

# Crime and Punisher: How the Punisher mediates domestic identity and American ideologies in foreign policies through images of masculinity and vigilantism

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*Carlijn Kruidhof*  
*3473171*  
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## Introduction

*“After all, it is this no-nonsense, black-and-white, kill-’em-all approach that led to the character’s brief, supernova-like time as one of Marvel’s unlikely A-list heroes. The unlikely part being: Frank Castle isn’t a hero; he’s the answer to the question: What if the guy fighting murderers and unscrupulous types was himself an unscrupulous murderer?”<sup>1</sup>*

Vietnam War veteran Frank Castle is the Punisher. His real name is Francis Castiglione and he is Sicilian. After Castle comes home to his wife and two kids, his family is assassinated during a drugs deal. Castle is unable to process this trauma and instead uses the skills he gained as a soldier to kill everybody involved in this drugs deal, using the justification of killing abroad to justify killing on American soil: he behaves as an American soldier in America. After all criminals involved are eliminated, he decides to keep ‘punishing’ criminals, insisting on calling it justice rather than revenge. He is judge, jury and executioner, the death penalty incarnate.

On April 10 2015, the first season of *Netflix Original Series Marvel’s Daredevil* (referred to as *Daredevil* from here on) appeared on streaming service *Netflix*. The series was a critical success, receiving a 98% on *Rotten Tomatoes*. This means that 98% of analyzes reviews were positive and it is ‘certified fresh,’ the highest possible rating. Reviewers particularly praised the dark tone of the series. *Daredevil* is about the titular superhero, whose real name is Matt Murdock. As a child, Murdock was in an accident, blinded by toxins. This left him with heightened senses: he can hear, feel and taste everything in his environment. He can even tell when someone is in love by detecting the rise in temperature in the skin when that person encounters his or her lover. His father is a boxer, his mother is gone. As an adult, after being trained in martial arts by an equally blind man with heightened senses called Stick, he fights crime in Hell’s Kitchen, an area in New York City he calls home. His moralcode: to fight the men that hurt his part of town, but never to kill. After all, he is raised a Catholic.

In 2016, the Punisher was chosen as an addition to the cast, played by actor Jon Bernthal. He is mostly known for his role of Shane Walsh in the zombie apocalypse AMC TV-show *The Walking Dead*. Born in Washington D.C. to Jewish parents, has heritage in Germany, Austria, Poland and Russia. The character was critically well-received, with many raving not only about the portrayal of the fan favorite character the Punisher, but Bernthal’s performance as well. On *Rotten Tomatoes*, season 2 of *Daredevil* has a 75% rating. The Punisher is called “one of its most complex comics-world

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Yeoman, “Daredevil Season 2 Proves The Punisher Needs His Own Corner of the MCU,” *Screen Rant*, March 25, 2016, <http://screenrant.com/the-punisher-daredevil-season-2-mcu/>.

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vigilantes.”<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Hatfull said of Bernthal's performance: “Bernthal dominates these 13 episodes with a magnetic and complex performance that fits the show's dark, violent tone perfectly. (...) He's so good that you miss him when he's not there.”<sup>3</sup> War veteran Scott Beauchamp of pop culture website *Vulture* applauded this latest incarnation of the Punisher, stating that, “...as the show makes explicit, this isn't about PTSD. This isn't the psychological exploration of a human being; it's more an examination of a collective myth. What the show gets, and this is where it really succeeds, is that we're all collectively implicated in creating Castle.”<sup>4</sup> He describes why the military uses the Punisher as a symbol, with the white skull the Punisher is synonymous for appearing on gear, and the name is used for platoons: “The Punisher is a way of understanding the civilian and military divide, while acknowledging that, however strained or fractured it may be, a relationship between the two still exists.”<sup>5</sup>

Film and television website *Screen Rant* wrote an article specifying why the Punisher is excellent enough to deserve its own spin-off series. Yeoman argues that he is a threat to the entire Marvel Cinematic Universe, or MCU, because he operates in such a different way than audiences have seen from superheroes. If the audience start rooting for the guy that kills, he argues, which is a moral line that cannot be crossed in the Marvel Universe, the whole idea of ‘superhero’ and ‘supervillain’ becomes irrelevant. This is why this specific version of the Punisher is admirable: “If the team of Ramirez and Petrie should be lauded for anything, it's the way in which they understand the limitations of the Punisher and how, despite the shades-of-grey moral examinations the character stimulates, by interacting with or in opposition to a character like Daredevil, Frank Castle presents an interesting wrinkle (and perhaps a huge threat) to the principles of a show like this.”<sup>6</sup> About a month after this article appeared on line, a Punisher-spinoff was confirmed on April 29.<sup>7</sup>

I will use the chronology of the character itself to discover the place of the current version of the Punisher: is this version of the anti-hero different or similar to the previous incarnations? Then, *Daredevil's* the Punisher will be analyzed to find what the character says about America's domestic identity, ideologies that inform and define foreign policy through images of masculinity, American

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Peters, “‘Daredevil’ Makes the Case against War: Underneath His Gun-Happy Surface, the Punisher Is a Powerful Symbol of the Horrors of Combat - Salon.com,” accessed May 9, 2016, [http://www.salon.com/2016/03/24/daredevil\\_makes\\_the\\_case\\_against\\_war\\_underneath\\_his\\_gun\\_happy\\_surface\\_the\\_punisher\\_is\\_a\\_powerful\\_symbol\\_of\\_the\\_horrors\\_of\\_combat/](http://www.salon.com/2016/03/24/daredevil_makes_the_case_against_war_underneath_his_gun_happy_surface_the_punisher_is_a_powerful_symbol_of_the_horrors_of_combat/).

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Hatfull, “Daredevil Season 2 Review: Hell's Kitchen Nightmares,” *SciFiNow*, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://www.scifinow.co.uk/reviews/daredevil-season-2-review-hells-kitchen-nightmares/>.

<sup>4</sup> Scott Beauchamp, “What Daredevil's Depiction of the Punisher Gets Right About War Vets,” *Vulture*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.vulture.com/2016/03/what-daredevils-punisher-gets-right-about-vets.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Yeoman, “Daredevil Season 2 Proves The Punisher Needs His Own Corner of the MCU.”

<sup>7</sup> Abraham Riesman, “Netflix Orders Punisher Spinoff From Marvel,” *Vulture*, April 29, 2016, <http://www.vulture.com/2016/04/netflix-punisher-spinoff-marvel.html>.

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soldier culture, vigilantism and popular justice, in order to see how an anti-hero can confirm America's domestic identity and foreign policy and maybe say more about America than a typical superhero can.

This essay fits in the paradigm of popular culture analysis. In this case, the overarching theme is American domestic identity, uncovered by looking at ideas about race and gender conveyed in the popular text. Amy Kaplan hypothesized that every cultural text could be analyzed for notions on themes like gender and race, which in turn constitute an American domestic identity. Simultaneously, these texts contain notions about the Other, as Edward Said argues in his work *Orientalism*. The Other is the foreigner or the foreign land. How this 'Other' is framed, in turn frames the Occident, or the domestic. The domestic and foreign are therefore juxtapositions of each other but also interlaced with one another. Jason Dittmer applies Kaplan's theory to Captain America comics and found that they juxtaposed the foreign and the domestic to reify what the domestic is and should be. This essay will also employ cultural criminology to examine ideas of crime, justice and vigilantism: the Punisher is a vigilante that serves justice on criminals because the institutions fail to. The main question this thesis answers is: How does the Punisher form domestic identity and reinforce American ideologies in foreign policy through images of masculinity and vigilantism and does *Daredevil's* Punisher represent a break or continuance of the character's tradition? Sub-questions include: how does the Punisher reflect on domestic identity? What does an American look like according to the Punisher? Who are America's adversaries? What kind of behavior is acceptable or indeed American? How does behavior inform America's foreign policy? And how does the Punisher serve as reinforcement?

The Punisher is not intended as a superhero. He was created as a villain who became so popular; he turned into an anti-hero. The readers are not supposed to identify with him in the first place - he is a villain - but somehow, did, and his behavior changed from villainous to acceptable for an anti-hero. Although because he is an anti-hero, readers are still not supposed to agree with his behavior, but this label is meaningless. Frank Castle has been treated like many superheroes. He was given several comic book series of his own, featuring him as main protagonist. It glances over the fact that that his version of 'justice' is mowing hundreds of people down with an automatic rifle. What does this say about America or Americans? It is relevant for these same reasons: he is not a superhero, he is able to behave in manners true superheroes cannot. Captain America cannot kill all his opponents; that is not part of this character. Yet he is just as popular as many a superhero. If nobody was interested in the character or did not identify with the character, he would never have been popular.

The thesis will be divided up into four chapters. The last three represent the three phases that the character of the Punisher has been through, represented in the following chart.

When	What	Issues
<b>1986</b>	The Punisher	<u>5</u>
<b>1988-1995</b>	The Punisher vol.2	107
<b>1988-1995</b>	The Punisher: War Journal	80
<b>1989</b>	The Punisher	Film
<b>1992-1995</b>	The Punisher: War Zone	41
<b>1995-1997</b>	The Punisher vol. 3	18
<b>1998-1999</b>	The Punisher vol. 4	<u>4</u>
<b>2000-2001</b>	The Punisher vol. 5	<u>12</u>
<b>2001-2004</b>	The Punisher vol. 6	37
<b>2004-2009</b>	The Punisher vol. 7 MAX	75
<b>2004</b>	The Punisher	Film
<b>2007-2009</b>	The Punisher: War Journal vol. 2	26
<b>2008</b>	Punisher: War Zone	Film
<b>2009</b>	The Punisher: War Zone vol. 2	<u>6</u>
<b>2009-2010</b>	The Punisher vol. 8	21
<b>2010-2012</b>	PunisherMAX	22
<b>2011-2012</b>	The Punisher vol. 9	16
<b>2012-2013</b>	The Punisher: War Zone vol. 3	<u>5</u>
<b>2014-2015</b>	The Punisher vol. 10	20
<b>2016-present</b>	The Punisher vol. 11	
<b>2016</b>	Daredevil season 2	13 (episodes)

Note: The underlined numbers represent a limited-series, meaning that they were meant to be that number of issues. Blue represents phase one, yellow represents phase two and green represents phase three. The white lines in the late 90s represent a lack of interest in the character.

The 1980s were turbulent. Violent crime was on the rise, horrible images of the Vietnam War were printed in the media, Watergate proved that people in the highest branches of government were corrupt. Faith in authorities plummeted. It is in this American the Punisher became an important protagonist for Marvel, as is reflected in the graph. The character got his first own ongoing series, identified as vol. 2, which ran for 107 issues, and his own film in 1989. Two spin-off series followed: *The Punisher: War Journal* started in 1988 and ran for 80 issues. *The Punisher: War Zone* started in 1992 and ran for 41 issues. In the late 90s, things calmed down again domestically, even though America was engaged in several wars. One eponymous series was launched, branded vol. 3, which ran for 18 issues. Only a short four issue story launched in the rest of the 90s. This concludes the first phase of the Punisher. It is identified as 'Reagan presidency', because it features popular tropes in this time period. Scholars have identified these as being specific to the Ronald Reagan Presidency,

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such as the Reagan hard body. In the 90s, these tropes were waning and nothing of note happened in the chronology of the Punisher, which is why the next phase starts after 2001.

In 2001, the United States was attacked on its own soil, which gave new life to the Punisher character. The series that started in 2001 in August, just before 9/11, ran for 37 issues, until 2004. Then in 2004, the Punisher's MAX series was launched (vol. 7). It ran for 75 issues. *The Punisher: War Zone* and *The Punisher: War Journal* rebooted and two feature films were made. It is evident that the interest in the Punisher as a character was renewed after 9/11. This is the second phase of the Punisher, which will be called Bush Jr. Presidency. George W. Bush Jr. was president of the United States for two terms, from 2001 until 2009. The War on Terror became a fact and President Bush said the legendary words: "Ladies and gentlemen, we've got him." This period represents an echo of the Reagan era, with many 80s tropes returning.

A few years later, though, interest declined again. Up until the present, almost every year since 2007, a new series started and ran for a few issues, but none of them came close to running for 75 issues, or even 37 issues. Yet the Punisher became a character in the 2016 season of *Daredevil*. Only time will tell if this sparks renewed interest in the comics, however, Frank Castle was popular enough to warrant a spin-off series of his own. This is the third and final phase, which will be named 'Obama Presidency.' Barack Obama has been president of the United States for almost eight years, with his second term officially ending January 2017.

To uncover constructions of American ideologies and domestic identity in *Daredevil's* Punisher, first a historical framework must be established. The sources used are more than forty years of comics, with emphasis on the first comic to feature the Punisher in 1974 and the MAX series that ran from 2004 until 2009, which is a fan favorite. Next to that, the three films - *The Punisher* from 1989, *The Punisher* from 2004 and *Punisher: War Zone* from 2008 - are analyzed. The main primary source is *Daredevil* season 2, which was available for streaming in March 2016.

The reason multiple types of media are used, is because a chronology of the character must be established. All media are made to surround this character, to reinstate him in a brand new manner that creators, be they film studios or comic book publishers, think the audience wants. Ultimately, this research is not about the form of the story, but about the content of the story. Nor is it about the reception, it is about the creators and the content of the cultural texts themselves. Next to that, several secondary sources are utilized. Scholarly works about reading comics for ideologies and American identity. Jason Dittmer's work gives directions on how comics reflect American identity and it which subtle ways it reinforces identity as well. The written works of Cary D. Adkinson have covered vigilantism and popular justice in comic books.

The first chapter, a theoretical framework is established. These are analyzed for themes surrounding American domestic identity and ideology in foreign policies. It will not be a thorough analysis of each source, rather, each theme is be mentioned and examples of these will be discussed and connected to the historical context. However, it must be noted that it is not my intention to build a comprehensive historical overview. In the third chapter, the second phase of the Punisher is analyzed. In this phase, several comics that were popular in the 80s had so-called 'reboots': new versions of old stories. These new versions often completely ignore previous stories and recreate the character himself and the world around him. In the fourth, the third phase of the Punisher is investigated. This era represents a new consciousness in the United States. *Daredevil* season 2 will be analyzed based on the historical context and chronology of the character, to discover whether these themes are recurring, or whether this represents a different approach to the character. This ultimately reflects America's current domestic identity and ideologies in foreign policies.

## Theories and myths

*"It isn't real...you're being entertained. That's what I'm going for with this series folks. Entertainment. Plain and simple. Not a complex analysis of the causes of crime, not a portrait of one man's tragic descent into murderous psychosis, not an in-depth examination of the vigilante down the ages."<sup>8</sup>*

This essay analyzes popular culture texts to investigate constructions of American domestic identity and foreign relations. As Jason Dittmer argues, it is worth looking at popular texts because "popular culture [...] is one of the ways in which people come to understand their position both within a larger collective identity and within an even broader geopolitical narrative, or script."<sup>9</sup> Popular culture creates and reinforces domestic identity. Dittmer applies this theory to comic books such as *Captain America*. Comic book analysis is a relatively new form of research; it has been picking up since the early 2000s. "Only recently has this medium gained critical recognition for its maturity and sophistications after years of being confined to the outskirts of the intellectual mainstream."<sup>10</sup> Previously to this gain in interest, comics were considered juvenile, but, as Dittmer argues, "the seemingly innocent nature of the comic book medium contributes to its significance in the battle over American identity because it usually operates beneath the gaze of most culture critics."<sup>11</sup> To ignore these mediators of culture and history, is to ignore all possibilities of political and cultural messages in a medium that has shaped American children's minds since World War II, when comic books became "vehicles for American propaganda."<sup>12</sup>

The most notable example of past comic books analysis is Fredric Wertham's 1954 *Seduction of the Innocent*. Wertham explores the subtext of comic books, and used this to argue against the abuses by the American comic book industry. According to McAllister, Sewell, Jr and Gordon, this book was "seen as catalyst for an anti-comics campaign that economically crippled and culturally bowdlerized comic book production."<sup>13</sup> Although this work is now seen as a product of its time, its ideology has influenced the next generations of scholarly research on comic books. Another important example is Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* of 1971. It focused on the pro-capitalist message of the Donald Duck comics exported to South-America in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Garth Ennis, *Punisher: Welcome Back, Frank* (New York, NY: Marvel, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Jason Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (September 2005): 626, doi:10.1111/j.1467-8306.2005.00478.x.

<sup>10</sup> Megan Hill R Lance Holbert, "The Political Relevance of Entertainment Media," 2014, 436.

<sup>11</sup> Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire," 628.

<sup>12</sup> R Lance Holbert, "The Political Relevance of Entertainment Media," 438.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, and Ian Gordon, eds., *Comics & Ideology*, Popular Culture & Everyday Life, vol. 2 (New York: P. Lang, 2001), 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Amy Kaplan analyzes popular culture works, such as books and films, to establish their subtextual constructions of America's identity. She does so by investigating images of the foreign, because the foreign is always viewed through the domestic lens.<sup>15</sup> The text contains a juxtaposition between the domestic and the foreign: what is domestic, cannot be foreign and vice versa.<sup>16</sup> Even though the domestic and foreign are seen as two separate spheres or entities, they are in fact linked in multiple ways, Kaplan argues. In short, cultural texts "both erect and unsettle the ever-shifting boundaries between the domestic and the foreign, between 'at home' and 'abroad.'"<sup>17</sup> In a romance novel, the way the writer discusses the foreign, is in fact a direct reflection of the domestic identity at that time. For example, in romance novels from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, damsels in distress had to be rescued from the hands of the antagonists by the male American protagonist. In this period of time, there was anxiety on the mainland about the independent New Woman, a woman who did not depend on or need men. The books were used as an attempt to reinstate traditional gender roles.<sup>18</sup>

In the chapter called 'Manifest Domesticity,' Kaplan argues that the foreign is considered male and the domestic sphere is considered female. The male must be domesticated by the female or feminine. It is an alternate version of manifest destiny, hence the title 'Manifest Domesticity.' The female deserves to take over the male, in order to domesticate and condition them in the American traditions and ideologies: "The rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and that of domesticity share a vocabulary that turns imperial conquest into spiritual re-generation in order to efface internal conflict or external resistance in visions of geopolitical domination as global harmony."<sup>19</sup> In other words, Manifest Domesticity is a justification for conquering land and minds: it is not imperial, it is for their own good.

Dittmer's *Captain America's Empire: Reflections of Identity, Popular Culture, and Post 9/11 Geopolitics* combines comic book research and Amy Kaplan's method of scholarly analysis of a popular cultural text. He specifically looked at *Captain America* comics from Marvel Comics. Dittmer chose him for his "ability to connect the political projects of American nationalism, internal order, and foreign policy (all formulated at the national or global scale) with the scale of the individual, or the body."<sup>20</sup> Captain America himself embodies concepts of nationalism, internal order and foreign policy, in the same way, I will argue, the Punisher does. Dittmer found that *Captain America* uses

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<sup>15</sup> Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 106–8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>20</sup> Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire," 627.

Othering to define an identity for America, using Captain America as a vehicle:<sup>21</sup> "The reader (...) is reminded of his or her individual identity as an American and is told what that means in relation to the rest of the world."<sup>22</sup> Although Dittmer mostly discusses the political implications of Captain America as it relates to geopolitics, the basic premise of the article is the same as that of this thesis: a cultural text is a reflection of domestic identity and ideologies.

For ideology, I will be following the terminology of both Dittmer and Kaplan: ideology is a framework of thoughts and ideas that inform identity and decisions. Dittmer calls them "mythic and symbolic aspects of national identities."<sup>23</sup> Ideologies are ideas that inform America and Americans of their own self and their place in the world. An example further clarifies. Take for instance manifest destiny. This is the belief that America was destined by divine selection to conquer lands from the Native-Americans. As Anders Stephanson puts it: "...a tradition that created a sense of national place and direction in a variety of historical settings."<sup>24</sup> God selected them to become a great force in the world: Americans are therefore exceptional. It is their right to take land from others, to spread their religion across the world. God Himself has said so. Therefore, they are allowed to, for example, send troops to the Middle-East to spread American values such as Christianity, a free market and democracy. These values "gives coherence to its boundaries and justifies its domesticating mission."<sup>25</sup> In other words, ideals form the domestic national identity, which constructs a boundary between 'us' and 'them.' Whatever 'they' are, 'we' cannot be, and vice versa. The Other that lacks our values has therefore shown that it is righteous for America to domesticate them. Simultaneously, the use of these justifications mask imperial work: it cannot be imperial, because it is for the good of the people, whereas empire can only be used for the subjugation of people.

Through elements such as religion, race and gender, a contemporary domestic identity and an idea of America's place in the world are constructed in cultural texts. I will use additional elements such as vigilantism and justice. Cultural criminology explores cultural texts for notions of justice and crime. As Cary D. Adkinson elegantly summarizes: "Cultural criminologists suggest that realities of crime, deviance, and criminal justice practice cannot be understood outside the context of media and criminal justice forces that act, consciously and subconsciously, to shape hegemonic definitions of 'crime' and 'justice.'" <sup>26</sup> In *The Punisher*, themes of vigilantism, justice and crime can be

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<sup>21</sup> Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire."

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 641.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 626.

<sup>24</sup> Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), xiv.

<sup>25</sup> Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*, 31.

<sup>26</sup> Cary D. Adkinson, "The Amazing SpiderMan and the Evolution of the Comics Code: A Case Study in Cultural Criminology," n.d., 241.

explored. Then, the notions of vigilantism and justice will be connected to American domestic identity, much in the same way that Dittmer has used notions of geopolitics to study comic books to discover the implied American identity in a specific cultural text.

A connection is made between theories about masculinity in cultural texts about soldiers and American domestic identity. One such theory is the Reagan hard body. During the Ronald Reagan Presidency, an American war film trope came into existence, which was based on the image of President Reagan. He became the symbol of American masculinity, having characteristics such as being competitive, decisive, strong, unemotional, aggressive and the antithesis of feminine.<sup>27</sup> One illustration of the trope, is the workout montage that is featured in many 80s films. In this montage, a man is shown to go through boot camp to become a soldier: he is being degraded by his officer, screamed at, and made to go through extreme conditions to harden his body, such as sit in ice cold water. It emphasizes "physical prowess."<sup>28</sup> "The very plot of the film...narrates the transformations promised by the Reagan presidency. The softened, pampered, ill-trained male body will become, for the Reagan imaginary, the body of the Carter presidency, the body that was unable to defend its country/its towns/its values against outsiders," according to Susan Jeffords.<sup>29</sup> The hard body trope was a reflection of contemporary domestic identity, but a reflection of the desired domestic identity during the Reagan presidency too.<sup>30</sup> The hard body montage is not only an example of said trope; it is also an example of the 'war makes men out of boys' myth that is rampant in American war films. The idea is that because the young boy is forced to undertake certain actions, such sleeping with a prostitute or kill a person, he mentally becomes hardened. This is positive: he becomes a strong, unemotional man like Reagan and is more capable of protecting America and himself. He lacks emotions: he is able to perform in cold-blood, whether that means seeing all his brothers in arms die or killing the enemy. He has become a 'true man.'<sup>31</sup>

This essay is based on Kaplan's theory that it is possible to read domestic identity by looking at the representation of race, gender and the Other in cultural texts. Dittmer connected this theory to comic books by analyzing *Captain America* comics and found that these create rules and boundaries which confirm America's identity. Another usable ideology is manifest destiny, which contains notions on race and the foreign that inform America's decision making in foreign policy to this day and are still reflected in cultural texts.

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<sup>27</sup> Susan Jeffords, "The Reagan Hero: Rambo," in *The War Film*, ed. Robert T. Eberwein (Rutgers University Press, 2004), 140.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (Rutgers University Press, 1994), 23.

<sup>31</sup> Albert Auster, "Saving Private Ryan and American Triumphalism," in *The War Film*, ed. Robert T. Eberwein (Rutgers University Press, 2004), 211.

## Phase 1: Reagan Presidency

*"Your kind of scum has ruled this country too long, punk – and I'm here to put a stop to it – any way I can!"<sup>32</sup>*

Before the 1970s, comics had to adhere to the Comic Book Code: rules about the content of comics. The only way to sell comics, was to acquire approval from the Code first. However, in the 1970s, the creators of *The Amazing Spider-man* introduced a story about drugs, one of the subjects forbidden by the Comic Book Code. During this period, the comic book producers like Marvel and DC found a way to distribute to their readers directly: namely by selling to comic book shops, circumventing the Code.<sup>33</sup> This brought much freedom to the creators of comics, including the freedom to introduce the Punisher in 1974. According to Adkinson, this was "the most culturally significant event to come out of the post-Code revision years of *The Amazing Spider-man*."<sup>34</sup> Frank Castle's popularity would have "a tremendous influence on the superhero genre and help give rise to the 'grim and gritty' era in comic history."<sup>35</sup> Adkinson hypothesizes that another reason this 'grim and gritty' era came to be, is the greatly increased public fear of violence, drugs and other crime in the 1980s and 1990s. Both Jesse Allen, and Tyler Scully and Kenneth Moorman have come to the same conclusions, but specifically relate this to the fear in New York City, home of both Marvel and DC Comics.

In the 1980s, urban violence spiked across the United States but in New York City in particular. A public desire for sentence reform grew.<sup>36</sup> This did not lead to a drop in crime. The public was dissatisfied with the system: in 1989, a Gallup poll found that 48% of people had faith in the abilities of the police to protect them, but half the respondents did not.<sup>37</sup> It created a climate of fear as well.<sup>38</sup> Citizens took matters into their own hands, leading to a rise of vigilantism across America and specifically New York City. In the mid-1980s, the five episode miniseries called "Circle of Blood" was released, the Punisher's first own series. This was one year after the Bernhard Goetz incident. Goetz was on a subway when four black men approached him for money. Goetz was convinced that they were going to mug him, and shot at them, supposedly in self-defense. He was arrested and criticized for his vigilante-type actions. Simultaneously, however, he was praised for taking matters

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<sup>32</sup> Gerry Conway and Ross Andru, *The Punisher Strikes Twice!*, ed. Roy Thomas, *The Amazing Spider-Man* 129 (Marvel Comics, 1974), 10.

<sup>33</sup> Tyler Scully and Kenneth Moorman, "The Rise of Vigilantism in 1980 Comics: Reasons and Outcomes," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 47, no. 3 (June 1, 2014): 649, doi:10.1111/jpcu.12146.

<sup>34</sup> Adkinson, "The Amazing SpiderMan and the Evolution of the Comics Code," 257.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Scully and Moorman, "The Rise of Vigilantism in 1980 Comics," 635.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 638.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 636.

into his own hands, for standing his ground and preventing crime from happening in the first place.<sup>3940</sup>

Pop culture too was filled with vigilantes.<sup>41</sup> Scully and Moorman refer to an interview, in which Miller himself reflected on the reasons why vigilante superheroes are popular in times of public fear: "That just by carrying a gun they have a power over you. That all of the things that you're proudest of about yourself mean nothing in that context and are no defense for you. That's a really, really terribly frightening feeling. I think that these characters are a response to it. The incidents of burglars being killed in the middle of a robbery, and the Guardian Angels...comic-book references could very clearly be made about them, but they aren't coming from comic books, they're coming from the same place the comic-book characters are."<sup>42</sup>

In the 1970s, the Punisher was mostly a minor character, a villain for superheroes like Spider-man and Captain America. He first appeared in *The Amazing Spider-man* #129, that came out in February 1974. He was created by writer Garry Conway, to oppose Spider-man's "sweet-natured humanism."<sup>43</sup> In this issue the Punisher declares: "I kill only those who deserve killing...It's not something I like doing, it's simply something that has to be done." The Punisher did not appear again until August that same year, in issue #135. In the beginning, he was nothing but a disposable villain for Spidey to fight.

Frank Miller, a now world-famous and renowned graphic novel writer and illustrator, was a struggling artist in the early 1980s. Marvel took a chance on him and let him work on *Daredevil*, who was a second-tier superhero. After the studio let Miller take over both writing and illustrating duties in 1981, *Daredevil* sales rocketed. Matt Murdock went from being a B-superhero to an A-lister almost overnight.<sup>44</sup> One of the villains he faced during Miller's time, was the Punisher, in issues 182, 183 and 184. He became an antihero: he was working with Daredevil to clean up the streets of Hell's Kitchen, even though he does not agree with his ways and wants him in jail. The Punisher was an antagonist, as opposed to the protagonist Daredevil. Murdock uses much violence to catch criminals and shows a lack of trust in law-enforcement, he never crosses the line of killing a person. He finds

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<sup>39</sup> Jesse Allen, "Marvel Comics and New York Stories: Anti-Heroes and Street Level Vigilantes Daredevil and The Punisher," *All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects (2014-Present)*, October 1, 2014, 43–45, [http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/402](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/402).

<sup>40</sup> Scully and Moorman, "The Rise of Vigilantism in 1980 Comics," 640–42.

<sup>41</sup> Mike S. Dubose, "Holding Out for a Hero: Reaganism, Comic Book Vigilantes, and Captain America," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 6 (December 1, 2007): 915–35, doi:10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00478.x.

<sup>42</sup> Scully and Moorman, "The Rise of Vigilantism in 1980 Comics," 648.

<sup>43</sup> Kent Worcester, "The Punisher and the Politics of Retributive Justice," *Law Text Culture* 16, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 330.

<sup>44</sup> Allen, "Marvel Comics and New York Stories."

criminals who the cops are unable to arrest, beats them up, extracts information out of them, and drops them off at the police, to let the law take its course. The Punisher is similar: he too uses his special skills to find criminals who were able to go free, but he is judge, jury and executioner. The juxtaposition between Daredevil and the Punisher once again made Castle an antagonist and a villain.<sup>45</sup>

Following this run, the Punisher had his first own series: a miniseries that ran from January to May 1986. In 1988, he got his own ongoing series for 107 issues long. In 1988 *The Punisher: War Journal* came out. The series ran until 1995. *The Punisher: War Zone* followed in 1992. The late 90s saw a decline in interest in the character. A few miniseries featuring the character as protagonist came out, a short ongoing series was launched. In 1989, the first feature film with the character was released. The 1989 Australian-American production starred Swedish actor Dolph Lundgren, who is mostly known for his impressive physique. A *Variety* staff writer called the character "two-dimensional," with the film mostly consisting of "slaughters of every conceivable kind."<sup>46</sup> The film was not received well critically; it currently has a 28% rating on website *Rotten Tomatoes*.

Castle had made the full transformation from being a villain and an antagonist in *The Amazing Spider-man* in the early 1970s, to a popular antihero and protagonist in his own series. As Coogan writes: "As he became popular in the 1980s and was featured in multiple series, the Punisher switched back and forth between the aggressor formula and the superhero genres depending on whether he appeared in his own comics or made guest appearances in superhero stories, that is his definition as a superhero varied depending upon the concatenation of conventions in any particular story."<sup>47</sup>

### The good guy or the bad guy

In the first issue to feature the Punisher: "The Punisher Strikes Twice!," the moral place of the Punisher is established on the first page. The Jackal, a well-known foe of Spider-man, calls him "friend." The Jackal hires the Punisher to kill Spider-man: he instantly becomes a foe of Spider-man himself. The Punisher agrees because he thinks that Spider-man killed Norman Osborn: "I kill only those who *deserve* killing, Jackal. And *Spider-man* deserves to *die!*"<sup>48</sup> (emphasis original) Killing is against Spider-man's moral code; he delivers the bad guys to the cops to let justice can take its

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<sup>45</sup> Scully and Moorman, "The Rise of Vigilantism in 1980 Comics," 642.

<sup>46</sup> Variety Staff and Variety Staff, "Review: 'The Punisher,'" *Variety*, January 1, 1990, <http://variety.com/1989/film/reviews/the-punisher-1200428190/>.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Coogan, "The Definition of the Superhero," in *A Comics Studies Reader*, ed. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 89.

<sup>48</sup> Conway and Andru, *The Punisher Strikes Twice!*, 2.

course. The Punisher, however, does not care about these specifics. At first glance, the Punisher is nothing but a flat villainous character for Spider-man to beat.

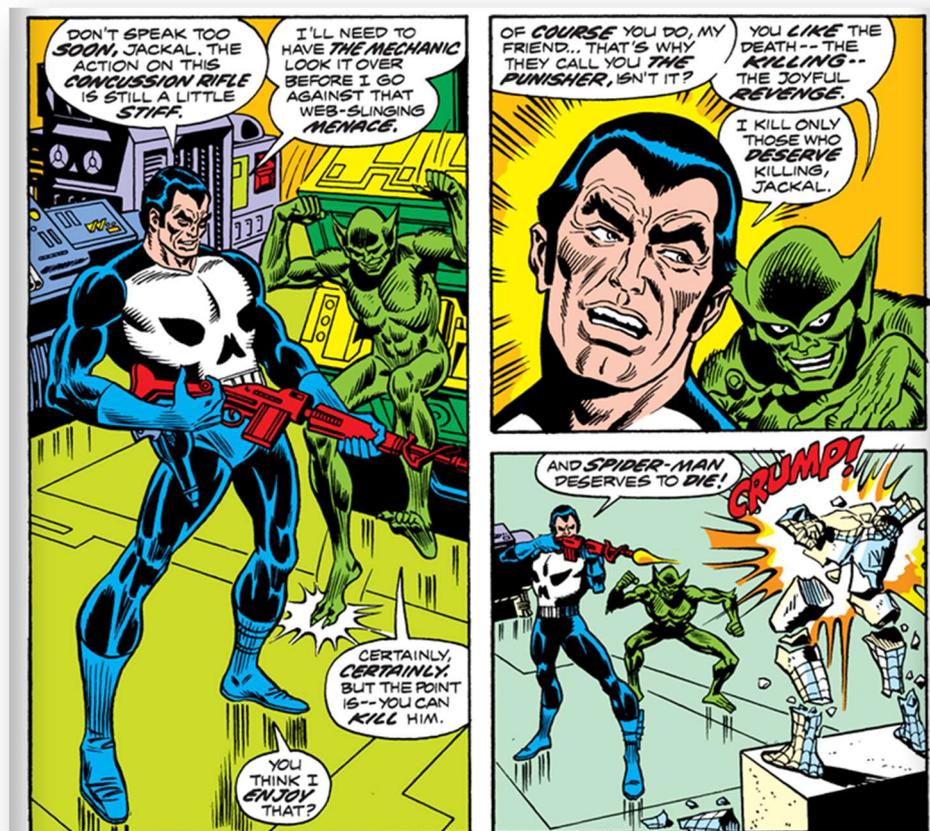


Figure 1 First dialogue of the Punisher.<sup>49</sup>

In every issue the Punisher is in, he is morally re-situated: when the Punisher is a guest character, he is 'evil', whereas he is 'good' when he is the protagonist of the story. In the Frank Miller series of *Daredevil*, in 1982, the Punisher is in prison. His first action is beating up three Injun Joe's boys. By placing him in jail, he is set-up as a criminal: he broke the law and was caught by the police. In this moment, he is a villain. He represents the evil side and is treated as such. He lacks empathy and a relatable motive for his actions. However, whenever he is a protagonist, like for example in his own series of 1984, he is on the good side. He is treated like a superhero: he is a layered character with a rich, tragic origin story that legitimizes his transformation into a hero. He narrates his own stories. This internal monologue is a way of familiarizing the reader with the character and to make the reader sympathize with him too. In short, it humanizes him. After all, if one does not sympathize for the main character, one has no reason for reading the comic. It too means that the reader is able to live the experiences of the Punisher vicariously: he is able to have the same redemption and

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

vengeance through the Punisher. As Scully and Moorman note, "his writers believed that the Punisher reflected the average American's secret desires of striking back at the criminal element and eschewing the legality of their actions for ruthless immediacy."<sup>50</sup>

At certain moments, the boundary between good and evil according to Castle, solidifies. In an altercation with a criminal, the thug ends up shooting into civilians on the subway, wounding one of them. The Punisher thinks: "Shooting into civilians? It's not done. That's a cardinal rule of the profession. Contendre crossed a line."<sup>51</sup> Now he is deemed worthy of killing. The boundary is ever moving, depending on the protagonist. For example, Daredevil often uses violence, so much that it is a miracle the attacked person even survives, yet he is the protagonist. He is the hero vigilante with whom the reader is supposed to side with. The only possible escalation of violence is killing people. Acts of violence in themselves do not entail a death sentence from the Punisher because he never intends to kill Daredevil, not once in the three issues he appears in. The only offense that warrants death, is to be a killer. Yet the 'contendre' is doomed to be assassinated, even though he has not in fact killed anyone, he shot someone in the arm. The rules appear to be as unclear for the readers as they are clear to Castle.

This one scene is an example of the general treatment of criminals: they *are* their crimes. There is no regard for his background, his history, his family. He is reduced to *being* this one moment. This complete lack of nuance makes it easy to justify and legitimize the Punisher's actions. Not only is the criminal doomed because of these actions, it illustrates that the real reason Castle attacks criminals so violently, is to protect civilians. These people are innocent, according to the Punisher. However, it never becomes evident that perhaps these people are not innocent either, just because they lack engagement with organized crime. This is not a topic of discussion, however: the reader need not occupy himself with these issues. He just needs to *think* the Punisher's actions are legitimate.

The overall violence escalates throughout the years. Whereas there is barely any violence in *The Amazing Spider-man* in the early 70s, by the 80s the violence is increased. Taking into account that Spider-man especially is a demure vigilante: he uses his webs to catch criminals and rarely lays a hand on them. There is more death, gun-violence and hand-to-hand combat in the 80s. This is connected to the fact that comic books became darker in the 1980s in tone of voice. Violence, crime, drugs and war became topics of discussion, partially because the comic books printers no longer had to adhere to the Comic Books Code, and partially as a reflection of the fear of the public concerning

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<sup>50</sup> Scully and Moorman, "The Rise of Vigilantism in 1980 Comics," 646.

<sup>51</sup> Stan Lee, Steven Grant, and Marvel Entertainment Group, eds., *Stan Lee Presents The Punisher, Circle of Blood!* (New York, N.Y: Marvel Entertainment Group, 1988), 62, 63.

growing violent crimes. When one thinks of comic books, one imagines colorful pages, filled with text balloons featuring words that represents sound effects, like KAPOW! This is what *The Amazing Spider-man* comics looked like in the 1970s. Then, in the 1980s, Frank Miller took over the *Daredevil* series. The comics are visually darker: they are no longer as colorful as *The Amazing Spider-man*. The subject matter is more serious too: in the issues that feature the Punisher, a child dies due to an accidental drug overdose.

A side-effect of the good versus evil dichotomy, is that the sanity of the evil-side can be questioned. In *Daredevil*, the titular hero and Castle end up fighting on a rooftop. The Punisher truly thinks that “there is no other way – to deal with criminals.”<sup>52</sup> Death is the only option. He believes that he and Daredevil could work together, because they ultimately want the same thing: a safe city. From the point of view of Daredevil, the mere suggestion is insane: he does not approve of killing. The readers are already involved with Murdock: they love and trust him, so the Punisher appears delusional and crazy. This makes it easy to deny that the Punisher's behavior, is approved in any way by the creators of the comics. On top of that, the Punisher reaffirmed as villain.

### Failing institutions and vigilantism

The Punisher has his mission due to failure of the justice system. It has failed his family and is unable to lock up criminals, allowing them to deal in drugs and kill people for profits. The police are incompetent: arriving on crime-scenes too late, getting lost while driving. The police are fools in the Punisher's universe. As the Punisher says in issue #1 of *The Punisher* in 1986: “Things in this country are getting out of control. Especially *crime*. The *police* can't handle it. The *courts* can't handle it. *Congress* can't stop it.”<sup>53</sup> (emphasis original) In the 1980s, fear got a hold of the public, who lost trust in the justice system. The Punisher cashed in on this fear, because this legitimizes vigilantism: if the police will not do their jobs, I will do it for them.

Castle has to cope with feelings of inability and frustration with classic law enforcement. The tough strong soldier from Vietnam, is unable to help his family or himself. The Punisher is enraged, and according to Worcester, the Punisher values “emotion over reason and unchecked anger over due process.”<sup>54</sup> However, the Punisher may be frustrated and enraged with the institutions, he rarely appears to be enraged when he is delivering justice on his adversaries. He is calm and operates with precision, like a trained soldier. This rage is contained by the trained individual, he is able to leave his emotions out of the process. He snaps sometimes, but this is most often the case

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<sup>52</sup> Frank Miller and Roger McKenzie, *DAREDEVIL BY FRANK MILLER & KLAUS JANSON VOL. 2* (New York: Marvel, 2008), 296.

<sup>53</sup> Lee, Grant, and Marvel Entertainment Group, *Stan Lee Presents The Punisher, Circle of Blood!*, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Worcester, “The Punisher and the Politics of Retributive Justice,” 329.

when he is an antagonist, not when he is a protagonist: his rage would delegitimize his actions. Frank Castle may not officially be part of the authorities, he still represents them in his own way. Ergo, he must represent these institutions in the expected ways: justice must be delivered, with no regard for personal feelings.

### Reagan hard body

Castle represents the typical Reagan hard body, the hyper masculine male. He is physically fit: when he is shot, he is able to push through and continue his war. It is not just through the actions of his body that his strength is shown, it is in his physical appearance too. Especially in the comics of the 80s and the film of 1989, the Punisher is often shown either completely naked, or with a bare chest. He is strong, muscular, and even though he is a war veteran, not covered in scars. On top of that, he is tall and towers over all of his foes. His is a perfect body, which he attained a soldier: he has been through several training drills, has gained muscle in order to be able to protect his country and to be turned into a true American male. This is hyper masculine rhetoric: the idea that war makes men out of boys. All in all, this creates an intimidating body and makes his physical prowess an important part of his character, because of the repeated show-downs of his ability to kill criminals with a single bullet or beat them to a pulp.



*Figure 2 Introduction of Frank Castle in The Punisher, 1989. Castle is sitting naked, in an almost meditative way. This is cross-edited with the death of his family.<sup>55</sup>*

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<sup>55</sup> Mark Goldblatt, *The Punisher*, Action, Crime, Drama, (1989).

Women are a rare phenomenon in the Punisher's universe. The stories revolve around men: all criminals attacked by Castle are male. Sometimes the stories feature women, but almost always as negative stereotypes: in *The Punisher* v1 from 1986, the only female in the story is a femme fatale: she seduces Castle to double-cross him. However, even though she is a criminal and all criminals deserve death, she is never seen dying or dead. The story has an open ending: she is in a life-threatening situation and Castle chooses not to help her. He is complicit in her probable death, but this interpretation is left to the reader. All in all, the Punisher's world is a hyper masculine one.

Worcester argues that the Punisher is not racist and contains no racist overtones because he is "indifferent to ordinary political discourse," and so, "terms like 'conservative', 'reactionary' or 'racist' do not quite apply."<sup>56</sup> The Punisher focusses on whoever he deems appropriate to kill. All they have to be is a criminal, regardless of their race, according to Worcester. The Punisher is neither overtly racist nor indifferent, however, it does contain evident themes of race. The race of the Punisher's opponents is subject to change. Most often, these are white, Italian mobsters, but in *The Punisher* of 1986, the Punisher hurts and kills several black criminals. About one-third of the people in the miniseries are black. They are token characters: they are present but do not speak. This was the only series to feature black people as citizens as well.



Figure 3 Frank Castle encounters criminals in prison.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Worcester, "The Punisher and the Politics of Retributive Justice," 339.

<sup>57</sup> Lee, Grant, and Marvel Entertainment Group, *Stan Lee Presents The Punisher, Circle of Blood!*, 8.

## Nostalgia

The Punisher is a nostalgic character. In the 1800s, in the days of cowboys while the West was still being discovered by immigrants, there was no effective law-enforcement in the way we have now. Vigilantism was common: gangs of people came together to enforce the law. They did not just apprehend people, but served as executioners as well. This practices were common, and were supported by local businessmen, attorneys and politicians.<sup>58</sup> Castle is a cowboy, who argues that he is needed because of failing institutions. Vigilantism is quick and easy: no fair trial is required. It is indicative of a desire for supposed simpler times.

The fact that the Punisher operates alone is significant because it means that he rejects authority and compromise. The Punisher is a lone ranger: the cowboy with nothing to lose. He cannot be corrupted. He is a pure source of punishment and morality because he is not affiliated with the corrupt institutions that are the government, police and media. Yet this also means there is no trial, no process and no responsibility. It is lone justice too. Other examples of the lone ranger is *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971). In the 1980s, vigilantism became a popular topic in popular culture. Examples of this are abundant: *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988), *Lethal Weapon* (Richard Donner, 1987) and *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987). These are examples of cops turned vigilante, a throwback to the 'good old days' in the Old West.

On top of that, the Marvel Universe is filled with people that are technologically competent. Tony Stark, also known as Iron Man, would be an evident example of this. The Punisher relies on his own skills, his talents, not on his high-tech superhero suit. The Punisher is a relic, old school: all he is capable of is shoot the guns he owns, like a cowboy. As Worcester points out, the Punisher "relies on his wits, training, weaponry, and sense of determination."<sup>59</sup> Lorrie Palmer argues that there is a distinct relation between the Punisher, film noir and the Western. "In each case, traditional forces of authority are inadequate, leaving the protagonist to enter confrontation with the hostile foes arrayed against him (and a society unable to do its own). He must negotiate the shifting dynamics of male power and often adapt the villain's dark modus as his own in order to defeat him and gain vengeance and justice."<sup>60</sup> This is exactly what the Punisher does: he becomes dark, tough, and unemotional, much like the enemies he assassinates. He feels there is simply no other way to create a safer New York City.

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<sup>58</sup> Scully and Moorman, "The Rise of Vigilantism in 1980 Comics," 625,626.

<sup>59</sup> Worcester, "The Punisher and the Politics of Retributive Justice," 335.

<sup>60</sup> Lorrie Palmer, "'Le Western Noir': The Punisher as Revisionist Superhero Western," in *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!: Essays on the Revision of Characters in Comic Books, Film and Television*, ed. Terrence R. Wandtke (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co, 2007), 194.

According to Worcester, the Punisher is “deeply rooted in Old Testament values,”<sup>61</sup> and he quotes the Bible to illustrate this argument. “Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it...Every one that is found shall be thrust through; and every one that is joined unto them shall fall by the sword.”<sup>62</sup> The Punisher is a perfect fit for this description. He is the wrath that comes to claim the lives of the sinners. This a Godly justification for the Punisher to kill criminals: once a sinner, always a sinner. And sinners must be eliminated.

### Fear and fantasy

The Punisher has changed, even though he might appear to be a consistent character. The biggest change is the amount of violence in the comics – in the films it has been steady. He started out as a villain for Spider-man. These comics were meant for kids; they were non-violent. Blood was never shown and Spider-man caught people by using his web. When the Punisher was released from *The Amazing Spider-man* and became part of *Daredevil*, the violence escalated. People were beat up and there was gun violence, but no blood. Visually it was still reminiscent of *The Amazing Spider-man*. The same is true for his own miniseries.

As Worcester points out, the fact that the Punisher is a villain in some stories, and a superhero in others, “allows Marvel to simultaneously distance itself from the character and simultaneously appeal to consumers who prefer uncompromising vigilantism to standard superhero narratives.” In other words, Marvel has created a character whose behavior is typically frowned upon in the Marvel Universe. By using him as a hero in some stories and a villain in others, Marvel is able to both disapprove of and celebrate his behavior. He is praised for violence and vigilantism, but hated and feared too. As an antagonist, he can be used to critique war and killing, on feeling entitled to kill others for personal gain. As Worcester states, sometimes he is a cautionary tale: he openly states in the story that his war is one that can only end in his death. He will not stop and the mob will keep replacing the fallen.<sup>63</sup> Castle himself says so in *The Punisher* of 1986: “I have my mission. My war. A war I’ll never win. The more I do, the worse things seem to get. A mob boss dies, someone else takes his place. Nothing changed. Not Really. I can’t kill all of them. I see a day, not too far off, when I’ll be too slow then I’ll be dead and they’ll go on and nothing will have changed.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Worcester, “The Punisher and the Politics of Retributive Justice,” 344.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Worcester, “The Punisher and the Politics of Retributive Justice.”

<sup>64</sup> Lee, Grant, and Marvel Entertainment Group, *Stan Lee Presents The Punisher, Circle of Blood!*, 53.

In times of upheaval, America takes time to find its identity again by reaching back in time and reiterate ideologies that they think are true. Its identity is mediated through Castle. He represents a nostalgia to earlier times and supposedly better times. Although the Punisher operates on American soil, manifest destiny is nonetheless a relevant ideology. Much in the way that Westerns take place on American soil, the frontier represents the border between the domestic and the foreign. It is therefore possible to practice manifest destiny in America: "...stories of the American west are still stories of empire, they repeat and reify a moment in American history where overt imperial conquest is masked by the myth of divine sanction repeated in the teleological narrative of Manifest Destiny."<sup>65</sup> For example, the treatment of non-white and non-American people is reminiscent of manifest destiny. Frank Castle is an extension of this ideology, even though he is a Catholic: he has been selected himself to be a part of America, has become an American by name, his religion all but erased. He has decided that these Italian Catholics have no place in the United States. The same is true for *The Punisher* of 1989: Frank fights the Japanese yakuza. Ultimately, it is up to Frank Castle to protect the lands from invasion by undesirable races. In other words, Castle practices manifest destiny on America's behalf.

Castle is a white man who has been appropriated by America to serve as a tool of war, to domesticate foreign lands. The fact that Frank Castle has been turned into a man by going to war, is an illustration of the 'war makes men out of boys' ideal that is present in America's identity. He has been made into an American man. A typical American man, therefore, must look like Frank Castle: he is white, tall, muscular, tough, ruthless, unemotional and always know exactly what is right and what is wrong.

As Susan Kollin notes, "these works extend the codes and conventions of the Western to produce an American orientalist discourse that help resolve threats to U.S. national identity."<sup>66</sup> He is a revisionist cowboy too: he uses vigilante justice similar to the vigilante justice America used to have in the frontier days. His justice and vigilantism becomes a reflection of manifest destiny too. He has been chosen to become a true American male, and now he must be used as a tool to vanquish foreign invaders, the Other, whether they are Irish, Japanese, Chinese or Italian, in order to reclaim his land. . It is justified for Castle to permanently deport them. This mediates the perceived foreign threats to domestic identity. The innocent represent true Americans. Manifest destiny is reflected in the Punisher as a way of justifying American presence in foreign countries: the hand of God guides

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<sup>65</sup> Randall Gann, "Cowboys, Six-Guns, and Horses: Manifest Destiny and Empire in the American Western," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 3 (April 3, 2015): 217, doi:10.1080/10509208.2011.646585.

<sup>66</sup> Susan Kollin, "'Remember, You're the Good guy:' Hidalgo, American Identity, and Histories of the Western," *American Studies* 51, no. 1-2 (2010): 5, doi:10.1353/ams.2010.0058.

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the Punisher – America – to reclaim their land from foreigners and spread their civility and knowledge. Justifying the behavior of the Punisher, justifies American behavior: it is not imperialistic because America has the knowledge needed to domesticate the foreign.

Ultimately, the Punisher represents different identities at different times. When he is an antagonist, he represents everything that is wrong with hyper masculinity, violence, rage and a lack of rationality, war and lack of support for veterans. When he is a protagonist, he represents the Reagan hard body, fearlessness, determination, rationality: the true American male.

## Phase 2: Bush Jr. Presidency

*“This character represents the frustrations of millions of people who feel powerless and who fantasize about striking back their enemies, be they real or imagined.”<sup>67</sup>*

On 11 September 2001, America was attacked on its own soil. Terrorists of the group Al-Qaeda hijacked several airplanes, with the intention to attack the Pentagon and the White House in Washington D.C. and the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. The terrorists who attacked the Pentagon and the World Trade Center succeeded and killed thousands of Americans. Heroic Americans managed to take the plane aiming for the White House down before it arrived at its intended target. America was shaken up because it had never been attacked by on its own soil like this. On March 19, 2003, President George Bush Jr. announced Operation Iraqi Freedom. President George Bush Jr., in a speech of April 10, 2003: “We will help you build a peaceful and representative government that protects the rights of all citizens. And then our military forces will leave. Iraq will go forward as a unified, independent and sovereign nation.”<sup>68</sup> Operation Iraqi Freedom’s goal was ultimately to free Iraq from their oppressive regime, and eliminate the threat of terrorism to both Iraq and the rest of the world. This was the first leg of the War on Terror, which spread throughout the Middle-East, to Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. It is in this world that interest was renewed in the Punisher. He was needed so the United States could mediate and renegotiate their domestic identity, because as Christine Muller argues, 9/11 caused an identity crisis. It made the United States aware of their vulnerability and mortality.<sup>69</sup> “Likewise, cultural memory formations seek to foster a coherent narrative of a disrupting event to restore cultural cohesion.” In other words, the Punisher helps to ‘mend’ national identity and to recreate the domestic identity and the cultural cohesion disrupted by 9/11.

In March 2004, the popular MAX series came out, created by returning artists Ennis and Dillon. This series was aimed at a mature audience and featured graphic violence and language. This series ran until October 2009. In 2007, *The Punisher: War Journal* was rebooted as a MAX series and so was *The Punisher: War Zone* in 2009. It is an echo of consumer behavior regarding the Punisher in the 1980s. These are the biggest titles to come out during this period; several miniseries and ongoing series came out simultaneously.

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<sup>67</sup> Worcester, “The Punisher and the Politics of Retributive Justice,” 329.

<sup>68</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2005).

<sup>69</sup> Christine Muller, “Witnessing the Fall: September 11 and the Crisis of the Permeable Self,” in *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture: September 11 and beyond*, ed. Alexander Schöpp and May Brawley Hill (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 50–51.

More films were made too. *The Punisher* (Jonathan Hensleigh, 2004) featured Thomas Jane as Frank Castle, the antagonist is played by John Travolta. *Time Out's* LZ describes the film: "Just a laugh, a thrill, and plenty of sustained weapons fire. Thus did Marvel Comics-writer Garth Ennis introduce his muscled psycho of one-track vengeance. Yet even these intellectual ground zero expectations are disappointed in the unsteady comedy of this latest live-action adaptation, whose hootsome script seems to have blown its own brains out amid the non-stop cartoon carnage."<sup>70</sup> LZ gave the film one star. *Punisher: War Zone* (Lexi Alexander, 2008) is the latest film featuring Frank Castle. This time, the protagonist is portrayed by Ray Stevenson. Dominic West plays Jigsaw, a well-known villain from the comic books. This film is the most comic-inspired film of the films mentioned; it heavily borrows from the comics not only character or plot, but visually as well. The consensus of the critics is as follows: "*Punisher: War Zone* recalls the excessively violent, dialogue-challenged actioners of the 1980s, and coincidentally feels two decades out of date."

### Dichotomy of good and evil

This dichotomy is a prominent feature of the Punisher's methods, much like in the 1980s. In fact, the treatment of this dichotomy is an echo of that in the 1980s. Even though the mob is responsible for the death of his wife and two young children, he hunts the mob for justice, not vengeance. They have not only killed his family, they continue to murder and spread drugs around his city. Just where a criminal crosses the line, is not discussed. The line is blurred, even though the Punisher treats the line as being crystal clear. This allows the Punisher to maintain a black and white version of crime and justice: his actions are legitimate. All the reader has to care about, is the Punisher wants to kill them, which instantly informs the reader his actions warrant his death. Besides that, criminals are still reduced to their criminal behavior. They are rarely shown with friends or family. Even during social gatherings, like parties or funerals, the criminals are only ever shown with other mobsters. This allows the Punisher to remain the good guy, even though he murders people, whereas criminals are the bad guys.

In MAX, an old companion of Castle called Micro even says that he killed 800 people in the ten years they have worked together. Still, his actions being criminal are rarely the topic of discussion. When they are, the result is always that the question remains unanswered because his vigilantism is justified.

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<sup>70</sup> LZ, "The Punisher," *Time Out London*, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://www.timeout.com/london/film/the-punisher-2004>.

The frustrations with institutions remains intact. The institutions are corrupted. Even worse: cops themselves dislike the law enforcement organization they work for. The cops cooperate with Frank. For example, in the film *Punisher: War Zone* of 2008, the police aid Frank in his hunt. As they say, it is because they can only dream of doing what he is doing. They interpret the rules surrounding being a law enforcer as limiting and restraining. What they want, even though they are law enforcement and are supposed to protect the law, is end crime by any means necessary. The system frustrates them too. Overall, law enforcement and the government are never trusted, except when the Punisher uses them to fight crime his own way.

### Lack of diversity

The Punisher comics are all about men, as they were in the past, and are again post 9/11. All criminals who are attacked by Frank Castle are men and of course, Castle himself is a masculine man, a Reagan hard body type also present in the post-Vietnam era. The only women who appear in this era, are villains, and there seems to be a quota: one female character appears in every story. In the MAX story "In the Beginning," one of the FBI agents is a woman. She is a caricature of a 'strong female character': she only talks about sex and how much she would love to have it with Castle. Multiple male FBI agents are killed, but she is shot in the arm. In the last story in the MAX series, "Welcome to the Bayou," one of the criminals Castle encounters is female. She is not shown dead either. The women in Castle's world do not die, unless it is with the purpose of sympathizing with Castle. His wife is dead and the other women remain alive for this reason.

The presence of black people in comics declined. In the MAX series, the criminals or citizens are rarely black. The Punisher battles the Italian mob most often. This is significant because of Frank's own heritage. He is Sicilian, which may not be Italian, but it is close enough. When Frank was six, his parents changed his name from Francis Castilogne, to Frank Castle. Frank can comfortably represent America in these fights, his heritage and his religion erased, as they often remain unmentioned. He is again appropriated as an American tool for manifest destiny, in the films especially. In the film *Punisher: War Zone* of 2008, most protagonists are white, with a few token exceptions. The criminals who are attacked, however, are of Irish, Japanese, Russian and African heritage. Diversity is only reflected in the 'evil' side.

In all the post 9/11 materials, Muslims and Al-Qaeda are referenced in nearly every story and film. Before 9/11, this did not happen in the materials researched. On the first page of issue #4 of the MAX series, Micro asks Frank if he would like to hunt the real monster: Bin Laden. Micro argues: "The ones who kill thousands. The ones who do it at a distance, training fanatics and cutting

them loose to kill and maim and devastate. Go out into the world and get them, Frank. Do it for your country. For civilization itself. With the full backing and support of your government. Combine the resources of the US military with the thing you've created – and unleash it on the truly deserving.”

Several ideas are represented in this single monologue. First of all, Frank needs to attack the “truly deserving” for “civilization,” suggesting the ones who attacked America on 9/11 are uncivilized. They deserved to be civilized by the tool that is the Punisher. The foreign lands are masculine, that need domestication by the masculine tools created at home, in order to feminize it, like the American main land, according to Dodds.<sup>71</sup> The Punisher is the masculine tool who attempts to domesticate the lands once more, describing in essence Kaplan's Manifest Domesticity.

Secondly, Micro talks about the “truly deserving.” He calls Bin Laden a monster. This re-establishes the dichotomy between good and evil: the Punisher is good and he needs to fight the ‘good fight,’ to eradicate evil in the world. This obscures any imperial behavior: America fights on foreign soil in the name of making the world a safer place.

Lastly, Micro mentions that the United States was attacked “at a distance.” The United States was denied a face-to-face fight, like Dodds stated: “[...] the use of airliners as weapons of mass destruction was indicative not only of so-called asymmetrical warfare but also denied Americans an opportunity to confront their adversaries in a proverbial ‘show-down’.”<sup>72</sup> America was denied a face-to-face show-down with their enemies, which has been part of their history, going back to the frontier days. Dodds too points out that this is specifically been important after 9/11.<sup>73</sup> Traditionally, in American culture, America has been able to defend itself against their enemies. Their enemies faced them on the battlefield, allowing America to defend itself and look their attackers in the eye, a legacy left behind by the frontier and manifest destiny. They, however, have been denied this “cowboy-like showdown,” as Dodds calls it, on 9/11.<sup>74</sup> On top of that, The Punisher is capable of having this cowboy-like showdown with his adversaries: he seeks them out and shoots at them, while being able to look them in the eyes. He is able to show bravery in the face of evil. This is an example of why the Punisher is considered to be a cowboy, just like in the 1980s.

### Cowboy and soldier

There are examples in almost every Punisher text of these show-downs. In the MAX series of 2004, he kills with guns. In the 2004 film *The Punisher*, the Punisher faces off with his enemy. They

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<sup>71</sup> Klaus Dodds, “Hollywood and the Popular Geopolitics of the War on Terror,” *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 8 (December 1, 2008): 1621–37, doi:10.1080/01436590802528762.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 1629.

<sup>73</sup> Dodds, “Hollywood and the Popular Geopolitics of the War on Terror.”

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 1629.

stand opposite one another, guns strapped to their hips, waiting for the other person to draw. Castle is a cowboy who serves vigilante justice. That has implications for the people he fights too. If Castle is a cowboy fighting on the frontier, then his enemies are the Indians who had to be vanquished from the lands the Protestants came to take, as guided by manifest destiny. Castle is the Catholic hand of God who is to take the lands for Americans, take it back from the foreign invaders such as the Irish mob. He rejects these people as citizens of the United States of America. This is essential manifest destiny rhetoric. This is why it is important to look at his own heritage. He is Sicilian, but the fact that his name has been changed from a Sicilian name, to an American one, speaks volumes. He is a foreigner who has been fully accepted as being an American, and therefore he is an American tool.



*Figure 4 A final look at Frank Castle speaks volumes: as he draws to save a friend, the word 'Jesus' blacks out on the cross, leaving just the word 'saves' brightly illuminated just above the Punisher.<sup>75</sup>*

When it comes to the Punisher, a lot of war references are used. He uses army-style weaponry too. In the first story of the MAX series, called "In the Beginning," he uses a bomb that is a well-known symbol of the American army: it is slightly rounded, flat, and reads 'front towards enemy.' He uses words like 'terrorize', 'eliminate.' It is not just him; the people around him constantly say that he is at war. The Punisher is a veteran of the Vietnam War. In the MAX comics of 2004, he is in his late fifties, early sixties. Micro states that his children were supposed to be in their

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<sup>75</sup> Lexi Alexander, *Punisher: War Zone*, Action, Crime, Drama, (2008).

thirties. In the film of 2004, however, he is a young ex-special ops. In which war that was, is not specified, but since he is a younger man again, with a young child, it cannot be the Vietnam War.

Strangely, even though the Punisher is a war veteran who has seen too much while at war, post-traumatic stress syndrome and mental illness are not discussed in the Punisher comics. It is, however, mentioned in the MAX series. While Micro interrogates Castle, he says: "You kill because you like it, Frank. Maybe it was in you all along, but...I believe you got a taste for it in Vietnam. I know about all that scout-sniper work in your second tour. I know something happened on your third."<sup>76</sup> Making the Punisher a sufferer of PTSD, would immediately delegitimize his actions and become a direct critique on how the United States handles the mental well-being of its veterans. Castle would become a patient who is in dire need of mental help. He would be a person whom the system failed dramatically, and would turn the comics from a cool superhero story, to a tragedy. The idea of Frank Castle as a strong American soldier would fail, then, too. He cannot be a strong Reagan hard body if he would admit to having feelings and psychological hardship. It also lifts responsibility from the American war machine: it was in him all along, touring in Vietnam simply opened the door to it.

## Echo

Castle is appropriated for different times: he is no longer a veteran of the Vietnam War in the latest materials. In the films, race is a more visible factor than in the comics studied. He fights Muslims or Muslims are mentioned after 9/11, whereas they were an invisible group before. Although they are not represented in a positive manner: in *Punisher: War Zone* of 2008, they are referred to as 'ragheads' and are never visible, only talked about. Women are not much better off: they remain a rare phenomenon in the Punisher universe.

In the 80s, even though there was much gun-violence in the comics, blood was a rare sight. The reader was aware of death because the criminals fell down and did not rise again, not because of the presence of blood. In the noughties, violence reaches a new level. In the MAX series, colors are completely washed out. Everything has a blue hue, making every color appear dull and grey. The comics appear more realistic and a lot darker. Specifically, this makes any blood and gore shown, stand out. The violence is at all-time high for the Punisher. Brains are splattered across the pages, guts are spilled, blood gushes out of victims, faces are mangled up. This is an adult-series; extreme violence is allowed. This is not possible in a regular series, be they *The Amazing Spider-man*, *Captain America* or *Daredevil*. The extreme, almost "pornographic" violence the Punisher uses is justified as

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<sup>76</sup> Garth Ennis, *Punisher Max: The Complete Collection Vol. 1* (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2016), 58.

long as he unleashes his fury onto criminals.<sup>77</sup> Like Worcester observes: "Violence in this context is legitimate, as long as it is decisively retributive."<sup>78</sup> In the MAX series, the Punisher kills fifty people at a party filled with mobsters in one fell swoop.

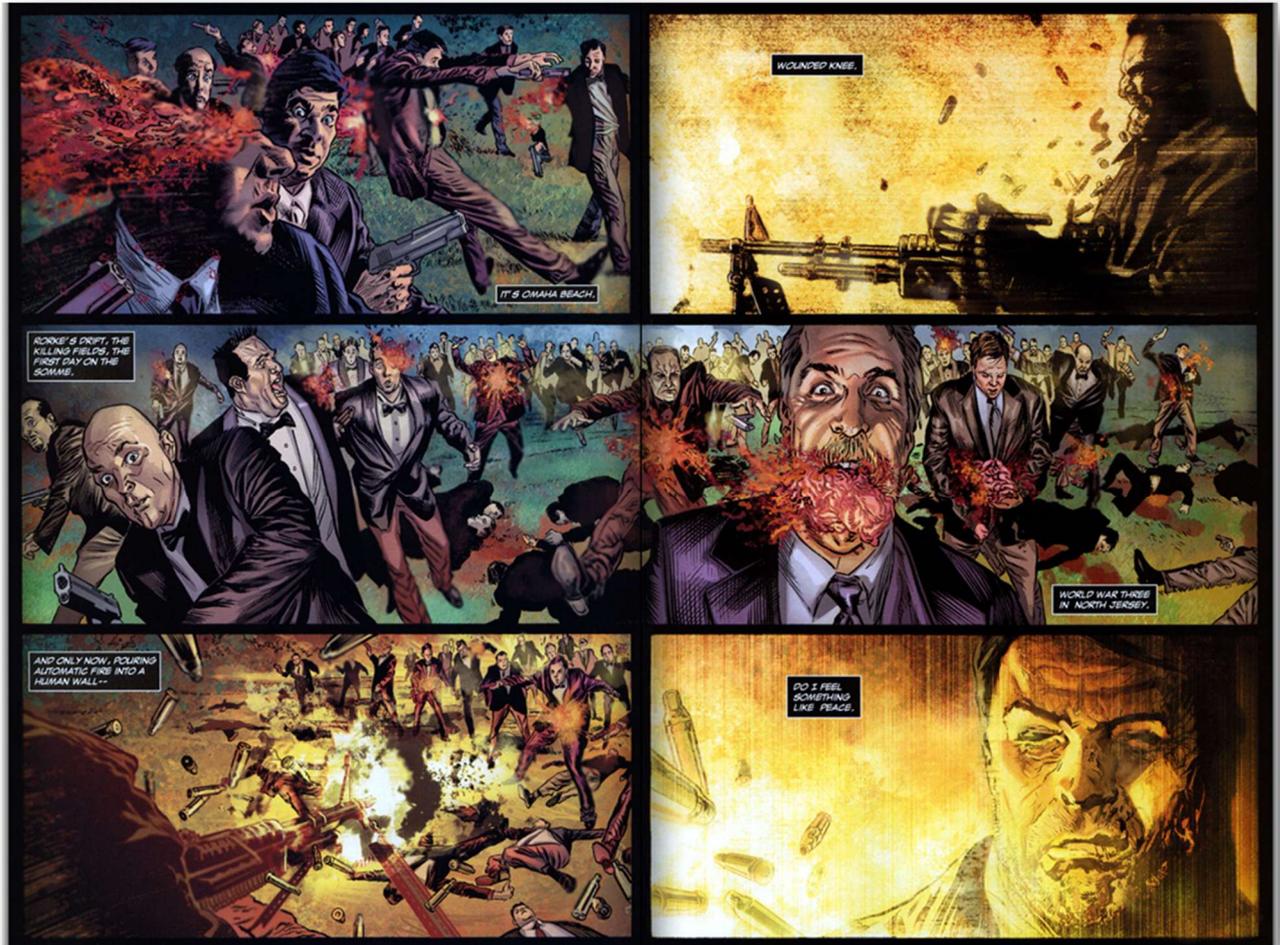


Figure 5 Castle crashes a party filled with Italian mobsters. The violence is grotesque and gratuitous in its depiction. While Castle is shooting, he recalls legendary battles, such as Wounded Knee.<sup>79</sup>

It is possible the violence has since decreased, but the reach of this study did not specifically examine the most recent Punisher comics.

The Reagan hard body ideal is alive and well in this period. There is emphasis on his physical prowess: he is often seen without his shirt on or with his arms bared and flexed. He is taller than any of his opponents. Physically, he remains imposing. Emotionally, he is often angry and cantankerous, in a similar way to Clint Eastwood's Harry in *Dirty Harry*, but still able to fight his enemies in a cool and collected manner. Overall, this phase is nothing but an echo of Phase Reagan.

<sup>77</sup> Worcester, "The Punisher and the Politics of Retributive Justice," 346.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>79</sup> Ennis, *Punisher Max: The Complete Collection Vol. 1*, 14.

## Renegotiating domestic identity

Following the 9/11 attack, during the Bush administration, Reagan hyper masculinity made a comeback, with emphasis on a strong foreign policy and family life.<sup>80</sup> Incidentally, that is precisely what *Rotten Tomatoes* noted about *Punisher: War Zone* too: "*Punisher: War Zone* recalls the excessively violent, dialogue-challenged actioners of the 1980s, and coincidentally feels two decades out of date." Readers renew their interest in the Punisher, because they know they can find traditional American values, while simultaneously being able to 'fight the enemies' with any means necessary vicariously through the Punisher. They can confirm their domestic identity and their relation to the rest of the world and be safe in knowing that America will become itself again after hard times.

In the post 9/11 period, the Punisher displayed many of the same themes as the period after Vietnam in the 80s. This signals the Punisher was used to renegotiate the domestic identity of the United States. The Punisher is someone who represents typical, classic American ideals that have been around since the founding of the country, such as manifest destiny and the desire to serve justice on those who deserve it, to eradicate evil in the world. It is an echo of the 1980s version of the Punisher, a nostalgic Punisher who wishes for the romanticized version of the frontier days, when life was simple.

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<sup>80</sup> Dodds, "Hollywood and the Popular Geopolitics of the War on Terror," 1629.

## Phase 3: Obama Presidency

*"You gotta cross the ocean... and go fight. You see... whole time you're thinking you're gonna be scared, right? But then, you're not. See, that part of it was always easy for me. Killing. Even watching my buddies die, it just... it didn't mean nothing. The first time I got scared... was on a plane on the way home. I kept thinking God was gonna pull the rug out from under us, you know? Shit, that's his kind of funny, you know. But the plane landed safe and we were home."<sup>81</sup>*

The War on Terror started in 2003 and is still going on to this day. Thousands of soldiers have died, as have thousands of civilians in the Middle-East. President Obama was elected in 2007 and became president in 2008. President Obama was to close Guantanamo Bay and 'bring the boys back home', to end the War on Terror that has just gone on and on. Hope was renewed in the public: President Obama would do what President Bush Jr. failed to. However, during his first term, it became evident it was not going to be simple. Congress was Democratic, but this changed in 2010, halfway through Obama's first presidency. Congress blocked Obama's and all Democratic proposals, and Obama lost his ability to do anything he promised he would. This left many people feeling frustrated and disappointed, again. Although President Obama was re-elected for a second term, the people were starting to feel disillusioned, not just because Bush's promise turned out to be false, but because the hope Obama brought was unfulfilled.

*Marvel's Daredevil* was launched online on March 18, 2016. The fact that the Punisher would be part of season 2, was heavily advertised. It was used in both trailers and on posters. Since the first season of *Daredevil*, was well-received, with a 98% rating on *Rotten Tomatoes*, expectations were high. The second season ended up with a rating of 75%, significantly lower than the first season. However, most praise for this season was for John Bernthal as the Punisher and the complex treatment of the character.

*Netflix Original Series Marvel's Daredevil* is analyzed thematically, in the same order as previous chapters for ease of comparison. The dichotomy between good and evil is discussed, ideas regarding vigilantism, justice and institutions are analyzed, followed by race and gender, both of which are closely related to ideas about family, and the Punisher as a cowboy and a soldier. Lastly, because religion is an important part of the televised *Daredevil*, this must be investigated too. Then, this source material will be compared to earlier materials, to discover how the Punisher has changed into the present. An analysis of what *Daredevil* says about America's current domestic identity follows.

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<sup>81</sup> "Penny and Dime," Webseries, *Marvel's Daredevil* (Netflix, April 10, 2015).

## A good guy *and* a bad guy

In the first episode of the second season of *Daredevil*, the Punisher is introduced. He is established as a villain: he shoots a bar filled with gang members with an automatic weapon. When one of the gang members, nicknamed Grotto, escapes and is hospitalized, the Punisher does not hesitate to take the fight to the hospital. His face is not shown, only his menacing footsteps, and he remains nameless. The anonymity of the character adds to the fearful mystery surrounding him. He is someone who shoots people even in the hospital; he is nothing but a common villain. Every episode gives little pieces of information at a time: he remains the anonymous villain. One of the most important scenes that solidifies the Punisher's presence in *Daredevil*, is a rooftop confrontation between Daredevil and the Punisher in the third episode, called "New York's Finest." This is the first moment Daredevil and the Punisher stand face-to-face, in a personal confrontation. The only difference between this moment and the episodes leading up to it, is that it establishes the Punisher as a human being, who is not very different from Daredevil. They have both lost important family members to organized crime, they both feel that their actions are necessary to protect their city and they both use violence to achieve justice. The difference is that the Punisher is a trained soldier and he is willing to kill, which is a moral boundary Matt Murdock is never willing to cross. However, the Punisher says: "You are a bad day away from being me."<sup>82</sup> Throughout the episodes, the line between Castle and Murdock is blurred, and so is the line between good and evil. The main question is: how can the Punisher's action be condemned as evil, while Murdock is celebrated for similar actions? Later in the episode, however, the tables are turned. Differences are solidified as well. In this confrontation, the Punisher confronts Murdock with the fact that he does not kill. Castle tries to argue it is the only way to prevent recidivism. Daredevil, however, believes in redemption. He believes that the system succeeds in acquiring justice for victims and punishes the criminals into never repeating their crimes. In the climax of the confrontation, Castle tries to force Murdock into killing him, to stop him from killing Grotto. This is an illustration of the blurred line between good and evil, but also the stark difference between the Punisher and Daredevil.

The Punisher is not satisfied with the answer and beats him up until he confesses the whole story. Daredevil becomes quiet and stops trying to escape.

Daredevil: "What did you do?"

Grotto: "It was accidental, I didn't know she was in the house! She wasn't supposed to be in the house. (...) She saw my face. I had no choice."

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<sup>82</sup> "New York's Finest," Webseries, *Marvel's Daredevil* (Netflix, April 10, 2015).

Daredevil is shocked and appalled by this confession. He hangs his head down. The question becomes: does this change how Grotto should be treated?

(...)

Punisher: "Cause you need to understand that pieces of shit like this ruin people's lives."

Daredevil: "Killing him is not gonna bring anybody back."

Punisher: "No, but it will keep him from hurting anybody else."

Daredevil: "Hey I'm gonna hand him over to the police. I'm gonna make sure he pays for what he's done, Frank."

Punisher: "You don't do it, his death's on you. Either way, you're a killer."

Daredevil: "What kind of a choice is that?!"

Punisher: "The kind I make every time I pull the trigger. The kind I'm gonna make right now."

As the Punisher states, shooting him in the arm or leg is no use, because he does not stop unless Daredevil kills him. Daredevil refuses and is unable to save Grotto. This single confrontation sets the tone for the rest of the season. Daredevil is forced to face the morality of his own code because of the Punisher. Grotto is a killer, not just because he was forced to by the gang he was involved with, but because he killed an innocent bystander: an old lady. Daredevil continuously refers to law enforcement throughout the confrontation. The Punisher has no trust in the system. At this point in the series, his tragic backstory is unknown. In the first three episodes, although Daredevil and Punisher have striking similarities, in the end, Frank is a violent killer, who believes in nothing but violence and death. Daredevil is solidified as the good guy, erasing the violence he has brought upon criminals.

That changes in the following episode, called "Penny and Dime." Frank is no longer a one dimensional villain. Instead, he is a tragic antihero. The first moment this becomes apparent, is when Castle is caught by the Irish mob for killing multiple members. When they threaten to torture him with a drill, he remains calm. However, when they bring in the dog Fido and threaten to hurt him instead, Frank starts begging them to leave him alone and that he will tell them what they want to hear. When it comes to himself, he has nothing left to lose, but he does whatever it takes to protect innocent lives. This is the first sign that Frank cares about the lives of others, which is a first step towards moral redemption and a first attempt to humanize him. Daredevil knows the Irish mob took Castle and rescues him, but not before both are badly wounded; Castle is unable to fight Daredevil. Murdock takes him to the cemetery. What follows, changes the perception of the Punisher completely. Murdock heard Castle mutter the words: "One batch, two batch. Penny and dime," before he attacked his Irish captors.

Castle: "Shit... I was too tired, I couldn't even drink a goddamn beer, you know. But not her. My girl was up. She wanted me to tuck her in. She outgrew it, she knew it, but she didn't care. She wanted it. She had that book. Her favorite book was out on the pillows. One Batch, Two Batch... Penny and Dime. I read her that book every night before this shit. I read it every single night, but, see, that was over now because Daddy's home now. She looked at me and she begged me, Red. (...) I said, 'No. Daddy's too tired, see. But I'll... I'll read to you tomorrow night. I'll read to you tomorrow night, I promise.' Never think that... for her there was not gonna be any tomorrow, see. The last time I'd see her, I'd be holding her lifeless body in my arms. Meat was spilling out of her, Red. The place where her face used to be. I think I'm done... Red."

This speech gives Castle his tragic background. He was a soldier in the War on Terror and survived. He came home tired, depressed. Then tragedy struck: his family was murdered at the merry-go-round in the park. The tragedy is exploited by illustrating the death of his family through his daughter. Evidently, Castle loves his family more than anything. He mentions she was hurt in the most gruesome way possible: she was shot in the face and it was gone. He saw his family like that. It is enough to traumatize anybody, let alone someone who has seen the horrors of war too. It gives a new psychological layer to his character. All he wants, is justice for the tragedy done to his family, not to him personally. Frank Castle has become a complex human, a multidimensional tragic antihero.

In the episode "Semper Fidelis," the seventh episode of the season, the trial of Frank Castle versus The People starts. Latin-American District Attorney Samantha Reyes represents the people, but the viewer knows she is a corrupt person: she is interested in her career and not in justice. This creates a juxtaposition: it is Reyes versus the Punisher, and because Reyes has no sympathy or the trust, it falls to Castle. He is automatically given the benefit of the doubt in this moment and becomes once again more sympathetic and human. It too delegitimizes all Reyes' actions. Her arguments why Castle is a nothing but a criminal because he kills, may be the truth, but it does not matter anymore because she herself is a corrupt liar.

However, throughout the season, Castle continuous to choose revenge over legal justice. The eight episode "Guilty as Sin," features the end of Castle's trial. He is close to gaining the sympathy of the jury, because of the character witness Colonel Schoonover. Schoonover describes how Castle single-handedly saved his platoon when they were led into a trap. Frank, however, as it turns out later, is given the chance to kill the man who was partially responsible for the death of his

family. He decided to forgo the trial and admit he is guilty, so they imprison him with said criminal. He screams: "I'm not crazy, I know what I did! I did it because I liked it. Hell, I loved it! I'm just itching to do it again. You people call me the Punisher, well I am the Punisher! I'll kill every one of them!"<sup>83</sup> He could have received a fair trial and a reduced sentence, and the psychological help he requires. Instead, he chooses killing. This, however, does not reduce sympathy for the character, if anything, he becomes even more tragic and is able to retain the sympathy he was given earlier in the season. Next time he has a redeeming moment, it is that much more powerful, because it becomes cathartic: he is expected to be a bad person, yet he shows again and again he is capable of forming meaningful bonds with people too. He refers to himself as the Punisher for the first time. He has always been Frank Castle and was only called the Punisher by the media. He appropriates the title.

In the final episode, called "A Cold Day in Hell's Kitchen," he kills his Colonel because he is the drug lord called the Blacksmith. He was responsible for arranging the meetup between gangs, causing the shootout that killed Frank's family. It is not until after he kills the Colonel, he becomes the Punisher: he gathers an arsenal of war weapons and spray paints his iconic skull logo onto a bulletproof vest. Whereas he used to become the Punisher after the death of his family, now he becomes him after he has gotten justice for his family. It is in this moment he recognizes that he will not stop killing. It is a question that has always been present in the canon of the Punisher: will he stop after all the people involved in the murder of his family are dead? Or has he gotten a taste for killing? This series answers that question as such: he will not stop, but neither does he like killing. He never feels satisfied that justice is indeed done.

Simultaneously, however, Castle finishes his redemptive arch. There is a great sense of redemption when he shows up one last time in the last episode. In this moment, he kills ninjas to help Daredevil in a fight he cannot win. This is curious because Castle ends up behaving the exact same way he did when the season started: he kills criminals. Yet it somehow feels like he acts for more legitimate reasons: the audience knows he cares deeply about people and has a psychological and physical affliction that causes his continuous emotional pain, that he has had his revenge. Any following kills are for tragic reason beyond his reach and no for emotional ones. He is a 'purified' source of punishment.

### Apprehensive trust

The failure and corruption of institutions is a prominent theme. In the first season, Wilson Fisk had corrupt officers in every department in Hell's Kitchen. Police officers could not be trusted, neither

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<sup>83</sup> "Semper Fidelis," Webseries, *Marvel's Daredevil* (Netflix, April 10, 2015).

could the local justice system. In the second season, this theme continues. In the second episode, titled "Dogs to a Gunfight," District Attorney Reyes uses Grotto as bait for the Punisher. This, however, was not the deal she made with Grotto and his attorneys Nelson and Murdock. Catching the Punisher is more important for her career than is the safety of Grotto. She double crosses Nelson and Murdock in the second episode of the season, which establishes her character as reckless, career-driven and self-centered. These are characteristics that are undesirable in a District Attorney: she is supposed to represent The People in court, not herself. The aftermath of the double-crossing is featured in episode three. The title of it, "New York's Finest," becomes a sarcastic jeer. In episode six, called "Regrets Only," Reyes wants the death penalty for the Punisher and is willing to try him in another state to achieve said punishment. Castle as a person does not matter, all that matters is that he is a dangerous criminal and the people want to see him dead. Again, Reyes' actions are intended to further her career. Justice is not her goal: the Punisher is guilty until proven innocent.

Daredevil is using local law enforcement again, in this season. The corrupt cops have been flushed out after Wilson Fisk was put behind bars. Sergeant Mahoney is his trusted liaison in the police force. After Castle finishes the story of the death of his family in "Penny and Dime," and signals that he is ready to give into law enforcement, Daredevil tells Mahoney that he must take credit for the capture of Frank Castle. He wants people to know that the law works, to avoid people lashing out in the way Castle did. He says: "Vigilante days are done in this town. The police are in charge." That is not entirely true; Daredevil continues to fight crime in Hell's Kitchen. However, he understands the value of public trust in the institutions. This season has a mixed message when it comes to institutions: on one hand, the D.A. is a selfish, career-driven woman, but the police are used to ensure that justice can take its course.

In "Semper Fidelis," the jurors for the Castle trial are picked. It features snippets of the interviews with the possible jurors, asking for their thoughts on Castle and his actions. People who agree with him are intercut with people who do not agree with him. One juror refers to Bernie Goetz, the example of real-life vigilantism in the 1980s and named as one of the reasons the Punisher became popular.<sup>84</sup> The juror thinks that Goetz acted as a vigilante and that this kind of behavior is unacceptable. There are as many people that argue against Frank, as there are that argue for him. They say that Castle is necessary, that crime is becoming more violent and that the police are unable to help. It is an echo of the justification for Goetz's behavior. Murdock argues why Frank Castle's behavior is not bad. Simultaneously, he justifies his own vigilante behavior. He says: "The city needs people like Frank. The police can't handle it." He fears the similarities between his own actions and those of Frank.

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<sup>84</sup> Allen, "Marvel Comics and New York Stories."

## Race and gender

Non-white people are represented in all sorts of roles: they are not just criminals or random civilians. One of the most important liaisons of Daredevil, Sergeant Mahoney, is an African-American man. However, much like in the films and comics, Castle fights foreign gangs. He attacks the Irish and the Japanese, although he kills members of an American biker gang too. Still, Castle remains a hand of God, fighting to protect American soil on the frontier. He kills foreigners that have broken the law and whose access to the United States has therefore been revoked. Much like in the films, his Sicilian ancestry is downright ignored. Viewers of the series would not know that Castle is Sicilian.

## Karen

The episode "Penny and Dime" does not only shift Frank's presence as a villain to that of a tragic antihero. A significant development is that Karen, the secretary of Nelson and Murdock, decides that she wants to know more about Frank. She is convinced he is not the evil villain people say he is, that he is capable of redemption. This is partially because Karen herself has killed someone. She recognizes herself in Castle, her desire to redeem him runs parallel with her desire to redeem herself. In "Regrets Only," she bonds with Castle. She becomes the person that he trusts, because Karen shows that she cares for the truth, for the context of his crimes. A moment that solidifies this, is when Karen wants to leave the hospital room Frank is in. He says: "You stay. Please." Not only does he ask her to stay with him, even though he shows no care for anyone or anything, he says 'please.' He has manners. He proves that Karen is right to trust him, because he treats her with respect. He is willing to talk to her alone.

This relationship continues to develop throughout the season. In the first confrontation between Karen and the Punisher, she was running for her life from him with the criminal Grotto. Later, he tells her: "I only hurt people that deserve it. You were safe." In episode ten, titled "The Man in the Box," Karen is guided home by police officers after she was involved in a shooting at the D.A.'s office. Castle knocks down the officers and meets Karen because he wants her to know that he was not responsible for that shootout, because he would never put her in harm's way. She does not trust him, neither does the audience, but when someone tries to shoot Karen again, Castle jumps on top of Karen and protects her with his full body, covering her head with his arms. He put himself in mortal danger to protect Karen. Sympathy is once again restored, Castle is redeemed in the eyes of Karen and the viewer. Afterwards, he takes Karen to a restaurant to tell her what happened. He tells her about his family and admits to feeling pain and love. There is trust, respect and a special bond between Castle and Karen. However, he admits to using Karen as bait to go after the people that

keep attacking her because they can lead him to the Blacksmith, the person responsible for arranging the deal that killed his family. The audience and Karen are disappointed again.

Frank has another chance at redemption, however. During the episode called "The Dark at the End of the Tunnel," episode twelve of the season, Karen realizes that Colonel Schoonover is the Blacksmith. She is in a dangerous situation: Schoonover knows that she knows and wants to make sure she tells no-one. When Karen enters her car, a tape starts playing. The song that comes on is one that Castle identified as being one of his kids' favorite songs in an earlier episode. Both Karen and the audience knows that he is around and there is a sense of relief: the Punisher is around and he will save her, because he will do anything to protect her. He is essentially a superhero in this moment, he might as well be Superman. These moments make the Punisher a multidimensional tragic hero. It is the juxtaposition between himself as a man and Karen as a young woman that builds sympathy in ways the Punisher has never had before. These moments would have been impossible with any other character: Daredevil would never be in need of protecting the way that Karen does and Foggy is a man and this would inevitably create homo-erotic subtext. Instead, a deep emotional bond is established that is reminiscent of a father-daughter bond and a romantic bond at the same time, without being explicit.

## Family

Castle being the Punisher has to do with the loss of his family, which is why family values is a recurring theme. For example, when he is held captive by the Irish mob, he asks the man who lost his son: "Your kid's in a box, but you want your money back?" When Grotto confesses to killing two people, Punisher makes sure to mention that they left behind families. On top of that, the reason that Castle loves his family so much is the reason he is humanized. In "Penny and Dime," a monologue of about 15 minutes illustrates the reason for Castle's behavior. He explains seeing his little girl for the first time: "We were outside her school. I get to her classroom, right? She's in there... but she's got no idea. She's got no idea that Daddy's home. I walk in, these kids, they're not even studying, they're... doing some kind of yoga. (...) And she looks up and she sees me. I see her. By God, that's real. That's real, Red. Boom. In an instant, she's across that classroom floor, she's in my arms. She's squeezing me so tight, I swear I was gonna bust a rib, you know?" Castle tears up while telling this story. His family and history as a soldier comprise his tragic background.

## "This isn't the Wild West"

In the rooftop confrontation of "New York's Finest," the Punisher is solidified as a soldier. He talks to a resident of the building about going to war. The resident is a Vietnam-veteran, Castle introduces

himself as a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan. He is no longer a veteran of Vietnam. In the series, the emphasis on the Punisher as a hyper masculine male has decreased as opposed to the films and comics that came earlier. There is one scene in which Castle is shirtless, but it serves the purpose of showing his wounds, and how he fixes them himself. The camera never focuses on his muscles, only on his wounds. He has been trained as a soldier and has many scars. However, he is still physically intimidating: in fights, he is often the tallest and broadest person in the room. One of the key characteristics is not showing emotions. Castle, however, openly shows his emotions, and not just rage. He admits to crying and is shown crying several times. For example, in the episode "Regrets Only," Castle becomes teary-eyed when he is shown a picture of his family by Karen. He is still a Reagan hard body physically, but he is not required to be unemotional the way antiheroes were in the 1980s.

He is still a cowboy. He relies on his weaponry and his skills acquired during his days in the army to serve vigilante justice, much in the same way cowboys did in the frontier days. Local authorities prove to be inadequate in the fight against crime: the police was infiltrated by crime lord Kingpin in the previous season, the local District Attorney is blinded by her ambition. Hell's Kitchen is his frontier which he protects from foreign invasion. It is justified, because it was his city first. The Punisher is therefore still a nostalgic character: he is a symbol of the 'good old days', the frontier days when crime and punishment were swift and simple. D.A. Reyes makes this quite explicit when she talks about the Punisher during the trial against Castle: "This isn't the Wild West."<sup>85</sup>

## Religion

Religion is a moral anchor, an institution who seems to have more insight into right and wrong than any other institutions. Daredevil's struggle with morality continues into the fourth episode, when Murdock visits Grotto's funeral that he planned, in his own church. His own priest serves as a moral compass and knows that Murdock is Daredevil. Murdock expresses guilt due to the death of Grotto. He cannot help but feel like he should have done more. The priest replies: "Guilt can be a good thing. It's the soul's call to action. The indication that something is wrong. The only way to rid your heart of it...is to correct your mistakes and keep going until amends are made." His priest endorses his vigilantism and encourages him to continue with his fight against crime. However, although Murdock is the one that believes that everybody is deserving of redemption, he is not the one that works hard to help Frank achieve his. After the first big confrontation on the rooftop, this responsibility moves to Karen. Murdock thinks the Punisher is dangerous and consistently reminds

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<sup>85</sup> "Semper Fidelis."

Karen of this. Castle's religion is mentioned too. During the rooftop confrontation, church bells start ringing. Castle recognizes the sound as belonging to St. Matthew's. Murdock asks: "Are you a Catholic?" to which he replies: "Once." Considering Frank Castle still symbolizes cowboys in *Daredevil* and the fact that he embodies religion, Catholicism in this case, manifest destiny is again present in the plot in the shape of the Punisher. He is the Hand of God to take back Hell's Kitchen from foreign invaders, to strike the sinners down, so that true Americans might safely take back their land.

## Change

The Punisher is significantly different in *Daredevil*. There are stronger attempts to humanize him. This is the first time his actions are connected to a physical trauma: he has been shot in the head, which had altered his psychological state of being. He relives the moment of his family's death over and over. This serves as a humanizing legitimization of his actions. Even though it is a psychological affliction, which would mean that he is incapable of fully comprehending his actions, it does not delegitimize the fact that he kills criminals.

Castle is a veteran to a different war. As stated in the show, he is now a veteran of the War on Terror and he has served in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. This puts Castle in a different situation: when he was a veteran of Vietnam, the Vietnam War had passed – except for his first appearance in *The Amazing Spider-man*. Now, however, he is a veteran of a war that is still going on: America still has troops in countries in the Middle-East in the name of the War on Terror.

He becomes the Punisher after receiving justice for his family, instead of after the death of the family. His actions, from start to finish, are similar to what he has done in the comics and the films. He kills criminals that are connected to organized crime from the beginning. However, he is not the Punisher to begin with: that is a moniker that he receives from the press. Later, *after* he achieves justice for his family, he appropriates the name and makes the outfit with the iconic skull on his chest. This is a significant change in the character's cannon. He is created throughout the show. The implication is that the Punisher was created by us. We taught him to become this great, perfect warrior. A Reagan hard body type soldier. When he comes home, he is forced to be a civilian again, without help. He is severely depressed, which is never explicitly mentioned but becomes evident when he says that he is really tired, yet there was no psychological help. Then, he is shot in the head, which becomes part of an institutional cover-up. People from the justice department are involved, the ones that are supposed to want 'the whole truth and nothing but the truth.' Yet our system failed him, again. The criminals responsible for the murders of his wife and kids remain out of jail, by failures of our system. His great injustice was not done in a country half-way around the

world, it was done right at home, on American soil. The system has failed Frank Castle and forces his hand into becoming the Punisher. In short: we made him and therefore he is not fully responsible for his actions; we all are.

Next to that, religion is a far more prominent feature in this story, mainly because of the presence of Daredevil. Murdock is a Catholic and visits church often. His priest serves as his moral compass and his mental support. This is common ground and therefore becomes a topic of discussion.

The diversity is greater in the series. There are non-white actors on both side of the dichotomy. Sergeant Mahoney and D.A. Reyes are examples of this. However, there are more non-white actors that are criminal, most prominently the Japanese gang of ninjas. On top of that, the Punisher also attacks the Irish. However, there is no mention of Muslims like there was in previous comics and films. Sixth, the Punisher has a redemptive arch. Usually, he has no arch: he is who he is and he remains the same throughout the stories. In *The Amazing Spider-man*, he has a kind of redemptive arch: he ends his collaboration with the Jackal, because he sees him for the villain that he is, but he does not turn to the 'good side' either. Yet in *Daredevil*, he has a full transformation into becoming the Punisher, and once he truly is the Punisher, he has been redeemed, because his first act as the Punisher is to help *Daredevil* when he is fighting ninjas.

Last, women are a more prominent feature of the story. For the first time, the story includes women of color, namely District Attorney Reyes. The most significant woman is Karen Page. She is the one that allows Castle to be humanized as much as he is. Their interactions shape both characters: Karen becomes a research journalist because she is convinced there is more to Castle than meets the eye. Castle starts out as a one-dimensional villain and is turned into a complex human being and a tragic antihero. However, in the end, stereotypes still prevail. Reyes turns out to be a corrupt institution, and Karen still occasionally is a damsel in distress, although she features prominent character development too.

What has remained constant, is the basic foundation of the character. The Punisher still kills criminals because he thinks that the institutions are incapable of doing their jobs, after the ones that killed his family were able to get away with murder. The level of violence is still high and is reminiscent of the MAX comic series and the films. When Castle is in jail, one scene is particularly violent. He is able to reach the wing where one of the men responsible for the death of his family is held and kills every single man held in that wing. He is in a white suit, in a well-lit hall. All blood that is featured, is bright red in that bright environment. For the final kill, Frank is lying on the ground on his back. His attacker is hanging above him and he opens up his throat, leaking all the blood onto Frank's white outfit and face. He is covered in blood, head to toe, in the end. The story features the

same black-and-white treatment as in previous stories. Criminals are their crimes. There is never a moment of doubt: when a criminal is attacked by either Daredevil or the Punisher, he is guilty of some crime.



*Figure 6 Castle has just killed about 20 criminals while locked up in prison, with a shiv and his skills. He is covered in blood, accentuated due to his white outfit.<sup>86</sup>*

### Domestic identity

Frank Castle is a perfect soldier, who is unable to return to society. He has been made into a tool to protect America and once returned, he is unable to see America for the domestic world. When he was abroad, he was killing for the greater good of protecting America from foreign threats. In other words, he was fighting for manifest destiny. Back in America, however, these actions are illegal, yet he cannot let this go.

Castle is more human and humane than ever before. His actions are justified in multiple ways: he is traumatized, he never had justice, he has a psychological issue. On top of that, he has a redemptive arch, even though he ends up killing people in the same way he did at the start of the season.

He is heavily justified throughout the season, one could argue that Frank Castle serves as the feared truth of domestic identity: America has been killing people abroad, but it was legitimate.

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<sup>86</sup> "Seven Minutes in Heaven," Webseries, *Marvel's Daredevil* (Netflix, April 10, 2015).

America had reasons for doing so. It panders to the minds of Americans, who might know fully well that it is wrong to kill people for whatever reason, yet their strength and national identity partially hinges on the legitimization of being the policeman of the world and being allowed to eradicate 'evil' and therefore killing people in other countries.

Even though Daredevil is ultimately the protagonist of the series, both the Punisher and Daredevil are treated as heroes and as protagonist in separate scenes: both represent America. The rooftop scene is illustrative of this negotiation: the Punisher points out all their similarities and tells him that he is "one bad day away from becoming him." How can America condemn violence and kill at the same time? Want an end to gun violence but expand gun rights at the same time? Want an end to the war and retreat their troops, but keep foreign civilians safe? Want to spread American values to foreign lands but not let those countries have the same rights as they do, like in Puerto Rico? These are the questions that the Punisher embodies and ultimately, only asks and never answers.

Several themes that are featured in *Marvel's Daredevil* have been analyzed for their relation to American ideologies and current domestic identity. The Punisher shows similar themes that he has in the past: there is a black-and-white sense of crime and innocence, vigilantism is justified by showing the institutions as failing. Race and gender play prominent parts in conveying America's ideals, such as the Reagan hard body, even though reduced, still present. Women have received a more prominent role in this show: they are there to build the Punisher's character and tragic antihero identity. He is still both a cowboy and a soldier. Family and religion, though present throughout the cannon of the Punisher, are both more visible in *Daredevil*. However, he has changed too: never has a story tried so hard to humanize Frank Castle. He is a complex mixture of being a protagonist and an antagonist, a hero and a villain. He is the embodiment of the two-sided America's domestic identity. Castle has represented both sides at separate times, but never before *both* at the same time. It attempts to renegotiate America's domestic identity by asking questions about their traditional values, rather than answering them. America has let go of some values and has renegotiated some of them too.

## Conclusion

The Punisher has seen three different phases. First, the 70s and the 80s; a turbulent time for America. This was after Vietnam and after Watergate, when violent crime was on the rise and peaked in the 80s. The Punisher reflected the times: he became a violent antihero, a veteran who behaved like a soldier on American soil, a cowboy to reclaim the land from foreign criminals. He changed from being an antagonist, a villain, for heroes like Daredevil and Spider-man, to the hero of his own comics. The second phase was after 9/11, in the 00s. Interest in the Punisher grew explosively: he appeared in the adult-oriented MAX series, which ran for years, and two series rebooted. After 9/11, the Punisher became a vehicle through which America's domestic identity can be renegotiated and the trauma of being attacked on its own soil can be processed. The third phase is now. The War on Terror has lasted for 13 years, though President Bush promised that the way would be swift. At the beginning of the war, America was still convinced that in order to protect America and the world, it had to attack terrorists in their homelands. Sentiments have changed; all America wants is to end the war and 'bring their boys home,' like President Obama promised he would. America has lost thousands of soldiers and killed thousands of civilians in the name of eradicating terror, similarly to the desire to eradicate communism during the Cold War.<sup>87</sup>

Throughout these eras, Frank Castle has changed significantly. He has often oscillated between being a protagonist and an antihero to an antagonist and a villain. The amount of violence and justifications for vigilantism did not change over the years: the failure of the institutions to punish guilty criminals is the reason Castle became the Punisher. Several other themes have been present throughout the years as well: the dichotomy between good and evil and gender and race, and how these are connected to several prominent American ideologies such as manifest destiny.

Kaplan claims it is possible to read the contemporary American domestic identity in cultural texts: in the comics, films and television series that featured the Punisher. American identity is mediated through the Punisher. He is popular during times of struggle and represents the American desire to renegotiate its domestic identity. The Punisher is a mediator of classic American ideologies connected to its history, such as the vigilantism of the frontier and manifest destiny. The Punisher reinforces the idea of American excellence, that America is a cowboy and a soldier that deserves to take back its country from foreign invaders, such as Chinese Triads or Irish mobs. Using extreme or lethal violence is allowed, because much like in the frontier days, the police are unable to do their jobs and catch criminals. Manifest destiny is reflected in the way that Castle is a Catholic, who is Sicilian but that ancestry has been erased. He is the hand of God that unleashes His wrath upon

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<sup>87</sup> James Castonguay, "Conglomeration, New Media, and the Cultural Production of the 'War on Terror,'" *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 4 (2004): 103.

sinners. He attacks criminals in Hell's Kitchen in most stories, but in every story he attacks non-American mobsters. Most often, they are Italian, but sometimes they are Japanese, Chinese and Irish. Castle serves as a rationalization for this behavior: because they are criminals, it is justified. In this way, he is the beacon of American excellence, an example of the ultimate soldier and cowboy that will stop at nothing to protect his family, and his homeland.



*Figure 7 Frank Castle enters court for his trial. He stands still in front the American flag. Castle has served in the War on Terror. The implication is that the same flag he fought to protect, now prosecutes him.<sup>88</sup>*

However, this is true whenever Castle is a protagonist. When he is an antagonist and therefore a villain, his ways are rejected. He becomes nothing but a common criminal, a murderer for the hero to defeat. He is a one-dimensional character: he kills to achieve justice for his family, but even after justice is procured he continuous assassinating people. It is possible for Frank Castle to be both an antagonist and a protagonist, and therefore it becomes possible for the creators of the films and comics to both celebrate his behavior and reject it. The Punisher represents the feared truth and the fantasy. The feared truth is that his cruelty in his personal war is America's cruelty in their wars, that even though they may only be killing the enemy, they are still wrong. The United States is a hypocrite, because it punishes for the same reason, it should be punished itself: it kills because other people have killed, but within that same line of reasoning, it deserves to die too.

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<sup>88</sup> "Semper Fidelis."

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Simultaneously, Castle is the fantasy: many an able-bodied male has dreamed of the ability to effectively protect Americans, be that on American soil or in foreign lands.

This oscillation is visible throughout the history of the Punisher. In times of domestic turbulence, he is a protagonist, an antihero who is the pure essence of America's dream identity. Whenever times are calmer, Frank is either an antagonist, or there is little interest in him as protagonist: sales dropped in the 90s, and again a few years after 9/11, leading to a drop in titles that featured the character. Now, once again, he is an antagonist: in *Marvel's Daredevil*. However, unlike times before, Castle is not just the Punisher, an ordinary villain. Instead, the negotiation of American identity that is reflected in his entire history, is debated in this single season of thirteen episodes. He begins as a villain that kills people at random. Throughout the season, Castle is humanized. The viewer sympathizes more and more with him, until he undoes the trust he had gained. After, he gains the trust of the viewer again: he switches between being a villain and a tragic antihero. The format of the series, namely that thirteen episodes are released simultaneously, also allow the Punisher to have moments all to himself: during these, he is the protagonist of the series. The season can be viewed as a thirteen hour film, because all episodes are released simultaneously. This means the viewer has no need for a reminder of what happened in the previous episode; they probably just watched it. This leaves time for other characters besides Daredevil to be extensively featured.

The viewer switches between agreeing and disagreeing with Castle's methods. One moment in the episode specifically embodies this sentiment: when jurors are picked for the Castle trial. Half of the jurors say that they agree with Castle's methods, the other half say they find his methods despicable. However, the final answers seems to be: Frank Castle is a tragic antihero who deserves our trust and sympathy. The conclusion of the television show is that American ideologies reflected in Castle, manifest destiny, vigilantism of the frontier, the Reagan hard body, a family values and justice, are alive and justified. Hell's Kitchen and with it the world, is a safer place for having people like the Punisher and Daredevil in it.

For further research, it would be relevant to analyze the Punisher comic book series that started before 9/11 in 2001, and which ran for a few years after. It would be interesting and relevant to see whether Castle himself changes in this series because of 9/11 and if that influenced his story in any way. I argue that the Punisher finds himself in a third era, a post-War on Terror idea, but the Punisher is not alone in reflecting this shift in domestic identity as a response to the lasting War on Terror. Daredevil, for example, had been chosen by Marvel as protagonist for a Netflix-series, to complement the cinematic universe it had created. His characterization could be compared to his

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most famous storyline by Frank Miller. Lastly, the Punisher will have his own Netflix-series because he has become a popular character in the Netflix cannon. It would be interesting to see if this renews interest in the character, but it would be relevant to see the development of the Punisher character, because he changes from being a secondary character in *Daredevil*, to the main protagonist.

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