particular motif within *Promethea* is sexuality. The superhero genre's history of dealing with questions of sex, gender, and sexism is one of its particular weak points. *Promethea* tries to go against this history in presenting a heroine who is a strong and rounded character in her own right rather than, as has been more common, merely eye candy for a juvenile male audience. *Promethea* discusses gender theory themes through the conventions of the superhero.

Promethea is also interesting as a contrast to the other main ABC title, *Tom Strong*, as examples of different approaches to the genre and its conventions. *Promethea's* focus on spectacular visuals and its dark, cynical setting fits well within the post-silver age superhero genre. And yet, reading the narrative, it becomes clear that this is something else. It is recognizable as a member of the genre but defies the formulas for a structure that is not particularly superheroic. While *Promethea* is both a continuation of the more modern trends in the genre and an attempt to dig deeper into the hidden aspects of superheroes, *Tom Strong* represents a return to the styles, structures and themes of Golden and Silver Age superhero comics, and treats them with a combination of nostalgia and deconstructive criticism. Running throughout *Tom Strong* as a subtle thread is the idea that Tom is a fascist, a charismatic authoritarian who is adored by the public he defends with extrajudicial use of force, who takes it upon himself to make decisions for his whole society.

All these various points revolve around the use and manipulation of the conventions of the superhero genre to counter formula and format in favor of more literary purposes.

America's Best Comics: A cohesive literary project.

America's Best Comics, ABC for short, was an imprint of the comics publisher WildStorm created for a specific set of titles conceived by Alan Moore. Although owned by a publisher of other superhero comics, the ABC titles existed in their own universe, with its own history wholly created by Moore.

A key point of ABC was for Alan Moore to retain full creative control. Moore had previously had bad experiences working for large publishers like DC, and wanted to get away

from that risk by working in a space entirely under his own control. In this way, the ABC comics would be quite free of the strictures of the normal publishing industry. As it turned out, ABC was not entirely free of editorial interference either: by the time ABC was started under WildStorm, WildStorm had itself been bought by DC, a company Moore had sworn not to work with again. WildStorm promised Moore that DC wouldn't interfere with the comics, but on occasion they did. Still, this interference was nothing so large and gross as to require wholesale reimagining of the series to conform to the franchise-building open-ended serial model. The end result is a collection of texts more suited to artistic, literary purposes than a conventional serial.

Geoff Klock argues that the ABC line is best viewed as one single large text rather than a collection of separate texts.⁴² The superhero continuity convention would make the genre a natural fit for that kind of experiment. The five main titles have a variable degree of overlap between them, from the major (*Promethea* and *Tom Strong*) to the nonexistent (*League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* seems to exist in an entirely separate universe from the other titles), but Klock argues that they inform one another and work together to illuminate the functions of the superhero genre from various angles.⁴³

Tom Strong is a so-called 'reconstructionist' series, a response to the revisionist trend that seeks to return to the unambiguous, uncomplicated goodness of Superman. And yet, it is not entirely innocent, but has a sort of running joke of the superhero as a fascist fantasy. Tom Strong's in-universe fanclub members are called 'Strongmen', and Strong always calls them by their membership number rather than by name. In one storyline in which Strong fights actual nazis, subtle similarities between the hero and villain inspires unease in the reader.

The various series within *Tomorrow Stories* each comment on comics conventions or the comics industry in characteristic ways. "Splash Brannigan" parodies the publishing industry directly by having the titular superhero inkblot working in a sweatshop-style comics studio that puts out mass-produced uninspired drivel, whose top-selling character is named "Sarcastic Thug". "Jack B. Quick" uses nonsensical super-science to built surreal scenarios. "First American" parodies the American patriot hero archetype, along with the obsession with fame and glamorous lifestyles of Hollywood celebrity. "Cobweb" parodies the use of women characters as barely-disguised sexual fantasy fodder. "Greyshirt" stands out as the only non-parody title in the comic, instead being a straight mystery man series in the style of Will

42 Klock, Geoff. *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* 100.

43 *Ibid.*, 98.

Eisner's *The Spirit*.

League of Extraordinary Gentlemen takes the superhero universe concept and applies it to classic literature. *Top Ten* is a police procedural series in a city where every resident has superpowers. And *Promethea* uses the superhero formula to explore ideas about sex and gender, religion, magic, and stories in general.

The various titles were published between 1999 and 2005, ending with an overlapping apocalypse storyline that brought most of the ABC titles to a close. The exception was *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, which is still ongoing and being published by Top Shelf Press.

An artificially aged continuity.

As Klock says, the ABC lineup can be seen specifically as a commentary on the structures of the genre, with each of the various titles focusing on particular aspects of the whole. Invariably, each convention is manipulated for unconventional effects, and are considered for their own sakes rather than purely in service of the narrative. One of these conventions is particularly expansive, and impacts all the rest, but must be considered on its own: the far-reaching continuity.

A central device in the ABC line is the use of backstory to mimic the history of long-running superhero titles, and use that history to play with the conventions that grew up gradually over time. Throughout the ABC line, Moore consciously invokes the story conventions that originally developed naturally from the decades-long history of the DC and Marvel comics universes, but he invokes them without that history. He uses the characteristics of open-ended serials without writing actual open-ended serials. So, even though the ABC line really began in 1999, it includes stories that are presented as reprints of earlier stories, as though the title had a publishing history extending back to the Golden Age of comics. For instance, in flashbacks to the 1950s in *Tom Strong*, the Silver Age *Promethea* is seen as a member of the in-universe historical superhero team America's Best. And speaking of America's Best: the entire imprint is named America's Best Comics in their honor, making the name of the publisher itself a false continuity reference. In the present day of the ABC titles, the superhero team of that name is long since disbanded, and has no prominence to speak of in the comics themselves. The name is presented as though it were an artifact of ancient comic book history, much as DC Comics still retains the name from *Detective Comics*, the company's most popular magazine in the Golden Age.

Genre conventions like a far-reaching continuity, retcons, and legacy characters originally developed as ways of maintaining the major superhero franchises that had been going on for many years, even many decades. But in the ABC universe, all these conventions were in use from the beginning, furnishing the various titles with an artificial past to draw on for material. This artificial past, in turn, functions differently in each of the major series. Always we see the conscious use of genre conventions as a tool to explore weightier matters than the genre is known for.

In *Tom Strong*, the artificial past contextualizes Strong specifically as a golden age superhero like Superman, and allows Moore to cast him in stories in the styles of past decades. *Tom Strong* regularly brings in stories and devices heavy on nostalgia, often referencing supposed past villains Tom Strong has fought, and generally suggesting that the series 'lives in the past'.

Superhero genre conventions in the ABC universe.

Let's begin by looking at the three key genre conventions laid out by Coogan: mission, power, and identity.

Promethea is particularly experimental with the mission convention. Promethea, it is true, fights against evil. In the earliest issues of the series, she fights off monsters and demons, agents of evil who fear her and want to stop her before she grows too powerful. But 'evil' turns out to be a very problematic term. Once the series's focus on new age cosmology begins to assert itself, 'good' and 'evil' become hollow concepts, mere material concerns that are ultimately neutral background to the mystic realm that makes up the bulk of the *Promethea* universe. Characters that are introduced early on as villains turn out not to be particularly villainous. Even the legions of hell turn out to be just spiritual reflections of the dark side of humanity that fulfill their allotted role in the cosmos, and are not actually anyone's enemy.

Beyond that, unlike the conventional superhero who owes his or her allegiance to existing society, Promethea owes her allegiance to no mortal society at all, but to humanity and the universe as a whole. This is one reason why the series features relatively little in the way of superheroics. In the *Promethea* cosmology, the material world in which mortal society exists is only one level of many that make up the universe. In a lengthy section of the series, Promethea leaves the material world and its human concerns behind entirely, in favor of a spiritual quest across the cosmos. In the final storyline, Promethea's literally god-given

mission is to usher in a metaphysical rebirth of humankind, a mission which makes her the enemy of existing society rather than its protector.

As if to underline the point that *Promethea* has different concerns than humanity at large, *Promethea*'s New York is filled with conventional supervillains that *Promethea* never meets. These villains are instead left for other superheroes, who carry on their own subplots in the background as the series progresses.

The second of the three key conventions is superpowers. It is arguably here that *Promethea* is the most conventional in its approach. *Promethea* has the standard array of superpowers: she can fly, she has great strength and resilience, and she has a magical weapon that fires powerful bursts of energy. These powers are set up at the beginning of the series in the traditional fashion: a shadow-creature is hunting Sophie to kill her before she grows too powerful, and Sophie must learn to use her weapons as *Promethea* to defeat it.

This introduction focuses on the practical aspects of the superpowers as just tools to perform the rather mundane task of fighting. But before long, as the story turns away from conventional superheroics, the powers also take on different meanings. As discussed above, *Promethea* does not have a typical superhero mission of fighting evil and injustice, but is charged with raising humanity to a new level of existence, and in accordance with that mission, her more characteristic power is simply to inspire people. *Promethea* is a creature of story, rather than of matter; her home is a fairy-tale land, and to invoke her people use art rather than magic or science. Which brings us to the third of the key conventions, identity.

Promethea's take on the secret identity goes right back to Golden Age conventions that have since fallen out of fashion. In a device harkening back to Billy Batson's magic word "Shazam", which when spoken transforms him into Captain Marvel, Sophie learns that she can transform into *Promethea* by writing poetry about her. Rather than appear dated, though, this old device is executed in such a way as to make it fit the theme. *Promethea* embodies creativity, and it is through creative works that humans have made contact with her.

In addition, *Promethea* ties the identity convention into discussions of sexual identity, of passing, of hiding to avoid persecution or discrimination. The secret identity convention has been analysed from this perspective before, but *Promethea* foregrounds it and makes it explicit in the narrative. This is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Another device of the identity convention is legacy characters. Legacy characters are hero identities which are not identified with one unique individual but which are passed along

from mentor to protege, or parent to child. Typically legacy characters come about because a hero is killed, and the publisher decides to bring them back with a new approach. Moore, however, invokes the legacy character convention outside of its organic context. In *Promethea*, the entire history of the character is created at once, complete with a long line of past holders of the name. Promethea herself has existed in spiritual form since the 5th century AD, and ever since creative humans have manifested her on earth many times.

Structurally, what this means is that Moore has made a framework for bringing in stories in the styles of earlier periods, in the guise of retelling stories from the past, as a way to comment on the history of the genre and its roots. The various earlier Prometheas all invoke the styles and forms that were popular at the times those Prometheas were active. Grace Brannagh is a pulp sword and sorcery warrior woman from the 1920s; William Wolcott is a playful, light-hearted silver age heroine who is attacked for sexual deviancy, and so on. In this way, Moore recapitulates the history of the genre and the earlier adventure genres the superhero sprang from.

Another effect of legacy characters is that it gives an easy way to justify explaining the powers and purpose of the hero to the reader by putting the character through hero-to-hero training. The fact that Sophie is a new and inexperienced Promethea who is trained by the previous Prometheas serves to enable the exposition that is most of the series' *raison d'être*. In the usual way of infodumping, these lectures serve more to educate the reader about the symbolic connections and motifs of the series than to train Sophie herself.

Those are the three major conventions. As we can see, *Promethea* manipulates each of them as a way to explore, comment on, or else simply differentiate *Promethea* from the superhero genre. The same is true of the characteristics of serialization. In the previous chapter I discussed various ways in which the open-ended serial publishing model affects the content of the stories. In some ways, *Promethea* turns out to be a perfect example of how differently the superhero story looks once that publishing model is abandoned. In other ways, such as with legacy characters, *Promethea* intentionally invokes the characteristics of a long-running serial without actually being one. *Promethea's* sister series *Tom Strong* similarly plays with convention, and a comparison on some points is interesting.

The convention that is key to the longevity of superheroes, and a necessary condition for an open-ended serial to endure, is that they can never win once and for all. The superhero has to be placed in opposition to some extrasocial menace, one which can never truly be

defeated. Otherwise, as Coogan argued, the superhero becomes either a ruler, savior, or destroyer, in all cases an enemy of human self-governance and freedom.⁴⁴ A related point is that in a neverending serial the superhero also cannot be allowed to significantly alter the functioning of society, for example by vastly accelerating technological progress with superhuman science, as then the world of the comic would no longer resemble the real world of the reader. In *Promethea*, all these tropes are abandoned. Promethea is not opposed by extrasocial menaces that cannot truly be defeated, and as a result she becomes a savior/destroyer, and she alters the functioning of society so absolutely that to even imagine how any future story in that world could actually work becomes a major metaphysical undertaking. Major crossovers in which large numbers of heroes gather to jointly combat the threat of a world-ending apocalypse is another well-worn story formula in the genre. In *Promethea*, this is exactly how the series ends, except that Promethea herself is the harbinger of the apocalypse, an apocalypse which is in fact a happy ending.

Conversely, the neverending menace is alive and well in *Tom Strong*. A prime example is the odd situation that Paul Saveen, the principal villain of the series, returns regularly to menace the Strong family in spite of the fact that he is already dead when the series begins. The convention of the villain returning for revenge after everyone thought he was dead is both played straight and manipulated: Paul Saveen appears regularly throughout the series, but only in flashback, as a time traveller, as a double from a parallel dimension, as a ghost, or being mimicked by an impostor. Another example of the convention being manipulated comes in a storyline⁴⁵ in which we see an alternate universe where "Tom Stone" successfully rehabilitated every villain Tom Strong has fought, removing them as a returning threat. The end result is disaster, with the heroes turning against each other until they threaten to destroy society around them.

Umberto Eco's concept of 'oneiric time' is not in force in either *Promethea* or *Tom Strong*, as both series develop over time, and past incidents have an effect on later events. *Tom Strong* does, however, use an episodic structure in which, at the beginning of each story, events begin from a default state of a sort of 'just another fine day in Millenium City', where the relation in time of each story beginning to each previous story ending is left unclear. Of the ABC titles, *Promethea* and *Tom Strong* have the most overlapping stories, yet they function very differently on these points. While *Promethea* is set at a specific point in time, in

44 Coogan, 114.

45 Moore, Alan. *Tom Strong* #20-22.

a (fictionalized) real city in a United States of America run by a President who looks very much like George W. Bush, *Tom Strong* is much more relaxed about its relationship to anything like the real world. This is true even though these two series are supposed to take place side by side. We can take note of the settings of the two series: Promethea's New York is a high-technology cyberpunk city, filled with neon lights and flying cars, reminiscent of a 1980s dystopian science fiction view of what the future might be like. The 1980s, of course, was the big turning point in the genre that ushered in an age of grim, violent superhero comics. Klock suggests Moore is in a way apologizing for his influence in that trend,⁴⁶ and has picked that setting as the emblem of the dark side of humanity that Promethea is meant to wash away. At the same date in the same world, however, Tom Strong's Millenium City is reminiscent of Superman's Metropolis, with an aesthetic rooted in the golden age of comics, a city of clean streets, art deco skyscrapers, and public transport that moves via cables suspended high in the air, in which the only flying car belongs to the villain Paul Saveen. While New York is dark and sordid, Millenium City is bright, clean, optimistic. New York is also dominated by popular culture in a way that Millenium is not, for good or ill. Rock concerts, night clubs, and pop-culture advertisements are a staple of New York, which evokes youth culture and rebellion, whereas Millenium City can be seen as a triumph of fascist order, completely bereft of frivolous distractions. We can also note that the city that refers back to the 1980s vogue for realism in superheroes is a fictionalized real city, while the city based on more fantastical Golden Age comics conventions is entirely made up.

Since the ABC universe lacks the long and convoluted real-world publishing history of DC or Marvel, 'retconning' has not been necessary. And yet, in accordance with the false continuity history of the ABC universe, the device has been invoked consciously for its own sake. *Tom Strong* #6 includes a supposed reprint of a supposed old issue of the comic in which the villain Saveen uses "Phlogisten, the invisible fluid form of heat"⁴⁷ as a weapon. In the present day, Tom Strong remarks that science has since proved that phlogisten doesn't exist. In reality, phlogisten was an outdated concept long before the 20th century began, rendering its inclusion in a Golden Age episode equally strange. That extra error serves as a reference to the willingness superheroes have always had for using dubious science for story purposes. This kind of dubious science is also the central device of "Jack B. Quick", one of the titles of the ABC anthology comic *Tomorrow Stories*. Klock also argues that in *Tom Strong*, Moore

46 Klock, 113.

47 Moore, *Tom Strong* #6.

uses the shallow science, continuity errors, and bizarre scenarios of the genre to invoke more sinister fascist population control: if you can suspend your disbelief enough to accept this, you can be made to believe anything an authority figure wants you to believe.⁴⁸

Finally, there is the matter of cultural relevance and revision. By giving up the open-ended serial model, ABC as a simple consequence does not have to update itself every now and then to changing times. It stands, like any novelistic work, complete and unchanging for whatever posterity may throw at it. But as with all the others, the convention is brought up intentionally in the false history of the universe. Stories set in earlier times work according to the norms of those times rather than today, even though the stories were all written in the 90s or 2000s. In addition to the outdated science mentioned above, the 'reprinted story' in *Tom Strong* #6 also begins with a page showing Tom Strong relaxing with a brand-name cigarette and engaging in casual sexism. *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* went so far as to include genuine ads from Victorian publications for products that seem bizarre at best today.

What did happen, however, was that over the time of the comic's run, 1999-2005, real-world events occurred that were hard not to respond to. There is a limit to how much we can imagine the story was planned out at the onset, when the concluding storyline is set very firmly in a post-9/11 USA at the height of the War on Terror.

It is worth noting that although much of the early run of *Promethea* takes place in an imaginary New York City, divorced from any real administrative political or governmental engagement. After the terrorist attack on 9/11 and as the series progresses, Moore and Williams moves the milieu of the text more and more into a wholly recognizable and contemporary America, complete with then-President Bush and a rising U.S. conflict with Iraq.⁴⁹

The fact that Sophie and *Promethea* were both already established to be of Middle-Eastern origin adds resonance to the sequence in *Promethea* #26, where Tom Strong is conscripted under anti-terror laws to hunt down Sophie in Millenium City. The War on Terror is folded into the narrative in a way that is thematically appropriate to *Promethea*'s mission to elevate mankind above war.

The ABC line also invites discussion of one of the long-lived criticisms of the genre. In its most extreme form, the criticism is that the genre is authoritarian, even fascist. The more realistic claim is that the major conventions of the genre are inherently conservative. The fact is that heroes are typically defenders of the status quo, and are unable or unwilling to actually

48 Klock, 110.

49 Petrovic, Paul. "'It came out of nothing except our love' *Queer Desire and Transcendental Love in Promethea*." L2391.

alter the society they defend. Then there are the fascist under- and overtones to having powerful men who administer justice outside of the law while ordinary law enforcement is powerless to do anything on their own. As we have seen, *Tom Strong* intentionally invokes fascist thinking in order to characterise the hero. *Promethea* escapes from these conventions by virtue of the fact that her mission is *not* to defend society from outside threats. If anything, she is the outside threat, and it is her enemies who are trying to defend the status quo from her. *Promethea*'s allegiance is not to earthly society, but to the metaphysical realm where she spends most of her time. With this in mind, it comes as no great surprise that the runup to the finale of *Promethea* has Tom Strong and *Promethea* face each other as opponents, with Tom Strong acting as an agent of the US government to stop *Promethea* from carrying out her mission.

One last manipulation of the comics form deserves mention. Alan Moore has a fondness for adding prose texts as supplementary materials to his comics; *Watchmen* includes in-universe documentary texts with each chapter. *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* includes whole prose short stories with each collection. *Promethea* likewise begins with a foreword, penned and signed by Moore himself, which describes a literary history of the *Promethea* character as though she were an established literary figure in the real world. In conventional comic books, the reader is accustomed to the system where everything that is part of the narrative is in graphic form, while pieces of prose text set apart from the graphic pages--such as letters to the editor--are part of the real world. Even this kind of convention is subverted in *Promethea*. Since readers are accustomed to the idea that forewords are supposed to be nonfictional commentaries on the text, Moore uses that expectation to immerse the reader in the narrative by entering it even when the reader thinks he is reading nonfiction. The foreword, then, is part of the narrative, describing things that only exist in the fictional world as though they were real. This foreword uses terms from the ABC universe, such as "science hero" in place of "superhero", but also names real-world comics artist P. Craig Russel as someone who had previously worked with the *Promethea* character. And although the foreword is written in an in-universe voice, it is signed by the real-world creator Alan Moore.

As we can see, *Promethea* and the other titles in the ABC line are used to invert and manipulate every genre convention in the repertoire, but *Promethea* also has more specific aims that must be considered, concerning the way sexuality is commonly presented in comics. This is the subject of the next section.

Sex and sexism in superhero comics.

Calvin: "Mom doesn't understand comic books. She doesn't realize that comic books deal with serious issues of the day. Today's superheroes face tough moral dilemmas. Comic books aren't just escapist fantasy. They're sophisticated social critiques."

Hobbes: "Is Amazon Girl's superpower the ability to squeeze that figure into that suit?"

Calvin: "Nah, they all can do that."⁵⁰

Superheroes have always been a very gendered genre, aimed almost exclusively at males, mostly children and teenagers but also, during World War 2, at soldiers. It is sadly no surprise, then, that it is held to be pervasively sexist. Alan Moore is not entirely free of blame himself in this regard: Moore's highly acclaimed Batman story *The Killing Joke* is one of the most influential stories in establishing the modern interpretation of the Joker, but its sexual politics are unworthy. It is notable for the way it focuses its attention on and directs the readers' sympathy towards the male characters, at the expense of the female characters who actually suffer the most harm. "Women in Refrigerators-syndrome", named by comic book writer Gail Simone in reference to Hal Jordan/Green Lantern's girlfriend who was killed and stuffed into a refrigerator,⁵¹ was a term coined to describe how women in superhero stories disproportionately suffer grievous, disabling injuries or death. Even when women are prominent characters, they are too often used as fodder for the fantasies of an assumed heterosexual male readership rather than as strong characters in their own right. Heroines are ubiquitously seen in skimpy, revealing costumes that would seem to be completely impractical for fighting, and often contorting themselves into impossible poses in order to reveal the maximum amount of flesh in every image. *Promethea* attempts to counteract this sordid history with a heroine who dodges the usual sexist tropes of the genre, while engaging in a frank discussion of sex and sexuality in the genre.

One of the central themes of *Promethea* concerns love and sex. Not sex as a physical act, but as an expression of identity and as a subject of symbology and cosmology. Sex in *Promethea* is not (just) a physical act, but a physical expression of spiritual love, densely laden with mystical ideas and symbolism. Not one but several full issues of the comic are dedicated to exposition about the cosmological meanings of sex, intimacy, fertility, and their expression in Moore's elaborately constructed magical universe. In her article "The Undying

50 Watterson, Bill. *Calvin and Hobbes*, 22.7.1992.

51 Marz, Ron. *Green Lantern* #54.

Fire: Erotic Love as Divine Grace in *Promethea*", Christine Hoff Kraemer writes:

Promethea's apocalypse recaptures the original Greek meaning of the term: *revelation* (Boyer 23). Here, the end of the world involves not its physical destruction, but a global spiritual awakening to the nature of divine love. (...) For Moore, love is more than right relationship between human beings; it is the universe reaching out compassionately and erotically to every being within it. Although such love is not necessarily sexual in a physical sense, in *Promethea* sexuality often operates as a metaphor for the passionate, intimate, and embodied qualities of divine love.⁵²

Much of the critical attention given to *Promethea* takes a queer theory approach, an unusual angle to consider a superhero comic. Certainly, superheroes have a long history of accusations of sexual deviancy, but these have always been just expressions of bigotry on the part of the accuser, not literary criticism. The secret identity convention has also been compared with being closeted, fear of coming out as gay, and having to pass as 'normal' in order to be accepted by society. *Promethea* foregrounds these themes, and overtly invites such interpretations and analysis. Paul Petrovic writes:

Promethea repudiates the construction of heterosexual ideology as normative and reverses such hegemonic principles. Because of this focus, *Promethea* dialogues with and needs to be considered as part of the emerging Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and Transgendered (LBGT) literary canon.⁵³

Petrovic goes on to argue that these themes are built right into *Promethea's* unusually elaborate and intricate artwork and layout styles and structures. *Promethea* #7, in which Sophie is accompanied by the Silver Age superheroine version of Promethea, Bill Woolcott (in ordinary life, a gay man and comics creator), features a cover in the unmistakable style of Silver Age romance comics. On it, Bill-as-Promethea leans tearfully into the arms of her lover, strong and handsome FBI agent Dirk Dangerfield, an in-universe fictionalization of Bill-as-Promethea's lover Dennis Drucker. This hyperbolically cartoonish cover belies the tragic transgender narrative within, which ends with the homophobic Dennis discovering and murdering Bill. The murder is depicted in photorealistic artwork, in fact artwork made from a photographic base. Since Sophie and Bill-as-Promethea are travelling through Bill and Dennis's memories, they can move freely within and between the panels, while Dennis is frozen in the moment immediately after shooting Bill in the back of the head. According to Petrovic, the function is that:

Dennis is immobile in the first two panels, bound by a regulatory, bordered existence; [artists] Williams and Villarrubia visually argue here that Dennis permits nothing in his identity to cross gaps or thresholds (2, 19). In contrast, Bill-as-Promethea moves in the

52 Kraemer, L2196.

53 Petrovic, L2340.

gaps between panels and iterations.⁵⁴ In this way, the ordinary formal characteristics of comics, even on the simplest level of panel design, are bent to a particular thematic purpose, that *Promethea* grounds "transcendence in all of its multivalent forms, especially in its gendered designs, where panels and borders are gendered as normative and heterosexual, while the foregrounding of gaps acts to queer and liberate that conventional sensibility."⁵⁵

Orion Ussner Kidder argues, however, that Moore's storytelling falls flat when it comes to presenting queer narrative outside of heteronormative formulas. Some of Kidder's objections have merit. Kidder notes that after Bill's murder, the spirit of Bill-as-Promethea is simply a woman, and as such the transgressive element of the the Bill-Dennis relationship is erased, and the relationship is rendered heterosexual before reaching a happy ending when they reunite during the apocalypse.⁵⁶

The problems with Kidder's arguments comes when he suggests that the difficulties the non-heterosexual relationships in *Promethea* encounter are supposed to be rooted specifically in the fact that they are non-heterosexual relationships. The circumstances of the Stacia-Grace relationship, Kidder says, means that "lesbian love is left with two options, violence or infidelity."⁵⁷ But this implication is not found in the text, and it is more sensible to ascribe those difficulties to the fact that these relationships are carried out by ordinarily flawed human beings. Indeed, even the demigoddess fantasy warrior woman Grace-as-Promethea is an ordinarily flawed human being in this respect, demonstrating unhealthy pride and greed, up to being willing to defy the cosmic order that empowers her in order to hold on to the pleasures of material life.

Promethea herself is subject to the seemingly inescapable problem of superheroines, that no matter what, she will be a sex object. Rather than avoid the topic or use an unsexed presentation, Moore instead uses this fact as a tool to explore the role of sex within mystic religions, and in so doing, attempts to turn the topic of sex in comics away from its usual sordid fantasy tropes and into something lofty and spiritual. This isn't the first time Moore has attempted to portray an act of sexual intercourse artfully: an infamous sequence in *Swamp Thing*⁵⁸ portrayed the Swamp Thing--a plant creature with a human's consciousness--and his human girlfriend making love. The sequence was psychedelic, and not at all graphic, yet

54 Petrovic., L2376.

55 Ibid., L2317.

56 Kidder, Orion Ussner. "Self-Conscious Sexuality in *Promethea*." L2642.

57 Ibid., L2597.

58 Moore, Alan. *Swamp Thing* #34.

unambiguous. Moore drew upon it for a similar (not actually similar) scene in *Promethea*.

Promethea does not escape one of the usual problems of othering in literature. It seems you can't have a woman superhero unless the story calls for it specifically, in a way that would never be the case for a male hero. So it is here: *Promethea* is not simply a superhero who happens to be a woman, she is the main character in a series that is in large part about superheroines qua women, about how a female superhero narrative is different than a male superhero narrative. Is this approach tenable? The crucial point of this approach is that the character is not just a character, but a representative of an entire group, and speaks (or is made to speak) for the group rather than as an individual. Historically, only members of the ruling group, straight white middle-class-and-up men have been allowed to be individuals, to be judged on their own merits, while every other group is judged as a group, and everything an individual does reflects on the group as a whole. This is a severe limitation on literary expression for anyone not in the ruling class. By making *Promethea* a series focused specifically on the role of women in superhero-comics, and *Promethea* the character as a representation of superheroines as a group, Moore opens himself up to this critique.

This kind of othering is a problem. But on the other hand it is also one of the only ways to get around another problem, that of assimilation. Another common critique of superheroines is that often they are not really women per se, but are just men with (ludicrously unrealistic) women's bodies catered to the straight man's gaze, such that even when there are women in a story, the story is still functionally just for boys. Klock says that "*Promethea* is an attempt to write a genuinely feminine superhero narrative, reversing a trend in superhero literature that sees a female hero as a male character, a male mentality, drawn with a stereotyped female body."⁵⁹ The strong expression of *Promethea* as something different than the typical superhero by virtue of her womanhood is a tool to this end.

The ludicrously unrealistic bodies raises another inescapable point in any discussion of superheroines: that they are there specifically to cater to the preferences of a juvenile male readership, not for female readers to relate to or identify with. This is what *Promethea* attempts to do, to create a superheroine who is not just an object of male desire. As Klock puts it, "*Promethea* is Wonder Woman as Wonder Woman could have become, a powerful heroine in her own right rather than something for young male readers to ogle."⁶⁰ The character design likewise dodges the sexist pitfalls common to superheroines. The contorted poses suggesting

⁵⁹ Klock, 111.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

spines as flexible as rubber bands are nowhere to be seen. Sophie-as-Promethea is tall and muscular, far from the soft, wasp-thin, inhumanly shaped body of the typical superheroine. Her costume is a suit of metal armor, which is beautiful without being laughably impractical for battle.

Conclusion.

Promethea specifically and the ABC line generally go to great lengths to demonstrate the ability of comics as a literary medium, and the superhero genre as a versatile form for the exploration of literary topics and themes. Throughout the ABC series, the conventions of the genre are used not to build formulaic action stories, but to explore literary themes and ideas.

The ABC universe was created as an interconnected literary project that uses various types of comics genres, most prominently the superhero genre, to explore the functioning of comics and superheroes specifically. Each of the five ABC titles can be read on their own, but when viewed together they form a multi-perspective commentary on the history and potential of the genre.

Tom Strong and *Promethea* are the most prominent of the titles, and the most generically constructed, and the two present contrastic approaches to the superhero. *Tom Strong* is retrospective, uses old-fashioned devices and mimics the styles and flaws of past decades to evoke the feel of the Golden and Silver Ages. *Promethea* is more of a continuation of modern trends, but directed to unconventional purposes and effects. The backstories of these series recapitulate the development of the genre in real-world history, and invoke common genre devices in isolation from the context in which those devices originally evolved, allowing them to be used self-consciously and reflexively, as objects of analysis.

As we saw in chapter 1, a key criticism of the genre has always been its formulaic nature. In *Promethea*, Moore appears to follow the formulas at first, only to brutally subvert them. Moore plays on the readers' expectations for what a superhero story is like, and initially sets up what appears to be a conventional narrative, but these early elements are revealed to be entirely misleading as the narrative goes on.

We see that *Promethea* goes out of its way to manipulate all the typical expectations of the superhero genre, almost to the point where one feels that it doesn't really belong in the genre at all, for all that it exists in a superhero universe inhabited by heroes and villains. An understanding of genre that hinges on superficial characteristics would accept the presence of

superheroes as sufficient for including *Promethea* in the genre. An understanding of genre that focuses more on narrative formula would find it more difficult.

Why make a superhero comic at all, then, if you're not going to focus it on superheroics? What *Promethea* does is to push the boundaries of the genre and challenge the readers' preconceptions about what a superhero narrative looks like, and to demonstrate that the genre has potential and versatility that has gone unappreciated. In *Promethea*, the visual styles of superhero comics, the comic equivalent of a special effects extravaganza Hollywood blockbuster, are manipulated to explore ideas about human psychology, religion, and sexuality, constructing beautiful art styles in a broad spectrum to represent a spiritual journey for enlightenment. A key point of *Promethea* is to tie together philosophical themes and visual symbolism in the narrative comic book format. Although criticized for its preachy, lecturing tone, *Promethea* is cohesively structured around this exploration of ideas; it is the fighting itself that seems out of place if we approach the text without preconceptions and judge it on its merits. In addition, *Promethea* particularly addresses sex and sexuality, topics where the genre has an extremely poor track record, in mature and thoughtful fashion. For this it has been the subject of gender theory and queer theory analysis, with Paul Petrovic going so far as to say it belongs in the LGBT literary canon.

What *Promethea* demonstrates is that, in the first decade of the new millenium, with the revisionist era many years in the past, the genre has stepped away from a narrative or ideological monism, and that we are now in an era in which the genre can be recognized as a valid vehicle for exploring a wide spectrum of literary themes and ideas.

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Chapter 3. Social commentary and generic experimentation in the comics of Warren Ellis.

Warren Ellis is a less famous comic book author than the likes of Alan Moore or Neil Gaiman, but his work has enjoyed critical acclaim and some academic attention. His work features certain recurring themes and concepts that delve into analysis of the development and consequences of the superhero genre. Heavily inspired by science fiction, his texts are often filled with social commentary of the kind the SF genre favors, but with which the superhero genre has a troubled history.

As we have seen, the superhero genre has been criticized for being inherently conservative, and the heroes cast predominantly as defenders of the status quo. While *Promethea* delves into metaphysics and spirituality to avoid placing the heroine merely as a defender of the establishment, Ellis instead attempts to place his heroes as revolutionaries, and his villains as representing the establishment directly.

A recurring theme in Ellis's work, and a way in which his superhero work manipulates the tropes of the genre, is that the villains tend not to be outsiders who are enemies of society, but rather the most powerful members of society itself, while the heroes are borderline revolutionaries who oppose the status quo but have to confront the fact their work helps to endanger the lives of ordinary people. In this chapter I discuss the extent to which these texts manage to escape the 'inherently conservative' paradigm of the genre.

Drawn Lines in Genre: Are these superhero comics?

In this chapter I look at three texts that fall on various places of the superhero genre spectrum, by writer Warren Ellis. These texts are *Transmetropolitan*, *Planetary*, and *Global Frequency*, and they each represent different approaches to using the the superhero genre and its conventions to tell unconventional and un-generic stories. *Planetary* pits a group of superhero archeologists who struggle to uncover the secret history of their world against an authoritarian force that wants to control the flow of information and keep those secrets buried, in an allegory of comic book publishing history. *Global Frequency* replaces heroes and superpowers with specialized human agents linked together in a communications network that allows ordinary people to confront supervillain-scale disasters. *Transmetropolitan*, finally, follows the renegade super-journalist Spider Jerusalem as he struggles to bring down a corrupt

US President in a story structured as a heroic adventure epic.

I will argue that all three of these texts can be analyzed and understood in light of the superhero genre characteristics I discussed in chapter 1. The complication is that, while all these series follow in the traditions of American adventure comics that superheroes have dominated for so long, these series are not themselves superhero comics according to the common, most superficial criteria. Of the three, only the cast of *Planetary* have actual superpowers, while *Transmetropolitan's* Spider Jerusalem arguably comes the closest of all to having a costume with an emblem representing his character, in the form of his asymmetrical punk sunglasses. Yet as we have seen, the various characteristics that define the genre have grown more flexible over time.

These texts by Ellis follow the path set by the revisionist movement in the 80s and brings the genre closer to conventional science fiction, speculating on the impact technology will have on humanity, and engaging in social commentary and satire of the modern world. Jenkins argues that contrary to the commonly rigid understanding of genre, genre is a flexible enough construct to permit a mixture of styles and influences.

Genre criticism takes for granted that most works fall within one and only one genre with genre mixing the exception rather than the norm. The genre theorist works to locate classic examples of the genre-primarily works which fall at the very center of the space being defined-and uses them to map recurring traits of identify a narrative formula.

Comics are not immune to industrial pressures towards standardization and differentiation, yet these forces operate differently in a context where a single genre dominates a medium and all other production has to define itself against, outside of, in opposition to, or alongside that prevailing genre. Here, difference is felt more powerfully *within* a genre than *between* competing genres and genre mixing is the norm. The superhero genre seems capable of absorbing and reworking all other genres.⁶¹

Many of Jenkins's list of examples of such genre mixing feature other genres being absorbed into a central superhero text⁶². The texts by Ellis that are considered in this chapter go in the other direction, leaving the central characteristics like costumes, secret identities, and superpowers behind while keeping the larger story structures and narrative conventions of the genre. Jenkins names *Pulse* as a story that pulls journalism into the superhero genre, following a magazine that covers the actions of Marvel superheroes. Ellis's *Transmetropolitan*, conversely, tells a story about journalism structured as a superhero comic,

61 Jenkins, Henry. "'Just Men in Tights' – Rewriting Silver Age Comics in an Era of Multiplicity." L465.

62 Ibid. L484.

even though no conventional superheroes appear in it. Genres can be combined in other ways than by simply adding one genre to another, as the examples listed by Jenkins does. In Ellis's texts, some superhero conventions are left behind, while others are developed beyond their usual presentation, and are melded with recognizable conventions from other genres entirely until it is difficult to tell where the superhero ends and the science fictional social commentary begins. According to Riley, *Transmetropolitan* "smuggled a complex story with many non-traditional elements to a mainstream audience using tropes of the superhero genre" while *Global Frequency* "explored a different kind of solution to the superhero team comic in the networked democracy".⁶³

***Planetary*: A narrative of revision.**

I decided early on to soft-pedal a lot of the Wildstorm U stuff. I bring elements in from all over because, really, so did Jim Lee and the others when they were generating their "Wildstorm Universe" superhero environment. It's all mix-and-match. And that's nothing new, people have been doing this for years, especially during boomtimes in superhero publishing. But that leads to a terrible dilution of what made those core concepts great in the first place, and that's a big part of what *Planetary*'s about. Showing you why millions of people were interested in that stuff in the first place... and what's been lost.

-Warren Ellis.⁶⁴

The most conventionally generic of the three texts of this chapter, *Planetary* is a 27-issue series that ran (on an irregular schedule) from 1998 to 2009, describing a war for the future of the earth between the titular Planetary organization, the protagonists, and the Four Voyagers, villainous replicas of Marvel's Fantastic Four. *Planetary* takes its themes from the concerns of the revisionist movement, and discusses the problems of the genre and the medium in-story, giving shape in the story to the history and the concerns of the genre and medium. The Planetary organization is a team, oddly enough, of superhero archeologists, who attempt to uncover and understand the hidden secrets of a world in which comic book history is real. Their adversaries, the Four Voyagers, conversely work to keep that history hidden from the public. They are revisionists in a literal sense, rewriting history for their own purposes and to the detriment of the public.

Planetary is reminiscent of *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* in that it posits a

63 Riley, Brendan. "Warren Ellis Is the Future of Superhero Comics: How to Write Superhero Stories That Aren't Aren't Superhero Stories." L2156.

64 Quoted in Allred, William James. *Sublime Beauty and Horrible Fucking Things: The Finer Worlds of Warren Ellis*, 69-70.

shared literary universe in which famous literary works are actually true, such that for instance Sherlock Holmes and Dracula can live together in London. Like *League*, *Planetary* focuses on popular literature in a way that retraces the lineage of comic books and superheroes back to the adventure literature of the Victorian age, as well as tying it to other contemporary adventure genres like Hong Kong action films and Japanese giant movie monsters. The Planetary team combines superheroics with archeology, as the team investigates the secret history of a world in which superheroes and other popular culture icons like Japanese giant movie monsters really exist.

Where does *Planetary* stand on the key conventions? As with the other texts discussed in this thesis, *Planetary* is a graphic novel in that it leaves the open-ended serial mode behind in order to tell a more cohesive and directed story. Oneiric time is not used in any meaningful way. But many of the key conventions and the story structures they lead to are consciously discussed. The MPI conventions are relaxed, in accordance with the typical postmodern genre conventions: the Planetary team members go by their real names, with the exception of the Drummer, who spent his childhood as a prisoner in a Voyager experiment and whose only name is the code name "little drummer boy". While he is the only one with a code name, he is also the one whose outfit least resembles a conventional superhero costume or uniform. While Snow and Chase wear white suits, and Jakita Wagner wears a black bodysuit, the Drummer typically wears a casual outfit of jeans, shirt and jacket.

Revisionism, as theme.

Planetary fits very well in the 1980s trend of darker, morally ambiguous antiheroes that was set by *Watchmen*. The heroes, while they do fight for humanity and against villains, are not kind or pleasant people, and do not behave in a particularly heroic fashion. Jakita Wagner, the principal combatant of the team, declares that she fights only because she gets bored easily rather than out of any allegiance to justice or goodness, and Elijah Snow is, as his name suggests, a cold and unaffectionate figure who once outright tortures an enemy for information. However, while *Planetary* follows in that trend, and while it is the most generically conventional of the texts by Ellis that are considered in this chapter, but it goes to great lengths to scrutinize and dissect those conventions and consciously comments upon them, and upon the history of the genre. Allred compares it to *Watchmen*:

Coincidentally, while both Moore and Ellis utilize the superhero sub-genre in their work, their objectives differ greatly. Each has a vastly different agenda guiding them

through their in-depth interrogations of the superhero genre, the results of which reveal almost diametrically opposed intentions. With *Watchmen*, Moore seeks only deconstruction and dissection of the genre. And this goal he pursues with a breathtaking skill and precision that leaves the concept of the superhero severely undermined. While with *Planetary*, Ellis seeks to build something new with the genre, something akin to a contemporary, more robust genre of superhuman fiction that encompasses not only the past in the form of the pulps and Victorian literature, but also the superheroes of yesterday, today, and beyond, as well.⁶⁵

While *Watchmen* asked what superheroes might be like if they existed in the real world of the Cold War, *Planetary* forgoes strict realism in order to introduce the larger field of adventure genres existing together. *Planetary* tells a story about the history of the superhero genre, and a struggle to widen the genre to bring back other adventure genres which the superhero previously deposed.

The villains of *Planetary* are the Four Voyagers, evil counterparts of the Fantastic Four, and their history within *Planetary* references not only the Fantastic Four's comic book stories but also their real-life publication history. Referencing the idea that the early US space program was created by captured Nazi rocket scientists, the Four Voyagers are supermen in the Nietzschean sense, humanity's overlords who withhold utopian technological advances and destroy countless lives in their pursuit of superpowers. In *Planetary*, the Four Voyagers first appeared in 1961, when they successfully and secretly landed on the moon. In real life, *The Fantastic Four* was first published in 1961. Like the Fantastic Four, the Four Voyagers passed through a strange phenomenon on their space voyage and gained superpowers as a result. The Voyagers are literal revisionists: much as the Fantastic Four's creation in 1961 was a key point of the Silver Age and the return of superheroes to dominance after the genre's post-WWII decline, in the pages of *Planetary* the Four Voyagers literally destroyed and suppressed the history of the superbeings that came before them.

The success of the *Fantastic Four* ultimately led to the eradication of nearly all other genres in favor of superheroes within the American market, essentially resulting in what Ellis and most critics would certainly call mediocrity. The loss of these other genres is particularly felt by Ellis and given voice by Snow, "The things these scum have cost us since 1961..." (Ellis and Cassaday *Absolute Planetary Book One* 144). In addition, and to a much lesser extent, Ellis makes the same point in the very first issue of the series as the pulp heroes, except for Doc Brass, are all killed by analogues of DC's Justice League of America upon the activation of snowflake. This parallels the historical battles between the different media and how the success of the comics medium led to the end of the pulps.⁶⁶

65 Allred, 24-25.

66 Ibid., 76.

It is this mediocrity that the Planetary team opposes, and their efforts to "keep the world strange" by uncovering the secret history leads them into conflict with the Voyagers.

Allred reads a larger purpose into this mingling of influences. Much as *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* traces the roots of the superhero back to Victorian pulp literature, *Planetary* follows parallel genres through the 20th century that are usually excluded from discussion of the superhero genre, arguing that they are all part of a larger, more versatile genre.

Planetary allows Ellis to borrow from many other genres to comment on various genre conventions, typically superhero genre conventions. This borrowing, such as when the Planetary Field Team visits an ersatz Godzilla's corpse, blurs the boundaries between genres, but not in the traditional postmodern sense. Ellis uses the various genres to show the reader that these other genres have always been a part of the whole that is superhuman fiction. His list of genres utilized is many and varied, but the following is a sampling of the genres touched upon in *Planetary*: Hong Kong cinema, mystery, horror, spy, magic, 50s monster cinema, pulp fiction of the early 20th Century, and the list goes on."⁶⁷

Allred is not the only critic to argue in this way. In Riley's article "Warren Ellis Is the Future of Superhero Comics: How to Write Superhero Stories That Aren't Superhero Stories", Riley writes that Ellis is using the conventions pioneered by Moore and Miller to expand the bounds of the superhero genre.

As the smoke from revisionist comics has cleared, the comic book industry seems to be making tentative inroads into the space opened up by the movement, namely the space to reconsider what the genre is and how it will function (as opposed to focusing on fulfilling the antithesis of the genre). Of course the old heroes march on, but alongside them new stories are emerging that challenge the traditional modes of the super-hero comic, that operate in conversation with the genre but push it in new directions (stories like *Powers*).⁶⁸

Riley notes that a key technique Ellis uses is to separate his stories from the overgrown continuity of the major superhero universes and the demands of serialization, even as his stories use those structures for narrative and thematic purposes. Riley touches upon the effect of publication format on genre when he says that superheroes are separated from the science fiction genre by the mythological aspect, which I argued in chapter 1 of this thesis is a function of the storytelling constraints of serialization.

Ellis' more contemporary work has begun occupying the space cleared by the revisionist comics of the late 1980s and 1990s. In particular, three of his works, *Transmetropolitan*, *Global Frequency*, and the *Apparat* comics singles push the boundaries of the superhero genre and suggest just how open comics can be.

67 Allred, 78-79,

68 Riley, L1927.

At the same time, Ellis' approach to writing comics pushes his stories away from the mythological limitations on the superhero genre by means of science fiction. Where many superhero writers are constrained by the mythological requirements of the serial narrative, the writer who approaches comics as science fiction can move in different directions. (...) In some ways, superhero comics become science fiction by default when their mythological elements are removed. Ellis makes the most of such expanded possibilities by side-stepping the continuity constraints in favor of original works⁶⁹. *Planetary* plays on revisionist structures, and takes its themes from serial constructs like retconning and continuity, even as the series avoids that publication format. The Four Voyagers suppress facts in order to control the narrative. Elijah Snow saves and preserves facts in order to free the truth. Snow has himself been literally retconned by the Four, his memory partially erased and his character rewritten before the series even begins. Thus, in the first issue, Snow is recruited by Jakita Wagner as a new agent of Planetary, but later in the series the mechanisms of retconning are deliberately invoked to declare that Snow was really the leader of the organization all along. Those responsible for this kind of retconning are the villains, who attempt to reduce and streamline the chaotic, organic history of the world that Planetary wishes to preserve.

The series finale does not center around the final confrontation with the Voyagers. Although structured as a conventional superhero narrative in which the Planetary team must overcome a challenge in order to save a life, the finale takes place only after the central conflict of the series appears to have been resolved. Yet, the conflict in the final issue fits within the overall theme of the series and within the ongoing debate about the genre and revisionism. In the issue, the Planetary team attempt to save Ambrose Chase, a former Planetary agent who was believed killed by the Voyagers years previously. Chase could rewrite the laws of physics at will, and when he was about to die after being shot, he froze himself in time, seemingly disappearing from the scene. Years later, the team return to the site with a time machine, intending to release him from stasis with an emergency medical team standing by to treat his wounds. However, the procedure for bringing him back will open the door to time travel, which here means that all future events will preemptively become past, ending free will and essentially locking the universe in a predetermined course. This is directly contradictory to Planetary's mission statement, to "keep the world strange". It is also contradictory to the open-ended nature of serial entertainment, on which the superhero genre's life depends. The question becomes not just whether the team can save Ambrose, but whether they can do so without condemning the world to something altogether less interesting. It is, in

69 Riley, L2017.

story structure form, the dilemma of the savior/ruler/destroyer: can Planetary and Elijah Snow both make the world a better place and still leave the world to choose its own course?

As Ellis treats the story of the comic and the history of the comic book industry in parallel, he also consistently uses the comic to engage in social commentary of the contemporary USA, turning the uniquely American genre against itself to analyze the behavior of the political superpower. In this way, the techniques and structures of generic writing are turned to larger literary purposes, used to comment upon the history of the genre and the society in which it exists. This anti-authoritarianism is a recurring theme in Ellis's work, as we will see again in the discussions of *Global Frequency* and *Transmetropolitan*.

Super-Science.

A particular convention of the genre very neatly serves to distance the superheroes from the society they are supposed to protect, that of 'super science'. Commonly, heroes without outright supernatural powers (and often also those with them) possess technology far more advanced than is available to society at large, technology that for some reason never spreads to the general public. In *Planetary*, as we have seen, the Four Voyagers are an example of the foremost scientists and inventors blocking, rather than furthering, progress across society. As they suppress the history representing other comic book adventure genres than the superhero, so too do they carefully control which technologies are released to the public, and restrict what they want to keep for themselves.

It is also worth noting that in *Planetary*, one of non-superpowered humanity's greatest achievements, the real moon landing of 1969, is reduced to a decoy while real technological advances are kept hidden from the public by the Voyagers. The Voyagers are embodiments of the military-industrial complex and the US government at its worst, as an entity concerned above all else with controlling and dominating the populace at the expense of all humanity. In a fashion similar to the ruler/savior/destroyer problem, the existence of superheroes trivializes the achievements of mere mortals, reducing them to pawns and cannon fodder in the schemes of supermen. In this way, the common genre convention where the heroes possess superior technology that could realistically do great good in the world, but which are instead only used by the hero, is deconstructed until the heroes turn into villains.

Ellis uses (The Four Voyagers) to comment on the science and technology inherent in most superhero stories. Typically, this advanced technology and scientific know-how never benefit anyone but the superheroes who possess it. The knowledge stays hidden

and closely guarded by the superheroes and supervillains and never seems to make a difference in the world. One would expect the villains to hoard technology and show no interest in making the world a better place, but Ellis makes the point that we expect better of our superheroes.⁷⁰

As a piece of social commentary, this raises questions of how technology is distributed unequally in the real world, and how economic forces keep technology unavailable to the people who need it the most. It is also of course a comment on one of the problems of the genre, that the existence of superhumans, and in particular superpowered scientific geniuses like the Fantastic Four's Reed Richards, should by rights lead to explosive scientific and technological progress across society and the world. That this has never happened, the text suggests, means that the heroes are not so heroic after all, and are for whatever reason not releasing the advances they own to the benefit of humanity at large. Dr. Dowling, the Four Voyagers equivalent to Reed Richards, says that humanity is unworthy of his gifts and would only waste them if he gave them. His disregard for humanity goes so far that, upon discovering the existence of a vast number of alternate universe earths, Dowling offers his own earth as a sacrifice to learn the secrets of a dystopian but technologically advanced earth instead, saying that the lives lost are trivial in the scale of a superhero multiverse.⁷¹

The Four Voyagers are representatives of American might in and after the Cold War. Since they had, in the form of the Soviet Union, an extra-social threat to oppose, they could have avoided Coogan's ruler/savior/destroyer problem, but they did not. Ellis rejects Superman's solution to the problem, that of finding some force outside of society to oppose. Instead, in the tradition of dystopian science fiction, the situation is reversed. The Voyagers are not made to serve society by fighting against a common enemy. Instead, the common enemy is maintained so that society will continue to submit to the Voyagers' authority for their protection. Ellis comments on the genre's traditional undercurrent of anti-democratic fantasy, even as he attempts to use it to engage in more socialist social commentary on US history.

We can compare the state of super science with the film *The Incredibles* (which is itself in many ways a more family-friendly film version of *Watchmen*). *The Incredibles* villain Syndrome was an old fan of the hero Mister Incredible, but was rejected as a sidekick. Lacking superpowers himself, Syndrome dedicated his life to creating equivalent powers through science and technology. Mainly these take the form of advanced weapons, but Syndrome states that he will make his technology available to everyone. Contrary to type,

70 Allred, 75.

71 Ellis, Warren: *Planetary vol 4: Spacetime Archeology*, issue #25, issue #26.

however, this is portrayed as villainous, as an attack on the special quality of those born with superpowers, and Syndrome states with malicious glee that "once everyone is super, no-one is."⁷²

In this way, the Nietzschean undertones of the superman are brought back into the story, and the American Way of capitalism and individual enterprise are held up as enemies of humanity: if the heroes were to actually gift their powers to mankind, that would be socialism, and contrary to the American Way the superheroes were originally supposed to defend. In *Planetary's* finale, that is exactly what happens: with the Voyagers' defeat, all their hidden wealth, secrets, and technology are found by Planetary, which immediately begins releasing utopian technology to the public, for free. It is mentioned in passing that some of these utopian technologies are facing legal challenges, the implication being that profit-driven companies are suing to prevent the release of technologies that would put them out of business.⁷³

Global Frequency: A different kind of super-team.

In light of the shifting ground under the superhero narrative, *Global Frequency* might very well function as Ellis' answer to the superhero team comic. We might even suggest it as the bastard child of *Planetary* and *The Authority*, the former having returned from its hiatus and begun publication during *Global Frequency's* run. If *Planetary* is, as Klock argues, the comic that cleans out the attic of the superhero genre, *Global Frequency* might be the new tenant.⁷⁴

The next series I will discuss is *Global Frequency*, a 12-issue miniseries which ran from 2002 to 2004. Like the other series, *Global Frequency* stakes out a position in the ambiguous borderlands of genre, where it is at first glance unclear whether it should be included at all. However, a closer examination reveals that the series connects with and develops from many of the same genre traits and attempts to apply them to create superhero stories without actual superhumans.

Global Frequency is a 12-issue series about superheroics by crowdsourcing. Rather than one hero with superpowers, the Global Frequency Rescue Organization is a global network of ordinary people with specialized but mundane skills, who are called up by the GF

72 *The Incredibles*, Brad Bird. Pixar, Disney, 2004. DVD.

73 Ellis, Warren. *Planetary vol 4: Spacetime Archeology*, issue #27.

74 Riley, L2072.

central communications hub when a disaster requiring their particular skill set is about to strike in their home area. In this way, GF is able to respond to supervillain-scale terrors worldwide on very short notice, mimicking the function of superheroes without any special powers.

In *Global Frequency*, Ellis also experiments with the superhero genre as a tool of social commentary, replacing the usual array of stock supervillains with the antagonists of the social revolutionary, and in so doing attempts to break free of the trope that the superhero genre is inherently a conservative construct, with varied results.

Superhero genre conventions and publication format.

We will begin by quickly running through the conventions. Like the rest of the series discussed by this thesis, *GF* is a limited series that is not made to be another never-ending franchise. *GF* was quite brief at only twelve issues and highly experimental. As such, the more elaborate constructs of long-running series, such as a detailed and convoluted continuity and all that results from that, do not appear. Oneiric time is invoked, however, in the series highly episodic format.

The issues are all independent of one another, each having a new set of main characters as local agents are recruited from wherever in the world the current issue is located. The situation to be resolved in each issue is also independent, and there are no recurring individual enemies that the Global Frequency organization deals with repeatedly. As a result, as with Oneiric time, each issue begins in a vacuum in which the events of past issues are unimportant. In fact, even the notion of a central character is left behind: each issue stars a new set of agents. The only recurring characters in the series are two organizers and administrators: Miranda Zero, the director of the organization who briefs agents and occasionally appears on site, and Aleph, who oversees the IT hub that keeps agents informed and in communication with one another.

While *Planetary* deals with the past history of the genre, and roots its central conflict in a Cold War setting, *Global Frequency* takes place entirely in an Oneiric Now, in which the past is unimportant. The entire series features exactly one flashback, which shows Zero recruiting Aleph to the organization. Otherwise, each issue is placed entirely in the present and on the scene of the current event. Everything outside of the *here and now* is not included. It is appropriate, then, that the series is also culturally in the present-day. The villains and

heroes alike have no histories to speak of, no experiences from recent history guiding their worldviews. Only the events themselves are important.

As with many other post-dark age superhero series, *Global Frequency* leaves the superficial markers of superheroics behind. Costumes and chevrons are gone, replaced by the corporate logo of the Global Frequency organization on the dedicated cellphones carried by each agent. Superpowers themselves are not in play, as each agent is an ordinary human with ordinary human skills. Code names are seemingly reserved for the two recurring characters, Zero and Aleph, who are not ordinary agents and do not normally go on missions. Upon closer inspection, however, all the central conventions remain in effect in more subtle ways.

Most plainly, Global Frequency does have a prototypical superhero mission of protecting the world from threats of the scale commonly faced by more conventional superheroes. Global Frequency confronts an alien invasion, a deranged cyborg killer, and a satellite doomsday weapon among other things.

Global Frequency does have a secret identity angle of a sort. In addition to the already mentioned secret identity of the organization's director and central overseer, each individual agent functions as a sleeper cell, leading an ordinary life until they receive the call to action. In issue 4, one of the agents is an Australian policeman who is interrupted on his day job in order to deal with a hostage situation, and his supervisor yells at him for leaving his job as he runs to the scene of the issue's situation. Issue #8, in which Zero is abducted and interrogated, likewise makes it clear that the organization's membership is a closely guarded secret.

The most interesting convention is what the series does with superpowers. As stated earlier, the series is entirely without supernatural, or even preternatural abilities. With the exception of certain action sequences that could have come straight from a typical summer blockbuster action movie, with one agent effortlessly gunning down dozens of terrorists without a scratch, the agents generally have only mundane skills such as computer programming, psychology or Parkour. The "super" element is synthesized by modern communications technology. As Riley says, "One of the more important changes occurring in the shift to the 1001 members of the Global Frequency is the integration of the digital mindset into the superhero comic." (Riley, L2080) The GF-branded cellphones carried by all GF agents invokes the superhero chevron in a more realistic format. While the large non-touchscreen cellphones of the early 2000s look hopelessly antiquated today, the idea remains entirely current. The GF uses modern communications technology to empower ordinary

humans, connecting people who happen to have relevant skills to nearby superhero-scale disasters. The superpower of GF is that the organization has a global network of such agents, whose diverse but mundane skills are ready to be called into action at a moment's notice, so that each agent is handpicked for being in the right place with the right skills when disaster strikes. In this way, Ellis uses modern IT to disseminate superpowers among ordinary people, taking the ability and responsibility for saving the world out of the hands of authorities and in the hands of the general public. In one issue this point is made rather directly when a dark-skinned girl in London sees the Indian hero of the issue climbing the London Eye and remarks "Daddy look – Spiderman's a girl. And she's just like us."⁷⁵

If this seems a stretch, remember as always that many superheroes, Batman most prominently, have no superpowers per se but use technology to enhance their ordinary human capabilities. Global Frequency follows in that tradition.

Being only a relatively brief series at 12 issues, *Global Frequency* is entirely removed from and disposes of the various conventions of long-running and open-ended serials. There is no long-lived history within the series to adhere to, so all the usual paraphernalia of superhero universes like retroactive continuity, series reboots, multiple universes, crossovers of ambiguous historicity, are all avoided.

Authoritarian vs egalitarian structures.

Visually, the inspiration comes from the contemporary world, culturally and politically, and in particular from the Global War on Terror. There is no ideological menace, no mastermind antagonist, no grand scheme of evil that must be fought: only isolated incidents, springing up more or less by chance. However, there is one recurring theme in the series. As in *Planetary*, many of the situations faced by the Global Frequency are rooted in the actions of the US government itself. Ellis's anti-authoritarianism is expressed in *GF* by his pitting a team of decentralized, hyper-specialized agents against the monolithic, faceless organization of the military-industrial complex. This lumbering behemoth inadvertently causes many of the impending disasters the GF must confront by sheer inertia and neglect: Cold War era weapons systems decay until they malfunction, with potentially apocalyptic results. Weapons research goes bad, resulting in a mad superpowered cyborg threatening to run amok.

⁷⁵ Ellis, Warren. *Global Frequency*, issue #6.

The problems GF must face are often created by a sort of specialized neglect, by placing power in very specific hands which are then not subject to adequate oversight. This is the antithesis of GF's own method, which is to invite in expertise from all walks of life. Allred emphasized this point.

The concepts of hierarchy and control are apparently extremely important to Ellis as they recur again and again in not only his works that have been discussed here, but many others that have not been touched upon. Clearly, *Global Frequency* displays an overriding interest in these themes as the narrative centers around the Global Frequency team's encounter with the military industrial complex.

The military industrial complex exists as the epitome of the slow moving, bureaucratic, strictly hierarchical organization. The Global Frequency organization exists outside the formal military chain of command, and is thus able to maintain its fluid and flexible structure. This is, of course, the point that Ellis is making. Global Frequency is far superior from an organizational standpoint in that while there is indeed central control, agents are strongly encouraged to think for themselves and given the leeway to do so. In fact, this appears to be the most important reason just behind their subject areas of expertise as to why agents are chosen.⁷⁶

The Global Frequency organization is the answer of egalitarianism to centralized authority wrapped in the styles and narrative traditions of the superhero. The emphasis on the individual level is found even in the publication format of the series. Since each issue is entirely separate from the rest, with no ongoing storyline or recurring characters, no one issue is more central or important than any other, and they can be read in any order without breaking the story.

The superhero in the Global War on Terror.

While *Watchmen* placed the superhero in the global ideological struggles of the Cold War, in *Global Frequency* Ellis places real-life superheroes in the context of the Global War on Terror. But, rather than place the heroes under government control, as Moore did in *Watchmen*, Ellis instead asks his heroes to clean up the fallout from misguided government policies of the Military-Industrial Complex. Social commentary. The genre as inherently conservative. As with the other Ellis comics, *Global Frequency* is full of marxist critique of the military-industrial complex in general and American governmental power specifically. GF seems like it would be expected to be under some form of governmental authority, but is not. Several of the situations the GF must deal with are the results of military technology that should never have been created.

This technology, however, can be used for good or evil. The GF itself exists because of modern advances in information and communication technology. Although the cellphones

76 Allred, 110.

carried by GF agents, designed to look high-tech in 2002, end up looking antiquated today in the era of touchscreens and smartphones, the image of an organization that sees everything remains entirely contemporary. *Global Frequency* is a fantasy of sorts in that it portrays this Big Brother-style organization that does not hesitate to kill to achieve its goals as the good guy, the protector of humanity, and as egalitarian rather than hierarchical. The old anti-democratic fantasy problem of the superhero genre remains. But while the conventional superhero genre uses superficial visual elements to paint the heroes as heroes, *GF* strips the light and the costumes away, and introduces us instead to ordinary people as paramilitary force as heroes.

The series is placed solidly in the cultural context of the War on Terror. The 'ticking time-bomb scenario' which was held up to justify aggressive expansion of the acceptable government response to terrorism is ubiquitous in *Global Frequency*, and frequently requires the GF to kill innocent people simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Right now there is an ongoing debate about the US National Security Agency using comprehensive surveillance technology that allows them to monitor essentially the entire Internet at once. Invariably, the government claims that such measures are necessary to protect people from terrorists, even as the NSA's track record is lackluster at best. The superhero genre in general feeds into these trends in alarming ways, with its presentation of trusted authority figures who must be permitted to step beyond the bounds of law in order to protect the innocent from evil forces. While the evil forces of comic books rarely bear much similarity to real-world criminals, the law-breaking of authority figures has plentiful real-world parallels. Even while *Global Frequency* places the duties of protecting the world in the hands of fairly ordinary people, and while the menaces that the world must be protected from are often the results of government overreach and inhumanity, the underlying dynamic remains: a trusted authority with vigilante powers beyond the bounds of ordinary law is needed to save the innocent from threats ordinary society cannot deal with.

What is perhaps missing from *Global Frequency* is a self-critique and introspection that its structure would seem to invite. A few issues introduce agents who are unhappy with GF's mission, or with their place within it. Yet, nobody ever questions where GF's authority comes from, or whether anyone should have it: after all, when you're faced with potentially world-ending scenarios regularly, the necessity of having someone to deal with it is not really a question.

Global Frequency avoids the ruler/savior/destroyer conundrum by dispersing power into individual human components, but it is left unclear why GF doesn't suffer from the kind of 'mission creep' that affects superheroes and real-world entities like the NSA in the War on Terror. Artificial constraints like the GF's oft-stated precise membership of 1001 agents worldwide might prevent the organization from expanding limitlessly, but such a sharp limitation also makes it implausible that the organization is always in a position to respond so effectively to dangers in any place at a moment's notice. Realistically, the organization would always have an incentive to expand to more effectively respond to any threat, and the threshold of what constitutes a threat requiring their attention would drop as their capacity increases, until the dilemma becomes active. At only 12 issues, *Global Frequency* is too limited in scale to adequately address the issue, and we are left with something that struggles to escape the simplistic mode of escapist fantasy into the more respectable mode of social criticism Ellis wants to voice. *Global Frequency* cannot escape the critique that the genre is inherently conservative, as the heroes invariably find themselves at the service of the status quo, even as the status quo is presented as the source of many of their problems.

The final issue perhaps comes the closest to directly addressing the topic. In it, it becomes apparent that the US government is sitting on a plan, long-dormant and never intended to be activated but still functional and ready to go, a plan for "reducing the human race to a manageable population"⁷⁷ by dropping massive objects from orbit onto major population centers with tremendous force. One of these satellites has gone haywire and is about to drop its payload on Chicago, unless GF can somehow stop it. While they work to stop the release, Miranda Zero argues with Aleph about whether or not to inform the public about what is happening and to try to evacuate the city. Zero says it must be kept secret to prevent global panic, even if that means Chicago will be completely unprepared when the object drops on the city. Aleph responds that perhaps a global panic will dissuade the authorities from creating more weapons of global destruction in the first place.⁷⁸ By keeping the plans secret, GF is directly aiding and supporting the military-industrial complex that the text wants to criticize, and adopting the attitude common to authority, that power and knowledge must remain with them lest the public revolt and destroy society. It is the ultimate anti-revolutionary statement.

77 Ellis, Warren. *Global Frequency*, issue #12.

78 Ibid.

After all is said and done, the arguments against the genre remain: that it is a genre predisposed to hegemony, in which an authority must be given undemocratic, extra-legal powers in order to protect society from outside threats. Since these threats do not, in fact, exist in real life, and since in the real life one sadly finds that authorities often stand in the way of progress that threatens it, it is easy to reach the conclusion that the genre at best cannot sensibly comment on reality, at least not without maiming itself. Even when the heroes are anti-authoritarian, the underlying dynamic remains.

Transmetropolitan: Journalism as superpower.

Transmetropolitan is Ellis's most successful, and critically acclaimed work. Running from 1997 to 2002, *Transmetropolitan* tells the story of Spider Jerusalem, a journalist in the style of Hunter S. Thompson, as he struggles to bring truth and justice to America through his writing, and to bring down a corrupt government.

The series is set in a cyberpunk future whose exact date is ambiguous, and relies heavily on science fiction tropes. Ellis uses the preternatural technologies of science fiction along with the visual language of superhero comics to tell a story that functions like a superhero story while superficially being something else entirely. Like the other series discussed in this chapter, *Transmetropolitan* heavily dabbles in social commentary, but to a far greater extent. The entire storyline of *Transmetropolitan* is built around Spider's battle against the US government itself, with two successive Presidents as the primary antagonists. As with *Global Frequency*, Ellis attempts to create an anti-authoritarian superhero figure, in defiance of the recurring dynamic that stations the hero always as the defender of the status quo from outside enemies.

Serialization and generic conventions in *Transmetropolitan*.

At 60 issues over five years, *Transmetropolitan* had a respectable run as a serialized comic, but in spite of a number of stand-alone issues, mostly concentrated early in the series, it is a graphic novel with an overarching story that was planned out from the beginning, and so avoids the characteristics of long-running serials except when it uses them intentionally for effect, as Alan Moore did in his ABC comics.

Although it was published by two successive imprints of DC Comics, *Transmetropolitan* is a cohesive whole, self-contained, and does not take place in or cross

over with the larger DC Comics universe. Yet, certain key conventions still find their way in. Oneiric time is intentionally invoked in a way that fits with the social commentary theme of the series as a whole. “The City” goes to great lengths to not learn from the past, to the point where the entire public lives in an Oneiric “now” in which the past is unimportant and historical events are remembered only vaguely. Exact dates are eschewed, and past events are referred to as having occurred “so-and-so years ago.” Memorials to past incidents are equipped with digital clocks that tick up one every year that goes by. Another effect of this is that it allows Ellis to go without ever saying exactly when *Transmetropolitan* takes place, giving it that timeless, mythic quality of serials without actually being one.

As with the other series, the most interesting conventions for analyzing *Transmetropolitan* are still Coogan's three primary superhero conventions, Mission, Powers, and Identity.

To begin with the most problematic of the three, Spider Jerusalem has no secret identity, no code name, and no hero costume. He is, quite clearly, no superhero per se. But we have already established and observed that the identity convention has gotten steadily less important over the history of the genre, and that it began to be dated and old-fashioned at least as early as the Silver Age. We have seen that the Fantastic Four were originally created without secret identities at all, but kept the trappings of the convention because the readers expected it. Today, superhero costumes are an inherently nostalgic, retrospective image. Film adaptations of established superheroes tend to either leave the costumes out entirely, or else alter them beyond recognition, or keep them but emphasize that the hero's powers are contained within the costume in order to justify its presence.

As an example, take the 2012 film *The Avengers*. The titular hero team consists of six Marvel heroes: Captain America, Iron Man, the Hulk, Thor, Hawkeye, and Black Widow. Hawkeye and Black Widow have left both their costumes and code names behind in making the transition to film. Captain America's costume is invoked specifically for its nostalgic, old-fashioned quality. The Hulk never had a costume in the first place, only his own physical appearance. Only two of the six, Iron Man and Thor, unironically retain their traditional costumes, and those are justified by Iron Man's powers being part of the technology of his armor, and Thor being a visitor from another world where his outfit is common fashion. Warren Ellis's other, more explicitly generic superhero series also have a laid-back attitude to the costume convention. The *Planetary* field team wear more or less ordinary clothing. *The*

Authority has a mix of traditional costumes, alien bodies, and fairly ordinary clothing. Those heroes with the most traditional costumes, Apollo and the Midnighter, are based on Superman and Batman respectively, and their appearances reflect that, making their costumes a matter of retrospection and callback rather than the continuing validity of the convention.⁷⁹

To return to *Transmetropolitan*, Spider Jerusalem's appearance is as intentionally designed as any other comic book protagonist, and his distinguishing characteristics, the black suit, tattoos, and unique sunglasses, is really not much further removed from the genre than Ellis's other work. As such, the fact that Spider has no traditional secret identity does not pose so much of a problem to including the text in the superhero genre.

Spider does, however, have a very clear-cut superheroic mission. The City, Spider's hunting grounds, is beset by villainous forces that threaten the lives and safety of its inhabitants. While Spider fits well within the 1980s antihero mold, being a misanthropic savage at the best of times, and being prone to outbursts of semi-random violence, he is unable to escape his journalistic duty to fight against injustice and corruption, and to expose the truth even when it results in well-connected and powerful forces trying to kill him.

Specifically, Spider struggles to bring down two US Presidents. In another nod to comic book convention, the two of them are given nicknames reminiscent of classical supervillains: the first of the two is known as "the Beast" after Spider Jerusalem described him as such in a newspaper column, and the second, who looks like the Joker as a politician, is called "the Smiler". Both are guilty of various abuses of power, and passively or actively contribute to the malaise and deprivations of life in the City, and Spider dedicates his career to bringing them both to justice.

As for the third key convention, superpowers, at a glance it appears that Spider has none. He uses advanced technology to his advantage, like many superheroes who are only ordinary humans beneath their costumes, but Spider's advanced technology is commonly available in the futuristic cyberpunk society he lives in, and as such is relatively speaking not 'super'. However, he does have a special power: journalism.

Certainly, journalism by itself is not supernatural or otherwise inexplicable. Yet, neither is 'strength', or 'resilience', or any other, more common superhero attributes. Spider Jerusalem's journalism nonetheless functions as a superpower, however. As in a conventional superhero comic, ordinary law enforcement is powerless to stop the villain, in this case

⁷⁹ *The Avengers*, Joss Whedon. Marvel, Touchstone 2012. Blu-Ray.

because the villain is the head of the government and controls the police himself. Thus the task is left to Spider, who, like a conventional superhero, is the only one who can stand between society and the force that menaces it. His writing abilities allow Spider to take on foes far beyond the power of ordinary people. The key quality of Spider's journalism is that it is irreplaceable. There are other journalists, but only Spider Jerusalem has the power to stop the Smiler. Spider, then, is a kind of super-journalist, whose journalistic abilities are uniquely powerful and able to transcend the limitations of ordinary journalism.

To go by Coogan's key conventions, we quickly see that Spider fits two of the three very well. He has a mission: to battle injustice and oppression, to protect the poor and weak from the rich and powerful. He has a special power: his skill as a journalist and writer, which he uses as a weapon to expose corruption and crimes by the powerful. Admittedly it is not a superpower in the conventional sense of being overtly beyond the capabilities of normal humans, but it does function as one. Of the three key conventions, the only one that is missing is the secret identity, which is the least important of the three, and which has been fading in importance for some time.

Social Commentary in *Transmetropolitan*.

Spider Jerusalem, as stated, draws much inspiration from real-life journalist Hunter S. Thompson, both in appearance, behavior, and writing style. So it comes as no surprise that *Transmetropolitan* is steeped in the kind of social commentary Thompson's work was known for. Ellis combines this with the genre conventions of action and adventure comics, dominated by the superhero genre.

Transmetropolitan fits very much in the tradition of dystopian science fiction, and the City is presented as a chaotic madhouse from which Spider is desperate to escape, even as he finds the life of the City irresistible. What Neil Gaiman called the "if this goes on"⁸⁰ trope of science fiction is in fully effect. Technological advancement and modern capitalist trends have continued to the point of surreal absurdity: cyborgs, human-animal hybrids, and space aliens walk the streets, and advertising for anything up to and including deadly diseases is ubiquitous. Ellis and Allred stress that the City isn't a pure dystopia, since technology has cured many of the problems humanity has today:

Ellis takes special care to note that the City is not a utopia. However, he also takes issue with those trying to label the City a dystopia,

80 Darius, Julian. "58 Varieties: *Watchmen* and Revisionism", L1785

"I really don't see the City of Transmet as dystopian. It's just like where we live now. There are horrible fucking things and there are things of sublime beauty, and they all live in the same place.(Oliveri)"

Apparently, the City is neither utopian nor dystopian, and yet possesses characteristics of both."⁸¹

But, in capitalist-dystopian fashion, these cures are only available to the well-off, while the poor are worse off than ever. The cures themselves have, in turn, led to ennui and complacency, and the development of new alternate lifestyles and marketing opportunities. Flesh-eating diseases are sold in soda form, as “Ebola Cola”, while genetic treatment allows humans to transform into animals for vacations, or the gray-skinned aliens of Roswell conspiracy fame.

Transmetropolitan gives us another take on the super-science problem discussed above. In *Transmetropolitan*, the super-technology has indeed been made available to the public, and solved many of the world’s problems. But as befits a satire, *Transmetropolitan* shows us that humans remain human, and immediately set out to make new problems to replace the old, ensuring that the poor remain poor and the rich remain rich. "Makers" are machines that transform matter to create anything you ask from them, an invention that one would think should make poverty and deprivation a thing of the past. Inequality is maintained, however, as fuel for the machine is prohibitively expensive. As a result, only the rich get to enjoy the benefits of the machine freely, while the middle class fuel theirs by scavenging garbage from the poor, who in turn find themselves robbed of everything. Clean streets, consequently, is a symbol of class inequality and economic repression rather than of a civilized society.

As we would also expect from a piece of social commentary, the active force for evil in *Transmetropolitan* is not, as per the common convention of superhero comics, an extra-social menace, but is instead a corruption at the heart of society itself, namely US national politics. Politics in the City is dominated by caricatures of US politicians who are constantly mired in the usual sex scandals and corruption, and occasionally step over into outright supervillainy. In the fashion of political satire, it turns out that the only way to find a politician without a scandalous past is to grow one in a cloning farm.

Filling the role of supervillains are two successive US Presidents, the Beast and the Smiler. The Beast, the incumbent at the beginning of the series, has presided over the US as a careless, callous leech, who uses his power only to provide material pleasures for himself and

81 Allred, 88.

does not care what happens to the country, and who describes his duties by saying, "Look, my job isn't to make everything beautiful. My job isn't to make living life a good time. My job is to keep the majority of people in this country alive. That's it. If fifty-one percent eat a meal tomorrow and forty-nine percent don't, I've done my job."⁸² Though repulsive and uninterested in public service, the Beast turns out to be better than his successor the Smiler, who is revealed to be outright insane and malevolent, actively interested in destroying society and willing to kill anyone who annoys him.

The contrast of words and images.

A central theme of *Transmetropolitan* is, of course, the role of journalism and media, and the ways in which modern media fails to serve the public as it should. The story of *Transmetropolitan*, which uses the tropes of superheroes to tell a story about a journalist trying to bring down a corrupt president, immediately brings to mind Watergate and Richard Nixon, but Ellis emphasizes that Spider is almost alone in his mission, while the sprawling media landscape around him fails to educate the public. Ellis draws inspiration from this seminal moment in modern American history, and mixes it with devices drawn from superhero comic books to tell a story about the importance of an independent and adversarial press.

Christiansen's article is about the conflict between words and images, and argues that in *Transmetropolitan*, words represent truth and images represent falsehood. Spider's weapon of choice is words: he is a writer, not a filmmaker, artist, or even comics creator, and the paper he writes for is called "The Word". By contrast, the forces of corruption and vapidly communicate predominantly by images, as with the ubiquitous but utterly uninformative campaign posters used throughout the election story arc, and the useless news and entertainment media of television.

The media landscape of the City is dense with electronic billboards and wandering radio reporters. In tune with the capitalist sensibilities of the City, particular emphasis is put on advertising, and which is carried out most invasively by nanomachines that hijack Spider's dreams to display ads in his mind while he sleeps.

The dream advertising sequence comes at the end of issue #5, "What Spider Watches

82 Ellis, Warren. *Transmetropolitan: The New Scum*, issue #21.

on TV"⁸³, in which Spider immerses himself in the City's media landscape by watching television all day and barely stirring from his chair. Spider attempts to counteract the harmful effects of the talkshows he watches by calling in and fact-checking them live, but is defeated when his actions lead to him being coopted and becoming just another part of the media landscape he deplors. At the end of the day, Spider's assistant returns home to find Spider lying prostrate before the television in a posture of defeated submission.

In this issue, Spider finds that he himself, rather than the substance of his criticism, becomes the story. This brings to mind how Superman's initial political activism during the Great Depression was toned down to make him a universally acceptable American symbol, even at the cost of having him no longer fighting for real social improvement. One of the ways the vapid hegemony of the City fights back against Spider is by turning him into entertainment, coopting him (in media predominantly oriented around images, not words) as a cartoon, or the subject of a feel-good television movie, and even in pornographic film.

Christiansen notes the irony that this conflict between words and images is contained in a comic book⁸⁴, a medium defined by the combination of words and images in narrative harmony, with images being the more important component. As McCloud notes in his definition of comics, images are necessary for a text to be a comic, but words are not.⁸⁵ Even though Spider works with words, *Transmetropolitan* is a work of images, and the visuals of the City convey far more to the reader about the world of *Transmetropolitan* than Spider's written work alone.

Inherently Conservative?

Does Ellis succeed in making *Transmetropolitan* what *Planetary* and *Global Frequency* attempt, a superhero text that defeats the conservative structure inherent to the genre, whereby the hero invariably fights to defend the status quo from aggressors outside society?

The most obvious point against *Transmetropolitan* being inherently conservative is simply that the enemy is none other than the head of the US government itself, and the preserver of the status quo. Furthermore, the fact is that Spider's weapon of choice is not the

83 Ellis, Warren. *Transmetropolitan: Back on the Streets*, issue #5.

84 Christiansen, Steen: "The Truth of the Word, the Falsity of the Image: *Transmetropolitan's* Critique of the Society of the Spectacle." 156-157.

85 McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 8.

use of force but the freedom of the press. We see that Spider Jerusalem does not defeat his major enemies through the use of force but instead turns the public against his enemies through revealing the truth, and in this way *Transmetropolitan* tries to avoid the historical criticism that the superhero genre is antidemocratic, a fascist strongman fantasy.

In spite of this, however, the text does not suggest that democracy is the solution. Rather, Spider's lament is that the public itself is unengaged with democracy, tolerate the dystopian social injustice around them without a thought, and are too happy to let authorities (including Spider himself) control them. Spider is, like a superhero, someone standing outside the normal political process to protect the public against threats ordinary legal processes cannot handle, and the electoral system of the US is presented not as a benefit to humanity, but as a tool for tyrants. Attempts to work within the electoral system for positive change are a complete failure. In fact there is only one important character, Rita Severn, who works in electoral politics at the time of the series and yet who is genuinely a good person with the public's best interests at heart, and she suffers a grim end for her idealism: she is murdered for the benefit of her corrupt boss, the Smiler, and her positive image is coopted to further his goals.

In short, *Transmetropolitan* comes closer than Ellis's other series to breaking out of the conservative-leaning structure, and remains within only in that interpretation of the genre which is most abstract and far-fetched, while the more immediate aspects of the text present a strongly anti-authoritarian protagonist and story.

Conclusion.

In this chapter I analyzed three of Ellis's texts in light of their position on the outskirts of the superhero genre, mixing influences from different genres and experimenting with bringing them together. Like Moore's ABC superheroes, these three Ellis titles, *Planetary*, *Global Frequency*, and *Transmetropolitan*, each approach the conventions of the superhero genre from different perspectives, but Ellis's works are more fringe than Moore's, and throw aside the most central distinguishing characteristics of the genre, making it complicated to declare for certain whether these should be called superhero narratives at all. This leaves us two options: accept a narrow, constricting understanding of the genre which declares that different artistic purposes are outside the genre's purview, or accept that the genre is actually much more open and versatile than it gets credit for. In addition, each of these titles use the

comic book form and superhero genre conventions to purposes of social commentary.

Ellis's work features recurring themes of anti-authoritarianism, an interesting choice considering that the superhero genre is stereotypically considered to lean in a conservative fashion whereby the hero serves the status quo. Each of the comics discussed in this chapter attempts to break free of that structure, and sets the heroes up in opposition to authority, even to the democratically elected US government. It is debatable whether or not Ellis fully succeeds at creating a superhero comic that entirely escapes the inherently conservative structure, however.

While the narrative may present authority figures as villains, it is not always clear that the heroes' victory over them will result in great change to how the world functions. In *Planetary*, the defeat of the Four Voyagers does lead to the dissemination of utopian technologies. In *Global Frequency*, however, it is uncertain that the GF can do anything more than keep society in its old state when disaster strikes, not improve it, and in *Transmetropolitan* no promise is made that the US government will become more noble and less corrupt just because the Smiler is removed from office.

Nevertheless, Ellis takes the extremely American and typically extremely patriotic superhero genre and turns it around to engage in biting criticism of American politics and culture. The protagonists of each of these series are deeply skeptical about authority, and each work, in different ways, to disseminate truth and power on a more democratic, egalitarian level. The villains, meanwhile, are bearers of authority, representatives of the status quo, and in a more conventional comic book might be expected to be objects of admiration and respect.

Planetary introduces its readers to superpowered archeology, and employs a superhero framework to tell a story about the consequences of who is permitted to write history, about American and superhero cultural imperialism, as well as the history of the comic book industry itself. The structures of comic book serialization and the genre conventions that sprung from them are invoked within the story as historical facts: as superhero history has been revised by publishers in the real world, so in *Planetary* superpowered entities have literally revised history to enforce a historical narrative that suits them, and to suppress facts and technologies they do not wish to be known. As superheroes came to dominate the action-adventure aspect of the comic book industry, pushing out other action-adventure genres, *Planetary* has villainous superheroes literally wiping out those parts of the larger fantastical fiction genre that do not fit within a narrow superhero genre. Throughout the series, Ellis uses

these comic book-specific topics to comment upon real-world history writing, and upon America's role as a military and cultural superpower.

Global Frequency discards superhero characters entirely, and in so doing presents a world much less superficially unrealistic. In their place, Ellis establishes the Global Frequency Rescue Organization, an organization which uses modern communications technology to bring together a loosely linked network of special agents worldwide. Each agent possesses skills which are unexceptional on their own, and far short of the spectacular superpowers we've grown accustomed to seeing in comics, but thanks to modern technology the organization can quickly and efficiently pick out agents with exactly the skills needed to confront supervillain-scale calamities worldwide. In this way, the work of the superhero is solved by crowdsourcing. As a result, superpowers and the authority that comes with them is rendered obsolete, and power to save the world is put firmly in the hands of ordinary human beings. *Global Frequency* also discards the continuity storyline structure in favor of an episodic special operations structure, resulting in something reminiscent of the stand-alone structure common to early comic books rather than the elaborate serial dramas the genre later adopted. Although there are a few recurring characters, each issue features new protagonists. As with the superpowers matter, the result is a story that is much more focused on the public level, rather than with private individual superheroes. *Global Frequency* is a superhero story with the super-element surgically cut out, leaving stories of ordinary humans struggling against terrible consequences brought about by technological advances wielded arrogantly and neglectfully by society's own authorities, all explored in the language of action-adventure and superhero comic books.

Finally, *Transmetropolitan* is the largest and most successful of the works under consideration in this chapter. As in the other titles, *Transmetropolitan* intentionally invokes and manipulates the conventions of the superhero genre for literary effect. The series tells the story of Spider Jerusalem, a gonzo journalist in a futuristic science fiction version of America, and uses the tropes of the superhero genre to tell a story about social decay, political corruption, and the journalistic profession. Spider Jerusalem himself mimicks the tropes of superhero presentation: he has a distinct costume with a recognizable icon in the form of his unique sunglasses, which immediately identifies him as the larger-than-life figure the City sees him as, special powers of writing for which he is famous as a warrior against injustice and corruption, and a prosocial mission to defeat a villain who is doing great harm to mankind

in the form of the President of the United States.

As in the other titles, *Transmetropolitan* looks at the technology of the superhero genre and how it is wielded. In line with the science fiction style of the series, Ellis both looks at how technology changes human society, and how it fails to change it. Unlike in *Planetary*, where the release of the Four Voyagers' hoarded technology promises to usher in a utopian age free of poverty and hardship, in *Transmetropolitan* technology fails to change human behavior, and economic inequality remains as widespread as ever in spite of it.

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Conclusion.

In chapter 1 we saw how the superhero genre emerged from the older adventure comics and pulp magazines and grew to dominate the American comic book industry. Although there was nothing about Superman that had never been seen in comics before, his popularity was such that he inspired droves of copycat characters, and spawned a new genre that gradually distinguished itself from the other action/adventure comics on the market.

We have also seen how historical events and the limitations of the serial comic book magazine format have shaped the development of the superhero genre, and that it is possible to trace specific genre conventions to the specific cultural and historical setting in which they arose.

The regular publication schedule and cheap printing methods of comic books favored a storytelling style that was simple and reliant upon formula in order to get issues out regularly. Bold lineart, simple color schemes, heroes with flat personalities and cackling, exaggerated supervillains all worked well within the limitations of the comic serial medium, but were also easily dismissed as low-brow and uninteresting. This remained the case for much of the genre's history. A regular publication schedule also led to devices like ongoing stories with constant use of cliffhangers, and as superhero universes grew in size the use of crossovers and connections between titles to get readers hooked and coming back each month to stories that would never really end.

Superman first appeared in 1938, at the height of the Great Depression, and in the first few years he was a social crusader, fighting against corrupt politicians and callous businessmen for worker's rights. These early elements of social awareness were scrubbed away over time, however, avoiding hints of the controversial in order to make Superman a universally beloved American symbol. Subsequently, during World War II Superman and other heroes stood for American unity against fascism.

After the war, with their greatest enemy defeated, superheroes faded in popularity and other, more prosaic genres took over. Cold War fears of subversive influences led to a new censorship regime, the Comics Code, which forced the comic book industry to adapt or die, and the result was a new style of superhero story which allowed the superhero genre to return to dominance in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The genre labored under the Comics Code, a set of rules that ensured that comics would remain family-friendly and devoid of controversial

content for the next few decades, further cementing the genre's reputation as childish and thoughtless entertainment.

This reputation remained unchallenged by the major publishers of the industry until the 1980s, when shifts in the comic book industry distribution structure had rendered the Comics Code sanctions toothless. A new wave of comic books with more literary sensibilities took the industry by storm. Titles like *Maus*, *Persepolis*, *Watchmen*, and *The Dark Knight Returns* seemed to usher in a new age in which comic books would be recognized as a literary artform on equal footing with novels or movies. While artistically masterful non-superhero comic books challenged the superhero genre's domination of the industry, genuinely intelligent and mature superhero comics remained few and far between.

It has now been three decades since the first wave of graphic novels showed the larger literary world that comic books had great potential as an artistic literary medium. This thesis looks at a selection of superhero texts that attempt to use the superhero genre and its distinguishing characteristics to greater literary purposes, to demonstrate that the superhero genre shares in that potential.

In chapter 2, "Alan Moore's ABC Universe and *Promethea*," we looked at Moore's recent contributions to the superhero genre in *Promethea* and *Tom Strong*, and in the America's Best Comics universe at large. The ABC Universe is a cohesive literary project by Moore that lays out multiple different approaches to adventure and superhero comics that operate semi-independently within a shared universe, occasionally interacting with one another. Taking inspiration from the Golden Age of comic books, the ABC universe is filled with callbacks and references to the story conventions of the 1930s through 1960s, and has an in-story history reaching back many centuries into the past. The titles of the ABC lineup are presented as though they had an actual publication history going back many decades.

Tom Strong plays the central conventions of the superhero genre completely straight, stripping away the moral ambiguity and 'dark' trends of superheroes after *Watchmen*. Tom Strong himself is modelled after Superman as the ultimate children's rolemodel, clean and morally unambiguous. At the same time, the less savory aspects of the genre are also included: the stoic, immovable Strong can easily be seen as a fascist figure, and his hometown as a triumph of authoritarian order over the messiness of civil life.

Throughout the series, the title models itself on tropes and genre conventions of the

Golden Age. Stories are presented as though they were reprints of older issues from past ages, and are filled with elements from those ages that are today considered beyond the pale, such as casual overt sexism and cigarette ads. By dragging out the less palatable aspects of the genre's history in this fashion, Moore challenges our perceptions of the functions of the genre.

Tom Strong is also a strong contrast to *Promethea*, which in many ways functions exactly the opposite. While *Tom Strong* uses an episodic format, *Promethea* has a cohesive ongoing storyline; while Tom Strong fights villains in a traditional superhero manner, *Promethea* leaves conventional villains to others and instead works to bring spiritual ascendance to humanity. Throughout the series, *Promethea* reinvents the old superhero genre tropes in fresh forms, to the point where the reader might even not notice that the same tropes, long since considered cliché, are being used.

Promethea at first presents itself as a straight-forward superhero narrative, in which the protagonist Sophie Bangs learns that she is the new incarnation of the immortal Promethea, and must learn to use her powers to defend herself and humanity from dark powers. This conventional setup is quickly revealed to be misleading, however. What had seemed to be villains are soon revealed to be indispensable cosmic forces that are merely fulfilling their required function without malice, throwing the good versus evil storytelling structure out the window. For a large portion of the series, *Promethea* travels into the spirit world, leaving the material world behind, and all the conventional superhero conflict with it. Moore instead uses the superhero characters and genre conventions, the comic book format, and the spectacle-filled visual language of superhero stories to explore philosophical ideas about religion, new age mysticism, gender and sexuality, and human morality. In this way, the superhero genre is treated merely as a vessel in which stories of any kind can be contained, defying the stereotypes of a genre mired in childish pursuits and unable to achieve broad literary value.

In chapter 3, "Social Commentary in the comics of Warren Ellis," I analyzed three of Ellis's texts in light of their position on the outskirts of the superhero genre. Like Moore's ABC superheroes, these three Ellis titles, *Planetary*, *Global Frequency*, and *Transmetropolitan*, each approach the conventions of the superhero genre from different perspectives, but while Moore's works are nostalgic in style and play upon instantly recognizable generic conventions, even as he uses those conventions in innovative ways,

Ellis's comics march boldly to the outskirts of the genre and leave behind the most recognizable characteristics of the genre in the pursuit of new ways of telling superhuman adventures. Furthermore, Ellis places a particular focus on the use of superheroes in social commentary. A very left-wing writer, Ellis takes advantage of the superhero's position as a uniquely American genre, turns it around and uses it to engage in biting criticism of American politics and culture. Each of these three titles feature characters and stories that are concerned with the abuse of authority, be it governmental authority, military technology, or superpowers, and the consequences of that abuse for the general population, and each of these titles use the conventions and characteristics of the superhero genre to inform and structure its satirical themes and social critiques.

What we see in the works of Moore and Ellis, and can see in other titles that could have been included in the thesis had circumstances been different, is that in the present day the superhero genre has indeed diversified and grown more versatile than it is commonly given credit for. We can see that the growth of graphic novels has indeed changed the face of the comic book industry, including the superhero genre.

Graphic novels are defined here as not only non-serial comic books but also limited serials which are not, like the big franchises, intended to carry on forever but which are written with a cohesive plan and an eventual endpoint. This allows writers to escape the constraints which have defined comic books for much of the industry's history, constraints which have conspired to create and enforce a stereotype of comic books as childish, shallow, and void of artistic merit, and has allowed them to create their work instead in more literary ways.

We can also see that, while the rise of graphic novels has allowed writers to escape the conventions of the genre if they so choose, writers like Moore and Ellis have opted instead for retrospection, to re-examine the conventions and use them to greater effect. They have done so in different ways. For example, in the very nostalgic *Tom Strong* Moore tries to uncover what made those resonate in the first place and reinvigorate them. In *Planetary*, Ellis uses the conventions as analogues and allegories for real-world history in the form of the Four Voyagers, who are both stand-ins for the superhero's dominance over the comic book industry, and representatives of American capitalism and the military-industrial complex. Even without abandoning the conventions outright, the genre is able to sustain a tremendous diversity of

styles and stories.

While superficially simplistic, the superhero genre has shown itself to be capable of adapting to survive changing times and unfriendly circumstances. This was true when the Comics Code devastated the crime and horror comics of the 1940s and 1950s, but allowed the superhero to rise victorious over its competitors, and it was true when graphic novels began to be recognized as a valid literary form in the 80s, a form in which critics said superheroes could not be included. Now several decades into the age of the graphic novel, the superhero genre has shown that it is capable of great versatility, and defies the stereotypes it has carried throughout its life.

Kristian Bjørkan.

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