MYTHOLOGICAL REFERENCES IN COMIC-BOOKS

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ABSTRACT

This paper falls into the line of other published studies which dealt with comic-books as a phenomenon of popular culture, focusing on the relation they entertain with myth and mythology. Sharing the same theoretical framework, founded on Asa Berger`s view of culture as an onion with successive layers covering a central mythical core, this article delves deeper into the presence of myth and mythical structures into the graphic medium comic-books provide. The purpose is to exemplify how this revisiting and reinterpretation of ancient and modern myths and disseminating them using contemporary technologies influence narrative strategies and favor their penetrating power into individual and collective conscience. Some mythical elements prove to be so enduring that they have gained global acknowledgement and have become integral and ineluctable parts of the human mind. In search of public relevance, comic-book creators use such well-known and established characters, events, places, images, symbols, and tropes, which help them convey stories, messages, and values to a wide audience. Comic-books are not existing in a vacuum and for the most part they share the narrative substance with other media (films, cartoons, radio programs, music, video games etc.), but they prove to be an ideal medium for mythical expression. This is emphatically confirmed by the fact that they have generated myths which have been absorbed by all other media and have obtained a certain mythical status themselves. By bringing into discussion illustrative examples and putting them in the larger cultural context, this paper identifies some of the most efficient mechanisms comic-books make use of the mythical elements present in various cultures and even globally.

Keywords: Comic-Books, Myth, Popular Culture, Media, Narration

INTRODUCTION: COMIC-BOOKS AS MODERN MYTHOLOGY

As an art form, comic-books have appeared by the second half of the 19th century, in an American context, although there are some authors who trace their "prehistory" much further back in time: the serial creations of artists such as Hogarth, or the output of other media, such as the Bayeux tapestry or Trajan's column, sometimes not shying away from considering the cave paintings as forms of proto-comic-books.[1] Moreover, another conceptual confusion became common place: to

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[1] An author who favorizes this approach is McCloud (1993), the one who offered the unmatched technical interpretation of the comic-book field up to now. A stance I favor belongs to Wright (2001), who argues that the definition of comic-books must also include their mode of distribution; therefore,

consider any form of storytelling which uses images as comic-books. For example, although animation functions through series of drawn images, it is a separate field, with its own inner mechanisms and dynamics, with its own semantics and ways of consumption. A cartoon which builds up the joke in two or more frames cannot be taken for a comic-book, just as a limerick cannot be taken for an epic poem. However, there are also authors who suggest regarding some texts as "written comics", referencing, for example, Céline's work.[2] Beyond the unusual perspectives and the interesting intellectual speculations, this lack of consistency proves that comic-books have not yet benefited from persistent academic attention and consideration, being disregarded as a minor form of artistic expression, and defined as a method rather than as a domain. But we may encounter rigorous analyses which prove that comic-books constitute a stand-alone artistic and semantic field, although they borrowed techniques and narrative content from other domains (also having transmitted, in their turn, techniques, codes and tropes into others).[3] We may even talk about a proper language pertaining to comic-books.[4] The importance of comic-books as an art form, as a communication medium, as a source of cultural models and patterns or, simply, as an industry, cannot be denied if we take into account their area of distribution, their penetrating power into individual and collective minds (common formulas and expressions), and the revenue they bring.[5]

There are many perspectives from which comic-books can be evaluated: historical, anthropological, social, economic, artistic etc. Although they are a relatively young form of artistic expression, the global production is so rich that one cannot issue the claim of a single totalizing, exhaustive and final interpretation. That is why it is necessary for studies from various disciplines, each with their own instruments and assets (but also with their own "blind spots"), to be integrated in the study of comic-books, a very complex artistic field. Their technical, historical, or economic implications can be investigated in separate studies, but in this paper, I am focusing on their narrative aspects, outlining the mythological vein which irrigates the whole field. I have already published an extensive study on the relation between myth and comic-books[6], in which I have placed, from a narrative point of view, the serial creations of comics on the canvas of mythology, following the interpretation key Arthur Asa Berger provided, to which I shall later return. In another paper I have offered a reply to some comments regarding the first one and I brought more arguments in favor of considering comic-books an ideal medium for disseminating

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comics being a field which was created and developed via newspapers, we cannot talk about it prior to their existence. For a complete history of the first period of comic-books, see the two volumes of Steranko (1970 and 1972). For an overview of the various approaches in defining and analyzing comics, see Teampău (2012).

[2] See, for example, Liéber (1984).

[3] See Blanchard (1969) and Boltanski (1975).

[4] See Gillon's arguments (1977).

[5] For more details, see Teampău (2012). Many expressions which are taken from American comic-books make sense only in English and cannot be translated: "my spider senses are tingling", "don't hulk up over it" etc.

[6] Teampău (2012).

classic or modern mythical loads, which I shall not reiterate here.[7] Some points I shall bring again into discussion, though, since they are relevant to this topic. In the following I shall present ways in which the epic mythic (and mythologizing!) substance is present in comic-books, backing the arguments with revealing images.

It also must be said that simply identifying characters, events or mythical narrative frames in comic-books does not provide a rigorous argumentation. The presence of Hercules, let us say, in a story does not automatically bestows it with mythical dimension. Beyond the narrative tropes which are used in the story, we need to investigate the inner dynamic of the comic-book field, focusing on how it is outlined, transmitted, perceived, and constructed as an imaginary and disciplinary domain. Comic-books are worth analyzing through mythological lenses, since they convey mythological themes and patterns, and also generate particles of meaning which sometimes coagulate into genuine imaginary spaces with structures, functioning and interdependence mechanisms, reflexes and usages which are taken as such into the consumer's (and not only) concepts, language and everyday gestures, or influence them via derived products, such as films, video games, music, cartoons, toys, clothing, groceries and so on. In other words, not everyone who consumes a chocolate wrapped in Superman's image or wears a T-Shirt with his image must keep up with all the mythos' subtleties or with its most recent inflexions, in order to get the references and placing them into the cultural landscape.

As I have already pointed out, there are a certain mechanisms myth imbues comic-book narrations and is, in its turn, processed and disseminated by this medium.[8] Mythological references in comic-books are to be encountered at the level of characters (after all, the most influential and durable creations in this field), but also at the level of events and narrative structures. These references may be explicit, when they involve characters or events which are already present in the known mythological lore, but also implicit, when they are indirect, veiled (for example, when certain characters borrow their abilities, looks or ways of acting from their mythological counterparts, or when events or sceneries have mythological correspondents). Of course, not only classical Antiquity provides such references, but they are abundant, and we may say that the overwhelming part of main American comic-book characters (and, by extension, of comic-books in general) were inspired by them. Superman's creators, Schuster and Siegel, confessed that they imagined him as a symbiosis between Hercules and Samson, to which they added their own cultural diet, comprised of bodybuilding magazines, western and science-fiction novels and stories; some scholars even identified in the construct of the most known super-hero the sexual frustrations of his creators, young Americans of Jewish origin, living in the context of the Great Depression suburbs.[9] By the way, Superman's creation and public appearance in comic-books may be considered to be the reason this medium gained such cultural, social and economic relevance, shortly becoming

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[7] Teampău (2015).

[8] Teampău (2015). In that paper I have argued for these points in detail, but they need to be mentioned here as a framework for the present topic.

[9] Shapiro (2006: 363-366).

one of the most profitable industries during the Second World War. Comic-books existed before Superman's first appearance and they surely exist in his absence, but once the super-hero type entered the scene, they became a privileged channel for disseminating stories tailored on mythological patterns. The public's appetite for such narrative schemes, which is confirmed by the impressive turnover editors have, is not just obvious, but a historical constant which grew in turbulent periods of crisis, conflict, and calamity. The psychological need for savior entities, albeit exclusively imaginary, is an anthropological permanence, certified by classical myths of origins, as well as modern myths which are manifest in politics, society, art and even science, paradoxically much less immune to myth's "invasion" than commonly believed.[10]

In addition to this original classical fund of mythological narrative structures, comic-books also borrow successful literary myths, taking advantage of their public relevance, by revisiting or by continuing the initial stories. Dracula's image, imposed in the global conscience by Bram Stoker's novel (which in its turn made use of a preexisting mythological folk and academic lore), got new features and perspectives in the comic-book medium, in connection with the representations conveyed in other media such as literature, film, cartoons, video games and so on, becoming a source of inspiration for further exploitations of this myth.[11] In the immense comic-book production we may find almost all of the literary myths which could be converted into a graphic medium, although not all reached a large area of dissemination or a relevant penetrating power in public conscience. Even though there are comic-books aimed at an adult public, which use intellectually demanding themes and pretentious techniques, it must be acknowledged that the field has been mainly adjusted to the level of a young audience, via clear messages, rather simple and unequivocal symbolism, easy storylines and, of course, a lot of action.

Also, in comic-books we often encounter the process of "mythologizing" historical and cultural events, periods, and personalities, although the process is not a feature of this medium exclusively. But here too we find (pseudo)hagiographies, romanticized biographies, or simply phantasmagories with elements taken from reality. Caesar, Napoleon, Churchill, but also Shakespeare, Mozart, Darwin, or James Dean become legendary characters in oversized, yet easily recognizable iconographies. Certain periods or historical events are exploited so much that they become imaginary constellations which open many other interpretative or speculative directions. The Second World War or the Vietnam War are perfect examples. The series dealing with them are so abundant, that every single soldier involved in such wars seems to have got a comic-book cameo. The mythical dimension of these conflicts is also granted by the fact that the graphic stories in which they are the subject, the background, or the pretext, have started being produced concurrently, the historical events having occurred simultaneously with and alongside the "mythologizing" process. As soon as 1940, Superman forcefully took Hitler and Stalin to the International Court of Justice in Geneva, and Captain America made his debut in the graphic super-heroic universe during 1941, by strongly punching Hitler

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[10] For a detailing of this idea, see, for example, Popper (1998).
[11] For a detailed discussion on the usage of vampiric imagery in comic-books, see Teampău (2011).

in the face (which was not just a figure of speech, but the channeling of the American public's sentiments and will).

Comic-books are also a source of various mythologies, some characters and layers of mythical nature having been firstly issued in this medium. This idea is perfectly supported if we take the super-hero profiles into account. Even if they borrowed pre-existing elements in a proper symbiosis, the way this concept was created and disseminated was defined by the comic-book medium. Certain narrative techniques and dynamics, character and plot building strategies, various visual and textual figures of speech, as well as symbolic connections, also firstly appeared in this medium. Manifesting themselves exclusively visually, but allowing the consumers to establish the reading and deciphering rhythm, in opposition to films or cartoons which impose their own, comic-books prove to be an ideal medium for mythical patterns, granting the opportunity of creating powerful, symbolically loaded and imaginatively fertile images, which can become privileged carriers of culturally shared and socially bounding meanings (as it happened during the Second World War or other crises mentioned above). Moreover, comic-books themselves, as a field, gain mythological features and become a topic of analysis, debate, or even conflict, and sometimes they get imbued with a will of their own, used to positively, or negatively, influence morality.[12]

It must also be said that these myths are belonging exclusively to the literary and artistic fields, since they have lost all religious and ritualistic value and are not the objects of public belief any longer.[13]

THE CULTURAL ONION

Arthur Asa Berger proposes a vision of culture using the metaphor of the onion.[14] Thus, he identifies in each culture a mythical nucleus as a source of irradiating ideas, covered in successive strata by the various layers of that culture. This nucleus is covered by a first stratum of historical events which are being interpreted through the lens of the original mythical narrative and in connection with it. Next comes the layer of intellectual creations which are inspired by the mythical nucleus, and which are produced by renowned authors and artists, in polished artistic forms which hold great exemplary power. These are covered by the layer of popular culture, of entertainment, which represent the cultural diet of most people, and which produces generally intelligible tropes, with great penetrating power into the public conscience. Eventually, all these layers are covered by people's everyday habits, social and cultural reflexes, which represent reverberations of the forementioned nucleus' impulses.[15]

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[12] See, in this aspect, the indictment Wertham enunciated (1953) and which climaxed with the hearings in the American Senate, on the topic of comic-book influence on juvenile delinquency.

[13] The historian Lucian Boia, in a Facebook post from 2016, made the claim that any strong belief may be considered a myth. I reject this vision, since not all strong beliefs reach mythical status and not all myths require such a belief.

[14] Arthur Asa Berger (2002: 378-386).

[15] Ibid. The detailing of the examples the author provides can also be found in Teampău (2012) and Teampău (2015).

Comic-books are to be found on the fourth layer, of entertainment, or "popular culture". They are a medium which traditionally addresses a young public, of a certain intellectual and aesthetic profile (urban, dynamic, with a medium level of education, with an appetite for quick-paced storylines and accustomed to at least some elements of comic-book production and of the culture they are created in). Consequently, comic-books borrow elements from the underlying levels, from the mythical core, from historical events reinterpreted through mythologizing lenses and from the "high" culture that contain, carry over and transform them into their own idiom, eventually imposing them in public conscience, where they generate linguistic, mental, and behavioral reflexes, as well as concepts and life attitudes. There are many ways in which comic-books influence public's preferences, habits and attitudes, from economic and cultural shopping habits to social interactions (linguistic formulae, gestures, clothing and so on), and even to political and philosophical stances.[16] Sometimes, these influences are intentional and explicit (as in the war propaganda during the Second World War[17]), and sometimes they are subliminal or even unconscious, influencing fashion, linguistic and gestural automatisms, and even intimate beliefs (see, for example, the influence Japanese comics (*manga*) have on the public's taste and on other media, by imposing a certain recipe for creating stories, characters, expressions and situations, as well as ethical and moral expectations).

EXPLICIT MYTHOLOGICAL REFERENCES

An obvious way comic-books take and disseminate mythological elements and structures is by borrowing characters which inhabit mythical stories, mainly those coming from classical Greek-Roman Antiquity, but also from other cultural traditions, such as Celtic, Germanic, Slavic, or non-European, such as Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Pre-Columbian or African. Characters originating in classical myths, be them gods, demigods, titans, heroes, or fantastic beings (satyrs, dryads, angels, demons, fairies, elves etc.) are taken as such, with names, attributes, and their whole referential context, or are conceptually reevaluated, being given different aspects, features, abilities, psychological profiles, or habitats. This is hardly a new procedure, since it has been long functioning and is still operational in other academic fields (cultural reinterpretations of mythical stories or references to such narrations – *The Iliad, The Odyssey*, the Arthurian cycle etc.) or in entertainment industries (popular novels, films, cartoons, video games etc.

Some of the most important mythological characters, such as gods and heroes, have become members of the roster which populates (mainly American) comic-book serial stories. The two publishing behemoths, DC and Marvel, got into a race of borrowing such characters and integrating them into their own imaginary universes. Thor, Odin, Zeus, Hercules, Mercury, Artemis, Ares, Perun, and others have become

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[16] For more information on the way comic-books influence public's everyday life, see Teampău (2012).

[17] An overview of the subject in Wright (2001).

characters with full rights in the graphic worlds created by great publishing houses specialized in comic-book production, either as protagonists of their own series, as members of certain teams, or as secondary characters. There are stories which closely follow their mythological premise, by integrating the character in narrative structures which retell these myths in a graphic medium, or by further developing the initial data (characters' profile, their relationship with other characters and with themselves, events, denouement etc.) in other directions. Thor, for example, is portrayed in the Marvel universe as a young, handsome, generous, and reasoned god, the unconditioned defender of humanity, although it is known that in the Norse mythology the thunder god was irritable, fickle and a warmonger.

For that matter, the whole Asgardian epos is reinterpreted in the Marvel universe and gets a modern technologized aura, which places it

Fig. 1: Thor in his dramatic signature pose

in the science-fiction paradigm.[18] Despite formal variations, the inner functioning mechanism of mythical templates follows the original principles. Even though we today know who the authors of the graphic stories are (but we also assume that his contemporaries knew Homer), these characters have surpassed their creators in fame and relevance, gaining their own "reality". We know who the creators of Superman were, but he doesn't belong to them anymore, just as Achilles does not belong exclusively to Homer. The undeniable proof of "independence" characters who reach a mythical status enjoy is that the writers and the artists who get involved in producing content which maintains and continues these literary myths must adhere to their guidelines, which in comic-book field are known as "serial continuity" (for example, even though Superman loves Lois Lane, they never get married). Occasional stories which contradict these tacit rules are not accepted as part of the canon. *Marvel* had started such a series, titled *What if...*, which deals with alternative storylines explicitly breaching the continuity, but this has not influenced the canon; on the contrary, it once again confirmed the agreed-upon continuity, by exposing the negative effects of disturbing the order.
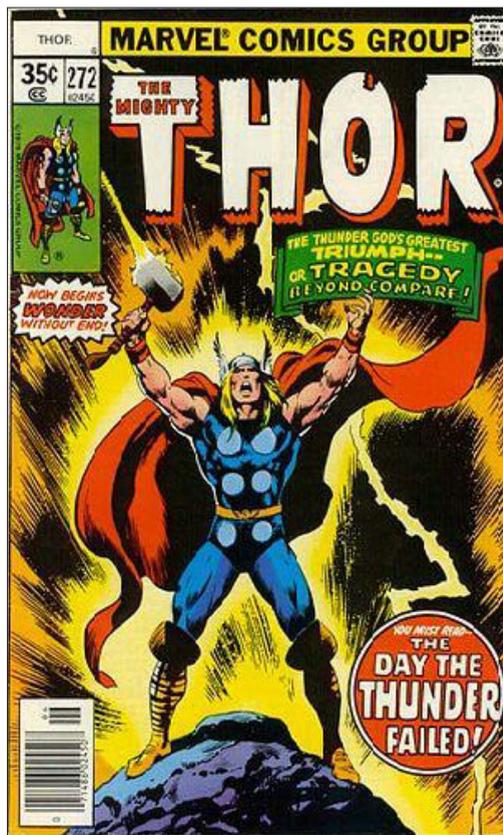
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[18] For a detailed discussion on the way mythology and science are intertwined in comic-books and generate new narrative and aesthetic patterns, see Reynolds (1992).
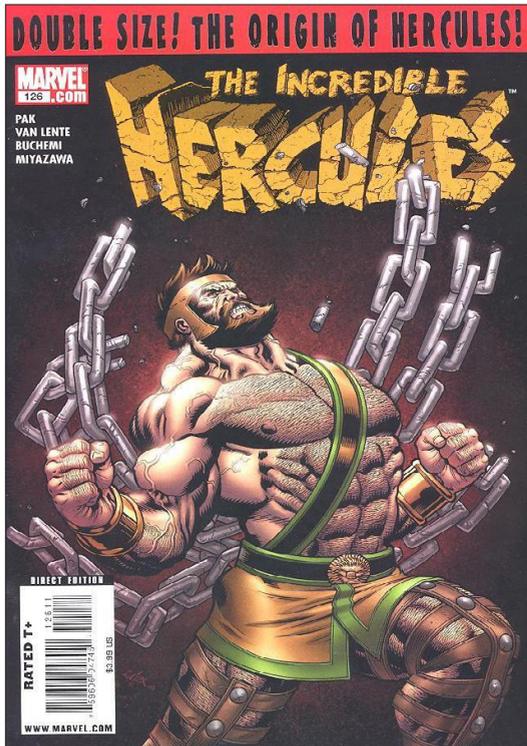
Fig. 2: The untamed Hercules, fighter and *bon-viveur*

Fig. 3: Jay Garrick becomes Flash and wears Hermes' winged helmet

Another way classical myths are being exploited in comic-books is by the presence of certain elements usually associated with mythical gods and heroes, which become metonymical expressions of their attributes, even in their physical absence. The Flash wears Hermes' helmet, Mjolnir, Thor's hammer, becomes the object which transforms any wielder into a god, just as extracting Excalibur from the stone reiterates King Arthur's legend every single time. Thus, the mythical god or hero becomes the alter-ego or more precisely the supra-ego of different characters who take that specific identity.

CHARACTERS ENDOWED WITH MYTHICAL ATTRIBUTES

Jean Bruno Renard identified four common features all American comic-book heroes shared, and which defined the blueprint for the countless characters created on this pattern, in all media channels. These are superstrength, double identity, Manichaeism and the eulogy of the body and technology.[19] They are operating in various degrees and combinations (some heroes hide their identity under costumes, masks, or transformations, as Batman or the Hulk do, while others are only using the context to disguise their alter-ego, in the case of Superman, Flash or Wonder Woman). Renard states that double identity is not just a figure of speech turned into a comic-book cliché, but also a passage from a "real" world into fantasy. The

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former gives the latter a realist veneer and at the same time provides the reader with a mechanism of character identification, by conveying the idea that any seemingly regular person, who lacks any special abilities, holds within an immense potential, which sometimes may be the only resource needed for saving his/her life, family, community or even the world.[20]

The body, as it is depicted in comic-books, also conforms to the classical Greek canon, motivating and educating the public in a cult of health as material support for great virtue. By being presented as avatars of ancient gods and heroes, with their specialized superhuman powers, nowadays superheroes may be considered the secularized "expression of a polytheistic thinking inherent to the human mind".[21] The set of attributes which define these characters exhibits a limited number of variants, which are to be found in mythical lore, and have been used in fantasy stories all around the globe (strength, speed, agility, intelligence, invisibility, heightened senses, the ability to fly, sophisticated weapons, various mutations etc.).

Besides many characters who are strongly individualized in their original mythical environment, who are borrowed into different branches of popular culture, and whose identity is fully recognizable due to specific well-known attributes (name, abilities, behavior, aspect etc.), comic-books are populated by a plethora of imaginary characters and entities which have also been taken from various traditions. Many fantastic beings have become a familiar presence in drawn pages, either in consonance with the classical canon, or in modern reinterpretations: angels, demons, spirits, satyrs, centaurs, gnomes, giants, vampires, dryads, harpies, minotaurs, sirens, cyclops, gorgons, Valkyries, and many others. These may play main, secondary, or supporting roles in narrations and can be placed on any spot of the moral spectrum, from positive to negative or, lately, more ambiguously (although we conclude that some are favored, as being usually portrayed as good, such as angels, while others, on the contrary, are given almost exclusively negative value, such as demons, vampires or ogres).

An interesting charac-ter who sometimes appears in action comic-books is Death, mostly personified in

Fig. 4: Death personified,
a representational cliché in Western culture

accordance with Western imagination, as a skeleton or a corpse, wearing a black, blue or cherry-red hooded cape, wielding a scythe which is allegedly used in ending lives. Sometimes, it is depicted following the pattern of a specific mythological

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tradition, as a young and beautiful (and, obviously, scantily clad) warrior maiden wielding a spear, as an unforgiving, yet fair and proud Valkyrie, as an unconquered warrior, as a wise old man or in zoomorphic forms, which remind of ancient Egyptian mythology. Regarding the explicit presence of this mythological background in particular, we only have to mention Dr. Fate, a cryptic character with diffuse powers, directly pointing to Egyptian esoterism.

Fig. 5: Angels, almost exclusively positive factors, usually flagging divine intervention

CHARACTERS REMINDING OF THERIOMORPHIC GODS

Through the type of theriomorphic gods, Egyptian mythology provides the template for characters who transgress realms, mostly from human to animal, but also to vegetal or mineral. This is done either by transformation or by obtaining abilities alluding to the zoologic catalogue. The characters who borrow animalistic features also try to get their aspect closer to the source-image. Some characters transform themselves temporarily or for good in the animals or the plants which grant them superhuman powers (Werewolf, Timber Wolf, Changeling, Beast, Snowbird, Swamp Thing), others keep their human form, but dress in costumes which suggest the origin of their abilities (Batman, Spider-Man, Wasp, Hawkman, Poison Ivy), while others keep their human form without the need to visually connote the nature of their abilities (Animal Man).

Nota bene: features from other realms only point to abilities which surpass their human equivalents. Cases in which characters make use of less flattering abilities are extremely rare, and when this happens, it almost exclusively involves humorous stories or parodies (heroes do not seem eager to use the powers of a snail or a skunk, for example[22]). Besides, it is clear

Fig. 6: Although he does not have spider guise, Spider-Man is recognizable any time, any place

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[22] The Marvel company introduced such a character, Squirrel Girl, a hectic girl resembling a squirrel, who defeated some of the strongest heroes and villains in the Marvel catalogue. For the fans, though, this move remained only a joke and was not introduced into the official canon. Even though the comic-

that characters who borrow features from certain animals have the tendency to also mold their character and behavior, based on the stereotypes associated to that particular animal: those who morph into a wolf are fearless, good fighters, explosive and loyal, those who resemble a lion are strong, proud and natural born leaders, those who take an owl persona are wise and patient, while those with insect abilities are extremely agile and perceptive.

Fig. 7: Human Torch, living flame and extremely popular super-hero

There are characters who combine zoomorphic attributes, simultaneously showing the properties of several animals (elephant's strength, monkey's agility, serpent's cunning, eagle's clairvoyance etc.), and even characters who resort to the attributes of invented animals, as Chameleon Boy does.[23]

CHARACTERS WITH ELEMENTAL PROPERTIES

Another way of absorbing ancient mental structures in the entertainment industry, including comic-books, is keeping the world's elements in the four classical categories defined during Greek Antiquity: fire, water, air, and soil, with occasional variants – energy, lightning, wind, metal, ice. Without holding any scientific value, they are, nevertheless, mindset markers and hints for the way Western man perceived nature and continues to do so at a vulgar level, if we are to consider the influence astrology still has over a relevant part of the public.

The way characters use their elemental abilities differs from case to case, but generally some leanings in exercising them are accepted. For instance, characters who possess earthly abilities rely on brute strength and endurance, fire elementals develop their destructive powers, while watery ones are subtler and specialize in healing. There where one of these elements is present, it is expected for the others to also get involved, either on the part of the protagonist, or against him/her. There are teams of specialized elemental heroes, such as The Fantastic Four, but also heroes who simultaneously possess all elements and can transmute them, such as Element Lad, who is able to manipulate Mendeleev's table. For that matter, these aspects are

book paradigm operates based on the suspension of disbelief, as in the case of science-fiction literature, for example, there are certain constraints within the medium, involving the forementioned serial continuity, which preserves the internal coherence of storylines and hierarchies. Thus, if it was agreed upon a specific character being immune or vulnerable to a certain substance, or maintaining certain ties with other characters, with the society or with him/herself, these must be factored in any future scenario (apart for alterations which are accepted into the canon).

[23] He is a member of the Legion of Super-Heroes, a team of heroes belonging to the DC company and who are supposed to be active a millennium into the future, when many inhabitable planets, with their own fauna and flora, are integrated into the story.

a constant of American (and not only) comic-books, as well as of other entertainment media (film, cartoons, video games etc.), proving once more that the human mind still operates using ancient some categories.

In some cases, it is acceptable for these four elemental categories to be considered incommensurable and complementary, outside of any hierarchy. But there are also cases in which a certain circular hierarchy between them is tacitly accepted, in a sort of natural democracy without any absolute superiority: water > fire > earth > air > water (with variants).

MYTHICAL POPULATIONS

Some characters have an origin which can be traced back to classical mythology, without entering the sphere of supernatural projections. They do not necessarily have divine origin and only seldom do they exhibit inhuman, angelical, or monstruous features. It is true that their profile is customized with attributes conforming to the original concept, or are literary modified and reinterpreted, so that they satisfy the taste of a contemporary audience, which is in its turn influenced by new narrative patterns, techniques, and strategies. One of the most important super-heroes, Wonder Woman, is an amazon princess who, in the modern world, proves to have superhuman, almost divine powers. The initial data of the myth are kept (her society of origin is exclusively female, strictly hierarchical and warmongering), but the development of this narrative matter incorporate science-fiction, detective, and even psychoanalytical accents (her creator, William Moulton Marston, being the inventor of the polygraph).

A constant presence in comic-books is the alleged lost continent of Atlantis, the homeland of a mythical population which became the subject of countless narrative reinterpretations. It was either considered to have forever been lost, drowned after the cataclysm, it's very few survivors becoming permanent exiles in our world, or having remained undiscovered, yet alive and placed in the most unexpected places on our planet (from the Atlantic rift to Antarctica[24]). It was also considered to have been located at the bottom of the ocean, homeland to characters who were a mixture of humans and various marine species. Atlantis is almost a common place in the imaginary spaces of comic-books. The Atlanteans are often depicted as positive, and rarely as negative beings, as passive victims, or as active actors in forging their own destiny, as collective characters, or on the contrary, strongly individualized. Super-heroes

Fig. 8: Wonder Woman, a strong, independent and, not least, very sexy woman

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[24] The many possibilities are rigorously exposed in Carnac (2003).

such as Aquaman or Namor have become unmistakable markers of the comic-book medium, also being extensively harnessed in film, cartoon, and gaming industries, as another confirmation of the attraction the mysterious Atlantean myth exerts on the public. As expected, many times the world and the characters of Atlantis are linked to Poseidon, their enlightened ruler, in a modern symbiosis of two antique mythical backgrounds.

EXTRATERRESTRIALS

The possibility of other worlds in outer space, which could be inhabited by beings resembling or not to humans, was a constant and at times obsessive presence in the collective and individual imagination. Once the technological development granted successive successes in space probing, the hypotheses and the speculations regarding extraterrestrial worlds exponentially multiplied and amplified. The endless and mostly

Fig. 9: Superman, the extraterrestrial keeper of human values

incomprehensible space offered the ideal premise for the most daring science-fiction stories, in which the invention of strange worlds and beings is the most exciting feature.

As a modern artistic medium, comic-books have euphorically embarked on this endeavor, once Superman was created. He was the factor which asserted comics as a strong, relevant, and influential medium, and he is the reason they have almost immediately delineated an artistic and paraliterary field. Superman is supposed to be the only survivor of an advanced civilization from his planet of origin, Krypton, which disappeared in a huge cataclysm, reminding of the Atlantis myth. As a little child, his parents, during their last moments, sent him on a spatial probe to our planet, where he could survive. But our yellow sun, unlike the red sun of his own world, granted him godlike powers. The child was found by a motorcycle rider at the landing area and put him up for adoption into a family in Smallville, Kansas, a typical American quiet suburban place, where the essential values of the American spirit were religiously kept. This scenario, which reminisces the biblical story of Moses's birth[25], is combined with other mythological sources and manages to fulfill a basic need the American public felt in the context of overlapping crises during the interwar context (economic, social, identitarian etc.). If the mythical sources of Superman, as a pattern for the super-hero type, are easily discernible, the research regarding

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[25] Even the real names of Superman and his father (Kal-El and Jor-El) remind us of biblical stories, revolving around the particle "El" and underlining once more the intention of attaching exceptional traits to the character. This is also articulated through the obvious contrast with his alter-ego, Clark Kent, a shy and clumsy reporter, a stereotypical urban middle class American.

the ways in which Superman himself becomes a myth requires accrued attention and a vast cultural coverage. He became a constant and conspicuous presence in the American and even global imagination and identity, via media channels and cultural products which refer to him. Although he was considered a mere juvenile phantasm lacking any depth, it is certain that few other characters, real or imaginary, have reached such a high degree of acknowledgement. If his simplicity is only a mark of the unsophisticated American spirit, it must be pointed out that his global success and the enormous sympathy he garners all around the globe cannot be explained just by the American economic power or by the persuasive abilities of the advertisement industry. Superman fulfills a general human need. He is a modern Hercules, and maybe even more, a sort of "commodified" Messiah, and the Americans have provided his ideal form in line with nowadays sensibilities, by making him easily intelligible. He is the ordinary man, the immigrant, the quiet and prosaic individual, who holds the inner resources to become, at any given moment, the savior of his community or even the whole humanity.

The premise of extraterrestrial origin grants the perfect pretext for inventing the most eccentric characters. After all, nobody can factually counter such speculations, since nobody can tell, at least for now, how physics or chemistry laws apply all over the cosmos. Superman is just the seed of an endless constellation of characters endowed with extraordinary capabilities which populate the graphic stories, although not all have reached the iconic status of their "dean". Silver Surfer, Hyperion, Gladiator, and others are just a few examples of extraterrestrials who got their own graphic series, some artistically and narratively even better than Superman's, without overthrowing him from the public's preferences, though.

CHARACTERS AT THE BORDER OF WORLDS, DIMENSIONS, AND REALMS

Another category of characters who get their narrative substance from various mythological backgrounds comprises those with unclear status, placed at the crossroads of different tiers of reality and existence, filling the role of communicator between these strata. Whether they dwell in one dimension in particular but are able to travel into the other (or others), like Ulysses, or they constantly swing between them, like Charon, or they do not belong to any, these characters enable speculations regarding the possibility of such dimensions, the connections they share, and the place humans have in these settings. Of course, death is the hottest subject, and mankind's eternal obsession of imaginatively investigating this realm profoundly influences comic-book production. Almost every hero has experienced death, even Superman, but usually they have also been revived; we must not forget that profit fuels the entertainment industry (and this led to the saying that in comic-books not even death is final).

There are characters who raise and manipulate the dead, who speak to them or even to death personified, but the most interesting ones are those who subjectively experience the state of being dead. The dread humans feel when death is involved (either for themselves or for others) is graphically depicted and we may find products

of high artistic quality and conspicuously profound ideas. Deadman is the ghostly super-hero on whom the Hindu god Rama Kushna has bestowed the power of possessing any living creature, so that he can find his own assassin (during his lifetime he was a renowned acrobat named Boston Brand and got killed by Hook during one of his trapeze performances). Not one of the most important DC characters, Deadman is, nonetheless, an element which stimulates inquiries regarding the afterlife and ventures into less investigated aspects of the relations between characters and between planes of existence.

Fig. 10: Deadman, the subject of the question "can a dead man die again?"

Another DC character, much stronger and with a greater career in the comic-book industry, Spectre, is maybe an even better example for how the interaction between the realms of life and death may graphically illustrated. One of the most problematic characters in the entire comic-book universe, having an ever-changing, fluctuating and morally unclear status and destiny, Spectre got such great powers that even Superman faded by comparison. Such a powerful character, truly comparable to a god, proved to be difficult to manage from a narrative point of view, although his series were artistically fulfilled. Paradoxically, one of the most powerful and mysterious characters in American comic-books has not reached the fame of other, explicitly weaker, characters such as Batman (proving once more that in super-hero mythology, the shrewd exploitation of weakness is at least as important as the premise of absolute power).
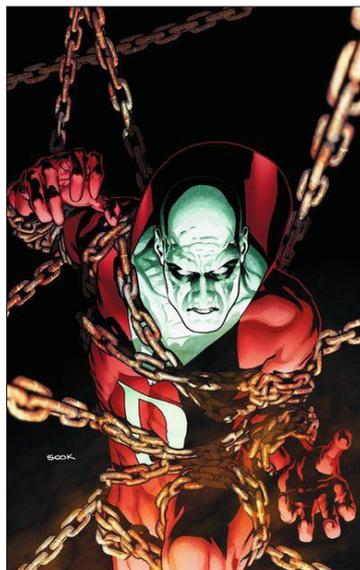
THE PRAISING OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology plays a paramount role in the comic-book paradigm. It is difficult to imagine a science-fiction scenario in which technology does not play an important part, be it positive (in which man uses it as a tool for progress and development) or pessimist (in a cyberpunk approach, unchecked technology becoming the major threat humanity faces). Its presence becomes manifest through various gadgets, weapons, vehicles, devices, and others, some with a certain degree of credibility (fire weapons, spaceships, robots etc.), while others are purely whimsical (time travel machines, absurd nanotechnologies, artificial planets etc.). However, not the shape and the specific incidences technology is portrayed in comic-books is important, but the general conception towards it, as narrative background, as pretext and even as substance. The insertion of a (vaguely) scientific and technical idiom, the public familiarity with some themes and concerns in the field, the espousal of ethical and moral stances regarding the importance of technology, all comprise a particular

Fig. 11: Iron Man and War Machine,
single-man armies

aspect of today's entertainment industry. We may say that technology is the hot topic in contemporary imagination, the best hope mankind has for redemption and, at the same time, carrying the threat of intentional or accidental annihilation. This anguish is not only felt by the modern man, but it reminds us of the metallurgical myths centered on the image of Hephaestus. Today, we just feel more acutely the capacity of achieving their own demise humans have.

An aspect which holds huge narrative potential is the symbiosis between man and machine, in which technology is not only a tool, but a component of man's identity, its vital support (Iron Man's costume not only grants him super-powers, but also keeps him alive). Not fully human, but not yet robots, these examples of symbiosis between the biological and the artificial (Cyborg, War Machine, Robot Man etc.) raise new questions regarding the role of technology and man's responsibility towards it.

TRANSFORMATIONS

Metamorphosis is a constant transcultural theme which is always present in various forms. Humans have "transformed" in animals, in objects, in other humans or in fantastic creatures either voluntarily, with the intention to kill or escape a difficult situation, to complete certain objectives, to gather secret information, to steal etc., or involuntarily, due to accidents or by the will of gods, of witches, of destiny or of other humans. From Ulysses to Jacob, Mr. Hyde or Fantomas, mythology and literature abound in examples of transformation, masking, cloaking, and travesty. The theme of the double, of the shadow, of the alter-ego are, in fact, the fundamental premise of super-hero paradigm in comic-books. It may be said that, for super-heroes, dissimulation is an even greater advantage than their own powers.

The possibility and even the necessity of transformation is almost always the key to the whole story and the narrative mechanism through which the story reaches climax. Some transformations are definitive, as in the case of Swamp Thing, who has become a sensible and virtuous monster in the lineage of Quasimodo, but most are temporary and reversible. If Superman or Batman, for example, only change the costume, announcing that they are acting in their super-heroic identity, others also change their aspect, becoming different creatures (Chameleon Boy, Beast Boy etc.) or getting distinctive features (Billy Bateson becomes Captain Marvel once he utters the magical formula "SHAZAM", an acronym which explicitly refers to mythological characters – Samson, Hercule, Achilles, Zeus, Atlas, Mercury – and Bruce Banner, having been exposed to gamma ray radiation, becomes the invincible,

lonely and paranoid behemoth Hulk, each
time he gets angry). Some characters keep
their identity and their personality in all
adopted forms, the transformation thus being
a personal strategy of managing crises, while
others change their personality and simply
become someone else, the transformation
being the very crisis, as it is the case of doctor
Jeckyll. In such cases the story becomes more
complex, the conflict covering many layers:
externally, between the hero and the adverse
context he/she faces, and internally, against
himself/herself and his/her unflattering urges,
or with his/her super-human abilities which
he/she cannot always keep under control. The
psychological depth grants a larger analytical
landscape, and some writers exploit these
openings and insert relevant philosophical
ideas into the comic-book medium. Spider-
Man, one of the most popular characters ever

Fig. 12: Hulk: unstoppable and explosive,
just as the bomb which created him

created and the banner bearer of the counter-cultural tendencies of the 60's[26], is
mostly known for his "great powers come with great responsibility" dictum.

SINGLE TALENT CHARACTERS

There are characters endowed with great penetrating power into public
conscience, who are able to sustain an industry and even a cultural scaffolding
and who, in the comic-book medium (but not confined to it), play a godlike part,
regardless of their alleged capabilities (again, Batman does not have super-powers,
but he is one of the most influential characters in history). Beside them, though,
there is a constellation of characters with a less outlined and prominent profile,
who usually work in teams. They can be compared to demigods or to various lesser
entities which populate all mythologies, and which are gravitating around strong
characters and images. If Superman is the prototype of the super-hero and has almost
absolute powers, these lesser heroes orbit around him and are specialized in only one
feature (strength, speed, agility, precision, intelligence, foresight etc.).

Many times, though, this relativization of abilities makes certain characters
more interesting, and when they are placed in complex relation with others of the
same kind or in the larger context, they offer virtually unlimited narrative possibilities.
Although they are not influential enough to be the protagonists of their own graphic
series, they manage to garner public sympathy as members of teams which become
collective characters. The Young Titans, The Legion of Super-Heroes, Infinity Inc.,
or X-Men are examples of such (minor) super-hero teams which act as a more or

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[26] See Wright (2001:207-210).

Fig. 13: Cyclops, the one with destructive vision, member and leader of the X-Men

less connected whole. For example, in the case of the X-Men, the narrative frame is extremely generous: this is a team of mutant super-heroes, placed in the hostile context of an American (by extension, generally human) society which rejects the idea of coexistence with biologically different individuals. Social commentary is abundant in this series, which has integrated *ab initium* (1963) social, political, and economic themes, alongside worries and dilemmas of their time.

LITERARY MYTHS

Besides obvious sources belonging to classical, mostly Greek, mythology, comic-books also take their narrative substance from the limitless supply of literary mythologies. Some of the most popular literary myths have been present in the graphic medium, be it in visual retellings of the original corpus, be it in reinterpretations or continuations loyal to the canon or departing from it. Dracula, Captain Nemo, Alan Quatermain, Robin Hood, Dr. Jeckyll, Doctor Frankenstein, The Knights of the Round Table, Zorro and many more, have become full time characters in the comics medium, sometimes even surpassing in popularity their initial avatar. It is true that these myths have developed in several media simultaneously, being borrowed into comic-books from other channels in an already processed and reinterpreted stage. Even when it does not involve specific mythical elements whose sources may be easily identified and whose trail may be accurately traced, comic-books sometimes borrow paradigms and tropes from other media. Narrative schemes and typologies may be extracted from popular creations (novels, films, music etc.) which deal with western, SF, crime, swashbuckling or romance themes. The characters, the situations, the

frames and the events replicate deeply rooted narrative trends, which become mandatory for satisfying the taste of keen consumers. The best example is provided by Conan the Barbarian, who has been created by Robert E. Howard in 1918, in 18 pulp fiction volumes.

Fig. 14: King Arthur and his knights for the year 3000

Taken over by the Marvel company in 1970, Conan became a global phenomenon, which imposed the "heroic fantasy" (para)literary paradigm, also known as "sword and sorcery" or "might and magic". Thousands of successfully products have been created within this paradigm, from cartoon series to films, music, video games, but also derived products, such as toys, T-shirts, posters, stickers etc.

It must be said that comic-books have, in their turn, created such myths, which have turned into pints of reference in other media. It suffices to point here to the *Rahan* French series, which revolved around a young warrior and explorer placed in prehistoric times, who played the part of the civilizing hero for many communities which had fallen into superstition and obscurantism. The character earned the unconditional sympathy of a large part of comic-books aficionados, and not only them (an animated series was dedicated

Fig. 15: Conan and his successful recipe – muscles, swords, and beautiful women

to him), even though the ideological load was visible and flaring at times[27], which must not come as a surprise, since Rahan's first adventures were published in *Pif* magazine, the well-known platform of the French communist party. Beyond the ideological load, an inevitable occurrence in the entertainment industry, the high quality of scenarios and drawings imposed this series and this character as an example of comic-book artistry. The theme, the atmosphere and, to a certain degree, the language (Rahan talks about himself using the third person and his name is the battle cry he yells each time his life is in danger), have cooperated in creating an imaginary space prone to mythologizing interpretations and projections.

HISTORICAL EVENTS AND PERSONALITIES TURNED INTO MYTH

Another way myth is present in comic-books, as well as in other media, is represented by the borrowing and the processing of real historical events and personalities and their investing with mythical value by various processes (repetition, hyperbolizing, symbolization, equivocation, associating exemplarity, etc.). Of course, not any historical event or personality which are present in comic-books, or in any other medium, obtains mythical dimension. There are graphic biographies and histories which only intend to make a historical period, personality or event, known to the public. But when these biographies get hagiographic accents and the personalities become effigies of general and atemporal values and principles, if not outright archetypes, they get projected into mythical spheres. Same, when a historical event or period leave the strict recounting of events and is retrospectively
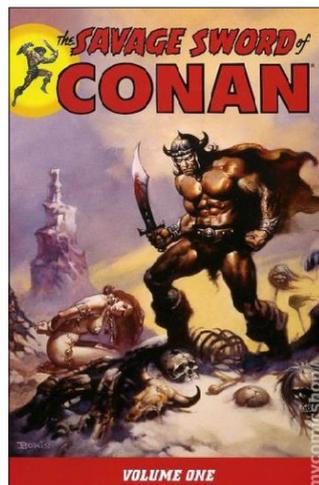
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[27] Almost without exception, Rahan, grounded only in his reason and sense of (material) reality, and only trusting his physical and intellectual abilities (and a knife as unique weapon and tool), unmasks shamans who are always portrayed as charlatans or tyrants.

loaded with, let's say, founding values, they appear in a different, mythologizing, light. Moreover, for these processes to be complete, it is necessary for the public to receive, accept and interpret them as such, and this is not possible if their form, aspect, and content are less attractive and convincing. In other words, products which are visibly lacking artistically or narratively, have less chances of being stuck in the public's conscience, even though it is sometimes possible that due to their sheer absurdity they might become cult-products, as it has happened, for example, with Ed Wood's movies.

Most historical personalities who have reached a mythical status in comic-books have been taken in an already processed state from other media or from the general cultural background. Many have been political, scientific, or artistic personalities, who already held this status, to the creation of which they had sometimes intentionally participated. Roosevelt, de Gaulle, Churchill, Hitler, Stalin, but also Einstein, Marylin Monroe, Elvis or James Dean have surpassed their strict biography and have become symbols. Their names are not only historical references, having the purpose of granting a semblance of reality, much needed in the case of implausible scenarios, but enter the comic-book field as characters, although seldom as protagonists. But it 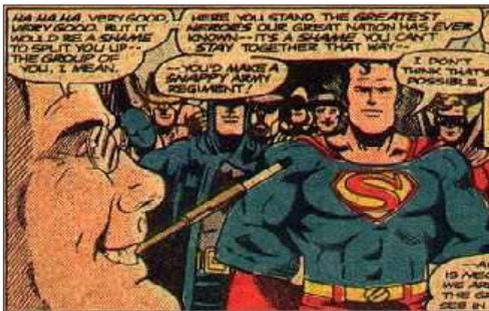does not surprise anybody that Roosevelt or Churchill used to conceive war strategies alongside the super-heroic members of the Justice Society of America. We may wonder whether these editorial moves aim at getting the fictional characters (Superman, Batman, and the others) closer to reality, or to project the real personalities into the imaginary spheres (we need to underline, though, that these appear in fiction works as characters, meaning fictitious, and not as real personalities).

Fig. 16: President Roosevelt chats with the strongest super-heroes

The same goes for historical events which are introduced in fiction works. The authors bet on their general degree of recognition, in order to frame the action and to stimulate public's intimate mapping with the story. There are events which have already penetrated the accustomed toolbox of those involved in producing popular culture items, out of which The Second World War is the most visible. It is the founding moment of the present global order, as a major event, but also as a sum of several moments in particular, which have gained mythical status and which can provide, in their turn, the background or the guise of the story (the attack on Pearl Harbor, the battles of Stalingrad and Moscow, the campaigns in North Africa, the nuking of Hiroshima and Nagasaki etc.). Anyone recognizes and intellectually and emotionally reacts to references such as the Thermopylae battle (masterfully exploited by Frank Miller in the *300* comics, which inspired the successful namesake movie in which the handsome Gerald Butler played the part of Leonidas), the fall of Constantinople, the discovery of America, the American war

of independence and civil war, the French revolution, the Vietnam war, or the terrorist attacks of 9/11 2001.

NEW FORMS OF VALHALLA AND OLYMPUS

In time, around the great figures of these imaginary universes, whole constellations of fantastic characters have coagulated, all having their own personalities and their own diverse or even divergent personal histories, and all maintaining complex rapports with each other, giving coherence to the narrative construction. Of course, some have remained just for a short time in the public eye, being closely dependent on certain social and cultural contexts, not getting updated (for example, the hero Johnny Thunder remained loyal to the '50s fashion and even though he occasionally still made his appearance in DC comic-books, he did not garner much reader sympathy any longer). Other characters were

Fig. 17: The attack on Pearl Harbor, a catastrophe, but also a catalytic and mobilizing factor

simply unfavored by the public and were short lived (Thunderbird, the irascible Apache mutant, a member of the X-Men team within Marvel universe for a very short time, was quickly disposed of, without even letting the fans get accustomed to his profile). The most important characters, though, are relentlessly updated, so as to satisfy the public's everchanging requirements, without being fundamentally at odds with the initial data and risk losing direct touch with the original mythical elements and alienating devoted readers; when such a move is tried, though, the fan's reaction may become vehement, as in the case of Superman's "death", which occurred in 1993 and was followed by symbolic funeral processions in the American streets, organized by those who loved this imaginary being and who marched crying alongside an empty casket draped in the American flag. Sometimes the hero outlives the alter-ego, the costume and the function being taken by other characters (Thor, Firestorm, Green Lantern etc.), and sometimes the latter uses different identities, filling out the heroic function in more instances (Hal Jordan, Steve Rogers, Dick Grayson etc.).

The connection to the hot topics of the day is not accomplished just in terms of formal preferences, involving the characters' aspect or *modus operandi*, but also ideologically. If during the Second World War Superman, Batman or Captain America urged the public to participate in the war effort and incentivized patriotic sentiments, during the protests of the '60s they started raising certain social and political issues, questioning previous certainties (during the Watergate scandal, Steve Rogers gives up on his Captain America identity and continues his pursuits as Nomad, "the man without a country"). Sometimes, though, the ideological imperatives forcefully inserted in comic-books become tawdry, harming the narrative and aesthetic aspects: lately, the strict commandments of political correctness, mostly present in Marvel productions, alienated an important segment of their traditional fanbase.
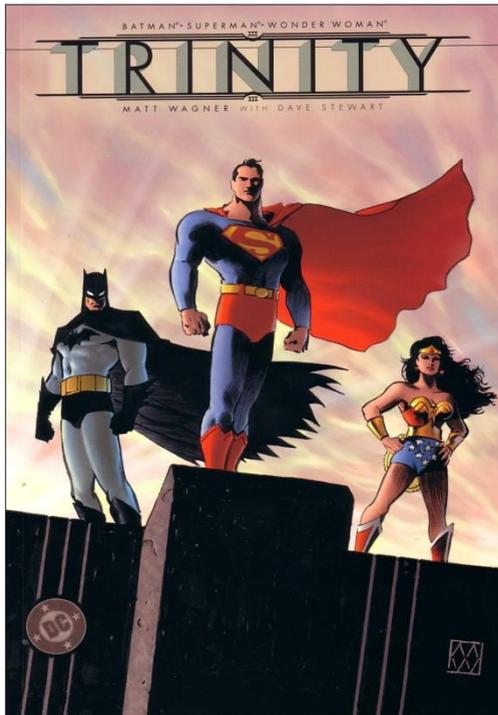
Fig. 18: No comment

Anyhow, the constellation of fantastic characters, which sometimes become widely known and more influential than real historical personalities (more people have heard of Superman than of general Bradley, for example), finds itself in a process of permanent expansion, rearranging and reshaping. All great publishing houses or studios own their casting, which they present and promote as a distinct, coherent, and integrated universe, in which the public is also invited. The plethora of characters offers a multitude of ways to interact and to identify with the imaginary world.

We may justifiably ask ourselves what need is there for lesser or secondary characters, since the main ones are allegedly so powerful that no catastrophe seems too big for them. As in the case of classical mythologies, the functions, the roles, and the profiles of paragon characters are diversified and specialized, so that there is no single individual solution to a given problem. Genuine "pantheons" are compiled and are functioning in contemporary contexts, even if they are not invested with religious value (although certain ritualistic tendencies may be observed, as it relates to consuming patterns, to interactions with other consumers, to the forming of communities centered upon shared interests or to the organizing of events for the "insiders" etc.). Some readers prefer solar, serene, virtuous, and sober entities, such as Superman, others favor the lunar, dark, troubled, and complex ones, such as Batman, while others are more attracted to clumsy, troublesome, discontent, or angry anti-heroes. If there is a power scale in the comic-book universe, it does not hermetically overlay the moral hierarchy, which is, in the end, the most important one.

CONCLUSION

Comic-books are an art form and a media channel mainly dedicated to entertainment and recreation. At the same time, they are a channel through which information, messages and ideological stances may be disseminated, trends, tastes, and attitudes may be created and influenced, certain moral, ethical or political issues may be brought into the public attention but in which, firstly, stories may be told in a specific way. When writers and artists involved in this medium intelligently exploit its specificity, using what only it can offer, the resulting products are of an undeniable

quality. The saliency of comic-books is artistically conspicuous, but they also have an unmistakable narrative profile. The way a story may be unfolded, transmitted, and interpreted in comic-books, the rhythm, the tropes, the relation with the consumer and the reading codes, but also the narrative substance, which is optimal for the graphic underlay they provide, grants their advantages (and, of course, limits!) when compared to other media. They imposed themselves as a distinct artistical and narrative field not only due to their technical specifics, but also due to the way they have borrowed, revamped, and conveyed a preexisting mythological background which deeply connected with the expectations of the American (and later, Western and global) public, in a certain context of economic crisis and social and cultural anxiety. Through comic-books, myth once again participated in filtering social anguishes and hopes, in coagulating interests, and in inspiring action. Their cultural, social, economic, and even historical relevance is also confirmed by the fact that after circulating various pre-existing mythical elements, they managed to forge and impose into public cultural diet some new ones, which have firstly manifested in this medium, and which later gained superior disseminating power in other media.

It may be argued that, lately, comic-books have lost influence while competing against other entertainment channels, which exploit the unprecedented technological trumps of visual media, mainly video games. Statistics may confirm it, but the relevance of this artistical and communicational medium does not only depend on quantitative aspects. If the great creative resources have oriented towards other, newer, more dynamic, and, it has to be said, more profitable media, it does not mean that comic-books have burnt out their creative potential and the possibility of further offering aesthetic and narrative delights. Humans feel the need to tell and listen to stories, be it for entertainment, for motivation, for therapy, or for social agglutination, and as long as comic-books provide a special medium for that, they will not lose relevance.

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All images have been taken from Marvel and DC official sites: https://www.marvel.com/, https://www.dccomics.com/.