

**Power, Responsibility,
and the Death of Captain America**
Comic book criticisms in times of horror

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Introduction

When Ward Churchill wrote his essay *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens* in the wake of 9/11, he raised some eyebrows alleging the complicity of the victims of the attacks, especially when he described them as “little Eichmanns.” When he cried foul on investigations into research misconduct, he may have been in the wrong, but the attention his comments drew and the social reaction to his statements were at once not unexpected and troubling. In a society that so praises freedom of expression, why did an academic garner so much attention for exercising this right in the wake of 9/11? There are other examples of self-censorship—in the media as well as academia—in the rash of knee jerk patriotism Americans sought to give the government all the liberty it needed to make things safe again.

Whether or not the government actually succeeded in consolidating those liberties is not of any real importance at this point. The most important consequence of the government's attempt went largely unnoticed when still clouded in the mists of shock and blind patriotism, and in households numbed by images of hi tech wars and exotic enemies living in Afghan caves, the terror was at once distant and incomprehensible. In time, the terror would fade enough for a more reasoned criticism to begin to enter public discourse.

This was not lost on Americans when Captain America was killed as he ascended courthouse steps and defend civil liberties, shackled as an enemy of the state and concurrently heckled and cheered on. In one frame, the tension was broken by the sniper's bullet. Captain America, sixty years the Sentinel of Liberty, was dead.

His death was the culmination of events that mirrored real-world events in American society and politics in the wake of 9/11. This gave rise to the question of whether or not this death could be taken as a criticism, and if so, why it had to be through actual *killing* that this criticism needed to be expressed.

Superhero comic books occupy a special part of American culture. The range of readership is great, and they are undeniably connected conceptually, ideologically, and topically to America. Examining American superhero comics at watershed events should give an indication as to how the particular medium of comics is able to express its cultural critique. Taking a framework that understands the inherent conservatism of superheroes and their relation to the status quo, cultural criticism should be easy to identify in comics of those time periods. Given that comics must operate within given boundaries, the language of the criticism must be specific.

The graphic novel *Watchmen* provides its criticism through a utopia narrative. The protagonist Adrian Veidt (known also as Ozymandias, the world's smartest man) engineers a plan to create world peace at terrible cost. Captain America comics, the long-running Marvel series about Captain America, the super soldier created during World War II when private Steve Rogers participated in military experiments—have expressed their criticism in the past by placing Rogers in direct conflict with ideological and sometimes social problems. Marvel's recent *Civil War* comics tied the entire Marvel universe to a central horrific event, dramatically altering the underlying status quo that is the Marvel reflection of our world. What sets the criticism in *Civil War* apart is the dramatic and *permanent* death of a supremely symbolic character (Steve Rogers, or Captain America). Although the character Captain America may return, his death marks a far deeper and more serious consequence of cultural conflict than in the six decades before.

Comics, Reading, and the World

Introduction

As a part of American culture and cultural discourse, comics do not usually command center stage. While academics in Europe studied the medium in the late 1960's and 1970's, American scholarly inquiry has been rather limited until recently. Most of the work done by the Europeans was on French comics, which fit into both the structuralism and cultural fabric of the time in a way very different from the popular American comics sold at newsstands today. This dearth of study is amplified by the fact that most investigations into the medium, both past and present (and especially in the case of European work), has concentrated on the *form* of the medium, thus emphasizing the linguistic behavior of the phenomena of speech balloons, panels, and the sequential interaction of the visual and literary elements at play.

This structural approach to analyzing comics certainly has its merits. Understanding the system by which they can tell a story and how this is different from both novels and films is important in establishing comics as a viable object of serious study, but in the end much of the work doesn't progress much farther than what seem to most as incredibly complex justifications for the existence of the funny pages. Thus it is imperative that we ask not only *how* comics do what they do, but *what* they are actually doing in cultural discourse. In making this step it should become clear why comics can be considered a valid place from which to glean criticisms of culture and its discourse.

Comic books and graphic novels are by nature intensely visual. Most works about comics will provide some sort of history of the sequential image dating back to the cave paintings of our ancestors, and the notion that pictures can tell a story is therefore not new. Scott McCloud sets out to show how difficult comics are to define in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, and comes up against similar problems Thierry Groensteen cited in *The System of Comics* as being items of contention in the 1960's and 1970's, namely that comics are more than mere sequential images with text, but that in the end any fixed definition will end up eliminating something somebody will consider comics. Though Groensteen takes a slightly narrower approach, their definitions overlap in their heuristic open-endedness.

Although it may be perfectly valid to claim comics fall into similarly undefinable concepts as 'literature' and 'art,' the fact remains that certain works are clearly comics. By focusing on the most mainstream comics, the need for some sort of transcendently truthful definition is eliminated, replaced by an informal cultural understanding. In any event, the point of this investigation is not to define comics as a medium, but to see how comics are specifically able to operate within and comment upon their discursive content.

Being both a textual literary and visual medium, there is an inherent instability in the medium that lends itself to a wider range of expression than either aspect on its own. It is to this point that Groensteen argues truly sets comics apart from being either merely one or the other. Although comics are fragmentary, he writes that it is precisely this “plasticity of comics, which allows them to put in place messages of every order and narrations other than the fictional, demonstrates that before being an art, comics are well and truly a language.” As he goes on to argue, it is not necessary to have an incredibly narrow and specific definition of comics, and that the basic requirement “to speak of comics is that the images will be multiple and correlated in some fashion” (19).

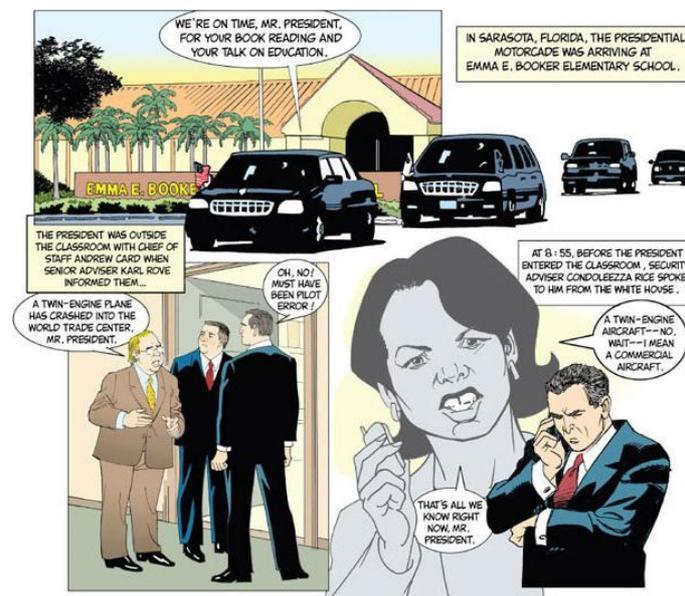
Whereas writers like Groensteen and McCloud move on from there to focus on the more structural aspects of comics—things like framing, panels, and precisely how these things

operate to create this “language”—I’ll make the same basic assumption about the definition of comics and focus on their “plasticity” as this is where imagery and narrative combine to both link to and critique readers and their world.

One of the first major American comics to revel in this ability was perhaps *Watchmen*, published in 1986, although examples of similar links through imagery and narrative have been found in mainstream serialized comics such as *Captain America* before the appearance of *Watchmen*. Nonetheless, *Watchmen* provides a prime example of how its own challenge as a 'graphic novel' to the medium of comics is both an embodiment of this plasticity and a vehicle for social commentary. The slightly more obvious (also less challenging and complex) linking and commentary in *Captain America* and other mainstream comics serve to support the idea that it is through the nature of the comics medium, the commingling of narrative and imagery, that complex criticisms can exist as ready participants of a discursive mainstream.

The plastic medium

Linking comics to the real world is to a large extent a subliminal process. Specifically superhero comics present worlds not necessarily identical to ours, but the interplay of narrative and image used to convey the comic book stories nonetheless give readers something to latch onto. A big difference between comics and text-based novels is the speed at which a greater amount—and diversity—of information can be processed by the reader. Images placed side by side express a particular relationship between the panels, and this relationship depends on their narrative and artistic context, as well as the familiarity of the reader with the subjects being (directly or indirectly) addressed in the comics.



Thus it is through this coexistence that textual narrative can at once inform a comic story by describing things in words while being effected by the imagery. Take, for example, the frames to the left from page 26 of *The 9/11 Report*. Speech bubbles are rounded and white, attributing statements and comments to particular characters in the lower frames. Having the bubble point to a vehicle in the top frame allows the reader to infer that the President is in the lead car, even though he is not pictured. Narration, however, is encapsulated in an off-white box, leading the reader to assume a different tone.

Coloring of text and speech bubbles (or narration boxes) as well as different fonts are all devices used to enhance the reader's immediate implicit understanding of the narrative. In this way, for instance, it can be made clear that the characters speaking have different voices, or that the narration is from a particular point of view, as in the panels from *Watchmen* below. Dr. Manhattan's speech bubbles are the same color as he is, simultaneously emphasizing his ownership of the text as well as imbuing it with his 'blueness.' The subsequent panels show a speech bubble with jagged edges, text emanating from the television sets behind them. The phrases itself is a fragment.

In the end, even Thierry Groensteen admits that the commingling of visual and textual aspects is responsible for the plasticity of the medium. The 'language' of comics he finds may be formed within the composition of the comics, but the presentation and framework—such as the rounding and coloring of speech balloons, overlapping text, and even how panels are divided—which he considers the larger “codes” that enable the operation of comics as a language “sometimes superimpose themselves to the point of indistinction”(4).

Anchored to the world around us

Groensteen's focus on how comics operate as a language is beyond the scope of what is being examined here. Aspects of the aforementioned “codes” exist in particular relation to the world outside the comic book, the two key aspects being text and image. Both of these have opportunities to link to the world on both a narrative and conceptual level, and to varying degrees.

Textual linking can have quite a simple function. The establishment of a spatio-temporal link between the comic and the contemporary real-world is done at its most basic through blatant textual links. For instance, many comics of the Marvel universe share cities, places, and institutions with the real world. There is a New York where superheroes like Spider-Man and Daredevil live and work, just as there is a United States. There are also less concrete temporal links, such as the World War II and the Cold War that have also occurred in the Marvel universe. Comic book characters like Deadpool also make frequent textual references to popular culture and media events (the character Deadpool notes in *Cable & Deadpool #31* that everybody knows Spider-Man is Tobey Maguire). These links serve to place the comics—and by proxy whatever moral, narrative, or dramatic discourses they contain—in direct contact with the world of the reader.

There are several obvious examples of narrative textual links between comics and our contemporary (both past and present) real world. Aside from images of real-world things and symbols—which will be discussed in the next section—textual links can operate with greater subtlety. Given the broad nature of the medium, some attempts at this are certainly more heavy-handed than others, such as *The 9/11 Report* or the autobiographical *American Splendor*, which are examples of realistic rather than fantastic works.

The textual links employed in *The 9/11 Report* narrative were done to a specific end, and focus more on consolidating the comic's connection to the places, events, and people involved in 9/11 while trying to make the events of that morning more 'real' (through accessibility, creating a broader shared experience) to readers. The *School Library Journal* explains that the authors of the graphic novel adaptation tried to bring the hefty *9/11 Commission Report* into the realm of public discourse by making it more accessible to a public unaccustomed to sifting through government reports (176). This has arguably been achieved (Thomas Kean and Lee Hamilton gave both blessing and commendation for the efforts involved in making *The 9/11 Report*), although most of the credit has been given to the visual aspects of the medium, the mere fact that the same narrative is at work—identical in progression and fact to the *9/11 Commission Report*—speaks to the notion of interaction between image and word at the heart of the comic medium.

In short, text is one of the avenues through which comics can connect to our world, both historically and contextually. This can only operate to its full potential in concert with links established through imagery.

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There is a continuum on which intertextual and textual-contextual links are found. Just as

with text, this continuum applies to the visual aspects of comics as well. At the one end are works attempting to be literal transcriptions of the world. These are comics that make an effort to provide faithful representations of the real—or realistic—world through images. Examples of this are *The 9/11 Report* and the autobiographical series *American Splendor*, but elements of this are also present in the other end of the spectrum. The DC comics universe, unlike that of Marvel, is more loosely based on the contemporary world of the reader. The imagery is more figurative and allegorical in that while a tree may still look like a tree, much of the world the comic book characters inhabit is a heavily modified version of our own. For example, Superman's Fortress of Solitude may be alien in design, but it is located on Earth and is at least physically bound to do so without creating serious ontological contradictions for the reader.



(The 9/11 Report 16)



(Civil War #1 33)



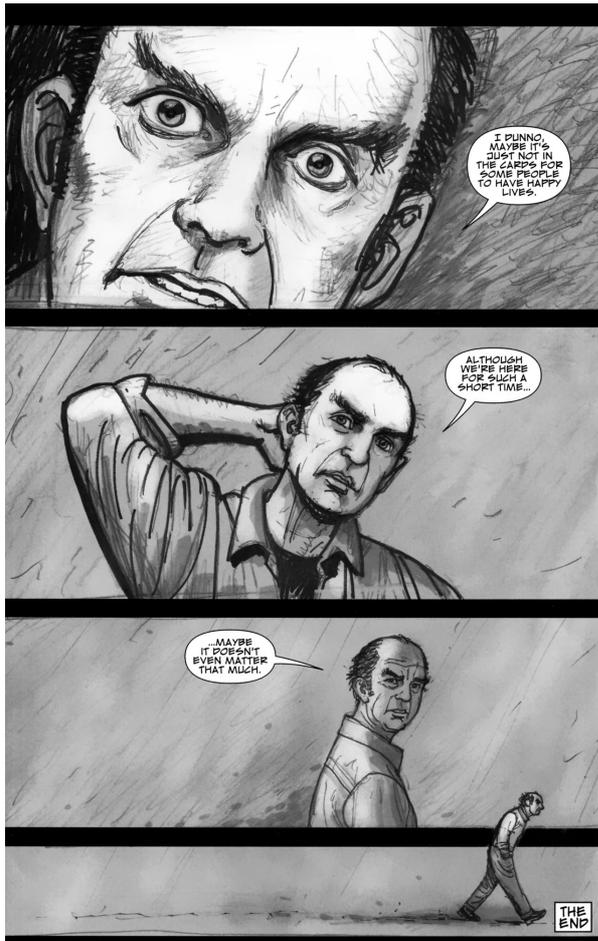
(Watchmen #9 4)

The imagery goes from the most mimetic on the left with a panel from *The 9/11 Report*, passes through the mixture of realism and the fantastic with the anti-superhero demonstration from *Civil War #1*, and further stretches the connection to the real in *Watchmen* when Dr. Manhattan takes Laurie to Mars and assembles a glass palace from Martian sand.

The degree to which a comic departs from literal transcription can also affect a certain analytical process. Grittiness and gray colors set a tone for interpretation, and the reader will be more or less likely to read the comic with a bias resulting directly from that tone. This is how we can look at a picture and muse 'How depressing' and see the same scene in bright colors and find it less so. The visual aspect of a comic is thus able to bring about this climate, effecting the narrative being conveyed in the book.

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The key, of course, is not the separate operations of visual and textual elements of comic books, but how they act when together. *American Splendor* can be an illustrative example of this. The comic has one writer for all and different artists for each of the stories in each issue. A comparison of visual style from one story to another makes it clear how different incarnations of the same subject (Pekar) combined with similar textual narratives (written by Pekar) can produce narratives that dispose the reader to different types of interpretations. The mindset of the reader is emotionally affected by the visual component of comic books, leading to, in the pages from Pekar's comic below, massaging the reader's disposition to either depression or frustration.



American Splendor #1 p9



American Splendor #1 p13

While comics may tackle serious geopolitical events, commercial and even academic issues—the 9/11 report mentioned above is but one example, as is Scott McCloud's recent explanatory comic for the Google web browser—the medium is still artistic (if not art). Susan Sontag argued in the early sixties that art is something we can't help but look for a message in. Her essay “Against Interpretation” partly blames Plato and Aristotle for the fact that it is now impossible to gaze upon art without looking for meaning or interpretation. “The fact is,” she wrote, “all Western consciousness of and reflection upon art have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as mimesis or representation” (“Interpretation” 4).

That, in any event, is what she said about visual art. Comic books, on the other hand, are not merely visual art, nor are they “burdened by content” as she alleges such art is. In fact, they will not work *without* mimetic theory. Sontag's lamentations of a hegemony of interpretation (not just one particular interpretation, rather the *act itself* of interpreting and approaching works of art in order to interpret them) no longer apply to comics, which thrive precisely for their content. Again, as demonstrated in *The 9/11 Report*, the key issue is access. Already predisposed to look at artistic expression (books, movies, paintings, etc.) with an eye for *meaning*, comic books will literally spell out a large part of the content through narration, speech, and any other text-based bits of the medium.

Through an integration of text and image, comics have self-consciously become a medium

that both *is* and *conveys* content simultaneously.

Horror and the banality of images

Having established that comics are dependent on image and text acting as both content and purveyors of content, the notion of the medium as malleable enough to fit everything from instruction manuals and government reports to fantastic journeys through space and time seems to throw the door wide open for a variety of topics for the medium to address. And indeed, from the anthropomorphic mouse that became so popular all over the world to the wildly popular pornographic manga comics, there is virtually no shortage of content.

Nonetheless, within American mainstream comics, the proximity of their content and readers to historical and cultural events has required some degree of absorption on the part of the comic books. This particular point will be addressed in further detail later, but for now it suffices to identify that there is an imagery of unspeakable horror present in a great deal of American comic books.

Susan Sontag and Nicholas Mirzoeff both address the horror present in American visual culture. Mirzoeff's descriptions of the Iraq war's opening shots speak of a numbness akin to that in Sontag's discussion of photographs from the Spanish Civil War. During the Cold War, Mutually Assured Destruction was a horror hung over everybody's heads, one unimaginable and therefore unable to be pictured. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were at once unimaginable but pictured everywhere with vigor, and this is the key difference between the American collective imagination's ideas of horror before and after 9/11. Taking Sontag and Mirzoeff's discussions of post-9/11 images and their relation to the American imagination, the result is a banality of imagery, one comics try to break by smashing the iterative schemes traditionally present in superhero narratives.

Iterating imagery

In his exploration of Superman, Umberto Eco described an aspect of serialized comic books called an iterative scheme which feeds a "hunger for redundancy" in the readership, which he claimed was responsible for the reiterations of message in popular comic books as well as literature. "A novel by Souvestre and Allain or by Rex Stout," he wrote, "is a message which informs us very little and which, on the contrary, thanks to the use of redundant elements, keeps hammering away at the same meaning which we have peacefully acquired upon reading the first work of the series." Desiring such a scheme in a narrative is the "hunger for redundancy" (21).

The iterative scheme itself could be seen as a contributor to the gradual banalization of horror and its imagery for the consumers of contemporary (post 9/11) narratives.¹ The same way a reader becomes giddy at the expectation of solving a whodunit detective story, the viewer of an imagery can expect the same thing from imageries that accompany the narratives we consume on a daily basis. The act of consuming—exposing oneself and processing a meaning or message, creating a narrative or piece thereof—is similar in the cases of text and photography, especially thanks to their intertwining in the modern era of 24-hour news networks.

As a result, when we look at images of war, we come to expect a similar type of imagery. From two Gulf Wars, such images could be night vision bombardments of enemy positions or

¹ Consumer being the subject who actively exposes itself to any medium to which content is attributed, and consumption being the act of watching or reading.

smart bomb footage destroying a nameless building complex. We are meant to expect these images, just as we are expectant of the accompanying narratives—the accompanying story or caption that *comes with* the images.

This hunger, then, is not for the images, but for something else. The plots of these narratives, Eco wrote, can even eliminate seemingly crucial emotional reactions to the plot (his example being the lack of suspense surrounding the guilty party in a detective story) in favor of “‘topical’ gestures of ‘topical’ characters whose stock behavior we already love” (21). We are, in a way, freed from having to reprocess the plot in each new episode.

Narrative of a redundant nature would appear ... as an indulgent invitation to repose, the only occasion of true relaxation offered to the consumer (21).

In short, we desire not so much the thrill of a mystery, but the comfort of its format. We hunger for a banalized image, for this opportunity to relax from the effort of understanding by already knowing what is going to happen in a narrative.

The Horror

The connection to Sontag and Mirzoeff is, of course, the similar bombardment of post-industrial society by images (cable news, Internet, and mobile video to name a few of the newest) that Eco ascribed merely to narrative in 1972. More recently, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag wrote that “For a long time people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war” (14). Sontag describes artistic and cultural efforts between the two World Wars to show people this very horror, emphasizing their ultimate failure in the chapter’s closing line: “And the following year the war came” (17).

The failure of employing an imagery of horror (through photographs and art) for any period of time attests to this tendency towards laziness Eco identified in “The Myth of Superman” as being offered by redundancy. The net results of consuming imagery of horror in this matter are varied but finite. Enumerating them, the most notable Sontag brings up “the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen” (13). This aspect of consumption could be considered a subjective move to banalize this imagery of horror, while repeated projection of this image would be a move to social banalization of the same.

Smashing iterative schemes

To bring the issue back to comic books, by virtue of their being mainstream, the “topical” elements Eco wrote of find themselves present within two iterative schemes: image and narrative. In comics today, narrative continues to operate largely as Eco described, although only on the episodic level. Crossovers and story arcs extending beyond a few episodes have become far more common in the medium, and were employed to great effect in narratives like *Civil War*.

The fact that comics have made a greater habit of extending their stories beyond the episodic creates opportunities to problematize the narratives normally iterated, such as in *Civil War* and *Watchmen* where notions of right and wrong become confused. Even in the case of the latter where Adrian Veidt plans to save the world, his idea hinges on the reaction of humanity *as a whole* falling into the invasion-from-outer-space narrative where humanity unites in peace out of fear. The problematization occurs through the questionable morality employed in

engineering his scheme.

This problematization can also conceivably reinvigorate aspects of imageries that consumers have become numb to, such as in the publication of *The 9/11 Report*. Not only does the accessibility of the medium expose the U.S. government's 9/11 narrative to a greater audience (thereby increasing its cultural footprint), but the medium infuses the story with a visual element that surpasses the gritty realism of the television and Internet images the reader has come to expect. The images are recognizable for what they are, but their relation to one another and the narrative they are a part of create different contextual reference points, imbuing the imagery with different meaning.

The original contextual reference points are, of course, those we experienced as we consumed the initial images of the September 11 attacks and the onset of the Iraq war. Mirzoeff places a fine point on this, as a major aspect of *Watching Babylon* is the subject's consumption: the act of watching.

I mean by watching all of the things we do when we watch television: looking, not looking, listening, not listening, eating, making a phone call, working, doing laundry, child care, reading and so on. In short, this is a vernacular watching, taking everyday life as its domain. (12)

Of course, the consumption takes place in the same context as the imagery is presented. This might be described as a partial trivialization, but more than that it creates a familiarity with horror. This is not new for wars and conflicts, as Vietnam and the first Gulf War evidence. Yet Mirzoeff's examination does bring up one important difference between past conflicts and our current, post-9/11 exposure:

Unlike in Vietnam, extensive coverage of the war in Iraq sustained the level of public consent in the United States, despite vociferous mass opposition. During the invasion of Iraq from March to May 2003, it seems likely that there were more images produced ... than in any other comparable period in history. (12)

This bombardment of images into the most intimate of settings—the living room, the kitchen, the bedroom, and wherever else Americans have televisions—and the “vernacular” watching described by Mirzoeff combine to banalize the horror that should be conveyed by the imagery.

Comic operation

It has been demonstrated that comics inextricably link their universe(s) to ours through both language and imagery. As a medium, comics can take on almost any type of narrative, and by virtue of this flexibility have a freer hand when it comes to problematizing both narrative and imagery. Thus, the medium allows a flexibility of message and a visual sway on both style and images, both extremely important in the emotional impact and content of the stories.

Comics remain a popular, commercial medium and need to cater to readers' desires, which, with help from Umberto Eco, explains the dominance of iterative schemes in both narrative and imagery. While these iterations have the effect in our real world of unsexing the imagery of horror, they serve to make the comic narratives more palatable. But comics (unlike photographs) are able to combat this tendency as a direct result of their visuo-textual nature.

One place these attacks happen is in the presentation of text, which is never done facetiously. Narration and speech balloons have spatial aspects to them—shape, position, size—as well as

other traits like color and texture (not to mention key juxtapositions with images) which contribute to a heightened expressiveness. Although relying in some respects on a reader's emotional reaction to the presentation of text in this form, by and large the visual aspects contribute to increased accessibility, lending the textual in comics towards meaning with a lower interpretive threshold.

This can be employed in the fight against banalization of imagery by attacking the iterative schemes themselves. These attacks serve not to shock readers by redisplaying images in different narrative contexts as much as they are meant to shock readers out of narrative complacency. Comics like *Watchmen* and *Civil War* present images and ideas in the comic book universe similar to our own, but dissimilar enough to put us on guard. This already affects the way we consume the narratives by upsetting consumption enough to take it out of the vernacular. We need to be prodded enough to regard the “indulgent invitation” with suspicion.

This can be used for any number of things, especially increasing social or political awareness, or to increase understanding and acceptance of a major narrative as in *The 9/11 Report*. It is combating these iterative schemes, regardless of success, that problematizes the narrative presented in a comic book as a whole. It is then by virtue of the spatio-temporal connections comics establish with the real world that this problematization escapes the comic book page, potentially raising questions of morality or ideology.

Utopian Dreams/Disappointing Utopias

Introduction

The previous chapter identified certain critical opportunities open to comics. As a medium capable of addressing everything from high- to low-brow, links of narrative and imagery combine with particular reactions to horror and the subsequent smashing of iterative schemes in order to speak to readers on a familiar level. There are, of course, the most literal connections from comics to the real world, but the looser the anchoring of comics in the real world, the opportunity to comment on that world is expanded. If there has indeed been a marked shift in cultural commentary in comic books, this should be easily confirmed when comparing pre-9/11 comics to those like *Civil War* that directly address 9/11.

Especially in times of cultural strife, superhero comic book narratives address the concept of *right*. This is traditionally a core element of superhero comic books given their characterizing virtues and vices into the most popular heroes and villains. Iterative schemes discussed in the previous chapter reinforce behavioral expectations of heroes and villains, so on one level character traits are perhaps the most base 'tells' in character development. These traits--which could be anything from habits, costume design, gender, race, size, or super power--all retain a certain iconic value based on their positions within the iterated narrative. Taken with imagery--both textual and visual--these aspects form the fundamental parts of the process that uses their proximity and position within narrative for the benefit of cultural criticism.

A common narrative theme is utopia. Frequently addressed in science fiction narratives, utopias seem the tailor-made narrative for superhero comics. Science fiction utopia narratives most commonly start with the utopia accomplished, seeking to create a dialog exposing the moral trade-offs required to maintain the state of affairs, ending with the implication that a) the utopia was really a dystopia, only nobody wanted to or could believe it (*Equilibrium*, for example), or b) an imperfect humanity cannot handle utopia (think *The Matrix*). The tendency of superhero narratives is more towards historical or hopeful utopias, even within their narratives, comic book characters address their utopias as ethereal dreams of the past or future.

Times of crisis in a society can serve as watershed events, and their ripples through society are reflected in its narratives. Superhero comics, so capable of addressing the moral issues involved in remembering/hoping for (in other words: dreaming) utopias—should be particularly sensitive to mainstream shifts in moral reasoning. If utopias are the embodiment of society's dreams of right and wrong, any changes in these dreams should be reflected over time. In the United States, prior to 9/11 the most marked national moral crises occurred during the Watergate and Iran-Contra affairs. Watergate shook American trust in its government, and the ramifications of Iran-Contra were even contributing factors to 9/11 (according to the 9/11 commission report).

Those specific examples will be examined in the next chapter by way of the *Captain America* comics of that period. What needs to be done here is establish that superhero comic book narratives chiefly express their criticism through utopian dreams in two ways. First are the dreams themselves. After that come the specific failures to realize them. There are certain common threads to these narratives, the first of which is the involvement of the super-human and how this ties into the Nietzschean concept of the *übermensch*. The other consistent element is great power in the presence of an ethereal utopia. This second point is crucial to watch for differences in pre- and post-9/11 commentary.

What those comic books show us is the following 1) that superheroes are primarily forces of conservatism, and 2) they show a particular model of what society expects should be done with power. Umberto Eco reasons superheroes don't overthrow governments just because the heroes are "nice." Spider-Man says it's because that there is a certain responsibility that comes with power. This is what drives Rorschach, Sally, and Nite Owl back to work when the Comedian is killed. They all have a notion that they should, on a personal level, do what they are immediately capable. This is the position that starts with 'do no harm.' One step up is registration, which is depicted in *Watchmen* and *Civil War*. This is the level where the individual responsibility is no longer merely selfish, but towards a 'greater good.'

Most superhero comic utopias necessarily fail. Allowing them to succeed implies either that things were indeed better in the past (such as Namor might wish of Atlantis) or the futility/danger/idiocy of working towards anything other than particular future (such as Veidt might wish of his new world order). American superhero comic books, especially those like *Watchmen* and *Civil War* which examine horrible disaster and its aftermath while vividly showing Americans--through visual and textual imagery--the utopias they dream of. The struggles of the superheroes and super villains both for and against those utopias in those narratives show conservatism and accountability of power are major issues in the American cultural discourse. Though the narratives discussed here offer resolutions that appear to be successful, they are also morally tainted and therefore subject to debate. The specific problematization of success is where the key difference between the pre- and post-9/11 cultural criticism in American mainstream superhero comics.

Comic Conservatism

Superheroes rarely use their powers to truly change the world. Their conservatism creates a standard by which those super-humans who use their powers as agents of change are mostly seen as villainous forces who attack the status quo. This categorization firmly establishes conservatism and perpetuation of the status quo as a central tenet of the comic book universe, and given the relationship between comics and our real-world, this categorization is a manifestation of American demands on its heroes. As Spider-Man comics have hammered into readers for decades, power brings with it an equal degree of responsibility, and historically speaking this responsibility has been to the existing social order. Superman may defend the weak and the helpless, but he doesn't fight for equality. Captain America may be the embodiment of the American ideal, but his mere presence perpetuates a myth of America that was conceived in the 1940's.

In terms of narrative, this tendency is fundamentally necessary. If evil is ultimately defeated, then there will be no social need for superheroes. When heroes do their job too well, the American public will demand accountability, such as in *Watchmen* and *Civil War*. This plays back to the iterative schemes described previously: with no bad guys, there need be no heroes to fight them. It is thus imperative that the status quo be defended, and that any attempts to change the world order (for better or worse) either fail or be abandoned by the narrative's end.

Pre-9/11 comics were steeped in the politics and culture of the Cold War, and *Watchmen* addresses the conflict head on. The status quo is one in which a balance of geopolitical power is crucial to preventing a world war. The *Under the Hood* realizations² of heroes needing their villains is a microcosm of the United States and the USSR needing each other. Such overt self-knowledge is rare in comics, and is only present in *Watchmen* insofar as the excerpts of analytical texts permit. Other superhero narratives, like those of Superman and Captain America, are far more subtle in their protection of the status quo.

2 Will be explained in more detail later.

Maintaining the balance (Tying iterative schemes to conservatism)

Umberto Eco's discussion of comic books was brought up in the previous chapter, specifically his look at iterative schemes present in comic book narratives. Recognizing these leaves a very short step to understanding the importance of such narratives in a pre-9/11 context. There is a crucial balance to be maintained, and at risk is the descent of the comic narratives into incredulity. For each hero there must be a villain, just as there must be two sides to every conflict. Historically speaking, World War II was one such conflict, but when the overwhelming force of the Allies emerged victorious, a new enemy was necessary, and the evil USSR emerged as a counterbalance to American power. Such conflicts are also evident on a smaller scale, such as the conflict between India and Pakistan, the latter having been able to maintain a semblance of stability only through the constant threat of a new Indo-Pak war (a very real possibility considering it happened three times already). Such conflicts allow society to forgive a lack of focus on seemingly less-immediate and tangible issues like social inequality and civil liberties in lieu of immediate conflict.

Eco's discussion of Superman highlights the point that the stories in the comics are prevented from making any real narrative headway. As Orion Ussner Kidder wrote in his commentary on Eco, “[Superman's] immortality, in the comics, comes with an inability to actually progress as a character” (*Four-Colour Commentary*). This gives Superman a sense of finiteness and the possibility of death. Taking the romantic tension between Superman and Lois Lane as an example, “If Superman married Lois Lane, it would of course be another step toward his death, as it would lay down another irreversible premise...” (Eco 18). Iterative schemes in narrative do not therefore exist merely to provide an easily accessible plot (answering to the the consumer's desire to relax discussed in the previous chapter), but develop naturally out of the need for balance of power, as Superman needs to maintain himself as a character in a plot which does not consume itself. Just as consummation of the romance between Superman and Lois would be a step towards death, so would any permanent capture or defeat of any of Superman's enemies.

The iterations of plot in Superman comics serve to reinforce notions of good, and in Eco's section on political and civic consciousness, he makes it clear that there are certain value judgments inherent in the actions of superheroes.

Each of these heroes is gifted with such powers that he could actually take over the government, defeat the army, or alter the equilibrium of planetary politics. On the other hand, it is clear that each of these characters is profoundly kind, moral, faithful to human and natural laws, and therefore it is right (and it is nice) that he use his powers only to the end of good. (22)

Conversely, Matthew Wolf-Meyer draws attention to the comic *Miraclemen*, where one of the characters comments on a super-powered character, musing “Have you ever thought how little he must care about us? As a species? Have you ever thought what we must look like to him? Like animals... like frightened, stupid animals” (499). Eco's response would be that the heroes are 'good,' although he does make note of the small scale on which he operates being a necessary result of the good-evil dichotomy both allowing Superman stories and preventing them from making any real conceptual plot development. So whereas Superman has ample opportunity to view puny humans from the context of being an *übermensch*, Eco maintains that these and other stories have as their content a pedagogical message stemming from the status quo.

Again, the discussion does not take on the features of the authors' preferences as much as their adaptation to a concept of "order" which pervades the cultural model in which the authors live, and where they construct on a small scale "analogous" models which mirror the larger one. (22)

Watchmen is perhaps one of the better examples of the possibilities opened up when power is imbalanced. A heavily intertextual graphic novel, each chapter of *Watchmen* includes three pages of text from somewhere else.³ One of these excerpts (found at the end of Chapter III) discusses the lack of enemies for costumed adventurers to fight:

I don't think any of us realized how much we needed those goons until they started to thin out. You see, if you're the only one who'd bothered to turn up for a free-for-all in costume, you tended to look kind of stupid. If the bad guys joined in as well, it wasn't so bad, but without them it was always sort of embarrassing (30).

A few paragraphs later, the (fictional) text turns of the advent of Dr. Manhattan: "The arrival of Dr. Manhattan would make the terms 'masked hero' and 'costumed adventurer' as obsolete as the persons they described" (31).

The fictional excerpt from Chapter IV is from the introduction of *Dr. Manhattan: Super-Powers and the Superpowers* by a Professor Milton Glass. An academic study of the advent of Dr. Manhattan, the text addresses the idea that while many would think a super-human like Dr. Manhattan would inspire world peace, in actuality he has brought the world closer to destruction. Though Dr. Manhattan's powers have brought all sorts of qualitatively good things to society—such as electric cars and efficient airships—the net result is the constant humiliation of a nuclear Russia that suddenly has nothing to lose. "One single being has been allowed to change the entire world, pushing it closer to its eventual destruction" (32).

Good, bad, & utopia

The desire on the part of superheroes thus seems to be the maintenance of an imperfect present rather than strive for an idealistic future (with few exceptions). There have to be both reasons for and implications of this tendency. The superhero comic, Eco explains, presents its heroes as mythic. One of the consequences of this is the timelessness of the tales. Kidder points out Eco's fascination at the comic book writers' ability for "retroactive continuity," meaning that the narrative can continue returning to the same point again and again and tell the story differently. Nonetheless, superhero comics maintain a continuity, and as Matthew Wolf-Meyer explains, this is an essential part of comic books.

Much like soap operas and other serialized media, comics develop sequentially on both a micro and a macro level, which leads to the development of complex histories that, while stretching back for the characters only a matter of years, stretch back for the audience and writers years, and often decades. (499-500)

This retroactive continuity (retcon) establishes that although certain parts of the story may

3 Keep in mind that all of these texts are fictitious. The actual plot continues in the traditional comic book format of frames and panels of art and text, but certain sections have been inserted which provide background information and inform on the social context of the heroes in the narrative. While some texts, such as the comic book *The Black Freighter*, operate more closely as dramatic foils, most of these excerpts come from *Under the Hood*, written by Hollis Mason, the first Nite Owl and one of the original masked adventurers.

change, the way the character relates to everything—conceptual, physical, emotional, etc.—needs to remain consistent. The consequences of not doing this are that the entire notion of the character in question implodes. Captain America, for instance, *has* to have a particular back story (born in a WW2 experiment to create a super-soldier). He also *has* to have certain elements in his costume (shield and flag-theme). Finally, he *has* to have a particular relationship to a particular idea of America. The same is true for Superman, Spider-Man, and all other mainstream superheroes. Perhaps the most important element of these continuities is whether or not the character is a “good guy” or a “bad guy.”

As the character Hollis Mason noted in *Watchmen*, the good guys far outnumber the bad guys. Wolf-Meyer's explanation is that these super-humans are in effect conservative forces. “These heroes,” he explains, “fail to uphold the philosophical responsibility that Friedrich Nietzsche thought so vital to the position of the *übermensch*, whose purpose was to 'go under,' to bring to humanity the lessons learned, metaphysical or otherwise, as post-humans, in an attempt to effect utopia.” He goes on to point out that the heroes who do “go under” are “marginalized and few” (501).

This doesn't mean that all non-conservative heroes are actually “bad guys,” especially since Wolf-Meyer presents Spider-Man and the X-Men as examples of these, but these are examples in which only the *society within the world of the comic book* views these individuals as forces that should be marginalized (think of the relationship between J. Jonah Jameson and Spider-Man, or the fact that the U.S. government effectively quarantines the X-Men on their compound). In terms of their relationship to their comic book society, there is nothing that really differentiates them from the super villains who wish to take over the world and impose their own order. In effect, just as Adolf Hitler applied Nietzschean ideology in an effort to transform Europe to what he theorized would be a better place. In the same way characters like Adrian Veidt, the “world's smartest man” in *Watchmen* and Alexander Luthor, the universe's smartest mind in *Infinite Crisis* could be seen as arch-villains on par with Hitler, or as misunderstood prophets with the power to actualize utopia. Veidt plans to bring about world peace through the massacre of millions in New York City, whereas Luthor plans to bring about utopia through the destruction and combination of various earths also at great cost to (super)human life.

Thus without the conservative force of narrative to effect constant return to the status quo, heroes would eventually defeat all of the villains and have succeeded in their primary goal of protecting the weak and innocent. What would happen then? Either the comic books would end (making this a bad business move for the publishers) or the super-humans would have to find something else to apply their powers to. Wolf-Meyer brings up examples of superhero teams who sought to fight for more ethereal goals—elimination of hunger, poverty, inequality and such—showing how all of those efforts either petered out or were constantly rerouted to fighting more immediate threats to the physical health and well-being of the normal humans. Specifically, he brings up the *Squadron Supreme*, a group of superheroes who aim to fight for these ethereal utopian goals, eventually leading to moral uncertainties related to the methods by which members of the group work for utopias. In absence of real enemies, “the series is more about the corruption of superheroes failing to be held in check by their constant battles with super villains—as long as superheroes are acting like super-humans, their 'human' aspects will fail to emerge” (505).

Choices

The issue of power and the responsibility that comes with it is a central tenet of superhero comics. The implications of this will be further investigated in the next chapter, but it remains

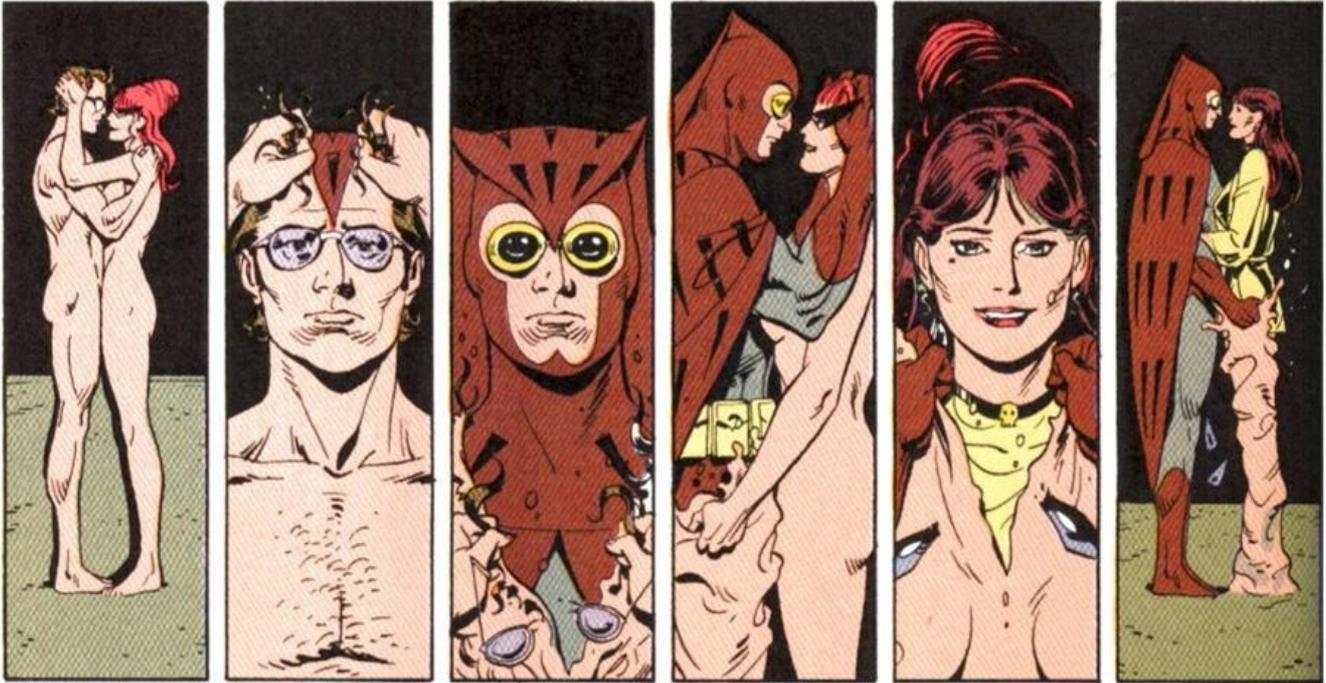
important to note that the conservatism that inhibits the achievement of utopias in comic book narratives also has a profound impact on the sense of responsibility superheroes experience along with their power. This is the only true differentiation between the heroes and villains in these narratives, as even the revolutionary (Wolf-Meyer calls them “terrorist” a number of times) super-humans imagine they are working for a greater good. What separates the revolutionaries from the conservatives is *which* greater good they serve. The choice is rather clear-cut: stabilizing the imperfect now, or fighting the imperfect now to attempt a more perfect future.

Eco's judgment that superheroes do not overthrow governments and institute super-human rule on earth merely because “it is nice” certainly doesn't do them justice. Wolf-Meyer's assertion that there is a tendency towards conservatism is a better explanation for this, although far more important is the notion that these super-humans have a *responsibility* to act, with choosing how to do so merely a symptom of power (the philosophical responsibility of the *übermensch* identified by Nietzsche).

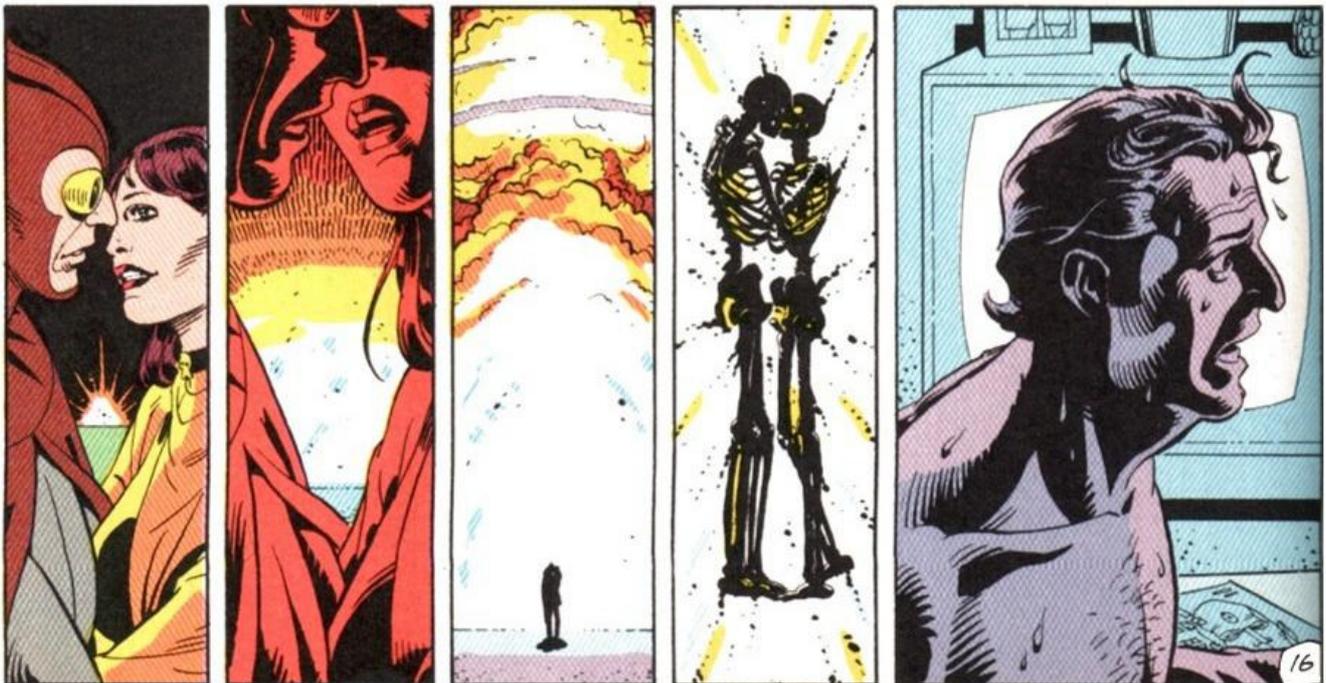
This responsibility is succinctly illustrated on page 16 of *Watchmen* Chapter VII, where Dan Drieberg, the character also known as Nite Owl, has a dream directly addressing his uneasiness about taking up the mantle of a masked adventurer once more. In the story before the dream, he has grown troubled about recent events, and all indications are that he is debating whether or not he should once again don the Nite Owl costume, as in his current state (mere man) he is unable to garrison the intangible something (Resolve? Intelligence? Mode of thinking?) that might help him combat the restlessness and uncertainty emerging around him.



The entire wordless sequence comes after a botched attempt at having sex with Laurie Juspezyk on his couch. The first panels (above) depict the carnal and selfish desire consuming the two of them, and the removal of their clothes in the sixth panel shows their desire to be with each other as they came into the world (nude and without the costumes they wear to perform their daily lives).



Following their undress, it becomes apparent that they haven't quite fully unmasked each other's performative mask. They proceed to peel off each other's skin, revealing their costumed-adventurer selves underneath. Beneath whatever mere human desires they shared, it is quite obvious that both of them are much more than that. The final panels show the Silk Spectre smiling contently as the Nite Owl peels away the remainder of Laurie Juspezyk.



Danger, although faint, remains in the background. The blank landscape of the first two rows gives way to a spark in the distance at the beginning of the final row of panels. As the Nite Owl and Silk Spectre remain infatuated with each other—at once realizing their true natures and not acting on them—the spark grows into what can only be assumed is a nuclear explosion. It is unlikely that this explosion is merely representative of their passion considering the sweat in which Drieberg awakes in the final panel. The message here is that Drieberg and Juspezyk cannot merely recognize who they are in the consummation of their

feelings for each other. Their lust is effectively inaction that could lead to their destruction.

Neither of the two are pushed towards choosing a conservative or revolutionary heroism at this point in the narrative. What is shown here is the necessity of action, regardless of the choice. This is the responsibility of the superhero.

Choosing utopia

The notion that this world could be more perfect has been the focus of thought for centuries, but only becomes revolutionary in the hands of those who try and make it come to pass. This was the same type of revolution that birthed the United States, although the mere fact that the new nation was referred to for generations thereafter as "The Great Experiment" reminds us that the American Revolution was conducted by humans in humble recognition of their weaknesses and fallibility. By their very nature, the superheroes who choose not to topple governments merely because they are "nice" are pulling punches. Super villains, on the other hand, do not represent His Majesty's colonial hegemony. They are usually depicted as embodiments of greed and opportunism at best. "Good," then, is a measured response to the world, leaving to "bad" everything that is unrestrained.

What of a carefully calculated plan to bring peace, cooperation, and order to everyone? Even the pacifists between the World Wars recognized that establishing this as an absolute was impractical, if not impossible, although in the world of superhero comics, this impracticality becomes a possibility (however dim) at the hands of the super-human. As Nietzsche described, it is the philosophical responsibility of those with powers to lift up humanity to a better world, but when this idea is explored in comics the outcome invariably involves a choice between a conservative defense of the status quo or a revolutionary Nietzschean world where those with power organize the world as they deem 'right.'

Many superheroes are like Superman and Captain America. They don't take on the burden of judging humanity, preferring to defend the weak against the super villains who wish to destroy or otherwise defile the property, life, and limb of humanity. Comics like *Watchmen* demonstrate that super-humans like Adrian Veidt who deem it their responsibility to lift up humanity to a better place—in effect choosing to bring about utopia merely because he can—inevitably meet with failure or a problematized success.

At the heart of the failure of social revolution is the conservative notion that the known imperfect present is at least known, and the uncertainty of the future is best combated by reinforcing the status quo. The world pictured in *Watchmen* is arch-conservative (Richard Nixon has been elected for a fourth term) and on the brink of nuclear war (the clock



beginning each chapter slowly approaches midnight). When Veidt finally succeeds, he is forced to question his deeds in light of all that had to be sacrificed. Thousands of lives are lost, of course, but more important is the loss of the familiar balance of power replaced by world peace.



Rorschach, the antihero in *Watchmen*, is the only costumed adventurer who is disgusted by the new utopia and sets out to destroy it. Unemotionally, Dr. Manhattan, who has become detached

from any humanity he may have had, destroys Rorschach to prevent a return to a dystopic, conservative reality. Although this allows the utopia to succeed nominally, the force of Rorschach's ideology carries on as his diary—one of the red lines in *Watchmen's* narrative—is discovered by a small publishing house. The truth of Veidt's unilateral decision for all of humanity will be known, opening forever the option of revolt against utopia.

Captain America

Introduction

The death of Captain America is a particular answer to American cultural cries for heroes in troubled times, much like his birth in 1941 was a cultural call to arms against an aggressive fascist *weltanschauung*. The answer we find in Captain America's death, however, is an answer born in the ashes of a national tragedy, and not so much a rallying cry but the death spasm of a country mortally wounded when the Twin Towers fell down in the morning hours of September 11, 2001. Captain America's death represents a realization America must make about how it thinks of itself and how to deal with the responsibilities and moral quandaries of a new American ideal. The Marvel crossover series *Civil War* begins with a disastrous incident in Stamford, Connecticut involving the deaths of more than 600 innocent citizens. The particular reaction of the U.S. government to this incident and subsequent decisions made by the superheroes in the Marvel universe, by virtue of topical and conceptual connectivity between superhero comics and our world, are parallels and criticisms of events that occurred in our reality's wake of the 9/11 attacks. Captain America has always served as a particular symbol for America, and his assassination at the end of *Civil War* speaks to the fact that he could no longer exist in a world so fundamentally altered by the disaster in Stamford.



The first comics featuring Captain America had him in direct conflict with Axis powers. Seen above is the cover of Captain America Comics #1, published in March 1941, where Cap punches Hitler. The U.S. would declare war on the Axis powers nine months later.

America's relationship to its superheroes, and Captain America specifically, has always been an intimate one. When Captain America—affectionately known as “Cap”—was first created in 1941, the United States had still not entered into World War II. Draped in the flag and carrying a shield emblazoned with the stars and stripes, Cap was an overtly patriotic hero whose principal weapon—a shield—is inherently defensive. Unlike some of the Looney Tunes and Disney strips commissioned by the government to drum up patriotism and support for the war effort, Captain America was the embodiment of a cultural and emotional disposition in America that preceded any diplomatic or political commitment to fight the Axis powers. Captain America was how Americans saw themselves and their country, regardless (or in spite) of its politics and government.

This is a pattern that comic publishers tried to cash in on in the 1950s, when the comic was reincarnated as *Captain America: Commie Smasher!*. Meant to reflect a spirit of the times, the McCarthy-era Captain America sold poorly, an economic indicator that the slight changes in ideology sat poorly with readers (Wright 123). With the revival of Captain America in the 1960s, a clear balance was struck and it became

increasingly clear that Captain America was loyal to America and to Americans, but not necessarily to politicians or government that could be corrupted. Several key examples in the history of Captain America comics clearly show Captain America siding with an American ideal rather than government, a choice often closely linked to (implicit) criticism of contemporary real-world politics. It is patriotism that is exalted while politics is derided.

The criticism of American government is combined with social criticism of the demands America places not only on its heroes, but by way of them also how it envisions itself. In effect, it is a criticism of itself as a discursive context. Captain America has renounced his mantle before, even proclaiming in the early 1970s that there was no more place in the world for a Captain America (CA #176). This philosophical musing happened a few more times, always bringing into question what it is that Captain America actually symbolizes. Though Steve Rogers becomes Captain America when he dons the flag and shield, the separation between the two is hardly pronounced considering the importance of Rogers' personal qualities in defining Captain America. Thus, when Cap's role is problematized by circumstance or context, Rogers recognizes that he serves something greater than himself and any other American, while at the same time showing that these same grand issues are personal to him as the ideal American everyman. When some aspect of America is co-opted or the symbolism hijacked, Rogers always continues his patriotic service to this transcendental ideal of America. Rogers was born into an idealized 1940s America, one with clearer (more hegemonic?) ideas of nation, culture, and service than the Americas he defends in the decades after his return to the comic universe in 1963, though somehow his idealism has at its core the same transcendent hopefulness the world fell in love with during and immediately after the liberation of Europe.

At least, this was until everything changed in late 2001. The scar left in downtown Manhattan was not merely the destruction of two towers, but the theft of a part of the optimism America has had since its rise to global power. This new antithetical America, damaged and wounded, became one of fear and xenophobia, a nation partaking in a dark and pragmatic cynicism. The characteristics—trading liberty for security, increased government control and increased accountability of citizens to the government—that thrive in an environment of fear bear with them certain cultural and legislative hallmarks. These formed the death knell of John Winthrop's "City on the hill" that Captain America defended so valiantly with his shield as the Sentinel of Liberty. With nothing left to defend, of course, the defender becomes irrelevant and superfluous.

America and its hero

The intimate relationship between Captain America and America has always been firmly grounded in Cap's creation and experiences during the Second World War. From Cap's genesis in "Project: Rebirth" through his various incarnations over the years, these ideals and the patriotic symbolism of his costume have created a very specific notion of 'right' in the Marvel universe. This notion has interacted with contemporary politics and culture in various ways through the changes the United States has experienced in the last sixty years, but America has always demanded—and has never been disappointed by Captain America in this respect—a steadfast and consistent response from the Sentinel of Liberty.

In order to better understand Captain America in a larger context, it is necessary to examine his *mythic* (as Eco would say) character, and that requires understanding the iterated narrative of his origins.

Project: Rebirth

In the Marvel universe, “Project: Rebirth” is the name of the scientific program that created Captain America. The Captain America genesis begins with the scrawny young WPA artist Steve Rogers. After seeing newsreel footage of the Nazi advance in Europe, he finds inaction an unthinkable course and attempts to sign up for military service with the hopes that this would put him face to face with the fascist aggressors. Unfortunately, his frailty makes him unfit to serve, though his eager spirit is noticed by a passing officer and Rogers is given the opportunity to participate in the experimental project.

Thrilled at being able to serve after all, the experiment—a combination of the 'super-soldier serum' and exposure to 'vita-rays'—is a success. Unfortunately, Nazi saboteurs learn of the project, and one of their operatives assassinates the only scientist with knowledge of the process. With his new strength and agility, Rogers avenges the treachery, but not before most of the research and equipment is destroyed. The net result is that Rogers is the only super-soldier created. He has no special powers, but his physical and intellectual attributes are developed to optimal levels for any human. He is the perfect man, the *übermensch* incarnate.

There are several aspects of this story that remain crucially important to Captain America as a character, what Eco would consider contributing to the *myth* of Captain America, and aspects which are iterated time and again in Captain America narratives. Steve Rogers volunteers out of an intense idealism, patriotism, and faith in his country. Even in his World War II adventures, it is clear (in the comic book universe) that he is somewhat of a propaganda tool, although this was at a time when propaganda did not always have the negative connotation it does today. What is important is that commitment to a particular ideology resulted in Rogers' physical transformation from physical inferiority to Captain America.

Another key part of Captain America's origin is the notion that there only is and only will ever be one of him.⁴ Were there an army of Captain Americas created, the reconciliation between this and the German subscription to the Nietzschean theories of a master race would have been impossible. Readers were reminded of this in the final issue of *Captain America*: “Project: Rebirth ended in blood and fire and left one man to carry on in the place of all the others that might have been. One man to carry that burden” (CA #525 2). He literally became the embodiment of an American hope against the Nazis, and America had its super-man instead of a race of *übermensche*.

The fierce patriotism infused into Captain America's origins meshes tightly with the symbolism inherent in his name and costume. Rogers begins as an employee of the WPA, an implication of hard work and perseverance, but when he tries to join the military it becomes clear that only by supplementing this with patriotism, loyalty, and an ideological dedication is it possible to rise above the suffering and inadequacies of mere men and commingle to create Captain America.

Frozen in the ice

The end of World War II brought on a new era in geopolitics, and a new paragon of American patriotism. Conservative America put itself through a second Red Scare, a hyperactive xenophobia that brought on a confusing decade of finger pointing and witch hunting associated with the Senator Joseph McCarthy. The original Captain America comic folded in

4 This creates a difficult situation, as we will see, when he needs to die at the end of *Civil War*. Whereas his previous bouts with corruption result in Rogers pondering and being conflicted, ultimately deciding the right thing to do and eventually returning to his role as Captain America, the issues at stake in *Civil War* are too serious. This precludes any sort of return by Steve Rogers to his role as he did in the wake of Watergate.

1949, and the character would not appear again until 1963, but for the brief publishing run of *Captain America: Commie Smasher!*

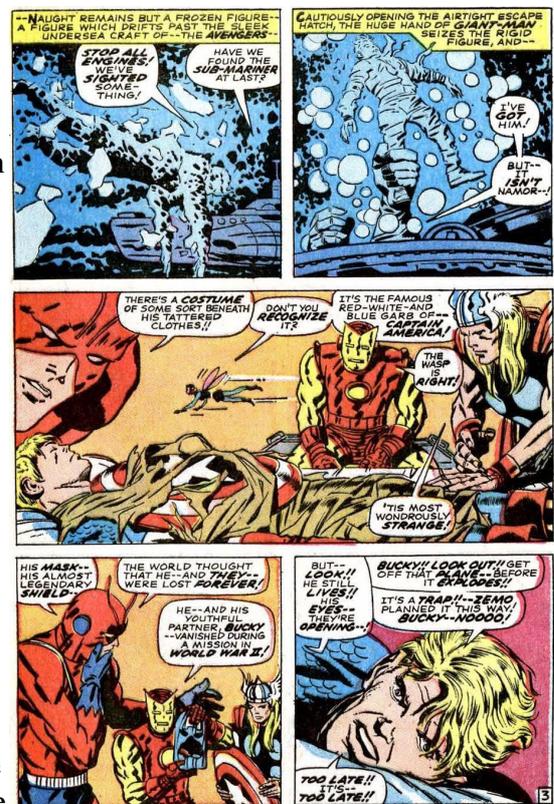
Keeping within the capabilities of the medium, the new incarnation of Captain America was nowhere near as popular as before. This was partly due to the formation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954 as a censorship body. The consequences of this were unfortunate. As described by Les Daniels in *Comix*, “The result was a setback for the art of comics, which was forced into essentially infantile patterns when its potential for maturity had only begun to be explored” (83).

The Comics Code was a specific set of rules governing every aspect of comics, from title to advertising. Rules such as “If crime is depicted it shall be as a sordid and unpleasant activity,” “In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds,” and even regarding dialogue: “Although slang and colloquialisms are acceptable, excessive use should be discouraged and wherever possible good grammar shall be employed” (Daniels 89-90). The patriotic Captain America never settled with readers in such a climate, and eventually fell out of print.

In *Strange Tales* #114, Stan Lee ran a story featuring a character masquerading as Captain America, who even in the comic book universe disappeared after World War II. Bluntly, he asked readers if they wanted to see Cap's return, and the overwhelming response was positive. Subsequently, he was *retconned* into the Marvel universe in *Captain America* #100, the story being that he had fallen into the North Sea after putting his own life on the line while trying to save London and was frozen in the ice. The Sub-Mariner and the superhero team the Avengers rediscovered the lost hero in 1963, thawed him out, after which he quickly became leader of the team, though he would never forgive himself for the loss of his sidekick Bucky during the same mission (though it is later revealed Bucky was found by the Soviets and turned into an assassin).

Although *Captain America* titles continued for a while without mentioning the anti-Communist ideologue, the Captain America of the 1950s was finally addressed and retconned during the 1970s as having been an admirer of Captain America who took his obsession a little too far by donning the flag and shield after the real hero's disappearance.

Captain America's role as a war hero, his self-sacrifice on his 'final' mission in World War II, being frozen in the ice, and personal guilt at the loss of his sidekick are perhaps the most important parts of Cap's story. The guilt makes it clear that he still sees himself as flawed and easier to identify with, even though the readership is well aware he has no reason to feel that way. His government service and heroic legend serve to inform both Steve Rogers' ideas of nation, government, and the American ideal. Being frozen for two decades carries with it the implication that the idealistic America, the one engaged in an altruistic fight for *right* against Nazi evil, was somehow crystallized within Rogers as he was frozen.



Consequences

In effect, whenever we see Captain America in a comic, his mere presence out of his own time is a juxtaposition, begging the comparison between the dreams of then to the unfortunate reality of now. The consequences of this retconning are twofold. On the one hand, the demonstrable failure of the McCarthyist Captain America and subsequent revelation that it was never Steve Rogers behind the mask serve to emphasize his uniqueness, thereby amplifying his mythic qualities, and demonstrate how difficult—both physically and (especially) ideologically—it is to be Captain America. This said, the second consequence, informed by this recognition of the heavy responsibility on his shoulders, is the infusion of Captain America's steadfast morality as a problematizing element in an increasingly complex world.

A morally strong Captain America always brought out the best in the characters on his team, while also highlighting their fallibilities. Tony Stark, for instance, is both Iron Man and an alcoholic. Although he becomes perhaps Rogers' greatest friend, the two come to blows on more than one occasion, highlighting the imperfections of the (not unrepentant) Stark. This casts Rogers as near-perfect, his only problems being either existential or the unfounded guilt related to the supposed death of his World War II sidekick. When Rogers temporarily gives up the mantle of Captain America in the late 1980s, it is because he does not want to compromise his standards and the American ideal he believes in by working for a corrupt American government. When John Walker is drafted to replace him, he fails to uphold the standard set by Rogers, just as the Captain America of the 1950s failed.

This weight is not easy to carry, a point which is returned to over and over in the years of Captain America comics. This serves to put a fine point on Cap's status as his team's moral compass. The expectation is that he will always make the right decision, regardless of the dissent, such as demonstrated in periodic tensions with Iron Man and the tendency of self-doubt. Nonetheless, just as his presence serves as a litmus test for the superheroes he works with (and against), the very nature of comic books allows his character to do the same for American culture. After his 1963 revival, he works most closely with the Falcon, one of the first successful African-American superheroes and tightly connected with the evolving race consciousness of the United States. He also briefly addresses the issue of homosexuality when he runs into childhood friend Arnie Roth in *CA* #270 (published June 1982) as part of the constant theme of being slightly bewildered with the pace of social change.

This Captain America provides a moral gold standard for the Marvel universe. In itself, this may be merely interesting to note, but when looked at as a potential discursive presence, Captain America's moral compass opens comic book narratives to critical commentary of social, political, and moral nature.



The severity of Cap's burden is reiterated mere pages before his assassination in Captain America #525.

Critical opportunities

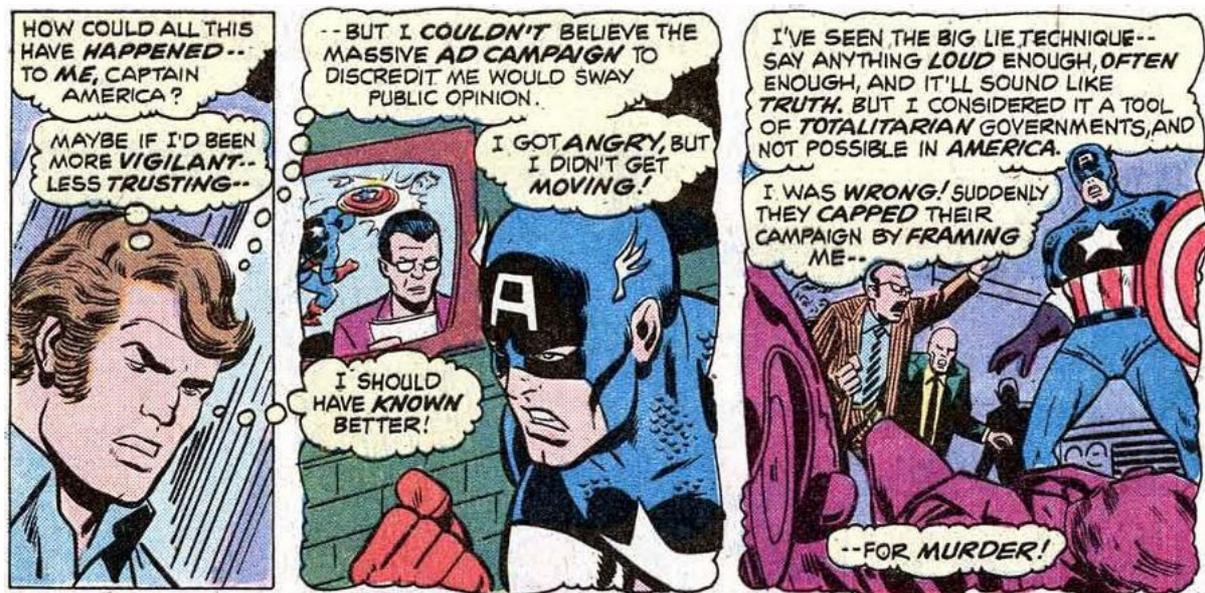
The America of Franklin Roosevelt had at its core a hope and idealism, a *weltanschauung* born in a firm belief in the clear division between right and wrong, the notion of protecting the weak and innocent when they are unable, one where patriotism and loyalty were exalted and informed by the sacrifice and hard work of all Americans throughout the Great Depression and the war effort. Though this ideal may never have existed in its purest form,

perhaps the closest it ever came was in the character of Steve Rogers. When he was revived in the 1960s, it was an opportunity to take the rapidly changing America and measure it against the conservative simplicity of Captain America. Perhaps the most marked opportunities for criticism have emerged from watershed socio-political events. Sometimes blunt, but often oblique references to real-world events and politics are common in Captain America comics, and his mere presence in these narratives swings the door open to commentary.

Of specific note are the Watergate affair and the attacks of September 11, 2001. The first (also addressed in *Watchmen*) and second events force Cap to confront government corruption, leading him to draw conclusions with regards to the true nature of his service and a separation of patriotism from blind complicity—essentially making him the antithetical Eichmann. There would be no passive cooperation with immoral policies, and as such he never capitulates to Arendt's banality of evil. With September 11, the America Cap embodies is attacked, tested, and finally sacrificed on the altar of history.

Watergate

Beginning in 1974, Marvel published a Captain America story arc of that explored the consequences of widespread corruption and the responsibility involved in being Captain America. An organization known as the Secret Empire has infiltrated the United States in all levels of government, and in their bid to take over the country launches a media smear campaign to destroy the nation's faith in its hero.



The focus on the media in the story arc was no accident. The massive lies radiating from the White House—and their eventual exposure—were characterized by extensive media coverage. The Vietnam conflict had taught Americans to watch television, and they did so *en masse*. During the Nixon Administration, the print and television media grew into a robust medium, and were used for both good and ill. These two faces are also exposed in the comic book story arc, where Cap is framed for murder through a crafty PR agent hired by the Secret Empire and the 'hero' who replaces Cap eventually starts naming names, bringing down the entire conspiracy in front of television cameras on the White House lawn in *CA&F* #175. The media is thus revealed to have the power of both obfuscation and illumination of the truth.

After Cap and the Falcon defeat the Secret Empire with help from the X-Men (who had also been targeted by the Empire as part of their far-reaching scheme) in a battle in front of those

very same cameras, after which Cap chases down Number One, leader of the Secret Empire, discovering he is the President immediately before he commits suicide in the Oval Office.

Deeply troubled by his discoveries, Steve Rogers quits being Captain America for a time, taking up the identity of the Nomad. Story writer Steve Englehart states on his own website that he did intend the President to be Nixon, but stopped just short of saying so outright in the comics (*Captain America II*).

The existential distress Rogers goes through is in a sense an allegory for the social upheaval of the times and the intense public reaction to the revelations that Nixon and his cronies were, indeed, crooks. Already, the hangover from the sixties was a surge in anti-American sentiment worldwide, questioning its role in a nuclear bipolar world. Although international concerns have never been a hot button issue in American society, there was enough uncertainty about the recent war in Vietnam (floods of veterans, the coming of age of baby-boomers, and the constant threat of nuclear annihilation among other things) to screw the socio-political climate tight as a drum skin. When the burglary at the Watergate hotel was made public, the ensuing storm of lies and cover-ups unleashed an emotional response that shook America's faith in its institutions and elected officials that gave reason for a collective rethinking of what it meant to *be* America.

After Rogers proclaims "Captain America must die" in the opening shot of *Captain America & The Falcon* # 176, his friends and colleagues gather around to try and convince him that America needs the Sentinel of Liberty. He explores his options and tries hard to put the life of being America's hero behind him, eventually discovering the truth in his friend The Vision's implication that he could never truly turn away from a life of adventure (32). Cap's shaken faith coupled with the intense cultural changes are summed up most effectively in the panels below.



The final panels of CA&F #175 showing Cap's reaction to the unraveling of the plot to steal America from within and subsequent suicide of Number One, discovered to be the President.



Captain America ponders his role in relation to the changed American identity on page 15 of CA&F #176

Nonetheless, true to the iterative nature of superhero comics, the eventual decision Cap makes is similar to the revelation of Veidt's dream discussed in Chapter 3. It was not nearly enough to recognize the hero that was a part of him (which led him to take on the Nomad identity), but he also came around to the fact that America needed its Captain more than ever in times of trouble. This tidy plot resolution fits the conservative tendency of comic book heroes, demonstrating at the same time that such conservatism can be a source of inspiration for good rather than merely a force against change. When Rogers takes on the mantle of Captain America once more, he also recognizes the new America he defends, the inclusive, diverse, and vibrant land he sometimes has trouble recognizing as the same America that made him.

The inevitable death of Captain America

The direct reaction of most mainstream comics to 9/11 itself was virtually the same as in other media: shock followed by knee jerk patriotism. These were almost immediately compromised by nuances brought on by the necessity to maintain internal consistency in a

fictional reality in which the destruction of the entire city of New York is often a convenient plot device. The easiest way for the publishers to deal with the issue at hand was to quickly focus on personal representations of emotional reactions in superhero comics and in the case of Marvel comics to launch a few new titles that featured police officers and firemen as main characters, working from the superhero reality's oft-stated maxim that 'they are the real heroes.'

This lacked the depth of analysis and commentary present in the discussion of Watergate above. It was not until February 2006 that Marvel writers turned their attention to the political and emotional consequences of the terrorist attacks on the United States, and who would suffer them more than Captain America?

More intensely political narratives began to dominate mainstream comics as banalization of the 9/11 images was effected through other media. Nuanced and controversial narratives appealed to the sophisticated audiences comics had been cultivating. The flurry of politicizing superhero conflicts spectacularly culminated in the assassination of Captain America at the end of Marvel's *Civil War*.

Media representations of this event in objective reality (read: the media in our real world) were skeptical, wary of the publicity flurry over the death of Superman in the early nineties, an event which turned out to be no more than a publicity stunt coupled with an iron clad law of super hero comics: new writers or editors will kill or bring back any characters whatsoever, regardless of how illogical or unnecessary the story has to be to achieve this. The death of Captain America might be temporary, the suggested symbolism is not. Killing Captain America is the ultimate gambit in politicizing comics. The message of story was clear, that in the current incarnation of America there is no place for its outdated views of itself as a moral state. Steve Rogers cannot return as Captain America in a post-9/11 United States.⁵

The Stamford tragedy

Although public concern about superheroes had been building within Marvel's United States (J. Jonah Jameson's steadfast crusade against Spider-Man⁶ and the increased prevalence of the Metahuman Investigations Committee in Congress are just two examples⁷), this was merely the powder keg waiting for a spark. What set this keg off was literally an explosion, one that killed more than 600 people (some 60 of them children) beamed live into peoples' homes on reality television.

The New Warriors, young superheroes interested in marketing their skills to do good and make money, found Nitro and his cohorts hiding out in a Stamford neighborhood. Right before engaging the bad guys, Robbie Baldwin a.k.a Speedball turns to the camera exclaiming how good for ratings it would be fighting super powered villains in stead of the usual run-of-the-mill criminals. The New Warriors had not counted on Nitro's powers – the

5 *Captain America* comics have continued. For a time it was unclear who would fill the void, although eventually in early 2008 Tony Stark chose Bucky Barnes, Cap's former sidekick turned Russian assassin turned good guy.

6 Jameson is the editor of the Marvel universe's *Daily Bugle* newspaper. He is depicted as right wing and short-tempered. Peter Parker, Spider-Man's alter ego, is a photojournalist for the *Daily Bugle*. While Jameson wants his pictures of Spider-Man as proof the superhero is a menace to society, Parker stages shots of himself fighting crime to try and have the photographs vindicate his superhero self.

7 Captain America's first run-in with the MIC was in *Captain America* #332 in 1987, where he was reminded of his duties as a soldier. This was the first instance of Cap disagreeing with the government, his argument being that he served the American ideal and not its politics. Although it never went away, the MIC was mentioned more frequently in the months preceding *Civil War*.

ability to cause an explosion with him as the epicenter – being augmented, as is later revealed, by a mysterious medicine provided to him by a mysterious corporation⁸. The general public is of course unaware of this, only being exposed to the images brought to them on their television sets. Throughout the *Civil War* series and its tie-ins, various civilians echo sentiments of loss and anger: so many knew somebody who died in Stamford; so many turned their attention to the threat super powered humans caused in their midst; so many were angered by the loss of innocent lives in a battle they had nothing to do with.

The writers and editors of the *Civil War* plot line all agree that this is an allusion to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. As Joe Quesada stated in a CNN interview shortly after the publication of *Captain America #525*, even children recognize events of a magnitude like 9/11, and it would be foolish to assume that Marvel, with its tradition of interacting with real-world events, would ignore the significance of such a thing. Because the Marvel universe is closely modeled on ours – with significant events such as the World Wars, the Vietnam conflict, and the Watergate scandal being just a few examples – certain developments are present to characters in that universe that are also present for us. Nonetheless, Marvel's New York has suffered countless beatings by superheroes over the years, and although the 9/11 attacks were reflected in the comics, they were not reflected upon. It was to this end that a tragedy involving innocent children was set outside New York City. Stamford was the 9/11 for superheroes, and the Super Human Registration Act would be its Patriot Act.

Registration: It's the law

Central to *Civil War* is the Superhuman Registration Act (SRA), originally introduced in Part II of “Mr. Parker Goes to Washington” (*Spider-Man #529-531*), proposed by the Metahuman Investigations Committee and rushed into law immediately after the Stamford incident. The SRA is the embodiment of a particular mode of thinking characterized by fear and xenophobia under the guise of public safety, much the same as that which resulted in the internment of Americans of Japanese descent during World War II. The fact that the storm had been brewing silently for some time was a contributing factor to its speedy approval.

The issue is originally pushed forward on a financial ticket, illustrated by Sen. Whitmore's remarks to Tony Stark in *Spider-Man #530*:

Mr. Stark, the presence within the United States of superhumans, or super heroes, as some call them, was most pronounced in the years after the Second World War, starting around 1946. These individuals, operating in disguise, their identities unknown, frequently engaged in brutal conflicts in which substantial damage was done to life and property. Mr. Stark, according to our best estimates, from 1946 to the present, such battles have incurred almost two hundred billion dollars in damages... costs that local and federal agencies have been forced to absorb because we don't know who else to bill for the expenses. (9)

At the heart of the SRA is the issue of accountability. The argument is that superheroes are in possession of potentially deadly abilities, and that it would be responsible for those with such abilities to be known to the government and trained in the use of these abilities. Tony Stark (Iron Man) is a billionaire industrialist of some clout and is thus tied to both the establishment

8 In *Civil War* it is hinted that the Red Skull—arch enemy of Captain America, one time Nazi, then a Communist—had a stake in inciting superheroes to infighting (*Captain America #522* and *#523*), implying that the forces at hand are enemies of America, and not merely of its heroes, further implying that the Stamford tragedy was a terrorist attack from without, just as 9/11 was.

and the superhuman community. He sees the sense in registering and training super-powered humans much the same way that soldiers and policemen are trained. His wealth and connections make him one of the Marvel universe's best candidates to take up the cause of superhuman civil rights.

Stark makes himself deeply involved in the SRA—attempting to steer it away from unimaginably horrifying outcomes. In the wake of the Stamford incident, he champions the act for the superhuman community, attempting to persuade them that by working *with* registration, they all have the opportunity to become trained and employed by the government, an option open even to super villains. Many are persuaded to go along—villains see it as a chance to become legitimate, and heroes buy into the argument that they should be held accountable to the government.

Legislatively speaking, the arguments for and timing of the SRA are uncannily similar to the United States' Public Law 107-56: Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT) Act. The attacks of September 11 had happened just a little over a month before it was passed, and in the wildly uncertain environment, Americans felt vulnerable and afraid. Perhaps ironically, the comic book version was more subtle, as by including “USA PATRIOT” in the naming of the act, the implication is that all those against it are against both “USA” and “PATRIOT.”

The Patriot Act was signed into law by President George H.W. Bush on October 26, 2001. The bill greatly expands the mandate of the U.S. government and its agencies to collect information on individuals—particularly those of foreign origin, permits the search and seizure of information and property without consent or warrant, allows for the indefinite detention of terror suspects, and redefines the notion of 'terrorist' to include those of domestic origin as well. With the 9/11 hijackers having lived in the United States for some time while training and planning their attacks, the public outcry of sympathy for the victims and disgust with the attacks allowed the sweeping changes to be passed into law. In the name of protecting the public and creating a safer, more efficient structure for keeping life and liberty safe, the Bush administration's act severely erodes civil liberties, a criticism of the Act since its proposal. Nonetheless, the American public allowed its politicians to trade in things such as the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Amendments for greater security.

Both the SRA and the USA PATRIOT Act were based on the assumption that the nation was faced with a solvable problem, and that it could be solved swiftly. The *naïveté* in the passing of the SRA was a total disregard for civil rights of those affected, treating superhumans as if they weren't citizens of the United States. In this respect, the assumption that led to the SRA and the USA PATRIOT Act share in the disgrace of the same thinking that led the U.S. government to inter Americans of Japanese descent in World War II.

However it was passed, the SRA forces an accountability to the government on the part of superheroes. With this accountability come questions of loyalty and responsibility. Those 'heroes' who choose their personal liberties over what they perceive as forced servitude to the government are labeled 'combatant' and subject to indefinite incarceration in a special prison in the Negative Zone⁹. Those 'heroes' who decide that it is safer and more sensible to operate with training and federal sanction through registration remain 'heroes,' and are set to work capturing their friends and teammates—now combatants—that disagree on the issue.

This problematizing of the issue is dependent on the human elements of the superheroes. The reader's ability to identify with the character traits presented by the heroes has traditionally

9 Without going into too much detail, the Negative Zone is not on Earth, and therefore also not on U.S. soil, begging comparison to the U.S. facility at Guantanamo Bay.

fed both their popularity and their ability to transmit narrative and ideologies through comic books¹⁰. Spider-Man is perhaps the most famous example of this. When a nerdy loser in high school gets bitten by a radioactive spider, he gains super powers, but does not lose his humanity. Likewise with characters like Iron Man—who struggles with alcoholism—and even the mutant X-Men (most of whom did not ask to have super powers either), the audience has something to grab on to. Thus when something like the SRA forces these heroes to make a stand, the issue is one of character and morality, not one of having powers. In essence, the comic book narrative demands the readers (by virtue of their identification with the characters and themes) to ask themselves the same powerful questions of civil liberties, public safety, and how to cope with fear in the wake of a national tragedy.

Responsibility

Steve Rogers being the standard against which the rest of the Marvel universe is measured, his reaction to this call for accountability to the government was perhaps the most crucial of the entire superhuman community. Although he had been a government agent in the past—fighting for the United States in World War II—he had also demonstrated a moral fortitude that led him to conflict with a co-opted government several times. In those instances, Rogers cast off his mask and pledged to fight in defense of *America* rather than the government, although always doing so based on reason rather than emotion.

Given that the argumentation the government used to pass the SRA was at least nominally sound—most notably the fiscal arguments and comparisons to soldiers and the police—it was not unreasonable for the government to expect that Rogers would side with registration. However, given the propensity towards mistrust of government in American culture (even Peter Parker's initial reaction to registration in *Spider-Man* #529 was exemplary of this), it was not unpredictable that Rogers would note the gross affront to the civil liberties presented by the SRA and take quarrel with it.

This is precisely what happens, and during the various soul-searching episodes in Captain America's adventures during *Civil War*, Rogers discusses both with his lover Sharon Carter (S.H.I.E.L.D. agent 13) and Tony Stark how unimaginable it would be for Captain America, the very embodiment of the American ideal, to subvert some of the most fundamental principles of America in service of security. When Carter meets Rogers in *CA* #522, she tries to convince him of the virtues of registration, pointing out that *his* identity as Captain America was long public, that he himself had been in government service for most of his life, and that he had received proper training. Rogers points out the harm that has come to those around him just for knowing him, and the sacrifices he has made are because he volunteered to serve as Captain America.

Carter admits that enforcement of the SRA is more challenging than the registration itself, namely that suddenly there are super-powered people in the United States who are suddenly faced with a choice, and that not everyone will choose to register. Earlier in the same issue, Maria Hill, S.H.I.E.L.D. commander, made it clear that Captain America's refusal to register made him a rallying symbol, and Carter tries to explain to Rogers how his actions can lead others to register peacefully. Rogers' insistence that registration is simply wrong forgoes this option.

The notion of a sudden choice forced from above has much to do with it. Whereas Carter tries

¹⁰ See Umberto Eco's sections 5-8 in "The Myth of Superman" for a discussion of how comics can teach, and see Grossman, Lofaro, and Ressler's essay "The Problem with Superman" for discussion of how readers relate to superheroes.

to make Rogers see the benefits of registration even though enforcement is problematic, his view is that the act is wholly wrong—a symbol of further government encroachment on civil liberties. That this sudden choice will lead to further problems in enforcement is without doubt, but the proponents of registration—Tony Stark, the U.S. government, and the rest of the 'establishment'—view this as a side effect, whereas Rogers views it as a symptom of something much deeper. The panels below from *Civil War Frontline #2* below dramatically illustrate the challenges of enforcement and the rationale behind resistance:



The drunkenness, the dreariness of the rain, teetering on the edge of a rooftop, and even the positioning of Prodigy in front of a cheap billboard – all of those images combine to show us how pathetic and depressing the SRA makes things for superheroes. Then Iron Man shows up with a S.H.I.E.L.D. Cape Killer team to allow Prodigy¹¹ to sign on to the SRA or face detention. Prodigy takes detention, and Daily Bugle reporter Ben Ulrich witnesses a fight he sees as the start of something larger:

At precisely midnight on Deadline Day, a few citizens of New York—myself included—witnessed the very first act of the coming Civil War... All of us watched as our newest law was violently, efficiently enforced. People could

¹¹ Prodigy is an insignificant and hitherto unknown character in the Marvel universe. His presence is symbolic more than anything else, as placing more well-known characters on that ledge would take the focus away from the act itself by placing it in the context of the character's *own* symbolic value.

debate forever the reasons for this. But nobody questioned the enforcers. Nobody ever does... And I kept thinking to myself, 'You know who's going to **pay** for all of this? We **are**. (14-15)

Those words sum up the anxiety about the situation by those characters who chose to pause and think about what was happening rather than just reacting. In Rogers' discussion with Carter in *CA* #522, he points out that America was founded on breaking the law. Americans, he says, should not be so weak as to trade freedom for security, and being Captain America, it is his responsibility to set the example against this weakness. As before, Cap's responsibility remains to America and its ideals, not a temporal government.

Captain America must die!

Although the death of Captain America came as something of a surprise to everybody (both in and outside the Marvel universe), it was by no means avoidable. When Steve Rogers returned to the world after decades of being frozen in ice, he found the world strange, but still found America to be a recognizable concept. During the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, Rogers learned to embrace the change, and remained a Captain America who defended *all* of America, regardless of the problematizing diversity that emerged in the wake of Vietnam. Though a fundamentally conservative force as a superhero, the liberal ideas of equality, justice, hope, and moral rectitude essential to American identity since the Revolution were central tenets to the symbol Cap was.

Whereas the Watergate narrative suggested that something incredibly traumatic had affected the American psyche, the damage done was not irreversible. Although Rogers' faith in America's institutions—symbolic of the faith of the American people in their civic religion—was changed by the rampant corruption and megalomania evident in the attempted takeover of the United States by the Secret Empire (led by Richard Nixon), the mistrust of government it cultivated was not unfamiliar to an America founded in revolt against the government. In the end, corrupt governments will pass and a new ones will be elected. Such is the beauty of democracy.

Far more serious is when society makes a turn for the worse. As with the complicity of German civil servants and citizens with the fascist regime of the 1930s and 1940s, there is a danger in a banalized evil. This is a pervasive affliction that goes largely unnoticed until it is too late and the populace is powerless to stop it.

Such is the progression marked by *Civil War* in the wake of the Stamford disaster. A society turns against its heroes, and some choose to join in the persecution of an enemy that really isn't an enemy.

The sky is falling

The first skirmish in the lead-in to the Civil War takes place in *Fantastic Four* #536-537, titled "The Hammer Falls." Thor's mythical hammer—an object of immense power inscribed with the words "Whoever holds this hammer if he be worthy, shall possess the power of... Thor"—falls from the sky, landing in a remote location in Oklahoma. The military sets up heavy guard around the hammer, erecting a 'research installation' around it. Victor von Doom, a 'bad guy' who at that point in the narrative had literally fought his way out of Hell and was subsequently convinced by a vision of the Gods of Asgard that he had the power to wield the hammer, launches an attack to gain possession of it.

The fighting that ensues is less important than who is involved, how, and to what end. Victor von Doom is a stand-in for a masculine imperial arrogance. He commands legions of Doombots rather than an army, all made in his image. As Doom's Prime Minister remarks, "To have an army of mechanicals you do not need a face at all...but he gave them his own face, so that when he looked up, he saw his own image, reflected a hundred times" (FF #537 10). Narcissism aside, the uniform projection of his own face through his Doombots is at once, to as Mirzoeff would put it, a militarization and a banalization of that image of power. The U.S. military, the entity in actual possession of Thor's hammer, is not a stand-in for anything but itself. The Doombots, although more unusual in their uniformity, are pitched in direct combat with U.S. troops, themselves uniformed and banal repetitions of each other.

What happens in the brief conflict is the portrayal of the U.S. armed forces in a literal symbolic sense through their possession of Thor's hammer and the complete lack of understanding of how to deal with it. Doom and his Doombots are a tainted reflection of the U.S. imperial desire for the power of Thor's hammer and the arrogant assumption that it would be able to wield it at all.

These two conflicting beliefs—which result in a bitter but ultimately irrelevant fight—exist simultaneously and can highlight an ineptitude with which the real-world U.S. dealt with the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In September 2001, the sky literally fell on Manhattan, a symbolic event of great potential power for both al Qaeda and the hawkish elements of the U.S. government. Specifically in the case of the latter, there was a desire to politicize the event, transform it into a type of Thor's hammer which could be wielded across the globe in what would become the War on Terror. The implication was that whoever could pick up a politicized 9/11 into their rhetoric would "possess the power of Thor" and be "worthy" by default.

Changing the playing field

It should not go unnoticed that absolutely every Marvel comic character had something—at the very least minor thing—to do with the *Civil War*. Tagged with "Whose side are you on?" the aftermath of Stamford was sweeping, forcing friend against friend and the enlistment of villains for the cause of good. The most immediate and direct consequence of the Stamford incident is one of polarization, catalyzed by the political situation that begat the SRA, Marvel's Patriot Act. Throughout *Civil War* and its tie-ins, disgust with the 600 needless deaths at Stamford is something shared by all, but the main question was what to do with this emotion. Congress passed a law that required only one response from the superhero community: sign up and be regulated. As mentioned before, this was not something that could ever sit well with Captain America, although it was something that was being promoted by his old friend Tony Stark.

The idea here is not to necessarily draw direct parallels to our contemporary real-world situation after 9/11, but more to show how such a catastrophically and uniformly denounced event has the potential to severely alter existing relationships between both people and organizations. Although the registration movement 'wins' the civil war, the victory is akin to that of Adrian Veidt in *Watchmen*. The ultimate goal may have been achieved, but at a heavy moral, social, and material cost. Goliath is killed early on in the skirmish between registration forces and rogue heroes, Sue and Reed Richards leave the Fantastic Four, former heroes are thrown into prison, former villains are enlisted as heroes, and the roles of S.H.I.E.L.D. and the U.S. government change drastically in relation to superheroes. As allegory, this is meant to show how the public should rethink its own relationship to our institutions, as well as what kinds of ideological stands we are and are no longer able to make.

Iterative schemes demand certain events happen. Bad guys generally remain the bad guys, and the heroes win the day. With the shifts in relationships between characters and institutions in the Marvel universe, it became impossible to maintain this central tenet. As such, Captain America was forced—as dictated by his decades as a mythic character—into taking a moral stand against registration. Though traditionally a conservative force, the ideals he represented left him no option but resistance. Unfortunately, the clout of the status quo—the government and the angry mobs who demand retribution for Stamford—is enormous, and tradition dictates that it must prevail lest society fall apart. With Stamford came a shift in the status quo, a shift which Captain America refused to internalize. He saw the larger issues at stake and kept right on his side. This led to the inevitable smashing of the iterative scheme: the good guys were suddenly against the majority, who by default cannot be 'bad' in comic book narratives. There would be no tidy resolution to this mess, and eliminating a now paradoxical *revolutionary* Captain America was the only credible ending.

By playing out 9/11 through a superhero narrative, Captain America was necessarily at the center of the issues. Due to the link between 9/11 and *Civil War*, a fictional narrative was created in which the problems created in the wake of the attacks could be explored and problematized in real terms. Ultimately, this led to the conclusion that the America defended by the Sentinel of Liberty could not prevail in the face of such tectonic shifts in the nation. This narrative can only be possible because of the reader's confusion between Captain America, the super hero and symbol of the United States in the fictional universe of the comic, and Captain America's existence as a real symbol of the United States in the real world, a message that was made possible by the medium. The iterative scheme of the comic was smashed solely to convey a message about the state of the country.

Thus along with the loss of more than 600 fictional lives, two more should be taken into account. Both Steve Rogers and the America he represented were cut down as a result of Stamford, which rendered him an impossible relic. There was no more place for the traditional morality of the American dream. In the same way, 9/11 fundamentally changed the real-world America's perceptions of its role in the world. Registering and monitoring of civilians is not popular, but considered a necessity by most. The changes heralded a new sense of 'right,' one which, among other things, problematizes torture so as to employ the gray area against terror suspects. Air travelers spend more time in security on some flights than on the plane itself, and nursing mothers are looked upon with suspicion for the baby bottles they carry. Captain America had a place in a free America, but the post-9/11 climate of fear stifled that freedom and assassinated its standard bearer.

Like visions in a dream, comics warn of things to come

Comics are a language. They have their semiotic elements—textual and visual images functioning as signs and signifiers—and these are linked on several levels to the world as we experience it. American superhero comics in particular have a relation to the cultural discourse of the United States that allows them to speak in a language of similar terms. As a language that speaks, this is what the American superhero narrative can talk about.

Narratives offering criticism through narrative links are even more accessible when conveyed by mainstream comic books. *The 9/11 Report* is one of the more poignant examples of this in the most literal sense. Through use of the specific opportunities offered by the comic book medium, the graphic novel was able to present the research and findings of the Commission to the public in a way comprehensible on a different level than the original report.

Although presentation of the 9/11 findings in a comic slightly removes the reader from reacting to the immediate horror of the attacks, this is a banalization that can work to an even greater degree through more fictionalized comic book narratives. As Umberto Eco showed, superheroes are cultural players of mythic function. In order to achieve this, a continuing presence is required, and the serialized fiction of comic books demands that the heroes occupy a time frame which does not progress as normal. Narrative operates through iterative schemes, returning again and again to narrative issues deeply central to the character in question (whether they be points in time described from a different angle, similar situations offering similar lessons, or iterations of attributes). Superheroes can thus operate symbolically through their mythic status as Captain America does through the American ideal.

Such things remain in the language of comics, however, and iterative schemes serve to reinforce the banality of the symbolism and imagery, effectively confining them in the first instance to the realm of comic universes. The particular type of linking serves to emotionally unsex these qualities, by default confining the eventual problematization through crisis or upheaval to the same boundaries and allowing it to be expressed in the language of comics.

Taking this into account, the language of comics addresses the real world through a narrative removed from the horror of what is at stake, opening the door that much wider for criticism. This same desensitization works in the real world, albeit with slightly different implications. Hannah Arendt is channeled by Nicholas Mirzoeff in describing the process by which the visual culture of the United States is exposed to similar reiterative forces in the form of media bombardment. The symptoms of this reveal themselves through how we watch images of horror without engaging emotionally, that we could even stoop to watching dead U.S. contractors dragged through Iraqi streets while making a snack in the kitchen.

As disparaging as this sounds, mainstream American superhero comics operate even more effectively in such an environment. Such a placid acceptance of such a horrible narrative as the cultural violence in the wake of 9/11, the socio-political trauma of Watergate, or the collective fear of the Cold War can be discussed in the language of comics by choosing to speak of a banalized horror in radically different terms, and in these situations a drastic deviation from the iterative scheme is required. With the added cultural pressure of a banalized visual culture, the criticisms of superhero comic narratives in those times have a propensity for pitting an incumbent conservatism against seemingly inherent forces of discord. When the social discord presses the narratives hard enough, they can force deviations from traditional narrative schemes.

The utopia narrative of *Watchmen* is one manifestation of this tendency. The problematic

moral choices of the utopia-in-progress presented in superhero narratives do not always lend themselves to clear resolution, although the specific aspects of a utopia-in-progress—by way of the relation between comics and real-world socio-politics—open the narrative to cultural criticism. Since comic book utopias nearly always fail and the utopia itself is a projection of American culture's socio-political dreams and desires, reasons for failure of utopias in superhero comics are a place where criticism can start. In the more nuanced approach of *Watchmen*, Adrian Veidt seemingly achieves utopia for the world, only to have it cast into doubt by Dr. Manhattan and the beginnings of his own emotional reaction to his path to success. In seeking external confirmation of his rightness, he has already begun to answer the question of whether or not he had done the right thing in the negative.

Given the tendency of superheroes in American comics to conservatism, their pitched battles against change and upheaval are commentary on the status quo. In the case of Veidt, he is the troubled revolutionary, both conservative in his desire to preserve America and revolutionary in his methods for doing so. Captain America is perhaps the ultimate manifestation of a conservative idealized America, but his subversion of the status quo turns his conservatism to revolt against the status quo. Where in decades past he defended a somewhat hegemonic American culture from symbolic threats like the Red Skull (fascism, later communism) and the corruption of Watergate, the hegemony in *Civil War* marked a shift from emanating from the American people to emanating from a political climate dominated by a paranoid government. In both cases, the plot demands them to fulfill the philosophical responsibility of the super-man, and when they do they are forced into paths of failure.

Whereas Eco thought superheroes do not reorganize the world according to their abilities merely because “it is nice,” Adrian Veidt attempts to do so merely because it is *right* as he understands things. Just as Dan Drieberg realizes he must act as the Nite Owl, and Steve Rogers discovers time and again that the powers superhumans possess beg them to act with a sense of right and morality. In all cases, there is a pessimistic hegemony of conservatism checking their successes, so that even when Veidt effects world peace, it comes at a cost. His willingness to pay this cost—and Rorschach's subsequent destruction due to *unwillingness*—show the inevitability of a problematic sense of good.

The aim in this research was to look at the commentary American superhero comic narratives provide and try to identify significant changes after 9/11. By examining both the utopian narrative in the Cold War's *Watchmen*, the problematization of Veidt's utopia is a moral critique of *method*. The dream for a peaceful world is not questioned, but the path is held up as its flaw—to create such a world, such horrible acts must be committed that only a total emotional removal from the horror and a conspiracy of silence can keep it afloat. Likewise, when Captain America battles and exposes the corruption of a co-opted American government, he questions whether his ideals match those of a government capable not only of corruption, but a breach of public trust in the wake of Watergate. Like Veidt's self-doubt at the end of *Watchmen*, Rogers' decision to abandon the identity of Captain America as if it were a tainted symbol speaks to an American cultural desire for moral accountability.

This does change slightly in the wake of 9/11. The writers and editors at Marvel admit the allegorical relationship between *Civil War* and the terrorist attacks, and although there was a somewhat uncertain response in the media¹², the significance of Captain America's death did not go unnoticed. More so than the failure of a utopian dream, his assassination marked the end of more than a half-century's American ideal. Given the options left to a superhero in comics, Captain America was doomed the moment Nitro exploded in Stamford, as was the America the world had come to know during the six decades previous. The shift was from a

12 Thanks to the over-publicized “death” of Superman in the 1990s.

cultural demand for moral accountability to a political demand for social accountability. An America that had once served as a beacon of light to the world subverted its own lofty ideals for the short-term safety of state control.

After decades of firmly defending America against ideological attack and corruption, the dramatic socio-political shift of a watershed event like 9/11—an attack at once socially horrifying, but also political, economic, and intensely visual—effected such a deep wound on American culture that the strength of the resulting fear and xenophobia stifled American idealism. When Captain America fought against registration, it was not merely because his position within the Marvel universe demanded it (given that he, too, must operate by the language of comics) but because the idealism which he embodied brought with it a belief that the world *could* be changed for the better in the wake of something horrible.

In order for the new socio-political paradigm to succeed, it must engulf the last vestiges of hope and idealism in U.S. society. The symbolic death of Captain America is paralleled in the actual deaths of the young men and women sent off to war in the rash of patriotism and anger so cleverly engineered by a cynical state. To kill Captain America in the heightened reality of the superhero comic is to drastically depart from the iterative scheme that demands Cap somehow emerge victorious, that he lives to fight again, and that the plot does not consume itself. In taking the opportunity to smash out of this scheme, the writers of *Civil War* showed in a *graphic* way the cost of security. In an America where people are desensitized to the horrors of war and terrorism by constant media bombardment, the banalized comic book can pull on their heartstrings by comforting readers with familiar myths and shocking them out of complacency through the violence of narrative deviation.

Herein lies the hope. The massively dire consequences in the comic book world are at once inconsequential to our world because of their fictitious nature, while still providing a warning of possible dangers ahead. It is not enough to know the immediate social benefits of a Superhuman Registration Act or USA PATRIOT Act. It is necessary to dare to imagine the horror that will be exacted on America's idealism as consequence of it.

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